


8-24-2015

## Merging: Contemplations on Farming & Ecology from Horseback by Soren Bondrup-Nielsen

Anna Banks  
*University of Idaho*

 Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Nature and Society Relations Commons](#), and the [Place and Environment Commons](#)  
Follow this and additional works at / Suivez-nous ainsi que d'autres travaux et œuvres:  
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose>

### Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Banks, Anna. "Merging: Contemplations on Farming & Ecology from Horseback by Soren Bondrup-Nielsen." *The Goose*, vol. 14, no. 1, article 36, 2015,  
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol14/iss1/36>.

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).  
Cet article vous est accessible gratuitement et en libre accès grâce à Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Le texte a été approuvé pour faire partie intégrante de la revue The Goose par un rédacteur autorisé de Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Pour de plus amples informations, contactez [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

## **Becoming With: Riding into the Contact Zone**

***Merging: Contemplations on Farming & Ecology from Horseback* by SOREN BONDRUP-NIELSEN**

Gasperau, 2014 \$28.95

Reviewed by **ANNA BANKS**

In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Donna Haraway introduces the concept of “becoming with” in which humans and animals blend into a form of hybrid being, sharing each other’s subject world and experiences. Thus, this process creates “a story of co-habitation, co-evolution, and embodied cross-species sociality” (Haraway 4). Soren Bondrup-Nielsen provides a detailed account of a “becoming with” in his memoir *Merging: Contemplations on Farming and Ecology from Horseback*. Toward the end of the book is a paragraph that summarizes his perspective:

Horses allow us to get closer to nature, to connect with and even become part of nature. Mounted on a horse, one is no longer a human to be feared. . . . [Horses] can teach us how to live in the now, but you need to allow them to do so. If you don’t fight them they will not fight you, and if you are lucky they will allow you to become them, to merge with them. This is the essence of riding; *becoming one with the horse, becoming one with the landscape itself.* (205, emphasis added)

Like all good memoirs, Bondrup-Nielsen’s book is both highly personal and the bearer of a universal message. *Merging*

is about how our perceptual boundaries shift as we become more attuned to the workings of the more-than-human world, merging with our environment and with the non-human animals we share it with. It is also a strong example of place-based writing, epitomizing the three qualities Barry Lopez cites as indicative of evocative literature of place: writing that pays intimate attention to details, that depicts a storied relationship to a particular place, and that reveals a sense of living in ethical unity with a place. In this way, writes Lopez, “the place knows you’re there” (n. pag.). Such is clearly the case with Bondrup-Nielsen and his relationship to Nova Scotia’s Annapolis Valley.

The narrative of this book is framed as a daylong horseback ride, beginning early on a spring morning and ending at dusk on a late fall evening. The story is engaging in itself, but what makes *Merging* especially interesting is that Bondrup-Nielsen has a co-author—his horse Bucephalus, who also has an intimate relationship with this place. Bucephalus is not anthropomorphized in that Bondrup-Nielsen does not put human words into his mouth, but he does give voice to the subjective realities of his horse by crafting stories where the individual animal remains an interactive presence:

“C’mon Bucephalus,” I call out. . . . He walks very slowly. I urge him on, but he stops again. “What’s wrong?” I ask, but of course I don’t expect a verbal answer. But he is answering; he wants to go back home. (157)

Bondrup-Nielsen recognizes that his perspective, on Bucephalus’ back, allows him to sense the world around him in ways that he, as a human walking through the same environment, would not. Throughout

the book, the author describes scenes and experiences such as the following:

I follow [Bucephalus'] gaze and see a fox on a beach far off in the distance . . . when I squint I can see pups jumping around her. There are many times when Bucephalus has alerted me to interesting sights such as this. (62)

The trail is hidden in the tall grass. It is only because I know it is there that we can follow it. No doubt Bucephalus can feel it due to the reduced drag on his legs. (105)

Suddenly Bucephalus slides to a stop ... I am baffled as to why Bucephalus would stop like that. After lowering his head to investigate the tall grass, he walks into the pasture like he had done it a hundred times before. The sharp edge in the landscape must have served as a barrier to him. (131)

These are just a few of the many instances where Bondrup-Nielsen reminds his readers that he is not travelling along the trail or through the farm fields alone, but in the close company of his horse. In the course of the memoir, we get to know Bucephalus as his character emerges, just as his human companion's personality does. The ride through the Annapolis Valley that structures the author's contemplations is just that, a ride—but it is also an expression of a lived experience of the world. In sharing these experiences with his readers, Bondrup-Nielsen takes us into what Haraway calls *the "contact zone"*: "Contact zones change the subject—all the subjects—in surprising ways," she posits

(*When Species Meet* 219). This is also the sentiment that Bondrup-Nielsen advances in *Merging*: "We ride between two fields and approach a section of the forest," he writes. "Sometimes I feel like Bucephalus and I are a single individual, a Centaur. This is not to say the flow is one way; Bucephalus may also influence me" (125).

During the course of his long ride, Bondrup-Nielsen explores a range of places, people, animals, practices, and histories that make up life in the Annapolis Valley. He contemplates diverse farming practices—organic and conventional—and, in so doing, he moves smoothly between concrete physical details and broader conceptual questions. We learn about the composition of the soil on his neighbour's farm, the impact of pesticides on its alkalinity, and the use of specialized machinery in the harvesting of monocultural crops. We also learn how this ecologist and conservation biologist evaluates the changing practices of land use; we hear his critique of the capitalist model and his concerns that, "If the 'bottom line' is all that's important, then there can be no love of land and animals" (98).

In *Merging*, what comes across most powerfully is the author's deep love of a place he has called home for many decades, and his compelling humility. The search for answers to the question which drives this book, "How can we change the way we see ourselves in relation to the ecology that sustains us?" (17), leads Bondrup-Nielsen to declare, "My head gets dizzy thinking about all this" (119).

#### Works Cited

Haraway, Donna, J. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and*

*Significant Otherness*. Chicago:  
Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003. Print.

---. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis:  
Minnesota UP, 2008. Print.

Lopez, Barry. "A Literature of Place."  
*Portland Magazine*, Summer 1997.  
Web.

**ANNA BANKS** is an Associate Professor in  
the Department of English, University of

Idaho, Moscow, Idaho. Her research and  
writing are interdisciplinary and she works  
at the intersection of ecocinema,  
ecocriticism, and critical animal studies,  
often addressing aspects of the human-  
animal bond. She is especially interested in  
works involving non-human narrators and  
in how narrative and cinematic point-of-  
view affect reader and viewer  
understandings of the storyworlds created  
and inhabited by animal narrators.