

GAINING VOICE THROUGH INJURY: Voice and Corporeality in Animal Rights Activism in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico

IVÁN SANDOVAL-CERVANTES
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9206-9077>

In May 2017, during a preliminary hearing held in Ciudad Juárez, a border city in the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua, a former member of the state police was being prosecuted for animal abuse. Eco-Canis de Asis, a local NGO, had filed a lawsuit a few months earlier accusing the police officer of shooting and killing two puppies and injuring their mother—a brown and white pit bull originally named Tsunami but renamed Justicia (Justice) by Eco-Canis on being rescued after the incident. The accused officer claimed that Justicia had injured his child. Outside the prosecutor's office, Justicia and a group of people, wearing T-shirts with the NGO's logo, waited for the judge's decision. They had hung two acrylic banners on display behind them: one showed a photo of the perpetrator next to a picture of Justicia taken just hours after she was attacked, explicitly showing the damage done by the shotgun. Among other things, this banner read: "Animal abuse is a crime, denounce it!" and "This state police officer massacred six puppies and only little Justicia survived. Every crime deserves a punishment." The other banner addressed the state governor: "Mr. Governor [Javier] Corral, we voted for you, for those who have no voice" ("Señor gobernador Corral, votamos por usted, por los que no tienen voz").



Figure 1. Members of Eco-Canis before Justicia's oral hearing.
Photo by Iván Sandoval-Cervantes.

There were no other dogs, banners, or groups of people around. People moved through the wide concrete entrance quickly. The interspecies contingent disrupted the flow, with the curiosity of passersby piqued by the presence of a dog surrounded by six humans (including me). Some of them watched from a distance, while others took photos. The more daring approached Eco-Canis asking about the case while petting Justicia, who looked happy but breathed with some difficulty. Justicia, however, could not enter the courtroom; she remained outside during the entire procedure, wearing a pink dog vest with pouches that had been originally designed for another dog, a German shepherd. A few minutes later, and inside the courtroom, a public prosecutor and Alicia, the founder of Eco-Canis, attempted to speak for her, demanding justice or, at least, some form of punishment for the perpetrator. After the hearing ended, members of Eco-Canis, standing next to Justicia, recorded and live-streamed videos narrating what had happened inside the courtroom, videos they later posted on their social media.

At first, Ciudad Juárez would appear an unlikely place for the defense of non-human animals. Located in northern Mexico, right across the border from El Paso, Texas, Ciudad Juárez is home to about 1.5 million people, ranking it among Mexico's ten most populated cities. Despite its size and place in Mexican history,



Figure 2. Justicia being photographed outside the courtroom.
Photo by Iván Sandoval-Cervantes.



Figure 3. Oswaldo getting Justicia ready after the oral hearing.
Photo by Iván Sandoval-Cervantes.

most outsiders recognize the city for recent phenomena associated with its border location: the *maquiladoras* (or transnational sweatshops), the unsolved cases of hundreds of disappeared women (portrayed in national and international media), and the rampant violence that stormed the city in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Not too long ago, from 2008 to 2012, Ciudad Juárez was considered “the most dangerous city in the world,” and although it no longer holds that title, violence persists, with the city still ranking among the most dangerous in the world. Yet animal rescue and animal activist organizations are on the rise and making their presence felt in the city’s landscape, its politics, and in the world of social media.

I begin this essay with the case of Justicia because it shows how animal rights and welfare activists, who self-identify as *animalistas*, use the concept of *voice* to mediate the relationship between human and non-human bodies in a context of violence and impunity. *Animalistas* are centrally concerned with their ability to represent abused non-human animals, legally and socially, through the concept of *voice* as a way to reframe the place of animals within the Mexican legal system. As Claudio Lomnitz (2022, 171–72) points out, *voice* emerged as a significant element in Mexico’s neoliberal transition, becoming a significant resource in the democratization process, even if it seldom receives a response from the government. The centrality of voice also becomes evident, quite literally, in the promulgation of oral trials.

The idea of speaking for voiceless animals is widespread among animal rights/welfare organizations throughout the world, particularly in Europe and the United States. In this article, I highlight the relationship among the construction of voice, animal bodies, and the Mexican justice system. *Animalistas* require violently injured animal bodies for their own performance of activism; anthropogenic

violence transforms dogs' bodies into "promising animals" (see Dave 2017). The injured animal bodies and their images create the assumption of an individual story and, thus, an individual voice that *animalistas* seek to channel. In other words, an injured body can make a dog "legible" to forms of state recognition, like the justice system (Bocci 2017), by making them specific and individual, resulting in the potential conferral of voice.

In thinking about the relationship between non-human injured bodies and voice or, at least, the promise of voice, the role of violence in Mexico becomes salient. Numerous social struggles position the concept of *voice* as central in the fight against injustices, particularly forced disappearances and feminicides. Voice, voicing, and giving a voice are seen as a first step to combat the purportive silence that often surrounds criminal acts and the accompanying climate of impunity. In contrast to other strategies analyzed by Lomnitz (2022), inspired by Albert Hirschman (1970), like *exit* and *hedging*, voice produces a direct confrontation between the institutions and those who seek to change them by making heard their concerns. Yet in other instances, voice does not necessarily refer to a rational or articulated call; rather, it describes a desperate call for help, so that its impact resides more in capturing attention than in articulating a message. For example, one collective formed in Ciudad Juárez in the early 2000s in response to the growing number of disappeared women took the name *Voces sin Ecos* (Voices without Echoes). The founder and mother of one of these missing women stated that the name referred to the kidnapped women's last moments of freedom, when their last screams for help would not be replicated by others. In the same way, looking at Justicia, her images on the acrylic banner, and hearing her story, one could imagine Justicia's response during and after the violent act of the perpetrator, a scream, a cry, something, anything that could be echoed by Alicia. Thus, the concept of voice can refer both to verbal articulation of discontent and/or to the inarticulate cries that occur in violent encounters. *Animalistas* seek to employ both simultaneously as they move through the legal system and require precise verbal articulation, attempting to channel the experiences of individual dogs and speaking for them.

Animalistas enter into relationships with individual animals through the act of the rescue, a singular event of witnessing (see Dave 2014, 434; 2021, 144), and through engaging in "transspecies semiosis" (Kohn 2007, 6–7). The rescue connects the non-human rescuee and the human rescuer; it crystalizes a particular story of past abuse and allows the *animalista* a concrete relationship with a non-human other. The act of the rescue marks the beginning of this concrete relationship between a human *animalista* and a non-human animal. However, the *animalista*

must rely on a triad consisting of animal (the physical existence and representation of an individual injured animal), activist (the rescuer or someone involved in the animal's rehabilitation), and the abuser (the human that injured the animal) to consolidate such an intimate relationship.

In this essay, I analyze how violence, through injury, can potentially activate the voice of non-human animals. Voice, through *animalistas*, appears as a necessary condition for non-human animals to be recognized as deserving some form of justice. *Animalistas* seek to become valid spokespersons for non-human animals through various means, starting from the act of the rescue. Yet within the Mexican criminal justice system, voice does not suffice to attain justice, and legal processes are often reframed to highlight human conflict.

CIUDAD JUÁREZ AND THE *ANIMALISTA* MOVEMENT

In the past three decades, writers, social scientists, and policymakers have looked closely at Ciudad Juárez. In their efforts to understand the relationship between the city, its border location, and the increase in violence, scholars have studied gender violence and femicide (or feminicide, in its Latin American acception), *maquiladoras* and transnational work, and organized crime and violence.

Researchers have emphasized that Ciudad Juárez's border location constitutes the city's "most important contextual variable" (Payan 2014, 435–36), one that has created what Howard Campbell (2009, 7) calls the Drug War Zone (DWZ): "A world where insecurity prevails and powerful forces, whose essence can never be fully known, impinge on the lives of individuals and communities."¹ This increase in insecurity and violence, Campbell continues (2009, 7), has contributed to the formation of "a social space in which the truth is elusive and relative and in which paranoia, fear, and mystery are the orders of the day." In this context of "political crisis," there are ongoing disputes over the meaning of violence in relation to the state and the justice system, where dead bodies can become symbols of both the state success and failure in controlling violence (Wright 2011).

The long tradition of antiviolence activism, particularly in the fight against gender violence, in Ciudad Juárez has long been connected to these disputes over the meaning of violence and of dead bodies (e.g., Ravelo Blancas 2004; Staudt 2008; Wright 2011). Kathleen Staudt and Irasema Coronado (2010) argue that antiviolence activism decreased (at least in visibility) during the height of the violence (2008–2012), mostly as a result of fear of reprisal from both authorities and organized crime. All this occurred while government officials at different levels tightened the discourse that the people killed were "bad people." It is in the

aftermath of this violent period that organizations defending animal rights and well-being began surfacing and becoming more visible. Several factors influenced the emergence of *animalistas* in the city, including changes in the Ley de Bienestar Animal (Animal Well-Being Law) in 2010 and the 2013 changes in the Penal Code criminalizing animal abuse.² For this article, it is worth mentioning two of such factors: First, efforts directed toward non-human animals do not *often* lead to confrontations between citizens and the government (or criminal organizations). Second, non-human animals are commonly seen as naturally innocent (see [Ticktin 2017](#)), leaving little room for disputing this innocence.

In Ciudad Juárez, the term *animalista* is used in contradicting ways. The term often indicates a person's empathy or special connection with non-human animals. The common usage of the term does not follow a narrow normative definition but can accommodate a wide range of human attitudes to non-human animals.³ This means that *animalistas* in the city are diverse, ranging from PETA-inspired vegans to meat-eaters who rescue animals even while violating private property laws—similar, in many ways, to global trends.⁴

The demographics of the *animalista* community in Ciudad Juárez reveal two main subgroups of activists. One group consists of middle-class, university-educated (or at least enrolled in college, either in Ciudad Juárez or in El Paso) men and women in their twenties or early thirties. Members of this group do not generally run or operate shelters; instead, they organize events related to veganism and collect dog food for shelters. The second group consists of working-class women from various age groups who are directly involved in the operation of shelters and in dog rescues. This second group also includes professional, middle-class women who provide support with logistics and finances, though most financial resources come through crowdfunding. There are numerous interactions between the two groups even if they do not necessarily overlap.

Despite this diversity, *animalistas* share certain elements: (1) All *animalistas* are concerned with reducing the number of street dogs (which also peaked during the “violent period” of 2008–2012) ([García and Alvarado Álvarez 2013](#)) and, therefore, (2) are in favor of sterilization campaigns. (3) All *animalistas* strongly oppose animal abuse and demand, to different degrees, governmental action against it; and (4) *animalistas* also claim, in various ways, to represent the animals' best interest and sometimes even to “speak for them.” These two last points prove central to my analysis here and have been salient during my research.

SPEAKING FOR INJURED BODIES: On the Appearance of

Dogs' Voice

Justicia's Oral Trial

The day of Justicia's trial, I accompanied a small human delegation who had gathered at Eco-Canis, a residence-cum-dog shelter located in the modest neighborhood of San Antonio, in downtown Juárez, just three miles south of El Paso, Texas. Two members of Eco-Canis formed part of the human contingent: Alicia and Oswaldo. They sported the Eco-Canis uniform: black cargo pants tucked inside black patrol boots, long-sleeved black shirts embroidered with their names, and baseball caps with the Eco-Canis logo. "We've been told that we shouldn't dress like soldiers," commented Alicia, who, at the time, aspired to obtain government support to form a detective unit to investigate crimes against non-human animals. Along with Alicia and Oswaldo, a family of three joined us, as well as Justicia, riding in the back of the truck.

This was my first time watching an oral hearing, introduced as part of Mexico's criminal justice reform to incorporate oral trials, passed in 2008. Oral trials were seen as a response to the opaque system of closed trials based on written testimony that had allowed for numerous wrongful convictions and forced confessions.

Chihuahua was a pioneer in the implementation of oral trials, partially funded by USAID (Aranda 2007). Oral trials were seen as providing greater transparency. Before the first oral trial for femicide took place, the journalist Lydia Cacho (2008) claimed that oral trials allowed for the possibility for people to be heard and for the judges to listen directly to the victims, as opposed to "being interpreted through hundreds of pages written in anachronical language filled with incomprehensible legal terms." Oral trials provide the opportunity of being listened to—but also of being seen. Voice in this context is not separated from a body but, rather, constitutes a link between multiple bodies (the victim, the judge, the public, etc.). This bodily presence also makes people vulnerable, and authorities use this vulnerability to discourage oral trials in favor of "faster solutions" (see Rodriguez 2021).

After passing through security, Alicia, Oswaldo, and I entered an empty courtroom equipped with numerous cameras. Minutes later we were joined by the "social representation" (the prosecutors). Alicia had filed the lawsuit, so she sat with the prosecutors. Oswaldo and I remained in the audience. The trial started after the arrival of the defendant, his legal team, and the judge. The judge proceeded to read the file, which included reports from eyewitnesses and character

witnesses, and low-quality photocopies of Justicia's X-rays. Justicia was blamed for attacking the defendant's child, but the judge dismissed the allegations, deeming the use of a shotgun, point blank, as disproportionate. Proportionality here is understood as part of the principle of self-defense that stipulates that the relationship between the attack and the reaction should be "proportional." Since the alleged attack had already happened and Justicia was tied to the ground when the defendant shot her, the use of a gun was seen as purely an act of violence, rather than an attempt to contain the attack.

During the trial, the judge mentioned the defendant's threats to Alicia and her family, which included sexist remarks and the accusation that she was using dogs for her personal gain. There was also talk of other instances in which the defendant had been accused of killing other dogs—to which the defense responded by suggesting there was a "dog problem" in his neighborhood.

Things, however, took an unexpected turn when the judge called for a "five-minute coffee break" that turned into a thirty-minute backstage discussion between the judge, the defendant's lawyer, Alicia, and the state-appointed prosecutor. A settlement was soon reached after the hearing's resumption, and it would be safe to say that the "coffee break" offered the participants a chance to speak off the record and away from the cameras. Based on the death threats that the director of Eco-Canis and her family had received, the defendant was to stay away from their places of business and their residence/shelter. He also had to send, through his lawyer, two bags of dog food twice a month for a period of six months to Eco-Canis.

As the trial wound down, Alicia started being labeled as the "victim," and even the "plaintiff." Justicia had been displaced. Before heading out, Alicia, who had mixed feelings about the turn of events, said that "it had been a historic case, and we shouldn't forget that." Oswaldo, on other hand, wasn't entirely convinced.

There Is No Voice without a Body

A few weeks prior to Justicia's trial, we had attended a health festival in a *colonia* (roughly equivalent to a neighborhood) located right across the Rio Bravo/Rio Grande. Juárez's municipal president was going to be there and Alicia wanted to remind him of his campaign promise to help *animalistas*. After the festival inauguration ended, Alicia and Oswaldo managed to get some words in with the municipal president, but it didn't amount to much of a dialogue. It would seem that the problem with these attempts did not so much concern their ability to speak for non-human animals but the political conditions that allowed someone to listen

to what was said. Politicians often address *animalistas*' demands with general and overarching solutions, such as the creation of new government departments, which tend to be insufficient and inefficient—if they ever materialize. Thus, one way in which *animalistas* respond to these generalizations is through the telling of stories of injured non-human bodies, allowing them to speak for an *individual* animal.

On our way back from the festival, Alicia talked about another report she had filed with the state authorities. This case involved an off-duty county police officer who had used metallic wire to strangle a dog that, he alleged, was bothering his daughter. Just as in the case of Justicia, no evidence supported the allegation. Instead there were superficial counterallegations that sought to position two living beings deemed inherently innocent against each other (see [Ticktin 2017](#)). The officer had strangled the dog in a park, in front of children and adults. Alicia emphasized how little progress the *fiscalía*, the state prosecutors, were making in this case. She had personally driven several witnesses to the *fiscalía*, but they had not managed to testify. Without a body, Alicia's ability to speak for animals was limited, and while there were other humans who could speak for the dog, they were not allowed to do so.

As in the case of Justicia, the involvement of a police officer complicated matters. Alicia told me: "After he strangled the dog, witnesses say he put the dog in the trunk of his car and drove away. They saw a police patrol stopping him for a few minutes but then letting him go. Now they're telling me they found the dog, but it's a beagle-looking dog, there are many street dogs that fit that description. They're trying to cover it up." Legally speaking, this case was more complicated than Justicia's because the dog involved was a street dog, *en situación de calle*, and existing animal-protection laws only protect "companion animals," as in pets.⁵ Justicia had a name, a body marked by injuries, and a prior relationship with humans (she had been a pet dog), so she seemed to possess a degree of subjectivity that would imply a voice. Justicia's bodily presence also meant that she continued to be vulnerable, and to make Alicia vulnerable as her self-appointed spokesperson.

On the other hand, the beagle-looking dog was just that, a generic dog, without a name, and with a body difficult to identify since "many dogs" fit that description. The beagle-looking dog lacked Justicia's visual potential, as well as the individuality needed to have a voice. Social and legal processes that did not allow Alicia to establish a clear link with an injured non-human body thus suffocated the attempt for specificity. In both cases, though, the injured bodies of the dogs proved central in the efforts by Eco-Canis to file successful lawsuits and to deploy non-human bodies to provoke compassion and popular support.

Injured Bodies: Or How Wounds Carve a Space for a Voice

When *animalistas* claim to speak for animals, they seek to include all animals. In many cases, *animalistas* use stock images of animals in distress or discuss some of the more or less well-known facts about industrial farming (see [Fernández 2021](#)). Yet the success of this exercise is at best ambiguous and, in many cases, futile because no visible link exists between specific human and animal bodies. However, the presence of individual injured animals transforms how the relationship between human and animal bodies is established. Violence itself does not generate sympathy. What generates sympathy is how violent acts create a link between activists and victims within a specific context. I will return to the creation of this link later in the article. In this section, I analyze why injured animal bodies become central in the *animalistas*' pursuit of representing animal interests.

Several scholars have demonstrated that bodies have always been a place of "imprinted" power ([Fassin and D'Halluin 2005](#)). Theorizing about injuries and bodies shows how violence and its effects are experienced and lasting. For example, as a way to understand the violent effects of the state in causing injuries at the Mexico-U.S. border ([Jusionyte 2018](#)), or as an invitation to rethink biosocial precarity emerging from the violence of war ([Wool 2017](#)). In his analysis of disability and gang violence in Chicago, [Laurence Ralph \(2014\)](#) argues that portrayals of violence and gangs tends to emphasize death and incarceration, while rendering injured bodies invisible. Ralph notes that former gang members' injured bodies make their messages more effective: men in wheelchairs who have difficulty moving and using catheters cease to be exclusively messengers, instead becoming both the messengers and the message. Thus, injured gang members who become anti-violence activists are also "enabled" by their wounds ([Ralph 2012](#)).

For *animalistas* in Ciudad Juárez, the wounded animals become a precondition that enables potential social awareness (see [Ralph 2012](#)). The injured bodies of animals are potentially the messenger and the message but, without an *animalista* telling their story and invoking their voice, their injuries remain signs to be interpreted. If, following [Rita Segato \(2013\)](#), every act of violence is a "discursive gesture" that presents a problem of intelligibility, injured animal bodies (and their representations) allow for multiple readings in ways that healthy looking animal bodies do not (see [García 2023](#) for the case of Peru).

For Alicia, the injured bodies of Justicia and the beagle-type dog became central in the pursuit of an interpretation that could direct animal-protection actions. Animal injured bodies constitute visual signs that demand an interpretation, and while they do not necessarily add anything new to the narratives of the city's

violence, they highlight its scope in a way that healthy-looking street dogs cannot. Street dogs are often ignored and seen as part of the city's landscape. Even organizations that rescue stray dogs and put them up for adoption portray street dogs as a natural result of urban living, rendering them generic dogs that do not require an individual voice or interpretation.

As *animalistas* seek to make connections between themselves and rescued dogs visible, seeking to make individual dogs specific through their stories, they engage in what Tim Choy (2011, 6) calls “acts of relation-drawing” that oscillate between the specific and the generic. This representation of street dogs as natural and generic, and of injured dogs as humanmade and specific, highlights how all representations of animals “are ultimately linked to power” (see Jalais 2010, 8–9). Violence disrupts such ideas about nature and grants some form of subjective individuality and specificity to canine bodies, making the bodies of injured dogs into signs worthy of an interpretation.

Like other *animalistas*, Alicia seeks to speak for animals in general, but the body of a survivor of animal abuse allows for a specific interpretation. Such an interpretative act requires a voice: the voice of the individual non-human victim demanding justice and reparations. This individuality has to emerge from a non-human body that can be seen—to remain a sign to be interpreted, it has to remain visible. The visibility of a concrete animal injured body pushes back against the construction of animals as “absent referents” that makes animal suffering invisible (Adams 2015, 20–22), while simultaneously suggesting the possibility of a voice that accompanies that individual body. The presence of injured animal bodies highlights how materiality (both through fleshiness and visibility) and voice can become intertwined in attempts to produce individual voices, and in how they are heard (Weidman 2014). I attend to this relationship between the materiality of injured bodies and voice in the next section of this article.

Voice and the Injured Body

News and social media reports of abused animals, such as Justicia and others, allow *animalistas* throughout Mexico to voice their opinions on the relationship between violence, animal abuse, and justice. One extreme example of this appeared in May 2019, when more than forty dogs were intentionally poisoned in the southeastern state of Campeche—one of the hypotheses blamed the government. This act of violence created an immediate reaction from *animalistas* throughout the country: they demanded an investigation and quickly pointed out the harsh conditions under which animal advocates in Campeche operated.⁶ Although not all cases

of animal abuse become as publicized as the Campeche dog poisoning, they appear constantly on the news and circulate on social media, allowing *animalistas* to point to larger issues that link corruption and impunity to animal abuse.

In Ciudad Juárez, reports of animal abuse and abandonment strengthen the common idea that the city's violence has, in some ways, obliterated the city's "social fabric" (see [Payan 2014](#): 437; also [Lomnitz 2022](#)), as non-human animals—especially dogs—are perceived as bearing no responsibility for the state of affairs and are considered inherently innocent (see [Ticktin 2017](#)). Thus, when violence reaches these "innocent creatures," it is seen as overflowing its designed human space, corrupting the moral qualities of the city's inhabitants to the point of harming innocent creatures. Mexico's violence thus becomes framed as a moral crisis rather than as the result of government decisions ([Lomnitz 2022](#), 172). Although the importance or the urgency of violence against animals is not necessarily a daily topic of conversation, it emerges locally and nationally when particularly heinous acts of violence against animals are committed and is commonly interpreted as (or used to reinforce the idea of) a crisis of values in the country.

The relationship between violence against humans and animal abuse is not lost on animal advocates in the city.⁷ When reports stated that during the peak of the "violent era" the number of abandoned dogs went from 20,000 to 200,000, animal advocates argued that such violence was directly linked to the appearance of "cases of [animal] abuse and mutilation" (see [García and Alvarado Álvarez 2013](#)).⁸ Yet despite the best efforts of *animalistas*, these dogs remained unknown, voiceless and, in many ways, bodiless—their bodies disappeared after being picked up by the city's cleaning services and the traces of their lives became unnoticeable, not directly linked to visual representations that would allow the telling of their individual stories.⁹

In this context of violence toward both humans and non-human animals, the injured bodies of animals who survive some form of abuse become important vehicles for *animalistas* as a more easily interpreted sign. The body proves central in the *animalistas* efforts to give a voice because it provides the necessary materiality both to attempt "transspecies semiosis" ([Kohn 2007](#)) and to present an individual narrative based on the evidence of injustice—the injuries themselves—to the general public.

The concept of voice in anthropology is "central but relatively unexplored aspect" of how "we theorize power, subjectification, and the efficacy of vocal utterances as social action" ([Weidman 2014](#), 46). In addition, voice as a concept is often seen as relatively unproblematic ([Revill 2021](#), 122). This means that there

is often a conflation, rooted in Western metaphysical and linguistic tradition, of voice, identity, rationality, and agency (Revill 2021, 122; Weidman 2014, 39) that tends to ignore how these connections are produced in specific political contexts and with specific human and non-human bodies. In the case of the *animalistas* of Ciudad Juárez, who are attempting to speak for and from injured animal bodies, voice emerges as a goal of their involvement in animal rescue. *Animalistas* attempt to become animators, potential ventriloquists (see Keane 1999; Cooren and Sandler 2014; Weidman 2014), or invocators of the sensorial experience of listening through images and gazes (see Dave 2021; Kohn 2007; Vargas González 2020).

During the trial, Justicia remained outside, while I accompanied Alicia and Oswaldo into the courtroom. Although Alicia claimed to be the voice of the voiceless, specifically of the dogs she had under her care, the voice of Justicia remained largely absent, though the possibility of retelling her story lingered in the air. Justicia—or, rather, images of Justicia—briefly resurfaced as the state-appointed prosecutor showed photocopies of X-rays of Justicia’s body. The low-quality, black-and-white prints showed Justicia’s body and the gun wounds as white, overlapping shadows in need of interpretation. No one paid much attention to these images as they circulated in the courtroom and were then quickly put away. The judge viewed the oral reports of the injuries as sufficient proof, given that they seemed to better invoke Justicia’s voice and the pain she suffered—something that low-quality photocopies of X-rays could not really do.

Another reason for the absence of Justicia’s voice in the courtroom was Alicia’s attempted participation in a complex act of ventriloquism. Not only did she want to speak for Justicia through the state-appointed prosecutor and the witnesses’ reports but she also spoke on her own behalf, as the defendant had threatened her via text messages and phone calls. Thus, as Alicia juggled between embodying different voices, Justicia’s voice dwindled, almost disappearing but always remaining as a central element, even if just as a possibility. This time, however, the act of ventriloquism did not problematize who was speaking for whom, or for what. Rather, it problematized the entire point of the trial: Justice for Justicia was no longer the objective, as the trial became more about humans engrossed in a potentially violent dispute. Rather than seeking to address directly the injustice of violently attacking a dog, the trial reframed the event, highlighting the post-rescue conflict between humans, not the origin story of Justicia, whose name evoked an act of injustice.

Reflecting on the relationship between voice and human/non-human bodies, another thing becomes clear: The “discursive gestures” of violence directed against

animals are sites of competing interpretations between NGOs who struggle to obtain donations to fund their rescue and shelter operations. These struggles can have serious consequences in an increasingly saturated field where organizations and potential donors are constantly questioning who can be the voice of animals by judging how organizations and individuals become voices of specific animals. Eco-Canis has been involved in two controversial cases: The case of Juanito and the case of Perro Pinto.

The case of Juanito, which, according to Alicia, involved a pet dog that had been raped, castrated, and then killed by a man, was highly publicized in 2015. Labeled by the tabloid *La Polaka* as the *perro capado*, the castrated dog, it marked one of the first cases that Eco-Canis tried to take to court. This is an important point, since Alicia often expressed her concern for cases of zoophilia. They failed because Alicia purchased an autopsy not considered “impartial,” thus rendering it unusable as evidence. Alicia learned from this case that the “chain of custody” is important, as any minor bureaucratic error might lead to the dismissal of a case. Alicia never managed to find the perpetrator or to prove that, in fact, Juanito had been raped, which led some people to question whether this dog “really existed.” Alicia’s failure to file a lawsuit was followed by repeated allegations from other organizations that Eco-Canis was using this case to profit from animal suffering.

The case of Perro Pinto involved accusations that Eco-Canis had stolen a dog just a few weeks after Justicia’s trial, in the summer of 2017. The accusation came from a woman who, according to Eco-Canis, worked for the office of the state prosecutor. The woman claimed that Eco-Canis had taken her dog illegally and that the dog had died inside their shelter. The woman, along with a group of people composed of members of other NGOs and Alicia’s neighbors, protested outside the shelter, demanding that the Perro Pinto be returned. Alicia told me what she had told a handful of reporters: “There was no dog to be returned,” making it impossible for Alicia to prove her innocence. The connections of the woman raising the allegation with the state prosecutor seemed a potential red flag for Alicia, who told me that she had filed a very similar complaint and was wondering about favoritism in which cases they accepted.

These two cases highlight the tensions that exist within the *animalista* community and how dog bodies (or their absence) become sites of contention as different organizations seek to make arguments on their behalf as the voice of the dogs’ best interests. The case of Juanito exemplifies how injured animal bodies become a more lasting vehicle through which *animalistas* can speak. Dead animal bodies quickly lose their potency, while living injured animals allow ongoing

interpretations and acts of ventriloquism. The publicity this case received thwarted a direct visual representation of Juanito, as different human agents sought to invoke his story, going so far as to claim that this dog did not “really exist.”

The case of Perro Pinto shows, too, how a body contributes to the materiality of voice, because in the absence of an individual body, it becomes almost impossible to know which humans had established a direct relationship with the animal. Conflicting claims about speaking for a dog that seems to lack individuality and subjectivity are likely to go unresolved, just like the case of Perro Pinto did. Without that dog, dead or alive, multiple human voices narrated different stories, but none of them had material evidence that could support them.

These three cases demonstrate the centrality of the body for *animalistas* who seek to defend specific animals in the midst of a political context that renders any kind of crowdfunded activism complicated. In this setting, the claim that one’s voice represents the imagined voice of a non-human animal can garner support from the general public. At the same time, it can place *animalistas* in direct confrontation with each other, as well as with government agencies (such as the state prosecutor, police departments, and others). The ability of a specific human or organization to speak for a dog is evaluated on the strength of a specific, concrete relationship between humans and animals. In the case of Justicia, Alicia was not challenged as an interlocutor since she had renamed, rescued, and cared for Justicia. The relationship between Alicia and Justicia was put to the test later, when the trial shifted gears, almost ignoring what was owed to Justicia. In the other two cases described above, it was difficult to establish a clear connection between the dogs and specific humans, leaving their cases dismissed and buried beneath multiple simultaneous failed attempts to speak for them. Without a body, speaking for an injured dog—that materially links humans and animals, voices and bodies—could not succeed.

TRUE ANIMALISTAS: The Bonds That Allow a Voice to Emerge (and to Be Heard)

If the relationship that grants humans the ability to speak for non-human animals is based on the association between human and non-human bodies, how is it that *animalistas* think about this relationship? In the *animalista* community in Ciudad Juárez, an ongoing debate swirls about what constitutes a “real *animalista*”—that is, someone who can truly speak for animals. In this section, I argue that for some *animalistas* it is the relationship between vulnerable human and injured non-human bodies, with the act of the rescue as the point of inception—the rescue

itself—that irrevocably grants a human the ability to speak for a non-human animal. However, this presents two problems. First, there are other competing and complementary views that emphasize personal histories of human-animal contact and underlying motivations when interacting with animals—particularly the idea that saving animals should be completely disconnected from human politics. Second, as *animalistas* seek to become spokespersons for non-human animals, they face “the *entire gamut* from complete doubt (I may be a spokesperson, but I am speaking in my own name and not in the name of those I represent) to total confidence” (emphasis on the original, Latour 2004, 64). *Animalistas* use the act of the rescue, and the relationship they develop with individual dogs, to validate their position as interlocutors. In addition, in the context of real and perceived violence, it has become increasingly significant for *animalistas* to establish a connection between a human perpetrator and a non-human victim.

For most self-identified *animalistas*, their ability to speak for animals comes from their own sense of empathy toward non-human animals that develops from personal experiences. The experiences that provoke empathy often involved direct interaction with dogs. For example, some realized that they needed to advocate for animals after they started having pets, while others came to this realization after watching street and abandoned dogs suffer. As Naisargi Dave (2014, 434) argues, “the locking of eyes between humans and nonhumans” can be a critical and intimate moment that “inaugurates a bond,” causing the *animalista* to distinguish between a singular animal and “all animals in general.” These experiences, and their interpretation, are highly variable both in their depth and in the response they provoke, which results in the broad and generalist way in which the term *animalista* is used. The breadth of the term, however, causes some discussion among different groups. The question of who is a real *animalista* is not merely rhetorical; it has implications on who gets to claim the label of being a “real” animal advocate and thus can ask for more funding. This is important, because even if most *animalistas* in Ciudad Juárez have no intention of criminalizing animal abuse, shelters and rescue organizations always need resources.

For Eco-Canis, the distinction between the “real” and the superficial *animalista* is rooted in the act of the rescue. The act of the rescue constitutes a potentially transformative event because it can create a relationship between specific human and non-human bodies. It is a shared moment of physical contact between two subjects, the human rescuer and the dog rescuee, producing a form “of intimacy that cross[es] distance between species” (Salazar Parreñas 2016, 98–99). These bonds of intimacy are forged between “a particular set of individuals” “who

encounter one another . . . as ‘transcorporeal subjects,’” and “not just as part of a collective” (Govindrajan 2018, 20–21).

Even before the act of the rescue itself, the human rescuer has to be able to identify the rescuee as a victim of human neglect, which means understanding their suffering. This first moment of contact also shows how human rescuers seek to engage in “transspecies semiosis” between dogs and humans, interpreting iconic and indexical signs (see Kohn 2007, 6–7) through their own bodily reactions. The rescuer, however, seeks to make such semiosis intelligible for other humans, thus trying to frame the dog’s suffering symbolically, through language: “The dog was cold”; or, “The dog was sad.” Although this form of voicing mostly seeks to describe an injustice, at this stage, the relationship between rescuer and rescuee is not yet fully formed.

The rescue itself transforms this relationship and the potential transspecies understanding by highlighting the interaction of human and non-human bodies. When dogs are rescued they might be under a great amount of stress, they might be injured, and they might be aggressive as a result. Humans who engage in rescues are well aware that their own bodies now become vulnerable, exposed to possible bites and other physical injuries. In addition, rescuers face harsh repercussions, as people in the dog’s immediate social environment might get angry and use the threat of violence to try to stop them. For the rescued dogs, this situation marks the road to recovery, but also the moment when someone first listened to them. For the human rescuers, the specific rescue, as a discrete event, becomes part of a conglomerate of rescue experiences that allows them to better notice injustices, consolidating them as *animalistas*.

The effectiveness of the rescue as an act that creates a bond is based on an understanding of human and non-human bodies as porous. The contact that takes place during the rescue allows for the development of an interspecies relationship that goes beyond a particular, discrete rescue event and grants the rescuer the possibility of speaking for dogs, thus making her or him a “real” *animalista*. This relationship ought to be maintained through ongoing interactions with dogs and other animals by creating a proximity among human and non-human bodies that makes rescuers vulnerable to dangerous diseases, as rescuers interact with dogs with terminal illnesses, open wounds, and sometimes tick infestations.¹⁰

If the act of the rescue grants the rescuer the possibility of speaking for or becoming a voice for non-human animals, the question remains which non-human bodies may acquire a voice. As I explained before, non-human bodies are only able to acquire a voice when they survive a vicious attack that results in injury.

However, there is also the element of human agency. The attack has to be intentionally (that is, not accidentally) caused by specific humans. This became evident in my rescue trips with Eco-Canis. On numerous occasions, we drove by a street dog or past the lifeless body of a dog on the road—but how could one speak for a dead dog? And, how could one “voice” a claim for justice when the human responsible for such abuse was nowhere to be found?

In her research on animal-rights activism in India, [Dave \(2017, 51\)](#) argues that some local activists differentiate between “promising” and “unpromising” animals, because “promising” animals are “capable of having names and faces.” This generally holds true in Ciudad Juárez when organizations are not interested in pressing charges or in directly addressing issues of violence directed toward animals. Some organizations in Ciudad Juárez are mostly interested in providing temporary or permanent homes for rescued street dogs. These organizations, sometimes operated by U.S. citizens and residents, rely on the violent history of the city as the background for their production processes that transform “unpromising” street dogs into dogs with familiar names and photogenic faces, but in a way, their stories are not specific enough for an individual voice to emerge. What is different for organizations like Eco-Canis, which want to address issues of animal cruelty, is that in addition to a name and a face, for an animal to be promising, it also requires a voice—a voice that emerges through an specific act of human violence.

This points to another relationship required for animals to get a voice: the relationship between the human victimizer and the non-human victim. The spillage of human violence into non-human residents produces relationships built on a physical relationship between the attacker and the target—becoming linked through the attack itself. This relationship, and the recognition of human agency it entails, makes dogs “promising animals” ([Dave 2017](#)).

The role of the human perpetrator completes the triad consisting of animal, activist, and abuser that allows the *animalista* to speak directly about an individual animal and an individual attacker. Here, the motive of the attack remains unimportant; what proves central in the construction of a voice is the ruthless nature of the attack on a dog perceived as naturally innocent. The attack, which produces an injured body, transforms animals from “something” into a kind of “somebody”—if the dog had been killed, it would have remained “something,” only legible to the state as a form of property, and only accessible to *animalistas* as a generic animal prey of the ongoing violence (see [Haraway 2008, 78–79](#)). Dogs can only acquire a voice if they have been injured through the forces of human agency—that is, if they have a story to tell about their abuse that involves specific abusers. Thus, even

when an animal has a name, a face, and a voice, for their stories to be convincing when told, they also need their abusers to have names and faces. This proves significant within the Mexican criminal justice system. Not only is there a *cifra negra*, a “black number” of crimes committed but never denounced; there also has to be a body, otherwise it is difficult to argue that a crime was committed; and there has to be a potential perpetrator. The story of abuse, the injured animal, and the human abuser are all needed for dogs to receive potential recognition as victims and to have access to justice.

The importance of the human perpetrator was one of the elements that blocked Alicia’s efforts when trying to take the case of Juanito to court, but perhaps it is more clearly exemplified in a remark made by Alicia after the end of Justicia’s trial. Justicia was riding in the back, in her crate, docile as always. Alicia, Oswaldo, and I rode in the front. As we exited the parking lot, Alicia said, with a bittersweet intonation: “The important thing is that he was found guilty. I must repeat this to myself, so that I don’t forget.” A reminder that without the perpetrator there would not have been anything to salvage.

CONCLUSION



Figure 4. Around the corner from Eco-Canis: “There is no crime without a victim.”
Photo by Iván Sandoval-Cervantes.

Around the corner from the Eco-Canis shelter, a painted wall said: “There is no crime without a victim” (“No existe delito sin víctima”). Without the dog, without the dog’s living injured body, it is difficult to show authorities and the public in general that a crime has been committed. Ciudad Juárez’s *animalistas* work hard, then, to stay close to the bodies of rescued injured animals. More broadly speaking, it shows the centrality of the victim in the Mexican criminal justice system. The victim has to be “someone,” with a body or a voice, or both. The case of violence against animals demonstrates that the relationship between body and voice can prove messy sometimes, and that certain bodies acquire a voice more easily than others do.

In this article, I have explored how non-human bodies become part of complex histories that seek some form of response, if not justice in itself, in violent contexts, analyzing the relationship between bodies and voices. Violence can activate the potentiality of voice in some bodies, while silencing others. I argue that for *animalistas* in Ciudad Juárez there is potency in the ways in which anthropogenic violence transforms dogs’ bodies into “promising” animals. Injured canine bodies become visual signs and evidence of injustices, and they create the assumption of an individual story and an individual voice. Even if mostly looking for patchy or small justices (see [Chao and Kirksey 2022](#)), *animalistas* speak for and from those bodies to demand recognition, or some form of punishment. Injured animal bodies, thus, gain a voice that seems unreachable for non-injured animal bodies: their injuries allow their particular stories of abuse to be told. In other words, injuries highlight the specific materiality of some bodies, separating them from generic street dogs. Street dogs are also abused and mistreated, but in a different way, a way that does not involve a specific identifiable act of human aggression.

The role of the injured body proves central in the *animalistas*’ efforts to look for an official and/or public response to specific cases of violence against animals. The injured body is not only evidence of injustice but the site from which *animalistas* seek to speak. In the particular case of Mexico, the circulation of images of disappeared people who are no longer able to speak for themselves implies the silence that surrounds impunity and highlights the lack of a voice that was once there but no longer exists (see [Vargas González 2020](#)). As other forms of activism in Mexico have shown, trying to separate the voice from the material bodies (frequently absent and disappeared) without losing part of the message (the potency of the message) makes for a complicated task that often results in generic demands for justice easily pushed aside and ignored.¹¹ Injured non-human animals through their bodies and their gaze (*su mirada*) invoke individual stories of suffering that

allow for the possibility of a human activist to become their voice, as long as there is also a human perpetrator responsible for such suffering.

Animalistas in Ciudad Juárez often face financial difficulties, time constraints, and a general climate that does not always see their labor as valid or worthwhile—as they are often asked why they are not saving children or the elderly. In this sense, both abused dogs and *animalistas* in precarious positions inhabit what Zoë H. Wool (2017, 83) calls “in-durable sociality”: “A way of being with others based in part on a common need for endurance . . . conditioned by the temporal limits of togetherness: the awareness of many, finite durations, rather than the possibility of a single shared one (*the* duration).” Yet perhaps the sociality established between humans and dogs becomes more indurable for the dogs than for the humans, since the humans can “become”—at least potentially—something for themselves. *Animalistas* gain a sense of direction and purpose by rescuing animals, while many rescued dogs are suspended in “the daily experience of a difficult and deeply uncertain life that is circumscribed within a present that seems to go nowhere” (Wool 2017, 81).

The individualization of the animal-abuse cases and the precarious situations shared by both dogs and *animalistas* continues to push for a depoliticization of animal abuse and toward the pathologization of violence—it is individual attackers who are to blame, not the inefficiency of legal processes, the infrastructure, the disregard for abused dogs, or the undervaluation of life. This obscures the larger picture that shows connections between different types of violence and indicates how the legal system can bury voices beneath other voices, producing bittersweet outcomes like the one experienced by Alicia and Justicia.

ABSTRACT

Activism in favor of non-human animals is on the rise throughout Mexico despite ongoing and episodic violence. Activists, also known as animalistas, represent themselves as the “voice” of non-human animals as they seek rights and well-being for animals. In Ciudad Juárez, a border city once considered the most dangerous city in the world (2008–2012), animalistas engage in complex ways with non-human bodies as they seek to “speak” for them. This article analyzes the relationship between injured bodies and voice in Ciudad Juárez’s animalista movement, with the act of the rescue as the point of inception. Injured animal bodies prove central for activists because anthropogenic violence transforms dogs’ bodies. Non-human injured bodies, and their visual representations, allow animalistas to position themselves as the voice of an animal that survived an abuse while also individualizing and depoliticizing—through

the discourse of pathology—violence against dogs. [non-human animals; injuries; voice; activism; Ciudad Juárez; Mexico]

RESUMEN

A pesar de la violencia continua y esporádica en México, el activismo a favor de los animales no humanos ha incrementado. En la búsqueda de derechos y el bienestar de animales no-humanos, las personas activistas, o animalistas, se presentan a sí mismas como la “voz” de los animales. En la ciudad fronteriza de Ciudad Juárez, que alguna vez fue considerada la más violenta del mundo (2008–2012), los animalistas se relacionan de manera compleja con los cuerpos no-humanos para poder “hablar” por ellos. Este artículo analiza la relación entre cuerpos lesionados y voz en el movimiento animalista de Ciudad Juárez, enfatizando el acto del rescate como un momento clave. Los cuerpos lesionados de perros son fundamentales para las activistas porque la violencia antropogénica los transforma. Así los cuerpos animales lesionados, y sus representaciones visuales, les permiten posicionarse como la voz de animales sobrevivientes al abuso, mientras que individualiza y despolitiza—a través de un discurso patologizante—la violencia contra perros. [animales no-humanos, lesions, voz, activism, Ciudad Juárez, México]

NOTES

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1. See [Josiah Heyman \(2012\)](#) for an analysis of the relationship between capitalism, immigration, and violence.
2. The Ley de Bienestar Animal para el Estado de Chihuahua [Animal Welfare Law for the State of Chihuahua] replaced a previous version, written in 1994, that did not include a clear definition of animal abuse. The 1994 version only included 35 articles, while the 2010 version had 95. The Penal Code reformed in 2013 included an entire new *apartado*, section 28, with three articles (364, 365, and 366) that addressed crimes against domestic animals.
3. I recognize the influence that philosophical and normative debates have on the *animalista* movement in Ciudad Juárez. In this article I am focusing on the descriptive, daily use of the term.
4. PETA stands for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. PETA was founded in 1980. According to the organization's webpage, it is “dedicated to establishing and defending the rights of all animals . . . under the simple principle that animals are not ours to experiment on, eat, wear, use for entertainment, or abuse in any other way.” PETA is probably the most influential animal rights organization in the world, but it has been criticized by several groups, including feminist vegan activists such as Carol J.

- Adams (see [Bindel 2010](#)). For additional references to animal rights/well-being activism in Mexico, see [Ana Cristina Ramirez Barreto \(2018\)](#) and [Azucena Granados Moctezuma \(2020\)](#).
5. See *Ley de Bienestar Animal para el Estado de Chihuahua* [Animal Welfare Law for the State of Chihuahua], published in November 2010.
 6. This was a highly visible report that circulated in the news and on social media (see [Pacheco 2019](#)).
 7. See also [Kate McClellan \(2022\)](#) on the politics of equivalence in Jordan.
 8. A more recent news article states that during 2019, almost 2,000 dead animals were “collected” from the streets of Ciudad Juárez ([Castro 2019](#)).
 9. Policies that removed canine bodies from the streets like trash can be related to [Yamini Narayanan’s \(2017\)](#) criticism of urban planning in India and its failure to recognize “cities as biodiverse spaces” and dogs as urban dwellers.
 10. *Rickettsia* is of particular concern as it is transmitted through tick bites and constitutes a public health issue in Ciudad Juárez ([Gamboa, Vázquez, and González 2019](#)).
 11. See [Olof Ohlson \(2019\)](#) for an interesting take on the role of “necrographies” (biographies of the disappeared narrated in first person) for the case of disappeared persons in Mexico.

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