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Feline Entanglements: Feminist Interspecies Care and Solidarity in a Post-Pandemic World

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Abstract

While the concept of interspecies solidarity has been central to ecofeminist work on animal rights since the 1980s, less attention has been devoted to the question of animal desire within the feminist animal care tradition, the majority of which has focused on women's and animals' shared oppression under patriarchy. This article offers a reformulation of feminist animal care ethics, one that seeks to recenter animal desire as the ground for interspecies solidarity. The first section of the article offers a review of the relationship between women and interspecies solidarity as articulated within the feminist animal care tradition. Part two draws upon multispecies ethnographic participant observation at a cat sanctuary in Syros, Greece, to account for questions of animal agency, as well as the gendered, racialized, and classed dimensions of interspecies care work. The final section of the article concludes by considering the ways in which grief and mourning are central to the decolonial project of feminist interspecies care and solidarity in a post-pandemic world.

How beautiful is her confidence. She speaks to me only with the utmost seriousness, intensity, and reasonableness ... I am so thoroughly hers that she turns her back to me ... I follow her, we kiss, we imitate each other, but if she imitates me while I'm imitating her, there is a slight animalhumanization that takes place among contact with one another ... in her there's something human—emotive elements, instantaneous thoughts, human echoes and presentiments—whereas in me, always palpitating in my tissues, in my organs, is my ancestral animality. Not with (in) my head, in the body: that's where deep intelligence lies ... It is with emotion and nostalgia that I touch Thea's soft fierce touch; she's the cat whose cat I am [la chatte dont je suis la chatte]. (Cixous 2000)

I often ask myself, just to see, who I am—and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example, the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment ... Cannot this cat also be, deep within her eyes, my primary mirror? (Derrida 2002)

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Cixous's meditations on feline-feminine geographies articulate feminist interspecies care and solidarity as an effect of shared embodiment. While Derrida's cat is a witness to her human's autobiography, Cixous's cat is sensual and passionate, a relentless provocateur whose desire is as multiplicitous as it is deconstructive. As Cixous reaches for Thea's soft fierce touch, she is taken out of herself and towards the other. In the caresses of love, as Kelly Oliver reminds us, there is no "subject" or "object/other" (Oliver 2001). The caress is intimate and does not take place from a distance; it is a non-possessive mode of touching the other, one that signals the impossibility of completely possessing the other. Like many of us, Cixous does not *own* her cat, she is *cat owned*.

The concept of interspecies care has been central to ecofeminist work on animal rights since the early 1980s. As Josephine Donovan, one of the founders of the feminist animal care tradition notes, "women's relational culture of caring and attentive love" provides the basis for the ethical treatment of animals (1990, 375). Seeking to reclaim feminine embodiment and emotionality as the foundation for feminist animal care ethics, Donovan and Adams call for a "unified radical and cultural feminist approach to animal issues, repositioning the ethic of care within the political perspective of the radical feminist tradition" (2007, 10). Drawing parallels between violence against women and violence against animals, Donovan argues that: "Just as feminism has called for incorporating the voices of women into public policy and ethical discourse, so feminist animal advocates must call for incorporating the voices of animals as well" (2006, 307).

This article seeks to expand upon previous work in feminist animal care ethics by recentering animal desire as the ground for interspecies solidarity. While the feminist animal care tradition has provided a robust analysis of women's and animals' shared oppression under patriarchy (Donovan 1990, 2006; Donovan and Adams 2007), the question of animal desire has received less attention within feminist animal care ethics which has tended to focus primarily upon violence against women and animals (see, e.g., Donovan and Adams 2007; Donovan 1990). When no desire for living is allowed for animals, however, violence against them becomes normalized—we cannot mourn them because we cannot grasp the singularity and complexity of their desire. How animals wish to live and the pleasures they might have sought during their lives become unimaginable to us. We, in turn, become little more than survivors, avoiding the vital question of what it means to live—and survive—in the Anthropocene.

Building on recent conversations in feminist and queer animal studies (Haraway 2008; Chen 2012; Taylor 2017), the first part of the article offers a review of the relationship between women and interspecies solidarity as articulated within the feminist animal care tradition. Part two draws upon my own multispecies ethnographic participant observation at a cat sanctuary in Syros, Greece, to account for questions of animal agency, as well as the gendered, racialized, and classed dimensions of interspecies care work. The final section of the article concludes by considering the ways in which grief and mourning are central to the decolonial project of feminist interspecies solidarity in a post-pandemic world.

Feminist animal care theory

What obligations ensue from the experience of entangled lives once touch has been initiated? (Haraway 2008)

Since the 1980s, the concept of care has been at the center of ecofeminist work on animal rights. The feminist animal care tradition developed as a response to the limitations

of previous approaches to animal ethics in the work of philosophers such as Peter Singer (1975) and Tom Regan (1983). Speaking on behalf of his wife, Singer is highly critical of what he refers to as a “sentimentalist” approach to animal welfare: “We were not especially ‘interested in’ animals. Neither of us had ever been inordinately fond of dogs, cats, or horses ... We didn’t ‘love’ animals ... The portrayal of those who protest against cruelty to animals as sentimental, emotional ‘animal lovers’ [has meant] excluding the entire issue from serious political and moral discussion” (cited in Donovan 1990, 351). Singer’s belief that associating animal rights with the feminized language of emotions serves to discredit the former from serious philosophical and ethical debate is echoed by Tom Regan. In his preface to *The case for animal rights*, Regan maintains that, “since all who work on behalf of the interests of animals are ... familiar with the tired charge of being ‘irrational,’ ‘sentimental,’ ‘emotional,’ or worse, we can give the lie to these accusations only by making a concerted effort not to indulge our emotions or parade our sentiments. And that requires making a sustained commitment to rational inquiry” (cited in Donovan 1990, 351).

Singer and Regan’s paternalistic rejection of emotions in discussions of animal suffering exposes the patriarchal bias towards universalism in mainstream animal rights theory. As Stacy Alaimo and others have pointed out, however, it is precisely such mind/body dualisms which reduce nonhuman populations to their physical bodies that establish philosophical justification for violence against animals in the first place (Donovan 1990; 2006; Alaimo 2016). Feminist animal care theory emerged to restore emotional complexity and the particularities of ethical decision-making to debates about animal rights. By analogizing the oppression of women and animals, however, foundational work in feminist animal care ethics by Donovan and Adams has a tendency to mirror some of the problems poststructuralist feminists have attributed to cultural feminism more generally: namely, the reproduction of the gender binary and the lack of an intersectional approach to gender identity.¹ As Maneesha Deckha argues, the humanist concept of personhood—itsself predicated upon the experiences of white, able-bodied, cisgender heterosexual men of property—is not an animal-friendly legal category (2021, 88). Within the racist, speciesist, heterosexist, and colonialist imaginaries that underscore legal definitions of personhood, the humanist construction of the animal constitutes a colonial invention imposed upon marginalized human and nonhuman populations. Failing to interrogate the human/animal divide as interrelated with other hierarchical Cartesian dualisms (man versus woman, reason versus emotion, mind versus body, West versus non-West, and so on) may contribute toward further epistemic violence against both animals and humans alike.

More recently, the field of feminist animal studies has moved to center the work of scholars who operate outside cultural and radical feminist discourses of suffering and rights. Drawing on indigenous, postcolonial, queer, posthumanist, poststructuralist, and disability frameworks, contemporary ecofeminist criticism demonstrates a commitment to theorizing the racial and colonial formations at the heart of animal oppression (Ko and Ko 2017; King et al. 2019). Tracing the entanglements between humans and companion species, this body of work focuses particular attention upon how, through interspecies encounters, humans and animals are co-constituted as subjects of multispecies worldmaking practices (Haraway 2008; Chen 2012; Taylor 2017). Rather than endorsing an abolitionist or extinctionist approach to interspecies relationality—one that advocates the elimination of all relationships between humans and animals (Francione 2010)—contemporary ecofeminist theories interrogate the intersectional and transnational contexts in which our dependency upon nonhuman animals is disavowed. As Harlan Weaver argues, paying close attention to the concept of interspecies

intersectionality means attending to the ways in which racism, poverty, colonialism, misogyny, and ableism impact the lives of humans and animals alike (Weaver 2021).

Central to such intersectional feminist critiques of anthropocentrism is an articulation of the relationship between racism and nonhuman animal oppression (Ko and Ko 2017), as well as an analysis of the connections between disability and animal liberation. Sunaura Taylor, for example, has called attention to the uncritical use of the term “care” within feminist animal care ethics (2017). As Taylor points out, while the feminist animal care tradition has accounted for what it means to care for animals, it has not sufficiently addressed the paternalistic, ableist, and infantilizing approaches towards those perceived to be dependent upon care. Taylor suggests that we need to pay greater emotional attention to what animals tell us about the kind of care they wish to receive, while also striving to care for animals in a way that allows space for their agency to emerge.

I concur with Taylor’s critique regarding feminist animal care theory’s lack of attention to questions of animal agency and desire. Placing pleasure and desire at the heart of conversations about interspecies relationality is crucial to countering the preoccupation with pain and suffering in animal rights work, a spectacularization of violence that objectifies nonhuman populations by reducing them to their physical bodies (Lewis 2021). As Radhika Govindrajana has commented regarding the critical imperative to view animals as agents with their own social lives and histories: “to write about multispecies worlds is to write about the ‘storied experience’ of both human and nonhuman persons and how they intersect and shape one another” (2018, 22). Not only is the recognition of animals as creators of narratives through their actions central to the project of interspecies solidarity, but it is essential to the work of acknowledging animals as grievable subjects.

In order to elaborate on the political and ecological possibilities generated via feminist interspecies solidarities, the next section of the article draws upon multispecies ethnographic and participant observation at a cat sanctuary in Syros, Greece, in August 2021. By multispecies ethnography, I am referring to multispecies encounters and contact zones that are characterized by animals as actors and subjects within the ethnographic scene (Shingne 2021). The project of multispecies ethnography requires attending to animals and humans as “co-creators of shared lifeworlds” (Blattner et al. 2020, 5). During my time at Syros Cats, I took field notes, photographs, and videos every day, recording key events and issues that were discussed. These notes helped me formulate questions for the interviews and get better acquainted with the work of the sanctuary. With their permission I identify certain human subjects by their first names throughout the essay because it is possible to readily identify them by their work. The following narratives illustrate the extent to which feline interspecies care work is disproportionately performed by women, who come to know cats differently due to the gendered nature of social reproduction involved in creating and sustaining interspecies friendships with companion animals. Through an analysis of feline-feminine entanglements at Syros Cats, I show how paying careful attention to what individual cats do over the course of their daily lives and to the kind of care they wish to receive can yield important insights into animals as intentional, empathetic, and agential beings.

Women, cats, and the feminization of interspecies care work

Animal care and especially cat care is a predominantly female thing. (Jo)
And here at Syros Cats most of us are females surrounded by cats. So be it. (Karen)

Women have been at the forefront of animal rights activism since the late nineteenth century; the early antivivisection movements in the United Kingdom and the United States, for example, were both dominated by women.² Many of the women involved in animal rights work in the early twentieth century also identified as feminists and were active members of the suffragette movements. Perhaps not surprisingly, women currently comprise the majority of volunteers at animal shelters, and they are also most likely to be the primary caregivers for domestic companion animals in the home. As of 2011, the American Veterinary Medical Association compiled statistical evidence that three out of four primary caregivers of household animals in the United States were female (McHugh 2012, 618). And yet it is men who have dominated the leadership positions within the animal rights movement (Gaarder 2011). As Emily Gaarder notes, while leadership positions devoted to large-scale animal rights campaigns such as abolishing factory farming are deemed to be “big” actions worthy of male involvement, daily care work for animals—the bulk of which is performed by women—is frequently dismissed as “trivial” by male animal rights activists and therefore assigned less value (2011, 14).

The feminization and subsequent devaluation of women’s care work for animals is exacerbated in the context of cat rescue. Not only do women undertake most unpaid volunteer labor at cat shelters, but they are frequently subjected to the charge of being “crazy cat ladies.” Since the late nineteenth century, female animal rights activists have been characterized by male physicians as “mad,” “crazy,” and “excessive” (Gruen and Probyn-Rapsey 2018, 2). Charles Dana, the nineteenth-century physician who created the diagnostic criteria for “zoophilpsychosis,” which he defined as an “unnatural” female attachment to animals, based his case study on a woman who was the “victim of a cat obsession,” and whom he advised to have “gynecological treatment” to cure her of her so-called “perversion of instinct” (Gruen and Probyn-Rapsey 2018, 3). As Fiona Probyn-Rapsey and Will McKeithen have observed, the misogynistic trope of the crazy cat lady as the single, unmarried (read: queer) overly emotional woman who hoards animals is frequently invoked in the context of contemporary media and popular culture to pathologize women’s care for animals and to feminize concern for animal rights more generally (Probyn-Rapsey 2018; McKeithen 2017).³

The perceived connections between felinity, femininity, and emotionality continue to result in misogynistic attitudes towards women who care for cats. During my interviews at Syros Cats, the stereotype of the “crazy cat lady” being invoked to discredit the work of the sanctuary was a recurrent topic of conversation. Founded in 2013 as a non-profit organization by Jacky Storey, Syros Cats is located in the small beach town of Kini, approximately 5 km from Ermoupoli, the urban capital of the island of Syros and the administrative center of the Cyclades region. The organization cares for over a hundred cats and kittens, including cats that live as part of the sanctuary’s outdoor colony, kittens awaiting adoption to Europe, “self-selected” house cats, and street cats that live by the beach. As Jacky commented, she never intended to open a cat sanctuary in Syros. Rather, “it just happened” when 20 street cats migrated to her property after the closure of a nearby butcher’s shop. Jacky responded to the street cats staking a claim on her land by pledging to care for them, as well as creating several Trap Neuter Return (TNR) programs for cats across the island. As she shared with me, launching the TNR programs was challenging at first due to the lack of veterinarians on the island. Initially, the cost of neutering an entire colony of cats was prohibitive. After subsequently partnering with a few local veterinarians who volunteered their time for two weeks every year, however, Jacky was able to get TNR

programs underway across the island. Advocacy and support for street cats in Syros through the creation of TNR programs, additional cat sanctuaries, and collective feeding stations, or “cat cafes” as they are referred to in Syros, is essential. Despite the celebration and commodification of feline imagery within the Greek tourism industry, most street cats remain unneutered, malnourished, and vulnerable to disease. In Greece, as in many countries, it is not uncommon for entire litters of kittens to be dumped in trash cans or drowned at sea.

Despite the crucial work performed by the sanctuary, however, women who volunteer their time at Syros Cats are frequently subjected to the charge of being “crazy cat ladies.” While I was volunteering at Syros Cats, a group of visitors stopped by to meet the cats. One person in the group, an older white American male, expressed his surprise at the work of the sanctuary and the high quality of care for the cats, commenting to Jacky, “And I thought you were just a crazy cat lady.” During our interview, Jacky expressed frustration regarding the sexist nature of this stereotype stating: “I don’t want my life to be defined by being a crazy cat lady ... I’ve got other interests and other things I want to do.” She went on to say that when she first created Syros Cats, even the local veterinarians were dismissive about the need for a cat sanctuary in Syros. Now, however, as Jacky noted, they encourage their students to visit:

At the beginning when we started the vets all thought we were a bit of a joke, more crazy cat ladies, herding cats, that kind of thing, and now they actually send vet students around sometimes to take samples from the cats if they’re doing research and they actually come and visit.

While discussing the sanctuary’s work with street cat populations in Kini, Jo Richardson, the manager at Syros Cats, similarly voiced her frustration with the “crazy cat lady” trope asserting: “We’re not just some crazy cat lady throwing food from a bag onto the ground,” but actively working to get an entire street cat colony neutered and healthy. As she pointed out, “when you’ve got a colony clean the ones that need to be neutered stand out so much.” Jo felt that the crazy cat lady trope was partly responsible for the lack of men applying to volunteer at Syros Cats, as well as the generally poor quality of work from the few male volunteers who did make their way to the sanctuary. As she stated, “Some guys are like, dog, man’s best friend, cats, wimps ... crazy cat lady, those sorts of stereotypes are actually so true, yeah, they’re not true that they’re true, but they’re true that everybody thinks them.” Both women referred to straight men’s lack of cleaning skills, inability to multitask or show initiative, and generally “minimalist” approach to volunteer work as “disappointing.” In addition, they were acutely aware of the gender inequalities in volunteer labor at the sanctuary between men and women in heterosexual relationships. As Jo commented, “it’s just painful to watch the woman doing double the amount of work and her picking up after him ... it’s not nice to work like that when there’s such inequality.” Jo attributed the fact that female volunteers are “better cleaners” than men to “toxic masculinity” and to gendered forms of socialization:

They [women] have had to help their mum around the kitchen, so they actually are better cleaners as well ... whether you like it or not we still do much more of the housework ... and so much of cat care is cleaning, it’s mopping, it’s dishes ... and that’s what we really want, that’s always what we’re saying to people.

For the above reasons, Jo concluded that, “animal care and especially cat care is a predominantly female thing.”⁴

As a result of the kinds of pervasive gender inequalities in volunteer labor summarized by Jacky and Jo, cat care constitutes a highly feminized form of interspecies care work. None of the women I interviewed at Syros Cats, however, had internalized the patriarchal devaluation of feline care work. Both Jacky and Jo were united in their preference for female volunteers and even went so far as to say that gay female couples were some of the “best volunteers” they had had at Syros Cats. As Jo observed, these women do not experience the same pressure of having to navigate “toxic masculinity,” and therefore lesbian couples could express “the same passion [for cats] at the same time.”

In addition to gender and sexuality, class and socioeconomic status also shape the labor issues surrounding interspecies care work in the context of international cat rescue. Although volunteers at Syros Cats typically come from all over Europe as well as from North America, Asia, and Latin America, most volunteers are white, European, and female. All volunteers freely donate their time to care for cats for anywhere between one and six months, a material reality which inevitably privileges those individuals with higher incomes and socioeconomic class positions. While Syros Cats generously provides accommodation for all volunteers, the 20–25 hours of volunteer work undertaken per week is unpaid labor and most people simply cannot afford to work for free.⁵

Despite constituting a class-privileged form of volunteer labor, however, feline care work can be an emotionally as well as physically draining experience. Indeed, the kind of emotional labor that female volunteers do for animals frequently takes place alongside the general devaluation of women’s care work—both physical and emotional—that occurs within patriarchal societies and social spaces. As Jacky commented, animal rescue can be both “emotional” and “overwhelming,” because “whatever you do it’s never enough.” In addition to the difficulties of witnessing the loss of much-loved animal companions, Jacky discussed the emotional challenges that arise with being unable to rescue every cat in need of assistance: “I think it’s hard that you can’t rescue them all and having a strategy for which ones we rescue is quite difficult and there isn’t really a strategy, often it’s the one that shouts the loudest so that’s kind of difficult and it’s difficult to get away from it.”

While I was volunteering at Syros Cats, Jacky had recently taken in a young female cat, Sissy, and her four small kittens, Andy, Micky, Oia, and Tiny, all of whom were named after nearby Cyclades islands (Andros, Mykonos, Santorini, and Tinos). As Jacky commented, it was a difficult decision to take Sissy and the kittens because “we had so many cats and kittens already and this was four more kittens and then two more afterwards [Astro and Zeneca] although we didn’t know about them then, but I was really worried what was going to happen to the kittens.” As she later confessed, “I didn’t want to say no and I suppose that was partly an emotional decision, but I don’t regret it.”

A recurrent theme during my interviews with women at Syros Cats was that animal care work is both constant and never-ending. Like Jacky, Jo referred to the work at Syros Cats as “all encompassing,” taking over “everything” even during her days off. She described the work as particularly “relentless” during the height of the pandemic due to the shortage of volunteers resulting from international travel restrictions. What was most difficult for her, though, was witnessing the death of an animal. As she shared, “it’s emotional right because if a cat dies like you’re very sad if it’s a cat that you’ve known for long ... it’s when there’s loss that’s really hard.”

Karen, another female volunteer I interviewed at Syros Cats, similarly referred to feline care work as a profoundly emotional form of labor. As she commented regarding the emotional management techniques needed to navigate working in the field of animal rescue:

I've always said this before that when you work in animal rescue, you need to have a gentle heart but also you need to have a tough heart. Because otherwise you suffer a lot. And me being a very emotional and sensitive person, I've suffered a lot in the past when I see a dog or a cat in the streets and I know that it's impossible to take them all, to save them all, that's always very tough. Also, sometimes you need to take hard decisions, that's very difficult, very challenging, especially when you rescue animals and put them up for adoption, you need to say goodbye at some point, and I get attached to them very easily. And that's also not fair for the animal and for us.

Jo agreed with Karen about the need to maintain emotional boundaries to protect oneself from the overwhelming desire to help every animal in need. As she reflected,

I think I would be quite cold when it comes to you know if I see a cat on the street. I think I can't save it and someone says I saw this cat in town and we [have to] dismiss it and I say well it's not my problem ... because I have to give my energy to these cats and we rescue who we can ... everybody comes up to me on the street and says "I found this kitten" and I'm thinking I don't care, like it that's kind of emotional burnout point whenever somebody comes to you with another kitten and you think well that's overload, I can't take another one but then you think you can't leave it we have to do something, so I think it can be draining.

Despite the emotional labor involved in working within the field of international cat rescue, however, when I asked Jo if she had ever suffered from "activist burnout," she replied that she had not yet "burned out."⁶

What was clear from my conversations with women at Syros Cats was that their deep admiration and respect for feline agency and self-determination was a significant contributing factor in preventing them from succumbing to activist burnout. In my interviews with female volunteers, the cats emerged as powerful actors who had a clear role to play in shaping the social trajectory of their lives. Both Jo and the other volunteers at Syros Cats saw their role not in terms of making decisions on behalf of the cats, but rather as stepping in to provide care as and when it was requested by the cats. As Jo commented,

I think the bond that you have with the cats is the best. People say to me why don't you become a vet or whatever but you know you don't get the quality time with them so I really like the quality time with the cats and kind of seeing them grow ... I also quite like it when the cats act like they don't need me because they've got such agency that they're just like yeah whatever human you feed me and then I go off and do my own thing, but it's nice when they appreciate you too.

In addition to foregrounding the agency of individual cats, Jacky and Jo repeatedly referred to the ways in which it is the cats themselves who make the decisions regarding whether they would like to be adopted or to remain at Syros Cats. As Jacky noted,

“mostly the cats that are going to be adopted sort of choose themselves. I mean we’ve got one or two older residents like this one [Barney] who kind of stay here.”

On my second evening at Syros Cats, another female volunteer introduced me to a lovely, petite black and white female cat called Jellicle, a long-term resident of Syros Cats and a firm favorite amongst the other volunteers. Jellicle likes to spend the summer months outside escorting volunteers home at night and the winter months indoors curled up on the lap of a human. As Jo commented regarding the decisions the cats make about the kind of care they wish to receive:

It’s not supposed to be a hierarchy of care ... the house cats they choose themselves. Either they were really sickly, and they had to be indoors because it was cold, or they needed monitoring because they were having you know their temperatures checked or regular medication or they became really friendly with a house cat and then they became a house cat too. And then we have the shed cat s ... they’re adults who go in at night for their own safety or for medical reasons ... We did have one outdoor cat Mochaccino who did ask for a room in the night shed which I gave him, and I just loved that he chose that he wanted that and he stayed for two months ... then he decided when it got a bit warmer that he was done with that and he moved out.

While companion animals such as cats and dogs are often expected to subvert their feelings or desires in relation to the needs of humans, what is clear from my time at Syros Cats is that the work of the sanctuary is not about *speaking for* animals, but rather about *listening to* what they tell us about the kind of care they wish to receive. Rather than being expected to remain in certain places and behave in certain ways, the cats who choose to stay at the sanctuary lead lives that are entangled with yet largely unrestrained by humans; unlike most companion animals, the feline inhabitants at Syros Cats are not governed by typical human expectations and assumptions. Like many cat sanctuaries, Syros Cats is an environment in which mostly women come to know cats differently due to the gendered nature of interspecies care work. Such everyday acts of care provide the basis for feminist solidarities across species lines. At Syros Cats, interspecies solidarities emerge via the recognition of feline agency and self-determination, as well as through an acknowledgment of the emotional labor companion animals perform for humans. As Jo commented, volunteers often come to Syros Cats for emotional healing resulting from prior trauma, mental health struggles, and/or challenging life circumstances and they almost always “get better.” She noted that, “by the end of it [their volunteer work] they’re so grateful.”

Jo’s observations regarding the experiences of volunteers at Syros Cats are consistent with Nik Fraser and Chloe Taylor’s study of the ways in which companion animals improve the mental health of the humans they live with by soothing their anxiety and easing their depression (2018). Fraser and Taylor suggest that recognizing the emotional care work companion animals perform for humans is as crucial to the politics of interspecies solidarity as human care for animals. At Syros Cats, feminist interspecies solidarity is an inevitable outcome of the kind of care work that demonstrates a commitment to self-reflexivity, that is attuned to human-animal power differentials, and that exists in an interdependent relationship with the animals it seeks to support.

In her study of the relationship between labor movements and animal rights advocacy, Kendra Coulter defines the concept of interspecies solidarity as “an idea, a goal, a process, an ethical commitment, and a political project” (2016, 150). The notion of

interspecies solidarity as embodying both an ethical commitment and a political project was evident in my conversations with Jacky when I asked her about her vision for the future of Syros Cats. Despite dreaming about the possibility of a cat village that is safe and protected, “a place where cats and people can live together safely and in harmony and Syros can become a model island where all animals are freed from cruelty, neglect, and starvation,” Jacky’s goal was that ultimately there would be no need for Syros Cats to exist:

Ultimately the need for this should just go away if we neuter enough cats and we have enough cat cafe feeders and educate enough locals. Actually, we shouldn’t really need to do it anymore ... I mean that would be one scenario in that the success of the cat sanctuary is its own total disappearance.⁷

Such an altruistic vision is perhaps consistent with the politics of a sanctuary that emerged in response to the needs and desires of the street cats themselves. By honoring the claims of nonhuman animals on human territories in this way, Syros Cats opens up a space for reimagining what a decolonial approach to feminist interspecies care and solidarity might look like.

Decolonizing feminist interspecies care ethics

What would it mean to recognize the claim of nonhuman animals on human territories? What sorts of practices or pleasures would foster posthuman, anti-consumerist subjectivities? (Alaimo 2016)

What I learned from the experience of volunteering and engaging in participant observation at Syros Cats is that feminist interspecies care work is grounded in an immanent mode of ethical engagement, one in which the everyday becomes a site of exceptionality. Witnessing the horror of a blind kitten being left to die in a dumpster is part of the traumatic, but devastatingly predictable reality of daily life for those who work in the field of cat rescue. While I was volunteering at Syros Cats, we cared for two visually impaired kittens, Simone and Rua, both of whom had been left to die, one by the beach (Rua) and the other (Simone) crying in a trash can.

In an essay on the politics of interspecies relationality in urban India, titled “Love and other injustices,” Naisargi Dave critiques animal rights advocacy that revolves around the notion of love (2014). As Dave points out, framing animal ethics around the concept of love is “unjust” insofar as it frequently serves to reinforce colonialist fantasies of human exceptionalism based upon psychic forms of projective identification:

Calling a politics love is to evacuate it of its ethical content ... not because it’s love, but because it’s categorical, and thus failed. If love is an injustice because when we love it is the one or ones who are special to us that we save, then ... love is an injustice because, by virtue of our love, it is *we* who must be saved. (2014)

I concur with Dave that a deconstructive approach to the idea of “loving animals” is crucial if we are to effectively disrupt the kinds of “saviorist storyings” (Weaver 2021, 18) that typically underpin narratives of animal rescue. By contrast, centering notions of immanence and particularity in feminist animal care ethics provides a space for articulating a decolonial approach to the question of interspecies relationality, one in which animals emerge as subjects of desire, rather than merely as objects of violence.

In addition to subverting colonialist rhetorics of salvation, rethinking feminist inter-species solidarities around immanence and particularity enables us to reconsider human-animal relationality in terms of the original etymology of the word care. The verb “to care” has its antecedents in the old German term “*chora*,” meaning lament. In Greek tragedy, the lament typically serves a proleptic function, operating as a mode of grief that precedes violence, death, and mourning. As Judith Butler comments regarding the anticipatory role of the lament in Greek tragedy,

The lament seems to follow rage and is usually belated. But sometimes there is a chorus, some anonymous group of people gathering and chanting in the face of propulsive rage, who lament in advance, mourning as soon as they see it coming. (2021, 102)

If we understand the original meaning of the word “care” to refer to anticipatory grief and mourning, then feminist animal care ethics is, by its very definition, a form of ethical engagement characterized by the experience of pain and loss.

In a powerful analysis of human-animal relationality in postcolonial India, Naisargi Dave quotes from an animal rights activist who, sitting behind the desk in her office, calmly states: “I only wish there were a slaughterhouse next door. To witness that violence, to hear those screams ... I would *never* be able to rest” (Dave 2014, 1). Within the context of an approach to animal ethics driven by the reality of failure and limitation, needing to witness the violence and horror of the slaughterhouse makes visible an act of care, one that keeps alive the project of interspecies solidarity as grounded in the affective state of anticipatory mourning.

In their recent work on the ethics of non-violence, Judith Butler similarly connects grievability with recognition and political equality. For Butler, grief foregrounds our relational ties with others in ways that have implications for collective forms of interdependency and ethical responsibility. As Butler writes, “What grief displays ... is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us ... in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control” (2004, 23). In Butler’s discussion of the political economy of grief—or what they refer to as the “differential distribution of grievability” (2021, 58)—it is grievability that precedes and makes possible “the apprehension of the living being as living” (2010, 15).

While Butler’s analysis of grief and mourning is anthropocentric in its rendering of violence against nonhuman animals invisible, their work nonetheless provides a helpful point of departure for conceptualizing a non-anthropocentric approach to feminist interspecies care ethics.⁸ Specifically, Butler’s discussion of grief in relation to recognition and political equality resonates with the notion that animals need to be acknowledged as desiring subjects in order to be recognized as grievable. At Syros Cats, part of the emotional care work of the sanctuary is to render the lives of the cats who reside there worthy of mourning; each cat is given a name and their personalities and characters are allowed a space to flourish. As a result, when they die, they are mourned, loved, and remembered. While I was writing this essay, a sweet, gentle ginger cat called Homer, one of the older residents at Syros Cats, sadly passed away. He had underlying health problems, was FIV positive, and had been diagnosed with liver failure. Homer loved to cuddle and play with the other cats at the sanctuary.

As this article was undergoing review, Karlsson tragically passed away in a road traffic accident.

Recognizing the extent to which animal care work is always already bound up with the question of loss necessitates that any attempt at forging feminist solidarities across



Figure 1. Karlsson (above) and Homer (below). Karlsson was a skin cancer survivor, having had both his ears and nose removed. He was approximately 4 years old when this photo was taken. Photo by author.

species lines must begin from a recognition of our own limitations. Unlike Karlsson and Homer, there will always be those animals whom we cannot help and from whom we must turn away. The extent to which caring for and with animals in the context of inter-species encounters is based upon asymmetrical modes of relationality was evident to me when I encountered a sick gray and white male street cat lying on a busy street in Ermoupoli, Syros, in June 2021. I stopped by to say hello, and he sweetly nestled his head on my lap. He was sitting next to a bus stop, invisible to the humans on the street who walked by him without giving him a second glance. I offered him some food which he refused; clearly, hunger was not the issue here. His right eye was weeping, but what he mostly seemed to want was affection. I spent some time with him while I was in Syros before I had to leave. When I returned to volunteer at Syros Cats in August 2021, I encountered the same gray and white male street cat in Ermoupoli. He was lying in the same place as before, although on this occasion his eye looked to be in worse condition. I mentioned to Jo that I had seen him, and she gave me some eye drops and meaty sticks in case I encountered him again. Between August 15 and August 29, 2021, I observed the gray and white male street cat on several occasions in Ermoupoli. On each occasion, he was lying in the same spot. I administered the eye drops and offered him the meaty sticks. He was never particularly interested in the food but after some encouragement he would usually accept the treat before retreating to the shade to complete his nap. Since returning to the United States, I have often thought about the gentle male street cat and the sweet way in which he would rest his head on my lap. The typical life expectancy for street cats in Greece is around one to three years.

The experience of encountering and interacting with street cats in Greece has taught me that any attempt at forging solidarities across species lines must be founded upon the paradoxical recognition of the lives of those animals who remain largely *unrecognizable* to us. Feminist interspecies solidarities, in other words, are based upon the experience of what we cannot yet know. To be grievable, as Judith Butler reminds us, is to be interpellated in such a way that you know your life matters (Butler 2021). Feminist interspecies care work, by contrast, is frequently characterized by the experience of anticipatory grief for those animal stories, lives, and histories that remain largely unknowable to us and thus, by extension, ungrievable. As Butler writes,

It is notoriously difficult to get the message across that those who are targeted or abandoned or condemned are also grievable: that their losses would, or will, matter, and that the failure to preserve them will be the occasion of immense regret and obligatory repair. (2021, 102)

In *The force of non-violence*, Butler advocates for the creation of alternative ethical and political frameworks that would enable us to better establish “the anticipatory powers of regret and remorse such that our present and future actions might forestall a future we will come to lament” (2021, 102).

Butler’s question about the need to anticipate futures that we will later come to lament exists at the heart of what it means to reimagine feminist interspecies solidarities around care for a shared earth. In the case of street animals in Greece, decolonizing feminist interspecies care ethics means recognizing urban spaces as sites for multispecies habitats, rather than the exclusive domain of humans and their companion animals. While the streets are a place of home and belonging for many animals, they are frequently structured in ways that position the needs of animals as subordinate to those of humans. As Yamini Narayanan argues with respect to the everyday forms of violence experienced by street dogs in India, urban spaces need to be restructured in ways that acknowledge urbanization as a strategy of colonialism over nonhuman animals (2017). Narayanan uses the concept of “subaltern animism” to recognize animals as subjects of anthropocentric colonization and to account for the agency of street animals, as well as their claims to urban space (2017). Similarly, engaging in feminist practices of interspecies care and solidarity across species lines means being fully responsive to the vulnerability of all beings—human and animal alike—that exist in relation to us. Seeing street cats not as pests or pariahs, for example, but rather as bodies that inhabit a shared earth alongside us engenders an ethics of compassion and responsibility, in which caring about the lives of street cats makes us more inclined to respond to their vulnerabilities and attend to their desires.

Recognizing the kind of political action needed to protect animal autonomy and life spaces not only allows us to see the ways in which human and animal liberation are connected but enables us to better acknowledge the very legitimate claims of nonhuman animals on human territories. Doing so in turn represents a decolonial ethic of inhabiting the world that respects the land rights of all beings—animal and human alike. As Billy-Ray Belcourt argues regarding the connections between animal rights and indigenous rights, what is implicit in settler colonialist violence and its denial of subjectivity to Indigenous people via the logic of dehumanization is the assumption that nonhuman animals similarly have no claims or rights to land (Belcourt 2015). Anthropocentrism is predicated upon a racialized and colonialist hierarchy that consigns all dehumanized bodies to premature death: “Black and indigenous peoples are dehumanized and repeatedly inscribed with an animal status—which is always a speciesist rendering of



Figure 2. Cat café in Ermoupoli, Syros. Photo by author.

animality as injurious, becoming a loose signifier, a fungible concept, that invites violence of all sorts” (2015, 22). Given the obvious connections between violence against animals and violence against marginalized humans, it follows that any attempt at creating feminist solidarities across species lines must begin from an anti-racist politics that understands both animals and humans as agents of decolonial resistance.

In Syros, the decolonizing work of establishing interspecies solidarities between humans and street cats has already begun. While more and more street cats in Syros are being cared for unofficially by female feeders and volunteers, including veterinarians willing to perform neutering surgeries at little to no cost, the emergence of cat cafes and gardens across the island as well as nearby Cyclades islands under the hashtag #WeLiveTogether offers a vision of a new decolonial and anti-consumerist way of inhabiting urban and rural space, one that recognizes animals as kin who co-produce a way of life with us.

Within these multispecies habitats, street cats embody their own distinct geographies and are recognized as active place-making agents whose histories are not contained by human domination and interference. Offering a radical point of departure from neoliberal models of pet ownership and animal rescue, such feline-feminine collectives gesture towards the promise of a world in which when a street cat dies, they are mourned, loved, and remembered.

Conclusion

The Earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge. (Haraway 2016)

A recent article by environmental journalist Matthew Rozsa published in November 2021 discusses the impact of climate change on the lives of companion animals and

street animals (Rozsa 2021). There are currently approximately 1.4 billion dogs and cats on earth, the majority of whom call the streets their primary place of home and belonging. Companion animals and street animals are profoundly affected by increased temperature changes, food shortages, and the growing number of human refugees caused by climate change. As Rozsa predicts, humans pressurized by environmental devastation will increasingly turn towards euthanasia to terminate animal lives that they can no longer support. Such changes in the environment will also lead to the increased spread of zoonotic diseases in ways that will severely impact the lives of animals and humans alike.

In the face of such growing environmental fragility and its consequences for all forms of life, it is essential that we better understand the connections between decolonial politics and human-animal futurities. Dismantling anthropocentric ways of being in the world is crucial given the global Covid-19 pandemic which, like many pandemics, is the result of zoonotic transmissions. As the pandemic forces us to grapple with our own radical dependency on others, it is vital that we engage in practices of care and solidarity across species lines. Animal liberation and environmental justice are fundamentally decolonial projects. Rather than advocating for extinctionism to end violence against nonhuman animals, we need to cultivate greater interspecies entanglements to take better care of an increasingly damaged earth on which we all depend.

In a moving essay on the relationship between service animals and disability, Kelly Oliver discusses the need to recognize the physical and emotional labor companion animals perform for humans to counteract the view of service animals as commodities designed to serve the functional needs of their owners (Oliver 2016). As Oliver remarks, it is only when we “see” vision as the proper function of the eye, that we consider blindness to be a defect (2016, 258). What if, instead, she asks, we “see” the function of the eye to be for crying, crying both for our own and others’ vulnerability and for the joy of shared connection? As I was reluctantly preparing to leave Syros, I purchased a silver and turquoise-colored ring in the shape of an eye and a teardrop to remember the gentle street cat for whose friendship and hospitality during my time on the island I will always remain indebted.

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Notes

1 For a discussion of second wave feminism’s reproduction of the sex/gender distinction, see Butler (1990). Aph Ko and Syl Ko (2017) offer an excellent critique of the lack of an intersectional analysis in feminist animal care ethics.

2 By 1900 women constituted 69% of members of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) in the United Kingdom (Gaarder 2011, 7).

3 As Probyn-Rapsey notes, e.g., while animal hoarding documentaries always feature women, there is a lack of evidence to support the claim that animal hoarding is a predominantly female crime (2018, 177).

4 Arguably, the labor inequalities between male and female volunteers at Syros Cats mirror standard heteronormative socially constructed gender roles in which women are expected to do the majority of emotional labor for heterosexual relationships due to masculinist fears about feminization. As Emily Gaarder observes, “Animal work is more socially acceptable for women because advocating for the vulnerable is considered emotional work” (2011, 57). Showing compassion for animals is often viewed as emasculating, or as a sign of weakness for men, even going so far as to dictate dietary choices and food consumption. For an analysis of how meat-eating is linked with white American masculinity and

vegetarianism is considered a “feminized” form of consumption, see Adams 1990. As Gaarder and Adams point out, in the context of American patriarchal culture, it is perfectly acceptable for women to be vegetarian, which is associated with “eating salads” and maintaining a slender body for heterosexual male consumption (Adams 1990; Gaarder 2011).

5 For a more comprehensive analysis of racial and class privileges in the context of voluntourism, see Henry 2019.

6 For a discussion of activist burnout in the context of animal rights work, see Gaarder 2011.

7 Olivia, director at Rainbow Haven animal sanctuary similarly commented: “My ultimate goal is for this place not to exist. But until the world changes, it has to” (cited in Abrell 2021: 187).

8 In Butler (2014) animal bodies are completely absent from their discussion of agential modes of vulnerability. Butler presumes no bodily agency or right to autonomy for animals whose political lives and sense of belonging reside largely in the streets. According to Butler, within the biopolitics of the Anthropocene, it is the migrant human body who occupies the dehumanized status of the nonhuman animal. As Butler argues, the Anthropocene constitutes “a racial schema in which the living status of the migrant, who fails to be registered within the perceptual field of the grievable, is already snuffed out, because from the start, such a life was not worth safeguarding and did not register as a life” (2021, 121).

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