

# Dog as Self and Other

Comparisons to  
Canines as a Practice  
of Dehumanization

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*Why should expressions like 'you son of a bitch' or 'you swine' carry the connotations that they do, when 'you son of a kangaroo' or 'you polar bear' have no meaning whatever?*

—Edmund Leach

This essay explores how language—specifically non-literal linguistic references to dogs in contemporary U.S. English—can unconsciously and perniciously reinforce narratives of oppression and domination. References to dogs in metaphors, similes, and idiom reflect how they act as figurative stand-ins for both the Self and the Other in American society. The unique status of dogs as quasi-persons and their pervasiveness in society makes them easily understood representations of those whose personhood is challenged or compromised by the dominant culture. Dogs' explicit status as subservient—and as servants—often marks such linguistic usage as affirming the status quo.

The goal of this essay is to place the cultural narratives about who and what dogs are in an explicit relationship, both with the linguistic references to dogs and with empirical studies of canines and their relations with humans. The intention is to create a greater conscious consideration of the implications of references to dogs in everyday speech, based on the assumption that it is only through unpacking the presuppositions encoded in language that the mythology underlying linguistic usage can be revealed (Barthes, 1972).

## Why Dogs?

There are dogs everywhere. Any place that humans inhabit, dogs abide with them, almost always as integrated members of the community. This integration is made possible because humans perceive canine behavior and motivation in the social and emotional realms as corresponding closely to those of human beings. The depth of this dynamic is testified to in many ways, ranging from Charles Darwin's relentless use of canines to support his theories of psychological and moral evolution (Knoll, 1997) to the well-documented contemporary roles of dogs as surrogate children, spouses, and caregivers (Katz, 2003). This unique relationship aside, it is self-evident that dogs are not human. They are members of a category that is sometimes constructed as the binary opposite of human: animal. The dog's simultaneous qualities of likeness and Otherness coupled with its persistent presence in human communities make the dog a ready reference for comparison. This comparison can result in definitions of boundaries between humans and animals and in challenges to—as well as deliberate transgressions of—the nature and existence of these boundaries.

Apparent similarities between dogs and humans are both affirming and threatening. These commonalities can call into question the unique status of humans, especially when the dog is used as a reference to explain or describe human behavior, as is the case when a man who is considered to engage in indiscriminate sexual relationships is described as “a dog.” When human actions are justified by their comparison to dogs, risks in such comparisons abound as when Presidential candidate Al Gore's highly paid consultant Naomi Wolf advised him on ways to be perceived as more of an “alpha male.”<sup>1</sup> When the incident became public, it served only to diminish Mr. Gore's stature (Seelye, 1999). The obvious Otherness of dogs provides a rationale for the categorization of behaviors—even those “normally” practiced by both species—as animal in nature. These comparisons between the species, whether for affirmation or derogation, are vividly apparent in linguistic metaphors, idiom, cliché, homily, and name calling. Such phrases as “dog-eat-dog world” affirm the similarities, while the description of a woman who is deemed unattractive by a man as a “dog” is an example in which the reference defines the differences.

It is not by chance that dogs are used as such a rich source of metaphors for human behavior and attitudes. Humans and dogs have a shared social history dating well over 10,000 years. Dogs are, by far, the earliest domesticated species, plant or animal (Clutton-Brock, 1994, 25). Dogs are so integrated into the fabric of human life that they are virtually taken for granted. For well over a century, zoologists and anthropologists have been plumbing the depths of the behavior of exotic animals and their relationships with humans world-wide, yet it has only been in the last fifteen or twenty years that serious attention has been given to the empirical study of dogs (Budiansky, 2001). Previous discussions of dogs, dog behavior, and dog-human relationships were often conjectural and theoretical, built on cultural narratives rather than systematic observation.

Dogs and humans associate with relative ease, largely because their behaviors and their assumptions about those behaviors intersect almost seamlessly. As with humans, the most important thing in a dog's life is its social status. This is not simply a matter of rank and relationship; it also involves knowing who provides fundamental needs: food, safety, and affection, and knowing one's own obligations (MacDonald & Carr, 1995). These shared values—along with mutually comprehensible gestures and tones for communicating about social status—make the dog the perfect canvas for projection, the most anthropomorphizable creature around.

While it may be an occasion for humor, it comes as no surprise when our politicians seek the qualities of an alpha male, a term derived from observations of canine pack behavior. The role of top dog is sensible to humans because the implicit social order is analogous to, though not identical to, that of humans. Similarly we are unlikely to misunderstand the social meaning of the gesture of a dog putting its tail between its legs. Because human gestures of submission share distinct qualities with canine actions, this particular image becomes a ready metaphor in describing a human's sense of humiliation.

Mutual though the relationship may be, when dogs and humans form packs together, only the humans can effectively attain alpha status.<sup>2</sup> As a result, it is no coincidence that when dog metaphors are invoked, the implication almost always situates the human who is so described as less than human, even when apparently admirable traits of dogs are evoked. For example, when dogs are used as symbols for loyalty ("puppy love" for shallow affection, or "dogsboddy" for a personal servant), subordination to superior status is implicit. When we say we don't wish to "rub someone's nose in" a mistake, it is not so much that we do not intend to call attention to an error as that we will refrain from the kind of humiliation that is taken as a given in disciplining a puppy. Even when the dog is invoked to affirm the self, there is a process of Othering taking place.

## The Other as a Threat to the Self

The Other threatens the nature of the Self not because of its differences but because of its similarities (Valentine, 1998). The purpose of Othering is to exclude those individuals, groups, or behaviors which otherwise might appear to qualify as belonging to the category of persons and by extension the Self. As the epigraph from Cambridge anthropologist Edmund Leach suggests, comparisons of human actions to the behaviors of kangaroos have little impact, while an allusion to canine conduct is opprobrious (Leach, 1964, 29). The "promiscuous" behavior of a "bitch" is one that requires censure, not for its "unnatural" qualities, but because its challenge to the established social order is within the range of human behavior. In his germinal essay "Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse," Leach goes on to suggest that it is the familiarity and the categorical proximity of dogs to humans that gives terms associated with them linguistic potency. His thesis (widely cited though unsupported by empirical study) is that their presence in the home rather than the farmyard or the wild and their perceived status (in the English speaking world) as not-food mark dogs' status as self-like "companions," though not equals (Leach, 1964). It is dogs' social similarity to humans that grants this status.

The fact that humans are perceived as capable of engaging in the familiar mating habits of dogs is essential in making particular nuanced distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable behavior, between the Self and the non-Self. There is no need to create an injunction against emulating the sexual behavior of kangaroos, which, even if these habits were well-known, we would not likely find especially compelling or even possible in some aspects. It is the perception that there is a very real possibility of emulation and the fear that it might even be experienced as preferable that make references to canine sexual habits potent.

This particular reference illustrates the role language can play in promulgating the cultural narratives about dogs and humans. The declarative statement that "he is acting like a dog" lacks any explicit reference to sexual behavior, calling on the listener to supply the concept of

promiscuousness. This process of what the linguist Norman Fairclough calls “gap filling” serves to actively reinforce the cultural model (Fairclough, 2001, 18).

Symbolically, dogs’ status as human-like, yet always subordinate, makes them especially useful as stand-ins for low status persons or those whom the dominant society wishes to name as not human, not persons, and not self. When a woman is called a “bitch,” it is not simply that her behavior is being compared to that of a dog, it is implicitly a process of casting women as Other, as not fully persons. When a child is called a “whelp” or a “puppy,” it carries as assumption that the one so named has subordinate status.

## The Personhood of Dogs: Self or Other?

*In symbolic terms, the domestic dog exists precariously in the no-man's-land between human and non-human worlds. It is an interstitial creature, neither person nor beast, forever oscillating uncomfortably between the roles of high-status animal and low-status person. ... it has become a creature of metaphor, simultaneously embodying or representing a strange mixture of admirable and despicable traits.*

—James Serpell

To understand the fine line that dogs walk between Self and Other, it may be helpful to consider how the personhood of dogs is viewed in the contemporary United States. While, as will become apparent, opinions vary widely, this is a subject on which most of the humans in U.S. society have a definite position. On cultural and psychological grounds, there are those who not only perceive dogs as persons but often as more person-like than certain categories of humans. Simultaneously, the self-evident biological differences of genetics and anatomy—literally the “specific” differences—will, in the minds of others, create qualifications or support an absolute definition of dogs as not-persons.

## Dogs as non-Persons

There are a number of ways of considering personhood, depending upon context and social, ethical, religious, or scientific beliefs. There is a commonly internalized belief that humans are distinct from and superior to non-humans. The Judaic, Christian, and Islamic traditions—those that have driven the development of the dominant culture and the use of language in the contemporary U.S.—separate animals and humans and give the latter dominion over the former. For the most part, science confirms this absolute difference between canines and humans. While biological distinctions are generally less sharp than their social interpretations<sup>3</sup> this one lacks ambiguity. In the society in question, those interpretations can be quite broad. References to dogs in the Bible (still the most quoted single source in the English language) make it clear that not only are dogs not persons, but also that humans who are likened to them are themselves of questionable personhood (Day, 1979).

The advent of modernist thinking during the Enlightenment supplanted, to some extent, divine guidance, replacing it with “reason.” As a criterion for personhood, descriptions of reason are often singularly and rather circularly human. While this description of the person had the effect of granting agency to individual humans, it also appears to have increased the distance between humans and other species. On this basis, dogs remain distinct from humans, unable, as they are, to use human language, engage in complex abstract thinking, and so on. However, as a criterion for personhood, the capacity for reason, or intelligence, has its risks. For every standard measure of intelligence there are substantive and compelling challenges, most frequently based on cultural bias. The history of attempts to make use of standardized tests to describe differences among racial groups or between genders, for example, suggests that their utility in defining the difference between persons and non-persons is perilous, and likely based on a failure of reason. Historically, descriptions of women and so-called savages (usually people of color) as “irrational” are so common as to be cliché and are deliberately used to justify placing those so described in the category of non-persons. In the realm of references to dogs, this is most explicit in the description “mad dog” for someone who fights unpredictably, without regard for consequences, and, implicitly, to no useful ends (Ammer, 1999).

## Dogs as (Qualified) Persons

Despite the bright-line distinction it creates between dogs and humans, intelligence is also an argument for the ways in which dogs are like humans. In relation to other animals, dogs do pretty well on intelligence tests, although this may again be a matter of the shared social structures and cultural bias rather than intelligence per se. As Stephen Budiansky, science journalist and author of the exposé, *The Truth about Dogs*, notes, dogs are eager to please humans (Budiansky, 2001). In discussing recent research he opines that “people tend to think animals are smart if they respond to things the same way humans do.” It is hard to get some species—cats for instance—to even take a human’s intelligence test, much less appear to care about the results (Budiansky, 2002). If reason, as defined by humans, is the standard, dogs are clearly not persons. However, if you accept the credibility of measures of reason and intelligence, dogs, while not people, do seem to stand pretty near the apex of species.

Some contemporary ethical systems use a criterion of consciousness for establishing personhood. A conscious being is one who has sensory experiences and is aware of those experiences. This definition of personhood is controversial because it can exclude humans whose status is contended, such as fetuses, those in vegetative states, etc. By this definition most (but not all) humans are persons and most members of an indeterminate number of other species—dogs included—are as well (Singer, 2002). However, for many humans, this definition is likely to be seen as both overly broad and unreasonably narrow. The inclusion of species such as rats (often treated as vermin whose presence is anathema and whose lives are devalued) will seem overly generous to some. Creating criteria for excluding any humans from the status of personhood is certain to be challenged as creating a slippery slope at best and as an invitation to genocide at the worst.

A more limited and perhaps more widely used definition that is consistent with both modernist thinking and that of many religious traditions is: a person is an individual capable of moral agency. The extent to which dogs exercise moral agency is an open question from an

empirical perspective. And, the answers to such inquiries create even more ambiguity about the personhood of dogs than those surrounding the question of reason.

Yet, an almost unshakable belief that dogs are moral beings is inscribed in the language. The dog is, after all, “man’s best friend.” Friendship is a context created by the free exercise of moral agency. While the evolutionary relationship between dogs and humans is biologically distant, Darwin made extensive use of descriptions of dogs’ attributes as evolutionary precursors to humans’ moral capacities. “Our dogs...have progressed [in relation to wolves] in certain moral qualities such as affection, trustworthiness, temper and probably in general intelligence,” he says in *The Descent of Man*. He goes on to suggest that a dog who loves his master provides the closest equivalent in the animal world to “religious devotion.”<sup>4</sup> While Darwin was always careful to maintain the boundary between humans and other creatures, clearly he set aside a special moral status for dogs (Darwin, 1981, 50). They might not be humans, but they might be persons.

Budiansky claims that most of what passes for loyalty is simply instinctive canine behavior modified by having been raised by humans. Humans may perceive a dog running to its owner’s side and growling at an intruder as being protective of the owner. Budiansky says they are actually seeking protection from a more dominant member of the pack. Indeed, he offers reasonable alternative explanations for a wide range of other perceived “loyal” behaviors (Budiansky, 2001). Linguistic references typically portray the dog as more treacherous than loyal. Expressions such as “crooked as a dog’s hind leg” and warnings about those who “bite the hands that feed them” are much more numerous than those affirming dogs’ reliability. Of course the explanations that Budiansky offers for canine behavior could as easily be used to account for human behavior attributed to loyalty—and often are.

Though interpretations of empirical evidence vary, it is clear that most humans assume that dogs are capable only of a more limited variety of moral agency than we are. While dogs’ positive moral traits may be revered, canines are not held to the same standard as humans are for behavior that would be described, had a human engaged in it, as immoral. While there are historical precedents for the criminal prosecution of animals for their acts, even to the extent of capital punishment (Evans, 1906), in contemporary society it is the humans who are held morally responsible for the acts of dogs in their care, not the dogs themselves.<sup>5</sup> Among the more public narratives is the case in which Marjorie Knoller’s dogs attacked and killed Diane Whipple in January 2001 in a San Francisco co-op. It was Knoller who went to court and eventually to prison. Only one of the dogs, Hera, was euthanized and then as a protective measure, not as criminal or moral punishment. In commenting on the case, John Snyder, director of programs for companion animals at the Humane Society, compared the dogs in this case to “loaded guns,” thus implicitly granting no agency at all to the canines (Moore, 2001).

On the other hand, the positive outcomes of dogs’ actions typically cause them to be viewed as moral, even if this is not the simplest or most obvious explanation. “Ozzy the Hero Dog’s Bark Saves Courthouse” trumpets the headline on an Associated Press story typical of its ilk in the *Atlanta Constitution*. The “hero” designation seems a bit hyperbolic when you read the opening paragraphs. “The mutt woke his owners with loud barking early Sunday morning. Owner Ray Wheelington got up, saw thick smoke pouring out of the courthouse next door to his home, in the Algiers neighborhood of New Orleans, and quickly called the fire department. Judge Mary ‘KK’ Norman credited Wheelington’s call for saving the structure. Wheelington gave the credit to his pooch.” (Associated Press, 2004). While a simpler and equally likely explanation is that Ozzy

was frightened and calling for assistance or reassurance from the leader of his pack, Mr. Wheelington and the press are happy to see a more altruistic motivation, even to imply that Ozzy acted this way with the intention of saving the courthouse.

The particular reasons for these attributions most likely result as much from dogs' high emotional intelligence, at least as demonstrated by the signifiers that humans recognize, as from their morality. Dogs are highly social animals; they are deeply sensitive to indicators of human mood such as tone of voice, posture, and vitality. They appear to be sympathetic. Their desire to always have the approval of the humans around them, especially those of higher status in their pack, leads them to act in ways that ingratiate. Dogs, like humans, use posture, gesture, facial expression, and tone of voice to convey emotion. They appear to understand what humans are saying, if not the rational meaning of it, then the emotional content. Thus "puppy love" is so emphatic and unmistakable that it becomes an easily understood reference for a similarly recognizable state in humans. This capacity for empathy, considered by some to be a correlate of moral agency, is one often associated with personhood. When a dog's action has a positive outcome, humans want to attribute it to conscious, moral motivation.

In a *New York Times* op-ed essay, South African writer Mark Mathabane describes the conclusions of his own youthful mind about empathy and personhood: "...white people could not be human. If they were, why did they not feel my pain?" He describes the turning point in his perception of whites as people this way: "I remember saying to myself: 'She feels my mother's pain. She's human after all'" (Mathabane, 2002). Based on this kind of description of persons, dogs' responses to humans may be experienced as more personable than those of many humans. Dogs almost always recognize that a human is in pain and offer emotional comfort and support. Even the feminist theorist and philosopher Donna Haraway—normally an advocate for seeing reality as a human construct—is unequivocal in describing the emotional response she receives from her Aussie as a "narrative of unconditional love" (Haraway, *et al.*, 2003). So powerful is this experience that there is a centuries-old expression that feels as if it is right out of the "me" generation: love me, love my dog.<sup>6</sup>

Dogs' conformity with human forms of emotional expression and their highly developed capacity for empathy make them persons in a way no other species but humans can attain. "Cat people" may object to this, and even note that cats might be seen as more like humans than dogs in that they often cannot be bothered by their companions' emotional needs. Cats, they might say, have "better boundaries" than dogs. As may be, cats lack the emotional range of dogs—in terms human can perceive—when it comes to expression. Dogs at least appear to care.

## Dog as the Self who can be Othered

These behavioral characteristics make dogs the perfect canvas for projection, the most anthropomorphizable creatures around. Humans can easily imagine that canine behavior shares human motivation. We can see ourselves in their actions; we can see dog-like behavior in humans, as when someone is described as "chasing his tail" or "at the end of his tether." The significance of this apparent empathy may not go far beyond appearances, however. Dogs will continue to ingratiate themselves with their humans, even if they are abused physically or verbally. While some humans will do this, such behavior is typically and reasonably viewed as

pathological and a symptom of the extremity of the abuse rather than as typical. So when someone is described as being kept “on a very short leash,” as former White House press secretary Ari Fleischer was by veteran news correspondent Helen Thomas (Stanley, 2001), you tend to wonder how long he will accept those circumstances. While the empathy factor may argue for their status as persons, it is not clear whether dogs are actually exercising empathy, or simply engaging in behavior that emulates it.

In general, any behavior by dogs that can be interpreted as human-like—whether it is in their acquiescence to status or their expressions of pain and submission—reinforces the notion that dogs are persons. While none of the predominant ways of thinking about personhood grant unequivocal status to dogs, the ambiguity of their place is evident in many of them. Dogs may not be persons, but they sure do have a lot of the characteristics of persons.

This ambiguity is the very heart of the description of the Other. Others are those who look a lot like persons, but are excluded from that category. Historically, the Other includes humans whose religion, place of origin, skin color, language, gender, and age are different from that of the dominant social group. Like dogs, people of color were deemed to be biologically not persons. Women, people of color, and those of a different religion, have been described by white Christian men as lacking or having limited capacity for moral agency, though perhaps, like dogs, having an excess of capacity for empathy. Women, people of color, children, and those who cannot speak the dominant language have been characterized as lacking the capacity for rational thought. When it comes to personhood, the Dog and the Other have a lot in common.

## The Dog as the Other

We may anthropomorphize dogs. Dogs may be seen as *canipomorphizing* humans. Humans can incorporate a dog into a family unit because the behaviors mesh, because the assumptions are not in conflict. In the home, the humans may treat the dog as a quasi-child; the dog acts toward the family as if it were its pack. For the most part, this works. So deeply ingrained is this notion that iconic depictions of the classic American family almost always include a dog (Haraway *et al.*, 2003). It is understandable then that the cliché excuse for the failure of a child to turn in a school assignment is that “the dog ate it.”

However, dogs are not humans. Like the Other, dogs alienate themselves from the category of the Self when they engage in behaviors that are imagined to be unacceptable for the Self. In many cases, this is purely a species difference. The mating habits and family structures of dogs, while bearing similarities, are undeniably distinct from those of humans. There are humans who engage in sex indiscriminately (the way humans describe dogs as doing) but for the most part, such behavior is not only socially unacceptable but also counter-instinctive. Dogs are scavengers: they eat things which revolt humans. Even the slavish loyalty that dogs exhibit towards their humans can be disturbing. Unless they are coerced, conditioned, or systematically terrorized, what person has so little self-respect that she or he will take extensive abuse and continue to lick the hand of the abuser?

The child-like role to which dogs are often committed in human society goes beyond social construction and pack mentality; it is an inherent characteristic of domestication. Dogs, as is the case with all domesticated animals, are “neotenous.”<sup>7</sup> That is to say that even as full adults they

retain the characteristics of the young of the “wild” species from which they derive, in this case, wolves. In comparison with mature wolves, full grown dogs have shorter snouts and larger eyes, looking much like wolf pups. Behavior is also more like that of wolf pups: dogs remain playful throughout their lives. As it turns out, you can teach an old dog new tricks. While the habits of many species tend to ossify in adulthood, dogs remain relatively flexible and open to new experience. Dogs’ development, especially predatory behavior, is arrested in various ways in relation to wolves (Serpell, 1995). This quality is captured in a Washington political simile: “like the dog that caught the bus” (Dowd, 2002). It means to be in unexpected possession of something that one never expected to catch and that one has no sense of any purpose to which it could be put. Dogs’ life-long propensity to chase that which moves without regard to the purpose of such a chase is an example of stunted predatory development characteristic of neoteny. The otherness of childhood is a lifelong characteristic of dogs, another ready reference point.

## The Dog as the “Model” Other

To this point the discussion has emphasized the ways in which the ambiguous nature of the dog’s personhood allows dog references to be used to define appropriate behavior for participation in the definition of Self. More disturbing are the ways in which dogs provide a reference for the ideal of what the dominant culture would (implicitly) like the Other to be. The combination of dogs’ undeniable Otherness as members of another species and their apparent comfort in their role as subordinate to the dominant species also makes them a model that the dominant culture uses to describe appropriate behavior on the part the human Other. The dog with a cocked ear, used as the corporate logo for several recording companies over the years, seems to catch the role perfectly as he listens to “his master’s voice.”

First, the dogs’ most desirable feature as the Other is that the biological differences prevent dogs from ever contending for full status as members of the dominant group.<sup>8</sup> They will always stay in their place. Of greater significance, however, is the dog’s apparent pleasure in assuming the subordinate position. A dog is grateful when you “throw him a bone,” even though the implication when applied to humans is that the recipient of the bone usually gets little real meat, that is to say, he or she gets little substantive attention or opportunity.

Dogs are the slaves who desire no emancipation; they are the children who never grow up to displace the parents. Consistent with the mythologies of equality, meritocracy, and social mobility, the dominant segments of American society tend to seek to have their dominance affirmed as “natural” and not the product of unearned privilege and institutionalized bias. They might go further yet, even suggesting that social dynamics such as marginalization, cultural imperialism, and inequitable distribution of power and wealth, are actually good and appropriate things. For the dominant culture, the implicit narrative goes something like this: *Look at dogs, they’re not only happy in their subordinate roles, they are appropriately grateful to have them. If only other Others understood their place as well as dogs do, they would see that the status quo is really best for all.* Dog metaphors are often evoked to promulgate this narrative. It is implied when the word “fetch” is used, calling to mind the image of a dog docilely procuring the master’s pipe and slippers. It is visible in the inverse as well, as when Prime Minister Tony Blair is derided as George Bush’s “poodle” or “lap dog” by the British press for not being sufficiently assertive (Assinder, 2003).

The implications of this are multiple, but the key one is that to cast a person as a dog is to place her or him in a subservient or inferior status. This may be less apparent—and even more important—when the connotation is affirmative. When a dog is lauded as loyal, as “man’s best friend,” this does not imply a friendship between equals even when the relationship is reciprocal and voluntary. When a person’s affection is likened to that of a dog, the implication is that it manifests in unquestioning (perhaps even unreasonable) deference and obedience.

Among the most telling elements of this subservient dynamic is the mutual nature of the association. Despite the enduring presence of a counter-narrative—that the process of domestication was one in which humans imposed themselves on dogs—best evidence suggests mutual adaptation rather than coercion (Clutton-Brock, 1994, 26). Evolutionary zoologists are even leaning towards theories that it was dogs who adopted humans, rather than the other way around, dogs having adaptively incorporated the capacity to appeal to humans’ egos and vanities. Some scientists have gone so far as to contend that from an evolutionary point of view the association has been far more beneficial to dogs as a species than to humans (Rindos, 1984, Budiansky, 2002). Generally accepted theory at this time describes a process of mutual adoption. The most widely held views are that canine scavengers initially trailed human communities as a source of food. The tamest of these wolves and jackals were the most tolerated and in this way a kind of natural selection led to the emergence of the species of *canis domesticus* (Vilà et al., 1997). These canines sought, auditioned for, and cling to their subservient role.

## Working Like a Dog, Lazy as a Dog

Finally, the affection of dogs towards their masters is slavish in a way that no human slave’s feelings towards her or his master could ever be. At the end of the Civil War, there were plantation owners who were surprised that “their” slaves didn’t want to remain with them. The owners had convinced themselves that those in bondage really were happy in their subservient roles and better off for it. They had blinded themselves to the fact that it was oppression (particularly in the form of threatened violence) that had coerced an appearance of affection. For those who seek and are comforted by such a sense of beneficent domination, dogs must be very satisfying companions. The dog has the demeanor and relationship to its master of the perfect slave, perfect, that is, from the slavemaster’s point of view. The significance lies not so much in the actual roles of dogs in human households (for it is unlikely that more than a few people even unconsciously see themselves as the slavemasters of their dogs) but in the linguistic opportunity that this possibility affords. Thus, “working like a dog” can be seen to have more complex connotations than working hard.

Dogs, while requiring material sustenance, are motivated not by greater material reward or opportunities for greater autonomy or power, but by greater social and emotional rewards. They demand their payment in attention and affection, as well as in social security and acceptance. If slaves and wage laborers actually did work like dogs, slavery might well have continued. At the very least, the wheels of capitalism would be untroubled by organized labor. To work like a dog is to participate in a narrative that says that the model worker is happy to know his or her place and be treated with kindness; he or she has no desire to supplant the owners and the managers, or to incur their onerous responsibilities.

The complexity which the simile, working like a dog, reveals about the narrative of the slave becomes more apparent when you remember that dogs are not notoriously hard workers. “Lazy as a dog” is implicitly evoked at the same time. Laziness is often attributed to the subjugated Other, most especially slaves of the antebellum South. While it might seem that this quality would in some way undermine the notion of the “perfect slave” enunciated earlier, it is in fact a desirable one for the master because it reinforces her or his sense of superiority.

The dog’s presence in the U.S. household involves domination, but relies on what can only be described as mutually agreed upon terms rather than an imposed subjugation or confinement. And those terms are constantly being negotiated, as any dog owner is likely to attest. As with most hierarchical social dynamics, it is not simply a matter of the dominant species or the alpha imposing his or her will upon those of lower status. With rank comes obligation and responsibility. Dogs are without shame in demanding that the humans with whom they live demonstrate *noblesse oblige*. The humans are responsible for structure and security. If they can wheedle them into it, dogs have no difficulty in letting the humans do everything regarding basic material and emotional comfort. And, if the humans have rules, say about where you have to defecate, it is up to the humans to provide the opportunity to follow these rules. Dogs certainly are willing to get away with whatever they can. So, like children who require a firm hand, dogs (as model others) need the guidance of their beneficent masters to assist them in satisfactorily completing their duties. Understanding that the dog is not equal to the Self, the master readily accedes, affirming his or her superiority. To work like a dog is to work in order to achieve the attention and approval of the master under his or her guidance and direction, that is to be the model Other.

## In Conclusion

The unstable equation of dogs and humans creates a rich vein of metaphor, simile, and idiom. The propensity to move between the categories of persons and not-persons makes dogs especially amenable to be used as symbols of the Other. Their apparent comfort, even pleasure, in the subordinate role of the Other makes them both a signifier of non-Self and of the ideal Other as constructed by the dominant social group. While there are numerous cases where the manifestation of this is explicit, such as, dog (to describe an “unattractive” woman), dogpatch, in the dog house, dawg (as a reference to a black male), and the many forms of bitch, it is equally important to be aware of it when the reference is less direct. Not every metaphor, idiom, or homily involving dogs participates in the narratives of the dog as a quasi-self or as the Other. Yet, once alerted, for the attentive reader or listener it seems as if the possibility is always present.

The stated goal of this essay is call special attention to the evocation of dogs as references to humans and human behavior. In his essay “As Charming as a Pig,” Arran Stibbe asserts that when an ideology is linguistically implicit, as it typically is with such animal references, “it cannot be resisted through direct opposition of the propositional content of the language in which it is embedded” and can challenged only through critical engagement with the language itself (Stibbe, 2003, 386). Such critical engagement can take many forms, such as considering in what connotative ways the narratives discussed here are being called upon when the word “dog” is

used adjectivally. Attention can be paid to the depth with which the perspective that is described here is ingrained in common linguistic practice. When dogs are referenced, consider the inferences that may be taken and the possible impact on listeners or readers, whether intended or not. When an idiom involving dogs is used, the speaker or writer can give thought to the choice and its significance. The consequences may be trivial or substantial, so bear in mind a bit of advice that classical Romans thought useful enough to inscribe in their mosaic floors: *cave canem*, beware of the dog.



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“Dog as Self and Other” is related to a larger web-based project: [The Canine in Conversation: Dogs in Metaphor and Idiom, Illustrated.](http://www.metaphordogs.org/)

<http://www.metaphordogs.org/>

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> An alpha male is one who provides virile, authoritative and unquestioned leadership.

<sup>2</sup> Veterinarians, animal psychologists and some dog owners will reasonably argue with this generalization. As Robin Kovary of the American Dog Trainers Network notes however, "Hopefully, your dog sees you as his or her pack leader ('Alpha')" (Kovary, 1999). In instances where a human will not assert him or herself, a dog will challenge for the role. While the human may accede—at least in part—to the dog's demands, neither party will be comfortable with the situation, as if the children had been put in charge of their parents.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, the biological categories of male and female are far more blurred than the social construction of gender would have you think.

<sup>4</sup> Note that the implicit role of the human is homologous with god.

<sup>5</sup> It is relevant to note that this has its parallel, until recently, in the social response to crimes committed by human children who are also deemed to have a status of quasi-personhood. Even as U.S. society holds humans of increasingly tender age accountable for crimes as adults, it seems unlikely that dogs are soon to follow.

<sup>6</sup> "*Qui me amat, amet et canem meum*" (Who loves me will love my dog also) is attributed to St. Bernard who, lived at the turn of the first millennium of the common era, though it is likely older (Skinner, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Dogs are "cute." They do things to endear themselves to us. The docility and voluntary submission to human authority is likely what won dogs their place in the lives of humans. A Russian scientist conducted an interesting experiment in which he bred several generations of foxes selecting for only one trait: tameness. Within a short period of time—20 years—the offspring chosen in this way not only developed many of the behavior characteristics of dogs, they also manifested neoteny and some of the varied appearance of dogs, such as mixed coats and colors (Budiansky, 2001, 46).

<sup>8</sup> This could change as genetic manipulation blurs species boundaries. Indeed the threat that the animal Other may contend for status as Self may be part of what contemporary society fears about these scientific endeavors.