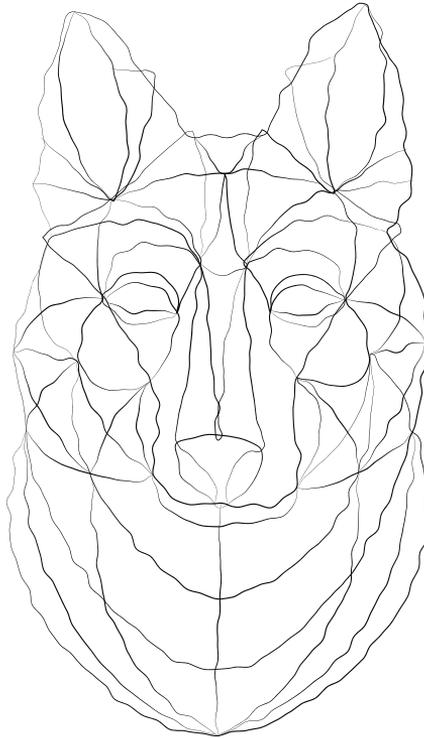


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Relational encounters. Agency in human-sled dog relations

Mikko Äijälä

It is an ordinary morning in December. It is around 7 am and without artificial lights it would be almost completely dark. Temperature is way below zero. The atmosphere at the kennel is anticipatory as human members of staff are working to get everything ready before the tourists arrive. They have to check and organise the gear and decide which dog teams will work today which requires that they know which dogs work well together and also that they have updated information from things such as if a dog is ill or a female dog is in heat. They want everything to go smoothly as tourists have paid quite amount of money for the dogsledding experience. It seems that canine members of staff do not stress at all yet. They are just waiting to get their morning drink and food. After about an hour and a half the tourist group arrives. One human staff member goes to meet them when others start to get the sleds ready for the safari. For the canine members this means working day in the form of pulling the sledge and getting some extra attention from the tourists. The noise level starts to rise immediately. As the weather is really cold human members put jackets on some of the dogs and also check the paws of every one of them. They put booties on if the dog has sensitive paw pads. Once the safari starts and the dog teams start to move, the noise level goes down almost immediately when the dogs get to their work. It is almost a sign that it is time for the canine members to take responsibility of guiding the tourists through the safari route that they are familiar with. After the safari tourists are keen to pet the dogs and they also receive information about the life of the dogs.

The vignette exemplifies how dog sledding as a tourism activity, i.e. touristic mushing as it is offered in northern Finland, is a commercialised encounter between dogs, humans and the environment. Through tourism sled dogs become part of relational encounters between several agents, including dogs themselves, tourists, entrepreneurs, DMO representatives and travel agents. These encounters are

entangled to broader political ecologies of tourism in obvious and less obvious ways. As a practice, touristic mushing involves the development of ways to communicate and co-operate across species boundaries. Practices, such as working as a team of several dogs and usually one human require goal-oriented training that entails understanding, empathy and articulation in interspecies level. The (un)success of the articulation affects how the species co-exist and co-evolve. Despite the asymmetry in (co)agency of humans and dogs, the dogs are capable of making a difference to the encounter through possessing “some kind of agency” (Koski & Bäcklund, 2017, p. 11). They are not only affecting the actual encounters with tourists, but also institutional structures by, for example, contributing to perceptions of animal ethics in tourism (Fennell, 2012; Notzke, 2017). With their status associated with polar and adventure histories, sled dogs, in comparison to many other dog breeds, occupy a liminal position. In human perceptions, they often reside on the boundary between the domestic and the wild; between culture and nature (Granås, 2018; see Onion, 2009). The important role sled dogs perform in tourism industry, and the inadequacy of categorisations and pure representations to account the ‘fleshy presences’ (Brown & Banks, 2015, p. 96) and vitality of sled dogs, as well as the fact that until recently the accounting of animal agency has been somewhat absent – especially in tourism research – raise an important issue of exploring sled dogs as agents co-evolving with humans in tourism (Bertella, 2014). The exploration takes place in the context of Finnish Lapland, where sled dog has become one of the most important animals for tourism industry and different stakeholders have quite divergent ways to approach the issues related to sled dog-human encounters, such as animal welfare (Ojuva, 2018). Many of the human stakeholders do not consider sled dogs as stakeholders of tourism industry at all.

With these reflections in mind this paper seeks to develop existing contributions to human-animal relations in commercial settings and proposes sled dog agency as a potential means to experiment the conceptual and material spaces of interspecies communities. Furthermore, the article contributes to an understanding of animal agency as co-operation in terms of animals as living subjects co-evolving with humans as part of the social (Buller, 2015). It derives from the line of thinking that agency – whether animal or not – is fundamentally relational and no agent is immune to the intended or unintended influence of others (see Syrjämaa, 2017; Urbanik, 2012). More specifically, this paper is aligned with the approach that agency of living animals is distinct from inanimate objects (Haraway, 2008; Ingold, 2011). In the first section I review that distinction and explore animal agency as relational and emerging in co-evolution with humans, followed by a perspective on tourism as a relational phenomenon shaped by humans and sled dogs. The paper is concluded with a discussion of movement as a practice through which sled dogs display and communicate their agency and how they co-operate with humans in defining tourist practices and spaces.

Relational agency

Human-animal relations hold questions of agency, ethics and their spatial dimensions (Jones, 2003; Urbanik, 2012). Particularly complex problems surround the task of taking agency and subjectivity of animals as well as humans seriously in the process of their co-constitution (Buller, 2015) – not least that agency is considered one of the most complex concepts in social sciences its content often remaining vague and obscure (Räsänen & Syrjämaa, 2017). In the most traditional sense agency is understood as a display of free will and moral behaviour referring to a contradictory space of self-fulfilment, forms of interaction, political possibilities and restrictions in structural and everyday

power relations. In the conventional developments of agency animals are understood as having no or only limited opportunities to affect these structures and therefore agency is possessed exclusively by human beings while agency of animals is denied (Koski & Bäcklund, 2017; McFarland & Hediger, 2009; Philo & Wilbert, 2000). This understanding becomes problematic, however, as beings, including animals, can adapt to the behavioural standards of their groups and this notion can be broadened to an interspecies sense of morality (McFarland & Hediger, 2009). Interspecies mutuality still entails that animals' capacity to act and coexist with humans is usually asymmetric and unequal (Haraway, 2003; see Carter & Charles, 2013). Despite this power imbalance, animals are not mere objects but act as agents shaping our material world and our encounters with them affect our ways of thinking about the world and ourselves (Räsänen & Syrjämaa, 2017). The ability to act, effect change, or make a difference is multidirectional and does not come from entities alone, but is essentially engaged in relations between subjects – human, animal – and the specific environment (Urbanik, 2012, p. 43). It should be noted that the relations do not have intrinsic value in themselves. Important are the distinctive implications of relations as enactments or displacements (Latimer, 2013). The relational and reciprocal encounters between humans and non-human animals involve at least two independent agents and there are basically two strands of discussion how to approach non-human agency. The first one is inspired by Actor Network Theory (ANT) and all-inclusive Latourian concept of agency considering that anything that sets an effect has agency (Latour, 2005). Efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, co-operation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces. A lot happens to the concept of agency once objects are considered less as social constructions and more as agents, and once humans themselves are assessed not as autonyms but as vital materialities (Bennett, 2010, p. 21). One major contribution of ANT has been an explicit challenge to human exceptionalism (see Buller, 2015). However, this stance has been criticised for its largely generalised symmetry (Johnston, 2008)

and dismissal of the living qualities of animals as distinctive from inanimate objects and machines (Ingold, 2011; Risan, 2005).

Domesticated animals, such as dogs, particularly have co-evolved and adjusted to the environment, creating new cultural environments with humans. The proliferation of animals due to domestication makes it impossible to recognize a pure 'human' society. Representations that define non-human animals through practices such as genetics – and touristic mushing – are inadequate and even contribute to the exclusion of non-human animals from society (Lulka, 2004; Philo & Wilbert, 2000). Common domestication narratives reduce non-human animals as objects under human control and domination. They also seem to disregard the explicit etymology of animal: to be "animate" is to be alive, to move (Buller, 2012, p. 142). To appreciate the agency and living qualities of animals, domestication should be seen as an ongoing mutual or reciprocal practice that transforms all species and spaces that are involved (Despret 2004, see Armstrong Oma 2013).

The advocates of recognising the co-evolution of humans and animals by separating animals from mere objects are mainly inspired by the work of Donna Haraway (2003; 2008). Emphasis is put on animals as conscious beings that form their own perspective in relation to the life-worlds in which they exist, and according to which they act reciprocally to their species and other animals. They co-evolve *with* humans in history and within this co-evolution they are able to communicate and make intentional decisions as agents (Haraway, 2008; see Dirke, 2017). Tim Ingold argues that all action is skilled which does not come ready-made but *develops* in organism's own growth and development in an environment (Ingold, 2011, p. 94, emphasis in original). For Ingold agency requires skill arising through development and therefore the process of development is fundamental for the exercise of agency. The ability to grow or develop through embodying skill and connecting movement to one's perception differs animals from inanimate objects as agents. In this sense attributing agency to objects might sound even absurd (see Ingold, 2011).

The following discussion is steered by the strand of co-evolution of human and non-human animals as conscious and intentional beings. It is not based on a belief in mutual intentionality of humans and sled dogs to produce commercialised experiences. Instead, the curiosity lies in the emergence of possibly shared set of knowledges, practices, and ultimately culture – and associated various embodiments of intersubjectivity in tourist practices as a social form (Brown & Dilley, 2012; Buller, 2012; Jerolmak, 2009).

Tourism as a relational phenomenon

Animals can have effects beyond the physical bounds of spaces where they are immediately present (Philo & Wilbert, 2000). Tourism occurs and contributes to shaping our world through relational encounters between humans and non-humans in which their roles and characteristics are co-constituted (Jóhannesson, Ren & van der Duim, 2015; see Äijälä, 2019). The ability of animals to affect at-a-distance through their presences and absences in cultural texts (e.g. brochures, souvenirs) is evident and significant in terms of a global phenomenon like animal welfare in tourism – be it in practical (Ojuva, 2018) or theoretical (Fennell, 2013) level. Hence, tourism offers a fruitful context to explore sled dog-human relations as it is a relational phenomenon in which boundaries of dogs' spaces and activities are quite strict as they are accepted into tourism sphere in subordinate roles under the rules and control managed by humans. Commercial tourism services expose 'human-dog collective' (Hodgetts & Hester, 2017) to encounters differing from general leisure time activities taking place in outdoor spaces, such as walking with dogs (Brown & Banks, 2015; Brown & Dilley, 2012), dog sports (Koski & Bäcklund, 2017) or wildlife conservation (Hodgetts & Hester, 2017) since the commercial activities are about the production of experiences for tourists on preset dates regardless of the weather or other unmanageable factors (see Rantala, Valtonen & Markuksela, 2011). Tourism becomes a public sphere, where the agency or agencies of the dogs are presupposed or given, and where the prerequisites to display their agency are already presented both semiotically and materially.

Within this framework, it is natural to think that animals are involved in tourism activities without the opportunity to give consent to their involvement. Even if animals were fully aware of the complexities of regulations of engagements in tourism activities, they lack the equal freedom to choose as they are subjects to human values (see Dashper, 2014). They live in a kind of parallel reality in which tourism as a human institution and structure is not meaningful to them as such but fundamentally influences their lives and in turn the animals affect tourism (Nance, 2013). Along with many controversial practices in animal-based tourism the awareness of tourists about issues in animal-based tourism is growing.

Tourism encounters are entangled to a certain place where humans and non-humans perform their specific roles through diverse dynamics (Rantala, 2019). The encounters are always happening in space whether it is a material space, such as a dog kennel, or more abstract and conceptually constructed space such as wilderness. Sled dogs are categorised between the extremes of tame and wild as through processes of domestication they possess utility to humans and are distributed to a special location. The terms such as 'sled dog' contain at least implicit spatial categorisations that ultimately tell less about the animal than about us (Buller, 2014). Despite the controversial categorisations and representations sled dogs are very real and are more than reflections of the human imagination producing unpredictable encounters in terms of the spatial categorisations. Unpredictable encounters happening within regulated spaces are possible as "sensory and social overload" exposes the routine behavior to settings where rehearsed roles have little coherence (Edensor, 2001).

Sled dogs contributing to tourism encounters

Touristic mushing is one of the fairly new roles the dog has occupied. The dog has become one of the most significant animal species in tourism in Finnish Lapland. Oftentimes, the dogs have an instrumental role as they are appreciated for the possibility of giving tourists an opportunity to come into close contact with nature (Bertella, 2016; Fennell, 2012). They are valued according to utopian ideal as

trusted companions conquering the wilderness (see Onion, 2009). Oftentimes, they are also considered to be born to run which is an essence of their lives also in the context of tourism. Similar purely representational narratives reinforce the notion that mushing as a tourist activity produces experiences for paying tourists in a way that the living qualities of the dogs, i.e. their agency, is disregarded (Bertella 2014; 2016).

Dogs as companion animals living in many human-controlled spaces are not very enduring if they are granted liberty to carry out their dogness as their activities, habits and ways of communicating differ from humans – they are those of animals that must be shaped and trained (Koski & Bäcklund, 2017). Sled dogs are granted more freedom to perform their dogness, which is about activities such as running and barking. Therefore, there is the potential for dogs and humans to make a difference in tourism encounter in versatile and unexpected ways. The (un-)success of the encounter is based on the shared connection between humans and dogs as agents and the external conditions such as landscape, weather and temperature (Bertella, 2016).

Touristic mushing is a highly mobile practice based on a team of dogs who are pulling a tailor-made sled in snowy conditions, or a rig if there is no snow cover. The team usually consists of four to six dogs depending how many tourists are on the sledge. Especially the team leader dogs have an important role as they know the tracks, lead the way and keep the pace. The wheel dogs running last in the dog team are usually the ones to bring strength to the team. And then there is the musher i.e. the human member of the team, which in tourism context is often a tourist, who is inexperienced and needs guidance of the company staff and oftentimes of the dogs as well – when to help the dogs by pushing the sledge and when to use the brake to stop. The team consists of human and non-human animal bodies and 'material presences of snow, a sledge, lines, harnesses and so on, which set up the conditions of touristic mushing under which the agency of the dogs and humans is distributed (Ingold, 2011, p. 91). In order to have any success, however, the tourist-sled dog encounter entails countless hours of work

and dedication from the mushers and the dogs towards practices such as knowing the directions, keeping the lines tight and not chewing the harnesses. It is human's responsibility to adapt to the dogs' embodied presence in order to understand the dogs, respect and trust their abilities, and ultimately to comprehend the dogs and communicate with them in a way they can understand (Kuhl, 2011; see Äijälä, Jylkäs, Rajab & Vuorikari, in press).

How the dogs, then, communicate and participate in the multiplicity and construction of a touristic mushing event, if they do not share a lingual language with humans? According to Thrift (2008, p. 155) different entities construct their bodies uniquely using different means of becoming and different locational anchors, as animals can be foraging herds, or migrating flocks, or hunting carnivores, each having their distinctive geographies which are part of what they are. In order to have any success touristic mushing entails that sled dogs and humans share knowledge and are able to communicate at some level. However, the shared knowledge and communication are not built through shared verbal language but through embodied responses and shared movements, which are situated as they are created in a specific encounter of the individual agents, in specific environment, and the actual event at hand (Buller, 2012; Brown & Dille, 2012; Schuurman, 2017). Human-animal-place relations are fundamentally relational in their nature entailing that the movements of humans and animals are mutual acts of emplacement (Gray, 2014). Through body movement animals both express, enact and develop their agency. Instead of rational thought movement highlights physical contact, encounters, and experience (Buller, 2012).

As a practice, touristic mushing is intrinsic to the embodied nature of movement in human-sled dog encounters. Like walking, mushing is an embodied practice, which is not only about journeying from place to place but also about an open-ended movement having neither a point of origin nor any final destination (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008). Both the dog and human participants have to be able to adapt to each other's bodily presence in order to develop shared practices of movement. Dogs and humans – especially tourists – may not be

fully aware of each other's modalities, nor of human policies allowing or restricting these modalities. These may lead to unpleasant encounters for one or both parties. These 'disruptive events' (Brown & Dilley, 2012) are quite common. Coping under these conditions requires that each party copies all the possible modalities of movement employed by the other and, as a result, both parties come to perceive the environment in similar ways (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008, p. 11; see Äijälä et al., in press).

In addition to actual safaris, touristic mushing is comprised of versatile practices such as developing and maintaining the housing systems for the dogs. These are sites, in which the material reality of the housing systems itself combines the practices of human and sled dogs, with science, and with politics (Björkdahl & Druglitrö, 2016). Sled dogs are kept in kennels and their possibilities to run, execute movement, are dictated not only by the mushers but also policies originating in other places such as landownership and tourism industry itself. Responding to the requirements of tourism development requires adaptation within prevailing practices in touristic mushing, which relate to questions about science, capitalist industry, ethics, welfare and politics defining "the meaning, the agency and the subjectivity of both the keeper and the kept" (Buller, 2016, p. 209; see Philo & Wilbert, 2000). Even in this seemingly closed space of a sled dog kennel, domestication includes "complex boundary work, unexpected intimacies, ontological uncertainties, and bodily co-constitution" (Lien, Swanson & Ween, 2018, p. 20), which shape the lives of humans and dogs in ways that are radically different from the domestication narratives of human control and domination over animals (see Ingold, 2000). Agency developed through movement is relational. It is not freedom, but co-operation. In touristic mushing, the environment becomes knowledgeable through the humandog collective.

Towards understanding animal agency as co-operation

This article has explored how sled dogs contribute with humans in tourism encounters through versatile and complex ways. Sled dogs are expected to embody

routine behavior based on rehearsed roles that are developed through domestication and goal-oriented training. They are capable of performing those roles but also produce unpredictability to the encounters through their agency that is always relational – in relation to other agents and the specific environment. However, animal agency is distinctive from inanimate objects as animals are able to develop, display and communicate their agency through body movement (Buller, 2012).

Movement is a shared practice between animals and humans which enables interspecies, non-verbal communication and co-operation between the agents even in situations where animals' capacity to act is apparently unequal to humans. The co-operation transforms spaces materially and such material transformations not only indicate the inadequacy of representations, but also become the means to create diverse assemblages, which are constructed particularly by the material impacts of movement (Lulka, 2004). Hence, spaces are co-produced by both human and animal agents in specific contexts, such as touristic mushing.

This is not to say that we should consider animals as identical to humans. Animals may exist in spaces and times in which the relation they have to their environment may differ radically from each other's and ours. Although the worlds of different animals, including humans, may not communicate in lingual languages, still they are attuned to each other (Thrift, 2008). Animals move differently but their bodies demand certain kinds of interactions and therefore produce certain distributions of subjectivities (Buller, 2012; see Risan, 2005). Through different contingencies of movement, they contribute to the worldmaking of other beings, including humans.

What makes the difference between a dog and a sled is that every movement of the dog is also a movement of its own attention, which defines that movement as an instance of action and qualifies the dog as an agent (Ingold, 2011). If we share movement and bodies with non-human animals, then we also share the ability to suffer and the inevitability of death (Buller, 2012). Perhaps we should not connect a sled and a dog to a representation of conquering the wilderness if we are to give

the animate and conscious animals more freedom to display their agency. Instead, we should understand and appreciate both the (material) impacts and the transgression of human (spatial) orderings that animal agency produces. Movement and the sharing of movement open up ways to understand human-animal encounters as co-operation.

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