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## The Plight of “Big Black Dogs” in American Animal Shelters: Color-Based Canine Discrimination

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Big Black Dog (BBD) Syndrome is the extreme under-adoption of large black dogs based not on temperament or health, but rather on the confluence of a number of physical and environmental factors in conjunction with the Western symbolism of the color black. The color black in Western society is typically representative of evil and other negative connotations. The physical and environmental factors of size, color, the kennel environment, and the “genericness” of black dogs, when combined with the negative associations of the color black in Western culture, create what I define as “unconscious background checking.” “Unconscious background checking” is a phenomenon caused by the belief that shelter dogs have questionable backgrounds. As a result, the public, in order to protect themselves from “damaged” dogs, tend to shy away from the black (impure) dogs, and thus unconsciously discriminate against black dogs.

In fall 2007 I began a year of employment at the Washington Humane Society (WHS) in Washington, DC where I first worked as an enrichment coordinator and later as a canine behavior evaluator and specialist. As an enrichment coordinator I provided mental stimulation for the dogs and cats of the shelter in order to reduce their stress level and maintain their mental stability. As a canine behavior evaluator and specialist I also preformed temperament evaluations on all of the incoming dogs in order to determine if their temperament was suitable for adoption. Throughout the year, I took on extra responsibilities within the organization including animal caretaking, vaccinating, educational lecturing, humane law enforcement, adoptions, and more. This year of informal participant observation provided the inspiration for this paper.

The paper begins by describing Big Black Dog Syndrome and its effects in shelters across the United States. I then discuss the physical and environmental factors that contribute to BBD Syndrome; Western symbolism associated with the color black, historical examples of black dogs as negative entities in Western culture, and the concept of “unconscious background checking,” which negatively impacts the adoption rates of BBDs. Lastly, I offer some suggestions as to how shelters in the United States can ameliorate the negative effects of BBD Syndrome.

### **What is Big Black Dog Syndrome?**

For a large black dog in an animal shelter in the United States, the difficulty with adoption does not stem from their health, breed, sociability, or temperament – it is the color of their coat (Hipp 2008). It is a matter of canine discrimination. Among those who work in the animal sheltering community the phenomenon is commonplace enough to have earned its own moniker: Big Black Dog Syndrome (Dahl 2008). Two undeniable

indicators of Big Black Dog Syndrome are that large dark coated canines are adopted less frequently and euthanized more frequently than dogs of other sizes and colors.

BBD Syndrome does not vary by breed. In my time at WHS I saw many BBDs whose breeds included Labrador Retrievers, Chow Chows, Rottweilers, Pit Bull Terriers, German Shepherd Dogs, Newfoundlands and mixes of all of the above. WHS even had a BBD named Jinny that we eventually identified as a rare *Cão de Fila de São Miguel* (Azores Cattle Dog). Similar stories are told across the United States (Cohen 2007; Hipp 2008).

Animal shelter officials say large black dogs are more likely to end up being humanely euthanized or turned away from a shelter than being re-homed. "Nobody tracks the problem nationally, and local shelters often keep only limited data on the sizes, breeds and colors of the dogs that are adopted or put down," the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) told the Associated Press (CNN 2008; Orlando Sentinel 2008). Stephen Musso, executive vice president of the ASPCA said, "What we hear from shelter after shelter: Big, black dogs just don't get adopted" (Orlando Sentinel 2008).

My experience at WHS indicates that BBD Syndrome is a very real and dangerous phenomenon leaving many temperamentally and physically sound dogs shelved for months while hundreds of other types of dogs find new and loving homes. Jill Wimmer, shelter manager at PAWS Atlanta, agrees: "I've had to turn away many black dogs because I can't fill the place up with them. And every one I turned away had a great temperament." Wimmer knows that she can adopt out three non-BBD dogs in the time it takes to re-home one BBD (Hipp 2008).

At the city animal shelter in Rogers, Arkansas, BBDs almost always make up the majority of the dogs put to sleep each month. In March 2008, 13 of the 14 dogs euthanized were large and black, said Rhonda Dibasilio, manager of the city Animal Services Department (Orlando Sentinel 2008).

I interpret the gross under-adoption of these dogs as attributable to a perception of their presence as menacing. What makes these dogs appear more menacing than their lighter colored counterparts is that their dark color has very real negative associations. The metaphor in Western society of black as bad, evil, sinister, etc. is not anecdotal, marginal, or minor. Ordinary conceptual systems, such as color symbolism, are fundamentally metaphorical in nature and influence action, thought, and govern everyday functioning down to the most mundane detail – including picking out a dog to adopt.

BBD Syndrome is the synthesis of physical and environmental factors, and the social memory (a society's shared beliefs about its past shaped by oral and written accounts passed down through the generations, Crumley 2002) of the color black as bad/evil that culminates in "unconscious background checking." The confluence of physical and environmental factors such as size, color, the kennel environment, the negative associations of the color black in Western culture, and the dog's background creates a situation where large dark colored dogs are under-adopted in animal shelters in the United States.

Typically, breeders are not faced with the challenges that BBD Syndrome presents to shelter dogs (Dahl 2008). In many cases the public is aware that the breed

standard for the dog that they are buying calls for only, mostly, or some black puppies. Also, “unconscious background checking” does not apply in the case of breeders because the background of the breeders’ puppies is known.

Delia Kelly, editor of *The White and Long Coat German Shepherd Society’s* magazine says, “People say to us that white German Shepherd Dogs look softer and gentler than coloured ones” (Cohen 2007:10). Delia explains, “Someone will ask if they can stroke one of our dogs, and when they ask what the breed is and we tell them, they say, ‘No, it can’t be – I’m frightened of German Shepherds!’” (Cohen 2007:10). Although white dogs of specific breeds, such as German Shepherd Dogs and Boxers might be discriminated against in pedigree circles, white dogs are often not discriminated against as pets. Dogs Trust and Wood Green Animal Shelters in the United Kingdom both note that although occasionally potential adopters are suspicious that a white dog might be physically or mentally defective (notably deafness), they are re-homed promptly. The color prejudice that works in favor of white dogs in shelters seems to work against their black kennelmates (Horton-Bussey 2007:15).

In late 2004, Tamara Delany, a former elementary school teacher, founded *Contrary to Ordinary: The Black Pearls of the Dog World*,<sup>1</sup> a website designed to help find new homes for dark-coated dogs and to combat BBD Syndrome by educating the public and the sheltering community. “I want people to become aware that when they decide to adopt a dog, they shouldn’t just look at what the dog looks like. They should find the best personality match” (Smolowe 2007). Delany’s site caught on quickly in the sheltering community and she was soon hearing from shelters from around the world, asking how best to showcase their black dogs. “What she’s doing is very important in terms of getting people to think about the way the dog will fit into the household instead of the way the dog will match the furniture,” says Suzie Duvall of the Common Sense for Animals shelter in New Village, New Jersey (Smolowe 2007).

Due in no small part to Delany’s work, *Petfinder*<sup>2</sup> made a banner specific to the issue of Big Black Dog Syndrome reading, “Did you know that large black dogs are the last to be adopted?” The banner was made for listing shelters to use to promote the awareness of BBD Syndrome. Despite a lack of firm statistics, *Petfinder* felt that BBD Syndrome was real and important enough to necessitate special attention (Delany 2008a).

## **The Color Black**

Black dogs can easily look more menacing than they actually are because black absorbs light, thus moderating facial feature definition, which makes it harder to read their facial expressions. “People are often wary of dark dogs because it’s difficult to read their expressions,” said Paul Nicosi, the dog behavior specialist at Bide-A-Wee animal shelter in New York City. Nicosi continues, “Without defined eyebrows, a playful grin might be construed as an angry grimace. There isn’t a lot of contrast between black eyes and a black face, so people can’t get a handle on how the dog is feeling” (Orlando Sentinel 2008).

The same effect happens when taking a photograph of a dark subject. Many images taken of dark colored dogs obliterate any facial features the dog may have and

create what appears to be a black blob where the dog's face ought to be. Often, the crucial first glimpse a potential adopter has of a dog is through the shelter's website. If the picture of a dog is not good, many adopters will move on because they are not drawn in.

Since no color reflects more light than white, and none less than black (Sargent 1964:64), the "blob effect" is achieved because black absorbs light and therefore makes it very hard to capture an image properly in the poor lighting of the kennel. "In a lot of shelter environments the lighting is not that great to begin with," says Pam Black Townsend, a shelter volunteer at the SPCA/Humane Society of Prince George's County in Maryland (Hylton 2008), making the "blob effect" that much more pronounced. The "blob effect" happens with many amateur photos and occurs even in some professionally taken images. "Blob effect" photos often end up on shelters' websites, which is how many people find the dog they intend to adopt (Dahl 2008).

In today's internet-based society, a photo of an animal is the foundation for Petfinder and shelter based ads. Potential adopters no longer have to go to a shelter and walk through the kennel to take their first look at the animals a shelter has up for adoption. The Internet is often the first place many consumers go to investigate a potential purchase, and potential adopters do much the same thing when searching for a new canine or feline member of the family. I often greeted potential adopters who were visiting WHS to meet a specific animal that they had researched on WHS' website. Due to the crucial impact of first impressions, especially those made online, good photography of dark animals is imperative.

The adage "A picture is worth a thousand words" is highly applicable in this instance. A good picture is crucial in the Internet era of pet adoption. First impressions, even those over the Internet, can mean the difference between five adoption applications or none. Unfortunately, many shelter workers find themselves short-staffed, rushed, and busy when trying to take a picture of a rambunctious black dog, which often leads to a less than ideal picture being taken of the animal that is then posted on the shelter's website.

"Darker colored subject material needs special attention to lighting to show details and to avoid the shadowing that will cause it to appear as a blob," says Ed Halley of Photographers' Notebook. "Our brains are very good for adapting to different lighting conditions, so it may not be intuitive to realize the importance of illumination" (Delany 2008a). Amateur or hastily taken photos of BBDs usually do not show their eyes or expressions, making them show up as "blobs" instead of a dog with an expression. Many potential adopters skip over a "blob effect" picture because they are not drawn in (Delany 2008a).

In my experience at WHS I also found that BBD Syndrome seems to occur in black cats, but to a lesser extent. "Blob effect" photos as well as decreased facial feature definition all affect adoption rates for black cats. Also, many patrons of WHS came in and explained to both myself and other staff that their only stipulation for adopting a cat was that it could not be black. However, despite the disinclination by some to adopt black cats, the black cats at WHS did not face the long waiting periods that WHS' BBDs faced.

In speaking with many potential adopters during my tenure at WHS, I came

to realize that black cats have a certain kitsch value due to their explicit, even cliché connection with superstition and witchcraft. A black cat is readily recognized as a symbol of witches, Halloween, superstition, and folklore. Black dogs do not have the same conscious and explicit connection to superstition that black cats do.

While black dogs have a connection to the spooky folklore of the spectral black dogs of England, the connection is not as readily obvious, well known and/or linked to popular culture as that of black cats. Today much of the superstition that linked cats and, specifically, black cats to witchcraft has been overcome, and the cliché of black cats as somehow affiliated with witches offers kitsch value that helps many find homes.

### **Shelter Color Psychology**

The kennel environment is often gray and the overall unwelcoming atmosphere also contributes to the psychology of color, because the color of a room can affect people's performance and emotion based strictly on the ambiance created by that color (Sloane 1967:71-80). Gray kennels negatively affect the mood of potential adopters and cause black dogs to blend into the background. By blending into the background they stand out less and are consequently adopted less than lighter colored dogs.

The often unwelcoming environment of the kennel does not foster increased adoption rates for two reasons. First, having a gray and drab looking kennel has the opposite effect that painting and decorating a kindergarten classroom does – the colorful room invigorates and energizes, while the dark kennel demoralizes (Sloane 1967:71-80). The experience of a gray kennel filled with the din of tens of dogs barking is not appealing or inviting. Poor visibility due to improper lighting may negatively affect BBD adoption rates because black absorbs light, making black dogs and their features harder to see. A poorly lit kennel will only exacerbate this problem.

### **Genericness**

The gene that produces black coloration in dogs is a dominant trait, (Hylton 2008) and thus a quirk of dark-dog biology has led to an overabundance of large, black dogs, said Alex Yaffe, who founded Heartland Lab Rescue in Oklahoma. Labradors and Pit Bull Terriers tend to have big litters of five or more puppies (Orlando Sentinel 2008). My experiences indicated that blackness in dogs is equivalent to “genericness,” and since people tend to seek pets that have some aspect of distinction, they are less likely to adopt a “generic” black dog.

Rarity drives supply and demand in many cases. Many uniquely colored dogs, whose personality and temperament might not be as sound as those of large black dogs at the shelter, get adopted on the basis of their more distinct color. The desire for an animal that stands out is certainly not to be overlooked when discussing why animals of a specific color are under-adopted (Cohen 2007:10).

I saw many BBDs reach very high levels of obedience training while at WHS only to be ignored by potential adopters. Even when these highly trained dogs are personally shown to potential adopters, many are still not adopted. However, I know of at least two examples of dogs from WHS who were adopted specifically because of their high

level of training. King, a black Labrador mix was the second dog at WHS to achieve American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizen<sup>3</sup> certificate. His high level of training is what eventually got him noticed by a young woman who was hearing impaired. King was adopted because his adopter wanted to train him to become a hearing assistance dog, and his high level of basic obedience was a great foundation from which to begin training him as an assistance dog.

## **Why Size Matters**

In addition to color, the other major factor is size. In Washington, DC, as in many urban areas, most people are interested in adopting smaller dogs (under 50 pounds, but especially those dogs in the Toy Group, none of which exceed 20 pounds, as defined by the American Kennel Club). Not everyone has a big enough home to accommodate a large dog, and many apartments have breed as well as size restrictions. Nor can every household afford to feed and care for a large dog. There are also the very practical aspects of handling a large animal. Small, portable lap dogs that can be toted in small purse-like bags also happen to be in vogue, possibly due to the high media visibility of celebrities such as Paris Hilton and her Chihuahua, Tinkerbelle. Bigger dogs face understandable, legitimate, and practical discrimination.

I observed that the areas of the New York Avenue location at WHS where the small dogs were kept were often the most frequently visited sections of the shelter. I can also attest that the small dogs spent less time available for adoption and received more applications per animal than did larger dogs. Often small dogs with less than affable or sound temperaments, or that had negative behavioral issues would barely spend a day available for adoption while larger dogs without any negative behavioral issues spent double or triple the time waiting for just one application.

## **Symbolism of the Color Black**

As diurnal creatures, it is no surprise that a primal fear among humans is the dark of night (Heather 1948:165-169). One of the most dangerous times of the day for diurnal creatures such as humans is nighttime since humans rely most heavily on the sense of sight. Nighttime, as well as storms and ash, are all early natural symbols associated with the color black. The Greek philosopher Homer had a concept of color derived from the elements that was founded upon light and darkness. The origins of symbolic meaning associated with color in Western society appear to stem from natural elements that were culturally elaborated (Heather 1948:165-169).

According to Marshall Sahlins, "color distinctions are naturally based, and these natural distinctions are culturally constituted" (1976:12). Semantic relations of colors in English have the same general structures as their perceptual system. A flag of quarantine is yellow, and yellow, like red, is a sign of danger; specifically, the danger signaled by yellow is illness in the hue of sickness (bilious liver disorders cause the skin to take on a sallow yellowish tint) (1976:15). Yellow as sickness, and black as negative, have their roots, as do other colors, in natural phenomenon that are culturally contextualized.

Furthermore, Sahlins says that the social use of color does not exist solely to

signify objective differences of nature, but also communicates significant distinctions of culture (Sahlins 1976:3). “Colors are, in practice, semiotic codes. Both as terms and concrete properties, colors are engaged as signs in vast schemes of social relations: meaningful structures by which persons and groups, objects and occasions, are differentiated and combined in cultural orders” (Sahlins 1976:3). Harold Conklin’s (1955) work on the Hanunóo correlates well with Sahlins’ work in demonstrating that color terms include a vast array of non-colorimetric information.

According to Sahlins, there is a correlation of the semiotic and perceptual structures of color. In a system of colors, a human group accomplishes the essential cultural act of making a conceptual order out of a natural order (Sahlins 1976:16). Thus the natural origins of color symbolism expanded by cultural contextualization (the black as negative/danger/evil and yellow as sickness), is coherent with the environmental model of why color symbolism is not universal – there is no universal ecological environment. The nature of color symbolism interpreted through culture, is the cause of vastly different ranges in the symbolism attributed to specific colors. In China and India, white is the color of mourning, not black (Sloane 1967:45).

While there is no universal code for the symbolism behind the connotations associated with colors found across all cultures, there does seem to be a link between basic color terms and natural objects. In their work on basic color terms, Brent Berlin and Paul Kay found evidence that when new color terms are added to the lexicon, they are often labeled with the same name as a natural object and that definite generic and abstract terms evolved from these initial terms (1969:39-40). For example, in many languages the word for red derives from a form of the word for blood (Greenberg 1963:154).

## Metaphors

In *Metaphors We Live By*, linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson suggest that metaphors not only make our thoughts more vivid and interesting but that they actually structure our perceptions and understanding. Lakoff and Johnson demonstrate that in all aspects of life reality is defined in terms of metaphors. Our lives are lived and our experiences structured both consciously and unconsciously by means of metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:158; 273). Malinowski in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) makes clear that many aspects of culture are invisible to the actors within it because the actors are so deeply entrenched within their culture. The metaphors used to structure social reality present in Western culture are not obvious and are acted upon unconsciously precisely because of their pervasiveness. One such metaphor used to structure social reality present in Western culture is the color black.

The metaphor “black is evil” structures the way that color is used and perceived in Western society. The concept of “black” is partially structured, understood, performed, and talked about in negative terms. Conventional ways of talking about color, presuppose a metaphor of which we are hardly ever conscious. According to Lakoff and Johnson, “Metaphor is not merely in the words we use – it is in our very concept of color” (1980:5). Colors in Western culture are engendered with metaphors such as envy in the case of green, lust with red, illness with yellow, masculinity with

blue, purity with white, and evil with black, to name but a few.

According to Lakoff and Johnson, "Every culture must provide a more or less successful way of dealing with its environment, both adapting to it and changing it. Every culture must define a social reality within which people can function socially" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:146). As discussed by Sahlins, social reality is defined by a culture and affects its concept of physical reality. What is real for an individual as a member of a culture is a product of social reality and of the way in which that shapes the experience of the physical world (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:146).

According to Lakoff and Johnson, much of "American" social reality, informed by social memory, is understood in metaphorical terms (e.g. 'black is evil'). Since the "American" concept of the physical world is partly metaphorical (the dangers contained within the black of night and the decay associated with death translate into the metaphor of black as frightening, menacing and evil), metaphor plays a significant role in determining what is real; and that is in this case, that black dogs are evil (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:146). The scrutiny BBDs face vis-à-vis the metaphor 'black is evil,' is likely the largest contributing factor as to why BBD Syndrome has such devastating ramifications in shelters across the United States.

### **Western Historical Traditions Concerning the Color Black**

Black and white stand out as particularly complex color names, because of the moral and psychological associations imposed on the words. Black and white are equated with wrong and right, night and day, and darkness and light. These links are learned through acculturation and persist through habit (Sloane 1991:xviii). In Homer, death and pangs are written about using black imagery. The Bible, Greek and Latin classics, such as Homer's *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, as well as in works by Sophocles, Euripides, and Virgil, attribute moral significance to white clothing as pure and innocent (Heather 1948:169-170).

"For this shall the earth mourn, and the heavens above be black" (Jer. 4:28) is one example where the Hebrew Bible references mourning customs in association with the color black (Sloane 1967:45). Examples of biblical references to the effects of famine and sickness, and the blackness of the sun in times of calamity (Heather 1948:169) include, "My skin is black upon me, and my bones are burned with heat" (Job 30:30), and "The earth shall quake before them; the heavens shall tremble: the sun and the moon shall be dark, and the stars shall withdraw their shining" (Joel 2:10). According to the book of Revelations in the Bible, "They shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy" (Rev. 3:4). In the same book angels are said to be clothed in white linen (Rev. 19:14).

In a treatise on color published in 1584, Lomazzo, a sixteenth century color theorist, set out to describe the seven principal colors which correlated to the seven planets, the seven days of creation, and so on. In this treatise, Lomazzo explained the ways in which these colors could and should be used in art. Black was to be used to convey melancholy, sadness, deep pain, decrepitude, accidents, death; and white for innocence, purity, miraculousness, justice, theological virtuosity, and hope (Lomazzo 1584:427-428).

Shakespeare uses the color white in connection with sanctity, innocence, virtue, and peace. In *The Hymn* John Milton wrote, “The saintly veil of maiden white to throw” (line 14). Alfred Tennyson’s references to whiteness are numerous and include the robe of saints, truth, blamelessness, innocence, maidens and knights in white, virginity, and the black sheep made white (Heather 1948:176-177). In Tennyson’s play *The Falcon*, the character of the Count utters, “And yet to speak white truth, my good old mother, I have seen it like the snow on the moraine” (Tennyson 1884:120).

Shakespeare uses black in association with death’s black veil, black as death, the devil damn thee black, a black deed, black “villainy” and sins. In *Hamlet*, the young Prince Hamlet is quoted as saying, “Nay then, let the devil wear black, for I’ll have a suit of sables” (Shakespeare: act 3, scene 2, lines 137-138). Shakespeare also refers to the witches in *Macbeth* as black hags (Shakespeare: act 4, scene 1, lines 46-47), and in other places to black magicians and black fairies (Heather 1948:176). In Milton we find black used in connection with hell, death, sin, sorrow, poison, black humors, black Perdition, and black magic. “And govern well thy appetite; lest Sin surprise thee, and her black attendant, Death” (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, book 7, lines 46-47). Percy Shelley uses the black in connection with death, despair, parricide, guilty world, vice, demon forms, lies, blood, the devil, and fiends (Heather 1948:175-176).

From these authors comes a rich tradition of proverbs, dialectical, and slang expressions that illustrate the negative connotations attached to the color black: to blackball, black list, black hole, blackleg, blackmail, black art, black flag, black Jack, black Monday, black sheep, black plague – most of which have a sinister signification. These references to black owe their origins to initial suggestions of natural color, and were transformed by classical writers as being primarily connected with thoughts of hell, sin, death, poison, evil, malevolence, malfeasance, the Devil and other manifestations of what is foreboding, and forbidding (Heather 1948:175-176). Here then are the foundations for the “white is good,” and “black is bad,” binary opposition seen throughout Western culture.

According to Lévi-Strauss, human culture needs to classify as a means of imposing order on people’s relationships with nature and between people (Lévi-Strauss 1969). He argued that a universal aspect of classification is opposition. He discovered that one of the most common means of classifying is the use of binary oppositions, such as good and evil, white and black, old and young, raw and cooked, male and female, and high and low. Binary oppositions imply, or are used in such a way that privileges one of the terms over the other, creating a hierarchy (Lévi-Strauss 1969). In the case of BBD Syndrome, white is valued more highly than black. So while black is not recognized in all cultures as a metaphor for evil, it is a metaphor for evil in Western culture, where there is a strong correlation between the binary oppositions “black and white” and “evil and good.”

## Historical Examples of Black Dogs

A big, black dog unleashing destruction is a common theme in books, movies and folklore as diverse as *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the *Harry Potter* series and *The Omen*. In British folklore, stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Sir Walter Scott

depict black dogs as creepy, spectral figures that haunt cemeteries. In the Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Norse mythologies, black dogs are often the harbingers of death or emissaries of the Devil. Even the common “Beware of Dog” sign depicts a big, black dog, teeth bared and eyes bulging (Dahl 2008; Hylton 2008; Orlando Sentinel 2008).

Through the Middle Ages, this connection continued to develop in folklore, particularly in Britain where sightings of devilish spectral black hounds are often recorded and are usually associated with liminal spaces such as graveyards, ley lines, churches, lonely highways, rivers, fields, ancient ruins, bridges, etc. Perhaps most famous is the phantom black dog of Dartmoor, upon which Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was based. In many cases the spectral black dog is directly linked to a deceased person, an executed witch or the Devil himself (Brown 1958:176-179; Rudkin 1938:11-131).

Beings that inhabit liminal spaces are often subject to fearful respect from those who do not occupy those liminal spaces. Much like shamans or hunters who are not fully part of the community, and not entirely part of the Spirit Realm/Wilderness, black spirit dogs are liminal creatures whose reputation affects the adoption rates of their real-world counterparts. It is not improbable that the public is unconsciously influenced by all the negative connotations surrounding black dogs, leading to a prejudice against them (Cohen 2007:10).

The association between black dogs and the supernatural world has led black dogs in Western culture to be regarded as earthly omens of disaster, crime, and/or death, thus creating an aura of apprehension around large black dogs. In British folklore, seeing a black dog was believed to be a premonition of a personal calamity and has evolved in the modern world into labels for negative personal emotions, in particular Churchill’s famous quote about struggling with his “black dog,” which has become a term for depression (Brown 1958; Cohen 2007:9-10; Dahl 2008).

## **Dark Colored Guard Dogs**

Long before BBD Syndrome was ever labeled as such, dark colored bully and guard dog breeds were singled out for guarding purposes and for masculine status (Delise 2007). Madeline Bernstein, President of the SPCA in Los Angeles suggests that BBD breeds include those who simply look a little big and scary, and whose bad reputations may have preceded them, such as the Rottweiler, the Doberman Pinscher and the American Pit Bull Terrier (Dahl 2008). However, my experiences indicate that BBD Syndrome is not related in any way to breed type. At WHS, BBDs included Chows, Labradors, Terrier mixes, Rottweiler mixes, and everything in between. However, Bernstein’s observation about guard dog types is not without merit. There has been and still is a market (albeit one to which WHS does not adopt out animals) for menacing dogs used to guard and for status.

Over the centuries in the United States, there have been trends in the dog breeds chosen for masculine status, and those breeds are often black, or dark (Delise 2007). Often these breeds fell into the guarding, mastiff or bully breed types. Bully breeds are frequently considered to be Pit Bull type dogs, and include the American Pit Bull Terrier, the American Staffordshire Terrier, the Bull Terrier, the Staffordshire

Bull Terrier, Miniature Bull Terrier and the American Bulldog. Dark colored guarding, mastiff or bully breeds seem to be singled out amongst popular breeds for guarding or for other violent activities because dark colored dogs appear more menacing and intimidating and would consequently function more effectively as guard dogs.

The first of these preferences for dark colored guard dogs were for Bloodhounds during the 1800s. These Bloodhounds were not what are today called Bloodhounds by the American Kennel Club. Rather the term referred to a group of breeds used for a similar function that fit into a larger category known as Bloodhound. Often these dogs were large and black (Delise 2007:20-35).

From the late 1800s to the early 1900s the Newfoundland and the Mastiff, both very large and often black, or dark brindle, were in vogue as guard dogs. Many who know Newfoundlands might balk at the idea that Newfoundlands could be capable of vicious behavior, but such a statistic is indicative of an alarming phenomenon. Increased popularity of a breed results in an increase in the number of substandard owners;<sup>4</sup> those owners who do not adequately care for and/or socialize their dogs, in turn create an increase in under-socialized and potentially dangerous dogs. The increase of substandard owners also increases the instances of cruel treatment that can create vicious animals or highly fearful dogs that are likely to bite out of fear. Similarly with an increase in popularity there comes an increase in poor breeding that not only results in poor conformation and health problems, but in unpredictable temperament (Delise 2007:28, 36).

In the first half of the twentieth century, Great Danes, Chow Chows, and German Shepherd Dogs grew in popularity – all of which have dark varieties in their breed (Delise 2007:48, 72). By the 1940s the image of the German Shepherd Dog was being rehabilitated due to its use by police and guide dog agencies. Around the same time the Doberman Pinscher's popularity as a guard dog/status dog was on the rise due to its color, physical stature, and 1940s era connection with the Nazi Party. From 1964 to 1980 the Doberman would rise from the 22nd most popular purebred dog in the United States to the 2nd most popular (Delise 2007:78-86).

Starting in the mid-1970s the Doberman was replaced by the Rottweiler in popularity; another large, dark dog. From 1975-1979 there were 372,532 registered Dobermans and 9,961 registered Rottweilers in the United States. From 1995-1999 there were 82,243 Dobermans registered and 355,797 registered Rottweilers. The breed of dog is the only variable that has changed over the decades. Americans were, and still are using large dark dogs as status/guard dogs (Delise 2007:92-93).

As was the case for the Bloodhound and the Doberman, for every person who fears the breed there is another person who wants it for that exact reason. It is because of their image as menacing and/or vicious, that specific (depending on the current trend), and often dark breeds were and are still sought after for status (Delise 2007:85).

## **Unconscious Background Checks**

The physical and environmental factors of the color black, the shelter environment, size, and genericness, when combined with the negative associations the color black carries in U.S. society, culminates in BBDs staying in shelters for months on end because of a

phenomenon that I call “unconscious background checking.” “Unconscious background checking” is defined by a preconceived notion by the public that all or most of the dogs in a shelter have backgrounds that predispose them to negative behavioral issues. The symbolism of black as the color of evil, as opposed to the purity of white, prejudices the public against BBDs. The assumption made unconsciously by the public is that since all of the dogs at the shelter have shaded pasts that predispose them to having behavioral problems, the black dogs will naturally have more issues as opposed to the white dogs, who, in the minds of adopters, are linked with the symbolism of white as pure and innocent. The binary opposition of black vs. white sets up a hierarchy where white (which includes all coat colors other than dark brown and black) dogs are preferred over black dogs.

The reality of the matter is that not all shelter dogs have pasts that predispose them to having behavioral issues. Similarly, behavioral issues come in all shapes, sizes, and colors and are influenced by a myriad of factors such as age, breed, breeding, socialization, and, yes, even their past/previous owners/living conditions. The best way to avoid adopting a dangerous or behaviorally unsound dog is to talk to shelter staff who are familiar with all of the dogs available for adoption.

### **Suggestions to Mitigate the Effects of Big Black Dog Syndrome**

During my research I have come across and created some tactics that shelters can use to mitigate the effects of BBD Syndrome. The Society for the Improvement of Conditions for Stray Animals in Kettering, Ohio, runs a discount on black dogs in February, where adoption fees are halved. The February sale was created by executive director Rudy Bahr who realized that more than half of the shelter’s 42 dogs were BBDs. Bahr recommends tying festive bandannas around the necks of BBDs and taking them to a well-lit area to have their photo taken for the website (Dahl 2008). Decorating, renovating, or building a welcoming shelter environment will also positively affect adoption rates, not just for BBDs, but for all of the animals. Kate Pullen, director of animal sheltering issues at HSUS, recommends not kenneling multiple black dogs next to one another (Hipp 2008).

Since education is key, shelters can also make posters and web postings for their BBDs that include the Black Pearl Dogs web address so potential adopters can learn about the plight of BBDs (Delany 2008b). Information about a specific BBD and BBD Syndrome can really make a difference in finding dogs a home since many potential adopters are extremely curious about the history of the dog (or cat) they are interested in adopting (“unconscious background checking”).

Another idea is to teach BBDs obedience skills or an endearing trick that will make them more attractive to the average family (Delany 2008b). The long stays at shelters that many BBDs face are often made more pleasant by the hard work of staff and volunteer trainers who work with the BBDs to keep them mentally sound. In teaching them basic, and in some cases advanced obedience, the lives of those dogs are improved and can even help them to find new homes by giving them “marketable” skills. There were two cases where BBDs at WHS achieved the American Kennel Club’s Canine Good Citizen certification, which in turn helped them find truly great homes.

For those shelters with flair, coordinating a “Meow Mixer”<sup>5</sup> or “Tuxes & Tails”<sup>6</sup>

events can be a great way to bring attention to BBD Syndrome and find homes for BBDs (Delany 2008b). Some other tips include photographing black dogs and cats against light backdrops if one cannot photograph them outside, fostering a relationship with a local photographer who will take images of the shelter animals pro bono for the shelter to use on its website, and designing a brighter, happier kennel environment.

## **Conclusion**

Upon reflection almost all of the BBDs at the Washington Humane Society during my time there (and according to co-workers there were many BBDs before and after my employment at WHS) were adopted by individuals or families who were invested in adopting a dog that matched their family dynamic and/or needs. These adopters made the conscious decision to go kennel by kennel (while consulting with staff) to learn about each dog's personality and attributes. A dark brindle Pit-Bull Terrier named Gabe was adopted by an avid hiker and camper because he was looking for a dog that was large, hardy and energetic enough to withstand the rigors of strenuous hikes. As mentioned earlier, King was adopted by a woman who wanted to train him to be a hearing assistance dog. King's American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizen (CGC) certification, which he earned while at WHS, was a great foundation from which to build toward certification as a hearing assistance dog because CGC certification is often a required building block for therapy assistance training. Jinny, the *Cão de Fila de São Miguel*, was adopted by a young family looking for the dog that was the perfect fit for their family dynamic. That family was also interested in helping Jinny overcome her timidity, which prevented her from socializing with other dogs and people.

All of these adopters were invested in finding the right dog for them, and in Jinny's case, with helping her overcome a behavioral issue that detracted from her quality of life. They inadvertently worked their way around BBD Syndrome because they were so invested in looking for specific attributes and personality traits (in Gabe's case his size may have been one attribute that made him well suited to hiking), that they looked past the physical and environmental factors, the unknown background of the dog, and the negative symbolism of the color black in Western society that causes BBD Syndrome.

Because the majority of potential adopters are not like the cases discussed above, awareness of the importance of personality over appearance is the key to breaking the chain that creates, recreates, and reinforces BBD Syndrome in animal shelters in the United States. With a few simple changes in place, the social memory of black dogs as menacing and dangerous can be overcome. There is no way around the unconscious and deeply engrained associations of the color black as the color of malevolence and evil. Therefore, the key is knowledge. The public can be made aware of BBD Syndrome through educational adoption events, shelter literature and signage, the shelter website, and by drawing positive attention to the dogs themselves through brightly colored signs, bandanas, and better photography. If made knowledgeable about BBD Syndrome, potential adopters will be made conscious of the prejudices they may have been operating under, and possibly, just possibly, not walk right past the black Lab mix in Kennel 5.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> [www.blackpearldogs.com](http://www.blackpearldogs.com)

<sup>2</sup> Petfinder.com (also Petfinder.org), is an online database of homeless pets in the care of about 10,000 animal welfare organizations primarily in the US and Canada. The site has aided in ten million adoptions in its first ten years. At any one time, 200,000 pets are listed including dogs, cats, birds, and other small animals. Some animal welfare groups have reported that they were able to more than double their adoptions as a result of Petfinder listings. The results are ranked in proximity to the user’s zip code. Each pet has their own page, which includes a description and photograph that shelter personnel and volunteers keep up to date. Petfinder.com is sponsorship supported and free to its users (Petfinder.com 2008).

<sup>3</sup> The Canine Good Citizen (CGC) program, established in 1989, is an American Kennel Club program to promote responsible dog ownership, encourage the training of well-behaved dogs that have the demeanor to be reliable family members as well as community members, and to promote good citizenship for all dogs. The Canine Good Citizen Program lays the foundation for other AKC activities such as obedience, agility, tracking, and performance events. A dog and handler team must take a ten step behavioral test and those teams that pass the evaluation earn a Canine Good Citizen certification (American Kennel Club 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Substandard owners can range anywhere from the extremely abusive and/or neglectful owner who does not properly or adequately care for the animal according to local and state regulations, to a well meaning owner who does not properly or adequately socialize and train the dog from a young age so as to provide it with the skills it needs to interact with other people and dogs in a safe, healthy, and balanced way. Many breeds of dogs, due to the purposes for which the breed was initially created, require more socialization and training than others as puppies and as young dogs. Without such training and socialization these dogs can be dangerous to both people and other dogs even without suffering from neglect and abuse.

<sup>5</sup> A “Meow Mixer” is an event created by employees of the Washington Humane Society. Pre-approved adopters are invited to a speed dating style event where potential adopters can meet all of a shelter’s cats (who are paired with a staff member/foster parent who can answer questions about that cat, specifically) and can go home with one that very same night. This same style event can easily be applied to BBDs.

<sup>6</sup> A “Tuxes & Tails Event” is an event that a shelter can organize to bring awareness to their BBDs and to BBD Syndrome at large. Employees put a costume, bow tie, or a fancy collar on a BBD and let them runway model it, giving them an opportunity to be seen by potential adopters. The runway show can be set to music with bios of the BBDs read over a sound system. The BBDs can give a demonstration of what tricks they might know. It is always a good idea to have a table set up to take applications and to accept financial support for the shelter (Delany 2008).