

IT'S A DOG'S LIFE: CONTEMPLATING THE HUMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONSHIP  
THROUGH DOG ADOPTION NARRATIVES IN THE UNITED STATES

by

NICOLE SILVESTRINI

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Student: Nicole Silvestrini

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This thesis has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in the Folklore Program by:

Dr. Lisa Gilman	Chairperson
Dr. Ed Wolf	Member
Dr. Phil Scher	Member

and

Scott L. Pratt	Dean of the Graduate School
----------------	-----------------------------

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

Nicole Silvestrini

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Title: Its a Dog's Life: Contemplating the Human-Animal Relationship through Dog Adoption Narratives in the United States

Dog adoption is a popular way for people to find pets in the United States. With dog adoption comes dog adoption narratives, ideologically about the dog, told by humans for humans. Dog adoption narratives, a genre of personal experience narrative, enact a series of formalized conventions that reveal societal binaries, tensions, and anxieties in the interspecies relationship. Using an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, I highlight the way these narratives are performed, organized, and interpreted. By comparing the adoption narratives of two different groups, people who regularly visit dog parks and people who do dog rehabilitation work, I argue that these narratives yield insight about the way humans perceive dogs in the United States within the context of how humans themselves want to be perceived by other humans. Dogs become a form of cultural capital and dog adoption narratives a reflection of cultural attitudes towards, and informed interactions with, the human-dog relationship.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Nicole Silvestrini

### GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene  
Indiana University, Bloomington

### DEGREES AWARDED:

Master of Arts, Folklore, 2016, University of Oregon  
Bachelor of Arts, Folklore and Ethnomusicology, 2010, Indiana University

### AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Human-Animal Relationship  
Storytelling and Personal Experience Narratives

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

“Animals are woven into our lives in ways that we seldom consider and infrequently acknowledge” – Tami Harbolt

Dog adoption has become increasingly popular in the United States over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With dog adoption come dog adoption narratives, ideologically about the dog and the human-dog relationship but told about the animal, by humans, for humans. Dog adoption narratives are interesting because, as a genre of personal experience narrative, they enact a series of formalized conventions that reveal societal binaries, tensions, and anxieties between dog owners and animal welfare organizations, and between human and dog. As a human cultural form, dog adoption narratives also show that patterns exist for humans’ conception of the dog, as the story’s subject. While dog adoption narratives are not understood by, and do not mean anything to, the dog, these narratives also impact how humans conceive of the dog’s agency. Are the dogs understood, by different narrators, as active agents in their own story? If they are, does this understanding change between groups?

I am comparing and analyzing the adoption narratives of two different groups of dog owners: people who visit dog parks regularly and people who volunteer or work in animal shelters in a dog behavior modification and rehabilitation program. By comparing these narratives to each other, I show how the narrators’ attitudes reveal constructed binaries, two beliefs pitted against each other as a form of “all-or-nothing” thinking, with which both groups interact. These binaries regard beliefs about the adoption process, specifically adopting from “kill” or “no-kill” shelters, about the dogs themselves, and

about the way dog owners construct and participate in the human-dog relationship. The ways each narrator addresses aspects of those binaries, as well as aspects of the human-dog relationship indicates changes that are occurring in these areas. Specifically, I argue that the ways in which narrators interact with dogs as cultural capital indicate a desire to change their relationships to dogs and how dogs are perceived at a larger scale in United States society.

I engage with narrative theory to define what personal experience narratives are and what they *do* for the narrators, as well as genre theory in order to establish the narrative's conventions. I use performance studies to highlight the way these narratives are performed, organized, and interpreted from person to person. I use an interdisciplinary theoretical framework because while folklore gives me a firm background in human cultural forms, the discipline is still relatively new to studying the human-animal relationship beyond looking at animals as symbols or characters in human folklore. I also engage with various animal studies scholars in order to gain perspective on the human-animal relationship as it has been constructed and participated with in Western culture, philosophy, and history.

My thesis will address the following issues: The ways two groups of people, dog owners at a dog park in Oregon and dog rehabilitators at an animal shelter in Minnesota, narrate the relationships between themselves and the dogs in their lives, and the reasons these stories are important to each group; an analysis reveals the consistencies or discrepancies between dog owners and Ad Preppers through the narratives they tell; and, what these human perceptions mean for the dog, and more specifically, for shelter dogs. I argue that these narratives reveal important information about the narrator's cultural,

political, moral, and personal beliefs about their dogs and dog ownership. Additionally, I argue that narratives demonstrate a shift in these beliefs, one that is changing the human-dog relationship.

### **Adoption Narrative and Social Meanings**

In my thesis, I shed light on the shared lives of humans and animals in the United States by analyzing and comparing the canine adoption narratives of dog owners who visit dog parks in Eugene, Oregon and of Ad Prep volunteers at the Animal Humane Society in Golden Valley, Minnesota. The canine adoption narrative, which I will simply refer to as an adoption narrative, has increasingly become a part of vernacular experience in the United States with the rise of adoption as a way for people to find their pets. I consider the adoption narrative to be a genre of personal experience narrative. While linked to other genres of personal experience narratives people from the U.S. tell about the animals they interact with, adoption narratives have their own set of conventions that decide and mediate its telling.<sup>1</sup>

While I am the first, as far as I know, to establish the dog adoption narrative as a genre, there was a general discussion of this at the American Folklore Society/International Society of Folk Narrative Research conference in Miami, Florida 2016 during a panel regarding the human-animal relationship. Another attendee brought the concept up, and I heard the panelists begin to list all of the conventions I had also found as common features of these narratives. Furthermore, there is precedence for establishing generic conventions of personal experience narratives. In her work with crime-victim personal narratives, folklorist Eleanor Wachs seeks to establish the common features or components (certain phrases or protagonist / “offender” characteristics,

common settings, common acts/events similar themes) that make up the narrative so it becomes an identifiable story to the audience, to other performers. I will do the same thing with dog adoption narratives, pointing out genre conventions that unite these stories together. These conventions were defined by my participants and corroborated by the hundreds of adoption narratives I have heard at dog parks in the two years since I have started going.

There is there is undoubtedly variation between the two types of narrative, due to location-based differences between my groups, and because one group of pet owners is made up of people who volunteer or work with dogs and the other group of pet owners does not work with them in any professional capacity.<sup>2</sup> I find, however, that these narratives reveal and reinforce tensions that exist in the animal welfare industry and in the human-dog relationship in the United States, even as the narratives begin to change the historical, political, and folkloric connotations of the human-dog relationship. Adoption narratives demonstrate, from human to human, one person's moral and personal values about dog and dog ownership.

### **Positionality**

I have always loved animals. I immersed myself with animals and animal paraphernalia. I grew up with dogs, hamsters, and fish. I became a handler for a sled dog racing team in high school. I started volunteering at animal shelters after I graduated college. I was an animal lover. I thought I knew everything. Then, four years ago, that surety crumbled as I realized that I knew almost nothing. In 2012, a few months after I had started volunteering at the Animal Humane Society (AHS) in Golden Valley, MN, I began working with their Adoption Preparation program (Ad Prep). It was a program that

helped rehabilitate and modify the behavior of shy and fearful dogs whose behavior did not at once qualify them for adoption. They spent, on average, a week in our program before they passed their behavior examination and moved to the adoption floor. To complete the tasks this job needed, I had to have a crash course on dog behavior. In a three-day training period, I was taught to read their body language, to recognize their emotional state, to work with the dogs on their terms. I thought I knew dogs. I realized I knew almost nothing. So, what else did not I know?

Two years after joining Ad Prep, I joined their Wildlife Rehabilitation program. Again, I was forced to make the same realization. Everything I knew about wildlife was either based on preconceived and often incorrect ideas, certain folk beliefs that are harmful to animals that I had heard repeatedly over the course of my life, and books I had read but had very little had anything to do with the animals themselves. Animal rehab taught me that while I had spent a lot of time *thinking* about the animals in my life I had only taken *limited* measures to understand them. It was through my work with wildlife rehab, and the adoption of my own Ad Prep dog in 2014, that I began to closely pay attention to the discrepancies and inconsistencies with the way people from the U.S. talked about and interacted with other animals in contrast to the behavior of the animal itself. In short, human interpretations of animal behavior inform our relationships with, and our understanding of, other animals. I realized that these inconsistencies existed and were reinforced by the media and in academia, which I will discuss in more detail later.

## **Methodology**

My fieldwork is rooted in Western assumptions about human and other animal relationships that exist in urban spaces in the United States. My research is based on

ethnographic fieldwork completed June-August 2015 and June-July 2016. In 2015, I returned to the AHS's Ad Prep program in Golden Valley, Minnesota, as a volunteer and participant-observer. I performed and documented the behavior modification techniques needed for working with the dogs that go through the program while also journaling about experiences and informal conversations had with people who volunteer and work there. I also photographed some of my work. I supplemented my participation-observation in Ad Prep by recording hour-long interviews with six long-time volunteers in the Ad Prep program, two Behavior Modification Specialists who run the Ad Prep program, and the adoptive owners of one dog, Vida, whose story was referenced by each participant. One of my participants asked that she only be referred to by her first name. For continuity and in agreement with the human subjects protocol that I respect my participants' preferences, I will refer to all my participants only by first name.

In 2016, I was a participant-observer at the Wayne Morse Ranch Dog Park in Eugene, Oregon. Though I did not record any interviews (conditions at the dog park does not make recording ideal), I took extensive field notes and created a recorded field journal of any narrative I heard within five or ten minutes after it was shared. The people I spoke with at the dog park did not give me their names though they told me their dogs'. This anonymity is a normal experience at the dog park and I wanted to reflect that in my writing as much as possible. Most personal experience narrative scholars are analyzing first person narratives. In Minnesota, the structure of my fieldwork allowed me to record narratives, so that these narratives are in the first person. In Oregon, the nature of dog parks (walking around outside while dogs play rough and tumble games not caring how humans are standing or of any kind of recording equipment they may have) made it hard



to record anything of quality. Chapter II deals with the dog park narratives in detail, so the third person account does change the point of view. In *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*, anthropologist Richard Bauman addresses this issue. Because third person narratives are “...not fully narratives of personal experience .... the personal involvement of the narrator as protagonist is subordinate to the structure of the event; it is the phase structure of the event that gives structure to the narratives, not the personal involvement of the narrator in the original action” (1986: 51). In other words, regardless of whether I have quotes from my dog park participants, their narratives follow the conventions I have laid out.

My participants at the dog park and rehab program where I did my fieldwork are, in both Minnesota and in Oregon, Euro-American. In both groups, with one exception, my participants are presumed female. I do not find this surprising as there is generally a higher percentage of women to men in the animal welfare industry. Dog parks I have been to across Oregon, Minnesota, and even Montana usually have more even mix of men and women attendees, though on average, I still usually count more women than men at dog parks. In most dog parks, they are white-appearing but this has more to do with regional demographics than a true representation of who takes their dog to the dog park across the United States.

Most of my participants also have some degree of higher education and are probably middle or upper-middle class, another demographic reflected in dog parks, which, in my experience, are usually found in more affluent parts of town. They ranged in age from mid-30s to early-80s. Because I am looking at folk groups with very specific demographics, I want to emphasize that the relationships between humans and animals

are culturally specific. I consider myself to be a part of both communities, not only because of my past volunteer experience with this group, but also because I am a late-20s Euro-American woman from an upper-middle class background pursuing higher education.

Throughout this project, I have carried with me the shock of that moment four years ago, when I realized I knew nothing. I realized I had to find a way to address this feeling in my ethnographic research, and I struggled when doing my theoretical research and in finding academics in my or related disciplines that were like-minded. I am a folklorist. I am a folklorist interested in looking at the human-being and animal-being relationship, and because I am using the word, relationship, to me that meant I needed to consider (as much as is possible) both sides of the relationship. Sociologists Birke and Hockenhull said “Understanding relationships with animals is about listening to stories—both human and animal” (2012, 31). So, how do I listen to the animal?

As I was already a participant-observer of human behavior at both the animal shelter and at the dog park, I included observations in my field notes about dog behavior as well. I am not specifically analyzing any dog cultural forms for this project, but I do find that my experience as an Ad Prep volunteer and my awareness of behavioral ethology made it hard for me to leave dog behavior entirely *out* of my fieldwork. Behavioral ethology is the study of animal behavior in a natural context, in other words, looking at the minutia of animal vocalizations, movements, physical positionality, expressions, and more to make inferences about their emotional demeanors. This is different than how many people understand animal behavior from television commercials, movies, and literature which emphasizes the ‘wolf within’ the family pet,

expecting their dog to behave as if it were a wolf” (Birke and Hockenhull: 2012, 17).

Behavioral ethology is not without its limitations, I cannot completely understand what matters to a dog or what their point of view is, I can only make assumptions and inferences based on observation and my ability to recognize shared experiences. That said,

...ethological studies of the communicative abilities .... are ways of finding out the animals’ tales, just as art, poetry and interviews may all be ways of listening to humans’ stories of their experiences with nonhumans. Emotions and attachments are crucial building blocks to these stories, and research must always recognize that. (Birke and Hockenhull: 2012, 31)

Part of my analysis of the narratives my participants shared does include looking at how their understanding or interpretation of dog behavior feeds into the language they use when telling these stories.

My work is not a multispecies ethnography, though at one point I did call it that, in part because of the power imbalance between me and the dogs I interacted with or about whose stories I heard. Dogs have no equivalent opportunity to make a choice to take part in fieldwork, there is no release form for a dog to sign. Furthermore, because I am human and my observations come from a human lens, no amount of knowledge about dog behavior will be enough for me to truly understand the situations I was participating in from a dog’s perspective, to understand what matters to them (Birke and Hockenhull: 2012, 19). Instead, my ethnographic fieldwork places an emphasis on reflexivity on my positionality to both my human and dog groups and including an interdisciplinary approach through behavioral ethology and empathy. During this work, I needed to be reflexive of my own humanity and the cultural perceptions I had about the dogs I worked with just as I needed to be reflexive of my own place within and perceptions of the Ad

Prep program and dog park communities I consider myself to be a part of. I use empathy as a way of checking my own and my participants' "anthropomorphization" of the dogs we reference but also as a way of naming shared characteristics and traits between humans and dogs. I hesitate to use the word anthropomorphization in relation to what my work because of its negative connotations in animal research. Primatologist Sue Savage-Rambaugh states that the irony of anthropomorphization "...is that we cannot study mental states [of animals] without attributing existence to them, because refusal to attribute existence to them precludes our ability to recognize them" (2007: 10).

### **Adoption Narratives' Impact on Humans vs. Impact on Dogs**

Adoption narratives serve the primary purpose of getting dogs adopted as the repeated transmission of these stories places emphasis on the cultural capital of adopting a dog. According to Tami Harbolt, who draws on the work of American historian Harriet Ritvo, pet keeping (and I would argue the foundation of adoption narratives), is about love between human and dog, but is also "strongly influenced by status and capitalism. People in all socioeconomic classes own dogs, and their pets become reflections of those class levels" (Harbolt, 2003: 27). I can address Harbolt's argument by describing dogs as cultural capital, engaging with Bourdieu's concept that an individual's, group's, or organization's cultural customs, traditions, practices, and knowledge determines distinctions of class and status, creating a hierarchy "based on the distribution of specific capital" (Coles, 2009: 36).

The ways that capital is valued (defined typically by people who are part of the hegemony) can be challenged by one group, or it can reassert one's status if legitimized by the dominant ideology (Coles, 2009: 36). In the United States, dogs are legally the

property of whoever owns them. They can be bought, sold, and “returned” like other commodities. If this statement reads callous, it is only because most people in the United States who have pets reject this idea, dog-as-commodity, even as they participate with it, because of the *value* we place on our dogs. Dogs are often considered to be family members, and in conversations with other dog owners, people define and form their own identities *in relation to their dogs* (explained more in Chapters II and III). Many people in the United States who have dogs judge the capability of other dog owners to even be dog owners based on: moral and personal values surrounding dogs’ behavior; dog breeds; dog training; what dog products they use; the act of buying a dog (kennel club breeder or amateur breeder? Pet store or Craigslist?) versus adopting a dog (from a rescue or animal shelter? “kill or “no-kill”?”); and so on. Because of the value placed on dogs in United States society, they become a form of cultural capital.

While adopting dogs is beneficial, adoption narratives also create and reinforce multiple binaries. These binaries include the United States public vs. animal welfare organizations, the United States public who adopt (“good”) vs. the United States public who buy from breeders, pet stores, and other places (“bad”), “kill” shelters vs. “no-kill” shelters, shelters vs. rescues, and even human vs. animal. American pragmatist Erin McKenna and Sociologist Leslie Irvine have also noticed these binaries, McKenna calling them “all or nothing” thinking” (2013: 6). These binaries, while problematic, are reflective of how the human-dog relationship has been socially constructed in the United States and are useful in understanding the cultural capital of dog acquisition. For example, the current trend to adopt dogs is often believed, in my experience and according to my participants, to be more morally correct than buying dogs because of the

connotations that adopting means “saving” the dog, thereby creating judgment, guilt, and justification among dog owners. This concept focuses on the narrative of dog acquisition and the immediate connection between human and dog as opposed to the relationship built between human and dog over time which reveals a preoccupation with certain conventions of the narrative explored throughout my thesis.

People from the U.S. have, on the surface, a much different relationship with other domesticated animals, despite its hierarchical (pets versus livestock or lab animals) nature. Pets usually gain the most from the symbiotic relationship we have created. The United States pet-keeping tradition has evolved over the centuries; more people from the U.S. increasingly think of pets, especially dogs or cats, as family members, some treat them or act as if they are surrogate children calling themselves “dog-mom” or “dog-dad” and their pets “fur-babies.” Sociologists Lynda Birke and Jo Hockenhull have explained these dynamics by saying, “Our relatings with dogs are never innocent...they always run through with other histories and other meanings, too, with other animals with whom we might share some part of ourselves: there are always many ways of relating” (2012, 21).

As for dogs, my experience in rehab led to this project, looking at the narratives people tell about the animals in their life, how animal behavior may inform these narratives, and the impact these narratives have on the animal itself. After I started taking my dog to the dog park daily in the fall of 2014, I focused on the stories I was hearing from people at the dog parks in Eugene, Oregon in comparison with the stories I was hearing from my Ad Prep friends back in Minneapolis, MN. There was a striking difference, most noticeable in the adoption narratives both groups told about the dogs in their lives. Members of both groups cared about the animals in their lives and have more

in common than not, but the Ad Preppers' close work with shy and fearful dogs seemed to point towards a fuller understanding of dogs, dog behavior, dog autonomy that was only echoed in dog park narratives.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The interdisciplinary nature of my fieldwork means that I am pulling my theory from a variety of places. Folklore is useful because it offers access to ethnography, performance, narrative, and genre theory. Animal studies, which already pulls scholars from a variety of fields, is important for understanding the positive and negative political and historical background of the human-animal relationship. In order to establish adoption narratives as a genre, I will be using the work of folklorist Lisa Gilman and folklorists Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman, whose work is grounded in the genre theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, in order to explore the emically defined conventions that bound my participants' stories. I will also use the scholarship of ethnomusicologist Sue Tuohy and anthropologist William Hanks to discuss the adaptive nature of genres that expose societal values and tensions.

I will use performance studies theory such as Richard Bauman's work on personal narrative as a culturally marked performance made meaningful by interactions between audience and performer. This is useful when exploring interspecies performance spaces and ideas of narratives as forms of activism. Furthermore, Bauman's work with lying tradition in narrative of Canton dog traders is reflective of my own research in that it discusses the cultural capital of dogs from person to person. The works of folklorist Sandra Dolby, linguist Charlotte Linde, and sociologists Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps are useful when defining what a personal experience narrative is and how the individual and

the community might interact with them. Additionally, folklorist Amy Shuman's critique of personal narratives as a narrator's attempt to aggrandize a moment in their past life is useful when exploring specific conventions of the dog adoption narrative.

The recent works of American pragmatist Erin McKenna and feminist philosopher Lori Gruen both describe the human exceptionalism prevalent in the language around non-hominid animals as well as animal rights and welfare organizations. These perceptions are important to consider throughout this conversation and offer insight into the binaries I describe. Sociologists Lynda Birke and Jo Hockenhull, who describe the ethical ramifications of ethnographies on interspecies relationships, provide guidance around the ideas of animal agency, choice, and resistance. While I am engaging with adoption narratives from a human-centric context, in that they are performed by humans, for humans, the narratives are still representative of an interspecies relationship. I demonstrate the influence animal agency can have on the adoption narrative. When establishing the group dynamics of human and dog, I will use folklorist Jay Mechling's piece on "'Banana Cannon' and Other Folk Traditions between Human and Nonhuman Animals," to explain the dyadic nature of these relationships. Lynn S. McNeill's article on cats as liminal creatures is useful when exploring the shelter dog construct and shelters as transitional places for the dog.

Lastly, as previously stated, I engage with behavioral ethology. While most of the knowledge I rely on is from practical experience, and interviews with my participants, Kate, and Becca, who work professionally as behavior modification and rehabilitation specialists at the animal shelter where I did fieldwork, I also draw on the research of sociologist Leslie Irvine and folklorist Tami Harbolt. Irvine's work is uniquely related to



mine. She has written articles about agency in interspecies play at dog parks, the vilification and historical baggage of animal shelters, the people who work there, and the people who adopt or surrender animals. Irvine has also done a lot of work to complicate the human's interpretation of the dog as pet. While I find her research incredibly useful, especially where she establishes a theoretical framework or engages with the complex histories she is describing, her work is limited. These articles are usually small case studies and I find that she not reflexive enough in her work when comparing her conclusions with broader implications on the human-dog relationship. In particular, her case study of people who surrender animals to shelters is not nuanced.

Tami Harbolt, whose dissertation *Bridging the Bond: The Cultural Construct of the Shelter Pet*, explores the cultural and political stances in animal welfare about euthanasia practices in animal shelters. Her work provides a firm foundation for my own analysis of adoption narratives, as she identifies many of the societal tensions that surround dog adoption in the United States. While we both interviewed shelter workers or volunteers for our projects, however, my own work focuses on the way adoption narratives are constructed and how they are used in two different groups. Harbolt's interest in euthanasia, tied very closely to the adoption narrative, is an analysis of animal shelters specifically.

## **Chapter Outlines**

In Chapter II: The Mutt Strikes Back! Rise of the Chiwieniepoo: The Evolution of the Human and Dog Relationship in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries, I discuss the complexity of the human-dog relationship in the United States in regards to terminology, Western philosophy, animal welfare history, the adoption process, dog behavior and how it is

generally interpreted in comparison to human behavior, breed behavior and stigmatization, and recent changes of the dog's positionality in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. I also engage in detail with my own positionality, as a dog owner and as an Ad Prep volunteer, in order to be transparent about where my judgments, biases, and values lie in regards to the human-dog relationship and the social constructs therein. While it is difficult to engage with every part of the human-dog relationship throughout time, my goal in Chapter II is to lay the groundwork for my introduction and analysis of dog adoption narratives as they relate to Western philosophical values of the human-dog relationship and the subsequent impact and construction of human's social, moral, and political values on their dogs.

In Chapter III: He Chose Me: Dog Parks as Performance Spaces and the Conventions of the Canine Adoption Narrative, I describe the dog adoption narrative as a type of personal experience narrative genre with formalized conventions that are emically defined by the groups who tell them. While these narratives may be performed anywhere, most people engage with them in dog-designated places, such as the dog park, where people trade their narratives during informal conversations about their dogs while watching dogs play. Dog parks are significant performance places for people who own dogs, as they are one of the few places where people can come together informally en masse with their dogs. While the emphasis is on the socialization of the dog, dog parks as places created and designed by humans also serve as places for human socialization. Conversations and narratives about dogs, act as a way to situate a human's relationship with their dog to other human-dog relationships.

This often requires people to align or separate themselves from other dog owners based on the social value systems in place. Most narratives engage with some variation of these conventions, a sense of kismet, a happily-ever-after ending (that can be implied when the narrative ends, or engaged in more detail if they describe their dog's present life), a human savior rescuing the dog from shelter or from a traumatic past, describing an actual but more often imagined past life for their dog. Furthermore, some of these narratives also engage with conventions that describe their dog's name or the breed of their dog, the latter of which especially has social implications for how dog breeds are privileged or stigmatized in the dog park. I use genre, narrative, and performance theory to analyze four general/dog park adoption narratives, three of which are collected at a dog park in Eugene, Oregon, that fulfill most of the conventions defined.

In Chapter IV: "She's Your Kind of Dog:" Animal Shelters, Animal Agency, and Dog Rehabilitation Adoption Narratives, I discuss the adoption narratives of a dog rehabilitation group, Adoption Preparation (Ad Prep) which is a program run by the Animal Humane Society in Golden Valley, Minnesota. I explain the relationship Ad Prep volunteers form with the dogs they work with, the emphasis on the dog's behavior through the language they use and the way Ad Prep volunteers perform their narratives. While I am insider to both groups presented in this thesis, Ad Prep most often informs my own adoption narrative of an Ad Prep dog which I attempt to engage with critically and analyze. I also analyze the narratives of two other Ad Prep dogs, one narrated by a fellow Ad Prep volunteer, the second narrated by many. I argue that Ad Prep narratives can be places of activism, influencing how the typical conventions of an adoption

narrative is changed, though the context of the performance and the insider/outsider audience dynamic can decide how successful this piece of activism is.

I analyze and conclude my thesis in Chapter V: The Tail End: Analysis of Dog Adoption Narratives and Conclusion, by comparing the narratives from each group together in an attempt to point towards larger social tensions and issues that each convention of the narrative reveals. I argue that Ad Prep narratives, in opposition to dog park narratives, resist some conventions of the adoption narrative while reinforcing others even as the influence of an insider or outsider audience changes the way the narrative is interpreted through genre and performance theory. I also explain construction of the shelter dog and the complexities of symbolic meaning added to this type of human-dog relationship. I also discuss the use and reinforcement of these narratives by animal welfare organizations, briefly comparing two, in order to once again show how the way we narrativize a dog's life, a dog's adoption has changed even in the course of a few years. Lastly, I talk about further ideas for working with this project or similar projects in the future as well as my desire to engage with other, non-Western, theoretical voices as a way of analyzing these stories.

My thesis also includes Appendices A, B, and C. These are transcripts of interviews with four participants who all told the same story about a deaf Border Collie, Vida, whose story is told in Chapter IV. I wanted to include these because the length of Vida's narrative prohibits me from including the full thing. Instead I summarize her story and analyze brief excerpts in order to understand how dog adoption narrative conventions fit into her narrative framework. Appendix A: Excerpt from Interview Transcript with Amy and Bryan, August 30, 2015; Vida's Story is the longest transcript, my interview

with the people who adopted her Amy and Bryan, how they met her, and the difficult, yet ultimately rewarding, transition home. Appendix B: Excerpt from Interview Transcript with Kate, September 2, 2015; Vida's Story is told by Kate, a participant who works at the Animal Humane Society as a Behavior Modification and Rehabilitation Specialist who picked Vida out to bring to the Animal Humane Society during the puppy mill seizure case Vida was a part of. Appendix C: Excerpt from Interview Transcript with Wendy, September 1, 2015; Vida's Story is Wendy, an Ad Prep volunteer's narrative. She worked closely with Vida during her time on Ad Prep and was one of the first to recognize Vida for Amy's "kind of dog."

### ***NOTES***

<sup>1</sup> People almost certainly tell adoption narratives about cats, ferrets, other small mammals, reptiles, etc. that share some of the same characteristics. While I have heard adoption narratives about other domesticated animals, my exposure to them is subsequently less than my exposure to canine adoption narratives. I currently feel unqualified to make any claims about those variants on the animal adoption narrative. I do believe there would be similar genre conventions.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, these groups are not mutually exclusive (I am evidence of this). There are people who work or volunteer at shelters and go to dog parks just as there are dog park people who volunteer or work at shelters. In my experience, initial conversations do not reveal this but I intentionally asked during my fieldwork to see where overlap may exist. This time, there was none.

**CHAPTER II:**  
**THE MUTT STRIKES BACK! RISE OF THE CHIWENIEPOO: THE**  
**EVOLUTION OF THE HUMAN AND DOG RELATIONSHIP IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> AND**  
**21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURIES**

Due to the complexity of the human-dog relationship, I want to take time to lay some groundwork before engaging with adoption narratives and my theoretical framework. In this chapter, I will provide basic statistics of adoption in the United States, a definition of terms, brief descriptions of the political and historical aspects of the human-dog relationship as they are evolving in the United States, and my personal, professional, and scholarly opinions and values regarding dog adoption. This will give important context for my next chapters, when I start to engage with the performance and conventions of dog adoption narratives. In order to do this, I use an interdisciplinary lens to analyze the ethical, historical, and political underpinnings of the human-dog relationship.

According to the Humane Society of the United States of America (HSUS), which has compiled statistics from several sources, 79.7 million households in the U.S. have pets of some kind. 54.5 million households have at least one dog, and 42% of these households have more than one pet. There are an estimated 163.6 million cats and dogs in the United States. 6-8 million dogs and cats enter animal shelters each year, 4 million of which are adopted, 3 million of which are euthanized.<sup>3</sup> While the HSUS does not have statistics about *who* adopts pets, they do have some for how people situate dogs in their lives. 66.7% of dog owners consider their dog to be family members, 32.6% consider dogs to be pets or companions, and 0.7% consider their dogs to be property. The most

recent statistical study I could find that profiled pet owners was one done in 2010 by the Pew Research Center. According to this survey, the “Profile of Pet Owners,” 57% of adults have pets, and 39% of these adults own dogs. 56% of men and 57% of women own pets, with 40% and 39% owning dogs, respectively. Pets were statistically more likely to be found in homes with a higher income (69% of families with \$100,000 or more income versus 45% of families with an income less than \$30,000). 64% of White people, 30% of Black people, and 39% of Hispanic people have pets, (45%, 20%, and 26% have dogs, respectively). Additionally, people between the ages of 30-49 are more likely to have a pet, to have a dog than other age groups, and pets are found more commonly in rural areas than urban, with dogs the most popular choice. These statistics are useful for considering the adoption narrative because we can see which populations of people in the United States are more likely to participate in the performance of the genre and that there are racial, class, and gender implications when we consider who owns pets in the United States.

### **“Human’s Best Friend”: Dogs in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries**

Dogs have evolved from working animals to companion animals over the centuries. Though dogs were domesticated by humans about 15,000 years ago (there is conflicting data about where they originated), first as working dogs (hunting, herding, guarding) and now, more often as companions. The dog as “pet,” as we know it today in Western countries, “was a middle-class invention of the Victorian era, strongly informed by class and gender stratification that structure nineteenth-century social life,” growing as more people moved into urban areas (Harbolt, 2003: 27). By the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the construct of the hero dog became extremely prevalent in the media,

television shows like *Lassie* and *Rin Tin Tin* are popular, and true stories about courageous dogs like Balto and Togo (the dogs that delivered the serum to Nome, Alaska their journey the basis for the Iditarod race now) and Chips, the most decorated dog in WWII. Literature, like *The Call of the Wild*, *Old Yeller*, and *Where the Red Fern Grows* further cements the dog as the unconditionally loving companion to humans in the United States cultural imaginary.

This construct is echoed in how human-dog relationship looks now. Human-dog relationships are often based on mutual love or affection (though I know some people would call this anthropomorphization, I do not), a sense of human responsibility to the dog, and relationship that is built on reciprocity. Not all human-dog relationships look the same. For many people, their dog lives in their house with them and is a companion. Others rely on dogs as working animals if they farm or rely on their dogs as service dogs (for mental illnesses, physical disabilities). Still others participated in sports with their dogs like sled dog racing or fly ball and agility. Each of these relationships is unique, complex, and valuable to the human and dog in the relationship. Dogs may rely on humans to take care of their basic needs, but both animals are social beings, so interspecies socialization is rewarding to both participants. There is a deep and abiding connection between human and dog.

This is not to say that humans do not form close relationships with other animals. Just as there are “dog people,” there are “cat people” (though more often than not these categories are not so black and white). Yet each animal’s behavior often influences the way the relationship between human and animal looks, even if it does not change how much the human cares for the animal and vice versa. Cats, who have not been



domesticated for as long as dogs have been, are still considered to be more “independent,” “self-sufficient” or “aloof.” Yet the groups of people who post videos of their cats online, the whole cat video phenomenon, points to a very similar perception of how cats and dogs are oriented in United States human life.<sup>4</sup>

### **Examples of Change in the Human-Dog Relationship**

Our relationships with dogs have not always been so positive, and are ever changing. The change that stands out most to me and my shelter worker friends is the training methodology used with dogs now as opposed to what it looked like even twenty years ago. Today, if someone takes their dog to a training class, they are likely to hear the words “positive reinforcement” and “conditioning.” They may be referred to as a team who are working together. This is drastically different than the training methods my dad learned, which are based in dominance theory and “pack mentality,” one of the greatest misconceptions about dogs that still exists today. Many people think that because dogs are related to wolves, their behavior and familial structures are mirrored. For a long time, dog training perpetuated this idea of being “alpha” or “dominant” over your dog. It used negative reinforcement, physically beating, shocking, or yelling at, the dog.

“Pack mentality” training was based on research done with wolves first, in 1947 with Rudolph Schenkel, whose article “Expressions Studies on Wolves” studied behavior of captive wolves in the zoo and first put forth the idea of pack structure and then in the 1970s with L. David Mech’s book, *The Wolf: The Ecology and Behavior of an Endangered Species*. Mech’s research was based on Schenkel’s, except Mech was looking at an Isle Royale, Michigan wolf pack. It was Mech who first started using the terms “alpha,” “beta,” and “omega,” to describe wolf hierarchy. By 1999, Mech

retracted his work, because a further study of wolves (not isolated in captivity or by an island) revealed Schenkel's and his own previous work was not a good representation of normative wolf behavior. Mench realized that hierarchical pack mentality was not normative behavior, instead, wolves form family units. Parents and offspring stick together until the offspring are old enough to start their own families, though the gestation cycle for wolves means that many different litters of offspring may live in the family together for some time before moving away (Becca, 8/15/15).

By this point, the link to dogs as hierarchical pack animals had been made, and dominance training was the predominant method of training dogs. Kate, one of my Behavior Modification and Rehabilitation participants, stated that one joke she and other behaviorists and dog trainers used to tell each other is that it took so long to beat the idea of dominance training into human's heads, "it will take three times as long to beat it out" (8/25/15). I do not, unfortunately, have any statistics to show how many people considered their dogs family from the 1950s-1990s in the United States, but I believe the shift in dog training approaches demonstrates the shift in attitude towards dogs and their positionality in human groups.

On a broader scale, one of the more obvious changes in the human-dog relationship in the United States regards the terms we use. Legally, animals (whether livestock or pets) fall under United States property law. For many people, this does not seem to be an adequate description of their relationship to their animal, nor does it seem fair to the animal. Suddenly we see the word "owner" swapped out for "guardian" or "companion" (McKenna, 2013: 4). The HSUS and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) have changed terms on their websites.

McKenna says that this shift is partially out of a human sense of responsibility to the dog, yet she also quotes the American Veterinary Medical Association's (AVMA) stance that: "any change in terminology describing the relationship between animals and owners.... does not strengthen this relationship and may, in fact, harm it" (McKenna, 2013: 4). Dog breeders especially side with the idea that a change in terms is harmful, the first steps towards eliminating dog ownership altogether (McKenna, 2013:5). The contention that is just starting exist in regards to human ownership of dogs pushes "people to the extreme and often contradictory positions. This results in unnecessary opposition and commitment to rigid positions" (McKenna, 2013: 5).

### **Dog Adoption and a Brief History of Animal Welfare Organizations in the U.S.**

In any given state in the U.S., there exists a plethora of rescue organizations and animal shelters. To be clear, an animal shelter is a physical location that houses (mostly) domesticated animals and attempts to re-home them. These animals have been surrendered, abandoned, found as strays, or seized. Rescues are usually foster-based programs that do not have a physical location. They are transitional spaces for the animal in question. Both rely heavily on, or may be run solely by, volunteers, may compete for funding, and may operate on different philosophies (explained in detail later) (Harbolt, 2003: 71).

Today most people get their domesticated pets from breeders, pet stores, animal shelters, and animal rescue organizations, and because of the stigmas attached to each method, people will sometimes categorize their dogs by where they were acquired. While animal welfare has often been a concern for some, it did not become a matter of public policy until the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Britain and the United States. In the

early 20<sup>th</sup> century animal control agencies or “the pound” came into existence as a way of dealing with the mass overpopulation of dogs and cats in the United States, changing the way domesticated pets and pet overpopulation treated. Becca, a Behavior Modification and Rehabilitation Specialist at the Minnesota Animal Humane Society said,

“I think that goes all the way back to many years ago, when we used to have more animal control. It was the pound and they basically impounded your pet when they were running at large. I don’t think a lot of the American public has really been able to separate themselves from that idea and so as more and more animal welfare and rescue groups and shelters started popping up they just kind of all got lumped into the same category, The Pound.”

Today rescue organizations and animal shelters coexist tenuously, some in partnership and others in opposition due to the conflicting philosophies and political nuances regarding euthanasia and animal behavior. The biggest conflict, or perceived conflict, is the decision to euthanize.

Animal shelters, especially those that practice euthanasia and have the resources, will often implement behavior modification programs for animals that need more work before they can be adopted. This usually lowers their euthanasia rates. Most animal shelters are open admission, they will take any animal surrendered indiscriminately. Some shelters and most rescue organizations are limited admission in order avoid euthanasia entirely which means they cannot take every animal surrendered. In Chapter IV, I will discuss AHS’s behavior modification program in more detail to explain how it connects to the adoption narratives in that chapter.

The Animal Humane Society, where I conducted part of my fieldwork, is an animal shelter. Animal shelters have a physical place where they take in (with some exceptions) domesticated animals who have been surrendered, abandoned, seized, or found as strays. It is a transitional space for these animals who, after going through

behavior and physical examinations, find themselves on an adoption floor where volunteers or shelter workers try to connect animals with people so they can find their “Forever Home.” This is different than rescue organizations, like RAGOM (Retrievers and Goldens of Minnesota) which have no physical location, are foster-based (where the dogs stay in people’s homes), and the number of animals they take in can be limited by the number of people taking part in their foster program. Shelters, especially shelters with resources, often create partnerships with rescues and other foster-based organizations to help with pet over-flow. Both rescues and shelters were established as ways to deal with the dog and cat overpopulation that exists in the United States.

Animal shelters and rescue organizations are part of the animal welfare movement, which should not be confused with the animal rights movement. Animal welfare did not become a matter of public policy until the anti-vivisection movements in the in Britain and the United States. Animal welfare does not condemn the use of animals by humans for food, clothing, testing, etc. so long as animals are treated humanely. Animal rights, a movement that developed in the 1970s has challenged this philosophy, claiming that animals should have equal rights to humans, decrying the treatment animals receive in shelters, in laboratories. The work of ethicists Peter Singer and Thomas Regan are the dividing line between animal welfare and animal rights. Singer, a utilitarian, believes that since animals can suffer, their happiness or pain should be considered of any moral philosophy. Regan believes that all animals, regardless of sentience, have an equitable right to life.

### **Attitudes Towards Animal Welfare Organizations**

The politics and contention that exist in United States society towards shelters and rescues is related to animal welfare and animal rights movements, especially how animal shelters have been stigmatized around euthanizing animals. Because of the multitude of beliefs that exist around euthanasia it is charged with “moral value” and can become a “slippery issue” to engage with (Harbolt, 2003: 10). The open admission shelters were dubbed “kill” shelters by people in the animal rights movement. Limited admission shelters, dubbed “no-kill,” do not euthanize and shelters are privileged by many people in the United States as a more humane way to deal with pet overpopulation. Shelters that euthanize may do so because of lack of resources (money, space), and/or because of health and behavioral issues with the animals in their care. This binary becomes complicated when we look at how “kill” and “no kill” shelters are defined. Many “no-kill” shelters have limited admission, which means they cannot take every animal that walks in the door because they have limited space. Many “kill” shelters are open admission and will take any animal.

To complicate it further, if a “kill” shelters’ euthanasia rate is low enough, it may technically qualify as a “no-kill” shelter. As my Ad Prep participants reiterated many times to me, there is no such thing as a “no-kill” shelter, because “no-kill” shelters are still complicit in euthanasia even if they do not practice euthanasia themselves. The binary creates a sense of ill-will between the public adopting animals and shelters that euthanize, or between “kill” and “no-kill” shelters which seems ironic as they were created for the same goal: to get the animals adopted and out of the shelter. The Animal Humane Society, where I did my fieldwork, does euthanize, though as a shelter with resources, their euthanasia rates are so low that they could advertise themselves as a “no-

kill” shelter. Harbolt states that these beliefs and the tensions that are created, is really a discussion of “quantity of life” versus “quality of life” (2003: 5). “No kill” shelters, those rescue organizations that openly revile euthanasia practices, people who hoard animals in an effort to “save” them from animal shelters are all examples of organizations and people who value “quantity of life,” that the animal is able to live its full natural life. “Kill” shelters, on the other hands, value “quality of life (which Harbolt, who worked in a shelter for years, says is the better goal out of the two), because they recognize that not enough good homes exist in relation to the number of stray and surrendered animals, making euthanasia a necessary practice.

This stigmatization, my participants and I suspect, has do with the American cultural imaginary of “the pound” or “the dog-catcher.” This imagery has ties to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when homeless animals became “a social problem” and “claims-makers began the work of portraying them as such...fear of rabies prompted American city governments to authorize the capture of roaming animals, particularly dog” (Irvine, 2003: 553). Pounds or animal control agencies collected these animals and, while some may have waited a couple of days for someone to pick up a pet, killed them, often inhumanely or giving them to researchers. Humane societies were a response to animal cruelty, the anti-vivisection movement (researchers surgically experimenting on live and un-anesthetized animals) and inhumane disposal of animals. They became places that “were mainly responsible for housing stray and unwanted animals,” often gassing animals (a quick and painless death in comparison to the drowning, shooting, or hanging methods employed by other establishments) (Harbolt, 2003: 35-36). However, many people have never made the distinction between humane societies and “the pound,”

irrevocably linking any group that euthanizes animals. Becca, Behavior Modification and Rehabilitation Specialist at AHS sums it up well:

I think that goes all the way back to many, many, many years ago, when we used to have more animal control and it was the pound and they basically impounded your pet when they were running at large. And I don't think a lot of the American public has really been able to separate themselves from that idea and so as more and more animal welfare and rescue groups and shelters started popping up they just kind of all got lumped into the same category, The Pound.... when people find out where I work and they're like "Oh, we rescued our dog from you!" And I'm like, I know what you're trying to say, I understand that maybe you don't believe that we're a horrible place where animals need to be saved from...but saying that you 'rescued' them from an animal welfare organization.... (8/15/15)

As said above, shelters obtain animals in a variety of ways. They might be found on the street either abandoned or as strays, or they were part of a seizure case from a puppy mill or a hoarder. Most often, animals are surrendered by their previous owners. Animals can be surrendered for a variety of reasons. Lack of space, because the family is moving, allergies, due to behavior problems (i.e. the dog is too mouthy, not house-broken, has too much energy) or medical issues (either they become too expensive or are unexpected).

Within the welfare industry, there is a degree of scorn that some animal shelter workers, volunteers, or even the public may have towards people who surrender their animals to the shelter. It can be equated with abandonment, cold-heartedness, lack of caring. When I worked as a volunteer, I often heard fellow volunteers see the note as to why the dog was surrendered and remark, "why would anyone give up a dog because they moved? Don't get the dog in the first place!" The judgment passed and lack of sympathy towards the people in this situation is important to mention, because, as one of my participants Kate, who works at AHS and has done in-take with people who surrender their animals, noted, this is often emotionally and mentally devastating for both person and animal, but, in some cases, it offers the best outcome for the animal.



A seizure is when an animal welfare organization takes animals and rehomes them, usually without the owner's consent, due to unsafe, unsanitary, and/or cruel living conditions. The word "seizure" is used because it is an ideologically and emotionally violent act for all involved (both human and animal). The people who own the facilities are often surrendering their animals under duress and can become irate or violent. The people present on behalf of the animal welfare organization deal with both the person in charge of the facility, and the distressing conditions the animals live in. The animals themselves are often under-socialized and unhealthy. They are forced to deal with strangers and taken away from the only home they have known.

"Puppy mill" is a colloquial term used by people in animal welfare for commercial breeding establishments. In other words, their primary function is to breed animals, usually dogs, for profit. Because they are places that mass-produce and mass-house animals, they often conjure images of dank, squalid facilities with dirty water and poor conditions where the dogs are either merchandise or breeding machines. Sadly, this is not always too far from the truth. Despite the negative reputation they have in the animal welfare community, puppy mills can vary in size, resources, cleanliness, and amount of animal care given which means that, while a good majority of commercial breeding establishments have deservedly gained that reputation, some are, in fact, reputable. State laws regarding breeding facility conditions and regulations vary widely. In states where there is little legislation, checking these situations often becomes the semi-purview of national animal welfare organizations such as the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) who create partnerships with local organizations.

## **A Brief Note on Dog Behavior and Interpretation**

Most people who have pets would say they understand their dog or cat's behavior and do. Generally speaking by interacting with their pet on a daily basis, it can become relatively easy to understand their emotional state, needs, or desires, through their behavior which sociologist Leslie Irvine calls "recognizing and giving voice to animal subjectivity" (2008, 124). Recognizing the emotional and mental capacity of animal is not anthropomorphization per se, but a form of mindfulness that indicates "animals' agency and consciousness" (Birke and Hockenhull, 2012, 30). It can be easy to read into and thereby misinterpret a dog's behavior because, while humans and dogs have learned a form of interspecies communication through hundreds of years of domestication and co-existing in shared spaces, dog behavior and communication systems remain fundamentally different than humans'.

What does it mean to "be a dog" in the United States? Harbolt writes that, "Animals, like nature, are social constructions" because "... they receive names, are associated with gender, taught rules, then thought of as family members.... [we] codify animals, turn [them] into "pet'" (2003: 25). The meanings that people associate with a dog may vary from person to person but through my fieldwork from various conversations I have had with other dog owners, I can list some of the cultural norms that create this construct. In general, people in the United States believe dogs are happy, loyal, and love all humans (regardless of gender, age, race, class, and so on – just a general love of the human species). Dogs are also expected to know how to function in our society. They should know what "inside" and "outside" mean, have concepts of human property (yard space), know to stay on or off furniture depending on the human's preference, be

able to climb stairs, hop in cars. In inviting dogs into our homes, people in the United States expect dogs to inherently understand the differences between “us” and “them.” They may be allowed to sleep on our beds or in our rooms (on a case by case basis) but they are not allowed to eat our food, chew up our stuff, go to the bathroom inside, and so on. When dogs do not know these things or struggle to learn them, there can be interspecies problems.

Dogs are primarily nonverbal communicators. They may bark, whine, growl, and make a variety of other noises in addition but they are primarily communicating subtly through the movement and position of their tails, body, hackles (a long strip of fur on their back), mouth, eyes, and ears. Humans, as primates, practice and express a completely different set of body language and behaviors, allowing for cultural variations across the world and in the United States in how different groups of people practice the amount of eye contact, physical space left between people, touch, and the right to touch, etc. such that interactions between human and dog are culturally varied.

In the United States, general human-to-human interactions include close contact and face-to-face interactions, which may include direct eye contact. Dogs and humans also have a different way of expressing emotions. When scared, humans are often more likely to run away, while dogs are more likely to go towards whatever is inspiring fear. They may act aggressively but often engage in “tells,” subtle behaviors linked to fear such as blinking, lip-licking, dissociative yawning, etc. When humans are happy, we usually hug or touch, we often equate touch with comfort, which is the antithesis of how dogs find comfort, as they do not engage in prolonged physical contact when they are happy.

Humans often understand dogs as having been bred to read human body language and dogs are usually incredibly successful at doing so. In other words, humans have acculturated dogs to human expectations of their behavior, of how they should interact with humans. Folklorist Tami Harbolt states,

.... domestic animals are acculturated, and in order to survive, they must learn the roles of human society. Dogs become acculturated through breeding and training (domestication), and this fact proves that there is the presence of communication between species because training is a *language*. In teaching an animal rules and language, by learning to read their actions and expressions we are engaged in communicative act with other species (2003: 21-22).

We can explore one of Harbolt's examples, training, more closely. When people give their dog a training command but the dog is already completing the action because they have read the cue through the human's body language. Therefore, dog training often uses a combination of verbal and nonverbal signals to communicate with dogs and why deaf dogs can learn sign language commands. Dogs can also be reactive to humans' moods. In an Animals and Philosophy class I took at the University of Oregon in early 2016, many of the undergraduates spoke about when they are sad or angry their dog (and even cats) lay next to them, lean on them, or seem to know exactly what their human is feeling. They each said that their pets *only* show this behavior when they are feeling sad or angry, not otherwise outside of that emotional state of mind.

Humans, the more dominant species, do not necessarily feel the need to take time to understand what a dog's body language is saying which results in miscommunication or misinterpretation between species. Becca once told me, "We're primates. And everything about us being primates is rude, offensive, threatening to canine species....all of that is terrifying to dogs. Every instinct we have...is wrong. Especially with non-primate species" (8/25/15). Hugging, leaning over, making eye contact, raising a hand

over the dog's head (even just to pet) can all be behavior that some dogs find intimidating, terrifying, or discomforting. A dog may duck their head when some stranger attempts to pet them or if they pull away entirely. One of my main groups of study, Ad Prep dogs, who have not been well-socialized or exposed to humans and human behavior, are less equipped to deal with human behavior because they have not been acculturated to norms that define the human-dog relationship. When people look at dogs, it is often in relation to their own dog or own experiences with dogs. They are not necessarily recognizing that the dog they are now interacting with may be different.

To complicate reading dogs' body language further, not all dogs express their moods in the same way because they are individuals. For example, if my dog is feeling less confident at the dog park, she plays with her hackles up. When she becomes more comfortable with the dog she is playing with, her hackles go down. Many people though, look at hackles and see it as a sign of aggression and voice a fear that she will attack their dog, because they are unfamiliar with her as an individual. In most dogs that have grown up around with and interacted with humans do not care and even seek out petting, hugs, touch, and meet the human expectation of how dogs should behave around and interact with other humans.

When dogs are engaging in "antisocial" behaviors, they become a "problem" because they do not fit or engage with human expectations. Sociologists Lynda Birke and Jo Hocknehull describe this issue within the human and animal relationship,

To be sure, the consequences of animals refusing to do what we want them to do may sometimes be cruelty; but even in the context of a relatively benign working relationship, resistance to human actions happens. These may reflect the animal's dislike of the specific encounter, or at times they may be part of the ongoing negotiation of relationship. (2012, 22)

In the human-dog relationship, some dogs end up in shelter and rescue because of these behaviors if their human cannot find a solution, some humans re-narrativize their dog's behavior find a way to explain or excuse it.<sup>5</sup> Whether it is excessive barking, destructive tendencies, jumping, mouthy-behavior, biting, submissive peeing, their behavior is rooted in fear and anxiety. A “dog has a right to feel what it's going to feel. Some dogs will disengage and do anything to get the scary thing to go away...if that does not work then they switch gears. Okay, you weren't leaving me alone now I need to *make you* go away” (Kate, 8/12/15). It may not take much for dogs to transition from one behavior to the next, but humans, even those familiar with dog behavior can be slow to recognize the change or what caused the change to happen.

At the dog park, people often express surprise, disappointment, or anger if their dog gets into a fight with another dog. You often hear profuse apologies from one human party to another as they separate the dogs, a lot of repeated, “they've never done this before/I don't know why this happened/they were fine just a second ago.” Truthfully, the dog usually is showing their fear, anxiety, or anger well ahead of time through their body language and behavior (snipping at the other dog, running between their person's legs, putting their hackles up, a long strip of fur on their back, or lifting their lip slightly) but the humans present may not take the time to read their body language or even know how.

### **Dog Breeds and their Stigmatization in America**

Humans often closely link dog behavior to dog breeds. As stated before, the domestication of dogs meant dogs were historically bred and trained for a variety of reasons. In the past, different breeds were created for different jobs and trained to do them. Traditionally, breeds have been divided in kennel clubs by the jobs they were

intended to do. Herding dogs like collies or shepherds, guard dogs like pinschers or Rottweilers, working dogs like huskies, and hunting dogs like spaniels or retrievers (which can be broken down further into sight hounds, coon hounds, and retrievers) are all examples of this classification. I am oversimplifying these categories because they can be so complex. There are behaviors that are associated with certain breeds and even though, many people do not use dogs for the purpose for which they were originally bred, the associations remain reinforced through our behaviors to specific dog breeds.

For example, Border Collies were bred to corral and herd sheep so hyper-focused and hyper-active traits were selected. Rat Terriers and Dachshunds were bred to chase small mammals out of holes and may have proclivity towards digging or using an alerting bark, again traits that were selected by the human. Shih tzus, which are classified by the American Kennel Club as a “toy dog,” were originally bred in China as companion animals. What does this mean when all of these dogs become companion animals only? Educational materials, whether is literature, media, or the breeder/shelter where you buy a dog, often place emphasis on the dog’s breed and your lifestyle. For someone not inclined to exercise a lot, the argument may be that a Border Collie would *not* be the best fit because of their energy level. Amongst breeders, these traits are desirable and closely guarded. When dogs are bred, responsible breeders pay close attention to the mental and physical well-being of a dog, so they can produce long-lasting resilient lines of dogs however, when dogs do not fit these qualities (i.e. genetic mutation and/or response to the environment) breeders may sell these dogs off so that they are not recognized as part of the “line.”<sup>6</sup> Whether breeders show their dogs at kennel clubs or use them as working

dogs, there is a certain amount of prestige and cultural capital that becomes attached to the dog by its association with the breeder's kennel.

You may have been wondering what the title of this chapter has to do with anything. The prevalence and preference towards pure bred dogs has shifted with the rise of adoption. The distinguishing factors between types of dogs is no longer "pure breed" and "mutt" but pure breed, mixed-dog, and "designer dogs," or, dogs whose breeds do not necessarily serve any function other than pleasant appearance and, often, disposition (Labradoodles, Shih-poo). Form, rather than function, becomes more important for some breeders creating dogs that have limited abilities to breathe (like pugs) or be pre-disposed to health problems (like the sloping spines of German Shepherds increases their likelihood for hip dysplasia). There are dogs that are "supposed" to have cropped ears or docked tails, which is a human-to-human preference and some people, amateur breeders especially, may change them through inhumane methods (rubber-banding ears or tails until they fall off, cutting them off, and so on). All of these methods lower the dogs' quality of life (Harbolt, 2003: 26).

"Mixed" dogs are no longer just mutts but they are not necessarily designed for their looks like the other dogs. These are still very much a result of accidental breeding between unsprayed, unneutered dogs. There are DNA tests now, which while problematic, are offered for dogs so that people can trace what breeds their dogs are and may find a hybridized breed name. For example, chiwieniepoo would be a Chihuahua-Dachshund-Miniature Poodle mix and a Labraheeler would be a Labrador Retriever-Blue Heeler mix. Many people believe that knowledge of their dog's breed is important (or at least interesting to include) to their dog's narrative regardless of the DNA test's



reliability because of the cultural significance that is placed on dog breeds and personality traits in our society.

Many people from the U.S. have been taught to privilege one dog breed over another based on their behavior or the purposes for which they were bred. This discourse stigmatizes other breeds. This gets even more complicated when we consider the issues behind the breed itself, who was breeding these dogs in the first place? What racial or class connotations underlie these biases? While there are many dog breeds that become stigmatized, especially those that were once guard dogs, no breed has been stigmatized quite so much as the Pit Bull and I think they are the best example at describing this issue.

Pit Bulls were originally bred as fighting dogs. They were used in blood sports, primarily bull-baiting, bear-baiting, and later, dog fighting. Blood sports are now illegal in many countries, but the associations that these images create, remain. Pit bulls are often thought of as more aggressive, as having “lock jaw” (which, while the pressure of their bite is strong, their jaws do not lock), something that has been hyped in the media and downplayed by Pit Bull rescue organization and fans of the breed. Dog bite statistics are usually used as proof one way or another of the instability of the breed, yet these statistics are not widespread enough or well-documented enough to be a reputable representation. Often, they are skewed towards certain breeds (i.e. pit bulls) or ignore that the popularity of a breed dog can cause an upsurge in the amount of bites by that breed. These connotations led to legislation that bans the breed entirely to apartments that ban “aggressive” breeds.

Of course, this discourse gets more complicated once you realize that the term “pit bull,” is now used as an umbrella term for multiple different breeds that share physical characteristics i.e. the American Pit Bull Terrier, the American Staffordshire Terrier, the American Bully, the Staffordshire Terrier and, occasionally, the American Bulldog. Aside from Labrador Retriever, Pit Bull is the most commonly used breed when shelters try to identify a mixed dog’s breed.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, shelters and rescue organizations push towards re-narrativizing the Pit Bull’s past in order to change their future. They claim Pit Bulls are misunderstood. It is also common in shelters and rescue organization to include notes on a Pit Bull or Pit Bull mix’s personality profile that tell the potential adopter that by adopting a Pit Bull, they become an advocate for that breed.

What shelters or animal advocacy groups do not engage with is the racialization or class links between Pit Bulls and groups of people. For example, I have heard people say that Chihuahuas are Mexican, Pit Bulls are Black, and Golden Retrievers are dumb blondes (White) yet no one I know when they consider their own dog or an individual of the breed necessarily makes these connections. Historically, Pit Bulls were originally bred by lower classes in the United Kingdom. Their primary function when they were introduced to the United States was in “underground” or illegal dog fighting rings, again associated with the lower or working class.

Dog breeds (and size) also infer other connotations about class and race that reinforce ongoing societal tensions.<sup>8</sup> Many Americans believe that knowing the breed of their dog is important, and include their dog’s breed in their narratives because they think it tells them something about their dog’s personality, behavioral traits, or medical profile adding another layer to their dog’s past (already murky or clouded if they adopt their

dog). What they do not necessarily realize is that they are participating in perpetuating larger issues. Because of these associations, certain breeds continue to carry stigmas in the American cultural imaginary.

### **An Insider's Perspective**

As stated in my introduction, I am a member of both the groups where these narratives are performed so my perception is an emic one. I actively take my dog to the dog park, and for four years I volunteered in the Adoption Preparation (Ad Prep) program at the Animal Humane Society. Growing up, I was taught that the relationships between humans and dogs were based on love, trust, and mutual responsibility. This view became complicated as I was exposed to more groups of people who had different relationships with the dogs in their lives. Ever since I started volunteering, my perceptions of dogs and the human-dog relationship have shifted; even though I grew up with dogs and have owned a dog for two years, I was an Ad Prep volunteer for much longer. The implications of my bias means that I cannot write anything that is “value free” and objective (Harbolt, 2003: 22).

This project is a representation of my own personal beliefs, opinions, and ideologies about dog adoption narratives as they are informed by personal experience, interviews with friends in the Ad Prep program, and informal conversations and observations at the dog park. This affects my analysis because my beliefs align closely with those of my fellow Ad Prep volunteers and our experience in shelters.<sup>9</sup> I will be conscientious not to pass judgment on my dog park participants. I do not believe nor am I arguing that Ad Prep people are *better* dog owners but I am arguing that understanding

dog behavior to the best of our ability and acknowledging their agency in the stories we tell about them, create healthier relationships between human and dog.

I also want to state the limitations of my fieldwork. I am working with two groups that have very similar demographics in terms of race, class, and gender. Despite some past experiences volunteering shelter or living in under-served neighborhoods, I was not able to incorporate perceptions of more diverse groups. I would feel uncomfortable making any assumptions or conjectures based on the little I do know. While there are undoubtedly similarities between groups in the American pet-keeping tradition, it would be wrong not to nuance this relationship. As with other aspects of folklore, there are differences in how people train and position the pets in their lives based on race, class, gender, and other identifying features. This does not mean that one group of people loves, cares for, or understands their dogs better than another, just that there is a cultural specificity directly tied to our own esoteric knowledge and handling of the animals in our lives. This is weakness of this project and an area for future fieldwork and comparison. Suffice it to say, many different groups of people adopt animals and have adoption narratives.

Many researchers and philosophers who study the human-animal relationship often start their work with a question, how can I be an advocate for animals and yet own them? There are animal advocates who are strongly against keeping pets, confining animals, using animals for human consumption (food or products), and a multitude of other relationships with animals. I never complicated my relationship with my dog until I started doing research on my thesis. I justify it just as American pragmatist Erin McKenna does, that interspecies relationships are of long-standing, “are natural and can

be mutually beneficial” (2013: 2). Just like McKenna, I have my own issues with zoos, some forms of pet ownership (specifically exotic pet ownership), with large-scale factory farming, with animal experimentation, but I also believe that ending or abandoning these relationships does not solve the problems that lie at the heart of the human-animal relationship (2013: 3-4).

Where I struggle most is with the idea of ownership of an animal. Legally, I know my dog is my property; I have the paperwork and the licensure to prove it. It does not seem an accurate description of my relationship with her. My quality of life is better with my dog in it. I laugh more, stay more present and mindful of my world and the people and animals in it, and generally feel more myself when in the presence of my dog. I would, undoubtedly, be one of those people who brought her dog with her everywhere if she could (but my moral compass prevents me from registering her as a service dog despite how easy this has become in recent years).<sup>10</sup> So what do I call myself in relation to her? I prefer the dog park approach, described later in Chapter III. Dizzy is my dog, but I am her human. Even if the terms are not a true representation of the legality and power balance of our relationship, they feel truer to how I define our relationship. I light up when I see her, she lights up when she sees me.

I am an advocate of adoption as a way for people to find pets because I do believe that it helps with pet overpopulation in the United States. I grew up with pure bred dogs, so while I know many people believe that adopting a dog has good or bad connotations, I do not. Furthermore, I have volunteered at shelter that euthanizes and a shelter that does not. I fully admit to being an advocate for shelters that do not euthanize, however, since volunteering at shelter that does, my stance has changed. I can recognize, that

unfortunately, many shelters do not have the resources to be open admittance and have space for every dog that comes in.

In my experiences as an Ad Prep volunteer, which can be the last chance for a dog before they are euthanized, I have seen dogs whose quality of life is so poor, euthanasia seems the kindest thing to do. In particular, I remember a sixteen-year-old Basset Hound named Josie whose family moved and were unable to take her with them. She stayed in Ad Prep for over a month, an unusual amount of time for any dog but from the moment she entered the shelter, it was clear to everyone she had given up on her life. This statement may seem dramatic, but she was listless, would not eat food or treats, barely drank water, and getting her out of her run (a large kennel) was impossible unless you had the physical strength to pick her up because she refused to move. The day I came in and found she had been euthanized, I felt nothing but relief because she was no longer suffering. Not all euthanasia stories seem as easily “justifiable” as this one, but my experience with Josie showed me that euthanasia is not always a “bad” thing.

Surrendering an animal to a shelter, another practice stigmatized by the media and the public in the United States, is another place where my beliefs are informed by my experiences in animal shelters. When I first started volunteering, I never understood why anyone would surrender their animals. Did they not love them anymore? How was that possible? Additionally, when an animal is surrendered to shelter, the paperwork is confidential. Most people who volunteer or work in the shelter do not know why an animal is surrendered beyond a basic description, i.e. moving, allergies, behavioral issue, leaving the reasoning to the imagination of the volunteer or shelter worker. It was not until I began hearing stories from my shelter worker friends who helped out with seizure

cases or in surrender that I began to realize how truly heart wrenching, how emotionally violent surrendering an animal can be for both human and animal, especially when the human is doing it for the welfare of their animal.

While I would like to say that I am an animal activist, but I am still working on putting it into practice. I have been a vegetarian since I was fourteen years old, and I tell my dog she is a semi-autonomous being on a daily basis. I believe that recognizing animal agency, giving them the ability for them to make a choice, and educating people about said agency can be a form of advocacy for them. This belief is often echoed in rehabilitation, those dedicated to both wildlife and domesticated animals.

### **Terminology**

Finally, because of the contention that can exist around some of the terms regarding the human-animal relationship, I want to explain my own philosophic word choices for this project. Within Western philosophy, other academic disciplines, and the animal rights movements, there is a great deal of debate over what we should call other animals. The current belief among many scholars studying the human-animal relationship, such as Carey Wolf, Erin McKenna, Lori Gruen, John Berger, Linda Vance and many, many more, is that by using the word human, we separate and therefore deny the fact that humans *are* animals which privileges humanity over “animality.”

This human exceptionalism has allowed people, through history, to deny basic rights to groups of other people, of other animals, of nature based on socially constructed ideas of what it means to human and what it means to be animal. Aristotle believed that humans have a rational soul but animals do not, Descartes described animals as machines with no sense of pain, emotion, or logic. Other reasons have been offered up through the

centuries and as each view has been disproven, a new reason differentiating humans from animals (and groups of humans who have been animalized) comes into play. Here is a brief history of how humans have sought to differentiate themselves from animals in Western cultures starting with Aristotle and ending in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: first, that animals have no sense of reason, then no sense of altruism, no language, no language production (speech), no capability to use tools, no capability to make tools, no sense of culture (Wolfe, 2003: 1). The current debate I have heard in college classes and at conferences is that while other animals have language and culture, it isn't as complex as humans'. In academia, people now attempt to show that other animals do not have complex grammar or syntax, that animal cultural forms are rudimentary in comparison. As conservation biologists Cal Slobodikoff and Denise Herzing are quick to point out, such distinctions are arbitrary and even inappropriate, because there is too much we do not know about animals, and measuring animals by human standards of what culture and/or language is, denies the possibility of animals' own systems of communication (Kiriazas and Slobodikoff, 1997; Herzing 2014). In my experience, many pet owners place emphasis on their personal interactions and experiences with pets to inform them of what animals "can" and "cannot" do, becoming quick to defend their animals when they feel "science" is not looking at the whole picture. I agree with Slobodikoff and Herzing, and so, I believe, would many of my participants.

I find that the variety of terms that exist to reference humans and other animals are all problematic. United States pragmatist Erin McKenna and anthropologist Raymond Madden have noted that even the terms "human" and "non-human animal," or "human" and "other animals" are still separating the human animal from the large catch-all term



we use for every other species, i.e. “animal” (McKenna: 2013, 2, Madden: 2014, 279). Birke and Hockenhull describe this problem in Western academics, saying “...we come to our task from a modernist heritage in Western culture, which separates ‘us’ from ‘other animals,’ who are relegated to ‘nature.’” (2012, 16) I plan on following McKenna’s approach, to be as specific as I can when mentioning another animal species e.g. human, dog, cat, parrot, etc. Otherwise, I will use the terms “human” and “animal” for simplicity with the understanding that human animality is implied and not excluded. Additionally, the terms “interspecies” and multispecies” may be used interchangeably and in this case, refer to relationships between humans and other species as opposed to two non-hominid species (Madden: 2014, 280).

Third, and I acknowledge this is a simplistic view, that in Western academia there tends to be two camps when considering the human-animal relationship. The first looks at how humans differ from other animals, the second looks at how humans and other animals are similar. I am decidedly in the second camp, something that is informed by my experiences in animal rehabilitation. Culturally speaking, I have found the most damaging relationships between humans and other animals are usually a result of misunderstanding or the widespread dissemination of potentially problematic folklore about animals.

Much of human folklore is usually beneficial to the human but often problematic for the animal when it affects how we value one species over another and then how we behave towards it. Examples may be the inexplicable or unexplainable fear the humans have of snakes and general dislike of other herpetofauna which has affected the conservation efforts towards these species (Ceriaco, 2012). Another example may be

calling someone a lemming if they are not thinking for themselves, evoking the belief that lemmings are suicidal, following each other off a cliff to their deaths (which is untrue, though this was staged in a 1950s Disney “documentary” the *White Wilderness*, where people off-screen shoved lemmings off of a cliff). Additionally, the saying that you could be “as blind as a bat,” or even good intentioned but uninformed folk beliefs like if you touch a baby bird it will be abandoned by its parents are also good examples. Some of these examples may seem harmless on the surface, but at the root, demonstrates how far away many people from the U.S. (especially those living in urban environments) have come from truly understanding the animals in our lives, perpetuating the animal as symbolic device or vehicle in human communication. Even phrases like “hungry as horse,” “pissing like a race horse,” and “brave as a lion” while complimentary to the animal do not do anything for them. Again, we as humans regard animals through a human lens which influences everything we say about, and every way we interact, with them.

Lastly, I want to explain briefly explain the difference between anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism can be defined as human exceptionalism, the idea that the human species is superior to all others and very closely related to speciesism, the hierarchical valuing of one species over another. Anthropomorphism is giving animals seemingly human traits, i.e. the ability to speak English, walk bipedally if they are traditionally quadrupedal, wear human clothes, engage with cultural forms specific to humans (types of dance, song). This is often seen in media: books, movies, cartoons, television shows. While anthropomorphism may seem relatively harmless in these contexts, they can relay a great deal of misinformation about

animals to the public, even as they attempt to give insight into animal emotions or mental states. They also can lead to people treating adult animals like human children or “defective humans” (McKenna, 2013: 9). Ever since Charles Darwin was accused of anthropomorphization in his description of animals in the *Evolution of Species*, “modern” sciences, still bearing the weight of a Cartesian past, have been wary of anthropomorphism due to its subjectiveness (despite the fact that no academic discipline can truly be unbiased or objective). Of course, the issue is never simple because, as McKenna rightly points out, some degree of anthropomorphism is good because it requires us to recognize shared traits between human and animal, for domestication or successful interspecies relationships to exist at all (2013: 9-10).<sup>11</sup>

## **Conclusion**

While this chapter ambitiously covered a variety of cultural understandings and attitudes about the human-dog relationship, animal welfare organizations, and my positionality to this project, we can go on from here with a solid foundation. I have established that dogs are important to humans in the United States and are part of an ever-changing complicated interspecies relationship. I have explained the role animal shelters have in the United States. Therefore, it makes sense that narratives concerning dogs are also important to the humans that perform and share them.

These beliefs all inform the dog adoption narrative and the attitudes my participants have about their relationship to their dog, other people’s relationships to other dogs, and the dog as cultural capital in the United States. In dog park adoption narratives, a couple of my narrators privilege “no kill” shelters above “kill” shelters, believe that their dog’s breed is important to the narrative, and while the way they talk

about their dogs shows they understand their dog's behavior and their dog's ability to make a choice, this is not represented clearly in their narratives. Ad Prep adoption narratives, told by people who work or volunteer at a "kill" shelter, understand that while adoption is the goal, euthanasia may be necessary, they also include their dog's breed in their narratives, and their narratives and speech reflect their understanding of dog behavior and dog agency. As folklorist Tami Harbolt says, "Pets offer us the ability to show the best and worst behavior toward another social being that we can exhibit or imagine. In keeping with that belief, dogs are most certainly the closet reflection to ourselves in nature with whom we have formed a bond" (2003: 71). I believe that adoption narratives, on the surface, are good intentioned and show off humans' "best behavior" towards another animal, even as they reinforce societal tensions about the human-dog relationship.

## **NOTES**

<sup>3</sup> HSUS compiled these statistics from the *APPA National Pet Owners Survey* by the American Pet Products Association, the *U.S. Pet Ownership & Demographics Sourcebook* by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), and the Shelter Animal Count. HSUS admits that it is difficult to find correct statistics regarding pet keeping and shelter counts.

<sup>4</sup> When doing research on the Internet Cat Video Festival in Minneapolis, MN for a previous paper, I heard the internet described as "the dog park for cats."

<sup>5</sup> At the dog park, I hear people excuse dog's aggressive or fearful behavior by saying that their dog is a "rescue" dog. "They don't know any better, they can't help it," etc. While on the one hand, these people are engaging with the concept that dogs have a choice and may even been working with their dog to modify or change that behavior. This makes the association that all rescue dogs are shy, fearful, and/or aggressive. Many of my participants, including myself, dislike when the term "rescue dog" is used in this manner because we all know many "rescue" dogs who don't engage in aggressive or fearful behavior. We feel it's better to just name the emotion or the behavior itself.

<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge, historically breeders culled dogs that did not meet their qualifications. Undoubtedly this practice continues today with some breeders though I do not have this knowledge first hand.

<sup>7</sup> Though, in my experience, some shelters do not identify dogs as pit bulls because of the stigmatization and the fear they will not be adopted.

<sup>8</sup> A dog's size can also be linked to gender. In my experience, many people feminize tiny dogs and think of big dogs as masculine (regardless of the dog's sexual biology). One of my participants, Kate, told me about a man who brought his Chihuahua into the shelter for a check-up. He was a "tough looking guy" and he had placed a giant spiked collar around the dog's neck that was so heavy the dog had a hard time holding its head up. Kate assumed, not incorrectly, that this was an attempt to prevent any associations between Chihuahuas, as a tiny dog, with femininity (8/12/15).

<sup>9</sup> These may also be similar to shelter workers' opinions but, even as a volunteer, there are aspects of animal shelter and rescue organization infrastructure that I am unaware of. I hope combat this by talking with two people, Kate and Becca, who work at the shelter where I did my fieldwork but invariably, I may have overlooked something.

<sup>10</sup> As service dogs are being trained to help people for a wider range of mental issues in addition to physical ones, people can ask their doctors for a recommendation for a service dog. Some people take advantage of this, saying that their dog helps them with anxiety or depression (which in reality it does not) which gives them better access to housing and the ability to take their dogs with them anywhere. There is not a standard regulation from state to state nor a way of monitoring this, creating an abuse of the system. At the dog park, I know three people who have told me directly that their dog is registered as a service dog even though they [the human] has no mental or physical issues. One of my close friends at the dog park is a doctor and she has offered, multiple times, to help me register Dizzy as a service dog.

<sup>11</sup> Zoomorphism, attributing animal traits to humans can also seem relatively harmless (Duran Duran's "Hungry Like a Wolf" comes to mind) until we engage with its contentious past, and the tendency of dominant groups to animalize and therefore trivialize groups of human beings, based on race, class, religion, and gender. Specific examples that come to mind: the subjugation and animalization of slaves by British and American colonialists, the dehumanization and animalization of Jewish people by the Nazis.

## CHAPTER III

### HE CHOSE ME: DOG PARKS AS PERFORMANCE SPACES AND THE CONVENTIONS OF THE CANINE ADOPTION NARRATIVE

As discussed above, adopting a cat or dog has increasingly become the common way that people from the U.S. find pets. It is no wonder that pet adoption narratives exist. It is common for people to tell stories about their own lives, why not about their animals? In this chapter I will describe the dog park as a unique performance space using Richard Bauman's description of cultural performances and an interdisciplinary approach to dog parks as an interspecies place. I will also describe the structure and conventions of the canine adoption narrative genre as they are traditionally told. For this I will use both genre theory and narrative theory to explain the consistencies and variations of genres of personal experience narrative and how people use and interpret them as expressive cultural forms. Conventions are useful for exposing judgments and shared values between groups of people who tell these stories. I will analyze three dog park narratives collected over the summer of 2016 in Eugene, OR and one adoption narrative collected in MN during the summer of 2015. While I have heard hundreds of dog adoption narratives since I started going to the dog park nearly every day with my dog, I chose these four because, while diverse in content, they each perform a variation on the conventional standards of the adoption narrative genre. It is important to identify these narratives as a genre, because it points towards cultural shifts in the human-dog relationship and current tensions that exist, especially in different groups of people that care about dogs.

#### **Dog Parks as a Performance Space**

Dog parks are off-leash recreation areas, typically run by the city, found in affluent urban areas where residents take their canine companions for exercise, play, and

socialization. Sociologist Leslie Irvine did a brief survey of the human-dog relationship at a dog park. She says that,

Dog parks represent something of a borderland: certainly part of the human habitat, but dedicated to animals. Granted, dog parks are developed with the needs of humans in mind. But the consideration of the needs of animals – albeit via the humans who care for them – is striking. Dog park land could be developed in profitable ways, or ways that benefit humans directly. Devoting space to the needs of animals offers enormous potential for challenging that status quo (2001: 156).

Although she does not engage with the divisions economic class creates in various human-animal relationships, Irvine's succinct analysis gets to the heart of the dog park experience and the unusual place that dog parks hold in the United States. After all, most other land reserved for domestic animal use is for livestock, which has a more direct economic purpose that benefits the human.

Before I explain how dog park narratives operate as a performance space; it is important to understand the function of the parks for both species present. Folklorist Jay Mechling has written about the dyadic nature of human-dog folk groups in "Banana Cannon" and Other Folk Traditions between Human and Nonhuman Animals." He says, "Humans and their pets sometimes develop traditional gestures, rituals (such as those around meals or walks), teases, taunts, and so on.... people play with their mammalian pets, often creating elaborate and complex interactive routines" (1989, 315). Dog parks are an ideal place to see these interspecies folk group's routines, because dogs are playing together, while humans are also playing with or observing their dogs. More than that, people and dogs who go to the dog park are constantly and subconsciously negotiating four types of expectations: a human's expectation of how their dog and other dogs will act, a human's expectation of how other humans should act, the dog's expectation of how their human or other humans will act, and the dog's expectation of how other dogs will

act. It is helpful to understand this through Mechling's description of human and dog play as a performance frame constantly being negotiated. He says,

Interspecific play between humans and other animals similarly depends upon an ever-evolving system of learning in which each participant becomes increasingly adept at reading the system.... The "reality" and, therefore, the meaning of the folk event lies neither in the text nor in the context but in the relationships in the whole system that is the event. We might even say that a folk group exists only if there is a communication system that *learns*. (319)

If the human-dog dyad is seen as one that is consistently being renegotiated and learned, then the dog park is an ideal place to observe these processes. Dogs perform their own set of rules and communication with each other that do not always align with human expectations. Often human participants will express surprise or frustration when these expectations (often unspoken and learned over repeated visits) are broken. In my experience, most people who attend dog parks have similar expectations of other humans: if your dog is aggressive, you leave; pick up after your dog; do not bring children under the age of twelve.

The activity of dog attendees, depending on their personalities as well as their level of interest and socialization with other dogs or people, differs. They may play, fight, engage in olfactory investigation, greet every person they see, etc. I bring this up because while dog parks are *intended* for dog socialization, dogs may not *choose* to socialize or play, a complaint some dog owners have. For human participants, the primary purpose of dog parks is a chance to exercise and socialize their dog, but the parks also operate as places where humans can socialize and engage with other members of the dog park/dog owner community.

I started taking my dog to the dog park shortly after I adopted her in 2014 and for the past two years it has been an almost daily experience. I felt that it was going to be the



easiest way to socialize my dog with other dogs. Despite this, dog parks are not popular with the behavior modification or training crowd because they are not controlled spaces. The space is shared with too many different people, each with different views and ideologies on dogs, training, and socializing. There is no guarantee when you go to a dog park (though there is often the assumption) that every dog there is non-aggressive and under voice command. There is no guarantee that even a non-aggressive dog will not become aggressive with right mix of factors. A dog who has never shown any “aggression” before may surprise their owner if that dog attempts to put an over-eager dog in their place, shows possessive tendencies towards toys, or “out of nowhere” attacks a dog for “no apparent reason.” There is also a lack of understanding about the amount of socialization a dog needs. As dogs mature, they usually play with other dogs less. This can be confusing to some dog owners who expect their dogs to operate with the same level of interest/energy as they did when they were puppies.

The Wayne Morse Ranch Dog Park (WMR), where most of my fieldwork was done, is tucked away in the foothills of Eugene, OR. WMR is comprised of three football field sized areas, one of which is bordered by mature trees, and each divided by fenced wildlife areas (there is a wildlife rehabilitation center above the park and the park itself was originally a family farm). Some people attend WMR exclusively because they like the kind of people and dogs there, but some people do not like it because there is not a guarantee you will find other people and their dogs (8-10am and 5-7pm seem to be the busiest). In my experience, WMR park attendees are usually local, perceived Euro-American, between their thirties and sixties, educated, and middle to upper-middle class. Most are experienced dog owners. If you walk into WMR, you are most likely to see

pairs or small groups of people walking together around the fields as their dogs play together. Sometimes these groups are people who already know each other or at least know their dogs play well together. More often, these groups form because their dogs are playing together, not necessarily from earlier acquaintance. A few people hang around the watering station in the first field, but it is rare to walk into the park and see groups of people standing and watching their dogs play for longer than ten minutes. Walking with somebody or joining a group is not usually a spoken invitation, but more something that falls into place through body language, by moving with the dogs.

This is stark contrast to the Alton Baker Dog Park located across the street from Autzen Stadium, the University of Oregon's football stadium and connected to a larger recreational park. Alton Baker still attracts locals, though there are many students from the University of Oregon who bring their dogs. The crowd is more racially diverse though still primarily perceived Euro-American, consistent with the demographics of Eugene, and usually between their twenties and fifties. There are still people who walk around the fields with their dogs, but most people stay in one field. There are more people who bring toys and play fetch with their dogs. People are more inclined to stand and watch their dogs play than walk around the fields together which can create shorter interactions once the dog play breaks up. From my observations, it is a larger mix of first time dog-owners and experienced dog owners. People who are just passing through Eugene may stop there too. I bring this comparison up because even though the following narratives are from WMR, the dynamics of each place change how and when adoption narratives are told. At WMR, I am more likely to hear an adoption narrative walking

around the park with one or two people than if I stand in a group of three or five people watching the dogs play. The opposite tends to be true of the Alton Baker Dog Park.

I have often heard from dog park users that dog parks are places where: “dogs can be dogs,” that humans are there as spectators, and occasionally as supervisors. The time spent at the dog park is not about the people, it is primarily about the dog. In her survey of dog and human play at a dog park, Irvine says that dog parks are places that “resist or renegotiate” the power differential between human and animals,

Regularly making time for play with a companion animal tempers the certainty of human superiority. Many guardians placed their animals’ need for play on an equal basis with their own needs. This was especially the case for dogs. A guardian at the dog park offered this illustrative example: This is her time. She needs time to be a dog, with other dogs, without a leash around her neck. We’re here together, but this is for her. Sure, I’ve got lots of things I could be doing, but she needs this for an hour or so (2008, 125-126).

It is important to understand this undercurrent when we talk about adoption narratives told at dog parks, because it influences the way the narrator performs the adoption narrative.

According to Richard Bauman, “oral performance is situated, its form, meaning, and functions rooted in culturally defined scenes or events – bounded segments of the flow of behavior and experience that constitute meaningful contexts for action interpretation, and evaluation” (1986: 3). Conversations at the dog park usually regard the human attendee’s dogs, whether they trade stories or information, such that they are bounded very specifically to the dog park. This does not mean that these conversations do not happen elsewhere, but the dog park offers a special place that gives people the time and space to routinely engage and share their narratives about their dogs. Additionally, he states that in general, performance is “aesthetically marked and heightened mode of

communication,” that they are keyed, scheduled, and restricted to the performance space (1992: 41; 1984: 28). Birke and Hockenhull have also noted this link between interspecies socialization,

The choreography of activities such as play and other interactions with companion animals depends, moreover, not only on paying attention to the other and their meanings, but also to the surroundings. Interactions are shaped by the social and physical contexts in which they take place— be that in the laboratory, the farm, the household, or the local park. In each of these, physical spaces shape activities, and so do encounters with others— of any species (2012, 27)

Using Bauman’s definition with Birke and Hockenhull in mind, the dog park becomes a “situational marker” for the narrative while physically entering the dog park keys the possible exchange of information specifically about the dog (Bauman, 1992: 45). As Bauman states, “...narratives are keyed both to the events in which they are told and to the events they recount...” (1986: 2). Considering this, I would argue that there is an unstated assumption that the people in the dog park are going to tell stories about their dogs with other attendees, and the act of going to one, marks or keys these performances.

### **Stories Told in the Dog Park**

Within the dog park, the focus is on dogs, however, humans still talk to each other. In my experience, their conversations are about dogs not themselves. For example, most people who become regulars at dog parks recognize and name each other through their dog, often not bothering to trade their own names. At the dog park, a person’s identity as a dog owner becomes the most important over and beyond other aspects of their identity. I am now my dog’s “person / mom / parent / guardian / owner,” etc. The shift in speech changes possession. Instead of my dog belonging to me, I now belong to her. My dog does not notice the shift in speech but the shift does act as aesthetic markers for other human attendees, of their approach toward their dog-human relationship. If

people recognize us when we enter the park, my dog is usually verbally greeted before I am. As stated in Chapter II, this action de-emphasizes the relationship between human and dog as one of owner and property. Even when I walk around the park with a regular group of people, we rarely traded names until close to three or four months of walking together nearly every day. Most conversations, especially in the beginning, revolve around each person's dogs. These narratives are interesting, because, while they describe an interspecies relationship and are performed in an interspecies place, the stories are narrated person-to-person which is very significant to my project.

Adoption narratives and dog trouble-making stories, are swapped more often than stories about a person's job or family. If people are watching dogs play, they often narrativize the play, explaining what their dog is doing behaviorally, telling their dog what to do, or creating a "voice" for their dog that explains what they are doing i.e. "Get that ball!" or "Go play!" or "Get that dog!" (Irvine, 2008, 124). Adoption narratives also are reflective of the place itself. The atmosphere at the dog park is very much like how dogs play themselves, focused and in the moment. The people are watching the dogs play as they narrate the stories, and I have found the stories are often funny or light-hearted, with a lot of side commentary, commands, or interjections to their dogs that may disrupt the narrative briefly before resuming.<sup>12</sup> While adoption narratives can be performed in other places, I have not experienced them in other settings. For example, if I meet someone when I walk my dog in the neighborhood, the interaction is usually brief and satisfies their curiosity about my dog (i.e. if they can pet her, what her name is, what her breed is, that she reminds them of their dog). Longer narratives are not often performed.

While the performance of an adoption narrative can be physically bounded and cued (though not immediately performed, just the expectation of an eventual performance) through the dog park, I would argue that the narratives are not necessarily restricted to that space alone. Rather, the stories become contextually linked and focused on the dog so that they are told and retold in conversation most often when the dog is present, or when the thought or idea of the dog is evoked. Adoption narratives can be performed at any given time, though mostly in informal spaces, like the check-out line at a grocery store or, as mentioned above, walking your dog out in public. These performances are brief and less detailed. Adoption narratives are also routinely performed at the dog park, a city park that has been set aside “for” dogs. The dog park becomes a place for the dog owner community, people who are drawn together because of their dog and their relationship with their dog. What the dog park offers as a performance space is a permissible sense of shared identity and community. These performances become “an act of... situated behavior, situated within and rendered meaningful regarding relevant contexts” (Bauman, 1984: 27). Adoption narratives are performed by people who identify themselves as dog owners, dog people, dog lovers. The dog park gives this group a place not only to exchange narratives and shared experience with other people who similarly name but also to repeatedly perform and practice these narratives repeatedly. Typically narratives tend to be “...shaped and reshaped turn by turn in the course of a conversation,” so that even if the same story is heard twice, there will be variation in what is kept in, added to, or left out of the performance (Ochs and Capps, 2002: 2).

From my observations, the narrative process starts when two dogs start playing together. In some cases, the owners stand and watch or, more commonly at the WMR,

walk around the park together once their dogs start playing. Perhaps one person comments on the dog's play style or look. Introducing the dog by name, breed, age, and temperament is a frequent but not required part of the adoption narrative performance. This information may precede or be included in the narrative structure itself however, an introduction is often a general convention used in the majority of dog narrative genres, and only happens when the dog needs to be introduced for the first time.

As discussed in Chapter II, some people consider their dog's breed to be an important part of their identity but for others, it is a habitual part of the United States dog lexicon, and they may dismiss its importance later. Sometimes the adoption narrative is prompted and other times volunteered. By Bauman's definition of performance, it includes "...a distinctive frame, available as a communicative resource..." that is recognizable to members of the community" (1984: 11). Though there is a lack of order in the manner an adoption narrative begins, a loose frame of the performance is formed as soon as the conversation starts. The routine questions or comments regarding personal facts about the dog become keys or markers to possible genres that could be performed. Adoption narratives themselves become keyed when someone asks "How/where did you get your dog?"

I have observed that narrators and audience usually trade stories, creating a mutual reciprocity. This reciprocity brings up the notion of Bauman's performer competency. How does the audience judge when an adoption narrative is performed successfully? I would argue that, through my experience, that the competency of an adoption narrative is not due to the length and detail included or how well the tale is told. A key feature of personal experience narratives can be their brevity. Instead, the

performer's narrative demonstrates the knowledge they have about dogs, their relationship to their dog, how they situate their dog in their life and regard the power balance (i.e. family member, "child," etc.), and what they value as a dog owner. This social performance identifies the performer's competency as a dog owner through the narrative. Anthropologist Richard Bauman's work with the lying tradition of Canton dog traders says something very similar. He states,

The way to establish that you are a good coon hunter is to show that you have good hounds and are thus knowledgeable about quality dogs - even more so if you have trained them yourself. Thus, because hunting stories are instruments for identity building, for self-aggrandizement, there is a built-in impulse to exaggerate the prowess of one's dogs with hyperbole (1986: 21)

In other words, the competency and behavior of the dogs is tied to the story itself. In comparison, adoption narratives establish the dog as a family member of the narrator (and the transition), but they also show off the narrator's morality and personal values within this construct.

For example, when I am conversation with another person at the dog park I am keying into the information I find most interesting, their knowledge about play, training, behavior (of dogs and dog owners). If someone mentions that they get all their training tips from celebrity trainer (Cesar Milan, for example) I, internally, write them off at once because of my own issues with Milan's training style.<sup>13</sup> As Patricia Sawin states about audience response to performance, "All of these responses are influenced, of course, by cultural and generic conventions, as well as by the listener's personal history and current situation" (2002: 41). Again, the dog park is "for the dog," and it is impossible for any dog park attendee to leave behind their knowledge or history with dogs at the gate. So, while the dog park creates a sense of community, there is also a degree of judgment being



passed through these performances by members on other members in their competency as dog owners.<sup>14</sup> There may not be repercussions, though I have seen and participated in longer lasting effects, such as dog park attendees avoiding a person and their dog if they are deemed “unfit.” This ongoing judgment from other park attendees can solidify one’s own opinions and values about dog care creating a degree of self-awareness as dog park regulars are known for repeating other markers of unsuccessful performances, secondhand personal experience narratives (the ludicrous things they have heard from other people to each other) and gossiping about what people and dogs to stay away from.

### **Adoption Narratives as a Genre**

Adoption narratives are a genre of personal experience narratives that are shared as part of the socialization process at the dog park. According to ethnomusicologist Sue Tuohy in her discussion of folk songs as a genre, “We use genres to organize culture and our daily lives and because we use them for different purposes, genres must be flexible and loaded with meaning” (1999: 40). Adoption narratives are part of what happens when a bunch of people and a bunch of dogs wander around a shared place together, a way of organizing that experience. Meaning is generated when people talk to other people about the importance of the dog in their life. There are many narratives about humans and dogs that could be told at the dog park yet the adoption narrative, in my experience, is the one most frequently performed.

Personal experience narratives are stories we tell about our everyday lives or about the experiences that make up our lives. They are one of the most widespread forms of cultural capital that exist in the United States as they “... express our sense of self: who we are and how we got that way” (Linde, 1993: 3). They act as way of building and

fostering community, of claiming or negotiating group membership, and help to narrativize and make sense of life experiences by expressing social and cultural anxieties (Linde, 1993: 3). Told in the first person, their content is often “nontraditional” (Dolby, 2008: 15). They are “...a way of using language or another symbolic system to imbue life events with a temporal and logical order, to demystify them and establish coherence across past, present, and as yet unrealized experience...” while fitting themselves into pre-constructed social and cultural norms and ideologies (Ochs and Capps, 2002: 2). Personal narratives may be told repeatedly over time, changing each time to fit the context with certain elements added or taken away depending on the performance space, the performer, and/or the audience. By this definition, if we consider dog adoption narratives as a genre of personal experience narrative, they are primarily about the relationship forming between human and dog by connecting the life story or life history of the dog in relation to the human’s life story and personal experience.

Personal experience narratives are made up of multiple genres, each in relationship to and interacting with each other, such that by performing a smaller genre, say a dog adoption narrative, you are also participating in, contributing to, and evoking larger genres. Genre is a form of categorization because, “as soon as we hear generic a framing device...we unleash a set of expectations regarding narrative form and content” (Briggs and Bauman, 1992: 147). Dog adoption narratives are part of a bigger life story about the human narrator’s interactions with their dogs over the course of time. Furthermore, they are intertextual as they create “connections that extend far beyond the present setting of production or reception, thereby linking a particular act to other times, places, and person” (Briggs and Bauman, 1992; 147-148). For example, dog adoption

narratives share conventions with adoption narratives of other domesticated animals, they can be family formative similarly (though not equitably) to child adoption narratives, they participate in “saving” or “hero” conventions like wildlife rescue and release narratives. The wider the lens, the more genres we put in comparison to each other, the easier it is to see the complex relationships between one narrative genre and another and the entangled social issues. While we may look at one story in isolation, it is always a part of a bigger story that is being told.<sup>15</sup> By naming and defining them, we “relate one [genre] to another and give them a meaning” (Tuohy, 1999: 41).

Tuohy notes, “pinning down a genre can be difficult...because they engage in ongoing change; existing genres are transformed and new ones created” (1999: 39). As folklorist Lisa Gilman explains, genres are identified by recognizable “formal conventions,” emically defined by the community (2009: 336, 337). These conventions shape how the story is told, how it is received, organized, and interpreted, and it is reflective and expressive of social values (Gilman, 2009: 337; Seital, 2003: 279; Tuohy, 1999: 41). Adoption narratives, as personal experience narratives, have conventions that make them identifiable by people at the dog park and by people who work in shelters. My participants, most of whom have been volunteering or working in the animal welfare industry much longer than I have, influenced my understanding of the adoption narrative genre conventions. In fact, they often went out of their way to draw my attention to recurring themes in narratives humans tell about the pets in their lives. Since I am looking at two groups of people’s adoption narratives and how they differ, it is also important to consider the how a genre’s power or value shifts from one group to another. As “cultural categories, genres do significant work within everyday social life and people do

significant work with them” (Tuohy, 1999: 69). They have a significant purpose and transfer meaning, values, and other ideologies from person to person.

As a genre of personal experience narrative, dog adoption narratives can be identified through four common conventions. I use the term “convention” as it fits with genre theory, however, through a performance studies lens Bauman would probably identify these conventions as keys or possibly aesthetic markers to their performance. My participants never called adoption narratives a “genre” themselves but brought up each of the four conventions as they discussed what bothered them when talking to members of the public about volunteering, about animal shelters, about the dogs they worked with, or things overheard from visitors when working on the adoption floor. While the adoption narrative may begin before the visit to the shelter or foster home (i.e. the adoptees see the dog’s picture online or they have been planning to adopt a dog and *today is the day* they are going to adopt), the act of adoption takes place at the shelter.

As personal experience narratives, adoption narratives are grounded in real life so a description of what an adoption looks like may prove useful. In 2010, when I first started volunteering at animal shelters, I worked on the adoption floor where my job was to connect the people who visited with the dogs on the floor, and I have observed this process many times. I have noticed two kinds of approaches to adoption. First, at animal shelters specifically, there are the people who come to “browse.”<sup>16</sup> They may or may not be planning to adopt a dog; they may or may not have an idea of what age, breeds, or temperaments they are interested in. They wander the aisles of the adoption floor, looking at the dogs in the kennels until they find one they want to visit with. At this point, an adoption floor volunteer sets them up in a visitation room where they get ten to fifteen

minutes to visit with the dog. The volunteer checks on them periodically to answer any questions, and to check on the dog. Some volunteers may try to steer people towards another dog if it seems the dog they are visiting with or interested in seems an ill-fit for the person's lifestyle.

Second, there are people who have seen a picture of a dog online from the shelter or rescue organizations' websites or from PetFinder, a website that compiles a database of adoptable animals so that people can browse by zip code, breed, age, until they find an animal they like. Some people in this group also become aware of shelter or rescue dogs through television news or radio promotional campaigns where they feature dogs that have been at the shelter for a long time. These people may know instantly that they want the dog, and visiting might be irrelevant (though still required by the shelter or rescue organization) as they have already made their decision, or they may travel long distances simply to pick up or look at a dog. A dog park friend of mine drove from Eugene, OR to southern California to adopt her dog Piper, who she saw online.

While the people visiting the dogs, whether in a room at a shelter or at a foster's home, may have been initially drawn to the dog by its appearance, often the dog's behavior clinches the connection between human and dog. A friend of mine looked for a dog at a shelter in Michigan. She described the cacophonous riot of the shelter, all the dogs were barking, and as she walked down the aisle looking at dogs she saw one, a medium sized orange dog sitting calmly in her run, not barking. She had been looking for a dog who could be trained as an epilepsy service dog and the demeanor of this dog, Meisje (as the Chow-Beagle mix was eventually named) stood out. Another friend of mine in Minneapolis went to the shelter to look for a dog and saw one she thought was

beautiful, lithe, multicolored, with long fur. Jesse remembers that she knew Pele was the one when she leaned on Jesse's leg in a hug, something that Jesse's dogs growing up had done. "I always loved leaners," she once said.

Though adoption narratives are individual stories, they often follow a similar structure, I which I argue have become conventions of a genre. Bauman says that it is important to respect the individuality of a narrative even as we link one person's narrative to another (1986: 5). He continues to say that defining conventions and format, is the classic problem of narrative genres, because of "the functional and transformational interrelationships that link them into larger expressive systems and so on" (1986: 6). In other words, a narrative may conform to conventions even as they change them. On the surface, an adoption narrative may be structured like so: human wants dog, human goes to shelter or to rescue or looks up online, human finds dog, human adopts dog, the end. Of course, like any genre, the structure may be similar but it is a little more complex than that.

First, there is a sense of fated-ness or kismet from the human's perspective upon meeting the dog, which from here on out I will refer to as the Kismet Convention. As described above, usually there is something about the dog's appearance and then behavior that the person appreciates. While most shelters or rescue organizations have a twenty-four hour hold period so a person can decide if adopting a dog is the best decision, most adoptions are made as a snap-judgment. They see the dog, they like the dog, they adopt.<sup>17</sup> In my experience, and that of my participants, friends, and colleagues, adoption narratives trigger phrases like "he chose me!" or "I saw her and I just knew." The first phrase, "he chose me!" gives the dog agency in their adoption, commenting on

the reciprocity of the interaction between human and dog. While dogs are individuals, and can react differently from one person to the next (which can be informed by their past life experiences, i.e. a fear of men in hats or a love of men with beards), this statement is misleading because the choice to adopt still ultimately lies with the human since they talk to the shelter workers or volunteers and fill out the paperwork. As for the other phrase, “I saw her and I just knew,” it points towards the instant, snap judgment many people feel when they see a dog that *could* be based on the dog’s behavior, appearance, memory of a past dog in their life or that they met, and so on. In a recent conversation with another dog park attendee, after she used the latter expression, I asked her what it was that she “just knew” about her dog Wanka. She thought about it for a moment, laughed, and said, “You know what? I honestly don’t know but it was his picture, I just immediately knew from that picture.”

The next convention is the “Forever Home” Convention. “Forever Home” is a term often used by shelters, rescue organizations, and adoptees, the idea that adopting a dog is giving them a loving home where they will live out the rest of their life. This language implies a happily-ever-after type ending, an idealistic or utopian expectation of perfect harmony between human and dog. There is no room for a surrender narrative, another genre of human-dog narrative that is thematically linked to the adoption narrative where the human surrenders a dog to shelter if the adoption does not work out (nor is the surrender narrative that got they dog to the shelter in the first place typically known). That said, most people who adopt dogs are familiar enough with the shelter system and ideologies surrounding animal shelters to interpret what a surrender means, that their dog had to come from somewhere, usually making the assumption that it is a result of a

“failed” relationship between human and dog on part of the human. This judgment places moral value on the act of “saving” not on the act of doing what might be best for the dog.

This attitude leads us straight to the next convention, the Savior Convention. There is also often language regarding “saving” or “rescuing” the dog either from its previous life and/or its fate at the shelter. In either case, dogs become “powerless, voiceless, victims of moral depravity” (Harbolt, 2003: 37). In my experience, many people may believe shelter dogs to have sad or tragic backgrounds or at least, they cannot imagine why someone would surrender or “abandon” their dog. They may also believe that adopting a dog means saving it from being euthanized. They may talk about the adoption floor at a shelter as “death row” or include the number of days their dog had left to live. As previously stated, euthanasia is the only way for some open admission shelters to deal with the pet overpopulation or overcrowding but the rate of euthanasia is dependent on a shelter’s access to resources.

This convention focuses on the change in the dog’s status from shelter dog to family dog (though as discussed in the Chapter V, dogs are not truly able to shed their shelter dog status). I recently heard at the American Folklore Society/International Society of Folk Narrative Research conference in Miami, FL 2016 that this convention of the Adoption Narrative is a “Cinderella” tale or rags-to-riches story. This description is semi-useful (in that it refers to the “Forever Home,” Savior, and Life Story Conventions). It is the prevalent theme in the United States cultural imaginary, and so it reinforces the structure of these narratives. The dogs themselves may or may not have a sad or tragic background, so the assumption that the adoption narrative is a “Cinderella story” means that it is also an imperfect fit.



Lastly, it is also common for some people to make inferences about the dog's history based on facts given to the person by the shelter or rescue organization or based on the dog's behavior. I call this the Life Story Convention, where the creation of these life stories can occasionally seem far-fetched, but, often, they are grounded in the narrator's cultural understanding of dogs and dog behavior. They may talk about a dog's history with abuse, or how the dog was surrendered, they may imagine what their dog's life was as stray or "on the streets." These conventions may not always be apparent in every dog adoption narrative, it may depend on the audience and location, as well as what the performer decides to include during this specific rendition.<sup>18</sup>

Generally, once a genre is established the "...generic expectations can shape the expressive choices individuals make, as well as the possible messages that can be produced, interpreted, or disrupted during complex performances, complicating relationships between individual agency and the messages disseminated" (Gilman 2009: 337). Often, at least one if not two out of the four of these thematic conventions both appear in and shape the adoption narrative, revealing the motivation or tensions beneath. Of course, conventions can be shared across related genres. Adoption narratives hold similar features to other "getting-a-dog" narratives. For example, the sense of kismet exists in narratives where people buy their dogs from breeders. A friend, Talia, once told me that her parents bought a Beagle from a breeder and they were looking for the liveliest dog and that the dog had to come up to them. My parents, who have bought American Water Spaniels from breeders look for the same thing. While not necessarily verbalized, the idea that "she/he chose me" is pervasive across narratives where dogs gain entrance into human family life, rooted in the dog's behavior.

Let us consider a few specific examples of the dog adoption narrative, so I can illustrate how these conventions work. I consider the four stories I am about to share to be typical in structure and content, based on having heard numerous of these stories during research and in many informal conversations with dog owners over the years. The first three were told to me in the afternoon at WMR. I have the names of the dogs but not the owners because, as mentioned before, anonymity is also a common part of the dog park adoption narrative performance. While I did not record the stories directly from the narrator, I recorded my fieldnotes about them shortly after they happened and have included what I remember. For these stories, “...” shows a pause in the conversation or story, usually because attention is fixed back on the dogs. I recorded the last one during an interview with Amy and Bryan, two of my participants in Minnesota, in their living room.

**Wolfie: Thursday, July 14<sup>th</sup> 2016**

Wolfie is a two-year-old “chiwieniepoo,” as his people call him (Most likely a Chihuahua-Dachshund-Miniature Poodle mix). I know him as a small friendly dog with a long body, short legs, mostly black fur with some brown and orange fur in his undercoat and on his legs. I have met “his people,” a man and woman in their mid to late 30s, many times as our dogs like to play together at the park. The day I heard Wolfie’s adoption narrative, only the woman was present and she narrated the story.

She said they adopted Wolfie from Luvables, a foster-based rescue organization in Eugene. Luvables sets up at the pet store PetSmart every Saturday, bringing adoptable dogs they have posted online into the store so that people can meet and adopt there. The woman and her partner had seen another dog they liked online and called Luvables with

some questions. The person they called said, “Why don’t you come down to PetSmart tomorrow and take a look?” They went down to Pet Smart the following day but wanted to keep their minds open. As the woman put it with a laugh, “we saw Wolfie and we picked him up and we never put him down. We just clicked.” Now the woman and her partner cannot even imagine getting a different dog because Wolfie is so small and so mellow. The other dog was a Border Collie mix, and they think back and wonder how they would have even managed the dog, since Border Collies have so much energy and they live in an apartment. She does not know where Wolfie is originally from, though Luvables had the address where he was found, on a farm in northern California. When I first met Wolfie and his people shortly after moving to Oregon two years ago, I had asked why they named him Wolfie. The woman had laughed and said that it fit him. “It was silly,” she said, and it is a “big name.” Wolfie, of course, references wolf or wolves, the “big” part of the name. Adding the -ie to the end is, what I assume, makes the name silly. She continued to say that despite Wolfie’s size, “*he* is silly and has a big personality.”

Wolfie’s narrative hits on the Kismet Convention and the “Forever Home” Convention of the adoption narrative but not the Savior Convention. Both the quotes cue the conventions, “We saw Wolfie and we picked him up and we never put him down. We just clicked.” While this statement may not look like the sense of destiny often described in these narratives, the instant connection between human and dog, or the human’s interpretation of their interaction with the dog and the dog’s later behavior, lines up. Wolfie’s happily-ever-after is implied in that his person and her partner could not put him down, that they could not imagine another dog despite going into PetSmart to look at a completely different type of dog. We even see how the narrator has rationalized her

adoption of Wolfie based on breed, that a Border Collie would have been too energetic. The Savior Convention is absent, in part due to the age of the narrator. From my observations, most dog owners under the forty leave this convention out signaling a change in the attitude towards animal welfare industry. With the increase of adoption, shelters have become less stigmatized through celebrity endorsement, popular media, and work on parts of shelters themselves.

**Casey: Monday, July 26 2016**

Casey is an eleven-year-old Cocker Spaniel-Terrier mix, a thick and small dog weighing in at forty pounds. She has long black fur except for some signs of aging, white fur around her eyes and snout. Her person, a woman in her seventies with long grey hair, who smelled like eucalyptus and wore a lot of tie-dye is the kind of person who, unsolicited, starts telling stories and each story bleeds into the next. According to Casey's owner, she is a very sweet friendly dog who loves people.

The woman adopted Casey when she was ten-years-old in January, 2016. She had always had big dogs, even fostering a Great Dane/Labrador mix who was quite old. When the Great Dane became too sick to eat or drink, the woman could not lift her to take her to the veterinarian. She had to call on friends to help her load the dog into the car. She decided that she wanted a dog that was manageable, reasoning, "If I can carry a forty-pound sack of dog food, I can handle a forty-pound dog." She looked at Greenhill and other local rescues but they all either had very tiny dogs or super big dogs. Finally, she looked at Wiggly Tails, a foster based rescue organization that serves Eugene, OR and the surrounding areas. She saw the picture of Casey and thought, "I have to go meet

that dog.” Wiggly Tails gave her the foster owner’s number who lived in Veneta. They met at a dog park.

Casey was “the sweetest dog she’d ever met.” The foster owner asked if she wanted to take her home that day, which surprised Casey’s person because she had never had that experience before. The foster owner just had to follow her home to make sure she had a physical location, so Casey went home with her that day. Casey cost only seventy dollars. The woman repeated this fact a few times over the course of her narrative, emphasizing how great a dog she has for a small amount of money.<sup>19</sup> Per tradition, I followed her telling with my story of how I found my dog Dizzy at the shelter and she responded, “don’t you think that rescues are just the best place to find dogs? They have the greatest personalities and the greatest dogs are there. Better than getting them from the pound.”

Casey’s person finally concluded her dog’s story by telling me the Casey’s backstory. Casey is from California and used to live with an elderly person who asked their two adult children to take care of Casey and Casey’s sister when she died. The children agreed but when their parent died, they at once took Casey and the other dog to the pound. Because they were both senior dogs, ten-years-old, they were at once put onto the euthanasia list. Wiggly Tails saw them and took Casey and her sister in addition to all the dogs that were on the euthanasia list that were not sick, back to Oregon. The woman did not say how she gained so much information about Casey’s past. It is unusual for dog owners who adopt to have so much of their dog’s history, such that the woman, as she narrated could pass judgment on Casey’s former owner’s children with a snort and a head shake. When I have recounted this story to other dog owners and dog lovers, they have

had a similar reaction to the previous owners' children surrendering the dogs to a shelter or "the pound." This assumes that the audience will have similar moral values and opinions regarding animal welfare and euthanasia as well as how people situate dogs in their lives. As Briggs and Bauman state, "genre thus pertains crucially to negotiations of identity and power" (1992: 148). Because Casey's adoption narrative belongs to and is created by the human narrator, the authority belongs to the narrator. She controls its morality, social value, and what conventions she chooses to use.

In this narrative, we see three of the four conventions present. The Kismet Convention because of the woman's snap judgment to meet and then adopt Casey. The Savior Convention, since Wiggly Tails "saved" Casey from euthanasia at a California pound, which in reality was probably an animal shelter that euthanizes (a "kill" shelter) or animal control (which also may house and euthanize animals). The Life Story Convention is also present, and includes a surrender narrative. Again, I would argue that one could probably infer the "Forever Home" Convention here as well; there is no room for a surrender narrative (she was already surrendered once, and based on the narrator's reaction to the idea of surrendering, will not be again playing into "Forever Home"), nothing that would make Casey's person take her back to Wiggly Tails or to an animal shelter.

**Lola: Tuesday, June 14<sup>th</sup> 2016**

Lola, a sleek golden dog of medium height with long fur (some kind of sight hound), is a two-year-old "African Street Dog." Her owner, a blonde woman in her early forties and the owner's mom, in her late sixties or early seventies co-narrated Lola's story. While her owner's mom began to tell the story, occasionally her owner would

break in and gently correct her mother when she felt it necessary. They walked up to me, my dog Dizzy, and my friend Jules in the WMR middle field where we first watched Lola attempt to engage Dizzy in play. After a few failed attempts on Lola's part, Dizzy became interested, and they began to chase and wrestle. I have included the following excerpt of Lola's story as I recorded it as a part of my fieldnotes from memory in Figure 1. In this figure, three dashes --- are used to establish that Lola's people, myself, and my friend Jules who had accompanied me to the dog park are silent and watching Lola and Dizzy play chase and wrestle together.

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Figure 1: Lola

Lola's Owner (LO): What's your dog's name?

Nikki: Dizzy. And yours?

LO: Lola.

Nikki: She's pretty, what kind of dog is she?

LO: We don't know, possibly something with sight hound.

---

Owner's Mother (OM): She's an African street dog you know...My daughter, she was in Africa, and she saw Lola. She rescued her...They kick dogs in Africa you know.

---

OM: She'd never been inside you know.

LO: She didn't know how to be a dog. When we first took her to a dog park, we didn't know how she would act. She was a little shy at first but soon she was running around and learning to play... [Lola had] never seen a bed, never seen stairs

OM: she [her daughter] had to teach her [Lola] how to go down stairs.

LO: Yes, I did have to teach her about stairs.

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In the process of telling Lola's story, LO never reveals her dog's country of origin or what her owner was doing on the African continent. After ten or fifteen minutes of playing, Lola and Dizzy were lying on the ground mouthing each other when another dog came up. Lola became interested in playing with the other dog so Lola and her people walked off. The story itself did not take too much time to tell, LO did mention her

experience with Lola going through security and airports and the OM focused mainly on praising her daughter (much to her daughter's discomfort, displayed through eye rolls and awkward shifting) and the perceived abuse Lola must have suffered in "Africa" before coming to the United States.

I wanted to include Lola's narrative for multiple reasons. It is unusual because it details an international adoption, which are not especially common stories to hear. For the few international pet adoption narratives I have heard, usually the dogs are from Mexico or the Caribbean and were still through a local animal shelter or a rescue organization. Another feature that makes Lola's story unusual as, by all appearances, LO found Lola on the street not through an organization. While it does not engage with the Kismet Convention that other adoption narratives included do, the other conventions are present.<sup>20</sup> First, the Savior Convention, Lola had to be "saved," at least from the mother's perspective, from "Africa." There is no room in Lola's story for any understanding of cultural differences between the human-dog relationship in the United States versus another country. There is an ethnocentrism in the way United States pet-keeping is privileged over any relationship between human and dog or human and animal in "Africa" which is no longer made up of individual countries or people but thrown together as "other."<sup>21</sup> Kate explains this from an animal welfare perspective,

...there's still this pervasive judgment that people are bad. And I mean people .... I think that people want to feel that they saved something. I think it makes us feel good.... It boils down to humans' own insecurity about things if we get right back into the whole psychology craziness of it. They have some need to make themselves feel better and that does it.... it's all emotions and human belief systems (8/25/15).



While Kate is not trying to demonize how people want to “save” the animals they adopt, nor is she talking specifically about international adoption but about domestic adoption, the theme remains. To have a happy life, she had to be “saved.”

Lola’s “Forever Home” is implied by the OM, who repeatedly compared the dog’s life now to what it was abroad (despite, as far as I can tell, not witnessing it herself). There is even a creation of life events through Lola’s lack of exposure to stairs, to being inside, to “being a dog” (as described in Chapter II). While I believe that Lola struggled on her journey from life as a street dog to an American pet, I find it striking that both her owner and the OM inferred that she had to be taught by American humans how to “be a dog.” Additionally, the narrators engage with Lola’s life story by mentioning her breed or lack of one, saying they think she’s a sight hound (based on her appearance and that sight hounds were originally bred in North Eastern African countries). “African Street Dog” is not without connotations. Street dog finds equivalency with stray dog, in both cases there is a perception of trauma, of un-belonging or unwanted-ness, of neglect or abuse that is reminiscent of the pound narrative.

Even though LO obtained Lola through unintentional means, she and her mother still find a way to situate Lola’s story within the conventions. As anthropologist William Hanks states, genres are a way of familiarizing and naturalizing reality (1987: 675). By telling Lola’s story as one of trauma on foreign streets, the narrators of Lola’s narrative are reasserting and reaffirming dominant political and moral realities and opinions that the United States treat dogs the best way. Furthermore, Gilman states that genres can affirm social hierarchies and “also provide socially sanctioned channels for criticism or

social commentary” (2009: 345). Lola, as a form of cultural capital, is used to pass judgment on people who do not treat dogs the way LO and MO do.

**Frankie: Monday, August 30, 2015**

I decided to include Frankie’s story, a dog adopted in Minnesota, to point out any consistencies or discrepancies between adoption narratives in Oregon and Minnesota. When I first presented my research for the Human-Animal Research Interest Group at the University of Oregon, I was asked whether these conventions were localized and, in fact, one audience member denied that they could be present in Oregon adoption narratives. While I would not argue for universality by any means, I have been to dog parks in Minnesota, Montana, Washington, and Oregon and most animal shelter and rescue organizations use these stories on their websites, on social media, and in their newsletters. Out of the hundreds of adoption narratives I have heard or read over the years, most of these conventions existed. The interview, held in Amy and Bryan’s living room, may seem very different from the dog park as a performance space but echoed the same signals and structure as the narratives collected in Oregon

Amy and I had mutual friends at the Animal Humane Society. I knew *of* her, and while I did not meet her officially until interviewing her for this project, I remember that she would give the Ad Prep volunteers routine updates on her dogs either by stopping in or through notes. Eventually I met with her and her husband Bryan to interview her about another one of their dogs, Vida, whose story I will recount in Chapter IV. Inevitably, our conversation turned to their other dogs, Frankie, and Rasta, as well as the first dog they had as a couple, Ruby, who has since died. I heard each dog’s adoption narrative in turn. Frankie, a fifteen-year-old yellow Labrador Retriever is, in my opinion, a sweet if stoic

dog. Amy and Bryan adopted him in 2011, Amy works for the Retrieve a Golden of Minnesota (RAGOM), a foster-based rescue organization in Minnesota dedicated to giving space and to rehome Golden Retrievers and Golden Retriever mixes while Bryan is a lobbyist. They are both Euro-American, in their late thirties or early forties and sat on their couch while they recounted how they had met each one of their dogs, Frankie sandwiched between them as Amy petted him and began creating a small ball of shedding fur on the cushion next to her. Frankie's story was told as part of a vehicle for telling Vida's story and was in two parts. Figure 2 is a transcription of my interview with Amy and Bryan, telling about Frankie's adoption.

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Figure 2: Frankie

Amy: And we got this guy, and we were his third home I think? And um, we'd figured out when we got him that he'd been beaten because you'd move wrong, especially Bryan, he might move his hand and he would drop to the floor and cower, his hip is damaged and the vet said it could be, I mean we don't know, but it could be...and he had some issues, kind of fear aggression, so we just figured it out, we worked with a behaviorist, and you know just worked really hard on that.... I remember meeting Frankie and he was just so sweet, I saw him sitting in his kennel and I went home and Bryan was like "get him" I mean, I could have brought any dog home and he wouldn't have cared so the next morning I went and grabbed him and he hung out in the office with me and at noon I went to fill out the paper work and then you came on your lunch hour or something and met him and I...Frankie and I connected but...Frankie and Bryan, like...those two were supposed to be together. I always think you get a dog that you're supposed to be with. Like, Frankie and I are crazy about each other but he and Bryan they saw each other and it was like "Dreamweaver" was playing. He came into the office and he crouched down and he was like "hi!" and it was like slow motion of Frankie running towards him and Bryan crouching down like this and Frankie and it was.... I was like, those two are supposed to be together.

---

Again, there is a sense of kismet in Amy's narrative, as there is in all her adoption narratives, though this example is perhaps the best description, with Amy describing Bryan and Frankie's meeting as if something out of a film. There is also an attempt at a

construction of Frankie's past. In comparison with Casey's owner who matter-of-factly recounted an incredibly detailed past account of her dog, Amy and Bryan admit they do not know the whole of Frankie's story, only that it was likely he experienced abuse by looking at his behavior and the results of a medical report.

While I have not found any real difference in the thematic conventions in the adoption narrative between states, there is one difference. Most of the stories I have heard in Oregon describe adoptions from rescue organizations and most the ones I have heard at dog parks in Minnesota, describe adoptions in animal shelters. This pattern may have been a result of whom I had access to for my fieldwork, but it could also be how shelters and rescue organizations market themselves in Oregon versus Minnesota, and what resources are available regionally for each. What this could mean, is that value placed on adopting dogs from rescue organizations versus animal shelters, (dog adoption as cultural capital) varies from state to state. Amy and Bryan, who adopt indiscriminately from either, adopted Frankie from the Animal Humane Society.

### **What Dog Adoption Narratives Do**

As the conventions of this genre stipulate, adoption narratives are used to construct a dog's history from the first person perspective of the human narrator and in relation to the human telling the narrative. For the performer, they become formative because they are reaffirming their relationship to the dog for themselves and to others. As Amy Shuman states, "Narrative creates chronologies and invents origins, crystallized moments in the past made to appear more significant than ongoing life in the present" (2005; 25). People tell these pieces of history to explain their dog's behavior to themselves or other people present, especially when their dog is engaged in play with

another dog, often hinting at or pointing towards the *specialness* of their dog in their eyes.

By sharing narratives with other dog owners, they establish a relationship between humans based on assumed shared values as they are performed in the narratives, (which may become a sense of group identity or commonality), a way of looking at and understanding other people's participation in the community and their stance on animal rights, animal welfare, and dog behavior. They also reaffirm the relationship between human and dog, highlighting the meaningful and loving relationship between them. Personal narratives, Sandra Dolby writes, are an "...expression of personal values," a "hidden agenda in any such storytelling..." (2008: 27). For example, Lola's story points to worries or concerns about dog welfare not just on a domestic level but on an international one too, even if, in my opinion, it is a little misguided and engages with ethnocentrism. Amy and Bryan, as I will discuss later, have activist tendencies in their adoption narratives. Wolfie's narrative points to the understandings and even stigmatizations of breeds based on behaviors. Adoption narratives also help dogs get adopted. The more they are told, fulfilling the conventions of their genre, the more they reinforce United States perceptions and expectations of what the human-dog relationship should look like.

## **Conclusion**

In summation, the dog adoption narrative is constructed through four conventions: Kismet, or a sense of destiny or fated-ness between human and dog; "Forever Home" is the happily-ever-after for human and dog; Savior, the human is saving the dog from a sad or tragic past or a sad or tragic fate (i.e. euthanasia); Life Story, the human engages with,

expands on, or imagines the details of their dog's life prior to adoption. These conventions are emically defined by the community. While not every narrator performs each convention, their narrative performances are keyed through specific phrases and marked and spatially bounded by the dog park.

Furthermore, in my experience, these narratives are stories of love between the human and dog and sometimes, they can be stories of trauma if the narrator believes the dog needed to be saved or was saved (whether from their prior life or from the shelter). The human-dog bond in these narratives is culturally contingent upon the interpretive process of both narrator and audience, and the dog, as cultural capital, is the vehicle for this interpretation. The way that these narrators talk about their dogs in the stories they tell reaffirm the value of dog adoption from (in this chapter) rescues in particular, but also shelters.

The first time I presented the beginnings of my fieldwork with other people was for the University of Oregon's Human-Animal Research Interest Group, a woman in the audience came up to me afterwards and explained that it was hard to hear me dissect adoption narratives because she could only think about her relationship with her pets, each of whom she had adopted and she had been an adoption advocate for many years. She said, "this is my heart, you're talking about my heart." The relationships many Americans form with their pets and the stories they tell about that relationship are deeply personal. These stories, while about the other animals, are also about ourselves, about how we consider our humanity in relation to the other animal beings we choose to share our lives. I may seem overly critical of the dog park narratives presented in this chapter, but what I am trying to draw attention to is that adoption narratives establish a

relationship between humans based on assumed shared moral or personal values performed in the narratives. By engaging with and telling these narratives, the dog owner is reaffirming their relationship to their dog, for themselves and for others, while also connecting to broader societal beliefs.

## **NOTES**

<sup>12</sup> Due to the constraints of my own fieldwork, some of this artistry and organization of the narrative is lost.

<sup>13</sup> Cesar Millan's training style (and many other celebrity dog trainers) is based on dominance training (described in Chapter II) that uses punishment based methods and flooding, prolonged exposure to the cause of the issue, in order to correct a dog's behavior which instead, can heighten a dog's fear or anxiety to a breaking point. Despite being "the dog whisperer," Cesar Millan routinely ignores the body language of the dogs he works with and does not engage with newer training methodology such as desensitization and counter-conditioning (described more in Chapter IV). I am not alone in my dislike, many of my friends who are trainers or behavior modification specialists also dislike him for perpetuating an archaic standard of training between human and dog.

<sup>14</sup> Note that humans, outside of a dog park, are also quick to judge a dog owner's competency based on their dog's behavior or what the dog owner allows their dog to do. I know people who put up no-pooing signs in their yard because some dog owners do not pick up after their dogs and I have heard when hiking, people complain about others letting their dog off leash. We can also look at issues of mental health. Someone who hoards animals may be deemed incompetent and unstable. These judgments are not necessarily transmitted between people through narrative but by observation and informal conversation.

<sup>15</sup> I am intrigued by the intertextuality created by the boundaries between genres, as described by Charles Briggs and Richard Baumann, especially analyzing how they work together. While I am not able to cover the complexities of narratives linked to the dog adoption narrative in this project, I hope to do so in the future, looking at the relationship between wildlife and domesticated animal narratives.

<sup>16</sup> This is because animal shelters have a physical location, where dogs are mass-housed. Rescues are foster-based and the dog is living with a person or a family in their home.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, if a shelter deems the fit unsuitable due to the temperament, breed, and age of the dog with the person's lifestyle, they may turn the adoption down. I have rarely seen this happen, as volunteers and shelter workers are usually successful at steering people away before the paperwork starts.

<sup>18</sup> I also believe that there is a correlation, especially with the Savior Convention, with age demographics. In my observations, people under the age of thirty were less likely to use language about saving or rescuing their dog than participants over thirty. This distinction may be due to the increased popularity in adopting animals from shelter or rescue organizations and the resultant awareness and/or a shift in social consciousness about the animal rights and animal welfare movements operating in the United States.

<sup>19</sup> The price of shelter and rescue dogs typically varies on their location and what resources they have. In my experience, a \$70 adoption fee (which usually includes preliminary vaccinations and spay/neuter) is common at animal shelters that are overly crowded, have low adoption rates, lack resources, and/or are located in underserved and economically poor communities. I have seen animal shelters that have high adoption rates,

access to resources, and/or are located in economically wealthy communities can have adoption fees (still including preliminary vaccinations and spay/neuter) as high as \$375. These fees can be lower or higher depending on the dog's adoptability, i.e. age, health, sometimes breed and disposition. In other words, a healthy puppy will generally cost more than an older dog with a lot of medical problems who may be in shelter for some time.

<sup>20</sup> One could argue that by the OM's statement "...she saw her. She rescued her..." may imply the sense of fated-ness common in dog adoption narratives but without hearing the story again, I would not want to make that inference. That said, I would be curious to know and wish I had had the chance to ask LO, why Lola? Undoubtedly, she saw more than one street dog in "Africa," what was it about Lola that made her stick out so that LO would go to the effort of bringing Lola to the country? Especially since traveling with a dog internationally usually includes a long quarantine process and additional state regulations.

<sup>21</sup> In many conversations, I have had with dog park attendees and people who work in animal welfare, this lack of understanding of cultural relativism is common. Americans privilege the way we treat pets and other animals in comparison with stories or experiences of how animals are treated in other (most often non-Western) countries. What I find interesting about this, is that Americans are not historically informed, even forgetting the fact that pet-keeping as it looks currently in the United States, is a relatively recent trend within our own history. The personal condemnation of how other countries and cultures treat animals (especially characteristic megafauna that are not native in the United States but we privilege, like elephants, lions, and panda bears) ignores or is ignorant of the role colonization has had in destroying, and/or teaching a new kind, of relationship between indigenous people and animals. Pre-colonization, the relationship between humans and animals across many cultures was an animist one, more respectful, equitable, and more understanding of an animal as animal as opposed to something for human use. This is not to say those relationships are totally gone, but they are certainly not (or have only recently become) a part of the dominant hegemonic purview of the human-animal relationship in Western societies. In her talk, "Right of Nature," environmentalist Winona LaDuke spoke to how colonization has impacted indigenous people's relationship to nature worldwide. She stated, "Everybody is indigenous to some place, it's just that people got further lost and removed from those teachings over time. And indigenous societies on a worldwide scale retain many of those values in spite of five hundred years of colonization." (Skabewis). United States's insider-outsider view of how to treat certain animals also ignores the access to resources that many of these countries have, so that even if some countries want to protect, conserve, or educate people about the animals in their country, they are unable to.



## CHAPTER IV

### “SHE’S YOUR KIND OF DOG:” ANIMAL SHELTERS, ANIMAL AGENCY AND DOG REHABILITATION ADOPTION NARRATIVES

In this chapter, I will explore adoption narratives as canine rehabilitators tell them, exploring how these versions, in comparison with dog park narratives, resist certain of the conventions described in the previous chapter, while reinforcing others. I will be drawing on my own fieldwork and experiences with Adoption Preparation (Ad Prep), a rehabilitation program for shy and fearful dogs at the Animal Humane Society (AHS) in Golden Valley, MN. This chapter includes interviews and personal experience narratives with other volunteers and the two shelter employees who helped run the program in 2015. Explaining Ad Prep adoption narratives in comparison with dog park narratives highlights patterns that exist in the adoption narrative, and how adoption narratives are informed by and changing because of the shift in the human-dog relationship in the United States. I am using genre theory to show how these narratives can create spaces for activism and performance studies theory, in particular Bauman’s idea of performer responsibility, to show that sometimes, they do not.

#### **How Adoption Preparation Adoption Narratives are Performed**

The narratives I collected for this project tend to be performed differently than those I gathered at the dog park. First, I have friends as participants. The anonymity that exists between people at the dog park, the expectation of a social exchange, exists but is not stressed. In Laura’s case, her shift was directly after mine and we had talked so much over the years together I was familiar with many of her narratives prior to doing research. I was less familiar with the rest of my participants, but because of our relationship to Ad Prep, a sense of camaraderie that exists. We knew of each other even if we did not share

the same shift, since Ad Prep volunteers tend to stick with the program. Ad Prep volunteers share so much information on shift, such as anecdotes and experiences, that even though I had not worked with some of my participants before, they told me the experiences they were sharing with me were redundant. As Wendy told me when she was talking about her experiences in Ad Prep, “I feel silly telling *you* this. You already know.” Ad Prep narratives are typically shared at the beginning or end of a shift and sometimes during, if volunteers are sharing the Ad Prep room to write up notes about their session with a dog. Typically, conversation revolves around the dogs in shelter and on the Ad Prep program though invariably stories of their own dogs do come up. Because Ad Prep volunteers who share a shift know each other so well, they usually do not share their own dog’s adoption narrative. It is either already known by their audience or their audience was a part of the adoption process in one way or another.<sup>22</sup>

There is also a contrast in physical location. The dog park, even if meant for dogs, becomes a place for human performance, for shared interactions that relate to the human relationship to dogs, uniting a group of strangers in a physical place. Without it, these people would most likely never have met as owning a dog tends to be an insular experience. Your dog is socialized with dogs from training classes, with friend’s or families’ dogs, or exposed to dogs in a veterinary waiting room. As Gilman states, “Genres in a complex performance are often associated with prescribed spaces...” (2009: 253). The creation of dog parks creates a physical place for the adoption narratives to be shared, for people to come together and talk about their dogs.<sup>23</sup> Even if I trade narratives with another person at the dog park and feel a sense of ownership of the place or connection to the person next to me, there is often the awareness that I may not ever see

that person again. The experience can be repeated with other people, but that performance of my narrative with that person as audience is bound to that time and place. The Ad Prep narratives I present were over the course of a formal interview in informal places (sitting on a lawn, at a coffee shop, in the Ad Prep room, in Laura's house), however there was already an established connection as I am also an insider in this group.

In both dog park and Ad Prep adoption narratives, when I hear these stories I judge the competency of dog ownership through the performance of the narrator (as described in Chapter III). I have a different set of shared assumptions with each group based on my experiences with them. I can recognize in Ad Prep narratives my own beliefs and values about dogs as a volunteer and a dog owner. Another difference in the performance of dog park and Ad Prep narratives is the presence of the dog itself. At the dog park, the dogs are physically present while Ad Prep narratives, the exception being Vida's story, were without presence of the dog.

Second, while I may have asked for some of the narratives by asking if they remembered or had a story of an Ad Prep dog they enjoyed working with, most of the narratives came out naturally as they shared their personal experiences at the shelter. I heard stories of their own adopted Ad Prep dogs (if they had adopted one) and talking about the shelter led to much older stories of adopted dogs in general, especially when my participants considered the stigmatization of shelters and began outlining the genre conventions of an adoption narrative.

### **What is Adoption Preparation?**

Ad Prep is a behavior modification and rehabilitation program at AHS that started in 1993. The program focuses on dogs that, during their in-take exam at the shelter,

express shy, fearful, or fear-based aggressive behaviors. Behavior Modification and Rehabilitation Specialists Kate and Becca oversee the volunteer-run program with Edie, an Ad Prep volunteer who has been part of the program since its start. They act as professional resources for the volunteers. Ad Prep is housed in a room in the AHS basement. Volunteers can work out with dogs in the room, though they also use the halls, the kitchen, or Kate and Becca's office to expose dogs to new people, surfaces, objects, etc. While Ad Prep dogs can be placed in a variety of wards, AHS have rooms in the basement that house dogs by size, age, temperament, or quarantine, but Q ward is designated specifically for those Ad Prep dogs who struggle the most with the shelter environment. Closer to AHS' boarding facility, the room is small and relatively quiet.

Ad Prep volunteers are trained to read dog body language and to employ counter-conditioning and desensitization behavior modification techniques. According to Kate, behavior modification changes a dog's negative association with something to a positive one. "If we can change their emotions about something, their behavior changes because of it. And that would be where the classical conditioning comes in" (8/25/15). For example, if a dog fears human touch or does not like touch on the head, Ad Prep volunteers practice touch desensitization where the dog is touched briefly on their back, working up to the "problem" area, alternating human touch with treats (usually chopped hot dogs). Eventually the dogs will associate the touch with good things (food), it counters their fear, conditioning them to welcome touch in the future.

Fear based or shy behaviors can be expressed in many ways. A dog may be afraid of or reactive to men with hats, men in general, walking up or down stairs, walking on a

particular surface, or even resource guarding and cage guarding. Nancy, an Ad Prep volunteer explained,

It just takes them time to realize people are a good thing...and a lot of the dogs we get haven't necessarily been abused. They just have not been socialized at all, they don't know what to expect, or they had one or two bad incidents or they were just neglected...

The type of conditioning described above helps to socialize the dogs out of this behavior, increasing their chance of adoptability and success outside of the shelter. Again, this points towards the acculturation of dogs. Tami Harbolt says, "Just as individual animals possess experiences unique to their lives, it is also imperative that we acknowledge that they are socialized, acculturated participants in our culture" (2003: 22). She continues to say that their participation might not always be voluntary but the relationship of people and their pets changes what meanings animals have.

Some of the behaviors are a result of shelter stress that all in-coming animals experience in varying degrees during their stay in an animal shelter. It may gradually go away with time. Becca states,

Animals are not bred to be mass housed. We don't train or breed them to cope with it, so shelter stress comes around when an animal is scared, worried, or under stimulated.... for a shy scared dog [this] will result in distance increasing behaviors or [they] completely shut down. The other kind of shelter stress is under stimulation – pacing, doing the same things over and over again and basically what it is dying brain cells...<sup>24</sup> (8/25/15)

Shelter stress is most often the direct cause of shy and fearful behavior in the shelter such that Ad Prep dogs can be categorized in two ways. Those that lack exposure and life experience may be under-socialized, have experienced past abuse, or some combination. Kate says that their departure from the shelter "... looks like its magic. We do a little work, we send them home, and it looks like they're magically cured. In reality it has little

to nothing to do with what we did, because leaving the shelter decreases their anxiety.” (8/25/15). Then there are those dogs that are genetically shy and fearful, chronically under-socialized.<sup>25</sup> These are the dogs that we will never “fix,” according to Kate, just make “feel better” (8/12/15). Dogs with these behaviors stay in the Ad Prep program for prolonged periods of time until they are considered acceptable to move to the adoption floor or to a foster-based partner rescue organization. The existence of this program has helped lower AHS’s euthanasia rates, as more dogs are vetted through the program than euthanized.

The average length of a stay on the program is one week before moving up to the adoption floor, and in May 2015, the program hit their 10,000,000 mark of dogs that had graduated from the program and been adopted. Once the dog is off the Ad Prep program, they are moved upstairs to the Adoption Floor, a large room with concrete floors, concrete bricks, and large industrial fans, filled with thirty or so runs and connected to a small yard. About 150 volunteers work in Ad Prep, for three hour shifts at a time. While they may work a shift alone, its more common for a shift to have two or three volunteers scheduled together. My participants come to rely on their volunteer partners. They organize their shifts in particular ways, help each other with difficult dogs, and often act as catharsis for each other, a way of sharing the stress that can come from regularly volunteering or working in animal shelters. Some volunteers prefer to work with some breeds over others; some want to work with dogs who are re-evaluations, which means the dog may have failed or not completed their behavioral exam and become “re-evals” for three days before the behavior assessment is redone, so not technically on the Ad Prep program yet.<sup>26</sup>

Each dog on schedule is usually seen for ten to fifteen minutes while the volunteers work on their core issue before moving to the next. Each volunteer has their own approach to their shift but the foundations each volunteer has is the same. Laura, a retiree who has volunteered with Ad Prep for twenty-five years and for AHS longer, explained what she does on her shift,

I love to sweet talk, I love to sing at these dogs, I find they respond really well, to get these dogs to come forward. I think I really like to develop a relationship with them and once you can get them to come to you and trust you...to want to be with you, to get them from the back of the run out of the gate...[she tells them] stay next to me, I'll take care of you, you trust me and I'll trust you – that's what I do best.

In short, her method like that of many other volunteers, is based in speech and in body language. Volunteers are told to “baby-talk” to the dogs because when we speak to the dogs our body language unconsciously reflects the words or tone of our voice. Dogs, reading human body language, notice the subtlest signals. Nancy, who had mentored me on my second Ad Prep shift, told me and all the new Ad Prep volunteers, she mentors that you must “leave your day at the door.” An Ad Prep volunteer shift is not about the person or any bad or negative thing that happened in that day, it is about the dog.

According to Nancy, Edie, and even from my own observations, a person's mood can drastically change their session with the dog because the dog is so attuned and so reactive, especially when they are experiencing the level of stress they do at shelters.

Volunteers are also taught that their job is not to train the dogs. “We never ask our dogs to sit,” Edie told me during training. In fact, volunteers are taught not to ask the dogs for anything. Kate explained further,

.... we're just asking him to breath and be.... we're not putting any contingencies on any of it.... we're not rewarding good behavior, the behavior changes because he gets more confident and it comes with that association. [speaking as the dog]

‘Oh this isn't so bad, when I'm in this room, I get hot dogs. I like hot dogs. It's not so bad, I calm down, when I calm down my behavior improves, I'm not frantic, I'm not barking, I'm not spinning in circles.’ (8/12/15).

This idea is the core of the Ad Prep program. They have the philosophy that an Ad Prep volunteer's first job is to make the space as stress-less as possible, to allow the dogs to *be dogs*, to engage in their shy or fearful behavior even as they are encouraged, gently, to overcome that fear. I have often heard volunteers telling the dogs, “you're so brave!” or “I know this is hard, but you are being so brave, you're trying so hard.” These concepts of “bravery” or “trying” often litter the speech of Ad Prep volunteers whether they are talking to or talking about the dogs they work with. Some people may view this dialogue as a way of anthropomorphizing the animal but I would argue that this more closely aligns with Irvine's recognition of the animal's subjective voice, (mentioned in Chapter I) or Tami Harbolt's argument that animals in shelters either need to learn how to “speak” for themselves or shelter workers learn to “speak” for them (2003, 105). She says, “Despite cultural standards for how certain breeds or species behave....the animals themselves have motivations, desires, expressions, and needs. Workers take these, translate them, and then take other socially constructed messages into consideration...” (Harbolt, 2003: 105). By calling a dog “brave,” Ad Prep volunteers are recognizing and acknowledging the dog's attempt to overcome their fear.

So, what does Ad Prep have to do with adoption narratives? Just like people at the dog park, “Ad Preppers” love to talk about the dogs in their lives, whether their own or a dog they have worked with in-shelter that stuck with them but their training and experience with dogs in the shelter affects the way they perform their narratives. Over the course of my interviews with Kate, Becca, Edie, Laura, Nancy, and Wendy, I heard a few



adoption narratives of dogs they had adopted themselves (Ad Prep and non-Ad Prep) or Ad Prep dogs they knew who had been adopted. Other people's adoption narratives, or adoption narratives about dogs they knew through Ad Prep, seemed to come up more often. In part, this is due to the nature of where they work and volunteer. The whole purpose of AHS is to get dogs adopted, working with Ad Prep dogs is a part of that process for those dogs in particular. I found it surprising when I did hear adoption narratives about dogs they had worked with but not adopted because once a dog graduates the Ad Prep program, Ad Prep volunteers do not typically hear what happens to the dog, or whom they were adopted by. The only notification Ad Prep volunteers have is the adoption board Edie keeps up to date with the Ad Prep dog's intake photo and their adoption date underneath. Occasionally, news might come from AHS's social media campaigns or newsletters, where they like to print success stories people have shared.

Regardless of how they knew the adoption narrative, it was striking how much their Ad Prep experience informed their narratives. The way they spoke to the dogs they worked with, about bravery and hard work, transferred to the stories they told. Tuohy states that, "genres are contested cultural categories" (1999: 40). That is, they are not just made up of conventions but also impact the people participating, how a genre is valued or affiliated which changes from one group to another. Ad Prep adoption narratives reinforce some genre conventions of the adoption narrative but also resist others. To prove this, I will share and briefly analyze three Ad Prep adoption narratives. First, my own adoption narrative which came up in conversation unexpectedly during each of my interviews; second Nancy's adoption of Chase, and third, an adoption narrative about a dog named Vida that I heard from every single one of my participants.

## **Dizzy**

I could not adopt a dog due to space and resources until 2013 when I finally lived in a dog-friendly apartment and a family member, frustrated with the fact that, among other things, I had stopped buying or drinking alcohol to save money to get a dog (drinking is a social expectation in my family at gatherings or events), gave me money to buy a dog. As someone who had worked with the Ad Prep program, I had worked with a lot of breeds, ages, temperaments of dogs. When people asked how I could bear to volunteer at a shelter without wanting to adopt every single dog on sight, I would joke that, “not all dogs are created equal.” I had done extensive research into which breeds I thought would fit my lifestyle best. I had worked as a pet sitter for many years and fostered a shy/fearful German Shepherd from a puppy mill seizure who, while sweet, was an unbearable amount of work. These experiences meant that I *knew* that there were three things I absolutely did not want in a dog. I wanted a mix but not a Labrador Retriever mix (hard to find in a shelter as most mixed dogs are part retriever), I did not want any herding dog (shepherd, collie, cattle dog, etc.), and though I worked with and loved Ad Prep dogs, I did not want an Ad Prep dog either. With these standards in place, I did not meet a dog I wanted to adopt until June 2014.

That summer there was a six-month-old black and white puppy that came into Ad Prep as part of a transfer from some southern shelters. She was sweet and excited to see people in her run. She never barked or cried, but as soon as someone took her out, she pancaked (Ad Prep term for lying flat on the ground) She was as leery of walking on concrete or linoleum surfaces, going up or down stairs, and did not like being touched. Someone had named her Socks because each paw was white with black spots. She was in

the program for two weeks. I worked with her once and visited her in her run (a kennel where the dogs *could* run from one end to the other) the second week because she was scheduled to go to the Adoption Floor the next day. I thought she was a great dog but not for me, because she was undoubtedly a Lab mixed with herding dog and, of course, recently graduated from Ad Prep. At the end of my shift, I saw she had been moved to the floor so I went up to say goodbye to her. Sitting in her new run upstairs as she wiggled all over me. I thought, “This dog is really sweet. I really like her. I could adopt this dog. I shouldn’t adopt this dog,” but it already felt too late. Not only did I hate the idea of her going home with anyone else, the idea suddenly sickened me, despite having no desire to adopt her *until she hit the adoption floor*. Being a more cautious sort, I put her on a 24-hour hold (aware of the fact I had just made a snap-judgment, which I had been actively resisting as a result of all my research). I asked my friend Andrea to visit her with me that evening, and promptly renamed her The Disreputable Dog, Dizzy for short, after a book character and because she was the antithesis of disreputability, so it made me laugh. I was filling out the paperwork by noon the next day.

I find it humorous that, despite my efforts to not adopt a Lab, herding, or Ad Prep dog, I wound up with all three. I often tell people that I thought I knew what I wanted, but what I wanted would have been wrong. When I tell my story to other people, I actively resist saying that “I just knew” Dizzy was my dog because my work at shelters has made me constantly aware that adoption does not always work out: some people and dogs are ill-suited, and a dog can go home with multiple different people and be happy. But the sense of “kismet” still lingers. I thought Dizzy was cute; I loved the way she wiggled and was so excited to see me but never barked. During my interview with Laura, she brought

my narrative up saying, “Linda [Laura’s Ad Prep partner] and I have talked about this. Why do you think Nikki picked her out? I would not have picked her for myself. And we have asked you and you do not know, she just spoke to you.”

This story, as it now exists here, was compiled out of the narratives I told my Ad Prep participants, but I want to note my story is undoubtedly different at the dog park. There, some of what I know of Dizzy’s history may come out. Occasionally I make the joke that she has lived in more states than I have, since she first entered the shelter system in Oklahoma, wound up at another in Missouri (in transit) before finally reaching Minnesota and then moving to Oregon with me. I do not, however, pretend to know where she came from or how she was surrendered. If people make assumptions that she was abused because she was in a behavior mod program, I explain more about the program and the two kinds of Ad Prep dogs, that she is fearful or shy from lack of exposure and life experience than anything else as she has mellowed out and become more confident with age.

I rarely engage with either the “Forever Home” or Savior Conventions. Yet during my performances at the dog park, resisting these conventions is not always successful among my audience. This is a result of ingroup/outgroup dynamics; they are not Ad Prep volunteers and do not have my experience or context. They often read into my narrative and tell me my dog is lucky to have me, tell me what a good job I did for helping her, express sympathy that she was a transit or shy and fearful dog. Once, a man (Euro-American and in his fifties) told me it was good I adopted her because with shelters, “it’s either out the door or in the oven” alluding to the misunderstandings about euthanasia.

This misinterpretation caused me to abbreviate my narrative, hardly giving out any details other than I met her at a shelter in Minnesota where she was part of a shy and fearful dog rehabilitation program, I knew her for two weeks and then adopted her. While I would like to abandon the shy/fearful dog part of her narrative altogether, I have found it important to include. While my dog loves other dogs, she can be aloof and standoffish with humans at the park. Even if she greets them by sniffing or asking for treats, she usually refuses to let them touch her. The explanation of her behavior, that she prefers to be petted under the chin, that she is less of a people-dog becomes an important way of advocating for her and for her use of the space at the dog park.

The few times that I have included and complicated any of the conventions mentioned above, particularly the idea that Dizzy could have happily had a home somewhere else with someone else, it makes my audience uncomfortable or dismissive. This relates to Bauman's concept of performer responsibility, that they "assume responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill and effectiveness as against other communicative functions" (1992: 44). How am I responsible to my audience? As much as I want to be an activist, go against convention or even dispute conventions in my narrative, I find myself falling back to what my audience expects of me as narrator. I know how to perform it well, even if I leave some conventions out, and while I may not change anyone's mind about animal welfare practices, I do advocate for my dog, which I find most important even as I maintain the status quo. Furthermore, as Gilman discusses, genres can limit the agency of the performer because of the "pressure to conform to conventions" (2009: 337). The conventions' influence on the formalization

of the genre can impact the performer, diminishing their agency (2009: 337). I have not found the dog park a receptive place for changing the narrative, which I find surprising.

### **Chase**

I interviewed Nancy on September 1, 2015. Nancy, a database administrator or “computer nerd,” in her words, who retired early and wanted something to fill up her time. She had grown up on a farm, been around animals her whole life, and wanted to be around people and work with animals. She has volunteered at AHS for over ten years. She has multiple roles, working on the Adoption Floor every Wednesday, matching dogs with perspective owners and working in Ad Prep every Thursday. In addition, she works in the administration facilities once a month, trains adoption volunteers and dog-walker volunteers twice a month and ad hoc mentors Ad Prep volunteers (such as myself). She started volunteering in Ad Prep because, years before volunteering at AHS she had a dog with behavioral issues and worked closely with a trainer to find a resolution. The process fascinated her. When she had met her quota of hours as a new volunteer on the adoption floor, she started doing Ad Prep because of her experience. Nancy described her introduction to Ad Prep, “...at first.... when you go through the training there’s so much reading to do and so much to watch, it seems fairly overwhelming but it settles into ya and, oh within six months.... you start to read the dog and start to see what they’re telling you, and then it starts working for you...” It works for Nancy, who is well-known and respected by the shelter workers and volunteers at AHS and on the adoption floor, she is one of the better advocates for Ad Prep dogs.

Each dog, once they reach the adoption floor, is given a personal profile sheet that has basic information about them such as age, breed, weight, name, etc. and some

information about their personalities so that prospective adopters can at once see if the dog will fit their lifestyle. Dogs are described by humans for humans as independent, energetic, playful, affectionate, easy going, and shy. Ad Prep dogs have an added note on their profiles (see Figure 3) that alerts potential adopters to their status as a shy and fearful dog. While these profiles have gone a long way helping people look past that first sense of kismet and consider their life with the dog outside of the moment, AHS did not start including these profiles until two years ago. I know from experience that sometimes the first connection to a dog is strong enough that people dismiss the importance of the note. Enter volunteers like Nancy.

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#### Figure 3: Ad Prep Dog Profile

People also describe me as shy. Shy dogs are very loving but may need a little time to acclimate to their new environment. A quieter, low-key home would allow me the opportunity to get used to new things at my own pace.

I will do best in a home without children under 8 years of age.

I was very shy when I arrived at the shelter, so I participated in a special adoption preparation program for Wallflowers that helped me adjust to a bustling shelter environment. I will do best in a quiet, low-stress home environment and may need some extra patience and time to get used to a new home.

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Nancy uses her experience in Ad Prep and her own adoption narrative (see Figure 4 for a transcript of her recorded narrative) of an Ad Prep dog, a Manchester Terrier mix she named Chase, to explain how the human owner will need to manage not just their dog, but also other people, when adopting a shy or fearful dog. It is not always an easy road. Depending on the dog's background, if they are genetically fearful or from a puppy mill or hoarding seizure and lack life experience, it can take time for Ad Prep dogs to

adjust to the home environment.<sup>27</sup> Other people who assume dogs should just “be dogs” (as discussed in Chapter II) often need to be instructed on how to interact with a shy and fearful dog. People who adopt Ad Prep dogs may find themselves working on overcoming their dog’s fear for the rest of the dog’s life.

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Figure 4: Chase

Nancy: I actually took an Ad Prep dog home so I recount my experience when telling other people interested in taking one [an Ad Prep dog] home. I say that they really need a quiet environment, they need a regular schedule, and they take a lot longer to acclimate in an environment because they have so many fears. He’s doing really well now. I mean when he first came home, he was so afraid of my husband that every time he walked into a room he’d just pee. And there was some needed education with my husband too because at first he’d be upset that the dog had an accident and he would want to yell at him and I would say that is absolutely the wrong thing to do. That’s just going to cause more of the same thing so you know, it takes time and patience and positive reinforcement and people come to the door, we have to manage them...you have to have patience, you have to have perseverance and then you can get to the other side of things.... now he sits on my husband’s lap when he watches t.v.

Nikki: What kind of dog is he?

Nancy: He’s Manchester terrier. I named Chase .... he was Mr. August on the 2013 calendar.

....

Nikki: What was it about Chase that made you want to adopt him?

Nancy: Chase? Well, I was probably one of the last people to work with him because he went on the floor later that day or early the next morning...and he was in Q ward and so I went in and he was kind of avoiding eyes but when I said “outside” he came up to me and he put his head right here and took a deep sigh and I was lost, I was just lost. It was like, ‘I’ll know you’ll take care of me’ so he followed me home. And I wasn’t even thinking of getting a dog but with that one big sigh, ‘I’ll trust you,’ he warmed his way to my heart. And he needed somebody, you know, who would go that extra mile for him. He was just about a year, he’s five now.

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Nancy can attest to this issue and either prepare adopters for the journey, or if it seems like an ill-fit, redirect them to a dog that might better fit their lifestyle. She was not



planning to adopt Chase. She had gone into Q ward to let him out, he had been approved for the adoption floor but was still showing some shy behavior. She told him they were going “outside,” and he leaned on her and sighed. It was the sigh, Nancy said, that clinched it, “he came up to me and he put his head right here and took a deep sigh and I was lost. I was just lost. It was like, ‘I’ll know you’ll take care of me,’ so he followed me home.” When she took him home there were difficulties. Many Ad Prep dogs need a steady routine to acclimate to their new environments and it takes a lot of patience to work through the dog’s issues without getting frustrated. Nancy explained that she had to educate her husband who wanted to yell at Chase if he peed on the floor. She would tell him, “That is absolutely the wrong thing to do. That’s just going to cause more of the same thing.” Nancy was not specific about whether Chase was not housebroken or if his accidents in the house were a form of submissive peeing, although with an Ad Prep dog, I would guess the later. In either case, yelling at the dog either introduces or reinforces fear with that behavior, often making the situation worse. Everything worked out, Chase now sits on Nancy’s husband’s lap when he watches television but, in Nancy’s words, “you have to have patience. You have to have perseverance, and then you can get to the other side of things.”

Like my own narrative, the Kismet Convention in the adoption narrative is present in Nancy’s story. Chase’s behavior, relaxing into Nancy despite his fear, the way Nancy interpreted his sigh as trust created a connection she had not expected. Nancy and Chase’s story, however, does not engage with the other conventions at all. One could argue for the “Forever Home” Convention because, at the end of Chase’s narrative, Nancy said he “he needed somebody, you know, who would go that extra mile for him,”

showing that she was that person. From an emic perspective, I do not believe (and Nancy would probably agree with me) that her story reinforces the Savior Convention because Nancy talks so much about Chase's behavior, acknowledging his agency. Chase's narrative could be argued as an inverse to the Savior Convention, that he is not being saved from the shelter or from a past life so much as he is "saved" from a future adoptee who would not have the time or patience for an Ad Prep dog. As an Ad Prep volunteer, Nancy knows that while it takes a lot of time and patience from the human side of things, the dogs are doing a lot of the work to become acclimated. She told me, "They're [dogs] each individuals, they each have their own personalities and what drives them..." Lastly, Nancy does not engage with or create any life history for Chase in this version of her narrative, a version constructed for people outside of the Ad Prep community.

Undoubtedly, because she met Chase through Ad Prep, she has some knowledge of his background, whether he was a transfer dog or a surrender. In this version, however, it has no place, as it defeats the purpose of Nancy's narrative. Her story is really about Chase's present, his future, what he is like today as opposed to his past life before her and before Ad Prep.

As described in my own narrative, Nancy also engages with Bauman's performer responsibility but in a different way. She does challenge the narrative by first describing Chase's transition home and then how she met him. The transition is more important than the first meeting, which is significant as she is actively using her story to inform potential adopters what the experience after the initial adoption is like. Even if they do not adopt an Ad Prep dog, the transition will not always be easy, and Nancy can prepare them through her own adoption narrative performance. The shelter is a better place to change,

challenge, or bend the conventions of the adoption narrative than the dog park because people are open to information about the dog they are bringing to their life.

## **Vida**

The last Ad Prep narrative I will explore is Vida's, a ten or twelve-year-old deaf Border Collie. I heard Vida's story first from Laura and Wendy who both told me I needed to talk to Kate, who had brought Vida to the shelter as part of a seizure case. I also spoke to Amy and Bryan, Vida's people.<sup>28</sup> When I interviewed Nancy, I asked if she knew Vida and heard a brief story from Nancy too. As such, I have an adoption narrative that is atypical because I know most of Vida's story in detail. Due to the length, I will give a summary of each account of Vida's narrative, using important quotes from my participants.<sup>29</sup> If we view Vida's narrative as a single story with Vida and Amy as the protagonists (which I know my participants would), then we can consider Bauman's comment on third person narratives as follows, that

events recounted in these narratives is purportedly one in which the person telling the story was originally personally involved, and the point of view from which the event is recounted is that of the narrator by virtue of his or her participation in that event (1986: 34)

Furthermore, we are learning information about Vida and Amy's story that we could not possibly know which Bauman refers to as "going backstage" as the "events are not immediately accessible to the narrator" (1986: 34). This can also act as form of hindsight.

Amy first heard about Vida, then named Fly, when she worked in the AHS development office. Wendy emailed her about a sweet, but asocial and deaf Border Collie she had been working with that had come to AHS as part of an animal seizure case. "She's your kind of dog," Wendy had said. Amy was reluctant. She did not need another dog; she did not want to feel sorry for one either, so she decided not to meet the dog. A

week later, Laura left a message with one of Amy's coworkers. "Tell Amy to go downstairs, because there's this little Border Collie. It's her kind of dog; she's gotta meet her." Again, Amy thought, "no way." A few days later, Amy went to the AHS basement to put some supplies away and saw a volunteer working with Vida in the hallway, and the moment she knew. She emailed her husband Bryan a picture of Vida and wrote, "what do you think? She needs a home with other dogs and we know how to do deaf dogs." Bryan wrote back, "What should we name her?" Amy insisted that Bryan meet her before officially adopting Vida because she was going to be a "project dog." He came to meet Vida who Amy had taken into the office and was cowering underneath Amy's desk. Bryan crawled under to meet her. That evening, Vida went home with them. At first, they called her Fancy because she was elegant. Eventually, they decided on Vida because it means new life or dearly loved. Ordinarily, this is where the average adoption narrative would end. Vida had been "found" and, despite her behavioral issues, was taken home, yet the multiple narrators give more insight.

Vida's transition was not an easy one. Amy and Bryan could pet Vida during the first two weeks, because her fear left her paralyzed enough to put up with it. After gaining more confidence, Vida began running away from them and they were unable to pet her again for two or three months. Amy said, "we were of course happy to have her, but you just wanted to love her up and you couldn't do that with her so... and there was just a lot. I would ask Kate 'now she's doing this, what should we do?'" They gave her space, allowed her to be, relying on skills Amy had learned from Kate, friends in Ad Prep, and Ad Prep and dog behavior sessions offered by AHS. In the process of moving to another house, Bryan and Amy built Vida a fort in the corner of the living room, and

she spent most her time there. They always made sure she had an out, a way to run, if they approached and she felt trapped. They avoided looking at her face and making eye contact, telling visitors at the house to look at her hips.<sup>30</sup> She had never eaten from a bowl, so they slowly introduced one to her. They could not take her for walks for months, and she was terrified riding in the car. Amy and Bryan said she got over a lot of her fears by watching the other two dogs, Frankie, and Rasta. When she was afraid of getting her leash and harness on, Amy said that Frankie would stand by her and “model.” Amy said, “He’d stand by us even though he didn’t care about getting his leash on. He’d just stand there like “see this is what you do and it’s fine” and then she’d get used to it.” Vida even started digging up or fluffing up her bed the way that Rasta did.

It was a full year before Vida came around to Bryan and Amy. After six months of living with them, she had let them pet her occasionally but otherwise shy away. Amy said, “When we got her, we said it doesn’t matter if she can do all the things normal dogs do just as long as she’s happy, and she is happy and [now] doing most of the things normal dogs do.” Bryan added, “That’s been the fun thing over the last year. She smiles all the time, she’s so much happier than she was.”

During my interview with Wendy, she asked if she could tell me one of her “happy ending stories.” She started telling me about a seizure case and a herding dog named Fly who was beautiful, deaf, and very, very scared. As a volunteer, Wendy said, “I really didn’t know what to do. I sat down in the cage with my back to her.... And uh, eventually I heard her sniffing my hair, sometimes that’s what they like to do, so I let her sniff my hair and eventually gave her treats.” She said that she was not sure how to interact with a deaf dog. Many of the Ad Prep volunteers were not, so it was a learning

experience for everyone. Kate told Nancy and Wendy that even though Vida was deaf, Ad Prep volunteers should still talk to her because of the way humans talk changes our body language. She taught them not to come up behind Vida or to touch her on the back of the head where she cannot see (9/2/15). Nancy also remembered Vida's fear in the run,

In the cage, she was very shut down, very shut down and um, I think it was maybe four or five sessions before I saw any response from her. We worked on her a long time. And sometimes there are dogs like her where you're so worried about the getting to the adoption floor because it can be so stressful up there.

It was hard to convince Vida to leave her run and when she did, she crouched low to the ground and was reluctant to walk, tail tucked completely underneath, ears back, head down. She was one of the harder Ad Prep cases to work with, but she was quickly one of the Ad Prep favorites. Wendy told Amy about Vida, saying that when Amy finally came downstairs to meet her it was "instant love." She concluded, "What just really got me was she [Amy] said, I just know she's my soul-dog. We were just meant to be together. And you know, it just kind of gave me goosebumps. I mean who else would have the patience?"

While Amy and Bryan, Wendy, Nancy, and Laura's narratives cover the traditional scope of an adoption narrative, expanding it a little beyond its borders to Vida's time at the shelter. Vida's story really starts with Kate. Kate started Vida's story by saying that Vida came to the shelter on May 23, 2013 and was adopted on June 27, 2013. The AHS was asked by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) to take part in a cruelty case, a seizure of dogs from a puppy mill in northern Michigan. Kate, an animal care worker, and four veterinary technicians who work for AHS drove up. Originally, the owner had agreed to surrender his dogs but once they arrived at the original location, Kate and the others found he had had taken the

younger dogs and puppies to another facility. He advertised on Craigslist so the ASPCA had some people call as potential puppy buyers and to meet him out at his other site. Once the ASPCA, AHS, and some people from another local shelter arrived, the man became violent and was arrested. Kate said, “Often, even if the person is amicable at first, you get out there and you're starting to take their animals away from them, their livelihood, and even if it doesn't look like they care about them they really do and I've never been on one where the people didn't get angry and violent” (9/2/15).

The two facilities were mostly terriers, specifically Jack Russell Terriers, but he also had some Shiba-Ins, two Border Collies, and some Border-Jacks (a mix between Border Collies and Jack Russell Terriers). It was in the woods, the “middle of nowhere,” with kennel after kennel lined up and a tarp over them. Of the experience, Kate said, “it was dirty and gross, it had poured rain the day before so it was literally like catching greased pigs. You have your boots on and you're trying to catch dogs that don't want to be caught. Shy/fearful dogs, at their worst.” They split into teams and started examining the dogs, sorting them into transfers. Some would stay with the shelter in Michigan, while some would go with the ASPCA or with AHS.

Kate had known about Vida before arriving in Michigan because she had seen her for sale on the man's website. She knew the dog was deaf and watched for Vida specifically once she arrived. Before the examinations started, Kate went into the truck and picked out which dogs she wanted to take back to MN with her:

They were all in this semi in carriers stacked to the ceiling, so there was just this little walkway so I walked down and wiggled my finger, and anyone who came forward and licked my finger, I wrote down who I wanted to take. I just wanted to see their behavior in a stressful situation...[Vida] licked my finger, but honestly, if she had been asocial, I would have taken her anyway (9/2/15).

They drove overnight to MN and started the Ad Prep work with the dogs the next day. Amy and Bryan commented on Kate's part as well, "AHS took about 40 [dogs] I think and I remember her telling me that Vida was in such bad shape and Kate said 'Vida give me a sign,' Well, she wasn't Vida yet, and she just decided to take her, knowing she was going to be such a difficult dog."

Vida's narratives both resist and reinforce the genre conventions a variety of ways. In multiple variants of Vida's narrative, the sense of kismet exists. This is exemplified in Vida's story by the line Amy heard repeatedly, that Vida was her "kind of dog." Amy herself has said to me that she believes people are meant to be with the dogs they adopt, and that Vida is her "soul-dog. When asked what she meant by Amy's kind of dog, Wendy said that Vida "reminded me of Amy. She was just a very sweet, loving gentle dog, and Amy is like that to me so their temperaments and personalities were just identical." Laura said much the same thing. They both said that Vida's deafness also factored into their recommendations, since Amy and Bryan have a deaf Golden Retriever who was trained using American Sign Language signs. Amy and Bryan agreed that they both take project dogs. Their past three dogs, including the two that now live with Vida, Frankie, and Rasta, have had medical or behavioral issues. Kate stated "We found out that she [Vida] was going to be a higher needs dog than I had anticipated, and she was deaf on top of it. She needed someone who understood that part of it and would be patient and wonderful...would just let her blossom as much as that was going to be possible."

It fulfills the "Forever Home" convention too. Wendy specifically states that Vida's story is one of her "happy ending stories." Additionally, all four women aside from Amy who talked about Vida commented on Amy's personality. Vida's success and



happiness is because she needed someone who was “patient” or would “persevere.” Because Vida was deaf and Amy and Bryan had experience with deaf dogs, the connection was perfect. This is the Ad Prep narrative that comes closest to the Savior and Life Story Conventions, because we have so much of Vida’s backstory. She was part of a seizure case and she was used as a breeder there to produce puppies on a continual cycle. Yet the language used, the way Vida’s story is described, differs. Amy, Bryan, and Kate may have taken Vida out of her situation (in many ways she is “found” and “saved” twice), without them and the work of the Ad Prep volunteers Vida could be, still, significantly worse off or euthanized. But all my participants also bring up some idea of Vida’s agency. They talk about giving her space, space to breathe; they talk about her fear and moments where she overcame that fear by licking Kate’s finger or sniffing Wendy’s hair. Each of my participants has a great respect for Vida and her ability to make a choice.

Gilman states, “At the same time, the multiplicity and fluidity of genres in a single event allows for individuals to make choices outside the generic conventions, inspired by such things as creative impulse, expressive need, or intention to rebel” (2009: 357). Vida’s narrators are not engaging in multiple genres, but the emphasis they put on Vida’s choice and the connection between Amy and Vida shows the same type of creativity and expressive need stated above. While dog agency is often engaged with at the dog park during play, it often does not translate into the language used in adoption narratives. Ad Prep volunteers, and those familiar with dog behavior like Amy and Bryan, actively seek ways to recognize the dog as an agent of their own story.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I discussed my second group of people who tell dog adoption narratives, Ad Prep volunteers. The goal was to show how the conventions established in Chapter III are pervasive and shared between groups but also demonstrating a change in *which* conventions are used. When told to an insider audience, Ad Prep adoption narratives may only participate in the Kismet, “Forever Home,” and Life Story conventions but resist the Savior convention. Yet the conventions they do participate in show subtle shifts in language used that highlights the dog’s agency for their audience. Of course, an outsider audience may not pick up on this, may even infer that all conventions are present demonstrating how difficult it can be to enact change (whether consciously or subconsciously).

Ad Prep adoption narratives highlight the difference between the way my rehab participants and dog park participants narrativize the dogs in their lives. Ad Prep adoption narratives engage with most of the genre conventions, but they offer a variation in how those conventions can be understood. In doing this, they also point towards a change in understanding the human-dog relationship in the United States and a desire to change the narratives that we currently tell.

## ***NOTES***

<sup>22</sup> See my own adoption narrative about Dizzy on page 96.

<sup>23</sup> Place as in a space made meaningful by humans.

<sup>24</sup> Under-stimulated behavior can commonly be seen with animals at zoos, polar bears, large cats, etc.

<sup>25</sup> Studies in shy fearful behavior inheritance have shown that, despite intentional care and training from birth, fearful dams and sires breed dogs more likely to be shy and fearful. Case studies in 1969 and 1981 have demonstrated this with German Short Haired Pointers. More recently, the popularity of Chihuahuas in the 2000s, created an influx of the breed. Anxiety, never known to be a behavioral trait of Chihuahuas, is now closely associated with them as a result of careless over-breeding and sometimes in-breeding.

<sup>26</sup> If dogs fail their behavior examination on in-take to the shelter, or if the veterinary staff is unable to

complete a medical exam due to the dog's behavior, they are often given to the Ad Prep program as "re-evals." Volunteers work with them for three days and then their behavior is re-evaluated, medical exam is completed, etc. For most dogs, these behaviors are a result to shelter stress, to the jarring change in their life in a place with unfamiliar sights, smells, and sounds. Three days give them time to adjust to the shelter. Those dogs that do not pass the re-evaluation are sent to Ad Prep, or if they're eligible, set up with one of the rescue organizations AHS partners with. Of course, some dogs may be euthanized, but they usually must display consistent and extremely aggressive behavior.

<sup>27</sup> Studies in shy and fearful behavior inheritance have been done with different breeds of dogs, most notably pointers in a 1969 and 1981 case study. They have shown that despite intentional care and training from birth, fearful dams and sires breed dogs more likely to be shy and fearful. More recently, this has become a trait often associated with Chihuahuas, whose breed popularity surged in the 2000s, despite the fact that Chihuahuas as they were originally bred are not anxious dogs.

<sup>28</sup> I'm including Amy and Bryan's interview with the Ad Prep narratives because while neither have volunteered with the program, Amy worked at AHS for years and now works for the Retrieve a Golden of Minnesota rescue organization. Amy has gone through Ad Prep training, is close friends with Wendy, Laura, and Kate and relied on Kate for information on Vida's changing behavioral issues as she adjusted to life with Amy and Bryan. Amy and Bryan's knowledge and terminology about dog behavior, dog body language is comparable to that of my participants'.

<sup>29</sup> For a more detailed account of her story, I included excerpts from the transcripts of my interviews with Amy and Bryan, Kate, and Wendy in Appendices C, D, and E respectively.

<sup>30</sup> Direct eye contact, while of an acceptable human-human behavior can be intimidating to dogs because of their own behavioral codes.

## CHAPTER V

### THE TAIL END: ANALYSIS OF DOG ADOPTION NARRATIVES AND CONCLUSION

As I conclude, I will discuss the implications of adoption narratives being performed by and for humans. I am using the work of ecofeminist Lori Gruen and genre theory in order to explore the ways that particular adoption narratives can reveal narrators' personal values. I analyze the symbolic impact adoption narratives have on dogs, using folklorist Lynne McNeill's ideas regarding cats as liminal creatures. Using the work of linguist Charlotte Linde in addition to sociologists Eleanor Ochs and Lisa Capps, I will further analyze the conventions within the adoption narrative and the social issues related to the binaries that are entangled with the human-dog relationship. Lastly, I will briefly discuss future plans for developing this research.

#### **Adoption Narratives and the Human-Animal Relationship**

What do adoption narratives say about the human-animal relationship? Adoption narratives, as a cultural form are performed by and for humans, are family formative for the human because, especially in dog park narratives, the human perception is the only one that matters. Feminist philosopher Lori Gruen calls this "arrogant anthropocentrism." She says, "it is a type of human chauvinism that not only locates humans at the center of everything, but elevates the human perspective above all others" (2015, 24). Ad prep narratives, by including animal behavior, resist this type of anthropocentrism. Gruen calls this "inevitable" instead, a result of our human bias, we can only see things from our species' perspective, and lack of reflexivity as human beings. She continues, "That we experience the world from a human perspective doesn't mean that we can't work to see things from the perspectives of nonhumans..." (2015, 24). For Gruen, this blind spot is

where an ability to empathize with other species becomes relevant. It is this form of empathy I see routinely in my Ad Prep participants' and increasingly in my dog park participants' interactions with and narratives about dogs. Again, as explained in Chapter II, my analysis is filtered through the lens of my experience as a dog owner, Ad Prep volunteer, and my scholarly background.

### **Adoption Narratives' Social Impact for Humans**

As an example of the adoption narrative genre, Ad Prep adoption narratives pinpoint how genres may, "derive their thematic organization from the interplay between systems of social value, linguistic convention, and the world portrayed" (Hanks, 1987: 671). While Ad Prep and Dog Park adoption narratives follow similar conventional standards, they do show a shift in values and how narrators position the dog as cultural capital in their lives in comparison to the people they share their stories with. So, while the narratives do not mean much to the dog, they mean a great deal to the human. I believe this variation highlights the consistencies and discrepancies between both.

The Kismet Convention and "Forever Home" Convention are prevalent in both dog park and Ad Prep adoption narratives. While adoption narratives have a lot of positive outcomes for the dog-human relationship, there are some problems that are generated from these conventions. The first, as I will prove through this comparison, is that adoption narratives create a lot of binaries between people regarding the value they place in animals, the value they place on themselves, and their understanding of how animal welfare operates in the United States.<sup>31</sup> That said, I also think that the difference between language used in adoption narratives by the two groups also points towards a change in conventions, a change in the way the narrative is told. As Tuohy says, "even as

they [genres] are defined and named by people, they are adaptive and changing especially when in conversation with another genre” (1999: 56). The flexibility that Tuohy describes is useful, because, as I have demonstrated through a comparison of two group’s adoption narratives, they are continuing to shift.

First, let us consider the four conventions I outlined in Chapter III in regards to both narratives. The Kismet Convention, the sense of fated-ness between dog and human, is truly a snap judgment on the part of the human (even when attributed to the dog), influenced by a limited access to the types of narratives told and re-told at in the media, at dog parks, between dog-owners. In the dog park adoption narratives, the narrator or person adopting may not take into consideration issues of dog breed, behavior, or temperament thereby *increasing* the likelihood of surrendering a dog back to the shelter, which they may not realize, however, such action is often forestalled because they only hear successful adoption narratives at the dog park. This oversight only becomes a problem when these adoption narratives are told to a person considering adoption but with little to no knowledge of dogs. Kate told me,

because we're [United States society] so high paced, and its [the shelter] first come first serve, you basically look at the animal, decide if you like the looks of it, maybe take it into a visitation room, pat it on the head a few times and then make a commitment to it for the next fifteen years. (8/12/15)

Shelters are slowly changing this by including dog profiles and by educating volunteers to ask potential adopters about their lifestyle so they can help make a match.

Ad Prep narratives, while still engaging with the Kismet convention, create a variation. My participants are highly aware of dog behavior, of what to expect when adopting a certain breed, age, or temperament (like adopting an Ad Prep dog). In their narratives, they acknowledge that something in the dog’s behavior was a cause of the

connection and later adoption (i.e. Dizzy's wiggle, Chase's lean, Vida's behavior in the halls) but also that their experience as volunteers qualifies them to take an Ad Prep dog home.

This leads us to our "Forever Home" Convention, that these stories end, and always will end, happily, until the dog dies. The existence of the convention proves that they are not surrender narratives as described in Chapter III. The Kismet Convention while distinct, is tied closely because of the general attitude that once you adopt a dog, you are committed to that dog for the rest of their life. The unhappiness on part of the dog or the human can mean an ill-fit, especially if one or the other's needs are not being met.<sup>32</sup> As I said in Chapter III, the "Forever Home" Convention also does not leave room for a surrender narrative.

The reason for this is that the social issues involved with the narrative, the cultural capital of dogs and of adopting dogs, tends to create a binary between people who adopt (good) and people who surrender (bad), or even between shelter worker/volunteer (good) and people who surrender (bad). Ochs and Capps say that personal experience narratives are, in general, "... rooted in community and tradition, moral stance is a disposition towards what is good or valuable and how one ought to live in the world" (2002, 45). In this case, adoption is considered "good," as we can see from the way people talk about it and from its popularity. Most of my participants are proud to have adopted their dog, regardless of intent, and because of the importance of their dog in their life, cannot fathom how anyone could surrender theirs. Again, the value dog owners place on shelter dogs and dog adoption creates incentive to tell an adoption narrative a lot.

This moral judgment *can* be true of seizure cases where the dogs are pulled from puppy mills or hoarding cases, but seizures are still an emotionally violent act for both dogs and humans involved. One could argue there is care, there even if it does not line up with how most dog-owners envision what the care of a dog should be. That said, often dogs do not come into shelters from seizure cases, which can take time to organize, but from people who are surrendering their own pets. According to Kate and Becca, this idea that people do not care about their dog could not be further from the truth. Becca said the assumption from people who have never surrendered a dog is that,

People who bring their pets to the shelter are quitters, or they don't love their pets enough. That's not the case. Many people who bring their animals to the shelter are some of the most caring and loving pet owners I've ever seen. It takes a lot to realize that you can't offer an animal what you thought you could (8/25/15).

In many cases, people surrender their animals because they are no longer able to care for them. People may surrender their dog because of a domestic abuse situation, because of homelessness, because they can no longer afford the animal, or must move into a residence that is not dog friendly. They may even acknowledge that it is a bad fit, or they do not have the time to dedicate to the dog in their life. As mentioned in Chapter II, the information in shelters as *why* a person is surrendering their dog is kept confidential and usually the dog's profile only includes a brief note about why they ended up in the shelter (moving, allergic, etc.), which leaves a lot to the adopters' imaginations. Especially if they feel that instant connection, it may be unfathomable that someone else did not feel the exact same way, so there is a great deal of empathy for the dog but not necessarily for the human who surrendered.

On the surface, both dog park and Ad Prep adoption narratives abide by this convention. There was emphasis in Vida's and Chase's stories on the idea that they



needed someone who understood their needs enough to work with them, who would respect their boundaries. Many of my participants talked about rightness of Amy and Vida's connection. I think that Ad Prep narratives can resist this convention, *because* the narrators are so familiar with the shelter environment and shelter dogs themselves so they know how these stories are created and they know that forever isn't always "forever." In my interview with Laura, she told me briefly about surrendering two dogs. Her surrender narratives are not evidence of a "failed" relationship between human and dog. She recognized that they were not the best fit, and after consulting Kate and Edie, returned the dogs because she knew they would be happier elsewhere. In my own narrative, I often mention to my audience that I am lucky to have my dog, that if I had abided by my rules for choosing a dog, I would have been wrong. I know she would have been adopted within a couple of days of hitting the adoption floor and most likely had a great life. It is just hard to imagine my life without her now that she is a part of it. What this means for the adoption narrative then, is that the adoption narrative, while ideologically about the dog, is really *about the human and the moral values they place on their dog, the relationship to their dog, and adoption.*

When we reach the Savior convention, we see the most difference between dog park adoption narratives and Ad Prep adoption narratives because it's notably absent, or varied, from the latter. In the former, another binary, specifically referring to "kill" or "no-kill" shelters, is created between the shelters, the people who work or volunteer there, and the rest of the dog-keeping public. Many of my participants told me they would overhear people at the shelter beginning to narrativize their dog's adoption narrative *before the dog was in the process of being adopted.* Kate had the best example:

.... [the adoption narrative] makes us feel better about ourselves too. 'Those shelter people? they didn't know what they had and they were gonna kill it, but I saved it in the last few hours.' Is that true? Of course not - I just heard this recently - [the person] saved him, [the dog] only had until noon that day, and she saved him. Yeah, on our adoption floor? Not so.... Because it's not just, 'hey, I went to the shelter and I adopted an animal. It was a really nice shelter. He had a really good life there but I adopted him anyway.' It's 'Oh my gosh, its prison, its jail, it's horrible and I saved him.' (8/25/15)

Here, Kate openly acknowledges the binary that is often created by these narratives.

When the public vilifies the shelter, they vilify (even inadvertently) the people who work there. There can be bad feelings and it goes both ways. Leslie Irvine also noted this need for a villain in adoption. "The animals remain the victims," she states, "in the reframed 'problem' of unwanted pets, but the new claims required a new villain" (2003: 555). For the public, Irvine continues, this need meant vilifying shelters, for shelters, vilifying the public.

Shelter workers who are frustrated with the public and are hearing the same stories repeatedly chalk up non-shelter workers as ignorant about animals. Kate identified herself as a shelter worker who, fifteen years ago, was antagonistic towards the public.

She says she used to believe that,

...people that come into shelters are idiots. It's sad we have to adopt our animals out to these idiots. But it's tiring to think that every person who comes into surrender and animal [adoption] is a piece of crap that is doing a bad thing because it's not true. The reality is that these people are just like you or I. The turning point for me was seeing people who were proactive, who were trying to work with their dogs' issues or when they realized they couldn't, surrendered.

In turn, the public sets up people who work in shelters, especially those that euthanize, as people who do not care about the animals they take care of. Ironically, both parties are working towards the same goal, even if it "differs on a continuum": to find dogs homes, "forever homes," to get them out of the shelter system (Harbolt, 2003: 56). As Ochs and

Capps say, generally, “narratives of personal experience do not present objective, comprehensive accounts of events but rather perspectives on events,” revealing the “moral stance assumed by tellers, by protagonists” (2002, 45). Stories like Kate’s above, in which the adoption narrative is being created in-shelter while setting up the shelter as a horrible place or the shared animosity between public and shelter, or public and shelter workers goes a long way to reinforcing the stigmas and misconceptions surrounding animal shelters.

The stigma reinforces the narrative that adopting animals is important because the animal *must be rescued* from the horrible place. The Savior Convention is mostly absent from Ad Prep narratives, once again, because of context: my participants’ relationship to the shelter system. They know the animals they work with, and understand that, at least with AHS as a shelter with resources, the space is transitional and an adoption is not necessarily “rescue.” Vida’s story engages with this convention the most, but again, it varies. She is not necessarily being “saved” from the shelter itself, from the people who work there, but instead is saved from her life at the puppy mill.

As for the final convention, the creation of a life history is engaged with partially by both groups. Dizzy’s, Chase’s, and Wolfie’s narratives make very little reference to a past life, because the narrators’ experiences with shelter and rescue organizations have been reframed and destigmatized. It may not feel necessary or may even be irrelevant in to the story. I have engaged with Vida’s background fully because I have it, but Amy and Bryan have said that they talk about it mostly when walking if a stranger asks to pet their dog. When they say “no” and are asked why, they explain that, “she’s a puppy mill survivor,” which usually leads to a conversation about what a puppy mill is, and then to

Vida's story. They have told me that they see it as an educational opportunity to talk about animal welfare and raise awareness. This means that adoption narratives, seen here in Vida's narrative but also discussed through Chase's, can also operate as vehicles to discuss the tensions that exist between people in animal welfare.

Even though more is known about Vida's narrative than most, one still does not know for sure what her life was like. Even if one can make inferences, before Kate saw her during the seizure. Casey and Lola's narratives were also given histories. Casey has a detailed account, which once again vilified the people who surrendered her to the "pound," where she was scheduled for euthanasia, but there is no way of fact checking Casey's person's story. Rescue organizations, especially those that are foster-based, may have a more detailed account of where the dog came from and what their backstory is, yet I still find Casey's story unusually detailed, especially if I compare it to Wolfie's or Lola's. Lola's context was again, that she was from "Africa" where she was mistreated. The last convention may be engaged with because people want to know what their dog's story is. Charlotte Linde says that the purpose of a life history is usually to define "what events have made me what I am" or more precisely "what you must know about me to know me," where knowing a person specifies "a range of linguistic and social activities and relations by the knowers" (1993: 20). In other words, for someone to truly understand another person, it seems necessary to understand important life events that who have made them who they are. In Lola's case, her people believe that Lola's origins in "Africa" is an important part of their relationship to her, they view it as a past trauma, something she has "overcome" to be the "American" dog she is today.

### **The Shelter Dog Construct**

With these last two conventions, we can explore what this genre does to the dog symbolically. When narrators perform this idea of “saving the dog” or if they create a life history, especially if they identify their dog as a shelter or rescue dog, they help to reinforce the construct of the “shelter/rescue dog.” Again, I am not saying that the dog’s life would have been better if they were not found or surrendered to the shelter or if they had not been adopted, but the construction of the “shelter dog” identity means that human narrators are not necessarily viewing the dog as a dog but as a symptom of a larger problem. Liminality is a threshold; you exist in transition between two stages – what you were before and what you will become. In a shelter dog’s case, because so little is known of “what they were before,” other than the fact that they existed in a transitional space, dog park adoption narratives place them in a constant state of liminality, stripping them of identity and agency, of the ability to make a choice, of anything other than a symbolic device to be used for human meaning-making.

In a discussion of cats caught in a state of perpetual liminality, folklorist Lynne S. McNeill argues that cats are often trapped between categories and boundaries created by cultural belief (2004: 14). Cats as supernatural, as bringers of good or bad luck, can become experientially liminal depending on the experience that informs the believer. Similarly, shelter dogs that are the focal point of adoption narratives are stuck in that temporal moment. According to Tami Harbolt, the shelter dog “identity” might start during the in-take process, or even before (when the owner calls to set up the appointment to surrender) but that a dog’s identity evolves over the course of their stay in a shelter (2003: 13). She states, “...in a shelter, a dog or cat is nearly stripped of the meanings and definitions of which her owner had represented her.... In essence, the story

of her life is reconstructed” (Harbolt, 2003: 18). What Harbolt implies, intentionally or not, is that the dog, upon entering the shelter becomes a blank slate devoid of the imposition of human cultural and moral values (until shelter workers start adding their own).

I would complicate this because once a dog is identified as a shelter dog in a human narrative the dog is no longer just a dog but tied to all of the cultural connotations, associations, histories, and politics that come with animal shelters and assumptions about shelter dog behavior. Additionally, if the dog comes in as a stray we do not know what their previous interactions, if any, with humans were so we can only make assumptions about the human meanings imposed on the dog. Furthermore, adoption narratives that including giving a dog a new name reinforce the liminality of shelter dogs. This trait is demonstrated in three of narratives I analyze in this thesis. While I do not know Wolfie’s name prior to adoption, both his and Dizzy’s new names are misnomers, which make their human counterparts laugh. Vida’s adoption narrative illuminates this liminality further because Amy and Bryan literally gave her a name that they define as “new life,” signaling her transition from the shelter to her new home.

### **Performance: Places of Resistance and Reinforcement**

Lastly, I want talk a little bit about how the performance itself of adoption narratives reinforce and resist these conventions. Often, my Ad Prep participants were aware of the conventions even as they took part in them. They were the ones who defined them. The language they use when telling their story often actively resists the Savior and Life Story, though especially the Savior, conventions because they are talking about the dogs as agents in the narrative. Ad Prep narrators will not deny their role in a dog’s

adoption, they work with them in shelter, *they* are making the *choice* to bring the dog home. Yet there is also an awareness of the dog's behavior, of how the dog's behavior affects them. They acknowledge, even in a limited capacity, that the dog is also making a choice. They are not the sole recourse for the dog being adopted, for a change in a dog's behavior because the *dog* is also trying to meet human expectations. Dogs do not know that their behavior results in their being adopted, they do not know the way humans have constructed and ordered their lives within the pet-keeping tradition or shelter system; however, dogs have agency over personal interactions with individual humans, and that is significant. By including and acknowledging dog behavior, placing it on equal footing with their own actions, Ad Prep narrators are pointing towards what they consider a fairer relationship between dog and human, to them, their role in their dog's story is less important than that of their dog's.

That said, there is a great deal of audience interpretation that causes Ad Prep narratives to reinforce genre conventions. When an Ad Prep narrative, such as my own, is told to an outside audience this acknowledgement of dog behavior, this nuance is lost because invariably, the audience is interpreting the story through their own. Lisa Gilman, drawing from Richard Bauman, explains,

The referential meanings tied to any given performance are linked intertextually to those of previous enactments of that genre of performance, and such meanings can serve as symbols indexing social relationships and other aspects of the lived world. As a result, performers draw on past performances to shape their actions, and audiences interpret performances based on prior experience of or knowledge about the genre - for example, prior experience having to do with situational context, ideological issues, and emotional associations (2009, 338).

An Ad Prep adoption narrative, told at the dog park, becomes linked to other adoption narratives. The audience listening is connecting it and comparing it to their own, thereby negating most of the resistance and variation found in Ad Prep narratives.

Furthermore, these conventions are also reinforced in the media and used by animal shelters and rescue organizations on their websites, in their newsletters, and on social media to increase awareness of adoption, a campaign that has been successful. During my interview with Becca, she brought up the British Columbia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (BC SPCA) commercial campaign that aired a few years ago. It featured singer/songwriter Sarah McLachlan advocating for animal adoption or for donations to the BC SPCA while her song “Angel” played in the background (one of the chorus lines being “you’re in the arms of the angel/won’t you find some comfort here”) and scenes of dirty sad-eyed dogs, puppies, cats, and kittens are shown, often behind kennel bars. Becca said that the commercial feeds the misconception of shelters as horrible dirty places (even though that is not what the BC SPCA is advocating for). Yet people jump to conclusion, Becca said, that “Everybody’s [the animals] sad and they’re all broken and they have horrible lives.” While the sad-eyed puppy commercial may increase adoptions, fulfilling the purpose of the adoption narrative, they also reinforce the convention that animals are victims in need of being saved.

More recently, AHS used Vida in a holiday campaign. She was featured on a billboard in Minneapolis advocating for adoption and also in a commercial. The commercial says,

This is where her story began but its ending was meant to be rewritten. This is Vida and everything changed the day she found the love and care she needed with the Animal Humane Society. Where her life started doesn’t define it because the



chapters that follow make it shine. Believe you can make a difference. Make a gift today.

While different in tone, AHS demonstrates that they also understand the power this narrative has on the American public as an advertising tool. In this way, Vida almost aligns with Harbolt's idea of shelter mascots. While she may act as a mascot for shelter workers, insofar as her story is well-known, and it plays into what Harbolt would call the "tragedy and triumph" narratives that shelter animals can inspire, it avoids the pitfalls because she is still Amy and Bryan's dog, and the campaign was brief (2003: 112). Harbolt discussed that some animal shelters have "mascots," a dog or cat that lives in shelter or becomes a part of their logo and overall narrative that, as she describes "provide workers with an animal to rally around and bond with. They present a recognizable image of concern and caring to the public..." (2003: 111-112). These animal's stories may be sensationalized and can create a loss of the animal's individuality because the animal becomes symbolic. Again Vida is made symbolic in these commercials but that symbolism only exists in her media presence and in the stories people tell about her not in her everyday life.

What I find most interesting about Vida's commercial is that, because she is a shy/fearful dog, the advertising company used a stunt double for the first half of the commercial. Why not use another dog, another story? In part, because Amy worked at AHS and was easy to ask, but I also believe that it is because Vida's story is well-known among shelter volunteers and workers (as evidenced by the multiple narrators presented in this thesis), it is intense, even when sparingly-detailed in thirty seconds. Amy said of the commercial experience, "I think they wanted a dog with a special story, and Vida was a dog with a special story." After all, adoption narratives serve the primary purpose of

getting dogs adopted as the repeated transmission of these stories places emphasis on the cultural capital of adopting a dog. Adoption narratives can be used *in* the shelter as well, like Nancy's use of her own narrative to explain what adopting a dog looks like *after* the adoption.

The goal of this project was to look at humans and animals together, at how humans interpret the animals in their lives through the stories they tell. While emphasis may have been on challenging the conventions of the adoption narrative through rehabilitation narratives, the stories as they exist are important. In part, most humans have a hard time not telling stories about the animals in their lives. Despite some common misconceptions about the animal welfare industry, the developing conversations about animal welfare are important to our understanding of animal behavior and animal self. The narratives we tell about our dogs are changing, and I believe Ad Prep narratives and dog park narratives both point towards this change. The dissolution of the Savior Convention in Ad Prep narratives, and seen in more dog park narratives is one example. As information about dog behavior and psychology becomes more prevalent in training, in media, as shelters continue to be destigmatized the adoption narrative will continue to change because the dog is increasingly become an active agent in the dog adoption narrative. In the meantime, they serve as way to build and fragment different groups within the dog pet-keeping tradition in the United States, exposing binaries and prejudices that often act cross-purpose, reflecting the politics and conflict between animal welfare agencies and animal welfare and animal rights philosophies.

## **Conclusion**

In the future, I would like to pursue this project from a few different angles. If I was to continue to analyze adoption narratives, I would want to interview people from other groups in order to look at narrative variations distinguished by race, class, gender, and so on. Naming conventions and the links between the stigmatization, racialization, and gendering of breeds would be two other interesting projects to pursue. This project was limited in a variety of ways I had not anticipated. In the future, I would want to do more fieldwork in dog parks and talk to more people about their own ideas and analysis of adoption narratives. While I found it useful to look at dog park and Ad Prep adoption narratives together, I also found it problematic as it *does* play into the binary and tensions that exist between animal shelters and the public. I believe that drawing more people's voices in would help complicate my bias more.

I was also limited in what voices were included, theoretically and ethnographically. I would want to include theory by Native American scholars, engage with queer and critical race theory to give another lens outside of the Western philosophical scope when studying the human animal relationship. Due to the cultural variations and interpretations towards pet-keeping, and towards the other species humans interact with, I think it is important to look at narratives involving the human-animal relationship in other communities. Do they reveal the same or different tensions? How are other animals, and their behavior, valued and understood by other groups of people?

I especially want to look wildlife rehabilitation and domestic rehabilitation in comparison with each other because most Americans interpret and interact with wild and domestic animals very differently, a great deal of tension and conflict can exist when the two are put in dialogue together. I would want to increase the interdisciplinary approach I

used in my fieldwork so that behavioral ethology is discussed equally with my ethnographic fieldwork with human participants to create a more balanced perspective (as much as I can be being human myself) between human and animal, because I believe this approach helps unsettle the status quo by bridging the gap between “humanity” and “animality.” Additionally, it opens the limits to our perceptions of animal culture, of how groups of humans form their relationships to wildlife, to pets, by acknowledge that this relationship has two perspectives and that the human one is not the only relevant one.

My goal, through a discussion of adoption narratives, has been to create a dialogue about the way humans perceive animals in American culture. By unpacking and analyzing stories about the human-animal relationship, one can find the parts that maintain hegemonic power dynamics, which posit the human’s importance over the animal, and those parts that directly challenge the normative narrative. It would be unreasonable and counterproductive to reject these stories in their totality, but by adjusting their focus, humans can begin to create a world that gives voice to animal agency, creating a more ethical place for humans and animals to coexist together.

#### *NOTES*

<sup>31</sup> I acknowledge that by doing this comparison I am enforcing a binary that divides animal shelter workers with the American dog-keeping public.

<sup>32</sup> In conversations, I have had at the dog park and in shelter, people talk about the mismatch between dog and humans. I.e. if a dog is super energetic but the person is too busy to give them regular exercise, the dog may routinely engage in destructive or anxious behavior. On the flip side, if a person is looking for a dog who is super cuddly and affectionate but adopts a dog that is independent or aloof, the expectation of how to interact with their pet shifts. This does not necessarily mean that these issues cannot be discussed or that the human will not come to terms. I feel that often, most people try to find a way to meet their dogs’ needs. This idea of happy-endings negates that idea that the dog could have been happier, or the human could have been happier, in a different situation.

## APPENDIX A

### EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT WITH AMY AND BRYAN, AUGUST 30, 2015; VIDA'S STORY

Amy: I had heard about Vida so, there was as you know a number of different volunteers who worked with Vida, and um one of them Wendy had emailed me “there’s this little Border Collie down in Ad Prep blah blah blah and she’s you’re kind of dog, you should go meet her” and I said oh yeah yeah and I didn’t cause I had a lot going on at the time and I didn’t want one more dog to feel sorry for. Like, a week later Laura came by desk and I wasn’t there so she left a note with one of my coworkers “tell Amy to go downstairs, there’s this little border collie, she’s her kind of dog, she’s gotta meet her” so my coworker told me and I’m like okay and Susan’s like “let me know when you go down to meet her I want to see this girl too.” And I said “okay” but I thought “no way” ‘cause I knew she would be bad off and then a few days later I had to go downstairs into the hallway into a storage room I went into maybe once a year um and on my way back from putting my supplies away a volunteer was working with Vida in the hallway and I saw her and that was it. I sent her picture to Bryan, oh this border collie blah blah blah, hah what do you think? She needs a home with other dogs and she’s deaf, we know how to do deaf dogs and Bryan wrote back, “what should we name her?”

Bryan: I’m pretty easy

Amy: And I said I can’t believe I’m saying this but you should come and meet her before because she’s, she will definitely be a project so he came to meet her and of course, she was in the development office by then and she was just cowering under my desk and he had to crawl under the desk just to see her and that was it. So, so then she came home with us.

Nikki: How was that first week transitioning?

Bryan: she was too terrified to move

Amy: It was really hard actually. Normally, like, we brought these dogs home and it was super exciting and joyful and they couldn’t get enough of us and vice versa but we brought Vida home and we couldn’t go near her because she was so terrified

Bryan: that’s not right

Amy: at first she was frozen with fear

Bryan: At first she was so scared we could come near her and I could sit next to her a pet her for a week or two and after that she had enough confidence that she would run away from us and that lasted, we couldn’t come near her, 2 or 3 months. But at the very beginning she was so terrified

Amy: she was just

Bryan: just frozen

Amy: And it was a new house and two new dogs and two people and we were going to be moving from our old house to this house, so we had started putting moving boxes and the timing was terrible.

Bryan: So we built her a little...corner of the living room, we built her like a fort and we blocked it off with chairs so she kind of safe area to sit in but she spent all her time either there or under a big roll-top desk that she would hide under... but she did that for a long long time

Amy: ... fort...like a little fort

Amy: yeah so we were of course happy to have her but you just wanted to love her up and you couldn't do that with her so... and there was just a lot, I would ask Kate "now she's doing this, what should we do? What's the best thing to do for" and we got it in time

NS: What were some of the techniques you used?

Amy: There was a lot of body language...when AHS would offer the Ad Prep or dog behavior anything I always went to them to learn even though my job wasn't working with the animals so luckily I knew a lot of that, don't look at her face, just, walking in circles to her instead of like this, just being very gentle, every time we approached her we made sure she had an out so she could run away if she needed if she felt trapped and then you just, you get so used to it that we still do that, even though she's doing so great we always use those same things. We can look at her face now but I still would never stare at her

Bryan: and just basic things were hard for a long time like

Amy and Bryan: feeding her/we couldn't fee her

Bryan: she didn't know how to eat out of a bowl so we would have to feed her separately. We would put the other dogs outside and we would dump the food, the dry food, in a pile in the living room floor and leave the room and she would wait and wait and wait and make sure we were gone and then she would eat it off the floor...and how did we get her to eat out of the bowl?

Amy: We slowly, over time, moved it near the bowl and started putting really really good stuff in the bowl. I think we'd cook them hamburger and so she got used to that and she observe the other two dogs too so that's, they taught her way more than we did I would say

Bryan: she would be, she's so much further along because of these two (gesture to Rasta and Frankie). You can see her imitating them. Like Rasta does some really quirky things that Vida just starts doing. Like, you can just kind of see Vida (in a higher pitched voice) "I don't know why we do this but..."

Nikki: can you elaborate?

Bryan: Well Rasta does this thing where she goes up against a wall and she rubs against it on both sides and Vida started doing that. What's some other?

Amy: um...

Bryan: oh Rasta will prepare her bed by almost like she's digging in the dirt, she'll knead it

Amy: she'll knead it

Bryan: and Vida started doing that, just all these things she's picked up from Rasta and I'm sure there's other natural things like just going outside

Amy: yeah, we couldn't take her for a walk obviously for a while, finally she was ready to do that she was nervous just about us putting her harness and leash on her and I think Frankie especially would try to help her, he'd come and model. He'd stand by us even though he didn't care about getting his leash on he'd just stand there like "see this is what you do and it's fine" and then she'd get used to it and he'd just stand there like "I got you Vida, its okay" and she'd figure out well, if he trusts them to do that then...

Bryan: that took a long time, a long time, months and months just to get her to go for a walk, just to get her leash on

Nikki: when did she start coming around to you two?

Amy: where we could really tell she liked us? Probably a year, don't you think?

Bryan: yeah, about a year

Amy: I mean she'd let us pet her a little bit before that and you could sense when it was okay or not

Bryan: six months it was a bit different and by a year you could tell and its been two years

Nikki: Its amazing to me from what I remember of her, 'cause I was only there for 3 hours a week and you only have a 15-minute period to work with her so it's amazing to see where she's at

Amy: yeah, when we got her we said it doesn't matter if she can do all the things normal dogs do just as long as she's happy, and she happy and doing most of the things normal dogs do

Bryan: that's been the fun thing over the last year she smiles all the time, she's so much happier than she was

Amy: yeah

Bryan: at the beginning, she was terrified and she spent most of her life terrified and moved to a new situation, moving to AHS, and then moving to our old house and then moving here, we didn't know if she was happy or not and then it seemed like was okay and suddenly she's just got all this personality now and its really fun to see.

Nikki: Yeah, I adopted an Ad Prep dog and she wasn't from a seizure case but I think it took her, her name is Dizzy, it took 6 months and we had to move too. I had her for three months and then we moved to Oregon ... she's come a long way too

Amy: Its really fun to see when they do something new. Like even today we were all waking up these guys like to jump up in the morning and Vida, she's not really ready to jump up yet but she kind of comes in and Bryan didn't see her, he was petting Rasta and then I was watching and he had his back to her kinda and she came up, cause he hadn't noticed her, and she has this way of just noses you so she just nosed him and she was like "hey! Notice me I'm here too!" just being assertive like I'd like you to pet me too

Bryan: yeah, just in the last few months she's gotten very assertive, I want to get petted too, she'll barge her way into the other dogs, don't forget me!

Amy: she wants her belly rubbed a lot

Nikki: how old is Vida about?

Amy: we think she's about 10, we got her when she was about 8. Frankie was about 11 we've had him about 4 years, yep, and Rasta is 7 and we've had her about 3 years

...

Nikki: what did "your kind of dog", what meant?

Amy: I think a project dog. We've just kind of figured out, it happened by accident, but our first dog who died, we got her when she was 8, she was our first dog and we didn't really know what we were doing other than we loved dogs and she had separation anxiety so we just worked and worked and worked with her and figured it out. So, we had a little experience. And we got this guy, and we were his third home I think? And um, we'd figured out when we got him that he'd been beaten because you'd move wrong, especially Bryan, he might move his hand and he would drop to the floor and cower, his hip is damaged and the vet said it could be, I mean we don't know, but it could be...and he had some issues, kind of fear aggression, so we just figured it out, we worked with a



behaviorist, and you know just worked really hard on that...and we got Rasta, she weighed twice her size and she was deaf so she turned out to be, you know, kind of a project, so we kind of realized we go for the dog that need a little more work of some sort and we, you know, we like to kind of work with them. We're both patient and love dogs and can take some of the challenging dogs and let the easy dogs go to someone who doesn't have as much experience. Is that right?

.....

Bryan:...Vida was different, you know you couldn't touch her, you couldn't come near her a lot of it was just being patient and letting, with a dog like that it's this push pull thing where you want to nudge them to do new things but you can't push them too hard because it's scary so it's just trying to get a feel for her and reading when she's ready to try something new and get to that little half step....

Amy: like going in the car. She *hates* going in the car. She's terrified of the car, she starts to drool even going near the car. So, you know for a while we didn't push it and then after a while we started slowly, we'd pile the whole family in the car because you know these guys love it so when she sees everybody else likes the car then maybe it's okay but, she's scared and we would just drive like, two blocks and give her treats. It was uncomfortable for her but we gave her just a nudge and now she's doing better and better and we try to do, we'll drive to the dairy queen that's about 2 miles away and we'll get out, she gets a pup-cone or what to you call it a pup-cup and we'll get back in the car and go for a drive or a little walk around it but we're trying to make every car trip we can a positive experience and each time go just a little further and a little further and everything is like that.

Bryan: yeah, the issue with her, I mean with Frankie and Rasta their issues were mainly just behavioral but with her it's not just the behavior it's that everything she encountered was the first time she had encountered it, you know, I'm sure she'd never seen a car until she was driven to MN. She'd never been in a house until we brought her home, you know everything in our house, I'm sure it was like going to a different planet, just that I think was hard. She'd never seen a person on a bike, she'd never, you know, she'd probably hardly seen trees before everything was just so new. And then she'd see a car, and then a truck, and then a school bus and it's like whoa, what's that? And then seeing other dogs out, she's *fas*-cinated by other dogs still

Amy: Especially when they're with their person. Like, well, what do you do together? She watches, if we're on a walk and she sees another person and dog she'll just lie down and she just wants to sit and watch for five or ten minutes. Sometimes we'll just go to the park down the street and there's a ton of people just biking and walking, and we just find a spot a little off the trail and we watch

Bryan: She watches them and sees them so happy...

.....

Nikki: why Vida?

Amy: well when we got her we just called her fancy because she's just so elegant you know but that's not her name and we just thought

Bryan: it means new life

Amy: or dearly loved, so we knew that was the right name

....

Amy: to us she's so special, we couldn't imagine not having her, she's such a special dog...AHS took about 40 I think and I remember her telling me that Vida was in such bad shape and Kate said Vida give me a sign (well she wasn't Vida yet) and she just decided to take her, knowing she was going to be such a difficult dog

Nikki: any point where it seemed like too much

Bryan: I think there were a few days in the beginning where we just wondered is she really happy here?

Amy: one rule, only do it if the other dogs get along...as long as those guys could be happy together, anything else we'd work with

....

Nikki: if people come up to you how do you talk about her

Amy: meeting people on the street, she's shy, don't look in her the eyes, look at her hips 'cause if you say don't look her in the eyes than what's the first thing people do and if people ask why then we say she was a puppy mill survivor, I don't know what do we say

Bryan: well, some people don't know what a puppy mill is so we say she was in a horrible situation, she was a breeding dog at horrible place for eight years or say something like that, give them some background, when we were out walking and saw other people Vida would pull far back she wanted nothing to do with them and now she'll kind of, some people she'll go up

Amy: she'll go up and introduce herself

Bryan: so I haven't had to say anything recently, and it's a good educational opportunity

....

Bryan: did you know Vida was in her own commercial?

Amy: yeah, for the shelter she was on the billboards, have you seen those? I have at least one of the ads on my phone

Bryan: so the first half of that ad it was a double because it was the first couple months after we adopted her that they shot that commercial and they wanted some shots with

strangers that she just couldn't do so they shot some stuff here and with us and they were like can we just take her to the park and let her off leash and just run around and we're like no.

Amy: the commercial people were nice but clearly had no idea what a puppy mill dog was and that was when she was at her worst so we even had to say, they wanted to film her and they're like "well, can you bring to the shelter?" and I'm like no I can't, she was terrified of the car at that time, I was like here's what you can do. You can film her in our yard or you can film a short walk but you can't put a camera right up in her face and they walked in the house...they found a border collie that has the same markings as her and you can just tell

Vida was picked...

Amy: It was a holiday campaign and I think they wanted a dog with a special story and Vida was a dog with a special story and so they just asked and I worked there so they were like, it was easy for them to talk to me ... the dog is from some border collie club and they people were so nice they brought a whole gift basket for Vida, her first Frisbee...it was so sweet when we got her, so many people were rooting for her, ... for months afterward people ask, ad prep volunteers, how's Vida how's Vida. But it's funny after the ad came out we'd be driving down the highway and see the big billboard and she'd be mortified to know but one time we did get recognized and the guy was like is that the dog from the commercial? Like, yes but don't come near her she's shy!

## APPENDIX B

### EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT WITH KATE, SEPTEMBER 2, 2015; VIDA'S STORY

Vida came to the shelter on May 23, 2013 and she was adopted on June 27, 2013.

Kate: These guys were part of a cruelty case...we were asked to participate. We're asked to participate in a lot of things. In this case, the governing body was the ASPCA, they'll call us and ask us to help us with seizure cases all over the U.S. AHS has a great reputation of having good workers, knowing our stuff, knowing our business so ASPCA actually pays us to go out on these cases. This was a different kind of a situation. Normally they'll call us and ask us out just to do animal care. This particular situation, they already had their animal care in place. This situation they wanted us to bring vet techs and a liaison that would actually go through the animals to help with the behavior piece of it so we could cherry pick what we wanted to bring back and then they agreed to ship everything that we wanted back. So we went out, it was in Michigan, it was in Northern Michigan. I think we were three hours north of Lansing, we had to rent a car and drive up there it was a long trip. It was myself, one animal care person, and four vet techs.

The ASPCA was trying to work out...he had agreed to surrender the dogs to us but of course when they actually get out there they realized he had taken all of the younger dogs and the puppies to a different site which is pretty normal because of course that's his bread and butter. Fortunately, they already knew this so they set him up, they found an ad on Craigslist and they called as prospective puppy buyers and had him meet them at the puppy site so everyone was involved, it was a legal situation. Often, even if the person is amicable at first, you get out there and you're starting to take their animals away from them, their livelihood and even if it doesn't look like they care about them they really do and I've never been on one where the people didn't get angry and violent. And he did. He punched a cop. Yeah, he actually made skin contact so of course he was arrested which, from my perspective, makes things easier.

So there ended up being two facilities of terriers, Jack Russell Terriers, and then there were these sprinklings of other dogs. He had two Border Collies, he had...I don't even remember anymore, a hundred, three hundred, two or three hundred Jack Russell Terriers and then twelve Shiba Inus...so random...and then a handful of Border-Jacks. So...the dogs were all taken away to a shelter. The garage had been set up with portable kennels and all that stuff. They were immediately vetted, we split up into teams, we had some local veterinarians come in and donate their services and then our vet techs supported them. Each one of our vet techs was matched up with a local veterinarian and at the end of the first day, each veterinarian couldn't believe how fast our techs were. And honestly, it would have been faster, if the vets had stepped aside and let the techs just do the work. Because you know, they're used to their own practices where they can take their time and we're used to cranking it out here, and doing it with dogs that are really really frightened...So they went through and just did preliminary examinations and then after

that we began to sort through the dogs we wanted, myself and then a shelter from southern Michigan were also there.

I actually picked our dogs out while they were still on the truck before they got unloaded and I had a very sophisticated technique. They were all in this semi in carriers stacked to the ceiling so there was just this little walkway so I walked down and wiggled my finger and anyone who came forward and licked my finger, I wrote down that I wanted to take (laughs). I just wanted to see their behavior in a stressful situation. So we ended up with both Border Collies, I think there were forty-five animals we could take back. We were going to take thirty and I picked out 28. We were already taking a few that we were taking a shot on. We were taking a Shiba Inu because I felt I had cherry-picked the best dogs out of there so I took a Shiba Inu even though she was showing no affiliated behavior and the rest of them were showing something. So we got both Border Collies, a Border-Jack, a Shiba Inu and whatever was left of the 28 were Jack Russells.

Vida was one of those Border Collies, she was very traditional looking and then the other, I don't know if you remember her, she was a smooth coated brown and white. And at the time, after I picked these animals, some of the people at the rehab center at the ASPCA were there and at first they weren't going to let me have one Border Collie and then they weren't going to let me have the other because they thought first one and then the other was too fearful to go back with us and their rehab center was, I think only just a few dogs, I want to say only 15 or 20 dogs and then they work on them until they're "fixed." And I tried to convince them that we are very experienced with shy and fearful dogs, that I wasn't just offering them lip service and that if we didn't think that these dogs were adoptable in a certain amount of time, we wouldn't take them. We knew they were shy/fearful. It wasn't any surprise.

I knew, actually, going into this case, about Vida because she was on the website of this gentleman. I knew some of the basic information, I did a search and I found his website, and on one of his for-sale pages he had this Border Collie and it said she was deaf. Because I'm a big deaf-dog person, I was kind of on the look out for her when we got there and when she licked my finger, but honestly, if she had been asocial I would have taken her anyway. And so she came back to MN on the truck. We did an overnight, and made it to Minneapolis in the morning after we had opened and we unloaded the dogs and started the Ad Prep work. Vida turned out to be more shy/fearful than I had anticipated, um, although some of the other dogs did too. I was pleasantly surprised that some dogs were more social than I thought or some were just as social as I thought they would be but there were a few, both the Border Collies honestly, that were pretty pretty scared that were pretty freaked out....

Amy herself was the perfect situation for this dog. I mean, Amy deciding to adopt this dog couldn't have been any more perfect because we found out that she was going to be a higher needs dog than I had anticipated, she was deaf on top of it, she needed someone who really understood that part of it and would be patient and wonderful and would just let her blossom as much as was going to be possible and in different situation with a less understanding home, it could have been disastrous. Amy started talking about adopting

her when she would see her walking around down here in the halls and of course we'd push it a little. Like, hey, and my office still used to be upstairs at the time and I would drag her up to my office and as I tend to do with the dogs that aren't going anywhere, sometimes just letting them gives me a better idea of what they'll be like in outside life and then she (Amy) started to ask if she could come over and visit her and if she could have her in her office and yeah, it turned out so so well, SO well.

## APPENDIX C

### EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT WITH WENDY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2015; VIDA'S STORY

Wendy: I'll tell you one of my happy ending stories unless you want to keep me on task. There was a seizure, I think it was Brainerd not Pine River. It was Cattle Dog or something, very beautiful. It was deaf. It was so scared and I really didn't know what to do. I sat down in the cage with my back to her. Her name was Fly. And uh, eventually I heard her sniffing my hair - sometimes that's what they like to do so I let her sniff my hair and eventually gave her treats. And do you know Amy Lake in development? Do you know she has a deaf dog?

Nikki: Yeah, I know she has Vida.

Wendy: Well she has Rasta as well. She had rescued Rasta from RAGOM. So, I kept saying Amy, have you met this dog. I mean, what better person than Amy because Rasta knows sign so it would be so easy for her to assimilate but she said "I'm not coming down there to meet her, I can't, I don't want to look at her" but eventually she came down and she fell in love with her. And, I still see Amy quite often 'cause we get together with her dogs and we talk and I'm actually doing some work for her. So she came down and it was instant love and about a month ago, it's really been fun, she's had her two years now, the dog is still very afraid but she's come a long long way where she'll actually jump in the car by herself now and go on a walk without being totally scared but um, she emailed me a couple weeks ago that she'll never forget, they almost left her there but Kate was the one that said, let's take her and she said I just owe everything to Kate for taking her, for not giving up on her and to you for your Ad Prep. What just really got me was she said, I just know she's my soul-dog. We were just meant to be together. And you know, it just kind of gave me goosebumps. I mean who else would have the patience? I mean the dog has a long long way to go. She's still really, really scared. She was one of my favorites so I worked with her all the time because she was such a sweet love but she was just so scared.

Amy's such a gentle person and Brian, her husband, is the same way. They've been a wonderful home for her too.

She [Vida] reminded me of Amy. She was just a very sweet, gentle, loving person and Amy is like that to me so their temperaments and personalities are identical but then the deafness was of course an added thing because I, in my limited skill set, could have a deaf dog.

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