Summoning Cloud Coyotes

/Coyote alert / Coyote Pack Alert! / Coyote sighting / Coyote Sighting Alert / Coyote spotted 9:34am / Coyote Just Now! / Coyote on 16th street / Coyotes on 14th and Montana / Coyotes! / LARGE COYOTE / Coyote Season / Coyotes at it again / Another day, another coyote…/[1]

This is how coyotes move on Nextdoor. At once keyed to specific places and untethered in a ghostly digital space, coyotes circulate in the homely precincts of "the app where you plug into the neighborhoods that matter to you." Nextdoor is a location-based social media application that allows users in specific neighborhoods, defined by the app, to communicate directly with one another. Relations of territory, ownership and domestic belonging are built into the platform; "neighborhoods" are demarcated by an algorithm, and determine who can speak where and thus who should feel propriety over what spaces.

Nextdoor has become famous for enabling rich white communities to practice constant racial surveillance of their streets (Kurwa, 2019; Lambright, 2019; Payne, 2017). This atmosphere of racist paranoia has led critics to describe Nextdoor's "neighborhoods" as "digital gated communities" and "the app version of the midcentury suburb" (Levin, 2016). The company has tried to discourage such posts, but to little avail (Hetzner, 2019). Nextdoor users carry the territorial thinking and volunteer surveillance practiced on the app into their relations in physical space, creating an ongoing carceral and surveillance infrastructure (Benjamin, 2019; Bloch, 2022; Bridges, 2021).

In Los Angeles, Nextdoor is also a tool for residents to police coyotes. They do this not by directly interacting with the animals in question, but by summoning up what we call *cloud*

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coyotes. Los Angeles is coyote territory, and anyone who lives in the city can, if attentive and patient, catch a glimpse of one trotting down the street or furtively darting into darkness. But thanks to platforms like Nextdoor, it is also now *cloud coyote* territory. A sighting of a real coyote can suddenly and vividly animate a cloud coyote, which in turn can convince hundreds of commiserating neighbors that they too have seen a real coyote, even if they have not. Even a casual acquaintance with Nextdoor will demonstrate how often heated debates involving coyotes erupt on the platform. The cloud coyotes that result—animated images of fearful human-coyote relations—*are real* and laden with agency.

Summoning cloud coyotes has material consequences for real coyotes in the increasingly contentious coyote debates unfolding in LA and other cities like it. Refusing to stay put on Nextdoor, cloud coyotes trot from camera phone to neighborhood council to city government to other social media platforms, and animal coyotes can die as a result. Groups with names like #evictcoyotes and "Coyotes out of Downey" bluntly connect the politics of racist exclusion and housing insecurity to relations with nonhuman co-inhabitants, and, frequently, demand action from local politicians. In response, cities develop "coyote management plans" that encourage humans to change their ways: from managing waste and potential coyote habitat, to "hazing", to creating coyote sighting reporting systems, to programs for the outright trapping and killing of the local coyote population (Strauss et al., 2020). Cloud coyotes shape urban politics by performing a fantasy of 'coyoteness' that is more mobile, predatory, numerous, and terrifying than real coyotes can be. Cloud coyotes threaten the sanctity of homes and yards, they eat pets with impunity, and they even attack children.

Cloud coyotes, as an animated, digitally mediated fantasy structure, diagnose a perceived threat to a way of life in Los Angeles, that of *a 21st century urban settler colonial ecology*.

Settler colonialism is defined as an ongoing project of securing control (physical, legal, administrative) over territory currently occupied by non-indigenous residents (Wolfe, 1999); it also focuses attention on how private citizens—the settlers themselves—colonize a place, and not only the state, as is often implied in the simpler term colonization. Here we focus on how this project is also *ecological*: we follow Kyle Powys Whyte in viewing settler colonialism not only as a structure of power or a legacy of US history, but a remaking of ecological relations that produces what he calls a "vicious sedimentation" (Whyte, 2018).

This paper describes how cloud coyotes help structure ecological settler relations in contemporary Los Angeles. They do this by performing a threat and justifying a response that includes various attempts at extermination, containment, and assimilation, all of which—even supposedly humane alternatives—continue to further sediment forms of urban settler colonialism in urban Los Angeles. We focus on the urban aspect of settler colonialism here because cities offer both a recapitulation of earlier forms of land settlement (especially in the Western US) and also potential for resistance and transformation because of their heterogeneity (Porter and Yiftachel, 2017; Simpson and Bagelman, 2018). In cities, cloud coyotes enable a fantasy of "generalized domestication": they create a renewable threat that justifies individual and state action, but one that is impossible to overcome, thus serving as a permanent support for strengthening forms of property and control in specific ways (Hage, 2017). We show how cloud coyotes animate fear and anxiety around ownership and family, specifically pets and pet keeping in the yards and streets of LA. In Los Angeles, this fantasy has also been used by politicians to justify and renew policies of extermination that exemplify a hatred (often racialized) of both human and animal others. Humane alternatives, as hopeful as they are, repeat the themes of containment and assimilation at the heart of the structure of settler colonialism. Our conclusion

therefore turns to the question of what anticolonial coyote relations might look like in LA and beyond.

Background and Methods

At a broad theoretical level this paper engages with work on settler colonialism, and especially the debates around the centrality of ecology and domestication, where we rely on the work of Whyte and Hage, as well as others whose work educates our approach (Belcourt, 2014; Byrd, 2011; Callison, 2014; Cattelino, 2017; Coulthard, 2014; Hage, 2017; Liboiron, 2021; Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Simpson, 2014; Tuck and Yang, 2012; Whyte, 2018). Our study of the cloud coyote contributes to a growing interdisciplinary literature on urban wildlife in its relations with human inhabitants, and on urban coyotes in particular. Biologists and ethologists have developed a rich portrait of urban coyotes, tracing how they differ in diet (Bucklin et al., 2020; Larson et al., 2020; Lukasik and Alexander, 2011), behavior (Breck et al., 2019; Gehrt et al., 2011; Mowry et al., 2021; Niesner et al., 2021), and even evolutionary trajectory (Adducci et al., 2020; Schell et al., 2021) from their rural counterparts.

Wildlife managers and other government officials tasked with managing the contact zone between urban coyote and human lives depend on such studies, but also on a parallel literature about the human *perceptions* of coyotes. "Human dimensions" research on human-coyote conflict investigates how factors including identity, worldview, risk perception, and message framing shape people's desires and actions towards coyote cohabitants (Alexander and Draper, 2019; Draheim et al., 2013; Drake et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2016; Siemer et al., n.d.; Sponarski et al., 2018; Wilson and Rose, 2019). Much of this research is motivated by a desire to shift urban human-coyote relations away from models that assume the necessity of conflict and toward the possibility of "coexistence" between people and coyotes (Elliot et al., 2016; Weaver et al., 2023).

As Alexander and Draper argue, how people imagine whether animals belong somewhere has life-or-death consequences, and "the goal of co-existence with wildlife can be enhanced by a better understanding of such constructs about coyotes" (2021: 132).

We contribute to this literature, building on work that recognizes social media and other digital ecosystems as important places for the negotiation of human-animal relations. Hunold and Lloro show that feelings about coyotes do not arise from encounters with "actual coyotes" but, "almost always, from media representations." They explore how Facebook debates about coyotes contribute to the "assembly and emergence of multispecies landscapes as city residents debate what they know and how they feel about urban coyotes" (Hunold and Lloro, 2022: 161). Human representations of coyotes are often substantially more vicious and ubiquitous than their originals (Alexander and Quinn, 2011).

Our project, however, shifts scholarly attention from human perceptions *of* coyotes to the way coyotes and their digital avatars shape discursive space in conversation with human interlocutors. By contrast to experts who often interpret digital coyote discourse through the lens of misinformation, we broadly follow an approach that respects the agency of non-humans—in this case both fleshy coyotes and *collectively produced digital coyotes*, each of which are in active relation with humans that interact with them. Like Hunold, we approach cloud coyotes less for their representational content than for their agential capacities, asking not "what images of urban coyotes show, but what they do" (Hunold, 2022: 130). Recent work shows how animals are active agents in the production of multispecies relations, such as cougars on Vancouver Island (Collard, 2012: 24) or wolves as agents in the production of legal regimes of property (Ojalammi and Blomley, 2015). Our work takes inspiration from Lauren Van Patter's innovative exploration of coyotes as "actors who participate in the co-creation of shared urban worlds" via

methods aimed at letting coyotes "'speak for themselves' within multispecies research" (Van Patter, 2021: 2218).

Methodologically, the authors combine expertise in coyote ecology, literary analysis, and ethnographic inquiry, and pursued three forms of inquiry: first, long-term situated ethnographic observations and discussions with coyote experts, residents, and wildlife managers conducted between 2017 and 2023 (Niesner, 2023). Second, collection and analysis of an archive of over 400 conversations on Nextdoor from 2016-2019 (Altrudi and Kelty, 2022). And third, a literary and rhetorical analysis of the first two sources (interviews and Nextdoor discussions) as well as additional material collected from online sources such as Facebook and official websites (Robins, 2022). Ethnographic observations and interviews were gathered in accordance with standard anthropological methods (UCLA IRB #20-001925), and have been anonymized here. The methods and limitations for the collection of Nextdoor material extensively described in Altrudi and Kelty (2022), which used the same dataset. Nextdoor conversations are not survey data, nor statistically representative of Los Angeles, because Nextdoor itself is neither a survey tool nor representative in any way. Nextdoor is designed for neighbors to ask for help, offer advice, report events. Thus, conversations have a recognizable rhetorical structure, and it is primarily this structure that we analyze here. It is, however, a structure that is recapitulated in interviews, Facebook posts, and news articles, and official documents like coyote management plans suggesting that it is not simply confined to Nextdoor or social media. More importantly, Nextdoor conversations are more than just representations of opinions or ideologies: these conversations pragmatically animate animals in particular ways, and this is what we analyze here---a process of creating cloud coyotes. These are not opinions or ideas representing beliefs, but the real effects of real conversations on real animals. Our research goes beyond theories of

human-coyote conflict or relations, and into the more precise question of *settler*-coyote relations, because it opens up the possibility of specifying other kinds of relations that *involve* humans but are not *confined* by such a category.

What is a cloud coyote?

Cloud coyotes and their human non-companions perform in patterned, predictable ways in Nextdoor's precisely delimited "neighborhoods." Their virtual life often starts when a human encounters a real coyote: on a street, or in a yard, or sometimes on a surveillance camera:

> *just saw a large coyote in somones front yard… i think he is stalking our small*
> *pets.*

In some grim cases, they encounter only an index of the coyote in the form of a missing or dead cat or dog. But by summoning coyotes in the space of Nextdoor, they and their neighbors then amplify the experience, fill in details, extrapolate, debate, and enable their human handlers to perform a set of scripted responses.

They are not restricted to Nextdoor, but this particular platform—widely used in Los Angeles—is especially attuned to them.

> *He came across FOUR coyotes on the 4100 block of La Salle at Braddock.*
> *They were running in pairs, obviously hunting.*

Representing animals with digital tools can encourage certain kinds of relations, like care or commodification, and indeed, invoking a cloud coyote activates a set of relations that are structured by the platform and its role in the governmental, ecological, and historical relations of a place (von Essen et al., 2021). For Nextdoor, the defining affect is *ownership*: Nextdoor's neighborhoods are an intimate site for imagining urban space as owned by particular humans and in need of constant, vigilant settlement by them.

> *While I do not want to exterminate coyotes I believe the city should play a more active role in moving the coyotes back up to the mountains where they belong. AWAY from homes.*

Cloud coyotes prop up this imaginary precisely by threatening it, but it is a threat that turns out to be *impossible* to overcome, because cloud coyotes (unlike real coyotes) are unstoppable.

> *Coyotes don't understand the word coexist—that's ridiculous!*

And cloud coyotes don't stay put in Nextdoor. Those who have lost companion animals, or who have imagined losing companion animals, sometimes show up in the real spaces of city councils, wildlife hot-lines, and city streets. People in these spaces engage in displays of grief and anger over their loss; sometimes these displays look more like therapy than political activism or participation.

> *have you lost a pet to one of these Feral Doggies? Have you witnessed your pet being carried away after her spine has been snapped? As she uttered her last bone chilling warrior screech? Followed by her final grunt as she relinquished her power to the jaws that carried her away?*

Residents transform their grief into political demands to strengthen practices of settlement and control, as if "closure" must lead inevitably to "enclosure."

There is a temptation to see cloud coyotes—especially for those with real expertise about real, embodied coyotes—as vectors for inaccurate or bad faith information about the behaviors of their fleshy analogues. The focus can quickly shift from the cloud coyote to the misrecognizing human in need of correction, critique, or control (Drake et al., 2020; Oleyar, 2010; Sponarski et al., 2018). The solution, it would seem, is to provide more accurate information, to counter these beliefs and anxieties with the truth of coyote behavior.

> *Check out recent studies on breeding/population replacement - the studies indicate that even if you kill the alpha male and female… the so called betas step up their breeding… the overall population increases due to additional coyotes moving into the pack from outside in the absence of those alphas being gone.*

But summoning a cloud coyote on Nextdoor is not a way of making claims, true or false, about coyote behavior. Rather, it is a way of activating and reinforcing affects that, in turn, structure inhabitants' relations with land.

> *Coyotes do not share our natural habitat, because cities are not natural habitats. Nature, for the most part, is not allowed to rule in cities because man imposes his will on an area to create cities.*

Cloud coyotes are not misrepresentations; they are performative or imagistic, in Eduardo Kohn's sense. They are signs in a network that reverberates in lively ways. *If they represent anything, it is not a coyote but a particular idea about human-coyote relations*, which in turn draws on and resonates with human-human relations of various sorts. There is evident pleasure when Nextdoor users animate a cloud coyote, imagining its unstoppable power to stalk and kill, to hide and survive. Cloud coyotes have "worldly effects" not reducible to their referential relationship to the material human-coyote encounters that set them in motion (Kohn, 2013: 34). Those who animate cloud coyotes tend to be aware that they are doing so, in subtle ways:

> *Maybe you guys should start a post that's against coyote sighting posts and type all your grievances there amongst each other.*

Nextdoor activates a particular conception of free speech structured around territorial sovereignty: settlement and domestication. To act and speak on Nextdoor one must have a door—literally. It is impossible to join the platform without providing proof of a fixed address in the "neighborhoods" which determine the shape and relations of who can speak and where. As such, they are doubly designed to police certain kinds of people: migrants, unhoused people, criminalized people, and in our case, non-human animals. Cloud coyote behavior is shaped by these design affordances and animated by the desire for private property, dominion, exclusion, and the need for an ever-renewing threat that justifies the maintenance of these protected spaces.

It is up to humans, who have taken out their natural predators (wolves and mountain lions) to cull the herd. What do you think Animal "Control" does every single day of the week? You know that's a euphemism, right? Why is it okay to kill cats and dogs and not coyotes?

As conversations evolve, the comments involving cloud coyotes start to organize themselves into some basic categories: coexist, kick out, or kill. Even the apparent exceptions—posts telling coyote stories, sharing coyote data, imagining LA through coyote eyes—tend toward one of these three options. Users entertain these various coyote ends and proffer theories of who should be responsible for bringing them about. The question being worked out on Nextdoor is *what should be done* with coyotes—by the state or by settler-homeowners themselves. Residents debate because they want to know how to govern not only the coyotes, but themselves, their pets, and other people. Cloud coyotes are, ultimately, a tool for shaping distributed ecological practices of settler colonial governance.

#evictcoyotes

Coyote debates refuse to be only about coyotes. The language of coyote eradication moves in striking parallel with anti-homeless, anti-migrant, and anti-Black rhetorics. In Los Angeles, anti-coyote activists often explicitly invoke images of both legal and racial exclusion, including eviction specifically, as in names like "#evictcoyotes" or "Coyotes Out of Downey" (modeled on a previous group that called itself "Gangs Out of Downey"). Cloud coyotes animate desires for eradication, containment, and assimilation of human and non-human alike. As Boesel and Alexander argue, the social mechanisms that generate violence toward coyotes operate "synergistically" with structures that oppress some people in order to secure the perceived humanity of others (Boesel and Alexander, n.d.: 155).

The language of eviction is particularly salient, especially in a city with a growing population of un-housed people and a long history of race and class-based exclusion from

housing. Ananya Roy, for instance, has recently theorized eviction as "racial banishment" (Roy, 2017), a legal mechanism for policing a racialized category of personhood that depends on the right to claim property. That a comparable logic of banishment operates on Black people, unhoused people, and coyotes suggests that the spatial questions around which coyote debates are organized—Are coyotes "moving into" the city? Do they belong here? – are part of a broader project of defining and defending an exclusionary conception of the human.

The name "#evictcoyotes," for example, secures for anti-coyote activists a privileged claim to belonging while insisting that coyotes, like those unable to pay rent, should be evicted. Benedicte Boisseron calls this form of negative association "becoming against," which names the mutual construction of both terms of the relation as "bad beings" (Boisseron, 2015: 20). Billy-Ray Belcourt diagnoses such forms of exclusionary anthropocentrism as the shared "anchor of speciesism, capitalism, and settler colonialism," wherein settlers, as "reifications of whiteness" and normative humanity, are entitled to animal bodies as site of "production, eroticism, violence, and/or companionship" (Belcourt, 2014: 4).

"Settler colonialism" suggests a focus on state power—the agencies and arms of government doing the settling, but what makes it distinctive from a concept of colonialism is the focus on settlement and settlers. While government agencies—including the National Park Service, the United States Department of Agriculture, state Departments of Fish and Wildlife, or local Animal Services departments—are important in the case of cloud coyotes, residents play a much more central role, one best understood through the frame of settler colonialism. Settler colonialism describes a historically specific and ongoing project of removing indigenous people from the land and replacing them with settlers endowed with new legal and juridical forms of exclusionary ownership (Whyte, 2018; Wolfe, 1999). It is, in Wolfe's formulation, better

understood as a structure, not an event. As such "its history does not stop" with the end of

explicit frontier violence or dispossession. Instead, its logic "transmutes into different modalities,

discourses, and institutional formations as it undergirds the historical development… of settler

society" (Wolfe, 1999: 402). Coyotes disturb this structure of entitlement just as indigenous

people do—by continuing to be a threat to the legitimacy of settlement. It is the threat which

enables settlers to call on the state to backstop their everyday activities of settlement and

domestication.

Under settler colonialism, the choices and decisions about how to govern a place are

delegated to individual settlers, backed by, but not directly executed by, the settler state

(Veracini, 2013). The forms of this delegated power are violent, bureaucratic, economic, and,

vitally, *ecological*: to settle is to transform the landscape in vital ways that sustain settlers and

displace relations/arrangements already in place. Settling includes bringing in forms of property,

enclosure, and fencing as much as it does new ways of cultivating land, raising livestock,

planting things settlers like to eat, and all the forms of management necessary to maintain these

new ecological relations.

Whyte describes the settler colonial project as a "vicious sedimentation" of one ecology

over another:

> *by seeking to establish their own homelands, settler populations are working to*
> *create their own ecologies out of the ecologies of Indigenous peoples, which*
> *often requires that settlers bring in additional materials and living beings (e.g.*
> *plants, animals) from abroad. (Whyte, 2018: 135)*

Coyotes are part of that ecology, and their status, their behavior, even their evolution is therefore,

both part of and legacy of the ongoing settler colonial project (Bacon, 2019; Schell et al., 2021).

The consequences are not only ecological: alongside the deaths of real coyotes, vicious

sedimentation "damages settlers' inclinations for consensual decision-making with Indigenous

peoples"—which makes recognizing colonization and imagining decolonization of these relations extremely difficult (Whyte, 2018: 139).

Urban ecologists and biologists talk of coyote "habitat", or coyote adaptation between "natural" or "rural" environments and urban or built environments. But naturalizing these spaces this way obscures the ecological, biological and historical remaking wrought by settler colonialism. More than just a "natural" or "unnatural" habitat, urban or rural, coyotes inhabit a landscape held in place by ongoing practices of settlement which not only displace the coyote but also specific kinds of people—native inhabitants, un-housed people, illegal migrants, and others—for specific political purposes. The very taxonomy of "native" and "invasive" species is inextricably bound up with settler states (Cattelino, 2017).

Cloud coyotes are new entrants into this project. They are part of this structure through which settler forms of governance are enacted by residents, with the help of social media platforms and the forms of organizing and response they enable. The ecological governance intrinsic to the settler project does not require centralized state action if residents desire for a safe domestic space, clear property boundaries, and a sense of ownership can take its place. Urban coyotes unsettle this project by refusing to comply with settler's attempts to transform the ecology; but it is cloud coyotes who really pose the threat—they are the coyotes who overflow, persist, will not stay put, and which in turn creates the desire to strengthen and police the boundaries and relations in question.

The cloud coyote thrives because there is a ready-made fantasy of viability and threat that underwrites the ongoing practices of settler colonialism, one that Ghassan Hage describes as "generalized domestication" (Hage, 2017). Generalized domestication is a structure of desire, an affective correlative of concrete processes of domination and extraction: "a mode of inhabiting

the world through dominating it for the purpose of making it yield value" (Hage, 2017: 92–93). "Domestication" here is loosely used to describe the control or extermination of any potentially dangerous or ungovernable social force, for "what is true of the logic of domestication in relation to one species is also true in relation to the environment as a totality" (Hage, 2017: 87).

As a structure of desire, the inexhaustible threat of the cloud coyote spreads outward from the virtual biome and into the yards, neighborhoods, council hearings, and landscapes of the city. The desire enrolls settlers as agents of the state in intimately re-making ecology: the *domus* (the house and its yards or gardens) is the site of ecological (as well as political and family) practices of domination. A real coyote might come and go in this space, creating a periodic upheaval. Cloud coyotes, however, *never go away*. They cannot be contained, nor can they be assimilated. As such, the demand for extermination can constantly renew itself. In the next section we demonstrate some of the ways that cloud coyotes exemplify the desire at the heart of generalized domestication, and sustain ongoing practices of settler colonialism.

Pets are the new livestock

For much of the 20th Century, settlers, with the help of the United States government, waged war against North American predators like wolves, bears, mountain lions, and coyotes. States paid bounties to private citizens who could prove their kills, the cost of which at one point made up two-thirds of the total Montana state budget. It was common practice for federal employees throughout the West to shoot a horse, lace its carcass with poisonous strychnine tablets, and wait (Flores, 2016). One of the US government's prominent predator hunters reported the possibility of killing up to 350 coyotes in less than ten days by these methods. Exceedingly efficient killing of large carnivores and other pesky vermin animals is one of the most striking ecological signatures of settler colonialism in the US.

Though wolves were essentially eliminated from the lower forty-eight states by mid-century, the coyote escaped extirpation. In fact, thanks to their remarkable behavioral and biological adaptability, coyotes have spent the century expanding their range. Once occupying the plains and deserts of the North American West and Southwest, coyotes can now be found across the continent (Hody and Kays, 2018: 81–97), including in cities as densely urbanized as Los Angeles and Chicago.

Despite, or because of, their flourishing, coyotes continue to be targeted by campaigns of organized killing, with several key differences. In place of the US federal government, it is now private homeowners and municipal governments that work to bring about a world without predators. And whereas in previous decades, protecting ranchers' livestock provided the main impetus for killing coyotes, today it is settlers' beloved cats and dogs who represent the front lines of anxiety. This transition—from livestock to pets—is not simply a material replacement of one valuable creature for another; it comes with new fantasies, desires, and anxieties as well. Whereas earlier settlers may have mourned the violent attack on a valuable animal, and demanded the extermination of a predator, pets activate different values and anxieties. These values appear in a striking and surprisingly common word-image that circulates in Nextdoor coyote posts:

> *As I was walking with my mother I noticed a deceased cat or body parts of a black & white cat [in a corner yard]. Most likely done by the coyotes in the area.*
>
> *We see far fewer squirrels in my neighborhood and have found cat parts in our yard.*
>
> *Hyperbole to you, until you have lost pets, or find pet body parts on your lawn.*

Such images mark the passage of the cloud coyote. The pet's dismembered body, oftentimes a cat, laid on the front lawn, as if on display. The horrific simplicity of this picture—the flat,

homogenous background of the grass, simultaneously a surface and a screen onto which to project a fantasy, and a pet once recognizable as whole, now in parts—gives this image its wide-ranging currency and emotional impact. As if operating by the logic of nightmare, and carrying the supposed facticity of the picture—even though it is almost never an actual photograph, which would be too much—this image courses through the imaginary of Nextdoor.

There is no doubt that the main emotional and affective vector of settler politics around coyotes is the family pet, the companion animal (Haraway, 2003; Shell, 1986). "Furbabies" and "furkids", inducted into the space of the family, collapse the distinction between human and pet, standing as the perfect victim for imagined attacks and thus demanding the extermination or banishment of the coyote. As with the necessary vigilance of the rancher or farmer, this relation encourages a kind of "nervous" reading of the landscape, an affective quality long noted as characterizing the settler colonial atmosphere (Byrne, 2010; King, 2019), shifted here from the rural frontier to the urban domains of house, yard and neighborhood.

The threat the cloud coyote poses to the furbaby is a complex intertwining of fear, anxiety and grief that cultivates a dangerous ethical orientation toward pets by imagining them as children. Donna Haraway, who otherwise defends a rich relating with companion animals, argues: "these beliefs are not only based on mistakes, if not lies, but also they are in themselves abusive—to dogs and to humans" and later warns that, "to regard a dog as a furry child, even metaphorically, demeans dogs and children—and sets up children to be bitten and dogs to be killed (Haraway, 2003: 33,37).

If the rancher's loss of livestock to a coyote could be valued in terms of the loss of income or food on the table, the loss of a domestic pet is valued differently: a spatial damage, the loss of the free and fair use of one's *own* backyard. The idea that coyotes are a threat to space

conceived as one's *home* is a crucial element of the "imagined geography of risk" that their

imagined presence generates (Alexander and Draper, 2021: 129). Indeed, post after post

mentions backyards and the painful idea of being unable to extract value from it just the way

individuals desire–including individual dogs and cats, who are increasingly recruited into settler

relations as *owners* via a kind of insistent pet primogeniture:

> *Dogs and cats should be able to be in their own fenced backyard to go to the bathroom and play… Wild coyotes roaming for food do not belong in the city.*

> *It is obvious that you've never had a loving dog or cat, a member of your family attacked in their own home, a place where one should be able to feel safe and secure from predators and yet it's happening every day. Coyotes are jumping into people's backyards and attacking poor pets!*

Following the structure of the impossible desire, these conversations also make clear that the

fence is both necessary and inadequate at the same time:

> *I have had a coyote in my backyard twice now. It went through an open gate the first time, but the second time, it jumped a six foot fence.*

> *Three coyotes jump six foot wall and enter backyard. What is important, they show no fear of multiple motion sensor lights or the home owner yelling at them.*

Coyote rollers (a device designed to prevent coyotes from jumping fences) are frequently

mentioned, as are motion-sensor lights, sprinklers or alarms. The fortress mentality of gated LA,

described by Mike Davis and Eric Avila pushes in two directions in these posts: on the one hand

it fantasizes about a city without coyotes (or certain human others), but it also emphasizes the

seemingly unstoppable capacity of the coyote to penetrate the fortress-yard, to renew the

necessity of fortifying the legal and material structures of settlement (Avila, 2004; Davis, 1998).

Settler control of the city is not confined to the backyard. Ownership is not just a question

of property boundaries, but of propriety more generally. Take, for instance, the leash. The power

of the leash is to produce a kind of roving human-animal, family-property assemblage that

privatizes public space as it navigates through the city. Heated debates on Nextdoor center around whether an animal that a coyote killed was on a leash or not, often framing the pet owner as the responsible party. But as with the fence, the power of the leash also brings a vulnerability that Nextdoor coyote watchers frequently lament:

> *I have seen them on [a nearby street] now and then and a pet was attacked a few years ago at [a nearby intersection] while on a leash.*
>
> *As far as leaving your pet alone or not it makes no difference, coyotes will snatch your dog right off its leash as you are walking them down the street because the coyotes are not afraid of us or anything since we do not pose a threat to them so pets on a leash is a easy opportunity for a easy meal.*

The leash is a frequent point of contention on Nextdoor, a site for the moralization of pet ownership: maybe you weren't paying enough attention to your pet. One self-proclaimed "coyote co-existence coach" says she recommends dispensing with extension leashes because, at the outer limits of the leash, sometimes fifteen or twenty feet from the owner, too much anxious attention is required to ensure the pets' safety.

Unless, of course, the anxiety is the point. As Hage explains, no single event can create an "ungovernable" entity. Classifying something as ungovernable is

> *paradoxical in that it indicates on one hand an inability of governmental forces to relate to it and yet also implies a historically acquired familiarity: it denotes a relation paradoxically marked by a certain intimate lack of relationality, a relating to something through a recognition of the permanent inability to relate to it. (Hage, 2017: 75–76)*

Real urban coyotes have very few relations with humans, and even fewer humans cultivate sustained relations with urban coyotes. Anybody who uses Nextdoor, however, will have relations with cloud coyotes, and the attention-grabbing behavior of *these* coyotes is pretty much guaranteed to be a nuisance. The ungovernable cloud coyote who leaps six-foot fences and snatches dogs from leashes is capable of a constant incursion into would-be-homely space.

Cloud coyotes, then, are saturated with the paradox that Hage locates in the ungovernable. The cloud coyote is a vicious, unstoppable predator with no remorse and an insatiable appetite, a kind of serial killer that targets furbabies and possibly even human children, dismembers them and arrays their body parts on the lawn as evidence of its evil. The yard and the leash extend modes of settler space-making up to the point where they are threatened, and must be asserted again and again.

Make our Lawns Great Again

In a polarized media landscape, charged images—like dead cat parts on a lawn—are powerful tools for organizing. If, in the wake of your loss of a beloved pet, you turned to Facebook, you'd find a political landscape waiting for you to choose sides: you could join pro-coyote groups like "Coyote Clan" and "Protect Our Coyotes" or, because you are angry and afraid, you could join anti-Coyote groups "Coyote Hunting" and "Evict Coyotes." Whereas Nextdoor coyote posts are about disagreement and to some extent, about information-sharing, Facebook groups bring like-minded people together for a purpose:

> *This group is for people wanting to bring down the coyote population to much safer levels. We are not here to discuss both sides. The only side we discuss is how to get our government to do their job and start Evicting Coyotes. … This group is meant for individuals that want to see the coyote population culled. If arguments arise from opposing views, you may be removed from the group. The group is meant for like-minded people wanting to find solutions to the coyote issue. We do NOT support Co-Existence, period. (Evict Coyotes | Facebook, n.d.)*

In another group, from another city:

> *This group is for people wanting to bring down the coyote population to much safer levels. … No coyote huggers are allowed. You can have respect for them. But going around causing problems or saying they were here first wont be tolerated. It will get you kicked out and blocked. (Evict Coyotes West Covina, Walnut and surrounding cities | Facebook, n.d.)*

And another, from yet another city:

> *This group is for people wanting to bring down the coyote population to much safer levels. … #EvictCoyotes #WearRed (Evict Coyotes - Downey California | Facebook, n.d.)*

The striking similarity of these descriptions might convince you that there is some kind of grassroots movement taking shape. And to some extent that's right—clearly, these groups speak to, and likely amplify, a shared fear of coyotes. Their goal is to convince local governments to adopt "trap-and-kill" programs to reduce coyote populations. Supporters have turned out at city council meetings, wearing red "#evictcoyotes" shirts and demanding action. They convinced one city to adopt a program to cull coyotes for 5 months out of the year (Green, 2019).

But these groups can also be traced entirely to a single person: Torrance City Councilman Aurelio Mattucci. In 2016, Mattucci sensed "the pain in people's hearts" and made a Facebook page called "A Coyote Killed My Pet in Torrance" despite having never seen a coyote himself. Afterwards, Mattucci says, he saw coyotes everywhere. The Facebook page became a popular community gathering space for "coyote criers"—people who feel intensely that the presence of coyotes in their neighborhoods is a problem. Mattucci used the momentum to run for Torrance City Council on a strong anti-coyote platform.

In an interview with Mattucci [9/19/2019], conducted at his real estate company's office, he admitted the likelihood of a coyote attacking a human was slim to none and that there are small adjustments people can make to keep their pets safe.[2] But this is not his public message:

> *As cute as these animals are, we must remember that they are ruthless and vicious killers and would have no issue attacking a young child right in front of an adult. (Evict Coyotes post of April 22, 2020)*

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[2] There were 367 attacks between 1970 and 2015; of which 3 were fatal (Baker and Timm, 2017). By contrast, an estimated 4.5 million people are bitten by dogs every year (*American Veterinary Medical Association*, n.d.).

And for Mattucci, the question of what is at stake is also clear:

> *Enough is Enough. We want our backyards back. (Evict Coyotes post of*
> *August 10, 2020)*

Although Mattucci used coyotes to build support, they are just one part of his platform. He's fighting, in his words, for "A Cleaner and Safer Torrance." He calls Black Lives Matter a "terrorist organization." He calls homelessness "a Cancer" and says it's "spreading," language decorated unconvincingly with a rhetoric of concern: "as for the homeless, may they be given viable options, because we care and our streets shall no longer be their permanent residence." "Cleaning up" Torrance is a cipher for strong police who keep the borders impermeable, and homeless people, immigrants, Black Americans, and also, coyotes, out of the American yard.

Mattucci exploits settler desire: he invokes the cloud coyotes as a threat to ownership and control over the city. Although settlers are deputized to remake the land, and to assert ownership over it, this work also comes with fear and anxiety. Coyotes *do not belong* in these non-wild places, and the possibility that they might enter them engenders fear and surprise. Mattucci recognizes this threat and offers, as an agent of the state, to take care of it. He offers to step in, as a kind of delegated apex predator:

> *Hey, I'm not going to argue whether they're here first or not. Well, now*
> *humans are here. Okay. And we deserve and want a safe place to live and*
> *coyotes aren't making it safe. (Balestra and Terry, 2019)*

Mattucci recognizes the implicit demand of residents to do something about the coyote problem, and offers to be a kind of backstop to their settlement. The cloud coyote is absolutely central to this offer, because it must appear to be impossible to even consider some form of co-existence with coyotes in the city. One Nextdoor poster makes this clear:

How do you propose we 'coexist' with wild, dangerous predators? Lock up our family pets & young children 24/7? … Coyotes are out to kill, hunting for food day and night. Coyotes don't understand the word coexist – that's ridiculous!

The apparent impossibility of living with coyotes – the "ridiculous" proposition, here made all the more palpable by the incessant activity of the cloud coyote—provides an opportunity for the state to demonstrate its capacity and necessity. Torrance's city council has, in fact, killed coyotes, even as Mattucci continues to depict them as a multiplying threat (Green, 2019, 2021; Hixon, 2021).

Mattucci's success demonstrates that the cloud coyote is a powerful resource for reactionary politics: its inexhaustible threat can constantly be invoked to renew the promise of control. Cloud coyotes generate political capital that Mattucci uses to advance his other projects of control: his promises to cleanse Torrance of trash, of the homeless, or of Black activists. The cloud coyote's crystallized image of a human-coyote relation is therefore also at work reshaping human-human relations in greater Los Angeles, and so its propagation emerges not only as a site where settler colonial structure is maintained, but also where multiracial and multispecies environmental justice work can occur (Pellow, 2016).

A kinder, gentler settler colonialism

Alternatives have emerged among wildlife managers and activist groups to the exterminationist program represented by Mattucci. Many agencies and coyote groups have turned to coyote management strategies premised on "coexisting" with coyotes. The trend is part of broader shift in in urban wildlife management from conflict to coexistence as the assumed form of relation between people and animals (Hunold and Mazuchowski, 2020). Recent scholarship has interpreted this move toward coexistence as a reimagining of cities as multispecies spaces that recognize nonhuman claims to belonging. Clement and Bunce, for

example, read Toronto's Coyote Response Strategy as a practice of multi-species "communing" that recognizes coyotes' "legitimate claims to shared urban spaces" (Clement and Bunce, 2022: 2). Others have argued that these programs are not only more ethical in their impact on coyotes but can be more cost-effective and popular with residents than approaches focused on lethal control or removal (Yashphe and Lisa Kubotera, 2017).

Despite the name, Coyotes Out of Downey is one representative of this newer and more humane approach. The organization, an outgrowth of an earnest community-facing City Hall, educates residents about what to do to avoid getting into conflicts with coyotes in the first place: secure trash at night, encourage residents to keep their pets on a leash; keep cats inside. Coyotes Out of Downey turns municipal attention toward coyotes, not in the form of violent interventions, but by funneling residents' anxieties into a version of community policing, an ecological analogue of Neighborhood Watch.[3]

The ambition of these more humane approaches is much broader than protecting cats from the occasional predatory coyote. These plans reorganize urban ecologies and human-coyote relations to produce coyotes whose use of space no longer overlaps with that of human property. Making such coyotes requires not just behavioral interventions on coyotes, but careful management of human behavior, too; because the two are intertwined. As a Coyotes Out of Downey representative put it:

> They're actually really fearful of humans… they're very observant animals.
> And so when they see humans and all they're doing is taking a photo or
> videotaping it… all you've taught to that coyote is, 'Oh, that person isn't scary
> at all. They just took a photo.' And so I think little by little, their inherent fear
> of us is changing because they're not constantly getting hazed or scared. And
> so they're like, 'Oh, it's not so bad here. And there's food out here. So why not?'

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[3] The California Department of Fish and Wildlife in fact runs a program called "Wildlife Watch," which consults with cities on their coyote management policies: https://wildlife.ca.gov/Wildlife-Watch.

Coyotes Out of Downey is, roughly speaking, on the side of coyote coexistence, but a more distant kind of coexistence, one premised on the possibility that, if people could discipline themselves, coyotes would no longer be a problem. By working with residents to change their behavior and undo the problematic coyote association of humans with food, this kind of "coyote" management hopes to retrain coyotes to keep their distance from equally well-trained humans. It's coyote management in a biopolitical mode: through self-discipline and self-governance, humans can in turn discipline and govern coyotes. Coyotes Out of Downey is part of a larger shift. Coyote managers increasingly recognize extermination policy as a failure; the City of Los Angeles stopped killing coyotes in 2004. Coyote expert Eric Strauss (LMU) puts it bluntly: "Lethal management of wildlife as a first recourse is part of an outdated paradigm" (Lynn and Strauss, 2014).

Instead, municipalities across LA County have started creating "Coyote Management Plans" —or more often, simply cutting and pasting these plans from one city government website to another. In place of killing, these plans offer a range of practices in line with the mutual disciplining advocated by Coyotes Out of Downey. It is human behavior, not coyote presence, that is the focus of wildlife managers' work: cleaning up trash, reshaping urban habitat to be less coyote friendly, and above all, *hazing*. Hazing is a central, though unproven, practice of threatening or scaring coyotes, using a variety of techniques like yelling, waving or throwing things, in ways that do not harm coyotes but, somehow, convince them not to return.

None of these non-lethal plans and techniques, however, address the central question of where the coyote should be. Once hazed, where exactly should newly-distant and afraid coyotes go? Out of the city entirely? To different neighborhoods? Or should they remain nearby, but out of sight? Coyote Management Plans don't say.

Such approaches still work according to the same logics of containment and assimilation, enforced by the settler desire for generalized domestication and backed by the threat of eradication. Containment means keeping coyotes out: create reserves, build fences and walls, innovate "coyote rollers" or wolf urine spray bottles; create roving, space-owning human-animal pairs that haze coyotes; encourage coyotes to hunt elsewhere by securing food, cleaning up clutter etc. Assimilation means knowing coyotes better: studying and learning about their movements and behaviors, collaring, reporting, and tracking them in order to learn more, hazing them. Containment and assimilation still require strategic intervention: rather than indiscriminate killing, killing happens, so the argument goes, only when absolutely necessary because one can more precisely predict the risk.

The shift away from lethal control, and toward attempted co-management of human and coyote behavior, represents a clear, material improvement in coyotes' lives, and perhaps a small step toward recognizing cities as places where other-than-human beings can and should flourish. But without attention to the underlying claims that management makes to land and bodies, this is, ultimately, a kinder, gentler form of settlement—one that demands changes, perhaps quite small, in both individual and collective behavior. Indeed, celebrations of "coexistence" can reproduce the logic of inclusion that Indigenous theorists have critiqued as a horizon for anticolonial politics (Byrd, 2011; Coulthard, 2014). Belcourt, for instance, describes theories of shared animal "citizenship" as a form of "strategic domestication" that recognizes animals only in terms that leave the structure of settler society unquestioned (Belcourt, 2014: 7, citing Coulthard, 2007). Justice for coyotes, as for humans, might be more than a question of simply being allowed to live.

Conclusion: The Land and the Cloud

Those demanding coyote extermination often appeal to the exceptional status of humans:

> *I don't know or care if they were here first; we're here now and any threat to us and ours should be met with as much force as it takes to eliminate it. This is how humans have survived and prospered for tens of thousands of years I see no reason to stop now. We are the Big Dog, we should act like it.*

> *They adapt quickly, breed quicker and have no predator enemies… except man. We need to stop abdicating our position at the top of the food chain. They need to be shot.*

But those demanding coyote co-existence also make strikingly similar claims:

> *They have a natural predator and something that has been "invading" their own homeland!!! It's called "human beings"!!!*

> *Humans are the most invasive species on this planet. We make kudzu look like microgreens.*

The curious symmetry in these appeals to the inevitable illustrates how grand species narratives serve to assuage settler anxieties. If the destruction of lives, land and relations is not colonial, but a biological or historical inevitability, then particular humans cannot be held responsible. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang show how the idea that "We are all colonized" serves as a "settler move to innocence," a way of relieving the "settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege" (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 10). The idea that we are all *colonizers* can do the same emotional work. Mattucci offers his followers precisely this move to innocence:

> *I don't subscribe to the idea that they were here first so we need to somehow play by their rules. We humans need a safe environment of our own and technically, no matter where we go, we are somewhere where something else was there before us. (Evict Coyotes post of May 6, 2021)*

Technically, says Mattucci, "we humans" are all settlers—thus absolving actual settlers of their complicity in actually existing settlement. A necessary step toward breaking out of the settler imagination that suffuses cloud coyotes is to recognize the ongoing structure of settlement in US

cities for what it is: to disavow this species "we" and recognize specific relations of complicity, and the ways violence flows downstream from them. To move from human-coyote relations to settler-coyote relations, and possibly other forms of relating as well.

To resist this move to settler innocence, it is necessary to understand how settlement works---politically, legally, and in our case, ecologically. Strategies for decolonizing a place like Los Angeles must both avoid this move as well as propose concrete ways forward. We are cognizant of Max Liboiron's warning that though anticolonial practice "requires critique…mostly it requires action" (Liboiron, 2021: 6). Tuck and Yang, too, insist that "decolonization is not a metaphor," warning against the risk that "dressing up" minor revisions to the status quo "in the language of decolonization" constitutes "a form of enclosure, dangerous in how it domesticates decolonization" (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 3). We learn from them and other scholars of sovereignty that decolonizing only means one thing: to return sovereignty over land to the Indigenous people from whom it was stolen. There are many different ways to do that in the context of a city like Los Angeles, layered over with generations of ecological remaking and now saturated with cloud coyote factories like Nextdoor and competing wildlife management proposals.

The Gabrieleno-Tongva thinker Cindi Moar Alvitre finds in the movement of coyotes across the settler city something she calls "coyote space," an alternative mapping of the city: "coyote space is about making visible what others cannot, or choose not to see. Arbitrary political boundaries become meaningless." Whereas the cloud coyote inspires settler fear at the revelation of settlement's porous boundaries, for Alvitre, tracing coyote trails across the city inspires joy at the knowledge of a still resistant outside to the settler city. Alvitre suggests that the practice of moving with or like coyotes can reveal the city as a place of Indigenous

survivance. While we don't claim that settler city dwellers, such as the authors themselves, can see the city and the land it's based on in the same way, we nonetheless take inspiration from her claim that "creating a cartography of coyote space is an act of resistance" (Alvitre, 2015).

By attending to sites of settler-coyote conflict, we can trace the places where the porous boundaries of the settler structure are weak but also consistently regenerated. These cracks, or multi-species zones of "equivocation," are productive places for imagining anticolonial experimentation (De La CADENA, 2010: 350). In particular, we point to two sites where anxiety and sovereignty intersect in the figure of the cloud coyote: first, in the material and discursive state practices constituting wildlife management, and second, in the ongoing negotiation of the relationship between environmental and digital space.

Current urban wildlife management in Los Angeles, and similar US cities, asserts settler state sovereignty over land through Coyote Management Plans (CMPs). It is clear that the "best practices" promoted here were not designed with much or any indigenous involvement. They neither question their own infrastructural access to Indigenous lands nor foreground place-based obligations (Liboiron, 2021: 9). Instead, CMPs perform and reinforce the structuring principle of private property as the basis for urban land relations. In settings like Nextdoor, cloud coyotes also become vectors of political pressure to adopt and revise such plans. Cloud coyotes animate affective circuits knitting state power, individual settlers, and digital storytelling into a governing structure whose outcome is the sedimentation of settler logics.

The process has significant ecological effects. Many CMPs contain landscaping recommendations, for instance, that aim to maximize enclosure and visibility by encouraging residents to remove brush and build fences over six feet in height, with little to no consideration for native vegetation or other ecological consequences. By prioritizing settlers' safety, comfort

and peace of mind over any consideration of their impact on other lifeways, these documents reify domestication as a primary mode of dwelling and intimately connect state power and the private sphere. It should come as no surprise that many of these coyote management documents were originally disseminated by police departments, who were in many cases the first state agencies tasked by residents with managing perceived human-coyote conflicts.

By contrast, Indigenous co-management of lands and conservation practices is emerging as an important policy framework (Neale et al., 2019), including in California. A well attested case is that of the Karuk and Yurok tribes in Northern California, who are increasingly involved in both fisheries and fire management, and who are finding new ways to work outside and alongside settlers in the forests and rivers of Northern California (Lake et al., 2017; Lake and Christianson, 2019). Several state agencies have adopted tribal consultation policies, and in 2020, California's Governor issued an executive order directing agencies to "seek opportunities to support California tribes' co-management of and access to natural lands." But as the reference to "natural lands" suggests, these examples have taken place so far mostly in rural areas. Cities are often falsely imagined as places of near-total Indigenous absence, and urbanization can function as a particularly vicious form of settlement (Porter and Yiftachel, 2017).

Los Angeles, for instance, maintains the largest Native American population in the nation (Alvitre, 2015: 44) as well as dozens of tribal organizations working to reclaim land for various purposes.[4] Urban wildlife managers could promote policies that recognize the rights of the native people of the Los Angeles basin to make decisions about who belongs on this land and on what terms. But consultation and collaboration with tribal groups should not be the only horizon for

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[4] See for example programs of the Fernandeño Tatavism Band of Mission Indians (https://www.tataviam-nsn.us/press-release-california-celebrates-launch-of-tribal-conservation-corps-program/), the Tongva Taraxat Paxaavxa Conservancy (https://tongva.land), and the Gabrielino-Tongva Springs Foundation http://gabrielinosprings.com/wpsite/).

anticolonial practice. Requests for tribal consultation can function as unwelcome demands on Indigenous groups' limited time and resources, and native people may refuse collaboration as part of a broader refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the settler state (Simpson, 2014: 11) or to cultivate relationships with places and beings outside structures of state recognition (Simpson, 2014; Simpson and Bagelman, 2018). Without meaningful commitments to sovereignty, consultation does little to dislodge the existing relations.

The second site where cloud coyotes point towards anticolonial possibility is in digital space, or more specifically, in the relationship between Land and Cloud. Cloud coyotes, as lively online images of a lively animal's more-than-coyote relations, aren't likely to go away: flesh and blood coyotes will continue to move through cities and the people who encounter them will continue to tell their stories, misinformed or otherwise. The problem is not the desire to tell coyote-stories, the problem is the structural affordances of an application like Nextdoor, whose very design shapes users' ecological imaginaries according to logics of enclosure, ownership, and domestication.

By examining how online conversations impact the governance of actual coyotes, our analysis of Nextdoor reveals the unavoidable imbrication of abstract digital space in material land relations. As Caranto, Morford and Ansloos write, the internet is ultimately a "landbased technology," a "living space not only where ethical relations develop and exist but also where colonial harm to relationships can occur" (Caranto Morford and Ansloos, 2021: 302). Internet technologies need access to land, energy infrastructures, and attention (Duarte, 2017; Estrada and Lehuedé, 2022). Cloud coyotes register the insistently territorial function of the seemingly deterritorialized digital 'commons' of the Cloud. By defining digital neighborhoods in terms of property relations, Nextdoor assumes access to land and ultimately further sediments the

dynamics of possession and dispossession. Given the histories of segregation and chronic housing injustice in Los Angeles, Nextdoor ensures that native voices will be largely excluded from these political-ecological narrative practices.

Like coyotes themselves, whose phenotypic variation across biomes is wide ranging, the cloud coyotes we've found on Nextdoor are just one local expression of a widely dispersed and unruly potentiality. Here and now, they animate procedures of settlement. But cloud coyotes are reminders that all of our practices—digital, political, narrative—place us in unavoidable relation with other people and with land. The spaces where city dwellers imagine their relations with coyotes could be tools for anticolonial practice if they work to undo the domesticating and property logics that now define the cloud coyote.

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