

American Bully: Fear, Paradox, and the New Family Dog

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Reviled, Pit Bulls have become representative. There is no other dog that figures as often in the national narrative—no other dog as vilified on the evening news, no other dog as defended on television programs, no other dog as mythologized by both its enemies and its advocates, no other dog as discriminated against, no other dog as wantonly bred, no other dog as frequently abused, no other dog as promiscuously abandoned, no other dog as likely to end up in an animal shelter, no other dog as likely to be rescued, no other dog as likely to be killed. In a way, the Pit Bull has become the *only* American dog. [...] We have always counted on our dogs to tell us who we are, but what Pit Bulls tell us is that who we think we are is increasingly at odds with what we've turned out to be (Junod 2014).

In “The State of the American Dog,” Tom Junod (2014) probes how it is that the United States – a country with a long history of concern for animal protection and a special fondness for the domestic dog – has come to so despise a broad category of dogs that its animal welfare services euthanize upwards of 3,000 ‘pit bulls’ *each day*.¹ Junod’s editorial contributes to a growing conversation about American companion animals and, more specifically, the history and present place of pit bull-type dogs in

¹ The designation ‘pit bull (also written as ‘pitbull’ or ‘Pit Bull’) refers not to a specific breed, but rather to a classification; it is used to indicate a body type shared by several different dog breeds and mixes thereof, including primarily the American Pit Bull terrier, the American Staffordshire terrier, and the Staffordshire Bull Terrier. The category is sometimes extended to include the American Bulldog and the Bull Terrier. In this article, we use *pit bull* to refer to this broad category of dogs; names of officially recognized breeds are capitalized.

the American cultural landscape. In recent years, scholars in veterinary medicine and behaviour, social and political sciences, history, and critical race and gender studies have weighed in on the multiple paradoxes and ambiguities that define life for pit bulls and their people. The fact that the pit bull – long featured and guaranteed to provoke controversy in glossy magazines, newspapers, TV news, and social media alike – has garnered attention from academics indicates a growing scholarly acknowledgement that much like the contested terrains of race, gender, and sexuality, the non-human, too, is culturally constructed.



Left: Fig. 1. An American Pit Bull Terrier (Nicolas 2006). **Middle:** Fig. 2. An American Staffordshire Terrier (Demon975 2012). **Right:** Fig. 3. A Staffordshire Bull Terrier (Sannse 2006). Note: these are public domain images from Wikipedia, so the genetic background of these dogs is not confirmed. We contacted both the American Kennel Club and the United Kennel Club for permission to feature their breed standards in this article, and both kennel clubs declined our request. Images of dogs that represent the standards for these three ‘pit bull’ breeds can be found online through <http://www.akc.org/> and <http://www.ukcdogs.com>.

We arrived at our research with an interest in understanding how American pit bull breeders address the widespread view that these dogs are inherently vicious and therefore dangerous. We were also interested in understanding how this market is modeled given the reality that pit bulls are, in many instances, illegal. Pit bulls are the dogs most often surrendered to and euthanized by American animal shelters: they are

the commodities of a production scale so large that the market has been flooded and supply far exceeds demand. Why do people continue to produce pit bulls given the fate that this type of dog is likely to encounter?



Fig. 4. A series of American Bullies credited as foundational to the Kinneman Kennels American Bully breeding program (Kinneman 2014b, reproduced with permission).

An analysis of our primary data (the arena of online dog sales) revealed that far dwarfing the Internet presence of pit bull breeders are breeders of something that

resembles and is sometimes referred to as a pit bull, but that in many apparent ways is *not*: the American Bully. Pit bulls are a category of dogs that can be visually identified by a muscled frame, a wide head and jaw, and tight skin, among other features, and American Bullies look to have these very qualities in exponential form. Resembling caricatures of an anxious public's imagined fear object, they are hugely muscled from their large skulls to their hind legs, with very broad jaws (see fig. 4). Already wondering how breeders could successfully market a demonized breed type, we were puzzled to see that many people were very purposefully producing dogs that embodied the most exaggerated version of this dog type's features.

We read this breeding program as a self-conscious, highly political response to a widespread instance of discrimination based on physiological markers – both of pit bulls and the people with whom they are typically associated. We therefore ask: How does the American Bully, as a recognizable animal body type, help to narrate a longer history of America's fraught relationship with criminality, race politics, and citizenship? How does the American Bully suggest a more particular story about America's ambivalent valuation of the dog as both family member and property, and how does this story play out in quite historically distinct ways along race and class lines? The manipulation of the pit bull body into the American Bully offers an important set of insights for understanding how human-dog relationships can negotiate traditional American values and cultural forms. More specifically, these breeding programs can index new articulations of identity for those people who have long been connected to the dogs' vilification.

There is an established body of scholarship on the American pit bull. A notable proportion of this work connects pit bull ownership to marginalized communities of color and examines the co-production of both the dogs' and the humans' outsider status, often via physiognomic understandings of their perceived

criminal pathology. We expand this discussion in a few specific ways. We locate the vilification of the pit bull within a larger account of the changing location of perceived threat to American security. When the War on Drugs replaced foreign military operations as the greatest source of fear for the American people, and drug-involved Black Americans replaced foreign nations as ‘public enemy number one,’ so too did the homebred pit bull replace the German breeds as the most feared type of dog. In our treatment of the evolving relationship between the pit bull and racialized Americans, we analyze how breeders, rather than lawmakers, pit bull advocates, or opponents, frame the dog’s relationship to American citizenship and values. Others have looked closely at the fact that pit bulls evade categories (Junod 2014; Irwin 2012; Delisle 2007). We examine this phenomenon and contend that American Bully breeders have capitalized on this very ambiguity to carefully carve out a delineated category of the pit bull dog. In the following pages, we trace how the pit bull became the American Bully through shifting registers of fear and Otherness. In doing so, we show how the ideological anchoring of marginalized Americans to perceived regimes of violence and disorder has, in effect, invited these same populations to participate in the discursive and material association of animal bodies and American citizenship. American Bully breeders use registers of home and family to draw the pit bull into American social order.

Legislating Uncertainty

‘Pit bull’ is employed as a blanket term for any dog that shares physical traits with a cluster of officially recognized, short-coated, game-bred terrier dogs: the American Pit Bull terrier, the American Staffordshire terrier, the Staffordshire Bull terrier. The term is sometimes also extended to include other similarly bodied breeds, and necessarily includes mixed-breed dogs resembling any of the above. The definition of

what constitutes a pit bull, Junod explains, is “so elastic and encompassing” that communities that want to ban ‘pit bulls’ must do so by banning all dogs that have any physical characteristics of the above breeds (Junod 2014). The city of Denver’s bylaw, for example, states:

Pit bull breeds (American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, or Staffordshire Bull Terrier) are banned in the City and County of Denver. Pit bull type dogs are defined as any dog displaying the majority of physical traits of any one or more of the above breeds, or any dog exhibiting those distinguishing (physical) characteristics, which substantially conform to the standards established by American Kennel Club or United Kennel Club (City and County of Denver 2016).²

What is often referred to as Breed Specific Legislation (BSL) might thus be better understood as Body Specific Legislation. Breed-specific bylaws targeting pit bulls encompass all dogs that reverberate with *the image* of the pit bull to which the public is accustomed. By virtue of this, these bylaws formally entrench public misunderstanding. Certain canine features become perceivable as frightening because they are thought to be ‘pit bull’ features and therefore indices of immanent threat: what is frightening becomes illegal, and what is illegal is frightening. The pit bull is an example of confirmation bias: *pit bulls are scary dogs, and so scary dogs must be pit bulls*.

Vague definitions of the pit bull have material consequences for dogs and their owners (see Irwin 2012 for an extended discussion of this). Broad definitions permit local animal services to seize and euthanize great numbers of dogs that can be argued to look like the above listed breeds, and defending or protecting a dog labeled as a pit bull can require significant personal and economic resources on the part of

² Breed-specific bans in many other American cities rely on similarly broad definitions. Miami’s breed-specific legislation, for only one example, qualifies a pit bull as “any dog that exhibits those distinguishing characteristics” of the American Pit Bull Terrier and the American Staffordshire Terrier (Miami – Dade County, Florida 2016).

owners. A 2006 piece in the *New Yorker* titled “Troublemakers: What Pit Bulls Can Teach Us about Profiling” specifically makes the connection between the targeting of pit bull-looking dogs, with the aim of reducing dog bites, and racially-targeted searches at airport security check points. The article concludes that both forms of visual profiling are ultimately ineffective sole methods of predicting or reducing potential threat (Gladwell 2006).³

Though the pit bull is the present canine focus of American fear and anxiety, it joins a storied list of dog breeds that have, for varying periods of time, held this status. In the 1880s, it was the Bloodhound. Bloodhounds were most feared because they were used in Tom Shows (staged adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*). These shows drew audiences by featuring “fierce Siberian Bloodhounds” on stage to pursue a run-away slave (Delisle 2007, 29). The dogs’ performances were so impressively fearsome that American audiences became convinced of the Bloodhound’s inherent ferocity. After WWI, the German Shepherd – used commonly for policing, guarding, and personal protection – replaced the Bloodhound as the most feared breed (ibid., 69, 74, 85). Shortly after WWII broke out, however, the American public became

³ Historians generally agree that the breeds comprising the pit bull category share a common link to dogs that were used for the sport of bull baiting in nineteenth-century England (American Kennel Club 2016a; American Kennel Club 2016b; Huemer 2000, 32). Drawing connections between a dog’s physical appearance and its behavior has some degree of value, since dog breeds were originally developed with specific utilitarian goals in mind – herding dogs (collies and shepherds), for example, share nipping tendencies which stem from the fact that they have been bred for the specific purpose of keeping herds of cattle together by nipping at them – but to attempt to deduce aggression from a dog’s size or physical characteristics alone is to make a huge leap that cannot be rationalized through genetic makeup. Several studies conducted by veterinary journals and animal behavior specialists have shown that the pit bull’s enduring reputation for genetically programmed ferocity is unsupported. In 2014, the American Veterinary Medical Association published a paper stating that “controlled studies have not identified this breed group [the pit bull] as disproportionately dangerous” and that breed-specific dog bans are an ineffective way of attempting to decrease dog-bite incidents (American Veterinary Medical Association 2014, 2). Canine aggression, the paper concluded, rather than being inherent in the dog’s genetic material, has a great deal more to do with socialization and environment (see also National Canine Research Council 2015; Perez-Guisado and Munoz-Serrano 2009).

fixated on another ‘dangerous’ German breed: the Doberman Pinscher. Depicted in American media as working alongside Nazi SS guards in concentration camps, the Doberman Pinscher was also thought to exist in opposition to American values. The dog’s use in this abhorrent work became a stain on its presumed moral integrity; the Doberman became “almost universally known as a vicious, heartless, demon dog” (ibid., 81). The Doberman’s link to Nazi Germany endured for decades (ibid., 80). By the late 1970s, though, the fear surrounding German Shepherds and Doberman Pinschers had calmed down, and people seeking intimidating-looking, strong working dogs turned to Rottweilers (yet another German working breed) and pit bulls.

Since the 1980s, well into the 1990s and continuing still, pit bull-type dogs have held the ‘demon dog’ title (ibid., 90). It is critical to note that the fear of pit bulls did *not* stem from a fear of any specific breed that falls under the pit bull umbrella, e.g. Staffordshire Bull Terriers. The boundaries around this fear object were necessarily indefinite and indeterminate from its inception.

Before the pit bull was a villain, it was a hero. In the early 1900s, pit bull-type dogs were depicted by media and in popular culture as the “all-American family pet” (Kim 2015, 67). Pit bull-type dogs were also used as a symbol of patriotism, and appeared on many American propaganda posters wearing the stars and stripes. Pit bulls accompanied troops into battle during World Wars I and II, and served as companions and guard dogs to wounded soldiers (Delisle 2007, xv). One pit bull named Stubby participated in seventeen battles. He was promoted to the rank of Sergeant, and was awarded a Purple Heart for his bravery (ibid., 71). A propaganda poster from 1915 (fig. 5) depicts the dogs of rival nations dressed in their national

military uniforms (“War Dogs: Pit Bulls in the Military” 2012).⁴ In the center is the pit bull, representing the USA, with a caption that reads: “I’m neutral but not afraid of any of them.” Using the pit bull as stand-in for national character at a time of hyper-patriotism meant the dog had enough cultural recognition to easily embody the master narrative of what it meant for Americans to be members of a nation at war. To characterize its own canine figurehead as even-tempered and courageous – *not* as superlatively hostile or combative – indicates that the country was so certain of the pit bull’s admirable deportment that it was reasonable and common sense to use the dog as a stand-in to make the same claim of itself.



Fig. 5. WWI propaganda poster (1915) (“War Dogs: Pit Bulls in the Military” 2012).

The pit bull is the first American dog, rather than a foreign breed, to occupy the status of canine outcast. It is also the first instance of a constellation of phenotypes, rather

⁴ Important to note is that the small Dachshund is used to portray Germany, and not the fearsome Doberman. Note, too, that England is not associated with its Staffordshire Bull Terrier – a ‘pit bull’ type dog.

than behavioral breed traits, being the determining factors for vilification. Despite its history as hero and patriot, the pit bull quickly became the target of prejudice in the 1970s. This status has endured for nearly half a century (Delisle 2007, xvii).

How and why did America turn on its favourite dog? The shift from fearing a delineated foreign threat to fearing the danger within corresponds with a larger move away from a nation united against external assailants, to a class-fragmented society that turned on the efforts of the powerful to control those citizens understood to be corrupted, degenerate, and debauched. The new image of the pit bull frames a new image of America. The pit bull's new reputation was bred by America's new war: the War on Drugs.

Post-War Poverty and Public Enemy Number One

The American War on Drugs was declared in 1971 and saw the apex of its early laws and policies in the 1980s, and, through law and policy, continues today. This 'war' grew out of the country's changing relationship with its underclass and military veterans – by the 1970s, increasingly overlapping demographics.

During periods of militarization, lower class, poor, and even homeless Americans were drafted to participate in nation-building industry, and heralded as heroes for defending their country on the frontlines. Americans of all racial backgrounds were recruited in large numbers, though the prototypical *image* of the American war hero was decidedly White. The end of WWII saw the return of vast numbers of veterans of which many had new and significant impairments. This demographic trend continued as a result of foreign military action into the 1970s. Between 1940 and 1980, the number of homeless, disabled, and deeply poor Americans exploded, producing increasing demands for social services (Howard 2013, 15, 71, 119, 220). Formerly war heroes, the veterans who largely composed the

mushrooming American underclass were now seen as degenerates and burdens on the public purse. The soldiers' public image shift from hero to hoodlum spelled out the beginning of problems for the dogs that had once been known as American war heroes as well. The pit bull's steadfastness and loyal service to its master were the traits that led to its celebration as patriot, but much like the former soldiers and factory workers who were now the jobless and destitute, these dogs no longer fulfilled an ideological public service.

In August 1969, shortly before Richard Nixon was elected president, a urinalysis of incoming inmates at D.C. jails found that 44% of inmates tested positive for heroin – the drug of common choice for down-and-out Vietnam veterans (“Thirty Years of America's Drug War: A Chronology” 2014). These findings were foundational to a shift in American governance that would target the drug users and dealers who were often members of the new poor, former-military class. Nixon had run as a social conservative and painted himself as the candidate of those people who “obey the law, pay their taxes, go to church...” His mandate was to be tough on “crime and disorder” (Yogman 1968, 1). Nixon cast the drug addict not as someone to be supported out of addiction, but rather as someone who “need[ed] to be *contained* before he can do any additional harm” (Dufton 2012). Nixon thus effectively designed the image of the drug user to be “one of a dangerous and anarchic threat to American civilization” (ibid.). His rhetoric centered on the view that drugs posed a threat to America's archetypal middle class family, pressing the point that drug addiction “destroys lives, destroys families, and destroys communities” (Nixon 1971a). Nixon called drug users and sellers “criminals attacking the moral fiber of the nation, [...] who deserved only incarceration and punishment” (Nixon 1971b). Such was the official state and federal attitude with regards to the management and punishment of drug offences.

Nixon's 'war' lost some steam during Democrat Jimmy Carter's presidency, but was renewed with the election of Republican Ronald Reagan. At the end of Reagan's first term in 1985, public anxiety around drugs was still quite minor: only about 6% of polled Americans saw drugs as an issue of national concern. By the end of his second term (1989) that number climbed to 64%, representing "one of the most intense fixations by the American public on any issue in polling history" (Drug Policy Alliance 2016). Over a very short period of time, drugs went from being viewed as a minor issue to being seen by the majority of the public as an urgent threat to the American way of life.

Segregation, Panic, and (Dis)order

Government responded to new poverty with 700,000 units of public housing across America (Goering, Kamely, and Richardson 1997). For many decades, public housing operators had enforced racial/racist tenancing policies which sought to house Blacks in all-Black projects near historically Black neighborhoods, thus entrenching inferior living conditions and both deepening and expanding the scope of existing racialized poverty (Hirsch 1983). In 1968, the Fair Housing Act formally acknowledged the continuing segregation of Black Americans through discriminatory housing access, but the structure of a segregated society had been laid. The growth of all-Black neighborhoods engendered occupants' relationships to community as based in shared misfortune and struggle (Hayashi 2014, 1209; Rossi 1991, 36-40).

In the 1970s, big cities began seeing waves of gentrification due to the growing post-industrial service economy. Traditional urban ghettos and their residents were now coming into close and regular contact with the White middle class, and testing the endurance of spatialized racial distinction. In his 1971 speech Nixon proclaimed, "America's public enemy number one [...] is drug abuse. In order

to fight and defeat this enemy, it is necessary to wage a new, all-out offensive” (Sharp 1994). In so saying, Nixon fortified weakening boundaries by installing an ideological divide between ‘*the public*’ and its enemy. This conceptual wall had strong lasting power.

Race has played a significant role in configuring American street publics, and has led to a common view of ‘public space’ as that which excludes certain raced bodies. A similar logic has operated in the widespread fear of pit bulls, which have been understood as a specific threat and menace by way of their unwelcome intrusion in an imagined ideal America where safety and ‘niceness’ is mapped by Whiteness (see Low 2009). In other words, the fear of the pit bull indexes a greater cultural logic wherein disorder and impurity cause the ultimate perceived danger. The pit bull label seeks to contain possibly dangerous dogs, but the multiple conflicts and contradictions within the category in effect *further* human insecurity by manifesting the weakness of human concepts and ordering devices (see Douglas 1966). The pit bull as it is presently conceived is not merely threatening because of its own presumed qualities, but because its label serves as a reminder of the deficiency of American society’s attempt to categorize its Others. It is the discursive production of the pit bull, necessarily full of ambiguity and barely contained by messy edges, which does the lion’s share of amplifying public panic surrounding dog bodies.

Mary Douglas’ theorem is useful for coupling the rejection of American Blacks with the denunciation of pit bulls. For Douglas, *space* is a critical mechanism for defining social pollution. In a context of established prejudice, pit bull-looking dogs *become* vicious when placed outside of their symbolic order – e.g. in proximity to the White middle-class family. Conversely, they are minimally dangerous when out of this ‘public’ view in a racially segregated housing project. It is perceived intrusion that makes the pit bull – already nebulous of category, and thus always

teetering on the brink of disorder – into “matter out of place” (Douglas 1966, 48). Of course, the violation of an unstable boundary such as the precise edges of a racialized neighbourhood in a changing city, or the precise genetic lines of a dog category created from corporeal ambiguity, is practically given. Nevertheless, such violations play an important role in American culture. By pronouncing the series of classifications that define daily life, they draw attention to the social need to keep bodies in place. Boundary keeping is thus a moral project, and the War on Drugs was a project in moral order, writ large.

“Wilding”: Pit Bulls and Racialized Crime

Throughout the 1980s, the media was transfixed with stories of youth crime, and doomsayer forecasts for future crime trends became regular features of news coverage (Pickett and Chiricos 2012, 676; see also Chiricos 1996 and Zimring 1998). Youth criminality was *overwhelmingly* attributed to Black youth, and reporting trends reflected the studied view that “delinquents are generally Black and that victims of violent crimes tend to be White” (Pickett and Chiricos 2012, 676; see also Feld 1999).

We can read the criminalization of Black youth as an example of pollution that serves to re-announce the cultural value of order. Black youth crime was considered exceptionally dangerous to social order because for so long it had no designated regulating framework. The early Juvenile Justice System had been written exclusively for the purpose of the reform of Whites, and so without change to the justice system to confirm that Black youth – the “superpredator” of the moment – could be tolerably contained, dominant White culture would continue to panic over

these as-yet unfixed events (Pickett and Chiricos 2012, 676).⁵ By the 1990s, and mostly owing to public protest, adult courts and correctional facilities enforced the bulk of violent youth crime (ibid.). Segregation led to crime; crime provided the justification for segregation. This “circular causation” itself legitimized beliefs of racial difference and produced the secondary phenomena of confirmation (Galster 1999).

The connection between the drug dealer (the Anti-American person) and the fearsome pit bull (the Anti-American dog) is not merely a conjectural hypothesis based on temporal coincidence. The 1980s media both followed very similar reporting scripts when discussing the groups separately, and churned out many stories formally coupling racialized men and pit bulls in a criminal context (see Tarver 2013, 281; Huemer 2000; Applebome 1987; Sager 1987).

Delisle argues that newspaper reports on dog bites and fatal dog attacks in the 1980s demonstrate a significant shift in their *style* compared with the previous 150 years (Delisle 2007, xvii-xviii):

Prior to the 1980s, theories and myths about Doberman skull size and wild rumors about viciousness were not taken up by the newspaper media [...]. But, starting in the early 1980s, all of this would change. A new breed of dog would start to be found in attacks [...]. Not only would the newspapers emphasize breed above all other elements in dog attacks, but the media would print outrageous rumors, myths and theories about anatomy and temperament (ibid., 87).

The dog’s body was central to the story of its monstrosity. The notions of e.g. “locking jaws,” “extreme bite pressure,” and “imperviousness to pain” were understood as specific and unique to pit bull-type dogs (Delisle 2007, ix). It is

⁵ Black children were understood as too “developmentally stagnant, incorrigible, and undeserving” to be supported by the Juvenile Justice System’s mandate of youth rehabilitation (Pickett and Chiricos 2012, 676; see Nunn 2002; Soung 2011; Ward 2012).

impossible to know what the precise breed makeup of the dogs involved in these attacks actually *was*; however, it was in the same timeframe when dog attacks were connected to racialized violence that ‘pit bull’ entered the popular vernacular as a term to organize a very genetically diverse grouping of dogs.

Fire burst from its open mouth, its eyes glowed with a smouldering glare, its muzzle and hackles and dewlap were outlined in flickering flame. Never in the delirious dream of a disordered brain could anything more savage, more appalling, more hellish, be conceived than that dark form and savage face. It is as if the vicious hound of the Baskervilles that burst upon Sherlock Holmes out of the fog has returned to haunt the streets of America (Brand 1987).

The above quote from Brand opens one of two mass-circulated articles on pit bull dogs published on 27 July 1987. Brand’s article, “Time Bombs on Legs”, begins its discussion of “killer” dogs by painting this picture of a pit bull as an almost supernatural being with enormous capacity for terror and malice. Brand quickly moves to discussing a real event involving a “creature” and its “savaging” of an elderly woman (Brand 1987). That same day, the cover of *Sports Illustrated* was filled by a single close-up image of a dark brindle pit bull baring its teeth and snarling. The dog’s mouth is the focal point of the image, its black nose and lips creating a stark contrast to its sharp white teeth. The sole text on the magazine’s cover is, “BEWARE OF THIS DOG.”⁶ Though *Sports Illustrated*’s commentary on pit bulls features less provocative detailing of the dog’s body than *Time*’s (e.g. describing the dog as America’s “four-legged problem”), its cover employs the same registers of monstrosity and immanent threat to prepare the reader for a catalogue of vastly different dog-attack incidents across America which seem to share two key features: the reported attacker is a pit bull and its victims tend to be the most innocent

⁶ Our request to reproduce the magazine’s cover as an illustration for this article was unanswered.

members of society – “small children,” women, and seniors (Swift 1987). Both pieces authoritatively link pit bull-type dogs to human owners also understood to be programmed for violence, and Brand does it explicitly: “violence-prone owners are turning pit bulls into killers” (Brand 1987).

A study of *New York Times* articles published between 1987 and 2000 argued that pit bull owners, like drug dealers, have been “consistently portrayed [...] as thuggish and unsympathetic” by American media (Cohen and Richardson 2002). Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was in the late-1980s that journalists popularized the terms “wilding” and “wolfpack” when writing of gang behavior and organization, respectively, by Black and Latino youth (Welch, Price and Yankey 2002, 13-14). The terms are plainly racially coded: a 2002 analysis of the use of “wilding” in media reports shows that “all incidents labeled wilding [...] and in which race was mentioned” listed either Black or Latino males as suspects (Welch, Price and Yankey 2002, 7). Thus, while dogs became subject to the ill logics of race, young racialized men were referred to as if relatives of another species entirely – their ‘wilding’ akin to the animal “savaging” of the pit bull described by Brand (1987).

As panic surrounding both dog attacks and gang violence mounted in tandem, the media began covering news reports of police raids on dog fighting operations (Delisle 2007, 97). Dogfighting became criminalized in the late 1800s and is now a felony in all fifty states (Delisle 2007, 257). American Pit Bull terriers, and thus, ‘pit bulls,’ are bred from dogs once used for blood sports – long considered a socially deviant activity in American culture (Delisle 2007, 136; Kim 2015, 272). America has historically used the treatment of animals to mark both racial and national difference. Laws prohibiting cruelty to animals in America date back almost two hundred years, and are an important part of Western discourses of civilization, described by Davis as, “often tacitly embrac[ing] notions of the white man’s burden

as part of their call to educate and enlighten their brethren of color [...] with a gospel of kindness” (Davis 2013, 555; see also Deckha 2013, 518-519). Blood sports were considered at odds with the early twentieth-century American ideal of refined masculinity, and “cruelty” was used as a register by which to target “lower-class abuses in blood sports and industry” (Glick 2013, 643). There is not complete consensus on the origins of the pit bull’s pathology; it has been simultaneously portrayed as primordially evil and as the victim of primordially evil humans.

In 2007, the connection between race and the socially unacceptable mistreatment of animals grabbed national attention when NFL quarterback Michael Vick was sent to prison following evidence that he was fighting pit bulls and housing over fifty such dogs (Kim 2015, 255). The American press began singing a familiar refrain about race, poverty, and criminality (see for example Leitch 2011 and Florio 2010). Media pundits and a vocal public commenting on the Vick case made easy sense of the links between animal cruelty and Vick’s childhood in a poor, predominantly Black neighborhood. The dominant argument held that poor, racialized neighborhoods (“ghettoes”) desensitize children to violence (Glick 2013, 648).⁷ As put in no uncertain terms by Glick, the popular suggestion was “that all kids from such environments are somehow destined to string up dogs, drown them, strangle them with their bare hands, smash their heads into concrete floors, and electrocute them to death” (ibid.).

Vick’s legal team argued that dogfighting is a “culturally based predilection,” and so aligned their defense strategy with the beliefs presented above and thus the same racial logic that was earlier employed by White imperialists (Glick 2013, 640;

⁷ Glick makes a point to highlight the fact that “no significant research exists comparing animal fighting practices according to socioeconomic or geopolitical status. In fact, animal abuse is recurrently represented as “endemic to communities of color”, and as “aberrant and psychopathological” when it occurs among white people (Glick 2013 648; see also Deckha 2013, 517).

Kim 2015, 267). By playing into stereotypes about the racial basis for the (mis)treatment of animals, Vick's behavior was framed as pre-determined for someone from the socio-economic position to which he was born (Glick 2013, 640).

Once again, pit bulls were publically linked to American Black culture through the indictment of a criminal enterprise that was framed as expected given the race of the perpetrator. In this instance, Vick is the author of violence and whether or not the dogs are inherently dangerous falls to the wayside. Relatively, the dogs are victims; any acknowledgement of an inbred capacity for violence is not discussed in the context of Vick's intentional orchestration of violence. Here we begin our discussion of a very different articulation of the long-enduring association between Black America and the pit bull, and we continue with this theme of designing the dog with a certain agenda in mind. The following sections introduce and discuss the creation and success of the American Bully dog. We argue that the American Bully has been bred as a direct and self-conscious response to the decades-long co-persecution and pathologization of marginalized men and marginalized dogs.

Introducing the American Bully

In the late 1990s, a focused group of pit bull breeders began tailoring their dogs to what has ultimately become accepted as a new 'breed': the American Bully. Purebred dog breeding is a multimillion-dollar industry in the USA alone (Harrison 2008), and the explosion of online commerce in the early 2000s has made the Internet the primary site for the sale of carefully branded dogs today. We therefore turn to the way American Bullies are advertised on breeder websites and online forums to study the progression of how this new manifestation of pit bull is marketed to, and understood by, the public. Breeders and fanciers are using 'family' as an aesthetic

and rhetorical framework to contain the disorder that is intrinsic to ‘the pit bull.’ The family here serves as an ordering system to draw the pit bull into middle America.

We surveyed over fifty breeder websites that advertise the sale of American Bully puppies.⁸ With little exception, these online markets share certain crucial commonalities. First is their rhetoric of genetic superiority. Next is an insistence on the dogs’ docile character coupled with a visual emphasis on the dog’s exaggerated physique. This latter point also fits with the third characteristic: the look of the websites. *Overwhelmingly*, American Bully websites (those of breeders, but also those for fanciers, including forums and official web pages of fancier clubs) follow a similar and quite characteristic aesthetic model that reverberates with the common packaging of crime-themed action entertainment media.

Making an American Bully

In today’s American Bully circles, the most significant dispute moves around what constitutes the ‘true,’ ‘real,’ or ‘best’ iteration of body type and temperament – understood to be linked (as has historically been true for its pit bull predecessors), and discussed in greater depth in the next section. Great debate revolves around the relative value of those dogs that represent either the Gottiline [*sic*], or Razor’s Edge line of dogs. Although even pit bull lovers would be hard-pressed to distinguish between the Gottiline and Razor’s Edge dog types, fanciers generally seem to contend that Gottiline dogs are shorter, wider, and bulkier in type than dogs claimed to be bred from Razor’s Edge lines (HQ Bullies 2016b). Though named for the notorious crime boss John Gotti, Gottiline dogs are not exceptional in their tough

⁸ American Bully kennel websites seem to get taken down with unusual frequency, with no remaining trace of contact information for the breeder or status information on the dogs. On a few occasions, we followed a litter of puppies only to find the kennel vanished unexpectedly.

appearance; an intimidating look is the benchmark of the American Bully as a distinctive type. Like the Gottiline breeders, Razor's Edge breeders claim that it is their line that should be credited as the sole producer of the 'true' American Bully body type. Again, these dogs are virtually indistinguishable. It is our belief that the fixation on 'lines' is far more a matter of pride and association than of a genuine belief that each type carries any absolutely unique, defining features.

Despite regular immersion in heated debate about the superlative American Bully form (and so, an insistence that there *are* different forms), breeders are insistent that the American Bully is *never* a crossbreed or a hybrid. This heavy rhetorical reliance on genetic purity shows an effort at constructing a system of recognition and standardization that bolsters the success and the widespread acceptance of body types *as standalone breeds*. This view involves the same thinking as has historically marginalized the pit bull. It is the view that some characteristic physical features can index a dog's relative value.

One American Bully fancier website claims that the Bully look was achieved "by selectively line breeding pure American Pit Bull Terrier Blood [*sic*] generation after generation" ("Featured Breeder" 2014). Breeders openly acknowledge "puppy milling" their dogs. Terrell, an American Bully breeder, speaks openly about how he and other longtime breeders would produce great numbers of puppies in hopes of finding one that appeared physically satisfactory: "we'd have to, sorta, puppy mill a lot of times... we would do a million breedings to get a couple dogs that would look like they was [*sic*] supposed to" (Terrell 2014). The American Bully is not recognized by the American Kennel Club or the United Kennel Club, so Bully-only kennel clubs (notably the American Bully Kennel Club) have cropped up to formally legitimize these dogs. Bully-only kennel clubs subsidize a new understanding of genetic purity

wherein dogs can be known by ever-expanding sub-types, each of which can be connected to or claimed by a ‘line.’



Left: Fig. 6. Notorious Juan Gotty of West Side Kennels (Kinneman 2014a, reproduced with permission). **Right:** Fig. 7. A dog featured on the Razor’s Edge bloodline information page on KinnemanKennels.com. Kinneman Kennels owner Matthew Kinneman has provided a full history of the Gottiline and Razor’s Edge breeding programs that resonates with other online accounts (Kinneman 2014c, reproduced with permission).

American Bullies are not bred with a utilitarian agenda in mind. Rather, their bodies are intentionally constructed to fit a certain image. Breeder websites therefore provide detailed catalogues of their puppies’ ancestry to demonstrate the focused workmanship that went into their product,⁹ including lists of famous littermates or other close relatives. This insistence on lineage and on the capacity to trace a dog’s genetic makeup back several generations reveals an attempt to historicize the American Bully, and to make the breed legitimate by following the same type of detailed record-keeping that major kennel clubs employ for pure-bred dogs. Most fascinating, though, is the way that dogs are catalogued by minimal information – often just by their call name but regularly also by the line name, although never a registration number or any official health clearance information, and very rarely a date of birth or other details to distinguish one “Booyah” from another (see fig. 8).

⁹ See for example: www.pitbull-chat.com, www.bullypedia.net.

This strategy is an ingenious marketing tool. By offering minimal information on the featured dogs, the given assumption is that interested buyers are already versed enough in this world to know the Booyah in question, and if they are not, then access to this insider knowledge may be very alluring. The puppy buyer is not just buying a dog: they are buying entry to an exclusive club.



Fig. 8. Detailed genetic lineage for Strongside Kennels (Strongside Bullies 2016c, reproduced with permission).

In the American Bully world, male dogs are named for alcohol, drugs, money, weapons, vehicles, or monsters (e.g. Patron, Remy, Mossberg, Young Money, Platinum, Monster, Blue Beast, Thing). Females are named for the above, as well as sex, femininity, and exoticism (e.g. Chesty, Ebony, Purity, Drama Queen, Tiger Lily, Erotica, Lady Valentine, Passion, Lil Darky). Interestingly, despite dichotomously gendered naming practices, extra-large female dogs are often referred to as “she-males.” Even as the dogs would seem to be collapsing under the weight of their bulk, they are advertised as ‘top producers’ and ‘all-stars.’ Seemingly, no American Bully can be oversized. The ‘freaks’ pictured as examples below (figs. 10 and 11) have now

formed an American Bully ‘extreme’ class that is formally recognized by the American Bully Kennel Club. When new trends in dog bodies become apparent, these types are encouraged so long as they are moving in the direction towards greater mass. When extra-wide and extra-short American Bullies were scoffed at and mocked as ‘toads,’ one breeder bred this deviation purposefully and then branded his dogs as ‘Toadline.’¹⁰ Another example of the desirability of these so-called ‘freakish’ characteristics is the Freakshow line. Bred by Bustin Out Kennels, this line of dogs emerged in response to the criticism of stud dog Freakshow’s bent tail, flat feet, and crooked legs. This line of dogs is intentionally bred to pass on these “deformed” features (Alvarado 2015b).



Fig. 9: Strongside Bullies’ Mini Duke, or Mini. Mini is a female “extreme pocket” bully. This is an extreme-type bully, but on a smaller scale (Strongside Bullies 2016b, reproduced with permission).

¹⁰ The Toadline has come under direct online attack for breeding what have been called “severe deformities” in its dogs (see Toadline Exotic Bullies 2016 for several examples of this body type) The writer of this criticism, “battenroo,” comments that “[American Bully show] judges have often times chosen the more deformed dogs to win in shows because the ‘extreme’ look is eye-catching and has shock value” (Battenroo c2014).



Left: Fig. 10 and **Right:** Fig. 11. Two sons of Dax, who is discussed below. These dogs display some of the ‘freakish’ characteristics that are so desirable to fanciers of the extreme type: extra-broad chest and wide shoulders, very large top-skull, tight eyelids with seemingly ‘intense’ gaze, visibly split chest muscles, extra-thick forelimbs and hind limbs, etc. Note that coat color and eye color are not considered a relevant determinant of dog quality in the American Bully world; the focus is on muscle bulk (DaxLineBullies c2003, reproduced with permission).

As dogs get more ‘extreme’ in type, the accompanying breeder language strays further from the lingo one may expect to accompany the sale of a pet. The breeder of “extreme” puppies featured in fig. 12 gives an example of the type of talk that is standard in fancier circles. As the dogs’ bodies get blockier and ‘bully’ features become more exaggerated, their descriptions become more hyperbolized (“slammed to the ground,” “girthy as f[uc]k”), and even naming practices take a turn for the more sensational (“Sadaam,” ostensibly for Saddam Hussein – America’s nemesis throughout the 2000’s). To whom are these unconventional dogs marketed and sold? We discuss this below.



Fig. 12. A screen-shot of a breeder describing his recent litter of 'extreme' puppies (Battenroo c2014).

A Couch Potato Called Al Capone

Pit bulls have historically been bred for work and agility, but American Bullies are marketed as “couch potatoes” (BullyTreePedigrees 2012). Pit bulls are known for their agile bodies and ropey musculature, while American Bullies have inflated muscles, often a bow-legged/splayed stance, short legs, and heavy girth. A morphologically exaggerated pit bull with a plus-sized head and jaw, the American Bully is described by fanciers as “mellow,” “friendly,” and applauded for being “great with kids” (“Gotti Pit Bull Puppies” 2016; Alvarado 2015a). The American Bully is a paradox. Its hyper-inflated physique recalls and exaggerates the features around which public fear of pit bulls has long been controlled, but here these traits are repackaged as indices of a docile, low-energy family pet. In this way, the American

Bully functions to redraw the temperament qualities of the dog popularly associated with racialized crime, while staying pointedly loyal to the general suggestions of the same dog's body type. We propose that the American Bully was, and continues to be, a successful and highly sought after niche breed precisely because breeders are responding to – and thereby capitalizing on – the key factors that marginalized and criminalized the pit bull: its coupling with danger, crime, and Black America.

As stated by Juan Gonzalez, co-owner of American Bully fancier magazine *AtomicDogg*, this imposing body is “just a look” (Stokley 2004). Gonzalez insists that the dogs that appear in skull print and spiked collars in the pages of *AtomicDogg* magazine are not bred for fighting or aggression (ibid.). Rather, they are “show dogs,” bred to *look* ferocious, but in actual fact they are “gentle and playful” (ibid.). This seeming contradiction between tough outer appearance and friendly, biddable temperament can be read as an outsiders' claim to normative American citizenship by way of the very dog that has played a hand in excluding him. By exaggerating the pit bull body while insisting on its value as family member and companion, breeders and owners are asserting the place of alternative images within the American social landscape wherein the domestic dog is valued for its obedience and tolerance.

Lowering the pit bull's height, increasing its girth, and inflating its musculature has meant a corresponding dilution of terrier-like behaviours: e.g. chasing, nipping, high prey drive. As it follows, the allegedly larger Gottiline dogs are either championed for being relaxed and laid-back, or criticized for being too sluggish and lazy. These attributes suggest either, respectively, a low energy and thus low maintenance family pet, or a work-shy waste of pit bull genetics. This is a critical ambivalence. For fanciers, the body's signifying meaning is not fixed; the ‘best’ energy level for the dog is a matter of owner preference. Therefore, what makes a ‘good’ American Bully, and even a ‘true’ American Bully is a matter of physical

standards that are up for grabs. Physical standards are not only aesthetic commodities, but are indices for how dog owners envision family, and by extension, proper American citizenship.

Below are a few characteristic physical descriptions of breeding stock. Note how breeders package their dogs as simultaneously threatening and steadfastly safe. A Gottiline breeder declares:

These bully puppies will have that super wide and stocky look with big blocky heads. They have large top skulls... these puppies have been bred to have bully appearance. All of our dogs have great temperaments and do not show any aggression towards people or kids. The perfect puppy to bring home to your family (HQ Bullies 2016c).

“Despite the American Bully’s fierce and powerful appearance,” another breeder insists, “their demeanor is gentle. Their [*sic*] great with kids and extremely friendly with strangers, other dogs and other animals” (American Bully Kennel Club c2004). SteelHeadPits, Razor’s Edge breeders, proclaim that their dogs “exhibit unparalleled [...] muscle mass and bone structure to match. A SteelHeadPit is an even tempered [*sic*], family dog that keenly exhibits protective qualities when needed. A SteelHeadPit is a true bully; a best friend” (SteelHeadPits c2016).

By producing a dog with exaggerated size and diminished aggression, American Bully breeders are challenging Americans to reconsider what a ‘nice’ family (pet) *looks* like.

The New Family Dog

As discussed, news stories over the past few decades have cemented the connection between race, crime, and pit bull-type dogs. Pit bull owners still continue to be referred to as “thugs,” “gangstas,” and “white trash” in news stories – the latter indicating that pit bull pathology no longer only attaches itself to racialized groups,

but is generally matched to any struggling demographic (Anderson 1999; Associated Press 2007; Rivero 2016; see also Dickey 2016 for an extended discussion of this topic).¹¹



Left: Fig. 13. Richard Barajas with Westside's Boogie (Kinneman 2014a, reproduced with permission). **Right:** Fig. 14. Ed Shepherd and an unidentified woman with 21 Blackjack (Kinneman 2014a, reproduced with permission).

The American Bully speaks to a long legacy of tense race relations in America, but the dialogue that is being attempted through their breeding is not exclusively from the Black Americans who have long been the co-persecuted. From its inception, the American Bully type has been a project of mixed human background. The famed founder of Westside Kennels, and credited with starting the Gottiline line of American Bullies, Richard Barajas (fig. 13), is Latino. Websites will also incorporate symbolism and language typically associated with West Coast Hispanic gang organization. Though no Latino breeders claim any sort of gang affiliation themselves, some celebrate gang culture through the marketing of their dogs – for example, the Hispanicization of infamous Italian mob boss John Gotti in naming

¹¹ For example, one section of a 2007 *Associated Press* article on Michael Vick, titled “Tied into the Hip Hop Culture”, makes an explicit connection between pit bulls and the culture of rap and hip hop music (Associated Press 2007).

foundation Gottiline male Juan Gotty. It is also somewhat common to see American Bullies presented in a style similar to that of Mexican-American Chicano rap artists. The Chicano-American political movement came into being alongside the Civil Rights Movement, when Mexican-American activists adopted the previously derisive term to assert solidarity and agitate for civil rights and respect (Moore and Cuéllar 1970, 149). In the 1990s, Chicano Rap was an offshoot of Black American gangsta rap, and both have shared in the objective of making a public forum for young men of color to speak out unapologetically about social issues such as racial profiling, poverty, and drug culture.



Left: Fig. 15. and **Right:** Fig. 16. A famous American Bully male named Dax, bred heavily from Gottiline dogs and credited as foundational to the DaxLine line of dogs (DaxLineBullies c2003, reproduced with permission). It is apparent that Dax is a widened and possibly shortened version of 21 Blackjack. Note that Dax is considered ‘extreme,’ though Gottiline dogs are typically considered to be a classic, or standard type of American Bully (ibid.).

Ed Shepherd (fig. 14, above), a grey-haired White man, is highly respected in the American Bully community for his “Daxline” or “DaxLine” dogs. His foundation male, an American Pit Bull terrier named 21 Blackjack, kicked off Shepherd’s

breeding plan when Shepherd made the connection between the dog's temperament, which he and his children so enjoyed, and the shorter, wider body that was then sub-standard for his breed. "After years of line breeding and inbreeding his dogs," the story goes, Shepherd had created a "signature" American Bully look (which would likely be indistinguishable, to the layperson, from other American Bully lines) (Kinneman 2014a). In Shepherd's stock of Bullies was Barbee, whom he bred to West Coast Gottyline's Romeo (Kinneman 2014a). The result was the now-famous stud dog Dax (figs. 15 and 16, above). Dax produced several famed litters, of which one – arguably consistent with "puppy-milling" – was with his dam (APBT Online Pedigrees 2012).

Our point here is that American Bully breeding was not started exclusively by Black Americans, but the American Bully type was very quickly cohered around registers that resonate with images of American marginality – of which the majority members are of color, but also of which some are White and of rural background, i.e. the stereotypically maligned 'hick' or 'hillbilly' from the Midwest, or the 'redneck' from the Southern states. Jim and Cody Blackburn, the owners of Carolina Bully Farm and creators of the "Moneyline" American Bully, name the kennel's dogs as a nod to their small-town country roots: Big Country and Miss Country, for example (Carolinabullyfarms 2012).

Though early breeders of the American Bully are well known, the basic personal details of many breeders – last name, for example – stay hidden. It would seem that the braggadocio about canine ancestors and head widths on the website front page can be considered enough information for puppy buyers to decide to purchase from a kennel. Similarly, very often quite little (if any) information is required from puppy buyers: purchases seem to be totally controlled by money through many websites' "Buy It Now" feature. With this said, it is fairly common for

breeders to show pictures of their dogs in happy new homes. These images reveal a lot about how varied is the demographic that is drawn to the American Bully.



Fig. 17. Famous R&B singer Mario holding his HQ Bullies female puppy on adoption day, accompanied by HQ Bullies' Epidemic Virus (HQ Bullies 2016a, reproduced with permission).

One commonly featured American Bully owner is the Black American celebrity. HQ Bullies presents, among other celebrity photos, images of R&B singer Mario with his new American Bully puppy (see fig. 17). The Mugleston's Pitbull Farm website features an article from sports magazine *Slam*. Mugleston's describes this as a "5 page article on [now former NBA shooting guard] Michael [Dickerson] and his two pits he got [*sic*] from Mugleston's" (Mugleston's Pitbull Farm 2016). The 'article' is in fact a small quote from Dickerson referencing his dogs and one photo of Dickerson with his dogs, posed together on a long and wide stretch of concrete. The photo is taken from below, making Dickerson and the dogs appear larger than life. The sun sets behind them, against a barren background.¹² When paired together, these men

¹² Our request to reprint this image was unanswered by *Slam* magazine.

and their dogs together produce a commanding image of confidence and power. Mugleston's Pitbull Farm also features images of (all Black) members of the NBA and NFL under the title, "CELEBRITIES DEMAND THE BEST." Mugleston's features a number of these wealthy kennel customers similarly to how they depict their dogs: as a headshot, accompanied by their impressive stats. The insinuation here seems to be that by buying a Mugleston's American Bully, one is also buying into the wealth and celebrity of their puppy's relatives' owners.



Left: Fig. 18. Young girl with adult American Bully bred by HQ Bullies. (Paul Au, e-mail message to Rachel Levine, 6 July 2016, reproduced with permission). **Right:** Fig. 19. A little boy and young American Bully use each other for cushioning while relaxing together (ibid.).



Fig. 20. Jaycel and family from Palm Springs, CA, featured with their two puppies from HQ Bullies (HQ Bullies 2016d, reproduced with permission).

More common than these celebrity features are pictures of tough-looking American Bullies with sweet-looking families. In the photos with children and babies, the clear implication is that the dogs are not just under control around little humans, but that they are tolerant of – if not delighted by – all manner of physical teasing, and have no behaviors of territoriality or sensitivity about personal space: they fit seamlessly into middle America. These dogs are often featured under sleeping children, with children placed upon their backs as if they are horses, in playful headlocks by children, having their jowls tugged on, being sat on, stepped on, or used as a foot rest. Essential to note here is that these children and nuclear families represent all racial/ethnic backgrounds: Black, Hispanic, Asian, and very often White. This suggests to us that, regardless of background, American Bully buyers find something appealing in this extended possibility of what might be considered an all-American dog.



Left: Fig. 21. ManMade Kennels’ Optimus Prime, with breeders Edward and Sarah Perez’ daughter, EmmaLisa. This picture was sent in correspondence to one of the authors, but is also featured on the kennel’s public Instagram photo sharing page, with the note, “this boy is a super lover!!!” (Edward Perez, e-mail message to Rachel Levine, 6 July 2016, reproduced with permission). **Right:** Fig. 22. A young son of DaxLine’s famous Dax, pictured with little girl (DaxLineBullies c2003, reproduced with permission).



Left: Fig. 23. Four boys smile for portrait with their young American Bully (Paul Au, e-mail message to Rachel Levine, 6 July 2016, reproduced with permission).
Right: Fig. 24. The same American Bully plays babysitter to baby boy (ibid.).



Left: Fig. 25. American Bully Rose from ManMade Kennels, pulling her human “sister” by a harness (Manmadekennels1 c2015, reproduced with permission).
Right: Fig. 26. ManMade Kennels’ Zombie demonstrating her athleticism with an unidentified adolescent boy (Manmadekennels1 c2016, reproduced with permission). It is unusual to see children presented with their American Bullies doing sports or working. These images demonstrate that not all families seek out the American Bully for a ‘couch potato,’ but may instead consider it to be a valuable family member for reasons more closely aligned with typical American Pit Bull Terrier working traits.



Right: Fig. 27. ManMade Kennels' Zombie out for a family walk with kennel co-owner Sarah Perez, and children Saraya, Eddie, and EmmaLisa, and American Bully puppy (Edward Perez, e-mail message to Rachel Levine, 6 July 2016, reproduced with permission). **Left:** Fig. 28. Zombie with young neighbours of kennel owners Edward and Sarah Perez (Manmadekennels1 c2015, reproduced with permission).

On the Ground and Here to Stay

American Bullies are not only built to look fearsome: the whole online marketplace is visually designed to mimic the experience of viewing the trailer to an action movie involving a motley cast of mobsters and monsters, outfitted with artillery and accompanied by provocative women. Many websites open with hip-hop music playing.¹³ Dogs follow predictable naming strategies as discussed above, and their names are often featured similarly to star boxers at a much-anticipated match, e.g. with flames or thunder coming out of each letter to dramatically announce the dog's presence (see fig. 9).

Webpage layouts follow near identical formulae. Common features are an all-black background with white or other standout font throughout; the kennel name featured in a font commonly found in prison-style tattoos; some combination of dark clouds, smoke, lightening, flickering lights as if from gunfire, and chrome or barbed

¹³ WEST COAST BULLY UNIT's (2016) website, which has now been taken offline, opened with Ice Cube's "I Rep Tha West" playing. "Niggas" is one of the first words in the song. New Age Pitbulls (2016) has its own rap music playing.

wire detailing; a top banner or opening page graphic featuring muscular dogs stacked side by side and presenting a sort of firing squad.



Fig. 29. Litter announcement for Strongside Kennels' breeding of Trunks (sire) and Dolce (dam). This litter announcement combines the 'barren ground' aesthetic that is popular in breeder website main banners with some of the other visual imagery common to website designs, e.g. flashy lights, prison-style tattoo font, no other humans or animals, concrete or otherwise bare ground, etc. (Strongside Bullies 2016a, reproduced with permission). This image has now been removed from the site.

Like in the image from *Slam* magazine in Mugleston's, dogs in the banner are typically featured on barren ground. Be the setting concrete, a field, desert ground, or as though in a dust cloud, the dogs are featured as if on a cleared horizon, a new frontier, or the frontlines of empire. This type of presentation is styled to position the dog and by extension its breeder – and now, if he is anything like NBA player Michael Dickerson, its "master" – as champion of the horizon and settler of nations. This is a certain redrawing of American history. The language used by breeders further reinforces this image. Breeders describe newborn puppies as "now on the ground" (for example, Strongside Bullies 2016a).



Top to bottom: Fig. 30. ManMade Bullies' Facebook page header (Manmade Kennelz c2016, reproduced with permission). Fig. 31. DaxLine Bullies kennel website header (DaxlineBullies c2003, reproduced with permission). Fig. 32. HQ Bullies' breeder website header (HQ Bullies 2016e, reproduced with permission).

This visual representation of power and prestige is matched by commentary throughout breeder websites, fancier forums, social media, and YouTube comments. One can find a chorus of passionate claims to have achieved power via breeding, and

a willingness to go to proverbial war to keep this achieved status. A congratulatory profile of several American Bully breeders reads, “Dog breeders come and go, especially with such a competitive breed as bullies, but these breeders have been around for years if not decades, and their dogs are here to stay” (Wilson 2016). Accompanying his kennel’s logo, Instagram user murillo_albert (2016) writes, “Home Of The Billseye Blood. [...] We Here And Aint [*sic*] Going No Where! Soon To A Show Near You!” Another breeder writes, “we are here to STAY!!! and stronger than ever!” (Blue Nose Bully Style Pitbulls 2016). In these instances, it is unclear if “we” are the dogs or the people associated with the kennel, or both. This ambiguity is a testament to the degree to which these enthusiasts will go to confirm association with their dogs.

In an online forum post, American Bully breeder Bear Mathews (2016) is insistent that his “family” of fellow breeders has defied a series of odds, and struggled for the right to continue to reproduce dogs with “Greyline blood:”

We started out years ago in the front yard of New Troijan kennels. All though [*sic*] the blood has been around since the beginning of the out break [*sic*] of blue nose pitbulls and bullies, we just got the blessing to carry out the blood and certifying [*sic*] it as a recognized bloodline... We are and always will be a true recognized bloodline.... See a lot of people counted us out, didn’t think we would make an impact on this dog game and or get the respect we demanded, but we are still here and we aren’t going to stop for anybody even if we accomplish what we set out to do! Those that are left obviously really had the heart and passion it takes to push a bloodline.... have a long way to go to succeed our goals [*sic*] we have set, we are going to be here even if [*sic*] we make that major impact...

Conclusion: Something Other

First the All-American patriot and then the Anti-American criminal, the pit bull has had two very divergent images in the American imagination. Both of these characterizations have depended critically on America’s relationship with fear and

terror, and have had very little to do with the inherent traits of the dog. The American Bully, however, indicates a decidedly motivated and directed genetic manipulation whereby the canine product has come to embody characteristics from both sides of the binary that has characterized its forbearers (loyal companions *or* monsters), and, by extension, their human companions (the nation's heroes *or* the nation's most despicable). The move from competing one-dimensional representations to a more complicated articulation of the dogs' social significance articulates a purposeful claim to valid citizenship for owners and breeders, but by a new set of terms. Importantly, this particular shift emerged as an unexpected *result* of the pit bull's connection to poverty and criminality by way of the American War on Drugs. Americans have used, and continue to use, pit bull breeding as a strategy for both integration into, and rejection of, mainstream middle-class America.

The gentle, child-friendly American Bully allows for groups historically and presently disregarded as violent, criminal, and a threat to the American family and the 'public' to claim social normativity. The seeming paradox is that this claim is being made through an animal body intentionally constructed to resonate with public fears. The American Bully's body tells a story to America, about America. It is a story of deceptive appearances. This story asks Americans to consider how fear can be constructed and manipulated and contested to serve an ideological purpose.

The breeders' design of their online market tells an important story, too. American Bully breeders reveal the extent to which American people can and do identify with their dogs. In so doing, they reveal that this bond is not just personal, but political. To disavow the dogs with which one has become associated or with which one has chosen to be associated, regardless of the attendant social discrimination that this association may entail, is to accept discrimination's governing terms. Generations of fear mongering, in combination with growing ghettoization and

imprisonment, has generated the need for the Americans of color to prove belonging in a deeply divided society. An easy continuation of America's long held affection for domestic dogs, American Bully breeding is one articulation of a claim to such belonging.

Junod (2014) argued that the American pit bull "is not *like* other dogs but rather something less and at the same time something more: something Other." Through the design of the American Bully, though, this Other seems to have gained entry into mainstream society without significant reproach. American Bully breeders are narrating the history of an outsider made legitimate. By fanatically designing and tailoring their dogs, breeders are not just announcing their right to belong, but their capacity for competitive industry and obsessive self-improvement – two qualities dear to the American self-image that were key in defining the villain of the War on Drugs. This improved self, though, is contingent on the pit bull's continued Otherness. By way of the American Bully, the new and improved American self is self-consciously Other.

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