

More-than human Cities: Where the Wild Things Are

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Abstract: In this paper we engage the twin concepts of ‘the stray’ and ‘the friend’ for developing empathetic imaginings towards ethical practices in the city. We build on Lori Gruen’s (2015) notion of ‘entangled empathy’ as a critical pathway for realising more-than-human cities. Critical theory, frameworks and methods work to challenge anthropocentrism, shifting the boundaries used to define the Anthropos, and decentring *homo urbanis* as the defining reference point for ethical action. Drawing on an assemblage-methods around diagramming and sketching we outline a more-than-human urban politics. In the urban archipelagos of the Anthropocene, ‘where the wild things are’ is a shared habitat called the city. As conceptual signifiers, we argue both stray and friend offer examples of new relational possibilities of a more-than human politics for cities that currently exist, and for those yet to come.

Key words: Cities, more-than-human, assemblage methods, Anthropocene

Introduction:

In the mythology of modernism, the city was depicted as a place where nature had been tamed and domesticated into a benign physical environment for primarily human habitation away from the ‘wilds’ of nature. The Anthropocene has re-positioned cities as both extremely vulnerable, and as major contributors, to a planetary ecological crisis. It is a very particular form of collapse of civilisation, as it is civilisation that brings it on. Greater recognition of the co-existence, and co-dependence, of humans and non-humans in cities (and beyond) form part of a wider project of dismantling human species exceptionalism. There is a problematic conflation of the ‘non-human’ and ‘the human’ as broad categories given not all non-humans are the same, not all humans are the same,. However, embracing our common role in the

collective more-than-human urban story works to reconfigure cities as mutually constitutive/hybrid/networked, rather than separate, binary and oppositional (Castree 2014). New ways of thinking about messy human and non-human entanglements in cities opens up possibilities for diverse imaginings of human-nature, specifically human-animal, relations. Like Susan Ruddick (2015), we ask what are the ways an empathetic and care-full more-than-human city is already being performed, and where can we find them?

In this paper we first engage ‘the stray’ and ‘the friend’ as conceptual signifiers for developing empathetic imaginings and improved ethical practices in the city. In doing so we build on Lori Gruen’s (2015) concept of ‘entangled empathy’ which focuses on improving human-animal relations by attending to another’s wellbeing. She describes this as a process in which first, we must recognize we are always entangled in multiple relations with others (human and non-human) - and that these are often imbalanced. This reflective recognition of the reciprocity of relations, is then the basis for taking more responsible interactions, care and attentiveness to others, with greater consideration of their needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes and sensitivities. Gruen’s proposition relates to Rifkin’s (2009) notion of an empathic civilization, where empathy evolves biologically as much as culturally, as a counter to human aggression, anthropocentrism and utilitarian approaches to the earth and other species.

We then turn to highlight the role of more-than human methods such as assemblage through diagramming and sketching as potential pathways to a more-than-human politics. Assemblage methods attend to the immanent effect of the association of diverse urban elements (humans, organizations, tools, objects, technologies, texts, organisms, other cities). Bruno Latour’s (2005) notion of ‘Wild things’ invokes assemblage theory to illustrate cities as a collective of inhabitants, materials, things and practices. The process of reframing human-environment relations through more-than-human assemblage methods involves shifting the conceptual scaffolding by: showing how concepts and categories matter; understanding contradictions and paradox; documenting variability; and identifying cultural norms and thresholds for change (Head 2016). Following Todd May (2005, p.166) “we can begin to think of cities not in terms of needs we already know but in terms of diversities whose connections we do not know”.

On Strays and Friends

In our imagination, a stray dog might conjure up fleeting images of a skinny, shadowy figure, darting for cover, hiding from attention or the light. Similarly, other perceived strays inhabiting unfamiliar terrains and contours of cities – wolves, foxes, dingoes, koalas – appearing displaced as if trapped within a constant state of estrangement. What is often not considered are the subtle connections between these non-human strays, and many other human strays: refugees, seasonal workers, illegal immigrants, the homeless, the otherwise unwanted, or the fringe dwellers of the urban realm. Eking out an existence on the margins of civilization, both human and animal strays inhabit an interstitial space that lies somewhere between the ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘us’ and ‘them’, and between notions of fixity and certainty (Gupta and Ferguson 1992).

A conceptual sketch of ‘the stray’ offers a way of shifting human exceptionalism within the context of urban habitats. At core the stray is homeless, unwanted, an exile, an outsider living in a liminal shadowy space. Commonly associated with domestic companion species (i.e. cats and dogs) gone feral, the term is equally applicable to some individuals of the human species in cities in the age of the Anthropocene (Creed 2017; Narayanan 2017). Unwanted animals and impoverished humans are equally considered trespassers in urban spaces, their exclusion legitimized by their informality. This is a condition produced by formal governance and planning processes where ‘the animality of humans and the personhood of animals are both denied’ (Narayanan 2017, p. 476).

The potential of ‘the stray’ as a concept has yet to receive wide critical attention but has recently begun to be addressed in the work of Barbara Creed and Yamini Narayanan around human-animal ethics in the Anthropocene. Creed (2017, p.167) for example argues for the moral significance of the stray as a “rich and varied concept and lens through which to consider the future of the planet and the lives of all living beings”. She argues for a ‘stray ethics’ focused on the shared cross-species experiences of marginalization and abandonment. These shared experiences also have the potential to give rise to cross-species recognition, empathy and resistance.

Creed's point of departure is the unsettling of home and civilization when faced with the precarity, instability and insecurity of growth-led urbanization and a changing climate. The loss of home and habitat applies as much now to citizens of low-lying islands and the victims of migration and exile as to endemic species and neglected urban companion animals. This confluence of experiences radically undermines previous borders and boundaries between species' (Narayanan 2017). As Creed (2017, p.168) observes "the human species is in danger of becoming a stray unto itself, a lost species whose ground of being both literally and ethically is shifting so rapidly that darkness engulfs the way ahead".

The strays of varied species inhabit 'a hidden part of the urban fabric' (Rahmann and Jonas 2011, p. 5) that exists outside the predictable spaces of consumption that contemporary urbanism generates. These are interstitial spaces often found "hidden between the facades of buildings – the 'slots', nooks, and crannies of the City" (Sankalia 2008, p. 29). Against its framing exclusively in terms of subordination and neglect, Narayanan (2017) calls for the stray to be recast as 'subaltern animism', recognizing its inventiveness as an agent of change. As Narayanan (2017, p. 488) explains subaltern animism "refers to the formulation of new multispecies-inclusive geographies or planning theories that recognise the agency and personhood of non-humans, as well as the ways in which they claim and occupy space." Also alluding to the inherent agency of the stray is Julia Kristeva (1982, p.12) who reminds us, "I stray in order to be".

The Friend

One counterpart to the stray is the friend. Harriet Ritvo (1996) describes a continuum between the settled and the stray in which both human and non-human species are all part of an interconnected whole. The friend is a figure of belonging and connection, rather than possessing the displacement, estrangement and aloofness of the stray. Yet, like the stray, the friend is a concept that transcends any one species. Stories and experiences of strong relationships between humans and companion animals in particular are not new (see Kohac 2000). The context of close human relationships with pets has a long history, where these animals are emotionally entwined with humans and are deeply embedded in family lives. These relationships indicate significant and enduring connectedness between humans and

animals which works across the species divide to create multi-species households (Charles 2014; Haraway 2003, 2008).

Kinship across the species barrier is not something new and strange but is an everyday experience of those humans who share their domestic space with other animals. Rather than witnessing a new phenomenon of post-human families, multi-species households have been with us for a considerable length of time but have been effectively hidden by the so-called species barrier (Charles 2014, p.715).

Trans-species relationships and feelings of love and closeness are discussed by Donna Haraway (2003) in her book 'The Companion Species Manifesto' and 'When Species Meet' (2008). The possibilities of a caring interdependence with other species is highlighted when they are viewed as significant others. This relational caring of significant others goes beyond more paternalistic, bourgeois notions of 'caring for' as a middle-class civilizing urbanization process (i.e. 'learning to be kind to animals') towards notions of caring-with and the co-production of joined-up (urban) futures. More-than-human friendships are therefore characterized by meaningful relationships and care-full connections, attachments and experiences in the city.

Empathy and care have typically been explored in a human context, as indicated by the well-cited definition of care as a 'species activity' (Tronto and Fisher, 1990). However, as Cloke and Jones (2003, p. 196) argue, 'the tightly drawn boundaries, which codify moral communities as human, need to be reconceived in order to foster new moral relationships with nature and thereby help to drag the everyday practices of society into new ethical formations.' More recent work by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, p. 16-17) also points to the potential of a care ethics to be more attuned to more-than-human worlds, defying the traditional ethical boundaries of enlightenment. Rather than the perfect equality of actants, networks of care can be described in terms of "a polity with more channels of communication between members" (Bennett 2010, p. 104). Rather than moral capacity – the defining feature of human exceptionalism – it is empathetic care in its diverse more-than-human forms that binds such a polity.

An important channel of communication that can be practiced by both humans and nonhumans is touch (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). The act of touching transcends presumed differences and blurs boundaries between human and nonhumans, the living and non-living,

the self and the other. To touch is also to be touched, and therefore necessarily a co-transformative connection between beings of any kind. The transformative power of touch can be caring and healing, but also abusive, forced, and harmful. Either way, touch leaves its imprint on bodies and minds . At the reciprocal centre of these relationships and entanglements stands the friend, caring for and being cared by, others. At the margins is the stray, present but alienated and out of place.

A More-than-Human Urban Politics

You will find no mention of animals in contemporary urban theory whose lexicon reveals deep-seated anthropocentrism... In mainstream theory urbanization transforms empty land through a process called development to produce improved land...such language is perverse...wildlands are not empty but teeming with non-human life (Wolch 1998, p. 119)

Both stray and friend offer pathways towards a more-than-human politics for the city teeming with both human and non-human life. Jennifer Wolch's (1998) seminal 'Zoopolis' made the case for a trans-species urban ethic, practice and politics of caring for and with animals and nonhuman 'nature'. The history of urbanization, she argues, is morally bereft, based on a palpable disregard for nonhuman life, its subjugation and its exploitation. She describes a parallel shadow world in cities where non-human animal species reside alongside, underneath (or overhead in the case of birds and insects) humans, but are politically hidden and marginalized, and thereby rendered invisible.

The *political project* on which Zoopolis and the wider more-than-human scholarship is focused on involves: de-centering humans as part of a broader entanglement of living and non-living entities; challenging the dominant ways of seeing, knowing and doing that harmfully separate humans from non-humans; and generating new more inclusive trans-species lexicons, lines of enquiry and practices (Maller 2018). More-than-human theories and methods seek to dissolve binary categories, recognize the agencies and dynamism of non-humans such as plants, animals and technologies, and bring attention to everyday trans-species encounters and social practices. The practice and intention is to destabilize dominant (i.e. Western Cartesian) ideas about knowledge, sociality, materiality, causality, agency, determinism and ethics, in favour of approaches that are more material, hybrid, performative, relational and dynamic (Houston et al. 2017).

More-than-human thinking and theories are found in a wide -ranging collection of ‘relational ontologies’ (Castree 2003) spanning diverse disciplines including human and cultural geography, feminist studies, science and technology studies (STS), and political science. It includes assemblage thinking, non-representational theory, affect, theories of social practices and new materialisms. Exemplifying the expansive thinking that these theories encourage are works such as Donna Haraway’s (2016) ‘Staying with the Trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene’, Ed Yong’s (2016) ‘I Contain Multitudes: The Microbes Within Us and a Grander View of Life’, Jane Bennett’s (2010) ‘Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things’, and Sarah Whatmore’s (2002) ‘Hybrid Geographies: natures, Cultures, Spaces’.

A common starting point in the more-than-human literature is that new forms of relational politics are required, inclusive of non-humans. Relational more-than-human politics is less then about ‘a merely formal constitutional, institutional, or normative edifice’, and more of ‘an ongoing process of negotiating power relations’ (Coole and Frost 2010, p. 18). Such an approach allows moving beyond ‘the trappings of the system’ to explore the transformative possibility of ‘laying down a path by walking out from it’ (Bennett 2015, p. 83). A more-than-human positioning often means embracing uncertainty and flexibility as outcomes of decision making are never certain in a changing urban climate and world. There is an onus here on ‘livingness’ as a modality of connection between bodies and worlds (Whatmore 2006); the re-animation of the missing matter of landscapes involving more-than-human bodies and a lively earth; and redistribution of subjectivity (Whatmore 2004).

Humans are no longer the only ‘beings that count’ (Whatmore 2002 p. 155), but simply part of ‘the messy heterogeneity of being-in-the-world’ (p. 147). For Bennett (2010, p. 108), this heterogeneity includes not only living things or “speaking subjects”, but also “mute objects” with their varied capacities for, and forms of, agency. Politics is about conjoint action between humans and non-humans that ‘paves the way for a theory of action that more explicitly accepts nonhuman bodies as members of a public, more explicitly attends to how they, too, participate in conjoint action and more clearly discerns instances of harm to the (affective) bodies of animals, minerals, vegetables and their ecocultures’ (Bennett 2010, p. 103). Yet, at the same time as we begin to acknowledge the heterogeneity of beings in the

world that ‘count’, there is growing recognition that in the Anthropocene humans have become a geological force capable of affecting all other beings (Braidotti 2013, p.5).

To imagine a vision of post-anthropocentric cities, requires moving beyond the essentialism of the human as the creature of enlightenment, the Cartesian citizen-subject, the rights holder and the property owner (Wolfe 2010). Shifting away from such dominant anthropocentric ontologies is difficult, because of the ‘terrible gravitational attraction of human specialness’ (Pickering 2008, p. 2), and the efficiency and effectiveness through which it was enforced at the age of enlightenment. Yet, by shifting attention to everyday more-than-human encounters in cities, we can start to consider key questions prompted by Haraway (2008) and Puig de la Bellacasa (2017): What does it mean to live-with non-human species? How do we build care-full relationships that recognize species’ difference and interdependence? How can we be friends across naturecultures and the dynamic peculiarities and particularities of kin and kind? As Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, p. 83) highlights “thinking with non-humans should always be a living-with, aware of troubling relations and seeking a significant otherness that transforms those involved in the relations and the worlds we live in”.

More-than human methods: Diagramming and sketching the stray and friend

A workshop on *More-than-Human Modes of Inquiry* (2008) convened by Gay Hawkins and Kay Anderson with Sarah Whatmore, drew international attention to the epistemological and political implications of more-than-human modes of inquiry. Specifically, discussions explored questions of why more-than-human modes of research matter and how they can be developed, how nature and other material forms are assembled and come to matter in different settings, and what innovative methods the more-than-human approach might generate. This built on earlier work by Whatmore (2002) who argued for greater acknowledgement that change is not just a human achievement, and more focus on the politics of knowledge production and how it can be changed is needed. Lesley Head (2010) describes this as a shift in our ‘conceptual scaffolding’.

The language of assemblage has been gaining ground in urban studies in recent years. Assemblages are not a ‘spatial category’, a condition or a formation produced as a result of

points being joined by linear, fixed, essential or filial relations. A Deleuzian formulation of assemblage rejects both fixed essentialisms, and the privileging of one scale or level of organization over another (DeLanda, 2006). They are much more open and mobile alliances and alloys – gatherings – that can stabilize (territorialize or reterritorialize) and destabilize (deterritorialize) at any time. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987) this involves new concepts and the creation of new productive ethical relations.

Assemblage thinking privileges processes and practices over categories, and particularly the processes of ‘becoming-with’ in contact-zones (Haraway 2008), entanglements and encounters. Braidotti (2013) highlights there are tensions between: the foundational figure of the human subject as separate and distinct from others; anti-human celebration; and humanist concerns to affirm and promote human flourishing. But this tension creates the potential for opening up new ways of thinking about what being human means.

Developing a trans-species ethic and empathy in cities is about changing the basic unit of reference of what counts to be human, but also moving beyond the centrality of humans as the defining reference point for ethical action. An assemblage-method approach around diagramming and sketching is a potential pathway for new urban possibilities to emerge; grounded in new stories; and ushering in new, more caring worlds. This, we suggest, might involve deploying a method based on assemblage thinking: a *diagrammatic* of the relational forces that are in play as effective emergences; and *sketching* specific examples of new assemblages and potentialities that already exist or might be able to emerge (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987, Hillier 2007, 2011).

The Deleuzian idea of the diagram focuses on the idea of representation, or more-than-representation, to connect directly with reality and all its embodied paradoxes (i.e. order and chaos, inside and outside, invisible and visible, content and expression). For example, Foucault’s Panopticon is not merely a representation of a building, but the diagram of a mechanism of power: a ‘figure of political technology’ (see Foucault 1995, p.205). A diagram is an assemblage in which non-technical processes, such as desire, are intimately connected with machines. Diagramming in the Deleuzian sense points to and establishes, becomings and intensities in the flow of desire, content and expression (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Zdebik,

2012).

Diagramming involves more than rearranging hierarchies, extending boundaries of inclusion and exclusion and displacing the centre from one point to another. It calls for a more fundamental rethinking of the very terms, categories and metaphoric spatiality that underpin this ontology. A new set of diagrams is needed that can portray more complex entanglements of humans, other living organisms, inanimate things, machines, earth and the cosmos (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Diagramming focuses on the interconnections and relations between agents (human and non-human) and helps to anticipate potential tensions and conflicts such as those embodied by an ethic of trans-species empathy and care.

Sketching is about the invention of new concepts and new productive ethical relations (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Change is paradoxical in that its nature cannot be predicted or recognized. The lines of flight or breakthrough occur as a moment of becoming often ‘when someone blinks or behind someone’s back’ (Young et al. 2013, p. 183). Sketching is therefore an ambiguous undertaking where breakthroughs are always tentative; rough; unfinished; and ever evolving.

Within an enlightenment paradigm, the notions of friend and stray are bounded by a set of moral parameters which set apart humans from non-humans. Within these parameters, friendship is understood as a social construct through which people learn and fulfil moral obligations such as loyalty, trust, commitment and honesty (Bukowski and Sippola 1998). However, non-humans’ capacity for moral agency – and as such the capacity to be a true friend – continues to arouse skepticism and philosophical debate (Clement 2013). If being a friend is a moral achievement, going stray is a moral failure, and is not restricted to humans.

The human stray can be vilified as an immoral deviant or pitied as a moral victim. Yet, even for non-humans, urban straying is often perceived as a failure to fulfil their imagined natural purity and human ideals of non-human habitat (Maller 2018). The shelter – for homeless people or for feral urban animals – is perhaps the quintessential institution erected to eliminate the urban stray. As a welfare institution, the shelter provides some important responses to basic survival needs of the stray. But it is also a mechanism of warehousing,

incarceration, and control (Kerr 2016) designed to stop the stray from straying. The moral separation of human and non-human strays is evident in the common policy whereby shelters would not accept a homeless person's companion animal, resulting in either the exclusion of both human and animal, or their painful separation and an enduring sense of grief.

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Alternative sketches of the friend and the stray are made possible when centred on diverse more-than-human forms and configurations of care and empathy, rather than anthropocentric moral parameters. Against the moral parameters of enlightenment, enforced by homeless shelter policies which seek their separation, Labrecque and Walsh (2011) found that homeless women and their companion animals were bound together both as friends and strays, offering one another solace, acceptance, and unconditional love.

Conclusion

The anthropocentric city is founded on ontological binaries (humans/non-humans; organic/artificial; living/non-living; wild/tame), underpinned by a metaphoric spatiality of centres, distances and boundaries. At the centre of this ontological space is the sovereign human subject (Castree 2003), and all 'others' are categorized in a hierarchy defined by their distance from that centre (e.g. from domesticated pets as closest to humans to feral wildlife; or from living organisms to inanimate objects). In this context, a new conceptual scaffolding and metaphoric spatiality is necessary, such as that which unfolds from the concepts of 'stray', 'friend' and a more-than-human ethics of 'entangled empathy' which focuses on improving human-animal relations by attending to another's wellbeing. Following Gruen, this is an experiential process in which first, humans must recognize that, like it or not, we are a part of many relationships with others (human and non-human) - and that these are often imbalanced, at times cruel - as a necessary precursor for more responsible interactions, care and attentiveness.

Focusing on what we share as human and non-human ‘strays’ means recognizing difference, but more importantly highlighting what we have in common, as well as empathizing (including at times grieving) for what we have collectively and/or individually lost. Within the context of the Anthropocene, the notion of the stray takes on a shared inter-species resonance that “inspires artistic practice and political action also paves the way for radical change” (Creed 2017, p.169).

Likewise, sketching the idea and practice of the friend sees human and non-human species in intimate networks and relationships premised on care of others. Nickie Charles (2014, p.x) highlights this is not a new phenomenon but should be seen as the “continuation of a long-standing trend towards an increasingly widespread experience of affective human–animal connectedness”. The friend therefore serves to de-centre humans with greater recognition given to interspecies networks, hybrid families and post-humanist/more-than-human households. In the urban archipelagos of the Anthropocene, ‘where the wild things are’ is a shared habitat called the city. Thinking in assemblages and embracing concepts such as the friend and the stray demonstrates how new urban possibilities might (re)-emerge, grounded in everyday stories and ushering in new understandings and practices of living in more-than-human worlds.

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