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**Commentary on
Rosie Jones McVey
“Learning from the Herd?: Intercorporeality and Ethics in Equine-Assisted Learning for UK Youth”**

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In this paper Rosie Jones McVey presents analysis of her ethnographic study of Equine Assisted Learning (EAL), a contemporary form of care based upon the finding that horses are “an invaluable ally in helping to improve human health and wellbeing” (Jones McVey, undated). In the paper Rosie, herself an EAL practitioner, focuses on a specific charitable centre, Paddock Farm, and on how EAL with young people who have been excluded from mainstream education is practiced and participated in there. The descriptions are of interaction between the young people, the workers, the horses, and all they bring with them into those interactions – histories, discourses, lived experience, habits, beliefs, ideologies, stuff.

Young people being excluded from mainstream education is a growing problem in the UK: “The number of permanent exclusions has increased by 44% from 6,500 in 2021/22 to 9,400 in 2022/23. The rate of permanent exclusions also increased to 0.11 from 0.08. This is the equivalent of 11 in every 10,000 pupils” (Government Education Statistics Service 2024). A 2017 report from the Institute of Public Policy, *Making the Difference* (Gil et al 2017), highlighted that excluded young people are often the most vulnerable: “twice as likely to be in the care of the state, four times more likely to have grown up in poverty, seven times more likely to have a special educational need and 10 times more likely to suffer recognised mental health problems.” The report also suggests that alternative provision and exclusion from mainstream education: “leads them straight from school exclusion to social exclusion. Excluded young people are more likely to be unemployed, develop severe mental health problems and go to prison.”

‘Learning from the Herd?’ asks not just whether encountering the horse helps young people become more ethical but how engagement in EAL which includes the horse as one of multiple and heterogeneous actants helps excluded young people become more ethical. Here Rosie emphasises that the young people she focuses on in the paper may have been subject to violence, neglect and abuse, and may themselves have been perpetrators of violence, neglect and abuse.

So, the subject of the paper – how EAL supports excluded young people in ways that may increase the chances of their becoming more included in the future – is of great importance. Drawing on the great anthropological traditions of thick description (Geertz 1997) and comparison (Strathern 1991) the analysis examines and reveals the ‘partial connections’ between two contemporary intercorporeal interventionist imaginaries that lay claim to enhancing ethical forms of world-making. On the one hand, the emergent feminist tradition that claims intercorporeal forms of relatedness which includes non-humans disrupt

dominant relations of power in society and thought to make world-making more ethical. Rosie compares this instantiation of intercorporeal relatedness with EAL's and its claim that interacting and working with horses helps troubled and troubling young people learn different ways of being in the world, including how to become more ethical in terms of becoming more reflective and empathic, cooperative, social, self-determined and, ultimately, more capable of dealing with the problematic worlds and relations that they find themselves situated by.

The characters at the heart of the paper are Rosie herself, Gulliver, an excluded young person of 15, and Chiron, the horse that Gulliver is given to work with. Each of these characters brings their lived experience and their ways of being in the world into their encounters. Rather than an emphasis on the environment as 'natural', the analysis reveals the environment as also characterised or 'curated': complex and heterogeneous material and discursive practices that body forth the culture of Paddock Farm and its workers. In other words, as having an ethos in which intercorporeal, more-than-human relations happen in very particular ways.

The paper traces Gulliver's travels into and through Paddock Farm, and the relocation of himself and his response to others through working with and interacting with the environment, other students, the workers and critically 'his' horse, Chiron. EAL does not really teach in the usual sense but nudges the young people's attention to the horse, particularly by figuring horses as both prey and herd animals. They learn to think horse as prey rather than predator – through which refrain and flight, not aggression, are a horse's *modus operandi* and that this way of being can be powerful and strong. Rosie describes how the young people's eyes, bodies and minds are opened to how horses' responses are located in and expressive of an almost wild, non-human and 'primitive' way of being in the world, which EAL figures in terms of authenticity. Specifically, that horses are big, powerful, highly sensitive creatures that can tread on your toes or bite you or barge you out of the way or simply back right off when you want them to do something is critical to encounters because the young people have to learn that these are responses to fear and to environment – they are not acts of aggression or confrontation.

They also learn that horses have a form of social organization, the herd, in which 'leadership' does not mean dominance or a pack mentality, characterised by competition or conflict, but by cooperation and a kind of persuasive embodied sensibility that radiates knowing where you are going and that you know what the group needs. Learning is manifested in how the young people develop different ways of being, doing and relating, including sensitivity to themselves and others. They cultivate a sensibility through which they can 'read' horse, and how the horse is reading them, to be-with horse. This form of intercorporeal relatedness is figured at Paddock Farm as more ethical because it enacts reflection and empathy and produces cooperation rather than confrontation, conflict, force or domination. However, as Rosie emphasises, underpinning how relations occur at Paddock Farm is partly achieved through forms of organization that include processes of exclusion and categorisation: for example, horses are chosen with very specific characteristics (similarly, in the mounted police context horses have a personality test!), while stallions are excluded, so that the dynamic of horse behaviour and of the herd is, as Rosie shows, highly curated to afford specific kinds of relatedness to flourish.

Gulliver becomes-with (Haraway 2008) Chiron and Paddock Farm by becoming aware of how his way of being in the presence of the horse affects how the horse feels and how he feels and the possibilities for their cooperating. For example, he learns that in order to be with a horse he has to help the horse feel safe. He also learns that if he wants the horse to work with him, to cooperate, he has to change his embodied ways of being with the horse. He learns to lead the horse. And here the analysis draws out another comparison – that the environment at Paddock Farm and the ways of bringing the horses and the young people together is probably not like anything they have experienced before in school or at home. Specifically, dominance, regimes of power, competition, violence, or abuse have no place at Paddock Farm. Mistakes are OK even if potentially dangerous. But care-lessness, unkindness or cynicism is not OK. What the analysis draws out here is how the particular ethos at Paddock Farm enacts an environment in which thinking and learning to be with horse as prey and herd is rendered as enabling and powerful, and that being vulnerable and needing to feel safe is a positive and reasonable response to situated threat.

The paper is beautifully and movingly written, not only evoking the world-making it explores but how that world-making feels. I would suggest that what is achieved is a rich description of the intimate entanglements (Latimer and López 2019) that compose the work going on at Paddock Farm. First, by describing expression, gesture and emotion, affects as well as effects are included in analysis to actually perform the intercorporeal feminist ethic that the inquiry at hand seeks to explore. Second, analysis is situated through examination of the political and theoretical significance of the discourses and the culture enacted and bodied forth in material practices as well as talk and text. This enables Rosie to explore the underpinning socio-political imaginaries being produced and reproduced, such as what constitutes ethicality or the qualities of good leadership, and which position and reposition how humans and non-humans encounter one another.

But perhaps, more than this the analysis enables a critical contribution to the field: by distinguishing the specificities of how, when and where intercorporeal, more-than-human relatedness contributes to more ethical world-making the analysis is open to the possibility that enhanced ethicality it is not a given of intercorporeal relatedness. This is important because in the contemporary moment more-than-human encounters are being held forth to be efficacious across so many different contexts, and what 'Learning from the Herd?' helps show is that for these encounters to be ethical and beneficial they need to be underpinned by a carefully curated ethos, which may itself reproduce specific discursive perhaps even culturally dominant tropes, of its time.

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Rosie Jones McVey <https://intelligenthorsemanship.co.uk/horses-as-healers-how-why-when-by-rosie-jones-mcvey/>