

CHAPTER 6

Barn Banter

An Exploration of Anthropomorphism and ‘Equine-o-morphism’ as Agency

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HALLA: I like the sense of a [boarding] barn atmosphere versus having your own acreage. I like being in the barn as a community. It gives you almost an extended family feeling. I love to watch the horses at the barn too. They have their community too. Like for the people, you get to see who is in the cliques, who’s in control, that stuff with horses too.

HESTER: Barn banter makes a bounded world within the barn itself. That there is this shared knowledge. There are these shared running jokes and they run and they run and they run. They endear your horse to you. They endear your horse to others. And they endear the people who share that lore to you within that barn community. It’s almost like a Masonic knowledge that you wouldn’t admit to having.

MORGAN: [On anthropomorphizing horses] I’m not making this up. It’s common knowledge that I do this.

This paper is about how humans, through the process of co-constructing and sharing intimate and personal images of horses and humans, act to shape human–equine partnerships wherein barns emerge, as Halla notes, as kinds of hybrid (Birke et al., 2012) communities populated by distinct personalities, who in the process of identity making interact and act upon each other. We draw on the term ‘barn banter’ to describe and

analyze the sardonic and whimsical in barn argot or verbal exchanges of humor that function both to develop an elaborated and shared sense of experience-based knowledge and imaginative camaraderie, that together interact to construct distinctive typologies of personhood, mutuality and community among horses and those who ride with them.

For example, Hester begins her interview stating that she rides “because of the joy of riding.” Hester adds that, “I love the way they [horses] develop a personality” and develops this theme by referring to her recently deceased horse who she characterizes as “really easy going” and “thoroughbred flighty.” Her characterization develops as the interview goes on.

He was one of the big personalities of the barn. This guy was a real schmoozer. I mean everyone knew him and everyone loved him. He just had a whole lot of personality and whole lot of character. He was a gelding and he had this sort of quasi-effeminate kind of demeanor.

At other points in the interview Hester again anthropomorphizes her horse, but also introduces the notion, as illustrated below, that he, in turn, as in the cow thing, has equine-o-morphed her.

[He was] a ‘metro male’ who we called Mr. Dress-up because he seemed to like to dress up in clothes, kept good care of his blankets, and could carry off flashy colors. He was scared of cows ... These things become a part of him. This makes the horse more of a person. As they develop a persona, a character, you treat them like that ... There’s also this incredible sense of whimsy as they develop a character that you become paired with. You sort of anthropomorphize them in a way but it is how the horse really was. It’s interactive—not just you. Things become elaborated. I wore hats with cow prints, people gave me cow-themed gifts ... [in the collective knowledge of the barn] the horse becomes part of a wider imaginary world.

She goes on to describe her horse as “Bullwinkle,” (a popular cartoon moose from the 1960s) Hester adds, “It’s not crazy. It becomes an outlet for the imagination.” It is this kind of barn banter, or, in Hester’s words, a “sort of anthropomorphizing and equine-omorphism,” that sets the scene for the analysis that follows, which will focus most particularly on the case of Morgan to feature an in-depth analysis of both the real world of “common knowledge” and the more creative processes and practices of “making it up.”

1 Situating Method and Theory

Focusing on commonplace activities and experiences of everyday life, our analysis of barn banter, as introduced by the quotes from Halla, Morgan and Hester, is informed by the perspectives of multispecies ethnography ([Haraway, 2008](#)), anthropomorphism/biosocial anthropology ([Ingold, 2013](#); [Mitchell et al., 1997](#)) and situated communities ([Davis 1999](#); [Lofgren, 1996](#)). This paper comes from a study where narrative data was collected in over sixty open-ended interviews with US Midwestern and north Norwegian horse people, who participate in different equestrian sports and ride within a variety of local settings. Our open-ended interviews were designed to generate narratives that reveal what Naomi [Quinn \(2005\)](#), a cognitive anthropologist, calls “culture in talk”—as Quinn states, “Discourse is duplex; it both enacts and produces culture” (p.

2). What our informants' narratives produce is their own specific versions of horse-human cultures and barns as conjoined, hybrid communities.¹

The emergent field of multi-species ethnography (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010) calls for new and innovative ways to think beyond the binary and to explore borderlands where humans and other species meet and identities form. Haraway (2008) refers a “dance of encounters” (p. 5) where species mutually constitute each other. To Haraway, ‘living with’ connotes not only deep engagement with particular animals, but also moves away from a view of animals as symbol or as passive reflections of human intentions. Haraway (2008) repeatedly refers forms of we-ness and animals as “full partners in worlding” (p. 301). Birke, Bryld and Lykke (2004, p. 167) use the term “conjointly engaged” to permeate, bridge or blur the hyphen in human–animal relations. A large literature on anthropomorphism and zoomorphism addresses issues of identity and identity making across species (Milton, 2005; Mitchell et al., 1997), Technically disparaged by some scientists as wishful thinking, human projections or the erroneous attribution of uniquely human traits to creatures or beings to whom they do not belong (Kennedy, 1992), anthropomorphism (and zoomorphism) find greater acceptance in a “lay,” “popular,” “satirical” and “mock” sense by more humanistically inclined scholars (deWaal, 2001; Milton, 2005). We use community in Lofgren’s (1996) sense of a setting for research where people live their lives and contextualize their experience in terms of immediate interpersonal worlds. Broadly defined community or communities can be seen as multiple, negotiated and situated.

¹ To protect the identity of our informants, we do not reveal the names of their horses.

In terms of the analysis that follows we see community as expressed in the narratives of our informants, as rooted in the locale of the hybrid community of the barn. The barn is a voluntary community and a physical location or a locale for the practice of commonly shared interest and expertise (Davis, 1999) where horse–human, human–human, and horse–horse relationships are acted out. At the barn horses and humans, as individuals and collectivities, spend a great deal of time together and develop long-term relational networks. Within this barn community, horse and human partnerships create the forms ‘we’ or become the “full partners in worlding” described by Haraway (2008, p.11 & p. 301). What makes the barn different from more traditional or modern notions of communities is that the setting and immediate interpersonal or relational worlds include various permutations and combinations of human and horses—your identity in the barn is closely tied to the identity of your horse. Within this community identities and partnerships are flexible, multiple, and negotiated. Laura says it this way, “I’ve ridden lots of horses and I don’t necessarily get along with some of them. I think sometimes with animals they just pick you and you wind up being in a relationship whether or not you picked it yourself.”

Biosocial anthropology, anthropomorphism and zoomorphism involve a play with boundaries—in our case, species boundaries. In the literature, anthropomorphism both creates and dissolves boundaries. For example, Hester’s Bullwinkle-i-zation of her horse [also termed Bambification (deWaal, 2001) or Disneyesque (Davis, 1997)] that blurs distinctions between humans, animals, and cartoon characters is an example of mock or satirical anthropomorphism. But it is also an expression of both Hester’s long term, loving and intimate relationship with her horse and the horse’s distinctive personality as

recognized by Hester and fellow barn members. Although the concept of zoomorphism finds far less development in the literature ([Gallup et al., 1997](#); [Guthrie, 1997](#)) we offer it in two related dimensions. The first is the attribution of animal traits, proclivities, perceptions and personalities to humans as in Hester wearing a cow hat. The second refers to a human awareness of an animal's inner, mental states ([Gallup et al., 1997](#)) as in Hester's depiction of her horse as extroverted, in the sense that he gets along well with others (whether horse or human) but is very afraid of cows. Other examples would include informants who comment that they cannot walk by a lovely patch of green grass without thinking about how much their horse would like to eat it; informants who ruminate on why they feel horse dirt is not dirt; and the familiar sight in dressage barns of a human imitating the walk, trot and canter as they bi-pedally practice a dressage test. Lara has recorded the sound of her horses chewing on her phone and replays it when she needs to relax. Self-chosen fictitious names Halla (a famous jumping horse), Morgan (a breed of horse) and Hester (which means horses in Norwegian) are also forms of equine-o-morphism ([Davis & Davis, 2010](#)). Horse and human, in this sense, conjointly make each other up ([Birke et al., 2004](#)).

In the past, representations of animals like Hester's reference to a cartoon character would have been dismissed as narcissistic projections that erase difference and would have failed to respect the peculiarities of a species ([deWaal, 2001](#); [Milton, 2005](#)). In a recently edited book on biosocial anthropology, however, [Ingold \(2013\)](#) argues that while the idea of species boundaries as a biological category may be appropriate for thinking about populations of animals, it does not adequately deal with the co-created kinds of co-being or interpersonal relationships we form with them. ([Birke et al. \[2004\]](#))

employ feminist theory for the same purpose.) Interspecies acts of personality attribution, according to [Ingold \(2013\)](#), are better regarded as boundary dissolving acts of coming together. [Argent \(2012, p.113\)](#) actually uses the term ‘friends’ to refer to horses as having an inherently co-operative nature in horse–horse relations and horse–human relations. [Argent \(2012\)](#) argues that nonverbal or even extrasensory forms of communication or co-being like touch and synchrony expand our identities (as humans) outside our own boundaries, and the horse becomes more than just a horse. Although Argent situates her discussion of transcendent aspects of human horse interactions in the realms beyond verbal language we will argue that the humor, as expressed in Hester’s over-the-top characterizations of her horses, although verbalized, also transcends species boundaries in ways that attempt to capture the interactive, less palpable aspects of human–horse relationships in ways that recognize or confirm agency of each particular horse as an individual.

Having set the scene with quotes from Halla and Hester, we now focus on Morgan. Our goal is to demonstrate how the particular animals we live with affect our representations of them ([Knight, 2005](#); [Weil, 2012](#)) and how our own personalities as humans individually and collectively are complicit in the process. Through frequent mutual contact and through the medium of lived social relationships, we describe how one particular group of barn members collectively come to understand and relate to individual horses through a process of attributing rather absurd, but agentic characteristics to them. While a horse’s individuality does take on forms of naming, soma (or body) recognition, and biographical awareness, it also consists of multiple, situated and whimsical characterizations of their horses that show how attributions of personhood

are produced as forms of mutual becomings (Birke et al., 2004) within the barn community, are flexible and fluid (Shir-Vertesh, 2012) and are co-created along a constantly negotiated and polytypic humanness–animality continuum.

2 A Case Study: Welcome to Morgan’s Barn World

Dona’s interview with Morgan illustrates the playful and instrumental expressions of anthropomorphism as interactively negotiated along a human-animal continuum and as taking place in one particular barn community. Morgan owns multiple horses, which she uses to give riding lessons to adults and children. Although not her sole occupation, lessons contribute substantially to her annual income (and expenditures).

Having fun and making fun are core themes in her narrative. Morgan’s “lesson girls” populate her barn. During the summer months, their parents leave them off at the barn and they spend the entire day there. Morgan is responsible for their horsemanship education, entertainment and welfare. By spending time with Morgan’s horses, these girls, according to Morgan, “fall in love with their horses and anthropomorphize them.”

MORGAN: With kids, they like being around their friends. They like ... a lot of the times—especially little girls—they love their horses. They come and they tell the horse their secrets. They sit in the stall with them for hours. They ride them. Then they bathe them and then they ride them and then they braid their manes and then ride them again. They make up stories about what they are doing, with their horses.

Morgan says that one of her jobs is to get kids to learn how to socialize with or “think like a horse” as she has learned to do. She offers the following, more grounded example

of kids learning that there is an established order by which the horses expect to be led into the barn. For their own safety the kids must learn that the first two horses brought in must be the dominant mare and then the dominant gelding. This in turn leads to a discussion learning from horses, of horses having a personality, assessing their internal states, of life's lessons and of having a sense of humor that challenges the borderlines of horse and human.

MORGAN: One time I was having a group of kids lead horses in and I had a horse, a gelding, that was very possessive of a mare, and they brought him in last and they brought her in first and in between they brought in another gelding who got too close to the mare. She squealed and the gelding that loved the mare went nuts. Nobody could figure out what happened. And I came in and explained it. You know, what you do is lead him in and then her in and much later anybody else ... because, that way you are going to avoid problems. I think I've learned that from horses. I also think I've learned that I've gotten a sense of humor and I've also learned that if a horse has a personality then you learn to work with that personality. You don't try to change the horse to work with your personality, because it's crazy. So I use the same when I deal with humans. If someone has an angry personality you don't do things to develop the angry personality, you relate to them in ways that are going to be calm. You do that with horses, if you have a nervous horse, you don't want to go in there all shaky and jittery and hyper, you want to go into there kind of droopy and laid back. That helps the horse feel calmer because you're calmer.

Dona asks if Morgan would say that horses have as much individuality or variability in personality as people do.

MORGAN: That's an easy question. Yes! I have a horse ... one of the games I play with the kids is "what would that horse drive if it was driving a car?" Like, we have horses that drive Lamborghinis; we've got horses that are soccer moms and

would drive a van; we've got horses that would drive a Mack truck, or a train, so we do that kind of thing and ... I used to have a horse that would be a southern policeman. He would have pulled you over for speeding in a speeding trap and he would have a piece of hay hanging out of his mouth and he would have come up to the door and said, "you know how fast you were going, son?"

The following exchange that ensues illustrates barn banter as a kind of fantastical running joke that is an everyday occurrence in Morgan's barn, where the horse becomes more than just a horse, and where a single animal does not represent an entire species or vice-versa.

DONA: You attribute characters, features and all this to their horses that, let's face it, the beasts could not possibly have ...

MORGAN: WHAT! You're so wrong. You haven't met my horses lately. You would know. You would know. I'm not making this up. It's common knowledge that I do this.

DONA: So, I've never seen a policeman horse, dressed in a blue police outfit.

MORGAN: It was down south and he looked hilarious in that blue uniform ... with the little hat.

DONA: Blue's a good color.

MORGAN: Almost any horse can wear blue.

DONA: Some geldings can't carry pink.

MORGAN: No my gelding doesn't mind pink at all. He's still macho enough to carry pink off.

Morgan explains this type of banter as having heuristic properties similar to horsemanship lessons directed at what horse to lead in first, but these lessons are more generalized and learned through stories rather than a response to a particular incidence. Morgan's narrative below is not only about "worlding" the barn; it is about closing

distance, blurring boundaries, and promoting attunement and empathy in horse–human partnerships. But the following narrative also privileges the horsiness (as compared to humanizing) of the horse.

MORGAN: The kids love it when we make up stories about what they are doing. One of the things it does beyond being fun and silly is helping people relax and not think of the horse as the enemy if it doesn't do exactly what you want. I think it makes people more empathetic, because the horses are just like you. They're not just motorcycles, maybe motorcycle people wouldn't agree with this because they probably love their motorcycles. But [horses] are living sentient beings who feel things and notice things and remember things. ... [Stories] teach the kids a little empathy and they relate to the horse more ... and so if you do a jump course and your horse refuses a jump, you're not going to just be angry because he refuses a jump, you're going to sit back and think what happened? Maybe it was the horse's fault; maybe it was your fault; maybe it was the jump's fault. Who knows? But you're not going to automatically make an assumption: that stupid horse did this to me.

Morgan goes on to comment about how her sense of whimsy, or the absurd, plays out and how identities have a life that goes beyond the horse *per se* to set a tone of a shared insider's knowledge for the entire barn community.

MORGAN: I really think it sets a tone for the barn, I've been in a lot of barns in my life, unfortunately, and a lot of times there's not a lot of camaraderie, there's not a lot of support. There's a lot of jealousy and a lot of criticism and not healthy criticism but criticism for criticism's sake. If you view the world with a little more humor and you realize that it's JUST riding horses. It's not preventing people from starving or dying from cancer, and we still are trillions of dollars in debt. It helps put things in perspective, I think. Plus it's fun. You know I have to say one other thing. I have talked to a therapist who said it saddens her that

people don't play—women, adult women, don't know how to play anymore ... and so it's never been a problem for me. I think that when you play at the barn with these silly little stories that it teaches people to play and it adds some levity to what is mostly a serious world and it doesn't detract from the seriousness of riding. I think it makes it easier to enjoy riding and not take it so serious and make it a job and think that your horse isn't reaching his potential when quite seriously his potential is to get enough grass and maybe more grass than that other horse and maybe kick that other horse once in a while when no one is looking ... or when everybody's looking. Oh my, we should have brought _____ [the police horse] to keep this interview on track ... I mean horse number five.

Using a more serious tone, Morgan reflects on what she has said and retreats, for a moment, from the more whimsical turn the interview has taken. Personhoods, she admits, are flexible in that the use of hyperboles to compare horses to cars can be made but also have limitations.

MORGAN: I think some of the problem is that people do anthropomorphize, and okay I pretend that Horse 1 would drive a Lamborghini and Horse 2² would drive a Mack truck, but I know they really don't. It's just if a human were as dainty and quick as Horse 1, then a Lamborghini would be the perfect car. Actually, it would be a Mack truck for Horse 2 or probably a Hummer. [It would be] something really big and powerful and strong but agile and controlled at the same time, because that's the kind of horse he is. Not because as a horse he would drive a car.

² Morgan named the horses 'Horse 1 and 2' as a way of maintaining anonymity – people would otherwise recognize her by the names of horses.

DONA: Is it a feedback thing? Do you think they present that image of them to you and then you return it value-added to them?

MORGAN: No, I don't think so. I just . . .

DONA: Is it one way?

MORGAN: No. I never really thought of it as that kind of a thing. I do think we interact but I don't think we interact with that kind of stuff. That is more something that I do with people that's fun. The actual interactions with the horse are give and take and cycle, no not cycle, but they are give and take. I know Horse 2 is a horse. I know one of the people I took lessons from said one of the things you should always ask if it didn't work is 'does the horse know what you're asking?' and the second thing you should ask is 'does he care?' Those are questions you ask yourself every time you ride. My students need to learn this. I just have to be more creative in how to approach what they need to be able to do.

Morgan's account illustrates a process that takes place within the space and shared meaning systems of the barn as a hybrid community, by which personhood and personality is ascribed to horses, based upon daily, intimate, long-term experiences shared with and developed through interactions with horses and their human partners. Morgan also uses anthropomorphism as a heuristic device for teaching adults and children how to be around, ride and relate to particular horses. While Morgan does anthropomorphize, she uses it as a tool to show that animals may actually have inner states or self-evident truths, motives and intelligences of their own (Milton, 2005), even if they do not directly match up with car types. Additionally, Morgan uses referential characterizations of their horses both to create distance as well as closeness and offer flexible versions of personhood. Morgan switches between whimsical characterizations of her horses in terms of cars and occupations, on the one hand, and more serious issues

of horsemanship such as respecting and taking into account the personal safety of her students on the other. What Hester and Morgan's interviews show, and what has received far less attention in the literature, is the facility with which these two experienced horsewomen move from whimsy or play to seriousness, co-terminously anthropomorphize and zoomorphize, and ascribe partible, multiple and inconsistent identities to horses they know. Finally, each also mentions the importance of shared knowledge and playing the anthropomorphism game in the development of the hybrid communities in the barn.

3 Community, Play and Agency

What is largely missing from more scientific and philosophical ruminations on anthropomorphism and multi-species ethnography is the notion of fantasy or the fantastical as fun and play. Everyday, commonplace experiences of horse-human relationships are not always amenable to reasoned scientific discourse ([Birke et al., 2004](#)). Animals inhabit the human mind or imagination as well as the physical environment ([Knight, 2005](#)). Similar to the ever-escalating, running jokes mentioned by Morgan and Hester, [Dresser \(2000, p. 92\)](#) also gives us some indications of the absurdist, silly sides of popular forms of anthropomorphism, where people have elaborate birthday parties, weddings, funerals or even bar mitzvahs (for a horse at a stable) for their pets. Dresser analyzes these in a multidimensional framework. First, they are fanciful, crazy behaviors, where escalating flights of fantasy are used to poke fun at life. Second, as collective celebrations, they bring a spirit of playfulness and creativity, in the sense of a

break from the mundane, as mental activities not permitted in daily life, to form a sense of community and sense of shared identity (as in Hester's reference to 'Masonic knowledge') to participants.

Barns are hybrid communities (Birke et al., 2012) populated by horses and human who interact individually, as horse-human pairs, and collectively on an everyday basis. Barns are specific communities with distinctive identities, discourses and practices. Con-specific relations overlap with trans-specific ones and horses are central agents in the constitution of an insider's sense of space and place. The constant facility with which Morgan's barn members, however, code-switch along a human-animality continuum attest to the fact that human-horse relations cannot be regarded as incomplete versions of human-human relations, but must be recognized as complete versions of relations between different kinds of animals (Patton, 2003) or as "new spaces of possibility" to be examined (Kohn, 2007, p. 4), or as in the case of Morgan new ways of "making it up." Two participants in a relationship create something that transcends both (Birke et al., 2004). As multispecies communities, barns become places where special attention becomes focused on new forms of co-being or we, where mutually constituted selves unfold as partnerships and where shared personhoods are formed (Fuentes, 2006; Haraway, 2008; Ingold, 2013); where struggles with otherness are acted out and reimagined and sensations of closeness and distance are negotiated (Weil, 2012); and where practices that involve crossing species boundaries do not threaten identity but define it (Pálsson 2009: p. 306).

Identities within the barn and across horse-human partnerships are multiple, flexible, and in reality ambivalent or mutually incompatible outside of the barn. They are

inactions of insiders' situated and locally constructed in-house knowledge. These characterizations or personifications of individual horses and humans as members of the barn community do not make sense outside of that particular community. As such they have what [Haraway \(2008\)](#) refers to as encounter value, and act as a form of social capital ([Gilbert & Gilbert, 2011](#)) for interaction, conversational exchange, and identity-making that defines the barn community and ties its members together. These experientially derived new spaces in their more intuitive, extrasensory or transcendent guises, however, can be hard to articulate. Hopefully we have shown how barn banter as a process of anthropomorphizing and equine-o-morphizing aids in the expression of a deeply felt and special insider's, horse person's sense of we-ness and co-being with horses. Barn banter is an insider's argot. Hester's love and Morgan's play and the partnerships that form through riding and the sense of community that develops within the barn (described by Halla) all connote a kind of transcendent liminal state (or states)—a profound connection with and appreciation of an individual animal being. Hester and Morgan demonstrate how barn banter both encompasses an aesthetic, empathetic and pragmatic appreciation of and minding of the horse as well as encompassing the complexities of the relationships they have with their horses. Bullwinkle-i-zation or “carifications” of a horse become ways of collectively and individually articulating that which is beyond conventional uses of language itself to express. This complex, deeply felt sense of relationship and connection joins work with pleasure, nature with culture and the imaginative with the mundane.

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