2024

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Recommended Citation

Dicenta, Mara, The promise of interspecies desegregation: Allying with capybaras against gated communities in Buenos Aires' wetlands (2024). *Environment and Planning F*. https://doi.org/10.1177/26349825241255688

Special Issue: Race and the Built Environment

F Philosophy, Theory, Models, Methods and Practice

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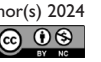
EPF: Philosophy, Theory, Models, Methods and Practice
1–21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Abstract

Nordelta is an exclusive gated community in Buenos Aires built over the wetlands of the Paraná Delta that has encroached on more-than-human bodies and lands through racialized discourses and infrastructures. In this article, I analyze a controversy that arose in 2021 when crowds of capybaras started roaming freely in the community. The event triggered a robust social media response that, I argue, generated popular epistemic tools to enlist capybaras into categories of multispecies endangerment and dispossession. In addition, I delve into the emergence of the communitarian territory of Punta Querandí, which, at the borders of Nordelta, seeks to repair segregation and encroachment for humans and other-than-humans. Drawing on scholarship on animals, race, and the built environment, I employ an ethnographically informed analysis of social media, archival documents, and interviews to explore the two cases as responses to racial capitalism and real extractivism in contemporary Argentina, shedding light into what I term "the promise of interspecies desegregation."

Keywords

whiteness, gated communities, racial capitalism, wetlands, multispecies justice

Nordelta, an assemblage of gated communities, stands upon the wetlands of the Paraná River (Figure 1) and has emerged as one of Buenos Aires' most exclusive neighborhoods. With properties ranging from US$300,000 to US$6 million, it accommodates over 50,000 residents. The conglomerate opened in 2001, although it did not see significant growth until 2004 due to an infamous extreme economic crisis marked by increased poverty, state violence, and social insecurity. However, as research uncovers, those who relocated to Nordelta were not solely moved by security discourses but also by the prospect of experiencing a US middle-class suburban lifestyle. This housing dream, nurtured by real estate layouts, illuminates the intersection between global real estate economies and national histories of race, including Argentina's narrative of white exceptionalism within Latin America.

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Figure 1. Nordelta's area over the wetlands of the Paraná Delta.
Source: Google Earth.

In the winter of 2021, two decades after Nordelta's opening, its idyllic routine was disrupted when crowds of capybaras started swimming in residents' private pools while agitating their dogs and foraging on their plants. These creatures, the largest rodents native to Argentina and known as *carpinchos* and *capibaras*, from the Guarani *kapiÿvá* [lord of the grass], had nearly vanished from Buenos Aires due to agriculture and urbanization. However, Nordelta's design enabled their resurgence by providing an idyllic habitat not only for the elite but also for these animals who found a rich environment and a safe refuge from predators within its walls and artificial lakes.

The response of Nordelta's residents to the capybaras was to ask for their relocation. They called the media and had one of Argentina's leading conservative newspapers cover the case. The article, titled "Injured Dogs and Shattered Gardens," featured two casualties: Oreo, a wounded dog, and an unnamed food delivery motorcyclist who had fallen while attempting to avoid a capybara crossing the road (Horvat, 2021). Ironically, the resident's call for attention through the media backfired, triggering a significant social media reaction. By portraying the animals as socialist *guerrilleros*, working-class allies, or Indigenous inhabitants, the controversy circulated popular environmental knowledges, employing memes as a technology to enlist species within more-than-animal processes of displacement and risk production.

The capybaras challenged Nordelta's internal order in 2021, but the conglomerate's capacity to police and displace bordering communities had already been exceeded since 2004. That year, a persistent Indigenous mobilization in defense of the land began when bones and ceramics surfaced in real estate excavations. The movement led to the formation of Punta Querandí—a communitarian, ancestral, sacred, and educational territory—at the borders of Nordelta. Despite enduring the violence of white elite development, Punta Querandí's struggle to defend the wetlands includes visions of more-than-human repair after segregation.

In this article, I examine the capybaras' controversy and the emergence of Punta Querandí as responses to real estate extractivism and racial capitalism. Pintos (2023) defines real estate extractivism as the escalating commodification of nature and housing, positioning real estate a central activity for capital accumulation. Pintos et al.'s (2023) work beautifully elucidates the mechanisms of real estate extractivism in Argentina, highlighting its intersections with state-market discourses, zoning policies, and the emergence of socio-environmental movements advocating for communities and

nature. However, their work eludes any analysis of racial dynamics. In a nation marked by persistent denial of racism and given the interconnection between whiteness and property (Moreton-Robinson, 2015), this article seeks to understand processes and responses to real estate extractivism as they intersect with racial capitalism—or violence and destruction against poorer, darker-skinned communities in pursuit of capital and financial accumulation (for a recent comprehensive approach, see Koshy et al., 2022).

I characterize such responses as promises of *interspecies desegregation* or collective efforts that, by interlinking race, class, and ecological struggles, aim to assess and alter socio-spatial racialized boundaries affecting relations between human and other-than-human communities. With such a concept, I aim to analyze the more-than-human works of racial capitalism while drawing insights from Sophie Chao et al.'s (2022) work questions on situated and multispecies justice. In my research, interspecies desegregation stands as a horizon of justice against the expansion of real estate extractivism and neoliberal conservation that reshape and fortify the racialized borders between the wild and the civilized in white Argentina.

While acknowledging the historical kinship of the term "desegregation" with the African American Civil Rights movement, my intention is not to equate the US and Argentinian contexts directly. Instead, I aim to establish partial alliances that both challenge Argentina's myth of white exceptionalism and emphasize the history of anti-racist struggles in the United States. This is particularly relevant given the widespread use of US segregation history as a means to deny racism in Argentina through comparison. With distinct racial dynamics (see Hernández, 2016; Segato, 2002), US anti-Blackness ideology partly derives from the blood fiction known as the "one-drop rule," which asserted that any Black ancestry categorizes a person as Black. In contrast, Argentina's white mestizaje suggests that the influx of European immigrants gradually "dissolved" nonwhiteness. Presently, the predominantly white population of Buenos Aires (approximately 75%) obscures the significant representation of Afro-Argentinians, Indigenous peoples, and Mestizo/Morochos in the city outskirts and the rest of the country, where half of the population does not identify as white (De Grande and Salvia, 2021). Amid these concealments, the persistent belief in Argentinians "descending from the ships" fuels urban schemes that promote distance from spaces inhabited and shaped by darker-skinned peoples.

The term "desegregation" originates from the Latin roots "de" (not, un-) + "segregation" or "se" (apart) + "grego" (flock) and hence refers to undoing an arrangement based on a flock that constitutes itself through separation from others. In this sense, desegregation and integration do not hold an etymological connection and do not necessarily correlate. Moreover, desegregation does not always align with a politics of recognition aimed at reparation through *aggregation*. Through my research on the capybaras' controversy and Punta Querandí, I have found that desegregation can also signify a horizon of worlds beyond segregation rather than one of border erasure aimed at unity. They respond to the wounds of human and other-than-human racialized partitions, specifically to those deriving from the commodification, racialization, and hierarchization of lands and bodies morally deemed disposable, wasteful, or underdeveloped. Despite being marked by encroachment and dispossession, the goal of abolishing segregationist moralities shapes practices, experiments, and labor for the regeneration of lands, wetlands, and human and other-than-human relations. In this horizon, the reparative promise lies in fostering life and alterity through relations, not separations.

This project originated during one of my stays visiting archives and family in Buenos Aires, as my broader research primarily focuses on Argentine Patagonia. After two short field trips to the area in 2022, I analyzed social media, archival documents, and interviews—all informed by the growing public and scholarly attention to race in Argentina. The article is divided into four sections and a conclusion. The first section provides context on race and whiteness across more-than-human Argentina before describing, in the second section, the history of Nordelta and the expansion of master-planned communities (MPCs). Then, the third section analyzes the controversy surrounding the capybaras and the social media protests, while the fourth section explores the emergence of Punta Querandí at the

borders of real estate developments. Reflecting on the political horizons proposed by these movements, I suggest they reveal popular capacities to assess more-than-human environmental risks linked to colonial, racial, and neoliberal segregation. These horizons promise to defy science as the sole ecological authority while also departing from commodified and solutionist tactics. In the concluding remarks, I discuss what a promise of interspecies desegregation might and might not entail.

Race, humans, and animals in white Argentina

Argentina's racial imaginary of white exceptionalism asserts that mestizaje with Europeans produced a white population and "dissolved" any trace of nonwhiteness. Eugenic discourses emerging in the early 20th century narrowed previous colonial racial classifications to emphasize whiteness as Argentina's defining national trait. Simultaneously, statistics and discourses promoted the belief that Indigenous and Indigenous and Afro-Argentinian Peoples had vanished due to warfare, genocide, or disease, while assimilationist policies sought to integrate survivors into an unmarked Argentinian citizenship. Those diverging from this image were subsumed into the "popular world," a term referring to poverty, even if associated with prejudices linking darker skin to lower status (Alberto and Elena, 2016: 7).

Such articulation of white exceptionalism continues to shape infrastructures and built environments, revealing its more-than-human works. Anthropologist Gastón Gordillo (2016) characterizes "White Argentina" as an affective project, promoting the desire to occupy a national space inhabited by white Europeans that is haunted by the ever-presence of nonwhiteness (Dicenta and Gerrard, 2023; Gordillo and Hirsch, 2010). It is also a more-than-human project, fostering desires for coexistence with European, modern, and white animals, plants, landscapes, and environments (Dicenta, 2023).

Scholarship on more-than-human racialization has addressed the mechanisms of biopolitical regimes, demonstrating how attempts to erase the animality from the Anthropos render entire communities "subhuman" (Paredes, 2022: 78). In addition, biopolitical imaginaries shape the value and disposability of other-than-human life through classifications of risk, protection, and endangerment (Braverman, 2015; Dicenta and Correa, 2021; Van Dooren, 2015). However, the absence of racial considerations in most biopolitical critiques of anthropocentrism has prompted scholars to seek alliances across animal, race, decolonial, and disability studies, emphasizing coalitions without erasing differences (González and Davidson, 2022).

An exemplary work on the more-than-human entanglements of race is Bénédict Boisseron's book "Afro-Dog" (2018), which examines the history of dogs bred and used by colonial powers and security forces to control and terrorize Indigenous peoples and enslaved individuals. Dogs were also used to repress Black activists during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and in the more recent protests following the murder of Michael Brown by police in 2014. Boisseron argues against equating exploited animals with the plight of Black people, as this utilitarian argument used by some animalist organizations neglects the aftermath of slavery and reinforces the view that some people are closer to animals. Simultaneously, she cautions against the discourse that animals receive more protection than Black people, as it not only continues to use animals to measure Black existence but also results in the justification of animal exploitation (Boisseron, 2018).

In this vein, scholars have explored various instances of intertwined subjugation, such as the exposure of animals and plantation workers to pesticides in the Philippines (Paredes, 2022), how beetles infesting oil palms in West Papua inspire Indigenous Marind workers to redefine notions of resistance (Chao, 2021), or how the Jñato and Hñähñu people living in the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve in México resist land dispossession through care for monarchs and forests (González-Duarte, 2022). In Argentina, Carman (2020) has examined the racialized discourses of animal activists, particularly those concerning horses used by Buenos Aires' *cartoneros* [recyclers], questioning how to reshape animal rights from a Latin-American perspective with a focus on mutual emancipation and care for life, human and nonhuman.

One of the challenges in pursuing multispecies justice involves examining alliances without uncritically romanticizing agency, as highlighted by Govindrajan's (2022) description of the struggles cattle carers face amid rising Hindu Nationalism in Northern India. Likewise, Salazar Parreñas (2018) has shown that more-than-human alliances are not free of violence, as interspecies care in orangutan rehabilitation centers in Sarawak, Malaysia, reveals. My analysis of the capybara controversy and its potential for interspecies desegregation is constructed in conversation with this extensive scholarship. While analyzing memes, news articles, and interviews, I ask: How do processes of environmental commodification and racialization affect the way human and nonhuman animals relate? Moreover, how do relational approaches that transcend biopolitical imaginaries enable multispecies justice horizons?

Real estate, racial capitalism, and the conquest of the wetlands

> I saw the new "conquistadores" disembarking as they arrived in Tigre and the Delta. They descended with their bulldozers, cranes, and dredges to "enhance these swampy lands full of vermin," which they bought at a laughable price and sold at a much higher one. (Martín Nunziata, 2023)

Nordelta is home to over 70 gated communities and approximately 50,000 residents and is the workplace of over 8000 workers who pass through its gates daily (AVN, 2021). It opened in 2001 amid Argentina's economic collapse, which led to the freezing of personal accounts and the conversion of dollar savings into Argentine pesos, resulting in significant losses for the middle class. The year 2001 saw 39 people killed by police during protests and five presidents in 11 days. Amid this period of loss, poverty, and social insecurity, Nordelta emerged as a sanctuary, providing an exclusive and secluded space that symbolized possibilities for those who could afford it.

The emergence of such an exclusive sanctuary in the Paraná Delta also reflects the enduring metaphor of *the desert* as a space of conquest. Previously peopled by Guaraníes and Carupás, these wetlands were parceled out through homesteading policies following the second foundation of Buenos Aires in 1850.[1] They were later acquired by Ángel Pacheco, a general who led the Desert Campaign (1833–1834) that resulted in a trench separating Buenos Aires from the "Indian threat."[2] The trench was later abolished during the Conquest of the Desert (1878–1885), a violent campaign planned to incorporate the southern territories through the killing of thousands of Indigenous people and the forced assimilation of survivors. Over time, these wetlands became known as the Tigre region, named by conquistadors who mistakenly identified the *yaguaretes* [jaguars] as tigers.

In the 1970s, General Pacheco's property was subdivided and sold, with engineer Julián Astolfoni acquiring a plot for Nordelta. At that time, some informal settlements began to develop in the area due to migration from the city and neighboring countries. In that context, Astolfini's proposal for Nordelta in 1977 aimed at modeling the French *ville nouvelles* [new cities], a concept seeking to integrate rural immigrants into urban areas. The project also aligned with the goals of the civic-military dictatorship (1976–1983), which was seeking to "eradicate" shantytowns through violence and forced evictions despite strong resistance. The emergence of *villas miseria* dates back to the 1930s, initially viewed as temporary housing for rural and European immigrants. However, by the 1950s, they started to be perceived as problematic and non-white, labeled as "filthy" and "promiscuous" spaces that posed a threat to private property and national morality (Massidda et al., 2022: 10). With intensified terror against the *villas* during the 1970s dictatorship, Nordelta emerged as a benign and state-functional project promising to integrate, engineer, and ultimately eradicate poverty.

The approval for Nordelta was delayed until 1992, but it underwent a significant shift in 1998 when engineer Astolfoni partnered with real estate businessman Eduardo Constantini, repositioning the project as offering a "lifestyle choice." This transformation mirrored broader changes in Argentina during the 1990s, with the expansion of neoliberalism and market-oriented state policies that turned

housing into a commodity (Pintos, 2023: 30). The narrative surrounding Nordelta shifted from one centered on development and poverty eradication to a focus on segregation. Moreover, the residents who settled there were no longer the type of elites who sought to lead the country's modernization, as in the past. Instead, they pursued personal well-being and individual development (Greene, 2020: 151). This transition was evident in Nordelta's marketing materials, which promised "a lifestyle akin to Miami, just a short distance from the Buenos Aires Obelisk" (Carbello, 2020).

While public information on the planning behind this vision is obscure, a master's thesis by Dan Martinez (1996), now a US Army chief with experience in real estate development and diplomatic missions in the Middle East, sheds light on Nordelta's design and objectives. Martinez's thesis, conducted in collaboration with Nordelta, outlines an "in-fill development" plan to repurpose supposedly "undevelopable" land using private capital. In addition, the thesis details Nordelta's ambition to emulate US MPCs, framing Argentina as a "technological vacuum" and Nordelta as a beacon of innovation that would help Argentina match the standards of top-tier US communities. The potential beneficiaries of these US innovations can be inferred from the entities funding the consumer research studies, including the private Center for Planning & Environmental Studies, global accounting firm Price Waterhouse, and US real estate company Robert Charles Lesser & Co., specializing in MPCs.

To capitalize on social stratification and property value, these investors employed a filtering tactic to encourage abandoning existing infrastructure in favor of newer developments. Nordelta aimed to enhance its value by attracting new residents to upscale homes with unique amenities, creating a demand that would filter down previous homes (Martinez, 1996: 107). While filtering is standard in contemporary gentrification, Martinez argues that its roots extend to colonial Homestead Acts. He also underscores the influence of MPC models implemented in "founding cities" like Washington DC and New York in the 1960s, suggesting that privatization and consumer-oriented approaches elevate property values while "solving urban problems" (Martinez, 1996: 21). What the thesis does not address is how these strategies were constructed upon the devaluation of Black spaces (Solomon, 2019) and the transformation of City Malls into shopping malls (Low, 2000).

Martinez's thesis paints a frontier narrative where colonization and neoliberalism converge, portraying the Nordelta engineer-businessmen duo as heroes rescuing "neglected" environments through sanitation and landscape management (Martinez, 1996: 4). Similar to other pioneer plots, Nordelta's strategy involves conquering wilderness by transforming land perceived as "vast, useless, dangerous, and empty" (Martinez, 1996: 5). However, departing from traditional narratives, Nordelta shifts its focus from national integration and modernization to embracing neoliberal values subjectivities. This shift is evident in their efforts to garner media allies like *Clarín* or La *Nación* to shape "popular sentiments," disseminate US models, and stimulate consumer desire (Martinez, 1996: 15). Collaborating with these media conglomerates, Nordelta positioned narratives aimed at defining and solving issues such as "urban decay" and "low-income urban sprawl," while targeting and defining young upper-class families as future consumers who "crave anything American, as do most cultures" (Martinez, 1996: 102).

Despite the power of global agendas, national politics also shaped Nordelta's development. Martinez's research, based on targeted consumer focus groups conducted by Nordelta's partners, revealed that prospective residents strongly desired to relocate due to "invasions, overcrowding, vehicle traffic, and noise" in their current locations. They also emphasized the importance of restricting access to Nordelta's facilities to "non-residents" (Martinez, 1996: 47). Furthermore, participants in the wealthiest focus group articulated a desire to maintain the "status quo" while embracing "American construction standards with variety and distinction" (Martinez, 1996: 50–51).

Nordelta's planning exemplifies the dynamics of racial capitalism in white Argentina, reflecting a desire to continue producing a territory predominantly inhabited by European and white citizens. While national modernization values had characterized most Argentinian governments since the end of the 19th century, shifts toward deindustrialization during the last civic-military dictatorship and the

Menem governments (1989–1999) have facilitated foreign investments and financial capitalism (Basualdo, 2006: 136). Nordelta materializes the sedimentation of the neoliberal state, characterized by psychoanalyst Leda Doat (1999) as exerting power through the demarcation of consumers and the exclusion of those denied consumption. These delineations are vital for the project of distinction, as they establish borders and contact zones where differentiation, as Patricia Hill Collins (2009: 70) describes in the context of African-American women, is achieved through oppositional relations of othering.

In Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of the 1970s French society, "distinction" is a socio-cultural practice wherein the middle class achieves higher status by naturalizing differentiated notions of good taste. Following this, Nordelta's consumer research reveals that distinction was greatly fueled by consumers' desires for tastes and lifestyles denied to the majority. Today, these desires produce conflicts over issues like noise, pets, or parking within the community and are managed through disciplinary measures (Mutuverría, 2020). Beyond the gates, contact zones such as Nordelta's charity foundation enable residents to volunteer with children outside, fostering moral encounters that actualize racialized hierarchies and subjectivities. Similarly, media platforms continue to circulate notions of good taste while profiting from class struggle, showcasing the community's opulent estates, English schools, and cutting-edge health centers. However, as the following sections illustrate, the impact of social media on the capybaras' controversy and the emergence of Punta Querandí promised to articulate discourses and horizons other than individual well-being and white distinction.

Enlisting species with memes: The working-class capybaras

During my first visit to Nordelta in the Argentinian winter of 2022, I rented a car. Unable to secure accommodation inside, I stayed in a guest house in a non-gated and non-asphalted neighborhood alongside a creek. While driving along the main road *Los Remeros* [rowers], I followed an extremely straight canal teeming with watersport activities on my left, while malls, apartments, and private schools lined to the right side—no signs of informal neighborhoods. As I approached one of Nordelta's main entrances, I encountered a mall that, despite its lack of gates, immediately singled out outsiders.

Once I reached the gates, I had to scan my Argentinian ID to enter Nordelta and access the ring road, *Avenida de Los Lagos* [Lakes Avenue]. Although I could not enter any of the 70 gated communities, I could freely drive in circles and catch occasional glimpses of the houses discreetly concealed by bushes along the roadside. I could not, however, make any stops; the lack of shoulders and parking lots made it nearly impossible. Frustrated, I kept driving while spotting many capybaras, either packed behind a bush against a fence during the day or grazing and hanging out at night. The cold of July definitely seemed to make these heavy rodents more active. One night, I "rebelled" and stopped in the middle of the road with flashing lights to try to take a picture, but a security guard promptly arrived and ordered me to move the car.

Like many gated communities, Nordelta perpetuates social distinctions through exclusion and surveillance, labor arrangements, transportation systems, social services, and community norms. While some housekeepers have accommodations within the townhouses, other workers commute daily to provide food and care for gardens, children, and pets. Some have also taken on the task of trapping capybaras. Many come from the vicinity and harbor mixed feelings about Nordelta, a corporation that generates jobs and marginalization. While Nordelta symbolizes progress and the future within its gates, beyond them, many locals feel a sense of living amid ruins, often connecting these feelings with memories of thriving artisanal wicker, fishing, and fruit and vegetable farming—practices that are now forbidden—or recalling the days of the phormium factory. Built during the 1920s on the lands of General Pacheco's descendants, the factory brought a company town to this rural area. However, after its closure during the 1990s deindustrialization period, many were forced to leave, exacerbating challenges for those who remained as land and rental prices surged following the expansion of MPCs.

Figure 2. Comandante Carpincho.
Source: Enrique Viale (2021).

Workers who arrive daily cannot walk through the shared avenues either. As a man who had worked in construction told me, "Nordelta residents do not want to see us around. I could bike from here, but I had to wait for the designated bus." His words echoed the 2018 viral video of a woman worker who was denied access to a bus connecting Nordelta with the outside, despite available seats. Although Nordelta's residents responded, claiming they had paid for security and distinction, the controversy led to the approval of a public bus service, which commenced operations in 2019 with two daily frequencies: 6:30–8:30 am and 4–6 pm.

The memory of the woman denied access to the bus resurfaced during the capybaras' controversy, as many reposted the 2018 viral news to connect both events and denounce classism. Throughout viral memes, the capybaras were depicted with Che Guevara's iconic hair and beret (Figure 2), reading Marx's capital, sharing a cigar with General Perón (Figure 3), or being held by the soccer player and working-class icon Diego Maradona (Figure 4). In part, these memes also reinforced the enduring invisibilization of women and LGBTQ+/Queer activists in popular resistance in Argentina, as they reaffirmed working-class organizing within a predominantly male space (see Fabbri, 2013).

With memes of capybaras wielding guns and communist symbols gathered in revolutionary meetings, Nordelta's history of class-based discrimination was linked with the power to hierarchize and capitalize on life. In one particular meme, the fictional "Carpincho Front for the Liberation of Nordelta" portrayed a muscular capybara holding a machine gun in a military stance (Figure 5). Featuring an altered Argentine flag with a communist star, it read: "fuera tinchos de Nordelta" [snobs, get out of Nordelta!]."

Memes, a subject of increasing research interest, serve as vehicles for expressing everyday social values (Zidani, 2021) and political dissent (Al Zidjaly, 2017). They offer silenced communities avenues for action and contribute to reinventing collectives, including Indigenous resurgence (Frazer and Carlson, 2017). In this case, the memes articulated a vision of multispecies working-class alliances by depicting capybaras alongside working-class icons and symbols of labor rights. Argentine scholars Winckler and Garcén (2021: 14) argue that capybaras have emerged as a popular representation of the

Figure 3. General Perón sharing a cigar with a carpincho instead of his dog.
Source: periodistadeperon (2021).

Figure 4. "El Carpincho No se Mancha." Iconic soccer player Maradona holding a carpincho instead of a ball.
Source: Kerusa (2021).

Figure 5. "Snobs, get out of Nordelta!."
Source: Nordelta (2021).

"dispossessed" and helped imagine animals beyond enclosed zoos. I concur with their analysis, adding that they also served to critique racialized labor structures that commodify, sicken, displace, and expose both human and nonhuman life to death. Furthermore, I suggest that memes also constitute popular epistemic tools, in this case, to assess and enlist forms of more-than-human discrimination that demand multispecies response.

In conservation, species are often categorized based on their risk of extinction, as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List does. These classifications, however, depend on multiple factors, including scientific interests, media coverage, charismatic empathy, and corporate interests (Braverman, 2015; Van Dooren, 2015). In this line, I suggest that the memes functioned as a popular tool to assess and classify not only capybaras but also their interspecies relations and vulnerabilities. They worked to enlist capybaras into different socioenvironmental risks, demanding specific responses such as housing and habitat protection, wetlands regulations, and labor rights.

As an enlistment device, the memes served as an effective tool to challenge discrimination and highlight racial dynamics in Nordelta, unlike the everyday derogatory use of animal signs to naturalize oppression in Argentine society (see Carman, 2020; Perelman, 2009). The memes portrayed alliances between minoritized classes and the capybaras, both marginalized and considered "pests," invading an upscale community. Notably, the depiction of working-class capybaras extended beyond metaphorically representing human-only class struggles, helping to assess harm experienced by wildlife and the working class, including their interrelated displacement. Interpretations of the memes in social media emphasized the potential for a multispecies alliance and expressed hope in the capybaras' ability to reclaim their habitat and "challenge discrimination" (Página12, 2021). In addition, the memes exposed Nordelta's project of white distinction, revealing racial dynamics in a nation-state that continues to deny racism while promoting white exceptionalism.

One of the viral stories circulating in the winter of 2021 was an older video showing a group of brown-skinned men listening to *chamamé*, a type of folk music from the Argentine Northeast, and sharing *yerba mate* with a joyful capybara that kept asking them for more (Taya, 2021). While many people carry hot water and yerba containers to share, Argentine elites have associated this practice with dirtiness and lower classes, excluding it from their public spaces as a sign of status (see Sarreal, 2022). Notably, a Nordelta resident gained media attention in 2017 when she complained to her real estate agent about having bought an expensive apartment, only to discover later "tenth-class neighbors who drink mate and sit on deck chairs," a violation, in her view, of "visual and moral aesthetic codes" (Gerónimo, 2017). Despite the rejection of her hate speech by Nordelta's residents, who organized a collective *mateada*, the association between poverty, nonwhiteness, and *mate* persisted in the collective memory, also resurfacing when the story of the capybara sharing mates went viral.

The video captures a palpable shared joy between the men and the capybara. With an air of uncertainty, they attempt to engage each other through offerings and exchanges of *mates* and plants, accompanied by gentle caresses and touches. The *chamamé* music playing in the background seems to captivate the animal. The pinnacle of joy appears to be reached when the capybara accepts the offerings and drinks the mate, even asking for more. The men also demonstrate an awareness or attempt to identify the capybara as a young female. Affectionately, one of them remarks, "Look at you, baby; you're a beauty. She's sipping it! She's terrific; she enjoys it; she likes the mate; see how she's sucking it." Nonetheless, for an environmental lawyer I spoke with, who moved to one of the gated communities and was originally from a farming family in rural Argentina, this encounter is characteristic of an underdeveloped country that has yet to distinguish between the wild and the domestic, interpreting the scene as evidence of a persisting "savage Argentina."

The wild-domestic divide, rooted in colonial histories of modernization, commodification, and racialization (Schneider, 2023), manifests in the construction of white Argentina. From the 19th-century assertion of sovereignty upon conquering nature and Indigenous territories to the early 20th-century transformation of nature into a symbol of national identity, contemporary environmental discourses often rely on a whitened narrative of saving nature against poor, dark-skinned citizens, perceived as either a threat to or an extension of wildlife. This enduring binary shapes domestic and wild spaces with opposed and monitored behaviors, fostering a view of the wild and those deemed closer to it as nature while viewing socialization as a mechanism to transcend nature in the domestic realm.

This wild-domestic order experienced disorder with the video showing men joyfully sharing *mate* with a capybara, a cultural practice involving sociality but also risky intimacies (Haraway, 2008) by the act of sharing a straw, which tells about the challenges of living together through acts of care, play, or licking. Such disruption did not stem from blurring human-animal distinctions but from contesting what is morally appropriate for humans, wild animals, and their relationships (on the moral geographies of humans and animals, see Matless, 2000). Later, however, wildlife researchers not only critiqued the video but also played a key role in reinstating distinctions between human, wild, and white spaces.

Scientific authority to restore order when wild-domestic boundaries develop porosity became significant when wildlife researchers were summoned to address the Nordelta-wildlife conflict. On the one hand, most ecologists rejected the idea of relocating the capybaras, arguing that they had adapted to the secure habitat within the gated community and would not survive outside. As a result, the Nordelta association began seeking alternative measures in collaboration with experts and the municipal government. Ecologists, highlighting the peaceful nature of capybaras, proposed educational programs to promote coexistence values and teach residents to prevent their pets from disturbing wildlife. They also contested the assessment of nature solely on aesthetic grounds, suggesting that if Nordelta included nature among its amenities, residents should adapt to species roaming within their habitat distribution.

Figure 6. Street poster in Buenos Aires City.
Source: Photo by author, 2022.

These scientific assessments enlisted capybaras as victims of wetlands degradation, emphasizing these ecosystems' abundant and interconnected surface and subsurface waters with rich biota essential for various life cycles, including social ones (Astelarra, 2023: 56). However, wetlands are often mistreated as deserts and devalued through racial and settler-colonial imaginations of pestilence and deficiency associated to swamps and their people (see Vickers, 2023). Despite Argentina's commitment to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands since 1991, enforcement has been lacking, with activities like plantations, mining, and deforestation persistently damaging wetlands. Their fragmentation and homogenization, turning them into either land or water, have led to increased droughts, climate change impacts, flooding, loss of biodiversity, and social, spiritual, and economic relations. In this context, capybaras have become potent symbols in the campaign for wetlands regulation (see Figure 6), featuring prominently in marches and protests where people wear capybara masks and demand wetlands protection. Despite nearly reaching fruition in 2021, the materialization of a national regulation remains pending.

Initially, experts and advocates for multispecies justice aligned in critiquing the treatment of capybaras in Nordelta. However, their perspectives diverged when proposing solutions. Researchers highlighted the risks faced by capybaras outside Nordelta, emphasizing the threat of "poachers" through derogatory discourses, as I learned during interviews. By linking poverty with the category of poaching, often an oversimplified and dehumanizing account of hunting (de Jong and Butt, 2023), researchers shifted their focus to working within the gated community, relegating the broader issue of wetland degradation and encroachment to the realm of politics. In this way, wetland peoples were also scientifically deemed less civilized—a threat to or an extension of wildlife—even as some Nordelta residents resorted to violent measures against capybaras, such as killing or trapping them using ruthless techniques. By distancing themselves from justice claims, the scientization of the conflict hindered some of the potential to address the social and environmental violence assessed during the controversy.

The racialized relations between science and the public in Argentina, combined with a prevailing reliance on economic and technological fixes in conservation, restricted wildlife scientists from

crafting holistic solutions to care for the inside, outside, and contact zones of Nordelta. While the team aimed to engage all relevant stakeholders, those were limited to the diverse Nordelta residents, ranging from those resistant to animal control to violently trapping capybaras. The collaboration yielded effective conflict-management strategies, including humane selective trapping and the installation of mild electroshock devices on plants. In addition, the application of urban ecology principles and strategic bush planting around the lakes has proven effective in deterring capybaras from grazing on properties. In the process, a promising and privately funded scientific niche in wildlife management within gated communities has emerged, offering a limited yet viable field for biologists in a country with increasingly scarce economic support for science.

The collaboration also played a role in reinforcing the commodification of wildlife, often viewed as an unavoidable compromise in conservation efforts. While discussions on livelihoods typically center on marginalized communities, in the case of Nordelta, conservation efforts ended up aligning with real estate interests, prompting the elite community to include a small wildlife reserve in each new neighborhood. While still insufficient for ecologists, these reserves are praised for promoting coexistence and for actually enhancing property values. Hence, despite the potential for the capybaras' controversy to foster less segregated interspecies relations, the logic and funding of conservation research contributed to once again re-enlisting capybaras into commodified relations. Moreover, the scientization of the conflict reinforced the dynamics of racial capitalism extending beyond humans, securing the elite nature of Nordelta and its value while neglecting the wetlands and communities it displaces.

Multispecies revitalization and Indigenous resurgence from the borders

Driving outside the conglomerate is rather challenging. Beyond its borders, Google Maps guides you to roads that are blocked or no longer exist. Leading to inaccessible walls, these "non-roads" are interrupted by creeks obstructed by plastic pollution, abandoned railroads, factories covered in weeds, and bridges that can no longer be crossed. As I drove across a dystopian landscape dominated by excavation machines (see Figure 7), I could not help but reflect on how such rapid forms of unearthing and refilling leave little space for thinking with the soil and the memories, bones, and stories it helps compose and decompose, as Kristina Lyons (2020) puts it.

In the 1970s, Buenos Aires witnessed the urbanization of rural areas as city residents constructed *quintas* [weekend houses], initially cherishing the lack of infrastructure as a marker of rurality. This shifted in the 1990s when developers, backed by foreign investments, began marketing the American lifestyle throughout rural Latin America (Roitman, 2017), promising the tranquility of nature alongside urban amenities. With support from market-oriented state policies, this strategy proved lucrative as it transformed nature into a "manufactured" commodity (Pintos, 2023: 31). In the northern outskirts, this led to spatial fragmentation by creating concentrated and enclosed privileged spaces at the expense of isolated and abandoned areas. This experience is succinctly described by local socioenvironmental activist Martín Nunziata (Anzolín and Nunziata, 2023: 137), who writes:

> When the gated communities and buildings arrived, Tigre had two hundred thousand inhabitants, less than 7% with sewage and 20% with tap water. With the same infrastructure, its population reached four hundred thousand inhabitants. Everything is collapsed for those of us outside this model.

Despite neglect, these fragmented zones are tightly surveilled and controlled by guards and cameras, revealing the multiple forms of violence within the "politics of abandonment" (Pulido, 2016: 5). When walking on the outskirts of Nordelta, pervasive surveillance instills fear while navigating through roads, waterways, or pathways that no longer connect places and are off-limits.

Figure 7. Blocked path due to constructions.
Source: Photo by author, 2022.

Here, disorientation affects not only outsiders but also longtime residents. These artifacts signal the transformation of wetlands into a policed border space, illustrating the "innovative and brutal ways of conceiving, planning, controlling, managing, and producing nature (. . .) to establish, with blood and fire, a new extractivist cycle" as described by Patricia Pintos and Sofía Astelarra (2023: 17).

Nordelta's engineering has also exposed its surrounding environment to severe flooding and overflows. Unlike most houses in Tigre's wetlands, elevated on pillars, Nordelta opted for ground-level houses given their higher property value. Engineers drained canals and extracted their soil to refill the land, raising the terrain by approximately 1.7 meters to meet required flood-protection levels. Then, existing canals were converted into marinas. While this design protects gated properties, it renders its surroundings vulnerable by polluting and destroying wetlands, crucial buffers against flooding and droughts (Fernández, 2012). The risk is exacerbated by La Plata River's currents during strong winds and rains from the southeast, hindering runoff (Ríos and Pírez, 2008). In addition, the destruction of wetland flora, which can curb winds, further exposes the area, particularly with the rise of unprecedented storms due to climate change. Such a loss also affects the subjectivities and livelihoods of fishers, gatherers, and dwellers who have co-evolved with these dynamic ecosystems (Astelarra, 2023).

In 2004, in this fragmented space, a local woman stumbled upon ceramic pieces among plants in an area where human remains had previously been detected. The National Institute of Anthropology and Latin American Thought (INAPL) dispatched a team of archeologists who confirmed the existence of an ancestral site, naming it the Punta Canal archeological site. That same year, Eidico, a real estate corporation specializing in slightly less luxurious estates adjacent to Nordelta, expressed interest in the site and began planning construction.

When neighbors learned about Eidico's plans to construct a gated community, comprising 20% public spaces and 30% bodies of water (Picoy and Vallejo, 2023: 177), they raised concerns that Punta Canal would be destroyed and attracted media attention. Indigenous collectives, environmentalists,

and locals gradually joined forces, increasing pressure until the company requested an Environmental Impact Assessment in 2008. Curiously, the developer enlisted the same archeologists who had previously identified the site to conduct the assessment. Also curiously, despite excavating only 18 square meters (roughly half the size of a parking lot) over 10 days and confirming the presence of bones and ceramic pieces, their report claimed that tracing the site's origins was impossible due to its compromised condition. Consequently, they recommended the "liberation" of the site, granting archeological permission for development (Indymedia Pueblos Originarios, 2013).

In 2009, the collective of organized neighbors and Indigenous peoples, native or immigrants to Buenos Aires, formed the *Movimiento en Defensa de la Pacha Mama* (MDP), initially aiming to protect ancestral remains. The MDP employed various strategies to prevent construction, including demonstrations, awareness campaigns, and establishing a camp on the ancestral site. They also protested against the archeologists who granted permission for development, interrupting their talk at an international conference in Buenos Aires while asserting the significance of Punta Querandí (Indymedia Pueblos Originarios, 2011). Meanwhile, the developer persisted in sending excavators to intimidate land defenders and seized every opportunity to send machines to destroy every sacred structure they built while delegitimizing the protest as backward for opposing progress. However, the endurance and visibility of the camp gained media attention, prompting the Tigre council to halt construction until a resolution could be reached.

Despite facing eviction attempts, the MDP persevered in their defense of the land, successfully winning two trials against Eidico, with the judge declaring no usurpation offense was proven. Following this outcome, and given that each real estate development must allocate a percentage of land for public use, Eidico decided to transfer the land title to the Tigre Council in 2019. In 2020, the municipality transferred the title to the community. A year later, the National Institute for Indigenous Affairs facilitated the restitution of eight ancestors, originally unearthed for research in the 1990s, who received then sacred reburial at Punta Querandí (Picoy and Vallejo, 2023: 190). In 2022, the National Institute for Indigenous Affairs approved another restitution request for the remains of 42 ancestors, exhumed by a US Central Intelligence Agency archeologist in 1925. However, their restitution is still pending.

I learned about this conflict when I visited Punta Querandí and its *Museo Autónomo de Gestión Indígena*, a collective space memorializing their struggle and archiving archeological remains. During our visit to Punta Querandí, my partner and I spent 2 hours driving through blocked and fenced streets until we finally reached a dead-end road that led to a creek. We then asked for help from a group of kids who were playing atop an old bridge. They ran home to come back with a phone already dialing Sergio Smith, a historian and Querandí descendant who was on the other side of the creek. Sergio showed up shortly and invited us to cross the creek with a boat tied to the other side, never letting go of the cord that kept us from drifting downstream (see Figure 8). He explained that the community sees the unrepaired bridge not as a sign of decay but as an asset; it grants them some security and access control.

Re-emerging from a fragmented space, the community is actively involved in diverse projects, such as wetlands and waterways preservation, food justice, language revitalization, and memory and reparations (including street renaming), all while drawing guidance from their ancestors. These projects epitomize their everyday acts of resurgence, as Indigenous Studies scholar and Cherokee citizen Jeff Corntassel (2012) would describe it. They are further articulated by Aymara land defender Pedro Moreira, who emphasizes the Querandí Indigenous community's dedication to offering a sanctuary for all those seeking to reconnect with their ancestors, nature, and the land following a long history of erasure and fragmentation:

> We strive for any brother, regardless of ethnic group, to reunite with their ancestors. Whether they want to enjoy the beauty of the place for leisure or to cool off in the water. That is why we are defending the wetland. It is as if the Conquest of the Desert continued, not through an army seeking to kill us, but through the merciless destruction that leaves nothing alive (Pedro Moreira, in del Sur, 2013).

Figure 8. Access to Punta Querandí.
Source: Photo by author, 2022.

As Moreira describes, Punta Querandí is not reserved or owned exclusively by any single community; instead, it serves as a communal territory where various Indigenous Peoples, including the Guaraní, Qom, Colla, Moqoit, Aymara, and others, can reconnect with their ancestors. On the city's outskirts, they challenge the historical narrative of Buenos Aires as a place devoid of Indigenous Peoples (Picoy and Vallejo, 2023: 187). Simultaneously, the community's plurality challenges the reductionist biologized or archaeologized configurations of resurgence, hosting various altars and ceremonies, including the Inty Raymi or the Ara Pyahu, all contributing to the restoration of land and knowledge tied to different ancestral stories. The plurality of ancestral histories, ceremonies, languages, trajectories, and geographies should not be confused with a celebration of multiculturalism, as the collective aims to embrace diversity while acknowledging the histories of erasure and dispossession that, while not equating their experiences, have subjected them to similar challenges. It is about mutual support in nurturing futures made of multiple pasts.

Both work and leisure play crucial roles in the resurgence of Indigenous Peoples in the communitarian, ancestral, sacred, and educational territory of Punta Querandí, enabling the cultivation of capacities for listening to the Pachamama and fostering relationships beyond mere efficiency and commodification. The site hosts communal activities where people of varied ages and backgrounds gather to share food, learn traditional crafts, and engage, albeit with significant challenges, in agroecological farming. This includes nonhuman beings like wild straws used for roofing, tomato varieties whose revival relies on connections with seed banks in the United States, and other working relations with moles, rain, or flooding. Despite economic hurdles, the community consistently refuses state support. For many of those involved in revitalizing the territory, as I learned, Punta Querandí is ultimately a project of autonomy.

Autonomy in Punta Querandí is inherently relational, intertwined with the liberation of numerous others. These include various other Indigenous communities, non-Indigenous neighbors who have

co-evolved with the wetlands and strive to protect them, victims of state-sponsored terror who have been forcibly disappeared, as well as the fish, peoples, and plants whose existence is threatened by pollution and wetland destruction. These others encompass a spectrum of beings, both human and other-than-human, existing and re-emerging in the present and beyond it. They include ancestors and kin, including plants, seeds, capybaras, or pumas, eagerly awaiting a return when they will freely cross the territory. Although not uniformly aligned, they collectively enhance the vitality of these and other wetlands, undoing global projects that pursue the privatization of land and the commodification of relationships. As Sofía Astelarra (2023: 58) describes, within the multiple grassroots movements organized to care for water in this region, the conflict is not only environmental but also about modes of relating.

Collectively challenging biologized notions of Indigeneity and their segregationist logics, Punta Querandí also resists scienticized constructions of wetlands, nature, and land, thereby defying the power of racial capitalism and real estate extractivism to profit from destroying lives, bodies, and lands racially deemed disposable. The promises of interspecies desegregation at Punta Querandí should not be seen as a romanticization of Indigenous struggles (see Ulloa, 2004) but rather as enduring horizons of repair in the face of violence, failures, threats, and uncertainty. At the outskirts of neoliberal capitalism, this territory confronts the cameras that surveil territories of abandonment with a different gaze, including that of a monumental female yaguareté sculpture. This gaze, I argue, does not envision a future of integration but instead confronts the harms of enclosure while acknowledging that the absence of bridges has served to protect the community and that walls, while encroaching, have also facilitated returns.

Conclusions

The material presented in this article prompts a deeper understanding of real estate extractivism and racial capitalism in contemporary Argentina. The 1990s expansion of MPCs, facilitated by alliances between Argentinian elites, state policies, global corporations, and the US military, unveils both changes and continuities. While the project of elite distinction persists through the whitening of social and environmental relations, elites have shifted focus from national modernization visions to prioritizing individual well-being and development. Nordelta epitomizes the consolidation of this neoliberal state, one that builds environments segregating consumers from those denied consumption. Furthermore, this article reveals a symbiotic relationship between conservation and real estate frontiers that enables the continuation of the logic of property and the accumulation of capital and moral privilege. Conservation and real estate development also redefine and solidify boundaries between the wild and the civilized through revaluing, dispossessing, and rezoning mechanisms that increase profits and property value at the expense of dispossession and ruination.

While the capybaras' controversy and the emergence of Punta Querandí illuminate the multispecies workings of racial capitalism, they also underscore desegregation horizons in the face of radical reordering in Buenos Aires' wetlands. I have argued that the memes crafted during the capybaras' media protest served as popular epistemic tools for assessing and responding to forms of more-than-human criminalization and displacement. Just as the capybaras' memes challenged the restrictive authority of science, I argue that Punta Querandí's efforts to care *for* re-emerging futures and *against* encroachment also challenge biologized or archaeologized notions of time, kinship, and Indigeneity. These practices of caring *for* and *against* seek to embrace the vitality of the world and its capacity to exceed engineered plans, borders, canals, and communities.

This analysis reflects what I term "the promise of interspecies desegregation." Such a promise does not envision integration or border erasure or involve repair through aggregation or recognition. As exemplified by the capybaras' controversy and Punta Querandí's resistance, desegregation promises can also signify the re-emergence of relations, bodies, and environments wounded by racialized and commodified partitions—both human and other-than-human. At Buenos Aires' wetlands, promises of interspecies desegregation lie not in dismantling boundaries but in regenerating orders beyond rigid

borders. As Sofía Astelarra (2023: 75) suggests, defending wetlands "limits the binary homogenization of life," nurturing a sort of amphibious subjectivity, neither purely water nor land.

Drawing from "The Promise of Multispecies Justice" (Chao et al., 2022), in my analysis of Buenos Aires' wetlands, the concept of promise serves as a resurfacing horizon. Pending human remains restitutions, wetlands regulations, or broken bridges are not signs of progress but affirmations of the borderity of time; in other words, affirmations of resurfacing alternative futures built from sedimented violence. These spatiotemporal borderities challenge the power of techno-scientific promises to exclude in the name of progress (Kreimer, 2023) and render territories and communities outdated and out of place. As a promise rather than a solutionist ideology, interspecies desegregation does not seek a singular, all-encompassing response to violent partitions but "response-abilities," as articulated by Haraway (2008). Central to this promise, as evidenced in this article, is the cultivation of moralities beyond consumption and distinction.

As described in the introductory section, my use of the term "interspecies desegregation" does not aim to equate racial and socio-spatial arrangements between the United States and Argentina. Instead, it challenges Argentina's discursive strategy of invoking US segregation history as a means to deny internal racism through comparison while completely disavowing the significance of US anti-racist struggles. Given the diverse racial narratives that real estate development circulates, these dialogues are essential. Considering, for instance, how Miami, a central laboratory for MPCs and wetland engineering, symbolizes a Hispanic or Latino space in the United States and whiteness in Argentina, such dialogues can cultivate potential alliances, avoiding the instrumentalization of each other for legitimacy.

Acknowledgements

This article is the result of numerous conversations and encounters in Buenos Aires, for which I am deeply grateful. Special thanks to Sergio Smith and Raul Lucero for their warm welcome during my visit to Punta Querandí. This essay was significantly improved by the incisive and generous feedback of an anonymous reviewer, as well as the thoughtful insights from my epistemic friends Alberto Morales, Columba González-Duarte, Daphné Esquivel Sada, and Nathalia Hernández-Vidal. I also appreciate the comments from Piergiorgio Di Giminiani, Marcos Mendoza, and Elliott Oakley during an AAA panel on rewilding. Finally, I thank Hannah Ramer, Rebecca Walker, Aaron Mallory, and Hannah Jo King for organizing this Special Issue and for their valuable suggestions.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by a Summer Research Award from William & Mary (2022).

Ethical approval

IRB Protocol: **Protocol PHSC-2022-05-30-15666-mdicentavilker**

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Notes

1. After the failure of the first foundation in 1536, when the Querandí People defeated the conquistadors' tropes and burned their settlement.
2. A 9.8-ft-dug trench known as The *Franja de Alsina*.

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This article is part of the *Environment and Planning F: Philosophy, Theory, Models, Methods and Practice* special issue on 'Race and the Built Environment', edited by Kate Derickson, Hannah Jo King, Aaron Mallory, Hannah Ramer and Rebecca Walker.