Narrating the First Dogs: Canine Agency in the First Contacts with Indigenous Peoples in the Brazilian Amazon

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Narrating the First Dogs: Canine Agency in the First Contacts with Indigenous Peoples in the Brazilian Amazon

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ABSTRACT Narratives addressing the presence of European domestic dogs (Canis familiaris) in the encounters between Indians and non-Indians in the conquest of the Central and South American lowlands often portray those animals as terrible and bloodthirsty weapons. From the settlers’ perspective, dogs were formidable instruments in the subjugation of the native peoples they came across at various times over more than 500 years of American colonization. But the indigenous narratives of these first contacts with dogs may exhibit distinct perspectives that view dogs not only as weapons, instruments, or tools of conquest but rather as agents or actors smoothing contact and establishing peaceful relations between Indians and non-Indians. This article explores the narratives of the first dogs encountered by two native populations in southwestern Brazilian Amazonia—the Puruborá and the Karitiana in the state of Rondônia—to demonstrate the canine agency behind the interethnic meetings in this region, where dogs were largely absent until the arrival of the Europeans and their descendants beginning in the sixteenth century. First contacts between Indians and non-Indians are complex interspecific events, and may extend beyond only two participants (a group of non-Indians and a native people) to include at least three parties, since the actions and dispositions of dogs play a crucial role in the development of human interactions. Recollections of the first dogs encountered by the Puruborá and Karitiana point precisely toward recognizing the importance of the animal’s presence as an actor, far beyond a mere instrument.

Keywords: agency, Amazonia, contact, dogs, Indians

A relatively widespread trope in interpreting the European conquest of the Americas, particularly in Spanish versions but also in Anglo-American and Luso-Brazilian tellings, deals with the efficiency of dogs (especially the notorious Spanish mastiffs, alongside British mastiffs and greyhounds and Brazilian-Portuguese cães de fila) in the process of
subjugating, controlling, and exterminating individuals, villages, or even entire indigenous peoples (Andrade, 2014; Chamayou, 2012; Jimenez, 2011; Piqueras, 2006; Restall, 2004). For example, in the statements of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s informants (as quoted in Piqueras, 2006, p. 188) in mid-sixteenth century Mexico on the dogs brought by the Spaniards:

His dogs are enormous, with undulating and crushed ears, with great hanging tongues; they have eyes that shed fire, their eyes are sparkling: their eyes are yellow, they are intensely yellow in color ... They are very strong and bold, they are not quiet, they walk panting, with their tongues lolling.

Some dogs were even memorialized for their military services and for their fame as butcher dogs fed with native flesh (“perros carniceros cebados en los indios,” cf. Jimenez, 2011, p. 203), such as the Spanish mastiffs Becerrillo, Bruto, and Leonicco. Leonicco accompanied the adelantado (a Spanish conqueror) Vasco Nuñez de Balboa in his conquest of Panama in the sixteenth century; Oviedo (cited in Piqueras, 2006, p. 192) remarked that “the Natives feared the dog so much, that if ten Christians roamed with the dog, they were safer and could do more than twenty without him.”

The narratives of the conquest (which in a sense span the centuries between Christopher Columbus’s arrival and the middle of the twentieth century when native populations in the Americas made their first contacts with Europeans or Euro-Americans) are filled with these dogs which were mainly tasked with intimidating, terrifying, and attacking local populations. As the Chilean literary critic Megumi Andrade (2014, p. 91) states in relation to these colonial narratives:

The repression towards the indigenous, done in this way [i.e. using dogs as military weapons], is documented in a wide corpus of documents of the time. It was not a question of sporadic or casual attacks, but that it was consistently put into practice, with the aim of using psychological terror, torture and, in many cases, the application of brutal death sentences.

This paper offers a very different version of how the dog may have arrived in the context of new encounters. Based on indigenous narratives and accounts given in interviews (not the writings of the colonists), it offers an alternative interpretation of the early contacts between Amerindian peoples and the dogs which arrived in the New World with the Europeans and spread across the continent with their descendants.

European dogs and horses did not appear in the Americas until 1492; these formidable instruments of violent colonization allowed the occupation of vast regions taken from the original inhabitants through the fear they inspired. Particularly vicious dogs were trained and widely used to chase, torture, and brutally murder Amerindians (Andrade 2014, pp. 88–98; Chamayou, 2012; Jimenez, 2011; Piqueras, 2006; Stannard, 1993; Werner, 1999).1

The use of fierce dogs against the native Amerindians continued during the early British colonization of North America, where Old English Mastiffs were also widely utilized as “tactical weapons” (cf. Mastromarino, 1986, p. 10) in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This practice received less documentation and study, however, considering British criticism of Spanish cruelty in historical writings known as the Black Legend (Mastromarino 1986, pp. 10–11; Restall, 2004).

It appears some regions of Brazil in the twentieth century were no different, where narratives about Indians (very often women) pegos a dente de cachorro (“caught by the dog’s teeth,” namely brought violently into contact with whites) are common until today (Oliveira,
1999). Consider, for example, Teófilo Otoni’s comment on the bloody conflicts with the Botocudo Indians in the forested backlands of the Mucuri and Doce river valleys in eastern Minas Gerais, Brazil, in the mid-nineteenth century:

The traffickers hunted the natives like wild animals. It is even said that to train the dogs for this hunt, they were given the meat of murdered savages to eat. (Otoni, 2002 [1859], pp. 41–42)

These narratives describing the exotic ferocity of the first canines accompanying the Europeans in unexplored regions do not seem to be restricted to the Americas: Golub’s description of the Highlands of New Guinea (2005, p. 9) states that the violence of the dogs is often remembered above all else in native accounts of first contact. This author points to the terror displayed by a number of peoples in this remote region when they encountered the dogs accompanying foreign explorers who traveled through the mountains during the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century.

In these descriptions of indigenous narratives of first contact spanning five centuries and distant, different regions, European dogs are described as weapons of conquest (armas de la conquista, in Spanish), as well as loyal companions and even best friends. Dogs, thus thought of as weapons or instruments of war and conquest, are described as an efficient and deadly technology that together with horses, armor, firearms, and metal swords sealed the fate of many native societies in the Americas and triggered a population loss so huge that we still cannot contemplate its magnitude in demographic and socio-cultural terms (Cook, 1998; Denevan, 1992).

The idea of dogs as hunting weapons does indeed resonate with the ideas of some native peoples in lowland South America (see, among others, Bento, 2011; Medrano, 2016). Yet this trope only partly explains the history of the canine conquest of the Americas: if dogs were so terrifying, why did so many indigenous peoples so eagerly ask the first Europeans or non-Indians they met for dogs and subsequently spread the practice of keeping dogs across the vast region? Certainly, the dog (re)conquered America, not only as military auxiliaries but also because of this species’ ability to forge links with human beings and foster relations between different human groups. In this process, the dog was not simply a weapon, a gift, or an instrument, but rather an agent which has always been able to successfully integrate the human domestic sphere and maintain fellowship with human populations worldwide. It should be remembered that several authors maintain that if humans domesticated dogs, dogs also in turn domesticated humans (Haraway, 2008); and the history of human–canine bonds is a history of voluntary association between two species, much more than the action one species (human) has on the other (canine).

This paper investigates some narratives about the first dogs in two indigenous societies in the southwestern Brazilian Amazon, the Karitiana and the Puruborá. My main objective is to show that although dogs were feared, they were never (or only very rarely) refused when they appeared in indigenous villages or were offered to them by non-Indians. Instead, as we shall see, they were actively sought out by these two peoples when they were first encountered, a recurring phenomenon in many places in lowland South America where pre-Columbian dogs were absent (and even where native canid species were present): the animal’s strangeness and its associations with the violence and death inflicted by the conquerors and colonizers in no way implied its rejection.

I believe that considering the dogs involved in conquest as simply weapons or instruments in the hands of Spanish or Portuguese colonizers overlooks the dogs’ ability to
associate with Indians and their efficiency as an agent in producing and structuring social relations. Indigenous narratives speak of these new dogs as more than just weapons, although they often insist on their aggressive and predatory capabilities. These reports also point to the dog’s potential as a fundamental social agent in creating links between indigenous and non-indigenous groups in the very first moments of contact.

The Puruborá and Rondon’s Dogs
Both the Puruborá and the Karitiana are located in the state of Rondônia, in the southwestern Brazilian Amazon. This region of the Amazon (on the right bank of the Guaporé river, which divided the Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires and today separates Brazil from its neighbor Bolivia) remained largely unexplored until the end of the nineteenth century as Portugal concentrated its interests in other regions of Brazil. The relative lack of natural resources and inaccessibility of the area kept the region virtually unknown and only sparsely inhabited by non-indigenous inhabitants until the second half of the nineteenth century, when the first rubber boom took place (Dean, 2002; Weinstein, 1983). The region then became heavily exploited and occupied by rubber tappers searching for precious latex. In the early decades of the twentieth century many previously isolated indigenous societies had already disappeared due to the devastating effects of epidemics or violence, and many others were absorbed by the system that carried rubber from the innermost regions of the Amazon to industrial countries abroad. At this time, Brazil seemed to realize that next to nothing was known about this isolated, distant corner of the country. From 1906 to 1909, Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon (1865–1958) headed the famous Rondon Expedition (Expedição Rondon) as the leader of the Strategic Telegraph Line Commission from Mato Grosso to Amazonas (Comissão de Linhas Telegráficas Estratégicas do Mato Grosso ao Amazonas; see Diacon, 2004). Rondon’s presence in this territory (which would be named after him in 1956) inextricably linked to the history of many indigenous peoples in the region. The first written reference on the Karitiana is found in a report by Rondon in 1907 stating that these Indians were on the banks of the Candeias and Massangana rivers, possibly already “in contact with rubber tappers” (Rondon, 1907, p. 329). The Puruborá, as we shall see, were first contacted by Rondon himself (and his dogs, of course).

The Puruborá have a history of extremely violent contact, and were nearly erased from the Amazonian cultural landscape; first they were not considered culturally distinct from the population in their region, then they were thought to be extinct in the 1990s, when FUNAI did not recognize their presence on the upper Manuel Correia river (Menezes, 2016). They nevertheless managed to stay near their traditional territory, but in a lower section of the same river, and they began their struggle for ethnic recognition and their rights in the early 2000s (Galúcio, 2005; Monserrat, 2005). Today, 12 Puruborá families (about 40 people) occupy the village of Aperoi, which is located between the municipalities of Seriñgueiras and São Francisco do Guaporé in central Rondônia, and they continue to pursue official identification of indigenous territory that consists of only a fraction of the land formerly occupied by the group. The elders retain a rich bank of memories describing the arrival of non-Indians led by Rondon and the ubiquitous dogs.

One of the Puruborá elders I talked to in 2013 recounted stories of Rondon’s initial arrival in the upper São Miguel River region, in what was then the group’s traditional territory. Written historical documents indicate that first contact with the Puruborá occurred in 1909, when Rondon directed construction of the telegraph line in the Manoel Correia river basin (Montanha, Barboza, & Oliveira, 2014, p. 157). According to this elder, Rondon stayed in a camp for about
20 days after losing one of his pet dogs; the explorer and his soldiers exploded “bombs” (fireworks) and fired shots, scaring the dog into returning to its owner. The Puruborá were curious and feared this noise that differed from anything else they knew, and encountered Rondon and in turn a new destiny. A statement by another Puruborá elder given to Tarsila Menezes (2016, p. 96) also narrates the first contacts between the Puruborá and Rondon:

The dog ran after a few animals and eventually got lost, the Indians saw the dog and knew that it was a white man’s dog (...) and they decided to walk with the dog to find the owner, and then they ran into Rondon. The dog met the owner and the Indians handed the dog over. After that, I know that the old man [Rondon] liked the Indians and began to please them, he tamed the Puruborá Indians.6

Note not only the statement that the Puruborá were already familiar with dogs (and somehow differentiated the dogs they knew from “white men’s dogs”), but also the fact that the dog assumes a central role, immediately recognizing its owner. More interesting, however, is the way the dog seems to effect contact by taking the Puruborá to Rondon and his non-Indian companions: the animal was part of the creation of the relationships between the Indians and whites, which is made explicit when the narrative continues to state that “the old man” (i.e., Rondon) “liked the Indians” and “began to please them.” There is a curious game here around the process of taming that passes from focusing on Rondon’s dog (which quickly recognizes its owner) to focus on the Puruborá, which were then captured by the SPI’ officers and the colonial apparatus. Rondon, as is well known, was one of the great “tamers” (amansadores, from the verb amansar, to tame, in Portuguese) of Indians in Brazil. Apparently, he was also a great dog lover; another Puruborá narrative from the times of first contact recounts how Rondon saved one of his dogs and let a human companion drown when both were stuck on a small island after a river flooded dramatically. The narrator who recounted this demythologized the popular image of Cândido Rondon in a sense by concluding: “yes, Rondon liked his dogs much more than the people who worked with him.”

Naturally, my goal is not to judge Rondon. Moreover, I believe it is virtually impossible to know his opinion about his dogs to more deeply appreciate this indigenous commentary. Nevertheless, during the famous Roosevelt-Rondon expedition in northwestern Mato Grosso, Theodore Roosevelt (1914, p. 150, emphasis added) described an encounter with a group of Nambikwara Indians and provided insight on Rondon’s relationship with the animals that accompanied him through the Brazilian forests and backlands:

The Indians stayed with us, feasting, dancing, and singing until the early hours of the morning. They then suddenly and silently disappeared in the darkness, and did not return. In the morning, we discovered that they had gone off with one of Colonel Rondon’s dogs. Probably the temptation had proved irresistible to one of their number, and the others had been afraid to interfere, and also afraid to stay in or return to our neighborhood. We had not time to go after them; but Rondon remarked that as soon as he again came to the neighborhood he would take some soldiers, hunt up the Indians, and reclaim the dog.

What is interesting, returning to the Puruborá narrative of the first contact, is that the connection between Indians (the Puruborá), non-Indians (Rondon and his subordinates), and dogs appears overwhelmed by the sign of pacification which is expressed by the notions of “pleasing” and “liking”: Rondon likes his dogs, the Puruborá bring him his lost dog, and Rondon soon comes to like the Puruborá and to please them.
However, perhaps the idea that Rondon appreciated his dogs more than people took deep root in Puruborá thought and to some extent shaped the ambiguous relationship these people have with dogs today. That is the reasons why Tarsila Menezes (2016, p. 56) describes the relationship between Puruborá and the dogs as ambivalent, at the minimum. The Puruborá do not approve of dogs in their homes, particularly begging for food in the kitchen. Puppies that do wrong (such as the case described by Menezes in which a dog killed and devoured ducklings) may be killed by the owners themselves, an act which is virtually unthinkable among the Karitiana. Still, daily relations in Aperoi reflect Rondon’s recognition of his lost dog, according to this same author (Menezes, 2016, p. 56): “despite such detachment [that is, dogs must stay outside homes], dogs always show great happiness when their owners arrive [at home].”

This establishment of interethnic and inter-specific bonds contrasts strongly with the images presented by the aforementioned Teófilo Otoni during the conquest of the Mucuri river backlands in southeastern Brazil in the nineteenth century:

The soldiers gave their dogs the flesh of the Botocudo Indians. The Indians were hunted like animals. The example of an officer from the Doce river divisions, who confessed to be “no longer a man when somebody speaks to him about the Botocudo,” was mentioned: when his dogs scented those Indians, he said he felt the same emotion as a hunter whose dogs scented a deer. Here, hunter, dogs and persecuted seemed to be in the same sphere of animality, alien to civilization, and the condition of humanity. (Duarte, 2002, p. 32)

Here, relations between Indians (in this case, the Botocudos in the province of Minas Gerais), whites, and dogs—which were Brazilian cães de fila specially “trained to tear the Indians apart,” according to Kohler (2011, p. 54)—are dominated by savagery and violence, like the historiographic characterizations of Spanish mastiffs as weapons of conquest. The dramatic liveliness of Otoni’s textual images and what we know about the extreme cruelty entailed in the late non-indigenous occupation of eastern Minas Gerais (see Langfur, 2008) do not allow me to deny the violence committed against Amerindian peoples using dogs; quite the opposite. Nevertheless, the images created by observers outside the processes of contact between indigenous groups in the Americas and the dogs brought by Europeans strongly contrast with the images that several indigenous peoples constructed of these same events. It appears these populations did not resist adopting dogs and rapidly incorporated them into Amerindian societies, even in the regions of the continent (eastern and central Brazil and most of the Amazon) where the species was originally unknown. The case of the Karitiana and their narratives of their first dog illustrates this dynamic very clearly.

The Karitiana and Marreteiro

The Karitiana have been drawn into the rubber economy since the early twentieth century, but their accounts claim that the group had sporadic contacts with whites since the middle of the previous century in the valleys of the Candeias and Jaci-Paraná rivers in the north of what is now the state of Rondônia (Vander Velden, 2014). After a long time wandering through the basins of the small tributaries on the right bank of the Candeias river in the first decades of the twentieth century—escaping or becoming accustomed to the presence of the settlers who intensified their exploitation of the region’s rubber trees—the Karitiana were definitively contacted and settled in a single village, Kyôwâ, on the banks of the Sapoti creek on the left margin of the Candeias in the late 1960s (Landin, 1989; Vander Velden, 2012). Since then, they have
begun a remarkable demographic recovery that led to new territorial expansion since the early 2000s, when the group founded four new villages. The Karitiana speak a Tupi-Arikém language and currently number about 320 people. Their villages are situated in the municipalities of Porto Velho (the capital city of Rondônia) and Candeias do Jamari.

The first dog that the Karitiana ever saw in the Candeias river valley (probably around the 1940s, according to personal memories) was reportedly presented to them by a marreteiro, a name given to itinerant merchants who wander the rivers of the southwestern Brazilian Amazon selling manufactured commodities and buying forest products. The animal, which remained with the Karitiana, was consequently named Marreteiro, and many of those who knew him when they were still children remember some of his characteristics: he was a small, white dog, and, most importantly to us, “he was a very good hunter.” That is, the first dog demonstrated his aptitude for hunting, making this animal an important addition to Karitiana hunting techniques; from then on, this group has almost always been accompanied by dogs when they leave the villages in search of prey. The reference to the first dog’s color is also significant: the Karitiana often name their dogs for their color (Branquinha ["Whitey"], Pretinha ["Blackie"], and Nego ["Black"] are some examples), and link coat color to certain skills like hunting. Moreover, dogs’ names are always in Portuguese, pointing to their persistent condition of alien creatures, white men’s creatures, among the Karitiana.

Another narrative collected among five students (Cláudio, Reinaldo, Luciane, Paulo, and Kátia8) from the Kyôwã village indigenous school in 2006 suggests the Karitiana were protagonists in transforming dogs into hunters (through “medicines” and teaching); but the text retains the importance of the animal’s hunting ability and its precious position as a “helper” of human hunters (as an animal acting together with human hunters). This narrative written by the students also shifts the origin of the first dog: it is no longer a traveling merchant but the great leader Antonio Moraes who leads the animal to the village, bringing him from neighboring rubber encampments or even from Porto Velho, a city that Moraes first visited in 1957 (Hugo, 1959, p. 259). Part of the narrative follows below:

The chief’s name was Moraes Karitiana. As soon as the chief brought the dog into the village, the population liked the dog. After this, the Indians gave hunting medicine [remédio de caçador] to the dog. After the dog took the medicine, the indigenous population taught the dog to hunt.

The dog also became a hunter, so the indigenous population asked for more dogs from the rubber tapper.

The Karitiana people call the dog obaky by’edna. The indigenous population likes the dog because the dog helps them to hunt in the forest. Because of this, the Indian realized that the dog is good to breed (...).

When the Karitiana indigenous people saw the dog for the first time, they were not afraid of the dog.

These first contacts with the dog permanently established the relationship between the Karitiana and these animals, these “hunter helpers” which they began to systematically obtain from rubber camps in the region. We should first note that the initial impression seems to have been not fear or astonishment, but pleasant discovery of a new creature with very useful skills for these people who define themselves as hunters: “the population liked the dog” … “the population was not afraid.” And soon the Karitiana taught the animal to hunt by applying “hunting medicines,” followed by a series of training techniques to make them more efficient hunters.
Contrast this with the image of dogs in chronicles of the Spanish and Portuguese conquest: no violence, much curiosity, and bonds between the Karitiana and the whites are sealed forever, even because that same marreiro (the human trader) returned to the Karitiana village headed by Antonio Moraes—the leader who, in fact, led the Karitiana to irreversible contact with non-Indians—many times after his first visit.

The Karitiana realized that “the dog was good to breed” and then demanded more and more animals from rubber tappers who quickly occupied the area surrounding the indigenous territory. Nevertheless, there is always a latent aggressiveness in dogs which makes them particularly apt for hunting and remains in the name this “species” received at the time of this first contact: obaky by’edna, the term for “dog” in the Karitiana language, literally translates as “breeding jaguar,” that is, “domestic jaguar,” a jaguar that is kept at home. Still, it is the ferocity directed at prey animals that initially enchanted the Karitiana, although the ambiguity of the dog—a jaguar, the formidable large South American predator, which is bred, which lives nearby—will be recognized later, even in its associations with the devil (“the Dog,” as it is termed in popular Brazilian Catholicism), a figure introduced by evangelical missionaries in the mid-1970s (Vander Velden, 2012).

After its introduction, the domestic dog contact came to occupy a central place in contemporary Karitiana culture and social practices. Dogs first became part of the family and home, and everyone is unanimous in stating that “a dog is like a son/daughter.” Even though they are ambivalent figures, these domestic jaguars—between the bloody savagery of forest hunting and the intimacy of village houses—abound in Karitiana villages and daily life. Perhaps this ambiguity explains why dogs in Karitiana villages and virtually all indigenous villages in Brazil are simultaneously dear and despised, often protected and sometimes brutally mistreated. These exotic beings made familiar always bear the marks of their foreign origin among the whites (the opok, “the others”), combining attraction and repulsion despite being inseparable companions in hunting expeditions and residences alike since Marreteiro, the first dog, settled among the Karitiana and definitively established coexistence between these Indians, non-Indian whites, and dogs.

From Instruments to Agents
The two narratives analyzed above are not myths, which is clear in the way the two Amazonian peoples perceive and tell their respective stories. The Karitiana say that “the dog has no history,” thus stating that these animals introduced “by the hands of the whites” do not appear in what they call histories of “ancient times” (tempo antigamente), narratives we can classify as mythical. These narratives differ from those introduced by the expressions “time” (tempo) or “there was a time” (era tempo), which recount events of a recent past still within the reach of the elders’ memories—as is the case of the arrival of the first dog remembered by some older men and women.

My intention in narrating the first dogs, however, should not be thought of as an attempt to create a detailed reconstruction of events, although the central trope—the combination of distrust and fascination with the white man’s dogs and a very fast adoption of this animals—is remarkably homogeneous among the various versions. It is important to emphasize that the texts analyzed here are narratives. They nevertheless reconstitute indigenous perspectives of events that happened more than a century ago and, in this sense, from the Puruborá and the Karitiana points of view, are events related to their respective histories. What matters more is recognizing what these texts can tell us about the relationships between dogs and people.
who only encountered each other in relatively recent times. Narrating the first dog thus approximates, for example, “narrating the last shaman” in the sense that these textualized memories interact intensively with other narratives of different natures (Lukin, 2012), thereby allowing a general intertextual appreciation of certain objects; or, to put it another way, these narratives tell us about many things not so evident at first sight, including, in these cases—whether narrating last shamans or primordial dogs—interethnic relations, politics, moral values, and sometimes dramatic changes in the native people’s lives. But in my view, comparative analysis of narratives from two distinct and relatively distant peoples permits us to advance beyond the particularities of historical experiences with dogs and the position that these animals have assumed in the symbolic universes and daily practices of each group (Vander Velden, 2012), to a more general hypothesis regarding the relations between human and canine beings.

In recent decades, several authors have devoted themselves to reconstituting historical animal agency, in other words, the presence and both active and decisive participation of different animals in the history of human societies, including significant events such as wars and revolutions (Baratay, 2012). This goes beyond suggesting that animals have a history (Delort, 1993), and instead states that human and animal stories intertwine and cannot be told separately (Few & Tortorici, 2013; Haraway, 2008). If animals are full-fledged actors in the ethnographic present, there is no reason to disregard animals as historical agents. Not, I insist, as supporting actors or spectators of actions and events that are entirely guided by humans, but as actors who generate their own present and future and often even the futures of their human companions or antagonists. Consequently, the classic split between History and Natural History loses much of its meaning (Few & Tortorici, 2013; Root-Bernstein, 2016; Tsing, 2015).

I think that the reading of dogs as the weapons of America’s conquest by Europeans and their descendants precisely obscures the historical agency of these animals. As a weapon, in these reports, the dog is only an instrument—“a true multipurpose tool, demonstrating great interaction and versatility of functions” (Piqueras, 2006, p. 188)—of actions designed and orchestrated by their human owners, masters, or companions, who are the only full actors in History. Nevertheless, I think the numerous narratives describing the terror European dogs provoked in different Amerindian peoples may have been viewed positively by the Europeans in assessing their dogs as fierce machines for discipline and death; a kind of projection of their (European or Euro-American) deadly efficiency in their animals. I believe that the speed with which many Amerindian peoples adopted the dog supports another hypothesis related to how indigenous peoples enjoyed the first exotic dogs they encountered: with less dread than awe and astonishment.

Consequently, the indigenous narratives analyzed above seem to place a significant portion of the agencies which were at play during the first contacts between the Puruborá and the Karitiana and non-Indians on the animals. Rondon’s dogs that came into contact with the Puruborá, and Marreiteiro, the first dog among the Karitiana, were not mere (military) instruments operated by their human owners/controllers, but their appearance and dispositions and especially their actions were considered crucial in the process of establishing peaceful relations between Indians and whites in this part of Amazonia. My proposal here is to think of dogs as central agents in creating social connections between human individuals and groups, and not as “subordinates” which were essentially transformed through human appropriation and shaped “as if they were clay” (Salisbury, 1994, p. 16).

Studies in a number of scientific areas confirm the ease with which human and canine individuals and groups establish relationships of closeness and intimacy (Haraway, 2008;
Podberscek, Paul, & Serpell, 2005; Serpell, 1996a, 1996b), and the intertwined history of both species over millennia highlights the enduring existence of affective bonds in what Donna Haraway has called coevolution (Haraway, 2008). Archaeological evidence points in this same direction with the discovery of sites containing not only carefully buried dogs, but also tombs in which dogs and humans were found together (Losey et al., 2011; Morey, 2006). These studies focus on the ability of dogs to enter into relationships with humans. What interests me here is the dog's potential as an intermediary agent in triggering intra-human relationships, that is, between different individuals or human groups.

This impressive canine ability to act as mediators or facilitators of relationships between individuals is supported by studies which focus on the role dogs play in reducing social isolation and fostering human social bonds (Berry, Borgi, Francia, Alleva, & Cirulli, 2013; Colarelli, Mcdonald, Christensen, & Honts, 2017; Hall, Wright, Hames, PAWS Team, & Mills, 2016; Lane, 2015; Podberscek, Paul, & Serpell, 2005; Robins, Sanders, & Cahill, 1991; Sanders, 1990; Solomon, 2010). In this way dogs behave as social catalysts, “lubricating” social relationships and disrupting an initial lack of communication between strangers. My suggestion is that early indigenous contacts such as those discussed above may have been facilitated by the presence of dogs, which acted as these social catalysts and generated an “interactional ecological niche” (Solomon, 2010, p. 144) which provided indigenous and non-indigenous individuals the possibility to communicate and establish social relations in an initial context of complete separation of local people and in-coming white people. Dogs may bridge the gap between people in their first encounters when there is no (or only a minimal) possibility of verbal communication, as neither party speaks the other’s language. Dog-mediated communication may operate in these events, and we can consider the “structures of conjuncture” (Sahlins, 1987) of the first contacts as a “multi-species relationship” (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010) in which dogs played a fundamental role, creating, in this way, many historical instances of mutual ecologies (Fuentes, 2010).

First encounters between Indians and whites are marked by mutual ignorance and the impossibility of adequate communication, which as a rule generates fear, tension, and the ever-present potential for this initial mutism to lead to violence (see Connolly & Anderson, 1987; Milanez, 2015). What I am suggesting is that the presence of dogs accompanying the first non-Indians during first contacts with previously isolated indigenous groups may have dispelled tensions and facilitated social interactions in these contexts, with the dogs “lubricating” social relations. As highlighted by several studies in distinct social settings, “dogs facilitate interaction and the development of relationships among previously unacquainted persons” (Robins, Sanders, & Cahill, 1991, pp. 3-4). To paraphrase Anna Tsing (2015, p. 125), it is about recognizing the ability of the dog “to build personal ties that made it so powerful.” The “social intelligence of dogs” (Bekoff, 2008; Serpell, 1996a), their unusual sensitivity to humans (Stahl, 2016, p.56) and their remarkable ability to understand our (human) communication (Hare & Woods, 2013), seems to be central to the creation of stable links in interethnic events, and it is there, connecting people, that we can locate significant canine agency.

Multi-species Contacts

In 1978, in the Javari river valley in the southwest of the Brazilian state of Amazonas, FUNAI established the first friendly contacts with isolated Indians from the Ituí and Itacoai rivers, who later became known in the anthropological literature as the Matis. The Revista de Atualidade Indígena (the journal of the Brazilian federal indigenist agency) described the scene as follows:
Motley mutts have become part of the list of traditional gifts used for the attraction of isolated and uncontacted Indians. FUNAI's fieldworkers [sertanistas] were surprised by strange requests for dogs when they first came in contact with an unidentified tribal group last year, on the banks of the Ituí River in the Amazonas state. From the very first contact, the Indians showed a strong desire to receive more than the axes, machetes, pots and scissors offered by the sertanistas (...). They wanted dogs (...). In the two meetings that followed, they went back to ask for more dogs, forcing the fieldworkers to round up and obtain them from the neighboring villages, buying some (...). (FUNAI, 1978, p. 18)

Even if the article gives very few clues about the dog’s position in the symbolic universe of this newly contacted Amerindian group—we later learn that their villages are full of familiarized and beloved animals (Erikson, 2012)—it precisely shows the dog’s position in sertanista thinking: along with machetes, axes, and pans, dogs are mere “gifts,” material items cementing attraction and pacific contact between Indians and non-Indians. These dogs purchased in nearby settlements became gifts in the hands of FUNAI fieldworkers. We do not know anything about the meanings they assumed for the Indians, but in any case, the situation certainly illustrates the Matis’ desire for animals: they “wanted dogs,” say the sertanistas.

Ever since I first encountered this story I have struggled with the meanings of the Matis’ requests for more dogs: while the dog’s status was clear to the sertanistas, what status did it hold in the indigenous point of view? Commodity? Gift? But if we rely only on these provisional interpretations offered by the human agents of the event, do we not obscure the abilities of dogs and even puppies to form and cement ties with humans and between humans? As suggested above, it is this function as a mediator or catalyst for social interactions that make dogs so special in the treatment of people with relational disorders such as autism. Perhaps it is this same capacity that makes these ever-present human companions so central to the stories of first contact between indigenous groups in the Amazon and, perhaps, elsewhere. Their ability to foster bonds between people makes these creatures far more than gifts, merchandise, weapons, tools, or objects. It makes them agents, go-betweens par excellence for relations between whites and Indians (Metcalf, 2006, pp. 128–152).

In the narratives of the Matis, the Karitiana, and the Puruborá there is no fear, there is no terror. And as we saw in the narratives about the first Karitiana dog, there is a desire for more and more animals. Reports like the ones analyzed here do not speak of refusal, but rather the contrary. Nor do they speak of violence, of dogs incited to attack terrified and defenseless people. We may question, however, whether we are dealing with different historical practices and different modes of historical sensitivity: after all, wasn’t violence more widespread in remote colonial settings than in more recent contexts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? I agree that comparing the actions of colonizers and natives divided by 500 years may be questionable, and more historical studies should clarify the multiple differences. Nevertheless, to believe that violence in the colonial world was greater than it is today is to ignore the oppression, terror, and death that existed and continue to exist in many parts of the Amazon and other places during the twentieth and even twenty-first centuries (Hemming, 1987, 2003; Martins, 1997; Taussig, 1991).

Indeed, even in contexts where the first encounters between dogs and Indians were marked by violence, we have no reason to reduce the animals to mere instruments or tools (their teeth) of a conquest which was totally orchestrated by human intentions and actions...
(their minds). It is widely known that violence also creates social relations. Although they were used as weapons, dogs certainly acted not only as appendages of their human master-partners, but as independent beings with their own agentive abilities, structuring contact relationships and later conviviality through terror and astonishment. Even where there was aggression, the dog was not refused: perhaps its potential for hunting activities was perceived during the initial moment of agonistic interactions, leading to value being placed on them by many Amerindian peoples who are eager hunters.

In contrast with Koster (2009, p. 592), in many cases dogs seem to be viewed with admiration and desire and were very quickly adopted when encountered, and it often appears that there was a vacant space awaiting these beings in the cosmology and daily lives of the Amerindian peoples in lowland South America. Stahl’s provocative suggestion (2012) that pre-Columbian populations associated themselves and even lived with several species of native canids (genera *Cerdocyon* and *Lycalopex*, mainly) points in this direction:

> Although the supporting archaeological evidence is often equivocal, I suggest that lacking an allochthonous domesticated dog, early humans [in South America] may have interacted with native foxes, possibly entering into a range of symbiotic relationships at different times and in different parts of the continent. (Stahl, 2012, p. 110)

As soon as exotic dogs were encountered, they were almost immediately reared in the villages, including their hybrids with native species (Stahl, 2012, p. 117), and virtually replaced the native canids with which many indigenous peoples lived (Stahl, 2013) and who seem to have occupied their vicarious position until 1492 or later. Such occurrences seem to indicate the ease with which European dogs were incorporated into cosmology and the daily lives of Amerindian peoples as companions, helpers, and even family members. The will to tame which the Karitiana expressed also seems to point in the same direction as an ongoing search for non-human companions, these “four-footed friends” (*amigo quatre-pés*), as they are called.

The first contacts between Europeans and indigenous peoples took place, like everything else, in multi-specific contexts. We tend to think of these initial meetings as restricted to the human presence, or at most incorporating the microorganisms that quickly circulated with catastrophic consequences. But to consider the Amazonian landscapes including historical configurations of pre-Columbian and post-Columbian Indian villages as uniquely human products is “a highly anthropocentric worldview” (Barlow, Gardner, Lees, Parry, & Peres, 2012, p. 48; see also Kawa, 2016; Raffles, 2002). The Amazon is the product of complex and millenarian interactions of countless distinct beings, only some of which are human. And the inter-ethnic encounters are always also inter-specific contact zones.

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**Conflict of Interest**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
Notes
1. The domestic dog (Canis lupus familiaris or Canis familiaris) was known before 1492 in North America, Mesoamerica, and parts of South America (the Andes, Patagonia and the Pampas), but not in the Amazon and central-eastern Brazil, although this topic is still under discussion (Gilmore, 1950; Schwartz, 1997). Reports mentioning dogs in the Guianas and the Caribbean are controversial, but may, as suggested by Peter Stahl (2013), refer to other species of native (but not domesticated) canids. Ethnographic evidence, however, suggests that several indigenous people viewed European dogs as very distinct creatures compared with the native domestic dog breeds they possessed (Ariel de Vidas, 2002). The horse was indeed absent, although first appeared in the Americas before its ancestors vanished from this region about 13,000 years ago (Flannery, 2001, pp. 293–296).

2. Otoni was a Brazilian politician and entrepreneur who worked for several years in eastern Minas Gerais during the nineteenth century when newly-arrived colonists were destroying vast tracts of virgin forest and violently impacting the Macro-Ge-speaking indigenous peoples who still lived in the region.

3. It is important to highlight the exotic origin of these dogs, since the species existed in the Americas (except for the Amazon and central and eastern Brazil) before the arrival of Europeans (see note 1). For at least 5500 years BP (or earlier), New Guinea has been home to a canine known as New Guinea singing dog (Canis hallstromi, Troughton 1957) (Cairns & Wilton, 2016; Larson et al., 2012, pp. 8,881–8,882). There is an ongoing debate about the taxonomic status of this animal (Koler-Matznick, Brisbin Jr, Feinstein, & Bulmer, 2003), but it seems we can reasonably assume that the dogs brought by the European explorers were perceived as exotic beings very distinct from the local varieties.

4. I am not suggesting that the technologies of war and conquest brought by the Europeans were more efficient than indigenous technologies, which I do not believe (see Alencastro, 2000 for evidence); consequently, I refer to the way in which narratives of conquest celebrate animals and metal as determinants in the many victories of the Spanish and Portuguese conquerors.

5. Rondon was the military officer in charge of building the telegraph line that would finally connect the north west of the country to its major political and economic centers. The peaceful relations he always maintained with the indigenous peoples he met established Rondon as the founding father of modern Brazilian indigenism.

6. Barboza (2012, p. 5) collected a slightly different version of the story of initial contact, but his narrative still maintains dogs as protagonists: Rondon and his group remained in Puruborá territory near the Manoel Correia river for 18 days because the Indians killed some “purebred dogs” that Rondon brought with him to undertake the Telegraphic Commission project.

7. Founded by Rondon in 1910, the Indian Protection Service (Serviço de Proteção aos Índios, SPI) was the first official indigenist agency in Brazil.

8. Those students were studying the history of their people at village school and were instructed to talk with their elders about the “first dogs they saw.” Then, they produced the written text reproduced here with permission.

9. I say many peoples because, strictly speaking, neither the Karitiana nor the Puruborá mention familiarization of native South American canids. On the contrary, the Karitiana claim the difficulty of breeding the two animals known in Karitiana as “bush dogs” or “wild dogs” (gyryty and kypon) which can correspond to some of the native canid species (Vander Velden, 2012, p. 298).

10. Contexts that obviously include not only dogs, but also horses, chicken, parrots, arthropods, worms, plants, fungi, and last but not least, microorganisms: Alfred Crosby’s The Columbian Exchange (1973) provides lots of examples.

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Naming the First Dogs: Canine Agency in the First Contacts with Indigenous Peoples...


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