



## A tale of tails: The place of dog parks in the urban imaginary

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### ABSTRACT

According to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association there are ~75 million dogs living as companion animals in the country and ~39% of all households include a dog. Because a significant population of dogs live in urban areas, there has been a growing interest in improving where and how dogs can inhabit city spaces. One result of this interest has been the rise of dog parks or off-leash dog areas – often inside of, or attached to, public parks. These dog parks, however, are not without controversy. At the heart of the controversy are two interrelated questions: (1) where and how do the needs of other species become incorporated into urban spaces? and (2) what is the place of dogs in the conceptual identity of urban residents? To answer these questions we used Kansas City, Missouri, as a case study because it is an urban area of ~100,000 dogs (~400,000 humans), one established dog park, and a recent political battle over establishing a second. We combine theoretical grounding in animal and urban geographies with data from a news media analysis, a small-scale resident survey, a content analysis of public comments, and interviews to demonstrate that as the urban human–dog relationship changes in the private space of the home it is driving new urban identities and new configurations of public spaces.

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### 1. Introduction

*“Some people rollerblade, some people fly kites. We play with our dogs.” (Stearns, 2000)*

*“Dog parks are for weird people and animal freaks.” (Survey comment)*

There is no doubt that the United States is a nation that has “gone to the dogs” (Schaffer, 2009) as 39% of all households have at least one dog. There are an estimated 75 million canine companions in the United States, contributing to an estimated \$40 billion per year pet industry (APPA, 2011). We have dog whisperers, dog shows, dog agility competitions, dogs deployed to rescue people, lead people, and sniff out drugs and bombs. There are designer dog accessories, doggie day care centers, dog-friendly travel guides, and a dizzying array of dog websites, dog toys, and dog manuals and magazines (Nast, 2006a). Furthermore, the dogs themselves come in a spectrum of sizes, colors, shapes, and temperaments. The American Kennel Club recognizes 155 different breeds and more are in the pipeline for approval (AKC, 2010). The American dog today is far removed from its ancestors who either eked out a living on the outskirts of human settlements or became part of the first human project of domesticating animals. Dogs today are now firmly embedded in the lofts, condos, apart-

ments, townhomes, and single family homes of the city. Our focus in this article is how urban areas now are trying to address the confounding urban issue of whether a dog is still a dog if it has no place to be a dog.

As a result of this conundrum, dog owners as well as non-dog owning and anti-dog residents are becoming more organized and vocal in urban areas where a matrix of laws control breeds, enforce contraptions such as leashes and muzzles, limit the number of dogs one can live with, and enforce fines for everything from not cleaning up after your dog to barking. The increasing articulation by urban dog owners that dogs need their own places where they can simply be ‘dogs’ and escape their largely confined and controlled lives has led to the rise of dog parks – or off-leash areas. Dog parks are fenced off areas where dogs can be legally unconfined-free to interact with other dogs and romp without the constraints of leashes, harnesses, leads, or muzzles. The parks can be privately, publicly, or jointly owned and maintained. Dog parks are not a new phenomenon as the first one in the United States was established in 1979 as the Ohlone dog park in Berkeley, California (Ohlone, 2010). Today there are an estimated 2200 dog parks around the country (Dog Parks USA, 2010) and there is even a newly released and free iPhone application to help you locate a dog park as you are traveling with your canine companion (Tech Wanderings, 2010).

Dog parks have come into existence with and without controversy (Schaffer, 2009) and, when there is controversy, we argue that at the heart of the conflict are two interrelated questions:

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(1) where and how do the needs of other species become incorporated into urban spaces? and (2) what is the place of dogs in the conceptual identity of urban residents now that we are 20 years into the practice of dog parks? To answer these questions we used Kansas City, Missouri, as a case study because it is an urban area of ~100,000 dogs (~400,000 humans), with one established dog park, and the site of a recent, heated political battle over establishing a second. The goal of this case study is to explore how constructions of human–dog relations are becoming intertwined with changing urban cultures and uses of urban spaces. The article begins by locating dogs and dog parks in the context of animal and urban geographies. It then presents the story of dog parks in Kansas City, and moves on to discuss the results of our multiple data sets.

## 2. Dogs and geography

Dogs, perhaps the epitome of the urban nature–culture hybrid (Swyngedouw, 1996), are increasingly being seen by city-dwellers as a group of living beings who's social and behavioral needs ought to be accommodated beyond the private space of the home. The challenge for geographers is to examine what dog parks reveal about shifting socio-political-spatial constructions of the place of urban nature. The importance of understanding a “more-than-human urban geography” has been clearly articulated (Braun, 2005). Indeed, Whatmore and Thorne (1998) suggest that animals be understood as ‘strange persons’ to be treated analytically in the same way as human groups, while Philo (1998) argues that animals should be viewed as marginalized, socially excluded people when studying human–animal relations. Our project sits at the intersection of animal geography and urban planning. Both sub-fields recognize that the city is not solely a human habitat, but is instead – whether visible or accepted – a place firmly inhabited by a variety of species, even if there has been little attention given to the ways in which specific human–animal configurations become politically contested. And, as Hobson (2007) points out, animals should be considered socio-political subjects because (a) they are already subjects of, and subject to, political practices, and (b) they are affective political subjects in the sense that the animals, as animals, can shift human political positions and practices. If we are to truly follow through on exploring and understanding a more-than-human urban geography then “taking the nonhuman seriously needs to be more than a matter of recognition of the ways in which animals affect the lives of human beings, it requires the very cry [or bark in this case] of the nonhuman to be heard: other beastly, ambiguous, maybe frightening and certainly embodied” (Johnston, 2008, p. 637). It is, in fact, the “livingness” of the dog and the “intimate fabric of corporeality” of the human–dog relationship that is forcing a shift not only in notions of urban public space, but also of boundaries for human–animal behaviors in these places (Whatmore, 2006).

Animal geography focuses on the myriad ways in which human–animal relations are shaped by socio-spatial processes (Philo and Wilbert, 2000; Wolch and Emel, 1998). A growing body of empirical work has explored topics such as the historical spatial orderings of animals in the city (Howell, 1998; Philo, 1998) and present day cultural attitudes towards animals in the urban environment (Griffiths et al., 2000; Wolch et al., 2000). Two geographic studies specifically on dog parks come from Wolch and Rowe (1992) and Nast (2006b)). Wolch and Rowe demonstrate how a dog park developed by local residents in Laurel Canyon in the Hollywood Hills area of Los Angeles helped change the identity of this particular park from being a place of illegal activities to one of community engagement. Nast uses a political economy perspective to contextualize the development of dog parks in the Chicago area. By showing how dog parks are part of larger, global

structures of post-industrialization and the return of a largely white suburban population to the city she demonstrates how gentrification and racial privilege are a key piece of urban human–dog relations.

Our study builds upon these works by focusing specifically on constructions of the human–dog relationship itself. As we will demonstrate, the conflict over a proposed dog park in Kansas City was about neither cleaning up a blighted area nor large-scale processes of racially privileged gentrification, but around attitudes towards dogs and, by extension, the urban spaces in which they are in or out of place. Along these lines we are also building on empirical work in animal geography on the role of power, dominance, and affection in the human–dog relationship (Tuan, 1984). Three case studies in particular provide important context for the issue of dog parks. The first is an ethnographic study by Fox (2006) where she explores how pet owners in Britain understand “the similarities and differences between themselves and their animal companions on a day-to-day basis” (p. 527). What she finds is that pet keeping is much more complex and involves a spectrum of exchanges that reveal both human and animal agency. For Fox it is the intimacy of human–animal reciprocal relations within the home that reveal a core challenge to the Cartesian legacy of seeing animals as akin to mechanical objects and without experiencing minds. Power (2008) focuses specifically on the ways in which dogs become part of a family in Australia. Echoing Fox's claim about the complexity of human–pet relations, Power finds that dogs become family in three ways – they are constructed as ‘furry children’ in need of protection, seen as part of a ‘family’ dog pack with a human as the ‘alpha dog’, and through accommodating the individual agency of the dogs (i.e., recognizing that an individual dog likes or needs certain toys, food, or schedules rather than being always forced to submit to human plans). While sometimes these relations fall apart or break down, the key point from both studies is that humans and pet animals are negotiating a new form of family in the private sphere of the home.

While a historical study, Howell (2002) explores the link between the private and public human–dog relationship as revealed through pet cemeteries in Victorian England. In documenting the opposition to pet burials, Howell cautions that “pet cemeteries should not be seen as simply an extension of middle-class humanitarian concerns, up to and well past the line of anthropomorphic whimsy: rather, we should note that their proponents were attempting to redraw the boundaries of the moral community by raising the treatment of all dead pets to something that approximated the treatment of dead people” (p. 12). Dog parks, as spaces for living dogs, also have the potential to challenge urban morals by reconfiguring dogs as worthy of needing, sharing, and utilizing public spaces. Dog parks can be then a place where the history of human–nature and human–animal divisions is broken down – or at minimum reconfigured.

The push to theorize an urban animal geography has come from Jennifer Wolch. Her aim with terms such as *zoöpolis* – a multi-species city – is to not only bring animals into urban geography, where they have largely been absent, but also to envision a reconfiguring of the urban to fully incorporate the needs of *all* species (Wolch, 1995, 2002; Wolch et al., 1995). While Wolch's work has focused mainly on urban wildlife, in *Anima Urbis* (2002) she highlights three key framings of urban human–animal relations that are relevant to urban dogs and dog parks. The first is that urban human identities and subjectivities are shaped by specific attitudes toward, and experiences of, animals. These identities “may have ties to temporal periods, geographic places or imagined communities such as nations, as well as to racial/ethnic, cultural or gendered identities” (p. 727). Whether being used to consolidate or exclude humans or animals from being in the right place, animals remain central to human identity formation in specific locales. The goal

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