

Feral ecologies: the making of postcolonial nature in London

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Abstract

Through a series of encounters with parakeets and other denizens in London, this paper expounds the concept of the feral and explores its purchase for an anthropological inquiry into urban life. Drawing on ethnographic and archival research, I specify ecological, cultural and political connotations of ferality. I show how ferality impinges upon evaluations of what counts and is allowed to flourish as metropolitan nature. Whilst constructed through nativist and racial taxonomies, ferality simultaneously refashions the city into a postcolonial formation, sparking both xenophobic and hospitable responses in urban dwellers. The paper draws attention to new ecological associations that parakeets trigger as they enter into relations with other avians. It argues that feral ecologies signal possibilities for a more just politics of postcolonial nature and prise open novel ways of doing urban anthropology.

A new urban phenomenon is taking grip in London's Kensington Gardens. In a spot near the Peter Pan statue and not far from the edge of the Serpentine, scores of people, some of them itinerant tourists, others London residents, gather to feed a flock of Rose-ringed parakeets. What is unusual about this activity is that the birds perch on people whilst feeding. Within minutes a person is covered in verdant birds which clamber on shoulders and arms, and make their way to extended palms that hold out nuts, seeds and fruit. Sometimes the birds squabble, at other times they are still. Reported to have taken off about four years ago as the birds became increasingly bold, feeding parakeets in Kensington Gardens has become an urban spectacle. Images and videos proliferate on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, drawing more people and fueling the phenomenon.

Amidst the motley crowd gathered on a weekday evening is Khahlil, a Syrian migrant in his late sixties. 'From India,' he says, pointing to the birds' origins in broken English, 'British bring them, now here'. Many people, there to feed parakeets for the first time or who have just stumbled upon the activity, nod in acknowledgement. Khahlil distributes handfuls of sunflower seeds to those who come unprepared. 'Five pounds for your group,' he discretely tells a man, there with a family of four. Nods are exchanged and a discrete transaction takes place. Hawking is prohibited in the Royal Parks and Khahlil is watchful. 'No job,' he tells me, 'Family Syria, Syria war'. Unemployed in a city that offers up few opportunities for those with limited education and spoken English, proximities with parakeets furnish avenues, however frail, for Khahlil to eke out a living.

[Insert Figure 1 here]



Figure 1. A parakeet feeding on sunflower seeds, Kensington Gardens, London. Photo: author.

Not everyone is enthralled by parakeets. ‘Aren’t they noisy,’ says a man on his walk through the Kensington Gardens as a small flock of five birds whizz past, squawking. ‘They do add a bit of colour,’ a woman accompanying him responds, ‘but they are certainly not British, and they are taking over the nest holes of woodpeckers’. The couple talks about how Rose-ringed parakeet populations became established in London, having escaped from captivity, recounting popular stories of their origins that have become urban legend. Did the birds escape from the set of the movie *The African Queen* or was it Jimi Hendrix, the musician, who released them in Carnaby Street? ‘Whatever it is, they are all over the place. Parakeets are relentless and run our bird-feeder dry. They have gone feral’.

Rose-ringed parakeets are a compelling entry point for engaging with urban natures constituted by the feral. A bird of South Asian and West African origin, brought into Britain through the commodity circuits of the pet trade, free-ranging populations established in London in the early 1970s. In a span of thirty years, their numbers have risen to 8,600 breeding pairs, making them one of the most successful ‘non-native’ birds on the island (Heald, Fraticelli, Cox, Stevens, Faulkner, Blackburn and Le Comber 2019). Traversing a range of sites, from urban parks to people’s gardens, interfacing with a host of metropolitan inhabitants, from middle-class residents to disenfranchised migrants, and bringing into purview a suite of other non-native, introduced and urbanized beings, parakeets become interlocutors for what I call a *feral ecology* of the city. Used by my informants, feral is a contested term. Derived from the Latin *ferus*, meaning ‘wild’, ferality has a very specific meaning in ecology. It refers to those creatures that have escaped captivity and are free-ranging, therefore shifting from being subject to forces of ‘artificial selection’ via human agency to be acted upon, once again, by processes of ‘natural selection’ (Allaby 1992). London is littered with such beings, from feral rock pigeons to terrapins and,

together with other non-native invasive animals including the Grey Squirrel, constitute what I call postcolonial urban nature. These are urban natures not rooted to place but constituted through a traffic and circulation of biota, often along the routes that colonialism has forged and traversed. Beyond ecological remits, ferality is equated with that which is neither domestic nor wild, threatening to disrupt social order. Colonial legacies underpin evaluations of ferality and have long served to render creatures, deemed feral, killable (Probyn-Rapsey 2016, Wadiwel and Taylor 2016). More recently, anthropologists have sought to invert these tropes, extending the feral to include 'counter-intentional forms' of nature that proliferate in spite of anthropogenic design (Tsing 2016). In a different register, feminist scholars point to ferality's political potential which, by unsettling domesticity, enable challenging patriarchal and capitalist orderings of the home and the body (Sandilands 2017), whilst queer and decolonial perspectives take ferality to be a starting point for eschewing 'forms of ontology tethered to a taxonomized humanity' and for undoing racial evaluations of nature (Belcourt 2016: 23-24).

Ferality became a lens for understanding urban nature in London as I encountered the term in a range of different settings: archival material on the status of parakeets in Britain, as a descriptor used by certain informants and members of London's public, and as a marker in Government reports on managing non-native species. As a concept with plural connotations, the feral brims with tensions. It is a product of oppressive taxonomies tethered to institutional orders and, at the same time, ferality points to ways in which other-than-humans elide binary categorizations. Ferality generates unease, fueling the creation of hostile milieus for parakeets, whilst simultaneously giving rise to possibilities for cosmopolitan accommodation. Ferality is diagnostic, revealing a 'biotic nativism' underpinning configurations of urban nature (Chew and Hamilton 2011), while revealing how London's nature is postcolonial, constituted through biotic flows of a range of creatures from erstwhile British colonies. In this article, I hold on to these tensions surrounding ferality in order to generate a parallax-view of the city, one where contrasting forces producing urban natures becomes visible.

Drawing on my fieldwork and a history of parakeets in London, this paper develops the concept of the feral as an analytic for rethinking metropolitan nature. Feral ecologies are not singular, but constituted by a heterogeneous array of beings and their relations with the wider architectural and infrastructural environment. They direct ethnographic inquiry to natures that emerge along and against the grain of capital, planning and urban design, and therefore to often overlooked ways in which the metropolitan fabric is composed (Stoetzer 2018). I hold on to parakeets as the main interlocutors and protagonists to narrate this story, combining urban ethnography with ethological attunements, as well as concerns regarding migration, colonialism and race. Such a method of working across ethno-ethological registers (Lestel, Brunois and Gaunet 2006), I contend, proves salient at a juncture in which several crises of inhabiting the urban have multiplied, from racism to predatory capitalism and climate change.

As a migrant from South Asia, I have always been drawn to London's parakeets. Small flashes of familiarity are sparked as they fly past squawking, reminding one of Indian cities, a home elsewhere. My attention to ferality – as that which unsettles the idea of home – is ethnographic. I conducted participant observations of people feeding parakeets in the Kensington Gardens intermittently over the course of twenty-four months. This included informal conversations and spontaneous interviews with people, guided by a set of questions regarding their knowledge and evaluations of these birds and the city's urban natures more broadly. My commitment included taking parakeets to be 'observant participants' of the world in which they live and where they dwell alongside people. Here, I endeavour to move beyond some of the impasses of multispecies ethnographies that turn towards the discursive and fall short of accounting for other-than-human lives. I draw upon observations of parakeet behaviour, observations that are not steeped in a quantitative ethological study but in an immersive one, oriented toward natural history. Equally, observation was an affective practice, one of cultivating proximities rather than distance (Candea 2010), as I, following my informants, was drawn to feeding the birds. Through contacts established at the site, I then travelled to other parts of the city where parakeets were present, enabling me to knit together a disparate set of locales, scales and practices, which seem disconnected at the outset but which reveal the shape and workings of

an urban order when juxtaposed. These ranged from the microspaces of ordinary bird-feeders in the gardens of people with whom I conversed, to skyscrapers that become cliffs for nesting pigeons and Peregrine falcons monitored by ornithologists I interviewed. My engagement with the feral emerges through these specific sites and practices, an engagement coupled with consulting archival material in order to track a brief history of how the current parakeet population arose. Through this situated, ethnographic approach, this paper explores what ferality, as a concept, offers up for an anthropological of urban life: an inquiry that not only attends to other-than-human worlds but also the wider, metropolitan fabric which parakeets forge and of which they become part.

Over the past decade, anthropologists have closely interrogated anthropocentric modes of social analysis, and have critically re-evaluated nature-society relations in the discipline. The doors have been opened to ‘multispecies’ and ‘more-than-human’ modes of inquiry that challenge the very primacy of the discipline’s central subject – *anthropos* – and point to a retinue of bodies, entities and beings with which sociality is configured and alongside which human lives are led (Ingold 2013, Kirksey and Helmreich 2010, Tsing 2014). An expanded anthropology has also led to concerted engagements with what some call the Anthropocene – an epoch where humans are purported to have become geological agents (Chakrabarty 2009, Crutzen 2002) – prompting new forms of noticing and collaboration to explore how human agency works ‘bioculturally, biotechnically, biopolitically ... relative to, and combined with, the effects of other species assemblages and other biotic/abiotic forces’ (Haraway 2015: 159). ‘Feral dynamics’ have become crucial to such inquiry, for they signal ‘anthropogenic landscapes set in motion not just by the intentions of human engineers but also by the cascading effects of more-than-human negotiations’ (Bubandt and Tsing 2018: 1).

Feral dynamics and their cascading effects strike at the heart of the concept of the built environment and associated hylomorphic ideas of planning and design that has preoccupied urban environmental anthropology (Rademacher 2018). As Tim Ingold has long argued, the notion that building precedes dwelling, and that only humans build worlds whilst animals simply occur, is a Modernist Western conceit (Ingold 2000, Ingold 2005). A new ecological urbanism in anthropology and beyond is beginning to attend to how other-than-humans co-construct metropolitan worlds, whether through spontaneous growth (Stoetzer 2018), their metabolic activities (Zhang 2020), or by repurposing environments for their own, animate doings in excess of intended script and design (Barua and Sinha 2017, Gandy 2016, Hinchliffe and Whatmore 2006). ‘Unintentionality’ is seen as ‘a feral effect’ of multispecies histories (Bubandt and Tsing 2018: 3), whereby urban landscapes can ‘move away from their original human purposes as they gather those living things that find human disturbance attractive’ (Bubandt and Tsing 2018: 2). Such gathering often results in what ecologists call ‘recombinance’, where novel relations are formed between populations and communities with no past ecological memory or evolutionary history of cohabitation (Rotherham 2017).

Equally, ferality – and recombinant assemblages – can emerge through the global transport and circulation of biota. As an associated but somewhat disconnected body of anthropological scholarship on invasive and non-native species shows, ferality is inexorably caught up in taxonomies determined by racial evaluation (Franklin 2014), settler-colonial discourse (Trigger 2008), and xenophobia (Fortwangler 2013). In this paper, I go beyond expositions of unintentionality, spontaneity and nondesign revealed by feral dynamics (Bubandt and Tsing 2018), to attend to the fraught colonial and racial legacies underpinning evaluations of the feral. The perspective espoused here pushes understandings of ferality further by theorizing urban ecologies and metropolitan life in the wake of the traffic and recombinance of other-than-human beings, xenophobia and racial inequality. It prompts engagements with questions of hospitality and accommodation, not just in a cosmopolitan but in a ‘cosmopolitical’ register where ‘a multiplicity of ontologies belonging to different beings’ is at stake (Candea and Da Col 2012, Stengers 2010: S13). To track feral ecologies, then, is to open up possibilities for practicing an

'ethnography attuned to its times' (Fortun 2012: 460), times where Britain is being marked by tendencies of becoming nationally entrenched, a hostility toward strangers and episodic racial and xenophobic violence.

The paper unfolds in five parts. The first two attends to historical processes through which ferality emerges as an urban condition and the ways in which the feral is constructed as a biopolitical marker for controlling parakeet populations. More specifically, it shows how free-ranging parakeet populations are products of other-than-human mobilities induced by the trade in, to use Donna Haraway's expression, 'lively capital' (Haraway 2008). This global traffic in parakeets, like that of a suite of other beings, recasts London's metropolitan natures as postcolonial. By tracing a brief history of 'biotic nativism', the paper then shows how ferality is territorialized by institutional forces and nativist currents. Moving on from archival accounts, the three sections that follow are ethnographic, providing a more granular account of the relations that emerge when lively capital goes feral and which expose some of the limitations of cultural and political economic evaluations. This includes exploring the cosmopolitics of urban hospitality and the contrasts between accommodating and expelling other-than-human strangers in gardens and bird-feeders. Here, ferality can be seen as a threat and generates a micropolitics of insecurity about who belongs and who does not, all too familiar to a migrant ethnographer. The paper then examines how feral parakeets forge forms of recombination through corresponding relations with other sentient beings that inhabit the urban landscape in ways that exceed give and take in an exclusively human club (Stengers 2010), and in excess of human design and assembly. The final section takes this further by showing how new alignments between parakeets and people are formed through practices of feeding birds in public spaces. They signal possibilities for a different politics of urban dwelling which, in contrast to biotic nativism, accommodates ferality. Together, they offer up avenues for a rich ethnographic account of urban life and the making of postcolonial nature.

Feral histories

London's urban parakeets originated as escapes from captivity. Valued as commodities for the pet trade and bred by aviculturists to produce prized mutant colour morphs, close to 26,000 birds were imported to Britain between the early 1970s and 2007. A substantial number were from India (Fletcher and Askew 2007). Instances of parakeets becoming free-ranging date back to the 1930s, when a small number bred in Epping Forest north of London's Forest Gate following deliberate release in the wake of a worldwide psittacosis scare (Anon. 1932, Morgan 1993). The birds however soon died out. The present population dates back to 1969-1971, when breeding was reported from Croydon and near Claygate, and a flock of about ten birds, that had escaped from a pet shop, began roosting in Runnymede in the city's western fringe (Self 2014).

The term feral soon became a taxonomized marker to designate London's parakeets, a marker that went hand-in-hand with attempts to construct and map their populations and, therefore, construe parakeets as object-targets of biopolitical intervention. Commentaries in *British Birds*, a popular magazine with a wide readership, warned readers and the ornithological community that feral populations were fast developing. Although 'proven instances of feral breeding have been few', parakeets were known to be hardy in captivity. Careful monitoring was needed as their chances of becoming 'an established breeder' were high (Hudson 1974: 33). More alarmist and xenophobic views followed. MD England, an aviculturist, called for stopping 'the nonsense (to put it at its lowest) of a parrot getting on the British list' of naturalized birds. Once parakeets became widespread 'in a feral state', England warned, they would go beyond 'the reasonable possibility of control' and 'our grandchildren will not thank us for a bird which could so easily become a menace to fruit and other crops, quite apart from its success in taking over nest-holes needed by other species' (England 1974: 394).

Ferality is a 'line of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari 1983) from the circuits of commodity capital, in that it not only entails escaping captivity but also the networks of trade through which they are trafficked as living commodities. Contrary to urban legend, the origins of London's parakeets was not through releases by Jimi Hendrix or from the sets of the film *The African Queen*

(Heald, Fraticelli, Cox, Stevens, Faulkner, Blackburn and Le Comber 2019), but from numerous escape events. Large numbers of parakeets were imported into Britain and pet shops were relatively lackadaisical about escapes. Demand for 'normals' or non-mutant birds that were abundant in the trade and fetched 'a pound wholesale' (Smith 1972: 132), was low. 'In my opinion,' England remarked in a denigrating tone, 'the reason for the success of the Ringneck is probably its cheapness, not its greater capacity to survive English winters' (England 1974: 393). A wider set of colonial relations to non-native beings underpinned the unease ferality generated. England called for parakeets to be trapped and incarcerated. Others joined him by pointing out that Britain had already witnessed 'introductions producing serious pests', notable among them being the 'Grey Squirrel' introduced 'in the 1890s' (Tozer 1974: 484), and which led to a crash in populations of the native Red Squirrel in many parts of the island. Grey Squirrels are not feral but an introduced and invasive species, imported from America and released at a number of sites, the most well-documented being Woburn Abbey (Lever 1977). Among the most debated non-native invasive species in Britain, the Grey Squirrel example was drawn to argue that 'uncontrolled populations' of parakeets 'should be eliminated before they became so widespread that such action is no longer possible' (Tozer 1974: 485). Taking note of the issue, the British Ornithologists Union (BOU), who maintained the official British List and advised the Government on laws regarding avian introductions, called for assessments to draw a more 'complete picture' and determine whether free-ranging parakeet populations were 'self-supporting' (Ferguson-Lees and Sharrock 1975: 300).

By 1979, parakeet populations began to grow. The appearance of parakeets in gardens and bird-feeders was likened to colonization, ironic for a bird trapped and imported as lively capital from erstwhile British colonies. Parakeets, the press exclaimed, were beginning 'to colonise in the London suburbs' and with 'its penchant for pears and plums' was 'in danger of becoming regarded as a pest' (Anon. 1976). In 1983, parakeets were officially added to the British List: 'a feral breeding stock', the BOU declared, was 'clearly ... self-maintaining' (British Ornithologists' Union 1984: 441). Twenty years later, in the early 2000s, metropolitan parakeet populations began to make 'sudden increases' (Python and Dytham 2002). A population of 1,500 in 1996 grew almost seven-fold to nearly 10,000 in 2004 (Butler, Cresswell, Gosler and Perrins 2013, Python and Dytham 1999). Parakeets appeared in places never seen before, spreading to almost every borough of London. A bird from the erstwhile colonies became one of London's commonest garden birds. One could argue that this was a reconfiguration of London's urban nature as postcolonial, a feral nature 'gathered' not just through industrial ruin (Bubandt and Tsing 2018), but through capital's trajectories and colonialism's continuous seeping into the present. It rendered nature's location conjunctural, creating another London or, as the 'slow ornithologist' Nick Hunt evocatively calls it, resulting in a 'parakeeting of London' that takes metropolitan natures along other, cosmopolitan, trajectories (Hunt 2019).

Wider commentary on the surge in parakeet numbers has been couched in xenophobic terms although the bird is not invasive. Invoking the demise of the native Red Squirrel, Tony Drakeford, a prominent London naturalist, stated parakeets were going to become 'the grey squirrel of the skies' (McCarthy 2015), set to extirpate native avifauna. Exaggerated storylines claimed there are '50,000 of them, threatening British birds, gobbling crops – and they are breeding like crazy' (Mount 2016). Yet, contrary to alarmist and xenophobic views over the anticipated effects of ferality, parakeets have not developed into an agricultural pest and preferentially remain in urban areas. Studies also indicate that their impacts on native nesting birds are not significant (Newson, Johnston, Parrott and Leech 2011). The unease generated by ferality, whereby parakeets are marked out as bodies that need to be culled or controlled, partly stems from a deep-seated biotic nativism underpinning evaluations of British urban nature.

Biotic nativism

Biotic nativism – the characterization of a species on the basis of whether it belongs and is adapted to an ecosystem – has become 'transmogrified' into 'an obsession of conservationists and a pillar of modern ecology' (Chew and Hamilton 2011: 40). It proceeds through legacies of

classificatory conventions and an affective biopolitics of race. Nowhere is this more evident than in the 'British List' of birds that MD England was worried parakeets would get on to. Maintained by the British Ornithologists' Union (BOU) since 1883, and originating as a means to provide an institutional steer on avian taxonomy (Knox 2007), the List serves as an official record of the origins, status and distribution of Britain's birds. Its current avatar is the product of a long debate on the status of subspecies or 'races' of British birds. In the mid-1940s, intensive 'racial surveys' and 'racial maps' of British birds were drawn and there was significant argument as to whether 'local forms' should be considered separate from their European counterparts (Clancey 1946). Underpinning these racial assessments lay the question as to whether Britain harboured a distinct and unique avifauna.

Although notions of a racial uniqueness of British birdlife was soon dispelled, biotic nativism remains a strong current within the List's classificatory conventions. Its two main categories – Categories A and B – pronounce whether a species occurs in Britain 'in an apparently natural state', whilst a third category – Category C, to which parakeets were added in 1983 – encompasses birds 'originally introduced by man [*sic*]' and which 'have now established a regular feral breeding stock without necessary recourse to further introduction' (Ferguson-Lees and Sharrock 1975: 300). All species with free-ranging populations prior to 1950 are recognized as part of Britain's natural avifauna, irrespective of whether they were introduced or not. The year 1950 does not mark any particular threshold in terms of the composition of Britain's nature, but was set to confirm to similar baselines drawn for Europe. The British List is important for understanding evaluations of urban nature, for it codifies interpretations of ferality, and is an institutional mechanism for advice on how to frame laws regarding the release and escape of birds (Holmes, Marchant, Bucknell, Stroud and Parkin 1998).

Naturalization not only has uncanny resonance with British citizenship law, working to accommodate or expel human migrants, but in fact derives from it. Practices of coding plants and animals on the basis of their origins can be traced back to the 1830s, notably to the work of the Cambridge botanist John Henslow, who first introduced a set of symbols to mark the origins of British plants. Henslow's nativist taxonomy was widely taken up in subsequent work, notably by Hewlett C. Watson, the author of a number of popular books on British plants. Dissatisfied with mere designation, Watson went a step further by trying to parse and define species' origins. He imported the terms 'native', 'denizen', 'alien' and 'colonist' from English common law, arguing that the 'division of the people into aliens and natural-born subjects' was a helpful analogy for defining what constituted a British flora. The latter were those 'born within dominions of the crown of England' whilst 'aliens' were those 'born out of it'. For Watson, this distinction, when conferred upon plants, was also a qualitative judgement. Unlike native species that arose without the aid of 'human agency', inferior 'aliens' exhibited 'lesser, artificial attachments' to the land (cited in Chew and Hamilton 2011: 38).

A nativist debris of the past haunts evaluations of feral populations, but the idea that the latter could be disruptive, or even trigger an ecological apocalypse, took hold after the Second World War with the invention of the field of invasion biology. In a hugely influential book titled *The Ecology of Invasions by Animals and Plants*, published in 1958, the Oxford zoologist Charles Elton put forward the idea that 'outbreaks in populations' with devastating consequences for native biota can 'occur when a foreign species successfully invades another country'. Central to dynamics of invasion was what Elton called the 'biotic resistance hypothesis', which proposed that native ecological communities resist a newly-arrived species through various combinations of predation, competition, parasitism and disease. Risks of invasion were at their greatest when biotic resistance was weak. Elton's ideas were partly formulated during the Second World War, when a German invasion of Britain was imminent, and he recast the advent of non-native species in militaristic terms. 'We live in a very explosive world,' wrote Elton, and 'it is not just nuclear bombs that threaten us ... there are other sorts of explosions ... ecological explosions' (Elton 1958: 15-18). The field of invasion biology, as both an ecological science of populations and a State science of population governance, has largely maintained a skepticism, and even hostility, toward non-natives (Fortwangler 2013).

Classificatory conventions, steeped in biotic nativism, militaristic metaphors and xenophobia, work upon ferality in biopolitical terms. Operationalized through ecological and bureaucratic assessments, parakeets are constructed as knowable populations and therefore object-targets of intervention. Such interventions are affective as much as bureaucratic or regulatory. They entail speculative forecasts which increasingly couch futures as turbulent, bringing disastrous situations into the present and mobilizing a politics of fear (Adams, Murphy and Clarke 2009, Amin 2012, Massumi 2009). As early as 1995, the BOU recommended controlling parakeet numbers before they began 'to threaten seriously fruit growers' crops or native hole-nesting species' (Holmes and Stroud 1995: 8). In 2007, as parakeets became ubiquitous, the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), responsible for environmental protection in Britain, commissioned a set of reports on the likely future spread of parakeets. Deploying forecasting models, these evaluations put the future number of parakeets in the Greater London area to grow in excess of a hundred-thousand birds by 2026, and suggested that broad-field crops and grape orchards would become vulnerable to a 'slow and almost linear increase in their exposure to parakeets within the next 30 years' (FERA 2009: 19). Ferality, to use Elton's prose, was a force waiting to detonate. To keep turbulent futures materialized by models at bay, the DEFRA reports recommended controlling psittacine populations, either stalling their spread or through wholesale eradication. 'Control', assessments warned, would become 'ever more difficult' if parakeet populations continued to 'increase and expand into the foreseeable future, as expected' (Fletcher and Askew 2007: 23).

The British Government considered a parakeet cull in 2007. Although shooting was believed to be relatively easy, given the birds' propensity to form large, communal roosts, the cull did not materialize due to public protests. Letters to the editor appeared in various newspapers stating the proposal of a parakeet cull was 'appalling'. 'I cannot imagine a less deserving candidate for culling,' wrote one lady, 'surely we should admire these birds for their ability to thrive peacefully in conditions so far from their original habitat' (Grisogono 2007: 18). Others pointed out that 'there is no scientific research to date on what effect (if any) these birds are having on our native species', and that the cull 'smells of the prevailing attitude that everything foreign is bad for Britain' (Meadows 2007). A campaign by Kate Fowler-Reeves of Animal Aid, one of Britain's largest animal rights organizations, put further pressure on DEFRA. Fowler-Reeves foregrounded the global transport of 'exotic animals for the pet, fur, zoo and vivisection trades', in other words lively capital, as the cause 'of non-natives being released or escaping'. It was these trades that needed to be curbed, not 'killing individuals who – through no fault of their own – have been brought to this country'. The campaign struck at the heart of biotic nativism when it argued that culling 'reveals a disturbingly purist tendency in our collective thinking'. 'Parakeets have become part of the fabric of London life ... and dictating which birds can and cannot live within our national boundaries is ridiculous' (Fowler-Reeves 2007: 2, 32). In lieu of the cull, Natural England, a DEFRA-sponsored executive public body, added parakeets to the general license allowing license-holders to shoot birds all year round. This inclusion was based on risk assessments that claimed threats posed by the birds were 'moderate', largely on account of the 'negative association' parakeets had 'with native secondary cavity nesters'. Public consultations on the matter revealed that stakeholders queried whether impacts on native birds were sufficient to warrant inclusion on the general license, but the statutory body overrode protests on grounds of '*potential* for negative impact' and to maintain a '*robust precautionary* policy on invasive non-native species' (England 2019: 10; emphasis in original). Nationally entrenched and statist views of parakeets thus rub up against cosmopolitan ones, and we get a different view of this dynamic when we move from the archives to everyday sites of dwelling and parakeet-human encounter.

The cosmopolitics of hospitality

The bird-feeder swivels in slow circles as a parakeet settles on it. 'Their beaks are strong,' remarks Andrew, a middle-aged Englishman and bird-enthusiast, who works as an administrator in a London institution. 'They have undone all my attempts to save the sunflower seeds for the

Goldfinches and the other needy smaller garden birds'. Two other birds join the parakeet pecking away at Andrew's sunflower seeds. The hanging feeder sways as the psittacines move about squacking, periodically fanning their verdant tails. 'London is plagued by these gaudy, green birds,' Andrew sighs, adding that he contemplates giving up bird-feeding altogether, a practice that he has been involved with ever since his childhood. 'Parakeets just don't hold back. They return day after day, until the feeder has been emptied. When will they learn they are unwelcome?'

The bird-feeder is an overlooked but vital site in which urban politics plays out. For Andrew, the feeder installed in his garden confers a sense of home. He recounts how he was fascinated, as a young teenager when packets of *Swoop* wild bird food first appeared on the market in the 1970s and which attracted a whole array of birds one could never imagine as visitors to one's urban garden. 'That was way before commercial mixes became commonplace,' he remarks, recounting stories of the different birds that visit his garden. Andrew is not a serious birdwatcher but calls himself an 'avid bird person' who feeds birds with regularity and care, purchasing seed mixes from a supermarket, keeping the feeder filled, observing the visitors arrive whilst cooking, reading the newspaper or lounging in his chair. Like many Londoners, he has been a long-standing member of the Royal Society for the Preservation of Birds (RSPB), closely following their advice on how to make gardens bird-friendly, and sometimes even participating in their 'Garden Birdwatch', an annual event of enumerating birds across the country. Feeding birds is Andrew's pastime, one that performs domesticity through acts of hospitality toward certain other-than-humans. It is this notion of domesticity, co-constructed with an avian world, which the feral unsettles. Their arrival on the bird-feeder summons fears of London being overrun by gaudy, green birds, resonating with a wider xenophobia toward migrants that has begun to take grip in Britain. But an unease towards feral birds is micropolitical, in that people can be accommodating towards human outsiders whilst having reservations about non-native fauna. Andrew does not have strong opinions about human migrants but parakeets, unlike the cherished native Goldfinches, are 'shamelessly and flauntingly foreign'.

Bird-feeders configure urban natures. They generate anthropogenic faunas reflective of the Anthropocene. In the 1960s, the Goldfinch was in fact a fairly scarce species that inhabited hedgerows and weedy fields. Today, they are found in four out of five metropolitan gardens (Moss 2019). A boom in urban Goldfinch populations is largely due to the widespread provisioning of sunflower, and more recently, nyjer seeds, actively marketed by a commercial wild bird-food industry whose annual turnover is £235 million in Britain alone (PFMA 2018). Nyjer is grown in some of the poorest parts of rural India that is facing an acute agrarian crisis, partly driven by capitalist restructuring of agriculture. Nyjer is no longer a subsistence crop, but a commodity cultivated for its exchange value, primarily to serve the wild bird-food industry. Demand for wild bird-food has intensified in Britain in recent years, in part due to the active promotion of bird-feeding by organizations such as the RSPB (RSPB 2020), itself a key player in the wild bird-food market. Bird-feeders, global metabolic flows and the promotion of practices of hospitality – encapsulated in the RSPB's slogan 'Giving Birds a Home' – *produce* urban natures and 'natural' birdlife. They configure what avian assemblages show up and congeal at any metropolitan juncture, witnessed in the recent urbanization of a suite of other species including the Greater Spotted Woodpecker, a favourite on people's feeders.

Bird-feeders have also enabled feral parakeets to thrive. Ecological studies of radio-tracked individuals indicate that parakeets spend as much as half their foraging time on such devices (Clergeau and Vergnes 2011). Contrary to their counterparts in India, which form 'enormous swarms to raid ripening crops' (Ali and Ripley 1987: 222), daytime flocks in London typically comprise of three to five individuals. This is a strategy of actively accessing seed-dispensers that place constraints on how many birds can feed at a given moment (Python and Dytham 2001). One could therefore argue that practices of hospitality, notably of putting food out for birds, has given rise to a distinct parakeet 'culture' specific to metropolitan London. Parakeets' reliance on bird-feeders has also meant that they remain in urban areas and rarely forage in agricultural land.

Gregarious, parakeets tend to territorialize feeders. As the ornithologist Hannah Peck and her colleagues show, the birds monopolize feeding sites and therefore ‘disrupt’ foraging behaviour in other birds. Parakeets’ presence affects how smaller passerines such as the Great and Blue Tit access feeders. Visitation rates by these passerines decline and they tend to become more vigilant. Such effects triggered by parakeets can be deemed cosmopolitical (Stengers 2010), in that they induce negotiations in excess of transactions in a human club. Great Tits tend to seek out alternate food sources, or resort to singing and foraging in earlier times of the day before the psittacines arrive (Peck, Pringle, Marshall, Owens and Lord 2014). Territorialization, as Vinciane Despret argues in recent work, is about invoking and entering into particular arrangements. These arrangements are not so much about negotiating space than distance, where the latter is not a measure but an intensity, a rhythm. Gregarious behaviour that parakeets exhibit is therefore about cultivating certain distances from other beings that visit bird-feeders, an activity that renders the latter into a highly differentiated space. A territory, as Despret further goes on to state, ‘takes on its qualities according to the coordinates of time and use’ (Despret 2019: 103; translated). Visitation patterns witnessed on feeders are therefore not absolute but situational, forged through who or what comes together in composition, where and when. Feeder visitation by Tits in fact begins to increase when parakeets become familiar elements of the ambient landscape and encounters with the verdant birds are no longer a novelty (Peck, Pringle, Marshall, Owens and Lord 2014).

[Insert Figure 2 here]



Figure 2. Hostile design: a hanging bird-feeder with a wire cage to keep out squirrels and parakeets. Photo: author.

Parakeets’ propensities to be gregarious and territorialize bird-feeders, however, are recast to fuel micropolitical insecurities about belonging that mark psittacine bodies as unwanted, out of place and a threat. ‘They have found asylum in south London’ says a man, annoyed by the birds frequenting his garden, ‘parakeet immigrants are a threat to our native birds and ought to be culled’. The arrival of feral birds on feeders unsettles the British cultural imaginary of the garden as a locale of privacy and sanctuary, and antipathy towards the stranger

operates through a range of optic, acoustic and aesthetic filters. 'Their distinctive squawking might be enchanting when heard for the first time, but it is not so bewitching when a hundred birds fly over your garden or are perched on treetops in the park,' says a middle-aged English lady, pointing to how parakeets untune the acoustics of the city. 'When they come to my feeder – usually small parties for four or five birds – their raucous just drives you nuts. Rooks may look dreary, but I prefer a quieter life any day'. 'Are we happy,' she asks, 'to let the squacking of parakeets become the overriding natural sound of London?'

Unlike a biopolitics of quelling ferality, which targets populations and is enacted by the State, acts of hostility at the bird-feeder involve a channeling of petty insecurities to constitute bounded dwellings. Bird-feeders are being refashioned through 'hostile design' (Rosenberger 2017), a set of interventions that redesign structures of everyday dwelling so as to discourage particular users and exclude them from the urban sphere. London has witnessed a surge in hostile architecture targeting the unhoused and the homeless, and their extension to include feral birds, from pigeons to parakeets, is striking. 'The caged feeder is what a lot of people use,' says Jonathan, a London resident who regularly witnesses parakeets coming to feed in his garden, 'the wire mesh keeps the birds out'. Others install feeders with small holes, so that birds with larger beaks cannot get at the nyjer seeds often placed for Goldfinches. A materialization of insecurity, hostile design reveals the shape of urban space. Here design operates as a double bind: as feral birds, a *domus* does not exist for parakeets, and they are denied access to bird-feeders as who is welcome as an avian guest is anchored in ideas of nativity.

Jonathan's interest in birds is relatively recent and he is ambivalent about parakeets: 'I don't really mind them all that much. You could say I am more tolerant than most'. Jonathan's efforts to keep parakeets at bay 'is more of an experiment, to see if one can prevent them from getting at the food'. 'There is also the Squirrel Buster, designed to keep the pesky Grey Squirrels out,' he remarks, making his antipathy for the animals quite apparent, 'the ports of the feeder close with the weight of the animal. However, based on some reviews I have read, parakeets stall the mechanism from closing by putting their feet into the ports'. Psittacines therefore subvert attempts to keep them away, indicating how hospitality and hostility are cosmopolitical, never outside of a sticky mesh of more-than-human negotiations. Jonathan, adds that the caged feeder design works 'only when the wire mesh of the cage is far enough from the dispensing tube'. 'And they are not always effective. I have seen birds peeling back the mesh to get in. It is remarkable how strong their beaks are'. The wire mesh also keeps out desirable visitors like the Greater Spotted Woodpecker. Tinkering devices such as bird-feeders to limit hospitality therefore has other consequences and repercussions. 'In the end it is inevitable that parakeets will get some of the seeds, you just need to accept that'. If cosmopolitics points to hospitality in a vein where the ontologies of different beings are at stake, these ontologies are multiplied when we turn to recombination or the new relations feral birds form with other denizens of the city.

Recombinant urbanisms

'I can hear Peregrine. I don't know where she is but she is calling out to her mate,' says Nathalie, as we stand below London's Charing Cross Hospital, eyes skyward. The building is a metropolitan equivalent of a seaside cliff, towering over the Hammersmith landscape. A streamlined silhouette pierces the sky at the edges of our vision, before slowing down and landing on a building ledge. A flock of feral pigeons residing in the building are scattered. The female perches calmly, unperturbed by crowds and motor traffic two-hundred and fifty feet below. 'The Peregrines started nesting on this building in 2011'. Nathalie, who is an amateur ornithologist, has been monitoring the lives of the nesting pair – named 'Fab Peregrines' after the localities of Fulham and Barnes – for over a decade. What began as passing observations of Peregrines as they came to inspect the building as a potential nesting site in 2009, has now turned into an almost full-time obsession. Nathalie, with the help of other ornithologists, installed a nest box for the pair and placed a webcam to monitor the birds' activities. An important and startling finding of her long-term observations was that the birds had learnt to catch parakeets on the wing. 'It has now

become a regular affair,' says Nathalie, 'the webcam reveals that they bring in parakeets to feed their young'.

Peregrine falcons preying on parakeets is a relatively recent phenomenon, but one that has important consequences for understanding how feral creatures forge new urban ecologies. During the turn of the millennium, London's parakeets hardly had any predators. The Sparrowhawk was believed to be the only species 'likely to pose a threat', and the only observed attempt of a native bird of prey attacking parakeets was that of a Hobby that 'attempted and failed' to catch a bird near Ramsgate railway station in the mid-1990s (Pithon and Dytham 1999: 114). Following the tenets of invasion biology, the weak biotic resistance of native faunal assemblages was attributed to be a major reason for the surge in psittacine populations. As news articles from the early 2000s lamented, England's southeast had been 'invaded by parakeets native to India' and a 'lack of natural predators' meant 'that there is nothing to halt a population explosion' (Hamilton 2004).

Nathalie tells me how, a decade later, in 2013, Tawny Owls in Kensington Gardens were found to regularly prey on parakeets. Owl pellets containing parakeet feathers were the first signs of evidence and observations later revealed how the birds had devised a simple but effective method of hunting the psittacines: owls would perch atop a tall tree and silently glide down to grab an unsuspecting parakeet. Observations of Hobbies and Peregrines catching parakeets soon followed. These relations foreground forms of urban 'recombinance', a process where species with no past history of contact come together to forge novel, 'no-analog' communities (Rotherham 2017). Recombinance gravitates toward spontaneity rather than being an outcome of design. But equally, it can be seen as another cosmopolitics involving relations other-than-human beings create by responding and corresponding to one another according to their own propensities and rhythms. Recombinance often occurs in disturbed landscapes, where infrastructures add, delete and re-sort entire biotic assemblages, but ruination (Bubandt and Tsing 2018, Tsing 2015) is only one driver of recombination. Recombinance frequently proceeds through the cosmopolitanization of floral assemblages, when non-natives are brought into a city through unintended transport or deliberate planting, resulting in an 'eco-fusion' of native and non-native flora (Rotherham 2017). Feral animals can thrive as cities' floral assemblages become recombinant. Parakeets in London benefit from a number of non-native fruiting trees, including Western Catalpa, Sweet Chestnut and Cherry, which flower when native trees do not. A recombinant assemblage approximates perennial tropical fruiting patterns, rendering the city into a hospitable milieu for a bird dependent on fruit and blossoms year-round.

Challenging tired divisions between natives and aliens, denizens and invasives, recombination opens up non-binary understandings of London's urban nature, one that is attentive to its postcolonial character. 'For instance, the invasive Box-tree moth and its caterpillar are a problem in Britain,' Nathalie explains, 'but in Italy their numbers are controlled by the Asian Hornet, another non-native species that was introduced prior to the moth's arrival'. At the heart of these observations lies the fact that identities and labels are never fixed, and ecological effects cannot be ordained in advance of who or what comes into composition. 'It is no longer true that parakeets lack predators,' says Nathalie, 'Peregrines and a number of other avian predators hunt them'. What is striking about this cosmopolitical predator-prey relation is that Peregrines, whilst being a native species, are relatively new converts to urban living. Falcons began nesting in London as recently as 2001 (Johnson and Corley 2007), a good thirty years after feral parakeet populations established themselves in London. The urbanization of Peregrines has led to the rise of new recombinant relations. 'Charlie,' the female from the Fab Peregrine pair, 'was first seen in October 2007, when she was still a juvenile' Nathalie recounts. 'It turned out that she was a 'rural' bird, born on a cliff in East Sussex. On the other hand Tom, the tiercel, hatched in London'. Ornithologists have found a distinct pattern to the urbanization of Peregrines: the birds usually appear on buildings and stay loyal to the site for a year or two, but as non-breeding pairs. They then attempt nesting, usually on suitable ledges, and continue to breed if successful (Drewitt 2014).

Urban Peregrines bring to life a wider feral and recombinant ecology of the city. 'Initially the Hospital was not that keen on the nesting falcons,' Nathalie tells me, 'because Peregrines are

protected and it brings in a whole set of legal restrictions'. 'The Hospital rents their roof to mobile phone companies, and the latter were unable to access their electric cabinets the year in which breeding was first discovered. Managers got worried that they would lose out on rent'. However, the Hospital were supportive and in the end a walkway to the cabinets was built in the subsequent non-breeding season. 'Mobile phone company staff can now access equipment and carry out maintenance work even when the Peregrines are nesting'. Ceding to recombination and accepting avian-infrastructure enmeshments rather than effacing them brought in surprise benefits. 'The Hospital incurs huge cleaning costs because of the feral pigeons that nest and roost in the building,' Nathalie remarks, 'and sometimes brought in a Harris's Hawk to scare them away. Now the Peregrines keep the pigeons in check'.

Although feral Rock pigeons became well-established in London by the 17th century, their numbers sharply increased in the late 19th and early 20th century. Spillage of grain used to feed horses drawing wagons and carriages were a primary source of food, which later shifted to provisioning and scavenging on litter with the advent of motor vehicles and the decline of horse carriages. Feral pigeon stock has been enriched through breeding with escaped racing birds. The architectonic environment of London, approximating rock surfaces, has enabled the birds to thrive (Jarvis 2011), and recent work seems to indicate that urban pigeons might in even be evolving darker plumages as melanin-laden feathers helps them deal with contaminants such as lead and zinc (Schilthuizen 2019). Sometimes denigratingly referred to as 'rats with wings', rendering the metropolis pigeon-free has been at the center of a number of urban regeneration drives in London, notable among them being efforts to transform Trafalgar Square into a 'high quality' public space as part of 'an urban renaissance in London' (Escobar 2014: 378). The abundance of feral pigeons has been one factor that has contributed to the urbanization of Peregrines and, consequently, has had indirect bearings on the recombinant relations between falcons and parakeets. 'Pigeons are Tom and Charlie's favourite food,' says Nathalie, 'closely followed by starlings and parakeets'. Cosmopolitical predator-prey relations, which lie at the heart of urban recombination, show how postcolonial urban natures are not simply forged along any one single axis. They are the product of a multitude of corresponding relations between creatures and their interrelated histories of urbanization.

Recombination, then, can also be read as a co-cultivation of habits. It is not so much about spontaneity than to do with the relations a being forges by drawing others into its lifeworlds, according to its own propensities and dispositions, to which others in an assemblage respond and correspond. Although feral pigeons are the primary diet of most urban Peregrines, Tom had become adept at hunting parakeets, swooping down on the psittacines from above. 'He often 'gifts' Charlie parakeets during their courtship displays,' says Nathalie, who knows the lives of these birds intimately. Once a skill is cultivated by an adult, offspring follow suite, learning through emulation. Hunting parakeets become part of a recombinant 'culture', manifesting in certain individuals and populations but not necessarily the species as a whole. Correspondence means that feral psittacines alter their behaviours. In and around Margravine Cemetery that adjoins the Charing Cross Hospital, parakeets have learnt to fly silently and stay below the canopy of urban trees. 'Parakeets usually fly quite high up in the sky, especially when going to roost, and can be very noisy when doing so,' says Nathalie, 'As peregrines hunt in open spaces, this makes them particularly vulnerable to predation'. 'It took parakeets two or three years to learn this, but if you look at the birds around here, they are very quiet, both when foraging and flying to roost. Nowadays you hardly see them flying that high, especially when going to roost in Wormwood Scrubs'. Recombination and predator-prey relations comes back full circle in yet other ways: a study conducted in the city of Seville, Spain, revealed that although nesting parakeets might displace native noctule bats from their cavities, certain native birds have begun nesting closer to parakeet cavities. They benefit from the psittacines' gregarious behaviour and their ability to keep predators at bay (Hernández-Brito, Carrete, Popa-Lisseanu, Ibáñez and Tella 2014). Other avians, however, are not the only constituents of parakeets' worlds: they also extend to people.

[Insert Figure 3 here]



Figure 3. Peregrine falcon with one of six parakeets brought to the nest on the day, London, 17 June 2019. Photo Credit: Nathalie Mahieu.

Making worlds

In London's Kensington Gardens, haptic encounters with parakeets undoes the micropolitics of hostility and nativist fears that aim to keep parakeets out of the urban polis. People touch, and are touched by, parakeets, opening up possibilities for living-alongside and accommodating the feral. Such possibilities are cosmopolitical as they involve a mutual composition of worlds by both parakeets and people. 'I stumbled upon the parakeets a few months ago when I came for a walk with my seven year old daughter,' says an English man in his mid-forties, holding an apple in his outstretched hands, 'and now she insists on coming to feed them every weekend, sometimes on both Saturdays and Sundays!'. The psittacines are an attraction for children, but proximate encounters also reorient how adults perceive them. 'I thought parakeets were rather annoying at first, especially when they fly past screeching, but coming here I have realized that they are actually "fun" birds with a lot of character'.

These encounters in the Royal Parks are about Londoners 'learning to be affected' by parakeets (Despret 2004, Parreñas 2012), to be drawn into their worlds. New, aesthetic, intimacies are forged with strangers in excess of a punitive biopolitics and where anxieties and fears over ferality are undone, even if partially. To feed parakeets by hand is a mutual cultivation of trust, where trust is 'not a qualified or unqualified given, or a delegated property but a transactional good dependent on active labour to align heterogeneous bodies' (Amin 2012: 36). Active labours of alignment entail material-semiotic 'trans-actions' between humans and psittacines, where the latter are not passive, mechanical existents but active inhabitants of the world. As my own immersion in the activity of feeding suggests, parakeets are observant participants in urban practice with an acute ability to sense, read and instill affects.

On a typical day, individuals from the flock, which comprises of about forty-five birds, will perch on low branches, hopping from one to the other, looking at people intently. Contact calls are made from time to time, keeping in touch with conspecifics. A bird will then make a quick

dart to an extended hand, take a few pecks at what is offered, before returning to the branch. When people stand very still, parakeets will perch for longer periods. Keeping to their gregarious feeding behaviour, such individuals are soon joined by others. Inexperienced juveniles, will even alight on an empty hand if outstretched for a long time, suggesting that parakeets may be reading human bodies rather than looking at what food is held out. Individuals may squabble with one another, but aggression is seldom directed toward people. Occasionally, a parakeet will gently nibble on a person's finger if they try and stroke it, a signal that lays down practical, tacit codes of what is permissible and what is not. 'Parakeets don't like being touched or stroked on their wings,' says Marc, a parakeet enthusiast, who regularly comes to the Kensington Gardens with his pet blue Rosering Toto. 'A nibble is their subtle message telling you 'Do not come too close''. Just as on bird-feeders, here too is a cultivation of distance, less to do with physical measure and more to do with the degree to which different worlds interpenetrate (Despret 2019).

[Insert Figure 4 here]



Figure 4. Proximities and alignments between parakeets and people, Kensington Gardens, London. Photo: author.

What has in fact emerged in the Kensington Gardens is an affective commons, a space composed through human wayfaring and psittacine flyways. Marc, who has become astute in observing and interpreting parakeet behaviour after having kept parrots for several years, says that the Kensington Garden birds got habituated gradually. 'Certain bird-enthusiasts who are adept at hand-feeding other birds, took to offering parakeets food. This was about ten years ago. Over generations the birds have got used to it, but it is specific to this flock. You don't see this phenomenon in other London parks'. Feeding birds in the Kensington Gardens has in fact been an urban ritual since the last decade of the 19th century (Hudson 1898). An escaped parakeet that lived in the Gardens in the early part of the 20th century 'became quite a well-known favourite and was fed by visitors' (The Duke of Bedford 1969: 120). The current flock of parakeets, however, first arrived in 2005, when twenty-one birds became resident in the spot by the Peter Pan statue (Self 2014). 'The large crowds coming to feed parakeets you see today began in 2015,' says Marc, who has been coming to the Gardens for several years. 'The advent of selfies and social

media has added to its popularity. Feeding parakeets has become the ‘thing to do’ when you visit Kensington Gardens’.

Yet, as much as people habituate parakeets, feral birds too tame people. New locales of metropolitan conviviality are shaped by both parties and each is transformed by the encounter. ‘The younger birds are habituated into this practice from an early age,’ Marc adds, pointing to a juvenile feeding on sunflower seeds from my palm, ‘and they are becoming increasingly bold’. Marc enjoys bringing his pet parakeet to the spot. ‘It is nice to get some fresh air, and I enjoy watching Toto amidst the other parakeets, although he does not interact much with the feral birds as he is not socialized into their flock’. As a parakeet enthusiast, Marc’s intimate, vernacular knowledge of the birds’ behaviour is illuminating. ‘Parakeets learn through emulation,’ he tells me, ‘and it is likely that once one bird began feed feeding from people’s hands, others followed by observing. In captivity, parakeets also learn from watching people, so it is also plausible that these birds have learnt from observing native species like Tits which have long been feeding from people’s hands in the Kensington Gardens’. He further adds that parakeets recognize human faces. ‘Toto does this, and it may well be that some of these birds here recognize individuals who come regularly, but there is no way I can prove it’.

Striking at the heart of the idea of the ‘built environment’ and the notion that cities are hylomorphic outcomes of human activity alone (Ingold 2000, Ingold 2013), the affective commons in the Kensington Gardens is the product of human and psittacine world-making practices. Here, potentials for creative alignments burst through, in spite of the stratifications of urban biopolitics, governance and design. Economic opportunities for those immiserated by urban life are prised open. Khahlil, the migrant from Syria, whom we encountered in the opening vignette, makes do by selling peanuts and sunflower seeds to itinerant tourists wanting to feed the birds. He acts as an ‘interpreter’ of parakeet worlds, telling people about the birds’ origins and how to distinguish between sexes. ‘This woman,’ Khahlil says, pointing to a female. When a ‘client’ asks how he knows this, Khahlil traces a circle around his own neck, ‘Man has ring’. The money Khahlil earns from selling seeds is meagre, but it is one avenue of getting by in a city that otherwise presents few work opportunities for someone with limited English and no skilled qualifications. Furthermore, Khahlil has ailing health, making strenuous work difficult. ‘No good job,’ he says, reflecting on the fragile endeavor of earning a living by selling peanuts, ‘only money to buy food’.

Not everyone is happy about Khahlil’s presence, as some feel being asked to pay makes feeding an unpleasant experience. London has in fact witnessed the enclosure of selling bird-food in public, a well-documented case being the London Mayor’s refusal to renew the license of Trafalgar Square’s last pigeon-food vendor who had been in operation for half a century (Escobar 2014). Yet, the contrast between a £235 million bird-food industry which has commercialized acts of commensality and the small acts of a migrant from a war-torn country trying to make-do through alignments with feral birds could not be starker. Seldom pushy or adamant, Khahlil often gives out seeds for free. ‘People my country love feeding birds, like in Hindustan’ he says smiling, ‘I enjoy here’. There are times when the spot is marked by Khahlil’s prolonged absence. Hawking without a license is prohibited in the Royal Parks and he is wary. The Park authorities also discourage feeding parakeets as what they view to be a large numbers of birds drawn by the activity is deemed disruptive for the balance of wildlife. There are further stratifications toward feral life within this space. People keen on feeding parakeets often do not want to offer food to a large flock of pigeons present in the area. These birds feed on seeds and other foodstuff that falls on the ground, and occasionally tries to perch on people’s upheld hands, often only to be shooed away on accounts of them being ‘disgusting’ and ‘full of disease’. Whilst ferality prises open the possibility for new forms of commoning, it can also get reterritorialized by the very institutional codes it seeks to break out of.

[Insert Figure 5 here]



Figure 5. Feral rock pigeons feeding on seeds dropped by people when offering food to parakeets, Kensington Gardens, London. Photo: author.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have developed an account of ferality, both ethnographically and analytically, to develop new ways of doing urban anthropology. I bring into relief some of the politics and tensions at stake in specifying and understanding metropolitan natures, and the urban as a more-than-human formation more broadly. Through the concepts of lively capital, cosmopolitics, recombination and alignments, which work relationally and in conjunction, the essay argues that feral ecologies reconfigure metropolitan nature as postcolonial. The essay has built this argument through two key themes. The first pertains to ferality as a diagnostic, one that reveals the cultural and postcolonial politics underpinning evaluations of what natures should flourish and what should not. Histories of ferality, tracked through the circulation of lively capital, recast urban nature as conjunctural rather than insular. Simultaneously, histories of ferality expose a deep-seated biotic nativism underpinning State and vernacular evaluations of urban nature. Whilst the management of nature in Britain is seen to gravitate towards forms of ecological rationalism and bureaucratic Fordism (Adams 1997), a nativist debris of the past continues to impinge upon debates regarding who should belong and what should not. Here, nativism works as a duration, bursting through in the nick of time to combine with the present in novel ways (Amin 2012), witnessed in how threats posed by ferality are reinvented time and again. Such threats are the product of institutional taxonomies and the honed vernaculars of racial judgment working in conjunction to construct cultural imaginaries of the urban garden and home. At the same time, there are cosmopolitan oppositions to these judgments and they call for accommodating the feral. These tensions surrounding ferality become productive entry points for specifying a politics of postcolonial London (Gilroy 2004, Varma 2012).

The second theme points to some of the limitations of overtly cultural and political economic interpretations of ferality. By foregrounding a cosmopolitics of human-avian relations, the paper shows how feral creatures unsettle nativist codings and domesticity. Whilst parakeets are targets of an affective biopolitics of population, centered on forecasting and risk, such a biopolitics dovetails with a micropolitics of race. The inclusion and exclusion of parakeets from urban settings is enacted through practices of dwelling and hospitality in seemingly innocuous sites such as the garden bird-feeder. Cosmopolitics pushes this argument further. It shows how

hospitality is enacted through a range of devices tinkered and modified to foster or repel the feral. Such devices mediate the politics of accommodation. At the same time, cosmopolitical relations, including those between parakeets and other passerines attending to bird-feeders, as well as those forged with predators such as owls and Peregrines in the wider landscape, can have unpredictable effects in excess of worlds set in motion by human subjects. Cosmopolitical relations show how urban hospitality (Candea and Da Col 2012) is never immune from the intra-actions and ethological relations between other-than-humans.

If the conjunction of bio-, micro- and cosmopolitics provides critical inroads to understanding the politics of urban nature, recombination reveals how postcolonial natures are forged. It takes off from anthropological critiques of the notion of the built environment (Ingold 2000, Ingold 2013), to reveal how urban worlds are composed by a retinue of beings in excess of hylomorphic ideas of planning and design. Contra the specifications of ferality by Anna Tsing and Nils Bubandt, I argue that it is recombination rather than ferality per se that is at stake in disturbed industrial landscapes (Bubandt and Tsing 2018, Bubandt and Tsing 2018). Ferality is a taxonomic marker whilst recombination is what happens when landscapes gather heterogeneous beings drawn to disturbance. This process is not spontaneous but involves the correspondence between a suite of different beings, some of which might be feral, others recently urbanized, and some deliberately introduced. For instance, the rise of feral pigeon populations have contributed to the urbanization of Peregrines whose presence in the city is, in turn, beginning to have surprise effects on parakeet behaviour. Furthermore, such recombination must be understood as a postcolonial condition, as a product of 'global empires, acclimatization and wild gardening' (Rotherham 2017: 56). Recombinance shows how contemporary urban natures emerge from a wider field of colonial relations with non-native species, relations that sometimes elide multispecies ethnography. These colonial relations caution against using the term 'anthropogenic' in an uncritical way, for what is at stake is not blanket human agency but very specific pathways through which altered ecologies are produced.

A feral analytic, and the tensions immanent to it, provides critical openings for a different kind of urban anthropology: one that takes postcolonial nature seriously. At the same time, by constantly overcoming the forces that territorialize it, ferality opens up possibilities for creating more just urban worlds, where postcolonial natures might be accepted rather than quelled. This is borne out in the alignments between people and parakeets in Kensington Gardens where, through acts of provisioning, relations of trust and attentiveness are cultivated across human-avian divides. An ethnography attuned to its times (Fortun 2012), and one that takes other-than-humans as observant participants of the world, reveals situations where people learn to be affected differently and become porous to the stranger. Ferality furnishes the grounds for an affective commons, no matter how transient or ephemeral, where solidarity between marginalized bodies are actualized. In times of unprecedented urban transformation, episodic racial and xenophobic violence that immerse the stranger, whether human or other-than-human, in a hostile milieu, situated alignments can be starting points for another city to come. Such a city might be one where racial exclusions can be overturned and the stranger accommodated rather than told to get back to where they once belonged.

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Author statement

The submitted manuscript is an original and unpublished text, written by me. This manuscript has been submitted only to the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (JRAI) and is not under review in and has not been submitted to any other journal, book or publishing house, either in whole or in part. It will remain so until a decision on its appropriateness to the JRAI has been made by the editor.

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