

THE MEANING OF AMERICAN PET CEMETERY GRAVESTONES¹



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Research on American pet gravestone inscriptions going back more than a century provides ethnographic evidence supporting the widespread observation that many Americans conceive of companion animals as family members, and endow them with cultural characteristics close to those of humans. Pet gravestone inscriptions illustrate three principal developments over the past hundred years: first, the growing use of human names for pets; second, the evolving definition of pets as actual kin to their owners; and third, an enhanced religious and ethnic identity bestowed upon pets. The article's conclusions suggest the reasons for these changes. (Companion animals, pets as kin, pet cemeteries, social change)

The American Pet Products Association (2009) recently reported that in 2007–2008, 63 percent of U.S. households owned a pet, a substantial increase from the 56 percent ten years earlier. More than 163 million cats and dogs, accounting for over 83 percent of the total, resided in American households in 2007–2008. Between 1994 and 2004, pet industry expenditures doubled from 17 to 34.4 billion dollars. By 2009, financial outlays for pets in the United States had reached an estimated 44.4 billion dollars (American Pet Products Association 2009). Over half this sum went toward the purchase of food, medicine, and sustenance items. Another 12.2 billion dollars were spent on veterinary care (American Pet Products Association 2009). The costly medical procedures available to dogs and cats today (periodontal surgery, dialysis, hysterectomies, magnetic imaging, chemotherapy, prosthetics, among others) are indication of the increasing money and attention Americans are willing to spend on these animals. What accounts for pet owners to going to such extraordinary lengths to preserve and enhance the well being of dogs and cats?

The answer may be that these creatures have, over the past century, become more and more like actual kin to Americans. As Franklin (1999) aptly states, “recent trends in pet keeping can be understood as the extension of familial relations to non-humans” (Franklin 1999:57). In modern times, and for a large segment of the developed world, the classificatory boundary dividing men and women from beasts, particularly from beasts that share their home, has virtually collapsed. In the United States, news reports demonstrate that Americans increasingly treat their pets the way they treat close family members. Popular culture reflects and contributes to this perspective. In the United States, dog and

cat owners have become like mothers and fathers to their companion animals. It is this feeling of kinship between humans and animals that best explains why people devote so much money, time, and emotional stamina to dogs and cats.² It is in the domain of death—both death of the animal and death of the owner—that the human-animal bond often manifests itself most overtly.

When anthropologist Nina Etkin died in early 2009, *Anthropology News*, the newspaper of the American Anthropological Association, ran an obituary which Etkin helped to compose (Etkin et al. 2009:32). The announcement ends thus: “She is survived by her husband and research partner, Paul Ross; three sisters, a niece, two nephews, and their families; and a golden retriever.” In this notice, the pet dog receives a status essentially equal to that of living kin, a reflection of the deceased’s own point of view. Consider, too, the famous last testament of hotel magnate Leona Helmsley, who left 12 million dollars to Trouble, her beloved Maltese. While bestowing a fortune on tiny Trouble, Helmsley entirely disinherited her closest relatives, two grandchildren, a decision overturned by the courts. Helmsley also requested that, upon Trouble’s death, the dog be buried together with herself and her husband in the mausoleum where they both now rest in the town of Sleepy Hollow, New York (Associated Press 2007; Strom 2008). She failed to take into account, however, that New York State law prohibits animal burials in human cemeteries. Helmsley would have been more successful had she requested that she and Trouble be buried together in one of the hundreds of pet cemeteries that can be found throughout the United States, given that these institutions in general permit joint animal-human interments. America’s oldest pet cemetery, Hartsdale Pet Cemetery, is located south of Sleepy Hollow.

In 1896, when Hartsdale was founded, it stood alone in its class. Today, the International Association of Pet Cemeteries and Crematories reports that there are over 600 operating pet cemeteries in the United States (IAOPCC 2009). Though the existence of pet cemeteries is not common knowledge in America, they continue to thrive and multiply. The principal reason for the growing popularity of pet cemeteries is that the messages inscribed on their gravestones reflect the attitudes, behavior, and religious beliefs of increasing numbers of people.

It is difficult, however, to say exactly how many Americans that is. Franklin (1999:34–61) points out that favorable economic conditions, especially freedom from extreme want, have stimulated a growth in pet ownership. Given that cemetery burials entail discretionary expenditure, one assumes that no owner in dire financial circumstances would choose to bury a deceased dog or cat in a pet cemetery. It is likely that burials at pet cemeteries were originally a privilege of the wealthy and of celebrities. Hence, by the 1920s in New York, Hartsdale Pet Cemetery became known as “the place where the very rich and very famous buried their pets. Large and elaborate monuments marked the graves of

pampered pets” (Martin 1997:39). Today, there are few clear-cut financial barriers, and certainly no class barriers, to pet cemetery interment. Given the burial and cremation options open to pet owners, burial falls within the budget of most families wishing to inter a pet in a formal setting. In fact, it may be that with the American prosperity that followed each of the twentieth century world wars, highly motivated pet owners from all walks of life were inspired to emulate richer citizens by choosing to bury pets in a bona fide cemetery. Social class is rarely depicted on grave markers, though grave inscriptions often reveal ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion of the owners.

The surest statement to be made is that pet cemeteries are chiefly an urban phenomenon, situated near or in cities. But the number of animals buried in genuine cemeteries represents only a small fraction of the total deceased pet population. In the countryside, other burial options predominate, as illustrated by the author of the best selling *Marley and Me* (Grogan 2005), who chose to bury his pet on his sprawling Pennsylvania property. Prior to the late nineteenth century, states Grier (2006:111), “most dead pets simply went out with the household trash or perhaps wound up at a rendering plant.” In the absence of pet cemeteries in mid-nineteenth-century New York, determined animal owners found ways to bury their pets (a knowledgeable woman from Manhattan mentioned illegal burials in Central Park). Starting in the 1890s, the founding of pet cemeteries in and around cities provided affluent pet-owning urbanites an acceptable way to dispose of animal remains.

The very existence of pet cemeteries indicates a deep emotional connection to dogs, cats, and other companion animals. Franklin (1999) refers to this human-animal bond as a kind of emotional crutch. He states that in the 1990s, there exists “a pet mortuary industry offering everything from a funeral, a grave site and cemetery services through to bereavement counseling. These businesses are thriving on the increased emotional dependence on pets” (Franklin 1999:93). By burying their animals in a public cemetery, pet owners not only demonstrate extraordinary devotion to these animals, but also attribute to the creatures a degree of sacredness not accorded to other beasts. Indeed, many bereaved owners would say that their animals have souls and that these souls live on after death. One New York cemetery caretaker defends this belief by stating, “Some people say that animals don’t have souls. But they can’t prove it.” If mounting evidence as presented by Franklin (1999), Gaillemin (2009), Grier (2006), and others (e.g., Grogan 2005; Manning and Serpell 1994) is correct, pet owners who bury their companion animals in cemeteries are not part of a small group with unique or extreme relationships to those animals. Rather, they seem to hold a pronounced version of widely held beliefs and attitudes, which overall serve to diminish, if not entirely obliterate, the categorical distinction between beast and human.

Most pet cemeteries in the United States, as around the Western world, were founded throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Franklin 1999), and they are rich repositories of information about attitudes toward animals in recent times. Hartsdale Pet Cemetery, for its relative longevity, provides especially valuable evidence of changing and evolving attitudes towards pets through the gravestone inscriptions found there.³ Although pet cemetery gravestones are only one indication among many, these monuments nonetheless offer powerful evidence for the evolution of attitudes towards pets, given that gravestone inscriptions are indeed carved in stone, thereby producing a relatively permanent written record.

The Hartsdale Pet Cemetery, originally known as the Hartsdale Canine Cemetery, is situated in Hartsdale, a village 20 miles north of New York City. The cemetery was founded when a veterinarian, Dr. Samuel Johnson, allowed a grieving client to bury her dog in a corner of his apple orchard in what was then rural Hartsdale (Grier 2006:110–11). Other New Yorkers, without access to land, soon followed suit. Originally pet owners were responsible for the care of their own burial plots. In 1914 the cemetery became a corporation, which is the legal route for guaranteeing a cemetery's existence in perpetuity (Grier 2006:111). As it appears today, the cemetery spills over a steep hillside. Although it lies adjacent to one of the busiest thoroughfares in Westchester County, mature plantings and deft landscaping seclude the cemetery from nearby traffic; one could drive by without noticing it. Hartsdale Pet Cemetery is home to more than 70,000 deceased pets—overwhelmingly dogs and cats, but also birds, rabbits, and the occasional monkey or snake. There is even one lion, buried at Hartsdale in 1908 by a Hungarian princess. About 20 cremated human remains lie there as well. Given that the estimated human population of Hartsdale in the year 2000 was only 10,000, the hamlet, incorporated within the town of Greenburgh, houses many times more deceased animals than live people.

In general appearance, Hartsdale Pet Cemetery is a miniature replica of a human cemetery, except that the gravesites are much smaller and situated more closely together than those in human cemeteries. A cursory examination of gravestones demonstrates marked changes over time. Specifically, gravestone inscriptions demonstrate the gradual appearance of religious and family affiliation bestowed upon the animals. Especially since the mid-1980s, increasing numbers of interred dogs and cats at Hartsdale are identified on gravestones as family members. During this period as well, there appears a definite and growing tendency for owners to link these creatures to specific religious communities. Before the 1980s, at least at Hartsdale, almost no monument inscriptions indicate the belief that pets are equivalent to kin. Nor do they show evidence that owners consider animals to be endowed with souls.

Although Hartsdale gives evidence of regular changes in gravestone inscriptions, cemetery monuments display no rigid chronology, either stylistically or

textually. Within any historical stage, there are at least a few unrepresentative monuments, representing styles characteristic of epochs other than the ones in which they were erected. There are no strict temporal boundaries dividing one stylistic period from another. Further confounding the picture is the fact that some monuments are dedicated to several animals that died in succession over a period of decades. In such cases, it is difficult to discern precisely when the stone was designed and inscribed. Despite these complications, socially significant changes are possible to trace at Hartsdale. These changes encompass at least three major domains: naming patterns, kinship and family affiliation, and religious and ethnic identity.

Naming Patterns

As registered on Hartsdale gravestones, fashions in pet naming have undergone changes over the course of a century. Some gravestones in the earliest years convey only the barest information, with several of the earliest monuments, those dating from the first three decades of the twentieth century, omitting the deceased animal's name entirely and simply indicating that "my pet" or "pets" are buried at the site. The majority of monument inscriptions prior to World War II, however, record the deceased's name, occasionally together with the age at death or years of life. The earliest monument at Hartsdale Pet Cemetery is typical. It dates from 1899 and reads "Brownie, Aged 13½ years." A 1927 monument is dedicated to "Laddie," who died at the age of eight. Another inscription of the same era reads "Rex 1910–1927." From the early 1930s comes a gravestone engraved with the name "Hobo," together with the years of Hobo's life, 1928–1932. Additional pet names that appear in the pre-World War II period include Trixie, Rags, Jaba, Bunt, Boogles, Teko, Dicksie, Snap, Punch, Bébé, and Pippy. There are, in fact, very few identifiably human names conferred upon animals from the date of the cemetery's founding in 1896 through the 1930s.

There are some exceptions, however. Among them is an inscription from January 22, 1927 that reads simply "Our Pet Tedd." Ted is a man's name, of course, but it would be unusual, even as long ago as 1927, to spell that name with a double d. Whatever the actual motive for the pet owner to add the second d, it is tempting to view this orthography as a symbolic means of differentiating the buried animal from any human named Ted. Another monument, from 1921, is dedicated to a pet named Robert Burns. Again, although no observer can be sure why the owner named a pet after a famous poet, the name draws attention to itself as being unusual and slightly exotic, even humorous when applied to a beast. It therefore serves symbolically to differentiate this animal from humans. Thor and Henrietta are among the handful of human names conferred upon pets from the pre-World War II period.

Aside from distinguishing between animals and humans, early pet naming patterns usually, if not always, fail to distinguish animals by sex. It is fairly certain that Laddie, Thor, and Rex were males. But of Bunty, Jaba, Snap, and most others, the pet's sex is unverifiable. The earliest inscriptions rarely reveal the species or breed of the buried animal. In almost every case it is impossible to know whether the burial is that of dog, cat, horse, or bird, not to mention a tabby or a collie. The only clue as to species is an occasional monument engraving or small sculpture of a dog, cat, horse, or rabbit. Where the deceased is listed simply as "pet," one is left completely ignorant of both sex and species. The overall effect of inscriptions during the initial decades of the twentieth century is the elimination of deceased animals' individual distinctiveness. Only the animal's name and time of death, where they appear at all, provide an individual identity.

At the same time, gravestones in this period often elevate the owners at the expense of the deceased animal. This effect is achieved through the relative size of lettering. For example, a first-generation burial style appears on the Brenner family monument, where the most prominent element of the inscription is the owner's surname. The pets' names, their species, and their gender are omitted. On another monument from the same era, only a single word appears: the surname Castle. In this instance, the very presence of the deceased animals lying beneath the spot is missing from the inscription. This monument was laid by Irene Castle, a famous dancer from the early twentieth century, who buried five dogs and a pet monkey at Hartsdale (Martin 1997:34–35). Several similar pet gravestones are found dating before World War II.

After World War II and up to the present day, monument inscriptions in some respects show a continuation of the types of pet names that predominated in the first half of the century. For example, it is easy to locate gravestones from the 1950s through the 1980s bearing non-human names like Freckles, Snowie, Clover, Spaghetti, Champ, Happy, Rusty, Taka, and the like. There are also several gravestones from recent years with common human names, but names clearly marked as whimsical or humorous, thereby calling attention to themselves as the name of a pet rather than a human—Charlie Brown is the best example.

Numerous monuments from this period, too, are minimally informative, bearing inscriptions that provide only pet name, owner surname, and the dates of the deceased pet's birth and death. Like the earlier gravestones, they fail to reveal the sex, gender, or species of the deceased. However, there are a number of significant post-World War II changes on inscriptions. For instance, as measured by relative lettering size, the names of the deceased pet assume a much more prominent position on the monuments. At the same time, the number of deceased animals with recognizable human names increases substantially, a trend

noted in other Western countries as well (Franklin 1999:95). Pet names, from the 1960s through the 1980s, include Rico, Ginny, Rivka, Francois, Samantha, Daniel, and Venus. The pattern continues into the 1990s and 2000s, with a growing number of human names like Maggie, Rebecca, Estrellita, Jasper, Chelsea, Jacob, Ronnie, Fred, Alex, Marcello, Oliver, Lucas, Max, and Timothy. Most human names automatically reveal whether the child is a boy or a girl. An animal carrying a human name is likewise assumed to be of the gender designated by the name. Many of the non-human names in the post-World War II era, in contrast to names before the War, also indicate the gender of the deceased. Examples include Cha Cha Girl, Candy Man, Mr. Cat, and Dot-Z-Girl. Where the human name is gender ambiguous, as in the case of Nickie, the owner sometimes appends a gender marker to it, as with Nickie Girl. In these ways, gravestone inscriptions at the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery show an overall tendency in the modern postwar period to anthropomorphize companion animals by giving them human names. At the same time, to a much greater degree than earlier, names provide information about the sex of the deceased, thereby conferring upon the animal a more distinctive identity than it would otherwise have.

There is also a noticeable tendency in recent decades to reveal the species of the deceased, even when the deceased bears a non-human name. Mr. Cat and Pussycat are two names that appear on stones laid after 1990. As we approach the twenty-first century, too, inscriptions reveal the specific breed of dog or cat. Overall, contemporary inscriptions allow for a more rounded picture of the deceased animal than do inscriptions on earlier gravestones. Aside from the pet's given name, recent inscriptions convey information about gender, species, and breed.

Following World War II, other significant changes begin to appear. One increasingly popular method of designating species and breed, if not gender, is the inclusion of memorial photographs on gravestones. At Hartsdale, the earliest recorded photograph on a monument dates from 1935. Several others, certainly no more than a handful, extend back to the 1960s. By the 1990s and 2000s, memorial photographs become a common, integral feature of animal monuments. The highly stylized, simplified representations in stone, like those on early gravestones, cannot possibly convey an individual portrait to the degree that a photograph, particularly a color photograph, is able to accomplish. A study of animal grave pictures in Japan revealed that "photographs of household pets tend to celebrate [a] metaphorical sense of kinship" (Chalfen 2003:143). This statement could apply equally well to the United States, where monuments, through photographs and text, show that pet owners increasingly consider their companion animals to be actual members of their human family.

Kinship and Family Ties

Early monument inscriptions at Hartsdale tend to convey bare facts, rarely expressing emotion or feelings of religiosity. Nonetheless, among the pre-World War II monuments, there are a number of exceptions which provide a window into how these animals were perceived by their owners. Some early gravestones, for example, indicate that owners perceived their pets as proverbial friends. One inscription reads, "Spud/A Friend Who Proved His Worth/1920–1923." Another, dedicated to Henrietta, refers to her as "a Beloved Little Friend/1908–1925." "Beloved" is a term used on other gravestones as well, including the one belonging to "Dotty/Beloved Pet of E. M. Dodge/Died Sept 16th 1899/In Her Fourteenth Year." Pet owner Frohman writes that his companion animal Dot, who died in 1929, "Lived to Love." In these cases, as others, pet owners from the late nineteenth century to the present strive through communication on monument inscriptions to express their deep attachment to deceased companion animals. Perhaps the most effusive expression of emotion among early gravestones appears on a monument that reads, "Marmette, Spirit of Love/My Heart Grieves Without You/Died May 24, 1920." Insofar as deep feelings for their animals are concerned, these gravestones are possibly more representative of their time than their relatively small numbers imply. The strongest evidence supporting this statement lies in the fact of pet burial itself. To expend the time, money, and organizational effort to give a pet a proper cemetery burial automatically suggests an extraordinary devotion to and love for the animal.

However, to think of a pet as "friend" or "beloved" is very different from representing that animal as a relative or family member. In the post-Second World War period, for the first time, kinship and family terms appear on pet monuments. The metaphorical kinship that Chalfen (2003) calls "implicit" in the use of memorial photographs is actually explicit in inscribed texts. Kinship terms describe a degree of emotional and social proximity between animal and human far beyond devotion or friendship. There is a gravestone from the 1920s that refers to a companion animal named Caruso as "My Baby." But that is one of only two kin designations that I have found inscribed on early gravestones. After World War II, and with increasing frequency, gravestone inscriptions denote family or kinship ties. A monument to a dog named Rico refers to the animal as "Third Member of the Family." The monument is signed, "Mom and Dad Miss You Always." A mourner bids another dog, Peppy, goodbye by stating, "All My Love/Until We Meet Again/Mommy." Other deceased animals of the modern post-War era are identified as "Our Little Baby," "The Kids," "Our Precious Girl," "Little Person," "Our First Baby and Love." A dog named Tiffany lies under a monument that reads, "In Loving Memory of Our Princess Tiffany Wong/Mommy and Daddy Will Always Love You." A dog Rusty is called

“Beloved Member of Our Family.” Especially since the 1990s, and increasingly into the twenty-first century, the kinship theme is echoed.

Animal surnames, too, provide important cues to feelings of family or kinship. Since the 1980s, dogs, cats, and even birds have acquired the surnames of their owners, as registered on gravestones. This innovation in monument design nearly converts the animals symbolically into blood relatives. At the same time, the owners themselves recede into the background, as they lose identifiable surnames or entirely omit their own names from monuments. This custom reflects human burials, in which monuments display names of the deceased alone, rarely those of the mourners. At Hartsdale, pet owners identifying themselves simply as M&D and R&A laid to rest Stony Harten, a companion animal who died in 1986. Monuments dedicated to pets like Sir Garfield Reiter, Corky Carlitz, and Hilly and Lilly Citron (also known on the monument as “The Kids”) lack owners’ names entirely. Commonly, owners are identified simply by a kinship term that denotes the specific family tie to the deceased, such as Mommy, Brother, and the like.

The story of Maria O’Donnell⁴ provides an excellent example of the thought and feelings that go into the making of these gravestones. Maria buried her cat, Margaret, in April 2008. A small temporary tag mounted on a metal frame was the only grave marker. On Mother’s Day of May 2008, Maria had visited the plot and brought a small bouquet of flowers for Margaret. The now somewhat wilted blooms remained an expression of her feeling that she was, in her words, Margaret’s Mommy. Maria held a clipboard and was busy drawing a design for the monument, which was soon to become the permanent gravestone. Thinking about the inscription, she said, was part of her therapy, a way she might conquer her sorrow.

Maria was eager to talk about her plans. The gravestone was to be rectangular and include three lines of picture and text. Each line would start on the left with a small, cameo shaped photographic insert, and continue with the name and birth and death dates of the deceased. The first line was to be devoted to Margaret. The second was destined for Sparky, a living cat to whom Maria is deeply devoted. The last line Maria reserved for herself. Maria explained that while she intended to insert pictures of Margaret and Sparky on the gravestone, she would fill her own cameo with a popular saying, “something like ‘Always in our hearts’.” Alongside her name, she wants “MOMMY” engraved. Maria plans for a simple cross to be placed at the top of the gravestone. Maria’s burial plan makes clear that she intends to be interred at Hartsdale Pet Cemetery together with her two cats.

Maria’s burial plan occasioned a family crisis. Born and brought up near Naples, her parents are first-generation Italian immigrants who settled in the United States in young adulthood. The family is extremely traditional, she says.

They still speak Italian at home. She admits that it breaks her parents' hearts even to imagine that Maria will be cremated, a mortuary procedure that, as traditional Italian Catholics, they steadfastly oppose. They are also troubled that she will not be buried in a Roman Catholic cemetery. Like members of most established religious communities, Roman Catholics prohibit the burial of animals alongside humans because animals are considered to lack souls and therefore cannot be buried in holy ground. Hence, if Maria is to be buried alongside her cats, a pet cemetery is her only option.

Maria O'Donnell defines Margaret and Sparky as members of her family, specifically as daughter and son, and for this reason wants to be buried along with them. As we spoke at Margaret's grave side, Maria spoke of her own life circumstances, which provide a clue as to how she came to feel this way. She is recently separated from her husband. From the day they were married, Maria wanted children, but her husband always refused. She remained childless and adopted both Margaret and Sparky instead. The cats became children to her, which is why she plans to be identified on the gravestone as "Mommy." In speaking of her cats, Maria consistently refers to Sparky as the "biological son" of Margaret, the cat who gave birth to him. This speech pattern indicates that Maria defines Sparky as her own son, albeit in social rather than biological terms.

Maria was recently dismissed from a job she had long held in the financial sector. Now that she no longer makes daily trips to Wall Street, she visits Margaret's burial site at least once a week. Although she admits having passed childbearing age, she displays little remorse. "I don't mind if I didn't have children," she states in a matter-of-fact tone of voice. "I have Margaret and Sparky." To speak of these cats as surrogate children seems, under the circumstances, a distortion of Maria's feelings. To this woman, as to so many other Americans, companion animals have become not just child substitutes, but actual sons and daughters—the real thing.

Religious and Ethnic Identity

A third major change in Hartsdale cemetery inscriptions since the Second World War, and especially since the 1980s, is the inclusion of religious sentiments and sectarian symbols. Just as pets have become defined increasingly as family members, they have simultaneously acquired a religious or spiritual identity, which implies for them a life after death. Numerous inscriptions bear a simple cross to indicate religious affiliation of both the deceased pet and the owner. But there are multiple monuments, too, that express more elaborate sentiments of a spiritual nature. At Hartsdale, the gravestone of Jacob, who died in 2005, bears a Celtic cross and the inscription, "We Will See You in Heaven."

There is also a communal grave, erected in 2002, in which the ashes of six male dogs lie. The stone bears a cross on top and words indicating a belief in animal immortality.

As in the famous pet cemetery in Asnières-sur-Seine just outside Paris (Gaillemain 2009:501), it is evident that owners who bury pets at Hartsdale believe that their companion animals possess immortal souls. Aida's dog, Estrellita, who died in 2005, gets her goodbye with the promise, "Until We Meet in Heaven." The inscription for an animal called Chelsea, who died in 2006, reads "My Golden Girl/Precious Friend/And Gift From God." "Mommy and Daddy" say their farewell to a "Beloved Boxer" named Champ by stating on his gravestone, "We Pray That We Will Meet Again." Dog Lanney is said to be "In God's Care" and "Gone to Eternal Rest." The bereaved owner of "Beloved Toto," who died in 1992, wrote on the dog's gravestone an epigraph stating, "Jesus Loves You and So Do I." The animal gravestones, like human gravestones, rarely distinguish among denominations of Christianity. Religious identification is sometimes evident, however, by the presence of a statue of Saint Francis, or a particular shape or style of cross. Virtually all sectarian symbols and expressions of belief in an animal afterlife date from the 1980s onward.

Deceased dogs and cats are not only given a Christian identity through gravestone inscriptions; many inscriptions reveal an unmistakable Jewish identity as well. The earliest such burial that I was able to identify occurred in 1980, upon the death of a cat, Corky Carlitz. Near the top of Corky's gravestone a Star of David has been engraved. A dog named Sushi has two Stars of David symmetrically placed at the top of his gravestone, on which there is also Hebrew lettering that reads "Shalom" (meaning both peace and goodbye). Consider, too, the grave marker of a cat named Sheebah. At the top of the monument sits a picture of Sheebah. The inscription reads, "Sheebah/who went to heaven on Yom Kippur Day/October 13, 2005/ Thank you for the happiness you brought into our lives/Love you forever/The Scher Family." Like Sushi's stone, Sheebah's shows two symmetrically placed Stars of David. Alongside several Jewish gravestones are tall votive candles. Known as *yahrtzeit* candles, they are designed to burn uninterrupted for eight days, the period of intense mourning that immediately follows a Jewish burial. In accordance with religious standards following the death of a Jewish man or woman, the *yahrtzeit* candle has recently accompanied the passing of pets as well.

Any visitor to a conventional Jewish burial ground is bound to notice pebbles balanced atop the stone monuments. When Jews visit a grave, they routinely balance a small rock atop the deceased's gravestone, a simple sign that they have remembered their departed kin. This custom entails surveying the ground for a pebble or rock of suitable size and shape to use for the purpose. These stones also adorn Jewish pet gravestones at Hartsdale. A number of Christian graves also

show small commemorative stones resting on top of the gravestones. These are noticeably different from the Jewish rocks, however. They tend to be industrial products, highly polished and shaped into perfect ovals or hearts, colorful, perfectly clean, and manufactured out of stones that are clearly not native to the cemetery grounds. An officer at Hartsdale said that some Christian clients, admiring the Jewish custom, have adopted it, at the same time transforming it slightly to suit their own tastes.

Hence, gravestone inscriptions and design at the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery, principally from the 1990's onward, bestow a religious identity upon deceased pets. They express the owner's belief in an afterlife for the pets, as well as the expectation, or at least the hope, that owners and pets will be reunited in the afterlife. Some inscriptions contain one or two of these elements, others the full range. A considerable spattering of monuments from the most recent decades reflects the presence in the United States of families of mixed religious background. Thus, there are gravestones that have a cross and Star of David, Star of David and Eastern Orthodox cross, and in one instance, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim symbols. It is hard to determine what proportion of pet owners conceive of their deceased pets in religious or spiritual terms. Among owners who conceive of pets as sacred creatures, it is probable that only some actually design monuments to include religious sentiments. Nonetheless, the exponential growth in the number of monuments with some form of religious or spiritual representation suggests that for many bereaved owners, a deceased dog or cat is more than a creature of nature. Through designing monuments with crosses and Stars of David, and expressing the hope or certainty of a pet afterlife, owners imply that their dogs and cats enjoy the same sacred status as human beings. Religious symbols and text also picture pets as individuals, not just animals of a particular breed or species.

At the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery, the presence of a tiny chapel—a side chamber situated off the main entrance of the cemetery office building—adds to the sacred nature of animal burials. The cemetery offers the services of a minister, a retired Episcopalian priest, to bereaved pet owners who request that burials be accompanied by a religious ceremony. The ritual, which lasts from a quarter to half an hour, varies in price: in 2007, \$100 for a cremation, \$150 for a burial. According to the minister, burial services take a little longer than cremations, given that in burials the minister waits until mourners have departed and the grave is completely filled with earth. The service itself consists of a reading from Genesis, especially chapters dealing with the creation of all creatures by God, followed by recitation of secular poems, as well as prayers that the minister himself has either composed or adapted from other texts. Only a fraction of pet owners represented at Hartsdale rely upon the services of this minister; nonetheless, the mere

availability of a clergyman attests to the deep, heartfelt religious feelings that some pet owners hold.

Perhaps the most vivid expression of animal spirituality, at least in the contemporary United States, appears in a prose poem entitled “Rainbow Bridge.” It is common for Americans who have suffered the loss of their pet, and experience deep grief and remorse, to learn about “Rainbow Bridge.” The piece is so popular, in fact, that it has been published on the internet at least thirty-five thousand times (Schaffer 2009:242). “Rainbow Bridge” in its current form was probably composed sometime in the 1980s by an anonymous author. However, there exist many versions, old and new. Some commentators would trace the origin of the poem to an ancient Norse legend (Syufy 2009), although there is no firm proof of historical antecedents. The standard version of “Rainbow Bridge” reads:

Just this side of heaven is a place called Rainbow Bridge. When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone here, that pet goes to Rainbow Bridge. There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they can run and play together. There is plenty of food, water and sunshine, and our friends are warm and comfortable. All the animals that had been ill and old are restored to health and vigor; those who were hurt or maimed are made whole and strong again, just as we remember them in our dreams of days and times gone by.

The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing; they each miss someone very special to them, who had to be left behind. They all run and play together, but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance. His bright eyes are intent; His eager body quivers. Suddenly he begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass, his legs carrying him faster and faster. You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet, you cling together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again. The happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands again caress the beloved head, and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your pet, so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart.

Then you cross Rainbow Bridge together. . . .

In the course of fieldwork with grief support groups at the Animal Medical Center in Manhattan, many bereaved pet owners asserted their firm belief in being reunited with deceased pets in the afterlife. Rainbow Bridge constitutes a kind of limbo or, to employ an oxymoron, a sort of happy Purgatory, a stopover on the route to heaven. The poem projects a fantasy of a joyful, carefree existence for a cat, dog, or other companion animal, which has probably come to life’s end through suffering, injury, or ill health. Despite no mention of God, the poem incorporates an undeniable spirituality and eschatological sentiment, as represented by the mention of heaven in the opening line, and the subsequent portrayal of an animal afterlife situated in a place that might well evoke images of a Garden of Eden. It also indicates a belief that the passed pets are endowed with immortal souls.

As a corollary of religious identity, many deceased animals at Hartsdale acquire an ethnic identity, as decided by the owner. Both given names and surnames of animals on monuments provide clues as to the ethnic identity that owners confer upon their pets. Hence, a monument to Tiger Levine, which also includes Tiger's Yiddishized nickname, Tigalah, in parentheses, reveals the animal's presumed Jewish connection. So does the monument to a dog named Shayna Punim (Beautiful Face in Yiddish). The owner of the Irish setter, Maggie Goldberg, implicitly endowed her dog through the gravestone inscription with mixed Irish and Jewish background.

Evidence for the ethnic identity of animals emanates also from language use. Undoubtedly, inscriptions reflect the language facility of the pet owner. In recent decades inscriptions are more often than not directed toward the deceased pet; that is, they contain messages to the departed animal that convey the owner's love, devotion, sadness, and expectation for a future together with the deceased in the afterlife. Implicit in the message is the assumption that the animal understands the particular language of the inscription. Aside from the predominant use of English on gravestones at Hartsdale, Romanian, French, Hebrew, Portuguese, Spanish, and Chinese can also be found. Ethnic identity, whether taken on its own terms or understood as a function of religious affiliation, adds to a sense of family and kinship membership, and contributes to a rounded, individualized portrait of the deceased animal.

CONCLUSIONS

When a man and woman marry and bear children, they normally expect the children to outlive them. When they adopt or otherwise acquire a pet, the only reasonable expectation is that they will outlive their animals. Hence, it is common for pet owners to erect monuments that are designed for the burial of future pets as well as for the specific animal to which the monument is dedicated. Consider, for example, the gravestone of a cat named Shayna. The stone is taller than it is wide. A photograph of the cat occupies the upper left. At top-center is a Star of David. Just below it appear the words "Our Children/Eternal Love/Shayna 1995–2005." A large empty space occupies the bottom half of the monument. At ground level, in very small lettering, the surname of the owner or owners appears: Krasof. The Krasof family has left room on the gravestone to list future deceased pets—in their words, "children."

For animals to be considered children, as they increasingly are, they must be endowed with the cultural traits of human society. In the first two decades of Hartsdale Pet Cemetery's existence, pet monuments list very few animal characteristics that might be termed cultural. Since the 1980s, and with growing intensity to the present day, gravestones reveal a fuller picture of the animals

that lay beneath the monuments, sometimes including photographs of the deceased, which can provide substantial information. The deceased have names and surnames, kinship affiliations, religious and ethnic identity, immortal souls, and even personal and emotional features that parallel those of human children. It is increasingly common, too, for owners and other visitors to decorate monuments with colorful toys, as is also common in Asnières-sur-Seine, the Parisian pet cemetery (Gaillemin 2009:499). Stuffed animals are most evident, but pinwheels, rubber ducks, and similar objects are also common, sometimes deposited on a pet's grave even before a permanent monument is designed or erected. All these objects are destined in the world of human beings for the use and enjoyment of children.

In California, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and some other states in the United States, some pet cemeteries date from the 1920s. None of these, however, has the historical depth of the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery. Nor do they have its worldwide fame. The Jindaiji cemetery, an hour outside of Japan, has received prior anthropological attention (Chalfen 2003). Affiliated with the Jindai Buddhist Temple, Jindaiji is one of the largest pet cemeteries in Japan. After showing me the cemetery grounds in 2007, the manager led me to the main office building, excused himself, and returned with a book in hand, entitled *Dr. Johnson's Apple Orchard: The Story of America's First Pet Cemetery* (Martin 1997). The book is authored and published by the current executive officer of the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery. As the manager leafed through it, he told me that it was his great aspiration to visit Hartsdale some day.

Future research might reveal regional differences in pet cemetery design and monument inscriptions. Comparative research, both historically and cross-culturally, promises to uncover information that material from a single cemetery alone cannot yield. For now, however, Hartsdale seems representative of the United States as a whole in terms of revealing changes in the way Americans view and treat their companion animals. Gravestone inscriptions at Hartsdale Pet Cemetery demonstrate a gradual emergence of pets as kin. It is only in the past 20 years or so that dogs and cats at Hartsdale have become identified in any great numbers as close family relatives. It is during this period as well that a tendency to endow these creatures with affiliation in specific religious communities appears. Moreover, many bereaved owners would say that their animals have souls and that these souls are immortal. These beliefs correlate with the increasing perception of pets as individuals, with specific cultural characteristics, as revealed through gravestone inscriptions and decorations.

Demographics can explain some of these changes. There has been an enormous increase in pet ownership over the years. This increase correlates strongly with a rise in single-family households, an elevated age at first marriage, rising infertility rates, and an overall decrease in household size (University of

Maryland 2003a, b). Couples give birth to children later in their lives than in the past, and consequently have fewer offspring (University of Maryland 2003a). Whether by choice or natural impediments, there is an increasing number of childless couples (Whipps 2006). Also, pets may alleviate loneliness sometimes felt by men and women who live alone. In urban areas, some single women initially purchase dogs for the purpose of protection, but over time, these guard dogs become like sons or daughters to them. Similar conclusions are mirrored at grief therapy sessions, organized in support of those who recently suffered the loss of a companion animal.

To many childless couples with whom I have spoken, dogs and cats are simply child substitutes, or in many cases viewed as actual children. This applies not only to those unable or unwilling to give birth, but also characterizes families in the empty-nest stage of life; that is, couples whose grown children have married, left home, or moved away. Longevity has also played a role in the developing sense of canines and felines as kin. People live much longer than they used to, and consequently find themselves residing alone as widows or widowers. Pets relieve loneliness for the elderly and become like children to them. In this respect, Marvin (2005:70) is correct to state that Pets could be viewed as non-utilitarian (i.e., not intended primarily for work) animals that are created in order to enter into close emotional relationships of love and companionship with humans. People often need to feel needed and when human lives feel empty, pets are available to fill them.

Then, too, dogs and cats are reliably present, something that can no longer be said of all friends and family. The increasing frequency of separations and divorce not only augments the number of single-person households (University of Maryland 2003c), but also produces a feeling of uncertainty about future support networks. Couples lucky enough to be employed in the same region do not feel assured that the situation will persist, as the current economy cannot guarantee a permanently stable living situation. Domestic and international migration, triggered by globalization and expanded opportunities for employment abroad, have produced a mobile population in which friends and family might at any moment be relocated—a situation that may leave loved ones on their own. Companion animals, by contrast, are always present. As long as they are fed, housed, and healed when ill, they provide unwavering love and support in an increasingly uncertain and unstable human environment. To millions of pet owners, these animals have become more than child-like. They have become, like Maria O'Donnell's cats, Margaret and Spanky, actual people. Hence, they are lavished with expensive wardrobes, provided special macrobiotic diets, and treated to sophisticated medical procedures and hotel accommodations to provide them care when their owners are unable to. Franklin (1999:85) summarizes these trends well:

Since the 1970s, the nuclear family has come under pressure and individuals at all stages in the life cycle face a more fragmented, insecure prospect. Here are the conditions favoring the elaboration of our ties with pets: while all around changes and “all that is solid melts into air,” pets provide a somewhat nostalgic set of old fashioned comforts. They make long-term bonds with their human companions; they rarely run off with others; they are almost always pleased to see “their” humans; their apparent love is unconditional (and therefore secured) and they give the strong impression that they need humans as much as humans need them.

Franklin’s overall conclusion is that “[p]ets are able to provide their keepers with many social benefits which are no longer guaranteed by society” (Franklin 1999:97). Consequently, humans have become even more intimate with their animal companions than they have been with others of their own species.

Elizabeth Thomas emphasizes not only the emotional but also the physical closeness between pets and people. She notes:

[M]any of us admit our animal companions into the most intimate areas of our lives. We are not in the least embarrassed when a dog sees us in the shower or overhears an argument. In this, a companion animal provides an intimacy that exceeds any we may experience with virtually any other human being, including our spouses and children; the intimacy is on a par with that of mother and newborn infant, or of our own skins. (Thomas 1993:ix)

The physical and emotional closeness that characterizes relationships between people and their pets has taxonomic consequences: it works to reduce the conceptual barriers that divide human from beast. The progressive breakdown in barriers finds material expression in the pet monument inscriptions and decorations that prevail today.

When people lose the animals that they have come to consider their children, the creatures that they have endowed with a host of cultural characteristics, they are likely to respond to their deaths as they would to the loss of a human son or daughter. Consider a famous instance of a companion animal that came to be defined by master and mistress as a real child. It is the beloved Dalmatian, Silverdene Emblem O’Neill (familarly known as Blemie), belonging to the great Irish-American playwright Eugene O’Neill and his third wife, Carlotta. Eugene, Carlotta, and Blemie lived alone on a large property in Danville, California. When Blemie was in his final days, Eugene O’Neill saw that he would have to do something to relieve his own and Carlotta’s distress. So, he produced what has become a famous document: “The Last Will and Testament of Silverdene Emblem O’Neill.” The lengthy text, reproduced below only in part, is a fine demonstration of how human feelings and concerns are projected onto one’s beloved pet when death draws near. Blemie “writes”:

I ask my Master and Mistress to remember me always, but not to grieve for me too long. In my life I have tried to be a comfort to them in time of sorrow, and a reason for added joy in their happiness. It is painful for me to think that even in death I should cause them pain. Let them

remember that while no dog has ever had a happier life (and this I owe to their love and care for me), now that I have grown blind and deaf and lame, and even my sense of smell fails me so that a rabbit could be right under my nose and I might not know, my pride has sunk to a sick, bewildered humiliation. I feel life is taunting me with having over-lingered my welcome. It is time I said goodbye. . . . It will be a sorrow to leave them, but not a sorrow to die. . . . One last word of farewell, Dear Master and Mistress. Whenever you visit my grave, say to yourselves with regret but also with happiness in your hearts at the remembrance of my long happy life with you: Here lies one who loved us and whom we love. No matter how deep my sleep, I shall hear you, and not all the power of death can keep my spirit from wagging a grateful tail.

This text, apart from illustrating tender family feelings between humans and their pets, serves as a reminder that the social definition of dogs, cats, and other animals as kin (e.g., Peace 2005; Servais 2005) is hardly new to the present generation. It extends at least as far back as 1576, when English physician Johannes Caius (born John Keys in Norwich) reported that the spaniel is “a kind of dogge accepted among gentles, nobles, Lordes, Ladies, etc. who make much of them, vouchsafeing to admit them so farre into their company that they will not onely lull them in theyr lappes, but kysse them with their lippes, and make them theyr prettie playfellows” (Caius 1969 [1576]:42). And in nineteenth-century America, “some people . . . argued for the therapeutic value of pets as friends and even as surrogate children in the lives of lonely adults” (Grier 2006:179). In 1845, for example, one author expressed the opinion that keeping pets is “something that childless people are apt to do, if they are wise” (Caroline S. Kirkland, cited in Grier 2006:179). It is the marked prevalence and intensity of the family bond with animals, together with the near obliteration of classificatory distinctions between animals and humans among growing segments of society, that characterize present-day pet ownership in America. This is the lesson that cemetery monuments at Hartsdale confirm and refine.

NOTES

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2. Some would extend that relationship to non-domesticated creatures like whales and dolphins (Peace 2005; Servais 2005).
3. I first recognized the potential for this kind of analysis through reading Deetz's (1977) classic study of colonial American material culture, including gravestones. Just as Deetz (1996 [1977]) documented a chronology of gravestone styles and inscriptions prevalent in early New England

as a reflection of changes in colonial society, so too may the gravestone inscriptions at Hartsdale reflect an evolution of attitudes toward pets.

4. Her name has been changed to maintain confidentiality.

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