

Canine Connections

Fieldwork with a Dog as Research Assistant

Karen Lane

Abstract: My research seeks out muted narratives that struggle to be heard in the contested city of Belfast. My dog is one of my ethnographic methods: dog-walking is rarely a direct journey from A to B and she can ‘authenticate’ my lingering presence in unfamiliar places; she is a gateway to dog-focused communal activities; and her categorisation of people is based on smell, not politics, religion or country of origin. When encountering random strangers with an attractive and friendly dog, her role is obvious: introduction enacted, anthropologist takes over. But does she simply mediate the encounter or does she shape what happens? The relationship between dog and person is reciprocal and the extent to which each actor responds to the other prolongs and moulds the encounter. Can she elicit stories that may not otherwise be told, do more than ‘only connect’? This paper draws on actor-network theory and cosmopolitanism.

Keywords: actor-network theory, ambiguity, Belfast, cosmopolitanism, ethnographic method, interspecies communication



Figure 1: Torridon (photograph by author: copyright of all photographs belongs to author)

Torridon is a two-year-old Wheaten Terrier (see Fig. 1), who not only accompanied me on fieldwork but also acted as my research assistant, enabling me to engage easily with strangers. When we were out, I was frequently stopped and asked about her breed, from where her name originates (Scotland) and whether her coat needs regular grooming (it does). She was declared ‘a great canine ambassador’ by the leader of a walking group we attended and it is Torridon’s diplomatic-ethnographic role that is explored in this paper. In *Howards End*, E. M. Forster prefaces his novel with the imperative ‘Only connect!’ (Forster 1972: 3), his phrase referenced by Edmund Leach to emphasise the importance of anthropology’s ‘total interconnectedness’, connections that are ‘dynamic not static’ (Leach 1967¹). Through a

discussion of my ethnographic data, I will show how Torridon assisted me to connect with people and consider whether she did more than simply mediate the anthropological encounter, drawing on cosmopolitanism and actor-network theory. The relationship between dog and human is reciprocal; the extent to which each actor responds to the other prolongs and moulds the encounter. Therefore, I will explore whether this dynamic connection elicited stories that would not otherwise be told.

My research is on personal quotidian stories told by people living in Belfast, a city dominated by two grand narratives, Catholic nationalism and Protestant unionism, narratives so pervasive they drown out other stories, other voices. Many people I work with agree and my focus on the muted is well received. The dominance of these grand narratives is not just a legacy of thirty years of the Troubles – the recent conflict formally ended by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement² – but of 800 years of antagonism between British and Irish that frequently spilled into violence, especially when the 1921 partition into Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State consolidated Protestant domination, and discrimination against Catholics, in the northern province. In Belfast, a city especially scarred by these divisions, residential and educational segregation led to what could be termed a duopolis and, although the city is undoubtedly changing, it is still, in many ways, divided and contested.

One method for eliciting quotidian stories is via Torridon. She enabled this in three ways: by vastly increasing the random-stranger-to-anthropologist encounter ratio as people sought to engage with her; by facilitating rapid entry to dog-focused or dog-friendly activities; and by authenticating my presence when meandering around a neighbourhood or going out for late-night walks, neither activity being odd with a dog. Torridon increased my visibility, especially in areas where strangers would be noticed, but for all intents and purposes I was merely walking the dog. However, both human and canine ethnographers were discovering ‘the social archaeology of community (...) [where] layers of repeated

meetings build, over time, into friendships or remain as they are – tiny intimacies or nodding [and sniffing] acquaintanceships’ and we can take advantage of ‘the everyday serendipities that go along with simply being outside’ (Davis 2013³).

Canine-initiated Connections

All ethnographers will surely recognise the importance that serendipity plays in our fieldwork – when we make happy and unexpected discoveries by accident. Expanding on Davis’s idea, I suggest that rather than merely taking advantage of serendipity, Torridon actually fostered it. Many people wanted to stroke her and sometimes they changed their direction of travel, or delayed their journey, in order to do so. I often wrote up fieldnotes sitting outside cafés and Torridon would place herself in conspicuous positions, so that, even when I was writing, she was on the lookout for potential interlocutors; absorbed in my typing I would be interrupted with ‘Excuse me, what kind of dog is she?’ and, in the ensuing conversations, some people had interesting stories to tell.

People’s connections with Torridon, and with me through her, fall into a broad range of interactions. Many people engaged with the dog only, smiling at her as they walked past. Sometimes human interaction was restricted to a fleeting comment: for example, one man in Belfast city centre proclaimed ‘fabulous dog!’ as he strode by; a child down the street exclaimed ‘that doggy looks like Sandy from Annie!’ as she tugged her mother’s arm. Often people stopped to talk to the dog, but did not talk to me. This may seem strange, but in dog-walking terms it is socially acceptable, since the dog acts as a mediator. Indirect non-verbal communication between the humans – between the admirer and the owner – was via the admired; positive regard is expressed and accepted (both humans are usually smiling), but there is no need for speech or even eye contact. Meanwhile, the unwritten, unspoken rules on personal space are relaxed as we all come close – the stranger sometimes crouching down to

be at Torridon's eye level while I stand by. This enables a type of distant intimacy: communicative distance with physical proximity. Meanwhile, in participant-observation terms, Torridon and the stranger are the immediate participants while I observe from the other end of the lead, connected but distanced, watching as they engage in intimate haptic, visual and, for the dog, olfactory contact. This is not dissimilar to the role that children can play in this type of encounter. Indeed, sitting outside a café, a young mother and myself had a whole conversation with each other by talking to the dog and the child without even glancing at or speaking directly to each other until it was time to say goodbye.

When people did converse with me it invariably began with the common questions of 'what breed, what name?' and so on, and the ubiquity of smart phones prompted frequent requests for Torridon's photograph. Some people actively changed direction, veering from their intended course to interact with her, crossing the street or following us around. For example, a man driving along Lisburn Road suddenly stopped his car, left it on a double-yellow line with the engine running and sprinted back up the street to ask whether she was a Wheaten and where I found the breeder. The woman in Figure 2 at the St Patrick's Day parade tracked us through the city centre, with her friends in tow, so she could meet the dog, an encounter that was enthusiastically enjoyed by both parties. And Torridon sometimes drew quite a crowd as people huddled around to cuddle her and others stopped to see what all the fuss was about.



Figure 2: A woman on St Patrick’s Day declares this to be ‘the best dog snog I’ve ever had!’ (photograph by author)

Sometimes, these encounters led to deeper conversations with individuals. Torridon was always the starting point but the discussion moved on to other matters: a woman standing on a street corner clutching two bags of shopping told me about the minister’s son, just about to graduate from university in England but killed, presumed murdered, although she did not like to ask the details; standing outside the local shop, an Englishman divulged his views on being an outsider and of the political incorrectness of policy documents after translation into Ulster Scots, something he found incredible ‘in this day and age’.⁴ These conversations led to detailed fieldnotes.

Torridon also facilitated and maintained longer-term relationships. We were members of the Belfast Hills Walking Dynamos, a large and fluid group of people and several dogs that meet regularly to walk and socialise in the hills, coastline and countryside around the city. Torridon was a popular member. With sometimes up to seventy people participating, she walked with the group rather than with me, stopping occasionally to check my whereabouts but most of the time running up and down the line of people, playing joyfully with the other dogs. Comments on the group message board sometimes made reference to her, such as this one from Alan after our first walk: ‘On Sat I saw a Wheaten enjoy herself; ‘twas terrific! Bounding here and there, leaping over logs, sniffing interesting sniffs. Oh yes please bring the Wheaten along; her sheer enjoyment was very infectious!’ Over the months and walks that followed, Alan, Torridon and I developed a friendship and he and I shared and recorded his stories.

Dogs and Children

On the Belfast street where I lived, there was a gang of children led by Angela, a mature and affectionate five-year-old. They were devoted to the dog and gathered around excitedly when I drove up in the car. They would knock on the door to ask if Torridon was coming out to play, take turns (and sometimes squabble about) walking her up and down the street, and the children hung around Torridon’s neck while she stood there wagging her tail. Interestingly, Angela and Torridon together facilitated and mediated the relationship between Angela’s mother and me. Initially, the mother did not speak to me but focused on Angela and the dog. Then she began to smile. But it was not until her daughter had established a mutual loving and fun-based relationship with Torridon that she spoke to me directly.

One interesting encounter between children and dogs occurred when walking Torridon through the Bog Meadows in West Belfast. It was a really hot day and I was

looking for the lake so she could cool off with a swim, but I could not find it. As we returned, Torridon began to play with two other dogs and I fell into conversation with their human companions – two nine-year-old boys whiling away the long summer afternoon. These were streetwise kids, one especially, and after asking the dog’s name, he commented that I did not normally walk there. I explained about the lake, to which both boys immediately chorused, ‘But there is one! Shall we take you there?’ and I spent a delightful half hour in their company. We scrambled under the fence, skipped across the Gaelic Football field (‘not supposed to but if we’re quick ...’), loitered by a bridge over a stream, scrumped for wild plums that were out of their reach but not mine, and we found the lake. I listened to their easy nine-year-old street-talk, heard about the ‘paedo’ seen flashing in the meadows, and we negotiated the ‘where do you live?’ question that would place all of us in one area or another of contested, conflicted Belfast.

It felt like a *Famous Five* adventure!

Telling Tales

In Belfast it is a social taboo to ask someone’s religion or ethnic identity outright so you find out (or assume) through their name, where they live, the school they attend, the sports they participate in or by listening to how they pronounce certain words. This is what the boys were doing when they noted I did not usually walk in the area and later asked me outright where I lived. It is called ‘telling’ (see Burton 1978) and serves to establish the parameters for social behaviour in any given situation. In a sectarian – and violent – society, this can be a survival strategy and there are many accounts of how people used this information to keep their heads down and out of trouble, or to fall foul of it with sometimes-fatal results (cf. Macauley 2011; O’Callaghan 1999). But telling is so much a part of the warp and weft of life in Belfast that, although it is nearly twenty years since the ceasefires, it still continues and has become

(probably always was) a sub-conscious act. Lanclos (2003) suggests that children as young as nine are adept at telling and my experience in the Bog Meadows supports this. Telling is deeply ingrained. For example, Horatio, a 25-year-old from South Belfast, deeply eschews sectarianism, is not religious, does not want his life to be dominated or even influenced by the Troubles/post-conflict and so on but he still ‘clocks a Catholic name’ when he hears one.

Authenticating Being-there

Although Belfast is now claimed as a post-conflict city (Neill 2006), with an increasing number of tourists, there are still areas where interface tension sometimes spills into violence (Cochrane 2013). It is a small city, composed of even smaller neighbourhoods, areas where people notice strangers. I do not wish to overstate this: middle-class Belfast looks like middle-class Anytown. But, for example, I lived on the edge of the Village, a Union Jack and Ulster be-flagged working-class district just south of the city centre, where paramilitary insignia indicates which organisation ‘controls’ the street.⁵ It is not somewhere people would think to wander at night. But walking the dog gave me a reason.

Walking the dog was not usually about going from A to B in a purposeful manner: she stopped and sniffed and urinated and I had time to look around, while my phone voice recorder enabled me to make fieldnotes on the go. On the afternoon of the eleventh of July, when the streets in loyalist areas were thronged with neighbours holding street parties to celebrate Protestant supremacy, and men and boys built bonfires that would burn Irish flags and Catholic insignia later that night, I comfortably wandered those streets, walking the dog, answering questions about what breed, what name, is that coat difficult to groom. Likewise, attending the Easter Sunday parade in West Belfast and the ceremony in Milltown Cemetery to honour the long-since and recent Republican dead; I was walking the dog and answering questions while a crowd of children found Torrion more interesting than political speeches.

Torridon's personality is very evident. She is a friendly dog, alert to her surroundings, and with a cheerful 'Hello Pup!' people often recognised she was a youngster.⁶ She displays positive, accepting behaviour and people respond, and the reciprocal relationship between dog and stranger becomes a virtuous circle of interaction. But sometimes, something more seems to happen. Easter Sunday is a high point in the parading year of republicans and Catholics, celebrating the 1916 uprising against the British. Although the coup failed, it was a seminal event in Irish history, 'a date that still holds all the sacrificial significance of High Mass for Irish Republicanism' (Coogan 2005: 3). In 2014, Easter Sunday was a gloriously sunny day. The Falls Road was lined with thousands of people and a carnival atmosphere prevailed. When the parade reached its destination, Milltown Cemetery, most of the people dispersed. However, some attended the ceremony held at the 1916 memorial situated next to the graves of the hunger strikers.⁷ The dead were honoured through a reading, in Irish, of the 1916 Proclamation and the unfurling of flags, and contemporary republicanism was represented (in English) by expressions of anger about continuing British oppression and calls for a united Ireland. While there are no paramilitary gun salutes anymore, it is still a highly charged atmosphere and one where a British accent such as mine would stand out.

I stood alone at the back of the crowd to observe the proceedings and Torridon lay down next to me but before long she was surrounded by five children, the youngest a toddler and the eldest about seven or eight years old. They were stroking her, feeding her cheese sandwiches and talking to me about their friends' dogs. After the speeches, as everyone began to leave the cemetery, the parents of one child came up and asked me about the dog – what's her name, what kind of dog – then they too moved on. But the child lingered and his father came back for him: 'Come on Michael, time to leave. Do you realise that's the longest you've ever been with a dog in your life? Well done!' His father explained that, until recently, the boy had been afraid of dogs and he thanked me: 'your dog has done a very good

turn today'. Now I cannot make assumptions about the father's views towards the British, but the interaction between boy and dog, and the subsequent interaction between his father and me, transcended the political setting we were in. I suggest it was an example of creative ambiguity.

This term (sometimes referred to as constructive ambiguity) is usually associated with sensitive political negotiations, where the intentional use of ambiguous language enables radically opposed factions to move forward: 'parties knowingly choose equivocal terms so they can pretend to agree even when they remain in basic disagreement' (Klieman 1999: 13). It was a tactic employed by Prime Minister Tony Blair during the peace negotiations in Northern Ireland (Gordon 2010), since the major parties to the agreement had to 'sell' politically charged issues, such as decommissioning weapons or prisoner-release schemes, to their own constituencies.⁸ In a BBC Radio 4 documentary, Connor Murphy of Sinn Féin highlighted the importance of creative ambiguity to create room for manoeuvre within contested discourse 'in order that people could satisfy and reassure their own followers' (Murphy 2014);⁹ the unionists had to do the same thing ... with the same proposals.

'Ambiguity' in negotiation then equates to polysemic meaning and it is 'creative' through an act of imagination to foresee a more positive future. Applying the concept of creative ambiguity to Torridon's ethnographic role in Belfast, she becomes a mediatory device that enables people to sidestep the telling game. Despite any telling-assumptions that may be made about me, people can choose to engage with a quizzically named shaggy dog, not a Catholic dog or a Protestant dog. My presence at the Easter Sunday ceremony, with my British accent, was ambiguous and could be interpreted in different ways (bystander? tourist? journalist? antagonist?) but Torridon's presence gave a focus that was not political, creating an opportunity to connect. In my interaction with the boys in the Bog Meadows, when I indicated where I lived by waving vaguely towards the Village (the significance of which

will not have been lost on the boys) we talked about dogs and watched them splash around in the water.

But on these and other walks, in my encounters with random strangers, does Torridon *only* connect? For the vast majority I would say yes. However, there are occasions when she seems to be a field actor who *conditions* the encounter. Does Torridon elicit stories that would otherwise not be told?

Canine Elicitation Techniques

On one of the first sunny afternoons of spring, Jane was sitting on a bench by the river Lagan, a bike resting by her side and a lit cigarette in her hand. A quiet moment of contemplation ... interrupted by a very river-wet dog! As I caught up with Torridon and apologised for the state she was in, Jane smiled indulgently and stroked the soggy creature. We fell into an easy conversation and she asked why I was in Belfast, my English accent being the dead giveaway of a non-native. She was interested in my research and we spent the next half hour or so discussing hidden voices, Northern Irish politics, social conditions and loyalist working-class areas. Soon after we started talking – Jane sitting on the bench, me standing in front of her – Torridon curled around Jane's feet and dozed in the sun.

To a passer-by she probably looked like Jane's dog. As our conversation drew to a close Jane stroked Torridon again, smiled at her fondly and said she was reminded of her own dog, who had passed away last year. But *why* did Torridon wrap herself around Jane's feet and why did Jane speak so candidly to a stranger? I met Jane again and asked her if Torridon was part of the reason she talked to me. She thought for a moment ... then said no, it was because I was so open about being in Belfast to study people and she felt it important that ordinary and everyday stories are heard. Much as it would be flattering to think of myself as an effective ethnographer, I still feel that Torridon played a role.

Gore et al. argue that to elicit experience not as it is understood *post facto* but as it actually happens, ‘what drives the actor to act as he or she does *at the very moment of acting*’ (2013: 129, my emphasis), we need to develop different methods to access a pre-reflective understanding of experience that highlights the situatedness of anthropological knowledge. My methodological contribution is to recognise that my dog plays a significant role in eliciting responses, in bringing forth stories, and that this happens in the moment – people do not cognitively analyse at the time why they are doing it. I now consider how Torridon-as-ethnographic-method works, first from a bio-psychological perspective, then as an example of an assemblage.

Canine behaviourist, Alexandra Horowitz, suggests that dogs are good anthropologists because they pay close attention to human behaviour; ‘they notice what is typical, and what is different’ (Horowitz 2009: 163) and how they do this is not just by looking but also by tasting and, more importantly, by smelling. Dogs have a superior olfactory sense with two- to three-hundred million sensory receptor sites in the nose compared to only six million in humans, and they breathe in through the front of the snout and out via two slits at the side, so they are constantly breathing in smells, circular breathing (Horowitz 2009). Indeed, dogs’ sense of smell is used to detect medical conditions, such as cancer or diabetes.¹⁰ Horowitz suggests that dogs pick up on our fluctuating hormone levels and the prosody of our speech, the inflections that indicate underlying intention, while patting a dog can reduce blood pressure and damp down an over-stimulated sympathetic nervous system. She refers to a study on interspecies hormonal interactions (Jones and Josephs 2006), which demonstrated that:

Levels of endorphins (hormones that make us feel good) and oxytocin and prolactin (those hormones involved with social attachment) go up

when we're with dogs. Cortisol (stress hormone) levels go down. (...)

In many cases the dog receives nearly the same effect. Human company can lower a dog's cortisol level; petting can calm a racing heart. (Horowitz 2009: 279–80. See also Nagasawa et al. 2009)

This suggests that Torridon's presence may have further relaxed Jane on that sunny day so that she was more open to discussion with me. And, although this may be a more tenuous connection, I wonder whether Torridon and Jane recognised something in each other relating to Jane's deceased dog? Anthropologist Samantha Hurn (2012) suggests that animals are able to empathise with members of other species. It is most unusual for Torridon to curl around someone's legs and doze off. It could have been post-swim, warm-sun tiredness, or maybe she sensed a hunger for comforting canine company.

The reason why Jane chose to talk could also be explained with actor-network theory (ANT), whereby it is the assemblage or heterogeneous network of people and objects that lead to the outcome (or effect in ANT-speak). Jane, Torridon, me, the bench, the lead (not attached), the warm sunny day, the river Lagan and the passers-by were all actants in this grouping: it is the *combination* that matters. Each entity 'acquire[s] attributes in relation to others' and all are treated equally for analysis (Law 1999: 4); thus Jane spoke because all of these factors were present in this place at this time. Some actants in networks are explained as intermediary – they are an important part of the network (for example, the bench Jane was sitting on) but they do not change the behaviour of the other actants. Mediatory devices, on the other hand, are actants that transform the network: Torridon interrupted Jane's afternoon, Jane and I had a conversation.

Mediatory devices can temporarily change the rules of social engagement: when talking to someone on the phone in the street, you are implicitly disengaging from the people

around you and someone else is unlikely to interrupt your conversation unless it is urgent. Similarly, when engrossed in reading a book in a public place. I often used my phone to record fieldnotes. Although it is acceptable to talk out loud in the street when making a phone call, I once felt compromised when I thought I was overheard making notes, commenting on what I could see around me, such that I quickly turned the voice memo into one half of an imagined conversation, suddenly very conscious of the man behind me on the street. Torridon acts as a mediatory device, for example, by making it acceptable for me not to communicate with someone who is stroking her, and she is transformational because she is an animate being actively engaging with her surroundings, including other people. She also changes the phone/book rules: I have been interrupted more than once during a phone call, and while deeply engrossed in a book, to be asked what kind of dog she is.

In ANT the explanation of the effects is in the detail of the situation – it is a method more than a theory (Latour 1999); the knowledge gleaned is the product of the network (Law 1992); and agency is not limited to the humans in the group (Munro 2009). The use of ‘agency’ here does not equate with intentionality. For example, if Torridon had been on a lead that day by the Lagan it would have prevented her from running up to Jane and the lead would be seen to have agency in this combination of actants. Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore intentionality since, if Torridon had been on the lead, it would have been *my intention* that Torridon did not interrupt Jane that would have enabled Jane to continue snoozing. Meanwhile if Torridon was on the lead but I was not holding it, *her intention* to interrupt Jane would have been realised. Sentient beings display intention, the inorganic world does not and this must be taken into account in an assemblage. It cannot just be brushed under the carpet.

In ANT all actants are equal for analysis, but I suggest that within the heterogeneous network with Jane by the Lagan, Torridon was more equal than the others and thus more deserving of analysis. If it is the combination that matters and we take Torridon out of that

combination, would Jane have spoken to me? She was enjoying the sunshine by the river – for all I know she could have had her eyes closed when Torridon thrust a wet snout on her knee. If that had not happened, I could have walked past without being seen or without attracting attention, being just another passer-by. It would have been a very different network. So, although it was that particular assemblage at that particular time that produced the conversation that Jane and I had, Torridon was the most important member of that assemblage.

People stop to talk to me *because* of Torridon; it *is* a causal relationship. Torridon interrupted Jane's moment of solitude because she wanted to be stroked. ANT theorists say it is reductionist to give credence to social-psychological causal relationships and that we should concentrate only on the effects of the network; 'Latour wants to stick to what happens, and avoid recourse to pseudo-explanation in the form of motives, interests and intentions' (Munro 2009: 125), but they also ground their ideas firmly in the empirical, and my empirical evidence is that Torridon mattered more than me or the bench or the sunny day. This recalls Prell, who suggests that it is the actants' positions in the network that matters in terms of who 'makes things happen' (Prell 2012: 96). Torridon makes things happen, the fostering of serendipity that I referred to earlier in the paper, thus it is difficult to reconcile this with an egalitarian view of actants.

So if ANT is left wanting, I need to turn to other explanations to consider why Torridon works as my research assistant. There is a plethora of research in social sciences and animal studies to support the argument that dogs encourage social interaction (cf. Hart et al. 1987; Messent 1983; Wood et al. 2007). Saito (2011) and Barua (2014) both combine ANT with cosmopolitanism, although Barua uses the language of ANT rather than its title. Cosmopolitanism, according to Ulrich Beck, is understanding people as being situated at one and the same time in the global world, the cosmos and in the local world, the polis: what

unites us is our common humanity which can encompass local differences (Beck 2002). Thus a cosmopolitan as a citizen of the world would recognise the sameness in others while acknowledging the difference. Saito uses ANT to argue that cosmopolitans are the mediators in a network, who allow locals ‘to increase their openness to foreign others’ and who enable other members of a group ‘to reexamine their outgroup prejudices’ (Saito 2011: 138). This would suggest that, in Milltown cemetery, Torridon was a cosmopolitan dog, enabling the other group members (particularly the adults) to transcend the implications of a Brit at a republican ceremony. Barua (2014) meanwhile writes specifically about animals as cosmopolitan. He considers elephants in a global network – real elephants in the wild, domesticated worker-elephants and images of elephants as symbolic ambassadors for wildlife conservation – arguing that they are cosmopolitan because they link together an assemblage of ‘diverse and far-flung epistemic communities’ – government-sponsored wildlife tourism, NGO-funded wildlife conservation and locals’ relationships with working elephants or with destructive and marauding elephants (Barua 2014: 560). But with both of these authors, the ‘fit’ between ANT and cosmopolitanism feels somewhat forced – I do not see that the sum of the two theories is greater than the individual parts.

Moving then into a discussion of cosmopolitan animals, Jalais (2008) argues that tigers are cosmopolitan because they are ubiquitous in many different places in the world (real tigers, toy tigers, tigers as symbols for conservation) and Lynn (2002) makes a case for cosmopolitan wolves because a moral cosmopolitan worldview sees wolves as having the same rights to inhabit the landscape as humans. But all of these animals – Barua’s elephants, Jalais’ tigers and Lynn’s wolves – are cosmopolitan because we have imposed human-symbolic meaning upon them. Is it possible that an animal can be cosmopolitan in and of itself? For this I want to turn towards Rapport’s (2012) cosmopolitanism, but first another human/dog connection story.

Susan is a member of another walking group that Torridon and I joined. She is a refugee with asylum status and is profoundly deaf. Although she has a good command of English, she does not lip read or sign in this second language but communicates through written notes. She often walked along quietly, not participating in group conversations as it is difficult to walk and write at the same time. However, she did communicate through Torridon. While we were out she would take the dog's lead from me and walk her, communicate with other group members by sometimes pointing at the dog and smiling, and she told me just a little of her story through notes, with sensitive information scribbled out as soon as I read it. Chris, the group leader said, 'it's interesting to note [Susan's] interaction with Torridon'. Was Torridon part of the reason that Susan entrusted me with a peep into her story?

Nigel Rapport has written extensively on cosmopolitanism (cf. Rapport 2010, 2012; Amit and Rapport 2002). His focus is on the individual, who is at one and the same time rooted in the local and part of the global, an embodiment of the universally human. Each person is simultaneously Someone, a unique individual, and also Anyone, a universal human being. I suggest that Torridon engages simultaneously with both. For Torridon, Susan is Someone, a unique individual like no other, and Torridon understands this in the main by her superior sense of smell: she will be able to detect the minute physiological cues that make Susan herself and no-one else. At the same time, Torridon is engaging with Anyone, a human being who gives her pleasure and pats her like so many others do. Meanwhile, Susan is Anyone, a human being, when she engages with Torridon, *not* someone defined by the social, political, sexual, disabled or gendered categories that she chooses or has ascribed to her, since those categories are meaningless to the dog. This is a cosmopolitan engagement between Susan and Torridon that is both local and global, individual and generic: a form of cosmopolitan politesse, which invites and recognises Anyone as a potential interlocutor and

equal other. Both Susan *and* Torridon are cosmopolitan.

However, I fear I have fallen at the same fence as Barua, Jalais and Lynn. This is still an explanation of a cosmopolitan dog transcending *human*-constructed categories. Is it at all possible that Torridon has her own dog-constructed categories whereby she acknowledges and embraces the foreignness and otherness of her interlocutors to recognise a universal animality, both members of the class *Mammalia*? Haraway notes that communication ‘across irreducible difference’ matters more than method between companion species (Haraway 2003: 49). Torridon and Susan could be seen to communicate across the irreducible difference of Susan’s profound deafness in a shared, animal way: their communication *has* to be non-verbal because Torridon cannot speak and Susan cannot hear. Their communication is also less complex relationally than it would be for human-to-human non-verbal communication, as Torridon is unaware of the human-constructed categories of sex, gender and so on.

Several commentators have discussed the importance of eye contact between humans and dogs (cf. Haraway 2008; Horowitz 2009; Sanders 2003). Torridon has striking deep-hazel eyes set off by her golden (wheaten) fur and when she holds you in her gaze it can be very arresting, it feels deeply communicative. I posit that the communicative trust established between Susan and Torridon had a positive spin-off for me: Susan was able to trust me *more easily* because she trusted Torridon. However, Torridon’s dog-constructed categories, built maybe around smell or willingness to engage, indicate that she does not embrace everyone.

Torridon’s Tail

Torridon and I took a break from fieldwork and were sitting with my partner in the sunshine outside a west London café. Torridon still attracts attention, fieldwork or not, and a woman, maybe in her mid-forties, crossed the street to talk to the dog. Dressed in jeans and a blouse

with a silken scarf around her neck and bangles on one wrist she did not look out of place in well-heeled Barnes village. She was pushing a large wheeled crate – the sort that market-traders might use to move stock around – loaded with suitcases and plastic-covered bales of something unseen. The woman stopped to pat Torridon and asked all the usual questions, smiling and cooing at the dog all the while, and after a few minutes said goodbye and moved on. Later that day, my partner asked if I had noticed Torridon’s posture with the woman? At the time I was busy answering the woman’s questions and talking to two people on the next table that had taken the opportunity to join Torridon’s fan club, so had not noticed the dog’s behaviour. Apparently, Torridon’s tail had been low between her legs and tucked right up under her body, a sign usually seen only when she has to suffer the indignity of a bath. This prompted me to recall that I had thought there was something unusual about this woman, a fleeting, largely subconscious sensation that I instantly dismissed: there were no outward signs to support the feeling, it was very likely to be one of the myriad momentary encounters Torridon engenders, and I was not on fieldwork. But Torridon had clearly been uncomfortable: she is usually friendly when people pat her. Torridon was attached to the table by a lead at the time and did not have the opportunity to move away, so it is difficult to discern whether she transcended her own dog-categorisation of the woman by staying put when she did not want to. Difficult to tell whether or not Torridon was a cosmopolitan dog.

Nevertheless, this encounter yielded methodological knowledge for me. It taught me to pay even more attention to Torridon when – in my frame of reference – she is engaged as my fieldwork assistant. I do not know why Torridon tucked her tail under her body, or why she wrapped herself around Jane’s legs on that day by the river Lagan, but in doing so she responded to these two people in a way that she had not responded to others. In my fieldnotes I merely recorded Torridon’s unusual behaviour, but *post facto* analysis suggests that this should have alerted me to be hyper-observant and maybe more enquiring. As Donna

Haraway notes, a dog's judgement 'can sometimes be better than a human's on the job' (Haraway 2003: 39). Clearly on this occasion Torridon was a better ethnographer than I was.

Teamwork

In the field, Torridon and I work as a team with complementary skills. Torridon initiates encounters and, I suggest, can seek out people willing to engage with us, while I can move a conversation about her onto other topics or develop longer-term relationships with people who are just as interested in the dog (sometimes more so) as they are with me. Human-animal teams are common of course – from carrier pigeons to sniffer dogs and everything in between – and close human/animal connections develop, described by Haraway as 'becoming-with' (Haraway 2008: 16). But to make a wider case for a dog as part of an ethnographic team, the method has to be applicable elsewhere and to work with another dog. There must be something specific that a dog offers that a human cannot do (or do easily) alone. To consider this I have pondered a counter-factual: What would it be like if I had a different dog? Or no dog? Or someone else was walking Torridon? And what are the canine qualities that Torridon contributes to this anthropological endeavour?

The opportunity to consider a different dog occurred in London, when my partner and I were walking Torridon up from the River Thames in Hammersmith past a large council estate. A woman with an English Bull Terrier walked towards us and Torridon greeted the dog, which was on a short lead but was friendly. We stopped to stroke the terrier and to talk to the owner, and she was *really* grateful; so many people cross the street to avoid her and the dog – exactly opposite to the behaviour I experience. A dog perceived to be an aggressive dog would make a poor research assistant for collecting stories! Halfway through my Belfast fieldwork, Torridon went to the groomers and was (unintentionally) clipped very short. I was devastated because she no longer looked like herself but, wanting to be a good

anthropologist, I decided to observe whether it made a difference to people interacting with her. It did. Far fewer random strangers stopped to stroke her. Torridon did not look like an interesting, shaggy dog anymore, just a mutt with a bad haircut. As her fur grew again, so did her admirers. This suggests that a research assistant dog needs to look cute or unusual. When walking Torridon in Belfast I felt highly visible on the end of the lead, but when I walked those same streets alone very few people paid attention to me, and no stranger stopped me to talk. There is no doubt that the (right kind of) dog increases the number of contacts. This is confirmed in a 1979 study of dogs and owners in Hyde Park, London (and four other sites in England) where those with dogs spoke more frequently with strangers, and had longer exchanges with them, than those without dogs (Messent 1983). It is different again when someone else walks Torridon. My nephew is a tall, lanky 18-year-old. Whenever he walked Torridon in Belfast, he was only occasionally asked what kind of dog she is and no one engaged him in conversation. But, he was not looking to engage with them either.

So perhaps it is Torridon's particular breed and my desire to work with her in the (dog-friendly) field that leads to good teamwork. The personality traits of a Wheaten Terrier certainly lend themselves to this endeavour. The Soft-Coated Wheaten Terrier Club of Great Britain describes the breed as 'lively, inquisitive and exuberant', 'kisses to express affection and delight to anyone', 'attached to the whole household not just one person', 'gets along with young and old', and 'adapts to city and country environments'.¹¹ Most of these qualities are good for anthropologists too.

Samantha Hurn states, 'If other animals are conscious beings, who may exhibit some form of (albeit rudimentary) culture, then the move to incorporate them as actors in ethnographic research and anthropological theory appears plausible at least' (Hurn 2012: 207). I have argued that my dog has assisted me in fieldwork not only by enabling contact with people but also by eliciting information that would not otherwise be revealed through

the connection she establishes with strangers. In his work on the relationship between Mongolian horses and their owners, Robin Irvine describes how one horse and one man learn from each other through the process of taming and preparing the horse for racing, suggesting they are 'subjects modifying each other; becoming something novel together' (Irvine 2014: 78). As an ethnographic team, Torridon and I become something novel together. I do not believe my encounter with the boys in the Bog Meadows would have happened without the presence of the dogs or that Susan and Jane would have shared information with me so quickly had Torridon not enabled the relationship.

However, this does not always happen. People who do not like dogs will avoid us, or others may be in a hurry and can only afford a few moments of canine connection. Sometimes Torridon undiplomatically breaches dog-walking etiquette and this may have a consequent effect on my relationship with others. For example, in one dog-walking group we were never really accepted by the leader. She was polite but reserved. She was incurious about my role as a researcher. Meanwhile, Torridon kept stealing her Jack Russell's flying ring toy. I assume that she considered (quite rightly) that dog disobedience and my culpability in this were far more important than any fancy research intentions I had. When I first began my fieldwork, any conversations I had with strangers with Torridon present focused only on her and I had to learn to move the conversation on, such as by asking if they had a dog, and then move it along again to non-dog matters: this sets the humans down particular paths of communication.

My empirical data offers many examples to illustrate that Torridon is my research assistant. But why does this work? I considered a bio-psycho-social model, linking a dog's sense of smell to human well-being and human interaction; a political model (creative ambiguity) whereby, in an ethnographic team, human ambiguity can be offset by the opportunities to interact that a dog creates; actor-network theory to show how the assemblage

of people, dog and objects works together in the moment; and cosmopolitanism to argue that Torridon transcends human-constructed categories to recognise the universal animal. But although all have illuminated an answer, none has done so exclusively. Maybe it is reductionist to think that only one explanation will do and it is only the 'assemblage of explanations' that sheds light. Maybe Torridon is a sniffing, empathetic, cosmopolitan actant fostering serendipity and establishing trust in the numerous transient encounters that we have. This recalls Rapport's edifying anthropology where he suggests that epistemic diversity is necessary to understand human life because 'reality is multiple' and thus its 'realistic representation might eschew any singular, authoritative framing' (Rapport 1997: 191).

Nevertheless, Torridon generally enables the dynamic interconnectedness that Leach (1967) urged upon anthropologists. I am not suggesting that this ethnographic team is a relationship of equals. I am unable to get inside Torridon's mind but I feel confident suggesting she has no idea she is my research assistant – a walk is a walk and adoration is easily come by. However, we do have a close bond and just as she is able to detect and act upon olfactory and other sensory information with strangers, she will be able to do that even more effectively with me. Over time, as our becoming-with evolves and we learn to interpret each other's communication more accurately, our fieldwork togetherness should become more effective.

Karen Lane's PhD research considers how people transcend dominant narratives to establish their individuality in contested spaces. Her fieldwork is situated in Belfast, Northern Ireland. She is interested in quotidian stories that challenge the hegemony of the two grand narratives of Catholic nationalism and Protestant unionism. E-mail: kll5@st-andrews.ac.uk

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¹ Quote taken from mp3 download (hence no page number).

² There are various start and end dates of the recent Troubles quoted in academic literature. For the purpose of this article it is taken to be from August 1968 when violence broke out at a civil rights march in Londonderry and April 1998 when the Belfast Agreement was signed (often referred to as the Good Friday Agreement).

³ Quote from abstract (hence no page number).

⁴ Apparently a strategy paper on services for people with learning disabilities translated into Ulster Scots used the term 'wee daft bairns' to describe the people for whom the services

were to be provided. I have been unable to identify this particular paper, but all official government documents are translated into both Irish and Ulster Scots.

⁵ In the Village Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Defence Association are the predominant loyalist paramilitary organisations. Their control includes when and where flags are erected on lampposts (see Bryan and Gillespie 2005).

⁶ Torridon was only ten months old when we started fieldwork.

⁷ The 1981 hunger strike, when ten republicans died, including Bobby Sands, MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone at the time of his death, is arguably equal to 1916 as a touchstone for Irish Republicanism (see Morrison 2006).

⁸ Creative ambiguity in the Northern Ireland peace negotiations is credited with both achieving a peace settlement (the Good Friday Agreement) and with making subsequent government difficult (Knox and Carmichael 2005)

⁹ Connor Murphy appeared on the radio programme ‘Word of Mouth – Weighing Your Words’, broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 21 July 2014. The programme is no longer available in the archive and the quote is from a contemporaneous transcript taken by the author.

¹⁰ For example, see the charity Medical Detection Dogs

<http://medicaldetectiondogs.org.uk/index.html>

¹¹ See the Soft-coated Wheaten Terrier Club of Great Britain website

<http://www.wheaten.org.uk/index.php/the-wheaten-terrier>