

Mythologies and Commodifications of Dominion in *The Dog Whisperer with Cesar Millan*

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The dog calls forth, on the one hand, the best that a human person is capable of – self-sacrificing devotion to a weaker and dependent being, and, on the other hand, the temptation to exercise power in a wilful and arbitrary, even perverse manner. Both traits can exist in the same person. (Tuan, 1984: 102)

In 2004, *The Dog Whisperer with Cesar Millan* premiered on the National Geographic Channel. Each half hour episode follows its star, Millan, as he uses his “innate gift” to solve or fix dogs’ behavioral issues in twelve-minute-made-for-television segments. Millan, a first generation Mexican immigrant, performs his expertise at establishing dominance over the troubled canines, and the dogs, both rescue mongrels and designer purebreds, perform their neuroses and subsequent submission to him, all to the amazement of the mostly white and often middle-to upper-class owners. Meanwhile, in the comfort of their own living rooms, a mass human audience enjoys the entertainment.

In *The Dog Whisperer*, the relationship between humans and dogs, and culture and nature, is mythologized into a narrowly conceptualized dominance paradigm through which the non-human animals are presented as commodities that conform to the human animal’s desires. Not only shall a dog not bite, but s/he should also get into a swimming pool, sit quietly while a mass of kindergarteners sing at him or her, and instantaneously overcome neurotic behaviors, even those originally fostered by humans. The humans in the show

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are trained by Millan to be “pack leaders:” to substitute themselves for the dominant male in the social hierarchy of “wild,” or “natural,” canine order. Although these methodologies may be erroneous, either wholly or partially false, they are ideological beliefs that are, as Terry Eagleton (1991) writes, *real enough*; that is, there is an effective benefit received from them, both relationally (between human and non-human animals) and economically (for Millan and the National Geographic Corporation). The clients buy Millan’s time and want results; the program’s producer wants good television and happy endings sell; Millan wants to earn an income. In this arrangement of benefits, however, the dogs are largely left out.

How we represent dogs, and receive those representations, affects and informs not only our relationship to the greater animal world, of which humans are only one facet, but also to the social forces of production that underpin our subjectivities and our daily lived relationships with commercial industries. *The Dog Whisperer* represents all dogs, regardless of developmental or genetic specificity, as products that submit to and adorn a consumer-based lifestyle. Contingently, Millan, as the dog expert, accesses and performs a hybrid identity as a product himself. While he embodies, on the one hand, the fulfillment of self-invention promised by the “American Dream,” Millan also participates, both by coercion and volition, in a legitimation of United States imperialism. Millan is at once constructed both as an American who has “made it” and as a colonized subject, an immigrant struggling to assimilate. *The Dog Whisperer* presents a chain of excluded and displaced socio-economic, inter and intra-species identity signs unmoored from material

histories. I am interested in exploring, one, why this might be so and, two, what an alternative might look like.

Inspired by Katherine Perlo's declaration that "An animal-conscious historical materialism would include the productive, reproductive and appropriative needs and activities of all beings throughout evolutions" (307), this paper is prioritized towards the non-human animals and their histories. Although necessarily, implicated as dogs are in human lives, both species will be examined as bearing on one another. My hope is that this project will fuel further interest in reconceptualizing the present and the past from a perspective of plurality and difference, where the human is just one being in a constellation of historical, social and economic struggles, in order to destabilize narratives of dominion predicated on class and naturalized practices of anthropocentrism and imperialism.

For the purposes of this study, I will focus on the television program and its narratives and methods of representation instead of on Millan's books, podcasts or blogs. I will also limit myself to season one of *The Dog Whisperer*. As the program continued to air on the National Geographic Channel, controversy around Millan and his methods swelled; additionally, human celebrities as well as organizations such as the Los Angeles Police Department began to guest star.

A larger study could be pursued around the polemical arguments his program incites as well as the counter media campaigns engineered to stem, control and deflate the criticism.

By following that line of inquiry, however, and tracing the evolution of the program's dramaturgy and marketing, the dogs themselves, I contend, would be overshadowed by human celebrity.²

Pet and Owner or Companion Species

“As the United States became a modern industrial and commercial society,” writes Katherine C. Grier in *Pets in America: A History*, “pet animals... (became) commodities, reared specifically for the purposes of sale, to be purchased as inventory by store owners and as goods by customers” (2006: 231). Grier traces the genesis of the pet store as a small business into what we now know as a pet industry. As a productive force, the pet industry encompasses everything from mongrel animals, expensive rare breeds, and designer canines to dog shows and agility competitions; vegetarian biscuits, pre-packaged raw food diets, massage, and glittery dresses; overcrowded shelters, cyber communities, and dog birthday parties. In short, the pet industry disseminates a host of manufactured goods that rely on myths about what a dog is or should be.³ The co-evolutionary history of dogs and humans, as well as the specificity of dogs as a distinct but contingent species, is displaced by a mythology that sustains itself by evacuating the dog-human relationship of behavioral and ecological difference. The consequences for the non-human animal in the equation are detrimental: the dogs are left vulnerable to becoming victims of ignorance, abuse, and waste.

² See the NGS website for synopses of episodes: http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/channel/dogwhisperer/episodes_season1.html. See also Milio, Jim and Melissa Jo Peltier. *Dog Whisperer with Cesar Millan: The Ultimate Episode Guide*. The American Human Society issued a letter to NGS stating that “The training tactics featured on Cesar Millan's *Dog Whisperer* program are inhumane, outdated and improper. . .” For the full document, see <http://www.americanhumane.org>.

³ Roland Barthes, in “Myth Today,” identifies myth as a connotative semiological system predicated on robbing a denotative semiological system of its material history in order to enforce, and naturalize, a bourgeoisie ideology (1972). It is from this discourse that I am drawing.

Two familiar relationship formations between humans and dogs that operate as mythologies are anthropocentrism (in which the dog is regarded as a furry human) and idealization (wherein any dog is expected to be a perfectly behaved super-companion). Heidi J. Nast characterizes the anthropocentric relationship as unqualifiedly positive; the pet replaces the child as an “ideal love object.” She points out that the dog is expendable where the human child is not:

Dogs can be dressed up as your baby forever. If a pet-animal becomes onerous (scratching furniture, pooping on a carpet, or spraying the house when you are gone too long), you can have them de-clawed, euthanized, or given away. If a pet becomes a financial or mobility burden (you change towns or jobs), it can be given up for adoption or taken to the SPCA. And if it dies, you can have it cloned. All advantages that human children do not share (2008: 302).

The point of view espoused by Nast, that expendability is exactly what makes pet-dogs marketable, is a disturbing underside to, and a propelling force of, the consumer driven pet industry.

Furthermore, when a dog is shifted socially into a “baby” or a “kid,” humans’ ability to understand the specific needs of the dog is inhibited and elided. If the dog is not discarded at whim, he may be made into a reflection of the owner’s self rather than permitted the autonomy or behavioral boundaries appropriate to a separate species. While Millan works to expose this myth, placing love as a third priority behind exercise and discipline in the dog-human relationship, he still permits it to exist in the television program and supports its continuation. In multiple episodes of season one, he linguistically extends the parental instincts and habits of dog owners towards their human

children to their pets.⁴ I am not trying to declare that we can know what the dogs want; indeed some may enjoy being dressed up, respond to baby-talk, or sleep well in a pseudo-bassinet. I *am* arguing that anthropocentrism sets up unrealistic expectations of what kinds of treatment a given dog may be able to endure. If a dog does not respond well to being cradled on his back like a human baby, for instance, and nips or bites the human, the dog faces dismissal, punishment or disposal.

Just as dangerous for dogs is the myth of an *ideal*: a loyal sidekick, well-adjusted, house-trained, tons of fun and ready to give love unconditionally. The expectations of the dog owner can be unreasonable, informed by cultural icons such as Lassie and Rin Tin Tin or predicated on the cuteness of a “helpless” puppy. “Being a pet,” that is, simply learning to co-habitate with a human family, let alone save Timmy from the well or endure dress-up time, is already a “demanding job for a dog, requiring self-control and canine emotional and cognitive skills matching those of a good working dog” (Haraway, 2003: 38). If the dog cannot live up to her owners’ ideals, she can, once again, fairly easily be discarded.⁵ Dogs are abandoned or given to a shelter for just about any reason: moving to a new house, going on vacation, kids outgrowing him, she got too big, she’s too much work and so on. In the pet industry, there is too much of *one* product, at least: the dogs themselves. The dogs become animate surplus value with nowhere to go.

To combat this waste and disregard, Donna Haraway, in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), argues for a reevaluation of the dog-human relationship by attending to

⁴ Episodes 9 (“Maya”), 3 (“Ruby”), and 4 (“Coach”).

⁵ When referring to dogs in this paper, I will alternate between masculine and feminine pronouns.

the history of the co-evolution of both species and the genetic predispositional needs of individuals, both human and non-human. This requires humans to shift the paradigm of “pet and owner” towards an understanding of mutual biological and ecological evolution and existence across species. In Haraway’s vision, dogs and humans are accountable to each other; one is not, in the relationship, more valuable than the other but neither are both beings the same. Furthermore, the relationship between the human and dog is not an instantaneous bond, but a process of “significant otherness” involving change and adaptation predicated on commitment, patience and education. Yi-Fu Tuan points out that the dog-human relationship is not, cannot be, one of equality (1984). The dog is dependent on the human and the human must set boundaries for their lives together. The human, however, rather than being simply an owner enjoying their possession, could be more attentive to how their dogs come to be their possession. Practices of training, breeding and mating are, Tuan writes, “repressed” in the dog-owner relationship (1984: 108). Haraway proposes they be foregrounded. With these two theorists in mind, I suggest that humans have options in how they choose to perform as the animal with the most power.

The specific and ethical investigation, along with its attendant interspecies accountability, that Haraway argues for could expose the material underpinnings of the ideological apparatus (capitalism, individualism, primacy of the human, disposability of the other, and so on) that produces and supports nonhuman and human abuse and waste. This exposure, in turn, might offer an opportunity to critique and change the naturalized

systems that govern our living relationships amongst and between species.⁶ *The Dog Whisperer*, airing on a legitimate science channel, widely popular and with a large audience, could be an effective platform for just such debate. The possibility, however, is evaporated by the program's efforts to sell quick fixes and "good dogs." The dogs are not historicized in terms of their own lived existence or their relationship with their humans. The dogs are transformed into essentialized, simplified types: "the bad dog," "the goofy dog," "the child dog," "the ideal dog" and so on.

The humans, in fact, are largely excused from history by the dominance paradigm, the Pack Leader mentality espoused by Millan, in which the dog is required to submit to the human's wishes and the human, is automatically given a narrowly defined right of dominion. For example, in episode five, we meet Brooks, a Burmese Elkhound, who was purchased by his owners because he "looked like a *real* dog!" The couple traveled from southern California to Oregon to buy him as a Valentine's Day present to themselves. The woman simply *wanted* him, in true capitalist desire; she did not research, as far as we can tell from the television program, the breed and its needs nor the breeder. The dog became a fetishized product; the owner, and the viewers at home, are permitted to purchase a dog based on the drive of consumer desire. For Brooks, the consequences of being a product to satisfy humans had pathetic consequences.

When Brooks was a puppy, it was funny, his owners relate, to make him chase a laser pointer. Five years later, the dog has been so conditioned to play with lights, he cannot

⁶ Eagleton is not addressing cross-species ideology but his arguments hold for my investigation. He envisions a challenge to ideology in the form of "as many people as possible actively participating in a discussion of these matters in conditions as free as possible from domination" (1991: 30-31).

stop panting and searching for flashing shadows or reflections. The neurosis was engendered and cultivated by his owners; now they want him fixed. Millan forces the dog to abandon his game: when he chases a flash or a shadow, Millan jerks his choke collar to surprise him into stopping. The human, Millan tells the couple, must become dominant, must become the Pack Leader. The human owners are slightly implicated in the dog's history but not held seriously accountable for the ignorance that created their dog's problems in the first place. They do not need to be. The dominance paradigm permits a power relationship not only of owner over pet, but of human over animal, and culture over nature. However, as Erika Fudge argues, "nothing which is used to maintain power is innocent, however it is presented" (2002: 11). The Pack Leader mentality gives dog owners the permission, because of their constructed superiority, to do whatever they want to their dog: to forcibly "fix" a neurosis but also, because of the power relationship inherent in the paradigm, to create one.

Naturalizing Domestication and the Dominance Paradigm

Tuan points out that "Domestication means domination: the two words have the same root sense of mastery over another being – of bringing into one's house or domain" (1988: 99). Yet, it seems to me that we need to parse out the nuances of meaning between these words in order to cultivate a curiosity about our complicity in the exploitative measures of the pet industry and our responsibility to other species. This is not to propose that we can speak for dogs, for their wants or desires, although dog owners certainly have habits of doing so which can be productive in pet care.⁷ Rather, I suggest that we examine what

⁷ See Arluke and Sanders' chapter, "Speaking for Dogs," in *Regarding Animals* (1996).

we accept as “givens” in the enactment and representation of dog-human “relational moments.”

Relational moments, writes Haraway, the instances in which a dog and a human make contact, are the smallest units of analysis in terms of the human-dog companion species, its “inherited histories” and “necessary joint futures” (2003: 7). In *The Dog Whisperer* there is, for each dog, a web of relational moments with which she has to contend: she must interact with her owners, the camera crew, and, by extension, the viewers at home, all of which are arranged around her interaction with Cesar Millan.

Each episode is constructed as follows: the dog is filmed performing his problem behavior, a male human voice-over describes the situation briefly, the owners share their exasperation with the film crew, and Millan arrives. He meets the people and shares with them his basic philosophies: “a dog needs exercise, discipline and love: in that order,” and the human “has to be the Pack Leader.” These mantras are the answer to every dog’s problem, regardless of where the dog has come from or his or her current state of agitation. Although there are alternative theories about dog behavior and training, any discussion of these is omitted.⁸ Millan then meets the dog, the dog submits to him, and the owners celebrate, often voicing their amazement in referring to the “miracle” they have witnessed. The formula—problem dog meets Millan, dog submits, and owners are overjoyed—does not waver. Although the footage is clearly edited to construct the predictable story, each episode presents itself as natural and spontaneous.

⁸ The slogans are re-enforced in each episode of the television program and distributed through the internet and product sales. From Millan’s website, you can purchase shirts, for example, emblazoned with “Pack Leader.” Millan also tours. See <http://www.cesarmillaninc.com/>

Describing shark documentaries, Nigel Rothfels explains that “these films are highly constructed endeavours in which, among other things, camera angles and exposures are carefully worked out in advance; animals are enticed, coerced, or otherwise manipulated into becoming performers; and overall story lines are fashioned to meet specific, conventional narrative expectations” (2002: x). *The Dog Whisperer* employs the same techniques. We never see the film crew or the camera, but each segment is dramaturgically manipulated, in terms of its documentary style and melodramatic plots, to convey the *otherness* of the dog and the superiority of the human. The humans on *The Dog Whisperer* are filmed in stationary positions, looking straight on at the camera, talking directly to it and establishing a connection of sameness with the human audience at home. The dogs are filmed in styles similar to wildlife documentaries: we might see through their eyes in a distorted lens, but most often they are objects that react to, or even attack, the camera. There is one important difference, however, between Rothfels’ sharks and Millan’s dogs. Shark documentaries work on the viewer by tapping into *human* fear; *The Dog Whisperer*, in contrast, takes advantage of the *dog’s* fears.

The camera intentionally zooms in on and is placed in close physical proximity to dogs who are aggressive or fearful of strange objects, such as Nunu the Chihuahua, Coach the Boxer and Ruby the Vizsla (episodes 1,2,6).⁹ The dogs are provoked into snarling and bearing their teeth futilely; their fear is exploited for dramatic effect. Nonaggressive fears are taken advantage of for comedic effect. For example, in episode one, Kane the Great Dane is afraid of shiny floors. Through Kane’s eyes (supposedly), we see the floor: it

⁹ Additional provocations of reactivity also occur in episodes 2,4, 8.

wiggles and wobbles while “scary” music plays. The fear is made silly even though it stems from a real experience: the dog slipped and fell as a puppy and knocked himself out. With the Dominance/Pack Leader theory in mind, however, the fear of Kane is simply irrational and the human must show him so. The solution is to put a choke collar on him and force him to confront the floor by running and pulling him along behind. Technically, Kane could have been left alone; his home does not have shiny floors, and he walks fine on carpet, cement, tile, grass, stairs, sand and so on. But his owner wanted him to come to her pre-school classroom so the children could sing “Happy Birthday” to him. At the end of the episode, Kane, ears back, eyes rolling and tongue lolling as he pants heavily in distress, sits in a circle of shouting and clapping children while his smiling owner looks on.

Regardless of the method of training used and whether we agree with it or not, the representation of the dog is that of a clown or a goofball whose sole purpose is to entertain his human. Both aggressive and nonaggressive dogs “perform” as aliens, either wild beasts to be domesticated or inexplicable, irrational mysteries to be solved. In *The Dog Whisperer*, the goal is always a product (a dog that behaves according to its owners’ desires) and the method is rightful domination based on the human action of domestication.

Behaviorists have critiqued and questioned the application of dominance theory to dog behavior. Because it is based on a study of wolves in the wild, it does not take into account the genetic morphologies or behavioral adaptations that domestication

engenders.¹⁰ Dogs and wolves share genes and physiognomy, but their social arrangements are necessarily slightly, yet vitally, different. Evolutionary biologists continue to debate the development of the dog. Although one possible narrative is that “man took the (free) wolf and made the (servant) dog and so made civilization possible,” it is equally likely that canines adapted themselves to share the resources of early hominids (Haraway, 2003: 28). *The Dog Whisperer* does not permit multiple narratives of the dog-human relationship; it is mired in a bourgeois ideology of man’s dominion over nature, in which dogs are the lowest class.¹¹

Dog Training and Ahistorical Product Pets

How to best train a dog is hotly debated in the behaviorist world. In the last decade, positive reinforcement training, in which the dog is rewarded for behaving appropriately with a treat, affection or a toy, has become increasingly popular. Positive does not mean permissive; discipline is still prioritized but it is conditioned without physical punishment. Inappropriate behavior, including reactivity to other animals, fear, aggression or simple bad manners, are not rewarded or punished; they are *reshaped*. That is, the undesired behavior is counter-conditioned. For example, my dog is scared of snowmen. I lead her towards a snowman and with every step she takes closer to the snowman, or for every moment she does not spin out of control or bark, I reward her with a treat. This can take weeks and requires patience. I do not know what caused her fear and I cannot know the

¹⁰ On the relationship between dogs and wolves, McConnell writes: “Domestication itself, whether it resulted from natural or artificial selection (most probably both took place), includes a process of developmental inhibition in which adult individuals retain docile characteristics of the young. In one sense, dogs *are* wolves—their genetics are so similar that they freely interbreed. . . . And yet, dogs aren’t wolves at all. Those who work with wolves unanimously agree that one never, ever commands a wolf to do anything. No matter how skilled or experienced you are, you work with wolves on their terms or not at all” (*For the Love of a Dog*, 2006: 171-2).

¹¹ In “Marx and the Underdog,” Katherine Perlo argues that “animals, working or not, do constitute a class. Kept animals, like the human proletariat, were reduced to their status through dispossession, not only of autonomy within their own habitat but even of their genetic make-up” (2002: 306).

extent of it, therefore, I am to remain respectful of her thresholds for information and tolerance for fear, reading her body language moment by moment while also monitoring my own. The slightest tension on her leash may alarm her. Proponents of positive reinforcement training argue that its effects are lasting and predictable, no matter who is holding the leash. The dog and human in this situation are working reciprocally, as a team, and history is just as important as progress.¹²

In negative reinforcement training, an undesired behavior is punished with fear, pain or surprise. If my dog is afraid of snowmen, I punish her for her fearful behaviors by using a choke collar, a leash pull, an ear pinch or a collar grab, or by forcing her to face her fear and tolerate it until I am satisfied she has overcome the phobia. In this instance, we are situated in a dominance paradigm where I insist she acquiesce to me on my time schedule—or *else*. The catch is, of course, that she may associate the pain with other stimuli. With snowmen this may not matter, but she might be very excited by children and in her exuberance jump all over them. I could reshape her with treats, reinforcing calm behaviors or leading her away from her beloved kids if she cannot behave; or I could pull or pinch her when she starts to react to the approaching children. It is possible, in the latter case, that she will associate pain with children, and become fearful or aggressive towards them: “child approaches, I get hurt, I have to make child go away.”¹³

¹² For an evolutionary investigation of dogs’ cognitive abilities, see Coren (2004). For positive reinforcement learning theory, its scientific support and examples of its applications across species, see Pryor (1999).

¹³ For a detailed analysis of genetic and experiential fear development in dogs and counter conditioning it with positive re-enforcement, see McConnell (2005, 2006, 2003).

Millan subscribes to negative reinforcement, the most effective for the Pack Leader/Dominance paradigm, and uses it successfully. I do not doubt that Millan believes he has the animals' best interests in mind; he insists he is humane and he is affectionate and gentle towards them once they have learned to submit to him. Millan is also devoted to exercising the dogs in appropriate ways, yet, and this is key, only if the owner has the time to make the effort. On the television program, the dogs' possible best interests are circumscribed by their owners' desires, which are often more about the human than the dog. The nonhuman animals are lifted out of their histories, as if where they came from and what they have experienced has no bearing on the present moment in which they live. The human animals, consequently, are excused from taking responsibility for any part they may have had, directly or indirectly, in shaping the dog's present.

Ruby, for example, a rare and pricey Hungarian Vizsla, was purchased from a breeder at two years old (episode 3). She is fearful, possessive of toys and food, and aggressive. While Millan instructs her owners about being dominant leaders, she cowers at her female owner's feet; when the camera moves in for a closeup, she visibly shakes with anxiety. The owners, a white, clearly upper class family, are not only frustrated with Ruby, but disappointed. Their previous dog, of the same breed, had been gentle and affectionate, just as her breed "is supposed to be." Millan's solution is, again, to use negative reinforcement to force her to submit to objects she is afraid of, such as the camera, and to relinquish toys she usually growls over. Necessarily, the dog may be afraid of him as well, and he uses this to his advantage. Finally, the children of the family, because it is summer, want Ruby to go into the swimming pool. Millan pulls her into the

pool by her choke collar to the cheers of the family; then the children, with the choke collar on the dog, leap into the pool, dragging Ruby with them. Finally, after her swim, Millan holds Ruby down and cuts her toenails, yet another fear of hers that she has miraculously conquered all in the space of one day, thanks to Millan.

Millan's methods work, it appears, but again, the family's possible complicity in establishing, or nurturing, their dog's fears and lack of socialization is barely addressed. The symptom is treated but preventative education is not presented. Furthermore, Ruby has, in some ways, been tormented if not outright tortured. She has endured repeated exposure to all of her worst fears, amidst the strangers of the film crew and in the space of a few hours, in order to please her owners and the television audience at home. At the end of the episode, the children splash in the pool (Ruby still with her leash and choke collar on) and the grownups promise their commitment to being dominant pack leaders.

A "happy" ending; but what happens when Millan leaves? When someone else has the leash and he is not present? What new scars or trauma might Ruby now be saddled with? Not all animals can be fixed so quickly (presuming Ruby's apparent and expedient change is permanent), and not all humans can afford Millan's services. Furthermore, by leaving out any possibilities for viewing the dog-human relationship besides the dominance theory, *The Dog Whisperer* ideologically subscribes to an empirical narrative of human's dominion over nature. The non-human animal *always* serves and changes while the human animal remains the beneficiary.

As in the pet industry, the dogs in *The Dog Whisperer* are surplus. In consumer culture, domestication has displaced them from their use value as guarders or herders and situated them in the far more nebulous “job” of “companionship.” At the same time, they are private property and expected to serve their human owners on the human’s terms. The dominance paradigm of the human and nonhuman animal is, again drawing on Eagleton, real enough; so is the subordinate Mexican, the US border to be protected and the American Dream. *The Dog Whisperer* perpetuates all four.

Neo-Colonialism and the “American Dream”

A critique of Millan’s methods and philosophies cannot be divorced from an investigation of how Millan himself performs, both by choice and by capitalist coercion, for his clients as a colonized subject. Through the television series and its attendant commercial industry, we can see Millan constructed and sold as a human product. Yet, Millan also participates in this construction, enacting his own version of the American Dream.

Millan crossed the U.S./Mexico border illegally as a youth; he did not know any English. He was sheperded by a “*lobo*,” a Mexican guide experienced in border crossings. Into the United States, Millan brought his deep affinity for and knowledge of dogs. He learned about canine behavior from his grandfather, a fact he proudly acknowledges. In celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month in 2007, for example, Millan tells his readers that:

“My grandfather was one of many workers and ranch families in Mexico who earned a meager income working parcels of land rented from the richer families. On every farm in the area including his, there were working dogs... Through observing my grandfather's behavior with the pack on the farm, I learned much of what I apply in my work with dogs today (Millan, 2008)

Once in California, Millan “worked his way up” from dog groomer to dog trainer of the stars. He remains still clearly physically marked as a Mexican of indigenous heritage, with brown skin and accented English.

Neither the Millan industry nor Millan deny his background. The very presence of Millan as a national star and pop culture icon makes visible and valuable the unseen or disappeared histories of economically oppressed Mexican migrants, both those who are undocumented and those who successfully become American citizens. Millan's history, however, is necessarily also tailored to fit the desires of his clients and customers. *Lobo* literally means a “wolf.” The transformation of self that Millan's border crossing ultimately allowed him was aided, metaphorically, by a wild canid. On the National Geographic Channel, Millan carries with him a trace of the primitive, of the wild to be tamed.

In the opening credits of *The Dog Whisperer*, a montage depicts Millan running with his pack of canines, swimming, climbing and playing with them. He is almost a dog himself, albeit the one in charge; the opening sequence also shows him wrestling ferocious-looking dogs, teeth bared and bodies tense, into submission. We see him enjoying his dogs and taming them, by himself. These images hearken back to his familial history, to the lessons learned from his grandfather. They also portray a man who is able to spend

his time doing the thing he loves, who has been able to sell his unique skills, who might be a role model for others who look like him. At the same time, the introductory montage constructs Millan as closer to nature, as distinctly *other* than his American clients *because* of his relationship with the dogs. He is constructed as a mystical, primitive native born with a gift that makes him more nonhuman than human. With his human clients, Millan often imitates their dogs, panting and wiggling. The dominance paradigm Millan sells includes himself: he can acceptably be the alpha male of the dog pack because he is like a dog, and therefore, is himself subject to culture's dominion over nature, the developed and colonial United States' dominion over the backward and developing Mexico.

Albert Memmi identifies two ways in which the colonized can survive colonization: he can assimilate or he can revolt (1965). Assimilation is denied by the colonizer; the colonized will never be given complete access. Revolution requires a violent upheaval of the colonial structure. Millan proffers a third option: assimilate just enough in order to remain nonthreatening. In doing so, Millan partially both preserves and sacrifices his heritage, creating opportunities to both put forward and sublimate parts of his "Mexican-ness."

Millan, despite having a wife and two children who sporadically appear as his helpers, is shown to be happily more comfortable with dogs. His clients, therefore, do need not to worry about him jostling for a position more powerful than theirs; he contentedly performs for them according to their wishes. Additionally, he always comes from

elsewhere: that is, he arrives at his clients' homes in his truck. They need not worry about him crossing any more borders by moving into their neighbourhood. Millan is assimilated just enough into the power structure of bourgeois American culture to remain outside of it as a South of the Border servant. Because he does not threaten to revolt against the power structure, he is acceptable as a "good Mexican" who has learned to be civilized in and from America.

The tension between Millan the product and Millan the man, both of which are mediated through a consumer culture, creates an unstable identity in which the "real" Millan perpetually comes into focus and slips away. For his economic wellbeing, and for his survival, Millan negotiates, in his multiple performances, a bridge between two cultures by way of his relationship with dogs. Memmi writes, "a man straddling two cultures is rarely well seated" (1965: 124). Perhaps Millan, however, seems to have found a way to be both American and Mexican, an embodiment of layered histories dependant on his relationship with nonhuman animals. The dogs are placed in service of their owners' desires *and* Millan's identity formation.

Millan gains license to participate in the ultimate American Dream of remaking one's self: a person can come from nothing and, with hard work, rise to the heights of riches and fame. Millan also legitimates a colonialist cycle of oppression and dominance, performed by a brown body who mediates the exchange of dog bodies between white bodies. Both races exploit nature; Millan remains complicit in the capitalist system of the pet industry. The dogs, once again, are the extra bodies that permit the economic exchange of

monetary value *and* cultural hegemony. As Millan walks across the pavement to pull Ruby into the gorgeous swimming pool of his affluent clients, he strolls past meticulously cared for landscaping. What we do not see is who cleans the pool and who tends the flowers. In southern California, it may well be Millan's countrymen and women, possibly illegal, disenfranchised or impoverished. *Their* absence combines with each dog's missing history and moves from a local to a national scale, in which "bourgeois norms are experienced as the evident laws of a natural order" (Barthes, 1972: 140). Millan's presence may critique the culture of the colonizer, but his presence is also an image of how the colonizer wants to see him. Boundaries between species are used to support boundaries between race and class and vice versa.

Reimagining the Dog: Past, Present and Future

Environmental historian and philosopher Clare Palmer proposes we start to look at our ethical responsibility to animals through the paradigm of human benefit (2008). That is, if a person benefits or has benefited in any way from an industry involved in keeping animals—and conceivably everyone has benefited, either directly or indirectly, from animals by way of food, technology, medicine or clothing—then the person is obligated to care about how animals are treated. I propose we extend this responsibility to the way animals are represented, as a presence or an absence, in narratives of history, media and nation. In terms of domesticated dogs, this would mean reconfiguring the way we view human history as well as evolution; the human animal would have to be resituated in the entire constellation of animals that inhabit the world, not as the ruler of a kingdom, but as one more sentient being dependant on a host of other sentient beings for its livelihood. It

would also require an exposure of and debate over the material underpinnings of domestication and dominance myths. Structured to benefit the material and ideological conditions of the human (culture) over the dog (nature) in the dog-human equation, these myths also legitimate, as evidenced by *The Dog Whisperer*, colonial and economic oppression amongst nations, in which the capitalist system benefits most.

To truly revolutionize the canine-hominid relationship would require a considered evaluation of, and acquiescence to, individual as well as shared histories. Dog training debates must be moved out of futile and circular arguments about instinct and “humane-ness,” and interrogated instead for the cultural myths and material conditions they perpetuate. If a training methodology is based solely on dominance, on a slave and master dichotomy, it is simply not acceptable if we are, as human animals, to accept our biological history and change our environmental future. The dog-human relationship must move toward a complex of mutuality and reciprocity, of, as Haraway argues, “significant otherness.”

“Human,” writes Fudge, “is always a category of difference, not substance... ‘human’ relies on ‘animal’ for its meaning. By refusing humanism, and therefore, anthropocentrism, we place ourselves next to the animals, rather than as users of the animals and this opens up ways of imagining the past” (2002: 14). It also opens up ways of imagining the future, our relationship to all commodities and the animal bodies, both human and nonhuman, that produce them.

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