Vulnerable Becomings: Reimagining Human Relationships with Horses and Other Beings

by

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Nada hay absoluto
Todo se cambia
Todo se mueve
Todo revoluciona
Todo vuela y se va

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Nothing is absolute
Everything changes
Everything moves
Everything revolutionizes
Everything flies and goes

- Frida Kahlo
This thesis wrote itself backwards, and perhaps that is fitting. It tumbled out in spurts of prose, burgeoning from the center of the last chapter, erupting in sentences that travelled between sections like jolly nomads. Words, as it turns out, don’t seem to want to be controlled or contained any more than horses, no matter how much I try to claim either of them as “mine.”

It’s fitting, how it unfolded, because the stories and reflections in this work ultimately aim to disrupt the notion that life marches along in any controllable fashion from beginning to end. And the “conclusion” of this project is not a place at which we (writer and reader) can arrive with relief; it is rather a pause to reflect on where we’ve been, gather courage, and perhaps re-chart our course. So, read on with the following warning: this is not an easy or predictable journey.

Certain souls and spirits and spaces deserve particular recognition for bumping me on to the paths I’ve found myself on, the paths that eventually converged in these pages. Lori Gruen: you gave me enough faith in myself to keep going, and you were also unapologetically honest when my ideas were utterly jumbled. Thank you. (And thank you also for letting me hang out with the pups - Taz and Zinnie, you forced me to take fresh air and cuddle breaks when I wouldn’t have otherwise – you’re lifesavers). Thank you to all my anonymous interviewees for being the voice of this project where mine fell short. Margot Weiss, if you hadn’t told me that this was a thesis and not a senior essay, none of this would exist. Anu Sharma and ANTH400, thank you for being excited about ideas that I was sick of, and feeling like family. To the art library thesis crew – losing our minds together made this a connective rather than an isolating type of crazy. To Espwesso and our staff – thank you for caffeinating me, being a second home, and picking up the slack at work when I devolved. Becca, you will always be my compatriot in thesis writing, dog sitting, and other sanity-saving shenanigans. Corey: thank you for Orangina bottles, for canyon trips, and for understanding the lonesome crowded western parts of me. Boathouse: you are the light on in the living room, you are home – thank god for you. Penny Snyder: without you and #sheryl, I straight up would not have survived. Mom, Dad, I'll never be able to fully thank you – obviously, you’re quite literally the reason any of this exists; in this process particularly though, thank you for listening to ideas I was too afraid to tell everyone else.

Thank you to the rainforest and the Cascade Mountains of the Pacific Northwest for inspiring animal noises and gurgles and instilling in my toddler self that first sense of connection with non-human entities. Thank you especially to the lobsters in that tank at that seafood restaurant at age seven; you made me cry and begin reckoning with difficult relationships. Jennifer, Holly, Annie and all the other powerful horsewomen in my life, you have been incredible role models; you brought me here. To Freyja, the first horse, and Sproti, the second, and Vindur, and Norr, and Jasmine and Newt and Spinner – you gave me the addiction; this is for you. Isa – I don’t know how I found you, but thank god I did. You showed me the world of horsemanship and made me realize this is more than just a hobby. Sonja, Lisa, Petra, Milton, and Lara, for making a difficult journey beautiful and resonant, vielen, vielen Dank, muchas gracias. Mel – in the last days of this madness, you helped me continue believing in vulnerability. Santi, Lady, Fresa - for you especially I will never have words that fit my gratitude; but I guess you don’t need them anyway, and that’s kind of the whole point. You are my teachers, eternally. I am honored and humbled.
Für Fresa


roots :: by way of introduction

“It is of interest to note that while some dolphins are reported to have learned English – up to fifty words used in the correct context – no human being has been reported to have learned Dolphinese.”

-Carl Sagan

I didn’t intend to write this thesis. In fact, I was quite opposed to the idea. A few persistent questions deserve credit for bringing the following pages into existence: the questions that wouldn’t leave me alone, even when I shook my head firmly no, told them I didn’t want to spend my senior year answering them; the questions that have been nagging me for as long as I’ve tried to push them away. In the fifteen years I’ve ridden and worked with horses, they’ve been popping up, pestering me, heckling. I was eleven years old and high off my first-ever, exhilarating canter through a field on a horse, convinced that I could be anyone and do anything. Excitedly describing the experience to a playmate, I was met with an unexpected response. Isn’t it kind of… mean, to ride horses? Don’t they just want to be wild and free?

I was eleven years old and ecstatic; then suddenly I was eleven years old and that response was a lump in my throat that pushed the air out of my chest and for days afterward my ribcage was tight and I found it hard to breathe.

This question has not left me; it’s gotten louder, and taken up arms against a contradicting intuition, a deep feeling of togetherness and rightness with the world that I’ve experienced when I am around horses. Twelve years later, this question demanded an outlet, which is how I ended up here, writing this.

This project has crystallized specifically around the following two queries: one smaller, one larger. The first, stated so bluntly by my friend at age eleven, is Should we
(humans) domesticate or ride or even interact with horses at all? And if so, what are the ethical terms of such an engagement?

I will argue that there are indeed ways of relating to horses that engender reciprocal partnerships. This argument led to a second question: What insight could horses provide into our other relationships – both with other humans and the earth?

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Late spring, nineteen-ninety-nine. Six years old and incorrigibly overeager. I’d been begging for riding lessons ever since that first pony ride at the fair, since the smile that was too big for my face, since I stuck my fingers in those slimy nostrils and got sneezed on and laughed at.

The mare, Freyja, was small, dark brown, and infinitely fluffy. I was given a currycomb that was far too large for my hand. My chubby fingers grappled with it, barely able to reach the middle of Freyja’s round barrel with the brush. Her rapidly shedding hair flew everywhere, hitting me in the face. I was delighted. I had no expectations back then; I could have stayed there, diligently attempting to brush her, for hours. At some point, she swung her head around gently and nosed my butt, curious about this small and wiggly new creature that had appeared at her side. I erupted into giggles and tried to kiss her nose about five times, which she tolerated generously.

My memory of riding her is hazy, but I know I wasn’t afraid. It made sense, somehow, to clamber up there. I was told to sit up tall and reach for the sky, which I literally did, stretching my arms up, staring up at the clouds in excitement at how much closer I suddenly was. The world was entirely new from this perspective. I was full of the smell of her sweaty hair and the fresh cut hay and the mud and manure carried on the windy Iowa afternoon air, and so much felt possible, back then.
Sometimes these days when the world pulses too fast or my mind gets overwhelmed and starts spinning, I go find any place that smells like fresh earth and hay and mud and I close my eyes and I think of Freyja, I think of Freyja, I think of Freyja.

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domestication, taxonomies of power, and animality

Domestication is a quintessential relationship of mastery of a powerful individual or group over a subjugated other or others. The history of human relationships with horses, particularly, is a story of domination: horses were domesticated around 3000 BC (Singer 2005) by Indo-Europeans to “increase their range and military superiority” (Rose 2004:75). Horses have played a pivotal role in conquest and colonization, encapsulating the narrative of hegemonic human ascendency over other humans, animals and the earth. This type of relationship is grounded in an ideology that envisions the world and its inhabitants as something that can be seized and controlled. The resulting binary understanding of culture as superior to and master of nature has been linked to intersecting dualisms that posit civilized over savage, man over woman, black over white, reason over emotion, and human over horse (and other animals) (Plumwood 1993, Adams and Gruen 2014, Kim 2015). The relationships of inequality that stem from these dualisms (and the subsequent battles to overcome them) are not, by any means, the same; the struggles they incite are specific to their individual contexts and should not be conflated. However, these “mutually reinforcing logics of domination” (Adams and Gruen 2014) intersect at their root: the tendency to classify the world into fixed categories for the benefit of those in power. As political sociologist Claire Jean Kim points out, the aforementioned dualisms are structured into a complex hierarchical taxonomy of power that places certain lives higher in value than others (Kim 2015:17).
While these categories are crafted based on classifiable differences, it is not our differences in and of themselves that cause oppressive relationships. We live in an indisputably richly diverse world, “but it is human classification that has mapped momentous political and moral meaning onto these differences, placed humans and chimpanzees into discontinuous, unequal categories of being, and bestowed upon the former the right to dominate the latter” (Kim 2015:16).

The imagining of the world into a fixed, hierarchical taxonomy is traceable to the emergence of the Great Chain of Being in ancient Greek Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought. The Great Chain of Being refers to the ladder-like arrangement of all creatures, descending downward from a perfect, immutable god. Humans are positioned underneath angels, but still closer to God than the “beasts,” plants, or stones. Distance from God in this model equals distance from perfection, placing the least value on the “lowest” beings. Furthermore, God’s perfection and immutability rendered this hierarchy fixed and unchangeable: there’s no jumping around from beast to angel (Kim 2015:33, Encyclopedia Britannica 2016).

In the nineteenth century, the Great Chain of Being was naturalized in many scientific discourses, as ethnologists sought to secure these categories and determine the position of racial classifications in this structure. Kim summarizes, “Scientists in various fields demonstrated race’s fixity by comparative studies of cranial capacity, facial angle, cranial folds, and more. The hierarchical categories created by ethnologists varied in some of the details, but virtually all confirmed the superiority of the European and the inferiority of the African,” (Kim 2015:26-28). The misguided perception of this science as “objective” served to further entrench the immutability of this system of ranking life and deepen the power of those whose lives fell closest on the ladder to God.
The emerging field of anthropology, too, used “science” to bolster the conception of black inferiority, and played a formative role in linking blackness and animality. Anthropologists Samuel Morton and Josiah Nott divided “the human” into different species based on craniometric studies. The result was a conception of “a Black man who was more animal than human and could, for most purposes, be treated as such” (Frederickson, in Kim 2015:39). The historical association of racialized bodies, particularly black and brown bodies, with animality sheds light on the functional convenience of hierarchical classifications (thought up by those in power) in securing the inferiority of those they wish to oppress. Kim reminds us that “animalization has been instrumental, not incidental to the project of racialization…Race has been articulated in part as a metric of animality” (Kim 2015:18). The misleadingly homogenized category of the “animal” is set in inferior opposition to the “human,” yet it is continuously re-defined as necessary to perpetuate the dominion of the hegemonic figure. Merely problematizing anthropocentrism, without recognizing the inequalities within the category of the “anthro,” disavows the fact that not all humans are granted fully human status; the qualification of “animal,” as it is located far away from the “human,” is used to systematically distance marginalized human as well as non-human bodies for the purpose of their exploitation.
horses and colonization

Horses are a fascinating example of the way a supposedly fixed hierarchy of being is shifted and adjusted to perpetuate the control of those in power. As I mentioned before, horses (as well as cattle) were key players in the colonization of the United States. In the 15th century, Spanish settlers re-introduced the equine species to North America for the purpose of conquest.\(^1\) Anthropologist Deborah Rose, writing about both the European colonization of the American western frontier and the colonization of Australia, remarks, “Indo-European people’s relationships with cattle and horses are enmeshed in an ethos which turns out, not coincidentally, to be ideally suited to conquest” (Rose 2004:74). The Spanish settlers brought horses as well as Longhorn cattle to the United States in the early 1400s. Cattle ranching was a lucrative industry for the settlers, but according to Rose, it also served a subtler purpose: the cattle and horses acted as placeholders for the settlers, taking up vast amounts of land that both Native Americans and Aboriginal Australians were respectively pushed out of. “The cattle themselves,” she writes, “four-legged soldiers in the army of conquest, occupy the country, and through their own reproduction make possible the production of wealth on the frontier” (Rose 2004:86).

In so far as cattle and horses were understood as “the non-human members of the conquering societies” (Rose 2004:85), they held a position of superiority to the native bodies they displaced. This was reflected in the comments of Aboriginal people Rose spoke to in Australia: “Some of the Aboriginal people who taught me were baffled by the fact that White people took the lives of cattle to be of greater value than the lives of the Indigenous people. Others were bitter that White people had used Aboriginal labour

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1 The species we know as the modern horse was native to North America beginning around the year 3 MYA but died out 8-10,000 years ago, until their re-introduction by Spaniards (Canadian Geographic 2016).

2 Female horse
for the really hard jobs in preference to the labour of animals, because they did not want to wear out their animals” (Rose 2004:74).

Horses and cattle hold a liminal position as both colonized and colonizer. The domestication of and control over both these animals is bound up in an ideology of hegemonic control over human populations and the earth itself. Interestingly, as Europeans laid claim to the land, the great quantity of hoofed mammal placeholders also left a lasting ecological impact on the grass and soil of that land, tearing up the earth in an irreversible way (Rose 2004:85). The mutability of animal and human rankings in histories of colonization is yet further evidence of the multifaceted ways that supposedly static classifications of life are easily moved around when it benefits dominion and domination.

a note on the word “hierarchy”

As much as we may have been convinced to trust scientific writing as objective, words are irrevocably tied to their loaded connotations. *Hierarchy* is used to refer to a number of types of social structures in different non-human animal populations. But hierarchical “pecking orders” function entirely differently than the human-created, morally implicated, fixed taxonomies of power that undergird relationships of oppression.

The word hierarchy was coined in the 6th century CE by the Christian theologian and Neo-Platonist Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (pseudo because he misrepresented himself and wrote under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite, who was on the board of the Athenian judicial council) (Corrigan 2015). Its Greek roots are *hieros*, sacred, and *arkhia*, rule, which gave it its original meaning: sacred governance. Pseudo-Dionysus used
it to refer to the “subordination that exists between the different choruses of angels” (Verdier 2005:1). Retaining the religious implications of its consummation, the word circulated in more general discourse and was used to describe the rankings of the Christian ecclesiastical state, and then eventually society in general. Hierarchy enabled the vision of the world prescribed by the Great Chain of Being, allowing the intellectual and linguistic organization of life in “degrees or ranks of beings and things from the most to the least pure. The metaphor involved is that of the ladder (with its rungs) rising vertically. Samuel Ward, in his ‘Life of Faith’ published in 1622, writes of this system as extending ‘from the mushrome to the Angels” (Verdier 2005:1).

At some point, hierarchy was imported from its origin and appropriated in biology to refer to the social dynamics of animal populations (often referred to as dominance hierarchies). There are several major distinctions between a Chain of Being based taxonomy and the specific social structures of different animal species. The social organization and mentality of a horse herd is of particular import to this thesis; the majority of my communication methods with horses, and the insights they offered me, were based on time spent observing and being with the herd. Horses certainly do not all have equal status within a herd. They occupy different positions that accord to different amounts of power and leadership. In a horse herd, there is a lead mare\(^2\) who is responsible for directing the herd’s motion. She is responsible for the others’ safety and they readily follow her, synchronizing to the subtlest shifts in her position and direction. In wild or feral herds, the strongest stallion\(^3\) also usually moves with the herd (protecting them and driving them from behind while the mare leads) and helps settle disputes

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2 Female horse
3 Male horse who breeds with the mares; in domestic horse herds, most male horses (geldings) have had their testicles removed so that they can live with the mares and not procreate. On breeding farms, stallions are kept separately unless they are purposely being bred with a mare.
between other herd members. The most attentive horses tend to be highest up in the pecking order, because they are the best at keeping the herd safe – they are the first to notice a sign of a potential predator, and the best at finding food and water sources.

Horses also frequently move around in the pecking order. New horses that are introduced to the herd are initially on the bottom, but quickly maneuver the social dynamics and establish a new ranking. Young horses, too, have much less power in the herd when they are born, but as they grow up they begin to challenge their older peers.

Because horses are hyper-aware of the space around them, claiming another horse’s space is the foremost way of establishing dominance or challenging each other’s leadership. This manifests clearly when we feed them: it’s always revealing to see who gets to eat first, and where. If a horse isn’t attentive enough at feeding time, a lower-ranking horse may jump ahead in line, taking food from the spot where their “alpha” normally eats. A fight may ensue, with the two competitors kicking and biting each other until one gives in (for the time being). Entering a horse’s “personal bubble” is no small matter, and even the most outgoing, tolerant horse will become nervous if a stranger walks boldly up to pet them without first extending a hand, waiting for a sniff, or letting the horse adjust to their presence from further away. Horses are very intentional about entering each other’s kinespheres. Two horses who are on pre-established, friendly terms will stick close together, walking side-by-side close enough to touch, sharing food, or scratching each other’s neck and shoulders with their teeth. But a horse who is lower in the pecking order will skirt far around the butt of a higher-ranking horse to avoid getting put in their place with a swift kick or lunge at the neck with bared teeth. Some horses are more tolerant – walking too close to them might only merit a sinister warning, ears

I am consciously choosing to use “their” as a singular pronoun when I refer generally to a horse.
pinned back flat against their head. But a particularly sensitive horse (most often mares, and especially when they are in heat once a month) will look for any excuse to barrel kick another herd member with both back legs and squeal.

![Ranger and Pegasus, Costa Rica 2015 (Courtesy of Aventura Doma Natural Facebook page)](image)

Clearly, a horse herd is not always peaceful, nor do all members share equal responsibility or power. Rather, establishing specific roles helps ensure the survival of the herd as a whole and helps them work together smoothly, communicating and listening effectively as a group. We cannot compare this social ordering with human hierarchies for several reasons. First of all, horses are just fundamentally quite different creatures than us, and their social dynamics should only be understood in the context of their particular herds. It is both pointless and logically flawed to map such a social structure onto humans, or attempt to naturalize it in defense of human-constructed taxonomies of power.

Furthermore, this type of pecking order is *always changing*. There is no immutability of a herd leader’s power – their position of leadership rests on continuing
to prove their ability to protect and guide the herd, which is why they are often eventually usurped by younger members.

Lastly, there is no mapping of morality onto these rankings — no judgment of the value of a horse’s life because of their relative position. They are all deeply engaged in intra-herd interactions for the purpose of their survival. It is hard to do justice to this concept in writing because there are negative connotations to almost all the human words I could use to describe the “lower-ranking” members of the herd (inferior, follower, submissive, lower, etc.). But it is humans that have attached these associations to the terms, not horses. And as much as I am limited by the scope of our words, I try to think beyond them and articulate my specific intention when I have to use them.

Therefore, I reserve hierarchy and hierarchical to refer to the original meaning, in the context of the human-constructed, static taxonomies of power I have been discussing. I don’t find “dominance hierarchy” helpful; if anything, dominance is a more loaded word than hierarchy, so I do not use this phrase to distinguish from value hierarchies or taxonomies. Rather, I speak about the specific roles horses play in relation to each other, and the importance of leadership in the herd in its varying manifestations.

why “sameness” is not the solution

Static, hierarchical classifications of life work to produce a disengaged and impassable separation between an “Us” (the pole of power) and a “Them” that is seen as other, object, controllable. We situate ourselves externally to a world that exists for our consumption, and the seemingly fixed and objective classifications off of which value judgments are made — including the category “human” — are manipulated and redefined in order to maintain and deepen hegemonic control. The power of the hegemon is then
taken as given and immutable, and the violence and suffering of the oppressed is ignored or treated as inevitable.

Because taxonomies of power are based on classifiable differences, ideologies that hope to disrupt hierarchies (specifically in animal rights discourses) often craft their ethic around similarities between humans and animals, stressing a continuity between or even a oneness among all beings. Suffering, in particular, is a dominant theme in mainstream animal rights activism. In his 1789 volume *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Jeremy Bentham made an important ethical move beyond reason and cognition as grounds for equal rights, famously saying, “the question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?” (In Derrida 2008:27).

The focus on suffering, a capacity said to be shared by most sentient beings, was an important turn away from anthropocentric dialogues that value what is most human about other animals (Gruen 2015). For example, while it is fascinating to study chimpanzee’s capacity to learn human language, basing their merit of ethical treatment off of that capacity (although it may be great news for chimps) is powerfully exclusionary to all non-linguistic beings. Suffering, in contrast, is a much more inclusive category. Philosopher and ethicist Peter Singer stressed this in his seminal work *Animal Liberation*: “If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering—insofar as rough comparisons can be made—of any other being” (Singer 1946:8).

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5 Lori Gruen distinguishes helpfully between two types of anthropocentrism. The first is an inevitable anthropocentrism: inevitable because we have distinct subjective perspectives, and although we can try to see the world from others’ point of view, we are still experiencing life based on an individual human perspective. The second more dangerous type attaches moral superiority to that subjectivity, locating the human perspective above other perspectives (Gruen 2015:24).
Certainly, suffering has been a powerful tool in illuminating the moral relevance of other animals, strengthening an ethical common ground between human and non-human animals. But there are also significant limits to focusing exclusively on suffering. While it is a much more inclusive category than reason or language, we still tend to only acknowledge suffering that at least vaguely resembles human suffering. What does “like suffering” mean, and what are the implications for those with whom “rough comparisons” cannot be made? It is pretty easy to assume that a squealing pig is in pain, but what about trees that are cut down, or entire habitats wiped out due to toxic waste? Most people don’t consider trees or soil or rocks to be creatures capable of suffering, and yet current environmental crises, if nothing else, have shown us that we need a radically altered ethic for our engagement with the earth. The question of suffering doesn’t quite get us there; it does not truly upend the root logic of domination that has led to the exploitation, oppression and consumption of animals as well as plants and other earthly life.

Additionally, suffering arguments tend to clump non-human animals together into a general, victimized position, rather than considering different animals’ individual agency.6 The universalizing tendency is of mainstream animal rights narratives is perhaps their most troubling feature. Attempting to bridge the gap between a generalized human “Us” and a generalized animal “Them” by squishing everybody underneath the suffering umbrella has the treacherous effect of mushing the distinctions between individual selves into one glob of happy Self. This can be deeply insulting to those whose lives have been

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6 In her article “more Joy,” Slicer discusses how suffering can lead to victimization, and provides alternative examples of expressions joy in non-human animals, in attempt to portray their fuller subjectivity instead of only the ways they have been victimized by humans (Slicer 2015).
systematically devalued based on their differences, and ignores the importance of diversity and individuality in the world. Lori Gruen explains:

I think it is easier for those who have not struggled to develop and maintain a self to be ready to dissolve it. For many whose subjectivity, agency, and experiences have been undermined, questioned, or denied, the maintenance of a self-identity is an achievement and not one that they are willing to give up so readily (Gruen 2015:62).

In particular, many attempts to blur human-animal distinctions in order to extend ethical treatment to non-human animals have been taken deeply offensively, especially by groups of humans that continue to experience societal subjugation. This particular tension has had a potent presence in the recent political sphere. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has received substantial negative backlash for their 2005 campaign, which flaunted the slogan *We are All Animals.* Their exhibit provocatively placed pictures of suffering animals alongside graphic images of historical violence incurred on various marginalized human populations, such as a photograph of the lynching of a black man next to a cow hanging for slaughter. PETA’s universalization of suffering for the purpose of evoking empathy was met with public outrage, particularly from black civil rights leaders. No one was arguing that animals deserve to suffer, but PETA’s cavalier comparisons overlooked the particularities of human suffering in those instances. And exploiting particular human histories of violence in order to inspire empathy about other animal suffering disavowed the ways in which the struggles of marginalized human groups for ethical treatment and fully human status are in no way resolved or finished (Kim 2015:Chapter 9).

Kim reminds us of the widespread nature of the tension between different forms of oppression, particularly between racism and speciesism (Kim 2015), which has recently centered on the lack of public grief for black lives compared to other animal
lives. The outrage displayed on social media for the death of Cecil the Lion in June 2015 received enormous backlash from members of the Black Lives Matter movement. The offensive nature of the outpouring of grief displayed for Cecil was highlighted by a now-famous tweet from Roxane Gay (@rgay): “I’m personally going to start wearing a lion costume when I leave my house so if I get shot, people will care” (Bellware and Craven, 2015). In the context of the continued treatment of black and brown bodies as disposable, the immediate, generous overflow of grief for Cecil became insulting.

The tension highlighted by quotes like Gay’s reflects what Gruen calls a “zero-sum mentality” (Gruen 2015): a sense that we must choose one competing brutality over the other. Conflating all suffering as the same and ignoring the urgency of individual contexts of subjugation is clearly problematic, but pitting these injustices against each other is also profoundly ineffective; we need to focus instead on overcoming the deeper ideology of domination that structures both struggles. Kim calls for a posture of mutual avowal (2015) of the distinct but interconnected modes of suffering caused by the logic of controlling others. Instead of conflating different struggles as “one,” we need to work toward a more radical avowal of permeable, connected difference. Recognizing shared capacities for suffering (and for joy) in addition to the particularities of individual experiences and identities might enable us to respond more effectively and ethically to our entanglements with others. According to Gruen, “The distinction between self and other isn’t one of distance and it doesn’t entail dominance and subordination… [it] rather helps to make vivid both the durability and the fragility of the self in relation to others” (2015:62).

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7 African lion shot illegally by dentist Walter Palmer, followed by a controversy about whether the death was indeed accidental.
In her discussion of the PETA controversy, Kim writes about the dangers of using the category of the “human” to determine ethical treatment, and, thinking along the same lines as Gruen, emphasizes the necessity of altogether reconceiving our systems of classification:

Rethinking the human begins with the recognition that the human has always been a thoroughly exclusionary concept in race and species terms – that it has only ever made sense as a way of marking who does not belong in the inner circle. It means clarifying that the project before us is not an extensionist one (expanding the definition of the human to allow a few racialized groups or preferred ape species in) but rather a reconstructive one (reimagining humans, animals, and nature outside systems of domination) (Kim 2015:287, emphasis in original).

“Extensionist” projects seem to work only as it is convenient for those in power. Often, the other animal species whose rights are most defended are those who humans stand to benefit the most from – the colonizing horses and cattle, for example, who were given more rest time than the Aboriginal human persons used for labor.

Writing and reflecting on my time with horses has essentially been a reconstructive project, in the sense that Kim meant it above. In threading together the moments in which my connections with specific horses were not structured by domination, I seek to understand how reconstructive imaginings of our relationships to others might look and be enacted in daily life. The following chapters explore the possibility of a togetherness with horses that is not defined by oneness or even similarity between us. I argue that recognition of fluid individuality and difference is crucial to reciprocal relating. Can horses, who have historically been a mechanism aiding hegemonic mastery, provide insight into intersubjective relationality that transcends that framework of mastery? In what ways can relationships form and flourish outside the ideology of domination that so often defines them?
where I’m going: chapter overviews

In chapter one, I lay the groundwork for the rest of this thesis by first establishing the possibility of mutuality in a relationship between a horse and a human. I explore the way that matrices of domination manifest in human mastery over horses, particularly in the setting of trail riding tourism. I examine the structural forms of violence that work subtly but powerfully to perpetuate horses’ exploitation in those industries, even when the horses are treated in seemingly “humane” ways by well-intentioned people. I contrast my experience working as a trail guide in Colorado with the moments I felt deep and non-hierarchical connection with horses while studying natural horsemanship in Costa Rica. I explore the potential of spontaneous play and co-created games, as well as time spent doing nothing, simply hanging out with horses without an agenda, as methods of relating that transcend structures of control.

In the second chapter, I address the ethics of riding horses. I outline the ways that riding can be violent and exploitative, but I argue that in specific conditions, riding can also be a powerful form of mutual enjoyment. I include interviews with musicians and dancers to explore the potential of shared movement and rhythmic synchronization as platforms for mutuality. Drawing on theories that posit an inevitably interconnected, entangled nature of all beings in the universe, I explore the ways that our identities are continuously shaped by our intra-actions. In the context of synchronous movement, I

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8 Even etymologically, the word “humane” reflects the inherent anthropocentrism of animal rights dialogues. Its root word “human” implies that we should treat an animal as we would treat another human (as if we treated all humans in that way).
9 Natural Horsemanship is a very general term referring to training methods that focus on learning horses’ way of communicating with each other in order to form partnerships with them, instead of using violence or fear coercion. These methods were popularized in the US by “horse whispers” such as Monty Roberts, Buck Brannaman, and Pat Parelli. While their methods vary, they all stress the importance of working “on the ground” with a horse, often at liberty, before riding them, as well as working toward riding without bridles, saddles or ropes.
10 A term coined by Karen Barad in preference to interaction – see explanation on page 75.
push to understand the way co-becoming and unity with others actually relies on individuality and difference rather than a merging or oneness of identities.

In the third chapter, I look more closely at rhythmic attunement as a way of responding to and aligning with horses’ individual perceptual ways of being in the world. Horses move through life at very different paces than must humans, yet we tend to assume our way of perceiving time is objective. I discuss the ways that universalizing a temporal prioritization of future goals over present experience can create one-sided, hierarchical relationships. I introduce the possibility of a flexible, rhythmic attunement to the different tempos of particular encounters with horses as a way to more responsively and mutually engage with them in the present, on their terms.

A common thread in these chapters is the necessity of relinquishing the possibility of total control over horses and instead being more vulnerable and open in our relationships with them. In my conclusion, I will expand on this idea of vulnerability, and explore engaged openness as a potential attitude of relating to other animals (including humans) as well as to the natural environment. As opposed to seeking control over a world that is imagined to be a static object and therefore classifiable into fixed categories, can we re-envision ourselves as vulnerable participants in a continuously nascent world? How might a radical embrace of non-mastery and an avowal of our vulnerability as well as our responsibility to others help us coexist in a more coeval fashion?
methods: representation and non-verbal interviewees

Representation is already a fraught issue in anthropology, and ethnography is an ethically tenuous adventure. It walks a fine line, attempting to study and portray others in as sincere a manner as possible without pretending to be able to objectively depict them, or truly speak from their own subjective perspective. As problematic as it can be to study others, it would be an equal if not greater injustice to let others’ stories go untold, thus abandoning them to misinterpretation or misrepresentation. Whether or not we write about others, we are always affecting and affected by them (particularly in an rapidly globalizing world), and choosing to simply not acknowledge them is a violent denial of those entanglements.

Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly obvious that our entanglements with others are not limited to human cultural interactions. In the current era of the anthropocene, attending to our complex relationships with and responsibility to all of our earthly co-inhabitants beyond the human is more urgent than ever (see Agustin Fuentes on “Becoming Human with Others in the Anthropocene,” 2015). If ethnography of human cultures can help us learn from other perspectives and shift our own accordingly, a turn toward multi-species ethnography is the important and logical move across disciplines.

However, the already fraught issue of representation is felt even more saliently when the subjects have no human words with which to speak for themselves. How are we to undertake such a project, without assuming that we could ever know what it is like to be another being? Many anthropologists, philosophers and theorists have played with different forms of representation, trying to get as close as possible to a humble and

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11 The term is generally understood to refer to the current era in which humans have begun to have significant geological impact on the earth.
accountable way of speaking about non-human others. A common technique is the inclusion of poetic and personal ethnographic vignettes in anthropological writing. In Gruen and Adams’ 2014 collection *Ecofeminism*, Deborah Slicer writes about the importance of storytelling, even (or perhaps especially) in academic work: “Literature is instructive because it represents something authentic in its difficulty and because it requires we participate – that we practice attention, emotional sensitivity and sensitivity to detail, deliberation, choice and judgment along with the narrative’s characters” (in Adams and Gruen 2014:60).

Anthropology in particular, because of the importance it places on the specific stories and subjective experiences of others, holds both great potential and great responsibility for opening up multi-species discourses. Kay Lewis-Jones of the University of Kent writes, “Multispecies ethnography is powerful because the decentering of self through the perspective of other lives is at the heart of anthropology, just as it is at the heart of multispecies relations – and thus of being alive in the world” (Lewis-Jones 2016).

Ethnographic vignettes, which Lewis-Jones speaks of as “imaginative journeys” (2016), give us insight into the ways that others perceive us, not just the way we perceive others. In *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, Eduardo Kohn makes a powerful argument that non-human beings have various ways of representing us. After learning to envision the ways a jaguar might be stalking or watching him in his time in Ecuador’s Amazon jungle, Kohn asserts that “*How other kinds of beings see us matters*” (2013:1).

If I find a chunk of play-doh with knuckle-shaped dents in it, I may not possess the hand that left the marks, but I can imagine it, or at the very least, I am forced to acknowledge its existence by virtue of the shape it carved out. That is how I picture
successful ethnographic representation of others: I am studying the imprints left on me by horses and the other beings I encounter. I can’t write as a horse, but I can begin to shape a sense of their way of being in the world based on the impact they have on me and the way I’ve had to change accordingly. In my work, I weave together a combination of creative, auto-ethnographic vignettes and interview notes, using dispersed theory throughout to help contextualize firsthand experiences. The vignettes mainly draw on my time living with a horse herd and studying natural horsemanship in Costa Rica, in comparison with my experience working in the commercial equine tourism industry. I also draw on various encounters I’ve had throughout the past fifteen years that horses have been part of my life. I interviewed various “horse people” I’ve met over those years, as well as musicians and dancers who offered more general insight into the power of rhythm, harmony and shared movement. While written from my inescapably personal, human perspective, these vignettes nevertheless attempt to privilege the various non-human agents at work in shaping particular interactions or experiences. Similarly, my interview questions focused on the impact specific horses have had on the people speaking about them, and the shift or change that may have incurred in the humans. I try to emphasize how we are affected by others, not just how we affect them.

In *Joy*, Deborah Slicer tells us that “stories are transgressive because they contain “ins” that disrupt our usual ways of perceiving and feeling and make possible empathy along with real friendships” (in Adams and Gruen 2014:61). Personally reflecting on my experiences is also a way to attend to the particularity and unique constitution of my friendships with horses. Auto-ethnography is an avowal of both the specificity and the continually changing nature of the relationships I recount, re-enacting the details of a

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12 Most of my interviewees chose to remain anonymous, so I have cited interviews and emails as “personal communication” and omitted or changed names.
particular encounter at a particular time. I try, to the best of my ability, not to make any sweeping statements about relationships in general, nor about horses as a homogenous species. I try to avoid even generalizing the nature of any one connection with a horse, recognizing that a relationship can only be qualified at the specific moment of an interaction. Because our relationships are constantly in flux, we can never summarize them or totally pin them down, but we can do a better job of attending to the ways we become with others, human and beyond.

My vignettes are thus a central component of this thesis. They were purposefully crafted in a poetic, performative manner, in the hopes of creating a more embodied, sensory, empathetic, specific experience for the reader. I write this with the awareness that upon encountering new eyes, even my words themselves are continually subject to change and interpretation. I write with the hope that these words, the subjects they focus on, and the people who read them will all participate as co-agents in discovery.
“I had forgotten the depth of feeling one could see in horses’ eyes... I was shocked that I had forgotten that human animals and nonhuman animals can communicate quite well; if we are brought up around animals as children we take this for granted. By the time we are adults we no longer remember... [I thought] about white children, who were raised by black people, who knew their first all-accepting love from black women, and then, when they were twelve or so, were told they must "forget" the deep levels of communication between themselves and "mammy" that they knew... As we talked of freedom and justice one day for all, we sat down to steaks. I am eating misery, I thought, as I took the first bite. And I spit it out.”

-Alice Walker, “Am I Blue”

_August, two-thousand-and-fifteen_. He tried to buck me off for about thirty straight minutes, and in the end, that was the reason I liked him. They sent him to a different farm; I wasn’t surprised, but I was a little sad. “We don’t have the staff to ride him,” they told me. “He’s just not a guestable horse right now.”

“Guestable” is a funny term; it is common jargon in the equine tourism and high-end guest ranch world. It means that a guest (who for liability purposes is assumed to have little to no riding experience) can be placed upon the back of an unfamiliar equine without their safety being compromised. “Guestable” is a measure of probability – are the chances of the rider being in any sort of danger from a misbehaving horse slim enough to risk it? Guestable is a cute term for whether or not a horse can produce capital or yield a profit. And Newt – the broad, tawny creature that did everything he could to get me off his back – did not make the cut.

I was working as a trail guide at a horseback-riding outfitter that advertised an experience of the quintessential “American West,” packaged as an equine adventure in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. Guest ranch resorts are a paradoxical entity: fond of

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13 By high-end equine tourism, I am referring to horseback riding in resort settings that typically charge around $100 for a two-hour ride; all-inclusive guest ranches offer weeklong resort stays and riding vacations that average $3000/week/person.
adjectives such as “luxury,” “rustic,” and “authentic,” they offer the romantic side of a western working dude ranch, without the work. It’s cattle herding when your livelihood doesn’t depend on the stock. It’s long hours in the saddle, the “cowboy life,” with a hot stone massage and a wine tasting waiting for you at the end. The people who schedule trail rides into their vacation want “wild” – but not too much. They pay big money to stay in a rustic lodge on the side of a mountain, whose winter face boasts a top-rated ski resort, and whose gates are guarded by people in shiny vests in well-heated, well-furnished offices. Their money pays for a trusted guide to lead them up the mountain on a horse. It pays for an adventurous vacation. And in return for their money, they want adventure on their terms. While they are presumably attracted by the idea of a horseback ride, they are generally not disposed to entertain the idea that the one-thousand-pound mammal carrying them up the edge of mountain might have any sort of agency. What they want is a quirky, glorified car, a furry perch upon which to take pictures of the mountain backdrop to bring back home.

If they’re unlucky, they are forced to realize that their trusted mountain guide actually has very little control over the mountain. When this happens, hysteria ensues. A thunderstorm catches us mid-ride. Heavy rain creates mud, and the horses slip and slide going home down the steep incline. The horses are calm, but every single member of the middle-aged group of men, here on a business vacation, is hyperventilating. Their smartphones and wallets are tightly sealed in zip-lock baggies, but their money isn’t protecting them from the threat of lightning. Some of them scream at their horses, others blame me. As if the horses, calmly balancing their own four feet while carrying the swinging weight of a man who’s had a few too many beers in his time, are suddenly
malicious. As if the price tag on this ride should have given me authority over the elements. As if it is possible to pay for guarantees.

The instrumentalization of horses for profit in the equine tourist industry is a reflection of what happens when relationships are assigned a monetary value. Horses used for recreational pleasure occupy a somewhat liminal space between pet, companion, and vehicle. They are often well loved, even adored, and generally well cared for; yet their welfare and position in relation to us is predicated on their value in enhancing human lives, whether for personal enjoyment or as part of a business venture. This particular horse stable fulfilled every requirement for a humane operation. I did not work for some cruel, abusive outfitter that hitched up emaciated horses on the side of the road. Our horses ate enough food; for the most part, if they had even minor injuries, they were given days of rest. No, my continued ethical discomfort with my job stemmed from the subtler but even more menacing foundation of this type of tourism: a structural ideology of exploitation and commodification of certain lives for the success of those in power. This foundation manifested in small but acute ways in my daily work: the pinching in my chest when I dragged a horse by their rope to the guest preparing to ride them; the distance in their eyes when they followed listlessly, kicking up dust; the stronger bit\textsuperscript{14} stuck in their mouth when they tried, understandably, to turn around and go back home (the woman on their back was fighting with someone on her cell phone); the fact that the horse who stuck up for himself, and tried to buck people off of his back, was sent away, his life no longer a productive aid in achieving our goals. I could

\textsuperscript{14} Piece or pieces of metal that rest on a horse’s tongue and are attached to reins held by the rider, for the purpose of controlling the position of the horse’s head and stopping their forward motion. See chapter two for a further discussion of the use of bits.
jump around and make all kinds of noises and movements around the horses and they wouldn’t even flinch or look at me, which, as anyone who has spent time around horses will know, is quite contrary to all typical horse instincts. What the stable boasted as calm, “bombproof”\textsuperscript{15} behavior of our horses was actually a listlessness, a desensitized shut-down state that had become their default. Work became boring, and I left at the end of every day with a sense of hollow disconnection that grew harder and harder to shake. The fact that my stable passes all regulations for modern standards of humane treatment merely serves as a distraction from the root of the issue. It is a band-aid covering a wound that is still open: an underlying disavowal of horses’ position as property supporting a for-profit industry, and the systematic denial of their agency. ‘Humaneness’ relieves the stable owners of guilt, and is reflective of a more general tendency among humans in a relative position of privilege to avoid doing the work necessary to understand and engage with those they oppress.

**structural violence and interpretive labor**

Anthropologist David Graeber speaks of the often unacknowledged threat of violence that perpetuates many relationships of unequal power, often masked by a lack of actual physical violence (or in the case of the stable, the label of humane treatment):

By ‘violence’ here, I am not referring to the kind of occasional, spectacular acts of violence that we tend to think of first when the word is invoked, but again, the boring, humdrum, yet omnipresent forms of structural violence that define the very conditions of our existence, the subtle or not-so-subtle threats of physical force that lie behind everything from enforcing rules about where one is allowed to sit or stand or eat or drink in parks or other public places, to the threats or physical intimidations or attacks that underpin the enforcement of tacit gender norms (Graeber 2006, 105-106).

\textsuperscript{15} A term used to describe a horse who can go out on a ride without jumping or running away from any of the unexpected noises or stimuli that often present themselves on a trail; generally this is the goal for a safe, steady trail horse that anyone can ride.
Failing to acknowledge these structures “tends to warp our perceptions of what power actually is” (Graeber 2006:106) and creates a state of blindness to the continued violence occurring. Many well-intentioned horse owners are (often unwittingly) reinforcing structural violence in their relationships with equines. Even if someone has never even considered hitting, kicking or whipping a horse, the capacity of humans to inflict harm is glaringly apparent. As prey animals, they do not need to undergo an actual experience of violence to understand that they are threatened. Their strongest instinct is to run; with tall fences around corrals, bits in their mouths, and even just legs on either side of them, we inhibit that possibility. Training horses tends to be about making them aware of what ‘could’ happen – if you run away, I’ll yank on your mouth; if you try to escape, you’ll crash into a wall. A horse does not need to be kicked to understand the pain my legs could inflict if I wanted them to.

Graeber points out that the threat of violence forces the oppressed to do the work necessary to understand the oppressor, in order to avoid the occurrence of actual violence. He calls this work “interpretive labor,” and uses the example of a typical patriarchal society, in which “Women are always expected to imagine what things look like from a male point of view. Men are almost never expected to reciprocate” (Graeber 2006:117). This is caused by many factors, including the threat of physical or sexual assault, and the quieter but nonetheless powerful fact that historically men have controlled the resources and income of their heteronormative family.

To turn again to the example of colonization, Native Americans pushed out of their homes by European settlers were forced to learn European cultural customs and theologies in order to survive and avoid further violence, while the settlers turned a blind eye to the existence of indigenous culture, language and values. The fact that the
oppressed groups or individuals are forced to do the interpretive labor in these relationships allows whoever is in a position of power to be oblivious to, and escape accountability for, the acts of violence that they perform.

These “lopsided structures of the imagination” (Graeber 2006) also forcefully characterize relationships between humans and nonhumans. We constantly expect the other animals in our lives to learn human words, sounds and gestures, while generally doing very little to understand or learn their modalities of communication with each other. And I speak here of animals we actively choose to bring into our lives and enter into relationships with, such as horses, dogs or other pets; we most decidedly do none of the interpretive labor to understand chickens, or cows, or for that matter, ants, rocks or trees.

Graeber also elucidates the power inherent to the hiddenness of structural violence:

If two parties engaged in a relatively equal contest of violence—say, generals commanding opposing armies—they have good reason to try to get inside each other’s heads. It is really only when one side has an overwhelming advantage in their capacity to cause physical harm that they no longer need to do so. But this has very profound effects, because it means that the most characteristic effect of violence—its ability to obviate the need for what I would call “interpretive labor”—becomes most salient when the violence itself is least visible... These effects are often most visible when the structures of inequality take the most deeply internalized forms (Graeber 2006:117).

Although he writes in a wholly different context, this qualification is helpful in understanding violence within a horse herd. While herd members often engage in physical fights for leadership and ranking, they are generally well matched, striking openly against each other. What’s more, they have extensive knowledge about each other and are deeply engaged in their relationship. Quite the opposite is true of relationships based on structural violence, in which the controller learns nothing and engages
minimally with their subject. This sort of disengagement perpetuates acts of violence upon an objectified other who is regarded as a tool rather than a partner or co-agent, and deepens hierarchical taxonomies that place higher value on the lives of the powerful.

**prey animals and vulnerability**

Horses’ instincts and behavior largely correspond to their position as prey animals in the wild. Their “flight” instinct causes them to turn and run at the sign of any possible threat - an unknown noise behind them or the apprehension of a sudden movement out of the corner of their eyes. Because they are rarely aggressive, and in the wild will perceive an unknown human as a predator, they are fairly easily exploitable by human beings. Structural violence is built upon an attitude of imperviousness among people in power; those in a position of global hegemonic control have positioned themselves as the ultimate predators, masters of society. But the idea that we are invulnerable is a false assumption that leads to oppressive and disconnected relationships.

In her 1995 essay “Human Vulnerability and the Experience of Being Prey,” ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood recounts the story of her near-death experience in the jaws of a crocodile. Canoeing in a wetlands known for its crocodile population, Plumwood found herself caught in a rainstorm, paddling down a section of the river she had intended to avoid. Her canoe was attacked by a crocodile, and she was chomped on and dragged under the water several times, escaping miraculously onto a muddy bank long after giving up on her life. She survived against most odds, sustaining severe injuries before being rescued just in time. While she marveled and wondered at her escape, she was most struck by the radical shift in perspective incurred by this near-death experience.
She was forced to recognize her own mortality and position as prey in the eyes of the crocodile (Plumwood 1995:30,34). Leading up to the attack, Plumwood had experienced significant apprehension and unease, yet paddled on anyway; afterward she questioned why she had chosen to ignore these intuitive internal warnings. She attributes this in part to a tendency, supported by much of Western thought, to trust the rational mind over instincts and intuition. She links the denial of her own vulnerability to “the similar failure of my culture in its occupation of the planetary biosystem. The illusion of invulnerability is typical of the mind of the coloniser; and as the experience of being prey is eliminated from the face of the earth, along with it goes something it has to teach about the power and resistance of nature and the delusions of human arrogance” (Plumwood 1995:34).

Similarly, an old horse trainer of mine, Sarah16, spoke of a personal vulnerable experience that gave her a deeper sense of empathy with horses and catalyzed a subsequent shift in her training methods:

I had my own first hand traumatic experience with another human on a personal level that left me feeling cornered and trapped. Where I felt for the first time the 'flight instinct' take over everything in my whole body. I was scared. Trapped. Adrenaline was at a new height I had never felt before. That day I was a prey animal... I had worked with horses since the time I was in kindergarten. But never did I have a perspective that would actually put me, literally, in their shoes. With my new perspective going forward, [when I am] working with horses [I am] able to relate to their awareness and when I start to see or feel their flight instinct...I am able to read it and adjust...my scared for my life experience allowed me to meet the horse emotionally where they are at (personal communication 2015).

She emphasized the importance of learning horses’ natural way of communicating with each other, and prioritizing mutual understanding over individual goals: “In my training I have made it a point to make sure the folks I have handling horses take their time and learn to refrain from forcing themselves into a horse’s space

16 Name changed
beyond their own, or the horse’s, level of understanding. At the end of the day, it becomes about protecting and preserving the natural instinct of the horse” (personal communication 2015).

World-renowned horsemanship guru Klaus Hempfling (whose background, interestingly, was in communications and anthropology) spent many years living with and studying wild horses in the Pyrenees Mountains. His ideas reflect Sarah’s comments: “The secret of a relationship with a horse,” he says, “is that you just stop being a creature that is allowed to give somebody pain, take somebody’s life, give somebody sorrow. You get into a completely different position” (Hempfling, in The Path of the Horse documentary, 2008). This “different position” Hempfling inhabits in relation to horses is a result of the significant amount of interpretive labor he performed by living with a wild herd for so many years. He learned their methods of communication, rather than attempting to teach them human words and forcing them to understand the intention of violent whips and physical constraints. This was one way of meeting the horse “where they are at,” as Sarah said, a preliminary step in avoiding the lopsided structures of the imagination that characterize many human relationships with horses.

Over the summer I was an intern on a natural horsemanship farm in Costa Rica. We shared our finca with twelve horses, who roamed through our pastures and garden. It was not uncommon to wake up staring at a curious nose through my bedroom window, or to be graced with the presence of our mischievous colt Payaso sneaking onto the patio at breakfast. Sharing space to this extent with the herd created an ideal environment for simply hanging out with them and learning their ways without a particular training agenda. I passed many hours studying and mimicking their behavior

17 See introduction pg. 22
18 Term for a young male horse
and “language.” As I explained in the introduction, an awareness of each other’s space is central to horses’ interactions, and I began cultivate this awareness in myself in order to communicate with them. For example, I could assert my leadership by asking a horse to back away from me; by turning and directing my energy assertively toward their front end, aided by a slight push from my hands if they are initially unresponsive, I can ask them to move their shoulders and step over. Alternately, by backing up, assuming a relaxed, friendly pose, and directing my gaze unthreateningly toward their hindquarters, I can draw them toward me. The more they get used to my presence in the herd, the more they adjust their physical position in response to mine; they tend to move so that I remain in their line of vision. But this only worked once I’d reached at least a basic level of competency in their communication system, and they perceive me as something similar to a herd member.

Putting in the work to earn horses’ attention also holds great rewards for us as humans. I interviewed Lisa,¹⁹ the coordinator of a therapeutic riding program for people with physical, cognitive and behavioral challenges. She too spoke directly to the shift that has to happen in her students’ mindset and behavior in order to connect to the horses. Unlike most dogs, who typically lavish us with attention without any work on our part, horses are generally aloof; they are not automatically confident or interested in engaging with people. Lisa reminded me that one of the most crucial characteristics to recognize about domestic horses is that behaviorally, they are tantamount to a wild or feral horse; their survival instincts are the same. While we have forced them to be somewhat reliant on their human companions by limiting their food supply, they would be perfectly capable of autonomy if they were released onto a wide expanse of land with other

¹⁹ Name changed
horses. Breeding and domestication has not rid them of an intuitive sense of independence, so in that sense, they do not need us. This is, I think, is an unexpectedly momentous revelation for people who spend time around horses. The majority of horse-human contact occurs because a human has requested or forced the interaction. Because a prey animal’s primary concern is their safety, a horse that feels nervous or trapped will never voluntarily interact with us. If we bring a negative or hectic attitude into the same room as a horse, the horse is likely just to turn and walk away; at best, we are met with indifference. Lisa attributes much of horses’ therapeutic capacity to the behavioral shift and increased self awareness that has to occur in humans before we are able to gain horses’ trust or form a partnership with them (personal communication 2015).

Anthropologist Barbara Smuts echoes many of these sentiments in her writing about baboons. After spending years with wild baboons in eastern Africa, she reflects on how she had to change in order for the baboons to interact with her:

The baboons remained themselves, doing what they always did in the world they had always lived in. I, on the other hand, in the process of gaining their trust, changed almost everything about me, including the way I walked and sat, the way I held my body, and the way I used my eyes and voice…I was responding to the cues that baboons use to indicate their emotions, motivations and intentions to one another, and I was gradually learning to send such signals back to them. As a result, instead of avoiding me when I got too close, they started giving me very deliberate dirty looks, which made me move away. This may sound like a small shift, but in fact it signaled a profound change from being treated as an object that elicited a unilateral response (avoidance), to being recognized as a subject with whom they could communicate.” (Smuts 2001:295).

In this case, Smuts did the majority of the interpretive labor necessary to create a space of mutuality in which baboons and humans could interact and communicate.
Tremendous potential lies in the act of relating to another on *their* terms, instead of imposing our manner of being, our language, our values, or our culture on them.

**Herd in Field, Costa Rica January 2016 (Front right: Fresa; light brown horse, center: Lady; photo courtesy of Adventura Doma Natural Facebook page)**

**play and spontaneity**

Drawing on her own work with horses, Deborah Slicer writes about how play, humor and joy can facilitate mutual interactions between very different beings (often of unequal power). She says that humility and trust on both sides of the partnership are prerequisites to spontaneous play: “Horses have to feel they’re on equal or near-equal terms with a person before they’ll horse around with you, joke or play” (Slicer 2014:66). As a pure expression of life or joy, the initiation of play is a gift that a horse may choose to bestow in exchange for a lot of patience and time spent establishing respectful and mutual terms of the relationship.

I was confronted with the power of this sort of spontaneous, agenda-free interaction when I was charged with the responsibility of training a horse from scratch
who had never been handled by humans before. My experiences of play with this near-
wild mare gave me a sense of humans’ potential to give, and not just take, from other
animals, and helped me begin to carve out an understanding of what reciprocity between
people and horses might look like.


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Mid-July, two-thousand-and-fifteen. Atirro (about two hours south of San Jose,
Costa Rica) is about one street long; deep in the jungle, its non-human creatures greatly
outnumber its human inhabitants. The neighbors of our farm had inherited a large
patch of land that came with two horses and a cow. Although they left food and water
out for the animals, they were not horse people, and had not handled their caballos at all.
They asked us to train the horses for them. The smaller of the two, a curious two-year
old strawberry roan, had been born on the field; she had never been touched by a
human before. We found a wild mare for you, my trainer told me. She’s yours to start.

Thrilled and terrified by the challenge I’d been given, I was determined to show
the mare, who I’d later call Fresa, that I was her friend. A preliminary task in training a
horse is haltering them. I used grain to bribe her into a small corral; she quickly began
to associate me with food, and would approach me, but continued to shy away from my
touch. If I held the halter in my hand, she knew exactly what I was trying to do. She
galloped in circles around the corral, trying to escape from me. I cornered her, hoping
to exude friendliness and calmness, but I'm sure my body only spoke tension and self-
doubt. I was shaking, falling apart on the inside, watching this innocent and graceful

20 A color of a horse coat. See pictures of Fresa on pages 39 and 100 for examples.
21 A more acceptable term in the horse world today that means training a horse to be handled and ridden.
It generally refers to non-violent methods that are in opposition to the old cowboy rhetoric of “breaking,”
but this term is used very generally and methods vary greatly.
22 The halters I used are simply knotted ropes that fit to a horse’s head and enable me to attach a lead rope
under their chin, similar to a collar that goes on a dog.
creature quiver in nervousness and drip in sweat as she tried to get away. But I wanted
desperately to prove myself to my trainer, to lay claim to the glorious feeling of success.
And I’d only given myself an hour to halter Fresa – time was running thin. Eventually,
on perhaps my fiftieth attempt at throwing the halter around her neck, I got lucky and
snagged her. Even then, I had to sprint a few laps with her to hang on before she finally
stopped running and froze. Her nostrils were flared; she was pushing air out of them at
twice the normal speed, and although she couldn’t physically go far, her whole being
seemed to turn away from me, waiting to be released. I couldn’t stop trembling and
apologizing. Who did I think I was, trapping her like this? Was any of it worth it? I
almost gave up on riding right then and there.

I kept trying because it didn’t make sense - I had experienced such deep and
resonant joy while interacting with other horses, joy that I was sure, sometimes,
somehow, was mutual. So I went back the next day, on my day off, when I had
nowhere to be, and no time constraints. I took the halter with me, so she would get
used to its presence, but I lay it in the grass and didn’t touch it for the rest of the
afternoon. I brought her food; then I turned around and walked the other way. I closed
my eyes, bent my knees, and sank slowly to the ground about twenty meters away from
her. Sitting with my back turned, I ran my hands through the grass, and I sang to
myself. I watched the mosquitoes drift past me, lazily riding the thick air. I asked
nothing of Fresa. I sat there for what must have been several hours. Sometimes I
reached out my arm toward her and then took it away again, and again, hoping
desperately that some of my good intentions would show through my doubt. I left, I
went to bed. I came back the next morning and did the same thing.
When she ambled over to me the following afternoon, searching for grain –
when she nosed and nibbled the top of my head, scanning my hair for more treats - and then, minutes later, when she edged her nose underneath the halter, examining it of her own accord – a fledgling lump of hope slid into my chest and I let out a yelp that was both a cry and a laugh and I had to clamp my teeth to my lip to stay calm because the world was suddenly so bright and forgiving. Fresa was still apprehensive, but she was curious too. I intrigued her. And her curiosity, in the end, changed everything.

Everything was new for her at our farm – she had lived in the same field for her entire life. And rather like a human two-year-old, once she wasn’t so afraid, she wanted to get into all of it. In the days that followed, Fresa and I explored together. She began trotting up when I came into her pasture, and following me around the field. As soon as she felt safe around me, she became braver in her environment. She liked surprises, and always seemed to be asking, “What today?” “What next?” This new world opening up around her was scary – there were ladders, saddles, chickens, bicycles, and new shapes, noises and smells everywhere. But her playfulness lit her up. She’d carefully watch my reactions to a new item, and if I appeared to remain calm, she’d take her turn investigating it, first sniffing tentatively, then gumming it, biting it and often throwing it up in the air. Her personality was infectious – I giggled readily and soon every new object became a game. I showed her a saddle pad (the blanket that goes under a saddle when riding) thinking she might shy away from the strange pink fabric flapping in the wind. Hooves firmly planted, she stretched her neck out as far as she could, giraffe-like, to sniff it, intrigued but not eager to get too close. Satisfied with her initial assessment, she cocked her head sideways, took a step forward, grabbed it with her teeth, and tossed it in the air. I laughed, slid it up and down her back and rested it on her head. She just
stared at me. I took it off and lay it on a nearby horse. Fresa followed, grabbed it off the other horse's back, and dropped it in the mud, giving me a look that seemed to say your move.

She loved to play with the dogs on the farm, chasing them and nipping at their tails. We had a large yoga ball in the pasture for the horses to play with, which I always found odd. But I gave it a try - I kicked it, Fresa nosed at it a bit, and I kicked it again. She followed. She nudged it harder with her nose and it began to roll. She really caught on then, biting it with her teeth, striking it with her front legs, and chasing it faster than I could keep up with. I was laughing and tearing up and chasing behind, and there is very little in this world that could have disturbed our mutual glee in that moment.

She teased me, too, reminding me constantly of my inattentiveness to things that to her, were obvious. One morning I left her in her field alone, instead leading away her pasture companion for my friend to work with. Five minutes down the road, I heard hoof beats, and looked back to find an indignant filly trotting up behind us. (Sure enough, when I returned, the metal pasture gate was bent just enough for her to push through). I had planned on napping. I had just showered; I was sitting down to write poetry and drink tea inside after a long, hot, muddy day. But she showed up, and I was the human she trusted, and she had no intention of being left out. So I played with her. I hung out with her, we kicked around the ball. She stood around as I wrote in my journal. I took her halter off, figuring she would roam around our farm, but she continued to follow me, wondering what game was next. The realization that she was choosing to be with me – over eating grass, over visiting with the other horses in the field – knocked the wind out of me for a few seconds. And for those few seconds, that was all I needed in this whole world.
Fresa’s choice to play with me was predicated on a pre-established understanding of trust and an attitude of ingenuity that had developed between us. Most crucially, in order to work with this mare, I was forced to shift and relax my personal agenda for her. My one-sided goals (to prove myself to my instructor, to train this horse on a specific and relatively urgent timeline) precluded any possibility for equality and spontaneity in our relationship. Beyond literally feeling trapped by the physical halter around her face, she was confined by the attitude I brought to the situation. I was objectifying her as a tool toward achieving my agenda, unwittingly rendering obsolete the value of her existence in its own right.

Writing about both other humans and non-human animals, philosopher Georges Bataille speaks to how oppressive relationships are predicated on the ideological reduction of certain lives to their mechanistic utility. “The time spent making [a tool] directly establishes its utility, its subordination to the one who uses it with an end in view” (Bataille 1989:28). In such relationships of subordination, Bataille says that the “object,” seen as the subject’s property, becomes “strictly alien to the subject.” He adds, “To subordinate is not only to alter the subordinated element but to be altered oneself,” (Bataille 1989:29). In the act of exploiting others, we alienate ourselves, obviating the possibility of connection in a relationship. Furthermore, the process of alienation allows for a sort of psychological disavowal of the violence we incur. The process of domination is a process of disconnection: as Bataille says, “An animal exists for itself and in order to be [regarded as] a thing it must be dead or domesticated” (Bataille 1989:39).
To develop mutuality in my relationship with Fresa, I had to recognize her as an “end in herself,” an autonomous being that existed beyond my goals for her. To co-create shared goals, my actions needed to shift to become about her, not just about me. I was forced to accept that I would never have total control of the outcome of our time together. One of my instructors on the farm spoke similarly about her twenty-two year long relationship with a horse: “It only became a good relation after I buried my ambitions of competing and tried to figure out what it is my horse really likes and needs. We only became partners after that” (personal communication 2015).

**humility and a “beginner mind”**

Partnership and co-discovery with a horse require a certain degree of unlearning and relearning on the part of the human. They necessitate a humble renunciation of our superiority as well as a readiness to allow an interaction to shift our perspectives and even identities. Contrary to what we might expect, this does not put us in a helpless or inferior position in the relationship; rather, accepting our imperfections and being open to learning can make us more attentive, effective leaders. Lisa stressed this type of humility as a fundamental lesson horses have to teach us. “They are very humbling,” she said. Horses’ trust must be earned. People tend to think they can get on and yank the horse in circles, but in the end, if a horse wants to overpower you, they are so much stronger - they will win. “You have to go in with a beginner mind to learn from the horse,” she said (personal communication 2015). Having a “beginner mind” is one of the best descriptions I have heard of the attitude of openness required to connect with horses. It seems simple enough, yet in my experience it is a shockingly difficult attitude to adopt, particularly for
adult humans. The tendency to avoid that type of vulnerable humility, and instead walk around the earth sporting an illusion of our control over it, is deeply entrenched in us.

Perhaps this is why horses tend to be exceptionally responsive to young children, who do not usually enter situations with a preconceived agenda. Horses readily pick up on and are attracted to ingenuity and openness; when I was working as a trail guide in Colorado, even our most desensitized, apathetic horses showed rekindled interest in the occasional delighted child. After dismounting a horse at the end of a ride, the kids had a tendency to linger in the paddock. They wanted to pet their horse, to stand around and hang out with their new sweaty, whiskery four-legged friend. But their parents shooed them out to the gate, and as staff members, we encouraged this - we all had schedules to keep, places to be.

Except that horses don’t operate on those schedules, so our individual timelines make creating any kind of relationship damn near impossible.

Klaus Hempfling also spoke to the presence and spontaneity of children that must be rediscovered in order to engage with a horse. In a scene of the 2008 documentary *The Path of the Horse*, he speaks to another professional horse trainer, a woman who has won dozens of championships and makes a living off of horses, but who is having trouble getting her horse to take any interest in her. They stand across an arena from the woman’s expensive competition mare. Hempfling takes the woman’s shoulders and says, “…as a professional you are expecting something to teach, you are expecting things instead of being… Being is complete…Remember the age of six? Stay there. Stay in the age of six…. And do with your horse what you would do, and then see what is coming.” He encourages the woman to dance around the room as she might have when she was young. She frolics with increasingly whimsical abandon as she stops
worrying about what she looks like to everyone watching. After several minutes, the mare turns, ears perked, and walks slowly over to her. Hempfling smiles and tells her, “You have to give up on expecting and start being… You can drag the horse, you can do a lot of things, but the horse from the inside will not come” (Hempfling 2008).

We alienate ourselves from others at the moment that our goals (winning a competition, perhaps, or turning a profit from their services, or settling a patch of land) become more important than our relationship with them. These agendas make mutual connection impossible. Barbra Smuts writes about “…equality - reciprocity, freedom, mutual dependence and respect – as the bases for friendship with another animal. Recognizing and allowing another to be a social subject and an idiosyncratic individual requires, among other things, we give up control over them and [importantly] how they relate to us” (in Slicer 2014:66).

For my purposes in this thesis, I define vulnerability as the openness to being affected by others. An attitude of vulnerability is thus the antithesis of one of immutable power, and is predicated on the continuous act of relinquishing control in our relationships and interactions. Genuine connection requires vulnerability; we both affect and are affected every time we come into contact with a horse. As a guide at the Colorado trail riding outfitter, I was supposed to have – or at least pretend to have – complete control over our horses, and to some extent, even the mountain we rode on. When the illusory nature of my control was revealed, in the event of inclement weather or a misbehaving horse, there were outbursts of panic, shock and anger from some guests. No amount of my expertise could provide us immunity to the dangers of thunder and lightning.
One of the guests witnessed one of Newt’s attempts to buck me off as we returned from our ride. Despite the fact that her own horse was cooperating perfectly, and that I was not at all afraid, watching Newt’s protests – his temper tantrum, if you will – made her profoundly anxious. She asked repeatedly what he was doing, and if I was sure everything was okay. The high quaver of her voice indicated a fundamental discomfort with this display of horsey agency as he challenged my authority and revealed that I might not always be in total control.

Riding an American Quarter Horse through Colorado’s Rocky Mountains may be packaged as an experience of “pure wilderness” and the “true spirit of the West,” but what people’s money actually pays for is a few hours on a well-worn trail, a chatty human guide, and a sore butt from sitting on an animal just dissociated enough to carry a heavy, noisy stranger up a mountain without excessive complaint. Many of my guests were eager to pick out “their own” horse for the ride, immediately asking their names and exclaiming about how cute they were – but only as long as the horse behaved and was docile. As soon as their mounts showed any signs of communicating or even of being alive (stomping the ground, swishing their tails to ward off flies, going too fast or too slow - really anything besides walking in the exact same muted cadence for two hours) people felt anxious. Without spending the time to develop an understanding of how the horses communicated, those signals – especially the more dramatic ones, like bucking – became terrifying.

I have heard many horse people speak about a horse’s “right to bite.” A horse who tries to bite me is not “naughty;” biting is a form of communication that should make it very clear that the horse is unhappy, or that there is a lack of trust in our relationship. “Biting is a symptom, not a problem in itself,” writes horse trainer Pat
Parelli on his website. Similarly, Newt bucking was a sure sign that he was (understandably) unhappy with the way he was being treated. Punishing him or trying to beat out the bucking habit would be ignoring Newt’s rather obvious attempt to communicate. But this denial occurs again and again; it allows us to continue to use a horse to achieve our goals without actual doing any difficult interpretive labor or changing our own behavior.

In the most open sense, I take agency to mean the capacity to affect. To have an affect on others, to cause the slightest shift in someone’s behavior or state of mind, is to possess the most basic level of agency. Understanding non-humans as agents, then, means being vulnerably open to their capacity to affect us. But very often, we flee vulnerability in an attempt to escape accountability for our destructive actions, and we ignore marginalized and domesticated voices (human and beyond) because we do not want to be affected by the pain we may have caused.

I have not concocted these notions of reciprocity as much as I have been slapped in the face with them; it’s hard to ignore the agency of a horse that is trying to buck you off. My butt was sore, my thighs were sore. My arm was scratched by a tree Newt used to try to brush me off. And I think I deserved it. He terrified the guests who watched me ride him - and for all of that, I loved him.

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Late July, two-thousand-and-fifteen. As our relationship developed, Fresa and I began going on long walks together down to the nearby river. Of the many hours I have passed in company with horses, some of the best have been spent just walking – my two feet on the ground alongside four hooves, a slackened lead rope connecting us. On the ten minutes’ stretch of dirt road that led from our farm to the creek, Fresa and I
encountered all kinds of curiosities – men on dirt bikes whizzing past, large garbage trucks lumbering up the road. She took all these encounters in stride, her apprehension shifting increasingly to inquisitiveness as the days fell past. A buoyant tandem shaped our walk; I let her go in front sometimes to investigate, but stood my ground if she went too far ahead, reminding her to wait for me. I jogged and she trotted after me, then I stopped short to see if she was paying attention. She learned quickly to be mindful, and seemed to gain more interest in me. She wouldn’t go into the water all the way, but she loved splashing in it. She munched on reeds and gradually followed me into the shallow current, striking out a front leg at the rocks and snorting air out her nostrils, blowing water bubbles. The murky river spray hit my face and I snorted in glee, delighted. I lay all the way down in the shallow rocky riverbed; Fresa was utterly perplexed. She sniffed me, rather like a dog. I was exposed and defenseless – barefoot, in a bikini, lying down next to a twelve-hundred-pound creature, two inches away from hooves that could step on me and break some of the smaller bones in my body if they wanted to. Still, I grinned. She put her nose to my toes and without planning to, just because it tickled, I started splashing her chest with my feet, kicking the water everywhere. She stomped the ground with her hoof, sending water back into my face. I hadn’t planned to ride her yet, hadn’t tried, but the comfort was thick between us and spontaneously, I sat on her. I was leaning on her in a sort of relaxed embrace, and I just swung my leg over, hugged her, and then got back off. She continued wiggling her lips against the rocks, searching for the best morsels of muddy grass, completely unfazed. I was a friend – definitely a strange, bizarre friend, but a friend nonetheless – and sitting on her back was just another one of my strange and unfathomable movements, a continuation of our game.
A friend of mine recently recounted an encounter he had with a group of otters while canoeing in the backcountry. The otters were bobbing up around the canoes, and as opposed to swimming away from the humans in fear, they began a playful splash fight in response to the paddles. This escalated, until one otter dove back under the water, only to resurface and throw a small stone at my friend’s face, to which my friend had no comeback. He was deeply entertained and slightly bemused, and we wondered aloud what enticed the otters to play with those they could have perceived as predators. I thought about how in the water, the otters had the upper hand; I thought about how beautiful and rare it was that the otters weren’t afraid, that they could swim away at any moment they chose. I thought about Fresa, and lying submerged in muddy riverbanks, and how the webbed paws of otters will always be more powerful than a long wooden canoe paddle. And I thought about what it means to be splashed back.
two :: resonance

“That night he dreamt of horses in a field on a high plain where the spring rains had brought up the grass and the wildflowers out of the ground and the flowers ran all blue and yellow far as the eye could see and in the dream he was among the horses running and in the dream he himself could run with the horses and they coursed the young mares and fillies over the plain where their rich bay and their rich chestnut colors shone in the sun and the young colts ran with their dams and trampled down the flowers in a haze of pollen that hung in the sun like powdered gold and they ran he and the horses out along the high mesas where the ground resounded under their running hooves and they flowed and changed and ran and their manes and tails blew off of them like spume and there was nothing else at all in that high world and they moved all of them in a resonance that was like a music among them and they were none of them afraid neither horse nor colt nor mare and they ran in that resonance which is the world itself and which cannot be spoken but only praised.”

-Cormac McCarthy, All the Pretty Horses

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Rainy season, two-thousand-and-fifteen. When I let go of the lead rope, I relinquish control. We both know this. Santi is eleven hundred pounds of shining copper flesh: flesh that twitches listlessly to shake off the flies that ride in on the hazy heat of unshaded afternoons; ornery, thick flesh. He is not, at outset, the handsomest horse I have ever seen. He is built strong and stocky, with the short neck of the Costa Rican criollo, shoulder blades that angle sharply out, and a rather stumpy tail that bounces when he moves. But in all his begrudging grace, Santi is unapologetically powerful. He may not be intimidating to look at, but when I slip the halter off his head, I have no more persuasion over him than the hidden cicadas who surround us with their blaring song.

Santi loves to eat. There is very little I can do to distract him from the grass we stand upon. So when I start to walk away – halter and lead rope lying in the dirt many paces behind us – and I hear the quiet warmth of his breath close behind me – it’s a thrill, it’s an honor. I feel special. I feel like my middle school crush just told me they liked me back. I feel honored in a way I didn’t know I craved. I turn, and he adjusts himself to stay in line with me. His awareness is invigorating; I run in a circle. Seeming
bemused but engaged, he turns slowly to mimic me. I walk backwards. I grin, I laugh. I start to run. And in the moment that he begins to trot next to me, most everything else falls away. I experience a rush of happiness that is not an isolated feeling, but rather a positive charge that seems to blossom in the space between us. He tosses his head, snorts, and kicks up his back legs, feisty in response to my playfulness. Jubilant, I stop planning my motions. I am both within and beyond myself; every movement is a becoming. The energy between us thickens, and I lift my knees high, mirroring his trot. Our strides liken—left knee, right knee, stop, turn, back up. I am not sure whose motion is directing whose as I jump, spin, gallop, and generally cavort. I am completely absorbed in the motion that moves us.

Months later, sitting on a listless horse at the top of a mountain resort, dragging tired horses through a dusty corral, a cavity cracked somewhere in my chest, turned in on itself, and made it hard, at moments, to draw breath. I felt antsy, trapped, and worn. I looked at the people around me and saw fatigue or disinterest in their eyes. I looked at the horses and didn’t see anything at all, except distance. And I felt overwhelmingly, crushingly alone.

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My favorite definitions of the word “resonance” come from music and physics. In musical terms, resonance is “the intensification and enriching of a musical tone by supplementary vibration.” In physics, it is the “reinforcement or prolongation of sound by reflection from a surface or by the synchronous vibration of a neighboring object” (OED Online). Central to both these definitions is the idea that nearby vibrations are inherently affective, changing and enhancing nearby tones that they come into contact
with. The moment of contact generates a new sound that is not simply a melding of the two into one, but rather an entirely new entity, a richer sound.

Relatedly, the science of synchronization is based on the process of entrainment: disparate rhythms in close contact aligning their frequencies. Pendulum clocks – the source of the discovery of entrainment, by scientist Christian Huygens – synchronize their swinging when they are placed close together. Entrainment is responsible for humans’ capacity to tap our feet at the same tempo and move in rhythm with each other. Fireflies in large groups flash in synchrony. Improvisational music relies on a complex form of entrainment to a common beat to create cohesive music without rehearsal. Muscle cells, pulsing independently, begin to pulse together when they become physically close – including human heartbeats. Oscillating rhythms in close contact unavoidably affect each other, and align (Sethares 2007:148).

Entrainment is responsible for the efficacy with which horses and other herd animals synchronize their motion. Because staying in a close-knit group helps protect them from predators, they have streamlined their ability to move in stride. They can gallop or stop and turn on a dime without breaking their pattern or ever colliding. Despite our very different anatomical makeup, resonant motion is also possible between a horse and a human, and its achievement is lauded in many schools of horsemanship. Ideally it occurs at liberty, reflecting the desire of both individuals to “dance” with each other of their own volition. It is an advanced level of partnership because it requires a) that a horse perceives human motion as validly communicative and b) that the horse has some personal impetus to move with us without forcing them to. This second requirement is perhaps more important than the first; it is also infuriatingly evasive, precisely because it is beyond our control.
At the beginning of my relationship with Santi, he wandered away to eat grass as soon as I took off his halter. I spent many hours watching my coworker Sonja play with her horse, Ranger. She is an incredibly disciplined woman, and at first, she kept strict agendas for herself, growing increasingly frustrated when Ranger walked away from her, even as she demonstrated meticulously practiced horse-like movements that she knew he understood. Their synchronization only finally occurred by accident; she was fixing the fence in his pasture, moving about with no intention of working with him, when he meandered over and started following her. Surprised and delighted, she began to run, and Ranger fell into step, cantering beside her, and they frolicked and wove in this manner all about the field. But soon after she realized what was happening, Sonja picked up her training stick and began to ask for specific movements from Ranger. He immediately stopped responding and walked away. She had spent hours studying and practicing for this moment, but what had been missing was her delight in the motion itself. When her delight was replaced by an agenda, Ranger was no longer captivated, and his attention turned elsewhere; their connection was lost.

Sonja and Ranger – Liberty Play, Costa Rica June 2015 (orange training stick pictured)

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23 A long stick (trainer Pat Parelli calls his “Carrot Sticks”) used as an extension of humans’ limbs to direct horses’ motion, and extend the functional length of our bodies in order to use them more like horses.’ They are not used for hitting or whipping the horses.
Me and Santi – Liberty Play, Costa Rica July 2015 (Photo courtesy of Sonja Rogoll)
Synchronous motion between bodies is a communicative process that generates shared channels of comprehension. When Santi began voluntarily mimicking my movements and we “synced up,” it was an avowal of mutual enjoyment. We were both free to exit the interaction at any time, but the thrill and shockingly simple joy of shared motion is what kept us. Barbara Smuts described a similar experience of unique and spontaneous co-creation of synchronous movement with her dog, Safi.

The more freedom Safi has to express her wild self, the more I delight, and the more I delight, the more she expresses herself…Safi and I have created many such rituals involving synchronous or complementary movements, but I can’t explain how any of them came into being. Certainly, I did not invent them, and I don’t think she did either. Rather, they developed spontaneously in the intersubjective space we inhabit together…When two beings delight in one another this much, their relationship becomes a haven for free and creative expression of being. Trust deepens, mutual attunement grows… (Smuts 2001:304,306).
Shared motion starts as bodies (voluntarily) responding to each other. This can be as simple as the playful gesture of kicking a ball back and forth, or a brief glance in response to a brush on the shoulder. The most preliminary stage of communicating at the affective or corporeal level is the basic acknowledgement of another’s existence. The more two beings interact, the more responsive they become to each other. It is a gradual process of attunement, until it is unclear who is initiating a movement and who is responding, and basic response evolves into harmony.

Sonja later wrote to me about the moment she first synchronized her movement with Ranger: “Suddenly something happened. It was like finding the correct “radio frequency,” at that moment I became aware of my own body language, attitude and energy. I could read and interpret his reactions better and we got connected. And this moment feels like magic! Then we started dancing” (personal communication 2015).

While her use of the term dancing (common in natural horsemanship discourses) may seem anthropomorphic or romantic, I use dancing as an open term that encompasses co-movement as seen in a wide variety of species. Philosopher and dancer Kimerer LaMothe writes about dance as a way of responding to and interacting with the other rhythms that animate and permeate our environments. She believes that dance “communicates participation;” as she moves, her rhythms adjust to the feeling and rhythms of the space around her, which continuously shape her identity. “It happens every time and never the same way twice: moving, I am moved. The movements I make make me who I am” (LaMothe 2012:96).

Understanding dance as a co-choreographic, inherently generative process opens up relational potential with those around us - whether dancing with other humans, synchronizing our motions with a four-legged creature, or merely moving in response to
a strong breeze or a tremor underneath the earth, a slight shake of the ground. LaMothe calls it “catching currents of life” (2012:100). Dancing increases our awareness of the currents of movement that permeate all life. As opposed to a pre-determined form of language that must be taught (in which the teacher, as imparter of knowledge, will always have the upper hand), responsive movement and rhythmic harmony lend themselves to mutuality because they are necessarily co-created. This levels the playing field between both agentive individuals. For two beings to move together, a certain level of equality must be pre-established before the intimate choreographic process can begin. In understanding all animate life as moving and vibrating, we can understand mutuality as continually generative moments of resonance, new layers of identity sparked by the bumping up of disparate selves in a rhythmic universe.

why we ride

Reading a webpage today, I came across the French word *cavalier*. I was pretty certain that in the context it meant rider, or equestrian, but I looked it up anyway, to be sure. I was right, it does mean rider; what I did not know is that, in ballroom dancing, it also means partner.

Rider, dance partner.

Same thing.

Horses do appear to take great joy in the art of moving, with no end goal beyond the movement itself. To watch a horse gallop, tossing their head and shaking their mane, is to witness grace in its most ecstatic form. There is something marvelous about the lightness of their power – the way fifteen hundred pounds in kinetic motion can appear weightlessly suspended in the air. In high school, I developed a habit of pausing on my
daily walk home past a neighbor’s field to watch three draft horses cavort. The largest of them, Roca, loved snow. He would push his nose through it, kick up his back legs furiously in a few, fantastic bucks, and send the flakes flying, arcing his neck, lifting his tail and trotting as if invisible balloons were rising under each leg.

To ride is to participate in this tremendous expression of motion, a kinesthetic journey that is quite beyond our physical human capacities. It thus incites a thrilling expansion of the self and invites to the senses inklings of unboundedness. Voluntary shared movement is an embodied demonstration of mutuality that manifested in my liberty play with Santi and other horses; riding can be a heightened experience of that connective, co-choreographed movement. The thrill of synchronization may be a huge driving force behind recreational riding, and is, in the end, what keeps so many of us with horses. It may be why, even where horses’ value as cavalry, transportation, or other forms of work is obsolete, some of us persist in molding our lives around them, despite the significant financial and lifestyle commitment it demands.

Preserving and participating in a horse’s natural movement – and the joy they take in it – can make riding an exquisite experience, but we have to earn it. Philosopher and animal trainer Vicki Hearne writes, “What a horse does under compulsion… he does without understanding, and with no more grace than a dancer would display if a person should whip and spur him during his performance” (Hearne 1994:150-151). Riding is a gift that necessitates great generosity of spirit from the horse and an immense amount of trust on both ends. Sitting atop a fifteen-hundred-pound creature in motion puts the

24 While much of my argument may apply to horses ridden for transportation or work, those contexts are complex in their own right – they have their own potential for exploitative relationships but also powerful partnerships formed through shared goals and teamwork. They thus deserve their own discussion, so for my purposes I focus on recreational riding.
rider in a deeply vulnerable position. As such, riding is an act that has the potential for great mutuality through co-choreographed, responsive motion. However, because of humans’ tendency to avoid vulnerability, riding has also been a site of some of the most intense violence and control in human relationships with horses.

Gala Argent remarks, “In order for riding to occur at all, it is not only we humans who must entrain to the experience of riding, it is a choreography of two” (In Smith and Mitchell, *Experiencing Animal Minds*, 2012:123). Riding, successfully, is co-choreographed as both horse and rider adjust to each other’s rhythms in order to stay in balance. Hearne stresses a horse’s agency when being ridden: “Because we ride them, because they carry us, it is particularly hard to avoid noticing not only that horses know us but that they know us without yielding their own volition, which continues to belong to the horse” (Hearne 1994:115). Humans have much less control on a horse than we do on our own feet – we can easily fall off, or, if we manage to stay on, we can be carried at breakneck speed in a direction we do not wish to go, with very little ability to stop them. Hearne believes that much of the fear people have about riding stems from the question, “How do I know what s/he’s going to do?” (Hearne 1986:108) It is an immersion in an alien tongue, she says, that is terrifying, at least until we gain fluency in the “language” of the horse.

This lack of control does level the playing field between horse and human in a certain sense, sometimes quite literally knocking us off our high horse. But it is precisely our fear of losing control that has driven us to develop mechanisms that ensure our domination, leading me to complicate Hearne’s above assertion and ask if and when horses truly have agency under saddle – and when they are indeed “yielding their own volition.” Many tools used by riders provide a shortcut to safety, allowing us to forgo the
extensive amount of hours required to actually develop a trusting relationship with the horses we ride. Perhaps the most controversial of those mechanisms is the horse bit.

**on bits and bridles**

A bit is a piece or pieces of metal that rests on a horse’s tongue and is attached to reins that the rider holds (see figure on page 63). The various types of bits are manifold, and they range in severity and depend on the discipline and school of riding, but the basic principle is that pulling on the reins exerts a combination of pressure and leverage on a horse’s sensitive tongue, so that even a beginner rider has some control over their speed and direction. If I yank back on the reins of a horse that’s trying to run away, for example, the bit will press down on the back of their tongue; harsher bits use leverage in the form of a shank attached to the reins, which multiplies the impact of the metal on nerve endings in the tongue and mouth.

Although bits are generally taken for granted as a central part of riding, an increasing number of people are questioning the ethics of their use. Many natural horsemanship trainers in particular believe that they should never be used, including my trainer in Costa Rica.

In *The Path of the Horse*, trainer Alexander Nevzorov elaborates on the violent potential of bits. In a study performed by Russian veterinarians, it was found that 300 kilograms per square centimeter of force were exerted on a horse’s mouth in one jerk on the reins (2008). Long term horse competitor Stormy May, who directed the documentary, was in shock. After witnessing incredibly advanced non-violent partnerships between natural horsemanship trainers and their equine friends, she said, “Once I had seen what could be accomplished without punishment or force, I could no
longer call [traditional riding] training. I had to call it abuse” (Stormy May Productions 2008).

Other equestrians, including Hearne, think that bits have been misinterpreted. Hearne quotes horseman Gervase Markham, who wrote about the supposed intimacy bits allow between a rider and a horse: “There is a secret pleasing and cherishing of the horse with the bridle, which the rider must accomplish with so unperceiving a motion
that none but the beast may know it.” Hearne supports this statement, arguing that “To understand this, one must get past the notion of the bridle as an instrument of the kind of subjection that, in my experience, exists only in the fantasy lives of people who have bizarre notions about the nature of power” (Hearne 2007:114).

While I am far from claiming to understand the nature of power myself, I have trouble accepting that statement, especially because she does not go on to explain what exactly these bizarre notions are, or what “genuine” power really is. She seems to be attempting to evade the complex dynamics of control between horse and rider by reducing potentially problematic elements of her passion and career to mere matters of others’ misunderstanding. Both Hearne and Markham accurately point out that bits can be used gently, subtly, without inflicting pain. It is true that when used softly, they act as a relatively neutral cue that enhances communication, no harsher than a squeeze of a leg (and far less physically violent than the ways horses communicate with each other in their herd). But, as David Graeber so perfectly pointed out, it is the threat of physical violence that structures oppressive relationships; the very placement of a bit in a horse’s mouth, even if it is never actually yanked on, puts the human in an automatically superior position. Just by being there to fall back on, a bridle denies the horse their agency: they must choose between behaving and having metal pull sharply on their tongue. Bits seem to me to be a way for people accustomed to being in control to continue to evade vulnerability in what would otherwise be a very vulnerable situation.

And this incorrigible illusion of invulnerability among people in a relative position of power characterizes oppressive relationships beyond just human-equine ones, which may contribute to the chills I get every time I read Markham’s quote. Maybe more troubling even than its implications for horses are the pervasive “white supremacist
capitalist patriarchal” undertones of Markham’s words, to borrow a term from bell hooks (1997). By romanticizing this mechanism of control and claiming to know the horse’s experience under its command (the “secret pleasing and cherishing” he speaks of), Markham re-inscribes the same rhetoric of mastery that has historically been so persistent in oppressing and subduing marginalized others. The fact that he is conveniently convinced that this objectified and othered “beast” enjoys the bit just adds insult to injury.

The bit and bridle are not just metaphors for this type of subjugation, which is why it is unsettling that Hearne calls the idea that the bridle is an “instrument of subjection” a mere “notion.” Not only have bits had lasting damage on horses’ mouths, they have also historically been adopted and made more severe for the purpose of torturing and subduing human beings. In 18th and 19th century North America, various metal devices with similar mechanics were used on slaves as a form of punishment, making it impossible to eat, speak or even swallow (Edwards 2011). There are very few historical accounts of this particular punishment; one of the most telling descriptions appears in literature, in the words of Toni Morrison’s character Sethe in the novel Beloved.

He wants me to ask him about what it is like for him – about how offended the tongue is, held down by iron, how the need to spit is so deep you cry for it. She already knew about it, had seen it time after time in the place before Sweet Home. Men, boys, little girls, women. The wildness that shot up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back. Days after it was taken out, goose fat was rubbed on the corners of the mouth but nothing to soothe the tongue or take the wildness out of the eye (Morrison 2004:84).

Another version of bridle’s use for torture was the “scold’s bridle,” said to have originated in Britain, which was used primarily to subdue and silence women, to “curb women’s tongues that talk so idle” (Earl 2007).
These are, of course, just a very few examples of the slew of torture devices that have been used throughout history for the purpose of human subjugation. I in no way wish to conflate the suffering of horses with human torture. Rather, the use of bits on humans is yet another example of the ways that the logic (and in this case even the mechanism) of dominating non-human animals is adopted for the suppression and exploitation of human beings. It is important to note that bridles were first invented for the purpose of domesticating and controlling horses (around 1500 BC) (sportingcollection.com 2016). The use of similar mechanisms much later for human subjection is an example of the way animality, as a qualification of ontological inferiority, is mapped onto certain humans in order to reinstate their position as lower on the chain of being and justify their exploitation. In many cases, including this one, the mechanism of domination is made even more severe when it is used on humans; while people speak of using bits “softly” on horses, they were blatantly used to torture slaves. It seems, perversely, that the closer the marginalized other gets to the top of the chain of being,
the more threatening they become to the position of those in power, which is reflected in the severity of their subordination.

What, if anything, does this say about the use of bits on horses? Their use as a torture device is a reminder that they are mechanically designed to inflict pain. While bits can be used subtly, “imperceptibly,” why advocate for a mechanism that is so easy to misuse, and with such dire consequences? One thing that bits are used for in nonviolent ways is helping the horse come into the correct “frame;” lowering their neck to a more relaxed position, driving themselves forward with their hindquarters, rounding their back. As riders, we can encourage them to carry their bodies in this more balanced and powerful way under the saddle, which is healthier for them and more comfortable for us. While bits are a much faster way to motivate a horse to come into that collected frame, it is possible to achieve without a bit. A bit is just a shortcut, a way for us as riders to force the horse into a certain body position without addressing any of our own imbalances that may be disrupting the natural balance of the horse.

And the reality is, the majority of the time the use of bits is not subtle at all. Anyone unaccustomed to the sensitivity of a horse’s mouth will pull too hard on the reins. And even a well-versed, well-intentioned rider (and I have done this myself many, many times) will yank harshly on the bit if they think they are in danger. I may have plans to keep my hands “soft,” but if my horse takes off running without stopping, I will probably end up pulling back in fear. The placement of a bit in a horse’s mouth is an emergency brake, even for advanced riders. It is an aid that renders a human much less vulnerable on a horse’s back, and gives us an upper hand that we probably do not deserve.
Therefore, riding without a bit, without a backup method to yank a horse into submission (at the very least until I have perfected my ability to ride without using my hands) is an essential part of performing the interpretive labor on my end of the relationship. My trainer said, “If you can show me something you can’t achieve without a bit, then let’s talk. But I haven’t come across it yet and until that day I won’t use them” (personal communication 2015).

Riding horses is a beautiful but precarious invitation to partnership. It holds potential for profound and intimate mutual relating, experienced through the co-choreographed, rhythmic attunement of two bodies. However, it demands a huge responsibility of the rider to develop trust and actively embrace a vulnerable position. If that responsibility is shirked, riding can incite vile, violent human domination over a horse.

With that in mind, I want to take a closer look at the specific terms of reciprocal riding: could its potential as an experience of intersubjective co-becoming ultimately disrupt the hierarchical rhetoric of dominion that so often characterizes it?

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January, two-thousand-and-sixteen. Back for a brief visit to the finca, I was amazed by how much Fresa remembered. I didn’t want to push her too much; I only had two weeks. But she was as curious as ever, eager to learn new things. I had sat on her back during my previous stay in Costa Rica; she’d carried me around a bit. But she had been hesitant, unsure of her balance with me on top, and her steps were taken begrudgingly. I wanted her to enjoy being ridden; I didn’t want to introduce it as a chore or obligation.

One morning, I decided to accompany a few other interns who were riding out from the farm on a quick loop through the jungle. I put a saddle on Fresa, but initially I
just walked by her side while our friends rode ahead. She seemed comfortable enough, focused mainly on keeping up with the other horses. So after about ten minutes, I stopped, let her snatch a bite of grass, and slowly pressed my foot into one stirrup, leaned my body across her back, and swung my other leg over. She was unfazed; we ambled along, the easy tone of the energy between us undisrupted. In fact, I became more relaxed as I sat on her back, my previous anticipation about riding fading into an appreciation of the soothing cadence of her walk. To ask her to move more quickly, I shifted my pelvis forward infinitesimally. She sped up, acutely sensitive to the movement of my seat in order to maintain balance underneath me. As the other horses shifted up one gear from a walk to a trot, Fresa and I followed suit. The cue was mostly just a thought – I felt her impulse to move with her fellow herd members, and my excitement, accompanied by a slight tilt forward with my body, gave her the green light. Horses’ urge to move with each other is perhaps felt most powerfully when riding – it is almost impossible to get a horse to stop if their friends are running ahead.

“Does anybody want to canter?” asked one rider. Eagerness swelled in my stomach and my chest. The rhythm of cantering is something I have come to physically crave. It is an inimical combination of a smooth, swinging cadence, and the thrilling adrenaline of being propelled through space at a rate much faster than human bodies are capable of on their own. Cantering (when it is a mutual decision, as opposed to a horse galloping away with me clinging to their back) is profoundly liberating. I must have enough trust in the relationship itself to relinquish control and allow myself to be moved by the powerful strides of the horse. I hadn’t planned on cantering with Fresa yet, but our ride thus far had been so intuitive and relaxed, and the channels of communication between us at that moment were open and reliable. Because this was only the third or
fourth time in her life that she’d been ridden – I was the only person who’d ever been on her back - she was still extremely sensitive to my subtlest cues. The familiar cadence was a physical memory that formed in my hips; Fresa could feel it too. My energy burst forward and we swung up into a canter. It astounded me that the cues I have been taught for years in riding lessons were completely intuitive to her. Because these cues are based on horses’ natural tendencies, Fresa didn’t have to learn what I was asking her to do; she just instinctively stayed in tune with my body. She gulped down the ground in smooth bursting strides, a waltz-like rhythm in threes. Three beats, then a silent moment of suspension in which all four of her legs were gathered before the next stride. Catching currents of life, as LaMothe would say. Eventually, I asked her to slow her movement back down, encouraging her first to shorten her stride by mitigating the movement in my hips, and then sitting down more deeply and speaking to her in a soft, low voice. We didn’t use bits on the farm, so pulling back on the reins wasn’t much use; I had to rely entirely on her attentiveness to my seat. We downshifted back to a walk, and a strange, profound relief swelled in me then. The relief had something to do with the experience of vulnerability without fear, an intense and corporeal realization that I could be an agent in my own life without any illusion of being in control. Fresa’s contentment was tangible, enhanced by my jubilance, as well as the very real endorphins produced in both of us as a result of moving our bodies at that speed. I felt awake to myself, and to the present, deeply sensory texture of our expanding relationship. I was still aware of the future, but it ceased to be more valuable than the current cadence of those buoyant moments. One, two, three, suspend; one, two, three, suspend; one, two, three;
cognition/sensation: a false dualism

To borrow a term from anthropologist/dancer/rider Jane Desmond, the possibility of this “kinesthetic intimacy” (2014) is a large part of why we ride. The vulnerably intimate nature of riding holds potential for mutuality, but is also terribly easy to exploit. In some schools of horsemanship, students are required to commit one to two years developing a relationship with a horse exclusively on the ground, without riding, before they ever get on.

Fresa and I had developed enough mutual trust between us that we were able to be very open and attentive in our “conversations.” We communicated motion through subtle somatic and energetic cues, affectively transmitted between us. Fresa could feel my excited energy, and sped up in response; similarly, sitting heavily, with a very calm demeanor, encouraged her to slow down. Riding really only works because horses have an innate desire to be in physical harmony. The motion of my hips in the saddle mimics my own natural motion at a walk; if I stop the motion in my seat, a horse will stop as well, because they do not want to feel out of balance. They are intensely attentive and will entrain to minute changes in tension and mood. These qualities also contribute to horses’ therapeutic value for people. Physically, sitting on a horse aids the natural motion of our bodies; emotionally, it increases our awareness of the energy we bring into an interaction.

Hearne reiterates the importance of learning horses’ somatic “language,” which requires the sort of beginner mind I talked about in the first chapter. “The spirit of the rider,” she says, “if s/he wants to be a genuine rider and no mere keeper of horses, a passenger at best, must match the horse’s generosity and expand to this language, which
means taking the risk of losing, for the moment at least, a great deal of the knowledge human grammars enable us to specialize in” (Hearne 1994:107).

Hearne highlights the loss of control intrinsic to riding, which comes from being forced to use a language that is not our native tongue and in which we may not yet have attained fluency. Horses are unusually generous in their tolerance for humans as we stumble over the correct physical cues, are frustratingly insensitive to the energies they emit, and blunder our way through the “grammars” of the somatic dialogue we are learning. It is important to recognize that we are behind in these aspects, and that generally, horses have more to teach us than we have to teach them. The idea of expanding to a new language aligns with my understanding of Graeber’s interpretive labor; in this case, a crucial de-centering of the human occurs when a rider puts in the time and labor necessary to understand the way a horse communicates, as a horse.

A heightened sensory awareness is also hugely beneficial for humans. Lisa from the therapeutic riding center spoke about how communication with horses “relieves the pressure to verbalize” (personal communication 2015). And another trainer in Costa Rica said that with horses, “You don’t need to explain yourself, you just have to be yourself (which is of course not always easy, ‘cause we tend to forget or neglect it). You are required to rely on and follow your feelings and intuition, be awake and in the very moment, where it is just you and the horse” (personal communication 2015). As Barbara Smuts reminds us, moving and sensing is “…also the way of humans, a way we forget all too often this day and age. It is a language of bodies and sounds and movements that preceded the spoken word and that tends to speak the truth, where words might lie” (Smuts 2001:304).
In Jim Coetzee’s meta-fiction *The Lives of Animals*, he uses the voice of his character Elizabeth Costello to write against Descartes’s famous pronouncement: *cogito ergo sum* (generally translated as “I think therefore I am”). Costello is uncomfortable with what this statement implies for the multitude of beings that do not think in the way this term is usually intended. She says, “To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being…a heavily affective sensation…of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world” (Coetzee 1999:33).

Increased attentiveness to our human capacity for embodied, sensory communication expands our ability to connect across species and helps us engage more deeply in our ethical commitments to others.

However, I am wary of the frequently resulting tendency to *privilege* the sensory over the cognitive, to *oppose* embodiedness to cognition. In the important attempt to disrupt Cartesian dualistic thinking and highlight the potential of our affective sensory faculties, we run the risk of creating an inverted binary that values body *over* mind and ignores the intimate interaction between words, sounds and senses. To be sure, when we focus on language as a demarcation of human superiority, we undermine the agency and communicative capacity of those who do not use it (non-human animals and plants, for example, as well as non-literate or vocally impaired humans). Western philosophy in particular has contributed to this tendency; as LaMothe says, “We have learned, through years of training ourselves to read and write and think, to ignore what our bodily selves are feeling, and how our movements are making us” (LaMothe 2012:102). At the same time, to deny the important role of human words in transmitting meaning (including their centrality to a written project like this one) is unnecessarily reductive and even hypocritical. Merely flipping Cartesian dualism on its pointy head just serves to re-
inscribe the separation between mind and body and the implicated binary between “rational human” and “sensing animal.”

What is necessary instead is a focus on the interaction between thinking and sensing, knowing and being. Costello speaks later of the mind itself being embodied (Coetzee 1999) which strikes me as a much more effective opening into the interactions between all our communicative faculties than her previous “opposition.” Thinking, cognition, speech, writing – these too are means of being alive to the world. There is a flesh and a texture to words and all their iterations, even as they rest on the page, that is intimately ensnarled with the senses. Writing can be playful; an exchange occurs between words, the writer, and eventually the reader, that continually creates new perceptions and expressions of ideas. My friend (and talented writer) Penny shared with me her reflections after a foray into movement and dance, activities that were relatively new for her. She said, “patterns of movement through a space or on the page root the doer/dancer/mover/writer in the present, in the walls, the carpet, and the lines… The practice, intentions, and focus make room for the quiver, the jolt, the influences of exteriority” (personal communication 2015). The act of writing, sometimes seen as furthest from moving or sensing (spoken word being some sort of performative intermediary) is in itself a generative act that is deeply engaged with the space around the writer, a space which will inevitably affect the words that are created.

Rhythm grounds language and knowledge in the senses; a conversation can be a form of improvisational choreography not dissimilar to a dance between two bodies. In her work Meeting the Universe Halfway, feminist philosopher Karen Barad stresses this crucial interaction:

Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are
of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming. The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse. Onto-epistem-ology—the study of practices of knowing in being—is probably a better way to think about the kind of understandings that we need to come to terms with how specific intra-actions matter. Or, for that matter, what we need is something like an ethico-onto-epistem-ology—an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being—since each intra-action matters, since the possibilities for what the world may become call out in the pause that precedes each breath before a moment comes into being and the world is made again, because the becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter (Barad 2007:185).

Highlighting the “mutually implicated” nature of the mind and the corporeal senses, Barad speaks to the ways that various intertwining manners of knowing and being uniquely constitute the *specifics* of our intra-actions with others. In the section of Hearne’s work that I quoted on page 72 of this chapter, she says that to communicate with a horse, riders must risk “losing, for the moment at least, a great deal of the knowledge human grammars enable us to specialize in.” The *temporary* nature of the loss is important here. While I prefer to think in terms of a perspective shift rather than a “loss,” Hearne gets at the way successful communication with a horse upends our typical manner of perceiving and being in the world (a perception which both informs and is informed by language). Losing human knowledge “for the moment” of an intra-action speaks to the importance of shifting in accordance with the context of communication and the particular capacities of the communicators. Meaning is transmitted in multiplicitous ways; the manner in which I communicate with a horse is very different than the way I would communicate with my dog, or a tree, or another human. And even intra-human communication varies vastly person to person. The balance between the

25Lori Gruen helpfully explains Barad’s coining of the term “intra-action:” “intra-actions differ from interactions in that interactions occur when there are two or more separate things that come into contact. Intra-actions are what makes those separate things possible in the first place” (Gruen 2015: 65). “Intra-action” implies the constitutive nature of our relationships with others.
somatic and intellectual faculties we are using at any given time is perpetually reconfigured according to the particularities of our intra-actions with others. When working with horses or dancing with other humans, I am much more tuned into physical sensory stimuli; alternately, when having an intellectual discussion or crafting the sentences that I type onto this page, I am relying more heavily on my specific cognitive capacities. But the cognitive and the sensory can never truly be separated. When I was riding Fresa, the knowledge that we were about to speed up was transmitted to my body: I felt the thought “canter” as a quiver of excitement my stomach, my thighs and my back. I physically anticipated its rhythm, which Fresa picked up on as well. And subsequently, my intellectual understanding of the word *canter* was deepened and slightly altered by the lived experience of that gait. Knowing contributed to being, and in turn, being further enhanced my knowledge.

**co-becoming, not merging**

Drawing on Barad’s work, Lori Gruen explains that our individual identities do not exist in a vacuum, but are rather constituted by our inevitable entanglements with one another. “There is no self or other prior to our intra-actions,” she says (Gruen 2015:65). Rather, we are continuously affected by and affecting the agentive individuals we move in relation with. Co-constituted identities implicate an ethical responsibility to others and a need for the kind of “ethico-onto-epistem-ology” that Barad calls for. Gruen and Barad stress the importance of cultivating an awareness of how our intra-actions continually refigure our individual identities and play a constitutive role in the continuous becoming of the world itself.
But becoming together is not the same as becoming one. This is a common misconception I’ve run into fairly frequently, particularly in the literature surrounding horse-human attunement. Barbara Smuts writes about the capacity for individuals communicating across species to “…experience such a profound degree of intimacy that their subjective identities seem to merge into a single being or a single awareness…” (Smuts 2001:307). Gala Argent invokes a similar idea, reflected in many of her quotes from interviewees: “To ride a horse well, in the sense of creating a harmonious partnership, we must “become horse…” said one woman. Another agrees, “I have come to appreciate just how important a forgetting of our separate human self is if we are to ride well” (Argent 2013:112). LaMothe writes, “My sense of self dissolves by virtue of the moves I am making” (LaMothe 2012:100). My friend Sonja also described her relationship with Ranger in these terms: “My mind and body moved with his body and the synchronization got better and better. You are a part of the horse and the horse is part of you” (personal communication 2015).

I am certainly wary of “the folly of trying to establish an individual identity over and against other bodies, including our own” (Deleuze and Guattari, in Bennett 2010:97-98), and the oppressive relationships that may result. But conflating very different subjective experiences as “one” devalues individuals’ unique perspectives. Recall Gruen’s words that I quoted on page 19: “For many whose subjectivity, agency and experiences have been undermined, questioned, or denied, the maintenance of a self-identity is an achievement and not one that they are willing to give up so readily…” Humbly recognizing our differences is crucial to doing the kind of interpretive labor necessary to meet another being halfway in a relationship.
Catriona Mackenzie provides a helpful perspective on relational autonomy – the idea that we cannot consider agency outside of the social and relational influences that constitute it (Mackenzie 2008). Understanding individual agency requires recognizing that our existences are intersubjective: “Our sense of who we are is intrinsically bound up with, and vulnerable to, our relationships with others…” (Mackenzie 2008:527). For Mackenzie, agency is not a result of independence; rather, “intersubjective recognition” is crucial to autonomy.

Furthermore, if our identities are continuously socially shaped, then our individuality – and the autonomy that is built off of it – is never static. In her book *Becoming Undone*, Elizabeth Grosz pushes for a fluid conception of difference, rather than a set of distinguishable traits off of which static classifications can be formed. Grosz sees difference as it exists in motion – a continuous, generative force of life:

> [Difference] stretches, transforms, and opens up any identity to its provisional vicissitudes, its shimmering self-variations that enable it to become other than what it is. I am more interested now in those differences that make us ‘more than what we are,’ recognizable perhaps for a moment in our path of becoming and self-overcoming but never fixed in terms of how we can be read (by others) or how we classify ourselves (Grosz 2011:91-92).

In emphasizing the elasticity of difference, Grosz disassembles the very notions upon which our understanding of separateness is based. By focusing on “constitutive rather than comparative differences” (Grosz 2011:96), she shows how individuality and togetherness are not combatants, but are rather inextricably bound. Actions, “and the immanent patterns they form and the bodily alignments they create, are as close to identity as we can get,” says Grosz (2011:98). A moment of rhythmic unity with a horse is an experience of being “more than what we are,” as Grosz says; however, it does not mean that we become the same as a horse. In his paper “Rethinking the Animate, Re-Animating Thought,” anthropologist Tim Ingold writes similarly about life as “a
continuous birth,” an immanent generation of beings that “continually and reciprocally bring each other into existence” (Ingold 2006:10,11). Echoing Gruen, LaMothe, Grosz and Mackenzie, he stresses the primacy of movement in understanding our relationships with others, in what he sees as an open network of becoming. Like Grosz, Ingold questions the assumption that the world can divided up into living and non-living categories - or for that matter, that the world can be corralled into classifications at all. Oppressive value-hierarchies rely on a static conception of life that can be cordoned off into quantifiable differences; alternately, a perception of a universe that is perpetually in flux ruptures notions of mastery and control over others, because life is impossible to pin down.

Shared motion between a horse and rider is an example of the way two very different selves expand by virtue of their synchronization while retaining their individuality. The beautiful part about riding is that to remain in harmony, I must have an autonomous sense of balance: I need to use a strong core to stay centered and upright, and avoid leaning on the reins or bouncing on a horse’s back to stay on (which would inhibit their natural motion and could potentially hurt them). At the same time, I must allow myself to move in response to the horse’s rhythm, relaxing my hips and lower back in order to align with their motion instead of stiffly pushing against it. The equestrian world calls it having an “independent seat.” When Fresa and I cantered up the road, I didn’t cling onto her neck for dear life – I actually put my hands out to my side, and let my legs hang loose, instead of clutching her barrel with my thighs. Mutual riding is an embodiment of a flexible, relationally autonomous self.
On the journey of understanding more about harmony and rhythm, I sought out those whose livelihoods depend on their expertise in those areas: musicians. I reached out to a friend who is a professional singer/songwriter, who wrote this back:

Musical harmony is more than two people singing at the same time. Something happens to voices when they make noise together: I kind of picture it like two gears locking into each other. There's almost an attachment that happens between the two voices - they lock into place and a special sound is created, one that can't be achieved by one person. It's unifying, communicative. When I sing with someone who I love, my voice locks more deeply into theirs. Something about shared feelings between people can actually affect the sound that comes out when they sing together: it is warmer, more satisfying to the ear, than two vocals from different people placed on top of one another. Music, or creating music with other people, is really just communication with other people (personal communication 2015).

Musical harmony is another simple and beautiful manifestation of relational autonomy. Two singers must be able to uphold their separate vocal parts: if the different notes they sing merge into one melody, the arrangement breaks down, and the marvelous harmony is lost. Another friend and brilliant cellist, Mel, wrote something similar to me: “When singing with others, [you can feel] sound waves align until you can feel their reverberations deep in your own body. To be the most honest, when I really align with someone musically, it can be as powerful and as transcendently intimate as the act of breathing deeply with someone while having sex” (personal communication 2015). The attunement of two voices or bodies creates something altogether new and richer, something that is greater than the sum of its parts. In the swings and falls, the reverberating underbelly of the downbeats, we encounter each other; we resonate.
three :: rhythms

rhythm: time order in the succession or occurrence of things, from Greek ῥέων, ‘to flow. In music, the proportion kept between the time of a movement and another different one; an appreciation on the ‘flux of becoming’ (Iparraguirre 2015:9-10).

moment: from Latin momentum and movimentum, movement

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Rainy season, still. Two-thousand-and-fifteen. We are riding together in the arena, playing a new game with the horses that involves crossing the ring at a walk until we reach an orange cone in the middle, at which point we ask the horses to transition into a canter. I am watching Sonja and Ranger, the pair I idolize for their near-flawless synchronization and the depth of their connection, and they are struggling. They reach the cone, and Sonja asks for the canter: left leg back, a cluck with her mouth, a push behind the girth with her calf. All the correct cues. She tries this several times, but each time they get to the cone, Ranger merely picks up a fast and bouncy trot. They are both becoming increasingly stressed, Sonja frustrated with herself, and Ranger frustrated because he senses Sonja’s frustration but can’t figure out what she wants. Confused, I look at Sonja, trying to discern what isn’t working. It’s immediately apparent in her face: she’s not really there, not really with Ranger. All her muscles are coiled tightly in concentration, her eyebrows furrowed down into her eyes, her shoulders raised up to her ears. Her back and torso are so stiff from nerves that she bounces up and down in the saddle rather than sinking into it, her body already anticipating failure before she’s even given Ranger a chance to respond correctly. She tries maybe ten times before dismounting and leaving the ring in silence – Sonja is one of the few people I have met who is harder on herself than I am. She wouldn’t say anything at all for a while; hours later, rocking in a hammock, she broke down crying. I am always afraid when people watch me
ride, she said. Afraid I won't be good enough. The barn where I used to work, the owners took my job away because I wasn't a good enough rider. They told me I was useless in the stable. My boyfriend broke up with me the same day. I was really depressed for months. Now whenever people watch me ride, all I can think about is what happens if I don't succeed, and I want to throw up.

Linda Kohanov writes:

The common human habit of suppressing negative or socially unacceptable feelings is notoriously unsettling to a species that survives by being able to gauge a predator’s presence and intentions at a distance. A person who is “emotionally incongruent,” who acts one way while feeling the opposite, appears dangerously out of focus to the equine awareness system (Kohanov 2001: 32-33).

Sonja was asking Ranger to canter in all the correct ways, but what was most clear to him was the extreme tension and fear conveyed through her body and energy; her fear of future failure distracted her from present motion with Ranger, and physically altered the messages her body communicated.

When I went back to visit Costa Rica this past January, I was partnered with a new horse, Lady, who was initially incomprehensible to me. I never expected to work with her, never even felt drawn to her. In my eyes, she was a bit of a brick wall of a creature, tall and bony but thick-skinned. But for whatever reason, my trainer decided to pair us together. Lady was in need of attention, and, whether I wanted to or not, I had much to learn from her.

The humans in Lady's life have never given her much reason to like us. She was cooped up in a stall for years, ridden with a saddle that pinched and imprinted sores on her back, and left untended after developing a liver and a skin disease. So I didn’t blame her in the slightest for pinning her ears when I came near (the clearest signal from a horse to go away, often followed by a nip). I didn’t blame her when I ignored the ears and touched her anyway, and she tried to bite me. I put my hand on her back where the
saddle would go, and she swung her head around with her ears flat back on her neck, teeth bared. I was supposed to be reassuring her, keeping her calm by being calm myself. But as much as I tried to pretend I was relaxed, I hadn’t convinced myself of this, and I certainly had not convinced her. I was not afraid that she’d physically hurt me – she was not really aggressive, just expressing her discomfort with the situation. But her discomfort was exactly what scared me. I couldn’t help it; I took it personally. It was a slap in the face, a clear sign that she wanted me to go away, which felt like a pretty big failure on my part.

But what impetus had I given her to want to be around me? Our time together had become more about me than her. About me wanting to feel confident in my abilities, wanting to prove myself, wanting her to like me so I could carry away a sense of success from the situation. The stretch of my arm out to pet her neck was intended to be slow and relaxed – but tension and insecurity clung to my calm façade. My movement was more pleading than reassuring: Please let me pet you without biting me, I don’t want to feel bad about myself. I was desperately attached to the outcome. I wanted to “fix” this horse, and I only had two weeks on the farm; every day without forward progress felt like a failure. The brevity of my stay instilled urgency in me, an urgency that knotted itself tight and heavy in my body and was immediately apparent to Lady. And this I will tell you: Lady did not care in the slightest whether or not I proved myself to her or to anybody else. She didn’t give a damn.

I knew that my preoccupation with the future fulfillment of an agenda was getting in the way of our connection. But telling myself to “just be present” is not as easy as it may sound. The more I focused on relaxing, the more my nerves thickened and coiled. When Lady moved her neck just the slightest bit, I anticipated a bite, and I
jumped back spastically. My body language became increasingly erratic and disjointed, which Lady perceived as insecurity. If my behavior communicated anything to her at all, it was that she ought to be nervous. As prey animals, horses are acutely and immediately perceptive of any tension in their fellow herd members, because it signals the possibility of a nearby predator, and the potentially urgent need to turn and run. My jumpiness kept Lady on the lookout for an impending threat. She didn’t feel safe relaxing, and I was certainly not behaving as the kind of leader that would be able to protect her.

She started to move away from me whenever she got the chance. She quickly devised a game in which, when I attempted to get on her back to ride, she’d bare her teeth at me and inch just far enough away that I couldn’t swing my leg over. My trainer noticed I was struggling. She came over and took the reins from me. She stood next to Lady, a knee bent, weight cocked to one hip, at ease. Horses stand the same way when they are calm, shifting their weight off of one back hip or the other. Because it is harder to immediately take off running from this stance, it is a vulnerable position. So when my trainer stood this way, she appeared unthreatening, and even more importantly, she was signaling that there was nothing nearby to be afraid of – it was a safe moment at which to be vulnerable. Without changing her position, my trainer reached out and stretched Lady’s head toward her chest with the reins, initiating the same movement that Lady had been using to try and bite me. She released her neck and then drew it back again, and again, in a slow, consistent tempo. Almost immediately, Lady exhaled through her nostrils, and perked up her ears; the rhythmic motion was both soothing and intriguing to her. “You have to move more rhythmically,” my trainer told me. Lady in particular needed consistency. She was comforted if she could predict my movements; that communicated certainty.
As it turned out, the rhythm calmed me down, too. The next morning, I walked up to Lady in the pasture. I told myself it didn’t matter if she turned away or ignored me; my only goal was to pet her. I vowed not to do anything else (try to saddle or ride her, for example) until she gave me some sign that she enjoyed my presence, however long it took: minutes, hours, days. Maybe I wouldn’t even ride her before I left, I thought, but it didn’t matter, that just couldn’t be my goal anymore. Letting go of my agenda with Lady became my new elusive but critical goal. I moved my palm slowly to her neck, petting her and singing a soothing song out loud to lull my body into a steady pace. I ran my hand across her skin in that same tempo over and over until the rhythm seemed to move my arm of its own accord. For the first time since I started working with her, Lady lowered her head, blew air out of her nostrils, and turned her nose to me softly, curiously, sniffing in greeting. I wanted to laugh because suddenly it all felt so obvious. I couldn’t control the outcome of our time together, I couldn’t think my way into presence. But by attuning to Lady’s individual rhythm that morning, I was able to be with her in a way that hadn’t previously seemed possible. My motion was intuitive and intentional. My breathing was slower, but there was a newfound softness to it as well, a gentle texture to its tempo. Life is so much subtler than we realize, I thought, and we can be so much softer than we are.

Time is experienced subjectively; that is, not all beings move through the world according to the same perception of time. Horses have made this readily apparent to me. They exist at much slower tempos than most people I have met, and as prey animals, their awareness is acutely tuned in to present stimuli. They are ready to change their plans at any second due to a snapping twig or shadow behind them that might signal the
approach of a predator. They are thus immediately aware of an energetic shift in nearby individuals or the surrounding space. Lady in particular, a tentative, sensitive introvert, quickly became over-stimulated when I moved too rapidly or rambunctiously around her.

I should introduce a crucial qualification here: when I say horses are tuned in to the present, I don’t mean that they don’t act with an awareness of past or future. They are deeply affected by past experience; their impressive memories are usually compared to elephants.’ And goals powerfully motivate them: for example, my trail ride with Fresa was successful because, as opposed to walking in circles around the ring (where she could see no impetus for moving underneath me), on the trail she had a sense of going somewhere. Goals helped make our interactions more exciting (I often hed treats for her to search for when I introduced a new game or task); goals also helped clarify my intentions. Asking Fresa to move sideways didn’t make a lot of sense when I first tried it in an open field, but when I encouraged her to sidestep to navigate the narrow gap through the gate to her pasture, she caught on much more quickly. Sometimes she’d invent her own goals: recall the yoga ball that she’d chase and kick all the way across the paddock.

These are all examples of shared goals: co-created and co-articulated. As opposed to one-sided agendas that preclude connection, shared goals have the potential to deepen partnership. It was my preoccupation with achieving a specifically one-sided goal (riding Lady) on a pre-determined, fixed timeline (the few days I had left on the farm) that created distance between us. Stepping out of the subjective timeframe that was

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26 Side passing (also known as “leg yielding”) is a common and important maneuver used both to get a horse to think about where their feet are going, make their bodies more supple and limber, and practically navigate tight spaces.
governing my actions and attuning instead to Lady’s particular rhythm gave me a way to perceive the world on her terms, at her cadence. Aligning with the temporal specificity of a particular interaction with another creature helps us attend to the uniqueness of each encounter and oscillate between the diverse rhythms of being in the world.

As defined by anthropologist Gonzalez Iparraguirre, time is the “phenomenon of becoming,” while temporality refers to its culturally specific interpretation (Iparraguirre 2015:2). If we understand identity as a process of becoming that is continually shaped by our entanglements with others, then the varying perceptions of that becoming (temporalities) must also inevitably bump up against one another and intermingle. Jakob von Uexküll was a biologist famous for his use of the German word Umwelt (literally, ‘environment’) to describe the perceptual, subjective world in which a particular being operates. For von Uexküll, the subjective experience of time (which I will call temporality) is a crucial component of a specific Umwelt; even the length of a moment varies for different life forms. This is a dramatic shift from the typical notion of time as the great figure of objectivity: “Time, which frames all happening, seems to us to be the only objectively stable thing in contrast to the colorful change of its contents, and now we see that the subject sways the time of his own world” (von Uexküll 1934:13).

Given the diversity of tempos at which creatures experience life, operating under the assumption that time is a universal, metronomic constant inhibits our ability to relate to others. Relationships become one-sided, and we don’t hold ourselves accountable to shifting our own perceptions. “Since we humans are accustomed to carry our existence laboriously from one goal to the next, we are convinced that animals live in the same fashion,” von Uexküll says. “This is a fallacy which has led research astray again and
again” (von Uexküll 1934:42).\textsuperscript{27} His point speaks to the difficulty I had working with Lady. My temporal prioritization of personal, future goals over our shared present experience precluded mutual connection between us.

As I mentioned before, horses \textit{do} act with goals in mind.\textsuperscript{28} The perception of time as moving toward a goal is not in itself a problem; the danger lies in the false assumption of its universality, and the subsequent ascription of such a mindset to all life \textit{at all times}. Von Uexküll uses the metaphor of an oak tree to describe the ways in which different subjective perceptions of life interact without being subsumed into one another:

In all the hundred different Umwelten of its inmates [ants, beetles, beetle eggs, owls, etc.], the oak tree as an object plays a highly varied role, at one time with some of its parts, at another time with others…Should we attempt to epitomize all the contradictory properties which the oak tree as an object displays, only chaos would result. And yet they are all but parts of a subject firmly structured in itself, which bears and harbors all these Umwelten – not comprehended and never discernible to all the builders of these Umwelten…What we have found on a small scale in the oak tree is enacted on the life tree of nature in vast dimensions (1934:75-76).

The idea is not to assert that there is a single better or alternative method of being in time. My aim is rather is to find ways to be more attentive to the diversity of phenomenological understandings of time in different “Umwelts.” Most of us continue to carry out our existences as if there were only one way of perceiving time, a dangerous

\textsuperscript{27} While von Uexküll seems to be flagrantly universalizing the category of the human here, he later goes on to explain that no two human Umwelten are the same, either (1934:50), so I don’t want to read too much into this generalization of human and animal categories.

\textsuperscript{28} von Uexküll would disagree with me here. He attributes goals to exclusively human Umwelten (1934:42).
ontological misconception; how might we attune instead to different life-temps at the particular moment of our encounters with one another?  

**temporal prioritization of future success: a cultural context**

Coming into rhythm with Lady required a temporary rupture of the progress-based timeline to which I have been culturally habituated. It is crucial to recognize that, while privileging future progress over current experience is not inherently bad, it is a culturally specific way of inhabiting time. But because it is the functionally hegemonic temporal model, it gets falsely naturalized as the only possible perception of time (Iparraguirre 2015).

The roots of this model can be traced back to the Judeo-Christian emphasis on divine salvation for a chosen people. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, history is envisioned as a progressive march from the year of Christ’s birth to the ultimate goal of eternal redemption, toward which all life’s actions are oriented (Fabian 1983, Iparraguirre 2015). The redemptive quality of the future endpoint here is key, because whatever happens on the way there becomes less important and morally justifiable. Interestingly, as Western culture post Enlightenment era became increasingly secularized, it continued to temporally locate redemption in the future. Redemption just took new forms: evolutionary advancement, social development, and economic progress. Anthropologist Johannes Fabian wrote that faith in God was replaced by “faith in progress and industry…[which] pretended to rest on strictly scientific hence universally valid principles” (Fabian 1983:17). And according to Deborah Rose, “Modernity has

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29 This is also a helpful way to consider my discussion of language in chapter two: a manner of communication (verbalized words/body language/etc.) is the result of a specific Umwelt and perceptual world, and the way we communicate with others should recognize this.
privileged a paradigm of progress within which human agency is the driving force” (Rose 2004:16). God’s jurisdiction over human salvation was re-relegated to human hands (but note that ‘human’ here refers only to the agency of those specific humans that have conveniently situated themselves closest to future progress – as Rose reiterates, “White man [is positioned] as time lord” (Rose 2004:63)). Secularized society did not change the idea of a divine endpoint that outweighed present conditions, but it did manage to project European colonizers into a suspiciously God-like category.

The ease with which this theological privileging of the future is mapped onto the secular ideology of social and economic development illuminates how it conveniently functions to privilege certain lives over others by positioning them closer to “redemption.” Progress-oriented temporalities perpetuate relationships of oppression in so far as they place the Western hegemonic individual on a temporal slope above other humans, animals, and the earth. According to Fabian, this has contributed to the “intellectual justification of the colonial enterprise” (Fabian 1983:17). Progress is understood in capitalist terms as cultural advancement, reflected by economic success, technological innovation, and anything else that makes society increasingly “civilized” (and therefore more distant from “uncivilized” peoples, other animals and so-called nature). Not only are less “developed” societies envisioned as inferior; the conflation of success with future advancement has the bizarre effect of situating the Global South as behind in time, as if “underdeveloped” societies were already part of the history of the developed world. This conflation of cultural and temporal difference even manifests in the terms used to discuss the Global South: terms like “backwards,” “stuck in the past,” and needing to “catch up,” as if we didn’t all exist right now. As Rose says, “Distance in space equals distance in time… In so far as the future is the privileged time, those
spatially closest to the future are in a privileged position” (Rose 2004:154-155). This simultaneously creates immutable distance from and dependence on the modern hegemonic figure. Writing about the European settlement in Australia, Rose says that the conflation of space with time, and of future with superiority, creates “…a kind of wasteland in which Aboriginal people’s ‘now’ is already the western world’s ‘yesterday’” (Rose 2004:155).

monological relationships

When the ideology behind divine salvation is mapped onto colonization, it privileges the agency of the white Western male figurehead, and builds its definition of progress based on what progress means specifically for those individuals, at the expense of the colonized other. This trend is deeply entrenched in modern development initiatives that purportedly aim to extend wealth and Western progress to the Global South. The deviousness of many development projects lies in the socially circulated idea that one model of “development” is ubiquitously desirable, beneficial, and sustainable. Rose comments on the dangers of prescribing or universalizing a singular model of being in the world: “This is monologue masquerading as conversation, masturbation posing as productive interaction; it is a narcissism so profound that it purports to provide a universal knowledge when in fact its violent erasures are universalizing its own singular and powerful isolation” (Rose 2004:20). Attempting to “share” the wealth just serves to secure international dependence on global poles of power. Thinker and activist Gustavo Esteva agrees: “Underdevelopment… converts participation into a manipulative trick to involve people in struggles for getting what the powerful want to impose on them” (Esteva 1992:8).
The notion of redemption, whether it is decorated by the hand of God or the golden riches of Civilization, creates a sense of inferiority of the current moment that absolves us from responsibility to the conditions of the present. Rose summarizes:

The vision of a future which will transcend the past, a future in which current contradictions and current suffering will be left behind enables us to understand ourselves in an imaginary state of future achievement. It thus enables us to turn our backs on current social facts of pain, damage, destruction and despair which exist in the present, but which we will only acknowledge as our past (Rose 2004:17).

As the future zooms into focus, present concerns become blurry; the current moment is run over by the mad dash toward whatever is next. If future redemption will absolve us, we needn't worry about our ethical responsibility in the present. We are no longer accountable to our entanglements; our worldly others become tools we can use orconsume on our own merry way to personal salvation. The fabricated sense that we operate in a vacuum, that our Umwelt is the only Umwelt, undergirds much violence in the world. Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas defines violence as “acting as if one were alone; it denies relationship, denies responsibility, and thus effectively denies others” (in Rose 2004:13). This echoes Graeber’s work on interpretive labor: the hegemonic figure operates as if they aren’t relationally intertwined, while the subjugated individual or group is all too aware of the relationship and its staggering terms. Rose says that a key mechanism of power is “the ability not to hear what is being said, not to experience the consequences of one’s actions… others never get to talk back on their own terms. Communication is all one way as the pole of power refuses to receive the feedback that would cause it to change itself, or to open itself to dialogue” (Rose 2004:20).

When I first began to work with Lady, my actions were driven by my desire for personal advancement and validation from my trainer. This desire effectively put blinders up to the signals of discomfort Lady was giving me, and I ignored my
responsibility to respond to those signals. Instead, I just became tenser, overwhelmed by my own frustration and lack of progress. As poles of power, humans often turn a blind eye to the communicative efforts of the horses we are with and our relationships become, in Rose’s words, monological (Rose 2004:Part One). To form a dialogue with Lady, I had to radically alter my perception of time as moving stubbornly toward a one-sided goal that was more important than the conditions of our shared present.

**herd rhythms**

If the temporal prioritization of future achievement lends itself to relationships of mastery and control over others, attuning to the temporal specificity of a particular encounter can give us more reciprocal ways of connecting. While each individual horse moves at the tempo of their individual Umwelt, horses in general do share a particular aptitude for attuning to the rhythms around them. This is what makes them so sensitive to synchronization, and why riding has the potential to occur on such subtle, intuitive terms.

Watching a large group of running horses is marvelously satisfying. Their surging hooves strike the ground in resounding unison, a powerful amplification of a specific, shared tempo. This power is enhanced by the fact that it is a somewhat rare occurrence. When they are relaxed, horses are stoic, intentional movers. Their respiration rates fall below humans,’ and their collective cadence as a herd is gentle. They will stand in one spot in the pasture as long as possible, swishing their tails and flinching their skin to shake off flies, steadily churning their jaws to chew the grass. They only take steps (one front hoof at a time) when they have absolutely run out of grass within immediate grasp of their nose. Sitting in a field of calm, grazing horses can be quite a meditative
experience. It is amazing how much I move extraneously when I’m not paying attention; being hyper-aware of the possible implications of each slight turn of my head or shift of my hand is revelatory and often tremendously difficult.

If a member of the herd breaks the slow rhythm of grazing with a sudden jolt up of their head or a hasty jump forward, it is immediately clear to everyone nearby that something has gone awry. It is shocking to the nervous system, akin perhaps to the feeling you’d get if someone suddenly started shouting in a library. So to the sensitive perception of horses, most human movement is loud and clumsy. It is easy for them to become over-stimulated by us, and they often learn quickly to tune us out. Lady interpreted my erratic movement as mindless, dissonant chatter.

Spending an extended period of time living with a horse herd illuminated how crucial adjusting our rhythms to match theirs was for forming coeval relationships. Many of the interns and visiting vacationers to our finca (mostly middle to upper class Europeans) come from high-powered, goal-oriented lifestyles. My trainer said it often takes at least a month before she sees people ease into the rhythm of the farm. And until then, they tend to struggle with the horses. “That is the biggest problem people run into with horses,” she said. “If they are thinking about whether or not they are going to succeed, if they are afraid of how the horse will react, if they are trying to remember the exercise or think about how the exercise went last time – they are already not there. They have already lost the horse” (personal communication 2015).
humans in time with horses

As deeply entrenched as progress-oriented mindsets are for many of us, the desire to transcend or escape their limits seems to be what keeps many of us with horses. The healing capacity of experiencing an alternate way of moving through time was a common thread in most of my conversations and interviews, particularly with people who have persisted in molding their lives around horses for its duration. My trainer Sarah expressed this shift when I asked her why horses are so important to her:

As opposed to hectic, disconnected, rushed and erratic use of time, energy and excessive movement, I believe in today’s fast paced society the horses’ way of living is so different, that that's what is appealing. They are energy and movement conservationists, they don't over-use or overdo anything. Every movement has a purpose. [People] also want to feel connected and purposeful when society tells us we need to be and do more. Horses are content with themselves, in their own fluff and fur and don't worry too much about anything that isn’t about 'real' living. In their world it's live or die. To be with them and to listen to them is quite humbling. That is also what keeps me involved with them (personal communication 2015)

This reflects a significant difference between having a purpose, and feeling rushed toward “being and doing more” (a feeling that drove my initial one-sided goals with Lady and Fresa). While the hectic hurry toward advancement often blinds us to the current moment, having a purpose can ground us in a richer present that is connected with (but not bound to) the future. My trainer in Costa Rica said that when she synchronizes with her horses, “It’s like a meditative state, so high concentration on the moment – so intense, it can feel like hours even when it is just ten minutes” (personal communication 2015). I noticed this as well; after I left the herd’s field or finished riding or playing, I often had to check my watch and readjust my plans to the previous schedule I’d made for myself. My fellow student Elena agreed; she said that she never knows if it has been fifteen minutes or two hours when she’s spending time with the horse herd (personal communication 2015).
Sonja spoke of the great relief her time with Ranger gave her: “I was never thinking of daily problems or time. You are just in the moment and that calmed me down. I felt centered and absolutely peaceful…this state of mind is addictive” (personal communication 2015). And Lisa, the therapeutic riding director, opened up to me about her own healing experiences: “It’s about presence – consistency – athleticism – a combination of exercise and mental relief. When my dad committed suicide and I was the one that found him – when I was depressed – I went to ride and all I was able to think about in those moments was where to steer or how to ride or what to do next” (personal communication 2015).

I heard this again and again. My fellow intern Sam,30 who was also going through a period of intense grief, said that “The only time I am not thinking about something else is when I am with the horses – for an hour or two I think about nothing else, for a while I can forget about everything else. With the babies too” (personal communication 2015). Sam was also the farm nanny, and responsible for my trainer’s two baby girls.

Living with horses – and with babies – twenty-four hours a day in Costa Rica was a constant reminder that our experience of time is always shifting. If the babies cry, we drop all our other plans to go pick them up. If a horse escapes, we forget everything else and go catch them so that they don’t run off to the highway. When it rains, we stop what we are doing to let the horses into their paddock, where they have a roof.

There is momentous solace afforded by these moments of presence. There is a significant difference, though, between briefly forgetting about other worries (which is more of an escape than an ontological shift), and the much more difficult task of holding ourselves accountable to others’ way of being in the world. Rhythmic attunement was

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30 Name changed
one way I found to honor that accountability. Aligning to the specific pace of interactions is much harder than pretending to forget about the future; just running away to hang out in a herd of horses for the rest of my life is as unfeasible as it is tempting. The more radical and emotionally challenging journey seeks a synthesis, a certain friendly mingling of Umwelts. It requires a flexibility and an openness to moving in and out of different perceptions of time. But with that openness comes vulnerability, and that is exactly what makes it so hard.

**vulnerable accountability**

In chapter one I defined vulnerability in this context as an openness to being affected by others. Allowing ourselves to be affected helps us perceive the responses of others, and alter our own responses accordingly. An avowal of vulnerability incites a shift from one-sided, monological relationships to two-sided relationships in which both parties have to adjust in order to communicate with each other. Rose describes this process as a dialogue that “seeks relationships across otherness without seeking to erase difference…[ethical dialogue] is open, and thus [the] outcome is not known in advance” (Rose 2004:21). Rhythmic attunement is an effective way of engaging in a dialogue with a creature who does not use the same verbal words as we do. When I began working with Lady, she was agitated and unhappy. Paying attention to the slow, smooth tempo at which she operated, and softening my own pace and motion accordingly, finally gave me a way to respond to her dissatisfaction. Our relationship shifted from monologue to dialogue, and her subsequent responses – pointing her ears forward, coming up to sniff me of her own accord, and eventually, walking toward me to allow me to get on her back to ride – were increasingly positive.
Horses have much to teach us about vulnerability. Their perceptual world is defined by their existence as prey animals, so attuning to their rhythm of moving through life completely upends any delusions of mastery under which we may be operating. At one moment, a herd might be safely grazing, and at the next they could be fleeing from a wolf that’s hunting them. Horses aren’t chasing life down and swallowing its minutes; they have to pay attention to the possibility of a jaguar jumping out from the jungle, or search for a new food source when their area of grass runs out. Letting go of the outcome of my time with Lady – and with Fresa, and Santi, and so many others – was an excruciatingly vulnerable but ultimately profoundly cathartic experience. There were many times when Lady would just turn and walk away from me in front of my trainer, leaving me standing alone and ashamed, and there was nothing I could do about it. Forcing the terms of our relationship only created distance between us. But when she did choose to offer me her attention, to come to me on her terms, it was all the more meaningful, and there was no question that it was genuine.

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*Early August, two-thousand-and-fifteen.* Some of my most cherished moments at the finca occur when the day folds and I get to watch the night sink in around us. There’s a pregnant pause, a liminal hour or so, when the sunny noise of the chickens has quieted but the nighttime shrill of cicadas has not yet begun. The heat of the day blows off at dusk, and the whole farm seems to settle. My friend and I walk the steep slope of the mountainside field where the herd grazes at night, sitting down on a rock at its topmost edge. From the apex of the darkening pasture, we can just make out the distant city below us as it slowly twinkles into life. It has become an evening ritual, and the horses have learned quickly that this is a time exclusively for companionship and ear scratches.
All twelve of them amble over as soon as they hear the sound of the gate swinging shut. I sense them before I see them. They continue to graze, but they have transported their grass munching to us, a moving affirmation of our inclusion in the herd. Sitting on the rock, turned the other way, I feel the warmth of her exhalation before it hits me. Fresa’s whiskers just barely graze my jawbone, and in any less settled moment I wouldn’t have felt them. Her breath floats cautiously out of wide, curious nostrils. As she drops her head onto my shoulder, a tingling electricity dances out from the point of contact, the gentlest of blessings. My skin gives way to her weight, and I feel my breathing quiet to hers. Fifteen beats per minute, then twelve, then ten. I know that I have no control over how long she stays, I know that I can’t keep her here forever, so I make no move to grasp her head in my arms; I don’t turn to touch her. I just sit, allowing the rhythm of her breathing to change mine. I am full of the pungent scent of nearby sugar cane plants and overripe platanos. The smell is so thick it barely fits in my nose; it moves through me and slides down my spine, soothing my nervous system. Even noises come in a softer tempo: teeth on grass, a munch, a distant gurgle of the river, an exhalation. I have no sense of time passing, but the mosquitoes’ punctual emergence is my signal to go back inside and start making dinner. As I walk away, the arches of my feet sit warm in my shoes, and the dry, lingering sweetness of the plantain smell coats the roof of my mouth. The night wraps around me and pushes me back to our cottage, to dinner, to my bed. Every moment is an unfolding, and in these moments I am suspended and in these moments I am held.
Fresa, Costa Rica July 2015 (photo courtesy of Lisa Toskovski)
conclusion :: reverence

“When I face upstream I see the light on the water careening towards me, inevitably, freely... You don’t run down the present, pursue it with baited hooks and nets. You wait for it, empty-handed, and you are filled... The present is the wave that explodes over my head, flinging the air with particles at the height of its breathless unroll; it is the live water and light that bears from undisclosed sources the freshest news, renewed and renewing, world without end.”

- Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

The logic of domination and mastery over others relies upon a conception of a static world that can be ranked into fixed hierarchical categories and thus controlled. This ideology undergirds violent, oppressive relationships, envisaging the world and its constitutive creaturely inhabitants as inanimate mechanisms that can be instrumentalized and exploited.

Alternately, an attitude of vulnerable openness in a continually nascent world altogether ruptures that ideology of control and creates potential for generative, intimate connections.

Horses continue to open me to a world of ways of relating outside a framework of mastery. Their non-aggressive, generous temperaments and position as prey animals have made them a target of manipulation for hegemonic human progress; our relationships with them have historically been structured by violent domestication and control. And yet, if we allow ourselves to learn from them, they have a magnitude of insight to offer us. They have revealed to me a type of connection that transcends taxonomies of power, and given me hope for the possibility of profound mutual connection in a profusely diverse world.

In the first chapter, I introduced the possibility of reciprocity in human relationships with horses, and outlined some prerequisites for that reciprocity: the
relinquishment of one-sided agendas, time reserved for spontaneous play, and a posture of humble vulnerability that upends the structures of violence common to human-equine relationships.

In chapter two, I discussed how riding horses tends to highlight the best or worst of our relationships with them. Because it can be a deeply vulnerable act, it has the potential for great mutuality but has also been a site of some of the most violent forms of exploitation. I explore rhythmic, synchronous motion as one example of the way our entangled identities resonate and shift in relation to each other and co-become, without losing their autonomy or merging into one.

In the third chapter, I offer rhythmic attunement (which riding is one example of) as a way to respond to and align with horses’ individual ways of perceiving and being in the world (what von Uexküll calls Umwelten). While we cannot know what it means to perceive as or to be a horse, attuning to the unique frequencies of our encounters gives us a way to respond to the specificity of each intra-action. I argue that rhythmic attunement helps us engage in reciprocal dialogues with others.

Of course, a dialogue entails not only the ability to respond but also the ethical responsibility to do so. As Gloria Anzaldúa reminds us in her beautiful work “La Frontera,” “The ability to respond is what is meant by responsibility” (Anzaldúa 1981:20). Indeed, Merriam Webster defines responsible as “liable to be called upon to answer,” and both words stem from the Latin responsum, “to reply” (Merriam Webster Online 2016). Engaged dialogues perpetually acknowledge and act upon our responsibility to one another as co-agents. If an artificial sense of control leads to a disavowal of our entanglements with others, vulnerability stands to offer an engaged avowal – an awakened ability to respond.
In vignettes about my experiences, I have provided some examples of what mutual dialogue might look like with horses. What does rhythmic attunement and reciprocal dialogue look like in our relationships with other earthly beings, human and beyond? These are not easily answerable questions, of course; prescribing a universal “solution” or a generalized guideline of relating would undermine my discoveries throughout this thesis, which highlight the importance of attuning to the uniqueness of our encounters with others. I will try instead to point to a few specific potential ways that vulnerability and rhythmic attunement might lead to mutuality beyond just human-horse relationships, recognizing that this will always be an intersubjective but unique and individual journey.

co-becoming with the earth – ecosystemic attunement

Spring, two-thousand-and-fourteen. We are searching for specific rocks in a landscape made up entirely of rocks. Much of the path has eroded; cairns (stacks of small stones) are the only trail markers. We don’t talk much; we are listening to the rocks. And I don’t mean this in a poetic way. We are literally listening to the way they move under our feet, listening for a cracking or sliding that might signal their instability beneath us. We are also listening for rocks above us, especially ones we may have disrupted on the way down, that are dangerously disposed to tumbling. I start balancing my feet based off of the noises the nearby rocks have made. How a rock moves under me changes how I will move on top of it. I step lightly.

We try not to step on cryptobiotic soil, which is formed when cyanobacteria make a sticky web that prevents erosion, constituting one of the few nitrogen
contributors in the sparse and arid desert. It takes between five and ten thousand years
to build up, and it is destroyed instantly in many places by my clumsy footsteps.

Sometimes we don’t pay close enough attention. Once, a rock slips out from
under my friend’s feet entirely, carrying him with it and sending a slew of other rock
shards galloping down 30 feet in their wake. He is fine, but the rocks leave their warning
on his skin, in deep pink gashes and warm brown bruises all over his dusty legs.

The rocks are ochre and deep red. But at night, they are just shapes. The
batteries in our flashlights wear out too quickly. Moving through a vast expanse of dark
ground and sky, we are acutely aware of how little control we have. Our feet tread
tentative and slow.

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Deserts operate at a drastically different tempo than any other I have
experienced. Rhythmic attunement helped us respond to that particular environment:
walking more softly to balance on precarious rocks, or changing our course to avoid
stepping on cryptobiotic soil. In the five days we spent within the canyon walls, I learned
quickly to make every action an intentional reaction to what the desert was telling me.
Our behavior accorded to our distance from the river, or our position in relation to the
sun, or the depth of the sand at any given point on the trail. Our goals were shared and
immediate (like finding water to drink and purifying it) rather than individual and
hypothetical. This also incurred a temporal alignment within our group of humans, which
contributed to the unique kind of camaraderie I have rarely experienced in other settings.

When we climbed out of the canyon, all proud sweat caked with red dust, we
tumbled into a zippy Ford Focus and sped down the highway to meet friends at a
crowded restaurant. After spending five days sinking into sand, the pace was dizzying.
Amidst the happy chatter and slamming beer glasses and waitresses’ precarious swinging trays, I had to catch my breath, even though I was standing still. It felt like my life was on fast-forward.

Recognizing our vulnerability to the environment we are in helps us enter into a dialogue with our surroundings. My friends and I adjusted to the pulse of desert life, but the desert also shifted by virtue of our presence. We kept our impact minimal, but all life leaves some trace. And understanding ourselves as engaged with and vulnerable to the beings that we call our “resources” makes it much harder to consume more than we have to give back.

Thinking along similar lines, Eduardo Kohn speaks about his immersion in the dense ecology of the rainforest. He writes, “Being alive – being in the flow of life – involves aligning ourselves with an ever-increasing array of emerging habits” (Kohn 2013:62). He writes about the Runa communities in Ecuador’s Upper Amazon, that have an annual opportunity to catch and eat a local delicacy: a species of fat, winged leafcutter ants. While these ants are masters at camouflage, once a year they emerge from their normally hidden positions to fly into the air in a mating frenzy, rendering them visible to their many predators (humans, frogs, snakes, and more). Predicting their emergence is an extensive process, and the Runa must attend to various subtle signs of its imminence: the seasonal shift to a drier period, for instance, and any change in the behavior of the competing predators, all of whom are watching each other in an attempt to predict the flight of the ants. The ants time their emergence when they will be least vulnerable to those predators, searching for the window (usually in the early morning or at dusk) between the specific rhythms of nocturnal bats and daytime birds (Kohn 2013:78-80). Successfully catching the ants requires intensely detailed, goal-oriented planning;
however, this planning is simultaneously responsive to the intricate network of plans and
temporal cadences of the other implicated organisms and ecological agents.

In her work *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennet similarly describes the dialogical nature
of the unfolding relationships in the rainforest:

> Forests, trees, soil, microorganisms, and humans native and exotic to the
> rainforest are all responding, in real time and without predetermined outcome, to
each other and to the collective force of the shifting configurations that form.
The task at hand for humans is to find a more horizontal representation of the
relation between human and nonhuman actants in order to be more faithful to
the style of action pursued by each (Bennett 2009:97).

I propose rhythmic attunement as one possible way to be “more faithful to the
style of action” pursued by these intersecting, responsive agents. It is a way of engaging
in reciprocal dialogues with those entities who we would normally consider furthest from
conversational. Faith to a style of action, rhythmic attunement, alignment with habits –
these are all ways of connecting more mutually to those around us, while retaining
respect for their specific and nuanced ways of being in the world.

**intra-human vulnerability**

The rhythms of a desert or a rainforest are clearly dramatically different from the
typical tempo of my life at a high-powered university in the northeastern corner of the
United States. But there is also a huge diversity of rhythms just among human
populations, and we have a significant responsibility to recognize them and shift
accordingly.

Travelling is one type of encounter with foreign human cultural rhythms. I lived
in Morocco for the greater part of a year, and while I was there, my manner of moving
through my days shifted drastically. Walking through the overcrowded *medina* of Rabat,
the screeching cars, triple-time yells of vendors selling vegetables, and swarms of bodies
carrying chickens and children caused me to quicken my pace. The city and its inhabitants absolutely refused to be penned into my typically regimented schedule; they found my expectation of punctuality comical. A brief “lunch” with my host mom was likely to begin at five pm and become a six-hour gathering with the extended family.

My capacity to connect with local Moroccans relied on my ability to humbly shift to their rhythm of being in the world, rather than assume the superiority of the tempos I’ve been habituated to. Deborah Rose emphasizes this distinction when she discusses the contrast between appropriative tourism and more ethical “journeying.” The typical tourist experience, she suggests, involves a “packaging or purchasing of certain prescribed geographical and cultural sights and sounds.” This is placed in contrast to a “voyage into vulnerability…[that is] open to serendipitous direction by the world” (Rose 2004:191).

But perhaps an even more difficult task than attuning to remote rhythms is recognizing and being vulnerable to the different rhythms that are closest to us. It can be tempting, for those who have the opportunity, to escape to the solace of the alternate tempo of a horse herd, or a desert, or a far away culture as a sort of vacation, and then return back to the more comfortable and controllable rhythms of daily life. The more difficult and important work is learning to continuously, flexibly move between and respond to the rhythmic particularities of different Umwelten.

The rapid gentrification of many major urban centers heightens the urgency of respecting and adjusting to the different rhythms within our own neighborhoods. In light of my impending entrance into a new city as a white, educated college graduate, I feel saliently the need for a way to connect humbly and respectfully with the original members of a community I might move to. This will mean something different for
different individuals in different contexts; for me, it might mean working in a restaurant with long-term community residents, joining a public club sports teams, or going to a long-standing dance club at which I am a racial minority. Being accountable to our entanglements means attuning to all the alternate rhythms we encounter – not just the more exciting or more convenient ones. I, for one, have always been quite comfortable with the quiet pace of a forest, having grown up in rural areas. Crowded urban centers are further from my comfort zone than the desert was, and require just as drastic a shift in pace. But attuning to cities expands my ability to empathize with the huge population of humans who live there. By allowing myself be swept into the swinging, heavy beat of drums and dancing bodies in an inner city club, or joining the buzz of purposeful pedestrians swarming about convoluted urban streets, I am extending the scope of how I can connect to others.

Let’s zoom in to the intimate site where much of relational attunement occurs – specific interactions between individuals. Linda Kohanov reflected on the importance of adjusting to the affective state and perceptual world of others in her work with autistic and developmentally disabled humans (a skill that she credits horses for teaching her). She was watching TV with Charles, one of the most violent and behaviorally unpredictable men at a group home where she worked. Charles was deaf, and in an attempt to empathize and attune to his perspective, Kohanov turned off the sound on the television and removed other stimuli in what was a typically chaotic, bustling space. She sat without agenda, simply “doing nothing” with Charles. Eventually, just staring at the walls in the dimly lit room, their breathing began to align, and she felt his volatile tension soften to calm relief. She smiled, looked at Charles, and saw tears streaming down his face. It was an experience of “…resonating with Charles on a similar
frequency,” she writes. “As my breathing slowed, the rising and falling of Charles’ chest became deeper and more relaxed in response,” she says. “We hugged briefly in the center of the room. ‘Thank you for showing me your secret world,’ I signed” (Kohanov 2001:139-140).

Barreling through life in rigid capitulation to a predetermined, ego-driven pace blinds us to the multitude of ways of perceiving and being in the world, and impedes our ability to relate to others. Alternately, adjusting to the specific rhythms of our encounters creates room for profound intimacy to develop. Each intra-action with another being – even with an individual with whom we’ve long been building a relationship – is a mutual re-discovery. It is given in newness, and is entirely different than any previous instance of being together. A marvelous sort of enchantment comes with this realization, as every nuanced particularity of an encounter is a birth in this continuously generating world.

Ingold speaks of a certain astonishment that erupts from the relinquishment of control: “Astonishment, I think, is the other side of the coin to the very openness to the world… It is the sense of wonder that comes from riding the crest of the world’s continued birth. Yet along with openness comes vulnerability” (Ingold 2006:18, emphasis in original). My most moving moments with horses were tinged with that sort of wondrous reverence – playing in the river with Fresa, synchronizing my steps as I ran and danced with Santi, petting Lady and feeling her turn her nose toward me, curious and relaxed.

Because in the end? We can’t force relationships. I can’t force a lover to stay with me, I cannot force my potential employer to return my phone call. I cannot force Lady or Fresa to love me, but I can open myself, humbly, courageously, to the shape of our
time together. To return to Klaus Hempfling’s words, no matter what manner of force
we may use, *from the inside, they will not come.* Avowing vulnerability is terrifying. To be able
to give ourselves, openly – to be able to declare love, of any kind, without the certainty
of getting it back in return – is utterly upending, sometimes unimaginable.

But when we realize that all life is in flux anyway, the clenching fear loosens a
little; we are never stuck. As Frida Kahlo so wisely notes, *nothing is absolute, everything flies
and goes.* The world will not guarantee us anything. But its mystery keeps us. It keeps us
enchanted, and makes genuine connection all the more precious. What a marvel, to
stumble across a fine and difficult blessing such as this.

Mel, whose words I included on page 80, shared a journal entry with me,
regarding the summer she was 16 years old and playing music in an old barn on a farm.31

This is what she wrote:

By the time we found our seats, the barn walls held us holy in an old barn
reverent with magic and vulnerability…When we picked up our instruments to
play together, it was as if we were holding each other tightly to say: “Hey, I know
this world can be scary and uncertain sometimes. But I see you. And I’m here.
We’re here.” Life pulsed so honestly and so *fearlessly* in those moments
(personal communication 2015, my emphasis).

Connection - audacious, vulnerable connection - transcends fear. “When we are
all truly emotionally naked with one another,” she wrote, “I feel less alone.”

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*Summer, two-thousand-and-fifteen.* It is one of my last days at the finca, and I swear
Fresa can tell. I lie for a long time on the ground in our field, trying to absorb the
coolness of the grass and the particular expansiveness of the sky at this angle. When I
finally stand up and begin to walk the pasture, she follows. She stops as I stop to look at

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31 The piece they played is Mozetich’s *Postcards from the Sky,* and you should listen to it; I wish it could
follow me around. It’s an orchestral embodiment of everything this thesis struggles to capture in words.
the mountains, waits patiently, curiously. There is a cow nearby and my human friend
does cartwheels a few hundred meters away and the dogs run after us, curious where this
horse and I are going, and I grin because I don't know where we are going, just that we
are, we're going, we are going. The sensation of grass on my bare feet tingles in my nose
and I am becoming more myself each passing second. The mosquitoes are worth every
instant of this and the light reflected in the mud puddles splits and bends in flecked gold.

On my way out of the pasture, I stand at the water trough and she is next to me.
She slurps and snorts, delighting in it. When she is finished, she sighs, an uninhibited
sigh, snot and nostrils going everywhere. She pauses, noses at me briefly, checking in one
last time before turning to walk away. I know I cannot keep her here, and I know that I
cannot stay forever, either. As I leave, I splash my face with the water in her trough. I
cup my palm to catch the beads of liquid as they drip slowly from the faucet, except of
course I can never really catch them. I watch them as they rest for a few moments in my
hands, impossibly, gloriously round, before folding through the gaps in my fingers. I
can't hold on to the water any more than I can drag a horse into connection with me,
but I guess that is exactly how it should be. I turn the water over and over in my hands,
feeling its tender cool, watching it slip away in humbled awe.

We are beings of a universe immanently unfolding. We ripple in response to each
other, we expand out ceaselessly, we become, we become, we become --
Water trough, Costa Rica, January 2016
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The Path Of The Horse. Stormy May Productions, 2008. DVD.


