

Companion Animals as Being-Objects: The Role of the Self/Other Binary
in the Human-Animal Bond

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DEDICATION

To Darwin, the adorable brainless wonder
and Stoli, the girl in my heart.

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ABSTRACT

This research project is an investigation into the human-dog bond and the practice of pet adoption and pet surrender at the East Baton Rouge Parish Animal Control Center. The human-dog bond is an excellent vehicle for an investigation into how we create categories of *other* because it is a highly complex and intersubjective relationship with deep evolutionary roots that is often reduced to a relationship between possessor and possessed in which cultural, historical, and biological contexts are not considered. It is a relationship in which constructed meaning is taken for fact.

This thesis explores how animal control centers both resist and reinforce the perception of companion animals as being-objects. The term *being-objects* is used to denote the tactic we employ by categorizing companion animals as beings when convenient and as disposable objects when necessary. When we categorize companion animals as objects, we other them. We create an unfair identity for them in order to distance ourselves from an uncomfortable confrontation with the reality of pet euthanasia. The author of this thesis will explore how meaning is socially constructed in the E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center through a discussion of the way we speak about animal control centers, the location and arrangement of the E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center, and the performance of adoption and surrender processes within the center.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“It is possible to add that for the soul to come to its true self it needs the help and recognition of the dog Argos.”

Loren Eisely (1969)
The Unexpected Universe

Loren Eisely wrote the above line about Argos, Odysseus’ dog in Homer’s *The Odyssey*. Eisely is referencing the fact that Argos is the first recognize his master after an 18 year absence in connection to the complex bond between humans and dogs. The bond is complicated because American society is seemingly obsessed with dogs, yet we have institutionalized kill centers to which unwanted dogs can be surrendered for euthanization. Millions of dogs as well as other companion animals are euthanized at the estimated 3,500 animal centers in the United States each year (www.americanhumane.org). How does a society hold both a cultural construct of dog as “man’s best friend” and a contradictory perception of dog as “disposable object” seemingly without conflict? How do we construct identities of dogs and other companion animals, and how do we enact these identities to help maintain our capricious relationship with them? Are the identities we create for companion animals authentic, or are they strategies based on a self/other binary? Do the identities we create for companion animals allow us to engage them in unethical human-animal relationships? Do ethics even matter in the human-animal relationship?

This research project explores these questions through an investigation into the human-dog bond and the practice of pet adoption and pet surrender at the East Baton Rouge Parish Animal Control Center. The human-dog bond is an excellent vehicle for an investigation into how we create categories of *other* because it is a highly complex and intersubjective relationship with deep evolutionary roots that is often reduced to a relationship between possessor and

possessed in which cultural, historical, and biological contexts are not considered. It is a relationship in which constructed meaning is taken for fact.

In *Pack of Two*, Caroline Knapp writes of the increasing intensity with which humans expect dogs to play certain roles: “Dog as family member. Dog as primary source of emotional support and affection. Dog as object of self-definition” (1995:54). Humans and dogs are uniquely suited as cross-species companions because we are both social beings, but we can often forget that a dog is in fact a dog and place expectations upon her that she cannot fulfill. Dogs’ instinctual drive to ingratiate themselves to their dominant or alpha pack member and to socialize with the pack enables them to capitalize on our own desire for social continuity and our attraction to juveniles. As I will discuss in this thesis, dogs closely resemble juvenile wolves in behavior and development. Also, dogs are famous for their loyalty, and in a world where human social interaction is complex and risky, the fantasy of unconditional love is a strong attraction. Dogs occupy a dangerous space in the lives of humans, for although the burden of communication must rest upon us, we often mistakenly place it upon the dog; a being that although sentient cannot verbally communicate nor grasp our deeply complex and rich world view.

The responsibility to act ethically in the human-dog bond rest upon our shoulders because we are the empowered agent. We have the ability to reflect and to project, we have the ability to recognize that a dog is a dog or to pretend that she is something else. A dog has no choice but to be a dog and brings only her canine perspective to the table. Yet, communication between people and dogs is possible and can be deeply satisfying for both species.

We fail to meet our canine companion’s alterity authentically when we assume the dog understands human perspective. We misunderstand our role in the human-dog bond when we

assume it functions because there is more similarity than difference between the two species; that dogs can be viewed as human-like, rather than because communication between two radically different types of beings can be achieved. When we anthropomorphize dogs, we run the risk of forcing the dog into playing a role that is about the fulfillment of the human self, rather than the fulfillment of the dog other.

Additionally, humans construct identities of dogs that force the dog into the role of object. Our conflicted perception of dogs as both beings and objects is evident in many practices, most particularly pet euthanasia. The purpose of this thesis is to explore how we use a perception of dogs as being-objects as a strategy in coping with our innate love of life and the reality of pet euthanasia. With this aim in mind, I will explore the evolutionary context of the human-dog bond and review ways in which we misinterpret the canine perspective in chapter two.

Additionally, I will discuss the role of the self/other binary and our constructed categories of other in our treatment of companion animals. In chapters three and four, I will show how we are disciplined to view animals as both beings and objects, and how this perception is enacted in the speech and behaviors of potential adopters and pet owners surrendering animals at the E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center.

CHAPTER 2: TOWARD CREATING AN ETHICAL HUMAN-DOG BOND

Two important aspects make up this investigation into the human-dog relationship. The first concerns the perceptions that humans have of dogs and how these perceptions fit into a self/other binary. The way humans view themselves as different from or similar to one another is important in a modern world fragmented by various cultural, ethnic, and political divides. The relationship between humans and dogs is a useful model for exploring otherness within our own species and is also a vehicle for investigating how humans construct identity for other species.

The second aspect of this investigation is a discussion of the scientific basis for the development of this unique interspecies relationship, the evolution of *Canis familiaris* as a species and the alteration of its biological imperatives by companionship with humans. Through recounting the evolution of the dog and exploring the self/other binary, we can search for answers about the predicament of dogs, or the “constant paradox” that “makes it possible for people to shower animals with affection and to maltreat or kill them, to regard them as sentient creatures and also as utilitarian objects” (Arluke and Sanders 1996:5).

Significant Others

The bond between human and dog breaks down for reasons that can be attributed to the inability of canines to fulfill the identities constructed for them by their human counterparts. In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Donna Haraway writes, “the status of a pet puts a dog at special risk in societies like the one I live in—the risk of abandonment when human affection wanes, when people’s convenience takes precedence, or when the dog fails to deliver on the fantasy of unconditional love” (2003:38). I add to this list the inability of the dog to deliver on the fantasy of unconditional compliance.

People who mistakenly view dogs as objects or “objects of self-definition” (Knapp: 1995:54) create a precarious space for dogs to be in because dogs cannot fulfill fantasies of the human self, and humans cannot root definition of self in their pets and expect to maintain this illusion. Yet, many people believe that this fulfillment of self is the purpose of the human-dog bond.

In *Pack of Two*, Caroline Knapp documents her experience with her dog Lucille and the experiences of others with their pets. She reveals how dogs are hailed into roles of substitution by their owners through recounting her reaction to a statement made by a woman she calls Paula:

“She’s the reason I belong in the world,” Paula says. “Otherwise I’d be lost. I wouldn’t know who I was. She’s how I define myself.” This rings many bells for me, reminds me of how vague and shapeless my life felt when I first came across Lucille, so I nod yet again. Dog as family member. Dog as primary source of emotional support and affection. Dog as object of self-definition (Knapp 1995:54).

That people see dogs as status symbols, ornaments, extensions of self, or substitutes for failed human relationships is evident in euthanasia rates; one quarter of all pets are euthanized by the time they are two years of age (Knapp 1995:83). Fifteen million dogs are released to centers by owners every year (Budiansky 2000:185). This project aims to explore a more ethical human-animal bond, a bond that is less dangerous and more authentic in that it is not based upon human projections of self or attempts to mold dogs into furry human substitutes, but upon “communication across irreducible difference” (Haraway 2003:49).

Although we may anthropomorphize dogs’ behaviors, the evolutionary development of *Canis familiaris* as well as the personalities of various breeds and individual dogs themselves, is decidedly non-human. Dogs are unique in their ability to form relationships with humans because we truly enjoy their company, but dogs do not have human thoughts or emotions just as we do not have canine perspectives. Yet, there are ways of thinking that can enable us to remain

open to the significant otherness (Haraway 2003) of dogs so that we can meaningfully communicate across the species barrier.

Haraway writes that the concept of significant otherness means that, “beings do not pre-exist their relations” (2003:6). There is no concrete self or concrete other existing preformed and unchanging. The binary exists as it is created in the emerging relationship, as the self and other constitute each other. Accordingly, “one cannot know the self and other, but must in respect for all time ask who and what are emerging in the relationship” (Haraway 2003:50).

Haraway points out that we must be aware that our categories of other result from and are situated in our historical narratives:

Through our ideologically loaded narratives of their lives, animals ‘hail’ us to account for the regimes in which they and we must live. We ‘hail’ them into our constructs of nature and culture, with major consequences of life and death, health and illness, longevity and extinction. We must also live with each other in the flesh in ways not exhausted by our ideologies (Haraway 2003:17).

Understanding the human-dog bond and its accompanying “constant paradox” is not only complicated by the ineffective and irresponsible perception many people have of dogs as insignificant others, but by the fact that dogs are both theoretical tools and real beings. Finding an ethical way to enter into a relationship with a dog requires that we understand the dog as a species in historical context, as well as an individual being that cannot be replaced or thrown away.

Recognizing that the human-dog bond is an intersubjective relationship in which both dog and human have agency does not mean that we should treat the dog as an equal, but that we should pay attention “to the conjoined dance of face-to face significant otherness” (Haraway 2003:41). Our job as humans is to be open to the dog as dog, and not mistake the dog for a quasi-human being. The human-animal bond cannot be about a fantasy of unconditional love, but must

be about “striving to fulfill the messy conditions of being in love” (Haraway 2003:35). To be “in love” with dogs means that we must meet dogs on their own terms while inviting them to understand our own intentions. The human-dog bond is ethical only if we move beyond the self/other binary in an attempt to accept the alterity of dogs.

We can ask who is at home in the canine mind through calling into question our notions of culture and mind, and whether we can apply these constructs to our relationship with animals. Do animals have culture? Do they have mind? We must examine what these notions mean in order to ask if they are shared by humans and dogs.

Anthropologists traditionally defined culture as setting humans apart from all other animals, but in recent decades researchers (Alger and Alger 1999, Boeche and Tomesello 1998) have argued that culture in a somewhat lesser degree is shared by other species. Primatologists (Boeche and Tomesello 1998) have discovered that wild chimpanzee troops exhibit behaviors not shared by all troops. These behaviors range from the use of tools to crack nuts to the apparently purely social behavior of hand clasping during grooming. These behaviors are considered cultural because they may be taught by mothers to juveniles, performed by only certain members of the group, or practiced by only some wild groups.

The existence of culture in nonhuman primates such as *Pan troglodytes* seems likely given our shared evolutionary history. But what about the existence of culture in animals not so closely genetically related to us, such as our pets? Janet and Steven Alger conducted an ethnographic study of a cat shelter in which they observed cats creating their own shelter culture (1999).

Cats arriving at the shelter were kept in cages until they were ready to join shelter life. All other cats were allowed to roam free and blankets were placed atop the cages for them to sit

on. Although the new arrivals often swatted at shelter cats climbing to the cage tops, the free roaming cats, who had adapted to shelter life, sat and slept together and washed each other peacefully. Territorial tendencies were not useful or necessary in the shelter. Therefore, the cats adapted by creating a more useful social structure, a social structure that promoted cohesion and tolerance. Alger and Alger attributed the social cohesion of the shelter to a rudimentary ability of the cats to take on the role of the other, to participate in symbolic interaction (1999:207,212).

Alger and Alger also observed bonds between cats not related by kinship. They observed one bond between two cats who always sat together in a specific litter pan in a specific place in the shelter. The relationship was supported by a feeding routine in which one cat always sat in the litter pan and waited for the other to return before going to feed (Alger and Alger 1999:210). The cats modified their natural behavior because social needs took precedence over survival needs. Therefore, Alger and Alger concluded that the cats created a culture that was specific to the shelter.

Recognizing culture in other animals means that we must be open to them as significant others and also to modifying our anthropological concept of culture. We must also be willing to revisit our notion of *mind*. Arluke and Sanders speak of mind not as an inherent ability of a single individual but as a *social accomplishment* between two individuals (1996:49). This definition of mind is aligned with Haraway's (2003) notion of significant otherness, as well as Alger and Alger's (1999) notion of symbolic interaction as culture.

If we understand mind as social interaction, we understand it more accurately as communication between agents such as a human and a dog, rather than the subjectively categorized cognitive abilities of a single individual. Arluke and Sanders argue that animals are able to use shared symbols (1996:49) as well as "take on the role of the other" (1996:44). Surely

anyone who has seen a dog scratch at the door when she wishes to go out or bring a toy to her owner when she wishes to play cannot deny that this dog is using a shared symbol to elicit a predictable response from her owner. Mind as social interaction also means that the dog is an individual who has lived a history of social interactions. As Arluke and Sanders write:

History informs the experience of a particular animal whether or not it can tell that history. Events in the life of an animal shape and even constitute him or her....[My dog] is an individual in that he is not constituted through and I do not live toward him as a species-specific behavioral repertoire or developmental sequence. More positively, he is an individual in that he is both subject to and subject of “true historical particulars”...I cannot replace him, nor, ethically, can I “sacrifice” him for he is a unique individual being (1996:26).

Entering into an ethical relationship with dogs requires that we turn away from the two pitfalls of human-animal bond, what Haraway calls “the god-tricks of self-certainty and deathless communion” (2003: 25). We must look at the dog as a being on her own terms who can participate in social interaction with humans, but only if we are open to ethical and effective communication with her. We must let go of the inappropriate fantasy of unconditional love, and determine if we are asking the dog questions a dog can answer, or if we are asking the dog questions we want to ask the human self. In order to do this, we must locate the dog in our own cultural context as well as in the context of her own evolutionary development.

Evolutionary History and Biological Inheritance of *Canis familiaris*

If we wish to be ethical in our treatment of dogs in what we expect of them and how we bond with them, we must first understand what they are. Despite appearances or wishful thinking on the part of humans, dogs are not little people in fur coats. They are domesticated mammals that have evolved from wild wolves. To understand how we manipulate dogs and how *they manipulate us*, we must review their evolutionary heritage and explore the question of just how

much we had to do with their domestication. Dogs are classified in Carolus Linnaeus' taxonomic scheme as follows.

Species: *familiaris*

Genus: *Canis*

Family: Canidae

Order: Carnivora

Subclass: Eutheria

Class: Mammalia

Subphylum: Vertbrata

Phylum: Chordata

Figure 1. Taxonomic Classification of *Canis familiaris* (Busch 1995:3)

The family *Canidae* which includes jackals, foxes, coyotes, wolves, and dogs evolved from a group of animals called miacids that lived about 52 million years ago. Twenty million years ago, the miacids split into two lineages: *cynodesmus* which became felines and *tomartctus* which became canines. The first wolf-like canids appeared about two to three million years ago. *Canis lupis* (gray wolf), the ancestor of *Canis familiaris* (domesticated dog) appeared about one million years ago (Busch 1995:1-2).

Wolf skeletons have been found in association with human remains as far back as 400,000 years, these wolves occupied the same areas as wild wolves and may have been scavenging from humans. The scavenger hypothesis is the widely accepted theory of how an ancestral population of wolves became genetically isolated from other wild wolves (Budiansky 2000:23).

Although this population of wolves was phenotypically similar to other wild wolves, recent mitochondrial DNA (or mtDNA) analysis conducted by researchers Robert K. Wayne, Jooakim Ludenberg, Kieth A. Crandall, Rodney L. Honeycutt, John E. Rice, Isabel R. Amorim, Jesus E. Maldonado, Peter Savolainen, Carles Vila shows that these wolves may have diverged from other wolf populations 135,000 years ago (Morell 1997:1647). These “proto dogs” would have look like other local wolves, but would not have been interbreeding with them. Although the mtDNA analysis is not conclusive, it does suggest that wolves were becoming dogs long before human-directed selection.

The researchers conducted the mtDNA analysis using tissue samples from 162 wolves representing 27 populations in North America, Europe, Asia, and Arabia, 140 dogs representing 67 breeds and 5 mixed breeds, 12 samples from jackals and 5 from coyotes. They studied a part of the mtDNA called the control region that is known to be polymorphic, that is; exhibiting a high mutation rate (Vila et. al 1997:1687).

The evolutionary geneticists found a total of 27 haplotypes in the wolf mtDNA and a total of 26 in the dog mtDNA (Vila et al 1997:1687-1688). Haplotypes are combinations of alleles or gene sequences that occur so close together on the chromosome that they are rarely separated due to crossing over during cell replication and are transmitted complete from one generation to the next (Rothwell 1993:84). The haplotypes in the dogs did not align with breed distinctions; individuals in the same breed were found to carry different haplotypes and different breeds were found to carry the same haplotypes. The dog mtDNA differed by at least 20 substitutions in different sites from jackals and coyotes, but differed from wolf mtDNA by a maximum of 12 substitutions (Vila et. al 1997: 1687-1688). The wolf samples differed genetically from the coyote and jackal samples by about 7.5%, and from the dog samples by only

about 1%. The researchers were able to use the mutation rate to determine that dogs split from wolves about 135,000 years ago (Budiansky 2000:21) by comparing their findings to the fossil record which shows that wolves and coyotes diverged 1 million years ago.

The researchers grouped the dog haplotypes into four distinct clades. In two clades, the sequences showed two different common ancestors meaning that dogs evolved from two wolf populations and that there were two domestication events. The other two clades contained wolf haplotypes meaning that after dogs had become genetically isolated from wolves they were bred with wolves by humans or did so on their own (Morell 1997: 1647).

The first clade contained 19 of the 26 dog haplotypes suggesting that three quarters of modern dogs evolved from a single female lineage and a single domestication event. The research team could not link this clade to any extant wolf populations suggesting that the ancestral species is extinct (Morell 1997:1647).

Although the mtDNA analysis indicates that dogs may have diverged from wolves 135,000 years ago, there may be discrepancies such as unobserved multiple mutations at “hypervariable” sites (Vila et. al 1997:1689). Yet, the findings do suggest that dogs diverged from wolves earlier than previously thought. The first clade shows far too much diversity to be only 14,000 years old as the archaeological evidence indicates (Morell 1997:1647-1648). The proto dogs may have remained phenotypically similar to the surrounding wolf populations until the development of permanent settlements and agriculture among humans provided a selective advantage for certain morphologies associated with domesticated dogs (Vila et. al 1997:1689).

The earliest archaeological remains of a dog were found in modern day Iraq and are dated to about 14,000 years ago. They are 2,500 years older than any archaeological evidence of agriculture or permanent human settlements (Budiansky 2000:18). The remains are considered to

be that of a dog and not a wolf because the jaw is shortened compared to a wolf's jaw and contains crowded teeth.

Although the emergence of the dog occurred some thousands of years ago, the emergence of the various modern breeds of dogs is quite recent. Most breeds emerged through human directed breeding practices and are the result of Victorian ideals of purity. The first kennel clubs were founded in the 1870s (Budiansky 2000:29,35). Wayne and his research team's mtDNA clades grouped supposedly ancient breeds such as the greyhound with recent breeds such as the collie and German shepherd (Budiansky 2000:31).

The mtDNA analysis shows that most dogs are genetically similar to each other and that human-directed breeding practices only began 200 years ago, yet dogs exhibit a wide variety of phenotypes and practical abilities. Dogs also exhibit many traits never found in their wolf ancestors. Not all variation in dogs may be attributable to natural or human directed selection.

The explanation for variation may be found in development. Puppies' bodies develop allometrically, meaning disproportionately, during the first months of life. For instance, a puppy's skull is nearly as wide as it is long when she is born. By the time the puppy is 4 months old, skull proportions have change drastically, resulting in a skull that is narrower and has a longer snout. The adult looking skull grows proportionately after this point (Budiansky 2000:38).

Growth is controlled by regulatory genes which govern sets of genes controlling what type of structure develops as well as when the structure begins developing and when it stops. This "period of disproportionate growth" or heterochrony can explain the various size differences between breeds. Wayne measured limb bones and found that most of the size differences between breeds are established during the first 40 days of life. After that time, the percentage of growth is the same for all breeds (Budiansky 2000:40) As Budiansky states,

“relative rates of growth of various structures during these critical periods of allometric change might be altered, giving rise to entirely novel forms” (200:39).

Another factor in the development of novel phenotypes in dogs is the linkage of genes. Regulatory genes control several genes; therefore, some traits will occur with others when genes expressing different traits are activated by a regulatory gene or genes at the same time. Geneticist Dmitry K. Belyaev and other researchers in Russia bred silver foxes for tameness and discovered that by selecting foxes on this single criterion, they had bred foxes that barked and had broken colored coats and drooping ears in just 20 generations (Budiansky 2000:46). These findings suggest that variation in dog phenotypes may have occurred simply because some physical traits occur in conjunction with some behavioral traits.

Heterochrony in the development of dogs tends towards paedomorphosis, which is the retention of juvenile characteristics in the adult. Essentially, as dogs became domesticated, they increasingly came to look and act like juvenile wolves (Mech and Boitani 2003:257). Paedomorphosis is exhibited in dogs' shortened muzzles and crowded teeth. Behaviorally, dogs act like juvenile wolves when they perform wolf behaviors as ends in themselves, rather than performing them in sequence with other behaviors as survival strategies. One example of juvenile behaviors in adult dogs is stalking. Domesticated dogs may stalk and even kill small animals but the chasing and killing are a game. Unlike wolves, dogs will rarely show any interest in prey once they have killed it. Simply stated, dogs continue the play behaviors of juvenile wolves into adulthood.

Some behaviors exhibited by dogs make them particularly suited to manipulating humans. These behaviors can be directly attributed to their wolf ancestry. These inherited behaviors are also the source of a great deal of miscommunication between humans and dogs.

Wolves are pack animals who maintain a strict social hierarchy. The pack is controlled by the alpha male and alpha female. Just as wolves struggle to establish rank within their pack, so will dogs, whether with other dogs or their human owners. Yet, dogs will engage in dominance struggles for different reasons than wolves. Budiansky writes that, “When wolves engage in contests over true dominance, they are not fighting over a bone or even a mate; they are expressing a very basic genetic imperative to suppress the free action of mating (of other pack members)¹ and passing on their genes. The dominance struggles take place for their own sake” (2000:76). Dogs may engage in dominance struggles over toys, treats, or the attention of their owners. Domesticated, male dogs who have not been neutered may also fight over a female in heat, and any dog may act territorial towards other dogs and humans not considered to be pack members, just as wolves in the wild. But these behaviors are not exhibited by all dogs, the drives that fuel these behaviors may be completely nonexistent in many dogs, but were certainly present in their wolf ancestors.

Different breeds exhibit varying degrees of concern or drive to establish a rank order. Some breeds may show no concern at all for who is the Alpha dog, and others may challenge anyone, even their owners. The drive to dominate can also vary between individual dogs within the same breed.

Social cohesion can be maintained in a wolf pack only if some wolves are genetically inclined to ingratiate themselves to the more dominant wolves. This inherited drive to submit results in behaviors that help dogs ingratiate themselves to their human owners. Submissive behaviors such as greeting and face-licking are the behaviors that make an owner think her dog is happy to see her or that her dog *loves* her. We must necessarily view these behaviors in their evolutionary context for, “Dogs have a powerful instinct to be with and to be compliant and mild

¹ I have inserted this parenthetical remark to clarify Budiansky’s statement.

towards those they view as their social betters. In the evolutionary sense, however, it is hard not to see all of this behavior as cynical in the extreme, for it is nothing but an expedient: change the balance of power ever so slightly and all bets are off. Wolves simply never would have acquired these instincts unless they paid off from time to time by greasing the path to power” (Budiansky 200:75).

Humans, who love for love’s sake, may misinterpret the behaviors of dogs. The strong instinctual drive of the dog to know her place in the social order can be the source of enduring loyalty to and continued conflict with her owner. Dogs exhibit a variety of behaviors that, if anthropomorphized, can disrupt the human-dog bond. Sometimes, human misinterpretations of canine behaviors do not negatively affect the human-dog bond. For instance, a dog may submit to her human owner by rolling over on her back and exposing her belly in a defenseless position, and the human will respond by scratching the dog’s belly. It is possible that the dog only wishes to convey submission to her pack member. Yet, when the human responds by scratching the dog’s belly, the interaction ceases to be first and foremost about the establishment of rank, and becomes primarily about the strengthening of the bond between the human and dog through touch. Yet, the experience is rewarding to both dog and owner. Problems arise in other situations when communication is more serious, when the human does not speak the dog’s language, and the dog cannot make her dog language apply in a human world. As Budiansky states, “The dog’s readiness to interpret its environment through the lens of its species-specific concerns and proclivities often causes much trouble when we try to shape behaviors” (2000:142).

As I have already stated, the dog is a highly social animal, attuned to what in her world appear to be clues about rank and order. Hitting or aggressively gesturing towards a dog that has defecated in the house or ripped apart an expensive bed covering will only communicate to the

dog that her owner is displaying dominance. The dog will take on a submissive posture such as cringing and may run and hide, but this is not because the dog is ashamed. The dog is only trying to appease the alpha dog and may make no connection between the admonishment and her transgression (Budiansky 2000:142). That is why a dog may continue to perform a destructive behavior again and again, yet appear ashamed when the damage has been discovered by the owner.

Benjamin Hart suggests that a dog should only be aggressively treated if she is showing signs of aggression such as growling or biting. In this case, the owner should respond with some type of dominance display to keep the dog from trying to usurp the position of alpha dog. Infractions which are of no social import should be punished in a way that carries no social import. The placement of a mousetrap in a garbage bag is a much more effective tool for eliminating trash digging behavior than spanking or yelling at the dog (Budiansky 2000:142-143). The social nature of the dog also plays a role in the treatment of dogs in a multi-dog home. Although, the human or humans in the home may wish to make things fair for all the dogs, this may incite a dominant dog to attack, or may simply make the dogs uneasy as their natural inclination towards rank is continually disrupted. Budiansky points out that allowing some displays of aggression by the dominant dog, such as growling or toy-stealing towards the other dogs in the home, helps to stabilize the situation. Furthermore, the owner should reinforce this hierarchy by doing things such as greeting the dominant dog first and feeding her first (Budiansky 2000:175). Budiansky also suggests scolding the subordinate dog during altercations with the dominant dog. This behavior will reinforce each dog's place in the hierarchy preventing further altercations.

Humans cohabiting with dogs must ask “who is at home” in the relationship to establish and maintain effective communication that accommodates both species. An ethical human-animal bond requires more than treating a dog *humanely*; it requires communicating with the dog in symbols that she is equipped to understand. A human who demands that her relationship with her dog be on purely human terms will most likely end up in a miserable situation.

Understanding the importance of social rank in *Canis familiaris* as a species, and how this drive manifests in an individual dog is necessary in accomplishing mind within the human-dog bond as well as exploring the emotions that are shared within this bond.

Because dogs are able to use shared symbols with other dogs and their owners, we must accept that they are, at least on some rudimentary level, able to take on the role of the other. However, dogs are not capable of the repertoire of emotions that humans are, and ultimately, any ability the dog has to empathize with the other is rooted in her shared evolutionary history with humans. A dog that seems to us to be ashamed may simply be exhibiting submissive behaviors. Budiansky writes that dogs that run to the side of their owners and growl at menacing strangers are perceived to be protecting them, but wolves in the wild run to the alpha dog in threatening situations to be protected (2000:77). The dog may simply feel emboldened because she feels within the protection of her owner.

Dogs are social animals that have evolved to fulfill a specific niche of companionship with humans. In forming an ethical human-animal bond we must bear in mind that although we share sentience with dogs, they do not share our richer, deeper understanding of the world. We must remember that dogs only became dogs in the first place because some wolves were lazier or hungrier than they were afraid and, therefore, began scavenging from humans.

Conclusion and Research Relevance

Dogs are not simple extensions of the human self. The human-animal bond is the result of what Haraway (2003) calls “natureculture.” *Canis familiaris* is a species with its own identity and agenda. But the *dog familiar* has an identity given her by humans and has been interpolated into our agenda. We did not orchestrate this arrangement, but we have orchestrated its meaning. The symbolism and expectation with which we have imbued the human-dog bond often causes the relationship to fail. The reason the bond falls apart so often may be because humans do not look for a bond that truly spans the species barrier but attempt to fulfill a misguided dream of total contentment in the self. As Haraway writes, “If the idea that man makes himself realizing his intentions in his tools, such as domestic animals (dogs) and computers (cyborgs), is evidence of a neurosis that I call humanist technophilic narcissism, then the superficially opposed idea that dogs restore human beings’ souls by their unconditional love might be the neurosis of caninophilic narcissism” (2003:33).

This is not to say that there are not those humans who do wish to engage in a true interspecies relationship with dogs, or that there are not those humans who succeed with only intuition and patience. But there are many people who become disillusioned with their dogs, and many dogs, *millions* of dogs, are subsequently euthanized or suffer other terrible fates.

The goal of this project is to address these issues through investigating human perceptions of dogs. This project is critical because research takes place at an animal control center, a site where the complexities of the human-dog relationship as well as the self/other binary are enacted daily. What draws us to companion animals? How do we justify euthanizing them?

I offer some answers to these questions by presenting responses to interviews and parts of observed conversations between center employees and the public recorded at the E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center. These interviews can offer answers because visitors are confronted not only with the reality of death but a personal responsibility for the suffering and death of innocent creatures. Researching human perceptions of dogs and of the operations of a parish run animal control center can open up the human-dog bond revealing its cultural myths and its realities.

CHAPTER 3: PETS AS BEING-OBJECTS: CREATING MEANING IN THE EAST BATON ROUGE PARISH ANIMAL CONTROL CENTER

Animal Control Center or Animal Center?

Arluke and Sanders state:

Studying animals and human interactions with them enables us to learn about ourselves as social creatures. It will show us, among other things, how meaning is socially created in interaction, even with non-humans; how we organize our social world; and how we see our connection (or lack of it) to other living things (1996:4).

They investigate contexts such as primate labs, veterinary clinics, and animal centers to “identify some of the key social forces behind the capricious treatment of animals and show how they operate” (Arluke and Sanders 1996:5).

I chose to explore the human-dog bond because this relationship has long been a highly fetishized cultural object. “Man’s best friend” has been forced by many humans in urban societies into an increasingly complex and often contradictory liminal space: a space between being and object, between human and non-human. We ask dogs to fulfill emotional niches created by fragmented living while simultaneously denying them authentic acceptance of their alterity and significance. In short, we engage them in an unethical relationship.

More than lab animals or livestock, we force companion animals into roles that vacillate easily (for humans) between being and object, between valued individual and valueless non-individual. Nowhere else is this contradictory perception of dogs and other companion animals more readily visible than in animal control centers and kill centers. The animal control center is an excellent vehicle for a study of “social forces behind our capricious treatment of animals” because it is a site that both resists our unethical relationship with companion animals and further disciplines us to accept and enter into such a relationship.

I conducted fieldwork for this project at the E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center with the intent of exploring how animal control centers both resist and reinforce the perception of companion animals as being-objects (Figure 2). I use the term being-objects to denote the tactic we employ by categorizing companion animals as beings when convenient and as disposable objects when necessary. When we categorize companion animals as objects, we other them. We create an unfair identity for them in order to distance ourselves from an uncomfortable confrontation with the reality of pet euthanasia. I will explore how meaning is socially constructed in the E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center through a discussion of the way we speak about animal control centers, the location and arrangement of the E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center, and the performance of adoption and surrender processes within the center.



Figure 2. The East Baton Rouge Parish Animal Control Center

The E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center is located at 2680 Progress Rd. across from the city airport and behind the parish prison. There are some signs leading to the center, but the building

it set back away from the main road and is on the outskirts of town. The center is funded by city taxes and is subsequently located on the cheapest city land. Yet, one can not escape the feeling that there is another reason why the center is placed on the outskirts of town away from public view. In fact, former Assistant Director Dez Crawford informed me that the center is located outside of town (as it is in most cities) because the public has traditionally had an “out of sight, out of mind” attitude about pet euthanasia. The fact that the E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center is located behind the parish prison only reinforces the unpleasant perception humans have of animal control centers as being dog jails or pounds. During my volunteer duties at the center, I often found myself staring through the fence that partially surrounds the center at the prison only a few acres away. The stiffly blurred meanings of *shelter* and *prison* were not lost on this observer.

Shelter, pound, and animal control center are all terms that people use to refer to such animal holding facilities, yet the terms are certainly not simply interchangeable. Each carries undertones of advocacy and judgment. Center employees answer telephone calls by saying, “Animal Control can I help you?” Officers in the field refer to the facility as the Animal Control Center. But among each other and often to the public coming into the center the employees and volunteers offhandedly refer to the center as an animal shelter. These “situational semantics” as Asst. Director Crawford refers to them, allow center employees to mobilize different meanings in different circumstances.

Crawford stated that officers use “center” in the field to reinforce the facility’s status as a government agency. This term helps convey authority when officers confiscate animals or issue warnings and citations. Similarly, answering the phone “Animal Control” reinforces the fact that the center is there first and foremost to provide a service for the public, such as removing

wildlife nuisances or dangerous animals. The fact that the center is called a shelter in casual conversation among employees shows that providing shelter for abandoned, abused, and stray animals is another mission of the center.

Many people may view animal control centers as pounds, places where unwanted animals are killed, but changing attitudes about companion animals in the last several decades have led to changing perceptions about animal control centers. Formerly, centers were simply places to dump unwanted animals, but animal advocacy and awareness have risen greatly in urban society making animal control centers places many people associate with pet adoption.

The decrease in the popularity of the term pound in favor of the term center does not indicate a decrease in pet euthanasia and an increase in pet adoption. It does indicate that we are less willing to accept pet euthanasia than we may have been a few decades ago, but the gentler terminology may have only encouraged us to turn a blind eye to pet euthanasia instead of attempting to affect change. A societal preference for an “out of sight, out of mind” mentality is expressed in many aspects of the E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center ranging from the location of the building to the language we use to speak about it.

The E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center is operated by a staff of 18, not including former Asst. Director Dez Crawford. Remaining staff members include Director Hilton M. Cole, seven commissioned animal control officers, four kennel attendants, three office clerks, an animal control supervisor, a kennel supervisor, and a part-time veterinarian. The veterinarian is assisted by several veterinary students who must fulfill rotations to receive degrees from Louisiana State University. The center was built in 1980 as a Public Health and Safety Agency. As such, it is funded by tax dollars, fines (or fees), and the sell of rabies tags (Crawford 1997: <http://brgov.com/dept/animal>).

The official mission statement of the center is as follows: “To deliver professional animal control center services based on sound law enforcement principles and to protect the public health and safety of the citizens of East Baton Rouge parish through enforcement of both Title 14 of the City Parish Code of Ordinances and the state animal cruelty laws” (Crawford 1997: <http://brgov.com/dept/animal>). Asst. Director Crawford adds that the center promotes responsible pet care and pet adoption in the community. In accordance with this mission statement, the center “protects public safety and health, provides animal adoptions, administers the anti-rabies program, conducts animal rescues, offers educational programs, investigates animal cruelty cases, interacts with the veterinary, medical, and animal welfare communities, cooperates with the LSU school of veterinary medicine in a student teaching program, quarantines rabies observation animals, and cooperates with fellow law enforcement agencies” (1997: <http://brgov.com/dept/animal>).

Our uneasiness with pet euthanasia is evident in the design of the center building itself. The front of the building houses a reception area for the public. This area is divided into several offices. Immediately to the right of the front entrance is a receiving window where the necessary transactions for adopting animals, retrieving impounded animals, and obtaining cat traps are performed.

Beyond the receiving window, the foyer narrows into a small waiting area with four chairs flanked by two large plexi-glass kennels (Figure 3) that are referred to as “display cases” or “show cases” by center employees. These cases always contain one litter of adoptable puppies and one litter of adoptable kittens, and are different from all other kennels in the center in that they are enclosed with plexi-glass rather than metal fencing. Also these display cases are in the main reception area, and other kennels are in the back of the center.



Figure 3. Animal Showcases

The two display cases are the first thing the public sees upon entering the office. It is here, when a human approaches the display case, taps on the window, and a kitten runs up and pounces on the glass that beguiling sentiment rubs uncomfortably against the notion of an ethical human-pet relationship. Yet, in the interest of adopting animals and supporting the center financially, employees cannot ignore the fact that in some respects, the animals are commodities that must be sold. The showcases help turn the animals inside them into commodities through displaying them in much the same way as a pet store.

Firstly, only puppies and kittens are kept in the display case (excepting the occasional mother cat). Puppies and kittens are much easier to “sell” than older animals. Secondly, the display cases are unlike the other kennels in the center but similar to pet store display cases. Displaying kittens and puppies this way is effective in getting them adopted, but it also serves

another function. Just as pens of playful pet store puppies hide the often disturbing truth about puppy mills and draw the customer in with sentiment, the display cases of the center hide the rows of kennels filled with abandoned, sick, or suffering animals slated for euthanasia.

Despite this similarity between the center and commercial pet stores, there is no mistaking that one is indeed in an animal center where animals are not sold for profit, but are advocated for by concerned and involved individuals. Pamphlets and posters about ethical animal care and treatment line the walls. One poster shows a puppy in front of a pile of euthanized cat and dogs and states, “When you let your pet bring unwanted animals into the world...guess who pays.”

Additionally, animals are *bought* from pet stores and *adopted* from animal centers. A seventy dollar fee is charged for any animal adoption at the center. This fee can obviously be construed as the *price* of the animal. But just as *sell* and *adopt* mobilize meanings associated with commodity and advocacy respectively, *price* and *fee* also denote more than simple semantic difference. The adoption fee covers the expense of the animal’s basic care while in center custody and his or her mandatory spay or neuter operation. Adopters are also provided with a rabies vaccination voucher that they must present to their personal vet within fourteen days.

Breeders and pet stores do not sell spayed or neutered animals because it lowers their value, and although a breeder must present documentation of vaccination for the animals she sells, in most cases the buyer is under no contract to provide continued medical care. Furthermore, animals sold by breeders and pet stores are valued according to their breeding. Purebred animals of champion lines can cost thousands of dollars. All animals, cat or dog, pure breed or mutt, can be adopted from the center for the flat rate of seventy dollars.

Pet stores and breeders enter into a contract with buyers in that they must provide some guarantee that the animals they sell are in fact purebred. The animal is reduced to an object in that her value is measured by human-directed standards set by kennel groups and her ability to produce offspring measuring up to the same human-directed standards. In center adoptions, the adopter enters into a contract with the center through accepting an animal that cannot reproduce (due to mandatory spaying and neutering), is not of any provable lineage, and must be vaccinated for rabies with fourteen days. The animal's value is measured by her being. Although adopters may come into the center with certain qualities in mind about the animal they wish to adopt, they do not adopt a manufactured breed object, but an individual being.

Although the animal adoption program attempts to function in the best interest of the animal, it is not without its problems. The ethic of the human-dog bond depends upon the human whether her animal is bought or adopted. The center must play along with our perception of animals as being-objects in order to save their lives. This means that at times the adoption program functions as an animal advocacy program, and that at other times, it is set up as a screen hiding the other, darker realities of animal control.

A clear separation between adoption and euthanasia, pet companionship and animal suffering, high sentiment and reality exists in E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center practice. The placement of the display cases strategically plays upon the consumer desire for instant gratification and does not address the stark realities such impulse desires often have for companion animals. The cases themselves do not construct an identity for companion animals as being-objects, but are a complex mixture of phenomenological expression and disciplining agent concerning this identity.

The cases do construct the identity of the animal control center as an animal shelter. The animal shelter identity is further reinforced by the presence of two “shelter cats” (Figure 4). Snowflake and Tripod are the only permanent residents of the center. These two cats live full-time at the center and are allowed to roam about the building. Both cats are allowed outside of the building as well, but most times can be found lounging on the chairs in the reception area.



Figure 4. Shelter Cats: Snowflake and Tripod

In contrast, two signs reading, “Please do not bring animals in the office. All animals go to rear of building,” are posted on the door of the front office. Animals being surrendered to the center are never allowed in the front office. Shelter policy may prohibit surrendered animals from entering the receiving office as a safety precaution, but this precaution is also one way in which the “out of sight, out of mind” mentality is constructed in center practices; puppies and kittens may be played with in the front, but animals being disposed of must be taken to the back. Animal adoption and animal surrender never formally take place in the same area, and animal

surrender never takes place in the main receiving office. In this manner, the receiving office and the adoption practice serve both to promote animal welfare advocacy and as buffers against the unpleasant reality of pet euthanasia.

Behind the front office is the main section of the building housing the dog kennels (Figure 5). The building is divided into three separate areas: stray dogs, adoption dogs, and observation dogs. The stray kennels are further divided into male and female sides, and one section for puppies.



Figure 5. Stray Dog Kennels

The stray dog kennels comprise the largest overall section and are made up of 88 kennels. This section of kennels houses stray and owner-released dogs. Owners are notified about dogs with identification tags (such as rabies vaccination tags) and are given six days to claim dogs without identification tags. After this time, if they have not been claimed by their owner and are deemed unfit for adoption by the veterinarian, they are euthanized. Cats are also

held at the center. Stray cats are given a four day reprieve from euthanasia and may also be made available for adoption. I will not go into further detail about cats in the center because the focus of this research is the human-dog bond.

The observation section of the building contains 39 kennels. These kennels contain dogs (and sometimes other animals such as cats) that are being held for medical observation. A dog without proof of proper vaccination who is impounded as the result of a bite case must be held until the veterinarian can determine that she is not infected with rabies. Other dogs may be held in the observation kennels until they are well enough to be placed in adoption.

There is a total of 38 adoption kennels. These kennels contain dogs that have been approved by the veterinarian for adoption. To be considered for adoption, a dog must be heartworm free and reasonably healthy (except in circumstances when a breed rescue group is able to pay the medical expenses of unhealthy dogs), be friendly and non-aggressive and must have some quality that makes it different from the other dogs up for adoption. If there are three lab/mix breeds already in the adoption kennels, no other similar dogs will be placed in adoption until those three have been adopted.

The veterinarian follows the aforementioned procedure to optimize the amount of dogs being adopted but is quite resourceful with making use of all available center space. Outdoor kennels and spaces within the medical area are used to hold animals until they are suitable for adoption. The fact that an animal is sick or mangy is not a certain death sentence. Animals are often treated for weeks at the center or are taken home by employees until they can be placed in adoption. Once in adoption, an animal is cared for by the center until she is adopted. Center employees make an effort to save as many animals as possible, but over 80% of the animals that arrive at the center are euthanized.

Behind the kennel area is a small kennel office and the medical area. The kennel office is the receiving area for owner-surrendered animals. Pet owners do not usually enter into this office but are met by a kennel officer at a cashier window similar to the one in the front receiving area (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Kennel Office Window

In addition to the separation of spaces in which animals can be adopted and in which they can be surrendered, there are differences in the way the transactions are performed. I have often observed the clerk in the front office making small talk with people adopting animals, wishing them luck, and giving them advice. I have never observed officers receiving surrendered animals in the kennel office inquire about the reasons the animal is being surrendered. This is not to say that people surrendering animals do not often themselves offer explanations, but I will address this matter in the next chapter.

The surrendering process is shorter and less engaging than the adoption process. People come to the window, show identification, and then sign a release form giving the center custody of the animal. The animal is then taken by the officer and placed in one of the stray dog kennels. I have witnessed the process several times and can attest to the fact that it usually only takes a few minutes.

When people come into the center to adopt, the process can take as long as 45 minutes. A volunteer or center employee leads the perspective adopters through the kennels and/or through the cat adoption area. The adopter is then allowed (and encouraged) to spend time with whichever animal she is interested in adopting. There is a cat adoption building in which people can interact with the cats, and dogs can be taken outside into the dog yard or to a small courtyard used for just this purpose.

In the adoption process, the fact that the person is considering bringing a new being into their home and life is high-lighted. As a volunteer adoption counselor, I often gave advice on the personality of the animal and many times engaged in long conversations about the adopter's personal history with companion animals and her feelings about animal advocacy. The surrendering process is radically different in that no counseling is offered, and people rarely engage in small talk.

The difference between the adoption process and the surrender process demonstrates our desire to construct an identity for companion animals that will allow us to move between valuing animals as beings, and discarding them like valueless objects. We attempt to remedy our obvious aversion to killing defenseless creatures by denouncing our stewardship though demoting them to the realm of objects.

When we enter the E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center, we see and experience the phenomenological expressions of our perception of companion animals as being-objects. In some ways, the center resists and admonishes this perception, and in others it further disciplines us to view animals this way, and even attempts to prevent us from directly confronting the consequences of this perception. The simple fact that people can dispose of animals at the center trains them to other animals, to think of animals as objects. The center must operate within a kill-center construct and therefore, cannot help but encourage the “out of sight, out of mind” mentality that it struggles to oppose through its animal adoption program and animal welfare awareness programs.

Animal Control Center or Animal Center? A Statistical Analysis

The E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center demonstrates society’s unethical perception of companion animals, and also conforms to this perception, thereby reinforcing it. Center employees do so because the center is a parish agency formed to address the problem of animal control. It was created to provide a service for humans, not for dogs. Currently, animal euthanasia is the most frequently provided service at the center.

In 2003, I conducted previous research on the rate of euthanasia at the center. The statistics from this year remain relevant, as the center maintains a steady euthanasia rate of roughly 80%. That year, the center euthanized over 10,000 animals. The majority of the animals were cats (4,697), dogs (6,555), and wildlife (1,111). A total of 3,455 animals were surrendered to the center by their owners. In contrast, only 295 cats and 750 dogs were adopted from the center.

In an effort to determine if there is any variance in species of animal being euthanized at the center, I ran a statistical analysis of 100 cases from 2004. Each time an animal enters into

center custody, an impound ticket is written noting the species and breed of the animal, reason for impoundment and the outcome of the case. These documents are kept in order of date in large filing drawers in the center. I collected tickets from April through September 2004. I did not search for specific types of cases, but simply pulled tickets at will without viewing them, until I had collected 100. I hoped a statistical analysis of the tickets would yield information about the number of varying species of animals coming into the center and euthanization and adoption rates. The tickets I collected documented cat, dog, and wildlife cases.

Each ticket represents one case, and each case contains a file number (some numbers are repeats because two or more animals may be considered part of the same case) and various information about the animal. For the purposes of this research, I collected information about species, breed, reason for the animal being impounded, and the outcome of the case, i.e. the animal's fate (Table 1).

There are several reasons an animal may be impounded by the center such as animals in immediate danger and cruelty cases, but the tickets in my sample listed only these reasons: stray, bite case, or owner release. The impound tickets represented the cases of 29 cats, 50 dogs, and 21 wild animals.

I noted the different species of wildlife in the data chart, but created one category for "wildlife" in my statistical analysis because the outcome and the reason for impoundment are often the same for most wildlife species. The center generally euthanizes wildlife species impounded at the center (such as opossums and raccoons) except in special instances, such as when an animal is young enough to be rehabilitated and re-released or holds some value as a teaching case. In these instances, the animal is transferred to the Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine.

I ran two analyses on the data. The first was a descriptive statistic of percentages. Descriptive statistics such as percentages are used, “to construct simple descriptions about the characteristics of a set of quantitative data” (Frey et al. 2000:291). I used percentages to analyze the data because such a large number of the animals in the sample were euthanized, that breaking the euthanasia rate down into percentages helped in making a conclusion. I also used a chi square test to determine if there were any statistically significant associations between species of animal and whether or not the animal was euthanized.

The descriptive statistic of percentages showed that 85% of the animals were euthanized. Of the 15% that were not euthanized, 6% were adopted by a new owner, 5 % were returned to

Table 1. 100 Impoundment Cases

Chart Abbreviations

Species:	Breed:	Reason for Impoundment:
C Cat	DSH Domestic Short Hair	STR Stray
D Dog	DMH Domestic Medium Hair	BC Bite Case
W Wild	DLH Domestic Long Hair	OR Owner Release
	X Mixed Breed	

Outcome of Case:

Y Euthanized	N-RTW Returned to Wild
N-NO New Owner (Adopted)	N-DIP Died in Pen
N-RTO Returned to Owner	

(table continued)

	File	species	breed	reason	euthanized	VAR00001
1	17588	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
2	17589	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
3	17580	D	X SHEP	STR	Y	.
4	17327	D	X SHEP	BC	Y	.
5	17281	D	X-CURR	STR	Y	.
6	17281	D	XCURR	STR	Y	.
7	17226	D	X LAB	STR	Y	.
8	17188	C	DSH	OR	N-NO	.
9	17188	D	X LAB	STR	Y	.
10	17062	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
11	17061	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
12	17061	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
13	17057	D	X COLLIE	STR	Y	.
14	17047	W	RACOON	STR	Y	.
15	17042	W	OPOSSUM	STR	Y	.
16	17018	W	SQUIRREL	STR	Y	.
17	17032	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
18	17034	D	X CHI	STR	N-NO	.
19	16940	W	OPOSSUM	STR	Y	.
20	16927	D	PIT	STR	Y	.
21	16291	W	OPOSSUM	STR	Y	.
22	16293	W	OPOSSUM	STR	Y	.
23	16904	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
24	16859	W	RACOON	STR	Y	.
25	15237	W	OPOSSUM	STR	Y	.
26	15240	D	X ROTT	STR	Y	.
27	15241	D	MIXED	STR	Y	.
28	15213	D	X PIT	STR	N-NO	.
29	15213	D	X LAB	STR	Y	.
30	15213	D	MIXED	STR	Y	.
31	15220	D	MIXED	STR	Y	.
32	15220	D	X PIT	STR	Y	.
33	15152	W	OPOSSUM	STR	Y	.
34	15147	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
35	15140	D	X ROTT	OR	N-RTO	.
36	15135	W	RACOON	STR	Y	.
37	15142	W	OPOSSUM	STR	Y	.
38	15117	D	X CHOW	STR	Y	.
39	15078	D	X PIT	OR	Y	.
40	15071	D	X LAB	STR	Y	.

(table continued)

	File	species	breed	reason	euthanized	VAR00001
41	15058	D	X PIT	STR	Y	.
42	15055	D	X LAB	STR	Y	.
43	15040	W	OPOSSUM	STR	Y	.
44	15030	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
45	15021	D	X SHEP	BC	Y	.
46	15029	D	MIXED	STR	Y	.
47	80942	D	MIXED	STR	Y	.
48	80941	D	X LAB	STR	Y	.
49	14995	D	X PIT	STR	Y	.
50	66052	D	MIXED	OR	Y	.
51	12991	D	GERM SHE	STR	N-NO	.
52	12851	D	PIT	STR	N-DIP	.
53	12826	D	BEAGLE	STR	N-NO	.
54	12828	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
55	12806	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
56	12806	D	X LAB	STR	Y	.
57	12761	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
58	12735	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
59	12726	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
60	12727	C	DLH	STR	Y	.
61	12631	D	CHOW	STR	Y	.
62	12631	D	CHOW	STR	Y	.
63	12613	D	X ROTT	STR	Y	.
64	12604	D	X HND	STR	Y	.
65	12604	D	X HND	STR	Y	.
66	12601	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
67	12548	D	MIXED	STR	Y	.
68	12548	D	MIXED	STR	Y	.
69	12535	D	X SPITZ	STR	Y	.
70	12542	W	RACoon	STR	Y	.
71	12538	D	X G. RET	STR	Y	.
72	12511	W	OPOSSUM	STR	Y	.
73	12499	D	X CHOW	OR	Y	.
74	14299	D	X SHEP	OR	Y	.
75	9965	D	X CHOW	STR	Y	.
76	9965	D	X CHOW	STR	Y	.
77	9973	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
78	9924	W	NUTRIA	STR	Y	.
79	9929	D	MASTIFF	STR	N-RTO	.
80	9943	W	AR	STR	Y	.

(table continued)

	File	species	breed	reason	euthanized	VAR00001
81	9928	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
82	9891	W	SQUIRREL	STR	N-RTW	.
83	9890	D	X LAB	STR	Y	.
84	9887	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
85	9883	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
86	9876	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
87	9876	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
88	9834	W	OPOSSUM	STR	Y	.
89	9794	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
90	9792	D	X BREED	STR	N-DIP	.
91	9793	C	DMH	STR	Y	.
92	9791	D	GERM SH	BC	N-RTO	.
93	9764	D	HUSKY	STR	N-RTO	.
94	9745	C	DSH	STR	N-RTO	.
95	9723	W	NUTRIA	STR	Y	.
96	9721	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
97	9721	C	DSH	STR	Y	.
98	9708	W	RACoon	STR	Y	.
99	9719	W	SNAKE	STR	N-RTW	.
100	80197	C	DSH	OR	N-RTO	.

their owner, 2% died in their pen, and 2 % were returned to the wild. The chi square statistic showed a level of significance below 0.05 for an association between the variables of species and outcome of case proving that the hypothesis that there is an association between species and outcome is null.

In light of this statistical analysis, it seems that E.B.R.P. facility functions mainly as an animal control center. This analysis supports the position that the animal center both demonstrates and reinforces the “out of mind, out of sight” mentality held by mainstream society. Yet, the center does not itself generate this attitude toward companion animals, but is the result of it. Perplexingly, as the center struggles to advocate for a more ethical relationship with companion animals, it must continue to reinforce the perception of animals as disposable objects.

The center must encourage the slippery identity of animals as being-objects in order to encourage humane animal treatment.

Conclusion

We ask dogs to fulfill emotional niches created by fragmented living while simultaneously denying them authentic acceptance of their alterity and significance. When we ask dogs to play the role of emotional equal, they fail. Subsequently, we often become disillusioned or overburdened and necessarily remove them from our lives. We find ourselves in an uncomfortable position, and we use a false self/other binary to cope with our failure to act responsibly. When we reduce animals to objects, an ethical human-dog bond becomes impossible.

The human-dog relationship cannot be reduced to a self/other binary because it is illogical and unethical. Dogs are not people, they cannot fill human roles, yet they are significant others. They are capable of socially creating and participating in mind across the species boundary (as discussed in chapter 2) in a complex relationship. As Caroline Knapp states, the human-dog bond “mitigates one of our most primal struggles, between the wish to merge with another and the need to separate” (1995:228).

As I have discussed, meaning is socially constructed in the E.B.R.P. animal center. We navigate our contradictory perception of companion animals as being-objects through the way we speak about animal control centers, the location and arrangement of the E.B.R.P. animal control center itself, and the performance of surrender and adoption processes with the center.

We have adopted an “out of sight, out of mind” attitude in order to cope with our uneasiness with pet euthanasia. We use the self/other binary as a rationalization for why we can discard sentient individual animals. Ultimately we say, *you are not human, you are not like me.*

Of course, we know that dogs are not human, but attempting to qualify the human-dog bond with this logic is what gets us into trouble in the first place.

Pet adoption and surrendering practices at the E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center enact our culturally constructed identity of companion animals. The meaning of the human-dog bond and its breakdown are socially enacted in the center. The center strongly promotes animal advocacy but also shields us from the role we play in animal euthanasia. Statistically, the center is little more than an animal control center, but center employees attempt to save as many lives as possible in their lived-in practice. Ultimately, the center's very existence is a phenomenological expression of the need for the institutionalized euthanization of companion animals.

CHAPTER 4: OTHERING COMPANION ANIMALS

Introduction

In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Donna Haraway writes that, “My multi-species family is not about surrogacy and substitutes; we are trying to live other tropes, other metaplasms” (2003: 96). Many humans fail to invite dogs into a human-animal relationship on such terms. Humans may ask dogs to fill some lack in their life, to reform a connection to some idealized version of nature that they feel is lost, or to express the traits they find valuable in the human self. As I have already stated, placing dogs in roles of substitution often causes the breakdown of the human-dog bond. Although humans and dogs make excellent social companions, humans must be willing to accept that a dog is a dog, not a child, spouse, or any being remotely analogous to a human.

We must look at the reasons people adopt companion animals as well as the reasons they surrender them in order to explore how we view companion animals as object-beings, since the misguided expectations we have of dogs are often what causes us to euthanize them. We can discover how people mobilize the object-being perception of animals, and search for an authentic acceptance of dogs through a discussion of the ways we speak about them.

Method

I conducted fieldwork at the E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center from August 2004 to February 2006. I made 27 visits to the center ranging in length from one hour to five hours. I began my research under the guidance of the Assistant Director Dez Crawford. Crawford has since left the center.

The bulk of my qualitative data comes from interviews and conversations I documented among center employees and pet owners. Crawford instructed me to remain as unobtrusive as

possible and never to verbally pass judgment on pet owners surrendering pets. In addition to agreeing to follow these guidelines, I offered to volunteer at the center in return for being allowed to conduct my research there. I walked adoption dogs, counseled potential adopters, answered phones, and helped out whenever asked. I also spent time sitting in the front receiving area and the back kennel office simply observing.

I was left alone by center employees when I first began conducting research. Most employees did not know exactly why I was there, but they did know that my volunteer duties were not part of a legal sentence. Therefore, I was not given any instruction on what to do. As the clerks in the front office became more accustomed to my presence, they began instructing me to answer phones whenever necessary as well as to show visitors the available adoption animals. Although the office clerks asked me to help, they never asked me to compromise my research. In fact, I was strongly encouraged to show visitors the adoption animals because this was a time-consuming task that kept the clerks from other duties. I collected much of my data during these adopter visits. These interviews were informal; people often engaged in long conversations while deciding on which animal to adopt, and would offer information freely. Sometimes, I would tell the person I was conducting a research project for my master's thesis and would take notes as we talked. On occasion, the process would go more quickly and I would wait until after the adopter had left to take notes. I always collected information about the species, breed, and age of the animal being adopted, as well as the reasons the person gave for adopting the pet. Often times, this and other information came from simply writing down what the person said and did during the adoption process, and other times I asked direct questions to obtain this information. I did not record any information that could identify the adopter.

I stayed in the kennel office on days when I collected data on surrendering pet owners. These interviews were conducted differently from the adoption interviews. I was often alone with adopters, whereas kennel officers facilitated the surrendering process. I would often listen in on conversations between the surrendering pet owners and the officers and then follow up with an interview when possible. I always started these interviews by informing the person that I was conducting research for my master's thesis. These interviews were more formal than the adoption interviews, and I conducted them outside of the center at a small table near the kennel office cashier window. The surrender interviews were more structured than the adoption interviews as there were no animals around and far less noise. Adoption interviews often simply happened while adopters looked at the available animals, but I had to construct surrender interviews deliberately. When I was unable to conduct formal surrender interviews, I was often able to obtain the necessary data by observing conversations between the surrendering pet owner and the kennel officer.

I recorded 55 interactions, including formal and informal interviews as well as observed conversations between center employees and pet owners. In each interview, I focused on documenting specific quotes in order to gather data on how people speak about companion animals and therefore, their perceptions of them.

Findings

I found through my analysis of the interviews that we can discover as much about the way we other companion animals through documenting how potential adopters speak about and interact with the animals as we can through documenting how pet owners speak about surrendering pets. The interview process allowed me to document ways of speaking about companion animals that indicate that a person is more inclined to the ethical type of human-

animal relationship I have outlined in this research project. Furthermore, I discovered humans engage in multiple verbal and behavioral expressions that suggest that our perception of companion animals is complicated. Not only do we use our perception of companion animals as being-objects as a strategy in rationalizing our capricious treatment of them, but we seem to employ the being-object identity as though it were a unified identity, made up of two complimentary perceptions rather than two contradictory ones.

Adopters

One repeatedly emergent reason adopters gave for adopting pets was the desire to save animals from suffering. This reason appeared in many variations ranging from the fear that the animals would be euthanized if not adopted to a moral standing that pet store practices are inhumane. Also many people wished to adopt “hurricane animals” following the influx of pets from New Orleans to Baton Rouge due to hurricane Katrina.

Many adopters told me that they wished to adopt center animals because they were under the impression that all animals at the center were euthanized if not adopted. One woman told me that she had been planning to purchase a beagle, but “I thought I better go to the center because I know. . . I know what happens.”

The desire to save unwanted or suffering animals often appeared in conjunction with an objection to purchasing pet store dogs bred in puppy mills. Puppy mill is a term used to unfavorably describe large-scale breeding operations.

One woman told me that she wanted a center animal, “because I’d rather save a dog’s life then adopt one that’s going to be easily adopted.” She added that she didn’t agree with puppy mill breeding practices. Whether or not pet stores do in fact sell pets from disreputable breeders

is not the focus of this research. What is important, is that several of the adopters I interviewed believed that this was the case.

A family adopting a cat as a birthday gift for their daughter told me that they had tried to adopt through a private humane group before visiting the center. They decided to come to center after the humane group representative informed them that would have to pass a home inspection before being allowed to adopt a cat. The woman was noticeably aggravated by the involved process and told me that she felt it would have been “easier to get a baby from overseas.”

Often times, the adopters paired a desire to promote animal welfare with an “us vs. them” dynamic placing themselves in opposition to people they believed do not promote animal welfare or who participate in animal cruelty. This dynamic also appeared in the speech of center employees. One adopter, a single middle-aged male came to the center to adopt a male mastiff. He told me that he adopted from the center because he wanted a dog that needed a home. He said, “People are cruel to drop their animals off, they should hang them (the people).” Another male adopter mentioned to me that it must be difficult working in the center; he told me he would not be able to last five minutes there. He went on to say that he could not watch shows such as the Animal Planet Channel’s “Animal Precinct,” a reality show that films animal control officers working in the field in various cities. He mentioned one particular show in which a bait dog (a submissive dog used to train aggressive fighting dogs) was removed from one owner. He stated, “Give me five minutes with that person,” in reference to the owner of the bait dog.

The center maintains contact with several breed rescue groups. Representatives from these groups are contacted when purebred animals needing costly medical attention (such as heartworm treatment) arrive at the center. I interviewed one such representative of the English

Springer Spaniel of America breed rescue group who had come to the center to adopt an English Springer Spaniel who had tested positive for heartworms. The woman told me that she had become interested in the breed when she confronted a neighbor who was keeping an English Springer Spaniel in unfit conditions. The woman emphatically told me that, “The public lies, they are ignorant and loving it.” She did not make any distinction between reputable pet owners and people who abuse or neglect animals. She stated that, “Breed rescue is the major/only salvation for a lot of these pure breeds.”

Many adopters chose to adopt from the center because they believed the animals to be more reliably healthy. One man told me that he had only bought breed-registered puppies as pets, but had “heard across the board that mutts are better tempered and healthier.” Another pair of adopters was two roommates who told me they chose to adopt from the center because they wanted a mutt. Interviewees also told me that they preferred center animals because they are spayed and neutered or have received their shots. In reality, the center does not provide animals with their annual shots. The medical staff provides adoption animals with necessary medical care, rabies and heartworm screenings, and a spay or neuter operation, but all adopters sign a contract upon adoption stating that they will take the animal to a veterinarian within 14 days to receive a more extensive medical evaluation and necessary vaccinations. A clause in the contract permits adopters to return sick animals to the center within 14 days.

Several adopters came to the center looking for hurricane animals after hurricane Katrina. Animal rescue stories were televised in news broadcasts nearly as much as human rescues. Adopters desiring hurricane animals often presented themselves as desiring to save the animals most in need, yet they often left the center upon discovering that there were no animals from the hurricane offered in adoption. In these cases, the suffering animal became a fetishized object.

Freud states that, “If one has lost an object or has been obliged to give it up, one often compensates oneself by identifying oneself with it and by setting it up once more in one’s ego, so that here object-choice regresses, as it were, to identification” (Freud 1965:79). These adopters objectified these animals by fetishizing their suffering as unique because they attributed the suffering to hurricane Katrina. They wanted only hurricane animals, in spite of the fact that other adoption animals had suffered, were suffering, and also desperately needed homes.

I conclude that these adopters were not in fact acting upon a desire to promote animal welfare, but were participating in a form of othering companion animals. I do so because of the fact that many of these adopters wanted only hurricane animals, and because some went so far as to request certain breeds. I answered one call from a woman inquiring if the center had any English Bull Dogs from the hurricane available for adoption.

The suffering dog as fetishized object appeared in other adopter’s accounts as well. As I was taking one woman through the adoption kennels, she asked “Have any of these dogs been abused?” She specifically requested an abused animal.

Adopters othered companion animals in several other ways. Several adopters did not handle the animal they adopted. On one occasion, a young male in his late teens adopted a dog he did not touch once during the entire adoption process. On a second occasion, a teenage girl and her mother adopted a dog that neither touched before adopting. In both cases, the adopters decided to adopt within a matter of minutes.

I conclude that these adopters were objectifying the pets they adopted because nearly all the adopters I counseled interacted with the animals through touch and speech. Many adopters even held the animals close to their faces or kissed them though the animals had not been bathed. The girl told me she wanted a pet for companionship, and her mother stated that she liked dogs

because they are there when “you need someone to talk to.” The women obviously felt the human-dog bond could be a substantial one filled with compassion, yet neither made any outward gesture toward recognizing the animal as a sentient being. The young man did take the dog out into the courtyard and watch him run around even though he did not touch him, but the women seemed to make their decision from simply looking at the animal. The animal seemed objectified in the sense that the women judged him only on visual criteria and othered him in the sense that they withheld the tactile interaction that was so common in other adoption interviews. The women failed to engage the dog as an individual by not interacting with him.

I observed adopters perform two other behaviors that can be linked to this type of othering. The first instance involved a man and his wife visiting the center in hopes of adopting a puppy. The older couple looked at several puppies and asked me to remove one from the display case. When I brought the dog to the man he held the puppy in his hand at arms length. The puppy’s feet hung unsupported from his hand. The man looked the puppy over, but he did not pet her or hold her near him. He inspected the puppy; he did not interact with her. I asked the woman if she would like to hold the puppy, she politely declined stating, “I love ‘em, but keep their distance.” The man informed me that he wanted a female because they make better guard dogs, and at this time Asst. Director Crawford interjected into our conversation that that was a myth and that he should choose a dog based on personality.

The second instance in which I observed potential adopters alienating the animal occurred in the case of a mother who arrived at the center with her three daughters. The family had seen a photo of a dog available for adoption in the newspaper and had hoped to adopt that animal. I told the woman that dog had been adopted, but that I could show her other available dogs. The woman told me she did not want to go back to the adoption area because she was

afraid of dogs. Other adopters had visited the center asking to adopt the animal they had seen in the newspaper. These animals were usually adopted quickly and, therefore, more often than not, people wanting to adopt the animal in the paper left the center empty handed. I consider this behavior a type of othering in the sense that these adopters chose to adopt an animal based literally on an object, a photograph. In the case of this family, the situation was compounded by the fact that the woman wanted to adopt the dog pictured in the paper, but was afraid of actual contact with dogs.

One male visited the center to adopt a Great Dane that had recently arrived. The man told me he wanted a large dog much like the Pit Bull he had recently lost. The man seemed to be looking for a monetary investment, rather than a companion. He complained when I informed him of the adoption fee. The veterinarian had estimated the dog to be around four years old. Large breeds such as Great Danes have a life expectancy of only seven to eight years. The man felt 70 dollars was too expensive for a dog that would live for only a few more years. He was also argumentative about the center's spay and neuter policy. He said, "They're going to save your life but cut your nuts off," to the dog during the adoption process. The man adopted the dog but continued to debate the center's spay and neuter policy with the reception clerk while filling out the necessary papers. He stated, "It's an expensive dog, I can't breed him." The clerk responded that, "You ought to come here and see when they fill up the dump truck with all the dead dogs." The man was visibly angered by her statement and went outside to wait while his companion finished filling out the paper work. After the pair left, the clerk informed me that "It's always the men who complain about the neuter policy." The man did not authentically engage the Great Dane in the sense that he attached notions of self to the animal in his reluctance

to have the dog neutered, and also reduced it to a breed object by noting that the animal was “an expensive dog” yet did not see any real value in a neutered animal.

Adopters often stated that they had visited pet stores or classifieds but had decided to adopt from the center because they felt it was a more affordable option. A middle-aged man searching for a pet for his three boys told me, “I must be stupid,” in reference to the fact that he had visited a pet store unaware of the expense of purebred pets. He decided to come to the center after he discovered the price of one pet store dog to be \$1,899.

Several of the adopters I counseled returned the animals they adopted. I was able to speak to only one adopter who had returned an animal. I had not counseled him, but answered his phone call. He wanted to know how the dog he had returned was doing. He told me that he had to return the animal because he kept escaping from their yard. The man obviously regretted having to return the animal, he told me “I liked that old boy.” Yet, the man did in fact return the animal when other courses of action such as better securing the yard or enrolling the animal in some type of training program were available. The adopted dog was objectified in the sense that the human-dog relationship was dissolved when the dog failed to meet the pet owner’s expectations. The dog is reduced to an object in the sense that he can be returned, and the adopter’s fee can be refunded.

Surrendering Pet Owners

My research with surrendering pet owners provided further insight into how we mobilize the being-object perception of companion animals when we must confront the unpleasant reality of pet euthanasia. Pet euthanasia is even more unsettling when we feel that we are to blame. I observed several pet owners engaging in what appeared to be blame displacement strategies

when surrendering animals to the center through employing the “us vs. them” dynamic between center employees and the public.

Several times pet owners came into the center with an attitude that the center is to blame for the euthanization of animals. A young couple came to the center to surrender an animal that had belonged to the woman’s mother. Upon getting out of their car, the young girl began to shout to the officer in the kennel office, “Ya’ll going to kill it? Why ya’ll going to kill it?” The officer explained to her that there was an 80% chance that the animal would be euthanized. The couple brought the animal out of the car and the woman photographed the dog but did not touch or speak to her.

In another case, center employees had convinced a pet owner to euthanize her Pit Bull humanely. The center had been fostering the dog because the woman had been displaced by hurricane Katrina. The woman had not vaccinated the dog, and as a result, during his stay at the center he contracted Parvo, a fatal disease. The woman was visibly upset about having to surrender her dog, but had not properly vaccinated the dog when he was a puppy and also stated that she had chose to relocate to a county in Mississippi where Pit Bulls are illegal. At first the woman seemed to think euthanization was in the dog’s best interest, and stated, “He’s sick, he’s just sitting there like he doesn’t even know me anymore.” But as she was signing the release form her attitude became accusatory and she asked, “They’re not going beat him or anything, when will it happen, he’s not going feel anything?” After signing the dog over to the center, the woman had a conversation with an office clerk in the receiving area in which she stated how upset she was that the center was going to euthanize her pet. The clerk was empathetic to towards the woman, but after the woman left, the clerk stated, “If they (the pet owner) would have vaccinated him, it wouldn’t have happened.”

In one case, projection of self onto the dog determined one pet owner's evaluation of humane and inhumane practices. A young male came to the center to have his nine year old Weinmaraner euthanized. I interviewed him while he waited for the dog to be euthanized. The surrender process was not typical because the man wanted to take the dog's body home with him to give it a "proper burial." I inferred from this statement that the man cared for the dog a great deal. Yet, when I asked him why he was having him euthanized, he told me that the dog had become aggressive, but he had not had him neutered. He told me that he had considered having the dog neutered, but ultimately decided not to because he felt it was inhumane. In accordance with my agreement not to harass pet owners surrendering animals, I did not point out the obvious contradiction in the man's decision, but I could not help but wonder what had made this man feel that euthanization was a more humane way to treat his dog than to have him neutered.

In several cases, the people surrendering the pet were not the pet's owner but a family member or friend of the owner. In several cases, the reason for surrendering a pet that interviewees gave me was that a family member had moved to a new city after evacuating from hurricane Katrina and had left the animal behind. In other cases, I was told that the pet owner had fallen ill or was otherwise incapable of caring for the pet.

I conducted only a few surrender interviews from which I concluded that the pet owner did not other the animal in an attempt to put distance between herself and her uneasiness with pet euthanasia. These interviews were with pet owners who surrendered their pet because the animal was ill or suffering. Yet, in all but one of these cases, someone other than the actual owner of the pet surrendered the animal. I consider this behavior to be an othering of the surrendered animal because the pet owner chose not to come face to face with the actual practice of the pet

euthanization. I use *practice* in the sense that the pet owners did not confront the physicality of the center itself and actually hand the animal over to the kennel officer, not in the sense that I feel pet owners can only authentically face pet euthanasia in the killing chamber. This distance between pet owner and the euthanization of the pet appears in the cases of hurricane Katrina evacuees who left their pets with others to surrender them, and even in the case of the woman who photographed but did not touch the dog she surrendered.

Conclusion

Before I began conducting research at the E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center, I expected that I would discover how we other companion animals mainly through interviews with pet owners surrendering animals. In reality, I learned far more about how we other companion animals through conducting adoption interviews and observing the behaviors of potential adopters. This discovery is in accordance with the thesis of this project in that it reveals how center adoptions are a double edge sword when it comes to promoting animal welfare. The adoption program itself supports our perception of companion animals as being-objects.

The E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center animal adoption program is perhaps the best way to save the lives of unwanted animals. The basic foundation of any such program is that companion animals are emotional beings and individuals capable of agency and deserving of just and loving treatment. Yet, the reality is that the center employees are overwhelmed with animals and must do whatever can be done to save as many lives as possible. This means that adopters do not go through any type of screening process or educational program before adopting a pet. Center employees would support such a program enthusiastically, but have neither the funding nor personnel resources necessary for such a costly and time-consuming program. Furthermore, it is

doubtful that adopters themselves would be willing to submit to such a program in order to adopt a pet. As I have already stated, the center provides a service for humans, not for animals.

Many adopters seemed to wish only to acquire another possession, such as the man who wanted to breed the adopted Great Dane, or the woman who wished to adopt an English Bull Dog from the hurricane. Although some adopters seemed to be truly beholden to the ethic of the human-dog bond discussed here, many seemed to be attempting to fill some perceived lack of self, rather than attempting to engage in a meaningful relationship with a marginalized being.

In the cases of surrendering pet owners, I discovered that the ways people put distance between themselves and pet euthanasia are more important than the reasons that people surrender pets. As I have discussed in chapter 3, this distancing mechanism is already in place in the design of the center and in the way surrendering processes are conducted. Pet owners themselves avoid confronting the reality of pet euthanasia through having someone else bring their pet to the center and also through questioning the center's kill policy.

It is important to note that all pet owners discussed in this study made a humane choice to bring their animals to the center. I do not wish to suggest that these people treated animals inhumanely by surrendering them to the center. They could have dumped the animal on the side of the road or allowed her to suffer some other cruel fate. These people brought animals to the center because they wanted to prevent the animals' suffering. The ethic this research questions is the framework that we are socialized into and continue to generate that allows us to view animals as being-objects, as liminal spaces between commitment and non-commitment that come with a return policy. I have tried to show how these adopters and pet owners' behaviors and speech point towards the existence of such a framework. I do not wish to imply that these individuals are themselves responsible for the solution to the problem of our unethical perception of animals.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

How and with whom do we create intersubjective relationships? How do these relationships impact how we constitute otherness? How can we communicate in a world divided by political, religious, class, cultural, and ethical realms? Where do we search for connection among difference? How do we act ethically toward beings in whom we see self and other? How can examining our relationship with companion animals offer insight into our relationships with each other?

These questions provided the impetus for this research project. As the author of this thesis, I in no way deny an agenda to promote animal welfare. That agenda also includes a desire to promote a more accurate understanding of the human-dog bond which I hope will lead to a more ethical enactment of this relationship. Dogs, as well as all animals, we draw into human, cultural constructs deserve empathy and authentic engagement. This authentic engagement does not require us to elevate dogs to the status of equal, but that we remove this construct of equality from our thinking about them. Equality implies similarity, and what I am searching for is not a way to find similarity between humans and dogs, but a way to coexist ethically in difference. What I am searching for is a way to experience the human-dog relationship without reducing it to a self/other binary, in the hopes that we may find ways of forming human-human bonds that are themselves more ethical and authentic. As Arluke and Sanders write:

Examination of the human-animal interaction leads to a far more social perspective on mind; it is reconceived as the product of interaction in which intimates are actively involved in contextualizing, identifying, understanding, and responding to the defined subjective experience of the nonverbal other (1996: 56).

Our pets' inability to verbally communicate with us forces us to reevaluate our notion of mind as object. Through exploring how humans and dogs navigate the interspecies relationship, we come to understand mind to be an exchange between actors, not a preexisting tool that agents

bring to the interaction. This research project exposes not only the inadequacy of the self/other binary to frame our interactions with each other (across species boundaries or otherwise,) but the unjust imbalance of power that such a binary creates between actors. When we acknowledge mind as social interaction, we are able to see what is at stake in creating a more ethical human-dog bond. We see that:

From this perspective, the world is not separated into subjects (scientists, men, the powerful) and the objects (women, animals, “savages”) but instead is composed of subjects-in-interaction, human and nonhuman actors cooperating and struggling with historical, political, and cultural forces that embed their action (Arluke and Sanders 1995: 57).

We see that an ethical human-dog bond involves face-to-face interaction, and that communication with other beings must be thought of in this way if we wish to avoid the pitfalls of appropriating and stereotyping other cultures and peoples. The study of the human-dog bond in the context of pet euthanasia is important because, “Lessons have to be inextricably part of the story, it’s the rule of the genre for those of us...who believe that the sign and flesh are one” (Haraway 2003:17). In the case of companion animals, the lesson is important because thinking about pets as objects not only places us in impenetrable, yet empty opposition, not only hampers our work with bad theory, but results in real life consequences of death and suffering for millions of individuals. Learning to recognize how we other dogs will open the door to how we construct categories of other, how we manipulate identities of other, and how we come to take as fact the meanings we have constructed. When we see understand that an ethical human-dog relationship involves face-to-face interaction, we understand why such a relationship must be ethical in the first place.

We also must also recognize that creating an ethical human-dog bond has nothing to do with applying some objective notion of morals to our interspecies relationships. This thesis is

based on the notion that human actors have a responsibility to ethically engage nonhuman actors, and as such I cannot deny that I feel empathy towards companion animals, and that I believe empathy with nonhuman actors is integral in maintaining an ethical relationship with them. But I must emphatically state that people who have failed to engage animals authentically are not unethical. I call you, the reader to understand that the call is not simply to treat animals compassionately or to pass judgment on those who have their pets euthanized. The call to act ethically is answered in recognizing how we other companion animals, that all people at some time or another mistakenly take “local and provisional category abstractions like ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ for the world, and second, mistake potent consequences to be preexisting foundations” (Haraway: 2003:6). Our ethical responsibility is to understand that the self/other binary as an “us and them” concept is a false and unjust dichotomy.

This research project demonstrates that people do not other pets only when they surrender them to animals control centers, but do so when they adopt them. Keeping animals as pets in no way should be construed with engaging them in an ethical human-animal bond. Furthermore, pet euthanasia is not always the result of the breakdown of the human-animal bond. Sometimes it is simply a loving choice made by the pet owner to end the suffering of animal who cannot make that choice for herself.

The human-animal relationship is unethical when pet owners rationalize euthanasia by turning a living being into an object. The human-animal relationship is unethical when animal are reduced to breed-objects, when they suffer because they are viewed only as commodities. The human-animal relationship is unethical when people view animals as objects of self-definition, or force them into an identity of “less than” on a quantitative continuum that

arbitrarily rates human attributes. Pet euthanasia in itself is not unethical, but is often the tragic outcome of engaging animals on unethical terms.

Many aspects are involved in creating an ethical human-dog relationship. First and foremost, there is the recognition that the self/other binary is a cultural construct that serves only to further empower those in power and to marginalize those not in power. The second requirement is that we as humans situate our human-dog relationships in historical and evolutionary context. It is absolutely imperative that we understand how dogs became dogs and humans became humans along side each other if we wish to better communicate across the species boundary.

As Budiansky states, “The ‘paradigm of consciousness,’ the belief that man is the author of his own history is hard to shake. Domestic animals shake it and none more so than the dog” (2000:17). Dogs became the companions of humans because of a mutual advantage the two species gained from interaction. The genetic and archeological evidence suggests that this interaction was initiated by wolves scavenging easy meals from humans who tolerated them most likely because they warned humans of other predators and removed waste.

The third requirement of an ethical human-animal bond is investigating how societal institutions such as animal control centers are both sites of resistance against our perception of dogs as being-objects, and how they necessarily serve to reinforce that perception. The E.B.R.P. Animal Control Center’s primary mission is to provide a service to the public. The center also functions as a facility where animals can be surrendered by pet owners, no questions asked. Yet, we must also note that although the existence of animal control centers helps to discipline society into viewing animals as disposable, there is no denying that centers do maintain adoption programs, and that euthanasia is not in itself a cruel practice.

The task we are called to is not to eliminate pet euthanasia but to examine the practice, why it exists and why our society is seemingly obsessed with pets, yet so many are euthanized each year. The American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, Inc. estimates that 63% of American households contain pets, and that 38.4 billion dollars will be spent on pets by their American owners in 2006 (www.appma.org). In contrast, American Humane estimates that 9.6 million animals are euthanized in the United States annually (www.americanhumane.org). How can we spend so much money on pets, and yet millions must be euthanized each year? This is the perplexing situation we find ourselves in as consumers engaging in “late industrial pet-keeping practices” (Haraway 2003:17). Part of the reason we spend so much money on companion animals is that we have elevated them to the status of human. Services and products for pets range from pet daycare and pet taxidermy to pet outfits and gourmet pet treats. Most of the available “pet services” conspicuously emulate services provided for humans. A pet owner who treats her dog as though she were a human child, or a substitute for any other human relationship is in just as much danger of engaging a dog in an unethical relationship as a pet owner who surrenders a healthy animal to an animal control center where she will most likely be euthanized. Spending money on products and services for pets that are based on the logic that dogs and other companion animals are little people in fur coats will not create an ethical human-dog bond. These practices certainly do not hurt animals, but we must ask ourselves if these practices address the dog’s needs or do they simply help to further construct our desired identity of self in our pets? Do they serve simply to allow us to indulge in inappropriate fantasies that an animal cannot ever fulfill? Are we only obsessed with consumerism (not dogs) and is it unethical to reduce sentient beings to objects that can be consumed? The answer is yes, for it is unethical to

mistake mind as a human characteristic when it is in actuality the engagement of both human and nonhuman actors in social interaction.

These reasons are why we must closely examine how we categorize animals through investigating how we interact with animals in institutions such as animal control centers, how we speak about them, and how we rationalize our desire to keep them as pets and to euthanize them. We must be aware of how societal institutions and practices discipline us to view animals as being-objects, and must be willing to reckon with the consequences this perception of companion animals can have for them and us. Finally we must be willing to locate our relationship with companion animals in historical, evolutionary, and cultural contexts in order to become aware of the meanings we create in our human-animal bonds.

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