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Features

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Saving Stray Dogs: The Global Politics of Aid and Spectacle in the Ecuadorian Jungle

Karin Friederic , Jordan Buzzett and Gabby Valencia

Introduction

The bond between humans and dogs. It's the stuff that feel-good stories are made of, especially when we feel overwhelmed by news cycles about suffering, violence and division, both here and afar. So, when we hear a rescue story involving a fated friendship between a man and a dog, we grin, we share, we clamor for more. The tale of Arthur, an Ecuadorian "stray dog" saved and rescued to Sweden, is one such story that has captured the hearts of millions. And understandably so. It speaks to perseverance and sacrifice, the possibility of fate and the deep connection between people and their dogs. Having inspired the sale of thousands of books in many languages, two book sequels and a major motion picture due for release in late 2022, "Arthur," the tale of a man's best friend "who crossed a jungle to find a home" is, in part, an invention. It is also — as we argue — a story of saviorism that derives its power from the long arc of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and racialized forms of symbolic and structural violence.¹

In late 2014, knowing that I, Karin, had strong links to Ecuador and that my family was Swedish, a friend sent me a news article about a stray Ecuadorian dog that had been adopted and transported to a new home in Sweden by an adventure racing athlete named Mikael Lindnord. I noticed that the story had been circulating en masse, hitting all of the major news venues, including *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, Al Jazeera and Public Radio International. The outpouring of support was palpable. Enthusiasm flooded the usually sparse comment area on news articles about the dog. Instagram was similarly overwhelmed with photos of rescue dogs and their owners, all expressing love and support for Arthur, named by his rescuer Mikael Lindnord to honor King Arthur's bravery. When I sat down to read an article about the dog who "adopted a team of Swedish trekkers in the Amazon," the photo stopped me in my tracks.² With my heart racing, I texted my friend: "Umm, I think I know this dog." As it turns out, the trekkers were nowhere near the Amazon. Instead, they had



Figure 1. Three English-language books written by Mikael Lindnord and ghostwriter Val Hudson about Arthur, published between 2016 and 2020. Photo by Karin Friederic.

gone through a village near the Ecuadorian coast where I had spent many years of my adult life as a volunteer and, later, as an anthropologist.

To make sure I wasn't inventing the connection, I sent the photo from the article to multiple friends in Ecuador with the simple query, "Do you know this dog?" The answer from all sides was resoundingly clear: he belonged to a friend, Esteban, who lived near the health center that had been my home for many summers over the past 20 years.³ Esteban, who lovingly referred to his dog as "Barbuncho," or "bearded, scruffy one," confirmed that the dog was his and that he was missing. He was unaware of what had transpired and utterly confused by the international media attention. He had not immediately noticed that Barbuncho had gone missing. Esteban has spent most of his adult life working at a biological research station alongside tropical biologists from around the world, assisting with their work on endangered species and conservation in a biological reserve we call Las Colinas. In that context, Barbuncho frequently traveled with others (often foreign volunteers, sometimes Swedish ones), but he always returned



Figure 2. First author, Karin Friederic with another beloved community dog in 2007. Photo by Aldo Martinez Jr.

"home" eventually. Barbuncho and Esteban split their time between the biological station, Esteban's farm in a remote community and a tiny house built on a small plot for more convenient access to amenities in a densely populated village. If Esteban would leave one of these locations and his dog chose not to follow, other family members or friends would step in to feed Barbuncho and help keep him out of trouble. This communal safety net, which provided support for animals, children and the elderly alike, was one of the things I appreciated most about this community.

Esteban did not have access to the news. His distant farm has no electricity. He therefore did not know that the dog had been



Figure 3. A communal dog named Lobo enjoying the sun, 2007. Photo by Karin Friederic.

taken to Quito by the Swedes. When he did learn this, he did not even know where he should file a report or announce that his dog was missing. He had had little experience with legal systems, especially concerning an international incident.

As soon as I confirmed that Arthur was actually Barbuncho, I contacted Lindnord to make him aware that the dog had an owner. Lindnord was probably fearful and frustrated, and I was promptly told that the dog was in such bad shape that, were he not a stray, he must have been abused or at best severely neglected. Lindnord cited intestinal parasites and an infected wound on Barbuncho's back as evidence of this claim.⁴ Through our phone conversations at the time, Esteban made clear that he did not expect his dog to be returned from Sweden. As he put it, while chuckling, "Good for Barbuncho, he managed! I, too, would like the opportunity to emigrate to Sweden." Even so, he was going to deeply miss his travel companion. He wondered if at some point the Swedes, or someone, could help him find another dog to keep him company. That seemed like a fair enough request, especially considering the tens of thousands of dollars that had been raised to fly Barbuncho across the world with the necessary medical and legal documentation.

More than anything, Esteban thought it very strange that the world was making such a big deal about his dog following this guy, because that's what Barbuncho always did. With its expansive rainforest, breathtaking waterfalls, deep mud trails and abundant wildlife, the Las Colinas reserve was Barbuncho's playground, and he was always eager to follow whoever was up

for the biggest adventure, whether it be a group of tropical biologists tracking wildlife in the reserve, medical volunteers conducting community health brigades (of which I was often a participant) or Esteban on a hunt for *guanta* or *guatusa* (paca or agouti, small forest mammals) in adjacent lands. The difference this time was that the adventurers (literally, adventure racers) were crossing through the territory to the coast and not circling back through the villages, as the rest of us always did. The other difference was the meatball.

The Journey: "It all started with a meatball"

As Lindnord told it, the story about his fateful bond with Arthur was a compelling one. He never set out to rescue a dog. At a staging area in the region's central village, the participating adventure trekkers took a break to recover and refuel between their cycling and trekking stage. Fittingly, the Swedish team replenished their protein with meatballs. As the story goes, upon seeing the "scruffy but dignified mongrel," Mikael Lindnord, the captain of the Swedish team, threw him a meatball. According to the book jacket for *Arthur: The Dog Who Crossed the Jungle to Find a Home*, Lindnord and his ghostwriter, Val Hudson, explain that

When the team left the next day, the dog followed. Try as they might, they couldn't lose him — and soon Mikael realized that he didn't want to. Crossing rivers, battling illness and injury, and struggling through some of the toughest terrain on the planet, the team and the dog walked together to-

ward the finish line, where Mikael decided he would save the dog, now named Arthur, and bring him back to his family in Sweden, whatever it took.⁵

Through suspense-driven twists and turns reminiscent of the trials and tribulations of star-crossed lovers throughout history, the readers of the book are meant to gain one important takeaway: considering the lengths that the dog went to follow the team, this union between a man and a dog was sealed by fate. Through this journey from the wilds of the South American jungle to the cultured backdrop of Northern Europe, a man and a dog transform into a man, Mikael, and his dog, Arthur. But in the counter-narrative that we tell here, Lindnord's powerful act of *possession* through saving is made possible only through the direct dispossession of Barbuncho from his original owner and home. Just as important, this act of possession is shored up by the longer history of dispossession central to settler colonialism. It assumes that what is wild can be appropriated and brought back to Europe, for the supposed benefit of all. In these stories, glory and fame are reserved for the one enacting conquest. For the hero.

A hero isn't born, a hero is made, as we're told. Sometimes, the construction of a hero is but a fabrication. It's how the accidental abduction of a dog ends in glory, authorship and a movie deal for the abductor but condemnation, threats of violence and attempted legal retaliation against the real owner. It's how the story was distorted so fantastically that Lindnord became the savior, Barbuncho the object of saving and Esteban the villain from whom saving was necessary.⁶

For anyone who has studied history, the construction of this savior narrative is familiar, as it relies on the exact tropes that have been recycled throughout history to justify land theft, enslavement, intervention and resource extraction. Conceived as *terra nullius*, or "no one's land," Lindnord sees a wild and rugged environment; without private property (marked land, property fences and microchipped dogs), people must not really exist here.⁷ From colonization through the 19th century to corporate and political exploitation in the 20th century and now new forms of illegitimate intervention in the 21st century, what is shared among these interactions between the Global North and Latin America is the way the story is told. A pattern emerges of othering local people by casting them as uncivilized, primitive and even savage and then establishing a need for rescue. Finally, nonsensical and performative interventions are reframed as "saving" so they can be branded as altruistic or even heroic. This last criterion of the white savior narrative helps to obscure the motives of the storyteller so that it may be leveraged for power and profit. Something else these savior narratives share is how they highlight that there is power in stories and the way they are told. Importantly, these false narratives, or "single stories," have real consequences.⁸

Lindnord and Hudson write that, "Nothing in that sticky bit of jungle bore the slightest resemblance to anything you might call a path."⁹ Thus, the reader can know the spectacle associated with the 2014 Adventure Racing World Championship in Ecuador. Teams from all over the globe start the competition in the colonial gem and cosmopolitan capital city of Quito. From there, they trek, bike and



Figure 4. A view of a main road during the height of the rainy season, Las Colinas Reserve. Photo by Aldo Martínez, Jr.

kayak some 435 miles over the Ecuadorian Andes and volcanic mountain ranges through alpine tundra ecosystems to the coastal lowlands. In this sport, the natural world becomes an arena to be battled and conquered by man. Indeed, Lindnord's book sets the scene of an exotic and untamed jungle environment as the team advances through the race, "constantly climbing over roots and rocks and vicious vegetation and steep gullies" in their approach of Esteban's hometown in the Las Colinas Ecological Reserve.¹⁰

The book's descriptions invoke the familiar imagery of explorers and colonists encountering the uncharted New World, pristine and primitive. Primitive, that is, both

in the underdevelopment of its land and in the lack of civilization of its people. Never mind that that this "pathless" jungle is home to 6,000 people, dispersed in 26 communities connected by paths and often drivable roads with schools, a health center and farms that supply cacao, coffee, passionfruit, palm and banana to the international market. The specifics of place are utterly unimportant; the Library of Congress subject heading for the book lists Brazil and Amazon River Region as keywords; in vlogs and videos, Lindnord casually references being stared at by Indians in the Amazon and borrowing their Inca canoes (Ecuador's coast is not Amazonian, nor is it close to any living Incas), and the movie has now been filmed in the Dominican Republic.¹¹ The fuzziness and ambiguity of the context (of terra nullius, indeed) is as deliberate as it is fundamental; the people of this region are merely a foil against which the Global North sees its own self, its heroics and its success.

Throughout the beginning chapters, a fixation on the absence of a trail continues, implying that the jungle environment is in fact untouched. Instead, it is "impenetrable, pathless, and full of flying, biting creatures," providing the arduous obstacles that test our hero and that will become his victorious conquests in hindsight.¹² The storytelling operates to transport the reader back in time to a premodern world as they come across "cheery" Ecuadorians herding cows, washing clothes in streams and becoming even "cheerier" as a result of the Swedes' patronage of natural remedies along the route.¹³ Heroic in his domination of the elements, the conqueror reaches "a village. Not an



Figure 5. A village in the region of Las Colinas, Ecuador. Photo by Aldo Martinez Jr.

Alpine-style village with a great view this time, but a poor Ecuadorian village with just a handful of dilapidated shacks,” the village home of Esteban’s family and their dog, Barbuncho.¹⁴

The Rescue

Having demonstrated Lindnord’s valor and worthiness, this chronicling introduces “a rescue narrative” that transforms the adventure racer into not just a hero but also a savior. Barbuncho wanders into the narrative in his usual meanderings of the village, a perfect

object of salvation. The Swede mistakes the dog for a stray, blinded by his own culturally biased understanding of pet keeping in which the animal is leashed or otherwise kept inside rather than free to roam. In contrast to the luxuries afforded to the groomed and pampered pooches of the Global North, Lindnord’s oversight of the material constraints that color the everyday reality of Esteban’s family further amplify the false impression of Barbuncho’s homelessness. Described as a “muddy, battered-looking dog” (though probably no more than the competitors at this point in the race), Barbuncho is cast as helpless and in need of a knight in shining armor.¹⁵

The book reinforces “how tough it must be to be a stray dog in this country, dependent on the kindness of strangers,” rendering the dog reliant, desperate and with no other option but Mikael Lindnord himself, “because some of the natives sure don’t show much kindness.”¹⁶ The dog’s need for rescue from local people is the foundation on which the myth of saviorism is built, with Lindnord writing that he felt, “he needs me, I’m his only hope.”¹⁷ Adopting the dog, now Arthur, to Sweden after crossing the finish line would prove an even greater challenge: “I knew without a shadow of a doubt that we were *saving* Arthur,” he says, maintaining the integrity of the fairy tale until someone comes along to challenge it.¹⁸

Indeed, every hero needs a villain and, further, a final duel to overcome before claiming triumph. Esteban’s claim to be the original owner of the dog made him a fitting actor for this role. Once friends in Ecuador started spreading the word that the dog had an owner, Esteban was approached by a news station. In a fateful interview, he mentioned that he’d like a replacement, but it is misconstrued in the press as a request for compensation. With his claim to heroism at risk of unravelling, Lindnord retreated to new methods of legitimizing the rescue. His developing story now hinges on three forms of evidence: that the dog was wounded and had parasites; the insistence that he didn’t choose the dog, “the dog chose us”; and that people like Esteban are not only different but also abusive. The desperation of the dog was Lindnord’s ticket to global glorification. Once he comes under fire (for potentially abducting a dog), he doubles down in his insistence that the dog was suffering and on the verge of death,

despite the fact that the dog had been physically able to follow the team through extraordinarily challenging terrain for days. When asked what he would do if contacted by the dog’s owner, he insists, “I have microchipped Arthur. I am his owner.”¹⁹ Lindnord’s team now frame their loss of the race as a sacrifice: they chose the dog, not the glory of winning. These factors come together to solidify this story as a compelling *act of altruism* instead of an *accidental abduction*.

Primitive representations are swapped for savage ones; Esteban is branded as backwards and barbaric. Thus, Barbuncho was not just saved from misfortune, he was saved from an abuser. So, the story goes, even if Arthur did have a home, our hero, who “knew nothing about dogs,” could tell “he had plainly been at best massively neglected and at worst horribly mistreated.”²⁰ Though Lindnord probably did not realize it at the time, he was relying on age-old characterizations of rural people that have been employed to dispossess and disenfranchise. Indeed, the book proceeds to demonize Esteban’s entire rural culture:

... it has just never been part of the culture for some parts of Ecuador to regard animals with any respect. They are kicked, shouted at, beaten — people know that there are no laws to protect the rights of animals, and it is not a crime to mistreat them, so people mistreat animals and they let their children mistreat them.²¹

Here, he expands the scope of his rescue: “Saving” isn’t just directed at the dirty, mongrel dog with “all the diseases” who needs liberation.²² It’s also directed toward all of these backwards people, but especially abu-

sive, *machista* men. It is their behavior that Lindnord turns to as an object for reform when he launches the Arthur Foundation (as we detail below), a tendency mirrored in many women's rights campaigns in Ecuador that villainize bad masculinity, or *machismo*, in lieu of expanding services and resources.²³

In Ecuador, the social media response against Esteban's claim to ownership is merciless, often violent, but it represents more than a response to a single owner's alleged maltreatment. Lindnord's story sets off a *moral panic* about the risks to the social order in a new Ecuador of men like Esteban (per Stanley Cohen's formulation, Esteban becomes the "folk devil").²⁴ Petitions to jail Esteban circulate throughout Ecuador, picking up steam through urban elites and animal rights network, becoming what we see as essentially a backlash against the whole of the rural interior. What Lindnord's concoction taps into is an anxiety that rural mesti-

zos and coastal Afro-Ecuadorians are holding the country back from modernity, from the future, a sentiment with strong historical currency.²⁵

When Esteban asked for a new dog, this was misconstrued by Ecuadorian people on social media as begging for money. This perceived "begging," in turn, fed perfectly into the stereotype of the dark-skinned Afro-costeño. This became especially evident in the language used on social media, referring to him as a *sapo* or his lifestyle as *la viveza criolla*. These terms imply that Esteban and his kind are good-for-nothing opportunists, or lazy schemers, who should be ashamed of themselves. Other comments go much further, using inflammatory epithets, calling for his imprisonment and lynching and noting that his body language is insecure or shifty and indicative of a typical *montubio*, an ethno-racial classification often used in derogatory ways to characterize "low-lives"

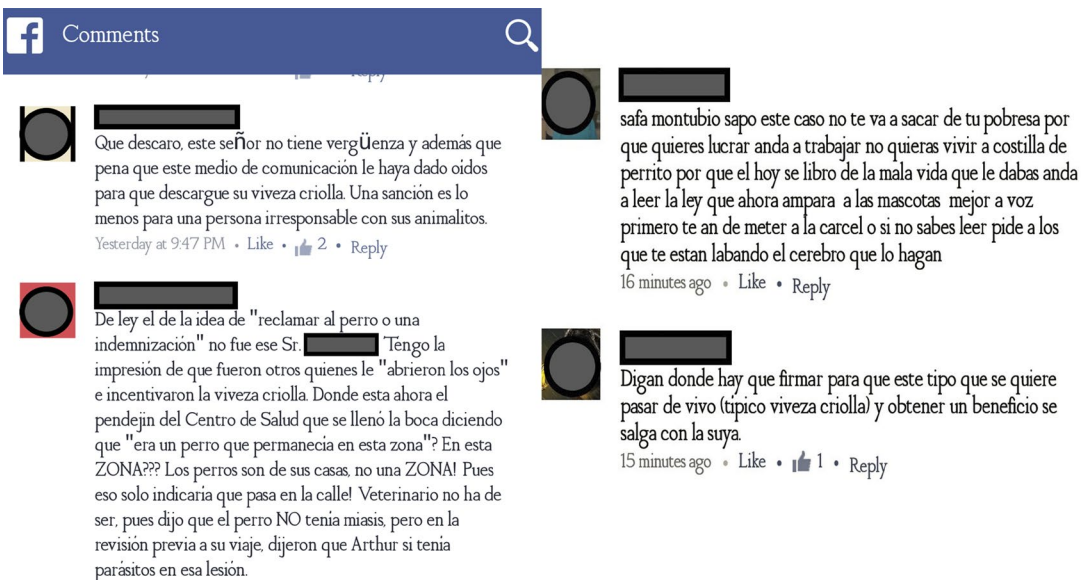


Figure 6. Screenshots of the social media response on Facebook to an article about Barbuncho's original owner in an Ecuadorian newspaper, in Spanish.

from the coast.²⁶ On the one hand, the celebration of Lindnord's cultured manner of pet-keeping functions as an appeal to modernity, especially the progressive modernity conjured by a country like Sweden. On the other hand, people calling out Esteban as a national embarrassment becomes an apology for their country folk. These posts plead: *we're not like him*.

What gets erased here is not only the truth but also the generational and structural poverty that shape how rural Ecuadorians can care for their dogs — and themselves. The possibility of other legitimate human–animal relations is unreflectively denied. Lindnord's storytelling forgoes understanding and instead foments hate, contributing to the demonization of these people and reinforcing their need for intervention. Their material scarcity is mistakenly attributed to their evolution. As they are robbed of legitimacy and cast as barbaric in character, their demands for material resources are more easily denied and discredited (as was the case when Esteban asked for money for a new dog). Upon hearing about the media attention around Barbuncho, another friend from Las Colinas remarked, "Why is it such a big deal that Barbuncho had parasites and a wound? We all have parasites, machete wounds, infections, all of it. We're poor and we get hurt while working the fields, producing cacao and all these products for the rest of the world."²⁷

The Return

Our hero's return is perhaps the most consequential part of the story, where his actions are relayed and received as indeed an act of

saving. Importantly, false narratives have real ramifications, for the hero and for the villain. In addition to the loss of his hunting companion, Esteban has to hide out for over a month, rattled by the fear and confusion associated with the petitions and calls for his jailing and lynching. Meanwhile, Lindnord's myth becomes more profitable the more it is perpetuated and consumed — the more books that are sold, the more followers and subscribers to his social media content and the more exposure he receives to advertise his new career as a keynote speaker through which he further propagates the myth. The pinnacle of the financial gain this "single story" offers is the launch of a major motion picture, starring Mark Wahlberg and Simu Liu, set to reach an even larger audience.²⁸

Lindnord's return to Sweden is coupled with the launch of the Arthur Foundation, intended to "help the Arthurs of this world."

There are two ways in which we would like our foundation to help the Arthurs of this world. The first is to adopt them and show them love and a loving family — possible, of

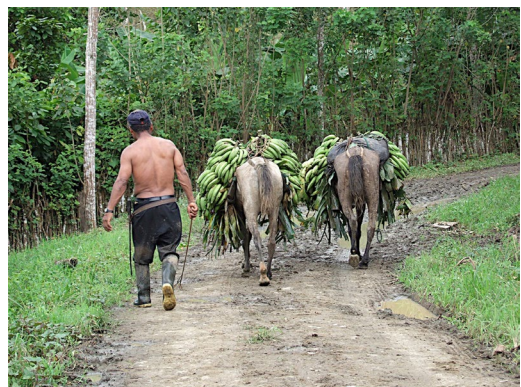


Figure 7. A man from the region of Las Colinas bringing his bananas to be sold to middlemen in a nearby city. Photo by Karin Friederic.

course, for only the tiniest fraction of street dogs. But if as many animals as possible can be rounded up and looked after in rescue centres — in the hope that, perhaps at some point, someone might come and take them in to look after them permanently — that would help.²⁹

“Helping” could have looked much differently. For example, the Foundation might have helped challenge the economic exploitation and poverty that make it so hard for global producers in rural Ecuador to keep dogs according to Lindnord’s cultural and material norms. Instead, they support a performative “band-aid” intervention, rounding up “the tiniest fraction” of dogs. To reframe dispossession as merely a benign cultural intervention, Lindnord focuses on ignorance and lack of civilization as the issue at hand. Following the familiar narrative arc, he takes what he has learned from his own experience in accidental saviorism to share with the world.

But what I didn’t know, until my experience with Arthur, is quite what a doomed and terrible life these dogs mostly lead. In some parts of South American countries there is very little respect for animals, and no tradition of looking after them — of having them as pets, living in the house and being “owned.”³⁰

In multiple ways, Lindnord has conquered nature and tamed the wild, which extends to attempts to govern the jungle people who he believes mistreat their pets. In this vein, when “rounding up” dogs becomes less feasible, the Arthur Foundation turns to provid-

ing support (though it is unclear how) for the passing of the Ley Orgánica de Bienestar Animal (LOBA), a law that criminalized the mistreatment of animals in Ecuador.³¹ In 2019, Lindnord takes the Arthur Foundation on the road, returning to Ecuador. A series of vlogs and social media posts advertise Lindnord on a promotional tour through the country, sporting merch branded with “The Arthur Foundation return to Ecuador.”³² Although the foundation advocates for the welfare of dogs, the itinerary of the trip is filled with expos, press conferences and publicity plugs for dog-friendly luxury hotels and pet travel agencies for the global elite. Lindnord can be seen signing copies of his book and delivering bags of dog food to locals, donated from a brand he seems to be promoting. It must be

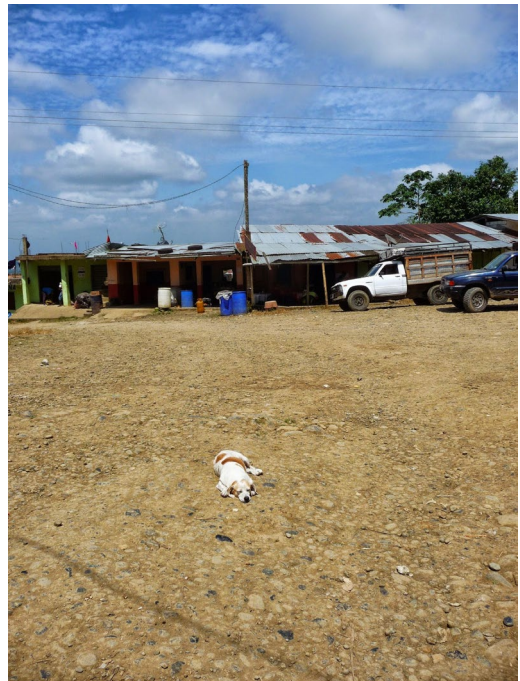


Figure 8. A village dog, owned by a shopkeeper, sunning in the plaza. Photo by Karin Friederic.

true what Lindnord writes in the first line of his book's acknowledgements. *I am no hero.*

The Arthur Stories of the World, or Do Stray Dogs Really Need Saving?

The events described here manage to tie an Ecuadorian man, his community and his dog to a Swedish adventure racing team, audiences from around the globe and the American film industry. Keen readers will see connections between these events and the history of colonization, destabilizing political interventions and exploitative business practices that have colored the relationship of the United States and Europe with Latin America.

But our goal is not merely to add to the archive of abusive storytelling. We also wish to illustrate the importance of cultural relativism, to remind people of the expansive range of human–animal relations across time and space and to recognize the dangers inherent in “Arthur stories,” or single stories about rescue (a literary genre unto itself).

First is Lindnord's inability to see beyond his own culture's rules surrounding pet keeping was how the misunderstanding over the dog's ownership status occurred in the first place. The irony was lost on Arthur enthusiasts that Barbuncho, upon being saved from his vast jungle playground, was placed in a crate during travel and then spent four full months quarantined in a small kennel in Sweden before being released to Lindnord's family.³³ Far more impactful, however, was the creation of his foundation, which extended the ethnocentrism from one man and his friends to a global crusade that demon-

izes various cultures and communities and justifies continued foreign interference.³⁴

In much of rural Latin America, the boundaries between domesticated pets and wild animals are not as clearly drawn as they are in much of Europe, the United States or urban settings the world over. In Las Colinas, it is abnormal to keep pets cooped up, and houses themselves are often open to animals and people coming and going. People move often between their farms and small village huts, and the animals often follow, but sometimes they do not. This is not unique. For example, Meyers and Weston point out that among the Lakota living on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in what is now called South Dakota, people traditionally don't own animals the way other cultures have pets; the animals are left wild and may choose to go to a home to offer protection or companionship or even to become a part of a community. People feed the dogs and care for them, but the dogs remain living outside and are free to be their own beings. This relationship differs from one where the human is the master or owner of an animal who is considered property. Instead, the dog and people provide service to one another in a mutual relationship of reciprocity and respect.³⁵

Meyers and Weston bemoan the (non-Indigenous) public outcry against “rez dogs” but also admit that some dogs are mistreated and can then cause harm to people, including young children. To help minimize the pain and suffering of Lakota rez dogs, Meyers and Weston call on people to understand how the Lakota view dogs and provide them with the means to care for their entire community, animals included. Just as it is “economically impossible” for the Lakota on



Figure 9. Two women walking a main road in Las Colinas, followed by a friendly dog. Photo by Karin Friederic.

reservations “to treat a pet like a child,” so, too, do rural Ecuadorians lack the means to give their animals as much food and medical attention as people in the Global North can give to their pets.³⁶

Anuradha Ramanujan tells a similar story in her article, “Violent Encounters: ‘Stray’ Dogs in Indian Cities,” arguing that “stray” and “pet” are misleading terms because Indian street dogs are “neither fully domesticated nor entirely independent of humans.”³⁷ In cities like Bangalore, Ramanujan explores the particular anxieties that “street dogs” evoke through their liminal status “between public/private, domesticated/wild, familiar/out of place.”³⁸ With repeated references to dogs as sources of disease and pestilence, Indian media regularly frames the “street dog as anti-modern, a dangerous remnant of the past that the city/nation must transcend on its path to spectacular urbanization and western modernity,” an anxiety paralleled in many post-colonial settings.³⁹

Finally, slanted storytelling about the Global South is so often used to obscure the existence of an unequal global system, impli-

cating culture and immorality as the cause of differences in quality of life. It is here that the effects of primitive representations become not only symbolic but material. Lindnord reproduced racialized tropes of rural agriculturalists, playing into the exoticism of these landscapes, such that their distance from state governing authorities gave a wild and savage quality to the people who live there. How do you correct a powerful single story, as it is building and developing, or even once it’s already been sold to the public? I, Karin, tried to intervene repeatedly, writing to Lindnord, to journalists, and by inserting myself into the always polarized social media debates. But the story was more powerful than the truth, and the response to the intervention was ruthless. In fact, we had to back down for Esteban’s safety.

Clearly, the neo-colonial story of white saviorism resonated with people across the world, and the bastardization of rural coastal agriculturalists further resonated within the Ecuadorian political imaginary. Their depiction as savages then made it easy or even “natural” for Ecuadorians and others to overlook their economic exploitation and their ability to govern themselves. The *consequence* is political disenfranchisement of this racial, economic and regional group, as their credibility with the state is further diminished by these representations, compromising their access to resources and fueling cyclical poverty. These stories are powerful, as their specific erasures and blind spots speak to the enduring hold of colonial tropes both between and within the Global North and Global South. The heroism is rendered visible, beautiful even. The extraction and dispossession that make heroism possible is actively cov-

ered up, hidden, forgotten. These “Arthur stories” are everywhere, and as “single stories,” they are dangerous.⁴⁰

As Teju Cole points out in his article on “The White Savior Complex,” “all [the white savior] sees is need, and he sees no need to reason out the need for the need.”⁴¹ *Arthur* gives us the heartwarming story of a white man finding a dirty dog from Ecuador and rescuing him from barbarous treatment to civilization. We put a band-aid on the problem by giving money to a foundation that advocates for the vague rights of dogs rather than considering what a redistribution of wealth from the Global North to the Global South would look like for the people (and animals) who live there. And while we all wait for meaningful forms of change instead of superficial neocolonial interventions, Esteban’s grandson himself continues to wonder, “Why do *gringos* come here and think they can take our dogs? I miss my dog Barbuncho.”

Notes

1. Mikael Lindnord, *Arthur: The Dog Who Crossed the Jungle to Find a Home* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2017).

2. Andrea Crossan, “A Stray Dog Adopts a Team of Swedish Trekkers on an Endurance Race in the Amazon.” 2014. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-11-24/stray-dog-adopts-team-swedish-trekkers-endurance-race-amazon>.

3. In keeping with anthropological convention (despite its messiness), we have chosen to use pseudonyms for places and people where and with whom we conduct research. However, we name individuals who have published public accounts of their experiences.

4. According to casual reports by many friends in the village, the wound on the back of the dog

had been caused by a fight that broke out between Barbuncho and a visiting dog weeks prior to the Swedes’ visit. It had since gotten infected, probably because he so frequently enjoyed running off with people to swim in the lagoon and trek in deep mud. The wound had been treated on at least one occasion by the doctors at the health center.

5. Lindnord, *Arthur*.

6. This setup provides a striking parallel to Gayatri Spivak’s concern with colonial feminism’s penchant for “white men saving brown women from brown men,” but in this case, the typical innocent subject — women and children — is instead a helpless dog. Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice,” *Wedge* 7–8 (Winter–Spring 1985): 120–30.

7. According to Hendlin (2014), *terra nullius* refers to the idea that land is often seen as wild or unoccupied, even when there are already people living on the land and modifying it. The illusion of vacancy then justifies and allows for the taking of land by colonial powers. It then follows, according to Veracini (2010, 2015) that settler colonization carves us and divides indigenous-held land into discrete parcels of private property. Yogi Hale Hendlin, “From Terra Nullius to Terra Communis: Reconsidering Wild Land in an Era of Conservation and Indigenous Rights,” *Environmental Philosophy* 11, no. 2 (2014), 141–174. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26169802>; L. Veracini, *The Settler Colonial Present* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); L. Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

8. C. N. Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” 2009. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en.

9. Lindnord, *Arthur*, 62.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Örnköldsviks Allehanda [Allehanda se], *Sagan om Arthur* [Story of Arthur]. November 29, 2014. Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cy6169GuZYk>; Wahlberg, Mark (@

markwahlberg), "We Went Deep!!" *Instagram*, March 19, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMn-CKtLePy>.

12. Lindnord, *Arthur*, 83.

13. *Ibid.*, 62.

14. *Ibid.*, 83

15. *Ibid.*, 85.

16. *Ibid.*, 87, 83.

17. *Ibid.*, 119.

18. *Ibid.*, 147.

19. N. Joo, "Vändningen: Arthur har redan en husse," *Expressen*, December 7, 2014. <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/vandningen-arthur-har-redan-en-husse/>. Translation from Swedish by Karin Friederic, first author.

20. Lindnord, *Arthur*, 86, 180.

21. Lindnord, *Arthur*, 270. This statement is especially ironic considering that Ecuador became the first county in the world to declare that nature, including animals, was a subject with rights. Ecuador's 2008 Constitution and ensuing National Development Plan (2013–2017) were explicitly based on the Andean philosophy of *Buen Vivir* (Good Living, or *Sumak Kawsay*), which recognizes the ways in which humans are embedded in both a natural environment and a social environment. According to the Preamble of the 2008 Constitution, "We hereby decide to build a new form of public coexistence, in diversity and in harmony with nature, to achieve the good way of living, the *sumak kawsay*. ..." ANC (Asamblea Nacional Constituyente) 2008 Constitución de la República de Ecuador (Quito: ANC, 2008); CONAIE (Confederación de las Nacionalidades y Pueblos Indígenas del Ecuador), Propuesta de la CONAIE frente a la Asamblea Constituyente: Principios y lineamientos para la nueva constitución del Ecuador (Quito: CONAIE, 2007). [https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=CONAIE+\(Confederaci%C3%B3n+de+las+Nacionalidades+y+Pueblos+Ind%C3%ADgenas+del+Ecuador\).+2007.+Propuesta+de+la+CONAIE+frente+a+la+Asamblea+Constituyente:+Principios+y+lineamientos+para+la+nueva+constituci%C3%B3n+del+Ecuador](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=CONAIE+(Confederaci%C3%B3n+de+las+Nacionalidades+y+Pueblos+Ind%C3%ADgenas+del+Ecuador).+2007.+Propuesta+de+la+CONAIE+frente+a+la+Asamblea+Constituyente:+Principios+y+lineamientos+para+la+nueva+constituci%C3%B3n+del+Ecuador)

or.±Quito:±CONAIE; SENPLADES (Secretaria Nacional de Planificación y Desarrollo) 2013 Plan nacional para el buen vivir 2013–2017 (Quito: SENPLADES 2013).

22. Lindnord, *Arthur*, 87.

23. Karin Friederic, *The Prism of Human Rights: Seeking Justice amid Gender Violence in Rural Ecuador* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press) Forthcoming, 2023.

24. Stanley Cohen. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of The Mods and Rockers*. (London, MacGibbon & Kee, 1972).

25. C. de la Torre and C. Conaghan, "The Hybrid Campaign: Tradition and Modernity in Ecuador's 2006 Presidential Election," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 14, no. 3 (2009), 335–352. doi:10.1177/1940161209334523

26. Technically, *montubio* is an ethno-racial classifier that refers to an independent ethnic group in Ecuador consisting of people from certain regions of the coast with a mixture of Afro-Ecuadorian, Indigenous and Spanish ancestry. However, in casual usage in Ecuador, it is often derogatory, implying that someone is uncultured, backwards, unintelligent, overly sexual and even violent (see Bauer 2014; Friederic, note 22). Daniel Bauer, "Identities on the Periphery: Mestizaje in the Lowlands of South America," *Delaware Review of Latin American Studies* 15, no. 2 (2014).

27. Quotation paraphrased from informal conversation.

28. D. R. Ramos, "'Shang Chi's Simu Liu Joins Mark Wahlberg In 'Arthur the King' with Simon Cellan Jones Set as New Director," *Deadline*, December 16, 2020. <https://deadline.com/2020/12/shang-chi-simu-liu-arthur-the-king-lionsgate-eone-simon-cellan-jones-1234656317/>.

29. Lindnord, *Arthur*, 270-1.

30. Lindnord, *Arthur*, 270.

31. "number one priority is to support the LOBA law (Organic Law of Animal Welfare – Ley Organica de Bienestar Animal). After years of work, the LOBA law was presented to the congress on

October 30, 2014. In April 2017 the LOBA law was approved and published. On April 12, 2018, the Organic Environmental Code including the LOBA law went into effect. "This [law] will apply standards of animal welfare to animals used for the purpose of consumption, companionship, labour, trade, experimentation and entertainment. This legislation seeks to minimize animal suffering through the elimination of violence and promotion of empathy towards animals. The legislation will also work towards humaney [sic] controlling animal populations by promoting adoption, sterilization and responsible coexistence."

32. Lindnord and Arthur, "Leaving Arthur and Returning to Ecuador | VLOG UNO." 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJFf7lr8y8k>; Lindnord and Arthur, "Visiting Shelter Dogs in Ecuador | VLOG DOS," 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLQOZ8CdumM&t=3s>; Lindnord and Arthur, "They Painted Arthur on a Wall! | VLOG TRES," 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYn4Fumwez8>.

33. L. Hanna and U. Andersson, "Stray Dog Arthur Rescued from Ecuador by Athletes Freed from Quarantine," *Daily Mail*, March 21, 2014. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3004343/Home-Stray-dog-Arthur-rescued-Ecuador-athletes-freed-quarantine-start-new-life-Sweden.html>.

34. Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002), 783–790. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3567256>.

35. Richard Meyers and Ernest Weston Jr., *What Rez Dogs Mean to the Lakota* (Sapiens, 2020). <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/rez-dogs/>

36. Meyers and Weston Jr., *What Rez Dogs Mean to the Lakota*.

37. Anuradha Ramanujan, "Violent Encounters: 'Stray' Dogs in Indian Cities," in *Cosmopolitan Animals* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 218. Editors: Kaori Nagai, Karen Jones, Donna Landry, Monica Mattfeld, Caroline Rooney, Charlotte Sleigh

38. Ramanujan, "Violent Encounters," 218. Editors: Kaori Nagai, Karen Jones, Donna Landry, Monica Mattfeld, Caroline Rooney, Charlotte Sleigh

39. *Ibid.*, 221. Ramanujan notes, in particular, that this anxiety in India is so strong because it is "a deeply divided society still impeded by socialist impulses and a colonial legacy of bureaucratic governance, [in which] neoliberal transformation remains incomplete."

40. C. N. Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," 2009. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en.

41. Teju Cole, "The White-Savior Industrial Complex," *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2012.

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