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'My Dog is My Home': multispecies care and poverty politics in Los Angeles, California and Austin, Texas

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ABSTRACT

My Dog is My Home is an art activist project in Los Angeles dedicated to sharing testimonies about the redemptive bonds of care and love between homeless persons and their canine companions. These testimonies politicize the structural violence and oppressive norms about propertied citizenship and notions of home that operate to render homeless human and animal lives disposable and ungrievable. Informed by the experts' testimonies on multispecies homelessness and an engagement with feminist care theory, we bring relational poverty studies into conversation with critical animal studies to reject this framing of homeless lives as disposable and to trouble the idea of property as the fundamental basis for value. We problematize these notions by highlighting the insights gained from witnessing the entangled empathetic relationships forged between homeless humans and dogs. These relationships are not only a window into the political economic material conditions and discourses that reproduce homelessness and the animal-as-property. We conclude that studying these bonds offers a collective politics of multispecies mutuality, care, and love.

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Care; relational poverty; animal studies; homelessness; structural violence; property

The animals don't care that you're homeless, they love you anyway. (Lynn, MDIMH)

If I didn't have them [dogs Melanie, Anastasia, and Roxy] I don't know where I would be right now... When I have them, I am a better person. (Judie, MDIMH)

I am a somebody, not a nobody. If it weren't for Prince, I wouldn't be here right now. (Myra, MDIMH)

Introduction

How does companionship between homeless people and dogs create a sense of home and care for lives lived on the streets? What does interspecies

interdependency and love reveal about structural violence and oppressive norms? Speculatively, how might these relationships open the possibility of articulating new political subjectivities and a feminist politics of care? We explore these questions about poverty, home, and multispecies care through a reading of *My Dog is My Home* (MDIMH): The Experience of Human-Animal Homelessness (<http://mydogismyhome.com/>, hereafter MDIMH), an online art activist project centered on testimonials by people living on the streets of U.S. cities about their redemptive bonds with their dog companions.

Judith Butler asks: 'what makes for a grievable life?' (Butler 2004, 20). In posing this question she considers what makes some deaths unremarkable. Lives framed as disposable are rendered ungrievable, unqualified for recognition, even as those lives set the terms for what is respectable and legible. Butler argues that grief and loss make visible the fundamental relationality of beings, '... reveal[ing] the social conditions of our formation' and further argues that in-common experiences of violence and emotion are potential bases for human (and we argue, multispecies) community, connection, and alliance (Butler 2004, 22). In extending Butler's humanist articulation of relationality, we utilize Lori Gruen's framework of 'entangled empathy' to theorize the unique multispecies entanglements occurring among homeless lives lived on the streets. Gruen describes entangled empathy within and between different species as

a type of caring perception focused on attending to another's experience of wellbeing. [Entangled empathy is] an experiential process involving a blend of emotion and cognition in which we recognize we are in relationships with others and are called upon to be responsive and responsible in these relationships by attending to another's needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes, and sensitivities. (Gruen 2015, 3)

The testimonies on MDIMH express love and care for their dogs and remind us of commonalities between all persons who share their lives with animals. Following recent interventions from critical animal studies (Taylor 2008; Stanescu 2012), we extend Butler's inquiry to consider multispecies relations and their potential for raising critical awareness of interrelation and solidarity. Can acknowledging and empathizing with interspecies relationships move our understanding of lives on the streets from disposability to grievability? Does a re-reading of homeless dog-human connections produce in-common emotions of sorrow, grief, joy, and/or love, and can this politicize the framing of lives that have been deemed disposable? If homeless lives become grievable in this act of acknowledgement, does this challenge normative judgments that blame people who are economically marginalized and shift attention to structural violence and the root causes of poverty?

We intentionally begin by introducing the experts featured in MDIMH in the next section to highlight the centrality of their knowledge-making practices about poverty and multispecies care to our project. We then introduce our research approach wherein we read/view MDIMH as a deeply politicized social text. After situating those featured in MDIMH as the experts, and ourselves as researchers, we draw on feminist theorists of care to explore homeless multispecies relationships as

fruitful grounds for revealing structural violence and challenging oppressive norms (Donovan 1990; Fraser 2012; Parreñas 2012; Hovorka 2015; Lopez and Gillespie 2015). We conclude with a reflection on the possibilities of this project for shifting political subjectivity toward building a collective politics against violence.

Context for MDIMH: introducing the experts

As a lens through which to explore interspecies care and emotion, and to challenge the framing of homeless human and animal lives as disposable, we analyze the MDIMH art activism project. This project (<http://mydogismyhome.com/>) was originally shown as the inaugural exhibit for the National Museum of Animals and Society in Los Angeles and is now available to view as an online installation. It has also grown into a nonprofit organization working to address multispecies homelessness. MDIMH features multimedia artifacts that highlight the deeply felt relationships of care between homeless people and the dogs with whom they share their lives. MDIMH centers the experiences and knowledge of homeless people, framing them aptly as ‘the experts.’ The project also involves academics and advocates, but their role is decentered and framed as secondary to the kinds of knowledge-making and activism undertaken by those who live with dogs on the streets or in temporary shelters. Following their example, we have structured this article around foregrounding the experts of MDIMH.

The website itself is a visually rich archive, utilizing video, photography, and audio recordings and the exhibit draws together people from several U.S. cities, including Los Angeles, Dallas, Austin, and Santa Barbara. Combined with art and testimonials that comprise the collection, the site also utilizes graphic renderings of moments of care between humans and dogs, and key quotes from the experts are interspersed through the website to foreground their voices. To give a sense of the kinds of artifacts that make up the MDIMH collection: One focus is a series of paintings by homeless and at-risk individuals of their canine loved ones at a Dallas, Texas center (called The Stewpot). Another exhibit features Christopher Chinn’s sculptures of homeless people with their dogs, showing moments of tenderness and care occurring within these multispecies bonds. MDIMH also includes a collection of cardboard signs expressing different dimensions of life lived on streets and there is art created from shopping carts to emphasize the meaning and use of shopping carts to carry one’s important belongings in Santa Barbara, California. These forms of art are deeply moving and emphasize the power of art as activism.

In this article, however, we center two specific dimensions of MDIMH: video testimonials of homeless people sharing their lives with dogs in Los Angeles, and audio testimonials (accompanied by photographs) of people living with their dogs in Austin, Texas. These video and audio recordings capture individuals’ experiences of homelessness and their relationships of multispecies care in their own words. We learn from their experiences, knowledge, and voices to understand how the concepts of home, care, and political subjectivity are felt and enacted across species lines.

Los Angeles, California: Myra; Judie & Chris; Spirit; Brigitte

The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (2016) counted 28,464 homeless persons in the city of Los Angeles in 2016, an 11 percent increase from 2015; 75 percent of these people are unsheltered, representing a 21 percent increase in the unsheltered (vs. sheltered) population. Within the overall L.A. homeless population, people experience chronic homelessness (30%); mental illness (31%); chronic substance abuse (23%); domestic violence (17%); physical disability (19%); and 6 percent are veterans (ibid.). These experiences and their intersection with rendering people homeless point to structural conditions of violence that heighten precariousness and vulnerability. The root causes of homelessness in Los Angeles are complex, driven by a powerful downtown growth coalition of business and political leaders pushing gentrification and displacement of low income populations from the center city (Davis 2006). This has been coupled with steady deindustrialization since the 1990s as aerospace, light manufacturing, and garment production went offshore; replaced with low wage service and retail jobs at best. Deep economic dislocation has been coupled with Southcentral redlining and generations of political disenfranchisement for Latinx and African American populations from city leadership. As a result, Los Angeles is a deeply unequal city, with little affordable housing and over one million people without health insurance or adequate social services (Davis 1998, 2006). Further, those disenfranchised, impoverished, and living on streets have been corralled into 'containment districts' and subject to spatial exclusion laws that make them both visible and vulnerable to police and other forms of street violence (Davis 1998, 383–387). Linked up with the political and property disenfranchisement of Black and Latinx populations, homelessness is deeply racialized with 43 percent of homeless people in L.A. identifying as Black or African-American, 26 percent as Latinx or Hispanic, and 24 percent as White (ibid.; as compared with resident totals for the city identifying Black or African American 9.8 percent; Latinx 47.5 percent, and White 29.4 percent). Within the landscape of services for homeless persons, there are very few shelters or organizations that allow animals into shelter spaces, or that provide services that accommodate multispecies family relationships.

Within this context, we introduce the Los Angeles residents whose video testimonies are included as expert knowledge on the MDIMH website. We refer to the experts in the way they have introduced themselves, using their real names (not pseudonyms); some, like Myra and Brigitte, have provided their full names, whereas most introduce themselves using only their first names.

Myra and Prince: Myra Vandenberg is an L.A. resident who is retired from show business; she never thought she would be homeless but found herself without a home. Myra and Prince (a small dog) found each other while living on the streets; Myra explains that she bought Prince from a man who was trying to trade him for drugs. Myra expresses that Prince protected her when they were living on the streets; he would keep watch while she was sleeping. She accessed PATH,

an organization with multiple locations dedicated to shelter and other services (including a pathway to permanent housing) for homeless people in Los Angeles (and throughout Southern California), and Prince stayed in the accompanying kennel at one of PATH's locations. Working with PATH, eight months later, Myra moves into an apartment with Prince.

Judie, Melody, Anastasia, Roxy, and Chris: Judie lives with her fiancée, Chris, and her three canine companions, Melody, Anastasia, and Roxy, in West L.A., in a tent under a bridge. Judie became homeless when she was sixteen because her mother was in an abusive relationship and so she left home. Judie came to live with Melody, Anastasia, and Roxy on the streets; they provide protection and let her know when she is about to have a panic attack. Judie expresses the difficulty of accessing services for homeless individuals and especially for people with dogs. Anastasia and Melody are service dogs (animals trained to assist persons with disabilities), but Roxy is not and this complicates Judie's ability to access Section 8 (U.S. government assisted housing), where regulations differ on allowing animals not categorized as 'service animals' (a concern echoed across other testimonies). Five months later, Judie is interviewed again; she is pregnant and plans to return home to her mother's house to give birth. She will leave the dogs with Chris and then plans to return with the baby and get an apartment with Chris and Melody, Anastasia, and Roxy.

Spirit, Kyya, and Miniaga: Spirit was living with, and caring for, his father when he adopted Kyya as a puppy. Kyya became a source of conflict between Spirit and his father, who eventually told Spirit that he had to leave if he wanted to keep Kyya. At that point, Spirit began sleeping in his car with Kyya and later stayed in an emergency shelter where the shelter manager allowed him to sleep on a cot with his dogs. Spirit expresses the difficulty of accessing services for himself because he must find a place where the dogs are permitted to stay. Two months after Spirit's initial testimony, he was able to move into a studio apartment in East L.A. where he can work, create art, and live with Kyya and Miniaga (who are registered service animals).

Brigitte and Nubia: Brigitte M. Smith lives in downtown L.A. with her service dog Nubia. Thirteen years earlier, Brigitte lost her son; after this profound experience of loss, Brigitte was diagnosed with depression and anxiety, and was hospitalized. Soon after her hospitalization, she became homeless. A friend gave her Nubia as a gift to keep her company and provide emotional support. At first, Brigitte says, she didn't want an animal, but once she met Nubia, she loved her. Brigitte explains that she only accesses places where Nubia can go, too. Five months after her initial testimony, Brigitte and Nubia move into Section 8 housing in L.A. Founder and director of MDIMH, Christine Kim, shared with us that, during the writing of this article, Brigitte and Nubia lost their apartment when the building was taken over by new management. The new manager no longer accepted Section 8 and Brigitte was not able to find a new place that accepted Section 8 in time.

Austin, Texas

The January 2016 Point-in-Time count of homeless individuals in Austin, Texas estimated 2,138 individuals experiencing homelessness; this represents a 17 percent increase from 2015 (EHC 2016). Within the Austin homeless population, 70 percent are unsheltered; 45 percent report having mental health issues; 38 percent report substance use and addiction struggles (ibid.). Demographically, 42 percent of Austin's homeless population identify as African American (ibid.; compared with 8 percent of residents identifying as Black or African American for the city overall). Ending Community Homelessness Coalition argues that, like L.A., Austin has experienced a dramatic rise in homelessness in recent years because of a housing and affordability crisis resulting from rising housing costs coupled with limited affordable housing. These recent trends build on a long history of racial segregation dating to the 1930s city ordinance that segregated African American residents into the East Austin 'negro district,' followed by redlining and 'Caucasian-only' residential covenants, and recently the 2008 mortgage crisis, all of which drastically limited minority homeownership and wealth accumulation and increased the vulnerability of Black and Latinx populations (Tretter 2012; Zehr 2015). In addition, stagnant wages (especially for low-income workers), lack of an adequate social services safety net and the criminalization of homeless people disqualifies them from rental housing in the city (EHC 2016). As in L.A., Austin organizations serving homeless individuals and families do not often accommodate the presence of animals; Animal Trustees of Austin, however, is one organization that runs 4PAWS (For People and Animals Without Shelter) program to respond to multispecies homelessness.

For Austin, MDIMH includes six audio testimonies, paired with photographic portraits of the experts and their dogs, to share their experiences of care and love with their dogs. Unlike the video testimonies, which share somewhat fuller autobiographical accounts of what led to their becoming homeless as well as how they came to meet their canine companions, the audio testimonies share snippets of what these bonds mean to the humans who are interviewed. These multispecies family portraits show tenderness and intimacy, joy and solemnity, as the humans in the photos embrace and hold the dogs, emphasizing the love and care within these bonds.

Sandra and Harley: Sandra and Harley are photographed close-up, with solemn expressions as they sit side by side, Harley leaning against Sandra. Sandra shares her experience of the unique love that she and Harley share: 'I've never had a dog; I like dogs, but they never seem to like me ... but she loved me from the beginning.'

Connor and Super Max: Photographed from behind, Connor is seated, embracing Super Max in his lap; Super Max's eyes are closed and his head is nestled over Connor's shoulder. Connor found Super Max as a newborn puppy in the Santa Cruz mountains: 'he's kind of a big deal ... to me at least, you know?'

'Pops' and Wednesday: 'Pops' and Wednesday are photographed sitting in the grass; 'Pops' is holding Wednesday in his arms, with a big smile and eyes closed, while she nuzzles his cheek affectionately. 'Pops' says: 'They're like having a kid, and it makes you concentrate more on surviving each day ... She comes first, before I do.'

Lynn and Charlie: Lynn and Charlie are pictured sitting on the sidewalk, Lynn bent over holding Charlie close to her. Lynn says:

That makes the bond greater, knowing that I'm not alone out here. He's always going to be there. And I think he thinks the same thing. He knows I'm never going to leave him. I'm always going to be here. Without Charlie, there's nothing. I love him.

Maggie and Eric with Dixie and Reptar: Maggie and Eric are sitting cross-legged under an overpass, with Dixie and Reptar sitting on their laps. Maggie explains:

She also keeps me all around happy. I don't like saying I own this dog, she's like my companion. I like the word companion better. They are, like, your best friend ... Everything will always be ok as long as I have Dixie.

Jedd and Alice: Jedd is photographed with Alice sitting on top of his shoulders. He says: 'She's a blessing to me. She's my heart, you know. She's there for me.'

Research approach

As authors, our research trajectories focus on power imbalances, political economy, and care in seemingly unrelated contexts. Gillespie's work is focused on the commodification and violence to which nonhuman animals are subjected in service to routine human activities. Lawson's research is centered on relational poverty politics and the possibilities generated by bringing critical poverty studies and feminist care ethics together to create alliances dedicated to addressing social inequality. What connects our research is a commitment to critiquing and transforming structural violence and its embodied effects through a feminist ethics of care. Over the years, we have engaged in recurring conversations about how people move from emotions – like grief – to politics. Drawing from insights offered by our respective fields of scholarship (critical animal studies and relational poverty studies), we explore this question through an empirical case that encompasses both these fields. Through her involvement in the broader animal advocacy movement in the U.S., Gillespie has been following MDIMH since the exhibit opened, thinking that this is a project from which to learn about connections between emotion, care, and politics in a context of multispecies poverty politics. Thus, drawing on our previous research experiences and theoretical frameworks, we engage with MDIMH as both an artifact and an archive, an activist project and a politicization of caring bonds among those who are often overlooked or ostracized. One of the things that we have both found so moving about MDIMH is its insistence on reframing the visual and spoken representation of people who find themselves without conventional homes; in other words, MDIMH centers the words, art, and

experiences of homeless people and their dogs in a way that emphasizes the complex and caring aspects of their entangled lives.

We recognize that we come to this analysis of MDIMH with our own perspectives on impoverishment, animality, and care; these are shaped not only by our positionality as academic scholar-activists, but also by our experiences as White residents of the U.S. who have not experienced homelessness ourselves. We recognize the power imbalance and distancing effects our positionality may have on our analysis, and work diligently to avoid coopting knowledge produced by the experts of MDIMH. Rather, this article centers the words and experiences of these experts and their knowledge of multispecies care and poverty politics. We humbly believe that there is much to learn from the insights and beauty in these heartfelt expressions of care, as well as the daily realities of living without a permanent home, that are expressed on MDIMH. Our goal is to learn from these testimonies to advance theoretical ideas about multispecies impoverishment as a guide for political transformation.

As such a rich visual archive and artifact, MDIMH could be analyzed through a range of lenses; as one reviewer aptly pointed out, for instance, the process by which the exhibit is curated – questions of who and what was involved in the curation – would be a fascinating site of feminist knowledge-making analysis. However, our empirical research approach, as noted above, engages two specific dimensions of MDIMH as an exhibit as it is represented online: video testimonials of homeless people sharing their lives with dogs in Los Angeles, and audio testimonials (accompanied by photographs) of people living with their dogs in Austin. Our approach is inspired by other work analyzing media and photographic representations of relational poverty/race (Knowles 2006; Lancione 2014). Hawkins (2013), for example, draws attention to the politics of aesthetic geographies (like art and photography) and so informs our examination of the ways in which MDIMH uses art to make visible – and, importantly, to politicize – human-animal homelessness (see also Penner and Penner 1994 on the depoliticization of homelessness in editorial cartoons). MDIMH also frames itself as an exhibit that foregrounds underrepresented groups and particularly the voices of people living in multispecies homeless relationships. In so doing, the exhibit disrupts dominant visual representations of homeless lives that objectify silent, solitary, faceless, voiceless, and often recumbent individuals as ‘the homeless’ read through, and reinforcing, dominant cultural framings of homeless people as lazy, irresponsible, or criminal individual (predominantly) males (Elwood, Lawson, and Nowak 2015).

Starting from this disruptive approach of MDIMH, we build a content analysis of the video and audio testimonies and code recurring themes identified by people who are themselves living multispecies homeless lives. The experts identify themes such as property and value, the disposability of homeless lives, lack of health care, exposure to violence, insufficient social services, and multispecies relations of love and care. Attending to expert accounts of their own lived experiences, we theorize the role of structural violence and the role of social norms in governing the possibilities for care-as-politics in multispecies contexts.

Why human-dog homelessness? Grief, care, and politics

We focus on humans and dogs experiencing homelessness because we are concerned with the way certain lives are made invisible and disposable through structural violence and oppressive norms. Homelessness and other forms of poverty in the U.S. are associated with a hegemonic ‘common sense’ that renders human beings disposable, as less-than-human, as non-citizens. Narratives of threatening, disgusting, criminal poor people pervade the mainstream media, popular culture, and political discourse (Schram 2000; Jarosz and Lawson 2002; Elwood, Lawson, and Nowak 2015). Many nonhuman animal species are also treated as disposable, as pests, food, research subjects, commodities, and these categories justify their exploitation and render their lives ungrievable (Taylor 2008; Stanescu 2012; Lopez and Gillespie 2015). Although pets, too, are routinely commodified or disposable if their care becomes inconvenient, and categorized as property, they also often occupy important places in our homes and hearts as cherished family members and companions (Haraway 2008). Thus, the human-dog bond may be a site for attending to how relationships of interspecies care can unsettle dominant narratives about poverty and animality that sustain disposability. Drawing on feminist care theory, we bring together two areas of scholarship that are not frequently in conversation – relational poverty research and critical animal studies – to conjure new understandings in close collaboration with testimonies from homeless people in relation with their dogs about the politics of poverty and animality.

Feminist relational analyses emphasize the fundamental interconnectedness of all subjects as an ontological claim and a theoretical orientation (Hooks 1984; Crenshaw 1991; Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1991; Butler 2004). We explore the interconnections between homeless persons and dogs to challenge normative and politicized understandings of homeless people as irresponsible, dangerous, and less-than-human and homeless dogs as disposable, out-of-place, and killable. Relational poverty theorists foreground the dialectical roles played by political economic relations and racialized productions of identity and discourse in the governance, surveillance, and exclusion of impoverished subjects (Gilbert 1998; Ehrenreich 2001; Lawson and Elwood 2014). This work traces how processes of gender, race, ability, and nationality intersect with material forces that dispossess, exploit, and exclude economically marginalized and homeless persons; rendering them ungrievable (Schram 2000; Nagar et al. 2002). Dramatic racial disproportionality among homeless people in Los Angeles and Austin, described above, arises from the central role of racist, White supremacist hegemony in producing political-economic exclusions that explain lack of access to shelter and livable incomes (Roy 2003; Carter 2011; Elwood, Lawson, and Nowak 2015). However, critical consideration of nonhuman animals has largely been omitted from relational scholarship on poverty. Irvine’s (2013) research is an exception that focuses on homeless human-dog relations to reveal how human-dog connections are produced through relations of care. Taking seriously these embodied and emotional

bonds of connection extends poverty research because they foreground mutuality, other-regardingness, and love among homeless people and challenge dominant framings of people in poverty as flawed, irresponsible, and in need of reform.

Feminist analyses have also extended to considerations of nonhuman life as ecofeminists and animal geographers have long drawn attention to nonhuman-ness as a site of marginalization and oppression (Donovan 1990; Elder, Wolch, and Emel 1998; Emel 1998; Kheel 2008; Deckha 2012; Hovorka 2012; Gaard 2013; Adams and Gruen 2014; Sundberg 2014). This work focuses on the interlocking oppressions related to gender, race, and animals and insists on recognizing the subjectivity of nonhuman animals in feminist care theory. This body of work also focuses on how hierarchies of power work to oppress certain marginalized (human and animal) lives and produce exclusion and disposability. Understanding the fullness of these multispecies relationships pries open normative categories that posit flawed, dangerous, disposable, and killable homeless lives.

Human-dog relations in MDIMH actively produce caring and relatable, rather than disposable, subjects. The interrelations between people and dogs challenge dominant framings of homeless lives, reframing them in caring terms as joyful and loving. This reframing matters because it challenges dominant constructions of homeless people as violent, irresponsible, pitiful, and anti-social (see other challenges to this dominant framing: Sibley 1995; Elwood, Lawson, and Nowak 2015). Further, in articulating deep emotional bonds, the MDIMH testimonies between homeless people and their dogs reveal intimate and bodily causes of homelessness such as domestic violence, (mental) illness, and disability. Further, through providing care for their dogs and expressing frustrations at the lack of services that will keep their dogs safe, homeless persons voice vital criticisms of social, political, and economic processes that exclude and discriminate against them. In so doing, the experts articulate care as a politics that argues for social change.

In addition to re-scripting understandings of homeless lives themselves, we argue that feminist care theory foregrounds the potential for emotion, empathy, and 'caring about' that might bring homed persons to learn about the conditions that produce homeless lives (Butler 2004). Our project explores the salience of what Jaggar (1989) and Fraser (2012) term 'outlaw' or 'bellweather' emotions such as anger, outrage, and grief that may arise in the witnessing of multispecies homeless bonds. These are outlaw emotions in that they access a sense of injustice that can bring the witness to new understandings of the workings of power. Within feminist care theory, Gruen's (2015) notion of entangled empathy operates as one such 'outlaw' emotion. Empathy emerging within these human-dog relations radically personalizes broader relational encounters; the experts' expressions of entangled empathetic relationships with their dogs (relationships of care, love, worry, and deep feeling) personalize their lives and experiences. These stories of empathetic entanglement also relate how these relationships are produced within, and impacted by, structural violence and oppressive norms. Thus, not only does entangled empathy describe the relationships occurring between homeless

persons and dogs in these testimonies, but further, entangled empathy functions as a framework that highlights human relationships of power, violence, love, and care with other humans and in relation with other species.

In MDIMH, we use entangled empathy as a framework of politicized emotional engagement to identify two key sites where feminist care theory helps us to bring relational poverty politics and critical animal studies into conversation. First, it facilitates a re-reading of homeless lives not for ‘flawed individuals’, but rather, for structural violence. Second, these testimonies, understood in the context of entangled empathy, challenge norms that oppress by centering the feelings and material experiences of those framed as ‘other’ that blow apart discourses about homeless lives. In particular, these expert testimonies challenge norms of ‘home,’ ‘propertied citizen(ship)’ and ‘animal as property.’ Taken together, these insights return us in the conclusions to feminist care as politics: we argue for continuing research on how geographically contextualized, entangled empathy (foregrounding insights from MDIMH experts) facilitates a move from emotion to political action. We argue that political subjects and the potential for new multispecies articulations of political action can be understood through multispecies bonds.

Structural violence in homeless lives

Informed by MDIMH testimonies, we trace the ways in which structural violence produces and threatens the wellbeing of those living without a conventional home. Learning about how dogs came to live on the streets reveals how dogs are framed as property that either circulates value or is treated as excess. Stories told by homeless humans enrich understandings of disposability by revealing the multiple ways in which they experience violence and/or are denied health or shelter services.

Decades of scholarship on urban homelessness have traced the rise of the revanchist city and the exclusion, banishment, and extermination of homeless people (Davis 1990; Smith 1996; Mitchell 2003). In this familiar, but abstracted story of structural violence, homeless lives are shaped by interconnected forces of intensifying gentrification, state retrenchment in social provisions and punitive governance over, and representations of, homeless lives (Davis 1990, 1998; Cloke, May, and Johnsen 2010; Carter 2011). Indeed, as we recounted above, these forces are all at work in both Los Angeles and Austin. However, MDIMH testimonies tell more intimate and embodied stories of structural violence that provide a deeper understanding of how structural violence operates to produce seemingly disposable lives, revealing the absence of health care, frequent experiences of direct violence, lack of living wage work, and unaffordable housing as central causes of human poverty and homeless lives.

These testimonies also uncover framings of animal life as ownable and disposable, as these were often the conditions that precipitated the relationships of multispecies intimacy described in the testimonies. Dogs’ simultaneous status as

property and companion, as capital and caring subject, as disposable and grievable is understood through the conflicting relations that situate them as subjects of power and care, violence and love; these interwoven dimensions of multispecies relationships are key themes in the testimonies (Tuan 1984; Haraway 2008). These conceptualizations of dogs as property and as disposable are at the root of the kind of structural violence to which nonhuman animals are exposed. Myra, for instance, describes how she came to share her life with her dog Prince, illustrating that it was Prince's ability to circulate as capital that brought them together, and that would have led him to a different, uncertain fate:

I remember my good friend had Prince ... and he was so tiny with these big old ears and big paws. And I said 'oh, he's such a cute doggie!' And one day he was trying to sell Prince for a twenty-dollar bag, and I got mad and I said 'don't you sell that dog for no twenty-dollar bag of speed.' And he said, 'but Myra, I need it, I need a fix.' And I said, 'I'll give you fifty dollars for the dog.' And he said, 'he's all yours,' and he picked him up and gave him to me. And I was, like, stunned, and I looked at Prince and he lay down and I remember getting on my knees and I vowed to him, 'from this moment on, I will never ever desert you like that man just did,' and we have been inseparable ever since. (Myra, MDIMH)

Similarly, Judie highlights the dual structural logics of commodification (or the property status of animals) and disposability governing many animals' lives and how these led to her adoption of her three dogs. Judie purchased Melody through a newspaper ad placed by a couple who fought pit bulls for a living (a practice which commodifies dogs for their ability to fight each other); Anastasia was unwanted and Judie intervened when a woman was preparing to put her out on the streets (her care had become inconvenient and her disposability enabled her to be discarded); and Roxie was also unwanted and discarded because she was blind (breeders and owners will regularly discard dogs born with disabilities or 'imperfections' that compromise their monetary value). In response to the rendering of these dogs as sellable and disposable, Judie emphasizes that her love for them, and her commitment to their care, is rooted in her belief that 'every animal deserves a life. If I didn't have them, I don't know where I would be right now.' She goes on to explain how many animals on the streets are abandoned, discarded and unwanted, and in need of care, and these sentiments echo the struggles of mental, emotional, and physical health experienced by their human caretakers.

As the testimonies make clear, mental health struggles experienced by homeless persons are often deeply linked to personal and societal trauma. Judie, with her fiancée Chris and her dogs Melody, Anastasia, and Roxy, explains that she became homeless at sixteen due to gender violence in her mother's home. She struggles with anxiety and panic attacks and two of her dogs are service animals who alert her when people approach and/or when she is about to have a panic attack. Her dogs help her cope with mental illness, even as city service providers did not deem her disability sufficient to provide her with services. Brigitte's traumatic experience of losing her son, paired with her mental illness and lack of a social safety net,

precipitated her homelessness. Nubia, her service dog, helps her cope with her anxiety, depression, and grief and she explained, '... she makes me feel like I have a reason to be here'. Lynn described how her dog Charlie has saved her life three times. She has seizures and had a heart attack and Charlie alerted people and took them to her where she was unconscious under a parking garage stairwell. Spirit's role of caregiving for his father highlights the undervaluation of care, particularly when provided by adult men. He explains that once he became homeless, he was able to provide for his dogs while on the streets through the organization PAWS/LA, but the hardest part of homelessness was the lack of services available for himself. These testimonies shine light on the links between homelessness, mental and/or physical illness, bereavement, the devaluation of care and being unable to access services or adequately paid work. A chronic lack of affordable health care and an ever-shrinking U.S. social safety net are proximate causes of homelessness in Los Angeles and Austin. The underlying causes of these vulnerabilities are deeper of course; these testimonies point to structural violence of state retrenchment and lack of public investment in health, housing, and the social safety net.

All of the testimonies describe homeless people's experiences of violence on the streets: violence that is itself rooted in widespread (mis)representations of people living on the streets as dangerous, criminal, and disposable (described and critiqued in Davis 1990; Smith 1996; Cloke, May, and Johnsen 2010; Elwood, Lawson, and Nowak 2015; Sparks 2010). MDIMH testimonies bring into sharp relief how dog-human relationships offer protection for homeless people as they creatively navigate and resist their own marginalization and devaluation. Myra talks about how her dog Prince protected her when she slept on the street, revealing the constant vulnerability and violence that she experienced. 'Pops' also explains that his dog Wednesday keeps him safe saying, '... they are protection to wake you up at night because it is dangerous out here on the streets'. These stories draw attention to not only homeless people's intimate experiences of gendered, classed, and racialized violence but also the ways in which they create spaces of love and security on the streets with dogs and other humans. Even as these stories reveal ongoing structural violence, these intimate stories of lives-in-relation are also always attentive to heartfelt crisis, love, and care, revealing needs, vulnerabilities, and agency that make up homeless lives. In this way, these stories challenge dominant norms about homeless human and animal lives, redefining how home, citizenship, and subjectivity are articulated and enacted.

Challenging norms

What is home? Is it four walls? Or can it be built in the heart of a loved one? What if that heart belonged to someone with four paws? (Homepage, MDIMH)

Multispecies homeless relations challenge the norms that make some lives disposable. Norms frame embodiment, behavior, and morality by exercising

disciplinary power through defining ‘proper and improper’ categories of subjects (Foucault 1990; Spade and Wilse 2015). Societal norms circulate as systems of control that define which racialized, classed, and propertied subjects can engage in particular behaviors on the streets, in public spaces, and in how ‘family’ is defined. And indeed, the structural conditions that render many people vulnerable to homelessness disproportionately impact communities of color (and Black and Latinx communities especially, in Los Angeles and Austin, and in other parts of the U.S.). Homelessness in the U.S. is defined as ‘... those who lack regular access to fixed and legal nighttime residence’ (Sparks 2010, 847), a frame that normalizes home as physical property, legally designated rights to dwell in a space and privacy inside it. Homeless lives, constructed as a constant threat to propertied and private homes, are constantly devalued and marginalized through cultural tropes of pathology, laziness, and dangerousness that frame their ‘improperness’ (Sparks 2010).

In sharp contrast, MDIMH testimonies situate loving and caring human-dog relations on the streets, and in so doing, these relationships resist the norm of home as a specific behavior, place, or private property. To be sure, many of the testimonies express the absolute need for a home in the form of conventional housing, and those who obtain permanent housing – like Myra, Spirit, and Brigitte (albeit briefly) – see this as an indication of a more stable and less difficult life: Myra says,

I’m very grateful to God that I was able to come off the street and I did this more so, not only for me, but for Prince as well. Because he deserves a home. He deserves a home. I’m in my apartment finally, after all this time, and I’m here to tell you that I am so happy. It really wasn’t easy to get to where I am right now ... I’m enjoying this little single. It’s very comfortable for us and Prince is having a great time.

But the testimonies also emphasize that home is situated in the relation itself. MDIMH articulates a more robust conception of home: home as a connection – where the dog-human bond is – that happens in public and outside of private property. These multispecies relations of love and protection invite a rethinking of home as entangled empathetic relation, narrated through desires, needs, and care for each other. In his testimony, Spirit expresses the centrality of the care and love of his dogs Miniaga and Kyya to his life and happiness. He says,

They mean everything to me, and I mean everything to them. My love for my animals is the primary source of my joy ... All these people who were homeless, who were thrown away from their families, they started to gravitate to my animals ... I’m always with my animals; I feel like something’s wrong if I don’t have them with me ... You need love in your life, and I have unconditional love with Miniaga and Kyya, and through that, it invigorates me. It forces me to get up the next day. To see through clearly what I need to do, and focus. Not for myself, but for them.

These homeless multispecies relationships reframe what home is (and what constitutes family, as well), and how, as a relation, it might be enacted.

These relationships do so through challenging the contexts within which they can or should exist. Western ideas about human-dog relationships dictate that

dogs are kept safe and healthy by housing them, whereas these human-dog relations are enacted on the streets. Dogs in U.S. or U.K. contexts are expected to live and be cared for in homes; dogs residing in the streets are seen as 'strays,' as out-of-place, and thus conceptualized as 'pests' to be managed, contained, sheltered, even eradicated (Srinivasan 2013). Homeless multispecies relationships of care, love, and empathy disrupt this conceptualization of where, how, and whether dogs are cared for by transforming the geographic and embodied norms of human-dog encounters and lived experiences. Indeed, the very healthiness of the dogs whose stories populate MDIMH challenges normative conceptions of what constitutes 'proper' care. 'Pops' explains in his testimony,

I've seen people that have houses that neglect dogs. But most of the people I know who live out here on the streets, their dogs are healthy and they're happy ... I've had people look at me and say 'oh man, you neglect your dog' and then they get to looking at her and they see how big and healthy she is and they change their mind.

'Pops' and Wednesday trouble expectations about 'proper' care and responsibility, challenging not only norms about home, but also about responsibility and citizenship.

Just as MDIMH resists the norm of home as private, physical space, the MDIMH testimonies also challenge the norm of propertied citizenship wherein claims on the state are rooted in respectability, morality, and property rights (Roy 2003; Sparks 2010). Sparks (2010, 847) explains that propertied citizenship emerges '... from a historical context in which property has often signified not just wealth, but virtue, self-reliance, and fitness for liberal citizenship ...' The result of these presuppositions is a form of differential citizenship wherein the homeless are framed as liberal citizenship's non-autonomous, irrational, and dependent 'other.' Homeless lives are viewed as morally deficient: read as not self-reliant enough, nor hard-working enough to secure a home. The testimonies on MDIMH not only challenge propertied citizenship, but also the norm of the animal-as-property. As we have explained, many of these dogs were discarded, no longer valuable as property, they represented the excess of the pet commodity circuit. But MDIMH challenges the idea that these animals have no value, rather they are integral to these empathetic entanglements that make meaningful lives outside of the property relation. These testimonies fundamentally question the property basis of value.

Of course, there are those who respond to human-dog homelessness with disbelief and even hostility at the thought of homeless people having responsibility for a dog. Irvine (2013) narrates an early encounter with a homeless man and his dog (prior to beginning her work with homeless communities), where she is more concerned for the dog than for the man, offering him water and food for his dog, only to discover that he already had both of those things. Then, believing a homeless person could not possibly responsibly care for a dog, she offers to buy the dog. Angry, the man asks her to leave them alone, and she finally calls Animal Control to report the man, but in answering the officer's questions, she must acknowledge

that the dog appears to be in excellent condition and well-cared-for. This example shows a response to human-dog homelessness that illustrates the impulse to blame people for their own poverty, as (prior to going on to engage in moving and important critical scholarship and activism on human-animal homelessness) Irvine sees the dog as somehow innocent and in need of care, and the man as neither deserving of care nor capable of giving care.

But MDIMH blows apart this assumption that homeless people are irresponsible or unfit to provide care, and highlights the dog's role as not just 'innocent, dependent, care-receiver' as Irvine's example implies, but instead that dogs and humans are both givers and receivers of care in empathetic multispecies entanglements. Multispecies relationships lived on the streets can be ones of intense care and responsibility. The testimonies express how relationships of care and empathy, and the creation of a sense of 'home' lived in relation on the streets, give meaning and purpose to the people who care for them, creating a rupture in negative tropes about homeless people. 'Pops,' talking about Wednesday, says,

she comes first, before I do. I mean, I always make sure she's got food and water. I carry two backpacks: one's mine and, you know, I carry a second one that's full with nothing but stuff that belongs to her.

This prioritization of the dogs' care and wellbeing is echoed across the testimonies and challenges normative ideas about the poor 'other' as irresponsible.

Not only do these experts express how they experience increased feelings of safety and a sense of home with their dogs, but also their lives and relationships refuse common cultural narratives of irresponsibility, dangerousness, and disposability. Their testimonies open up how all involved are creating intimate and loving lives in the face of disposability and ungrievability; creating joyful and loving liveliness in the face of structural violence. Just as the testimonies often illustrated that it was animals' property status and the structural violence to which they are subjected that led homeless persons to find companionship with these dogs, the love and empathy experienced between them – the companionship, the creation of home – highlights that they are more than capital, property, and disposable subjects. They (humans and animals) are companions, loved ones, family members, all active agents in making meaningful lives. Thus, these multispecies relationships of care lived on the streets rupture norms about how and in what ways humans live with other species, about who is deserving of care and capable of giving it, and, ultimately, about how notions of home, citizenship, and responsibility are understood.

Conclusions: feminist care as politics

We have drawn on feminist care theorists Judith Butler and Lori Gruen to bring relational poverty analysis and critical animal studies into conversation to understand interspecies interdependency and love in homeless lives. We argue that multispecies homeless relationships offer fruitful grounds for challenging oppressive norms and shifting political subjectivity toward building a collective politics against violence.

The MDIMH expert testimonies point to structural violence and oppressive norms that reproduce homelessness but more importantly, they offer possibilities for new political understandings arising from multispecies relations rooted in entangled empathy. By sharing their entangled empathic relationships of attentiveness to the wellbeing of others and of responsiveness to each other's needs and desires, they reveal much that hegemonic narratives of homelessness work so hard to obscure: that homeless lives are valuable, loving, and grievable, not disposable.

Feminist care theory connects relational poverty work and critical animal studies through its attention to emotion and embodiment (Davidson, Bondi, and Smith 2007; Donovan and Adams 2007). Thein (2005, 453) argues that '[A]n emotional subject offers an intersubjective means to negotiating our place in the world ... attention to emotional geographies is an attention to relationality [and] intersubjectivity'. The deeply emotional testimonies by the MDIMH experts reveal the inseparable material and discursive conditions that produce the disposability of all homeless lives. Learning about the entangled empathetic relationships between homeless people and their dogs opens the possibility for more caring and more politicized ways of knowing. Caring about homeless lives starts the process of caring perception and prompts '... critical attention to the broader conditions that impact the wellbeing or flourishing of those with whom we are empathizing. This requires us to attend to things we might not have otherwise' (Gruen 2015, 52).

We are wary of the ways in which only homeless people caring for dogs, rather than homeless lives overall, might become the subjects of empathy (potentially valorizing the idea of the 'responsible individual pet owner'). We argue that these expert testimonies sharply uncover and push analysis into a critique of violence against all homeless lives. We have shown how these multispecies relationships can be a window into understanding broader systems of structural violence and challenging the oppressive norms that sustain this violence.

The testimonies do more than merely describe lives, they also politicize poverty, propertied citizenship, conceptions of home, and animals as property. They teach us that homeless lives are better understood when theorized in relation to capitalism, patriarchy, and through critiques of the human-animal divide. They reveal that the violence producing homelessness is both intimate and structural. By attending to embodied experiences of violence in all its forms, MDIMH testimonies connect feminist readings of the need for care with a political analysis of structural and discursive violence. The entangled empathy that sustains these multispecies families also powerfully reveals the ways in which the political-economic forces of gentrification and discrimination are sustained by cultural narratives that misrepresent homeless lives. The experts' stories refuse these misframings of their lives, revealing intense and beautiful relations of care and love. At the same time, the experts make deeply political arguments by rejecting any idea of homeless lives as disposable and by refusing the concept of property as the fundamental basis for value. Instead, MDIMH foregrounds multispecies mutuality, caring relations, and love as a basis for building a collective politics of anti-violence.

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