

**Cowgirl Up:**  
**An Ethnography of Gender at a Horse-Boarding Facility in the Rural Midwest**

by  
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*Dedicated to Joyce Eckstein, the original cowgirl*



*A block sculpture placed in the bathroom window of the barn at The Farm.*

## **Abstract**

This ethnography asks: What does the cowgirl signify, and how do horses affect the performance of femininity and the concept of gender roles within a particular community of horsewomen? In my position as a horse owner and facility volunteer, I conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews over a period of six months at a 35-horse boarding facility located in a rural area of Michigan just outside the town of Belleville. Country music and Western-style trail riding predominate at this facility, where most of the horse owners are middle-class, middle-aged, white females. Despite the fact that more than half the group did not identify as feminist, most participants attributed qualities such as strength, independence, fearlessness, and skill to the cowgirl archetype. Most also indicated qualities such as strength to define women and expressed egalitarian opinions about the qualities that define men and women. The women and their horses mutually co-create each other at the same time that they produce a locally situated barn culture in which the ideal of the cowgirl features prominently. Consistent entanglement with the behaviors of a dangerous animal dramatically shapes their attitudes and outlooks. Horses and women evaluate each other on the basis of skill in handling a horse. Toughness and competence ensure the women's survival. Many participants also describe a willingness to get dirty, and an attitude of not worrying about appearances. These women practice a subversive femininity that values

agency and competence over appearance—two qualities that are usually attributed to hegemonic masculinity. Idealizing the cowgirl and the values of strength, fearlessness, and independence that the cowgirl represents, the women of this community perform a local alternative femininity that I call *cowgirl femininity*. As one participant notes, “We are our own group of strong women and it’s not because we want to really be cowboys; it’s because we’re horsewomen.”



*Informant's grooming kit*

## **Introduction**

If I would have known that morning what was going to happen that day, I would have never ridden. But I have a very good friend who encouraged me and also told me the same thing as Cindy: “You’re going to do this eventually. Your heart’s too big for it. You’re not going to give it up.” And I felt like they were right. And, of course, I prayed a lot: “Help me with this fear that’s gripping me.” But I saddled up with her and we headed down the road into some trails that were along the railroad tracks, and we were just going along. Well, we went as far as we could go along the trail, and then we turned around. And I felt a little gutsy, so I asked her if she wanted to race. Which we did. And ten seconds into the running, I felt the horse I was on grab the bit, and he took off with me. So now I’m on a barnstorming horse that I’m not in no way experienced enough to handle, right? And when he, um, he went straight for a while and then bolted to the left, which made me lose my right stirrup. And I thought, “Okay, I’m in trouble,” right? And then he bolted to the right, which knocked me out of my saddle, but I clung on. I mean, I’m literally . . . one foot—my left foot—in the stirrup and the calf of my leg is on the saddle seat. And I thank God for Cindy that taught me a tight cinch, ’cause if that saddle would have fallen or slipped, I don’t know what would have happened. But, anyway, so now I’m kind of clinging to his side, and I’m looking as we go. I was going to bail. I was just going to jump because I knew I was in trouble—and, in the meantime, my friend’s behind me, kind of, and she said, “I was a mentally pushing you up in that saddle,” she said, “but I couldn’t catch you.” I mean, he was flying! So anyway, I saw a little tree—about, you know, not very big—and I thought, “Oh

my god, that's going to hurt." And I pressed my body against his body, and that tree just grazed my face. And that made me mad. And, in an instant, I went from panic to determined. And, in a second, I was up—bust in the saddle; foot in the stirrup—and I yanked him with everything I had to stop. And he did one of those bouncing stops and I got him to stop. I turned him around and my friend come up and she goes "Oh my God, you stayed on! You stayed on!" and I was like "Sssh! Don't say anything right now. Let me contemplate what I just went through." And it changed me. The fear was gone. And I thought, "You know what? You don't care about me at all." Because I was convinced this horse loved me, but that was my inexperience talking. So, I just said, "If you want to run, we're going to run." I ran him back to where it all started. And, needless to say, he never did that to me again.

If I've ever been a cowgirl, it was that day. And, like I said, if I knew that was going to happen, I wouldn't have went, because it would have scared me to death. But that was the deciding factor for me that made my eyes look at horses and my heart look at horses differently. . . . There's no doubt we can have a relationship with a horse. There's no doubt. But I was too inexperienced to understand what that really meant. But, after that day, I did. I knew what that meant to be around a horse and what to expect and what maybe not to expect. So that was it. I'm glad I survived it . . . 'cause I'm telling you, I thought "I'm not. I'm going to die. I'm going to die." But I didn't, and it worked out. (Trailblazer)

Country music wafts out the doors of the green-and-tan barn at The Farm.<sup>1</sup> A group of middle-aged women is out riding on a one-mile trail that runs around the perimeter of sixty-five emerald acres. Thirty-five horses grazing on pasture dot the level fields. The women ride black-and-white horses at a fast clip. They are "gaiting," which is the term for the smooth, bounce-free movement of these Tennessee Walking horses. "Hey, woman!" they greet me as they approach the barn. One of the horses catches sight of a blowing plastic bag, spins suddenly, and starts to bolt toward his home pasture. His rider holds him tightly and, instead of running, his front feet start to leave the ground in a rear. One of the women yells out encouragement, "You got this, Cowgirl!" as the

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<sup>1</sup> To protect anonymity, this thirty-five-horse boarding facility will be referred to as "The Farm."

rider regains control of her horse. If her horse continues to act up and she handles him without fear, the women will say that she earned her cowgirl stars that day. These women construct a local culture deeply influenced by the inherent danger involved in handling a horse.

I have observed the women of The Farm frequently using the word “cowgirl,” sometimes as a word of encouragement, sometimes as a term of praise, and sometimes as a title or a sign of accomplishment. Hats, T-shirts, bumper stickers, and wall art on these grounds feature the term prominently. It signals the value these Western riders place on ideals such as strength, fearlessness, and toughness—ideals that contrast with the traditional expectations of women that are prominent in the rural Midwest.

In this paper, I explore the local meaning of the word “cowgirl” at The Farm and investigate the effect of horses on the performance of an alternative femininity, symbolized by the cowgirl. What I call *cowgirl femininity* challenges traditional gender roles in the overwhelmingly female community of The Farm. Thirty horse owners, many former boarders, several mentors, a few horse-owning friends, and thirty-five horses form a tight community centered around this horse-boarding facility in rural southeast Michigan. The intersubjective relationships of horses and humans constitute the substance of this community, where the ubiquitous presence of horses informs nearly every human interaction. Its functioning revolves around the practice of horsemanship and relationships with horses, which in turn generates the practice of an alternative femininity. How is it that women at The Farm express their female gender in ways that subvert traditional gender norms?

The performative nature of gender allows for the possibility of it being performed differently than expected. Judith Butler (1990) defines gender identity as “performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (271). She argues that gender is



instituted through a “stylized repetition of acts” and can be transformed “in the possibility of a different sort of repeating” (Butler 1990, 270–71).

If gender is something that we *do*, rather than something that we *are*, it remains possible to do it differently, and this “doing” occurs in relation to other people. In their classic work, “Doing Gender,” Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) argue that gender is “a situated doing, carried out in the real or virtual presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production” (126). These others are important because gender is enacted in, and reinforced by, its social relational context. Cecilia Ridgeway and Shelley Correll define a social relational context as “any situation in which individuals define themselves in relation to others in order to act” (2004, 511). In the social relational context of The Farm, the *others* that individuals define themselves in relation to are horses as well as other horse owners. Here, horses have a significant impact on the expression of gender.

When women perform gender differently in a particular social relational context, the performance is called an *alternative* or *oppositional femininity*. This is not femininity in the general sense as a state of “femaleness.” Here I use the idea of *a* femininity as one among many sets of situated practices that constitute a local gender performance. In his book, *Gender and the Construction of Dominant, Hegemonic, and Oppositional Femininities*, Justin Charlebois (2011) defines masculinities and femininities as “situationally specific *embodied social actions* which constitute normative actions and behaviors that men and women are held accountable to” (21). Women at The Farm hold each other accountable to a horse-influenced femininity locally distinguished by frequent references to the word “cowgirl.” This cowgirl femininity is one among many femininities performed in different situations and social relational contexts. The context that concerns this study is an 82 percent female milieu centered around horses.

Femininities are understood in a complementary relationship to masculinities. Raewyn Connell (1987) describes multiple masculinities that exist in relation to each other as well as in relation to femininities. Her work pioneered the definition of *hegemonic masculinity* as the dominant form of masculinity that sustains male power. Connell uses the term *emphasized femininity* to label the femininity that complements hegemonic masculinity because of its subordinate status. Mimi Schippers (2007) replaces the term *emphasized femininity* with *hegemonic femininity* to name the feminine practices that reinforce hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic femininities support patriarchal dominance. In contrast, Schippers (2007) defines *alternative femininities* as those femininities “that do not articulate a complementary relation of dominance and subordination between women and men” (98). Charlebois (2011) equivalently defines *oppositional femininities* as those which are noncompliant with the hegemonic femininities that support patriarchal gender relations (33). Alternative and oppositional femininities challenge the dichotomy in systems of hegemonic masculinities and femininities, where men are viewed as more competent, independent, and in control, and women as more passive, compliant, and dependent (Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Charlebois 2011). By defining the ideal feminine performance as competent, independent, and in control, cowgirl femininity functions as an oppositional or alternative femininity that does not comply with patriarchal gender relations.

At The Farm, women idealize feminine competence, strength, independence, and courage—traits traditionally coded as masculine. However, they are not imitating hegemonic masculinity. Instead, they are generating an alternative femininity in which these traits are valued and reinforced socially by the other women as well as by the practices involved in maintaining

control of horses. These values define the local feminine performance precisely because horses are dangerous animals that require competent handling.

Other authors have examined the practice of alternative femininities in a variety of contexts, including skateboarding culture (Kelly et al. 2005), women's roller derby (Finley 2010), breakdancing (Johnson 2014), alternative fashion in Great Britain (Holland 2004), and alternative rock culture of the 1990s in the United States (Schippers 2002). Based on my research, almost no studies look at leisure riders in a rural American horse subculture, although several studies do discuss the experiences of horsewomen and girls in European contexts. I was able to find two ethnographies available in English that examine gender and human–horse relationships in specific localized communities—in these cases, riding stables with communities of teenage girls in European contexts (Forsberg and Tebelius 2011; Ojanen 2012). Two other studies have focused more broadly on what the authors call “the horse world” in the U.S. and U.K. (Birke and Brandt 2009; Dashper 2016). In these studies, women and girls are empowered by their interactions with horses and their horse communities.

Lena Forsberg and Ulla Tebelius (2011) interview and observe six teenage girls at a state-funded riding school in Sweden. They find that the riding-school environment impacts how girls construct their identities. Through interactions with horses, the girls in this study develop leadership qualities and a sense of personal competence while creating a culture in which these qualities, as well as hard work, eclipse feminine adolescent concerns with appearance. They conclude that, at the stable, the girls had “to develop ‘masculine’ as well as ‘feminine’ traits” (Forsberg and Tebelius 2011, 54). Likewise, women at The Farm, while not unfeminine, promote masculine-coded ideals such as strength, competence, fearlessness, and independence. These are the ideals coded in the word “cowgirl” at The Farm. In adopting these ideals, these women do

not seek to duplicate or imitate masculinity. Rather, they develop a distinctly feminine culture that reclaims these attributes.

Karoliina Ojanen (2012) interviews twenty-two “stable girls” at stables in different parts of Finland and conducts in-depth observation at one stable in particular. She observes the establishment of social hierarchies among the girls based on horse-handling skills and stable experience. She finds that the culture at the stable, while focused on girls’ power over each other, does not challenge traditional feminine gender norms. Ojanen’s study contrasts with my study of The Farm, where I did observe a significant challenge to gender norms and I did not observe power hierarchies between the women. Although there does not appear to be a distinct hierarchy of social power at The Farm, horse-handling skill and experience influence which community members are chosen as mentors and described as “cowgirls.”

In a study of what they call “the natural horsemanship world” and “the traditional horse world,” Lynda Birke and Keri Brandt (2009) conclude that “the presence of horses enables a subversion of dominant gender practices” (189). They also find that gender in an equestrian context is the product of the human–horse relationship. Their work draws conclusions that resonate with mine; however Birke and Brandt base their work on the researchers’ collective experiences of decades of participation in the “horse world,” rather than focusing on a specific community.

A Norwegian survey conducted by Bente Traeen and Catharina Wang (2006) examines the results of 333 questionnaires. The authors find that female horse owners characterize their own behaviors as more assertive and masculine compared to the self-characterization of female non-horse owners. This study highlights the idea that the riding-school environment contributes to women and girls “visualizing and recognizing competence” (Traeen and Wang 2006, 444).

Similarly, women of The Farm community are evaluated by each other and their horses on the basis of competence as well as a cluster of other qualities that are usually coded as masculine.

An article written by Katherine Dashper (2016) also looks broadly at “the horse world,” in this case in Great Britain. Through seven years of insider experience and 55 semi-structured interviews, she finds that horsewomen construct gender in ways that challenge traditional rural gender norms. My research at The Farm also seeks to answer the question of how relationships with horses affect the construction of femininity, and likewise concludes that these relationships contribute to the subversion of traditional femininity. However, Dashper focuses broadly on the British horse world, while my study looks at a specific local community in the Midwestern United States. In both realms, horsewomen perform a femininity that challenges traditional rural gender norms.

All of these works touch on the specific effect that relationships with horses have on women’s and girls’ practices of femininity. All of these studies are based in English-style riding in Europe as opposed to Western-style riding culture in the Midwestern United States. Women at The Farm ride almost exclusively Western style, which is the style of riding that emerged from cowboy culture in the American West. How does the idea of the cowgirl, and women’s relationships with horses, affect the local practice of femininity in this particular community? What are the textures of this practice of femininity?

Horses determine this texture. In this community of horse boarders and horse-owning friends, practices are so thoroughly entangled with horses that they form a fusion of the human and horse worlds. In this social relational context, the animal rivals the human in influence. Local *natureculture* is a more accurate term than local culture for capturing the sphere of local practice of femininity at The Farm. In describing Barbara Smuts’ research with baboons, Donna

Haraway writes of “situated naturecultures in which all the actors become who they are in the dance of relating” (2008, 25). This dance of relating is the intersubjective process whereby human and animal co-create each other. In this process, which Haraway (2008) calls *becoming with*, “all the dancers are redone through the patterns they enact” (25). Women at The Farm have been redone through their relationships with horses, as well as with each other.



*Informant barrel racing at the Cowboy Games.*



*The Farm*

## **Methodology**

In order to examine the effect of becoming with horses, I utilized my position as a horse owner and facility volunteer at The Farm. I conducted participant observation and interviewed 19 members of The Farm's community over a period of six months at this 35-horse boarding facility located on 65 acres in a rural area of Michigan just outside the town of Belleville. Belleville is 86 percent white with a population of 3,872 residents (City-Data 2016). The town's median income is \$5,000 below the state median income (City-Data 2016). All 29 horse owners at the boarding facility are white and working or middle class, and 82 percent are female. This gender ratio is consistent with national figures that define the leisure horse-owning population as 90 percent female (Georgia Horse Council 2012). Eighty-eight percent of the riders at the farm primarily trail ride in the *Western* style (a type of riding that emerged from the American West). Ninety-six percent of the boarders are adults and 65 percent are over 40 years of age.

I witnessed the day-to-day operations of the community and participated in multiple community events. I used purposive sampling to recruit 19 interview participants from the community. Fifteen of these participants are current boarders who own horses that reside at The Farm, two are former boarders, and two are mentors to boarders. All of them identify as female. I conducted 19 semi-structured interviews and recorded, transcribed, and analyzed them for themes using a qualitative approach. Interview questions included: *What does the idea of the cowgirl mean to you, personally? What qualities define women for you versus what qualities define men?* and *How would you describe your relationship with horses and with your horse in particular?*

Interviews were loosely structured around a set of questions that were included in every interview. A full list of these questions can be found at the end of this paper in Appendix A. The answers to these questions led me to focus on Haraway's (2008) concept of *becoming with*, as it became clear that becoming with horses forms the foundation cowgirl femininity.





*Informant pole bending at the Cowboy Games.*

## **Becoming With**

The phrase *becoming with* identifies the process of mutual influence between companion species. The Farm community has a word for a woman who becomes with horses. I observed informants calling each other “cowgirl” on many occasions and frequently using the word in conversation, so I asked them to define what the cowgirl means to them personally. The rich and complex answers to this question form the foundation of this paper, so it is useful to begin by defining the meaning these informants attribute to the word at its most basic level.

While a woman who is not a horsewoman can earn the title *cowgirl* based on exhibiting certain cowgirl ideals such as fearlessness and independence, the prototypical cowgirl, according

to this group of women, is first and foremost “someone who has devoted their life to horse life” (Lynn2).<sup>2</sup> Although a few informants associated the cowgirl specifically with Western-style riding, most felt that the word *cowgirl* transcended riding styles to include all women that embody certain characteristics, beginning with a devotion to horses. “You know, it doesn’t matter. You could be Western, English, or dressage . . . being able to handle the horse and respect the horse, that’s the core of it” (Starryeye).

Informants identified members of The Farm community as cowgirls, saying that “most of the women at the barn” (Stephanie) qualify. As Evelyn says, “All of us here are a cowgirl in our own way, in this barn.” A cowgirl is “a woman that knows how to deal with horses and can get shit done” (Stephanie). Moreover, cowgirl-ness is a state of being in control of a horse. “Anytime a woman is on a horse telling a horse what to do, that’s being a cowgirl” (Stephanie).

I previously discussed the idea that gender expression is a performance. This idea of performance extends to human–animal relations. Birke and Brant (2009) agree that “Human relationships with animals—like gender relations—are *performed*” (190). Since women at The Farm use the word *cowgirl* to describe the gendered local performance of women becoming with horses, it makes sense to call this performance *cowgirl femininity*. This unique local performance situated in a specific place (The Farm) and practiced by a specific community (women and horses who board or have boarded at The Farm) has a human–horse hybrid quality; intersubjective human–horse entanglements generate the essence of all the human-to-human relationships as well. Animals inherently define and inform the social relational context that produces this alternative femininity in a naturecultural process.

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<sup>2</sup> Informants picked their own pseudonyms. When someone chose a duplicate name, I distinguished between the two with a number.

In The Farm's natureculture, people remain constantly aware that becoming with horses entails danger as well as interspecies communion. Theorists frequently idealize the sense of connection created in becoming with horses (Savvides 2011). Ideals of seamless interspecies communication and becoming one with the horse predominate in human–horse ethnographies (Birke and Hockenhull 2016; Brandt 2004; Dashper 2016; Dashper 2017; Latimer and Birke 2009; Maurstadt et al. 2013; Maurstadt et al. 2016). Such authors miss a key element of human–horse interaction that separates it from the experience of most companion species: that is, that horses, as 1,000-pound-plus prey animals prone to sudden flight and kicking in self-defense, are inherently dangerous to their handlers (Keaveney 2008; Savvides 2011).

Horses are not pets, despite their significance as a companion species (Keaveney 2008). As Trailblazer says, “horses, to me, are *not* pets. . . . Unfortunately, a lot of people treat them like pets and they create 1,200-pound monsters.” They do not live in the home, and the majority of their time is spent socializing with other horses, not humans. Unlike humans, who are predators, horses are prey animals dominated by instincts of self-protection despite their apparent domestication. Naturally claustrophobic—because their safety depends on their ability to flee rapidly—they can be defensive in confinement or in situations in which they feel cornered or trapped. They are prone to “spook”—violently jump, spin, or bolt—based on their frequent perception of dangers in their environment. Their eyes are large, round, and situated on the sides of their heads to allow nearly 360-degree vision. With vision designed to perceive minute movements in the far distance, they notice things that a human would rarely perceive, which renders them unpredictable. Their senses of smell and hearing are highly acute. Thus, they have a profound physiological response to factors invisible to their human handlers. This results in sudden movements such as spinning, bolting, jumping sideways, bucking, kicking, and rearing

that can injure a rider or handler on the ground. In the wild, their survival depends on their attunement to the emotional states of other herd members. If one member of the herd becomes even slightly tense in response to a potential threat, all of the other horses in the herd respond by mirroring this tension and readying themselves to flee. Domestic horses have not lost this quality. They are keenly attuned to the emotional state of other horses and humans in their environment. In particular, the human that rides or handles a horse becomes the herd leader and the horse tunes into the body language and emotional state of that person. Because of this, horses mirror emotional states and require tremendous patience and emotional control from their handlers and riders. Their perception is so keen that they appear able to read thoughts—an attribute that is utilized in equine-assisted psychotherapy, but that is a source of stress for the anxious rider. Despite this attunement to the human handler, the horse's allegiance remains with other horses. Unlike dogs, horses are herd animals and, consequently, their primary attachment is to other horses, not to human beings. Thus, even the calmest handler's influence can be overridden by the presence of other anxious horses, or by the horse's attachment to its pasture mates and consequent drive to return to the barn.

A study from *Neurosurgical Focus* recounts that 42.5 percent of all traumatic brain injuries are caused by horseback riding (Winkler et al. 2016). One in three horse-related injuries occur on the ground when the handler is not even riding (Thomas et al. 2006). Women of The Farm are aware of the risky nature of human–horse interaction, having experienced it personally. Despite the danger, they continue to pursue the experience of becoming with horses. Handling a dangerous 1,200-pound prey animal requires courage and fortitude, a fact that women at The Farm consciously express. This poses an explanation for why so many informants indicate that fearlessness and toughness form significant aspects of the cowgirl identity.

Negotiating the danger posed by these animals distinctly shapes the culture of The Farm. Significant moments of disharmony precipitated by this danger are critical elements of the experience of becoming with horses. Haraway (2008) acknowledges that the becoming with process through which the human and animal enactors reshape each other entails “out of sync” interspecies moments, saying that “The flow of entangled meaningful bodies in time—whether jerky and nervous or flaming and flowing, whether both partners move in harmony or painfully out of sync or something else altogether—is communication about relationship, the relationship itself, and the means of reshaping relationship and so its enactors” (26). The disharmony that is also a feature of human–horse interaction shapes these women profoundly. Writers of horse blogs discuss this disharmony so regularly that Nora Schuurman’s (2014) study of blogs describing human–horse relationships devotes a significant section to the theme of conflict. What does it mean for a woman to become with an animal that engenders so much risk of bodily harm?

All of my informants relayed stories of almost getting hurt, or actually being injured by a horse. Most of my informants identified fearlessness as a key cowgirl characteristic. As Janet says, “part of being a cowgirl is also that fearlessness.” Here, Janet recounts a harrowing incident with her horse:

I was riding by myself and—which I’ve done a lot—and you know, with her, growing up with her—I got her when she was six months old, and so I would walk her down the road a lot by ourselves. I would really get her into being able to go out alone. And so she’s five and I’m riding out by myself and we came up to this little creek that’s maybe one foot wide and I walked her up to it and she didn’t want to go in it or over it or through it or anything. She didn’t want to go. She was being stubborn. And so I got off and led her up to it and she walked right up to it with me and she stopped right at the edge. So, I took one rein—I had split reins—I took one rein—and they were long reins—and I went on the other side of the creek. And I wasn’t standing in front of her. I was standing at a good 45-degree angle. I was not straight in front of her. And I was just, you know, asking her to move to go over the ditch. Well, when she did decide to go over, she jumped over the creek and then she turned to me and jumped straight over me and she knocked me in the head, in the forehead, with her front feet, and I’m falling

backwards. I see her belly and I fall back and then she just stopped. And she's all calm and. . . Yeah. Yeah. That was one of my concussions. I've had several. [laughs] That explains a lot. She tried to kill me. I mean she obviously wasn't intentionally trying to kill me, but she just had no boundary, you know?

In explaining the reasons that she kept a horse that nearly killed her, she says, "As a cowgirl, you know, you feel like you can handle everything." Making the choice to return day after day to handle an animal that nearly caused one's death requires confidence in one's own competence and an ability to overcome fear. Women at the Farm keep horses despite the awareness that they are likely to get hurt. At the time I interviewed Janet, she had three broken ribs from a mounting accident (which didn't keep her from riding twelve miles that day). In telling me this, she said "The epitome of cowgirl is just hard work and working through pain. It's kind of part of it. You get hurt."

Becoming with horses, for these women, means embracing the awareness that one can get hurt and yet pursuing human-horse relationships anyway. Janet was not the only one who said getting hurt was part of it. Jane<sup>2</sup> described recently falling when her horse went down on a hill and nearly rolled on top of her, which could have resulted in a serious injury. She went on to describe another incident in which she was "hauling butt down the road" on a thoroughbred and went flying off, and ended her story by saying "If you haven't fallen off, you haven't really ridden." This sentiment is common among the women of The Farm. Several informants have expressed that one is not a real rider until they have fallen off at least three times.

Even a horse that the owner trusts and knows well can be the source of an injury. Jane described a time when her usually calm horse spooked at a water trough, threw her, then stepped on her and sprained her ankle. She casually mentioned that he could have crushed it, "so, knock on wood." The casual and even humorous acceptance of such risks permeates the attitudes expressed at The Farm.

Horses can injure their handlers in everyday handling as well. Anne received a black eye when her horse kicked at a fly and almost knocked her unconscious while she was treating his hoof abscess. Anne<sup>2</sup> was actually knocked unconscious as a child while riding a “kid-safe” horse. She and her cousin were cantering down a trail when she forgot to duck underneath a tree.

Even the daily tasks of caring for a horse—such as feeding—can be dangerous and result in serious injury. Trailblazer suffered five ribs broken while feeding. Her horse jumped sideways when another horse bit her and, in her words, “When she forced me against that wall, my ribs broke. . . . Yeah, five ribs were broken. So, um, that was a hard lesson to learn. But, like I said, with horses . . . if you’re involved with horses, it’s not *if* you get hurt, it’s a matter of time, *when*—and, hopefully, it’s not anything catastrophic that you can’t recover from.” Women at The Farm express casual confidence in the inevitability of getting hurt, yet continue to choose to work with horses despite this awareness—which builds everyday courage. Trailblazer quoted John Wayne from a sign that hangs near the saddling area: “Courage is being scared to death and saddling up anyway.” Women at The Farm live with everyday fear and encourage each other to overcome it.

Sometimes, a horse accident can reveal unknown reserves of strength. Here, Trailblazer uses the phrase “cowgirl up” as she narrates a friend’s accident and her powerful response:

There was a time I had a friend that I used to ride with and she was oblivious to the danger, so it was kind of . . . I felt the pressure of not only taking care of myself, but taking care of her too because she was kind of reckless around horses. And we were on her property. I wasn’t on a horse. I was trying to help her be better under saddle. And we came to a creek on her property and the horse was afraid of the water. So, there was the creek and then the trail continued on after the creek, or there was an embankment straight up. So, I was telling her, encouraging her, to squeeze her legs and push forward, but what I failed to notice or say anything about was her reins were hanging loose. So that horse had no direction, right? So this horse, being green—you know, green and green make black and blue, right?—she, uh, this horse jumped onto the embankment. And I don’t know if this really classifies as “cowgirl up,”

but um so here's this horse standing straight up, clawing at the embankment, and the trail was five feet off to the left. But this horse didn't know what it was doing anyway, so I'm watching this in horror. So, the girl just fell straight back and into the water and the horse is still clawing at the embankment and ... you've heard these stories where the strength to move the car off of somebody? Well, what I thought was going to happen was the mare was gonna come back on her, right? So, I stepped two or three steps in and I grabbed her, and I picked her up and I put her over here, and ... 'cause I thought she's going to die, you know? But then it was over with. And then the mare turned and took off up . . . down the trail. What it should have done in the first place. And she was stunned and said, "You saved my life." And I'm like "You know what? I think you're part cat, actually," because. . . Uh, so I probably have told her many times "cowgirl up," but I was almost afraid to, because I don't know that she had the ability to cowgirl up. And it was amazing, because I couldn't ever do that in my life normally. Because, first of all, she fell in water. So she's even heavier. And it was kind of chilly out and I picked her right up like she weighed nothing and moved her out of the way. . . . That's how she lived. Matter of fact, her nickname was "Tumbleweed."

Tumbleweed earned her nickname because she fell off her horse so regularly. Serious horse-related injuries have happened so often at The Farm that people joke about having an ambulance day. In the past five years, horse accidents at The Farm have caused one broken foot, one dislocated shoulder, one serious closed-head injury, one minor closed-head injury, one broken back, and one broken arm. Clearly, these women are aware that they are becoming with a dangerous animal, and yet they continue to choose life with horses. Becoming with a dangerous animal produces strength. As Jane says, "As a woman, it's very empowering that you can have a relationship with an animal that's a thousand pounds or more that can easily hurt you or kill you. There's a peace that comes from having that relationship." Handling a horse requires a great deal of equanimity and inner peace. Here Jane identifies this as generating one of the benefits of horse ownership.

Trailblazer said several things that referenced the strength that is both taught and required by horses, saying, "If there's anything that can make you stronger, it's a horse!" When I asked if



and how horsemanship had changed her, she replied, “It made me more aware of the possibilities, more aware of *wow, I didn’t know I had that in me.*” She also said she has helped some women that “are not as strong as they need to be, to be around horses. . . . For the average horse, you need to be a little bit stronger than you think you are.” She bemoaned that people who are “timid, weak, skittish, or fearful” are prone to getting hurt unless they “put their big-girl boots on” and learn how to handle their horse. Horses provide an opportunity for many handlers to grow and change as individuals beyond what they encounter in their everyday lives.

Janet spoke about the strength horses imbue in her body and character, saying “I’m just a little thing. . . . I know I surprise people with how much strength I have, so definitely don’t underestimate me.” Even if one doesn’t start out with a great deal of personal strength, relating consistently with a horse will develop an individual’s strength.

Anne overcame significant fear in order to become a horsewoman. Horses absorb the anxieties of the people who handle them and become skittish and dangerous. This is common knowledge among horse trainers and instructors, and is empirically validated by studies such as one in which humans in a human–horse pair were told to expect a frightening stimulus. The stimuli was never enacted, and yet the heart rates of both the horse and human became elevated based on the human’s anticipation of a stressful event (Keeling et al. 2009). An article in *The Atlantic* validates this, emphasizing that “domestic horses respond to the tiniest change in tone of voice, quality of touch, or stiffness of their rider’s body” (Davis 2016). Because of this phenomenon, it is necessary to perform confidently when handling a horse. If the handler–rider is confident, then the horse is much more likely to be calm and well behaved. Here, Anne describes how this has empowered her:

As someone who had anxieties, I still had to be strong for him and it really became a magical thing for me. Because there have been times when I get on him

and it feels like we are this team that can go and do anything together. And that I'm strong for him and because I can be strong for him he's going to be strong for me. And it gives you goosebumps just to talk about it, of how much empowerment that's given me.

Anne and her horse are strong for each other, and this becomes a significant source of empowerment for her. The bravery required for a successful ride on her anxious horse generates tremendous personal growth and positively impacts her mental health.

During our interview, Anne spoke openly about her recovery from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and how her relationship with her horse, Thrilly, has helped her to overcome her own anxiety symptoms. Here she describes the process:

And the times that I've been really struggling with PTSD and I go "You can get out there and jump a three-foot fence. You can get out there and gallop. You've gone out there with Thrilly in pea-soup fog in the middle of the night and confidently ridden through that and had fun at all times of the day and night. And sat through all these gnarly situations.

Sitting through "gnarly situations" means her horse became hard to control and yet she stayed calm and stayed on. Persevering through adversity with her high-strung horse has accelerated her recovery. She says to herself, "You can't be that bad if you can get through all that," and to me, "You know, it's been an amazingly empowering thing for me to go 'If you have it in you to be able to get to this point, then you must have it in you to get better and continue forward with your recovery.'" Riding her horse has been so transformative that Anne experiences her mental-health issues completely receding when she is with her horse:

When I get on my horse, I don't think of anything else for hours. It's not that I choose to; it just happens. I get on and I focus on what's in front of me. And for those few hours that I'm riding, I'm not a person with PTSD anymore. That's been the biggest thing. I'm now this person who has this awesome teammate and we've had these awesome adventures together. And we can go out and we can kick some butt and it's such a huge blessing to have those couple of hours a week to not be Anne with PTSD, but to be Anne with Thrilly. I can't begin to tell you how much that's helped me over the years and what a source of strength that's been.

She goes on to explain how riding requires toughness and personal hardness: “I see riding as being a very difficult sport. It’s not what people think at all. If you want to be a good rider, there’s a lot of toughness you have to go through. There’s a lot of personal hardness you have to go through to not be afraid . . . because you have to be not afraid for you and for the horse.”

She goes on to say that her horse is an amazing confidence booster, the best thing that ever happened to her, and that she is at her “strongest and best” when riding him. She is one of many informants who said that horses made them a better person—including Jane2, who said that horses are her “sanity,” and Brittany who described how horses have stabilized her throughout her life.



*Sign in the observation room*

“Strength” is among several key words that were repeated throughout the interviews in informants’ descriptions of becoming with horses. Other key words include “fearlessness,” “toughness,” and “empowerment.” As Joyce said, “Horses give you a sense of freedom and empowerment like nothing else does.” This is validated by a Norwegian survey conducted by Traeen and Wang (2006), who say about young female horseback riders that “riding and caring for horses was likely to have as positive effect on self-esteem, development of identity, and perception of self-efficacy” (439).

A woman who becomes with horses must overcome the fear engendered by a dangerous animal, which leads to a sense of strength and empowerment. The dangerous, prey-animal nature of horses demands that handlers enter the horse's world. As Jane<sup>2</sup> says, "You're in a whole new world. Their world." While entering the horse's world, the handler must be alert and present. Anne<sup>2</sup> reports that "It's very grounding. . . . You have to pay attention to everything that's going on. You have to be there with them. You have to be present." The effect on the person is deep because, as Janet insists, "It just becomes part of who you are." The horse does not care about appearances. As Suzanne concludes, "She doesn't care what I'm wearing, other than the saddle."

The horse acts as a mirror to the inner state of the handler, requiring leadership and patience and a commitment to staying present. Here Anne<sup>2</sup> delineates this experience:

Your horse is a quick mirror. People aren't such quick mirrors sometimes. And if you're not there, they will know it and they will let you know. 'Cause they're just that herd mentality, that continual pushing to see who's doing what. And they're constantly. . . . I wouldn't say testing you, but they're always going to be seeing who's going to be running the herd and that's just something that keeps you there.

Jane identified the horse as a mirror that has developed her sense of patience. In this quote, Jane emphasizes the way a horse's behavior reflects the inner state of the handler.

When I asked her how the horse had shaped her, she observed:

Well, I've never been patient. Ever. My kids will tell you the same thing, I'm sure. My husband would definitely tell you the same thing. But it's helped me to become more patient and um . . . especially with them . . . [laughs] with horses, I mean. I seem to be more patient with those that can't speak. So I think it helps you to. . . . They're a mirror. So, a cheeseball saying: They definitely do show you who you are and who you are that day when you show up. So when some trainers say, "work with the horse that shows up that day," I think the horse has to do that too. Work with the person who shows up that day. But they tend to mirror off and go "See? You're looking ugly today. Not outside, but inside. There's a lot of things going on . . . you're not being honest when you come to me." You're thinking one thing and you're feeling another thing, and that doesn't work well with them. So sometimes I think that you're creating what horse shows up by how you show up that day.

She is describing a process in which the horse creates a biofeedback loop that reflects the inner state of the handler. Thus honesty and patience in the human are rewarded by the consequent positive demeanor of the horse, or conversely, anxiety, frustration, and a lack of integrity on the part of the human produce an ill-behaved horse.

In addition to fearlessness and patience, horses require toughness and a willingness to let go of worries about personal appearance. Lynn<sup>2</sup> elaborates: “You can’t be frow frow. You have to be able to get dirty and be okay with that. It should not even be a second thought to you. ‘Oh my nail broke!’ Then you’re not going to be able to cope. . . . You have to be physically tough. You have to be patient. You have to be fearless. . . . You can’t be afraid of horses. You can’t be afraid of 1,400-pound animals.”

The handler must be assertive and create a relationship of mutual respect because, as Joycelyn says, “Horses tend to take advantage of you.” She has had to learn to become more assertive as a result of handling her horse. Here she explains:

So I know that Joe has a long ways to go as far as behavior and training. You know, he’s a dominant horse and I’m not a dominant person. So I tend to have to be more assertive with him and that’s hard for me to do. I tend to want to . . . “oh that’s fine. Just go ahead. Just go eat the grass. I don’t want to discipline ya.” And that’s not the attitude to have, you know? That actually makes it even more dangerous because he’s like “I’ll walk all over you then.”

Mutual respect and communication, rather than “love,” define the feelings the horse has for the human. Trailblazer describes, “I’m not going to say that a horse is going to love me as much as I love the horse, but I definitely think that there is respect or not respect there. And I think that some horses want to be with you because they respect you and sometimes in their character they need to lean on you for direction and I think that alone is love from a horse.”

Leadership is critical to this relationship and makes the horse more comfortable. Here Jane talks about her relationship with one of her horses:

I had to set up some boundaries then, because he'd get all up in your face. He'd get all pushy. He would bite you. Not hard. But he would definitely get you. So I was like "No, that's not acceptable." So once he was oh 90 percent, it was like, okay, it's time to set some boundaries here. And now he's actually happier that he has some boundaries. It's like "okay, now you are being the leader of our two-person . . . our two-animal team, so I feel more comfortable."

Trailblazer instructs that most horses "will mistake kindness for a weakness." Becoming with a horse requires assertiveness, toughness, fearlessness, patience, and the ability to stay present and alert. The horse mirrors these qualities by exhibiting respect and cooperative behavior, or by misbehaving dangerously when these qualities are lacking. The horse acts as a biofeedback machine, positively reinforcing the handler's assertive behavior and ability to stay present, while punishing fear and weakness by becoming hard to control and dangerous.

There are other aspects to becoming with horses, such as the feeling of oneness between horse and rider that many studies have described. This study focuses on the more dangerous elements of interacting with horses because it is generally neglected, and because it helps to explain the reasons that personal strength and courage are idealized by women at The Farm. Women at The Farm code and promote these values of courage and strength in their use of the word "cowgirl" as a term of praise, and their use of the phrase "cowgirl up" to encourage each other. In doing this, the women of The Farm generate and promote *cowgirl femininity*, which is an alternative femininity that challenges hegemonic gender norms. The character traits that emerge from becoming with a large and dangerous animal create the foundation of this alternative femininity. This process of individuals becoming with horses happens in the context of the community produced by The Farm. How do these individual character traits become encoded in the group norms that generate cowgirl femininity?



*Informants engaged in a game of musical stalls at the Cowboy Games.*

## **Community of Practice**

Etienne Wenger's concept of *communities of practice* helps to explain the creation and functioning of cowgirl femininity at The Farm. Wenger (1998) defines communities of practice as those in which "Collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise" (45). He applies this concept to the community created by the learning of skills and culture in the workplace. Carrie Paechter (2003) utilizes communities of practice as a "way of thinking about the formation and perpetuation of localized masculinities and femininities" (70). At The Farm, the "shared enterprise" is horsemanship as well as cowgirl femininity. I explore the concept in both

senses simultaneously, as the skills of horsemanship and the values of cowgirl femininity intertwine with each other at The Farm. Wenger conceptualizes communities of practice in four dimensions, *meaning* (learning as experience), *practice* (learning as doing), *community* (learning as belonging), and *identity* (learning as becoming). I employ these four dimensions to look at cowgirl femininity and social practices at The Farm.

Wenger (1998) organizes the first dimension, *meaning*, in terms of three concepts: *negotiation of meaning*, *participation–mutuality*, and *reification*. Negotiation of meaning emerges in the shared meanings of concepts and phrases that define participation in this natureculture. Paechter (2003) emphasizes that within a community of practice, “To be a full participant of the community, core meanings must be shared” (72). Women at The Farm illustrate the concept of negotiation of meaning in their widely shared definitions of the characteristics that define a cowgirl, and in the expression “cowgirl up.”

As described earlier in this paper, informants agreed that a cowgirl is, first of all, a horsewoman. Strength, courage, independence, and freedom were cited consistently when I asked what characteristics define a cowgirl. Trailblazer announced that “not everybody can be a cowgirl.” For her (as well as many others) the first quality of a cowgirl is *strength*, because to be a cowgirl it takes “courage, strength, and a love of horses ... and guts, too.” Lynn<sup>2</sup> maintains that toughness, fearlessness, and courage define a cowgirl. Janet asserts that “working through pain” and “also that fearlessness” make one a cowgirl. According to Stephanie, a cowgirl is “a strong, independent woman who gets shit done. Probably a woman that doesn’t need help from anybody unless she asks for it, a kind of take-life-by-the-horns, I’m-just-gonna-do-it-myself kinda person.” To Joycelyn, a cowgirl is a dominant personality who is a go-getter, an advanced rider who can get on any horse and is fearless. Starryeye identifies respect for the animal,



confidence, and inner peace as primary cowgirl characteristics. Lynn espoused that the cowgirl is “someone who’s free and independent.” Evelyn pinpointed strength, freedom, stamina, independence, and patience as key characteristics. Sandra described a cowgirl as a tomboy who’s “quite capable . . . resilient and tough, but not crude.” Anne pointed out that “there’s the cowgirl that’s completely fearless, that can do anything. . . . Here I see it as centered on being a tough horsewoman. . . . There’s no such thing as a weak cowgirl.” Anne<sup>2</sup> insisted that “cowgirls are known for their strength and their sort of honest way of looking at the world.” Jane<sup>2</sup> indicated that bravery defines a cowgirl and talked about a boarder at The Farm, saying that a cowgirl is “like Brittany, the night of that ride. That cowgirl hung on. She hung on very well. [A cowgirl is] somebody that can really persevere through things.” Brittany herself stated: “I think that a cowgirl is definitely an independent woman who has a love and a passion for her horse and wants to succeed in accomplishing adventures.” Sam confirmed: “I think of cowgirls as being strong, not just physically, but overall.” Significantly, there was widespread agreement between all informants that cowgirls are *strong*. This is a negotiated meaning common to members of this community of practice.

In addition to exhibiting shared meanings around the salient characteristics of cowgirls, women at The Farm have a remarkably consistent definition of the phrase “cowgirl up.” Multiple informants defined the phrase as meaning “suck it up, Buttercup,” “put your big-girl panties on,” or “put your big-girl boots on.” Stephanie said, “When a horse is acting like an idiot and your horse is bucking and reeling, someone screams ‘cowgirl up.’” Suzanne added that, in addition to these, it denotes “Just get to it and get what needs to be done, done.” Starryeye expressed that it’s “a confidence thing,” which is why she has it written on a bumper sticker displayed on her truck. Lynn affirmed that it communicates “Don’t give up.” Evelyn specified that “It means when

you're having a rough day on your horse or anything like that, toughen up, cowgirl up, toughen up. Suck it up, Buttercup. Get over it. Yeah, just pull your bootstraps up." Sam agreed that it conveys "Just toughen up, just go for it," and added that she used to have it on a bumper sticker on her truck and currently has a decal of it on her grooming box. Sandra uses the phrase to indicate that "Something didn't turn out like you wanted it to and you just persevered through it." Lee stated that "cowgirl up" indicates "Be brave, take the ropes and run." Jane expounded that it communicates "Put your big-girl pants on. It means you need to suck it up a little bit and maybe take a look from a different angle and don't be a whiner and don't have somebody else fix it for you and maybe step back and think about it a little bit and go at it from a different angle. To take on whatever sort of challenge it might be." To Anne, "cowgirl up" represents the idea that "Okay, this is going to be really tough, really hard, whether it's something riding related or a real-life situation. . . . It's going to be tough, it's going to be gnarly, but we're going to do it. . . . We're gonna go through the middle of this. We're gonna go through it and you're gonna get up. You know, courage is getting in the saddle anyways."

Women at The Farm use the phrase frequently as a way to encourage each other, which distinguishes it from the parallel masculine phrase "man up." As Brittany claimed, it signifies "Put your big-girl panties on. Be tough. You got this. It's going to be okay. Don't be weak. You're fine, mentally and physically. . . . You're going through a rough time and your friends don't want you to be down, so you gotta cowgirl up on this. You got this. It means stay strong, be tough. You can get through whatever's bothering you."

In this case, Wenger's negotiation of meaning helps to answer Paechter's (2003) question "How do we come to perform particular genders at particular times" (69)? Locally defined shared meanings that are socially reinforced in a community of practice reinforce a particular

gender performance. Shared meanings around the word “cowgirl” and the phrase “cowgirl up,” and the frequent use of these words in the social relational context of The Farm, communicate a community-wide emphasis on values such as strength, bravery, toughness, and perseverance. They claim these values as desirable features of femininity for its members.

The second feature of the *meaning* concept in Wenger’s community of practice theory is *participation-mutuality*. The ways that women at The Farm become with horses, as previously discussed, illustrate one element of this mutuality. Through becoming with horses, these women develop strength and bravery. They also create mutual participation in how they become with each other. They do this by riding and handling horses together, group rides both on and off the property, community riding events, potlucks, and bonfires. Through all of these, the use of the word “cowgirl” as a term of praise, and the use of the phrase “cowgirl up” as mutual encouragement, help to communicate the value placed on strength, bravery, and toughness.

Bumper stickers and a large sign in the barn bathroom that says “cowgirl” literally reify the concept. The shared ideal that *cowgirl* is an aspirational title to be earned further reifies the concept. Anne indicated that the title of cowgirl is “something that you have to earn through horses.” Many informants agreed that one achieves the right to be called a cowgirl through excellence in handling horses. Anne remarked that she would take it as a compliment if someone called her a cowgirl. Joycelyn commented that she didn’t consider herself a cowgirl because she wasn’t a confident enough rider yet, that a cowgirl is someone so skilled that she can get on any horse and ride it, no matter how spirited. Brittany declared “the name ‘cowgirl,’ you have to *earn* that, that title.” *Cowgirl* has been clearly reified as a title that one acquires by embodying certain skills and personal characteristics. The title, and aspiration toward it, become markers of community membership. Paechter (2003) proposes that “certain concepts become reified as

symbolic artifacts and practices; they may then be used not just to focus discussion but as markers of recognition or membership or otherwise of a particular community” (76). Women at The Farm illustrated this concept when I asked them if they knew anyone they would describe as a cowgirl. Most informants answered this question with the name of another member of the community whom they felt was a brave, strong, experienced horseperson. Trailblazer, Suzanne, Brittany, and this author were all mentioned in this context. Jane expressed that “There might be levels of cowgirl.” Evelyn, Stephanie, and Starryeve all insisted that *everyone* at The Farm could be described as a cowgirl. This community recognizes its members through the concept of the cowgirl.

The second dimension of communities of practice is *practice* itself. Paechter (2003) writes of “a shared repertoire of practices which may be very heterogeneous but which gain coherence from the fact that they belong to the practices of the community” (72). At The Farm, the most salient of these are the practices of horsemanship—which, in experience, reinforce cowgirl femininity. Themes of this practice include work, experience, learning, time, commitment, the importance of the relationship with the horse, and the determination to keep going even if one falls or gets hurt. Trailblazer explained “It takes experience and time. Not everyone can be a cowgirl,” and “You’re always learning. You can’t learn everything there is about a horse in your lifetime.” Jane recognized Suzanne as a true cowgirl because of the amount of work and time she has put into developing her relationship with a formerly troubled horse. “She has continued her progression of building a relationship, gaining knowledge, and working on things with her horse.”

After practice, *community* forms the next dimension of communities of practice. Wenger (1998) divides this dimension into *mutual engagement*, *joint enterprise*, and *shared repertoire*.

Mutually engaged horses and horse owners develop their connections through community practices. The practice of planning rides together occurs in several different ways. Boarders use Facebook as a means to communicate about shared rides. Commonly, a boarder will invite anyone in the group who is interested to haul horses together in trailers to a state park with riding trails. In the process, those who own horse trailers frequently offer to share trailer space with those who don't own one. Three- to five-hour off-site rides with up to ten riders happen weekly in all seasons except the depths of winter. Riders also plan to ride together for safety and companionship when negotiating a one-mile trail that circles the property. Night rides, where riders don headlamps and gallop together in the dark around the property, occur several times a week in good weather. In addition to rides, The Farm community gathers regularly for potlucks and bonfires. Special event rides happen several times per year. The horse-centered culture predominant at The Farm creates a cultural space where people, whose lives and attitudes may be very divergent outside the farm, can find rich sources of commonality and intimacy.

All this time together nourishes the sense of community that many informants spoke about in interviews. Many informants named other community members as mentors and spoke about the strong presence of a sense of community with each other. Lee called it uplifting. Jane indicated "This community is wonderful that we have here. Everybody's helpful and they get it and they're understanding and I don't feel a lot of judgment here, like there is at some barns. . . . When someone new comes in we sort of rally around them, and if I come to you or someone with a question, you'd be like, 'absolutely, and here's what I know and here's my suggestions,' and I love that about this community." She went on to name a number of people at The Farm that have been helpful to her. Jane2 noted that "we all just kind of support each other."

Anne spoke of all the calls of concern she received when her horse was sick and said:

It really takes a village to be a good horseperson. Having all that community, and all the different viewpoints and all the different things that people have learned—I think that’s very important. . . . I have really good memories of coming out here and, you know, it’s a bunch of people riding, and we’re all doing our thing and that’s a good feeling. We’re all in this together.

Anne<sup>2</sup> also finds The Farm supportive. She reinforced that The Farm sustains a “culture of women that just want to continually improve and be the best they can be with their animals and with each other. They support each other. It’s a very supportive environment—’cause nobody can do this kind of thing alone.” She elaborated later how this sense of community includes horses: “Whether it’s the people or the horses themselves . . . you just sit there and hang out with the herd, and it feels like its own community. And then when you have people that are also the kind of people that would do that, it’s its own community, whether it’s with the horses or the people or with both.” This statement emphasizes the multispecies quality of this natureculture. She went on to explain how the phrase “cowgirl up” is used for mutual encouragement: “It’s positive. It’s not like ‘man up,’ because ‘man up’ has a nasty ring, like you’re somehow not doing it. But ‘cowgirl up’ is more of a supportive kind of thing. It’s like ‘you know it’s in there, just go in and find it. Go.’ . . . It’s used to cheer somebody on, or get ’em to do the best they can, have the strength to do the best they can.”

All of these aspects of joint enterprise emerge from a shared repertoire. This comprises the horses themselves and the facility, including the saddle and tack area, the large indoor arena, the horse pastures and shelters, and the trail that surrounds the 65-acre property. Historical elements include several important yearly events: The Cowboy Games, The Glow Ride, and The Trick-or-Treat Ride. I attended all three of these events.

The Cowboy Games occur every fall and involve a friendly competition in which competitors pay a dollar to enter each event and the winner receives the money as a prize. Three

quarters of the boarders participated this year. Events included the traditional Western speed event known as barrel racing, in which contestants compete to achieve the fastest time galloping their horse in a cloverleaf pattern around barrels. A more humorous event was a speed contest called “The Panty Race,” in which contestants raced to the end of the arena, jumped off their horses, put on a very large pair of underwear, and then remounted and raced back to the finish line wearing their “granny panties.” Other events included a wheelbarrow race—in which contestants ran to the end of the arena on horseback, dismounted, and pushed a friend to the finish line in the wheelbarrow while they led a horse—musical stalls, the egg-and-spoon race, and a toilet-paper race, in which paired contestants who were connected by a flimsy strand of toilet paper rode together without breaking the paper. These events produced a lot of laughter and frequent exclamations of the phrase “go, cowgirl” as encouragement.



*Informant dismounts to put on panties for the panty race.*

For the Trick-or-Treat Ride, the perimeter trail was decorated with ghosts, skeletons, and strobe lights, and bins of candy were hung from trees at a height that was reachable from the back of a horse. The boarders rode the trail and gathered candy from the buckets. Afterward,

participants joined together for a potluck meal in the observation room that overlooks the barn's indoor arena.

For the Glow Ride, participants decorated their horses with glow sticks and then rode the perimeter trail in the dark while collecting colored glow sticks as they progressed around the trail. The first person to collect a complete set of colored glow sticks received a prize: A bag of horse treats. This ride produced two cowgirl moments when horses became agitated and spooked at the sight of the glow sticks while out on the trail. Anne overheard someone talking after the Glow Ride about how she had handled her horse—who was spinning, jumping sideways, and threatening to rear. They proclaimed, “She earned her cowgirl stars that day.” Brittany recounted, “I was called a cowgirl when we were on that Glow-Stick Ride. Our horses had a giant meltdown when they seen those glow sticks coming at them. It was all cool until it got dark outside and then only seeing glow sticks and not the horses. They were like ‘What’s going on?’ Rebel spun and Jane’s like ‘That’s right, Cowgirl, you ride it out.’”

All these events generate a rich repertoire of shared experiences that supports the development of a local microculture. Within these events, community members socialize each other with a local definition of the cowgirl ideal and a significant promotion of the shared values that this ideal represents.

The last dimension of communities of practice is *identity*. Wenger (1998) suggests that “we define who we are by the ways we experience ourselves through participation as well as by the ways we and others reify ourselves” (149). This applies directly to the ways that women of The Farm use the word “cowgirl” to identify themselves and others. All the women that I interviewed had examples of other women they would consider to be cowgirls. Trailblazer, Suzanne, Brittany, and this author were frequently labeled by others as cowgirls. More than half



considered themselves to be cowgirls, while others felt that, although they were horsewomen, they had not yet reached the level of skill and experience needed to be considered a cowgirl. Trailblazer said she was not a cowgirl on this basis, but then, later in the interview, as we discussed the harrowing ride that helped her conquer her fear, she proclaimed “If I was ever a cowgirl, it was that day.” Lynn2 underscored “I’m a cowgirl first. This is the real me. And then I thought is ‘cowgirl’ appropriate, because what does a cowgirl mean? I’m not a rancher. I’m a barrel racer. I’m a horse owner. But ‘cowgirl’ says how I feel best—in boots and jeans and no makeup when I don’t have to worry about all that crap.” Janet also considers herself a cowgirl and remarked “It just becomes part of who you are. . . . When you ride horses it just becomes what you do. . . . It’s part of who you are, and you always have to have them in your life.” Starryeye commented “From my point of view, am I going to go out in a reining competition and try to win a million dollars? No. But I consider myself still a cowgirl. So the thing is, I’m happy with that. And nobody’s gonna say ‘oh no you’re not.’” Evelyn asserted that “We are *all* cowgirlish at this farm,” and explained: “We don’t care if we get dirty. We’re not so concerned about appearances. And we’ll eat after scooping poop. I mean, it’s not like we picked it up with our hands! We use a shovel. We’re just not afraid of that stuff. Other people are like, ‘Oh my god!’”

When asked if they would identify themselves as a typical woman, most informants exclaimed “no,” and elaborated about getting dirty and avoiding housework. Trailblazer pointed out her ‘genuine cowgirl’ poster that states “I don’t do windows.” Jane expounded:

No, I don’t consider myself a typical woman. There are things that I like that are what I consider typical women like, but I’m a lot more . . . outside, getting dirty, don’t care if my hair’s not perfect, would rather spend time with my horses, dogs, and dirty grandsons than, you know, go shopping. Not that I don’t like shopping, not that I don’t like getting my nails done, or those sorts of things. But I’m pretty far. . . . I think most cowgirls are on the outside edges of those typical women.

In a similar vein, Jane2 insisted, “No! I’m not your typical high-maintenance woman at all. No, I’d rather clean horse poop than vacuum my house.” Brittany said “no,” that horsewomen are tomboys. Sandra described herself as a tomboy. Stephanie joked that she’s more “like a dude”:

I have always joked that I’m more like a dude. Like I, uh, don’t really typically like many girly things. I don’t wear dresses. The only time I ever wore a dress was when I got married. I don’t do my hair. I don’t do my make-up. I barely paint my nails. I don’t really fit into the girly stereotype. I have a hard time getting along with women because of that, because our interests are typically like really different. I consider myself more masculine. I like cars. I like doing things by myself. Some girls, you know, their whole thing is like they want you to do everything for them and I’m like “Nah, I got this.” And I drive a truck. And, um, I don’t know. I don’t consider myself a very typical girl.

Relationships with horses and the social-relational shaping that occurs in a community of practice influence the expression of gender at The Farm, which engenders cowgirl femininity. As asserted by Paechter (2003), localized femininities can be developed and maintained through participation in communities of practice. The mechanisms of this development include negotiation of meaning, participation in practice, engagement in community, and negotiation of identity. Through shared meanings around the cowgirl ideal, shared practices of horse handling and riding, a lively Farm community, and the resulting development of cowgirl-oriented identities, members of this community exhibit an alternative or oppositional femininity.



*Panty race*



*Sign in the barn*

### **Alternative Femininity**

“Cowgirl, you need one of these! Come see this.” The speaker gestures for us to come over to where she is standing in the November dark, next to a pasture gate. We approach as she switches on her flashlight to show us a light blue plastic funnel. “You’ve got to have one of these. It lets you pee standing up. If you’re really good, you can pee off the back of your horse without even getting off. Can you imagine having this on a trail ride?” Four women gather around laughing and remarking about how great it would be to pee standing up. One says she would write her name in the snow.

This moment, which transpired several years ago, inspired me to write this thesis. There I stood with a group of white, conservative, rural women, all over 45, openly discussing the desire

to adopt a masculine style of urination for the practical reason of not having to dismount on the trail. This inspired a curiosity that drove me to study the paradoxically feminist stance that so frequently emerges from a community in which over half the women pronounce themselves to be non-feminists. I have demonstrated how interactions with horses and the shared community of practice that these women and horses create together can generate cowgirl femininity. Previous sections established that members of The Farm associate the values of strength, independence, and fearlessness with the cowgirl ideal. Through the icon of the cowgirl, women at The Farm reinforce attributes in women that are commonly associated with hegemonic masculinity. As Dashper (2016) observes “The horse world does clearly offer opportunities for women to begin to define normative gender roles and feminine identities” (364). How has cowgirl femininity affected the views of members of this natureculture regarding the roles and characteristics of women?

When I asked Evelyn what feminism meant to her, she answered “I’m just not into all that taking my bra off and waving it. I’m just not into any of that stuff. . . . Out here we’re *not* very feminine. No, we’re very cowgirlish out here. But that’s not the kind of feminism you mean.” With this statement, Evelyn was describing the alternative or oppositional femininity performed at The Farm, which is distinct from feminism, and performed by women who do not identify with feminism as well as those who do. Ten of my 19 informants denied identification with feminism. Yet, as Jane observed, “Most cowgirls are on the outside edges of typical women. . . . I think cowgirls have a broader, more enriching life because they allow themselves to be outside the norm.”

Women at The Farm fit Charlebois’ (2011) description in that they “do not necessarily embody aspects of hegemonic masculinity but nonetheless resist or oppose elements of

hegemonic femininity . . . oppositional femininities encompass women who challenge patriarchal gender relations through outright noncompliance and more subtle forms of resistance” (33). In this oppositional femininity, women resist the traditional definitions of hegemonic femininity, yet still embody aspects of feminine performance. Here Brittany explains how cowgirls are “like a tomboy mixed with a girl”:

Horse people are more like: tomboy. I think tomboy is like, like a girl who’s all like wanting to play sports and not get girly and all that. But I think a horseback rider can be different. I don’t think it’s quite a tomboy. *It’s like a tomboy mixed with a girl* [my emphasis] at times. . . . So I think the cowgirl is, I think it’s its own thing, you know? I like all the bling, and I think that’s also something that makes cowgirls different than just straight-up tomboys. Tomboys don’t want no pink or bling or bright blue or stuff like that, and cowgirls do. They like the bright blues and the bling and the breast collars looking good and the saddle pads looking great and the horse’s got glitter all over him.

Women who perform cowgirl femininity are not practicing an adapted masculinity. They are claiming attributes that have been stereotypically assigned to masculinity and repurposing them to generate an empowered feminine identity.

Leisure environments where women gather can be fertile sites for resistance to hegemonic femininity. In her study of women’s friendships, Ellen Green (1998) describes this: “Leisure contexts, particularly those with other women, are important spaces for women to review their lives; assessing the balance of satisfactions and activities through contradictory discourses which involve both the ‘mirroring’ of similarities, and resistance to traditional feminine identities” (171). In this leisure context, women’s relationships with horses and each other have influenced the women’s assessment of gender roles. Informants’ answers to the question “What characteristics define women?” surprised me. I expected fairly traditional answers that contrasted with the more liberated image of the cowgirl. Instead, twelve of my informants gave answers that suggested resistance to hegemonic gender roles. Five answered that

strength is the primary characteristic that defines women, one mentioned independence, and six claimed it just depends on how the person wants to define it. Charlebois (2011) explains:

“Hegemony is maintained through constructing complementary but asymmetrical relational differences between men and women. For example, men are physically strong and authoritative while women are physically weak and submissive” (29). My informants’ definitions of women’s characteristics do not demonstrate the expected asymmetrical relationship between femininity and masculinity that maintains masculine dominance. Women of The Farm gave answers that mixed resistance to hegemonic femininity with more stereotypically feminine qualities.

Trailblazer, who is explicitly opposed to feminism, answered that women are defined by “strength, and not so much expectations, since everybody’s so different. Just courage and drive. And a heart for whatever life gives her.” Sam related that the first thing that came to mind was that women are defined by strength and then grace. Jane made a statement that stressed strength as well as relational qualities:

The first thing that came to mind is anything a man can do, I think a woman can do better. . . . Being supportive. Being honest without being brutal. Huge amounts of strength. Integrity. Strength. And not just physically—although there’s plenty of strong women out there who can haul bales of hay and stuff like that—but it’s more of an inner strength that you’re willing to lend out.

Lynn repeated that women are stronger than men. Anne<sup>2</sup> remarked that women are strong, but flexible. Lynn<sup>2</sup> specified that women are tougher than you think and courageous. For Joyce, independence defines women. Another six gave replies that indicated that women couldn’t be defined at all because roles aren’t defined anymore. In fact, twelve of the nineteen informants said something about gender roles being more blended, or even the same, for women and men. Even more surprising, seven of the ten non-feminists gave such answers. This contrasts

dramatically with the asymmetrical relationship between femininity and masculinity typified in the hegemonic system.

What follows is a group of replies from the non-feminist women: Trailblazer expressed that both women and men need to have a balance of hardness and softness. Janet described how “The roles are so much more blending now. . . . The line between man and woman and our roles, it’s so different now. We’re just closer together.” Jo insisted that *both* women and men need strength and empathy. Joycelyn emphasized that “there’s a lot of masculine women too, so there’s kind of a large umbrella of different traits for women.” Sandra talked about her belief that Jesus was the ultimate liberator of women and that both women and men enjoy freedom now. Evelyn explained that “I don’t think a man has to do something, or a woman has to do something, to prove themselves as a woman or a man. I just feel like we need to respect each other.” Sam said that men need empathy and strength just the same as women.

Informants who identified with feminism expressed egalitarian views more strongly, and questioned gender itself. Stephanie described how “gender is so fluid now. . . . What is a man? What is a woman?” Suzanne declared “other than body parts, I’ve always felt outside of gender definitions or roles, and it drives me crazy when people try to push me into a specific role. . . . I don’t feel like men and women should have specific roles.” Starryeye expressed “I think everyone should just go be who they want to be. . . . These days, the roles, the gender roles, it’s a grey area. . . . I don’t really have a definition of what a woman is, except for your physical body and then mentally whatever you want to put into it.” Jane reflected that there’s not “a gigantic difference.” Jane2 contended that gender just depends on what you like. Anne said:

The lines are getting blurred so much, and I feel that’s a good thing. Everyone has this image in their mind ‘this is what a man is’ or ‘this is what a woman is,’ but we’re learning that, in reality, if we can just be honest with ourselves . . . there’s all different definitions of what makes a man and what makes a woman, and

people who don't feel that they are either, that they're somewhere in the middle. And I feel it's good for humanity in general that we can have those discussions.

Here we see Anne making a case for the importance of gender fluidity. Rigid gender differences are a cornerstone of gender inequality. Ridgeway and Correll (2004) remark that "Gender is an institutionalized system of social practices for constituting people as two significantly different categories, men and women, and organizing social relations of inequality on the basis of that difference" (510). By blurring the distinctions between genders, women at The Farm begin to dismantle inequality in their promotion of cowgirl femininity. They diminish the prevalence of hegemonic masculinity when they naturalize an equal relationship between masculinity and femininity. As Charlebois (2011) explains, "Hegemonic masculinity's ascendance to power is contingent upon persuading the populace that asymmetrical gender relations are natural and inevitable" (24). Women at The Farm are not persuaded. What is it about this social relational context that encourages women to perform an alternative femininity?

Women at The Farm are redefining themselves in a social relational context composed of horses and horsewomen. Ridgeway and Correll (2004) find social relational contexts to be of interest because "The process of defining self in relation to others evokes hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender" (512). The *process of defining the self in relation to others* is key here and has a dramatic effect on gender hegemony because, in this social relational context, women are *not* defining themselves in relation to men. The *others* in this setting are other women (boarders at The Farm are 82 percent female) and, even more significantly, horses. By defining themselves in relation to horses, these women necessarily define themselves and each other in terms of competence, because competence in horse handling determines the outcome of every interaction with a horse and is critical to personal safety.



In stereotypical gender beliefs, men are seen as more competent than women (Ridgeway and Correll 2004, 513). Rural women, in particular, are socialized to expect conventional family roles for women and men (Little 2002, 41). At The Farm, women have reclaimed a sense of competency stereotypically reserved for men. This occurs, in part, because horses act as others that do not objectify women. Self-objectification occurs when people see themselves from the outside, as objects, rather than from the inside, as agents. According to a recent psychological study, “Objectified individuals see themselves as less warm, competent, moral, and human” (Loughnan et. al. 2017, 217). Due to the primacy of interactions with horses, where women act as controlling agents, women at The Farm experience less objectification than in the hegemonic culture at large. As described in a seminal study from the 1997, “Objectification theory posits that girls and women are typically acculturated to internalize an observer’s perspective as a primary view of their physical selves” (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997, 173). At The Farm, my informants experience their physical selves from the inside, where they act as agents in control of a large and dangerous animal. This provides an experience counter to that in the outside world. This shared experience of acting as competent agents by becoming with horses informs the community of practice that centers around the local production of horsemanship and cowgirl femininity.

These women value strength, competence, and fearlessness and reinforce these values through their use of the word “cowgirl.” They place great emphasis on finding the inner strength to overcome one’s fears and successfully handle horses. The narrative that begins this paper provides an example in which Trailblazer finds the strength to overcome her fear and gain control of a runaway horse. This experience of becoming with a dangerous animal changed her as a person and made her strong in ways she could not have imagined. In this natureculture, 35

horses and 30-plus women express an alternative femininity based on their similar experiences of empowerment. Here, female objectification recedes, and the local community of practice is based on the competence achieved by becoming with horses. This undoes hegemonic gender beliefs and generates cowgirl femininity.



*Two informants compete in the wheelbarrow race.*



*Informant racing to the finish line.*

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this paper, Trailblazer narrates an incident that was pivotal in her personal development. Convinced she is going to die, she regains control of a runaway horse. She realizes her relationship with the horse is determined by its prey-animal nature rather than love. She gets angry, overcomes her terror, and emerges as a competent and unafraid horsewoman. She describes this as the moment of her life when she most embodied the ideal of the cowgirl. The personal competence required to safely control a dangerous prey animal changed her. At that point, she became aware that her relationships with horses succeed based on the respect she commands from them. Similar narratives of overcoming danger repeated in my interviews of

women at The Farm. The daily practice of commanding respect from 1,200-pound animals changes the way the women of The Farm express their femininity and define gender roles. As they succeed at becoming with horses, they come to embody cowgirl ideals of strength, courage, independence, and competence. Shari Dworkin and Michael Messner (2000) explain that “When women exercise their agency to develop bodily mobility and muscular power, these activities are self-affirming for women, and antithetical to patriarchal definitions of women as passive, docile and weak” (351). Interacting with horses undermines the grip of patriarchal self-definitions. Rather than being subject to the patriarchal limitations of hegemonic femininity that would describe them as *passive, docile and weak*, these women define themselves as active, wild, and strong.

The Farm provides a setting in which a natureculture composed of women and horses flourishes. This natureculture functions as a community of practice centered on the skills of horsemanship and the propagation of cowgirl femininity. The women are influenced by their engagement in the fearless and competent handling of horses and by their respect for each other based on this handling. This local community of practice idealizes the cowgirl as an icon that symbolizes the value they place on courage, competence, strength, and independence. The community’s emphasis on these values resists the patriarchal definitions of women common to hegemonic femininity, especially in rural contexts. Through shared meanings around the idea of the cowgirl and the phrase *cowgirl up*, and their shared experiences, they reinforce the ideals of an alternative femininity. Their mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire cohere the local community and develop a cowgirl-oriented sense of group and individual identity that challenges conventional gender norms.

This cowgirl identity operates similarly to a professional identity. Charlebois (2011) describes this: “Women who successfully construct their professional identity may simultaneously subvert norms constituting dominant femininity and inadvertently construct oppositional femininities” (63). Thus, women of The Farm unconsciously construct and promote an alternative femininity that influences their definitions of women’s roles. Interviews revealed that these women not only attribute ideals of strength to the cowgirl, but extend these ideals to an egalitarian interpretation of men’s and women’s roles that embraces a sense of gender fluidity. Here, a horse-centered culture undoes traditional gender expectations. This phenomenon has also been observed elsewhere. Conducting fieldwork in Great Britain, Birke and Brandt (2009) observed that “the presence of horses enables a subversion of dominant gender practices” (189). Dashper (2016) also observes, again in Great Britain, that the horse world allows women to “rework what it means to be a woman” (363). In the case of The Farm, women operate in an environment that values them for their strength and competence, rather than their objectified image or utility as a caretaker of others. The horse functions as an alternative other that allows these women to define their femininity in ways that are independent of a complementary relationship to masculinity. Idealizing the cowgirl and the values of strength, fearlessness, and independence that she represents, the women of this community perform a local alternative *cowgirl femininity*. As one participant notes, “We are our own group of strong women and it’s not because we want to really be cowboys; it’s because we’re horsewomen.”

This research adds to the wider dialogue about alternative femininities and fills a void in the ethnography of American horse subcultures. It also raises some questions that are worth further exploration. Sixteen of the 19 women in this study have male partners. Further research could investigate how this alternative femininity affects their relationships with these male

partners, and how it affects the male partners' expressions of masculinity. Is cowgirl femininity practiced mainly at The Farm, or do these women bring the practice home with them? If they do bring it home, do their partners in tandem produce an alternative masculinity?

The other questions that arose concern the role of the horse. In this natureculture, the horse functions as an alternative other that allows these women to redefine their femininity. Within this femininity, women reclaim the traditionally masculine attributes of strength, courage, and independence, and are not objectified as they are in the wider systems of hegemonic femininity and masculinity. The question arises: Do these women, in redefining their femininity in relation to an animal other, objectify this animal other, much as men objectify women within hegemonic masculinity? In other words, do these women objectify their horses much as men in the culture at large objectify them? Is objectification a critical element of the performance of cowgirl femininity? These questions are beyond the scope of this project, but are nonetheless interesting to consider. The naturecultures produced by women with their horses pose provocative questions. The phenomenon of cowgirl femininity explored at The Farm undoubtedly exists in other contexts as well and certainly warrants further study.



*Sign given as a prize at the Christmas party.*

## Appendix A: Interview Questions

What does the idea of the cowgirl mean to you personally?

What are some of qualities that a cowgirl has or what makes someone a cowgirl?

Do you know someone that you would call a cowgirl and why would you call her a cowgirl?

Do you consider yourself a cowgirl or would your family and friends call you a cowgirl?

Would you ever call someone who wasn't a horseperson a cowgirl based on her characteristics and what would those characteristics be?

Have you heard the phrase "cowgirl up" and what does the phrase mean to you?

Do you have any cowgirl paraphernalia—T-shirts or mugs or posters, and such—with sayings on them?

What are the qualities that define a woman?

What are the qualities that define a man?

Do you consider yourself a typical woman?

What does feminism mean to you?

How would you describe yourself politically?

Are you religious?

What is your occupation?

If you went to college, what did you study?

Did you grow up in a rural, urban, or suburban area?

Are you married, and do you have children?

Do you own horses? How many?

How did you get into horses?

How old are you?

How would you describe your relationship with horses and your horse in particular?

How have horses shaped you?

Is there anyone whose support or help has been important along the way?

Do you feel a sense of community around horses?

Have you ever been hurt or almost hurt by a horse?



## Appendix B: Interview Timeline

June 17, 2017	Trailblazer
June 27, 2017	Lynn
July 3, 2017	Janet
July 6, 2017	Jo
July 6, 2017	Lynn2
July 7, 2017	Evelyn
July 7, 2017	Stephanie
July 8, 2017	Suzanne
July 13, 2017	Joycelyn
July 16, 2017	Starryeye
July 19, 2017	Sandra
July 20, 2017	Sam
July 25, 2017	Lee
July 28, 2017	Jane
July 29, 2017	Anne
July 30, 2017	Anne2
July 31, 2017	Jane2
August 3, 2017	Brittany
August 15, 2017	Joyce

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