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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rats claiming rights? More-than-human acts of denizenship in Amsterdam

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Abstract

The anthropology of citizenship has sought to understand citizenship beyond formal-legal definitions, including a focus on how those who are legally without citizenship rights also engage in everyday acts of political claims-making. While this emphasis on the enactment of citizenship has expanded our understanding of who counts as a political being, it has also been obviously human centered. Might we also understand animals' acts, their presence and movements, as having the potential to constitute political constituents? This article develops a more-than-human perspective on political claims-making by connecting insights from human-animal studies to the anthropology of citizenship. We draw on research on rats in Amsterdam to propose an understanding of these animals' interventions in the urban built environment as more-than-human "acts of denizenship." Focusing on different forms of rat behavior, we analyze rats' mundane interactions and relations with the city's residents, infrastructure, and other animals as forms of claims-making. We see the behavior as efforts that are partially recognized by humans and that, as such, can be understood as enacting a relation of denizenship. Such attention to how rats act in and on urban space, we suggest, can help us conceptualize

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political agency and the formation of political belonging in ways that extend beyond the human.

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citizenship, denizenship, animals, more-than-human, right to the city, rats

We see them running across the street, they walk across fences, and residents hear them under their house or in the ceiling. When parents take their children to the daycare on the Victorieplein, in the morning or afternoon when it's dark, the rats just dart past the strollers. In someone's home two blocks further down, a rat even jumped out of a toilet, on the second floor, would you believe.

—Sam de Graaff (2021)¹

In early 2021, a flurry of news items highlighted the “rat problem” affecting the Rivierenbuurt, a wealthy Amsterdam neighborhood. Multiple articles included an account of a rat popping out of a toilet two stories above street level; examples of rats dashing past children's strollers also emphasized the horror residents had to contend with. The media blitz was a concerted effort to prod local politicians and the municipal health authorities into action. A group of residents sent an urgent letter to the city district authorities after having posted flyers throughout the neighborhood to raise awareness about the rat problem among their neighbors, which led to significant media coverage. This citizens' initiative was at least partially successful: “We're being heard, that's a start,” one resident noted hopefully (de Graaff, 2021).

Amsterdam's rat problem mobilized citizens and led to the articulation of political claims. But what if we understood rats not as a problem but as nonhuman political subjects? Is it possible to consider the formation of citizenship as a more-than-human process, one in which animals also play an active role? Might we understand certain animals' acts as constituting claims on political communities, claims that are often ignored or dismissed but that are sometimes recognized, that might also be “heard” by humans? How does this potential for political recognition relate to the cultural meaning of an animal species, but also to its bodily forms and capacities? In exploring such questions, we draw inspiration from the anthropology of animals and more broadly from human-animal studies.

This article seeks to develop a more-than-human perspective on political claims-making that takes the agency of animals seriously by connecting insights from human-animal studies to the anthropology of citizenship. We are interested in how rats' mobilities and their encounters with humans and the built environment might be interpreted as nonhuman ways of claiming the right to the city, and how we see a growing human recognition of such claims. In the next section, we draw out connections between the anthropology of citizenship and more philosophical work on animal rights, proposing an understanding of animals' interventions in the urban built environment as “acts of denizenship” that constitute a more-than-human form of political agency. Drawing on our own research in Amsterdam, the following sections discuss different forms of rats' behavior. We argue that these can be understood as rats' claims to urban belonging and discuss the conditions under which we see humans confer or refuse political recognition of those claims.

FROM CITIZENSHIP TO MORE-THAN-HUMAN DENIZENSHIP

As Adriana Petryna and Karolina Follis (2015, 402) note, “The concept of citizenship is now ubiquitous around the world, a primary nexus defining the relationship between the individual and the state.” Anthropologists have sought to understand how this relationship takes shape across different cultural and political contexts, and, specifically, how

the promise of the equal rights that citizenship entails is always faced with a reality of inequality and exclusion. A key interest in understanding citizenship's inclusions and exclusions has been to examine the normative registers through which belonging is articulated. Such research has emphasized that citizenship is a cultural process of subject formation that involves both self-making and being made within broader power relations, including a normative project of marking who "deserves" to belong (Ong, 1996; Paz, 2019).

The anthropology of citizenship has studied such cultural processes of political subject formation by focusing on how they are enacted in everyday life not just (or primarily) through legal or policy analysis. Instead of focusing on formal-legal definitions of citizenship, such studies have focused on substantive distributions of rights and responsibilities (Holston, 2008). They explore how this substantive citizenship is formed not only through everyday citizenship practices that reproduce the status quo but also through more disruptive citizenship acts that destabilize an established political order (Isin and Nielsen, 2008). Importantly, anthropological approaches emphasize that persons who are legally without citizenship rights—for instance, undocumented migrants—can also become claim-making constituents, sometimes through no more than their physical presence or movements (e.g., Bachelet, 2018). "To investigate acts of citizenship," Engin Isin (2008, 18) argues, "is to draw attention to acts that may not be considered as political and demonstrate that their enactment does indeed instantiate constituents (which may mean being part of a whole as well as being a member of a constituency)." In urban contexts, this approach resonates with Henri Lefebvre's (1968) concept of "the right to the city," which refers to the right of all city dwellers—and not just specialized professionals such as urban planners—to appropriate and remake urban space. This right to the city foregrounds the capacity of citizens to *make* the city themselves in ways that disrupt state and capitalist notions of value through mundane yet political acts.

This emphasis on the enactment of citizenship has expanded our understanding of who counts as a political being; it has also been obviously anthropocentric, approaching political agency as involving intentional decision-making. But what about animated, sentient, nonhuman beings? Might we also understand *animals'* acts, their presence and movements, as having the potential to constitute constituents? Might an attentiveness to how rats act in and on urban space help us conceptualize political agency and the formation of political belonging in ways that extend beyond the human?

To develop such an attentiveness, we draw here on human-animal studies. An important strand of more philosophically inclined scholarship has sought to conceptualize animal rights. A key work in this regard is *Zoopolis* by Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka (2011), which develops a political theory of animal rights, categorizing domesticated, wild, and liminal animals as three groups that could be accorded differentiated rights and responsibilities based on their relations with humans. The authors suggest that domesticated animals should be viewed as co-citizens, wild animals should be seen as members of sovereign communities with their own territories, and liminal animals—those that are not domesticated but live among humans in cities, such as rats—should be seen as denizens. Denizenship, here, is "a status which recognizes that [liminal animals] are coresidents of our urban spaces, but that they are neither capable of, or interested in, being recruited into our cooperative scheme of citizenship" (Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2011, 15). A fair political system of denizenship, they suggest, would entail three principles. One of these would be secure residency, or the recognition that liminal animals are residents that belong. Another would be a weak but reciprocal system of rights and responsibilities, or a fair balancing of risks and benefits between humans and animals. In effect, Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011, 245) suggest that "the robust responsibilities of the human community towards liminal denizens are hedged by a robust right to exercise control over their total numbers and use of shared space." The third principle would be anti-stigma; for example, the legal enforcement of denizens' protection and education on the possibilities of coexistence (Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2011, 241–50).

Working from a different tradition, the anthropology of animals has been focused less on such normative models, and more on everyday human-animal relations. Where early anthropological research on animals understood them mostly as symbols (Mullin, 1999; White and Candea, 2018), recent multispecies ethnography has sought to understand animals more agentively, drawing attention to their cognitive, emotional, and communicative capacities and emphasizing their active role in developing relationships with humans and places (e.g., Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010; Ogden, Hall, and Tanita, 2013; Porter and Gershon, 2018). This scholarship draws on new materialism and actor-network

theory and does not see agency as the unique property of human actors, or even as restricted to self-directed, future-oriented intentional action. Rather, agency is understood as a relational accomplishment, emerging through everyday practices and more-than-human relations, influenced but not determined by animals' biological specificities and cultural associations. This approach has implications for our understanding of political agency; as Jake Kosek (2010, 669) argues, "the materiality of objects and animals can be apprehended as part of politics without being attributed an 'agency' that has to do with nonhuman intentionality or a politics simply animated by human practice." Although multispecies ethnography increasingly centers a range of political questions—from destabilizing the boundaries between animals and humans (de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018; Nading, 2014) to considering the role of animals in warfare (Kosek, 2010; Ruiz-Serna, 2021)—the connections between this field and political and legal anthropology have been relatively limited.²

Our approach draws on both philosophical and anthropological scholarship on animals and seeks to connect this to more human-centered discussions of citizenship. As a synanthropic species—animals that are undomesticated but live near, and associate with, humans—rats are archetypal liminal animals. However, they are also agentive creatures that shape the urban landscape as they interact with the built environment: their tunneling behavior damages sidewalks, sewage pipes, and the foundations of houses; they gnaw through electricity wires to grind down their teeth; and scatter trash as they rummage for food in public garbage cans or after gulls have torn open trash bags. These interactions could be described from a more traditional animal etiology perspective as "animal behavior." Here, we are particularly interested in understanding these behaviors through a political lens: as rats' claims to the right to the city, or as more-than-human acts of denizenship.³

We focus on rats' presence and movements in parks, under pavements, and on streets to explore their potential ability to appropriate and remake urban space. Focusing on different forms of rat behavior, we analyze rats' mundane interactions and relations with the city's residents, its infrastructure, and its other animal residents as forms of claims-making, as efforts that are partially recognized by humans and that can be understood as enacting a relation of denizenship.

We draw here on ethnographic research by all three authors, conducted independently then brought into analytical conversation in the coauthoring of this article. Fieldwork was conducted between May 2020 and February 2021, with our methods adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying countermeasures over time. Herre focused on neighborhoods in Amsterdam's South and New West districts with high rates of rat detection reported to the city's public health service (GGD Amsterdam); his fieldwork involved participant observation in these neighborhoods, including visits with GGD employees, a digital survey among residents on rats ($n = 209$), and 34 follow-up telephone interviews. Mandy's research focused on Amsterdam's Oosterpark. She conducted walking interviews with 14 interlocutors through this park to explore the everyday lived experiences and interactions of park users with waste and rats. Rivke draws on autoethnographic fieldwork in the Plantagebuurt neighborhood based on the cave-in of a sidewalk in front of her home. The fieldwork involved observations, discussions with neighbors, and firsthand experience of reporting rat-related issues to the municipality. All authors also drew on ongoing media analysis of local news reporting and rat-related websites that emerged around a growing sense of a "rat crisis" in Amsterdam.

Pandemic-based fieldwork limitations made it more difficult to participate in urban residents' everyday activities and to include a broad range of residents across race and class lines. In addition, we encountered "rat-based" methodological challenges, in that the animal-focused participant observation and thick description that forms the basis of multispecies ethnographies with large mammals and domesticated animals such as elephants, primates, horses, or dogs is much harder to achieve with rats. Those rats that are easily visible to urban residents are often either dead or have ventured into the open out of desperation—rats tend to actively avoid direct interaction with humans; human-rat encounters are often indirect and focused on rats' impact on the built environment. Accordingly, we read rats' presence, mobilities, and encounters more through the traces they leave on the material environment of the city than through direct observation or interaction. In the next section, we discuss what we might understand as rats'

claims to urban belonging—their acts of denizenship—and how humans confer or withhold political recognition of these claims.

RECOGNIZING OR REJECTING RATS' ACTS OF DENIZENSHIP

In a 2019 report on pest management, the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) acknowledged that “there are situations in which rodents are not a problem” (Komen, Scheepmaker, and Wezenbeek, 2019, 16). This reflects a growing recognition that Amsterdam is what Steve Hinchliffe and Sarah Whatmore (2006) call a “living city,” in which human and nonhuman city dwellers live both with and against urban design. Both the RIVM and the GGD, Amsterdam’s public health service, formally recognize that the brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*) is only problematic in certain situations, which indicates an emergent ecological recognition of cities as sites for more-than-human dwelling. Despite the strong presence of private pest control companies, recent years have seen an increase in pest management companies that emphasize ecological concerns and animal welfare (Figure 1). This disposition can be tied, in part, to Amsterdam’s specific municipal politics, including the recent electoral dominance of the progressive Green Party GroenLinks (Boterman and van Gent, 2023). There are, however, limits to this recognition of rats’ right to live in the city. In the next section, we analyze rats’ claims to their right to the city of Amsterdam—what ethologists might describe as animal behavior—as shaping relations with humans and the built environment in ways that enact a relation of denizenship. We discuss six rat-specific acts: burrowing, gnawing, mobility, foraging for food, reproducing, and infecting. We show how the potential for political recognition relates to the cultural meaning of an animal species, but also to its biologically shaped bodily forms and agentic capacities.

Burrowing

One way that rats appropriate and shape urban space is through the practice of burrowing. Rats are social animals that live mainly underground in an elaborate burrow system that involves tunnels, food chambers, and nest rooms. Though small, colonies of rats use their dexterous paws and strong teeth to collectively dig extensive tunnels that create sinkholes in gardens and grassy fields and cause sidewalks to collapse. The appropriation of urban space often remains unnoticed when this burrowing takes place in parks—urban areas that usually have ample room for nests. But when rats burrow under sidewalks, their behavior comes into conflict with human forms of habitation by damaging residents’ private gardens and public infrastructure.

We suggest that rats’ agency can be read in their claims to the city’s subsoil through acts of burrowing that can lead to material damage and unsafe situations for humans; in addition, the rats’ ability to make a difference is evident in the interactions they generate between residents and the municipality, and among neighbors. Human city dwellers generally do not take kindly to such subterranean claims; they respond to the rats’ disruption of the material status quo in ways that largely assert the human right to exercise control over rats’ use of shared space, although we see an emergent recognition of their permanent residency.

The sidewalk in front of Rivke’s home in the Plantagebuurt neighborhood began to cave in. One of her neighbors posted a picture of the haphazard sidewalk tiles to the WhatsApp group connecting the building’s three apartments, captioned “reported to the municipality.” Rivke decided to submit a report on the municipal website as well to see if this might increase the urgency; to her surprise, the sidewalk was fixed the next day. The excitement that this quick repair generated in her apartment building’s WhatsApp group diminished when, just a few weeks later, the tiles began to cave in again. The municipality returned quickly to fix them, but not long after, the sidewalk collapsed once more. A neighbor submitted a new report to the municipality, expressing his concern that rats were to blame. A response from the municipality announced that they would follow up with an investigation into rat nuisance (*overlast van ratten*), which would primarily involve locating the rats’ dens and determining whether pest control was possible and necessary. Less



FIGURE 1 Company van advertising “Sustainable Fauna Consultancy, human/animal conflict mediation” in Amsterdam East. Source: Photo by Jelke Bosma. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions)]

than two weeks later, the first neighbor reported: “The GGD just came by because of the tiles. There is probably a system of underground rat tunnels beneath the collapsed tiles.” A visible trap soon appeared. After a week or so, the trap was removed and the tiles laid straight once more. At the time of writing, over a year after this last intervention, the sidewalk showed signs of damage again.

The collapsing section of the sidewalk was located exactly between the front door of Rivke’s building and the spot where some 20 households piled their garbage bags for collection twice a week. Often, these bags appeared on the wrong day instead of the designated times and days: early on Wednesday and Saturday mornings. It seemed likely that there was a direct connection between the piled-up garbage and the sidewalk breakdown. This connection was also emphasized by two small posters that Rivke spotted taped to a parking meter down the street from her

house. Written in English and in Dutch, the posters urged residents to dispose of their garbage properly. The English version read “Because of the growing number of rats / Please no garbage here / Except on Wednesday and Saturday early in the morning or in the evening as from 22.00 hours / Your neighbors.” These notices suggest a recognition of the associations between humans, rats, and waste—Amsterdam residents read the nuisance associated with rats as the result of more-than-human relations that include, but extend beyond, rats themselves. Rather than focusing on exterminating rats, neighbors remind each other to not encourage rats’ presence by preventing access to the garbage that is their main source of food.

We saw a similar recognition of actor networks in an interview with Cynthia, an Oosterpark visitor who sought to negotiate the unwelcome presence of rat burrows in her front yard. In her case, the municipality and the GGD were less effective than in Rivke’s case: they placed small boxes with traps and checked them on a weekly basis but declined to fix her yard, as the municipality considered rats within one meter of a private dwelling to be the owner’s responsibility. Even as she complained about the futility of the GGD’s traps, Cynthia emphasized the rats’ ingenuity almost admiringly:

Those rats are much too smart for that. . . they’re such survivors. There’s a trap in that little box, I don’t know how many rats they catch with those to start with, but in my yard: not a single one.

Ultimately, she gave up on the municipality and took matters into her own hands by closing off the burrow entrances in her garden with steel wool. Cynthia sought to discourage rats’ claims on her yard more directly than Rivke’s neighbors who posted signs in the Plantagebuurt by intervening in their relation with their material surroundings. Rather than stigmatizing the rats or trying to kill them, she sought to increase the distance between their home and hers by blocking their passageways, while recognizing their resourcefulness and their ability to survive.

Gnawing

Another key behavior that involves rats asserting their own needs in ways that disrupt the human-centered status quo is that of gnawing. As with other rodents, gnawing is vital behavior for rats: their front incisors do not stop growing and constant gnawing is the only way they can prevent them from becoming overgrown. Rats can gnaw their way through wooden walls, insulation, and floors and destroy infrastructure such as electric cables, garbage bins, and sewage pipes as they search for nesting places or food. This presents human residents not only with potentially costly material damage but also, in the case of electricity networks, with actively unsafe situations.

Though gnawing is normal behavior for rats, it tends to challenge human norms: when rats gnaw their way into private homes, they challenge the sociospatial boundaries—between indoors and outdoors, between home and nature—that human city dwellers hold dear. The GGD’s municipal ecologist explained how gnawing led rats beyond public space and private gardens into domestic space, sparking predictable outrage. “A rat can gnaw, of course,” he explained, laughing, “so about four or five times a year we get a report of a rat entering a house via the toilet bowl. Obviously, that doesn’t contribute to improving the rat’s image.”

Although we can read gnawing as enacting an expansive claim to the city for rats, we found that residents rejected these claims emphatically as illegitimate, costly, and dangerous intrusions, more than in the case of yards and sidewalks. Fed up with the presence of rats in her neighborhood, one of our interlocutors living in the city’s wealthier South district, Eline, complained: “I feel that a rat doesn’t belong in our community. It creates lots of damage, gnaws, is dangerous in terms of cables, electricity, the sewage system is leaking.” Another resident from the same neighborhood, Jessica, described similar incidents in which rats wrought infrastructural havoc: “They’re just *slopers* [wreckers], filthy *slopers*.” In an attention-grabbing, if unsuccessful, counterinitiative to the municipality’s overall ecologically nuanced policies, the conservative liberal People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), dominant in this elite neighborhood, proposed killing rats with air guns (Roele, 2021).

As with burrowing, these observations surrounding gnawing illustrate that while we can recognize the rat as an agentive being, its political agency does not emerge from its individual, intentional actions per se. Rather, we can see a more-than-human act of denizenship as resulting from rats' interactions with the material environment—the specific forms taken by these animal-infrastructure interactions mediate the recognition or rejection of rats' claims to the city. Compared to burrowing, human city dwellers respond to rats' gnawing through electricity networks and sewage pipes by labeling them disgusting wreckers and denying them belonging in “our community.” Yet, as we describe further below, when rats' claims on urban space take the form of eating their way through fatbergs within the same sewage system, their infrastructural interactions are valued differently.

Moving

Rats' gnawing is intimately entangled with what we read as a third form of claims-making: their mobility. Rats can transgress various material and imaginary boundaries. In addition to gnawing their way through barriers, a very specific bodily capacity—the ability to collapse their skeleton to squeeze through spaces—allows them to enter buildings through the smallest openings. Gaps of just one and a half centimeters, easily found in Amsterdam's historical buildings and sewage infrastructure, provide rats with sufficient space to navigate the city, moving in and out of homes (van Kempen, 2016). Because rats are nocturnal animals, mostly active during the night, much of this urban mobility remains unseen. But when rat populations exceed a certain size in one location, the rats lowest in a colony's hierarchy will forage for food during the day. In addition, those rats that become more familiar with humans will adapt their natural instincts to the daytime rhythms of city dwellers, intensifying the frequency of human-rat encounters.

Rats' nocturnal visibility appeared to be relatively acceptable to our interlocutors. For instance, Gijs, a New West resident who occasionally picks up litter as a leisure activity, explained in an interview that “the rats that you just see on the street here and there, especially at night I mean, they're just a part of it all.” Other interlocutors similarly marked a nighttime rat presence on the streets as normal, as in line with what is expected of nocturnal animals such as rats. Conversely, the recognition of rats' right to inhabit the city diminished when they appeared in the daytime. Mandy became aware of this through her research in Oosterpark, a park that harbors a large rat population. This presence interfered with the daily stroll through the park that Mrs. Geel, one of Mandy's interlocutors, liked to take. Mrs. Geel, a senior citizen, was born and raised near the park, and she accepted rats as a fact of urban life. But the Oosterpark's rats no longer restricted their movements to the night and had begun to forage for food during the day, which disrupted the enjoyment of her daily walk: “Nowadays you see them walk across the path. . . during the daytime, just like that! I find that disturbing.” (Figure 2) Many other park users similarly considered the rats' urban presence to be “normal”—up to a point. Fran, a self-declared animal lover, recognized the rats' right to move through the park and the city, but emphasized the parameters of such copresence, echoing the fair terms of reciprocity that Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) associated with denizenship:

Look, I certainly see rats as nasty, but it's not a hate relationship. The wild rat and I can coexist but in separate territories and not while I'm eating, but for the rest it's fine for them to be there. . . It's really not fear that I feel, but I don't want them up in my food while I'm picnicking.

The specific material form and traces of rats' mobilities elicited affective responses such as fright or disgust. Rats are highly skilled at hiding and their movements through the park—and the rest of urban public space—are relatively evasive: they scurry back and forth quickly as they familiarize themselves with their surroundings, staying close to walls, trash cans, and vegetation. Accordingly, human encounters with rats are often brief and unexpected—the sudden sight of a tail slipping under the bushes or a dark flash seen from the corner of one's eye. Such unanticipated encounters also took place during interviews with interlocutors in the Oosterpark, eliciting both shrieks and sighs. In addition, rats leave material, olfactory traces as they move around the park and the rest of Amsterdam. Although rats' natural



FIGURE 2 Two brown rats in Oosterpark attempt to reach discarded chunks of bread during daytime. *Source:* Photo by Mandy de Wilde. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/japh.12580)]

behavior includes frequent grooming and cleaning, they use urine and feces to mark their routes and territories. This practice results in a strong unpleasant smell near rats' regular trajectories through parks, streets, and buildings.

Such encounters with rats or their smelly markings clash with Amsterdammers' sense of the normal spatial and temporal logic of a city (see, for example, Jerolmack, 2008): humans own the streets and houses, rats belong in their burrows in the shrubbery and underneath buildings; it makes sense for rats to wander through a park at night that is the domain of human recreational activities during the day. When rats' movements transgress these temporal and spatial parameters, their claims to mobility and copresence are met with pushback. This sense of transgression—the extent to which rats' enactment of their right to the city is recognized or rejected—is sensorially mediated; it is highly dependent on whether human city dwellers actually see or smell a rat. We found that when rats' movements remain

confined to subterranean sewage networks even as humans are aware of their presence, the lack of visibility makes it easier for humans to recognize their right to coexist. However, as soon as rats' movements became visible, audible, or smellable—especially in spaces and times considered to be inappropriate for rats—our interlocutors tended to reject their right to use and mark urban space.

Foraging

Rats' urban foraging for food constituted another act of denizenship, highlighting an emergent sense of a weak but reciprocal relation of rights and responsibility between rats and humans. In discussing their encounters with rats, our interlocutors frequently framed them as "trash animals" (Nagy and Johnson, 2013). Urban rats are picky eaters; they prefer food that is high in fat and protein, and they are drawn to human food waste, junk food in particular. In Amsterdam, the maintenance of an effective waste infrastructure is a core responsibility of the municipality, which organizes the collection of general waste in parks and streets and installs underground containers for residential waste collection. Over the years, budget cuts reduced the frequency with which the municipality collected waste from these underground household containers and public bins. Garbage became increasingly visible in public spaces, not only as the result of littering but also as residents encountered overflowing underground containers and disposed of their bagged garbage next to a full container rather than attempting to locate an empty one. These issues—which were associated with an increase in rat sightings—were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, as lockdowns and working from home led to an increase in household waste (van der Beek, 2022).

To tackle the litter problem, the municipality sought to inculcate a stronger sense of garbage-related responsibility among residents through a so-called waste offensive that started in 2019. This offensive involved fines as well as a wide-ranging awareness-raising campaign disseminated through the municipal website and local news outlets, emphasizing residents' responsibility for keeping the city clean. The alderman charged with sanitation explained that the informational campaign sought to effect behavioral change among human city dwellers by focusing on container locations, explicitly specifying desirable behavior and mobilizing "the street as the extension of the living room" (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2021). The GGD, in turn, highlighted the connections between garbage and rats, emphasizing the role that residents could play in rodent management, for instance by minimizing food waste and by disposing of their household waste inside, rather than next to, the underground containers (GGD Amsterdam, 2020). Despite the militarized language of such "offensives," we suggest reading them as a political response to rats' eating as claims-making. Rather than rejecting rats' rights to food and life by launching extermination campaigns, the waste offensive recognizes humans' responsibilities in discouraging rat population growth instead.

Such an emphasis on waste frames the problem of foraging rats in terms of human culpability, rather than blaming the rats themselves. In addition, however, we saw a tentative move to identify rats' foraging for food as a positive contribution to the city, recognizing it as a form of waste work. Although rats' feeding on waste is a disruptive act, it also helps to remove litter, such as that created after gulls and crows peck open garbage bags. For example, Mara, a New West resident, emphasized in an interview that rats "undoubtedly also do good work, they clean parts of our waste." Some Oosterpark visitors offered similar positive assessments, noting for instance: "Well, they do clean up the mess! I am not so anti-rat I must say." Media reports also advance this framing of rats as waste workers, describing them as "the cleaners of the city."⁴

This recognition of rats' contributions to the city was even more evident in relation to their role in eating the growing amount of fat that Amsterdammers flush down their drains. A GGD internal report noted that "rats eat fat from sewage pipes and, in the process, help with the maintenance of the sewage system" (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2018). Explaining that residents had to learn to live with rats, an Amsterdam-West district manager similarly noted that "they're also useful animals, they eat away fat from sewer pipes and that saves maintenance work" (Boon, 2021). Newspaper articles echoed this narrative, explaining to readers that this feeding on fat prevents the sewage pipes

from clogging and saves cleaning, while also noting that rats themselves are food for urban wildlife including martens and owls (van der Beek, 2022).

Ultimately, their eating enacts rats as both an urban problem and a solution. Their habit of eating human food waste in the form of litter or subterranean fatberg—their role in “collecting and transforming the unwanted remains of human consumption” (Holmberg, 2021, 20)—is appreciated as a contribution to waste management and infrastructural functioning. Yet the recognition of their contribution or their right to eat depends on their invisibility. Rats’ engagement with litter in particular makes both the rats themselves and the traces of their presence (e.g., droppings, gnaw marks, additional litter) more visible on the streets, eliciting a negative response similar to that described in the previous section. Rats’ right to eat, then, is premised on this foraging going unnoticed and on serving human interests, whether in the form of removing litter from public space or maintaining sewage flows.

Reproducing

Amsterdam’s municipal approach to rats’ eating connects directly to their approach to rats’ reproductive habits. Working from the knowledge that rat populations are remarkably resilient (Glass et al., 2009) and that eradication is virtually impossible, the GGD—like the Dutch national health authorities—has been shifting its approach from pest eradication to integrated pest management (IPM). IPM starts from the assumption that rats are endemic to Amsterdam but seeks to lower the reproductive capacity of its rat populations by creating food scarcity. From this official perspective, rats are, in principle, free to coexist with humans in Amsterdam, but they become classified as a risk or nuisance to humans once they reproduce more quickly than the city’s parks, courtyards, and squares can “handle.” In this sense, IPM aligns closely with the fair balancing of risks and benefits between humans and animals, including humans’ right to exercise control over their total numbers and use of shared space, as described by Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011).

Amsterdam’s human residents are well aware that they are surrounded by rats. When sharing their stories of encounters with rats, our interlocutors drew attention to their colloquial knowledge of brown rats as synanthropic species that live near humans. A frequently repeated factoid was “There’s at least one rat per Amsterdammer” (*voor elke Amsterdammer is er minstens één rat*), a statement indicating the relative normalcy of the urban rat presence. The GGD’s municipal ecologist used the same expression to discuss Amsterdam’s rat population. Quick to assert that the brown rat did have a right to live in Amsterdam, he pointed out that the city formed an ideal abode for rats as it is constructed largely on reclaimed land, on dry sand bodies that constitute ideal places for rats to build their burrows. Accordingly, the city’s parks and squares currently harbor a number of permanent rat populations in what the ecologist described as “a natural phenomenon”: the rats often hide in their burrows and come out at night, displaying “natural” behavior by minimizing their visibility.

As noted above, many of our interlocutors also saw a nighttime rat presence as relatively normal. A more objectionable daytime visibility becomes especially pronounced when incidental rat populations emerge suddenly around (undermaintained) waste collection sites. There, rats can reproduce at an alarming pace, with populations our interlocutors described as “exploding” and becoming “too large.” Rats are known for their high reproduction rates, which is related to the speed with which female rats reach sexual maturity, their short gestation periods, and their ability to conceive again quickly after giving birth. When rat populations have access to an abundance of food, the reproduction rate will scale up proportionally; if a small number of rats encounter a new source of abundant food, their reproductive behavior and associated population growth will result in a fairly sudden increase, disrupting the acceptable “balance” of urban denizenship. The municipal ecologist acknowledged that in certain cases, the GGD would exterminate rat populations, rather than seek to manage them through minimizing food sources:

We as the GGD do still go to places where extermination still remains necessary, where there are really a lot of rats in an enclosed garden or a large burrow. So a risk analysis is done there and... rats, yes [if there’s just too many, those have to be exterminated].

Even for those fully embracing IPM's goal of reasonable coexistence, there are limits to rats' rights as denizens.

Infecting

The strongest objections to rats' appropriation of urban space are related to their bodily capacity to carry zoonotic pathogens and infect humans with a range of diseases. Various interlocutors' first association with our research topic was "Wasn't it rats that spread the plague?" Many of them mobilized Dutch terms such as *goor*, *smerig*, and *vies*—all variations on "dirty"—when discussing rats. Rats can, indeed, spread diseases: directly, by passing infectious agents through their blood, saliva, or urine or by transporting microorganisms they pick up from rotting garbage; and also indirectly, by serving as hosts for other disease vectors such as fleas and ticks. While the current health risk in Amsterdam is relatively minor, twenty-first-century rats are still feared as vectors of leptospirosis, a bacterial infection that is potentially deadly to humans. Interestingly, when discussing their fear of infection, interlocutors referenced not their own health but that of repairmen, their (grand)children, or their domesticated companion species, dogs.

Those interlocutors who were health professionals were especially concerned. Jessica, the previously introduced resident of the Scheldebuurt in the wealthy South district, discussed her fear of rats as disease agents:

Because I know they can transmit leptospirosis, and I work in a hospital myself, and I've seen a few patients suffering from it in intensive care. . . so meh. I'm really nervous for all those repairmen who have to enter the crawlspaces here, I tell them, "Please protect yourself well, wear gloves, cover your face, and wash everything you can wash afterward," because I don't want to be responsible for people getting sick because of those stupid animals here.

To support her point, Jessica also offered the example of a friend of a friend who had become dependent on a wheelchair for mobility after contracting leptospirosis, although she was not sure if he had caught it through rats. Rob, a middle-aged doctor and avid bird-watcher who Mandy met in Oosterpark, was also adamant that in the park, and in other public areas, the municipality was responsible for keeping the rat population under control in service of public health, "as rats can transfer diseases, and children play in the park." He was less concerned about his own health. He had encountered a rat in his own kitchen cupboard and placed traps. He eventually killed a trapped rat by hitting it with a full beer bottle—"I didn't want it to suffer"—and felt that washing his hands thoroughly after killing it was sufficient health precaution.

Dog owners frequently expressed concern for the health of their dogs, who would occasionally chase rats in the park: Laura, one such dog walker, shared with Mandy, "This week alone she's already caught two rats," while throwing a somewhat concerned glance at her terrier, Rex. Sporadically, dogs would get bitten by a rat or catch one, and many dog owners expressed a constant dread of such encounters. To manage this fear, they would avoid specific corners of the park or keep their dog leashed tightly.

A recognition of rats' capacity to form a public health risk informs their subjection to IPM by the GGD. The GGD's role as a public health service is primarily to monitor and kill rats in public areas and to offer free residential rat-control services, relying mainly on the use of "ecologically responsible" nonpoisonous baits and traps. Rodenticides are used only when all else fails or when the GGD identifies an imminent public health risk—they generally consider the use of rat poison to pose a larger health risk than the rats themselves, reflecting a recent national regulation restricting the purchase of rodenticide to professionals.

Through their capacity to infect humans and animals, rats evidence another means to shape the city. Their infectious potential shapes humans' use of domestic space, compelling them to avoid parts of their homes where rats are known to roam, for instance in basements or crawl spaces. In urban public space, dog walkers are more accepting of rats as part of a city park's ecology, but they still avoid spaces where their dogs might interact with rats. The public health agency, in turn, seeks to keep the rat population "manageable" to minimize health risks but discourages

rodenticide-based eradication efforts that have harmful health consequences of their own. As with the other acts discussed in this article, we see an ambivalent recognition of the rat's right to copresence—the rats' potential to infect humans and dogs does not result in extermination, but the spatial context strongly shapes whether their right to appropriate and shape urban space is acknowledged.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A MORE-THAN-HUMAN ANTHROPOLOGY OF CITIZENSHIP

We have sought to problematize the anthropology of citizenship's predominant focus on the relationship between humans and the state, suggesting that this focus obscures the political salience and agency of nonhuman beings. We have argued that the anthropological interest in studying those everyday practices and political acts that constitute citizenship—by enacting a relationship with the state or other forms of political community—can be extended to include the politically meaningful acts of nonhuman animals. While a growing body of anthropological work acknowledges agency as a relational accomplishment involving humans and nonhumans, political and legal anthropology still rarely considers animals as possessing *political* agency.

Building on work that recognizes everyday practices as enactments of political agency, we have sought to understand certain animals as claiming a Lefebvrian right to the city, not so much through conscious, intentional political decision-making but rather through appropriating and shaping urban space. Drawing on philosophical and anthropological work on human-animal relations, we suggest that considering animals' claims-making and the conditions under which these claims are recognized or rejected extends our understanding of what constitutes a political constituent.

Following Donaldson and Kymlicka's (2011) differentiated approach to animal rights, we built our overall argument on the case of Amsterdam's brown rat, suggesting that we can recognize the negotiation of a more-than-human form of denizenship, characterized by a relatively widespread recognition that rats "belong" in the city alongside a municipal move to educate human residents on how to coexist with rats. In particular, we identified an emergent sense of a fair balance of risks and benefits between humans and animals and connected this to what we analyze as Amsterdam's rats' "acts of denizenship": the claims to urban belonging that rats enact through their presence in and movements through the city. This analysis has involved reframing ethological understandings of rats' burrowing, gnawing, moving, eating, reproducing, and infecting as such claims to belonging. Importantly, our analysis extends the scope of much of the human-animal research by highlighting how the built environment of the city is another critical component that mediates rats' acts of denizenship. Urban architecture and infrastructure both shape and are shaped by human and nonhuman practices, and the ways that rats engage with these artifacts—gnawing through electricity cables, foraging in garbage bins, cleaning fat from sewage pipes, or popping out of toilets—have important implications for how humans experience and value their copresence. Such more-than-human practices enact the urban "rat multiple" (cf. Law and Mol, 2008)—some of its forms despised, some tolerated, some even embraced.

Amsterdam's rats, we argue, demonstrate that nonhuman animals are involved in ongoing negotiations with humans and state institutions over the temporal and spatial limits to their urban belonging. Understanding political agency as a relational, more-than-human accomplishment, we recognize that the political impact of these animals' claims depends not only on rats' acts but also on how humans respond to them. Unlike cities that seek to eradicate rat populations—as in New York City's recent job posting seeking a rat czar with a "killer instinct" and describing rats as "enemies that must be vanquished" (Rubinstein, 2022)—Amsterdam's municipal policies and residents' responses suggest an urban politics that is more receptive to rats' claims to belonging. The growing recognition of rats' rights to coexistence is tempered by a strong sense of when and where rats belong in the city: while circumscribed levels of mobility, reproduction, and foraging are recognized as "normal," the rejection of rats' claim to the city becomes evident when destructive burrowing, gnawing, reproducing, and infecting transgress human norms associated with property regimes, private/public boundaries, and tolerable public health risks. Conversely, Amsterdam's state institutions and residents increasingly recognize the rats' waste work—their unclogging of sewage pipes and cleaning of streets by eating fat and litter—as a valuable contribution to the city.

Animals' urban presence, movements, and encounters with humans, the built environment, and other animals can be understood as acts of denizenship—acts that are politically meaningful even if they are hard to recognize as such through dominant, human-centered notions of agency. Decentering humans in our analyses of political belonging and agency requires both developing a different kind of ethnographic attention and expanding our imagination of how constituents are constituted. Political and legal anthropology are both well-positioned to undertake this empirical and analytical challenge, demonstrating how philosophical positions on animal rights are already being negotiated in everyday life—by humans and their nonhuman neighbors.

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ENDNOTES

¹ All translations from Dutch are authors' own.

² For recent work that does engage explicitly with the role of animals in political and legal anthropology, see, for example, Irus Braverman (2021).

³ For a related—if less agency-focused—application of the concept of more-than-human denizenship, see Krithika Srinivasan's (2019) work on free-living dogs in urban India.

⁴ <https://open.spotify.com/episode/4rZeKlItF9Bxomjf0h2lt6?si=-Bbrco0SS7q9LkcsSrCjCA>

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