

Chapter 20

Comment: Encountering Urban Animals: Towards the Zoöpolis



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20.1 The Urban, the Animal

We are living in the age of the urban, with the majority of the planet's human population now inhabiting cities. Urbanisation creates novel challenges for many animals who are either driven out of these 'human-dominated landscapes' or forced to adapt to drastically different conditions to survive. There are pressing questions about what it means to coexist with other species amidst the precarity of life in the Anthropocene, in which the urban is both a central driver and outcome (Amin and Thrift 2017; Ruddick 2015).

Cities are predominantly constructed in our imaginaries, policies, and practices as uniquely human spaces—in opposition to 'nature' or 'wilderness'—and thus are distinctive contexts in which to discuss animals. Counter to modernist bifurcations of culture/nature, urban/rural, and domestic/wild, we need to recognize cities as a porous matrix of landcover types with transposed infrastructural networks and habitat corridors which create opportunities for the circulation of animals into and around the city (Amin and Thrift 2002).

Discussing urban animals becomes more challenging when we trouble understanding of the 'urban' alongside a recognition of the vast heterogeneity of 'The Animal'¹? Urbanization and all it entails has drastically different import for the bear and the crow. Does the snail differentiate between the farm field and the city park? For many, the assumption remains that the urban is an 'unnatural' dwelling for wild animals—a space of danger. But the success of many species—even those as

¹As Derrida (2008) famously delineates.

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unlikely as leopards²—is a testament not only to animals’ resilience and adaptability, but to the very real opportunities often afforded by this heterogenous space we call the urban. In landscapes otherwise dominated by agriculture, cities may provide oases of greenspace (parks designed for aesthetic or recreational purposes, riparian corridors, and renaturalized urban natures) amidst vast areas of insecticide-treated monocultures. Within such urban-rural matrices, where is the ‘natural’ landscape in which animals belong? We need to find new ways of conceptualizing and caring for ‘recombinant ecologies’ (Barker 2000), wherein our assumptions about the neat divides between the natural and unnatural, the feral and the wild, the native and the exotic/invasive are reconfigured in Anthropocene environments of globalization and urbanization.

This in part involves asking how animals make a living within cities, either with our help—as with intentionally provisioned species such as songbirds—or in spite of our best efforts to ‘manage’ them—as with ‘nuisance’ or ‘pest’ animals like rats. This is both a spatial question, stemming from our judgements about who does or does not belong in certain spaces and how particular animals should live, but it is also an ethical question, in terms of what rights other-than-humans might have to the city, and what responsibilities we might have to promote, or at least not impede, their flourishing. Despite the challenges posed by the dominant anthropocentric design and ethos in cities, animals survive, inhabiting their own rich ‘storied’ worlds (van Dooren and Rose 2012), which raises questions about how they experience and know the city (Barua and Sinha 2019), and what animal-friendly cities might look like. Moving towards multispecies spatial justice—towards the Zoöpolis—means recognizing the many nonhuman Others who live alongside us in our shared urban ecologies, and developing creative solutions aimed at flourishing in the more-than-human city.

In this chapter I briefly consider the politics of spatial access within three settings of animal encounters—the home, the zoo, and the street/park/margins—and reflect on three avenues that merit further engagement in thinking towards the Zoöpolis: ‘articulating with’ animals; making visible relationalities; and re-storying the city to imagine otherwise.

20.2 Urban Animal Encounters and the Politics of Spatial Access

Spatial inclusions and exclusions in the city have long been a concern of animal geographers, who have explored the expulsion of farmed animals from the urban sphere (Philo 1995), the border practices which keep wild ‘intruders’ from the space of the home (Power 2009), and the fostering of very particular forms of animality, human-animal relations, and nature, within cities (Griffiths et al. 2000). Although the city is usually thought of as a primarily human space, many animals are welcome within its bounds. The most obvious are domestic ‘pets’, which in modern cities are valued for

²See Braczkowski et al. (2018).

companionship and often made to fit within visions of the heteronuclear family and neoliberal individualistic and consumerist cultures (McKeithen 2017; Nast 2006). Certain species of wild animals are also embraced, enrolled in the production of biodiversity and valued for their aesthetic benefits or contribution to ecosystem services. These welcomed wild animals are expected to remain in ‘natural’ areas and are subject to biosecurity measures when they engage in practices viewed as disruptive or dangerous, enter spaces in which they are deemed not to belong,³ or come to be viewed as ‘pests’ due to perceptions of overpopulation or association with filth and disease.⁴ Overall, contentions around the ‘place’ of animals in modern cities raises questions about who belongs and where. Encounters within diverse spaces of the home, zoo, and streets/parks/urban margins are subject to their own complex affective and political dimensions, with animals disciplined in the production of particular modes of value and visions of nature and culture.

20.2.1 *The Home*

Within the home, we find intimate relations of companionate cohabitation. Urban ‘pets’ are increasingly seen as members of the family, a status at odds with socio-legal/capitalist operations wherein animals remain property—commodities able to be bought, sold, traded, used, and disposed of with little regard (Instone and Sweeney 2014; Pallotta 2019). But home is more than a physical space, it encompasses particular relations of companionship that stretch outwards into the broader realm of anthropogenic urban public space, with associated contention in the case of domestic animals’ spatial access. For example, debates surround whether or not canine companions should be given their own space in the form of designated dog parks, which arguably represent urban planning’s response to more-than-human agencies and corporealities (Urbanik and Morgan 2013). Or the contradiction wherein dominant understandings of environmental responsibility increasingly dictate that domestic cats be confined indoors, while at the same time we are increasingly finding it morally indefensible to bar animals such as chickens raised for food from having access to the outdoors and the opportunity to exercise natural behaviours. But these debates around spatial access are part of a larger landscape of negotiated borderlands which make visible the porosity of the domus, as the wild are invited in as exotic pets (Collard 2014), ingress against our will by burrowing under our porches or into our walls and ceilings (Power 2009), and the domestic leaks out from under our control, becoming stray or feral.

³For instance raccoons in daycares (Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo 2016) or cougars in suburbs (Collard 2012).

⁴Such as cormorants in Toronto (Sandilands 2017), or pigeons in New York (Jerolmack 2008).

20.2.2 *The Zoo*

Zoos are another space in which animals are made to live within the city, with contention surrounding the purpose of the Modern zoo: Do they exist primarily for entertainment, conservation, or education? For the benefits of individual animals, species, or ecologies, or ultimately to serve human interests, reinforcing our supremacy? As Brando and Herrelko highlight in their chapter *Wild Animals in the City: Considering and Connecting with Animals in Zoos and Aquariums*, debates surround: what constitutes ‘natural’ or ‘wild’ versus ‘unnatural’ behaviours in these situations of confinement; the implications of this for zoos’ conservation goals which include reintroductions—for which animals are required to be maintained as sufficiently ‘wild’; and the inherent tensions between providing for animal welfare versus purported conservation and educational aims.

Alongside these concerns are layered considerations surrounding public engagement, perceptions, and expectations. As Kisora and Driessen point out in their chapter *Interpreting the YouTube zoo: ethical potential of captive encounters*, what is most often sought by the zoo-goer is “a dream-coming-true visit—not only seeing, but also being seen by the other”. Proximate encounters, even touching and handfeeding, may be afforded at zoos, but are discouraged in the case of animals in ‘the wild’, potentially sending mixed messages to the public about appropriate interactions and boundaries with wildlife (Brando and Herrelko).

Our relationships with wildlife take shape not only through proximate encounters, but through complex media ecologies, which enrol diverse actors, including zoos. The ways we come to know about, and our expectations for relating to, animals and ‘nature’ more broadly, are increasingly shaped through ‘spectacular environmentalisms’, highlighting the currency between the dramatic and the everyday (Goodman et al. 2016). Within these ‘fabulous ecologies’ (Howell and Taves 2019), the boundaries and purpose of the zoo are increasingly blurred, as ‘electronic zoos’ create virtual encounters through advances in surveillance technologies, within which animals live digital ‘second lives’ (Adams 2020) with limited opportunities to shape recounted narratives about Nature (Davies 2000). A more expansive understanding of the ‘zoo’ takes into account that various animal bodies are cultivated for particular encounters in the service of entertainment, and/or the (re)production of particular visions of Nature. Furthermore, it is important to consider the dispersed spatialities and temporalities of encounter, as the immediacy of the zoo travels through virtual networks, bringing animals into the spaces of homes, workplaces, theatres, and pockets around the world. As discussed by Kisora and Driessen, within such ‘Youtube Zoos’, the ambivalence surrounding boundaries between animals as familiar individuals versus autonomous wildlife, and the ways in which their virtual representations both challenge and reinforce assumptions about and unequal relations with animals, come to the fore. In user-generated venues of online videos and commentary, the meaning of animal encounters can be contested. Digital technologies and connectivity trouble the boundary between public and personal spaces of encounter, as the ‘Youtube Zoo’ opens up the private lives of animal celebrities to discussion

and debate. Consequences of such negotiated meanings ripple out to shape lived encounters between people and animals—domestic, zoo, wild, liminal—throughout the city.

Materially, zoos represent unique spaces, bubbles designed for certain valued animal bodies within cities, with architecture that promotes wellbeing and/or encounterability, fostering particular affective atmospheres and encounter value (Barua 2017, 2019). Within these spaces charismatic species—cherished megafauna fetishized as the epitome of ‘wild’ nature—are accumulated, lively commodities in the currency of rare genes (Lorimer 2015). Alongside considerations of animal welfare, labour, and multispecies relations of power lie questions about the role, function, and implications of the zoo as simulacrum of nature (Braverman 2015): Which Natures do zoos conserve, and for whom? What is the value of *ex situ* conservation in the context of ever-disappearing ‘natural’ habitats? What is the relationship between captive animals in zoos and the wild animals which may share their genetic makeup, but which lead vastly different lives, embedded in vastly different experiences, memories, and relations which, arguably, are core to what it means to be that animal⁵? Such questions illuminate the biopolitical realities of these quintessential spaces of ‘wild’ encounters within the city, wherein animals are “not only confined and subdued...but also interpreted and classified” (Anderson 1995, 283).

20.2.3 *The Streets/Parks/Margins*

In the streets, parks, and ‘marginal’ (Gandy 2013) city spaces, we encounter ‘liminal’ stray, feral, or wild animals who negotiate their own existences, often counter to human intentions. These unintentional or spontaneous spaces and beings, and in particular the feral and synurbic, transgress expectations around who should be using natural versus anthropogenic spaces and resources, and who should be making a living autonomously versus through dependency on humans. Feral animals are domesticated animals who have ‘gone wild’, in that they are no longer under human care—or at least not in the traditional sense of ‘belonging’ to one particular owner or household. Synurbic species are wild animals that thrive in cities (Luniak 2004), like racoons, rats, crows, and seagulls. Both types of animals transgress nature/culture divides: the feral by escaping the realm of culture, becoming unruly, independent, and wild; the synurbic by crossing boundaries from nature into culture—into cities—disrupting our expectations of the safe, tame, ordered space of the human.

Urban animals are often both materially and discursively invisible. Materially, behavioural patterns are shifted to avoid attracting notice, for instance, through becoming increasingly nocturnal (Gaynor et al. 2018). Discursively, they are backgrounded, dismissed, or devalued as ‘common’, ‘pest’, or ‘trash’ animals (Nagy and Johnson 2013). Liminal animals are often pitied, with assumptions about their

⁵As discussed by Evernden (1985) in the case of gorillas, and Whatmore (2002) in the case of an African elephant.

inevitable poor quality of life as they eke out an existence in such an ‘unnatural’ manner. But the heterogeneity of livelihood opportunities experienced by synurbic and feral/stray/street animals defies simplistic assumptions about their lives and practices (Meijer, this volume; see also Van Patter and Hovorka 2018). They are also, at times, celebrated, their transgressions, resistances, and agencies in coshaping urban spaces and relations with humans indicating to some the resilience of nature.⁶ But, as Meijer emphasizes in her chapter *Stray agency and interspecies care: The Amsterdam stray cats and their humans*, these relationships are inherently unequal, as despite animals having a degree of choice in the spaces they occupy, resources they access, and proximity to or avoidance of humans and other species, we ultimately have the power to discourage, remove, or destroy unwanted or ‘nuisance’ individuals and populations.

The city takes shape through myriad more-than-human relations within diverse spaces, from the porous home, to the ambivalent zoo, and the liminal urban interstices. Along with considering these urban ‘animal spaces’, it is important to consider the politics of knowledge through which belongings are negotiated, and the ‘bestly places’ of material animal lifeworlds.⁷ In terms of the former, this involves attending to the ways in which power operates in the maintenance of expertise whereby ‘nature’ becomes intelligible in particular registers. For instance, in the chapters contained herein, who can legitimately interpret the actions and motivations of Jacky and Jinga? What happens when cat caretakers and more powerful agencies or institutions disagree about what is best for cats, or for the community? Or when practitioners and theorists are at odds about zoo animals’ lives, needs, and welfare? In terms of the latter, our lack of knowledge about animals’ ecologies and lived realities can present limitations for coexistence, and foregrounding their experiences, knowledges, and practices is key to engaging with challenging questions of shared life in the Zoöpolis.

20.3 Towards the Zoöpolis

Over two decades ago Wolch (1996; Wolch et al. 1995) advanced that realising the Zoöpolis⁸—the imagined city of multispecies cohabitation and belonging—requires that we take animals seriously as legitimate matters of concern within urban policies and practices. A number of interventions have advanced approaches which work towards this, for instance: a ‘*cosmopolitics*’ in which space is made for diverse actors to participate in a politics that resists narrow nature/society binaries (Hinchliffe et al. 2005); an understanding of ‘*commoning*’ as a more-than-human practice through

⁶See, for example, Montford and Taylor (2016).

⁷See Philo and Wilbert (2000), who formulate this distinction.

⁸The term is also mobilized by Donaldson and Kymlick (2011) to advance a political theory of animal inclusion within urban governance frameworks through a model of citizenship for domesticated animals and denizenship for ‘liminal’ animals who live around humans but not in direct relations of companionship.

which the needs and benefits of diverse urban inhabitants are negotiated (Cooke et al. 2019); and an ‘ethics of *conviviality*’ which demands that we “find multiple, life enhancing ways of sharing and co-producing meaningful and enduring multispecies cities” (van Dooren and Rose 2012, 17). But many questions remain to be addressed, and in the remainder of this chapter I reflect briefly on three avenues that merit further engagement in thinking towards the Zoöpolis: ‘articulating with’ animals; making visible relationalities; and re-storying the city to imagine otherwise.

20.3.1 ‘Articulating With’ Animals

The Zoöpolis requires an approach to urban policies and practices in which animals “bring their own politics of recognition” (Narayanan 2017, 488). But attending to animals’ ‘political voices’ (Meijer 2013) presents challenges in terms of how we typically interpret, represent, and engage with animals. For instance, Meijer highlights that there are often inherent tensions within practices of care enacted for urban animals, including paternalistic assumptions about what is ‘good’ for them (such as sterilization in the case of feral/stray animals⁹). In asking questions about what matters to animals and how they want to live, we need to shift away from *speaking for* more-than-human Others, and towards experimental and generous modes of *articulating with* them (Giraud 2019; Haraway 2003).

As Nieuwland and Meijboom point out, methodologically, we need to attend to “the urban environment as an animal collective” by engaging “multispecies epistemologies”. For instance, Barua and Sinha’s (2019) etho-geographical approach asks what animals’ knowledges and practices can tell us about life in the city, and the material, ecological, and phenomenological dimensions of urbanization. By foregrounding animals’ experiences and lifeworld, we can begin to take seriously more-than-human modes of inhabitation and claims to space. In so doing, we move towards seeing “urbanisation not as something merely going on in cities, but as a process where dense traffic in commodities and materials transforms lifeworlds of humans and animals, with asymmetric and often disturbing effects” (Barua and Sinha 2019, 1174).

20.3.2 Making Visible Relationalities

The Zoöpolis require a ‘politics of sight’ (Hunold 2019)¹⁰ wherein we learn to see the city as legitimate habitat for many more-than-human Others embedded in rich social and ecological relations. As delineated by Nieuwland and Meijboom in their chapter “*Eek! A Rat!*”, being sensitive to particular animals’ circumstances and ways

⁹See also Srinivasan (2013).

¹⁰Drawing on Schlosberg (2016).

of life can be a meaningful starting point for compassionate action. But, as the authors note, compassion and care can be thwarted by the potency of affective dimensions—such as visceral responses of disgust or fear—which are central to the ‘terrain of killability’ (Gillespie and Collard 2015, 15) that constitutes our relations with many urban animals. In overcoming these barriers to coexistence, there is value in both pragmatic attention to suffering, and a metaphysics of interconnection. Only by realizing the complexity of ecological interconnectedness—that we are all in this together—can we hope to create futures of flourishing amidst the threats of global crises like climate change, zoonotic pandemics, and extinction.

Rather than focusing narrowly on conflict mitigation, we need to make visible the ‘ecologies of care’ and resistance which permeate the urban (Meijer). Rethinking care for the more-than-human city involves attending both to animals as individuals, and as relationally-embedded within complex socio-ecological networks. For instance, the intersections between individuals or groups of humans and animals are often ignored when we consider urban animal management policies and their implications. As Narayanan (2017) discusses, close relationships of the urban poor with street dogs, who provide security and companionship, means that programs to ‘manage’ these dogs often adversely impact the most marginalized human inhabitants of cities as well. Similarly, Meijer notes the shared precarity of particular animals (stray/feral cats) and the humans with whom they often associate (e.g. homeless, neurodiverse, and economically disadvantaged individuals). It is imperative to carefully consider the ways in which more-than-human identities, differences, and inequalities intersect and are (re)produced within multispecies relations of power (Hovorka 2019). Making visible these relationalities within complex colonial-capitalist realities requires that we resist oversimplifications and grasping for tidy answers. Though no easy task, we have a responsibility to ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway 2008) and work to make visible the violent histories and ongoing injustices and dispossessions in the post-/settler colonial city. The Zoöpolis requires that we unlearn the anthropo- and Eurocentric frames through which the city is typically understood, with their “erasure of existing kinship relations that have been nurtured for generations” (Porter et al. 2020, 10).

20.3.3 Re-Storying the City to Imagine Otherwise

Working towards the Zoöpolis requires that we ‘re-story’ the city, imagining ‘as well as possible’ multispecies futures (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017) amidst the shared precarity of the Anthropocene. One way in which to do so is by attending to the lives of animals to weave a different narrative of urban life, one with the potential to envision “flourishing landscapes of coexistence, rather than battlescapes of violence” (Narayanan 2017, 488). Engaging in such exercises of ‘imaging otherwise’ recognizes the interconnected nature of our imaginings, understandings, thoughts, emotions, and practices, and their implications for material worldly becomings (Walker 2013).

How can we imagine the city otherwise, as a “co-emergent world based on intimate human-more-than-human relationships of responsibility and care” (Bawaka Country et al. 2016, 470)? We need to think carefully with ‘care’ in its asymmetrical reciprocities (as Meijer notes, “cats also take care of humans”) and its messiness and noninnocence (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). Chrulew (2011, 139) notes that the “caesura between the overloved and the unloved, between the politics of life and death, bios and thanatos, brings into stark relief one of the central ethical questions of our time: how should we love in a time of extinction?” Within the city—in the zoo, the home, and the streets/parks/margins—this ‘caesura’ plays out dramatically: with the hyper-visible overloved—doted upon ‘fur babies’ and carefully cultivated spaces of ‘biodiversity’—and the made-invisible unloved—intensively eradicated ‘pests’ and surplus stray/feral bodies. Thus, central to re-storying the city is confronting these inequalities and the challenging questions surrounding what it means to love, to care, to ‘live well’ with more-than-human Others in a time of planetary urbanisation.

Imagining the Zoöpolis requires an openness to “risky worldings” (Haraway 2008, 27) in which outcomes and optimal approaches and configurations remain uncertain. It involves asking questions which include: Can we think of wild animals as companions, as Haraway (2008) suggests, but in ways that are attentive to the tensions of space, boundaries, and remaining responsible for the futures that are created through situated relatings? Can we be open to the recombinant ecologies of the Anthropocene, and rather than gazing into the past and clinging dogmatically to divisions of ‘native’ versus ‘exotic’ or ‘invasive’, ask ourselves what opportunities arrivant species may offer, what we can learn from other animals about living together, and what our responsibilities to these new configurations might be; as Reo and Ogden (2018) suggest, drawing from Anishinaabe teachings and practices¹¹? Can we think of feral or stray animals as legitimate and valued components of urban socio-natures, as Srinivasan (2019) advances, moving towards non-dualistic understandings of belonging in the multispecies city? Imagining the city otherwise—as a place of more-than-human belonging—requires “a speculative commitment to think about how things could be different... attached to situated and positioned visions of what a livable and caring world could be” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 60).

20.4 Conclusion

This chapter has briefly considered the spatial and politico-ethical dimensions of multispecies urban cohabitations within three settings: the home, the zoo, and the street/park/margins. Cities are heterogenous spaces composed of myriad actors, most

¹¹Reo and Ogden (2018) discuss the concept of ‘aki’ within the Anishnaabe land ethic, which denotes the “cosmological sense of the sacredness of place”, wherein teachings “hold land as sacred and as the embodiment of Creation, as are all the living beings such as plants and animals, as well as water, stones, and supernaturals” (1446). Within such an understanding, “the agency of plants and animals, as persons, relatives, nations and teachers, are all central to how [Anishnaabe] make sense of introduced species” (1445).

of whom are not human, and are routinely made invisible within urban planning and policies. Despite this, everyday practices reveal intimate interconnections of care and violence, discipline and transgression. Urban animals become emplaced conceptually and materially within dominant visions of what the city, the animal, and nature ought to be.

But urban animals also shape spaces and relations according to their own needs and lifeways. Addressing the pressing questions of coexisting with other species in a time of planetary urbanisation requires that we see the city in a new light: as a space of multispecies cohabitation and possibility. This chapter briefly advances three avenues that could help in thinking towards the Zoöpolis: ‘articulating with’ animals, making visible relationalities, and re-storying the city to imagine otherwise. It is crucial that we continue working towards new understandings of urbanization and animals in the Anthropocene which foreground multispecies justice and opportunities for co-flourishing in the more-than-human city.

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