

Unbridled: Queering Animality with Human & Horse

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Abstract

Though in the Global North, domesticated horses have been largely retired from their historical labouring roles, their bodies have continued to be instrumentalized to meet human desires. Not only does the classic interspecies dyad of the “Man on horseback” pervade in contemporary equine roles—as a symbol of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, colonialism, and elitism—but also so often as a failure to meaningfully empathically engage horses. *Unbridled* is a major research portfolio that responds to these biopolitical and anthropocentric dilemmas through three interwoven projects. Each engages my own lived experiences to queerly reimagine *being-with* horses in our shared worlds, as reminder of our mutually embodied animality.

The first project intervenes in the dominant horse-human pedagogical relationship as it unfolds in the riding school at which I currently teach as a riding instructor. I engage the literature of animal and critical animal pedagogies, as well as my own lived experience, to inform my discussion of some of the challenges and opportunities for achieving less anthropocentrically oriented relationships to horses in these educational settings. The second project invokes Warkentin’s phenomenological interspecies etiquette (2010), along with queer theories of performativity, to explore how notions of power and agency are co-creatively enacted during my encounters with the horses with whom I work. Incorporating arts-based methodologies, including life writing and figurative drawing, I challenge dominant cultural constructions of *human* and *horse* by attending to the embodied encounter as a possible site for more empathic relationships to blossom. The third and final component is a visual project that responds to traditional representations of horses in Western art history. Through six digitally composited portraits, I remix the work of animal portraitist George Stubbs (1724–1806) to queer the cultural symbol of the horse-human dyad—re-centring the affective, body-to-body intimacies that have always existed between our two species.

Attending to the domains of pedagogy, performativity, and representation, this portfolio marks only the beginning of a larger project of challenging anthropocentrism and queering horse-human intimacies. I intend to carry on exploring these themes and more as I continue to study contemporary relationships with horses in the Environmental Studies doctoral program.

Foreword

This portfolio fulfils the requirements of the MES degree by demonstrating a graduate level depth of knowledge in the scholarly domains of human-animal studies, queer theories and ecologies, and nonhuman animals and pedagogy. It demonstrates a critical understanding of the biopolitics of contemporary horse-human intimacies in the Global North and how they are representative of dominant human-animal power asymmetries.

The three projects of the *Unbridled* portfolio collectively achieve the learning objectives put forth in the MES Plan of Study. By intervening in the educational employment of horses in riding schools, the first project establishes my intimate familiarity with the intersecting themes of animal studies and critical animal pedagogies. I take up these themes to challenge institutional anthropocentrism and advocate for more empathic kinds of interspecies learning in these educative spaces, thus also appealing to the requirements of the Environmental Sustainability Education (ESE) diploma. The second and third projects thoughtfully engage with queer theory and human-animal studies to challenge how cultural constructions of humans and horses together are performatively enacted under the biopolitical constraints of where they take place. The projects also respond to how these constructions have been represented in dominant Western visual culture. They also demonstrate how arts-based methodologies—specifically phenomenology-inspired creative non-fiction writing, figurative drawing, and graphic illustration—can speak to themes of embodied animality in ways that more traditional academic writing alone may not.

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Positionality

Before I begin, I would like to solemnly acknowledge that this research has taken place on stolen land, in the area traditionally known as Tkaranto. I feel especially compelled to do so, due to the enduring colonial legacy of horse-human intimacies on Turtle Island, and around the world. I also respectfully acknowledge that many Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island—such as the Lakota, Nez Perce, Diné, Ojibwe, and many others—have ancestral relationships to horses that are culturally and spiritually significant to them. As a settler, these relationships are not my own, nor do I attempt to speak for them here.

I understand that the opportunity to encounter horses in the first place was largely a privilege of my stable, middle class, and white-settler upbringing on these lands. Yet as a queer person, I have often felt most at home in the company of nonhuman animals, none more so than horses. Thus, it is my ethical imperative here to challenge normative, Western constraints on horse-human intimacies—which themselves can be largely traced to colonialism—as I creatively imagine more empathic ways of being together.

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I.

Introduction to *Unbridled*

I arrive at this project at a particular moment in place and time, when domesticated horses have been largely retired from their historical labouring roles in agriculture, military, transportation, industry, and many other spheres of human society. Though contemporary human relations to horses may vary globally—they are still pulling power or sources of food in certain regions (Tadich, 2020)—in the Global North, horses primarily work in the various disciplines of equestrian sport or, secondarily, in the service of mounted police units (Coulter, 2019; Spanning, 2019). In both these cases, the classic interspecies dyad of the “Man on horseback” pervades as a symbol of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, colonialism, elitism, and anthropocentric domination over the more-than-human other (Boisseron, 2018; Howell & Taves, 2021; Dallow, 2022; Swart, 2024). For centuries, the bodies of horses were weaponized in the interest of upholding violent systems of power and oppression. For example, European cavalries played a vital role in the conquest of Indigenous peoples in the Americas and around the world (Mitchell, 2015), while mounted figures oversaw the policing of enslaved humans in the plantation economy (Lambert, 2015). Today, equestrian sports—including dressage, showjumping, racing, rodeo, and more—continue to propagate the elitist pomp and pageantry of their military and imperial origins (Coulter, 2014; Hansen, 2017). Meanwhile, mounted law enforcement carries on the oppressive legacy of the cavalry on the streets of large cities around the world (Howell & Taves, 2021). As I am writing now, I am as horrified as ever to witness the footage from Los Angeles (AP News, 2025) as well as Toronto (Gray-Donald, 2024), as officers on horseback, batons in hand, are once again unleashed by the state upon activist protestors.

Amid all of this violence, part of what troubles me is that the subjectivity and agency of horses—as well as perhaps their fundamental desire for safety and wellbeing—appears utterly ignored. Their bodies continue to be exploited in the interests of human ends, of which horses have no comprehension. The sociocultural evolution of horses into the industrialized and digitized twenty-first century is no less biopolitically oriented toward human desires, from Olympic equestrian events to equine-assisted therapies. Our relationship thus represents a fraught example of human-animal power imbalances in practice: humans often control nearly every aspect of domesticated equine life—from diet, reproduction, and socialization to their every movement under saddle (Hansen, 2017)—leaving horses incredibly vulnerable to the decisions and ethical comportments, or lack thereof, of the humans around them (Spannring, 2019, pp. 80–81). However, beneath all of this lies the reality that many humans, including me, love horses very much and feel very strongly about their treatment and wellbeing (Maurstad et al, 2013; Davis & Maurstad, 2016; Dashper, 2017; Birke & Thompson, 2018; Coulter, 2019; McVey, 2023; Swart, 2024). Many of us may even feel conflicted about our participation in equestrian worlds and actively strive to move beyond this paradigm of domination in our relationships with horses. I hence began my research with the question of how we humans can cultivate an empathic sense of embodied *interanimality* in the presence of horses. Specifically, I asked how queer theoretical and arts-based interventions could disrupt normative, binary, and dominating logics of relating to animals such as horses, with whom we share such complex social and political histories.

The literatures of animal studies and queer theories—particularly queer ecologies—come together in fruitful ways to give this creative research process its shape. First and foremost, I understand horses and humans to be “companion species”—which scholar Donna Haraway

(2003; 2008) describes as species who come to define what it means to be one or the other, often in far more dialectical ways than previously imagined. Refuting one-sided notions of domestication as human domination, Haraway and others argue that companion species have co-evolved interdependently over long periods of time. We have transformed each other culturally, politically, biologically, and affectively in so many ways that neither of us would be recognizable had the other not existed. These co-becomings render entities, both human and equine, as neither wholly of “nature” nor “culture,” but rather a cross-pollinating hybrid of the two, she refers to as “naturecultures” (2003, p. 3).

To critically attend to the *naturalcultural* character of horse-human co-becomings, I turn to queer theory and queer ecologies for their challenges to dominant culturally-constructed categories, as well as attendance to more fluid ways of being and relating in the world (Giffney & Hird, 2008; Chen & Luciano, 2015). The work of Sandilands (2010; 2022), Weaver (2015), Hume and Rahimtoola (2018), Angus (2021), Riggs (2021), Horn (2022), and Gosine (2024) on queer multispecies intimacies, complements Haraway by challenging normative categories and constructions of power, imagining alternative possibilities for relationally co-existing. Queer theory informs my thesis’ commitment to 1) interrogate anthropocentric power relations, and 2) re-center the body—or more specifically, our embodied animality—as a way of empathically engaging with the more-than-human world. I thus engage queer critical thought to understand the complex ways in which horses are constructed politically as instruments of power, culturally as status symbols, *and* affectively as our emotional companions.

Fascinated by the theme of embodiment, I also look to phenomenology as a unique methodological entry to understanding our relationships with other animals (Painter & Lotz, 2007; Lestel et al, 2014). Drawn to Ahmed’s queer phenomenological intervention (2006), as

well as attendance to more-than-human intimacies by Shapiro (1990), Abram (1996; 2011), Warkentin (2009; 2010; 2011), and Smith and Riley (2024), I find phenomenology to be a practical way of studying lived experience, emphasizing the embodied nature of consciousness and rejecting the Western duality of the body and mind (Gaard, 1997; Shiva, 2010). I am inspired by the argument of Maurice Merleau-Ponty that the reality of our embodiment makes human beings “yet another corporeity” among all animal life— underscoring the *lateral* rather than *hierarchical* essence of our “strange kinship” to other animals (Toadvine, 2007, p. 50).

These three core theoretical underpinnings come together in *Unbridled*, a portfolio of three interwoven projects that engage my own life experiences with horses as an entry point to reimagine *being-with* them in our shared worlds. Through an embodied praxis of interspecies attentiveness (Warkentin, 2010), I hope to speak to a sense of Earthly animality that is shared across species lines (Abram, 2011). By re-centering embodied ways of knowing, I challenge not only the human-animal, but also the reason-erotic divide (Gaard, 1997) that has upheld the supremacy of Western knowledge, underscored racist and heteropatriarchal systems of oppression, and left humans detached from the more-than-human world and their own embodied selves (Lorde, 1978; Watts, 2013). I thus describe my work as an act of *queering* horse-human intimacies. I invoke queering to refer to the queer theoretical process I undertake to dismantle cis-heteropatriarchal conceptions of “nature” and “the animal” (Lundblad, 2009; Morton, 2010; Sandilands, 2010), as they especially relate to horses.

With an awareness of systemic anthropocentrism, I explore the queer potential of horse-human intimacies, based on a willingness to learn both *from* and *with* animal others in pedagogical relation—rather than to dominate or subject animals to human will. I attempt to explore “co-domestication” as a potentially reciprocal and queer process of mutual

transformation or becoming in which more-than-human animals such as horses are always participating as agential subjects. I understand that anthropocentric power will never be completely absent when it comes to human relationships with domesticated animals (Hagström, 2016; Spannring, 2019; Chang & Corman, 2023). However, it is because horse-human intimacies remain so common, and Western cultural meanings of horses so largely anthropocentric, that a queer intervention is warranted. Following queer and anti-colonial theories' challenge to Western notions of kinship as property ownership (Belcourt, 2015; Huebert, 2018; TallBear, 2018; Sandilands, 2022) and reproductive futurity (Seymour, 2013), it is my intention to locate alternative opportunities for being and becoming with horses, as fellow animals here together.

The *Unbridled* portfolio is also a deeply personal undertaking for me. As Huebert (2018) argues, “the definitional threshold of the human has never been a welcome place for queer bodies and minds” (p. 170). Having experienced the struggle to realize my own “humanness” as a queer person in an overwhelmingly cis-heteronormative world, my refuge from an early age was the more-than-human world of animals and its seemingly limitless possibilities for existence. Animals have provided me and other queer people (Riggs, 2021) comfort and companionship during times of vulnerability and isolation, for me none more so than horses. Working closely with horses since childhood and being responsible for their care, I have had the privilege to experience the profound transformative effects of living in relation to horses. I witness these interspecies becomings often, working with horses in a professional and pedagogical capacity as a riding instructor. I thus take up the call of Gosine (2021) to “reclaim” our human animality as “a declaration of *willful but not always achievable* solidarity with all animals in a moment of global ecological crisis” (pp. 143–144; my emphasis). I highlight the intentionality, or “willfulness,” of Gosine’s statement, while reckoning with the inherent difficulties in achieving

true solidarity with animals in such an ecologically precarious world, embroiled in the ongoing violences of colonialism. However, by queering my own relationship to the horse, I strive to enact such intentionality, placing questions of queerness, domesticity, and animality in conversation with one another.

I chose to undertake a portfolio in order to approach the subject of queering horse-human intimacies from three distinct, but closely related, perspectives. The first project is the most traditionally academic, specifically addressing the pedagogical relationship humans share with horses as it unfolds in the riding school at which I work. The second project incorporates arts-based methodologies, including creative non-fiction writing and drawing, to speak to embodied knowledges in a way that academic writing alone might not (Fawcett & Johnson, 2019; Muhr, 2020). In doing so, this project explores my own praxis of attending to the horses with whom I work, and how notions of power and agency are co-creatively and performatively enacted during our encounters. The final component is a visual project, queerly intervening in the representation of horse-human intimacies in Western art history. Thus, by exploring the domains of pedagogy, performativity, and representation, *Unbridled* becomes a fulsome, queer intervention into the various aspects of horse-human intimacies that are most relevant to my own personal, artistic, and scholarly experiences.

In the first project, “Becoming Equestrian/Becoming School Horse: Pedagogical constructions of horses and humans in riding schools,” I intervene in dominant conceptions of the horse-human pedagogical relationship as they manifest in the institution of the riding school. I begin at the riding school because these institutions are so commonly the first places that certain humans—particularly of privileged racial and socioeconomic positionalities in the Global North (Coulter et al, 2013)—come into relation with horses, serving the purpose of educating

these humans in the arts of riding, handling, and caring for them. Following a review of the main currents of thought in animal and critical animal pedagogies (Corman & Vandrovcová, 2014; Dinker & Pedersen, 2016; 2019; Nocella, 2019; Spannring, 2023), I engage these theories—as well as my own observations as a former student and current instructor at a riding school—to discuss some of the primary challenges and opportunities for cultivating less one-sided pedagogical relationships in these spaces. Critiques by Russell (2019) and Spannring (2019; 2023) demonstrate how animals who are engaged in educative capacities, such as horses in riding schools, are often instrumentalized for human learning, denied their unique senses of agency. However, I argue that while riding schools are certainly guilty of such anthropocentric tendencies, they also readily acknowledge the subjecthood, agency, and individuality of each horse. The challenge lies in the fact that riding lessons remain largely anthropocentrically oriented towards the development of human students as equestrian athletes skilled in the *redirection* of horses' agency. I conclude by attending to the horses themselves as teaching and learning subjects within our pedagogical relationships, particularly in the moments and spaces that occur in-between more formally structured riding lessons.

In the second project, “Equestrian Performativity: Queerly redoing the encounter between human and horse,” I take up a theory of animal performativity (Birke et al, 2004) that draws on both queer theory and phenomenology, positing that the respective roles of humans and horses in their shared environments are socio-culturally constructed—specifically, performative—rather than biologically or naturally inherent. I challenge both traditional and so-called “natural” horsemanship's tendencies to essentialize humans as dominant, and horses as a “naturally” submissive species, which has justified their domestication and use. By invoking Warkentin's “interspecies etiquette” (2010) as well as Butler (1990) and Barad's (2003) queer and feminist

theories of performativity, I embrace a praxis of attentiveness that challenges traditional constructions, while striving to embody a more intersubjective positionality that is geared to empathically being with horses. To do so, I look to the *encounter*—the spaces in which horses and humans meet—as a starting point for ethically reevaluating our lived relationships. Through a phenomenologically-inspired approach to memoir and life writing, as well as figurative sketching, I recorded my own experiences working alongside horses for five months at the riding school in which I work. My focus was specifically on my own embodied responses to the horses’ expressions of their agency, striving to think through the more performative aspects of our interactions in the school environment, particularly our socio-culturally informed roles as “trainer/instructor” and “school horse.” These “impressions” distill queer theoretical underpinnings on performativity through lived experience and memoir. They demonstrate in a non-linear way how attending to the embodied languages of horses, and allowing oneself to adaptively respond, may challenge equestrian anthropocentrism. Each encounter thus might become the foundation of a kinder, more empathic relationship with our equine kin.

The third and final component of *Unbridled* seeks to intervene in dominant visual cultural representations of horses in the West. Horses have figured prominently in the history of fine art and visual culture, as centaurian extensions of their typically white and male human riders, emphasizing their patriarchal power as symbols of status (Pickel-Chevalier, 2017, p. 125; Swart, 2024, p. 3). The prominence of such images has rendered horses into potent symbols of heteropatriarchal power and white supremacy in settler colonial contexts (Boisseron, 2018, pp. 52–53; Howell & Taves, 2021). By visually exploring the theme of embodied attunement, covered previously in my writing, I attempt to queerly subvert the cultural symbol of the horse-human dyad that is so deeply embroiled in Western cultural configurations of gender, sexuality,

race, and class. The resulting series of six portraits draws specifically from the work of eighteenth-century British animal portraitist George Stubbs (1724–1806), as well as the figurative sketches created throughout my research process. Stubbs’ painting was informed by his study of equine anatomy, epitomizing Enlightenment principles in his highly detailed depictions of horses against pastoral landscapes, which were commissioned by the aristocracy who owned them both as property (Prown, 2017). Using a combination of digital compositing, photography, and my own pen-and-ink drawing, I (re)illustrate my lived encounters with horses, now in the company of the oil-painted horses of Stubbs’ portraits. I invoke Marra’s concept of “queer historical memory” (2017), to highlight the erotic, body-to-body intimacies that have always existed between humans and horses, as opposed to the figurative distance Western art history has attempted to construct between us through images of equestrian mastery and control.

These three components come together in *Unbridled* to take on the daunting task of queerly reimagining the centuries old, horse-human relationship. The popularity of equestrian sport in Euro-American contexts, competitive or not, continues to reaffirm many of its anthropocentric leanings, making alternative futurities difficult to conceive. I acknowledge that my research here revolves almost entirely around the multispecies pedagogical arena of the English riding school, and is in *no way* representative of the many diverse horse-human relationships that can be found on Turtle Island—including racing, ranches, mounted units, sanctuaries, therapeutic programs, and the ancestral relationships many Indigenous peoples have with horses, to name only a few. I also reiterate that the captive reality of the domesticated horse precludes the notion of a totally egalitarian relationship: humans will always carry the responsibility of holding a certain degree of power over horses in these contexts. What I hope to accomplish in the pages to come is a creative reimagining of what humans do with this

responsibility. What happens when horse and human meet? Do we continue to subject horses to our own human wills, whether they like it or not? Or do we take a step back and listen to what they might be trying to communicate with us, despite the noise of the imperialist, neoliberal, and anthropocentric institutions that typically frame our relationships? What if we tried to listen, not in the traditional sense through words and language, but rather as Abram (2011) suggests, through our whole embodied selves? What if we vulnerably opened ourselves to the uncertainties, and possible becomings, that might arise from such a queer praxis of attentiveness. We may not like what we learn. There may be much to reckon with. We may be surprised by what emerges. Regardless, we owe it to the more-than-human animals in our lives to do so, for the chance that we all may thrive in this world we share.

II.

Becoming Equestrian/Becoming School Horse:

Pedagogical constructions of horses and humans in riding schools

Introduction

The inclusion of more-than-human animals in pedagogical contexts has been the subject of much debate, widely contested for how this inclusion either defies or reinforces speciesism and anthropocentrism. Emphasizing the significance of animals in human learning, Bone (2013) suggests that animals represent a “taken-for-granted pedagogical force” in the construction of our social worlds (p. 57), to which we ought to pay further attention. Horses are among the most popular animals engaged for educational purposes (Vardy et al, 2025), and riding schools are the primary institutional settings where horse-human pedagogical relationships are first formed in the Western world (Redmalm, 2019). It is here that humans learn the embodied language of riding horses, or how to communicate with horses in order to perform in equestrian sports such as showjumping or dressage. While riding schools largely acknowledge that horses are beings with their own imperatives and points of view—even during riding lessons—the school remains a captive environment with a pedagogical objective that is anthropocentrically oriented toward human riding skill and sporting accomplishment at the expense of the horses’ own agency (Scott, 2009; Gilbert & Gillett, 2011).

This project strives to make sense of the complex pedagogical roles that riding schools play in teaching humans about multispecies intimacies through horses. It asks: how do riding schools construct the figures of the horse and the human as both learners and teachers? How do these constructions reinforce learning as a human ability, possibly rendering animals into instruments for our learning? How do these ideas manifest in everyday pedagogical encounters at

the riding school? Conversely, in what ways might riding schools also already afford humans the opportunity to learn from horses in pedagogical relations, including beyond the inherently anthropocentric nature of equestrian sport? To answer these questions, I will begin by describing the pedagogical approach of the specific, English riding school at which I currently teach as a riding instructor. Next, I will explore some of the main currents of thought surrounding animals and pedagogy and how they theoretically underpin questions about power and agency in multispecies educative spaces. I will follow this brief literature review by attending to how these notions of power and agency become defined asymmetrically between human and equine participants in the riding school. Finally, I will explore what kind of learning might also take place in the school, that enables humans to learn more empathetically from horses as wise teachers (Chang & Corman, 2023). I argue that enabling this latter kind of learning may be one potential avenue toward de-centring the human while centring caring and empathic multispecies relations as a primary learning objective, even within such a constrained pedagogical environment.

I have been intimately involved with riding schools in the so-called Greater Toronto Area (GTA) for nearly two decades, first as a child student myself and now as a riding instructor. In my memory, from the first moment I set foot in the stable, I saw the horses as nothing less than fully alive and sentient subjects with their own points-of-view, no less important than mine. I felt a profound sense of awe in their presence, which hasn't yielded into adulthood. However, as I grew older, I began to recognize how my own participation in equestrian sport was often at odds with this recognition of equine subjecthood. I became increasingly aware of how my riding school education had equipped me with the embodied tools of domination, mainly the ability to redirect horses' agency in the interest of completing certain equestrian objectives. As a result,

this project reflects the uneasiness I feel over my own perpetuation of certain anthropocentric tendencies and biopolitical structures that have persisted over centuries of institutionalized equestrian education in the West (Hansen, 2017).

Yet I can also recall the less fraught moments of my equestrian upbringing: mostly moments out of the saddle, when I learned where a certain horse enjoyed being brushed—and where they did not—or how to speak and carry yourself so that even the shyest horse might welcome you into their space. It is these moments that give me hope that learning from horses without so explicitly exploiting their physicality and constraining their agency, might be possible. I recognize that agency alone does not always equate to the shifting of power relations, and that humans will always maintain a degree of power over domesticated animals (Dashper, 2017). However, I believe it is worth challenging the disciplinary focus of these horse-human pedagogical spaces in order to explore what other kinds of learning may arise.

The riding school

Riding schools are important places to begin exploring horse-human pedagogical relationships because they are so often the very first places that humans come into contact with horses (Redmalm, 2019, p. 194). In simple terms, the school exists to teach students of all ages how to ride, handle, and care for horses, often in the form of regular, organized lessons. Within English riding contexts, the school's origins lie in the *haute école* classical riding academies of Early Modern Europe (McHugh, 2011, p. 84) as well as the military regimens of cavalry training (Thorell et al, 2017), from which they are instilled with a strong sense of discipline, order, and tradition. Historically, rider education is aligned in theory and praxis to Enlightenment principles of human creativity over a largely passive Nature and nonhuman animal (Hansen, 2017). I speak

now from my firsthand experience as an instructor and former student of several riding schools in the GTA. While I believe many schools possess similar characteristics, in no way is this a fulsome discussion of *all* riding schools. As examples of “animalScapes” (Lloro-Bidart, 2018), riding schools exist in certain culturally, historically, politically, and geographically situated contexts, and are all thus unique. That said, national and provincial governing bodies such as Equestrian Canada (equestrian.ca) and Ontario Equestrian (ontarioequestrian.ca) do provide general guidelines regarding curriculum, rider leveling, equine welfare, and instructor certification systems, that schools may follow to varying extents.

To structure the following procedural account of the specific riding school where I have taught for the past five years, I roughly engage Dashper’s pedagogical “triad” of horse, human-student, and human-instructor (2016) as a useful framework to understand how each multispecies agent participates in the school setting. The school is designed to introduce students to the disciplines of English equestrian sport, primarily jumping and dressage. It is located on a multi-acre agricultural property, suited with a central stable, grass paddocks, and indoor and outdoor riding arenas. The “herd” of “school horses”—horses that are not privately owned but ridden in the lesson program—ranges from twelve to sixteen at any given time, including both mares and geldings. The horses consist of different breeds and sizes and come from various disciplinary backgrounds in their former careers. However, all have been re-trained or “re-schooled” to some extent, to become accustomed to being ridden by multiple human students per week or day. Students participate via weekly, organized sessions known as “riding lessons,” although mounted riding is not the only activity included. Human students possess drastically varying levels of experience around horses, from many years to none at all. The youngest are children of seven or

eight, while the oldest may be upwards of seventy or eighty. They do not “own” a horse or horses of their own, hence their participation in the school.

Upon arrival, the students learn which horse they have been assigned for their lesson. Horse assignments are made daily by the instructors, matching humans to horses based on both parties’ levels of experience, physical and technical capabilities, as well as the horses’ general workloads to ensure balance across the herd. The students are then taught to retrieve their assigned horses from their stalls or the paddocks, and lead them to the stable aisle, where the horses are tied and prepared for the lesson. The lesson preparation process always begins with grooming, or the brushing of the horse’s coat and cleaning out of their hooves, followed by saddling and bridling, or “tacking-up.” During this unmounted time, horses are expected to be still and respectful of students, allowing their bodies to be touched and brushed, feet to be held, and to willingly accept the saddle onto their back and bit into their mouth. Students are instructed in the interspecies etiquette (Warkentin, 2010) of “horsemanship,” which requires them to be conscious, gentle, confident, and aware of themselves in relation to the horse. They learn where to stand and how to move around horses so that they will not appear threatening to them—such as by gesturing calmly and clearly, speaking in a soft and low tone, and avoiding the horses’ “blindspots” that are directly behind their tails and in front of their faces. However, they are also told not to tolerate pushiness or resistance to their presence from the horses, such as biting, shoving, or stomping—acts which may result in reprimanding from humans. In this way, the hierarchy between us is largely established on the ground, long before the riding act has begun. Once riders become comfortable with this process, they are typically given the space to groom and tack horses for lessons unsupervised. They will repeat this process in reverse following the riding lesson to untack and cool out the worked horse.

The lesson formally begins as students are mounted onto their freshly groomed and tacked horses in the riding arena. Regardless of students' levels, the riding instructor now assumes a significant amount of pedagogical authority, responsible for the safe execution of the lesson for all humans and horses present. As the human pedagogues, instructors are experienced riders themselves who are also intimately familiar with each horse. The instructor orients the lesson toward a sport-specific goal, coaching the students and horses through a series of progressive exercises catered to the accomplishment of that goal. These goals are generally not conceived without the capabilities of *both* the humans and horses in mind. For example, some horses may be more physically suited to jumping, while others may be older and more suited toward introductory level exercises. The instructor may also reflexively tailor the content of the lesson based on how the horse and human appear to be performing at any given moment. However, it is ultimately the human who holds the power to decide what the content of each lesson will be.

Given the seemingly human-centered character of these early horse-human educational encounters, it may be logical to conclude that a more reciprocally co-created learning paradigm would be unattainable. However, I argue that some aspects of riding schools already succeed in overcoming some of the anthropocentric and speciesist dilemmas that scholars have outlined within animal-inclusive pedagogies (Dinker & Pedersen, 2016; 2019). First and foremost, I believe that horses in riding schools are often readily recognized as fully agentive subjects. I emphasize *agency* to acknowledge that horses' actions are not merely seen as instinctual reflexes, but meaningful and intentional engagements with their environment (McFarland & Hediger, 2009, pp. 2–3). They are fully participative “social actors” (Birke & Thompson, 2018, p. 34),

with the ability to process and act upon their worlds. Thus we owe them the courtesy, as fellow social animals, of an empathic response (Dashper, 2017).

Teaching students to listen closely and respond to what horses are sharing with us—to be kind, patient, and always provide the best possible care for each individual horse—has been a core tenet of every riding school I have experienced as an employee or student. Even during the constraints of the riding lesson, instructors make a point of describing the horse as an active participant, with their own imperatives, who is constantly interpreting and acting upon the information they receive from the rider, the instructor, and other surrounding figures in their environment. It is notable that the goal of the human is generally not to coercively *force* the horse into outright submission. Rather, echoing Donna Haraway’s discussion of agility sport with dogs (2003; 2008), riding is conceived much more so as an ongoing embodied *conversation* with horses that strives toward cooperation, mutual respect, partnership, and trust (Game, 2001; Maurstad et al, 2013; McVey, 2023).

Take for example a lesson in jumping. Although a more advanced topic, it is one in which the horse often communicates their point-of-view very clearly. In terms of the “riding aids”—the embodied tools that humans use to communicate with horses—the rider must use their legs, hands, seat, and gaze to steer their horse with forward energy towards the obstacle, in order for the horse to produce a jumping effort. While the horse cannot simply tell the rider and instructor how they feel about this in words, their body language will speak volumes. Some horses may unmistakably “perk” at the sight of the jump—erecting their ears towards it, brightening their eyes, lifting the carriage of their heads and necks, and seemingly increasing in pace without any indication from the rider to do so. Such a reaction is considered “productive,” and is encouraged by humans—so long as the horse’s speed remains within an “acceptable” limit. Other horses may

react oppositely, slowing down and sinking in self-carriage in order to produce the minimum effort required to surmount the obstacle. However, the most visceral expressions of equine agency will come in the refusal to jump at all—when the horse either halts at the jump’s base or opts to run around rather than over it.

In these circumstances, instructors and students alike will very much acknowledge the horse as possessing a desire *not* to jump. They will use their combined knowledge of equine body language, as well as familiarity with the individual horse, to try to deduce why the horse has refused in order to *correct* the refusal when the rider re-attempts the exercise—which unless a physical limitation of horse or rider is indicated, they surely will. Thus, while the horse’s possession of agency and capability of expressing it are fulsomely recognized by their human counterparts, that does not mean that all expressions are regarded as acceptable. In a biopolitical sense, actions that are not considered productive to equestrian accomplishment will not be tolerated during lessons, as riders will be instructed to redirect horses toward more cooperative engagement. This human-imposed obligation of equine compliance manifests at every level of training, even within exercises as mundane as transitioning from walk to trot and back again. It is this conflicted conception of the equine point-of-view—as something that does exist, but should be heavily constrained and redirected—to which I will now respond through a discussion of the literature on animal-oriented pedagogies.

Currents of thought in animal-oriented pedagogies

To guide this brief review of the major literature in animal-oriented pedagogies, I start by asking: How are horses “constructed” as participatory subjects in these multispecies pedagogical environments? What are human students taught about horses, and how are they positioned in

pedagogical relation to them? To address these questions, I begin with the main currents of thought surrounding the engagement of animals for pedagogical purposes. At the intersection of critical pedagogy and animal studies, critical animal pedagogies have explored how the objectification and exploitation of animals is not only normalized within dominant colonial and neoliberal Western educational paradigms but also cultivated within them throughout (Corman & Vandrovcová, 2014; Dinker & Pedersen, 2016; 2019; Nocella, 2019; Spannring, 2023).

According to Spannring (2023), critical animal pedagogies “[do] not seek to just destabilize human power in the abstract, but [root] this in the need to support cultural and political practices that actively seek to overthrow speciesist relations across society” (p. 1). In other words, beyond mere discourse, the purpose of critical animal pedagogies is to dismantle and disrupt anthropocentrism and speciesism as they intersect with other logics of oppression, within various biopolitical systems of power (Corman & Vandrovcová, 2014, pp. 135–136). I invoke this theoretical approach to 1) interrogate species-stratified notions of power, agency, and learning in the riding school, and 2) posit an intervention based on the school’s pedagogical strengths, that might de-centre human equestrian accomplishment, and instead focus on learning from horses in more organic and empathic ways.

Dinker and Pedersen do not disavow the possibility of learning through an “alternative affective human-animal education,” inviting human educators and learners to reimagine our intimacies with other animals, through our affective relationships with them (2016, p. 418). However, they stress that even the most non-invasive encounters must attend to interspecific power imbalances and question what exactly is being taught and learned about animal subjects in a given educational context (pp. 418–419). Rejecting a positivist approach to encountering animals as specimens, many scholars have argued that humans can cultivate more ethically

attuned multispecies intimacies by focusing on our intersubjectivity with other beings (Kuhl, 2011; Dinker & Pedersen, 2016; 2019; Russell, 2019; Russell & Fawcett, 2020). Returning to the concept of “animalScapes”—the physical and emotional spaces in which human and more-than-human bodies meet and influence one another—Lloro-Bidart asks human learners to pay attention to the political situatedness, and shared but distinct experiences, of humans and animals within each encounter (2018, pp. 152–153). She roots her pedagogy in an ecofeminist dialogical method (Donovan, 2006), humbly attempting to empathize with animals and enable them to thrive in their own species and individually-specific ways—beyond human presumptions of what their thriving should be or look like.

Scholars such as Corman (2011) have also radically taken up an anti-speciesist lens of critical pedagogy, to intervene in human-animal pedagogical relationships. She and Chang (2023) challenge anthropocentric notions of teachers and learners as exclusively human, asserting:

We centrally posit that there is much to learn by turning to ‘farmed animals’ as sources of wisdom, as unique knowers with lessons to teach us about problems of extinction. By turning to those who have been so debased and profoundly instrumentalized through Western cosmologies and practices, we directly confront the ideologies that manufacture life as fungible: under Western colonial capitalism, farmed animals matter only in their service to others, their subjectivities hollowed out of flesh. (p. 91)

While the authors write of “farmed animals” in the context of the animal-industrial complex, I argue that their statement is also highly relevant in the case of horses. As domesticated companion animals, they too have been instrumentally, rendered servile to humans under Western colonial capitalism. To explore the idea of learning from animals as teachers, Corman

and Vandrovcová (2014) discuss the work of anthropologist Barbara Smuts (2009) and activist Sharon Núñez (2009). On learning from and with her dog, Smuts argues that humans can kindle more empathic relationships with animals if we only give them the space and time to engage us in their own ways (2014, pp. 140–4). Starting from here, we can learn to respond more intentionally, as nonhuman animals’ respectful and attuned human animal companions. Furthermore, they argue that Núñez’s attendance to the individuality of animals, also enables our most compassionate responses (pp. 144–5). Evoking Lloro-Bidart’s dialectical ethics (2015; 2018) their arguments collectively assert that animals are agents with voices of their own—and that human animals have much to learn from seriously engaging them in conversation. I will return to this notion of animals as “sources of wisdom” and “unique knowers” whom with we should converse, as I explore the pedagogical role of the horse in the school.

Of course, the inevitable dilemma of taking a dialectical approach to animal-oriented pedagogies is the challenge of representing the “voices” of beings that do not speak our human languages (Bell & Russell, 2000; Corman & Vandrovcová, 2014, pp. 136–140). Kuhl (2011) begins to compose a guideline for considering animal voices more thoughtfully in our teachings, avoiding traditional representations that otherwise flatten or oversimplify animal life as biologically essentialized and mechanistically instinctual (see also Birke et al, 2004). Kuhl reminds us of the inherent position of power human researchers and educators have over animal subjects, driving our ethical obligation to engage them respectfully and with care. They identify two thematic touchstones of interest here. The first is our *intersubjectivity*, or shared experiences of the world with other animals, albeit in our own distinct ways (2011, p. 110). They argue that attending to intersubjectivity has the power to highlight connectedness over separateness and create space for more compassionate human interventions. Second and closely related is the

theme of embodiment and embodied knowledge (pp. 110–111). The practical phenomenologies of many thinkers, such as Shapiro’s “kinesthetic empathy” (1990), Csordas’ “somatic modes of attention” (1993), Behnke’s “interkinesthetic comportment” (1997), and Warkentin’s “interspecies etiquette” (2010; 2011), teach us that humans can make educated approximations regarding the meaning of animal behaviours, based on the reality of our mutual embodiment (Spannring, 2017, p. 65). These embodied approaches can inform how we engage and respond to other animals, such as the horses of the school.

However, Warkentin’s analyses of marine mammal parks (2009; 2011) also serve as potent reminders that pedagogical encounters—such as those between humans and horses in riding schools—are always embroiled within biopolitical configurations of power that are fundamentally made possible by the animals’ “captive umwelts” (2009, p. 28). That is, the physical enclosures created by the stable, as well as the systemic constraints of training and lessons, enforce limitations on the *unwelt*—or perceptual world—and free movement of the horses. Pedagogically speaking, these enclosures and limitations place human learners in a distinct position of power over the horses. The educational imperative to *know* horses is framed within the human interest of *mastering* and *controlling* them for equestrian purposes, preserving this biopolitical position of power—echoing a broader Western narrative of knowing Nature for the sake of instrumentally controlling it (Shiva, 2010, pp. 15–20). Warkentin also addresses the heavily scripted and structured character of some interspecies pedagogical experiences as an institutional limitation that leaves little opportunity for any kind of meaningful connection between human and animal participants to come into fruition (2011). Russell (2019) argues that reconfiguring animals as active participants within captive learning environments, might be an acknowledgement of their subjecthood and agency, countering dominant ideas of animal

passiveness. He posits that any encounter with a nonhuman animal—in this case horses—carries a potential for learning and therefore may be considered pedagogical. Echoing Warkentin, as well as Lloro-Bidart’s *animalScapes* (2018), Russell also presents an opportunity to challenge the institutional constraints that foster such uneven power dynamics. Though perhaps in an overly linear way, he conceptualizes a scale of “shallow,” “moderate,” and “deep” approaches to describing animals in educative settings, from mostly instrumental relations to a fulsome recognition of animal subjecthood (2019, pp. 128–133). Russell’s scale provides a valuable guideline for evaluating the language that is used to describe horses and teach about riding in the school so long as it is understood that no approach is fixed, and that the supposed depth of subjecthood our language represents is likely to fluctuate.

Other thinkers have also already attempted to reimagine the pedagogical aspects of horse-human relationships. Hagström (2016) and Spannring (2019) have both speculated on the possibility of more open-ended pedagogical encounters with horses. Evoking Chang and Corman’s belief that animals are “unique knowers with lessons to teach us” (2023, p. 91), they both ask how we might approach learning from and with horses in order to facilitate more mutually engaging learning spaces. They adamantly challenge the sport orientation of mainstream equestrian education, regarding it as a continuation of the historical exploitation and manipulation of equine bodies (Guest et al, 2023). However, echoing Dinker and Pedersen (2016), they do not altogether dismiss the possibility of other kinds of coexistence and learning. Both reframe horse-human intimacies as reciprocally pedagogical “becomings,” or co-becomings, when humans allow horses to co-create the character of each encounter, thus respecting and *enabling* horses’ unique senses of being rather than striving to control them.

But is such a notion of horse-human co-becoming even possible within an institution as constrained as the riding school? Taking a Levinasian approach, Redmalm's 2019 study of adult riding school students in Sweden identified a sort of trade-off between recognizing individual equine subjecthood on the one hand, and a reversion to essentialized ideas of horseness on the other. His study is one of the few to consider horse-human social relations and biopolitics within riding schools. I will consider biological essentialisms and their material consequences for horses in the next section, as I address how a traditional sense of anthropocentric power and hierarchy is upheld in the institution of the riding school. However, I also wish to acknowledge some of the promising ways in which students may already be coming into more fruitful pedagogical relation with horses. Echoing Kuhl's advocacy for intersubjectivity and embodied ways of knowing (2011), I attempt to locate opportunities for alternative, less human-centered, kinds of learning from and with horses, that occur under the surface of the captive Umwelt that is the school.

The horse-human pedagogical relationship: Challenges and opportunities

Drawing from the above theoretical interventions, I now turn my discussion over to how horse-human pedagogical relationships are constructed in the context of riding schools. On first glance, the pedagogical character of our relationship manifests in the hierarchical ordering of a human teacher, or more commonly "trainer," over a horse who is always in a state of so-called "training." That is, the human teaches/trains the horse to perform specific roles that are useful in some way to humans. However, to regard our pedagogical relationship in this way alone would greatly oversimplify it. Exactly who is the "teacher" and who is the "student" in these relationships may not be so clearly discernable. In other words, so long as we are in each other's presence, humans will always be learning something about horses, just as horses will always be

learning something about humans. However, there is a stark asymmetry to this mutual learning, as the riding school's educational imperative remains to train human's ability to effectively ride and handle horses, and thus effectively redirect their actions toward our own goals. As I will explore, the horse often becomes framed as an educator of human students, particularly in riding schools. Therefore, I ask not *if* our relationship is a pedagogical one, but rather what role do *power* and *agency* hold within it, for both species involved? What are horses expected to teach students, and how are they taught/trained to conduct themselves while doing so? Likewise, what are human students expected to learn about horses and about themselves, from human equestrian pedagogues as well as from school horses?

“Becoming-equestrian” / “Becoming-school horse”: An anthropocentric dilemma

To move towards a more mutually avowing horse-human pedagogical paradigm, I will first work through some of the riding school's own anthropocentric tendencies that thwart the possibility of learning truly *with* and *from* horses. I emphasize *with*, as these tendencies generally foreground the human as the primary learner and beneficiary of this education, while the horse is ascribed a more passive and stagnant role. As Russell (2019) explains, animals in educational contexts are taught to fulfill certain pedagogical roles through “regular ‘training’ regimens” (p. 123).

Although such regimens may “involve mutual reinforcement rather than simply human domination” (p. 123), it is important to discern how power is still unequally distributed. As subjects of a specific kind of anthropogenic domination, *school horses* are taught/trained to be largely docile, patient, obedient, and willing participants in the school. I am not making any claims as to whether the horses actually “enjoy” the activities they perform in lessons. To reiterate, the strengths and apparent interests of the horses are often considered. For example,

more athletic horses might be dispositioned toward advanced subjects, such as jumping, while older, slower horses would never be made to work these lessons. However, whatever the lesson topic may be, horses ultimately have no control over what tasks they will be asked to perform, with which students, and when. As Dashper (2017) writes:

horses cannot give informed consent to their involvement in sport, so there is an element of coercion involved, an unequal power relation between humans (who voluntarily choose to be involved and are aware of the rules of engagement) and horses (who do not have the same freedom of choice or level of understanding about the activity). (p. 218)

In the end, it is usually the human's learning, or "becoming-equestrian," that is prioritized. The school itself may even be seen as a stepping stone in the human's education as a rider: somewhere they learn "the basics" before progressing to a competitive career in showjumping or dressage someplace else. The *school horse*, on the other hand, is conceived as a stoic and pedagogically stagnant character who has already become all they are meant to be and now satisfies a largely instrumental role in the education of human others.

The "schoolmaster" is a common epithet for these horses, popularly defined as "a horse that has a rich and sophisticated vocabulary or understanding of aid pressures. Generally... a mature horse that is very receptive to a range of riding challenges," possessing "a depth of understanding of the finer nuances of aid pressures that can help a less sophisticated rider develop better feel and timing" (Vale, 2023). While the title speaks to the perceived wisdom and experience of these horses, it also flattens them into a performative role they must repeat ad nauseam until their eventual retirement. A "green horse"—who is often younger and perceived as less experienced or trained—is a notable exception to the schoolmaster trope. However, it typically becomes the *goal* of the instructors, as well as sometimes the advanced students, to

train or to “school” horses labelled green into future schoolmasters. In other words, *schoolmaster* becomes the telos for all school horses, and behaviour that is not conducive to human learning must be trained out. This understanding of school horses as “masters” or “green” harkens to species-totalizing, essentialisms that flatten individual animals into “species representatives” (Russell, 2019). As the argument goes, horses are *naturally* herd animals who understand power and hierarchy and thus are looking to the human to become their leader, or surrogate alpha (Latimer & Birke, 2009). In other words, the desirable traits of the idealized school horse—submissive to strong leadership and willing to cooperate—become symbolic of acceptable equine behaviour more broadly.

Redmalm (2019) describes how these totalizations rely on ethological notions of horses as prey animals with strong herd hierarchies, unconscious of their own flight responses (p. 200). The irrational and unpredictable horse becomes positioned as dependent on human authority and rational decision-making capabilities. “Unacceptable” equine behaviours that are considered irrational and unnecessary—such as spooking at objects that would appear non-threatening to a human—are explained as problems to be worked through until the desirable outcome is achieved. Meanwhile, totally unscientific, anthropomorphic labels are commonly used to describe horses for their supposed enthusiasm, or apparent lack thereof, during lessons. These may include terms such as “eager” or “smart” for horses who appear to enjoy certain tasks, or less flattering descriptions such as “difficult,” “lazy,” “too smart,” or even “dangerous” for less obedient individuals. The label of “too smart” or “clever” is especially interesting, given it contradicts the previously stated notion of horses as irrational flight animals. It may be invoked if a horse’s actions suggest they possess a more complex cognitive awareness of what is going on and are now acting intentionally to avoid a certain exercise. While all of these labels may stem

from human observations, I find they often reputationally precede the horses they represent and inhibit humans from achieving more dialogical and understanding relationships with them. Thus, both biological essentialisms and anthropomorphic labels are means to totalize and simplify horses for human understanding. Often these are made in the interest of utility and sporting performance, rather than tools for engaging with horses in more reflexive, dialectical ways.

The reality of the horses' captivity in the school makes them highly vulnerable to the decisions, actions, and overall ethical capacities of human instructors and students during lessons (Spannring, 2019, pp. 80–81; Lloro-Bidart, 2015, p. 93). Consequently, biological essentialisms and anthropomorphic labels that avoid more bodily attuned forms of understanding may have genuine material repercussions for the horses they seek to represent such as more vigorous attempts to control their agency. Of course, horses may refuse or resist against such redirections of their agency, following their own imperatives instead. On the milder side, resistance may include ignoring the communications of the rider and failing to increase their effort—often called “laziness.” More dangerous examples of resistance might include bucking, bolting, rearing, or the previously explored example of refusing or running out on jumps. Such instances are all examples of what Warkentin calls “affordances,” or opportunities for animals to explore their senses of agency, while navigating their captive circumstances (2009, p. 26). Rather than acknowledging resistance as a horse's attempt to dialogue with the humans around them, more often than not such behaviours lead to the label of the disobedient “problem horse.”

Human students learn the language of domination and control very early in their equestrian education, epitomized perhaps by the controversial phrase “showing them who's boss.” Returning to Russell's scale of shallow, moderate, and deep approaches to describing animals pedagogically (2019), I find how horses and their actions are spoken of tends to fluctuate

from moderate positions which “maintain a largely anthropocentric view of learning objectives, goals, and techniques, but perhaps consider individual animal welfare” (p. 130), to deeper positions which “indicate a strong affiliation with attributing *agency, subjectivity, intentionality, and communication* to other animals in their encounters with human beings” (p. 131, emphases added). Aligning to a deeper position, the attributes of agency, subjectivity, intentionality, and communication are regularly affiliated with horses in the school, as is the notion that they are active participants in the learning. For example, instructors will often comment on horses’ ability to remember certain exercises and perform them relatively independently, often compensating for the students’ lack of knowledge. In this sense, the horse also embodies a teaching role in the equestrian pedagogical triad (Dashper, 2016), that has inspired the “schoolmaster” title. Instructors will also fully recognize a horse’s resistance—such as a refusal to jump—as an expression of their own will and intentionality. However, it then becomes the imperative for the student rider and instructor to *correct* such agentic acts of apparent disobedience.

Resembling Russell’s more moderate approach, learning is still highly human-centered, with horses sometimes discussed more-or-less as a “pedagogical tool” (p. 131), instrumental to achieving certain goals. In other words, equine intentionality is acknowledged, but not often respected, especially in how the sport-oriented riding lesson is carried out. Perhaps most emblematic of how this appears in practice is the popularly taught “ask-tell-demand” sequence, used to elicit the “correct” response from a horse in an ascending level of physical severity, from the lightest possible application of the aid, to potentially a tap from a riding crop. The approach is even recommended in the official Equestrian Canada rider level handbook (2007, p. 44). Even when students are instructed to “ask” something of the horse—which would imply the horse has the option to decline—if the response is not as desired, the student should increase the pressure

of the aid to “tell” or “demand” their horse to respond affirmatively. Therefore, while horses may be regarded as fully agentic beings, the possibilities or affordances they have to express themselves without redirection or repercussion are highly limited within pedagogical encounters with humans.

Finally, the human students’ own potential for learning *from* horses may also become constrained if they cannot engage more thoughtfully and profoundly with the horses in the school. Riding lessons in this sense resemble Kellert’s notion of “indirect” educational experiences with animals, the “result of regulated and contrived human activity” (2002, p. 119). Echoing Warkentin’s discussion of the swim-with-dolphins encounter (2011), instructors structure and script the riding lesson so that there is little space for human students to engage in more organic forms of learning with the horses. I do not think riding education is so seemingly relationally shallow as Warkentin’s experience with swim-with-dolphins encounters. On the contrary, cultivating strong relationships through intimate knowledge of horses as a species *and* as individuals—as I will discuss in the next section—is one of the school’s more noble efforts. However, the highly structured character of organized lessons can still make it difficult to learn with horses in more empathically attuned ways. A strong sense of tradition and adherence to classical disciplinary practices within the realms of jumping and dressage are significant obstacles. They orient the intentionality of the human instructors and students toward sporting performance and a sense of prestige that is already heavily ability and class-based in Euro-American contexts (Coulter et al, 2013). Once again, progressing through the levels required to become-equestrian may take pedagogical precedence over understanding equine companions on a deeper level. However, as I will now briefly explore, there may be opportunities to reimagine

the dominant equestrian-sporting paradigm in these educational spaces, by looking to the moments that occur around and in-between formal lessons.

Opportunities for learning from and with horses in the riding school

If we start from the premise that every horse is already regarded as an agentic subject of a life, there may be opportunities to subvert anthropocentric equestrian discourse in the riding school. Inspired by the embodied pedagogies of Warkentin (2010; 2011), Spannring (2019), and Hagström (2016), as well as Corman's recognition of animals as wise teachers (2023), I now attend to some of the alternative pedagogical possibilities I see taking place in the school. I ask here: Is it possible that a transformative process of learning, through our embodied encounters with horses, may challenge the anthropocentric orientations and biopolitical power dynamics of the institution itself?

As I've emphasized throughout, the agency and subjecthood of horses are generally accepted truths in equestrian environments. One of the most apparent examples of how this acceptance manifests in the school, are the very personal relationships many human students—as well as instructors for that matter—strive to cultivate with each individual horse. Unlike Warkentin (2011) or Russell's (2019) accounts of interspecies educational encounters that stifle possibilities for relating, such empathic relating on a more deeply embodied level frequently emerges in the school, whether formally part of the curriculum or not. I particularly recall this phenomenon as a child student at a riding school. Each horse becomes simultaneously a distinct figure with a life story you will never fully know, and a personality it becomes your imperative to learn through any opportunity for interaction that presents itself to you—perhaps a horse peering through their stall door or standing idly by a paddock fence. The dispositions,

mannerisms, and preferences of each horse become a part of their overall character, making it possible for humans to engage with them on a level that goes beyond species-generalizations. It has been argued that this kind of anthropomorphism, balanced with ethological knowledge, enables humans to empathize with horses, inspiring an ethical imperative to care for and be kind to them as a species and as individuals (Birke & Thompson, 2018, p. 119). I reiterate that students are also taught early on to be intimately familiar with the body language of horses: how their ears, eyes, nostrils, tails, and more, are always in communication with their environment. Instructors strive to cultivate embodied empathy for horses, often during students' first lessons, with the goal they will continue to retain this empathic position in all their equine encounters.

However, the primary obstacle to more empathic relations remains the anthropocentrically sport-oriented and highly structured character of the riding lesson. In such a scenario, the actions of the horses will always be redirected towards submission to lesson goals. Instructors are rarely thoughtless to the needs of specific horses when planning lessons yet whether the horse actually wishes to participate is left completely unquestioned as any attempts at resistance are often reprimanded as disobedient behaviour. Deformalizing the character of lessons, and allowing for less prescribed interactions to unfold, would present many challenges, as the safety of inexperienced human students around horses must be accounted for. However, I believe organic encounters that result in various kinds of experiential learning, are already occurring at the school all the time. Often this kind of learning occurs in the in-between times and spaces outside of, but also within, formal lesson contexts. They happen as students stop to observe the horses at play or rest in their paddocks, socializing with each other in the absence of humans. They happen as horses come curiously up to fences, or stall doors, to investigate passersby. They also happen as students groom the horses, discovering which brushes and which

spots they respond most positively to; what lulls them to rest, and what makes them nervous, anxious, or defensive.

In my experience, these are the moments when space is opened for the most reciprocally enriching interspecies dialogues and learning, counter to the anthropocentric power asymmetries present in more formalized training. While instructors can help facilitate and mediate these encounters, it is the horses themselves that now take on a unique pedagogical role as, in the words of Corman, “sources of wisdom” and “unique knowers” (2023, p. 91). This is not a notion of horses as teachers in the equestrian sense, where they may be more familiar with a certain exercise than the student rider. Rather in these cases, human students will learn through trial and error to respond to the motions and gestures of the horses with their own body language, often creating fruitful embodied conversations. A horse pinning their ears, baring their teeth, or perhaps shying away when a student approaches them too quickly or boisterously, is a lesson for us to be mindful, quiet, and intentional with our bodies and to give this companion some respectful space until they tell us otherwise. Although the ritual of grooming before and after lessons serves a distinct purpose in keeping horses’ bodies fit to be ridden, this act of care can also exist for its own sake, apart from the biopolitics of riding. Going far beyond aesthetic purposes, brushing, sponging, and hoof picking are intimate acts that students are encouraged to carry out thoroughly and attentively for the sake of the horse’s wellbeing. Grooming can thus foster both a strong sense of responsibility as well as empathy for another living being. Walking with horses and allowing them to graze and explore their surroundings, is another kind of encounter that teaches humans to attend to how horses navigate their worlds. It demands our empathy via our ability to be present, intersubjectively trying to make sense of the environment from both of our perspectives.

I am encouraged by the widely accepted principle in equestrian worlds that humans are *always* continuously learning around our teachers, the horses. They teach us that their trust must be earned, and that it is never absolute, and must constantly be renegotiated throughout our encounters. Thus, one never truly becomes a “master” of “horsemanship.” To be a companion to horses is itself a never-ending pedagogical process of becoming during which humans will certainly make mistakes, and continue to expand their interspecific senses of empathy, or “interspecies etiquettes” to borrow from Warkentin (2010). I would like for the same sentiment to be extended toward horses. As individual beings, they too are also learning subjects, entangled within our cross-species pedagogical becomings. Whether we are conscious of it or not, our actions are always telling horses something about the comportments of humans: will we be gentle and patient? Or careless and rushed? With this sense of mutuality in mind, it should become our imperative to refuse settling on any static notion of the *school horse*, or *schoolmaster*, encouraging thoughtful engagement with horses and discouraging oversimplified labelling. As companions of horses, we should seek to learn from them as fellow transformative subjects who are always becoming in relation to us, just as we are to them. If this kind of interspecific dialogue became the focal point of our lessons—fulsomely respecting and considering the beingness of horses, perhaps, I daresay, even at the sacrifice of equestrian sport—I feel a more reciprocally enriching horse-human pedagogical relationship may begin to emerge.

Conclusion

My intention here was to begin further considering horse-human pedagogical relationships within the institutional setting of the riding school. While I have argued that more organic kinds

of learning from horses' unique wisdom does certainly arise in the school's margins, formal rider education is still dominated by the biopolitics, discipline, and near militarism of equestrian sport. Transforming a paradigm that is so deeply culturally entrenched in Euro-American colonial tradition is surely a daunting one. As I discuss elsewhere, other attempts at intervention, such as Natural Horsemanship (Birke, 2007) have struggled to move past the human tendency to essentialize horses based on their supposed, biologically predestined, species natures. Ultimately, as Hagström (2016), Spannring (2019), and others have argued, the entire equestrian tradition must come under extreme scrutiny if there is any possibility for the equine point-of-view to be taken seriously. In my forthcoming doctoral studies, I intend to undertake this progression of the research—further exploring how anthropocentrism is embedded within equestrian sport and teaching, and what opportunities for less dominance-oriented encounters might exist. I believe that the more organic kinds of learning I have begun to identify, occurring in-between formal equestrian riding lessons, can be regarded as a starting point for cultivating more dialogical human *and* horse co-becomings in pedagogical relation. Perhaps the riding school of the future may someday drop the emphasis on “riding,” becoming an educational beacon for teaching humans to be kinder and more empathically attuned to our animal companions, horses and beyond.

III.

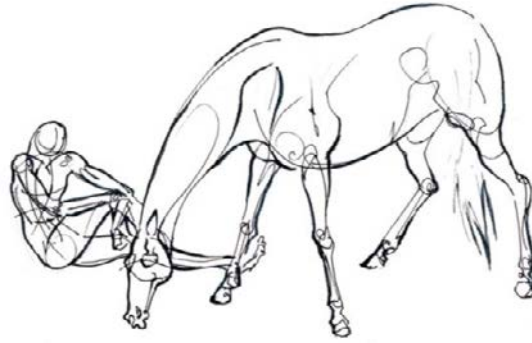
Equestrian performativity:

Queerly redoing the encounter between human and horse

Vintage: Graze

It's mid-summer. The air is warm as the sun sets, turning the sky a radiant pink and orange. I sit on the cool grass with my legs crossed and watch her graze. The lead runs slack through my hands to her halter, where it dangles. She chomps, tearing long green blades of grass from their roots in mouthfuls. I'm mesmerized. She stretches through her spine, from her bowed head through her lengthened neck all the way to the dock of her tail, which swishes now and then to ward off the flies. She stops to sense, with her lips and whiskers, where the perfect patch grows. Her ears turn at the faintest sound: a rustle in the trees, the tweetle of a bird, the distant whinny of a companion out in the paddock. Her skin twitches at the slightest touch of each passing fly. I take in each miniscule event with her, turning to locate the tree, the bird, the friend that calls from the paddock. I can't recall ever feeling so at peace and I want this moment to last forever.

But it's getting darker now. She lifts her head and stares attentively off toward her paddock, where herd mates are congregating around their hay. I smile, accepting that it's time to say goodnight. We walk together to the large, grassy field of rolling hills. She is calm and direct, gaze focused upon our destination as if she doesn't need me to hold the lead at all. We arrive, and I give her one last massaging caress to thank her for giving some of her time to be with me, before opening the gate and slipping the halter off over her head.



This memory is of Vintage, a mare I was lucky to call my companion for five years, before her passing. In the final months of Vintage's life—as her health failed and she could no longer ride—many wonderful hours were spent like this, basking in the sun, sitting on the grass as she grazed. Often, we would walk together on foot, exploring the pastures, until she found the ideal spot to stop and dine. This moment is among my favourites of us together, despite the lingering fear of losing her: reveling in the pleasures of our environment, two beings exchanging small acts of care for one another.

As Donna Haraway has suggested, horse and human exemplify companion species, entangled forevermore in one another's evolutionary trajectories (2003; 2007). We have each played a transformative role in molding each other's bodies, histories, cultures, geographies, languages, and much more: so much so, we have been dubbed “co-travellers” through space and time (Birke & Thompson, 2018). However, the horse-human relationship is also deeply intertwined with heteropatriarchal power and domination (Kelekna, 2009). As Swart (2024) writes, “the conventional narrative is mainly of conquest: dominance over the horse first, then [human's] immediate and obvious use of this instrument of dominance over other humans” (p.

3). Thus, it is easy to see why the horse-human dyad has become ripe for scholarly scrutiny across several fields and disciplines.

There are material ramifications for deconstructing and reimagining our relational realities. The welfare and livelihoods of the millions of horses and humans working together around the world depend on (re)evaluations of *why* and *how* we relate to one another (Spannring, 2019). The workhorses and warhorses of centuries past have not altogether disappeared. Over time, in the shadow of industrialization, horses have evolved into the athletes, educators, therapists, law enforcers, and other human-prescribed roles of the present (Birke & Thompson, 2018; Spannring, 2019, pp. 80–81). Across several domains of contemporary life, horses continue to carry the weight of human heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and neoliberalism on their backs, such as the modern police horse (Howell & Taves, 2021) or luxury sport horse (Coulter et al, 2013). What could it mean—for horses and for humans—if we questioned the categorical identities that we have co-created for one another? What if we sought to challenge the limitations of the inherently anthropocentric material, social, and cultural enclosures that bind us, focusing instead on experiences that foster mutual agency and flourishing? What could we, as humans, learn about our own animality, and our belonging in multispecies worlds, by paying attention to our more-than-human companions, in ways not merely suited to our own desires and ends? I am interested here in embodied horse and human beings that encounter one another in a particular space and time as recounted in the tender memory of Vintage; sensitive, touching, feeling, breathing, smelling, *living* beings co-constitute multispecies intimacies.

In this project, I take up a “praxis of attentiveness” (Warkentin, 2010; 2011) to reflect upon my own lived experiences of being and working with horses, through both a textual and visual explorations in phenomenology-inspired writing and life drawing. I do so to reimagine the

horse-human relationship by *queering* its anthropocentric foundations—that is, to work past culturally and biologically essentializing representations that have oriented horse-human relationships to human-determined ends. I alternatively focus on what opportunities for intersubjectivity and empathy may emerge in the context of companion species. I see phenomenology as an appropriate methodological approach. According to Sara Ahmed:

Phenomenology can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as it emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds. (2006, p. 2)

Complemented by Haraway’s understanding of companion species, phenomenological inquiry may be suited to explore how “nearness” between humans and animals may shape the bodies and worlds of each. I also embrace Ahmed’s refusal to be “properly phenomenological”—philosophically and methodically speaking—as she notes “a queer phenomenology might rather enjoy this failure to be proper” (p. 2). Several authors have pointed to phenomenology as a relevant methodology for human-animal studies, as it 1) takes sentience and embodied consciousness as uncontested truths, and 2) suggests lived experience is “intersubjective,” or co-constituted by beings sharing common worlds, whether human or not (Toadvine, 2007; Lestel et al, 2014; Daly, 2023). These principles are rooted in phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the “strange kinship” humans share with other animals (Oliver, 2008, p. 102). Rejecting humanity as the evolutionary telos of animality, he recognized our animal embodiment as the corporeal foundation of our being-in and perception-of the world (p. 115). Toadvine (2007) quotes Merleau-Ponty, asserting:

Just as there is an *Ineinander* of life and physicochemistry.... so too is the human to be taken in the *Ineinander* with animality and Nature.... And this is why we are concerned with the body: before being reason, humanity is another corporeity. (Merleau-Ponty qtd in Toadvine, 2007, p. 50)

Recognizing the “lateral relationship” between humans and other animals—as opposed to a vertical, hierarchical one—Merleau-Ponty implies that our shared embodiment and intersubjectivity are the basis of a fundamental kinship between all living beings. It is through our ability to touch, co-perceive and *encounter* one another in the world that we establish an *Ineinander*, or “intertwining” of both human and nonhuman sentient beings. It is through this intertwining that one might discover a sense of our species-traversing “interanimality” (Toadvine, 2007, p. 50; Lestel et al, 2014, p. 136).

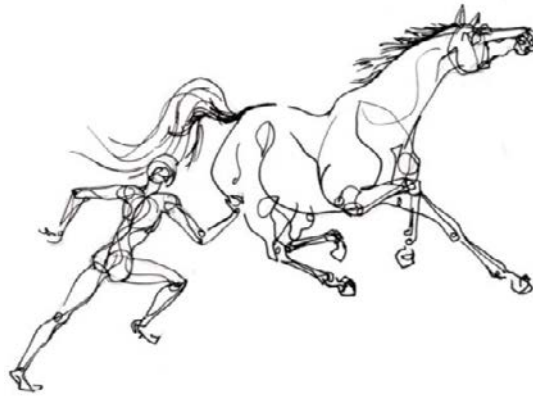
I turn to the encounter—the spaces in which bodies and entities meet (Ahmed, 2006, p. 19)—as one potential site for the eruption of the biopolitical power configurations that have traditionally constrained horse-human intimacies. Echoing Haraway, Swart defines “slow intimacies” as the evolutionary-level influences that humans and horses have had upon each other over thousands of years. Conversely, “fast intimacies” refer to the more erotic, moment-to-moment encounters that occur during individual horse and human lifetimes (pp. 2–3). While my focus on the encounter may orient this project toward “fast intimacies,” I acknowledge how “slower” intimacies have shaped the conditions under which I currently work as an instructor in an English riding school. Engaging the concept of animal performativity and its queer and feminist foundations as discussed by Butler (1990) and Barad (2003), I outline how popular understandings of horses in the present are informed by generations of culturally constructed meanings. Over the course of five months, I questioned the performative expectations of equine instrumentalism and human domination during my own lived encounters with the horses I work

with. Informed by Warkentin's phenomenological praxis of attentiveness, I challenged my own equestrian practice by reflexively attuning my own gestural responses to their embodied dialogues, while still remaining cognizant of the biopolitical constraints that overshadow our every interaction. These moments are captured in the impressionistic vignettes and figurative sketches interspersed throughout this project. My approach to queering horse-human intimacies is consequently twofold: by first attending to equestrian performativity as it manifests in the bodies of humans and horses, I turn next to how we might encounter one another on more lateral terms. It is my hope that this queer, interspecies etiquette (Warkentin, 2010) may start a larger conversation around the character of our relationship to horses as companions with whom we share common worlds.

Ricky: Gallop

He halts abruptly across from me. At last, stillness. Planting his hooves into the sand, he stands upright and rigid. Two eyes, two nostrils, and two ears, focused my way. Our eyes lock and the arena disappears around us. Leaping from my standstill, I dash to my right. With a grunt, he tosses his head and gallops off in the same direction. He throws his hind-end into the air above his shoulders in an animated buck, kicking out his hind legs with an unrestrained striking force. I run after, keeping a more-than-respectable distance between us. My arms swing. Heart pounds. Breathing hastens. Legs burn. As I run, I can feel the one-two rhythm of my feet on the ground beginning to emulate the rhythm of his stride—one leg lags and the other “leads.” Now I too, find myself galloping. PAAA-dum! PAAA-dum! PAAA-dum! He fumbles into another halt, and I follow suit, stopping in my tracks. We stare into each other's eyes. Who will make the next move?

He breaks the stillness, hopping to my left, with another huff. Snor-Rrr-Rrr-Rrrttt! He shakes his mane and swishes his tail. I respond, galloping after him, once again giving in to the temptation to mimic his impressive stride.



The biopolitics of horse-human intimacies

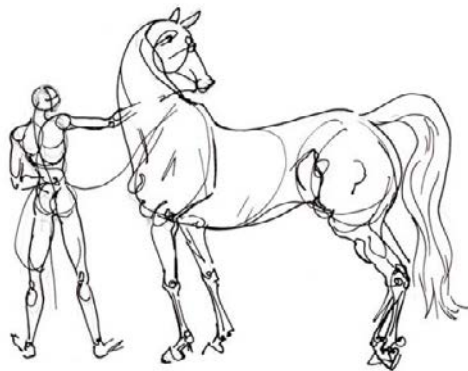
To adequately contextualize a praxis of attentiveness towards horses, I first describe how these encounters are nuanced by the inherently anthropocentric and neoliberal contexts in which they take place. Additionally, I identify what meanings and roles have already been prescribed to horses by the humans in these contexts, me included. Horses—like humans and other animals—never wholly occupy either end of the Western nature/culture spectrum. They are, as Haraway might suggest, “natural/cultural” assemblages (2003; 2007): that is, while the equine body may be a biological entity like any other, its evolutionary trajectory has been heavily manipulated by human domestication and socialization. Overly simplistic categories such as “nature” and “culture” thus become inadequate when describing horses. Through the selection of traits most desirable to social, cultural, and political needs, humans have customized the equine body over time, to fulfill a multitude of purposes (Guest & Mattfeld, 2020; Guest et al, 2023). However, nonhuman animals such as horses do not play a passive role in such processes. This is evident in

the many ways that horse domestication has influenced human culture and society (Kelekna, 2009; Howell & Taves, 2021), as well as the effects individual horses have on individual humans, and vice versa (Hogan, 2020; Swart, 2024).

Perhaps the most glaring indicator of the biopolitical pretenses within which I am writing now is the physical enclosure of the agricultural property within which the horses are kept. The present-day stables, paddocks, arenas, and riding trails are all reminders of the colonial notion of land and nonhuman animals as property, mainly of white humans of European descent under settler law (Jackson, 2016, p. 98). These features are all structurally designed with the intention of preserving the horses' captivity, by restricting the autonomous movement of their bodies (Warkentin, 2009; Hansen, 2017). Enclosure underscores the primary power imbalance in horse-human intimacies by leaving horses little choice but to enter into relationships with certain humans on whom they are involuntarily dependent (Birke & Thompson, 2018, p. 35). As legal property themselves, each horse is assigned a dollar value according to their "worth," reflecting their supposed physical or emotional usefulness to humans, a value that will surely fluctuate throughout their lifetimes. Many horses will have already passed through several "owners" and properties, as well as the hands of countless human riders, trainers, veterinarians, farriers, grooms, and other handlers, long before we've met (2018, p. 17). While horses may possess a certain privilege among domesticated animals in that they are not widely consumed as food in the West, their dependence on human care nonetheless leaves them highly vulnerable to human mistreatment, abuse, and neglect (Spannring, 2019, pp. 80–81).

Leo: Twitch

We step out into the courtyard, the brightness of the sun reflecting off the snow-covered ground, momentarily impeding my vision. I continue marching forward along the muddied trail. The lead rope slung through my hands, he follows without any pull or pressure. However, I sense a restrained anxiousness in his step. His gait isn't fluid, but choppy and inhibited. He turns his head and glances to the paddock of horses to our right. A great rumble of hooves against earth stirs as the gelding herd comes frolicking our direction. His expression is curious—ears twitch upright, eyes wide—but he tenses nervously, craning his neck upwards and hollowing his back, as if the group were about to gallop straight through the fence and directly toward us. My body involuntarily tenses in response, my joints locking as I grow nervous, worried the herd will cause him to spook or excite. Inhale. “It’s OH-KAAaaay, sirrrr,” I speak in a low voice, trying to ease his apparent anxiety. At the sound of my voice, his head turns back toward me. His muzzle pokes slightly against my arm, as if acknowledging my words. Exhale. I’m relieved he isn’t frightened or defensive. I refocus my gaze forward and continue walking purposefully along the trail again. He follows actively behind, though I can see his ears occasionally twitch backward, listening for what the lively herd may be doing next.



In terms of how “horseness,” or the “essence of horse,” is constructed in Euro-American equestrian cultures, academics have extensively examined the differences between the “traditional,” historically aligned praxis of English riding, versus the more recently formalized paradigm of Natural Horsemanship (NH) (Latimer & Birke, 2009). While exploring the differences between the two at length is not my purpose here, it should be noted that the legacies of both subcultures loom large over my own encounters with horses. On the one hand, traditional equestrianism, such as dressage or showjumping, has been described in terms of its biopolitical power dynamics, in which humans exercise a totalizing control over the equine body in terms of appearance and physiology; sexuality and reproductive capabilities; the restriction and control of movement; and much more (Hansen, 2017; Patton, 2003; 2019). The principles of modern dressage continue to draw from the sport’s Early Modern, Enlightenment origins, highlighting the human rider as a creative agent who “improve[s] upon the *natural* beauty of the horse” through the embodied language of riding, requiring the horse’s willingness, obedience, and submission (Birke & Thompson, 2018, p. 55, emphasis added). The traditional paradigm has been criticized for preserving human-animal binaries, largely due to the utility of the horse for human-determined ends, regardless of the quality of care that the horses receive (Hansen, 2017; Dashper, 2017).

Conversely, in more recent decades NH has positioned itself as an intervention to the traditional paradigm by advocating for allegedly kinder, less technologically dependent methods of engaging with horses (Birke, 2007; Latimer & Birke, 2009). Often traced to the praxes of famed trainers such as Monty Roberts (1997) and Pat Parelli (2003), NH leans into behavioural understandings of the pre-domesticated, pre-cultural, “Wild” or “Natural” horse, which the

paradigm of NH suggests exists within every equine, and can be accessed through unmounted exercises that reject traditional technologies of control: in other words, training horses through a body language of domination. Thus, just because NH takes place on the ground and without many of the technologies of traditional equestrianism, does not necessarily make it any less biopolitically charged.. NH too has been critiqued for its dependence on essentialized, typically masculinized ideals of the naturalness and wildness of animals, and for writing humans into overly simplistic ideas of the herd politics that govern how horses live together in “the Wild,” i.e., as prey (Birke & Brandt, 2009; Patton, 2019). As Latimer and Birke (2009) explain:

NH discourses draw explicitly upon ethological ideas and language describing equine behaviour: in these narratives, horses know about *dominance*, and about predator/prey relationships because these are built into their *instinctive patterns* of behaviour. Humans, then, must learn about what horses “*do naturally*,” and must learn to read the signs in equine body language. Here, the body of the horse represents *wildness* and *naturalness*; by contrast to traditional worlds, complexity and cultural differentiation represented through the body of the horse are played down in NH. (p. 15, emphasis added)

Thus, while the intention of fostering kinder and more empathic relations between humans and horses is a noble one, the naturalizing discourse of NH is challengeable on two closely related levels. First, the elimination of technology or equipment, such as spurs, whips, and bits, does not eliminate the presence of coercion or domination in horse handling. Very often, the purpose of NH is explicitly to assert human leadership and domination, through an understanding of the equine herd as already hierarchical (Latimer & Birke, 2009). Second, the idea that a wild, pre-domesticated, and species-generalized version of “The Horse” exists in the first place—much less within each and every equine—and can be accessed or drawn out through NH’s

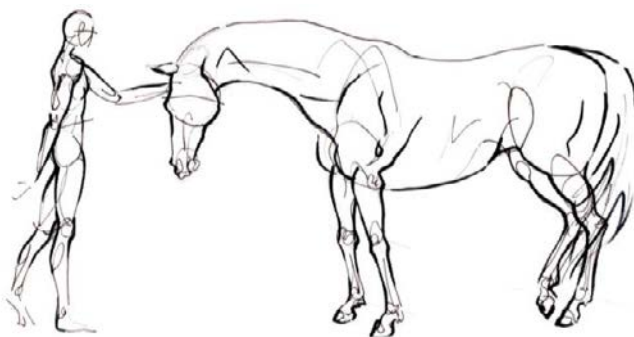
methodologies, is highly essentialist itself. Here, NH pays little heed to how horses themselves are always becoming with humans as participatory co-agents in equestrian cultures (Birke & Brandt, 2009; Birke & Thompson, 2018; Patton, 2019), flattening them as a species into flight-driven prey and herd animals, seeking out the leadership of more dominant figures.

Therefore, both NH and traditional equestrianism evoke a sense of “the Natural” that queer and ecofeminist theory might suggest harkens to heteropatriarchal and colonial conceptions of Nature as something passive, pre-human, and pristine: something for certain humans to act upon (Shiva, 2010, pp. 15–20; Morton, 2010, p. 274). The NH discourse often ignores not only how all encounters with domestic horses take place within human-defined spaces and conditions, but also the social intelligence and adaptiveness of horses, who learn how to “perform” different versions of their horseness in order to survive in such anthropocentric environments (Birke & Thompson, 2018, pp. 47–48). The equine body and mind must be understood as both biological and historical—neither wholly “natural” or “cultural”—to see past such essentializing characterizations.

Ricky: Joining up

In this moment, when no one is watching, I feel we’ve left the world and all its rules and expectations behind. Sweat drips down my brow and dampens my winter clothes, now clinging to my skin. My breathing is hard, chest heaving, and my running slows. He’s also getting tired. I can hear each exhale growing increasingly louder and heavier, his flanks heaving more dramatically as his gallop slows into a canter. Giving in, I straighten my stance—opening my hips, chest, and chin towards him. His canter straightens and becomes more upright too, eying

my change in posture. He begins to turn a large circle around me. His right eye and ear facing toward me with focus. Finally, his canter decreases into a lofty, extended trot. His body lengthens from nose to tail as his head lowers beneath his withers. His legs reach to cover the ground in an elongated, but punctuated, rhythm—oooONE-twoooo-oooONE-twoooo. His ears slacken too, turning more casually left and right, one at a time. My breathing slows as my body grows more relaxed and stiller, allowing my arms and shoulders to slump down. He lifts at the chest and neck and makes a turn in towards me. WOOOooaah! I widen my stance so he will not continue trotting straight into me. He halts. Deep breath. My body slackens at ease; I approach him. He doesn't flee. Holding his head high, his barrel fills and collapses with each breath. I exhale slowly as I reach from below and gently stroke his sweat-dampened neck. He returns my exhale—Prr-rrr-rrr-rrr-rrt!—allowing all tension to melt away from his muscles and soften through his spine. His neck lowers and head sinks down as he relaxes at the poll. Speaking to him softly as I gently stroke his neck, the heat of our bodies burning through the winter air.



The horses engaged throughout my work as a riding instructor are what are called “school horses.” *School horses*, in a Western pedagogical sense, are assigned the role of “teaching” developing equestrians—who typically do not “own” their own horse(s)—how to ride at a pre-

competitive level (Redmalm, 2019). Performing *school horse* is a tall order for any equine. They may carry multiple different human riders per week, or even per day, all with drastically varying levels of knowledge and experience. They are expected to tolerate mistakes and to always demonstrate patience, quietness, and obedience around humans—what humans classify as “good behaviour.” *School horses* are generally granted very little opportunity to express their agency around humans, regardless of whether they are being ridden. There is a clear hierarchy between human and horse, which is enforced through the acts of grooming, riding, and handling. Exhibiting behaviour not considered “good” may jeopardize the horse’s place in the school, making them vulnerable to relocation, where the quality of their care and safety of their circumstances might change. Many have not been school horses for their entire lives. Some may previously have been racehorses, show horses, driving horses, trail horses, among other equine roles in human equestrian cultures. These past meanings continue to influence how they are—often anthropomorphically—perceived by humans in their current role, for example whether they are “feisty” or “lazy,” “honest” or “naughty.” These attributes are human constructions that conveniently suit human narratives, whether or not they reflect what the horses are actually trying to communicate (McVey, 2023, p. 12; Redmalm, 2019, p. 200).

Furthermore, humans also have performative expectations of other humans who work around horses, largely dependent on their roles within the equestrian environment—instructor, trainer, owner, student, barn staff, groom, etc. These human roles are often further complicated by social factors such as gender, race, socioeconomic class, ability, and so on (Birke & Brandt, 2009; Coulter et al, 2013). As a riding instructor, I am expected to convey pedagogical authority and expertise in everything “horse” and “equestrian.” I am to design and execute lesson plans that are appropriate to the level of the rider, who is then paired with a suitable school horse,

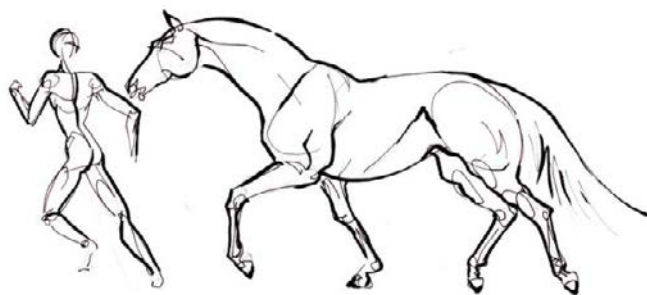
serving to develop their own equestrian proficiency. I am expected to know the school horses intimately, and often to assist in their ongoing “training.” A term I have grown uneasy with due to its connotation of one-sided dominance, the training of school horses, also referred to as “schooling,” is performed to ensure the continued disciplinary adherence of horses in the lesson program and behavioural conformity within the school horse role. My positionality as a white settler in so-called Canada—who, in spite of my queerness, visually reads as cis-male—further complicates this power dynamic, given the connection of whiteness and maleness with equestrian military authority in the colonial Americas (Howell & Taves, 2021).

It may seem as though the anthropocentric underpinnings I have described are utterly insurmountable. However, I do believe that challenging this paradigm is possible, and that as humans we have an obligation to do such dismantling work so that companion animals may live well and thrive in our multispecies communities (Dashper, 2017; Donovan, 2006). The place to begin is in the encounter itself: the meeting of horse and human. We can allow our dominant, anthropocentric lens to prevail and likely fail to engage in a meaningful dialogue with animal others. Alternatively, we can attune ourselves to their embodied languages and gestural dialects, learning how to be in relation with respect and care.

Tarragon: Chase

He walks the perimeter of the arena with a rider in tow. I follow a short distance behind, at a slow, strolling pace. My body is at ease and my shoulders down, free of tension. My voice is warm and soft—for him and the inexperienced human rider sitting upon his back. His attention is on me, more so than on the student—his eyes and ears are turned my way. He appears calm; the

reins are long, allowing his neck to stretch and head to hang beneath the height of his withers. Nonetheless, I remain aware of his every move. Every footfall, tail swish, muscle twitch, nostril flare, and chomp of the bit is on my radar. Wary of the slightest increase or decrease in pace. I gather from the way he eyes and ears me that he is doing the same. It's time to attempt a trot. I take a calming breath. Standing close by his head at the ready, my body slightly tenses in anticipation. I pop my tongue. Cluck-cluck. No response. He carries on walking just as he did before. I giggle, relieved. My body untenses. "Come on, Tarry let's go..." I smile to him and pick up a jog; now he lifts his head, perking his ears as his eyes brighten; he breaks into a trot, gaze locked onto me. I count out loud for him to follow: "One-two-One-two-Up-down-Up-down-Good-Tarry-Good-Boy!" A wave of exhilaration passes over me. His bright eyes, upturned ears, and the animation of his step seem to echo my excitement. He is close behind now, his muzzle a short way from my shoulder. For a moment, I feel we are both genuinely enjoying ourselves. Maybe too much... I sense a rush of energy from behind, as his trot grows faster, each stride lengthening across more ground. He accelerates past me. Uh oh! I refocus... AND WAAaaaaalk. GOOOood, Tarry! The exhale of the drawn-out vowel brings our legs slowly back down into the same leisurely walk as before. Snorr-Rrr-Rrr-Rrr-Rrrttt! He exhales too.



Queering horse-human intimacies: A praxis of attentiveness

When I write of the encounter between me and the equine other, it is not my intention to ignore ethical dilemmas. I turn to queer theory to frame how interspecies entanglements hold the potential to destabilize normative binaries, such as those between humans and animals. Asking “has the queer ever been human?” Chen and Luciano (2015) argue that the dominant Western category of the Human has always been based on the “dehumanization” or “animalization” of the queer, the feminized, the racialized, and the disabled. Thus, they position queer theory as uniquely suited for this kind of categorical dismantling and exploring human entanglement in a more-than-human world (pp. 186–187). Giffney and Hird’s (2008) definition of queering praxis resonates strongly, as it pertains to the “non/human”:

The unremitting emphasis in queer theoretical work on fluidity, über-inclusivity, indeterminacy, indefinability, unknowability, the preposterous, impossibility, unthinkability, unintelligibility, meaninglessness and that which is unrepresentable is an attempt to undo normative entanglements and fashion alternative imaginaries. (p. 4)

Further, they argue:

Queer is utilized... as a critical theory “to challenge and break apart conventional categories” (Doty, 1993, xv) pertaining to the ‘non/human,’ including the long-standing divide between ‘nature’ and ‘culture.’ Queer is employed... as a collection of methodologies to unpick binaries and reread gaps, silences and in-between spaces. (p. 5)

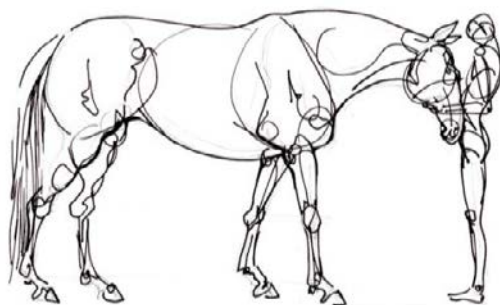
For Giffney and Hird, to queer is to challenge and disrupt the fixedness of normative constructions, particularly what constitutes culture/humanity or nature/animality. Locating the liminal spaces and times these monolithic categories come undone, is also part of this imperative.

The concept of “animal performativity” (Birke et al, 2004; Geiger & Hovorka, 2015) can offer an insightfully queer and feminist approach to understanding the social constructed nature of animality. Following Judith Butler’s (1990) theory of gender as a performative social construct, the authors consider animality as a social “doing” or “becoming,” rather than a biological essence. They invoke Karen Barad’s (2003) concept of “agential realism,” underscoring how all bodies, both human and nonhuman, are co-constructed as phenomena *intra-actively* and discursively through material encounters, rather than “an end product of cultural performances” (Geiger & Hovorka, 2015, p. 1101). In other words, the various cultural meanings that humans associate with certain animals are produced during the interspecific encounter with those animals in a dialogical exchange. Humans then continue to reproduce these meanings over time, through stories and other representations, sometimes to the point that the “real” animal becomes absent (Berger, 1980). Due to our historical proximity to horses, their meanings to humans are abundant, and generally widely understood within a given cultural context (Davis & Maurstad, 2016). School horse, as I have previously described, is one such example of a human constructed equine identity, in that it is culturally and socially performative rather than biologically innate.

Coal: Rest

The sun beams through the dust-coated arena windows, making him appear little more than a silhouette to my eyes. He crawls onward with his neck outstretched and head low. I notice he eyes me tentatively, ears flicking to the side in my direction, then forward again. I know from experience what he is looking for. I make my figure open and receptive to him, drawing back my

shoulders and untensing my limbs, walking slowly and backwards away from him. He responds instantly to the gesture, eyes locking on as he follows, turning directly my way. He presses his forehead into my chest as our bodies meet, bringing himself to a halt. I welcome him with a slow, deep, massaging caress with my knuckles at the base of his ears. “Hell-OOOH there, my friend!” The heat of his breath warms my core. He chews calmly and softly closes his eyes to rest. Our relaxed figures lean on one another in stillness, for support in repose. Other horses and humans around us seem to fade into the background. “GOOood, Coal, REEE-LAAaaaax.” Drawing soft, deep breaths, I revel in the pleasure of his closeness. It has to end: I’ll be expected to send him back out to finish the lesson. But right now, in this fleeting moment, we simply enjoy the comfort of having someone near.



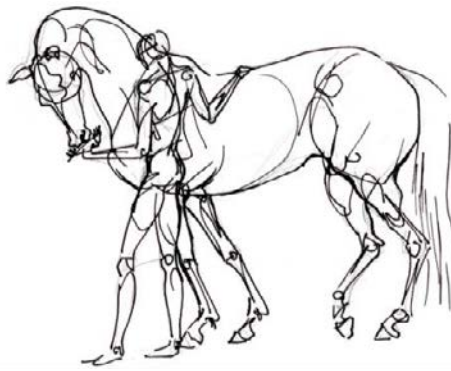
Together with Butler (1990) and Barad (2003), I also engage Traci Warkentin’s interspecies “praxis of attentiveness” (2010) to explore how the encounter itself can become a site with transformative potential: that is, a site in which one can recognize and strive to move beyond the culturally encoded meanings and performances of human and horse. Rooted in practical phenomenology, Warkentin argues that “embodiment enables the expression of ethical comportment toward others, while also providing a kind of empathic approximation of the experience of others in our midst, which can (and should) inform our responsive interactions

with them” (p. 103). The concept of “empathic approximation” pertains especially to nonhuman species: while humans can never truly know the inner worlds of other animals, we can make educated judgements in our interspecies encounters by inferring, through body language, what is being communicated nonverbally. To do so meaningfully requires adopting an open-minded responsiveness to the bodily gestures and movements of the other, evoking what Shapiro describes as a “kinesthetic empathy” (1990). By embracing the inter-corporeal consciousness outlined in Warkentin’s praxis, humans can come to understand and re-evaluate their own imperatives within multispecies relations as they evolve dialogically with other sentient beings. Our encounters become the sort of “in-between spaces” that Giffney and Hird (2008) speak of, where normative binaries may be queerly destabilized.

Leo: Sniff

I’m standing at his shoulder, close to his side. I reach slowly into the satchel of brushes and retrieve the body brush with the softest bristles. His eyes apprehensively follow my hand. I hold the brush out before him, and he curiously brings his nostrils to interrogate it. Sniff. Just a brush, my friend. He nonchalantly turns his head away. Apparently, nothing to worry about. Inhale. My chest fills with air as I slowly lift my right arm, passing through the dense yet empty space between us. There’s an unseen barrier I’m beginning to sense. A sort of reverse magnetic force, as though any movement too strong, too fast, or too energetic on my part will repel him, causing him to flee the opposite way.

The bristles meet his coat just behind his ears—the barrier is breached. I press the brush slightly down so not to tickle him, careful not to push too firmly either. Exhale. I release my hand down the length of his neck in a gentle swoooooosh! Inhale. I rest my other hand flat against the broad surface of his shoulder. There is no pressure in my touch, only the lightest feel, intended to reassure. The brush returns to the top of his neck. Exhale. I stroke downward. I continue brushing him in this exact manner: patiently waiting for a sign of some relaxation before I move onto the rest of his body. In silence, he watches me—eyes glancing to his right. He is still but for his ears, which constantly twitch forward and back, at attention. Finally, he shows some signs of relaxation. His jaw unlocks, and for the first time he softly opens and closes his mouth, releasing tension. “GOOOood, friend!” He softens the muscles in his shoulders and neck and lets his head lower restfully. I’d hardly realized he had been carrying it so high—so strained. With this reassurance, I take a small step to the side and continue brushing onto his torso.



Adopting a praxis of attentiveness toward horses would not mean trying to uncover a “true meaning” or “true essence” of Horse, as followers of NH may seek out (McVey, 2023, p. 76). This kind of embodied attentiveness is specifically where a queer theory of performativity and co-becoming intervenes. A queer, interspecific praxis of attentiveness challenges the kind of

hyper-attention that is focused on biopolitical control through the instrumentalized, goal-oriented keeping and training of horses outlined by Hansen (2017). It harkens to the “fluidity, ... indeterminacy, indefinability” and “unknowability” that Giffney and Hird argue underscores the work of queer theory (2008, p. 4). We cannot know horses in the same way we can other humans as our dependence on spoken language can make this kind of knowledge difficult for us to engage with (Bell & Russell, 2000). But we can try to open ourselves to meaningful, embodied conversation with our more-than-human companions, if we are willing to pay attention and be present. Brandt (2004) describes how our two species cultivate a “third language” of bodily gestures that is neither wholly human nor horse, but something in-between through which we can communicate nonverbally. However, Brandt’s notion that this “third language” enables “working together in a *goal-oriented fashion*” (2004, p. 304; emphasis added) should be questioned, as it fails to address the role that the horses play in determining such goals. In the end, anthropocentrism will be largely left unchallenged when “dialogue” between human and horse is only a means to fulfilling human ends.

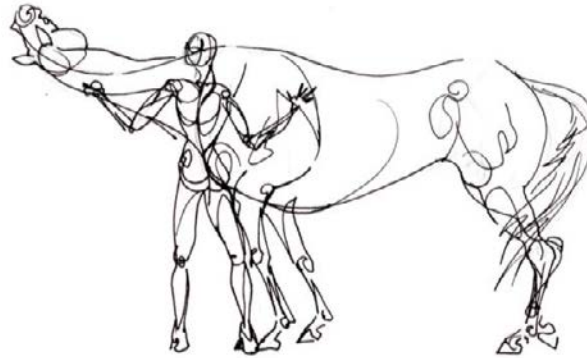
Thinkers such as Spannring (2019), argue that equestrianism is inherently anthropocentric, calling for a complete reimagining or “deterritorialization” of the fundamentally instrumental nature of the horse-human relationship. Smith and Riley (2024) go on to call for an attunement of our innate animal senses during play with horses at liberty, citing Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the lateral—rather than hierarchical—relation between mutually embodied species (p. 141). This re-embodiment of the human has elsewhere been described as our “strange kinship” with other animals, or even our sense of “interanimality” (Toadvine, 2007; Oliver, 2008). For example, the inspirational poetry of Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan establishes an embodied and erotic ethic of care and attentiveness to equine companions that refuses instrumental, colonial

ways of relating—forming the basis of an “[inter]species sisterhood” that is rooted in shared Earthly vulnerability (Huebert, 2018, p. 174). Neither I nor these thinkers suggest that our humanness or horseness can ever be completely ignored or forgotten. However, I suggest that the goal-oriented inclinations of equestrianism can be challenged during the horse-human encounter. Could something less determinate—a less predictable co-becoming, undefined from the start—be made possible, in which humans can attempt to meet horses as mutually agentic subjects, listening and responding to one another in ways that are not oriented toward human achievement? In other words, could empathic, mutual pleasure and care become goals in and of themselves?

Idina: Groom

I retrieve a soft body brush from the grooming satchel. I approach her slowly, from the side, so that I'm visible and won't surprise her. She's already turned my way, seemingly comfortable with me near her. I bring the brush tenderly behind her slackened ears, circling it around their base. She gently leans her head in closer, pushing into the soft bristles. Her muzzle closes against my chest, leaving it there to rest, while allowing the feeling of the brush to lull her into a sort of meditative state. Her breathing becomes slow and deep. Her eyes flutter, struggling to remain open, then she gradually allows them to close. Gentle flicks from the brush toss dust up and off her coat. Her nearness warms me through the whole of my body, all the way to my frozen fingers and toes. I speak in a soothing voice, creating long and low vowel sounds. Sweet nothings, emphasizing tone over diction. “GOOOooooood, maaare, REEEE-LAAaaax.” The sounds relax

me just as much as they do her. Deep breaths. Softly, her lips begin to churn in a nuzzling chew against my clothes, reciprocating the gesture of the brush on her own skin.



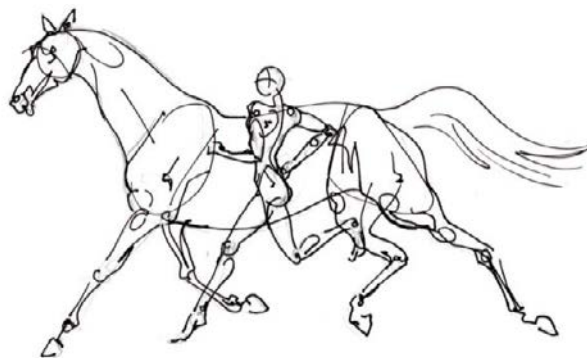
Between December 2024 and April 2025, I recorded my encounters with the horses at the riding school I currently work for as a riding instructor, through an exercise in phenomenology-inspired life writing. In most cases, I already knew these horses intimately and had previously established relationships with each of them, with the exception of one, more recent arrival. The selected encounters are almost entirely taken from times during which I am one on one with the horses alone, outside the “riding lesson” setting. In the traditional equestrian paradigm, this time may be described as “training,” while I occupy the performative role of the “trainer,” tasked with ensuring that the horses remain physically and behaviourally fit for the school. However, by leading with the question of how humans can challenge the goal-orientation of their relationship with horses—as well the performative roles each is expected to fulfill—I sought to unsettle the power imbalances of the encounter. I engaged with Warkentin’s praxis of attentiveness (2010), not in the interest of forgetting, but of problematizing the performative meanings of *horse* that humans have crafted over time. Equally so, I question the performative meanings of *humans with* horses, such as “instructor” and “trainer,” that humans have constructed about themselves.

Idina: Trot

She spryly trots, each leg thrusting energetically off the ground in powerful two-beat pulses...

One-two-One-two-One-two... Her shoulders and haunches swing freely, without stiffness, back and forth with each stride, as she carries her neck and head elegantly above her withers. Eyes bright, each leg reaching long over the ground, with an accordion-like elasticity, her muscles contract and expand. Captured by her, I don't feel my legs transition from a walk to a jog, but I now find them trotting rhythmically alongside her. My knees echo the expressive bend and extension of her two front legs; my heart rate and breathing growing faster as I do. I laugh between heavy breaths, consumed by an intoxicating, uninhibited playfulness. Limbs swing to-and-fro from shoulders and hips, feet propelling off the sand. She doesn't charge ahead, but stays close, in conversation with me, her gaze and far ear focusing frontward, her nearest ear turned inward, locked in to face me... listening for what I might do next. An invisible tether bridges the space between us, holding us together in harmonized motion. She drops into a walk and so do I.

"GOOoooood, maaaAARE!" I manage between breathes.



From the outset of each encounter, I strove to let go of predetermined expectations and allow my whole being to become attuned to my equine companions: pushing myself to be present, listening and following their gestures and movements in a dialogical and spontaneous manner. I tried to relate to the horses on a level of shared, embodied animality, rather than a hierarchy of species: Merleau-Ponty's lateral transcendence, absent of any presumption of how we ought to express ourselves in each other's presence. I paid attention to the horses, listening to their bodies, not in order to better control them but to afford them the agency to *co-create* the character of our meetings. Did they demonstrate anxiety? Fear? Curiosity? Restlessness? Playfulness? How could I engage with them in a way that would be calming? Soothing? Mentally stimulating? Physically rewarding? I cannot, and have never claimed to, "speak horse" as proponents of NH do (Birke, 2007), nor can I understand their innermost thoughts and experiences. But as Warkentin suggests, my experience enables me to make educated approximations by paying close attention to body language, increasing the awareness and intentionality of my own communicative movements and gestures responsively, in a dialogical manner (2010, p. 103).

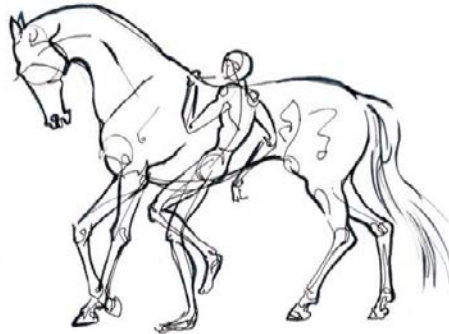
Following each encounter, I handwrote fieldnotes as soon as possible while my memory was still fresh. These journalled notations were soon after poetically refined into the impressionistic passages you find here. As I wrote, I tried to consider the events and circumstances of each encounter in detail. The impressions do not represent the entirety of any encounter, but brief moments in which I felt that the culturally-coded categories of "trainer" and "school horse" had even minutely been destabilized. In addition to writing, I also sketched each encounter in a gestural drawing style, trying to capture the communicative movements and body language of the human and equine figures visually. My reflections contemplated how in certain

instances, anthropocentrism, or human-centeredness, sometimes may have prevailed, as well as the moments in which it may have been surprisingly called into question.

Leo: Spook

I place my right palm on his croup, just above the dock of his tail, slowly pivoting around his haunches. Exhale. Staying close to his body, I allow him to feel my presence as I pass, his tail brushes against my chest. “GOOOood, Leo.” He’s listening, with his ears turned back to face me, not in aggression but attention. I massage him, pressing my fingertips against the fleshy surface above his tail. Now facing his opposite hip, I give him a soft massage on his haunch. Repositioning myself behind his head, where I am comfortably in sight, he looks to me cautiously from his left eye. His upper neck tensing and ears focusing outwards. “It’s OH-kayyy, Leo,” I whisper to him. Inhale. I raise the body brush in my right hand toward his upper neck. Though no physical contact is made, it breaches the barrier that has re-formed between him and me, pushing him away in an abrupt jolt. He skids off to the right, shying his head away from me. Shoot! Too fast; too much pressure; I didn’t even show him the brush from the left! Deep exhale. “I’m soooo sorry, sirrrr,” I say in my lowest and most reassuring voice. I take a slow and humble step forward. He is still again, eyeing cautiously, breathing slightly elevated. “It’s OH-KAAaaay,” I whisper. I turn my wrist so the soft bristles of the body brush face upward, slowly holding it out toward him, low where he can see it. Inhale. He hesitates for a moment. Slowly, he turns back toward me and grazes his muzzle and whiskers to the brush in hand. We both exhale. Proceeding with caution, I bring the brush back to the top of his neck, closing it against his body

and releasing it down its length with a swooshing flick. My left hand rests softly against his him.
I begin the process of rebuilding the trust that was lost.



These impressions are intended to demonstrate a praxis for paying attention to the performative aspects of horse-human intimacies. I call them performative as a reminder that they are always taking place under historically and culturally informed, biopolitical conditions, that traditionally define how horses and humans exist in hierarchical relation to one another. By understanding how horses are expected to perform *school horse*, and I the role of *instructor* and *trainer*, I can attempt to work past instrumentalist and anthropocentric presumptions of intimacy throughout these interspecific encounters. Reflecting upon my entries, this was most apparent when horses were given the space to explore themselves and their agency, challenging the traditional constraints of the riding school in a way that would still ensure both of our safety.

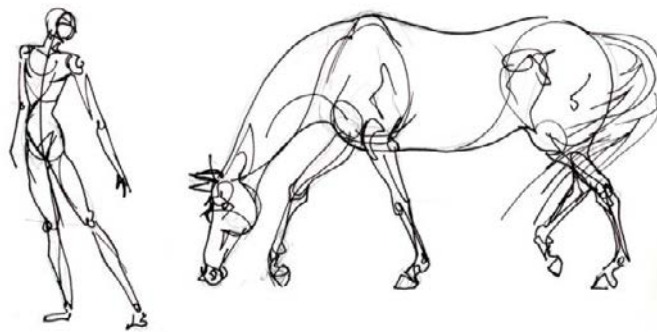
For example, in my encounters with a younger horse named Ricky who had been struggling to conform to the behavioural requirements of school horse, I engaged him at liberty—loose and without tack in the enclosed arena—to allow him to express himself as he wished and interact with me only as he pleased. Though his initial reaction was to release his energy by galloping around the large open space, it wasn't long before he acknowledged my

presence by focusing his gaze my way. While I cannot know the true intention of his acknowledgement, experience led me to read the brightness of his eyes, alertness of his ears, and unresolved tension in his stance, as invitationally playful. This experience-based judgement is the sort of empathic approximation that Warkentin (2010) advocates for in her interspecies etiquette. When his excitement grew following my response—again, manifesting gesturally in his animated movements—my intuition was affirmed, and I continued to engage him in this way. I was inspired to briefly *become horse* in movement and gesture, in a choreography of mutual snorting, cantering, and bucking.

Of course, my use of the term “liberty” should not go unquestioned. Although the term is commonly used in equestrian discourse—especially NH—to refer work in which the horse is not physically tethered in any way by bridle or lead to a human (Smith, 2024), the horse in fact is never *totally* free. They are bound within the walls or fences of the arena or round pen in which the session takes place. The power dynamic between human and domestic horse can also never fully disappear: Humans are after all the sole decision makers when it comes to the timing, duration, goals, and character of working sessions. Hence the importance of continuously underscoring the performative character of the encounter: His agency remains limited by the enclosure of the arena, placing me as a trainer in a position of control and authority. However, during the time I was allotted to work with Ricky that day, I tried my best to forget any notion of a predetermined goal or outcome and take on a more passive position, allowing an unbridled Ricky to act first and me to respond thoughtfully in a way that was validating to him.

Ricky: Explore

We walk side by side. His head lolls by my shoulder; he glances thoughtfully left and right as we meander around, taking in our surroundings. No lead tethers him to me, nor me to him. Our shoulders and hips sway elastically with each of our strides, freeing our bodies to loosen, stretch, and decompress after our run. We exude an embodied calmness; a sense of relaxation permeates our syncopated movements. Sensing him slow down as we approach a huddle of wooden jump standards, I pause and wait for him to investigate. He explores the wood in his own, tactile way, bowing his head to touch them curiously with his muzzle and whiskers. He smells through his widened nostrils and tastes them with his large tongue. I wait patiently, bemused, wondering what he thinks of these objects of human design. He loses interest, looking back toward me and stepping nearer to be close again. We walk on together, ready to explore someplace else.



Despite their poeticism, my intention is not to overly romanticize horse-human intimacies in art or writing. I equally wished to attend to the innate biopolitical challenges of working alongside domesticated horses. Of course, there were moments when anthropocentric power dynamics and tendencies undoubtedly prevailed. The encounter with Tarragon during the riding lesson underscores this tension. Although we shared a transgressive moment in which it felt to me as

though we too were truly playing with one another in a mutually engaging way, the realities of our respective performative expectations as instructor and school horse quickly came into sharp relief. As Tarragon's trot became too expressive, I had little choice but to slow him down for the safety of our student. Bringing him back to a slower, less lively, and more "acceptable" pace may have stifled his agency by restricting his bodily freedom despite the very brief instant in which he was afforded the opportunity to move himself more freely.

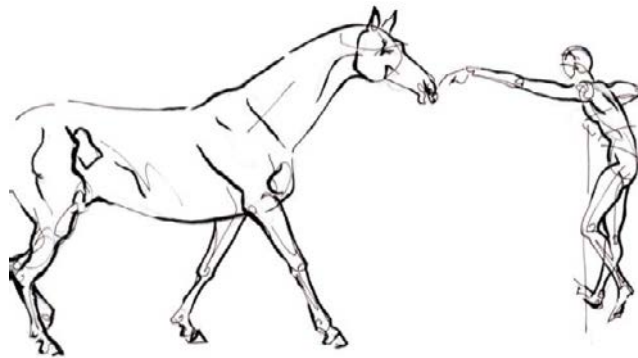
I also paid heed to the moments in which I was not understood or did not understand or immediately recognize what was happening. Misunderstanding and miscommunication are guaranteed in multispecies intimacies of this kind, and humans must be able to admit when they have gotten it wrong. For example, in the grooming encounter with Leo, I allowed my presumptions of a docile, relatively unsensitive school horse to overpower my attentiveness, and by extension my ability to appropriately respond to Leo as an individual. When I forgot to reintroduce the body brush on his opposite side, I failed to recognize Leo's uniqueness as an unfamiliar horse—with a history of life experiences I lack any knowledge of—in a brand-new environment. My totalizing him as a school horse led me to misrecognize his needs, thus leading him to misread my intentions and to startle. However, by slowly reintroducing the brush to him in a way where it would be clearly visible, I reinvoked a praxis of attentiveness by responding appropriately to rebuild his trust. While miscommunication may occur, a reflexive praxis of attentiveness enables humans to consider, in the moment, what went wrong and how to respond from a place of empathy.

As I've argued, the core tenet of a queered praxis of attentiveness towards horses remains refusing to conform to normative, essentialized tropes of human or horse—embracing indeterminacy and reflexive response. During my encounter with Idina in the stable, care through

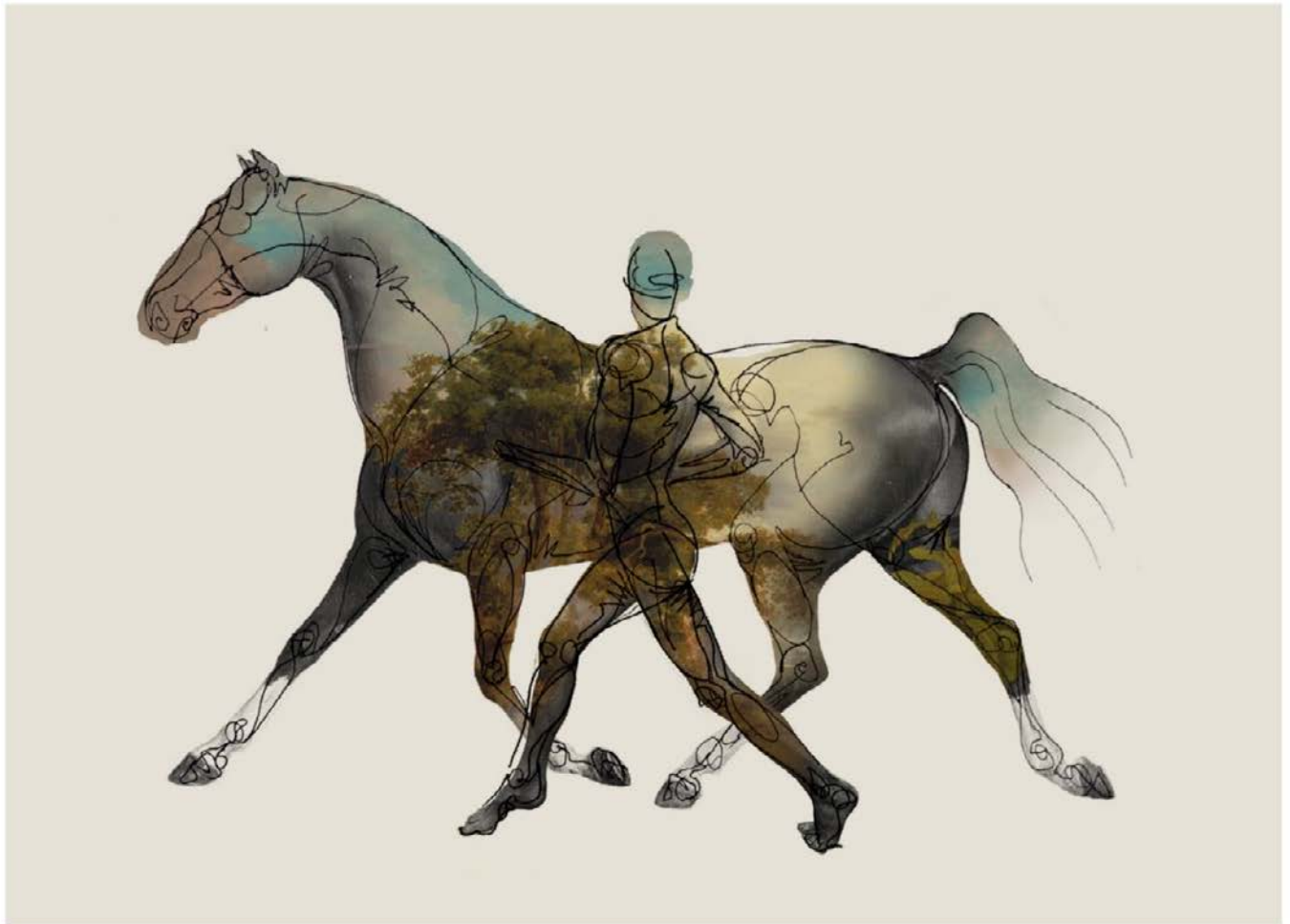
grooming—without any ulterior motive for work or sport—became the central, defining purpose of the encounter. This form of care was still fundamentally a discussion between us. Idina’s fervid affirmations of pleasure from the brush against certain muscles informed me how and where she enjoyed being brushed, through nonverbal, embodied means. The grazing of her muzzle against my arm might even suggest she was quite possibly reciprocating the grooming gesture onto me. Once again, care does not mean all biopolitical constraints have been transcended: after all, Idina’s movement was still restricted by the four walls of the stall, making it impossible for her to simply walk away. Yet through my attunement to her body language, I remained cognizant of her reception to the grooming act. The calm and silent stillness in *both* our demeanours, perfectly at ease in each other’s presence, connotes a mutual sense of contentedness that I feel may just be the foundation of a queerer horse-human intimacy. By embracing queer theory’s flexibility and adaptiveness, and abandoning normative tendencies toward narrative linear progression, the encounter is allowed to remain dialogical. It was through dialogue that care and pleasure—both physical and emotional—could emerge as possible ends in themselves (Donovan, 2006; Lloro-Bidart, 2015; Huebert, 2018). Thus, no matter how brief, or simple the act—grooming, playing at liberty, or just passing by—each multispecies encounter has an opportunity for transgression. The encounter can either uphold or defy the power relations and anthropocentric propensities that traditionally define horse-human—and most human-animal—intimacies. The intervening result is two beings, sharing a moment in space and time, unbridled of the performative roles encoded onto one another.

Idina: Greet

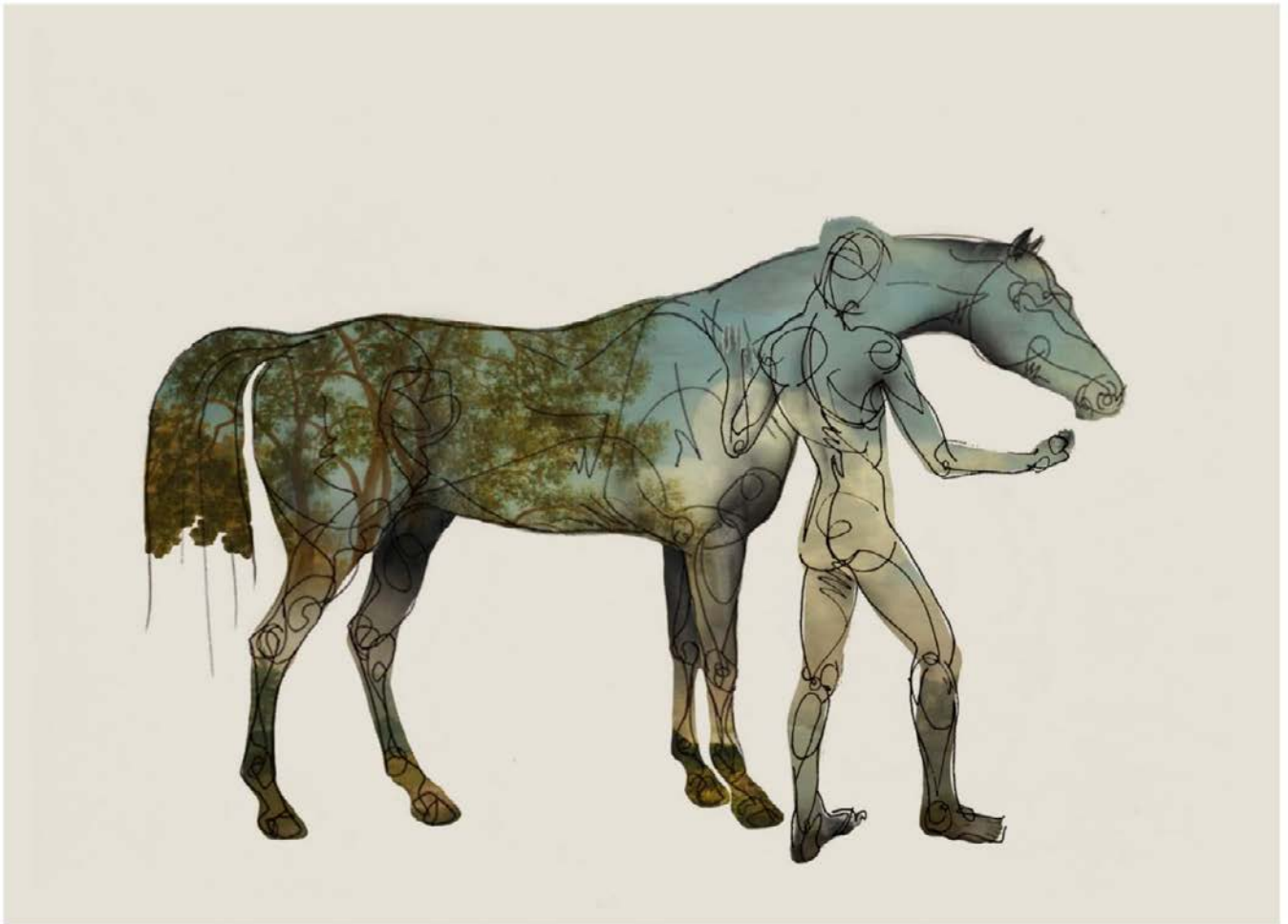
I stroll along the winding dirt path that leads to the barn. It's a mild spring day, the sky is clear, and the air is cool but pleasant against my skin. Looking to the paddock on my left, I see the horses are at rest, lounging in the sunlight, heads hanging low as they graze. Slowly circling their ears in each direction and alternately resting each leg from the ground, one at a time. I slow my stride to watch them for a moment. [Idina] takes notice, her eyes locking on and ears turning up to face me. I smile broadly at her, relaxing my posture. She ambles over to the fence, my way, swinging her shoulders and haunches with each stride. I stop and rest my arms upon the fence to wait for her. As she arrives, her muzzle closes against my slouched forearm. "Hell-Oh, my friend." I slowly extend my opposite arm from below and gently caress her neck. She deeply exhales—her breath warm in contrast to the air surrounding us, her velvety coat equally warm to the touch. Her figure is at ease. For a moment, I forget where I'm going and why, simply enjoying the pleasure of her company. Ah, I remember now. Good-bye, sweet mare, go and enjoy the day. With a final caress, I slowly back away to return to the path. She also backs away from the fence and slowly turns back to join her grazing herd. I continue watching them as I leave, surprised and refreshed by her friendly greeting.



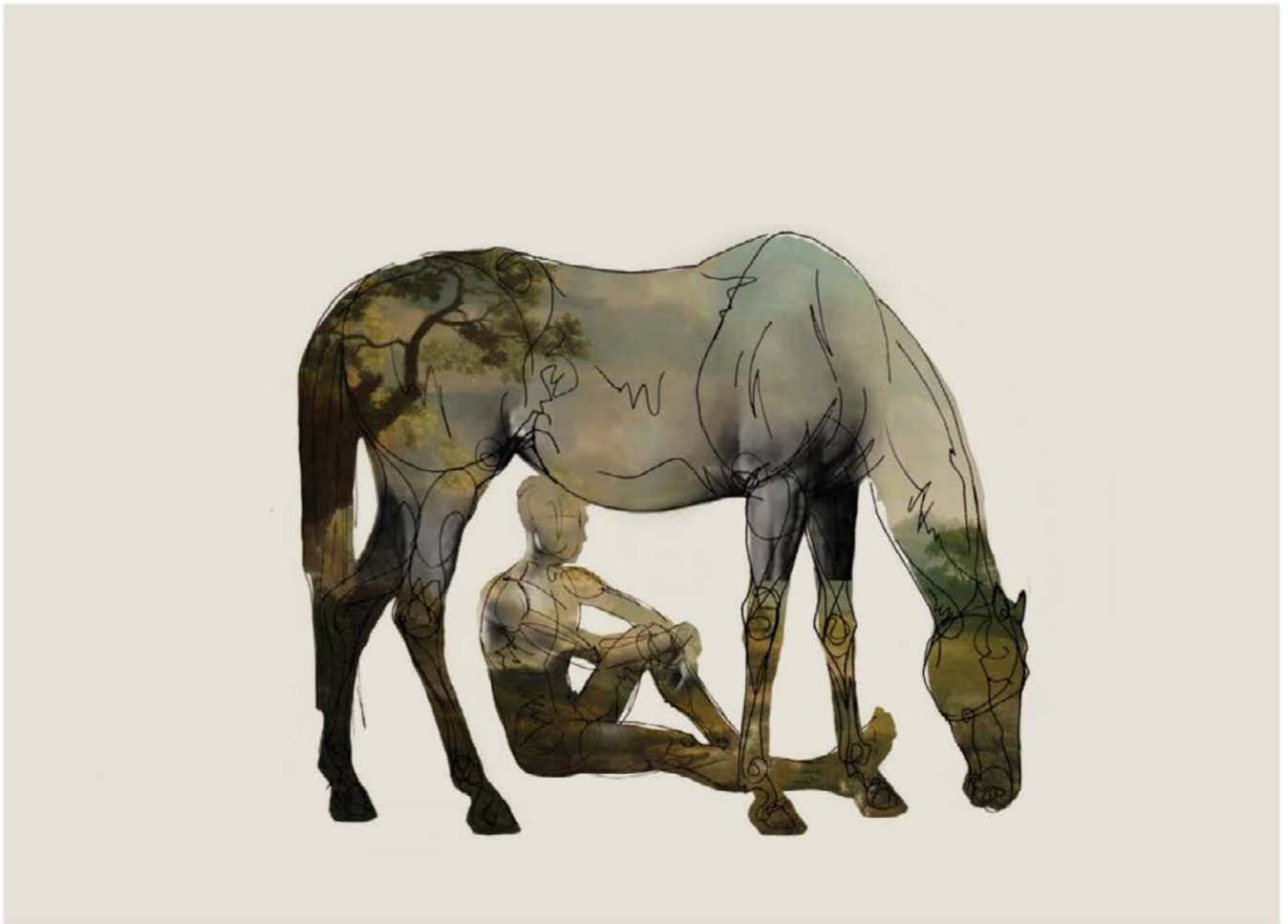
When humans first harnessed the power of horses some 6,000 years ago, we became companion species largely unlike any other. Despite the extensive discourse on the profound connection, or affective bond, that may form between humans and horses (Maurstad et al., 2013; Dashper, 2017; McVey, 2023), the anthropocentric, or human-directed and determined, biopolitical underpinnings of our working relationship cannot be ignored. In fact, they are so deeply embedded into every aspect of horse domestication—from breeding, to training, to competition—that a paradigm in which horses may be recognized as subjective agents in their own rights seems a rather distant possibility. Yet I hope that my exploration here contributes to an ongoing conversation around anthropocentrism, biopolitics, performativity, and horse-human relationships. The act of writing my encounters this way has opened new questions for me as a scholar and equestrian: namely how have *I*, the human, as well as *they*, the horses, been changed by our encounters? What have we (co)become that we were not before? Do we humans become more thoughtful, compassionate, and empathic companions as the result of our attendance to multispecies intimacies, recognizing horses as agents rather than tools for achieving our own desires? Perhaps even more challengingly, how will the horses' lives be changed by our encounters, for better or for worse? There is no simple answer to these questions, as they demand a commitment to continuous self-reflection and attentiveness to our each and every meeting with horses. However, I hope that by asking such questions, we can begin to imagine different ways of being together with equine companions, as we continue to co-evolve deeper into this century.



TROT



SMELL



GRAZE



SPOOK



REST



GALLOP

IV.

Gestures:

Artist's Statement

In the Euro-American art historical canon, few nonhuman animals appear as frequently or as diversely as horses. Horses were some of the first animals that humans attempted to depict visually, immortalized in the iconic paintings on the cave walls of Lascaux, dated some 17,000 to 22,000 years old (Chaudun, 2010). As horses became domesticated and increasingly valued and instrumentalized in human societies, visual representations of them abounded, with significant cultural meaning and symbolism becoming attached to them. By the Early Modern period, the horse in the Western art had become much more than a domesticated mammal that was ridden upon: They were symbols of the power, status, masculinity, and virility of their riders (Howell & Taves, 2021); symbols of nationalism, or the achievements of their lands of origin, also deeply connected to ideas of racial or ethnic purity (Landry, 2001; Guest & Mattfeld, 2020); and finally, they became symbolic of the innate power of the human—unquestionably white and male—to subdue and domesticate a “sublime” and seemingly untameable, more-than-human nature (Pickel-Chevalier, 2017, p. 121). These varied images of horses are evocative of the rather queer interspecies attraction humans, particularly artists, seem to possess for horses (Probyn, 1996; McHugh, 2011; Marra, 2017). However, while the horses of art history are often aesthetically magnificent, they are also necessarily rendered property: tools or instruments of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism, lacking the freedom to be authors of their own life stories.

Upon reflection, the *Unbridled* portfolio has been an opportunity for me—as a graphic artist and illustrator interested in visual cultural representations of animals—to creatively explore this enduring artistic legacy through a queer theoretical lens. Referring to my original research

question on how *being-with* horses may cultivate a visceral shared sense of animality, this visual exploration sought to disrupt normative, dominating logics of relating across species lines. Through a series of six digitally composited portraits called *Gestures*, I subvert the symbol of the horse by attending to the moment-to-moment intimacies of our embodied encounters. *Gestures* was conceived in direct conversation with my second project, as the sketched and journalled impressions of that piece served as a starting point for each of the digital compositions here. However, after extensive theoretical and visual exploration, the pieces have taken on their own meaning, beyond mere illustrations. The remixing of the equine figures of British animal portraitist George Stubbs (1724–1806) allows these works to dialogue not only with the living horses I’ve encountered, but also with the symbolic horses of art history, still burdened by the weight of their heteropatriarchal, imperialist, and elitist legacy. Rather than replicating the classic centaurian union of “the Man on horseback” (Howell & Taves, 2021), each piece depicts a single moment of a gestural conversation between horse and human, both literally and metaphorically unbridled by the equestrian equipment that so often hierarchically binds us. By recentering our bodies, I reemphasize that beyond our performative roles, we are ultimately two animals, flesh and bone, sharing a moment in space and time.

The concept of “queer historical memory,” according to Marra (2017), is heavily influential on this body of work. Echoing Haraway’s theory of companion species (2003), Marra argues that “millennia of intimate congress with equines left deep traces that continue to animate human culture, especially in shaping attitudes about the body, gender, and sexuality” (2017, p. 33). That is, the Western historical record—and certainly the art historical record—has largely asserted the horse’s sociocultural positionality as a status symbol of the upper classes and lethal weapon of war (see also Kelekna, 2009). As Ahmed (2004) has argued, the pervasive attachment

of different entities to one another, including visual ones, causes them to become closely associated, or “sticky,” within the imagination of a given cultural context. One needn’t look far into the canon of Western art history to notice the visual “stickiness” between powerful men, who are predominantly white, and the horses they ride. However, Marra suggests that these heavily classed and militarized images exemplify a certain anxiety about male sexuality and the erotic nature of riding. She writes:

projections of the underlying queerness of white men’s riding... had to be repressed as long as horses were required for manly performance and progress. The roots of that repression extend far back into history; they lurk beneath the intrusions, accumulated from the Middle Ages through the Enlightenment, that have come between human and equine bodies: beneath the material layers of sewn clothing, undergarments, heavy armor, and framed saddles and stirrups, and beneath the ideological layers of antipagan Christianity and Cartesian dualism, lies the bare rub of human male genitalia on horseflesh. (p. 37)

I thus invoke her conceptualization of queer historical memory as an intentional act of queering the visual legacy of humans and horses together. It became my artistic imperative to accomplish this by less anxiously centring the erotic nature of the horse-human relationship, paying attention to how our bodies have touched and gestured to one another in the centuries-old choreography of horse-human dialogue, now free of the constraints imposed by the dominant equestrian dyad. Consequently, from this project’s onset, I understood the encounters I would depict would take place with both figures on the ground, rejecting the all-too-common image of a white, male-presenting figure on horseback. I understand that although I am a queer person, and that this part of myself is strongly reflected in the work, I am also a white settler on Turtle Island who presents as male. Thus, I believe it is of heightened importance that my work queerly subverts the image of horse and human together, given the historical legacy I am responding to.

In my research on representations of horses in Western art, I became drawn to the work of the British painter George Stubbs (1724–1806), who is notorious for immortalizing the prized possessions of the English aristocracy in oils: their horses. However, the incorporation of Stubbs' work provides a much richer layer of meaning to the *Unbridled* portfolio than merely his association with depicting finely bred horses. As Dallow (2022) claims, his equestrian and equine paintings:

came to reflect [eighteenth century] English upper-class society: its Enlightenment views of nature and nature's relationship to a moral and healthy body, its growing obsession with country sports and animal breeding, and the expansion of its country estates that necessitated increasingly specialized and stratified staff. (p. 21)

Stubbs was undoubtedly an artist of the Enlightenment. Prown (2017) writes of him as an anatomist as well as a painter, studying the skeletons and cadavers of equine bodies in every which position, to portray them to the highest degree of visual realism (pp. 32–33). Thus, it is difficult not to believe he regarded the horse in purely objectivist terms, as a specimen of both scientific and artistic study. As Prown claims, his art “reflect(s) a fundamental faith in the power of human reason to make the unknown known” (p. 34). He goes on to argue that “there is a suggested analogy [in Stubbs' work] that as God is to man, so man is to the animal kingdom. And there seems to be divine sanction to man's domination over horses and dogs, and his use of them to hunt and control nature” (p. 37). In other words, Stubbs seeks to legitimize human domination over the animal, and more-than-human world more broadly, in his work. Further, as Dallow (2022) argues, the pastoral landscape which serves as a backdrop to his equine figures, is equally embroiled in this biopolitical configuration. The land too represents nature rendered into property by a social elite, with captive resident horses serving as an evocative mediator between

the naturalness, or wildness, and domesticity of these spaces(p. 24). Thus, the land and horses of Stubbs' wealthy patrons assume their rightful position as the obedient, living possessions of the English upper class, who are nearly divinely ordained to rule over the Earth and all its inhabitants, human or not.

However, Dallow also suggests that there is another side to Stubbs' work, which imbues a sense of life and subjecthood into his equine figures that few Western artists had previously attempted to convey. In her words:

Stubbs ushered in a new mode of equine portraiture through his depictions of animals with "names, unique comportments and attitudes" and who, like humans, "bear marks of weariness, anxiety, and loss." (Eisenman, 2013, pp. 110–111). These animated portrayals suggestive of an animal's inner life diverged from the writings of eighteenth-century naturalists... who believed that animal behavior derived solely from instinct and habit; they also countered earlier, seventeenth-century Cartesian understandings of animals as soulless machines. (2022, p. 21)

The horses of Stubbs' portraits are full of life and character, donning a wide range of expressions and behavioural gestures—from playfulness, to nurture, to outright fear—that make it impossible to see them as merely mechanistic automatons. Thinking with Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2020), I wonder if artists like Stubbs, who sought such anatomical perfection in their representations, also felt a deep sense of emotional attachment to their subject matter, what one might even call love (2020, p. 7).

Take for example Stubbs' portrait *Lord Grosvenor's Arabian with a Groom* (Fig. 1). As the title immediately suggests, the chestnut horse is the possession of a landed patron, and we may be safe to assume the archetypically English pastoral background represents his Lordly estate. To someone familiar with horses, the equine's demeanour is easy to recognize as

apprehensive and alert: their ears stand upright and face forward; their eyes are widened and nostrils flared, as veins protrude from their delicate face; their neck stands erect, near perpendicular to the ground, while their back is hollow; their legs appear stiff and four hooves planted, as their tail rigidly lifts from the dock at which it meets their spine. Such thoughtful attention to the full-bodied expressiveness of the horse accentuates their aliveness, positioning them as a sentient and active central subject within the scene: far more vital and animate than the title would suggest.



Figure 1. *Lord Grosvenor's Arabian with a Groom*. By G. Stubbs, c. 1765, painting, oil on canvas, located at the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, TX, US.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/af/George_Stubbs_%2C_'Lord_Grosvenor's_Arabian_Stallion_with_a_Groom'%2C_c._1765.jpg

However, the horse's vitality is nonetheless a captive one, deeply embedded within hierarchical notions of species, class, and race. The human figure of the white male groom, for

example, is juxtaposed next to the nervous equine, appearing calm, at ease, and comfortable with his ability in handling horses—perhaps an Enlightenment representation of human rationality, contrasted against the irrational animal. The whiteness of the handler, and Englishness of the country estate, also cannot be ignored in relation to the foreignness of the *Arabian* horse (Prown, 2017, p. 38). Prown thus identifies an element of the exotic within the piece, driving an even deeper separation between the uneasy horse and their otherwise serene environment, *naturalizing* British imperial desires to preside over foreign lands, animals, and peoples alike. Lastly, the pastoral landscape itself is a defining element of the painting’s biopolitical undertone, by both literally and figuratively containing the horse and human subjects. Both have been enlisted in the service of the landowner and so are mutually tied to the land, albeit in very different ways, with very different levels of agency. The groom may have some degree of autonomy—though this may be limited by his socioeconomic status—while the horse, as a nonhuman agent, is irrefutably captive and never could have consented to their circumstances..

It is this layered understanding of Stubbs’ work and legacy that led me to the inclusion of his equine figures in this series. I felt compelled to give them a new life, to visually liberate them from their Lordly estates, and their instrumentalized value as symbols of status and wealth. I wanted to queer historical memory, by refocusing on the embodied intimacies with humans of various social classes they would have surely encountered during their lives, from servile grooms to landed elites. Perhaps some were, kind, gentle, and attentive, while others probably were far less so. However, it is only Stubbs’ caring attention to the physical and emotional expressiveness of horses that made their inclusion in my own so striking.

My composite images stemmed from sketches originally drawn during field work, researching my own embodied relationship to the horses with whom I work on a near daily basis.

The sketches, along with my journalling, were made in ink-pen almost immediately following the lived encounter to visually capture the essence of one moment in that time. After selecting some of my preferred explorations, I began comparing them to the horses of Stubbs' paintings. It was not difficult to find similar postures in his work when layered against my own. The second step was to refine my pen drawings so that they aligned to the equine figures of Stubbs' portraits more closely. This involved a process of tracing the outline of Stubbs' figures, then filling the spaces within. Finally, the two pieces were layered together using Adobe Photoshop.

Since the project's onset, I struggled with the idea of somehow alluding to the physical land on which these encounters had taken place. As Warkentin (2009) argues, various material phenomenon—in this case, paddocks, fences, stables, etc.—are essential to the distribution and conservation of biopolitical power in captive environments. I wanted to ensure my work did not omit the reality that these encounters had all occurred, and been made possible, in some way because of these various technologies of enclosure. However, I also wanted to achieve this in a way that did not so literally function as a traditional background to the figures. Using my compositing tools, my final approach was to layer fragments of Stubbs' landscapes—the lush, green estate properties that serve as the backdrops to his horses—as a sort of painterly texture over the figures. It is my belief that moving the landscapes to the interior of the figures—rather than leaving them to the exterior—can be representative of how these histories of colonial and imperial domination of the land and more-than-human animal are constantly haunting every encounter between human and horse in the Euro-American context. While the encounter may be a space in which anthropocentric domination can be challenged, the history of our biopolitical relationship to horses simply cannot be ignored. Thus, at first glance, the pieces more closely resemble Stubbs' more objectivist anatomical studies, which feature the equine figure against a

blank backdrop (see Fig. 6). Much like the encounters themselves, one need only look a little closer to notice how historical legacies continue to influence their performative character, such as in equestrian environments.

The final phase of production was incorporating my own human figure. I knew I wanted the human figure to be my own to represent my personal participation in these performative encounters, as well as my critical engagement with the histories of visually depicting horses. Once again turning to my original sketches as points of reference, I photographed myself in various positions, recreating the embodied gestures that I used as a human animal to dialogue with my equine companions. The decision to pose without clothes was twofold. First, I wanted to emphasize the interanimality of the encounter, thus omitting my traditional equestrian wear, as well the various tack Stubbs may have originally dressed his horses with. I consider this an act of shedding one performative aspect of our relationship, the clothing/tack we wear as human trainers and equestrians, and sport horses. This shedding also does the work of re-eroticizing horse-human intimacies, rejecting the various physical barriers crafted to separate our bare flesh (Marra, 2017). The pieces thus more closely resemble the body-to-body, skin-to-skin, equestrian depictions of antiquity such as the famed Parthenon friezes (Fig. 7), as opposed to the morally coded equestrian portraiture of Stubbs' day. The clothing of humans and tack of horses ensures no such scandalous skin-to-skin contact makes itself present in the portraits painted by Stubbs for his noble patrons. Lastly, I wanted to create another "blank canvas" of skin upon which to layer my ink-pen drawing and the fragments of landscape. In other words, I wanted to visually treat the human figure exactly the same way as the horse, emphasizing continuity and connection, rather than difference or hierarchy.

While each portrait has taken on a character of its own, they clearly allude to the encounters of my impressions. *Trot* and *Gallop*, capture the motion and energy of their respective impressions, lifting the equine figures from Stubbs' *William Anderson with two Saddle-Horses* (Fig. 2). The rider, a groom for the Prince of Wales, has been removed from the back of the trotting horse, while the evidence of both of their tack, including the lead that binds them to one another. In *Trot* and *Gallop*, the horses now move of their own free will, while the human figure passively follows at the horses' gait. *Smell* and *Groom* initially appear more tranquil given the stillness of the equine figures. They capture the delicate subtleties and affectionate side of horse-human intimacies—such as the introduction of the brush in *Smell*. The horses are borrowed from Stubbs' *Mares and Foals are Anxious Before a Looming Storm* (Fig. 3), and the tender *Pumpkin with a Stable-lad* (Fig. 4), both of which depict their horses as still, yet alert and attentive to their surroundings. The animated *Spook* lifts the startled equine figure from *Horse Frightened by a Lion* (Fig. 5). The equally startled and unfooted human destabilizes the concept of the ever rational, calm, and in control human figure that manifests in Stubbs' depictions of human handlers (Prown, 2017, p. 37). Last, *Graze* proved to be one of the most emotional pieces in the series, as it portrays the serene initial impression of the mare Vintage and me. Borrowing the grazing mare of *Mares and Foals* (Fig. 6), the portrait depicts two figures in a shared, meditative state, at peace in their environment. On a personal level, it remains the most special to me of the series.

Appendix

Figure 2

William Anderson with two Saddle-Horses



Note. By G. Stubbs, 1793, painting, oil on canvas, located at the Royal Collection Trust, London, UK. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_Stubbs_\(1724-1806\)_-_William_Anderson_with_two_Saddle-Horses_-_RCIN_400106_-_Royal_Collection.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_Stubbs_(1724-1806)_-_William_Anderson_with_two_Saddle-Horses_-_RCIN_400106_-_Royal_Collection.jpg)

Figure 3

Mares and Foals are Anxious Before a Looming Storm



Note. By G. Stubbs, 1764–1765, painting, oil on canvas, located at the Dickinson Gallery, London, UK.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_Stubbs_023.jpg

Figure 4

Pumpkin with a Stable-lad



Note. By G. Stubbs, 1774, painting, oil on canvas, located at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, CT, US. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_Stubbs_-_Pumpkin_with_a_Stable-lad_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

Figure 5

Horse Frightened by a Lion



Note. By G. Stubbs, c. 1762–1768, painting, oil on canvas, located at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, CT, US. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_Stubbs_-_Pumpkin_with_a_Stable-lad_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

Figure 6

Mares and Foals



Note. By G. Stubbs, 1762, painting, oil on canvas, located in a private collection.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_Stubbs_Mares_and_Foals_1762.jpg

Figure 7

Two horsemen South Frieze Parthenon



Note. By unknown artist, c. 447–432 BCE, marble relief, located in the British Museum, London, UK.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Two_horsemen_South_Frieze_Parthenon.jpg

V.

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