Animal Acts
Hughes, Holly, Chaudhuri, Una

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Hughes, Holly and Una Chaudhuri.

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When I was ten years old, I had my first horse-riding lesson at a summer camp in northern Virginia. My strongest memory of it: being bucked off a horse, suddenly flying through the air, and landing hard on the bare ground. I don’t blame the horse. He had to stand there to be mounted by what were doubtless a bunch of noisy and novice young girls . . . a procession of youthful incompetence. I do remember landing sharply on the dirt, dusting off my shorts, and getting back on to try again. No long-term trauma, but nonetheless, an image etched unforgettably in my memory. Horses were big, powerful, potentially dangerous, and part of being a girl, at least for my middle-class, Euro-American, East Coast, northern Virginia cohort in the 1960s.

My second-strongest memory of horseback riding came from my early twenties, when, having joined the dance faculty at Cornell University, I discovered they had horses right on the campus. I signed up for riding lessons, joining a small, mainly female group. All was going well until we got to lesson number three, when we were taught to move from a walk to a trot. I vividly remember the horse starting to trot, losing my balance, and grabbing onto my horse’s neck while slipping to the side of his body, right leg still looped over the saddle, left under his belly, and cantering around the ring like an Annie Oakley stunt rider. As I hurtled wildly through space, it occurred to me that, since I was a dancer, maybe riding was not such a good idea. Once again my short-lived riding experience reminded me that horses are big, powerful, potentially dangerous, and associated with females. I gave up my equestrian dreams and quit taking riding lessons.

But why did I have those dreams in the first place? Looking back, as Kim Marra does, into my cache of equine memories, I find a long-standing pas-
sion... one that I believe I shared with many young girls of my age and class. Whereas Marra sketches the closely braided lines of elite class status and horse owning and riding for women, my own suburban experiences and passions were more middle class, involving rare contact with living horses and certainly no horse of my own, but yet, and still, a passion for horses that revealed itself in my childhood in several ways and survived in various personal archives: material, kinesthetic, and emotional.

I came across part of that material archive when I sold my mother’s home in suburban Washington, DC, in 2002, keeping only a few boxes of mementos. Among those treasured objects was a collection of knickknacks I’d had as a child: four tiny ceramic mice, for example. But to my surprise the majority of the figurines were of horses: big, small, plastic, ceramic, realistically painted in blacks and whites, or coated in fake gold (a prize won at a carnival long forgotten.) Apparently I, like so many middle- (and upper-) class girls, had gone through a “horse phase,” despite the fact that actual horses were only rarely present in my life.

My favorite toy of all was a plastic palomino horse standing ten inches tall. He was honey colored, with a tawny mane and tail and white socks on his lower legs. He came complete with a removable brown plastic saddle and a gold chain “bridle.” Holding that figure in my hands again as a middle-aged adult brought back remembrance of hours of play, of taking the saddle on and off, of trotting him around on my bedroom floor, pretending he was alive. This golden-colored talisman suddenly, like Proust’s madeleine, brought back intense memories of kinesthetic and emotional involvement in a world I had created from my imagination. I want to come back to these themes of kinesthetic imagination later, because they are essential to the power of Marra’s performance piece.

But, as I child, I didn’t just play with horses in the form of figurines. I invested myself in “becoming horse” in a much more physically involved way. I played, and moved, through the suburban backyards of my youth as if I were the horse, not the rider! Holding the palomino plastic horse in my hands, I recalled the Palomino Club that I formed prior to age twelve with some neighbor girls (as the founder, I also appointed myself president!). Membership in the club was by invitation only, and it involved hanging out and generally running around in a cantering mode across the green, grassy, backyards that connected our houses. (Perhaps it was not total happenstance that two of us later became professional modern dancers—perhaps that boldness of movement and sense of running freedom even paved the way for our future professions.)

We leapt too, our legs fully extended with youthful fervor over the planted
beds of flower gardens, trying to stretch out our own kinesthetic abilities to match those of the imagined magnificence we associated with horses. We were the leaping horses, not the riders, and such imaginings fed a sense of power, speed, and almost reckless freedom for our preadolescent female bodies that would soon face the challenges of restriction and discipline in dress/fashion, “ladylikeness,” or sexualization as objects of desire. “Becoming horse” at age twelve—with the sense of power and physical freedom that that enabled—provided a lived counterpart to the relentless class-shaped pressures to “become heterosexual female” that would engulf us just a few years later, as puberty hit.¹ In our own way, we were echoing the nineteenth-century women who sailed free over tall fences, sidesaddle.

Where did we, as young girls, get this impetus to pretend to “be” the horse? What cultural imaginaries of that time and place in the United States fed our creative play? Cowboy westerns of the late-1950s movies and television of our youth, full of racing horses? The teary and stirring story of National Velvet, with a very young yet determined Elizabeth Taylor (as we were young soon-to-be very determined women), starring in the popular horse-racing movie about England’s Grand National Steeplechase, melding girl and horse into an impossible triumph of racing and winning against the odds? Were horses going to be our route to an impossible triumph in a world that would see our femaleness as a marker of limitation? These types of questions link philosophy, ideology, and social history with the lived experience of gendering and social class and do so by examining our relationships to living animals and to our concepts of animality.

Why and how is a horse-girl relationship so important—whether in the (horse)-flesh or in the imaginary realm, for so many generations, in so many parts of the country, across many class lines? Only further research, and perhaps other performance pieces too, can help us understand the experiences of multiple female communities and their similarities and differences. My point here is that while watching Marra’s performance, with its laserlike examination of upper-class relations to horses and its visual documentation of the historical past of this relationship across generations in her own family (caught most strikingly in the photo projection of a teenaged Marra and her mother riding in tandem at a “mother-daughter” Pony Club show), we are also necessarily reminded that the lived or imaginary encounter with horses can be a powerful facilitator for female social development beyond the elite classes too—whether any living horses are present or not. Indeed, the cultural imaginary of being, or being with, horses for young females provides an important realm of possibility in the development of a female sense of self and of empowerment.
PART 2: BEING WITH HORSES

Even if Marra’s piece invites us to think back to our own horse dreams, horse play, and encounters (however sporadic) with live horses, it also zeros in on the extraordinary intimacy between rider and horse that riding daily can bring. Here is where the wealth of Marra’s grandfather Max Bell, as a Canadian “captain of industry” during the first part of the twentieth century, set the stage for her family’s ready access to horses—and not just any horses, but “thoroughbreds,” bred to run and jump as world-class athletes.

So intense was this physical relationship that Marra pursued a dream of Olympic competition and trained with an Olympic veteran coach, even through a devastating accident. Horses were the cause of the accident, but they also became the mode of rehabilitation. Throughout the piece, traced across the narrative of her family’s story, Marra details the bodily entwinement of girl/woman and horse. Her serious injury was the third in three generations of horsewomen, reminding us of the physical size, power, and potential danger of working with horses, a danger that, it is important to note, girls are allowed to take on.

Despite the dramatically violent intimacies of these riding-related accidents, the daily intimacy of riding was challenging and pleasurable as both horse and rider learned together how to accomplish athletic feats of delicacy in dressage, of grandeur in cross-country jumping, and of precision in arena jumping, all parts of the “three-day eventing” world in which Marra moved. Riding gave us “strong thighs and straight backs and so much else,” says Marra. The “so much else” refers to the link between physical mastery and the experience of courage. This courage, Marra suggests, went beyond the riding ring and spilled out into the political and social arenas, whether for the early suffragettes who rode on horseback in their protest parades or for Marra herself, who associates it with both her “coming out” as a lesbian and her later “coming out” as a member of the economic and social elite, a potentially uncomfortable identity for a humanities professor committed to social justice.

As an academic, Marra draws on her highly trained ability to analyze the social meanings of everyday practices and multiple worlds, like the world of riding, in devising this presentation. In her performance Marra alternates between the professorial mode of scholarly slide lecturer, adept with the clicker and the podium, and her role in depicting a woman riding, adept as an athlete, astride the surprisingly effective three-dimensional model of a horse, draped with a historically evocative gold-colored horse blanket from her grandfather’s stable. Then, through the familial artifacts of saddle, bri-
dle, and curry comb, she goes back to the physical experiences she had with specific horses she rode over the years, inviting us to understand the cross-species intimacy of riding. “A major part of the appeal of horses,” she says, “is the relationship one can have with them. Horses compel a fully embodied connection and a sense of partnership with another living creature that is unique” (my emphasis).

One of the strongest signals of that physical intimacy in the performance comes about through the evocation of absence. Early on, Marra holds up a leather girth, a piece that runs under the horse’s belly to cinch a saddle onto its back. This leather, she tells us, is made supple through years of use, careful application of saddle soap, and the soaking up of the horses’ sweat. Passing it around the audience, she says, “Don’t worry—it’s clean!” and invites us to smell it . . . to inhale the horse scent that still lingers. We all do, the jingle of the buckle rattling across the aisles as the leather is passed from hand to hand. The bodily traces of the horses that wore that girth are suddenly present in the room—evoking huge living, breathing, sweating animals.

Throughout the piece Marra delves into the intimacy that riding well both demands and enables. She uses her technical knowledge as an equestrian to unpack the power of sidesaddle riding for elite women in the last century. How did they stay on, she asks, and why did they outshine so many men in their riding while seemingly encumbered with the “modesty” demands of sidesaddle? The secret, she tells us, like so much else in riding, is in the “seat.” With more surface area of the lower body in contact with the horse, side-seated women gained greater communication through touch, and the horse adjusted to correct the imbalanced position of the legs.

I wanted to test this “seatedness” out for myself, so while writing this response I signed up for a lesson. This time I didn’t fall off. Hanging out at the barn for the evening, I watched the easy camaraderie among the women there, smelled the scent of hay and manure, watched the sun set over the fields criss-crossed by paddocks, and felt just a bit of the workaday world of a working horse farm. Dirt, sweat, and labor. Freedom, ease, and deft movements emanated from the experienced riders—all female and all ages—who came for lessons that night. Aside from the smell of manure, it was very much like a dance studio: a largely female space of effort, sweat, and deft competence.

Astride my horse Major, a ten-year-old chestnut, I felt his easy responsiveness to the slightest movements of the reins and his urge to run, invigorated by the cool evening breezes. My teacher reminded me to “relax my seat,” and in those few moments when I could stop tensing my legs in a deathgrip, I could feel the melding of my pelvis and the swaying of the horse’s rocking
gait, large movements even at the walk. When his hips moved, my spine did too, swaying gently through the gait. Watching other riders and their horses take their lessons, I saw that the horse has to learn how to move with a rider on her, something that had never occurred to me before. In other words, riding lessons are for the horse as much as for the rider. The horse’s balance and rhythm are subtly changed by the addition of a top-heavy weight (a person) on its back. The mutuality of this learning, the proposition of moving together, suddenly became clear. Marra calls this riding requirement “the need to be attuned, the willingness to give as well as take.”

New work in animal studies is exploring this horse-rider dyad through multiple scholarly lenses, including those of theories of nonverbal communication and theories of phenomenology, embodiment, and multisensory engagement. In the work of Traci Warkentin and of Gala Argent, exploring human-animal relations with, respectively, whales and horses, what emerges is a commitment to embracing the challenges of understanding interspecies communication. To do so, as scholars, or as performers, we must bring the animal’s modes of being in the world into the text, onto the stage, or into the scholarly analysis. Obviously, this can only be an approximate translation; ultimately we are doomed to fail, but we are, I believe, morally and intellectually obligated to try.

Otherwise whatever we write, or perform, will only really be about us—the human animals. The nonhuman animals—the horse or any other animal being invoked or represented—will be but a means to the end of telling our own story. We see this all the time in cartoons: animated fables dressed up in animals’ clothing. But Marra demonstrates another way of telling our story: one that is based in relationships.

In her piece, she shines a light on the familial and social/class relations that had such a profound effect on her life and on the lives of elite female riders before her, whom she revivifies through her rich historical research. But she additionally tells the story of her emotional and physical relations with horses, particular horses, across many decades: Poltroon, My Turn (now affectionately known as Mylo), and her pony Irish Coffee, horses with whom she shared moments of exhilaration flying over jumps and relationships that punctuated different parts of her life history. This is the interspecies relationship, and at least in Marra’s words and in her life, it is surely as important to her as any intraspecies ones.

Marra’s relationship with the magnificent (mostly) thoroughbred Poltroon demonstrates this relationship and its two-way flow, where an extraordinary physical intimacy can reach into an emotional one too. Think of the moment during an elite eventing competition when Marra’s horse Poltroon
refuses a huge jump not because it exceeds her own abilities, but because, as Marra senses, Poltroon senses Marra’s fear. The horse seems to know that the jump exceeds her rider’s abilities, so she refuses her rider’s commands to go over it. At that moment of cross-species communication, Marra knew she had reached the limit of what she, as a rider, could do in competition but that Poltroon had not yet reached her equine athlete limit. While Poltroon went on to win international titles, Marra made the difficult decision to retire from the sport of eventing.

For girls, and for women in past generations too, this development of intimate communication, resulting in shared action in the world, is one of the deeply empowering axes of that relationship between women/girls and horses. It is not about the potential for sexual stimulation that comes from riding in the astride position or about the opportunity for a woman to exert domination over a much more powerful being; rather, it is about being heard and listened to and about listening back, through what animal studies scholar Gala Argent terms “a co-created and understood embodied language” (116).

The other half of this cocreator dyad is, of course, the horse. We can never know the horse’s experience of being in the world. But we can know and come to understand, through long-term attentiveness, some of her or his responses to being in the world. As scholars and as performers, we have to have the courage to take on this challenge of trying to understand and to articulate cross-species communication when it happens through something like riding. We should not be deterred by easily cast charges of “anthropomorphism” when we try to encounter the horse as an individual being with a specific life history and a sense of agency.

Anthropomorphism, when it refers not to the simplistic attribution of human characteristics to nonhuman animals but to understanding the world through a human lens, is, after all, all that we can really do. To know otherwise is impossible. But to imagine otherwise is not. Perhaps this is what I was trying to do leaping over flowerbeds in the Palomino Club. And this is where performance and performance studies can intersect so profoundly with animal studies. Acts of the imagination—that at which artists excel—can render to some slight degree a sense of what animal worlds might be.

Marra’s performance excavates the development of this type of shared kinesthesis—what some call entrainment—a shared synthesis of movement together. Serious and successful riders and horses develop this union into exquisite fluency. To bring this process to the fore, to make it visible, to take it apart and put it back together again: this is what performance excels at, and this is perhaps the ultimate gift that Marra’s performance gives us: a
deeply personal investigation and narration of one girl’s life with horses, from childhood to the rejuvenation of that passion in middle age, seen as a social reverberation across multiple generations and profoundly shaped by and shaping social class and gender. Affect, embodiment, and communication are the links that unite the horse and rider, the girl and how she comes to act on the world, and the performance that brings it to us as the audience. These are trenchant lessons to take from the stable to the studio to the stage and from the stage back out into the world we share with animals.

NOTES

_Horseback Views_ was first developed as a workshop for “Past Imperfect,” the 2009 Summer Institute in Performance Studies led by Tracy C. Davis at Northwestern University. Since Marra is a scholar by trade and not a performer, she did not set out to create a performance per se. But adding the dimensionality of objects, movement, and embodied experience to standard paper presentation to tell the story quickly led to wearing riding clothes—a costume—and creating a stage horse—a set, and soon she was performing. Davis then invited her to stage the piece for a “Shift” she chaired at “Performing Publics,” the 2010 Performance Studies International Conference in Toronto. In April 2011, the piece was restaged at Marra’s home institution, the University of Iowa, for the national American Studies/Sport Studies symposium “Performing Ethnicities through Sport.” Marra next performed the piece in “Standing Heat,” a series of performances about animals that Holly Hughes curated for Chicago’s Links Hall in May 2012, which marked the professional debut of _Horseback Views_. Sustaining the type of interdisciplinary, intergenre research that _Horseback Views_ represents would not have been possible without the ongoing institutional and personal support of Teresa Mangum, Director of the Obermann Center for Advanced Studies at the University of Iowa. Among its other enabling gifts over the last three years, the Obermann Center, along with Matthew Biro and the University of Michigan Department of Art and Art History, funded Marra’s participation in the “Animal Acts: Beasts of the Northern Wild Performance Festival and Symposium” at the University of Michigan in March 2013. Throughout the entire journey of creating and performing _Horseback Views_, Marra has benefitted invaluably from the deep moral support and inspired stage direction of her spouse and colleague on the University of Iowa Theatre Arts faculty, Meredith Alexander.

1. My “becoming horse” is emphatically not the same as the “becoming animal” theorized by Giles Deleuze and Felix Gauttari in _A Thousand Plateaus_. While these writers explicitly distance their concept from mimesis and metaphor, pointing instead toward a relation of disjunction and displacement, my kinesthetic enactment of “horseness” was specifically and joyously mimetic, albeit animated by an ideological association of horses (palominos, at least) with the freedom I desired as a young girl on the cusp of adolescence, in the specific time and place of my youth.


WORKS CITED


Jennifer Allen as the Monkey-Woman in Deke Weaver’s MONKEY. Photo by Valerie Oliveiro.