

SUMMER 2016

Writing interspecies relations with Joanne Bristol

WRITING INTERSPECIES RELATIONS WITH JOANNE BRISTOL

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community cats and interspecies literacies

BY JOANNE BRISTOL

Over the past 9,000 years, trophic relationships have formed between cats and sites of human settlement. Modern cities are experiencing increasingly pressurized entanglements of interspecies relations, which reveal complex cultural specificities by which cats are included or excluded. The physical and mental health benefits of living with pet cats have become apparent, and pet-related products and services have become billion-dollar industries.¹ While many cats become “indoor people,” occupying increasingly stratified human-built environments, the spaces of free-ranging urban felines are more precariously negotiated. Stray domesticated cats are often characterized as being “homeless,” and feral cats – who live more independently of humans – are being reconceived as “community” cats by feline welfare and rescue organizations. Such shifts in feline-human identity and urban

spatial politics exist alongside the lives of indigenous wild cats, such as cougars, who become displaced as city boundaries push into their habitats.

Cat populations were introduced to the Americas via the Atlantic passages of European settlers since the 17th century. Conflicting human perspectives on the status and belonging of such cats raise issues about animal welfare and ecology, as well as species’ autonomy and community. Geographer Nigel Clark reminds us that “colonization was as much a biological process as it was an economic, cultural or political one,” and that “biological forces stand out as the most irruptive and unpredictable – and the least amenable to re-containment.”² That the European colonization of the Americas has recently been claimed as the central force constituting our current geological era of the Anthropocene³ underscores the degree

to which addressing interspecies spaces demands decolonizing approaches.⁴

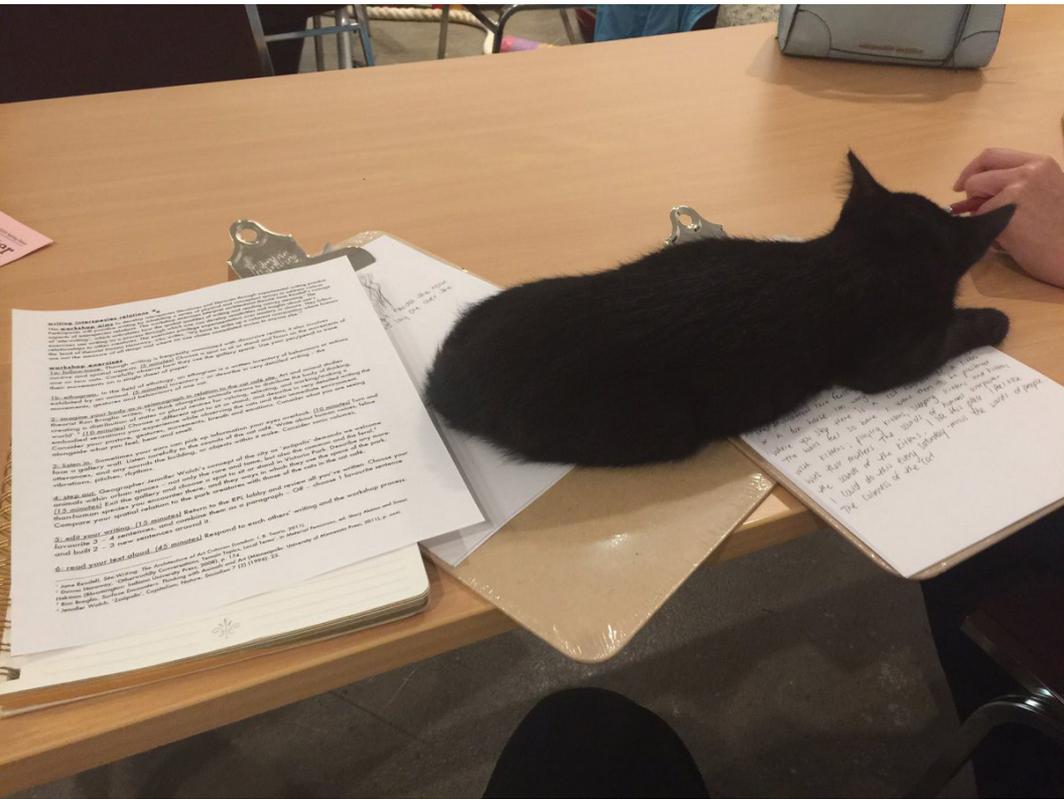
While cats have come to be associated with domestic spaces, they circulate as figures in a multitude of cultural realms. Feline figures have informed strands of modern human subjectivity and cultural production, from philosopher René Descartes' optical theories about "cat people"⁵ to writer E.T.A. Hoffman's literary stylist "Tomcat Murr,"⁶ to beckoning *maneki-neko* figurines in shop windows, to *Hello Kitty* merchandise and digital memes circulating cyberspace. The focus on multispecies relations at *DOCUMENTA 13* – to name one of many recent art events – emphasized contemporary art's role in addressing biopolitical concerns. Though his contribution to *DOCUMENTA 13* involved human-canine relations, artist Brian Jungen's 2004 installation, *Habitat 04-Cité Radieuse des Chats/Cats Radiant City*, addressed a population of felines in a context of urban gentrification and colonial displacement.

Situated at Montréal's Darling Foundry, Jungen's installation referenced the utopian architectural aesthetics of Moshe Safdie's building *Habitat '67* (1967), and Le Corbusier's plans for the *Ville Radieuse* (1933) to produce an assemblage of cat "furniture" – scratching posts, climbing tubes and cubes covered with carpet – which acted as a conduit through which audiences could observe and potentially adopt cats from the city's SPCA. Through adapting the modular structural aesthetics of Safdie and Le Corbusier for the well-being of feline users, Jungen articulated shared visual

and spatial economies by which art, architecture and urban cat management operate.

Art theorist Ron Broglio writes, "(t)o think alongside animals means to distribute the body of thinking, creating a distribution of states or plural centres for valuing, selecting, and marking/making a world."⁷ Situating a cat café in an art gallery within a public library invites concerns regarding species' belonging, and opportunities for different ways to think and interact alongside cats and coffee. Such opportunities may spawn questions like, "how does the hosting and sharing of 'community' cats resonate with the knowledge-sharing economies of public libraries and art galleries?" and, "how do cats and coffee relate and differ as companion species to humans?"⁸ Other questions and interspecies convivialities will undoubtedly emerge through observing the cats' use of the gallery. Attending to more-than-human perspectives and capacities affords new ecologies of cultural production and knowledge which may animate public spaces as interspecies habitats. Such ecologies anticipate interspecies literacies that feralize and enrich animal welfare and rights discourses.

- ¹ The American Pet Products Association reports 2015 expenditures of over 60 billion dollars in the USA. See http://americanpetproducts.org/press_industrytrends.asp, accessed 1 May, 2016.
- ² Nigel Clark, "Feral Ecologies: Performing Life on the Colonial Periphery" in *Nature Performed: Environment, Culture and Performance*, ed. Bronislaw Szerszynski, Wallace Heim, and Claire Waterton (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 163.
- ³ Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene" *Nature* 519 (March 2015), 171–80.
- ⁴ See, for example, Zoe Todd, "Indigenizing the Anthropocene" in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 241-254.
- ⁵ An account of Descartes' "mis"-reading of the feline *tapetum lucidum* can be found in Branka Arsić's *The Passive Eye: Gaze and Subjectivity in Berkeley (via Beckett)* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003).
- ⁶ E. T. A. Hoffmann, *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Penguin, 1999). First published in 1820–2.
- ⁷ Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xxxi.
- ⁸ Where any species meet, additional species are entangled. By drinking "bird friendly" coffee produced in one part of the world, do we indirectly recoup damage to bird populations made by free-ranging cats in another?



Joanne Bristol, *Writing interspecies relations*, 2016, workshop. Photo: Jessica Madiratta.



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COVER IMAGE

Joanne Bristol, *shelter cat study*, 2015, ink on paper. Photo courtesy of the artist.



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