

Researching Contested Companionship: Responsibility and Care Work in the Field

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Abstract

June 8th, 2016 ended the lives of both Christiane Vadnais and Lucifer, but it also unraveled many other relations between humans and pitbull-type dogs. In this paper, I explore what it meant to conduct multispecies ethnography in the context of Breed Specific Legislation (BSL) in the city of Montréal between 2016-2018. I detail how methodologies of participant observation, walking interviews, and auto-ethnography explored themes of care, ethics, solidarity, and intervention. In the first section, I describe who I am engaging with when I say ‘pitbull-type dog’. It is here I define what I call contested companionship. Next, I turn to my fieldwork detailing three research methods. I first describe participant observation and rapport building at Tails and Paws Montréal, a dog care facility, and introduce Rocky, a pitbull-type dog that had to evacuate the province of Québec. Next, I outline the benefit of walking interviews for multispecies research. I conclude my reflection on methodological practices by drawing from auto-ethnographic data outlining my shared life with Clementine and Eleanor. In the third section, I consider questions of intervention in the field that were deeply tethered to matters of life and death for both human and nonhuman participants, in particular for Fred and his companions Marilyn and Samson. Scaffolded together, I provide an example of what an ethically informed multispecies research design looked like that additionally had to navigate contested companionship—illegal or precarious—that shaped methodological practices into politically productive strategies that safeguarded not only individuals but relationships.

Keywords

Animal geography, breed specific legislation, care ethics, multispecies research, panic policies



Introduction

On June 8th, 2016, Christiane Vadnais was killed by her neighbor's dog Lucifer. Montréal immediately proposed an amendment to the current animal control by-law adding sections pertaining to owning a pitbull-type dog (16-060). On September 27th, 2016, the city of Montréal voted 37:23 in favour of Breed Specific Legislation (BSL) despite evidence that suggested Lucifer was not a pitbull-type dog coupled with mounting examples of the ineffectiveness of BSL to address human-canine conflict (CBC, 2016; Bisgould, 2015; Hunter and Brisban, 2016). Lucifer's breed association became the explanation for the attack rather than his living situation or the fact that he had two prior bite reports¹ that were revealed by an unlikely source, the coroner assigned to the case, Dr. Lichtblau (Lichtblau, 2016; Bisgould, 2015; Delise, 2007). Dr. Lichtblau's detailed account of Lucifer's life under the neglectful guardianship of Franklin Junior Frontal was disregarded² as the city speedily introduced BSL as described in the literature as a form of panic policy making (Hunter and Brisbin, 2016). Panic policy is characterized as an immediate legislative intervention that introduces a new regime of governance to manage imagined conflict. Described as a "symbolic gesture," it addresses immediate fear that circulates from an event, such as the death of Vadnais, instead of the underlying issues including the lack of clarity surrounding Lucifer's breed association. Instead of addressing a case of neglectful guardianship and failed municipal intervention, all individual pitbull-type dogs, as well as pitbull-type dog-human relations, were characterized as posing a threat to society thus in need of specific governance.

In this article, I ruminate on what it meant to conduct multispecies field research under the spatial logic of BSL as it transformed relations and how bodies move through space and time. Sarah Ahmed's (2015, 70) writing about affective emotions reminds us that "[f]ear works to align bodily and social space: it works to enable some bodies to inhabit and move in public space through restricting the mobility of other bodies to spaces that are enclosed or contained". Ahmed's work proves to be incredibly politically productive to think about how individual dogs and their relations were spatially transformed during the regime of BSL that spanned 2016-2018 in Montréal.

In this article, I share my research that thinks about the spatial logic of BSL highlighting how affective emotions circulate in multispecies research. Multispecies ethnography was given currency by Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich (2010, 545) as an approach to ethnography that accounts for "creatures previously, appearing on the margins....as part of the landscape, as food for humans, [or] as symbols." Foregrounding nonhuman animals as "social agents" challenges the human supremacist dualism inserted between human and more-than-human lives (Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010, 554). Critically, multispecies ethnography draws our attention to the, "highly asymmetrical relations of power" where nonhuman animals are "significantly unfree" research participants (Collard, 2015, 155). Recently, scholars have started to ask important questions about what an *ethical* multispecies ethnography looks like that safeguard's nonhuman animal participants involvement as well as what benefits do they receive (see Collard, 2015; Gillespie, 2019; Van Patter and Blattner, 2020)? Kathryn Gillespie (2019, 1-2) considers recent feminist critiques of multispecies ethnography as a corrective to research that at times fails to grapple with the political responsibility of advocating for nonhuman animal research participants. She argues that we need "gentler, more caring, and ethically attuned" multispecies research practices that foreground the lived experiences of nonhuman animal participants in ways that are committed to change exploitative human-animal relations (Gillespie 2019, 2). Thinking through what an ethical multispecies

¹ The City of Montréal was involved in both bite incidences but failed to implement the animal by-law that was in place to address canine-human conflict. This led Dr. Lichtblau to advocate for a centralized registry for dog bites instead of BSL (Lichtblau, 2016).

² Lisa Vadnais, the sister to Christine Vadnais deplored Dr. Lichtblau's choice to not condemn all pitbull-type dogs including his concession that he was not able to identify Lucifer as a pitbull-type dog (CBC, 2017).

ethnographic practice looks like in the context of researching contested companionship, this paper draws on qualitative research conducted during 2016-2018 in the Montréal anti-BSL community³. The qualitative research was based on participant observation, walking interviews, and auto-ethnographical data. Thinking with Collard, Gillespie, Van Patter, and Blattner I turn to my research studying contested companionship in Montréal and thread together how a *politicized* multispecies ethnography emerged in my practices.

This paper taps into ongoing conversations about what an ethical multispecies ethnography looks like and what transformative role as a methodology it can have for our human and nonhuman participants. In the first section, I describe who I am engaging with when I say ‘pitbull-type dog’. It is here I define what I call contested companionship. Next, I turn to my fieldwork detailing three research methods that I employed in the hostile geographies of Montréal. I first describe participant observation and rapport building at Tails and Paws⁴, a dog care facility, and introduce Rocky, a pitbull-type dog that had to evacuate the province of Québec. Next, I outline the benefit of walking interviews to multispecies research. I conclude my reflection on methodological practices by drawing from auto-ethnographical data outlining my shared life with Clementine and Eleanor, two pitbull-type dogs. In the third section, I consider questions of intervention and relationships in the field that were deeply tethered to matters of life and death for both human and nonhuman participants, in particular for Fred and his companions Marilyn and Samson. Scaffolded together, it is my intention to provide an example of what an ethically informed multispecies research design looked like that additionally had to navigate contested companionship –illegal or precarious— that shaped methodological practices into politically productive strategies that safeguarded not only individuals but relationships.

Who Constitutes a Pitbull-Type Dog?

Who am I talking about when I say ‘pitbull-type dog’? What can I do in my research that challenges tropes of pitbull-type dogs?

This article considers an assemblage of dogs referred to as ‘pitbull-type dogs’, a term that is ‘sticky’ in Ahmed’s (2015, 7) words as it is charged with “heavy associations and consequences”. Writing about pitbull-type dogs is muddled by the fact that ‘pitbull’ or ‘pitbull-type dog’ is not a breed, but rather a convenient misnomer for many different types of dogs. As Harlan Weaver (2013, 692) reminds us, “dogs labeled pit bulls experience breed as a formulation that lies in the eye of the beholder, a variation of ‘I know it when I see it’”. The umbrella category of pitbull-type dogs includes Staffordshire Bull Terrier; American Staffordshire Terrier; American Pit bull Terriers; any dog mixed with these breeds; or any dog that presents visual characteristics associated with those breeds. Contending with this wide-reaching definition of what a pitbull-type dog is, the City of Montréal developed a phenotypic list to classify pitbull-type dogs. According to the cities document a pitbull-type dog was classified as having two-thirds of the following traits outlined in Figure 1.

The aforementioned characteristics of a pitbull-type dog are bound together to exaggerate the proof of “dangerous potential” (Collier, 2006, 17) of these dogs (Dayan, 2011). An example of this found in the list of traits is associating a context-specific behaviour of ‘tail kept down’ as a standard phenotypic

³ To review the entire project, see Authors master’s thesis (Eccles, 2018).

⁴ All names of subjects including my place of work have been changed to preserve their anonymity

PIT BULL-TYPE DOGS: MORPHOLOGICAL TRAITS

- Muscular, short-haired, powerful and athletic-looking dog. Dog has square shape when viewed laterally.
- The male weighs 12 to 35 kg and is 36 to 53 cm high at the withers. The female weighs 10 to 30 kg and is 30 to 50 cm high at the withers. Height to weight ratio is usually proportional.
- Its coat is close-hair, short and smooth.
- Its head is wedge-shaped when viewed laterally or above, but round when viewed from the front.
- The head is about 2/3 the width of the shoulders and 25% wider at the cheeks than at the base of the skull.
- The distance from the back of the skull to the eyes is equivalent to the distance from the eyes to the tip of the muzzle.
- Well-defined stop.
- The muzzle is straight and square.
- The lips are tight and dental occlusion is normal.
- The eyes are small and triangular when viewed laterally. They are round or slightly elliptical when viewed from the front.
- The ears are high set and small.
- The neck is muscular.
- The shoulders are a little wider than rib cage at the eighth rib level.
- The elbows are not prominent and front legs are parallel.
- The front legs are heavy and solid looking.
- The front is massive, with a comparatively delicate back.
- The back slopes slightly from the withers to the rump.
- The hips are broad for firmly attached muscles and the hind legs are muscular.
- The hocks are low and the hind legs appear slim under the knees.
- The tail is of medium length, becoming slimmer from the base to the tip, and generally kept down.

Montréal 

Figure 1. Pit Bull-Type Dogs. Source: 16-060.

quality of a pitbull-type dog. It is well known that when a dog lowers their tail, it is to communicate “anxiety” (Horowitz, 2016, 57) or anti-social behaviour that discourages their scent to spread. The city of Montréal’s choice to emphasize a behavioural response associated with all dogs as inherently a ‘pitbull-type dog’ quality reveals just one example of the making of these dogs. René Cadieux, the lawyer who represented the City of Montréal in an appeal against the vagueness of who constituted a pitbull-type dog defended the typology when he stated, “like pornography, you know it when you see it” (Bernstien, 2016). It is the aforementioned typology, media sensationalism, and remark from the city lawyer that constructed a particular type of dog and relationship that became not only subject to governance but marked by broader contestation.

Contested Companionship

The re-storying of pitbull-type dogs has high stakes as these dogs are trapped in a narrative that marks their bodies as inherently dangerous; thought to be “irredeemable” (McCarthy, 2016, 569). Pitbull-type dogs have been discussed at length in literature as knotted in histories of Victorian coal mines and

dog fighting rings, as American war heroes, to contemporary stories of anti-blackness (Nast, 2014, 2015; Dickey, 2016; Kim, 2015; Boisseron, 2015). It is not my intention in this article to elaborate on the histories that scholars such as Heidi Nast and Bronwen Dickey have mapped with great care. What I am more interested in is how the stories we tell in the literature serve to perpetuate or re-story the lives of pitbull-type dogs, which has consequences in how we conduct our research and what stories we contribute to that have material consequences. I want to flag this as an ethical impetus as in the literature regarding pitbull-type dogs' some scholars have fallen into the trap that Karen Delise (2007, 105) has referred to in her work as the "creation and maintenance of the pit bull" trope. Delise's cautionary words materialize in two prominent pet studies scholar's work. In a recent pet studies reader, Tony Milligan (2017, 20) buttresses the contested status of pitbull-type dogs as 'pets' stating,

[i]n the case of certain kinds of dogs, Staffordshire Bull Terriers being an obvious example...are the stuff tragedies are made of. Owners, can, and in some cases do, lose sight of the reality of who and what they share their homes with, that is, creatures who remain *inserted* [emphasis added] into a human-dominated environment.

Milligan's choice word of 'inserted' contributes to the idea that pitbull-type dogs are not normal dogs, rather there is something other-worldly about them as if their domestication was incomplete. Corroborating Milligan's stance is Nast's (2018, "The Pit as Worlded" para. 1) discussion of pitbull-type dogs, dogfighting, and coal mines. She writes the dogs were "partially responsible" for the human practices they were enrolled in because of their "natural propensity to fight". Thus, contending with pitbull-type dogs in the literature presents itself as an opportunity to invoke Van Patter and Blattner's (2020) ethical principle of 'beneficence,' which considers reciprocity and representation in multispecies research. In particular, they write it is a "moral imperative to carefully consider which realities we bring into being through our writing, along with potential implications" (2020, 178). Milligan and Nast arguably did not consider the implications of translation. Invoking tropes of pitbull-type dogs as inherently dangerous harnesses the potential to cause harm outside of the research context by propelling unscientific narratives about who these dogs are (Buller, 2015). Examples such as this in the literature, in the media, and expressed through legislation such as BSL including the typology of who constitutes a pitbull-type dog contribute to what I call contested companionship, further described below.

Margaret Jane Radin's (1996) concept of contested commodities describes commodities that are subject to moral or political debate that become only available through governed and highly regulated circumstances. Repurposing Radin's concept I suggest pitbull-type dogs are examples of contested commodities, however, I take one step further to resist their property status and suggest their circumstance is better understood through the lens of relations. In places that do not have BSL, there are still blockades to companionship between pitbull-type dogs and humans as witnessed in insurance policies that will not insure a household with a pitbull-type dog, people moving off of side-walks to avoid proximity, or animal facilities such as PetSmart that have an exclusion policy for pitbull-type dogs in their dog socialization programs⁵ (Goss, 2015; PetSmart, 2021). I argue there are unique mechanisms that regulate, manage, and often attempt to eliminate relationships between humans-pitbull-type dogs and other animals-pitbull-type dogs. Thus, in my research, I intentionally push past the collapse of pitbull-type dog stories in the literature as warriors, monsters, or victims (Zinda, 2014, 51). To emphasize

⁵ According to PetSmart's (2021) dog day care policy, "Furthermore, for the safety of all animals and associates, we cannot accept dogs of the "bully breed" classification or wolves/wolf hybrids including American Pit Bull Terriers, Miniature Bull Terriers, American Staffordshire Terriers, Staffordshire Bull Terriers, American Bull Dogs, Bull Terriers or mixed breeds that have the appearance or characteristics of one of these breeds".

this, I focus on the “lives of *actual, real* animals” to make visible individual dogs’ stories once labeled as pitbull-type dogs in the context of BSL (Govindrajan, 2018, 21). Holding myself accountable as a researcher of contested human-animal relations required careful attention to how I could perpetuate dangerous tropes such as Nast and Milligan’s slippage. This reminder was matched with a concerted effort of how to contribute different stories that engender affective emotions regarding pitbull-type dogs; ones of care and empathy that involved at times agitating for their lives in the field.

Research in Hostile Geographies with Contested Companions

How do you design a multispecies ethnography that is a pleasurable experience for nonhuman animal participants? What would it mean to design a project that took seriously the lived experiences of nonhuman animals? Of individual pitbull-type dogs?

In an attempt to design a multispecies ethnographic practice, I was both concerned with how to make interviews accessible and pleasurable for both humans and dogs. Barbara Smuts’ work is an exemplary model of research practices that commit to the well-being of dog participants. Smuts, an esteemed primatologist, and sociologist is less known for her canine research. In her multispecies research with canines, she approached the participants as unique beings with individual subjectivities who actively shape the world around them. By immersing herself in the world of dog socialization and play, she was able to draw observations sourced from “what matters to them”—where ‘they’ are her canine participants (Smuts, 2006, 124). With this in mind, I considered methodological practices that would bring individual pitbull-type dog experiences to the forefront. Methodologically speaking, to acknowledge nonhuman animals in our research requires researchers to “perform, to engage, to embody, to image and imagine, to witness, to sense, to analyze” differently (Dowling, Llyod, and Suchet-Pearson, 2016, 2). It also requires us as researchers to enact “sustained and careful attention” (Govindrajan, 2018, 22) lending itself to become deeply concerned about the spatialization of the political struggles of our nonhuman participants (Hobson, 2007).

My research practices involved daily interactions with pitbull-type dogs in an effort to know them as individuals and understood their embodied experiences of being in the world (Govindrajan, 2018). In the following sections, I will reflect on three areas of my research that allowed me to immerse myself in the lives of individual pitbull-type dogs. Each ‘field site’ represented its own challenges and unique opportunities to grapple with matters of care, responsibility, and ethics that shines through with vignettes from the field. In the final section, I ruminate on a particular, knotted multispecies relationship that thrust me into matters of life and the threat of death in the field. It is through these reflections, experiences, and individuals that I hope to communicate the commitment of participants—myself included—to challenging contested companionship.

Caring for Contested Companions at Tails and Paws Montréal

The first field site I established was paramount to establishing many of the relationships that carried forward in my project as it positioned me within the wider BSL community. Before enrolment in my graduate program, I worked at Tails and Paws Montréal, a boarding, training, and daycare facility for dogs. During my tenure as both a worker and researcher at Tail and Paws Montréal, there were many instances of advocating for pitbull-type dogs during BSL including frequent media interviews. Aside from the very public acts of advocacy we also engaged in clandestine activities. Tails and Paws Montréal served as a “spatially demarcated” (Pachirat, 2018, 338) safe-space for pitbull-type dogs before the introduction of BSL in Montréal as many other facilities refused to board or socialize pitbull-type dogs as per ‘liability’ concerns (PetSmart, 2021). Once BSL was in place, Tails and Paws Montréal took on a further dimension of becoming a “staging ground for resistance,” (Pachirat, 2018, 338) a cornerstone to sites of sanctuary and a key theme that connected each of my field sites. Montréal’s BSL required that the individual dog must comply with conditions when outside the premises of the residential address

associated with the special permit license. According to the ‘By-law Concerning Animal Control,’ it meant that the “animal must be muzzled at all times” (16-060). This aspect of the law contrasts what is believed to be a safe amount of time for a dog to wear a muzzle—twenty or sixty minutes respectively for occlusion or basket muzzle—according to animal behaviourists (personal communication with Tabatha Joy, dog behaviorist May 5th, 2018). At Tails and Paws Montréal, we actively resisted the oppressive mandate by caring for pitbull-type dogs *sans* muzzle for their entire stay at the kennel whether that be when they ate, played, or slept.

In addition to these small acts of resistance each day, my rapport at Tails and Paws Montréal allowed me to be in conversation with and to participate in actions that have been described in Darren Chang’s writing as acts of infiltration. Chang (2017, 34) asserts that “permissibility for guardians and their animals to take on non-consensual risks became less relevant” when animals themselves are considered “asylum seekers/combatants/fugitives”. Thinking about my fieldwork at Tails and Paws Montréal the story of Rocky comes to mind. Rocky was abandoned on a highway and rescued by a co-worker. He stayed with us during the summer months of 2016 forcing our attention away from the “disembodied terrain” of BSL and its regulations concerning ‘illegal’ pitbull-type dogs and instead onto the individual death-dealing circumstance Rocky was subject to (Pachirat, 2018, 349). A key piece of the BSL legislation mandated a legal pitbull-type dog be a dog who belongs to a guardian that both met the requirements and purchased the annual special permit license. For a short while, Rocky moved between his kennel, the backyard, and an indoor playroom. Circumventing the law, we found a forever home in Western Canada, and in late August, he was on route to Alberta. The choices we made to conceal his presence aligned with efforts of challenging notions of animal property or in this case the legal framing of animal life “according to their relationship with humans” (Braverman, 2013, 108) such as an owner emphasizing why my research advocates for an understanding of contested companionship, rather than commodities.

Tails and Paws Montréal allowed me to develop rapport within a community, while also carved out the space to bear witness and participate in efforts that actively dealt with matters of death—whether that be social or real-and-physical—thrusting me into mundane, daily acts of care for contested companions where the ethical imperative to both safeguard life and access to sociality drove decisions with both ‘illegal animals’ and ‘illegalized activities’. In the following section, I turn to how walking interviews enacted similar acts of care in the field.

Walking Interviews

The interview process is a key piece of conducting ethnographic research. The trouble with multispecies ethnography is the dependence on interviews and textual representation that can lead to “blockages” limiting how researchers engage with multispecies participants (Dowling, Llyod, and Suchet-Pearson, 2016, 6). As multispecies ethnographers, we are constantly confronted with the limitations of the available methods that restrict us from achieving representation or participation of nonhuman animals. A particular methodological meshing is identified by Alice Hovorka (2018, 455) as “bridging social and natural sciences” in an attempt to expand methodological approaches. The hybridization of social and natural sciences allows researchers to investigate animals’ lives with rigorous detail exploring their thoughts, intentions, and behaviours, as well as emplacing their lives in broader political and ecological contexts. By expanding multispecies ethnographers’ toolkits with possibilities of witnessing nonhuman animals’ interactions with their environments, we decenter the human perspective and afford space for the animals to assert themselves (Dowling, Llyod, and Suchet-Pearson, 2016; Gillespie, 2017).

I was keen on finding ways for the dog participants to produce knowledge alongside human participants, thus explored multispecies walking interviews. Walking interviews can “generate richer data, because interviewees are prompted by meanings and connections to the surrounding environment”

(Evans and Jones, 2011, 849). I was very interested in employing this mode of an interview as it had the potential to sharpen many of the human responses while centering the experiences of nonhuman participants (Dowling, Llyod, and Suchet-Pearson, 2016, 7). First, I would join them in their borough for one of their daily routine walks—referred to as a “go-along” approach in the literature—which was the least disruptive interview one could do with humans and their dog companions (Evans and Jones, 2011, 850). It also had the potential of being pleasurable. Think about going for a walk from a human’s and a dog’s perspective. Humans typically have six million sensory receptor sites in the nasal cavity, compared to dogs, who have an average of two to three hundred million sensory sites (Horowitz, 2016). Horowitz (2009, 71) writes, “dogs have more genes committed to coding olfactory cells, more cells, and more *kinds* of cells, able to detect more kinds of smells”. Smellscapes and specifically smell-walks matter greatly to dogs’ experience of their worlds as well as the enjoyment of an interview (Porteous, 1985).

Secondly, I was interested in ‘research-in-motion’. Walking is considered an integral aspect of the dog-guardian relationship, measurement of welfare, and a facilitative force that can increase social contact and strengthen community (Bulsara et al., 2007). However, as Thomas Fletcher and Louise Platt (2018, 13) articulate, contrary to a “mundane activity” walking is experienced differently depending on one’s social location and dog companion. Walking a pitbull-type dog most often is rife with tension, a walk that often “discourage[s]” sociality (222). By employing walking interviews, I was able to explore the potential of this methodology to produce knowledge with both humans and dog participants.

The Montréal by-law required pitbull-type dogs at all times when away from their residential address to be muzzled and on a leash no longer than 1.25m (16-060). This component of the interview allowed the dogs themselves to communicate to us about their level of comfort in public while wearing a muzzle, as well as more general behaviour. Eva Meijer (2019) describes the lead as a material intervention in learning about her dog Olli as well as Olli learning about her. In my interviews, the muzzle served the same dialogical tool as the lead.

The muzzle served as a transformational device for how pitbull-type dogs experienced their world governed by BSL. Within the literature on the impacts of dogs wearing muzzles it has been argued that the muzzle has little impact on the level of cortisol released in the muzzle wearing dog’s saliva (Cronin et al., 2003). The same study acknowledged behavioural changes, such as reduced barking and submissive stances, but did not consider that indicative of being uncomfortable. Cronin and colleague's (2003) study took a reductionist stance on dogs’ embodiment and failed to consider the complexity of muzzle-wearing on individual dogs; something I wanted to understand greater. In my research, I observed that muzzling dogs had a significant impact on how they accessed and embodied space. All of the dogs included in my research were properly muzzle-trained. Regardless, each one showed disdain towards wearing the muzzle that went beyond pawing their face in an attempt to remove the muzzle. I think of Rylie growing more nervous and at times causing injury to herself and others as she tried to kiss through her muzzle. I think of Kyto who would run for twenty minutes consecutively, but with the muzzle could barely manage five minutes. I think about how I noticed changes in Clementine’s behaviour as she refused to urinate or defecate outside; spending our entire walks pulling at the muzzle to the extent she would open her own skin regardless of how much positive reinforcement and training sessions we did together. Thus, the muzzle operated as an instrument of reduced welfare that was expressed in the walking interviews.

Using walking interviews to strive towards a lively multispecies ethnography takes seriously the communication relayed from the dogs beyond just having them present for conversations. It allows us to take note of their mannerisms and to get to know them as individuals. It also demands the researcher takes seriously the different ways of being in the world (Meijer, 2019). It means being attuned to how different species embody space.

These modest examples of attempting to have dogs as participants in an interview process is an effort to seriously consider nonhuman animals as knowledge-producers, centering their teachings that “are too often marginalized” (Corman and Vandrovcová, 2014, 140). Thus, stories were further validated during our shared time, creating a cathartic experience for interviewees who reflected on an ‘empowering experience’ as the interview bore witness to the spatial injustices of BSL. Not only were participants able to animate the lived experiences of their neighborhoods but together—human, dog, and researcher—we were able to navigate hostile public spaces together taking stock of the spatial, relational, and embodied injustices of BSL.

Auto-Ethnography: Relations with Clementine and Eleanor

Not only was my work, and research engulfed in the politics of BSL but so was my most intimate lived experience as I was a guardian to two pitbull-type dogs. Thus, I employed auto-ethnography as a primary method in my project. Auto-ethnography is defined as “a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts (Spry, 2001, 710). The auto-ethnographic method can serve as an erasure of relations presenting an individual void of her relations. Cynthia Huff (2014, 131), critical of the single-narrative of auto-ethnography from a multispecies perspective, reminds us that writing about tales of dogs and their humans can be a doubly disruptive move, centering dog subjectivity and pronouncing relationality. Auto-ethnography allowed me to situate my lived experiences with Clementine and Eleanor as relevant insight into the broader questions pursued in my project. As Huff (2014) writes in her article about canine memoirs, dog writing is an act of weaving dog and human tales alongside one another that serves to disrupt autobiography by bringing attention to the relations that make up individuals. By weaving my personal experiences of BSL, I too am writing about Clementine and Eleanor, as we shared stories of being in contentious relations with one another.

Gillespie (2017) argues that her transformative relationship with Saoirse, her rescued beagle, granted her insights and deep moments of knowledge-making. During my research process, I was working with, caring for, and living with pitbull-type dogs that, at any point in time, could be subject to “legalized violence” at the discretion of a by-law officer (Dayan, 2011, 227). It was this positionality that I nurtured in my research practices and that led me to integrate my shared life with Clementine and Eleanor into my research. As stated in Gillespie’s (2017, 167) writing about her life with Saoirse, “our shared life together has transformed the way she moves through and experiences the world around her. And it has transformed me, too”.

The transformation Gillespie speaks to has been articulated in pitbull-type dog literature in terms of class, gender, and race (Hallsworth, 2011; Weaver, 2013; Kim, 2013). There has been an emphasis on discussing gendered and racialized guardianship as seen in the narratives of “whiteness to the rescue” in the case of Michael Vick and the Vicktory Dogs (Weaver, 2013, 697; Kim, 2013). It has been asserted that placing a pitbull-type dog beside a white person undergoes a similar transformation into a “canine citizen” (Weaver, 2013, 647). Weaver (2013) himself is a white trans man who rescued a pitbull-type dog named Hayley. He has commented that when he is walking with Hayley, she appears “less threatening,” and “less dangerous” by her association with his whiteness (Weaver, 2013, 689). Interestingly enough, Weaver writes explicitly about the protection that comes with companionship to pitbull-type dogs. Weaver (2015, 349) admits that during his gender-affirming transition he realized “people would not mess with [him] when she was there”. Weaver’s contradictory statements of Hayley being ‘less threatening’ by his side yet when they are walking, he feels ‘protected’ is representative of how pitbull-type dogs are rendered a “symbolic foil” in human-centered stories that fail to understand them as subjects with their own “legibly biographical and political lives” (Govindrajana, 2018, 6,19).

Multispecies ethnography at its core considers the hierarchies, power dynamics, and different experiences of vulnerability between multispecies relations, however, as Govindrajana (2018) correctly

points out at times the political subjectivity of the nonhuman animal is understated. I attempted to center individual pitbull-type dogs to emphasize they were individually and collectively “victims of the speciesist law” (Lie, 2017, 297). My social location of being a white, cis-gendered, and educated woman was not enough to safeguard Clementine and Eleanor from the regulations and stigmatization associated with BSL. I think of Clementine who was labeled as a pitbull-type dog in Ontario, a province that has had BSL since 2005 (DOLA). Her association with an illegal type of dog combined with her extensive medical conditions, and elderly status marked her as an unlikely candidate for adoption. With a friend’s connection, I was able to rescue her in the spring of 2016. Crossing the provincial border between Ontario and Québec felt hopeful, however, I was only able to keep her safe for a short time before BSL would haunt her again and demand a muzzle be placed on her face every time she stepped outside of our shared home.

Or Eleanor. I adopted her in May 2017, approximately sixty days after the cities special license permit deadline, March 31st. What this meant was she was illegal, prohibited and subject to being killed⁶ in a municipal shelter or sold to an animal testing facility as outlined in the by-law (16-060). This possibility translated into early morning or late-evening walks where we would be less likely to encounter a by-law officer. We also performed the regulations of BSL by affixing Clementine’s collar with the legal tags on Eleanor’s neck and muzzle around her snout. Every day came with a possibility that we would be stopped on our walk, questioned, and I would have had 72-hours to surrender Eleanor to the municipal shelter.

One story I was not able to fully disclose during my fieldwork due to the legal ambiguity surrounding how I found her relates to how Eleanor entered my life. Expanding on the truncated story as presented in my thesis, a relationship I nourished between participants Fred and his two dogs Samson and Marilyn becomes more nuanced. Below I will include an entry from my field journal dated April 3rd, 2017.

It was early 6 am when I went to pick up Samson to take him to the Montréal free spay and neuter clinic. Confirming the plan, the night before with Fred, we failed to account for how to let them know I had arrived since the dilapidated squatters building did not have a functioning doorbell and strangely the doors remained locked. They were on the fourth floor, but I saw the balcony door was opened. So, I screamed their name, increasing each time with a sense of panic as I yelled either “Samson” or “Marilyn” thinking one of them might bark waking up their sleeping human. Ten minutes pass and I see a groggy Fred step onto the balcony to ‘shh’ me. He throws down a set of keys and I head up to the fourth floor to leash Samson to start our day. Thinking all the excitement for the morning was over, Fred intercepts me on the stairs and points to the door across from him covered in tape that read, ‘Do Not Enter: Alarm System in Place’. Curious, Fred opened the door earlier that morning and found an abandoned American Staffordshire Terrier named Geisha according to the purple-bone-shaped tag around her neck. Days of excrement permeated the single-roomed apartment, discarded drug paraphilia everywhere, and Indiana Jones DVD movie credit repeated on the screen to

⁶ I use the word ‘kill’ in place of ‘euthanasia’ to beget a different perspective. Taking note from legal scholar Leslie Bisgould (2015) in regards to the language we use when discussing harm to animals, we should remember the problem use of the term euthanize is “applied when a life is ended in the individual’s own interest, to bring and to end [their] suffering, and not for somebody else’s financial or other purposes” (11). Explicitly distinguishing the language of euthanasia and killing in relation to what is happening to pitbull-type dogs thus calls upon us differently.

fill the barren apartment with some form of life and perhaps entertainment for Geisha. As I take it all in, Geisha pushes herself closer to the wall as if she could escape our gaze.

Fred and I mutually cared for Geisha (now Eleanor) for a month awaiting the original guardians to return. Fred, who had lived in precarious living situations for over a decade, stood beside his compassion and commitment towards dogs, especially pitbull-type dogs as he recounted one day to me, “if a pit bull [needed his] help, [he would] be there”. It was nearing the end of the month when Fred suspected the original caretaker would not return and asked me if I would adopt Geisha. It was at this moment I was drawn into an uncomfortable place as both a researcher, friend, and animal advocate. However, as the days passed, it was either report her to the city, resulting in her death, or being sold to a research laboratory, or the second option of bringing her home with me (16-060). Knowing what was at stake, Eleanor left one night with me to only enter another contested living arrangement because she was not registered according to the city’s BSL guidelines that made it illegal to register “new” pitbull-type dogs after March 31st, 2017 (Olivier, 2017). But she would have a chance with me.

It is common for multispecies ethnographic researchers to share moments of possible intervention in the wellbeing of nonhuman animal participants. However, oftentimes access to a field site or the size of the individual animal creates insurmountable challenges. María Elena García (2020) shares her experience in Peru bearing witness to a female guinea pig who was thrown on the dirt floor in a breeding farm. She writes about the shame she felt during this experience, “the shame of *taking* his side; or worrying about *my* research, about what would happen if I criticized his actions?” as access to the farm required García to be “Walter’s friend” not the guinea pigs (2020, 42). I wonder in my own experience if I did not open my home to Eleanor, would I have diminished my friendship and research relationship with Fred, Samson, and Marilyn? And of course, what would have happened to her? Beyond questions of if it was the right thing to do, I turn to Eleanor who sleeps in the sunniest spot in my home, remembering that if it was anyone else who found her, her life could have been extinguished by speciesist violence (Lie, 2017). Gillespie (2016, 127) writes, “as scholars, we have the responsibility to respond” to the injustices we see that go beyond our fieldwork. Part of that responsibility is embarking on multispecies projects that open up spatial- and temporal- moments to witness nonhuman animals allowing us to “resist with them, rather than for them” (Gillespie, 2016, 137). Positioning ourselves as ‘resisting with’ encourages us to make when-appropriate, life-saving interventions as I did that day.

Interventions in the Field

What does intervention look like in the field? How can I challenge speciesist violence in my research practices? What role do relationships have in research? Knotted Relations: Fred, Samson, and Marilyn

As discussed in the previous sections, responsibility and care-work guided my research practices. Responsible research, according to Karen Potts and Lesli Brown (2015), means that as researchers, we make a commitment to agitating against injustice. Aligning myself with the words of Potts and Brown, I scanned the animal studies literature for examples of tangible acts of reciprocity between researcher and participants to guide myself in the research process. In particular, I wanted to read about instances of reciprocity or as described in a key research paper that guided my thinking, intervention (Sanders, 1998). By emphasizing those practices in my research, when I think about the relationship formed between Fred, Samson, and Marilyn, and myself I feel that I used my social location to advocate for them in a way that allowed me to be their “all[y] rather than their savior[.]” (Corman and Vandrovová, 2014, 137). I will explain what I mean by this in the following section, however, first I will articulate what intervention looked like in my project.

The paper of interest was written by Clinton Sanders (1998) about conducting multispecies ethnography in a veterinarian office. Sanders’ stationed himself in the office observing the interactions between animal-guardian-veterinarian; many of the interactions he witnessed were fraught. At first,

Sanders (1998, 187) sat and observed, or in his own words, “turned pain into data” subscribing to “emotional management” in the field. Over the course of his research, he found refuge in feminist practices that seriously take the role of emotion and empathy in producing and circulating knowledge. It is this empathic connection that proves to be unimaginably insightful and in turn, is a step that has the potential to shift the researcher-researched dynamic to one of reciprocity rather than extraction. Sanders describes empathy—a skill that enables us to take on different perspectives—as a cornerstone to his ethnographic research that allowed him to embrace the possibility of intervention (Gruen, 2015). Admittedly, he reflects it may have changed the dynamic at times, but when he felt that it would make improvements for the well-being of the animal, he intervened.

Sanders’ discussion on intervention in the field became quite significant for me, as I found myself in an entangled relationship with friends who became participants, Fred and his two pitbull-type dogs Samson and Marilyn. I met them in the winter months of 2016, when all three were living on the street, occasionally finding refuge in abandoned apartment buildings. When I heard about the implementation of BSL, having developed a kindred relationship with the three, I contacted them immediately and asked what I could do. Being well-aware of the unequal power, access to resources, and lived experiences I took seriously Fred’s request to assist and advocate against the unjust ways BSL was impacting their lives.

Over the next few months, Fred focused on surviving on the streets while maintaining a relationship characterized as friendly as possible with the police and animal by-law officers to prevent them from questioning if he had secured the special license permit to maintain companionship with Samson and Marilyn. Confronted with the fact that he could not keep his dogs safe for long, Fred invited me to help him plan their exit to Vancouver, a city without BSL and with a more moderate climate for folks that live on the streets. Our course of action was to sterilize Samson and Marilyn at a free clinic hosted by the Montréal SPCA along with organizing a GoFundMe campaign for their travel expenses. The choice to have Samson and Marilyn sterilized did not arise out of personal preference but was a condition from the NGO that would cover the cost of their flight tickets and crates. Samson’s surgery and post-care went smoothly. However, Marilyn’s surgery became a series of emergencies that may have cost her life. Upon picking her up after walking a few blocks, we successfully managed to hail down a taxi; this task alone is a difficult thing to do with a pitbull-type dog. Once in the back of the cab, I inspected the area on her body where I expected to find her stitches. Much to my alarm, in place of the sutures, I discovered the outermost and middle layer of skin had torn away, revealing the stitches just at the point of the subcutis layer. I calmly asked the driver to turn around back to the clinic as I ‘forgot something’. Back at the clinic with Marilyn who was now bleeding from her incision, I questioned the technician how this could happen. She told me little more than the fact that they did not have a spare Elizabethan cone to put on Marilyn therefore, post-surgery as she waited in the crate, she may have opened up the stitches. To make matters worse, the clinic would not be able to schedule Marilyn in until the next morning, leaving me the option to either board her there overnight, knowing that in her state it would almost certainly result in a life-threatening infection, or take her to the closest emergency veterinary hospital.

In the back of my mind when talking to the technician, I was reminded of Fred’s resistance to oblige to the procedure itself and his already-fraught relationship with animal care institutions that saw people like him—homeless—as “irresponsible” and incapable of providing proper care for companion animals (Gillespie and Lawson, 2017, 783). Fred had previously shared with me many instances of animal care workers’ attempts to dissuade him from keeping companion animals⁷. When I updated Fred

⁷ Fred had been living precariously for almost a decade at the time and always had a pitbull-type dog companion. He said he felt deep affinity with them, even when they further complicated his ability to access stable housing.

on Marilyn's condition, he immediately called it a "botched sterilization," done to prevent him from reuniting with Marilyn. All I could do was ask that he trust me a second time to find appropriate medical care for her. Marilyn underwent her second surgery of the day after I rushed her to the other side of the city to undergo an emergency corrective operation. Fred and I mutually agreed that it would be best to keep Marilyn in a kennel at my work, Tails, and Paws Montréal, ensuring a sterile environment during the projected two weeks of her healing process. Despite the fact that Marilyn was in a sterile environment, she developed a hernia under the suture. As a result, Marilyn was once again admitted to the veterinary clinic for her third, and fortunately, final surgery in less than two weeks. After spending over five weeks apart, Marilyn regained her health and was happily reunited with Fred and Samson in mid-June.

About a week after Fred Samson and Marilyn were re-united, Fred received a twelve-hundred dollar fine by the city for not possessing the special permit required for keeping his dogs. It was not that Fred did not want to follow the by-law, but he was not eligible in the first place. The special license permit required the individual to have a permanent address and a clean criminal record (16-060). It was these two requirements that Fred could not meet. The fine was accompanied by a threat that he had two weeks to be off the street, or else Samson and Marilyn would be confiscated and, in the language of the by-law destroyed; a similar fate that Eleanor had faced. As a result, Fred, Samson, and Marilyn left for Vancouver in early July 2017.

I included their story and our friendship to serve as an example of what multispecies ethnographic research can look like when foregrounding ethics and when appropriate, intervention in our fieldwork. Recalling Sanders's point of how it is important to not turn 'pain into data' I made the decision in my research practices to take seriously the implications of my participants' lives and relations. Through conversations with Fred, we articulated the best course of action for himself and his dogs just as we did for Eleanor who I illegally cared for during the duration of the ban. Just like Rocky, Marilyn mutually benefited from the spatial safety nurtured at Tails and Paws Montréal. I bemoan what could have happened to these relationships and individuals if I did not foreground ethics and care in my research process. Through sharing these research vignettes in my article, I hope to offer examples of when ethical considerations in the field spillover from our responsibilities as outlined in ethics reviews boards that allow us to not only be in reciprocal relationships with our participants but to prefigure different ways of conducting research that tend to real challenges of life and death enabling the possibilities of intervention in the field.

Conclusion

As multispecies researchers committed to justice, we become eager and relentlessly willing to imagine "political transformation" between how humans relate to nonhuman animals in our research praxis (Gillespie, 2019, 1). Without institutional ethics governance, we decide for ourselves what an ethical care practice is in the field, challenging us to enliven the theoretical backbone of our projects. In this article, I share what care, ethics, solidarity, and intervention meant to me in the span of two years (2016-2018) of conducting multispecies ethnography in hostile geographies. One of the guiding ethical imperatives in my research practices was to represent pitbull-type dogs as unique individuals and not just "as part of a collective" (Govindrajan, 2018, 21). By centering empathy as a mode of research I admit like other researchers that we can never understand what it is like to be an animal, but we can explore ways that foster glimpses of their embodied lives such as by employing walking interviews. By honing our caring perception, we can use observation, witnessing, bodily encounters, and interviews with human caretakers and dogs to co-produce knowledge together (Gillespie, 2017). June 8th, 2016 ended the lives of both Vadnais and Lucifer in a tragic story of neglect and violence; but it also unraveled many other relations between humans and pitbull-type dogs. Researching contested companionship under the

governance of BSL⁸ enabled numerous other stories to be told, such as Rocky, Clementine, Eleanor, Marilyn, and Samson whose lives became wrapped up in the affective value of fear assigned to their bodies (Ahmed, 2015). This project allowed me to enact what Gillespie (2019) refers to as a politicized ethnography, an approach to research that embraces and seeks to improve the conditions between humans and nonhuman animals. The stories shared in this article represent one of my greatest efforts to approach research participants, both human and nonhuman, with the intention that “we may be in relationship...for life,” as many of the relationships formed during this research continue to be nourished today (Potts and Brown, 2015, 21). A politicized multispecies ethnographical practice then requires the researcher to actively agitate against unjust human-animal relations in caring, meaningful ways that spillover from the ethical review board's guidelines into the transformative relationships fostered in our research and beyond.

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⁸ It is worth mentioning that BSL was overturned in Montréal under the election of Valerie Plante who made repealing BSL a part of her platform. However, this success was felt briefly as the province of Québec tabled Bill 128 three-months later. After days of consultation in June 2018, the province withdrew the legislation due to mounting evidence of the ineffectiveness of BSL (Montgomery, 2018).

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