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Racing to retirement: Understanding greyhounds' experiences of becoming pets

A dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

This thesis is a multispecies ethnographic investigation of the transition of retired racing greyhounds to domestic pets. The key aim of this research was to understand the greyhounds' experiences of this transition. To achieve this aim, I sought to understand the relationships that greyhounds have with both human and non-human animals over the course of their transition and how these relationships influenced the pets they became. I use the concept of rite of passage to frame greyhounds' transition because they move from one societal role, working dogs, to another, pets, undergoing transformation in the process. My fieldwork involved a mixed methodological approach, combining participant-observation, interviews, and photography. In doing so, I gained insight into greyhounds' own experiences of their rite of passage and not just that of the humans involved in their lives. To help me do this, I combined ethnography with ethology, the science of animal behaviour. Using ethology allowed me to learn how greyhounds used their senses to investigate and make sense of the changes in their lives, which were brought about by their transition, and how they responded to and communicated about them. I did this by interpreting their body language, body carriage, and vocalisations. Thus, greyhounds play a central role in this thesis, whilst the human is decentred. The goal of this research was to centre greyhounds, even though it is challenging to do this in text: as such this thesis is an experiment in representation. My findings suggest that greyhounds can successfully transition into pets due to breed-specific traits, such as laziness; individual dog personalities like independence; and the constructive interactions they have with both human and non-human actors. This is even though some greyhounds may find their rite of passage more difficult than others.

Keywords: greyhound(s), racing dog, transition, retirement, adoption agency, (domestic) pet, multispecies ethnography, rite of passage, non-human animal, human companion, companion animal, companion species.

Approval for this research has been given by Massey University Human Ethics Committee, who have deemed this thesis to be low risk.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	iii
List of figures	ix
Chapter One: Introduction	1
The journey to studying greyhounds.....	4
Questions raised	6
How I conducted this research	8
Chapter outline.....	12
Chapter two: Transitioning species – Theory and literature	15
Multispecies ethnography	16
Companion species theory	19
Rite of passage	21
Racing animals in the social sciences	25
Working dogs.....	27
Greyhounds	28
Conclusion	32
Chapter three: Finding and giving greyhounds an equal voice	35
Attempting to understand and provide the greyhound voice	37
Semiosis	37
Participant-observation and establishing rapport with greyhounds	42
Silence.....	46
Photography	48
Greyhound perspective stories	51
Finding and providing the human voice	53
Participant-observation with humans.....	53
Establishing rapport	54
Interviewing	55
Diaries	58
Conclusion	59
Chapter four: Greyhound ethology	63
An introduction to greyhounds	66
Physical characteristics	68
Temperament and behaviour.....	72
Health.....	74
Greyhounds and their senses.....	75

Smell	76
Sound	78
Sight	79
Touch	81
Taste	82
Greyhound communication.....	83
Body language	84
Body carriage	95
Vocalisations.....	97
Conclusion	99
Olive’s racing career.....	103
Joe’s racing career	105
Chapter five: The racing life.....	107
Greyhounds’ relationships with humans.....	109
Relationships with trainers.....	109
Relationships with other humans	114
Greyhounds’ relationships with other greyhounds	116
Greyhounds’ relationships with other dog breeds.....	117
Greyhounds’ relationships with cats and other animals.....	118
Greyhounds’ relationships with the environment	119
Relationships with kennels.....	119
Relationships with paddocks.....	120
Relationships with race track	120
Conclusion	127
Olive at the adoption agency.....	129
Joe at the adoption agency	131
Chapter six: Liminality at the adoption agency.....	133
Greyhounds’ relationships with humans.....	135
Relationships with adoption agency staff	135
Relationships with other people.....	137
Greyhounds’ relationships with other greyhounds	145
Greyhounds’ relationships with other dog breeds.....	148
Greyhounds’ relationships with cats and other animals.....	152
Greyhounds’ relationships with their environment.....	154
Relationships with the kennels.....	154
Relationships with the dog paddock	158
Relationship with the office	165

Relationships with the vet room.....	166
Conclusion	167
Olive in her new home	169
Joe in his new home	171
Chapter seven: Life as a pet	173
Greyhounds' relationship with humans	174
Relationships with their human companions	174
Relationships with other humans	180
Greyhounds' relationships with other greyhounds	182
Greyhounds' relationships with other dogs	185
Greyhounds' relationships with cats and other animals.....	189
Relationships with cats.....	190
Relationships with other animals	193
Greyhounds' relationship with their environment	194
Relationships with their new home	194
Relationships outside of the house.....	201
Conclusion	204
Chapter eight: Conclusion	207
Reference List.....	215
Appendices.....	223
Appendix 1.....	225
Cat Training Tips	225

List of figures

Figure 1	1
Figure 2	4
Figure 3	43
Figure 4	69
Figure 5	69
Figure 6	85
Figure 7	85
Figure 8	87
Figure 9	87
Figure 10	87
Figure 11	87
Figure 12	88
Figure 13	88
Figure 14	90
Figure 15	91
Figure 16	92
Figure 17	93
Figure 18	93
Figure 19	94
Figure 20	110
Figure 21	121
Figure 22	125
Figure 23	125
Figure 24	125
Figure 25	126
Figure 26	126
Figure 27	139
Figure 28	141
Figure 29	141
Figure 30	141
Figure 31	142

Figure 32	143
Figure 33	143
Figure 34	144
Figure 35	151
Figure 36	151
Figure 37	151
Figure 38	152
Figure 39	155
Figure 40	155
Figure 41	157
Figure 42	158
Figure 43	160
Figure 44	161
Figure 45	163
Figure 46	163
Figure 47	163
Figure 48	163
Figure 49	164
Figure 50	164
Figure 51	164
Figure 52	164
Figure 53	166
Figure 54	178
Image 55	181
Image 56	184
Image 57	186
Image 58	191
Image 59	191
Image 60	195
Image 61	195
Image 62	195
Image 63	196
Figure 64	197
Figure 65	197

Figure 66	197
Figure 67	197
Figure 68	198
Figure 69	198
Figure 70	199
Figure 71	202
Figure 72	203
Figure 73	203
Figure 74	203
Figure 75	203

