“My dog and I, we need the park”: more-than-human agency and the emergence of dog parks in Poland, 2015–2020

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Abstract
The article analyzes the emergence of dog parks in Poland, on the basis of stories from local media, with emphasis on how dog park proponents justify the need for establishing dog runs. Even though official arguments present dog parks as an amenity that offers training opportunities for dogs, the guardians’ activism is motivated by the recognition of their dogs’ needs for off-leash play and social interaction with other dogs. The guardians often phrase the arguments using language that presents the interests of the human and the canine as inseparable, sometimes even merging the human and the dog through the use of second person plural. The article identifies this type of argumentation as an expression of more-than-human agency: the humans not only see themselves as speaking on behalf of their dogs, but see themselves as speaking with their dogs. However, the article also identifies social and cultural factors that have made dog parks a desirable amenity in Poland. These include the parks’ associations with progress, modernity and broadly understood “Western” culture. The drive to build parks is thus also tied with the desire for a spatial emblem of the recognition of the human-canine bond. These social and cultural factors also shape the hybrid agency at work in the Polish dog park debates.

Keywords
animal studies, commons, dogs, dog parks, dog runs, Eastern Europe, enclosures, fences, pet-keeping, post-socialist cities, public space, urban space

In his recent book *Canine Confidential* (2018), respected cognitive ethologist Marc Bekoff expresses his enthusiasm for dog parks, commenting that they are “an ethologist’s dream,” a natural habitat for a scientist studying canine behavior. In Bekoff’s narrative dog parks are places where dogs can engage in social play with other canines, where they can finally romp off-leash and “be dogs.” The fact that dog parks have become prevalent in the landscapes of North American

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cities is explained – by an ethologist like Bekoff – by humans’ growing recognition and respect for dogs’ social, emotional and physical needs. This recognition of canine needs has the beneficial side effect of creating opportunities for the study of dog-dog interactions, an opportunity that has resulted in multiple publications on the topic by scientists studying canine social behavior. For ethologists, and most likely for dogs, dog parks are “beastly places,” to recall one of the founding metaphors of animal geographies. The fact that dog parks are fenced off from human-dominated urban space, can transform them – to use Foucauldian terminology – into canine heterotopias; spaces, where the same dogs whose movements are restricted throughout most of the day can exercise what Bekoff elsewhere calls “an ethology of freedom.” Heterotopias, after all, are spaces that both reflect and refract; that invert dominant processes and power relationships. Dog parks are spaces where canine needs and desires invert the anthropocentric order of the city.

However, animal geographers have largely studied dog parks as “animal spaces”; that is, as sites of the spatial ordering of animals by humans, as sites which make it possible to understand how animals figure in the everyday spaces of human activities in a late capitalist, neoliberal society. Studies of dog parks within animal geography have identified “dog park tales” as narratives that are not really about dogs, but about certain social processes (e.g. gentrification, urbanization, the growth of neoliberalism) which concern dogs only indirectly, through the involvement of their human guardians. This is visible in literature spanning a period of almost thirty years: from Wolch and Rowe’s early and optimistic essay about how a community of dog park activists transformed a derelict wasteland into a hub of human-canine activity, through research on how opponents of dog parks see the presence of dogs as a danger to the cleanliness and order of a modern city, to analyses of how the location of new dog parks correlates with processes of gentrification in American cities. Nast interprets the impulse to set up dog parks as an expression of “pet-love,” which she sees as both typical of late capitalist societies – a concept also explored by, among others, Adrian Franklin and, quite famously, Haraway – but simultaneously as actively undermining the possibility of transspecies social justice. A space catering to the well-being of selected members of a selected species is created through a framework that strategically overlooks the well-being of other species and the possibilities of peaceful multispecies coexistence in shared greenspace. Tissot’s study (2011) concurs that communities of dog park users can also be exclusionary toward certain groups of humans. All in all, the optimism of Wolch’s early study seems to be lost in the more recent accounts, and even interest in the study of dog parks among animal geographers is waning.

There is little discussion of animal agency in the above-mentioned studies, because dogs are not seen as agents in “dog park politics”: they are perceived as pawns in the hands of humans. With increased interest in conceptualizing animal agency, the thrust of research in animal geography has shifted away from the study of processes in which animals appear to be only subjects of human dominance. Nevertheless, within animal geography there does exist research that focuses on canine agency and on greenspaces and parks, just not on dog parks. Ethnographic studies of dog-walking, such as the ones carried out by Cudworth and other largely British and Scandinavian researchers, bring to the surface issues of canine agency in the activity of dog walking: dogs often choose the route taken on a walk; their preferences for canine and human friends shape the social interactions of their human guardians; their insistence on exercise encourages humans to spend time outside, even in bad weather conditions. Furthermore, the reason why dog-walkers undertake this sometimes-burdensome activity is because they believe that their dogs find it enjoyable. Similar studies have also been carried out in relation to canine guardians taking up certain training and sporting activities with their canines. These studies could be used as a framework that takes the debate on dog parks away from “dog park politics” and toward the dynamics of human-canine agency. The framework I propose here looks at the human-canine dyad as both a target of a
particular set of regulations and a “more-than-human” subject in that system, to use a term introduced by Whatmore.16

As I hope to show through the case study presented here, the relegation of the study of dog parks to the study of “animal spaces” is a result of the dominant perspectives and research methodologies used by animal geographers, and even by most scholars coming from the broadly defined humanities. However, a promising methodological trend has recently appeared: the incorporation of ethological perspectives into geographical research, in an effort to achieve the political agenda articulated already by the early animal geographers.17 Recent collaborations between ethologists and geographers have resulted in opening up new perspectives on animals’ experiences of human-designed spaces.18 In effect, these studies have made it possible to not only acknowledge the agency of animals, but also, as Fletcher and Platt note in their dog walking study, to decentralize the human within human geographies.19 A similar effect of centering the human is aimed for in this paper. Simply stating that relationships with animals influence the actions of humans is an insufficient theoretical strategy for comprehending the multi-layered agency at work in the case of these activists. This is why I propose to treat the human-canine dyad as a “container” with its own hybrid agency, neither fully canine nor purely human. By analyzing well-intentioned human articulations of canine needs in the campaign to set up dog parks in Poland, the paper traces how dog guardians see themselves as speaking in unison with their dogs and how their status as canine-identified humans pushes them to civic activism. Yet, it also reveals how the guardians’ arguments are influenced by some distinctly human needs, such as the need for (human) social recognition. Thus, this type of more-than-human agency cannot be divorced from the social and cultural context in which it is expressed and on which it is reliant. Ultimately, it is necessary to go beyond the dyad to understand the arguments formulated by the dyad. This hybrid approach is necessary to better understand the dog park as a space in which animals are placed by humans, but also a space in which humans and animals are placed together and with the goal of increasing the canine-human dyad’s pleasure and well-being.

Methodology

This paper is rooted in both a cultural scholar’s interest in the social and political dimensions of human-animal relationships and a dog trainer/behaviorist’s attention to canine well-being. Even though the primary methodology applied is an analysis of articles from Polish local media, from the period 2015–2020, the author’s theoretical analysis is backed up by years of involvement in dog training and behavior counseling as well as a history of dog-walking and dog park use spanning two continents and four countries. Local print and online media are the most popular venues for conducting debates about local issues, and the setting up of dog parks is perceived as such. Local newspapers are sites where dog owners present what can be seen as the official version of their attempts to set up dog-friendly spaces. The comments sections underneath these articles have also been taken into account, and they provide an often much more emotional and less self-moderated response to the issue. The study is interested in how proponents of dog parks ground the need to establish such spaces, how they present their knowledge of their dog’s needs and how they situate those needs alongside their own.

This perspective adds to the study of more-than-human agency, as called for by Whatmore.20 Whatmore’s work is influenced by actor-network theory (ANT), which itself proposes a reconceptualization of agency beyond self-reflexivity and intentionality, opening up the possibility of animal agency in ways that do not necessarily structure it in terms of animal resistance to human domination. Helpful conceptualizations of non-human-agency that go beyond animal resistance have also come from the field of historical geography and animal history. Examples include Phillip
Howell’s work on dogs in Victorian Britain, Chris Pearson’s work on the agency of police canines and Neil Pemberton’s work on human-animal agency in co-creating guide dog partnerships.\(^{21}\) However, what I am interested in here is not purely canine agency acknowledged respond-ably in the process of training, as Pearson and Pemberton are, but in the multi-layered merging of agency in the case of companion species. Dog park activists see themselves as consciously acting on behalf of both themselves and their dogs. Benefits of dog parks are, in fact, perceived by their supporters as inseparable for humans and non-humans: dogs and humans are joint beneficiaries. Even the experience of the space of the dog park as a space of pleasure seems to be shared by both humans and canines. Dogs also serve as “agents provocateurs” – to return to Whatmore’s terminology – engendering the activism of humans who otherwise would possibly not have engaged in civic issues. These canine guardians conceptualize their identity largely in terms of their relationship with their dog; they are canine-identified humans, to play on the term woman-identified woman used in gender studies.\(^{22}\) They embrace the word *psiarz* [dog person] in a way that reflects Haraway’s understanding of the entanglement characteristic of companion species.

Howell’s Foucauldian reading of the regulation of the presence of dogs in public space through leash laws as an example of governmentality, or “the conduct of conduct,” traces the historical emergence of the human-canine dyad. Howell identifies the inception of leash laws in the nineteenth century as a critical moment when the law, rather than targeting individual canine transgressors, begins to promote an ethics of responsible pet ownership that also brings the human and the canine closer together, both symbolically and literally through the presence of the leash. Howell notes that, as something of a side effect, this turn also results in the creation of spaces, where “particular human-animal behaviors are tolerated and even celebrated.”\(^{23}\) In a move that resonates strongly with the topic of this study, Howell ties the formation of human-canine agency with the creation of new spaces. Notwithstanding the myriad different factors that have resulted in the emergence of today’s pet culture, the long history of regulations aimed at controlling the dog through regulating the behavior of the dog’s guardian, has most likely also contributed to the emergence of the human-canine dyad. This case study makes visible how the human-canine dyad is both a subject of regulations, but also a potential agent of change.

**Globalizing dog park research**

Bekoff’s very matter-of-fact observations about the omnipresence of dog parks may raise some eyebrows among readers outside the United States who are unfamiliar with dog parks. The first dog park was founded in the United States and, for several decades, dog parks were a uniquely North American amenity. Ohlone Dog Park in Berkeley, California, was first established in 1979 as a fenced off section of People’s Park, equipped with benches and tables for the dogs’ guardians [see Figure 1, Ohlone Dog Park, 2018].\(^{24}\) Historically, the need for the setting up of dog parks in the US emerged from within the community of dog guardians in response to restrictions on dogs’ access to other spaces. In *Unleashed Fury: The Political Struggle for Dog-friendly Parks*, Julie Walsh notices that even though the first dog park was opened in 1979, the sudden surge in the number of dog parks in the 1990s was tied to the increase in the enforcement of leash laws across the United States in the 1990s.\(^{25}\) The dog park movement – this term has become prominent in literature related to the topic – in the US was instigated by dog guardians themselves; it is the owners who saw the creation of space where dogs were permitted off-leash as a solution to the problem of decreased availability of non-fenced-in space.\(^{26}\) This is by no means a universal response to authorities’ attempts to regulate the presence of dogs; for example, in the UK recent attempts instigated by local authorities to set up fenced dog runs have met with a lukewarm reception. Multiple British organizations that focus on dogs – from The Kennel Club to Dogs’ Trust – also recognize the
setting up of dog parks as part of a broader wave of restricting dogs’ access to public space but see the solution elsewhere than the American dog park movement; that is, in safeguarding multispecies use of urban common space, such as city parks. In fact, the American solution is often viewed as faulty, as elaborated in The Kennel Club’s statement on dog parks:

Dog parks are usually found in countries such as America, where “dogs on lead” is the default position and so dogs are only allowed off the lead in designated areas. The opposite is the case in the UK and the Kennel Club opposes the general concept of dog parks as they are usually very small areas and a symptom of very extensive restrictions on dogs.27

Still, in the first two decades of the twenty-first century fenced off areas for dogs have begun to be set up in many Western European countries [see Figure 2: dog park in Zaragoza, Spain and Figure 3: dog park in Helsinki, Finland], in some Asian countries, in Australia, and in New Zealand. While the existence of these parks has not yet generated scholarly interest, it seems that their emergence is not tied to sustained civic activism. Even though dog parks have spread beyond the United States, the different social, spatial and cultural conditions in many of these countries do not generate the same kind of dynamics as the one noted in the US. One can hypothesize that in many of the countries which have begun to establish dog parks, these spaces function in addition to other opportunities for legally exercising dogs off lead. However, case studies from different countries are needed in order to provide the data necessary to draw out some generalizations. Here, a case study coming from Poland can be interesting on two interconnected levels.
Firstly, the very existence of a case study from a non-English speaking country adds to the task of globalizing and decolonizing animal geographies, a task that is viewed as urgent by many scholars. At the time of writing, Central Europe has been a rather marginal location of animal geographers’ research; in her 2017 article Hovorka lists one study coming from the region, specifically,
from Romania, a country with a very different legal and cultural approach to dogs; a country where, unlike Poland, free-roaming dogs remain a significant problem. Secondly, the fact that dog parks were first established in the United States and are now being adopted in other countries ties overtly with processes of globalization. This should encourage reflection on how globalization is linked to cultural colonization and on the effect these intertwined processes can have on the lives of animals. In this case, the study can contribute to an account of the global spread of pet culture, a task that, in the case of Poland, has already begun to be undertaken by local animal studies scholars representing various disciplines from the humanities and social sciences.29

Poland seems to be the perfect location for examining the intersections of capitalism and globalization: it is a country that is still recoiling from a significant political and economic transition, a shift from a totalitarian regime to a democracy and from a centrally-steered socialist economy to free-market consumerism. Already in Animal Geographies, Jennifer Wolch called for a trans-species urban theory whose “goal is to understand capitalist urbanization in a globalizing economy,” its implications for animal life, changes in human-animal interactions and how these are “shaped by managerial plans and grassroots activism.”30 Poland looms as an ideal site for examining such changing interactions. It is a country that has, since 1989, undergone intensive processes of economic change, both on what could be called an economic macro-scale, a process comprehensively described in Elizabeth Dunn’s Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business and the Remaking of Labor31 but also on other levels, even the micro-level of relationships among companion species.32 It is also a country where the effects of globalization begin to be felt only in conjunction with the entry of capitalism and where, significantly for the topic at hand, globalization has often quite often been equated with “Americanization.”33 Again, this influence of the English-speaking world is hugely visible on a macro-scale: in the availability and consumption of Anglo culture, in policies related to foreign language teaching in schools, etc. Yet, this macro scale is inseparably entangled with the micro-scale of human-canine interaction: for example, changes in the popularity of canine breeds are likely tied to the popularity of Hollywood cinema and the ease of transporting animals across borders.34 Dog parks are yet another site that can be studied from the perspective of tracing the spread of “Western” culture and can provide an account of how it becomes changed and domesticated in the local context.

**Dog parks in Poland: background**

The first dog park was opened in Poland in the city of Łódź in 2007, but the process of creating dog parks intensified in Poland in the period 2015–2020.35 The growth of dog parks has been extremely dynamic: the first dog run was opened in Warsaw only in 2014 and five years later there were twenty-eight of these fenced off enclosures in Poland’s capital city. Fifteen dog parks were created in the same time frame in the city of Toruń (population 200,000) and sixteen parks have been established in Krakow (population 750,000).36

In order to establish whether, as had been the case in the US, initial interest in dog parks was a response to a decrease in the availability of space available for multispecies use (and especially off-leash dog walking), it is necessary to briefly assess the availability of space for dog walkers. Off-leash dog walking is governed through local regulations about cleanliness and order. While these ordinances can differ, they usually do not allow for off-leash dogs in built-up areas. A typical solution incorporated by many municipalities is to allow dogs off-leash (often, only while muzzled and always “under control”) in “unfrequented areas.” Overall, as compared to many countries in Western Europe and Poland’s southern neighbors, Czechia and Slovakia, the regulations are quite strict. However, Poland is quite notorious for its lax enforcement of certain laws and the enforcement of dog-related regulations is one such area. Additionally, citizens of post-socialist countries
have often been described, mostly in sociological thought, as exhibiting a certain propensity to creatively outsmart the authorities. These attitudes are often seen as carryovers from the period of communism, when a distrust of authorities created a mentality referred to, for example, in Piotr Sztompka’s influential article “Civilizational Incompetence” (1993), as “society versus authorities” or “we versus them.” Provisionally disregarding the huge civilizational implications of these concepts, it is safe to say that even though the letter of the law is quite strict when it comes to off-leash dogs in Poland, in practice, the situation of dog walkers was not as dire in the 2010s in Poland as it was in the mid-1990s in the US.

One can hypothesize that it is not decreased access to off-leash walking opportunities that fueled the 2015–2020 boom on the construction of dog parks, but the spaces’ symbolic association with modernity and the broadly understood “West.” It must be added that the “the West,” a term which appears frequently in Polish media discourse, is not a precise location but a mythologized construct, as George Schopflin has argued “it is Central and South-Eastern Europe’s idealized other ( . . .) an alternative, superior world.” It must also be stressed that the new kind of “pet-love” that emerged in newly-capitalist Poland is also seen as a trend imported from abroad; a fact that carries positive associations for the segment of society for whom the phrase “catching up with the West” carries huge potency and represents Poland’s self-diagnosis of backwardness and delay on the road to “authentic modernity.” However, the same associations were also used in creating a counter-narrative in which Poland is becoming colonized by foreign forces, which should be stopped to protect Polish national interests. Thus, dog parks, as a spatial emblem of “pet-love,” have become incorporated into the Polish edition of the culture wars.

In the period before dog parks became a popular sight in Polish cities, they were sometimes mentioned in the media as something of a civilizational achievement, proof of a society’s wealth, penchant for cleanliness and order. In a discussion of the possible construction of a dog run in Opole, a local newspaper wrote: “Dog parks have become common in the West. No one is surprised by them.” A 2015 article about a new dog run in Wodzisław Śląski states that “Something that is quite common in the West, is still a source of disbelief, doubt or even laughter here. Can you imagine a dog needing a playground? Why?” Dog parks, supposedly commonplace “in the West,” became an aspiration for Poles who saw their emergence as proof that Poland was indeed catching up with the West. While seemingly trivial, the recognition of the need for dog parks was an element of broader processes of modernization and globalization. This desire for dog parks seems to be based simultaneously in two “waves” of modernization: on the one hand, the need for recognition of the physical closeness of the human-canine bond (as a mark of modern societies), as discussed by, for example, Adrian Franklin, Rebekah Fox, Bob Carter and Nickie Charles, and, on the other, the older but persistent need for defining the space of the city as a hygienic and sanitized space, a topic analyzed in detail by animal historians and some animal geographers.

The emergence of dog parks is tied to a confluence of affective, cultural and material factors. However, on the level of tangible material conditions, the sudden explosion of the number of urban dog parks in post-socialist Poland is linked with the appearance of a source of funding that made it possible to implement the “Western luxury” of dog parks in the Polish context: that is, participatory budgeting. Participatory (or civic) budgeting is a process through which a percentage of municipal funds is allocated for the realization of projects directly submitted by residents and selected through (often online) voting. The first civic budgets began operating in Poland in 2011 and became widespread in larger cities by 2015. The capital city of Warsaw first introduced the civic budget in 2015, and dog parks have been a major category of projects submitted since the first edition of the budget. Of the almost thirty dog runs operating in Warsaw at the end of 2019, two were chosen in the participatory budget for 2015, six in the budget for 2016, six for 2017, five for 2018 and one for 2019. Additionally, multiple dog runs in the Warsaw metro area have also been financed
through local participatory budgets. This suggests that dog parks are clearly perceived as a desirable amenity by local residents of Warsaw who support these initiatives through online voting. This positive image of dog parks seems to be shared by local authorities and local media, who view the establishment of dog parks as a solution to conflicts related to the presence of dogs in the city, especially the issue of dog waste.

**Legitimizing dog parks**

In 2016, when a discussion about the setting up of a dog run in the peripheral district of Białołęka in Warsaw was taking place among residents, the local web portal *Tu Białołęka* wrote: “Dog parks are a good solution: the dogs do not disturb other park users; they are separated from them, and at the same time they can run free and play. At the same time, the problem of dog waste becomes eliminated. Unfortunately, not all dog owners clean up after their pets.”47 Similar arguments are also put forward by the authors of the projects submitted to the city. The author of the project of a dog run in the neighborhood of Chomiczówka in Warsaw presented the goals of the initiative in the following way: “On the one hand, it [the dog run] is going to fulfill the needs of dog owners and their pets who complain about the lack of such places in Chomiczówka; on the other; it should satisfy those who complain about dogs running loose around the neighborhood.”48 What is striking in these two texts, which are exemplary and not unique among the voices advocating for dog runs in the city, is a seemingly paradoxical confluence of two types of arguments. On the one hand, dog parks are a space of modernity, where the setting of physical boundaries between different types of spaces helps in safeguarding order and safety; on the other, the fences of the dog parks are seen as a way of containing the filth and pollution associated with dogs. They are both a modern amenity – the dogs can run free and enjoy themselves – and something of a ghetto: the dirt associated with the dogs is contained within a fenced in area. Thus, these texts, media articles and the projects themselves, are addressing two groups at once: “dog persons” [*psiarze*] and “dog skeptics,” proposing dog runs as a solution to their different problems.

The parks are usually opened on city-owned property, and while they can range in size, the typical area is between 1,000 to 4,000 square meters. The parks are all fenced and – unlike American and most other Western European runs – are fitted with equipment resembling agility obstacles, which gives them the appearance of canine playgrounds (see Figures 4 and 5). This rather unique feature of Polish dog parks is quite significant for the focus of this study; that is, for an analysis of the expression of more-than-human agency in dog park activism. American dog parks are perceived as spaces of canine freedom, where dogs can roam free and play with others without interference from their guardians who are encouraged to sit on benches and use picnic tables while their dogs play. The presence of agility obstacles, which are meant to be traversed by the dog with human guidance, suggests that dog parks in Poland formally function more as spaces of human-animal interaction. In the official narrative in support of dog parks, proponents of the runs argue that they are spaces that provide training opportunities for dogs. An activist explains the role of dog parks for a local paper using the following arguments: “The run would make it possible for our dogs to get some exercise, and the agility equipment would make it possible for the owners to train with their dogs, which strengthens their bond.”49 Another activists says: “This obstacle course is going to encourage owners to work and play with their dogs, which is necessary to build a good relationship.”50

Interestingly, the author’s field observations do not confirm the premise that the parks serve training purposes. The obstacles are largely unused or function as hiding spots for dogs during play. At this point, one could hypothesize that proponents of dog parks attempt to legitimize the function of parks by mentioning their role in strengthening human-canine cooperation and, in
result, in the creation of more obedient and better-behaved dogs. In an analysis of everyday human-canine interactions in the UK, Rebekah Fox argues that some of the respondents in her study were embarrassed to admit to the close intimacy they shared with their pets. Here, a similar mechanism could be at work: the interviewees could be slightly embarrassed to speak of wanting to fulfill their dogs’ needs in the formal context of being interviewed for an article in the press, although, as it will become clear, some dog guardians do utilize arguments related to their dogs’ pleasure.

More-than-human agency

Even though the official narrative legitimizes the establishment of dog parks through arguments that focus on increasing hygiene and improving the obedience skills of dogs, when articles in the local media give space to dog guardians to present their views, many of the humans speak directly of their desire to fulfill their dogs’ needs for social interaction and play. In 2019, the local paper *Halo Ursynów* covered a discussion on the need for a dog park in the neighborhood. The majority of canine guardians recognized their dog’s need to play with other dogs: “I would really like for such a [dog] playground to be built here. An animal also needs entertainment and it is less aggressive then. My Karo loves to play, just running is not enough.” Another dog walker stated: “My Bunia loves to play with other dogs and when I let her off leash, I can see how happy she is.” It is clear that the guardians feel comfortable with interpreting their dogs’ emotional states, and it is their dog’s happiness that drives them to frequent the parks: “This is the second time my dog is here and he clearly really likes it. Playing is better than just walking” – comments a user of a recently opened dog park in Wrocław.

In some instances, the guardians even phrase their opinions using the plural form of verbs. In a 2019 article about a new dog run in Szamotuły, one of the interviewees responds: “This is a fantastic initiative. Bazyl and I are very happy that finally there is going to be a dog run.” A user of a dog park recently opened in Toruń says: “We like to go there because it is shaded, which is a great
Another user of the same park adds: “My dog and I, we need the park. It helps us relax and alleviates boredom.” A user of a dog park in Ursynów states: “Going to the dog park is a lot of fun for Fifka and I. Dogs are social animals and she likes meeting her friends there.” Even though these are simple and casual statements, it is difficult not to notice the fluid merging of the human and non-human subject here; at times, it becomes difficult to discern who enjoys sitting in the shade and whose boredom is dispelled through dog park visits. One could argue that using the first-person plural “we” could be read as yet another form of the coupling of dominance and affection, which Yi-Fu Tuan warned about already in the 1980s. However, it seems that, similarly as in the studies of dog walkers carried out in the United Kingdom by Erika Cudworth, the guardians are not only attentive to their dogs but also experience pleasure vicariously by watching their dogs have fun with other canines.

“Psiarz” [dog person] as identity category

The analysis so far has been implying that dog park activists and users exhibit what could be termed as a model posthuman subjectivity, in which both responsibility and response-ability, to use Haraway’s term for the ability or capacity to respond and adjust to the other, result in a merging of the needs and desires of two species. However, it must be noted that this subjectivity is linked to the creation of an identity category that can be quite exclusionary and that operates largely within the sphere of identity politics: the identity category of psiarz [dog person]. The word itself is an application of a derivative of the word pies [dog] to the canine’s guardian. In result, the word symbolically merges human and canine into one: resulting in a term that denotes a canine-identified human, someone for whom the fact of living with a dog is the defining social relationship. The
identity category is picked up rather willingly by dog owners themselves and is often used to self-identify in opposition to other interest groups:

The mayor is doing everything for the residents of Pabianice who have children, but some of us already have grown-up children, and the dog is a creature in our household that is treated as a family member. There are quite a few of us, as someone once said pchlarze [*"fleabags", a pun on the word psiarze*] and we would be very grateful (here, I mean in the next elections) for having a place like that.

Here, the interests of psiarze are pitted against the interests of parents, with claims of discrimination made by the canine guardians who validate their demands through the humans’ status as taxpayers. This is clear in the quotation below, taken from a letter to the editor submitted to the local paper *Halo Ursynów* in 2019:

I pay my taxes, just like most others, and I don’t need a space for children or for seniors, but my needs are ignored. Children are running around and screaming. (...) When will the promises made to psiarze finally be fulfilled? I’m not asking for much, just a fenced off area. No need for agility courses, just an area where dogs can run around without the danger of crashing into children or being hit by a car. Grandmas with their grandchildren have the right to use the park, but so do I and my dog. Maybe it’s time to create zones for everyone. There is a playground, a sports field, an outdoor gym and benches for senior citizens. Would it be such a problem to fence off some space for dogs?

It seems that here the need for the dog park is clothed in a need for symbolic recognition of psiarz as a category with rights similar to those of other groups as much as it is in the dog’s need to play. Writing of the appearance of the dog walking dyad in Victorian England, Phillip Howell notices how the formation of the dog walking dyad through legal regulations resulted in the emergence of spaces where human-animal interactions were tolerated and celebrated. The difference here is that dog guardians are asking for the rigid partitioning of space, for space zoned for humans and non-humans. Notably, the three groups – dog guardians, senior citizens and parents of young children – are conceptualized as separate and not overlapping groups, even though this is a false opposition. Still, this distinctiveness suggests how important the human-canine connection is in the process of establishing identity categories. Not only do proponents of dog parks recognize their own identity as entangled with that of their dog, but they are also recognized as such in the discourse of the opponents of dog parks, who object not solely to the presence of dogs, but see “dog people” as undesirable. A commenter in the discussion about the construction of a park in Pabianice says: “The city is for people, not for psiarze [dog people].”

**Opposition to dog parks**

While bigger cities have been surprisingly welcoming of dog parks, Poland has not been completely immune to conflicts like the one described by Urbanik and Morgan, where the presence of a dog park is staunchly opposed by some residents. Such conflicts are especially visible in smaller cities and are, in fact, intensifying as dog parks are gaining popularity. The first dog runs were opened in large metropolitan areas but initiatives for the construction of dog parks have recently begun appearing in smaller cities. There, opponents of dog parks have raised the predictable arguments of filth and disease. Residents of Suwałki (population 69,000) and Płock (population 325,000) are complaining about the smells and noise generated by potential dog runs. In both these cities, the constructions of dog parks have been blocked, even though the projects received enough votes in participatory budgets. A similar conflict is currently developing in the city of Iława (population 32,000), where a dynamic in-person confrontation took place in February 2020 between the
proponents and opponents of the construction of a dog run. The following arguments appear verbatim among the concerns identified by the opponents of the investment: “If the residents vote for a garbage dump in the Old Town, is the city going to build it?” “How are senior citizens going to relax here? There is going to be so much noise.” “Are dogs more important for the city authorities than senior citizens?"66

The tensions, in fact, appear greater in small-town Poland than in the capital city of Warsaw. One could hypothesize that residents of smaller cities continue to identify modernization with the separation of humans and animals. Their desire to exclude dogs from the sphere of the city’s care (and from the city budget) could suggest their lack of consent for acknowledging the value of human-canine relationships, but also – possibly – their lack of consent for equating “Western inventions” such as dog parks, with desirable interventions in the structure of Polish society and the shape of Polish cityscapes; maybe even of equating “Westernization” with progress. However, in the two cases mentioned above, dog runs received significant support in online voting processes and were among the projects selected by the citizens themselves. It is the authorities who bowed down to the pressure exerted by specific interest groups and abandoned the projects.

**Conclusion**

The analysis above has shown how dog parks can be viewed as “beastly places,” both by their proponents – who see them as spaces of canine pleasure and freedom – and by their opponents, who concur, although the second group sees little value in supporting “beastliness.” Furthermore, it is clear that proponents of dog parks and dog park users are motivated by a recognition of their dog’s need for play and social interaction. While the dogs are not conscious, intentional agents in the processes of establishing dog parks, neither are they pawns in the hands of humans. Even though one cannot deny that changes in the pet relationship in post-socialist Poland are entangled in the commodification of pets, for psiarze in Poland dogs are not a mere lifestyle accessory; their needs are taken seriously. They not only enable and influence dog park activism and later dog park use, the activities themselves are perceived as being carried out for the dogs and with the dogs. In fact, in the narratives formed by dog parks users, it becomes impossible to separate the experiences of the humans from those of the dogs. The type of agency identified in both park activism and use has been referred to as more-than-human agency and it has been suggested that its emergence is linked with the formation of the human-canine dyad, in which the interests and needs of the two companion species criss-cross, overlap and are negotiated in ways that are respectful and caring, even though human dominance remains an uncontested fact.

However, what a discussion of the dynamics within the dyad cannot do is answer the question of why canine needs and canine happiness are identified differently by well-meaning “dog people” from different cultural contexts; for example, it cannot explain British dog guardians’ reluctance toward dog parks and Polish dog guardians’ enthusiasm about this American invention. Here, it is necessary to recognize that more-than-human agency functions in a cultural context and that the human part of the canine-human dyad is shaped by social, historical and cultural factors. For the majority of urban Polish residents, the fenced enclosure of the dog park has evoked associations with luxury, progress and modernization. It becomes a space of symbolic recognition of the value of the human-canine bond, which they feel has been belittled and even ridiculed. For the British, the associations seem to be different: the enclosures are a symbol of the human-canine dyad’s freedom being constrained. For Poles, the fence becomes infused with the safety and prestige of a gated community; but in a different cultural context it can be associated with the restrictions imposed by prison walls and the bars of a cage. The level of a society’s consciousness about the role of the commons, of space that is open and accessible to everyone, also plays a role in dog
guardians’ approaches to parks, as does a society’s history of regulating human-canine presence in public space. All of these factors come together in complex ways, which may not be evident to every individual human involved in the debate. In effect, what I am suggesting here is that to fully grasp the complexity not only of the establishment of dog parks but also of the global spread of pet culture, close attention needs to be paid both to the dynamics of the formation of new forms of embodied posthuman subjectivity but also to the canine-human dyad’s immersion in the local cultural context. The human may see his or her role as that of a translator, interpreting the dog’s intentions for a broader public, but this is a translation for which there is no precise dictionary. Marc Bekoff, like other ethologists, suggests that empowered with the new advances in canine science, we can most definitely move beyond seeing the animal mind as an unknowable puzzle and safely assume that there are ways of establishing what canines want and need. However, the general knowledge that dogs need social interaction does not necessarily provide us with an answer as to where those interactions should take place: in an open field, in a park, or in a fenced off dog run. In fact, the concept of more-than-human agency that I have been exploring here provides a more precise understanding of the utterances analyzed in this case study than the notion of translation: while the guardians may see themselves as both interpreters for and lobbyists on behalf of their dogs, there is an additional layer, or maybe even multiple layers, added onto this process of translation by the cultural context in which they dog-human dyad is immersed.

I have suggested that the study of dog parks within the humanities and social sciences has so far been focused largely on “dog park politics,” while the studies carried out by ethologists do not question the naturalness of the dog park as a habitat for scientific research. These two perspectives have resulted in the creation of two different disciplinary discourses and, in a sense, of two spaces: an ethologist’s dog park (“a beastly place”) and a social scientist’s dog park (“an animal space”). While we may be tempted to leave it at that, animal geographies and animal studies more broadly have goals that exceed theoretical inquiry and include improvement of animals’ lives and seeking out solutions for harmonious coexistence in hybrid, multispecies communities. If these goals are to be reached, a hybrid perspective – one that bridges the gap between these two discourses – is necessary. We need to develop tools that make it possible to both acknowledge the genuine respect for canine needs that underlies the drive to create “beastly places,” where dogs can experience freedom and pleasure, but also to objectively and carefully analyze whether the setting up of fenced off areas truly serves the interests of multispecies communities or whether there exist better solutions. Let us not forget that, as Lorimer and Hodgetts remind us, the distinction between “animal spaces” and “beastly places” was not meant as a binary opposition or an attempt at re-establishing the nature/culture distinction.

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