

Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating, cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi: Jean Halley is a professor of sociology who teaches at the College of Staten Island and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She earned her doctorate in sociology at the Graduate Center, and her master's degree in theology at Harvard University. She is author of several books including her latest, *Horse Crazy: Girls and the Lives of Horses*. Welcome back to the Thought Project Professor Halley.

Jean Halley: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Tanya Domi: So after one becomes an established scholar and academic, it seems that this new book, *Horse Crazy*, could be part memoir. And you know, one of the truisms of the Academy is that every book is partially memoir. But this one seems much more so given your intro, talking about how your father bought your first pony for you.

Jean Halley: That's right.

Tanya Domi: Can you talk about why horses? Why this story? How did your relationship with ponies and horses shape you?

Jean Halley: It's a great question. As one of my interviewees said, I feel the same way and that is, I was born and I looked around for the horses. I've always been horse crazy and it's a passion. It's more than I love the mountains or I have good friends that I love. It's an obsession that I had, particularly as a child and I grew up, I was a kind of an isolated kid. I didn't spend a lot of time with other kids. I spent time with my horse and so I wasn't that aware of cultural phenomena like the demand for girls to be thin or horse craziness as a larger thing. I grew up, I moved to New York city. I had a daughter and lo and behold at a public school in Harlem, she became horse crazy, not a horse in sight. And so I began to think, what is this?

Jean Halley: It's something that's bigger than just my own personal experience. And I began to look around and kind of notice that it's a big thing, you know? I mean people who don't know about it, it's not there at all. But for those of us with a horse crazy family member are who were ourselves horse crazy, it's quite something and powerful. And there's a whole sort of apparatus of consumer culture that's in place to feed it. I'm a sociologist, I want it to look at the sociological literature on this and there was none, there was nothing. And so I decided I would make this my project.

Tanya Domi: So this is a real contribution to the Academy via women's relationships with probably the largest domestic animal there is.

Jean Halley: That's probably right. Yeah.

Tanya Domi: Of course, this is an academic book as well, and you acknowledged the graduate students that worked with you. But I was really taken with the idea that you approached this book through the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault.

Tanya Domi: Then I had never thought of Foucault and relationship divorces either. I'll be really honest. I think of him more or less about sexuality and power and relationship of those who are minorities to power, et cetera. But Foucault does loom large on the questions of normalization and how this social process is reinforced through many institutions that exist in our society as well as within one's family. There is no question the pressures on girls by those institutions are very, I would say very, very powerful. So it makes sense that you would select Foucault. But let's talk about that some into more detail.

Jean Halley: Well, Foucault is someone I've referred to and used in my work from the very beginning I really admire and he's, he's given me a theoretical frame, time and again. It was sort of natural to go to Foucault, but I think Foucault's a good fit for this topic because Foucault's interested in how we make choices in life and how we become who we become and the ways in which institutions and structures of power shape our experiences, even of our most intimate insides.

Jean Halley: And I think horse crazy girl-ness is a challenge I think as well as these girls feel the pressure as you mentioned, to become normative girls and to be, for example, heteronormative.

Tanya Domi: Exactly.

Jean Halley: And yet they also offer a challenge to that. I think there's a way in which horse crazy girl illness is in part most fundamentally a challenge to heteronormativity because...

Tanya Domi: And resistance. A resistance, right?

Jean Halley: Absolutely. Yeah. So that was one piece that I was really interested in: how a lot of the women that I interviewed, who identified as horse crazy girls when they were young, talked about their own mis-fitness in the cultures in which they grew up. A lot of the women I spoke with had disability and there were probably more LGBTQ identified women among the group that I spoke with than there are in the general population.

Tanya Domi: That's interesting too.

Jean Halley: Yeah, absolutely. There's a way in which girls become horse crazy instead of boy crazy. And that's not true of all horse crazy girls, but I think it's a general tendency. It's probably true of the vast majority that they are passionate about, they obsess about, they write about, they think about, they dream about, they fantasize about horses, not boys. And in a culture that demands heterosexuality of everyone, but I think in some ways especially of girls, this was a challenge to that demand and a challenge, I think, that was both a place to become for girls where they became the person that they were more than they would have when they're acquiescing to sort of the normative culture, but also a place where girls gained real power.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, I mean you think about just juxtaposing a young woman standing next to this huge animal and some of them that I have seen are just massive. And there's this special relationship that I really never appreciated as a younger woman, which is really interesting to me because I was the furthest thing from being at heteronormative.

Tanya Domi: I resisted all of that, but I wanted to do that through sports. I was denied that. Over and over, I was told you're not supposed to play basketball, you're not supposed to do that because girls don't do that. But I guess there's more freedom for girls in relationship to a horse.

Jean Halley: And in fact, I mean it's interesting you bring up sports. I only did 25 interviews, so it was limited and qualitative. But I interviewed women who are in age 19 to actually a woman in her nineties who's since passed away. And the women of the older generation, who I defined as older, sixties, seventies, eighties, that group talked about horseback riding more than the others in terms of sports. And a lot of them had been athletic women, you know, in that generation had very few avenues for their athleticism. So horseback riding was in part that.

Jean Halley: But it's interesting because all the way from 19 to a woman in her nineties, everyone talked about their passion and their love and their intimacy with horses. So it's an interesting example of sport where a big piece of the sport is having an incredibly close love relationship with another creature. And that's, I think in some ways, traditionally gender female, right? We raise girls to be relationship focused.

Tanya Domi: And to be in relationships.

Jean Halley: Exactly. And to care, right? To be carers for others. And so I think it has been an avenue for a long time that girls to be something in the world, and today I know it's true too through my daughter, that a lot of girls will identify as animal lovers. So that's something where they can be sort of empowered in the world and have an identity but yet still fit into this normative girl thing of being carers. And horseback riding offers that.

Jean Halley: So I think there's a way in which it reinforces that kind of normative idea. I heard a lot from my interviewees, for example, that, well they would say women were instinctually good with horses. So this kind of reference to women's capacity for caregiving through our embodiment, which true or not, it's still a very normative idea. Yet here they were, both taking up sort of normal girl-ness through their care giving, but also taking on a kind of interaction and a relationship and a sport that's incredibly dangerous. Sports scholars write about horseback riding; some argue it's the most dangerous sport in terms of the level of injury that people have when they ride. And also the how often injuries happen. And so you might argue football is more dangerous, but in any rate, horseback riding is up there at the top of the list. And yet it's a sport dominated by girls and women.

Tanya Domi: Except in horse racing.

Jean Halley: Except in horse racing. Right. That's true. But women are beginning to enter even into that.

Tanya Domi: But in show jumping, you do see a lot of women riders and the Olympics. It's all these Royal children, Royal family children, that become horse jumping riders. You watch them in the Olympics. It's appropriate. It's accepted, it's affirmed. Right. And of course my first memory of a girl on a horse was watching actress Elizabeth Taylor in National Velvet with Mickey Rooney, the iconic 1944 motion picture. Elizabeth Taylor, she injured her back, didn't she, in filming National Velvet. But here it is on the silver screen. This is 1944 in the middle of World War II and this beautiful young woman is riding this beautiful horse in her palace. Mickey Rooney, the best boy friend of a girl there was, maybe in Hollywood at that time, like, "Gee whiz, you're so great." That's an iconic moment in US culture, in Hollywood. And it's enshrined to eternity, right?

Jean Halley: Yes, absolutely.

Tanya Domi: So how could that be bad? And so how could that be negative? And I never really thought about it before. The way you've written this book, I think you really bring out these issues about women in their appropriate place in the world and in society. And I was also taken with the idea and you write about how you yourself felt safer being with a horse, having a relationship with a horse. And you mentioned that so many young women maybe have been marginalized or abused, have been transformed by a relationship with a horse.

Jean Halley: Yeah, it was really interesting to me how often my interviewees talked about feeling safest with horses, that they use the same language I would use. And I, myself, came from an abusive family, so I wasn't in my most intimate place, I wasn't safe. So it made sense for me, that this would be the place where I had this very close relationship with my horse. And of course on my horse, nobody could touch me. I was a good rider, I could go fast, I could go far. I was safer in a

certain sense. So I was really surprised to find that that's actually what most of the women I spoke with said that they felt safer. And not everyone has an abuse history, but this was a place where they became stronger and they became more. And like my experience, there's a way in which girls or riders in general, become one with the horse that they ride. And that oneness I think is one of the elements of safety because you then become another, almost like another being. You're a girl horse, not a girl, not a horse.

Jean Halley: And that being is fast and is powerful and is held up by the love that girls share with their horses. It was physically faster and physically more powerful, but also about the power we gained through intimacy.

Tanya Domi: Very interesting. So what about boys, boys and horses? You talk about that seems to be maybe emerging now.

Jean Halley: Yeah, I think so. I mean it has a long history of course, horses before industrialization was associated...

Tanya Domi: In a West, the Cowboys.

Jean Halley: Yeah, absolutely. And in fact, it was odd. Will Smith is a very famous Western novelist from the early part of the 20th century and he writes about men and men's world. McMurtry. All these cowboy writers write about horseback riding as a male phenomenon. And it really was dominated by men up until the second wave of industrialization.

Jean Halley: And then as horses began to be used less and less for transportation, for industry, for all the things they were the power, they became animals for leisure. And that's where women and girls increasingly stepped in and took over that space. But, of course, well into the probably sixties and seventies they were still understood in some ways as both male and female.

Tanya Domi: It's true. It's been true. Now, I think because of my military background, I think of horses in the cavalry. During the Civil War, even in World War I, horses were used quite a bit in the cavalry. Some of the famous wars in the Balkans, the Austrian Prussian Empire, all the officers had their own horse. And so I think of it in a different way given my own history in the military.

Jean Halley: Yeah, that makes sense. It's interesting to think about how horses even came to this continent as a part of military. They had disappeared, you know, 10,000 years ago from the Americas and they came back as the power and the transportation for colonizers. So that's how we have domestic horses on the continent is through that relationship.

Tanya Domi: I see. That's very interesting.

Jean Halley: And the Spanish were, you know, the Spanish King and Queen demanded that the people they sent across the ocean, the men that they sent only rode, in fact, I think it was like a legal code, that you could only ride a male horse and not a male horse that was gilded. It had to be intact, a stallion.

Tanya Domi: Interesting.

Jean Halley: Yeah. And you can imagine if you've been around stallions, they have a tendency to be a little wilder.

Tanya Domi: They are.

Jean Halley: So to bring over dozens of horses that were all in tack stallions was a pretty difficult thing to do. I think the first ship came with only two mares, and so it meant that essentially the horses couldn't really reproduce. That policy had to change eventually. It was male. And the literature in the US, the children's literature, reflects that as well. So that from the 40s, and 50s, and 60s we had children's literature like the Black Stallion, which was an all male world. The humans were male, the horses were male, all male.

Tanya Domi: The first book that you talk about is My First Pony. There's a book about ponies and it's diminutive. It's a smaller animal and that lots of girls would get a pony; the first horse like animal they would get. And you got a pony?

Jean Halley: I did. I got a pony. My father bought me a Shetland and they're tiny but extremely smart and very feisty. So I really learned. My pony taught me how to ride. I didn't really take lessons. I just got out there and learned that way.

Jean Halley: Ponies, it's a very popular consumer cultural phenomena too. I bet a lot of your listeners have heard of My Little Pony, which is this whole cultural phenomena, right? Lots and lots of pony characters who come in colors like pink and purple and are very interested in being pretty.

Tanya Domi: It's very feminized, right? Unicorns now, you see more unicorns and that are little: they're not big. I think it's really interesting. I don't have children so I don't think about those things. When I was looking at your reading your book and thinking about it, I was like, "Oh, there is a lot of images out there and it's just part of the background of the culture.

Jean Halley: Absolutely. When you live in a consumer capitalist society, of course capitalism is going to take advantage of our passions. So it became something which could make [crosstalk 00:17:39] a lot of money.

Tanya Domi: It's been appropriated, made a lot of money off of it. Speaking of which, this is not as sweet, but I mentioned to you that I know a group of women in Athens,

Ohio, the Last Chance Corral and they save nurse mare foals there. And one of the things that I have learned about their work is that a lot of the nurse mare foals are dumped and they're starved to death or they're killed and they actually use the fur from nurse mare foals for high end stuffed animals. That kind of thing is just really horrific.

Tanya Domi: I mentioned this to you because you do mention in the book about harming the animals, harming these horses, these beautiful animals and what's happened to them. And what I notice there's this gendered approach to rescue and it's really dominated by women. And it's something I've noticed anecdotally. There's no like social science research out there that I've seen that most rescues are run by women, but it's something that it just reappears over and over. People are driving dogs from New Jersey to like Montreal. There's these caravans of women that organized themselves to save animals. So this seems to be like an extension of the idea of this intimate relationship with another animal. What are your thoughts on that?

Jean Halley: No, absolutely. I think it's such an interesting thing that's happening. And what I found with the women that I interviewed was that their relationships, I interviewed pleasure writers so I wasn't as interested in the sporting or the elite world, which is very expensive.

Tanya Domi: Sure.

Jean Halley: Although I think there are links to the horse craziness in that world too, with women there. But the women I spoke with were largely having non-instrumental relationships with their horses. And a lot of the relationships had a lot to do with relationship: caring and loving and so on. As girls, most of them couldn't afford a horse of their own. So they got access to horses through things like hanging out at a stable and helping out and then eventually becoming connected with one stable horse and so on. What happened with the women when they grew up, 21 of my 25 interviewees basically were still post crazy and spent a lot of time with horses and they did it the same kind of way, like volunteering at a stable. These women were doing things like helping out with rescue. They told me again and again, absolutely. They reflected what you said and that is it's as the girlhood horse craziness thing, it's all female world, or almost totally, not completely, all female world.

Jean Halley: One woman was at a stable with 100 human volunteers. It was all volunteer work and they were working with rescue. All of them, every single one was a woman, but not only that, they were over the age of 60.

Tanya Domi: This is true because the owner of First Chance Corral has done it with her sister and both of these women are in their sixties.

Tanya Domi: My friend Pat Raya, who writes a blog called Heart Horse Welfare News, but she tells me that that's the fastest growing group of horse owners is women in their sixties and up. Which is just amazing. This phenomena that was empowering and is empowering for girls, it continues. That women throughout their lifetime find something really important in their relationship with horses.

Tanya Domi: Well, I find this absolutely fascinating. I congratulate you. I think it's really a great contribution.

Jean Halley: Thank you very much.

Tanya Domi: And it says something not only about women, but about the human experience and being connected. I think it's a wonderful image to think of a disempowered girl feeling empowered by this huge animal that clearly have a connection to human beings to.

Jean Halley: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to our guest, professor Jean Holly, of the College of Staten Island and the Graduate Center CUNY. The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.