

Cat lives: On love, litter, and -graphy

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One-Eye: litter

Our house came with cats. The family before us left behind a tame kitten that shared the yard with a tatter-eared tom and six or seven others. They depended on scraps from the butcher two doors down, where an employee calls out "Here babies!" and feeds them in the alley. The colony was growing fast, thanks to steady food and no sterilization.

Our second winter there, the tom lost his left eye. The infected hole wouldn't heal, along with a deep gash on his back. Parasites sucked his body of life. My step mom asked, "Shouldn't you just put him to sleep?" Instead, Jen used holiday gift money to take him to Riverside Vet. Lured into a carrier with wet food, he was neutered, vaccinated, eye sewn up, side stitched, ears cleaned of mites. The vet said his one good eye had been punctured, making him practically blind. He recovered in our bathroom, saturating it with a polecat stench of spray. The skin over his missing eye healed into a little bowl of fur.

We call him One-Eye – Jen's "cat hero." It's his fierce will to live. She loved him even as an aggressive, infected zombie, imagining him healed and tame. Being part of that process solidified our sense of love and responsibility for cats, despite the spray and scratches. Three years after becoming One-Eye, he lives with five cats on our back porch, a shelter with salvage wood bunks, weatherized with shower curtains. Nowadays we care for 7 indoor and around 8 outdoor cats. I guess we qualify as "crazy cat people," and Jen says that makes our feline family "human cats." We run an in-home curiosity museum, and trained Mia to jump through hoops while Chama and Delphi greet people in the yard. We love our cats!



affection and calm, their idiosyncratic personalities and soft fur, how they pick strange spots to nap. I want to say they love us too, but who can really say?

What is this love that transforms animals and mixes species? In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway writes of dogs, "to be in love means to be worldly, to be in connection ... on many scales" (97).ⁱ As companion animals cohabiting the intimate space of houses, cats and dogs are densely woven into our moment of late capitalist technoscientific culture, as well as longer histories of individual breeds and natural histories of invasive species impacting native populations. Under the aegis of love and kindness, we subject cats to sterilization, euthanasia, microchipping, ear-tipping, and other operations that come with being, as Haraway says, "interpellated into the modern biopolitical state" (281).

Likewise, loving cats subjects us to all the litter through which cat lives unfurl: litter boxes and feline feces; litter transformed by cats into beds; litters of kittens; and in the end, the sad litter of dead cats. Litter's etymology indexes how life forms lie down to sleep, how they reproduce, and how they shed waste. The word derives from Old French for 'bed' and an Indo-European verb for 'lie down.'ⁱⁱⁱ 'Litter' referred to straw strewn on the ground for beds, but also all the animals born to a mother in a birthing bed. By the 1900s, 'litter' was synonymous with trash, garbage, waste. Then in 1948, Ed Lowe marketed a clay-based product called Kitty Litter that became generic for all brands of litter box fill.

Like other aspects of cat lives, kitty litter has become a worrisome ecological object. *Green Living* estimates that two million tons of non-biodegradable kitty litter enters landfills every year,ⁱⁱⁱ only adding to its



about Brazilian culture. Blogger reactions range from outrage at another form of scientific racism to jokes that the parasite causes crazy cat person syndrome.

Most cat people would say love, not *T. gondii*, attaches us to cats. Love infects our lives, making us clean litter boxes and witness cat suffering. And kitten litters, in their playful, furry frailty, incubate an excess of infectious love.

PT: -graphy

Our first winter at One-Eye's house saw a litter of three kittens: a black and white one with a moustache, and brother and sister tabbies resembling exotic ocelots with seal faces. Mr. Moustache caught a respiratory infection and died on our bathroom floor the morning of his vet appointment—the first cat to die in our care, buried in the backyard over tears. In his honor we adopted the ailing tabby brother. Tabbies are named after a striped silk pattern spun in Baghdad's al-'Attâbiya quarter and exported to Victorian Britain and France.^{xiii} We named our scrap of silk PT, after Barnum. I thought four indoor cats was enough, but according to Jen, "When you have one cat, it's just as easy to have a bunch": an arcane math where 1 = 5, 6, or 7. I reluctantly agreed to adopt cat number five.



From the beginning, half-feral PT was trouble – one of those maddening males that sprays despite being neutered. The spray smell pisses me off. It saturates the yard, graffitied across plants, metals, and plastics. After touching things my hands smell like spray. And what I touch gets sprayed; I spread cat territory. Now, thanks to PT, rooms *inside* the house smell of ammonia. One day while writing "Cat Lives," PT sprayed the wall next to my desk. This isn't our house; the males keep *their* turf thoroughly marked. Even Perla, a spayed outdoor female, gets into the art of spraying.



Spray marks objects with pheromone messages about an animal's sex, age, and health that humans, lacking vomeronasal sensory organs, can't comprehend. In *The Practice of the Wild*, Gary Snyder describes such marks as a world of animal writing that is "not a text, a system of symbols, a referential world of mirrors... This world in its actual existence is ... an enactment... It stands for nothing" (112-3).^{xiii} Cat writing includes spray, but also claw marks, scent glands rubbed against legs, refrains of meows, even beautiful patterns of fur. Perhaps it would be better to call it *-graphy* instead of 'writing,' given that word's baggage as civilization's special achievement.

Animal aesthetics challenge our symbolic thinking that refuses to allow *-graphy* to stand for nothing. Getting away from these habits of thought, Gregory Bateson writes of *meows*, "the cat does not say 'milk'; she simply acts out (or *is*) her end of an interchange" (275).^{xiv} For Bateson, relationships between self/other are "the subject matter of what are called 'feelings' – love, hate, fear... It is unfortunate that these abstractions referring to *patterns* of relationship have received names" (140-1; his emphasis). Too bad we have a word for



"love"! We need to forget or forgo the word to grasp such feelings as beautiful relational patterns composed in living bodies through *-graphy*. These patterns jump between things in ways that are at once historical, material, and magical — like the moiré silk patterns from Baghdad imprinted on Tabbies' names and bodies that end up as patterns on Jen's ceramics.

Cat *-graphy* lays down these aesthetic sensory patterns in living bodies, in messages *about* relationships that simultaneously *enact* relationships by changing bodies. For example, cat purrs say something humans interpret as love, but what happens to bodies *vibrating* with purrs? Elizabeth von Muggenthaler patented a therapy device based on findings that frequencies from 25 to 50 Hertz — the cat purr range — help heal torn muscles and broken bones.^{xv} Her research dovetails with claims that pet owners enjoy low stress, rarely visit doctors, and are less likely to die of heart attacks.^{xvi} Could it be purr *-graphy*?

Through purring, spraying, and other *-graphy* forms, cats pattern social relationships into the places they inhabit. In *Cat Culture: The Social World of a Cat Shelter*, sociologists Janet and Steven Alger approach cats as social agents shaping a shared human-feline culture.^{xvii} New shelter arrivals were housed in big cages that free roaming cats chose to sleep on in a relaxed pile; cat friendships formed through the bars (96). One pair of cats liked to sit together in an empty litter box. The Algers interpret such nesting spaces as "meaningful," a "symbol of their friendship" (103). What if these nests are not symbolic but *ecologic* places (akin to atmospheres, habitats, and greenhouses) where relational patterns we call 'love' can flourish? The difference is that the spaces are more than

referential symbols that stand for friendship; they are greenhouses for feelings of belonging, atmospheres of affective engineering that envelope bodies inside relational patterns.

Because their little bodies let them inhabit spaces at subhuman scales, cats can throw together beds out of all kinds of litter and household surfaces. Sinks make perfect readymade hammocks. Nesting choices exploit thermal capacities in the built environment, like passive solar architecture accidentally assembled out of cardboard and a broken window. Some find places for solitary catnaps, like PT's bag burrow under the kitchen sink. Rather than thinking of our house turning wild with animal use, I like to think the cats are making their own houses by domesticating human space with feline *-graphy*. No wild/domestic dichotomy, only interdomestication in all directions. If nothing else, it helps me appreciate the smell of PT's spray.

Units A & B: love

Cats reproduce so swiftly that a group of them is called a "clutter." At its height, our backyard clutter numbered twenty. The year following PT's birth, a litter boom mass-produced so many tabbies we started naming them Unit A, B, C... We got them fixed at Emancipet, an east Austin nonprofit with low cost spay/neuter, vaccination, and microchipping. The Units are cyborg creatures, registered in City databases. Because we couldn't pay for fixing so many kittens, we also reluctantly used free Austin Humane Society vouchers involving mandatory ear-tipping — snipping a quarter inch off the left ear to mark ferals as belonging to trap/neuter/release or TNR colonies. As an Emancipet volunteer described it, TNR is a way to increase the value and quality of individual cat lives. People see cats as a problem if there are too many. The less cats there are, the more care they receive, and the more of them find homes. TNR colonies also keep reproductive ferals from taking over new turf.



When Units A and B came down with winter colds, Jen asked if we could adopt them. I didn't want any more indoor cats. I was sick of PT spraying everything, plus, he gave me cat-scratch fever. A chain of reasons why *not* to adopt more cats clinked through my head, but I gave in to Jen's insistent love of kittens, resigned to becoming a crazy cat person. Maybe it was *T. gondii* in my parasite-addled brain. When the cat person at the butcher's asked for help fixing a three-legged calico kitten, I was happy to adopt her as cat number eight. Since then, Mao, a north campus stray, died of old age, bringing our indoor clutter back to seven.

The outdoors is a precarious world: a dog mauled one cat, another was shot with a beebee gun, and a third was euthanized after developing inoperable cancer. Indoor cats live two or three times longer. With all these cats around, we've buried four, and at least six have gone missing. One-Eye's missing eye and Lacy's missing leg are little parts of what adds up to tons of grim garbage every year. In 2008, City of Austin's Solid Waste Services collected 158 tons of dead animals (out of 378 tons of urban waste).^{xviii} These figures do not distinguish roadkill from animals euthanized at Town Lake Animal Shelter. Although the City has long sought to run a no-kill shelter, Town Lake operates with a 50% euthanasia rate — much lower than Texas cities with rates of 70 to 90%.^{xix} In 2007, the City decided to move the shelter from central Austin to a \$1.5 million facility to be built in east Austin. Animal groups argued that fewer animals would be adopted there, leading to more euthanasia. Eastside activists who wanted that land for affordable housing chalked the move up to institutional racism that puts polluting industries and undesirable jobs like killing animals in minority



neighborhoods. Early in 2008, PODER and FixAustin took the City to court to halt the relocation.^{xx} Like the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony and Oil-Dri's mines, it looms as an undesirable future caught up in cat lives and litter.



Austin's plans for a new shelter became deadlocked in politics about what belongs in whose neighborhoods, conflicts that come spinning out of kindness. Nigel Thrift writes, “Kindness has to be built into the spaces of cities. Think of kindness as a social and aesthetic technology of *belonging to a situation*, rather than as an organic emotion” (144; his emphasis).^{xxi} Thrift uses the term 'kindness' to get away from a language of 'love' he finds too romantic or demanding of purity. Cat lives problematize rhetorics of 'love' and 'kindness' alike: they sound sweet and innocent, but cross cats' bodies and cities with violence. It is not only a matter of building spaces for cats, but building cats into spaces by making them non-reproductive. They are “fixed,” as if reproductive capacity is something broken, churning out litter in the form of feral kittens.



The etymology of “feral” goes back to “fierce” and “wild” – a cultural category for synanthropic species falling out of human control. Our thought and language about wildness and civilization are locked into imagining humans as *one-way domesticators*. Against this, there are *-graphy* practices whereby animals and their parasites domesticate us, making secret rooms inside our houses and bodies. Loving cats entails a fierce belonging or subjection to their litter, to biopolitical violence, to aggressive spray and the healing frequency of purrs. Love keeps humans and cats circling each other amidst a lot of hangers-on: animal activists, veterinarians, brain parasites, clay miners, food and toy producers, cat psychics, and all sorts of other characters. The beloved is attached to *unloved* ones, like fleas. Love does not purely divide us from the rest of the world. It mixes us together in wild ways.

Endnotes

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- ^v Nicky Boulter. "Alley Cats & Sex Kittens." *Australasian Science* (January/February 2007), 35-37. Accessed at <http://www.control.com.au/bi2007/281parasites.pdf> on April 14, 2009.
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- ^{xiii} Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild*. San Francisco: North Point Press (1990).
- ^{xiv} Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. 1972. Fwd. by Mary Catherine Bateson. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press (2000).
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- ^{xvi} BBC News. "'Healthier hearts' for cat owners." <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/7304393.stm> 19 March 2008 accessed March 5, 2009.
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