Lacan: A Zoontology (or How My Dog and I Figure in the Anthropocene)

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"Dogs are not surrogates for theory; they are not here just to think with. They are here to live with. Partners in the crime of human evolution." – Donna Haraway

Lacan sits at the corner of my room, intently watching me. He waits with anticipation, looking for signs that I'm awake, so he can shower me with licks and kisses the moment I move even a finger. We are each other's 7 o'clock appointment. I push myself up from the bed with a jolt, causing him to scamper towards me. As he covers my face with licks, I stand up and walk to the kitchen counter to prepare his breakfast—both of us getting ready for the day ahead.

We found ourselves landlocked in this social *terra firma*, entangled in this conjoined ontological choreography one fateful day on the last week of January 2019. The spirit of the New Year's celebration had already passed and I found myself staring blankly at my new apartment. The thrill of living on my own with a meager salary from working at a nearby university did not hit as expected. Something was missing; a feeling of emptiness despite my new freedom. I was browsing Facebook one night, seeing virtual animals on my timeline when I realized: I was alone. And I was lonely.

The day I fetched him, I carried him in a blue shoe box. I placed him in a diaper to prepare for the taxi ride from Makati to Marikina. Lacan was the runt of the litter, the unluckiest draw from the gene pool of an aspin father and a shih tzu mother. Phenotypically, he manifested his father's characteristics: lacking shaggy fur, and this made him an *improper* shih tzu. This marked him as being *unwanted*.

The day I met him, Lacan was veritably marked *aspin*—spared from getting tossed to the streets, from being *askal.*

"Aspin" is the socially acceptable term, as suggested by the People Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) when referring to Lacan's type. "Askal" or "asong kalye" reeks of ignominy associated with living in the streets. This city is harsh to street dwellers. Moreover, such socially constructed categories matter in the animal kingdom. These categories decide who gets to live in a home, thrown into the streets, or served on a plate. Aspin denotes a "home" dog, usually chained as "bantay"; on the other hand, askal is a vagabond, with skin patched with mange, constantly searching for scraps.

Representations of animals affect the trajectory of a species' history. The background of Palawan Pangolins, considered the most trafficked animal in the world, demonstrates this; the pangolins' scales are said to be ingredients in traditional medicine, and this claim has caused the species to be critically endangered. Burt (2001) asks us to examine animal categories in order to see how species bear the symbolic and biological consequences of an anthropocentric imagination. Dog history, for instance, is a story of biopower and biosociality (Haraway 2003). Moreover, echoing the accounts of human repressions in Michel Foucault's "We 'Other Victorians'," canine bodies underwent violent and explicit biological engineering to develop the apex dog breed (vonHoldt and Driscoll 2017). During this time, the American Kennel Club (AKC) was formed, which in corollary heralded an astute focus on artificial breeding. Prestigious pedigrees with desirable phenotypic traits, such as dwarfism, were bred out of canine genes via continuous artificial selection and reproduction. Furthermore, this was the time of breed-specific ailments that erupted in and out dog bodies due to the severe mutations (Haraway 2013).

The need to acquire a show dog during this era was partly meant to display the dog owner's wealth. Bodies of dogs symbolized human affluence. Pure-bred dogs contributed to fabricating an elite social capital. Centuries later, Lacan still carries the weight of this gentrification. In the Philippines, aspins are still considered lower in rank compared to their pedigreed kin.

Even the categorization of "pet" in the Philippines opens trivial inquiry about what it means to be one. Lasco (2021) cites as uncommon the differences in the ways Filipino households treat their alaga, in which the pedigreed dog is allowed inside while the aspin is left outside as bantay. Serpell (1986) says that an animal being considered a pet is to elevate its status by allowing it inside human domiciles. But aren't pets also victims of abuse? Bodies exploited in puppy mills, dogs chained and left in backyards because the novelty of having a cute puppy has expired.

Lacan, for instance, is a pet. More precisely, he is my pet. I follow all the performative derivatives that come when I say that I am his pet owner, or when I say that he is my pet dog. I enter ontological routes that conceptually and socially construct the person I am when I utter such a pronouncement, from being dog and/or animal lover, to veterinary-bill payer, to pet-goods shopper, and even as fur parent.

The word pet (n.) comes from its other form as a verb. An animal is a pet if it is meant to be petted, to be held, and to engage in communication where touch is the medium of transaction and instruction. To be pet is to be touched. On most nights, Lacan even asserts his *pet-ness* by wedging his head between my chest and resting elbow. He not only asks to be petted, but demands. Our human-animal relationship is based precisely on this co-touching. Touch: the basic medium of the animal's body. Classen (2012) asks: aren't animals "virtually all body" (92)? Thus, dogs are essentially beings of touch.

Lacan and I share interspecies transfecting—passing to one another our histories; our own significations—"vibrant practices of love" as philosopher Donna Haraway (2003, 16) calls it.

Still, a greater symbiogenetic story is inscribed and encrypted in our flesh, and this story entangles us together as *Homo sapiens* and *Canis familiaris.* Dog and humans share an evolutionary history that shaped us through and with another biologically and culturally, even before I came and earned the right to call him my pet (Kendall 2008).

I like to imagine that the world prepared itself for millennia up until the day Lacan and I met on that fateful day in Makati: the distinct evolutionary history of our species intertwining to form a knot, an entanglement. Filipino archaeologists have found evidence of human-dog socialization in the Philippines, proving that dogs have always occupied a special position in their society relative to other animals. A right occipital fragment of a dog from late Holocene was found in Pasimbahan Cave, Palawan (Ochoa et al. 2014) and a dog burial situated among human burial sites during the Neolithic Period was found in Nasagbaran, Northern Luzon (Amano et al. 2013) suggest that dogs were valued by early natives. Mourning and placement among human burial sites tell of the gravity of the death of a canine companion. Today, some of us are familiar with this pain. Pets are family members. Sometimes, even, they are the only family we have.

Lacan's progenitors are grey wolves *(Canis lupus)*. Archaeozoologists agree that dogs are the first species of animals that were domesticated by early hominins (Clutton-Brock 2017; vonHoldt 2017; Hiby and Hiby 2017). Taming and domestication refer to different things. Taming means a person allows a wild animal to get accustomed to his presence, whereas domestication incites genetic, physiological, and behavioral changes in the animal that leads to the development of a "unique human–animal relationships that vary greatly both in quality and intensity" (Clutton-Brock 2017). In the phylogenetic tree, dogs diverged from wolves 100,000 years ago; however, analysis of their respective mitochondrial DNA shows that the diversion happened as early as 16,000 to 12,000 years ago.

Dogs tamed humans, too. Lacan's first few days in my apartment were challenging. His presence changed the way I planned my every day. I thought I had prepared for the worst by researching extensively about housebreaking, but I did not expect to him to be resistant to using the potty mat I provided. He taught me patience. Or maybe it was something that I always had, but he brought out of me. Waking up in the morning to a mess after Lacan missed the potty mat took adjustment. Worse were his nightly tantrums that made me question my decision to adopt him. Yet, I understood his cries; I knew what it meant to leave the pack. I knew that after some time, Lacan will eventually learn to trust me as his companion, just as his ancestral wolf kin learned to live adjacent to early human settlements. VonHoldt and Driscoll (2017) speculated that the first proto-dogs were born from wolves that had the "propensity to associate with or tolerate some degree of proximity to human groups" (28). These tolerant wolves eventually pioneered the first generation of proto-dogs by passing on to their offspring the genetic code of their less aggressive temperament to humans (28). These proto-dogs scavenged around human-settlements instead of hunting, and this behavior eventually led to the failure of developing skeletal and muscular tools for hunting megafauna (Clutton-Brock 2017). Domestic dogs carry the history of their contact with humans in their body. Their contact with humans changed them.

In this evolutionary narrative, wolves and humans tamed each another. However, prevalent literature on the subject is only interested in showing that dogs are the only ones that underwent these biological changes through domestication. None of these studies show the evolutionary implications of dog domestication to us as a species. Refusal to acknowledge the profound effects of dog domestication indicates the height of our "anthropological egocentrism," which means to regard "ourselves as miraculously unmarked by the effects of these phenomena, especially in our evolutionary relationship with the oldest domesticated species" (Kendall 2008, 201).

The Philippine colonial experience demonstrates how Filipino-becoming and identity-making are affected by the entanglement of human-canine ontologies. The 16th-century Visayan high regard for domestic dogs, who they "pampered," "fondled," kissed, and "carried" on top of shoulders (Scott 1994, 48), was challenged when in 1544 a Spanish solider insulted a Leyte merchant by comparing him to a "dog" (Scott 1994, 85). The Spaniard's pronouncement of the word dog as an insult intuits the injection of anthropocentric western attitude towards animals that considers them as lesser beings than humans in the native psyche. This worldview stems from the Aristotelian notion of the Scala Naturae (The Great Chain of Being) that hierarchizes beings

according to their "perfection," in which Humans are considered species par excellence (DeMello 2012). By comparing the Leyte merchant to a "dog," the Spanish soldier reduced him to something less than human.

A similar occasion happened at the advent of American colonialism in the Philippines, in which Filipinos were framed as savages through the *asocena*. Asocena is a portmanteau of the words aso (dog) and the Spanish cena (dinner) and means dog eating (Fernandez 2010). In the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair during the Louisiana Purchase, dog-eating Igorot were exhibited as if zoo animals. Note how the category animal was once again juxtaposed to the human. The Igorot traditionally practiced dog-eating as part of their rituals (Heinrich 2017) and this was to acquire the "brave spirit" of the animal. Thus, canines were tied and aggravated first to unleash such aggression for the consumption of the masculine warrior class, which was especially needed in head-hunting expeditions (Heinrich 2017, 34). Here, Western dietary ideology regarding dog consumption conflicted with the Filipino asocena, which it considered taboo. Thus, It is through the body of the dog that we were crucified in the Western gaze as Other. Their existence prompted the necessary conditions for the Philippines to undergo the experience of colonization. This historical moment inspired the writer Jessica Hagedorn to name one of her novels *Dogeaters* (1990).

Even contemporary examination of the subject reveals the Western influence towards dog eating in the Philippines. The archaeological literature I described earlier by Amano et al. (2013), which discusses Philippine Neolithic and Metal attitudes toward dogs, found that besides dog burials, there were also skeletal remains of dogs that exhibited butchering marks in the area. They surmised that these butchered dogs were treated as lesser than other dogs that underwent burial rites or were freely roaming the area. Yet, butchering dogs does not mean that a culture diminishes the societal status of an animal. Consider for instance what 19th-century explorer George Caitlin saw in the case of the Sioux Indians who served their companion dogs to him to honor his arrival. Caitlin pointed out that dogs that were served as meat did not necessarily mean that they were looked down upon by Sioux society. For in the case of the Sioux, the very offering of their companion animals was a form of ultimate sacrifice to indicate their willingness to let go for the sake of another (Serpell 1986). Other sacrifices in their society would symbolically amount to nothing because there was no attached emotional investment in them. Hence, dogs in Sioux society possessed great cultural value, and that was why they fit the requirement of a prestigious sacrifice.

However, I am opposed to the practice of dog eating. If Lacan could read my mind, he can sleep soundly knowing that I am not contemplating eating him as I write this. Invoking cultural relativism is tempting on the matter of dog-eating now that it persists until today in the form of festivals, such as the controversial Yulin Festival in China. Moreover, a quick Google search shows that dog eating is still done in some areas in the Philippines.

The pressing weight of our entangled history compels me to oppose it. Anthropocentrism dictates that humans emerged as humans upon the mastery of nature. However, multiple species are bound, shaped, enmeshed, and sometimes pitted against each other within a collective patchwork of the evolution of the world. I have never been just a human as Lacan has never been just a dog (Haraway 2013), and perhaps this is what compelled me to frame the *I* in this essay within this larger zoontology of our species. To challenge dominant anthropocentric narratives, we insist telling ourselves that in learning Lacan's history, I find pieces of myself within it. We are made from the same star-stuff, after all.

These past nights, Lacan jumps on top of my bed and proceeds to stare at the open jalousie, toward the full moon up the sky. Winds coming down from a distant mountain flit past Loyola Memorial and then towards him, gently touching his face. I imagine the primal need to howl start building in his body—the ghostly wolf buried within, deep in his cells and nerve receptors. I rise from by bed and join him in his watch. This is how we face the Anthropocene: together—his paw by my hand, his fur by my skin, each atom brushing upon each infinitesimal atom.

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