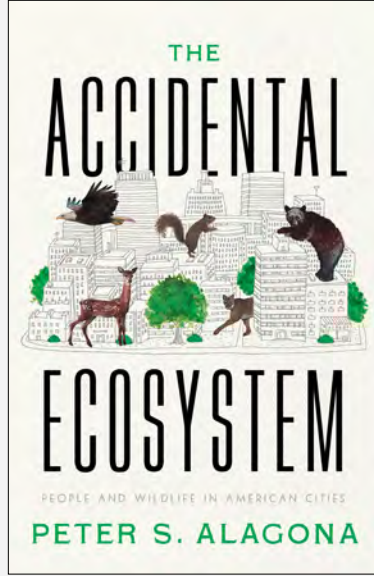
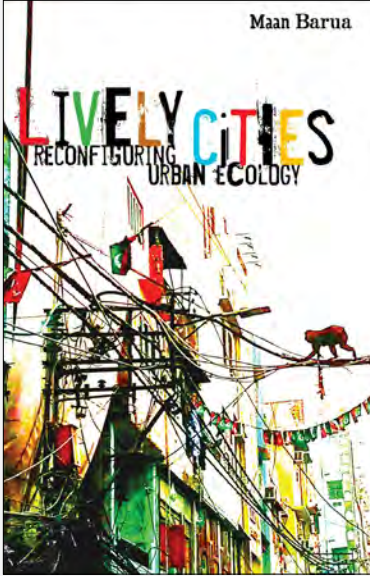


The Line Is Death: Animal Fugitivity and Urban Planning

Imogen Grigorovich



Review of:

Maan Barua, *Lively Cities: Reconfiguring Urban Ecology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023. viii + 373 pp. 53 illus. \$30.00 (pb).

and

Peter S. Alagona, *The Accidental Ecosystem: People in Wildlife in American Cities*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2022. xvi + 276 pp. 10 illus. \$26.95 (hb)

Imogen Grigorovich is a research master's student in Comparative Literary Studies at Utrecht University, Netherlands.

Email: imogenwf@gmail.com

Le Corbusier's *The City of To-morrow and its Planning* (1929), a foundational work of urban planning theory, imagines the city by reducing it to a diagrammatical map of paths, lines, and curves. Lamenting that the cities of his time were built for pack-donkeys rather than men, Le Corbusier aligns humans and animals with different urban geometries. Man's preference, he argues, lies with the straight line, as he "walks in a straight line because he has a goal and knows where he is going". The pack-donkey, on the other hand, prefers curves and open spaces: he "meanders along, meditates a little in his scatter-brained and distracted fashion, [. . .] zigzags [and] takes the line of least resistance".¹ For Le Corbusier, the line represents the triumph of human reason over other animals and the animality we share with them. The line asserts mastery and control over one's passions. The modern city, thus, must "live by the straight line", constructing its buildings, sewers, tunnels, highways, and pavements as linear throughways for human navigation. In the face of such efficiency, the curve of the pack-donkey's way becomes a "ruinous, [. . .] paralyzing thing".²

Le Corbusier's visions for the city of to-morrow shaped much of Western urban architecture of the twentieth century. The pursuit of efficient, logical form wrought havoc on urban animal life: walls and fences cut off well-trodden paths, and the proliferation of motorways introduced new, deadly dangers into established habitats. In his preference for a specific kind of geometry, Le Corbusier neglected the needs of urban animals, and cities re-structured by his philosophy made animal life precarious, forcing them to rapidly adapt to human-centred patterns of urban living.

Two recent publications push against the established canon of urban planning literature. In *Lively Cities: Reconfiguring Urban Ecology*, Maan Barua explores aspects of urban animal life that often go ignored by post-Corbusierian city planning. Barua takes the language of canonical urban theory and repurposes it to work against itself, developing a "polyphonic" (18) account of the city, what he calls "the urban

1 Le Corbusier, *The City of To-morrow and its Planning* (New York: Dover, 1987), 40.

2 Le Corbusier, *City of To-morrow*, 46.

in a minor key” (14), that is lively and sensitive to how urban space is shaped by heterogeneous and “meshworked arrangements” (16) of human and nonhuman protagonists. Exploring the lives of macaques and cows in post-independence Delhi and parakeets in contemporary London, Barua writes against the received wisdom that cities are made by humans for humans, showing how people and animals find novel ways of living together despite the segregated forms imposed by urban planning.

Taking a different approach, Peter S. Alagona’s book *The Accidental Ecosystem: People in Wildlife in American Cities* traces the history of animal presence in American cities, looking at the evolution of the relationships between human and animal co-habitants through the establishment of the United States to the present. Such a bird’s eye view of American urban histories allows Alagona to trace the construction of the contemporary common-sense ideas of urban animality and showcase the shifting nature of the city’s relationship to its animal others. Investigating the ways in which urban flora and fauna have been shaped by decisions that did not take them into consideration, Alagona argues that the recent explosion in urban wildlife has “happened largely by accident” (2). Alagona calls for a wider awareness of how our urban decisions will shape the ecosystems of animal others “for generations to come” (7).

Together, the two books call for a new approach to urban planning. In paying attention to the diverse ways human and animal others coinhabit urban spaces, Barua and Alagona argue that animal others are vital and active participants in the shaping of our urban landscapes. To account for their presence, we must make space for both the man and the pack-donkey.

Oppressive Diagrams

Barua’s investigation begins at a moment when human-drawn city diagrams collide with the fleshy materiality of the animal body. Connaught Place, Delhi’s upmarket business district suddenly comes to a halt when a rogue rhesus macaque climbs up the pipes, loses its footing, and falls into the district’s main transformer (25). The macaque’s

death, which causes an electrical outage that lasts for hours, marks just one moment of Delhi's complex relationship with the primates, who are both venerated and construed as nuisances (33, 36).

A closer look at Delhi's electrical infrastructures exposes another conflict of interest. The drawing and redrawing of Delhi's electrical grids is an effort of co-production not only between the macaques and the authorities but also the people living near the electric lines. Attempts by Delhi's energy grid authorities to impose order and bring the populations into what Barua calls "the ambit of capital" — through installing electric meters and assigning each household a unique grid number — have had to contend not only with the monkeys but also with the realities of "informal urbanization" (40). Away from the sight of Delhi's authorities, illegal power lines are drawn by urban *katiyabaaz* — Delhi's unsanctioned professional electricians. The *katiyabaaz*, operating precariously at the margins of society, establish connections from the Discom transformers into urban homes, opposing state-sanctioned impositions of order (42). The new lines are then repurposed by the macaques, who use the new pathways to traverse the city. Stories of city planning are dominated by neatly drawn diagrams. Yet in Delhi, the diagrams of the electric grid are not able to keep up with the constantly evolving landscape of electric lines that are illegally drawn, repaired, and chewed through. Imposed electrical infrastructure is repurposed and redesigned by both macaques and humans, who draw new connections and sever old ones, providing marginalized homes with electricity and the monkeys with new pathways of urban travel.

On the other side of the globe, urban grids face similar challenges from local wildlife. In describing the birth and growth of American cities after the Second World War, Peter Alagona discusses how a myriad of factors, such as "new roads, zoning laws, government-backed mortgages, and the postwar baby boom" have contributed to the development of vast suburban areas, whose sprawl encroached onto territories previously surrendered to nature (46). The ecological impact of postwar suburbs was devastating, ravaging the area's wildlife, paving over habitats, and polluting waterways.

Diverse ecosystems were replaced with uniform green lawns, which caused the landscape to be dominated by relatively few grass species (46–47). Yet the very developments that have devastated existing ecosystems unwittingly created fruitful conditions for the emergence of new ones (49). Species such as white-tailed deer, coyotes, and black bears, who were able to adjust to human behaviours, soon found themselves encroaching back into the suburbs. Adapting more nocturnal life cycles, they commuted to suburban zones to search for food in the copious waste the suburbs produced (50, 65, 84). Residents of the American suburb whose interactions with animals were limited mostly to their pets, and who were largely unaccustomed to hunting and trapping thanks to the decline of both practices in the twentieth century, now had to contend with the evolving nature of their habitat, and share their living space with wild, and sometimes dangerous, animal others (46).

Such developments were most unwelcome. The encroaching animals were treated as intruders and met with violence and ostracization (79). Mass media stoked the fire, as sensationalized narratives pitted humans against wildlife, often by echoing the “paranoid, racist, and xenophobic tropes of the day” (78). The police, mobilized to maintain the idyll of the suburb, proved inadequate at managing the crisis. Cullings of coyote and bear populations were resource-intensive yet ineffective, failing to address the main reasons for the proliferation of urban wildlife, namely the food-rich ecosystems created by aggressive suburban zoning efforts and lacklustre waste management (79). Since what drew animals towards the city remained unchanged, coyotes and bears that were captured or killed were soon replaced by others, wandering in from nearby forests (96).

Like in Delhi, solutions to problems of cohabitation that imposed human-centred notions of order did not yield the desired results. Instead, successes came from unlikely sources — as was the case with Steve Searles, the “bear yeller” who was hired to rid the Californian town of Mammoth Lakes of its bear problem (97). Quickly realizing that killing the bears was of no use, Searles turned to other tactics such as hazing and intimidation while, at the same time, urging

the city to secure its trash and educate its citizens on proper conduct (97). Searles's strategy, which made peace with the bears' presence and respected their intelligence, is credited with dramatically reducing the conflict between the people and bears of Mammoth Lakes (98).

As the above examples make clear, infrastructure is not the sole domain of humans. We must therefore contend with the fact that the city we built and delineated will be used not only by us. We must make peace with the fact that our infrastructure will be repurposed, our zones breached and reinscribed by animal others. Urban planning that is sensitive to the animal, then, must not rely solely on static diagrams to understand the city, and must instead keep itself open to the possibilities of change engendered by the urban animal.

Troubled Categories

The animal in the city muddles not only the drawn boundaries of city zones but also the very categories we use to discuss it. Changes to the landscapes of American cities and the increase in sightings of wildlife in the suburbs have troubled conventional American wisdoms, which split animal presence into zones, with the city inhabited by companion animals, the countryside inhabited by livestock, and the wilderness as the province of wildlife. While bears and coyotes crept into the city from the forests, domesticated and captive animals escaped from their homes and cages and made a life for themselves on the city streets.

Both Alagona and Barua are concerned with the ways categories simplify our understanding of urban animal life. Alagona showcases the true complexities of urban ecosystems by looking at the Floridian wilderness. Florida is home to an astonishing number of exotic animals: some five hundred species roaming free. Once introduced to the ecosystem, many exotics breed in the wild for prolonged periods and, seemingly, have no intentions of leaving. The vectors for the animals' introduction into the wild are numerous. In the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew, for example, more than three hundred species broke free from their enclosures in Zoo Miami (153).

Another contributor to the movement of exotic species into the Floridian wilderness is the exotic pet trade. Today, illegal wildlife trading is a massive industry worth tens of billions of US dollars, dealing in thousands of species worldwide, with American cities like Miami being home to thousands of captive exotic animal species (156). Thanks to a culture of interest around exotics, lax regulations, and individual convictions, animals escape or are set free, creating disparate populations of wild exotics who then proceed to intermingle with the captive animals. The constant flows of capture, release, and recapture, Alagona argues, break down the barriers between native and exotic, wild and captive animals (6).

Attempting to regulate which animals should be allowed to exist in ecosystems is often a Sisyphean task—once an animal has taken root in an ecosystem, their removal proves to be an endeavour that does much ecological damage with little upside. Alagona is particularly critical of the industry of Wildlife Damage Management (WDM) which deals with animal removal and pest control (170–71). Pest control is a private-run industry whose methods and goals often conflict with those of conservationists and urban ecologists (170). Lethal pest control has devastating effects on ecosystems: because poisons take time to kill the animals that eat them, this leads to the chemicals being ingested by predators who feed on common pests, thereby weakening the very populations which help control the city’s pest problem (178). Lethal means of removal are also ineffective at actually reducing pest populations. One of the most damning statistics Alagona presents is the reported tenfold increase in the number of “wildlife-related incidents” between 1994 and 2003 despite the continued efforts of pest control companies to cull pest numbers (176). Instead, in many social animals, culling leads to explosions in population growth to replace the dead, as well as to the deaths of “high-ranking individuals” and their replacement with younger, less experienced specimens (177). Such replacements “scramble social structures and territorial boundaries” and make the animals much harder to predict and deal with in the future (178). Ultimately, Alagona argues that the category of “pest” that the WDM uses lacks concrete definition—“the same creature

may be a pest to one person in one context and a benign, valuable, or even endangered species to another person in another context” (170). The vagueness of the definition leaves pest control susceptible to enforcing normative social values, eliminating animals that may not do much quantifiable damage because of social stigma and prejudice.

Barua, too, is interested in the breakdown of categories that urban animals engender. Through his investigations of the history of the parakeet in the London metropolitan area, Barua shows how the bird’s presence complicates notions of domesticity and wildness. Caught in Africa and South Asia and transported to London, parakeets have long been caught in a complex web of movement of lively capital (105). But birds fly away. Escaped parakeets from different locales band together and interbreed, which leads to new mutations and genetically distinct populations (132). To account for the parakeets’ constant movement between capture, escape, and recapture, Barua introduces the notion of ferality to describe a kind of life that resides in between the categories of wild and domestic. Being neither fully native nor fully foreign, parakeets occupy a precarious position within the city. Concerns about feral animals can often echo racist and xenophobic anti-immigrant sentiments (106). Through examining the “politics of hospitality” at the site of the bird feeder, where citizens of London often deny the birds feed to prioritize the native species, Barua highlights a “micropolitics of race” (151) in which concerns about booming parakeet populations map onto “broader anxieties over the arrival of human migrants and the threats they purportedly pose to Britain” (151–52). Feral parakeets are, then, fugitives of the urban landscape.

Living Together

The fates of fugitive animals are intertwined with the fates of human fugitives. Looking back to Delhi’s macaques, Barua focuses on local practices of human–simian cohabitation. Thanks to the animal’s religious connection to Lord Hanumān, the city’s inhabitants often feed the monkeys as a way of appeasing the deity (67). Such acts of human–animal interaction run against official city

policy. The macaques' boisterous presence disrupts the vision of Delhi as a "modern, clean and globalized capital", and Delhi authorities have a long history of attempting to expel, resettle, and regulate the "monkey menace" (67, 69). However, officials' attempts to rid the city of macaques, which involve restrictions on feeding practices and catch-and-release programs, treat the humans and animals as "docile bodies that power can work on from without", rather than as individuals with complex, embodied relations to their places of dwelling (86).

Cataloguing this history, Barua criticizes the effectiveness of such modes of governance. In their place, he calls for "vernacular practices" — practices that "unfold through cofabrications between human[s] and other-than-human[s]" (89–90). One such practice is the work of *langur-wallahs*, workers who navigate city streets imitating the calls and behaviours of langurs, whose calls and acts of aggression frighten macaques (90). Langur-wallahs' methods of macaque regulation takes macaques to be knowledgeable, social beings, who inhabit the urban world alongside us and are able to respond to human communication (95). Barua is careful not to imply that vernacular practices run in opposition to practices of state violence. On the contrary, he emphasizes how langur-wallahs are often employed by the state to enforce a certain city aesthetic which puts the animal out of view of the urban. Existing on the margins of society, langur-wallahs are themselves vulnerable: their employment is precarious, deeply tied to the fates of the monkeys (91). Vernacular practices, however, treat the macaques as capable agents of urban life, transcending the city's anthropocentric governance.

Fugitive practices of cohabitation can also be seen in Barua's recounting of the troubled histories of Delhi's urban cows. Urban cattle populations have, historically, played an important role in Delhi life and are "intrinsically enmeshed in an intensely contested politics" (193). Such politics have often been actuated through urban planning: in 1962, driven by the pressures of modernization and concerns over cleanliness and civic sensibility, the Delhi Municipal Committee commissioned the design of the Delhi Masterplan, a work of

city planning that included the removal of cattle from Delhi streets as one of its objectives (203). In the years since, the Municipality has made multiple attempts to restrict the ability of cattle to navigate the city. Borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, Barua calls such attempts to segregate living space and separate cattle from urban life the “striation” of urban space, juxtaposing the restricted landscapes of post-Masterplan Delhi to the “smooth space” of unrestricted cattle movement (196). Attempts to striate urban spaces have, however, been repeatedly stifled by the combined fugitive efforts of cattle and their sympathizers. Cattle owners were often unwilling to restrict the movement of their animals, and often trained their cows spot municipal staff sent to catch them, and to resist capture by lying “motionless on the ground as if dead” (210). Their neighbours would also alert the cows when they saw the municipal *chowkidars* approach (205, 210). Such fugitive resistance made attempts to impose order difficult and costly. In fact, the more resources were pulled into catching the cattle, the more the map proliferated with smooth spaces, as cows and people worked together to break down the diagrammatic, state-imposed zoning barriers (221).

To find such smooth spaces in the striated city, Barua follows the daily walk of Kaali, one of the urban cows living in Delhi. Kaali’s journey through the city, “a slow but steady walk”, takes us through shops whose owners feed her roti, alongside roads bustling with traffic, and through the many “piles of ephemeral garbage”, in search of food and quiet dwellings (196). In tracing Kaali’s everyday movements, we see the various ways in which cattle are integrated into the urban circuits, “bring[ing] to the fore a smooth cartography of Delhi that emerges in spite of the enclosure of pastures and the urbanization of erstwhile grazing grounds” (199). Despite the presence of human-erected barriers and enclosures, Delhi urban cows and their human accomplices trace fugitive trajectories through the city. In doing so, they destabilize the aesthetics of the city and allow us to be privy to a different kind of urban life, one that acknowledges the city as co-constituted by human–animal relations.

However, while animal fugitives find ways to cross imposed borders, Barua is quick to point out that the city can introduce other dangers into animal life. In their travels through the city, Delhi bovines, for example, are constantly exposed to “a toxic ecology of hazardous substances”, which are damaging to the cows’ health (264). The cows regularly consume life-threatening amounts of plastic, and necropsies often uncover “twenty to thirty kilograms” of the material in the cows’ stomachs (264). In living together with animals in the city, we must also take into account the ways in which the animals’ lives are complicated, shortened, and deadened by the presence of human waste.

Epilogue: The Curve Is Freedom/The Line Is Death

Le Corbusier’s emphatic calls for cities to prioritize the straight lines of human convenience at the expense of the curves of “the pack-donkey’s way” have dominated the discipline of urban planning of the last century. To this day, diagrams and maps that segregate urban life into neat blocks and zones drive policy and characterize urban living in many urban centres, including Delhi, London, and Miami. Yet, as Barua and Alagona repeatedly show, animals, with and without human help, routinely trespass the zones to which they are confined, escape their cages and enclosures, infiltrate human spaces, and build their lives enmeshed in city space, tracing their own pack-donkey’s ways, finding pack-donkey’s resources and creating pack-donkey’s habitats in the linear mazes of human cities.

Furthermore, urban animals, through their existence in-between categories and their frequent movements across them, throw into question the very words we use to know them, showcasing the oppressive and bloody histories of categories such as “pest”, “feral”, and “wild”. Once animals appear in the city, they cannot be easily wished away. Efforts to remove animals from urban spaces are often costly, ineffective endeavours that do untold harm to the ecosystems, the people, and the animals. The moral of looking at urban animals is evident — city planners of the present and future must make peace with living beside animals. However, to live together we must think and plan differently, think outside of the efficiencies

of the line and the simplicity of border-zones, and instead take the city for what it truly is: a space in which the trajectories of human and animal life endlessly intertwine with one another.

The two books explored in this review complement each other. In *Accidental Ecosystems*, Alagona provides a lucid account of the complex history of urban planning and its impact on urban animal life, underscoring the many missteps and missed opportunities as well as celebrating the often accidental and unintentional successes. Barua's *Lively Cities* adds to and recontextualizes Alagona's accounts by providing a rich and evocative theoretical framework for thinking the city in a minor key—a framework that understands the animals as capable agents in the urban environment, and sees the city as a stage for human–animal interaction. Taken together, they mount a powerful critique of the urban planning policies of London, Delhi, and various US cities. In addition to critique, however, they show how city planning should be done—giving us a glimpse of the cities of the future, peeked at through cracks in the wall, through broken fences, and unlocked gates. Such alternative cities no longer live and die by the line. Instead, they embrace animal others as cohabitants whose paths through the city, non-linear as they are, have a right to exist. Together, Alagona and Barua imagine a different city of to-morrow: one that does not centre the line, with its ideals of anthropocentrism and reason, but instead permits the presence of the curve, following with interest and curiosity the urban animals as they make their way.