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A good time to die: horse retirement yards as shared spaces of interspecies care and accomplishment

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Abstract

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, as a subset of the livery yard market, a number of specialised horse retirement yards have emerged, providing care for horses between their active age and death. The contemporary status of horses as companion animals, and the recent advances in veterinary practice – both resulting in the possibility for horses to live long beyond their ‘useful’ years – are seemingly of direct contextual relevance to the emergence of these specialist spaces of care. Considering that animal deaths are ‘culturised’ (Marvin 2006), meaning that they are nearly always carried out by humans, the emergent question is then, how to accommodate equine death in a human–horse relationship?

While the owner of a pet such as a dog or a cat is generally expected to care for their animal for the entirety of its life, with horses this is not necessarily the case. Unlike pets, horses are often sold several times during their lifetime, they can live to over thirty years, and keeping horses is relatively expensive and time-consuming. Thus, there is not necessarily a conscious decision or an active choice made by the owner, to care for the horse until the very end. The situation can be arrived at unintentionally, through failure to sell the horse, if the horse is not fit for work anymore due to an injury or illness, or simply if the owner is not ready to part with their equine companion. Horse retirement yards offer an option for the owner who cannot accommodate the aging horse but is not willing to euthanise it yet. The yards, with their full service packages, thus represent a commercialisation of care for unsound and elderly horses and the responsibility for decisions and tasks regarding companion animal death.

In this paper, we explore the ways in which the managers of equine retirement yards navigate the accommodation of equine death within the human/companion animal relationship. In seeking to understand how death can be accommodated ‘successfully’ we focus, in particular, on the importance attached to achieving a ‘good death’. A good death is conceptualised here in an Aristotelian sense, including the last phases of life (Rollin 2009). In their pursuit of a good death we understand equine retirement yards as constituting shared interspecies spaces of

care and accomplishment. Accordingly, we adopt a situated and relational approach to unpacking the role of the yard manager, but also their enrolment of non-human others, in the practicing and spacing of care in this setting. We are guided by asking whether it is possible to understand animal death as an act of interspecies care, a part of good care for an animal, and how this might be accomplished at a horse retirement yard?

In addressing these questions we consider when and in what ways death comes to be felt as variously present and absent in the daily routines of caring for horses at retirement yards. In so doing we orientate our inquiry around the parallel and sometimes problematic identity of retirement yards as simultaneously spaces of animal death and care. We also consider the ways in which euthanasia as a form of care is encountered, managed, and reflected on in the cultures of companion animal keeping. Notably, this includes regarding the duty to care for one's animals as long as they are useful, or as long as they do not suffer extensively (Rollin 2009). In exploring a good death as an act of interspecies care, we bring together literature from the fields of human–animal studies, the studies of human health care, and from death studies within geography and the social sciences. In seeking to combine and extend the insights offered by this literature we apply it to the analysis of qualitative research data collected from equine retirement yards in the UK.

Good death as an act of care

From a relational, animal geography, viewpoint, a retirement yard can be identified as an animal space, characterised by shared practices and experiences between humans and animals (Philo and Wilbert 2000: 7–11). Moreover from this viewpoint, it can simultaneously be understood as a 'deathscape', a place associated with death or dedicated to the dead (Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010), and as a space of care, representing the "shifting cultures of care, control and commodification of animals" (Milligan and Wiles, 2010, 739). In this section, we proceed by critically reviewing core components of each of these two framings as well as their value as a conceptual lens for answering the research questions set out above. We begin with animal death.

With increases in the interest in animals as companions and, simultaneously, the absence of death in everyday life, animal death has become somewhat of a 'problem' in Western societies (Redmalm, 2015). According to Bauman (1992, 138–139), death in late modern societies can be controlled to some extent, as the diseases leading to death can increasingly be treated. With animals, controlling their death is one of the most critical questions; in animals living with humans, a 'natural' death without human intervention is rare (Marvin 2006). The discussion concerning the death of animals living with humans, if not slaughtered for human consumption, commonly involves the question of euthanasia. This makes animals vulnerable in a different way from humans; their position as property gives their owner a legal right – and responsibility – to make the decision on their death (Cudworth, 2015, 9–11). In the case of horse retirement yards, the yard manager becomes the person with the most knowledge of the horse's daily

wellbeing while the legal responsibility for euthanasia still stays with the owner of the horse. This arrangement complicates the simple rule in a way we consider further later in this paper.

As a term, ‘euthanasia’ can be translated as ‘good death’ (Rollin 2009). The aim of giving an animal a good death has several dimensions, including for instance, issues of care, control and trust. Generally, animal euthanasia is understood as giving the animal a painless ending to a life that cannot be continued any longer, in a way that is considered ethically acceptable (Ginn, 2014). The animal is usually in a situation where it can no longer have a good life (Law, 2010). Thus, euthanasia as a good death is strongly associated with animal welfare, in the effort of making the actual moment of death as peaceful and painless for the animal as possible (Arluke and Sanders, 1996, 86–100).

In practice, however, performing a good death for a horse is more complex. The Aristotelian understanding of a good death implies that the last moments of life contain the possibility of defining one’s whole life. A life that may have seemed happy and reliable may be dramatically altered by, for example, a loss of trust in loved ones. According to Rollin (2009), animal death can be conceptualised in similar ways. For an animal, trust is embedded in daily routines, the safety provided by the herd, and embodied communication and cooperation with humans (Despret 2004). Neglect of a horse that is approaching its death, in the form of unduly postponing the decision to euthanise, causing fear or failing to relieve pain and discomfort, for example, would therefore have implications for the understanding of death as part of a good life. In this sense, death becomes an act of care (Srinivasan, 2013) that starts long before the final moment of euthanasia.

The questions of care and euthanasia in horses, which seemingly come to the fore in the space of retirement yards, address the conceptual boundary between humans and animals. The ways in which the boundary is understood, enforced, transgressed, and reworked are embedded in cultural conceptions and material practices regarding animal death (Charles and Davies, 2011). The status of the companion animal is in no way fixed but varies between a ‘person’ similar to humans and an ‘animal’ different from humans (Redmalm, 2015). With changes in the life of the human, for example, the animal that was previously perceived as a close companion may be redefined as one that is easily disposable and ultimately replaceable (Shir-Vertesh, 2012). In this way, the human–animal boundary stays flexible, sometimes transgressed and at other times enforced. This indicates that even in situations where the boundary seems to be deconstructed, it may be reinstated, indicating that it was perhaps not fully challenged in the first place (Shir-Vertesh, 2012, 428).

Despite the presence of the species boundary, many of the questions concerning *care* do, nevertheless, overlap between the treatment of humans and that of animals. There is an increasingly shared understanding, for instance, that animals should be treated as individuals, that their consciousness, subjectivity and agency should be appreciated, and that their care should be based on empathy and the aim of promoting wellbeing (Schuurman, 2017). Such expectations echo the values and cultural norms associated with the care of humans. In the context of human–animal studies, the importance of attending to the fact that care “is not necessary verbal” (Mol et al., 2010, 10), but rather, constitutes “embodied practice” (Mol et

al., 2010, 15), is also usefully brought to the fore. Perhaps most significant though, from the work of Mol et al. (2010) (see also Mol, 2008; 2002), is the conceptual utility of what they characterise as the basis for achieving good care: “persistent tinkering” (p. 14). The metaphor of *tinkering*, understood as referencing complex and specific, intricate and individualised forms of embodied practice is seemingly as valuable in helping us to explore what constitutes good interspecies care, as it is to explaining the pursuit of a good animal death.

Underpinning the idea of tinkering is the concept of ‘care multiple’ (Mol, 2008; Law, 2010). In the case of a horse retirement yard and the work of a retirement yard manager, for example, constituent objects of the care multiple, may extend (but also not be limited) to the resident horses, the owners of the horses, staff employed to work at the yard, other professionals providing services to the yard, the spouse and any other family members residing at the yard, the built and natural environment of the yard, equine retirement as an industry and profession, and the yard manager themselves (Law, 2010). In accordance with Mol (2008; see also Mol et al., 2010) and Law (2010), for care providers to achieve ‘good care’, this requires an on-going *choreography* of this care multiple.

“Crucial”, as Law (2010, 67) reminds us, “to the ordering of choreography, including the choreography of care, is the arrangement and distribution of events and actors in space and time”. The significance of the temporal and spatial dimensions of care, accords with a growing body of literature broadly located within the field of critical health geographies. One such example is the work of Milligan and Wiles (2010). Building on the assertion that “the nature, extent and form of [care relationships] are affected by *where they take place*” (p738, emphasis original), Milligan and Wiles (2010) put forward the concept of *landscapes of care*. Through such a lens, retirement yards can be understood as complex embodied and organizational spatialities. They emerge over an extended period of time, taking shape through the very experiences, relationships and practices of care. Within different care relationships and networks, landscapes of care thus involve issues of responsibility, norms and values, ethics and morals, as well as any social, emotional, symbolic, physical and material aspects of caring. Because care is co-produced by recipients and providers and involves reciprocal dependence, responsibility and commitment, it is also inherently relational. As such, care often involves networks with exchanges of different kinds of care, including physical and emotional. Moreover, care providers often derive significant benefits, such as a sense of pride or satisfaction in the care that they provide.

In exploring the ways in which animal euthanasia can become an act of care (Srinivasan, 2013), it is important to acknowledge the obvious differences in how euthanasia applies to humans and animals. Most important of all in the case of animals, as indicated above, is the power of humans to make the decision to euthanise the animal. This dynamic results in the unavoidable question of whether euthanasia is, in any given case, in the interest of the animal itself. Achieving a good death can be simultaneously dependent upon, and constitutive of, the ways in which the moral dilemmas raised by such a question come to be navigated and assimilated in each case. The provision of good animal death involves an entanglement of emotions, ethics, animal welfare, expertise and human–animal relations, all of which have to be coordinated and managed in order not to risk a failure (Higgin et al., 2011; Schuurman 2016). For the horse,

such a failure would entail, for example, unnecessary pain and an ultimate loss of trust in humans. For the human charged with the task of carrying out euthanasia it may generate a strong, potentially long-lasting, set of emotional reactions, characterised by feelings of guilt, shame and moral blame (Morris, 2012).

The ways in which the different factors included in the provision of good death are controlled and choreographed (Law, 2010) at the retirement yard, and how they affect the chances of successfully providing the horse with a good death, are central to the empirically-based discussion which follows. In accordance with our primary interest in how death comes to be relationally accommodated, we remain attentive to how the human–horse relationship is managed and spaced, both *prior to* and *during* the moment of physical death. We also, however, extend our analysis to the period which comes *after* the physical death; a period understood by Van Gennep (1997 [1909]) as constituting the second and third phases of a three-phased death ritual (the first phase being the physical death). According to van Gennep, whilst the second phase involves the disposal of the body, the third phase is characterised by acts of remembrance by those close to the deceased. For van Gennep, the significance of the third phase is that it enables the achievement of a full social death. The process of providing a horse with a good death at a retirement yard includes characteristics of these three phases, but with clear differences. This includes, for example, the fact that the social death may begin long before the moment of death (Walter et al., 2012). Recognition of this, as we will show, can prove especially illuminating when it comes to exploring the unfolding of human–horse relationships in the context of aged and unsound equine bodies.

Data and methods

The investigation of horse death discussed in this paper is part of a larger study on contemporary practices of care in the context of keeping horses at livery yards. In the process of gathering information about livery yards in the UK, we became interested in the specialist subset of yards targeted at owners of retired horses. Although the number of horse retirement yards identified was low, they provided a view into the emergent practices aiming to accommodate equine death within the commercial care of leisure horses in contemporary equestrian culture. Due, in part, to their low number most retirement yards are located at a distance from their clients (commonly a minimum of two hours' drive, but for many owners, much further away). This, together with the sporadic nature of visits to the yard by owners (reported by yard managers as occurring on average only once or twice per year), guided us in our decision to focus on the managers of these yards for the purpose of this paper.

The data supporting this paper was primarily collected through semi-structured research interviews with managers from four retirement yards across England, Scotland and Wales, all of which reported having a life time of experience in practicing the care of horses. Exploring a new phenomenon that is only about to become mainstream, we did not try to maximise the number of respondents in order to reach statistical representation. Instead, our aim was to focus on the specific ways in which the yard managers understood, carried out and reflected on the

practices they offered to horse owners. We therefore sought informants who would be interesting for the questions we wanted to ask, following the principle suggested by Despret (2008, 129), to understand our respondents “not as properly representative beings but as good representers”.

The identification of the yards involved an online search for commercial webpages as well as a review of UK-orientated discussion forum postings on equine retirement. The interviews were conducted between December 2014 and July 2016. During the interviews, questions were asked about the daily routine at the yards, horse owners’ visits to the yards, care of the aging animals, communication with owners, decision making, and euthanasia. Given the sensitive nature of some of the research topics (directly addressing the practices and experiences of the yard managers in connection with the death of horses in their care), all interviews were conducted on the understanding that the data would be fully anonymised. Moreover, the semi-structured nature of the interviews was found to be highly supportive in facilitating respondents to iteratively engage with, move away from and return to, sensitive matters of death and euthanasia, in a none-too-intensive manner.

Individual interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 120 minutes, and they were tape-recorded and transcribed. On all but one occasion they were accompanied by a tour of the retirement yard, during which we were granted permission to take photographs. In addition to the yards visited, we conducted a desk-based secondary data analysis of the websites of both the study sites and other UK-based yards purporting to operate as retirement yards. This data was used as background information, including serving initially to inform the design of the interview schedule and as an introduction to the ambiguous identity of the yards as spaces of care and death.

With the four interviews completed, the data seemed sufficiently saturated; a feeling confirmed by both the in-parallel and subsequent data analysis. The interviews were coded according to themes, following the principles of qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013). In this paper, the analysis is organised around the presence and absence of death, care as shared accomplishment, death as an act of care, and acts of remembrance. In accordance with the data anonymization, attribution of the extracts used in this article is reported through the use of codes (RY01–RY04).

Waiting for death – the presence and absence

At a retirement yard, death is simultaneously present and absent throughout the horse’s journey from arrival to the end. Indeed it is reasonable to suggest that equine death at a horse retirement yard to some extent begins when the horse owner first decides to take the horse to the yard. In this sense, in parallel to being a place of dwelling, a retirement yard is also a place of waiting, by their human owners at least, for a horse to die. Although death may not be explicitly present in the thoughts, discussions, plans and practices of those involved, its implicit future presence is acknowledged in the presupposition that a horse once relocated to a retirement yard commonly will not be expected to leave alive.ⁱ This is reflected, for instance, in the way in

which one of the yard managers interviewed encourages people to see the farm ‘at its worst’ (RY02) in the middle of the winter, before deciding to place horses there, just to make sure the horse will not be removed without good reason. The decision about moving a horse to a retirement yard is also not up to the horse owner alone. In addition to helping the owners with their decision, the yard managers have their own ways and policies for accepting new customers:

“I try to find out a bit about them when I speak to them first and she said well it’s got no teeth left and it has to have soaked grass and this, that and the next thing and I said do you think you should be moving that horse at all? And I wasn’t going to, you know, co-operate there because I don’t think it wasn’t fair on the horse at all...” (RY03)

For some horses, as in the above case, there may have been a profound deterioration in its bodily condition before arrival at the yard. For retirement yard managers this can be highly problematic. It makes it very difficult to give a good death to a horse that is already chronically suffering. In a sense, such a horse is already in a phase of ‘waiting for death’. Importantly however, as already eluded to above, we do not understand the waiting as such to be experienced by the horse itself. As Todd (2013, 223) states, the time preceding death, "a phase of dying", can be a stage of which the person herself is not necessarily conscious. Here, the conscious process of waiting is experienced by the humans in the human–horse relationship. Whether a horse is seen to be waiting for death depends on the extent to which the horse is perceived by humans to be able to lead a ‘good life’, without such pain or suffering that cannot be alleviated anymore (Law, 2010). At a retirement yard, instead of the horse owner being the only person attentive to the approaching death of the horse, the burden of waiting is also partly transferred to the yard manager:

“we’ve had scenarios where horses have been moved here for six months and then we put them to sleep, you know, and it’s that period of adjustment was more than likely just time that... to allow the owner to get used to the fact that actually their horse is going to go and it means that they’re not looking out their kitchen windows seeing their horse on a day to day basis knowing that that’s coming.” (RY04)

Caring for an animal that is going to die is an active task for the yard manager who, instead of passively waiting, narrows the type of care given to the horse.

Animal euthanasia is rendered more acceptable under certain conditions, related to the animal itself as well as its surroundings, than under others. Nevertheless, the yard manager has to give reasons for why they think that an individual horse is, or is not yet, ready to die. One such illustration provided, was of a horse whose wellbeing was not regarded as compromised despite it having already reached an advanced stage of blindness; at least not to the extent that it should be euthanised. On the contrary, the yard manager was confident that this horse “[f]unctions perfectly fine, absolutely brilliantly, so you’d never dismiss her and say she’s blind, put her down, you could never do that to Belle” (RY01). Thus, instead of general principles guiding

the decision to euthanise, it depends on many factors such as the age and condition of the individual horse, how fast the condition is going to deteriorate – and other, more circumstantial factors, such as seasonal changes. This is also the case when, for instance, a yard manager decides to give a horse one more summer, a chance to enjoy the easy life at pasture, and then euthanizes it before the hardships of the winter set in. In their logic here yard managers are working with nature to optimize the possibilities for the horse to cope as long as it is not too much of a burden for the animal – as long as it can be acceptable.

Many of the examples from the research interviews, including those already recounted above illustrate the extent to which managing the end of life for a horse at a retirement yard is about ‘tinkering’ (Mol 2008). This includes, observing, assessing, pondering, experimenting, and making numerous little decisions at the level of the individual animal, that eventually lead to the final decision of death. A central method here is reading the horse, by observing its physical appearance and movement, its actions, its expressions and ways of communicating with humans and other horses (Birke, 2008; Schuurman, 2017). In daily interaction with the horse, the yard managers are able to learn to know the animals individually and to interpret their feelings, emotions and experiences. By relating these to general knowledge about animal welfare, they then assess the moment when the horse’s life is no longer good enough to be continued.

This tinkering is, however, not done by the yard manager alone. Although they remain responsible for all primary care, they are variously assisted by part-time staff members, other horses, outside experts such as veterinarians, their own family members – and by the owner of the horse. Their own personal skill and experience, but also the ways in which they choreograph the involvement of these other potential sources of expertise and support across time and space, are in turn central in the way each horse is cared for individually. Taking responsibility for each decision to kill is thus always contextual as it concerns the individual animal. However, the burden of the decision is one which can, in part at least, also be shared. Accordingly, such an act can be understood in terms of a relational ethics of care and as a form of shared accomplishment (Law, 2010; Singleton, 2010).

Care as shared accomplishment

Care, as discussed by Parr (2003, 217) in the context of hospital settings, "is not something that is unproblematically or simply ‘given’ [...] but is better conceptualised as a series of precarious ‘achievements’". Practicing equine care at a retirement yard in the context of equine death can be understood as a form of shared interspecies accomplishment. For the owners who are rarely (or in some cases never) physically present at the yard, the presence of death may remain opaque. Indeed, for the horse owner, one of the possibilities brought about by the advent of retirement yards is the emotional distance that they are able to create between themselves and their dying horse. Reflecting an implicit acknowledgement of the importance of attending to “the separations and distances that are also entailed in care” (Law, 2010, 67), apparent in the accounts of all the yard managers is their work in actively promoting the owners’ awareness

and process of acceptance that keeping a horse at a retirement yard is ultimately about death. In this way, they are able to not only keep the horse owner informed but also involved. It is the shared process of acceptance which creates the shared accomplishment necessary in order to achieve a good death.

In principle, horse owners are able to choose how they relate to their horse's approaching death, beginning from when they first make contact with the retirement manager. Some of them want to engage in the discussion from the outset; others we were told, prefer to avoid the subject entirely, or at least for as long as is physically possible. The retirement yard managers, however, try to keep the owners involved in the process, initially over the years and then ultimately during the final months, weeks and days: "she knows that it's coming near to a decision time, so I keep the conversation open, you know [...] I just let them sort of think about a bit" (RY03).

Although the horse owner is involved in the process of giving the horse a good death, the decision-making is often left in the hands of the yard managers, who also accept that it is their responsibility to be aware of the time for each horse to die. None of the yard managers interviewed expect, or condone, the horse owners making the decision on euthanasia by themselves. It remains a shared accomplishment, but one whereby in practice, the role of the owner in the shared accomplishment often remains at the periphery. In order to propagate an acceptance by owners that retirement yards co-exist as spaces of death, the managers attend to the dual identity of their yards as spaces of death and care in multiple ways. This begins with how they advertise their services online, and subsequently extends to how they communicate private updates to a distant owner regarding the condition of the horse placed in their care. In some cases the owners are able to follow the situation so closely that the need for euthanasia is arrived at by way of incremental and mutual consent.

"I found that with the horses that we've had to put to sleep over the years it's become more of a mutual thing. I've often kind of raised the subject and then the owner's kind of thought about it and the owner's then come over and then brought up the subject again rather than being pushed by me to kind of go... making it a decision here, you know." (RY04)

There are, however, often challenges and tensions within the private communication between the yard managers and horse owners regarding the control of a good death.

In attending to their responsibility for deciding upon the right time to die, the yard manager commonly does so in an iterative fashion. Before becoming final, the decision calls for a period of review and consideration of the evidence accumulated through the yard manager's intimate embodied knowledge of the horse. As illustration, in one case a yard manager gave the example of why the time had not yet come to euthanise the horse in question, despite its bodily appearance: "[the] horse is one of our oldest ones and he looks really skinny, but he's as active as anything, so I'm not ready to let him go" (RY01). The task of the horse owner, in contrast, is very different. As they have the legal responsibility but no longer the first-hand knowledge of the horse's wellbeing on a daily basis, they are expected to accept, to trust, and to wait. In

doing so they are required to relinquish a considerable amount of control. By taking the horse to the retirement yard, they have handed over the responsibility of a good death to the yard manager. Therefore, as long as it remains at the retirement yard, the owner can only take back responsibility for the control of a good death, without challenge, once the horse is already deceased.

As the moment of death finally approaches, the communication between the yard manager and the owner increasingly centres around the practice of euthanasia. In this phase, the status of the horse owner as an outsider becomes more evident.

“Some people want to talk about it, some people don’t. Some people want to know exactly how we do it, what we do, at the end, and some people don’t really, well they just want to make sure that, the biggest thing for people is shooting I think. [...] But the biggest thing is, ‘you’re not going to shoot my horse if it’s put down, they will have the injection won’t they?’ That’s the kind of thing they want to know.” (RY01)

In the practices of euthanasia, yard managers rely on the personal experience that they have gained over the years of having horses euthanised with different methods, by a veterinarian or other expert. For them, performing a good death at the point of euthanasia is crucially a learning process: by learning how horses can be “killed well” one learns how to provide a good death and, equally, how it may perhaps also not be achieved (Higgin et al., 2011; see also Law, 2010, Singleton, 2010). Unwanted occurrences, as documented in the following extract, have the possibility to ruin the efforts of providing the horse with a good death:

“the shooting is so quick... and so absolutely accurate and as I say we’ve got it down to such a fine art. [...] it just drops and [...] there’s absolutely no stress. With the injection, you know how with anaesthetics the horses can react differently to the right dose of anaesthetic, if you don’t get the weight absolutely spot on and you do hear some horror stories about horses stuck on fence posts because...” (RY03)

The examples above illustrate the role of personal experience in the yard managers’ preferences for the best method for carrying out equine euthanasia. There is, thus, no consensus among the interviewees as to the way in which a good death for a horse can be achieved in practice.

Death as an act of care – and caring

Despite the above mentioned issues of control, the fact that the yard manager, as primary carer, usually determines the appropriate time for each animal to be euthanised, can be a considerable benefit for the horse owner. As well as having to face the grief of losing an equine companion, many horse owners have no first-hand experience of equine euthanasia. However, what it does then require of them is a willingness to place their trust in the yard manager’s assessment of the horse’s condition and complicity with the decision:

“It’s very hard [for the owners] when it comes to also making that decision to put them to sleep, some people really cannot deal with it and they don’t see the horse on a daily basis, and I do, so sometimes we have to twist someone’s arm and say no it’s the time.” (RY01)

As in the excerpt above, trusting the yard manager to make the right decision can be challenging for the owners. In some cases, an owner may want to rush the decision and, in others, resist to acknowledge the need for taking the decision at all. In determining the appropriate time for euthanasia the yard manager draws on their wider experience and expertise, but also their intimate, iteratively co-constructed knowledge of the individual animal in question:

“you’ll look at one horse and think, gosh that horse is thin, but as long as they’ve got a bright eye and they’re reacting with the rest of the herd, and they’re able to move and get up, get down and eat and they’ve got an appetite, then I’m fine with that and I do warn the owners, they’re very thin, but they’re happy.” (RY01)

Before the final decision is made, many yard managers emphasise the support given by a trusted veterinarian, an expert of scientific knowledge with often long personal experience. In this context, both the veterinary and yard manager’s expertise can be understood as situated rather than as universal – referring not only to spatiality, the yard, but also to the relationality of the human–animal interaction (Schuurman and Franklin, 2015). In situations encountered in animal health care as well as in euthanasia, universal scientific knowledge is supported by contextual interpretations of individual animals. This includes shared understandings on how the welfare of an individual horse might be interpreted. Apart from the yard manager and the veterinarian, any additional yard staff are also expected to take part in interpreting the welfare of the horses, in order to determine their condition and ability to go on living.

“everybody that works here, knows that if, when they’re mucking out, if there’s anything different they tell me, if the horse has done less droppings or more, or if their bed is disturbed then they’ll come and tell us because it’s the start of something, so I have to know.” (RY01)

Practicing interspecies care inevitably also leads to feelings of attachment in some cases. Retirement yards are loaded with liminality and, in conformity with ideas of positive and active aging and befitting ends, structured by practices aimed at managing such liminality. It is through this practising of everyday duties of horse care and their characteristic as forms of shared accomplishment, that retirement yards retain the potential to propagate intimate and meaningful horse–human relationships. At the moment of death, these relationships carry a special meaning, which is illustrated in the efforts by the yard managers at providing a good death for the horse.

The task of the yard manager in taking care of the dying horse, is in the final transition to death, when she becomes what Todd (2013) describes as a ‘death escort’. Central to the idea of death escorts, but also to performing well the duty of care bestowed to retirement yard managers, is the need for 'being there' for the dying horse. Being there, as Todd (2013, 219) explains is "important to the staff in several ways, not just at the moment of death, but in the numerous

transitions from living to death". *Being* with the dying, as much as doing anything specific for them, is central to good care; also significant here though is the notion of being *there* (Utriainen, 2010, 440). At a retirement yard, the yard manager's role is especially pronounced because of the horse owner's status as an outsider – the owner, having distanced themselves from the last phases of their horse's life, is rarely in the position to support the dying animal when the time really comes. As Terhi Utriainen (2010, 440) writes, "[c]aring (for the dying) can only be done properly on the very spot where the patient is; it cannot be accomplished by long-distance".

"If the horse is put down, [...] probably 90% [of owners] will stay away and 10% will want to come and be there. So. But that's worse. And if a horse is bad, colicing, in pain and they want to come I'll say, I don't think you should come because I don't want them to see their horse like that, it's best if they don't come. It's difficult." (RY01)

According to Todd (2013, 219), "one aspect of the role of death escorts is to communicate death to others. The role involves being a witness to and a messenger of death". In the context of interspecies care, it is important to consider not only the efforts made by humans to communicate death to other humans, but to other non-humans as well. This brings us back once again to the significance of 'being *there*'. In the pursuit of a good horse death, a horse itself sometimes acts as a death escort to another horse. Where it is felt to be supportive of the achievement of a good death – both for the one about to die and for the one left behind – horses are not separated from their equine companions. As explained by one of the yard managers.

"If something's ill, we'll have to bring its best friend in, and then if they die then we'll leave that horse with them, to see. [...] we let the other horse see him go down and then put him back to his friends. And he took a while, they'll look and they'll call, it's not very nice." (RY01)

Care and escorting the horse to death thus become a shared interspecies accomplishment between the yard owner, staff, horse owner, and other horses. For all of them, humans as well as equines, there is also the emotionality of caring and loss to be felt at the moment of death. For the yard managers, there is an effort at controlling the encounter with death as an emotional experience. This act of control extends, to some extent, to the associated encounter between the yard manager and the horse owner.

"normally I will sort of encourage people to say their goodbyes and then let us deal with it [...] at the time because then they remember it on it's feet and ... I mean it is so quick and the horse doesn't know a thing [...] but, you know, it wouldn't ... it shouldn't upset them but at the same time I think if you're not used to these things, you know, we have become hardened to it on the farms I suppose." (RY03)

The excerpt above illustrates the way in which experiences of encountering and managing death affect the yard managers to the extent that it almost becomes routine for them. The interviewee notes, "we have become hardened to it on the farms I suppose", indicating a process where the encounter with death has become an iterative event that detaches them from

the emotional experience. The continuous presence of death suggests that the yard managers become “hardened”, meaning that they do not experience the death of the horses as emotionally as the owners perhaps do. This transformation is interpreted spatially, as an event that takes place “on the farms”, indicating that the farm itself as a place does not support the feeling and display of emotions in connection with animal death. Related to this, there is a performance of professionalism, implying that the yard manager as a professional working with animals is emotionally distanced from animal death. Moreover, the animals in question are not owned by these professionals but entrusted in their care, especially in regard to their approaching death. The question of emotions is, however, more complex than perhaps the first quote suggests:

“I’m often a bit too emotional to (laughs) do it [phone the owner] straight away, so I kind of encourage them to kind of go I’ll phone you in the evening once it’s been done to let you know how ... it will give the rest of the afternoon to just (laughs) give me a bit of a breather, you know. The last thing they want is the stable manager phoning them with floods of tears kind of going ‘it’s done! It’s done!’ (laughs).” (RY04)

This quote reveals a process of emotion management. Instead of communicating it to the owner of the horse in question, the yard manager keeps her own reaction to herself. Similar to veterinarians and veterinary technicians (Sanders, 2010) and shelter workers (Arluke and Sanders, 1996, 86–100), retirement yard managers have to cope with the burden of having to euthanise animals on a regular basis. This may require an on-going need for emotion management, even when the yard manager has considerable experience of being a death escort, and even when the euthanasia is considered acceptable and timely, with the support of a diagnosis by a veterinarian, in the sense of an act of care (Srinivasan, 2013).

Apparently, yard managers also become attached to certain individuals. This can sometimes further complicate the effort at providing a timely death. In an example recollected by one yard manager, the owner herself died before her pony, who then became a ‘mascot’ at the yard:

“[Frankie] was 40, he was actually in the [television news] on his birthday, and, he was a character. The sons, once the mother died, there was no money left to pay for him, so they said, can you have him put down. We just couldn’t do it, he didn’t cost much to keep, so he, he was a, everybody loved [Frankie]. So we kept him. But that’s the only one, I can’t, it’s just impossible. It’s very, very hard.” (RY01)

In euthanasia, the two meanings of care are both present: caring for and caring about. According to Milligan and Wiles (2010, 741), caring *for* refers to practices, “the performance of proximate and personal care tasks” whereas caring *about* is about the social and emotional aspects of care, including the “relational and affective elements of being caring”. They point out that proximity and distance do not necessarily imply either caring for or caring about. Instead, a care-giver living in another city, country or continent may still be emotionally proximate. Their notion that “even physically distant care-givers can be affectively or socially proximate, and that physically distant care relationships can be literally embodied” (Milligan

and Wiles, 2010, 749) suggests that the owner of a horse placed at a retirement yard is by no means necessarily indifferent to their horse's fate. It is only that for an outsider, in this case the horse owner, following the process leading to death may be difficult. Accordingly, emotions felt regarding the experience of death of an equine companion may also therefore be more challenging to control.

Remembrance – caring for the owner

The responsibility of the retirement yard managers does not end with the physical death of the horse. Once the act of euthanasia has been completed, they then have to take care of the body. With horses at retirement yards, there is no ritual associated to the actual disposal of the body (such as a funeral), largely due to the absence of the owner. With UK legislation nowadays banning the burial of horse carcasses on agricultural land, their remains are often cremated. Reported as being common practice in the context of retirement yards, is for the owners to pay an additional fee to the crematoriums such that the body will be cremated individually and the ashes returned to the yard for the owners to collect. The commodification of equine bodies in such a way, combined often with awaiting the collection of the ashes by the owners (which may take weeks or many months), creates a situation that some yard managers find difficult to respond to: "I've got two horses sat in my front room who have been cremated, that are in boxes, waiting for owners to come and scatter their ashes" (RY02).

With no funerals to attend to, owners sometimes engage in other forms of rituals, whereby they acquire parts of the horse's body or other material items close to the body: "some want a lock of tail, some don't, some want mane, some want shoes. One wanted its foot as an ashtray, that was a very long time ago" (RY02). For the yard managers, fulfilling such wishes is considered to be part of the whole service provided at a retirement yard in accordance with the accommodation of a good social death. As in the following case, however, the success of such services in supporting and sustaining a good death are once again often reliant on the absence of the owner:

"If the body has to stay overnight we put it into a tractor bucket and it sits there because obviously you don't want anything to get at it. [...] One owner, after the horse had been put down, wanted his shoes off. That was pretty, that wasn't the easiest. [...] there is no dignity, when the body is dead, there really is no dignity, you know it's going to get winched into the back of the trailer wherever it is to be fair." (RY02)

It is in such practices of remembrance that the owner's distance from their horse and the conditions of death sometimes become strikingly apparent. Even if some practices feel foreign to the yard manager, for the horse owner they represent a regaining of control; if not control of a good death, at least control of a good remembrance.

"we had one horse that died with colic in the night, that was the only time he must have coliced in the middle of night, when we finished off he was fine but we

found him dead in the morning, and he looked like he'd had a rough night poor thing. And she wanted a photograph of him. So we had to groom this, we felt like undertakers, we had to brush this dead horse and make him not look as if, he'd been sweating, it was horrible. So I said to [Betty], I'm very sorry [Betty], we're going to have to be like undertakers now and make him look nice." (RY01)

In death, the horse–human relationship has a potential to continue to dwell at the yard through remembrance. In many cases the retirement yards co-exist as cemeteries or burial sites. As well as substantiating the simultaneous presence and absence of death at retirement yards, in accepting their role as spaces of remembrance yard managers open retirement yards up to their human clients as spaces in which grieving for a companion animal becomes legitimised in perpetuity. Moreover, they offer a safe, private, space in which to do so:

"we have some people come back even though the horse isn't here, just to say hello. Or just to have a look at the tree where the horse's plaques are. We put them in the field where they were grazing and we put the plaques on the tree." (RY01)

Grieving for companion animals remains, as yet, something that may not be easy in more public spaces (Kean, 2013), including other 'animal spaces' such as traditional livery yards or veterinary clinics (Schuurman, 2016).

The social death of the horse, the actual ending to the human–horse relationship in the form of mourning, is epitomised at the retirement yards through other material practices. These include the scattering of ashes and planting of trees, thus celebrating the shared relationship that not only includes the horse and its owner but also the yard management, their family and any staff. For the owners who participate in these practices, the yards become important as intimate spaces that may be deeply connected to memories, thoughts and imaginations (Shortt, 2015). The private nature of the retirement yard also helps give acknowledgement to the identity of the horse in remembrance, in the specific way chosen by the owner. While daily life goes on with the equine residents and the staff, the material presence of death is evident in the selective planting of trees and other physical reminders of horses that were euthanized at the site.

"We've got quite a few plaques here, and trees planted. Beautiful oak bench we've got out the front where an owner had three horses with us, and had a lovely bench made. They didn't have them cremated but they had a bench!" (RY01)

The materiality of the remembrance finally also has the potential to render the death of the horse a truly shared interspecies accomplishment. One in which each participant contributes what they are expected, and able to, and which gives a chance for everyday challenges to be replaced with mourning and memories.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have explored the accommodation of equine death in a human–horse relationship, in the context of horse retirement yards in the UK. We asked, whether it is possible to understand companion animal death as an act of interspecies care, a part of good care for an animal, and how this might be accomplished at a horse retirement yard? According to our analysis, horse retirement yards can be understood as spaces measurable through the success – and dedication – with which the culturally defined good death for companion animals is actively pursued. Moreover, they are presented as constituting spaces of shared interspecies accomplishment in which yard managers, staff, and horses all participate in the individual provision of care. Our study illuminates the ways in which the dual identities of retirement yards as spaces of interspecies care and as spaces of death become intertwined. This begins in the everyday work that involves negotiating the ways in which death is continuously present – even in its absence from daily life (Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010). An important part of that work is a process of tinkering (Mol, 2008), assessing and observing the condition of each horse individually, as an on-going form of daily practice, in order to determine the right moment for euthanasia. Responsibility for identifying when the right time to euthanise is approaching, or has already arrived, although requiring the consent of the horse owner, rests primarily with the yard manager. Critical in informing this decision-making process is the managers’ intimate knowledge of each individual horse, supported by their wider experience and expertise, as well as by veterinary expertise. For the horse, the final moments of a good death at a retirement yard (where it can be achieved) are characterised by the continuous provision of interspecies care and caring, in the form of the presence of both human and equine escorts. Commonly, however, the presence of humans does not itself extend to the owner. Rather, the owner both makes up for their absence from the death, and finds consolation in the event of death, through the subsequent material practices of remembrance that serve to complete the social death (van Genep 1997 [1909]).

Horse retirement yards can be understood as a commercial response to the needs of contemporary equestrian culture – as well as the culture of keeping companion animals more generally. That is, they extend the promotion of individual wellbeing to horses to the final part of their lives, including the moment of death. They represent a shift from the anonymous, visit-based service provided by veterinarians, constituted as it is on the universal knowledge of veterinary science. At retirement yards, the individual identity of the horse remains present throughout – all the way to the ashes. The difference can be understood as a way of authenticating the life of the horse *in the space where the horse lives*, through good care and good death, underpinned by the expertise and intimate knowledge of the yard manager.

The discussion in this paper illustrates the centrality of trust and vulnerability between horse, owner and carer, in the giving and receiving of interspecies care. They take us beyond formulations of distant owners as "either caring or careless, to a more subtle and variegated picture" (Conradson 2003). They also help us understand how animal death is managed and responded to by those charged with formal responsibility for the care of elderly or sick animals. In this context, death can be seen as signifying the end of life, but not the end of caring (Todd, 2013). It is very much an ongoing process of shared accomplishment and, in the case of equine death at a horse retirement yard, necessarily includes the choreography of human–animal

interaction (Law, 2010; Higgin et al., 2011). As a result, the practice of caring for – and about – the horse, from its arrival at the yard to the moment of death and beyond, becomes an extended process of social death in which the human–horse relationship is brought to an end in a controlled way.

Finally, we suggest that in the human–horse relationship, the concept of shared accomplishment may apply beyond the space of horse retirement yards, encompassing also the multiplicity of other individuals and institutions involved in shaping, attending to and regulating the nature of this interspecies relationship over time. For, in accordance with the emergent nature of human-animal relationships, the achievement of shared accomplishment and interspecies care are both shaped by, and themselves shape, the changes that take place over the life span of individual horses (e.g. birth, training, riding, retirement, death). Another direction for possible future research is the ways in which veterinarians construct a good death in terms of different practices of euthanasia. This includes exploring how this understanding has been constructed initially through professional education and subsequently through personal experience, in the context of such intimate and ultimate interactions with these non-human others.

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ⁱ The horses living at the yard are generally not supposed to return to their previous life as a ridden horse. They may have chronic conditions that are not expected to be cured, and the understanding between the owner of the horse and the yard management is that the horse will eventually die in the care of the retirement yard. For the vast majority of the horses, the move to a retirement yard represents a ‘final destination’.