



# Animals, Angelenos, and the Arbitrary

## Analyzing Human-Wildlife Entanglement in Los Angeles

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**Abstract** Multispecies entanglement has been a major research focus in environmental humanities, aiming to rethink ontological and ethical possibilities, especially in urban settings, by attending to speculative other-than-human futures. This article dwells on already existing entanglements of multiple species of animals in Los Angeles, using empirical data (conversations from the social media platform Nextdoor) to describe these entanglements according to a fourfold framework—spatial, emotional, behavioral, and political. Drawing on the political philosophy of nondomination, it argues that existing entanglements are primarily *arbitrary* in a political sense, and that moving beyond them will require reducing this arbitrariness, even if it means restricting human freedom or introducing new forms of control over animals, for a more-than-human city to be just.

**Keywords** arbitrariness, multispecies entanglement, social media, urban wildlife, wildlife management

Los Angeles is a city of 4.1 million humans and an unknown number of other animals. While companion animals—dogs and cats—are ubiquitous, they are in turn entangled with the city's abundant wildlife in multiple ways: house cats and small dogs are threatened by coyotes; dogs attack humans; humans feed feral cats, who kill songbirds; dogs and cats kill and sometimes eat rodents, risking secondary poisoning of animals higher up the food chain, including mountain lions; rodents chew through soy-based car wiring and carry fleas, which pose disease risks to pets and humans; gophers are everywhere in the lawn-filled megalopolis; and the average garden owner is in constant warfare with animals, insects, fungi, and microbes in the effort to cultivate the orange and avocado trees that stretch from the oceanside habitat of sea lions to deserts full of Joshua trees. In short, Los Angeles is a preeminent example of multispecies entanglement.

Novel, complex, boundary-crossing, ontology-changing, reciprocally capturing: these have been the terms of analysis in recent literature focusing on entanglement of animals in cities.<sup>1</sup> Much of the literature on entanglement and more-than-human storying is intended to crack open a Western anthropocentric bias that “functions to anesthetize its adherents to their intimate relations to and entanglements with other kinds of life.”<sup>2</sup> This speculative mode of attending to more-than-human relations is largely prefigurative, providing alternate ways of seeing, in the hope of more just future relations. But actually existing entanglements do not necessarily take these forms. Rather they concern the political status of human-animal relations and questions of life, death, killing, feeding, caring, and power. In this article we describe the shape and contour of these entanglements, and we propose a more general political theory of how residents and experts do, in fact, entangle themselves with animals on a daily basis, and with what consequences.

We argue here that the more-than-human entanglement with animals in Los Angeles, and likely many other US cities, is primarily *arbitrary* in a political sense, marked by capricious judgment that follows no agreed upon procedure nor takes into account the interests of those who are at stake (human or animal). The concept of arbitrary domination comes from well-trodden debates in political theory, specifically neo-republican debates about the nature of freedom and domination, but it has not been widely applied to debates about animals.<sup>3</sup> Arbitrariness refines debates about negative and positive freedom to suggest that even in cases where no actual interference occurs, a form of domination is nonetheless possible. We extend the concept from its primary focus on human domination to include domination of nonhuman residents of cities. The theory, by definition, tries to focus on a supra-individual form of violence (e.g., “structural” racism, enslavement, or colonialism) without losing sight of the nature of individual freedom. To exhibit this, we propose four analytics of entanglement—spatial, emotional, behavioral, and political. At the center of these analytics lies the problem of arbitrariness, a form of domination that is unhappy for both humans and animals.

Arbitrary does not mean random. It here refers to a specific political relation that exhibits procedural and substantive capriciousness.<sup>4</sup> Resulting from the devolution of decision-making from municipal to private actors in the twenty-first century, existing legislation, regulation, and market-based behavior toward animals (e.g., pest control and

1. Stengers, *Cosmopolitics*; Kirksey et al., “Feeding the Flock”; Lulka, “Posthuman City”; Byrne, “Human Relationship with Nature”; Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

2. Erev, “What Is It Like?,” 132. See also Latimer, “Being Alongside,” and Rose, van Dooren, and Chrulew, “Thinking through the Environment.”

3. Key texts include Pettit, *Republicanism*; Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*; Lovett, *General Theory*. Among the critiques are Markell, “Insufficiency of Non-domination,” and Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*. For an exception in the case of animals, see Essen and Allen, “Republican Zoopolis.”

4. Debates abound about arbitrariness and its relation to freedom; the definition given here follows Lovett, *General Theory*.

pet ownership) is contradictory, poorly understood, and often makes entanglement grow tighter the more people struggle to escape it. We raise the question of whether a reduction in this arbitrariness would result in more justice for humans and animals, and what might be needed to accomplish that reduction.

### Entanglement and Arbitrariness

Urban environments have attracted much analysis of the animals and other non-humans that occupy them.<sup>5</sup> Our focus is on Los Angeles, where pioneering work by Jody Emel and Jennifer Wolch and the writings of Jenny Price are still the most widely known analyses of how Angelenos relate to nature.<sup>6</sup> Cities are not separated, nature-free spaces of human flourishing but are saturated with nonhuman life of all kinds.<sup>7</sup> “Multispecies entanglement” is a speculative theory of human-animal relations “beyond nature and culture.”<sup>8</sup> This literature starts with particular forms of humans “learning to be affected” by other creatures such as pet dogs, birds, and insects.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes these approaches seek to decenter or demote humans from their presumed perch; others use the approach to explore shared ways of being and flourishing that open out into critiques of settler colonialism or capitalism.<sup>10</sup> More recently, anthropologists and geographers have attended to the practice and science of conservation in and out of cities, along with its struggles to define what belongs and what does not,<sup>11</sup> and to systematically put all “urban nature” under critical scrutiny.<sup>12</sup> These speculative philosophies find their most extensive theorization in the work of Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Eduardo Kohn, Eben Kirksey, Deborah Rose Bird, Thom van Dooren, and Isabelle Stengers.<sup>13</sup> These “ontological” re-definitions of human-animal entanglements have also seen critique, extension, and alliances of various sorts and calls to rethink the human in contexts of settler colonialism, racial injustice, and queer “inhumanisms.”<sup>14</sup> Often this work is at odds with the more traditional forms of “animal rights” or animal welfare

5. Keck, *Avian Reservoirs*; Gandy, “Fly That Tried to Save the World”; Jerolmack, “How Pigeons Became Rats”; Draus and Roddy, “Weeds, Pheasants, and Wild Dogs”; Kirksey et al., “Feeding the Flock”; Stoetzer, “Ruderal Ecologies”; Hinchliffe et al., “Urban Wild Things”; Steele, Wiesel, and Maller, “More-than-Human Cities”; Houston et al., “Make Kin, not Cities!”; Franklin, “More-than-Human City”; Metzger, “Cultivating Torment.”

6. Price, “Thirteen Ways”; Wolch and Emel, *Animal Geographies*.

7. Hinchliffe et al., “Urban Wild Things”; Brighenti and Pavoni, “Situating Urban Animals.”

8. Whatmore and Hinchliffe, *Ecological Landscapes*; Lorimer, *Wildlife*; Asdal, Druglitrø, and Hinchliffe, *Humans, Animals, and Biopolitics*; Kirksey and Helmreich, “Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography.”

9. Haraway, *When Species Meet*; Weaver, “‘Becoming in Kind’”; Boisseron, *Afro-Dog*; Maxwell, “Queer/Love/Bird Extinction”; Kirksey et al., “Feeding the Flock”; van Dooren, *Wake of Crows*.

10. Van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster, “Multispecies Studies”; Tsing, *Mushroom*.

11. Bocci, “Tangles of Care”; Wanderer, “Biologies of Betrayal”; Lorimer, *Wildlife*.

12. Arcari, Probyn-Rapsey, and Singer, “Where Species Don’t Meet.”

13. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; Haraway, *When Species Meet*; Kohn, *How Forests Think*; van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster, “Multispecies Studies.”

14. Todd, “Fish Pluralities”; Todd, “Indigenous Feminist’s Take”; Whyte, “Settler Colonialism”; Whyte and Cuomo, “Ethics of Caring,” 234; TallBear, “Beyond the Life/Not Life Binary”; Cattellino, “From Locke to Slots”;

frameworks.<sup>15</sup> Empirical work in these areas tends to be prefigurative in the sense that it focuses on hopeful forms of entanglement as an alternative to ongoing forms of domination in cities and elsewhere.

While these works help orient us theoretically, they often mistake a speculative other-than-human future entanglement for actually existing conditions. A risk of this approach is, as Eva Giraud writes, that “irreducible complexity . . . can prove paralyzing and disperse responsibilities in ways that undermine scope for political action.”<sup>16</sup> Multi-species entanglement, therefore, is not only about representation or ontology but, even more urgently, about justice, power, and domination. Abandoning or overcoming a split between nature and culture would have significant consequences for political theory and practice, but existing forms of entanglement are also present in cities and routinely subject to theoretical and practical debate, both among experts and among everyday citizens. Entanglement is a political fact of life, for which there is a range of different responses. There may be no justifiable nature/culture split, but there is often nonetheless a nature/nature split.

For this reason we propose that the political theory of domination, and especially the concept of arbitrariness, can make some sense of the forms of entanglement we identify.<sup>17</sup> Arbitrariness is closely related to the neo-republican approach to freedom and domination, which defines freedom in terms of nondomination, or freedom from arbitrary domination.<sup>18</sup> Arbitrary domination can be procedural (no regular or predictable procedure is followed in the domination of another) or it can be substantive (domination occurs without regard for the interests or rights of those subject to it, whether consensual or not).<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most political theories of a neo-republican sort do not focus on animals. Conversely, most animal rights and animal welfare theorists do not employ an analytic of domination; the language of autonomy, rights, and liberation is far more common. In many such cases, a theory of “negative liberty” is implied, especially for wild animals: that we should “let animals be” rather than governing them at all, even though it is clear that this subjects them to all kinds of harms that they cannot avoid: freeways, skyscrapers, toxic rivers, abundant human food, and diminished wild resources. Others have proposed citizenship as the salient category; Kymlicka and Donaldson distinguish among domesticated (citizens), wild (sovereign), and “liminal” (denizens) animals.<sup>20</sup> But this clean categorization fails to account for the entanglements

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Boisseron, *Afro-Dog*; Dayan, *Law*; Weaver, “‘Becoming in Kind’”; Chen, *Animacies*; Luciano and Chen, “Queer Inhumanisms”; Livingston and Puar, “Interspecies.”

15. Sunstein and Nussbaum, *Animal Rights*; Diamond, “Eating Meat”; Singer, *Animal Liberation*; Regan, *Case for Animal Rights*.

16. Giraud, *What Comes after Entanglement?*

17. Pettit, *Republicanism*; Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*; Essen and Allen, “Republican Zoopolis”; Bufacchi, “Colonialism, Injustice, and Arbitrariness.”

18. Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*; Pettit, *Republicanism*.

19. Lovett, *General Theory*.

20. Donaldson and Kymlicka, *Zoopolis*.

we describe in this article, where liminal animals mix with both wild and domestic and all are subject to management and governance by humans in different ways.

A neo-republican theory of nondomination, we suggest, provides a starting point for thinking about animals in cities today. Many animals are dominated by humans in *nonarbitrary* ways: they are killed for meat, they are enclosed in zoos, they are hunted in nonurban environments, and so on. Each of these forms of domination is perpetrated in ways that humans themselves oversee, regulate, and control in nonarbitrary and highly predictable ways, both for humans and for animals. In cities, by contrast, the lives of animals are not dominated in these ways, but arbitrarily and capriciously, and this has implications for the freedom and flourishing of both humans and animals. *Arbitrary*, as we use it here, does not mean random: the concrete historical reasons for the existence of this arbitrariness can and should be illuminated, even if we cannot attempt that here. We merely demonstrate that from the perspective of animals (and, arguably, that of humans as well), there is no procedural or substantive consistency to their treatment in the city. Thus, although it might be the case that animals are not interfered with in a given case, there is nonetheless a system of arbitrary domination that governs the possibility for freedom in the city: at any point an animal could be fed, killed, cared for, poisoned, relocated, or many other things, without a clear reason or justifiable anticipation. Twentieth-century forms of wildlife management, the intensification of pet capitalism, the general devolution of governmental roles to private actors, and the growth of specific patterns of building and ecological management in cities all ground this arbitrariness. The structure of arbitrariness is, in general, visible in places with multilevel democratic institutions whose jurisdictions overlap or are incomplete with respect to any given problem. It may also be most visible in cities that have engaged in extensive suburbanization, of which Western US cities, like Los Angeles, are paradigmatic.

### Method

Our methods are anthropological in scope, and in particular, we observe conversations that took place on the social media platform Nextdoor.<sup>21</sup> We reflect here on this method because it can be difficult to interpret the right ethical orientation toward such material: one day, concerns about individual privacy and control of data dominate; another, it is concerns about hate speech, manipulation, conspiracy, and disinformation. Our work follows standard anthropological procedures: observation, participation, interview, the collection of documents and media, and interaction with residents and experts (human and nonhuman) related to the topic of wildlife management in Los Angeles.

Nextdoor is a location-based social media platform in which users may post (text, images, and video), respond, like, report users, and edit their own previous posts. At the

21. Regarding digital methods, practice, and ethics, see Geismar and Knox, *Digital Anthropology*; Townsend and Wallace, "Social Media Research"; Marres, *Digital Sociology*; Ellison and boyd, *Sociality through Social Network Sites*; Fidino, Herr, and Magle, "Assessing Online Opinions." Volume 15, issue 1–2, of the *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics* is also devoted to the topic.

time of our research Nextdoor was very popular in Los Angeles, and many on our research team used it. As such we designed a project where we accessed these conversations using our personal accounts to search for and read archived conversations about wildlife (using a standardized codebook and list of search terms, the details of which are available from the authors). We did not participate directly in these conversations, nor did we interact directly with the original conversers. Rather, we searched for, read, made copies of, and analyzed the conversations after the fact. We collected 461 variously sized conversations, covering roughly the years 2016–19.

Methodologically, there are limits to this data set. It is not survey data, nor is it statistically representative of all residents, because Nextdoor itself is neither a survey tool nor representative in any way. The conversations we analyze are more akin to an archived transcript of an unstructured focus group, but not one that we constituted (it results from the everyday use of the platform by residents). The value of this data is as evidence of disagreement, emotional intensity, proposed solutions, and conflicting explanations of animal behavior and ecology. Nextdoor is designed for neighbors to ask for help, offer advice, report events. Thus, conversations have a recognizable rhetorical structure. Conversations also represent events; they often begin immediately following a lived encounter with wildlife. Sometimes this happens within minutes (most coyote sightings, for instance), sometimes over a longer period (a repeated, frustrating battle with a raccoon or a rat). A virtue is that these conversations are relatively organic (by comparison with survey and focus group methods), and they capture an emotional and behavioral aspect that *ex post facto* questioning cannot; the risk, which we try to avoid, is in overemphasizing particular sentiments as characteristic of a whole population.

More importantly, conversations are more than just representations of opinions or ideologies: conversations animate animals in particular ways. Usually, only the original poster has had any direct contact with an animal, visual or otherwise. But respondents then discuss and debate such animals *as if* they had seen them, creating a kind of ghostly animal that is different from either any real animal or any idea or representation of an animal. These are not opinions or ideas but the real effects of real conversations, leading to the entanglements we describe here. Nextdoor itself becomes part of the way animals in cities are dominated; it is not just a medium for our research but also an object for our analysis.

The rights and welfare of humans are subject to diverse forms of protection that we must navigate. Our research is reviewed under human-subjects protection regimes in a local and national context; is subject to national regulations of privacy or property; is constrained by the technical and legal restrictions of the platform; and is subject to our own ethical commitments.<sup>22</sup>

22. Our research protocol has been reviewed by the UCLA Institutional Review Board (IRB #17-000297 and IRB#22-000060), but it is also the case that social media conversations (without any direct interaction) do not fall under the federal definition of research on human subjects in the United States. While this provides a

In this article, we reprint parts of Nextdoor conversations in a different medium (this journal) and analyze them without having sought the permission of those who participated, but also without identifying them personally. Such an act can be interpreted multiple ways and is constrained by different legal regimes and ethical assumptions. Intellectual property laws (specifically copyright laws) protect humans' proprietary rights in their speech and writing, but all US citizens (and residents of most similar legal regimes) also possess a fair use right to copy or make use of copyrighted material for certain limited purposes, including scholarly critique. Similarly, privacy law is designed to guarantee people a reasonable measure of control over how they present themselves. For this reason, it is centrally concerned with the identifiability of persons and their words, actions, or behaviors. Privacy law is weak in the US generally but stronger in California, which models its evolving privacy regulation on the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Both regulations concern the collection and processing of personally identifiable data. In our case, we did not collect or process any such data, which was already collected and processed by Nextdoor. We did, however, attempt to anonymize this data to the best of our ability—much more so than Nextdoor itself does, for instance—so that it cannot be associated with a particular person. From a methodological perspective, this is appropriate, because what we analyze here is a discursive field or a general sentiment, not the specific words of specific people, whether public or private. It is necessary to retain some context (the context of the conversation, for instance) so as not to misinterpret such statements, but there is no methodological reason to associate these statements with specific identifiable individuals (human or nonhuman) and good reason not to (to protect them from potential reprisal). In an era of rampant violation of privacy by a range of actors, from the largest platforms to criminal hackers to advertising firms and workplaces, the use of people's words for scholarly purposes is a fraught activity, which we navigate with respect and concern.

Platforms like Nextdoor also make extremely broad claims in their terms of service (TOS) agreements with users. Our research occurred in 2017–18, and under that TOS contract, Nextdoor did not prohibit users from reposting or commenting on other users' posts.<sup>23</sup> Subsequent versions of the TOS do attempt to restrict what users can do, though it is often purposefully vague (the current TOS claims users may access Nextdoor's services “only for the purposes for which they are provided” without specifying those purposes) and is intended either to restrict commercial competition or to staunch the hemorrhage of hate speech, misinformation, and conspiracy common on all platforms. In doing such research, we must balance the legitimate technical restrictions in these terms (such as restrictions on obtaining accounts, access, misuse, or abuse) with the

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necessary level of protection and liability for subjects, researchers, and institutions, it is never a sufficient ethical guide to how to conduct research.

23. See Nextdoor, “Nextdoor Member Agreement,” <https://legal.nextdoor.com/us-member-agreement/> (accessed May 10, 2022).

more diffuse attempts to control discourse on a platform. In our case, since we did not interact on (post content to) the platform, this largely concerns what it is legal and ethical to do with the words of those people who did post there, but in another setting (i.e., this journal). Allowing such Terms to govern speech outside and beyond the platform strikes us as beyond the legitimate scope of such terms.

Finally, none of the above legal or technical constraints are equivalent to the ethics of our research practice. Above all, those ethics are guided by ongoing discussions in the disciplines of the social sciences concerning issues of autonomy, harm, protection, and justice for humans. Such a discussion deserves much more space, but perhaps most interesting for this journal and our work is the fact that it is not only *humans* toward whom we owe an ethical consideration but animals and other entities as well. As the very topic of this article points out, that relation is currently *arbitrary*—giving citizens the right to act more or less as they please, in arbitrary ways, toward animals, whether that means caring for them, letting them be, or killing them. As such, the ethics of conducting this research cannot rest solely on the protection of human subjects but must also consider balancing that protection with the protection of nonhuman subjects, or even perhaps nonsubjects, in a time of climate change. Such ethical concerns extend to criticism of Nextdoor itself: Is it right for Nextdoor to retain these conversations and make them available to neighbors? Is Nextdoor itself at fault for enabling certain forms of policing and domination? Nextdoor presents an idealized image of neighborly interaction but in practice rarely meets these goals: it perpetuates exclusionary and often hateful behaviors by residents toward each other (accusations of racial profiling by neighbors are common).<sup>24</sup> It meets the criteria for what Benjamin and collaborators call a “captivating technology” that participates in generalized forms of carcerality.<sup>25</sup> Can we critique Nextdoor without accessing the speech and writing of its users, whether or not they are innocent of these issues? Should Nextdoor be changed from within by its users or externally by regulators and nonusers? Although we access these conversations as scholars, subject to all of the above concerns, we also do so as residents of Los Angeles, observing political speech that has real consequences for real entities in our neighborhoods.

### **Analytics of Entanglement**

“Coyote just sighted trotting down 16th street just south of Montana in Santa Monica. Keep your small pets inside!”<sup>26</sup> The most common conversation starter on Nextdoor is a warning of this kind. Despite its simplicity, we can analyze four different types of

24. Payne, “Welcome to the Polygon”; Kurwa, “Building the Digitally Gated Community”; Lambright, “Digital Redlining.”

25. Benjamin, *Captivating Technology*.

26. All quotations here are from our database of conversations, unless otherwise noted, and are anonymized as to name, location, and other identifying details.



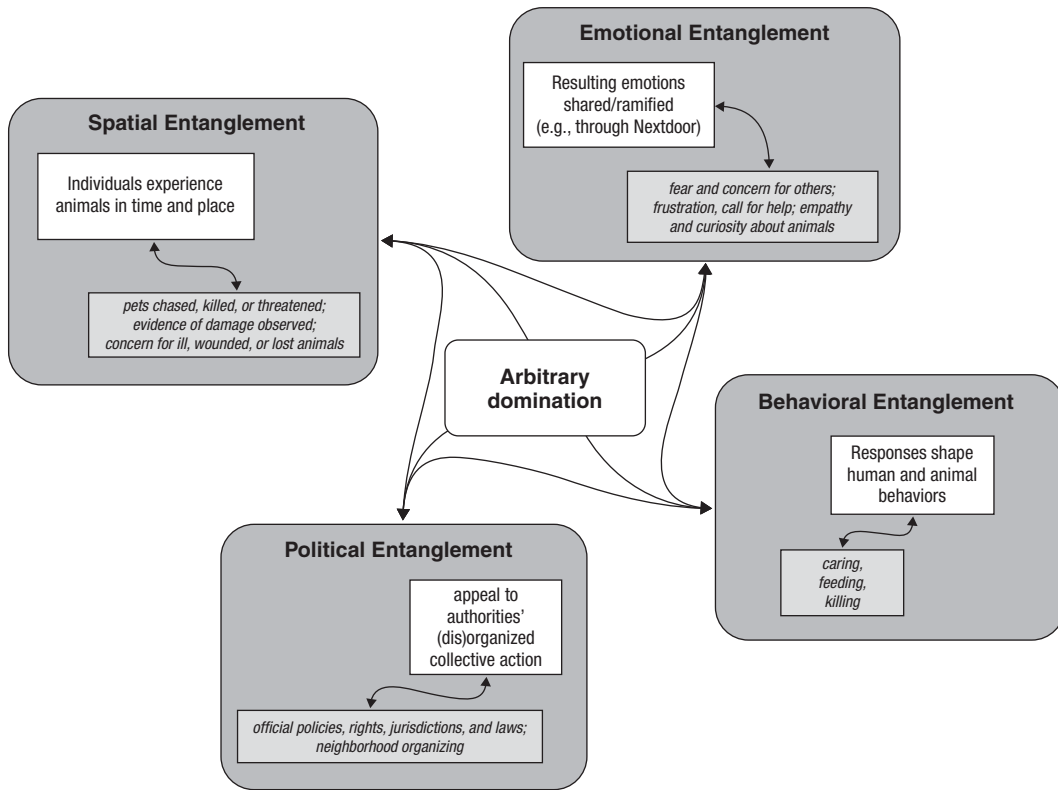


Figure 1. Fourfold framework of human-animal entanglement linked to arbitrary domination.

entanglement here (see fig. 1). The warning is *spatially* entangling: it pinpoints a specific intersection in a neighborhood, and it signals an animal out of place, in the city, on the streets, clearly visible, that does not belong there. Such a warning also intends to produce fear in neighbors, entangling them *emotionally* in what the poster has experienced, especially those who own cats or small dogs. Once a post emotionally entangles by fear, various provocations to action often follow, entangling dog owners in a form of both moral and physical *behavior*: keep pets inside, keep dogs on a leash, safe. Ultimately, it supports a kind of *political* entanglement, because it immediately and implicitly makes the problem of wild animals in the city an individual responsibility, and not the responsibility of a municipal, county, or state agency.

Although most conversations, especially those about coyotes, revolve around the rights and duties of individual residents and their animals, cases of collective action do emerge. For example, residents in the City of Torrance, situated in southwest Los Angeles, were frustrated by the contradictory or incoherent advice they often received about what to do regarding coyote predation: police would argue it was not their responsibility; city Animal Services would respond that coyotes are a known danger in the city and not an animal to be removed; private pest control would offer to attempt to trap and kill a coyote if a resident wanted to pay for the service; and so on. Spurred by an angry

councilman, a group of residents started an #EvictCoyotes campaign and attended a city council hearing dressed in red T-shirts to share stories of pets they had lost. To placate angry residents, the city identified a piece of land where coyotes were known to gather and both advised residents to “haze” coyotes (i.e., act aggressively toward them or employ deterrents in the hopes of scaring them away and discouraging further visitation) and contracted with a private pest control professional to trap and kill coyotes. Because this particular piece of land was county property, the city also contacted the county of Los Angeles, which dispatched an employee who promptly killed thirteen coyotes—one of whom had already been trapped with a snare by the private pest control company.

This case demonstrates well the arbitrary nature of human-animal entanglement. The mess of reactions exemplifies the fact that human-animal relations are arbitrary with respect to both procedure and the interests of animals (both domestic pets and coyotes, as well as humans). Coyotes do not, so far as we know, recognize the legal boundaries of city and county land; they likely recognize particular humans who are experienced as safe or dangerous in different situations. Yet they are confronted with a form of domination that in one case (on this side of a property line) means death and in another (within city limits) means hazing or survival. One human may threaten them with a noisemaker (and never more than that); another may shoot and kill them without warning.

Like the coyote, the residents and the officials in Los Angeles are ensnared in such arbitrary traps, mixed jurisdictions, and emotional maelstroms. In what follows we offer a tour of these four kinds of entanglement, and a reflection on the problem of the arbitrary.

### **Spatial Entanglement**

Los Angeles is a paradigm of the subdivided, gated, single-family, fenced, defended, and personalized use of urban space. It boasts few public parks, and the private ownership of land famously restricts access to both beaches and the surrounding hillsides. Animals must navigate the roads, fences, lights, and other hazards, intentional and not, that humans create to make their property lines more tangible.

When private, nonwild space is invaded by ostensibly out-of-place wildlife, residents react in various, sometimes contradictory ways. Some residents evince a sharp, sometimes absurd, sense of ownership that restricts the access of not only human neighbors but also animals and plants of all kinds. Most, however, default to an understanding that constructs the human inhabited space—the “city”—as separate and qualitatively different from the space wildlife inhabits, usually referred to as either “the wild” or simply “nature.” In a conversation regarding a coyote sighting, one neighbor stated, “I like seeing them in the mountains, but not so much around our homes,” to which another neighbor replied, “I am with you, I love wildlife in the forest, not so much in my backyard.” In the same exchange, a third neighbor synthesized these and similar opinions by concluding, “Where do you draw the line? Are bears OK in the city? Mountain lions? Coyotes have

no more place in an urban area than bears or mountain lions.” Some neighbors seem to be able to geographically pinpoint the threshold between these realms: “By the way, the wild is not 4 miles away but around 2 from my house,” while others can draw clear temporal distinctions: “We don’t live in a wild area. I could see if we were a new spot that uprooted their living space [in relation to coyote populations], but [this neighborhood] is old.”

Opposite this demarcation are examples of conversations in which animals are said to have a right to the city: “Remember that all creatures have the right to be here. I know it’s a bit scary but rats belong here also”; or, “They have just as much right to be here as we do. They live here. We have moved into their neighborhood.” Yet others react strongly against such rights talk: “I’m not sure why people talk about coyotes ‘belonging’ or ‘always being here.’ Coyotes migrated here. There have always been some, but now there a LOT more, especially in the urban setting.”

Spatial entanglement is necessarily arbitrary: property lines are a senseless marker for a rat or a coyote, existing as they do in the symbolic register of planning documents and legal rights. Nonetheless, they produce a certain kind of order in the city by separating private from common space, requiring easements, rights of way, medians, underpasses, and other infrastructural features that facilitate many animals’ experiences of the city.<sup>27</sup> When animals cross these features between public and private land, an arbitrary human reaction can confront the animal. This is perhaps best illustrated by the turn to technological means of trying to control animal behavior.

Residents on Nextdoor report myriad instruments to prevent wildlife from entering backyards. Wildlife deterrents include cayenne pepper, chili powder, or red pepper flakes; moth balls; motion-detector water sprayers; bobcat/wolf urine; peppermint oil; motion-sensor lights; stomping of feet and waving of arms; ammonia-saturated rags; boom boxes, loud radios, or tin cans filled with a handful of pennies. Benson has described devices and practices meant to isolate a system from its living environment, like pans and spikes on electric towers, as bioinsulators.<sup>28</sup> In this context, these vernacular pest-control technologies work more like biomembranes: cayenne pepper or a radio blasting rock music are not trying to isolate Angelinos’s backyards from “nature”; rather, they are trying to keep certain types of “nature” away while allowing others to enter. One neighbor wanted to deter a raccoon from their buckwheat shrubs but also to hang birdfeeders from the trees in his property; a coyote entering a garden is a threatening invader, while a deer, a fox, or even a mountain lion can become a welcome visitor, one that grants authenticity and added aesthetic value. These *biomembranes* are material instantiations of aesthetic and ecological values: some users seem to want their own slice of “nature,” interpreted as a private space marked by distinct (and often arbitrary) ways of valuing the worth of multiple kinds of nonhumans at once.

27. Niesner et al., “Wildlife Affordances.”

28. Benson, “Generating Infrastructural Invisibility.”

### Emotional Entanglement

Emotions such as empathy and fear have ecological consequences.<sup>29</sup> To experience empathy and intense affect for cats and dogs in the city is to entangle songbirds, lice, fleas, rats, and coyotes along with other humans and their differing emotions and experiences. To experience fear of coyotes—or for that matter of stray dogs, a more likely danger—is preliminary to the political entangling of city councils, police, animal services, veterinarians, dog lovers and coyote feeders, pest control companies, and more. Different animals evoke different emotions: opossums, gophers, and squirrels are generally likely to provoke humor, surprise, disgust, or an appeal to cuteness, while coyotes, raccoons, and mountain lions evoke fear, suspicion, or worry.

Positive affective connections with wild urban mammals are rare, but some do consider themselves “lucky to get to see these creatures as part of our every day.” One poster shared a picture of a bobcat near his house, and a neighbor replied, “Last summer, we watched a couple of twin cubs drink from our bird bath! Cuter than cute!” Even skunks, who are more commonly referred to as smelly pests or annoying (even threatening) creatures, can be subjects of positive emotions: “I love the little squeaks they make to communicate with one another . . . sometimes I hear their chatter at night. Smelly, but so CUTE!” While the cute-ification of animals is a problematic phenomenon with derogatory and de-animalizing effects, it is also a common mode of emotional entanglement between humans and nonhumans in the city.<sup>30</sup>

Frustration is also a common emotion. The majority of the conversations we analyzed were prompted by neighbors who describe a problem with an animal and seek help or advice regarding this nuisance. To some extent, this is a feature of the platform, which is organized around neighbor-to-neighbor discussions, most of which are requests for advice or assistance, and so the trigger for posting to Nextdoor is often, in fact, a sense of frustration. For example: “Hi neighbors, I need recommendations to remove an animal from under our house. It grinds wood at night or early morning. Sounds like a larger animal like an opossum or a raccoon. Any ideas? How much would it cost?” Or another: “It’s bad enough they are eating my pond fish like sushi! But now I have huge piles of feces! Does anybody know how to get rid of raccoons? I would really love to know????”

Fear is a common emotion often expressed as an immediate reaction, almost always to coyotes. Nextdoor conversations often provide vivid evidence of fear of wild animals:

I encountered a large coyote in the . . . Church parking lot at 8:30 in the evening. I was walking my two dogs—one is 8 pounds and the other is 14 pounds. At about 20 feet from me, this animal was blocking my exit from the lot and I couldn’t escape. We had about a 10-minute stare down and I’m certain he was deciding whether or not to take a chance

29. Laundre, Hernandez, and Ripple, “Landscape of Fear.”

30. Malamud, “Looking at Humans”; Berland, *Virtual Menageries*.

and attack us. I waved my arms, stomped my feet and shouted but it didn't faze him. Finally, he trotted off. . . . But I was terrified.

Fear also reverberates through posts that, although *intended* to cause fear in neighbors, also evoke forms of gratitude and responses that indicate solidarity in the face of threat as others respond. For example, it is common for a conversation about the predation of a cat or dog to include both intense agony and empathy for the loss of one animal and a total lack of sympathy for “normal” forms of coyote prey like rabbits or rodents.

Emotional entanglements such as these demonstrate arbitrariness. As many Nextdoor neighbors will point out without emotion, coyotes “play an important role in our ecosystem by hunting mice and rats and keeping the rabbit population down.” While it is fine for a coyote to eat a rabbit, it is a horror for it to eat a dog. The distinction here is largely about the difference between a free-roaming animal and a domesticated pet, but the line between wild and domestic in urban settings is difficult to establish (not least for the coyote!), as the following quotation illustrates: “This afternoon a coyote fatally attacked my feral cat of 8 years. The coyote was very aggressive and entered the side yard and the cat had no chance to escape. Please be mindful of the perils of allowing your cat outside! It’s a heartbreaking experience.”

The “feral cat” in this example is neither a conventional pet nor a fully wild animal—probably either a roaming cat that has been loosely adopted, or an abandoned cat, of which there are approximately four hundred thousand in Los Angeles.<sup>31</sup> This poster nonetheless feels propriety for the cat (“my feral cat”) and imagines the world through the cat’s experience—a sentiment that would likely be absent if the coyote were to kill and eat a possum or a rat.

### **Behavioral Entanglement**

Fear and concern for pets’ safety, alongside frustration and anger, are the most common emotions that entangle humans and animals in Los Angeles. They enjoin people to act differently toward animals, to become behaviorally and consequentially involved in the lives, bodies, and behaviors of the offending animal or species. Often, behavioral entanglement is a radically individualized (and thus arbitrary) response that enables each person to do as they see fit with respect to urban wildlife, whether to care for them or to destroy them.

Caring for animals is common. Humans often bring sick or injured animals to shelters, and occasionally seek help or advice via Nextdoor. Even animals that are commonly feared, like coyotes, can evoke caring behaviors. One neighbor posted about spotting on his property a “frail, hungry-looking,” and limping female coyote with “a little mange” and, after putting out some water for her, began calling wildlife rehabilitation programs, which were suggested in the conversation thread. Because none of these

31. Hillier, “If Schrödinger’s Cat Miaows.” See also Lynch and Kelty, “Another Insane Devotion.”

organizations would go fetch the animal, neighbors offered monetary contributions to whomever would volunteer to trap and drive the coyote somewhere (they even suggested a GoFundMe page).

Feeding animals is the most common and most contentious of behavioral entanglements. Many people feed birds uncontroversially; some feed squirrels (intentionally or not); and some feed raccoons. As noted above, many neighbors relay their experiences feeding their feral cats, a practice that is openly and commonly discussed, ubiquitous across neighborhoods, and a source of many entanglements. Residents even feed coyotes, as we learned from a canyon-dwelling couple who adopted one coyote from a pack, fed and welcomed it into their home, and named it. Pest control professionals lament the fact that humans feed animals regularly—both intentionally and unintentionally—because it is seen as the source of problems.

Feeding feral cats and birds is viewed as unproblematic, but feeding wilder animals is not. In the rare case that a poster admits to feeding a wild animal it can unleash a wave of angry accusations, claims about the harm that feeding does, and concerns about disease or, alternately, expressions of sympathy and solidarity, or nostalgia about “pet raccoons” for those who value caring and feeding over its harms. What wild animals should eat and where they should get it is tangled up with what humans do both intentionally (leaving out food for animals) and unintentionally (making trash, growing fruit trees, keeping compost bins, etc.).

The most consequential behavioral entanglement of humans and nonhumans is the killing of animals. In some cases, there is an unwavering conviction about the need to kill some wild animals, as one neighbor expressed: “Definitely rodents. Most likely rats. They are filthy and brazen. . . . They will overrun your home if you don’t take action now.” Unsurprisingly, rats tend to be the most common target of these types of comments: they cause damage, they carry disease, and they seem to evoke a fundamental human horror that even other rodents like squirrels or mice are not capable of: “Violence is the answer. A good old killing trap from Amazon is the tool”; “You have roof rats. . . . You need to put out some good food for a few weeks and then fill it with rat poison and wipe them all out.” Examples of such bloodlust are abundant and are rarely contested. Some find opossums and raccoons beautiful and thus would never consider terminating their lives (or, in some cases, even forcibly removing them from their property), while others are eager to get revenge on the raccoon that destroyed a garden or lawn. Some consider coyotes and to a lesser extent bobcats to be pet-killing machines, while others believe that they can be useful in controlling certain unwanted lifeforms, such as the rodent and squirrel population but also grubs and similar garden pests like snails or slugs, which makes their lives worth preserving.

Although there is widespread agreement on the need to remove rats living in close proximity to human residents, there is also a heated debate about the killing or removal method. Rather than killing, the action of moving or relocating animals is often discussed in Nextdoor conversations. This is a controversial issue, because California state

law prohibits relocation of wildlife by anyone, including licensed trappers, which means that if a neighbor wants to get rid of an unwanted wild animal in their premises and proceeds to trap it (or hires a pest control service to do so), the lawful course of action is either to kill the animal on the spot or release it exactly where it was caught.<sup>32</sup> Most Nextdoor posters were not aware of this regulation; some trapped and relocated animals themselves: “Over the last several months, our relatives in Pasadena have had 8 !!! racoons trapped in their backyard and relocated.” Angelenos also hired pest control companies who promised relocation: “Seriously, hire a humane trapper. These people relocate skunks and other animals to the wild. We used a humane trapper who relocated a pesky possum back to the San Gabriel Mountains where other possums live.”

As all of these examples throughout the city demonstrate, residents’ behavioral entanglement with animals creates situations in which some *care for* and some *take care of* animals that are present in the city.<sup>33</sup> Both types, however, signal an intimate (sometimes brutal, but not always) engagement with the vitality of the nonhuman actors that are part of the urban fabric. But the lack of coordinated policy or practice at a government level means that such behavioral entanglements are arbitrary: in some cases, killing of animals goes on unquestioned, and even unnoticed by most residents, while in others, residents actively care for animals, rehabilitate them, and feed them. These heterogeneous behavioral entanglements are driven by emotions and feed those emotional entanglements. Yet they also define the city as a lived space within which definitions of natural, urban, safe and unsafe, clean and dirty, rooted and displaced are contested.

### Political Entanglement

The emotional, spatial, and behavioral entanglements with wildlife in the city sometimes culminate in a form of political entanglement, whereby humans and nonhumans enroll political entities to deal with real and perceived problems. Nextdoor contains a lot of confusion and misinformation regarding how to deal with wildlife and who should be in charge of doing so. Consequently, attempts to engage political entities often feed the feelings of frustration, as well as fan the confusion over the spatial jurisdiction of political entities.

“The city” is an agent attributed both power and responsibility, as well as ineffectiveness and disregard for the needs of citizens. Los Angeles County (of which the city of Los Angeles proper is the largest political entity in size and population) has eighty-eight cities and a patchwork of incorporated and unincorporated areas strewn across multiple ecosystems. So “the city” can refer to local representatives, animal services, animal shelters and local animal control officers, county sheriffs, or city police officers. Because the city of Los Angeles has almost no dedicated employees to deal with wildlife, they often direct residents to private pest control as a solution, while many smaller

32. California Code of Regulations, Title 14, sec. 465.5.

33. Bocci, “Tangles of Care.”

cities contract directly with pest control to deal with such issues. A third political entity commonly involved includes the many nonprofit and volunteer organizations in the area, such as the Humane Society, the SPCA, the various activist organizations regarding wildlife, and the feral cat caretaking organizations. State and federal agencies also sometimes play a role.

The result, we found, is that, even though there is a strong demand for political responsibility, individual approaches to wildlife management far outweigh any other type of intentional, coordinated institutional response. When coordination happens, it often occurs, perhaps ironically, on platforms like Nextdoor. But for the most part, residents express dismay about political responsibility; for example, “NO ONE WHO WE ARE TOLD ARE THE PROPER AUTHORITIES to do does anything. . . . Residents know the reality of what is and has been going on for a while AND WE ARE SICK OF IT.” Emotions run especially high when domestic pets are part of the assemblage: “I feel helpless as long as the City Council is strictly partial to the coyotes and their ‘rights.’ In other words, our pets have NO RIGHTS, nor do we the pet owners.”

The invocation of *rights* in scare quotes is not an accident. It signals the very central confusion around what rights animals do and do not have in Los Angeles. Legally speaking, pets have dramatically more protections in the law than wild animals do; but the poster is referring less to the legal than the moral rights attributed to wild animals in an attempt—perhaps an arbitrary one—by Animal Services or others to protect wild animals from human vengefulness.

The devolution of authority to individuals is therefore asserted not only as a right or responsibility but as a duty to fill in where the city has failed: “Bottom line . . . the city doesn’t care. They can’t even repave our roads. . . . Better to take matters into your own hands if you see a coyote, sad, but true.” Although menacing, this “need to do something” mostly materializes in a myriad of (sometimes contradictory) deterring and hazing practices meant to be carried out by individuals, promoted with uneven enthusiasm by different agencies, scientists, and politicians. There is also evidence that Nextdoor itself provides the opportunity for grassroots responses, as one neighbor suggested “forming a workgroup to create a strategic plan to resolve this ever-increasing problem. Email me if interested.” Another suggested petitions; “I think we need to start some sort of petition to get animal control to take this more seriously so no one else loses their beloved pet!!” A third offered to host a meeting: “None of us can use our yards the way we intended to when we bought our houses. Very frustrating. Maybe a large group would make a difference. I have a place we can meet.”

The arbitrary governance of wildlife extends to caring as well as killing. A typical example: “Does anyone know of a possum rescue or want to come get a possum from my front yard? Dude doesn’t look happy. . . . Any suggestions or ideas? I don’t believe that the humane society deals with these critters—or do they? Spent some time on hold with them this morning but no answer.” Some respondents will recommend one of various wildlife centers or humane societies, but this is often met with comments that warn



the same neighbor not to call them based on their own personal experience of finding the organization either unresponsive or unwilling to help. Other neighbors offer to pick up the animal or lend a trap, to care for the injured animal, or to deliver it to someone they know who is capable of doing so.

Finally, many conversations demonstrate that companion animals are frequently conscripted, politically speaking, into the role of wildlife management. Most conversations about rats and mice include the injunction to “get a cat”: in a post labeled “avoiding rat poisons” a poster wrote, “GET A CAT!! Quick, clean, thorough, 24/7, earth-friendly and great company!” Many more examples demonstrate that not all residents view humans as separate or superior but instead implicitly understand (and encourage) the complicity of some animals in human projects of remaking the city to their liking. Most often these are companion animals, but similar sentiments often occur around coyotes and mountain lions, and even raptors: a group calling itself *Raptors Are the Solution (RATS)*, for instance, urges an increase in urban raptors as a way to deal with rats (instead of using poison). Political entanglement thus enlarges to include the problem-solving capacities of animals themselves, whose very involvement contributes to the arbitrary environment, even while they are recommended as a “natural” solution.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout the entanglements detailed here, we can glimpse the complex system of human involvement in the lives of animals in Los Angeles. These entanglements go far beyond the occasional sighting of a wild animal to include intense emotions about the safety of companion animals; frustration with coinhabitants; demands for local or state involvement in the protection, movement, or governance of wild animals; and the active feeding and care of animals, as well as their annihilation. Recognizing these forms is important because animals in Los Angeles are not invisible; social media platforms themselves make animals more visible and yank them out of the background and into a problematic foreground.

In cities wild animals are dominated by humans arbitrarily: there are few clear norms, laws, or regulations that are followed by everyone, even where they exist, and the default mode of justice for animals is radically individualized—in almost all cases, it is up to individuals to make decisions about what happens to animals. To be more precise, the form of domination is neither procedurally nor substantively regular but instead is left to the whims and caprices of those who are in a position to act. To be clear, any given individual may act reasonably, after a fashion, but they do not necessarily follow a rule that is in general followed by others, or one that tracks the interests of animals. In Los Angeles, such action itself is also subject to a kind of administrative arbitrariness, in that there is no agreement about who actually holds the power to dominate animals. It thus devolves onto individuals who, even if they dominate animals nonarbitrarily qua individuals, effectively produce arbitrary domination across the collective of differently acting individual humans. These forms of power are also arbitrary for the

animals. Whatever capacities animals have for experiencing freedom from domination, an arbitrary domination, by virtue of its very capricious, whimsical nature, is likely both physically and mentally torturous.

We conclude by raising these questions: What would it take to produce a less arbitrary relationship to animals in the city? And if our relationship to animals in the city were nonarbitrary, then would it be better for humans and animals equally? Would our domination of them be more just? A negative theory of animal liberty—noninterference with animals in the city—is, and has long been, impossible. As we have explored here, city residents are bound to interfere in one way or another with the urban wildlife they are always already entangled with, and so the defining feature of animals' freedom cannot be lack of human interference. Any proposal to rationalize the governance of animals in cities is likely to produce less arbitrariness, even if, on the face of it, it appears to increase control of animals, or reduce the freedom of individuals. Thus, if we cannot simply “let them be,” then we must find ways to be more consistent in our entanglements with them.

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