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The Contested Meaning and Place of Feral Cats in the Workplace

Carol Thompson

Abstract

This research is grounded in three years of fieldwork with Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) groups on university campuses and participation in a consortium of feral cat managers located in a large metropolitan area in the United States. TNR groups provide care and humane management of feral cats with the goals of reducing the overall number of stray and unhealthy cats in the wild and allowing healthy and non-reproductive cats to resume their territorial colonization of campus spaces. The analysis communicates the experiences and perspectives of feral cat caretakers as they struggle to preserve and create space for cats on their university and college campuses. Narratives and communications from and between feral cat caretakers illuminate how they resist existing definitions and arrangements of power and endeavor individually and collectively to manage their identities and activities within the workplace. The analysis shows that by extending the locus of care of non-human animals into the workplace setting feral caretaker actions break with normal practice by bringing non-human animals into the moral landscape of the campus and treating campus workplaces as ecologically integrated urban environments where feral cats and other animals are legitimate and appropriate co-residents. Their actions are seen as transgressing the conventional uses of place and space and results in stigmatization from three sources: the perceived misuse of the physical space at work, being out of order in ideological or normative space, and guilt by association or what Goffman (1964) calls *tribal stigmatization*.

Keywords: feral, cats, TNR, stigma, reanimation, trans-species, work, Goffman, companion animals, identity, emotions

This research focuses on animals in the workplace and is grounded in the assertion that non-human animals are always, and always have been, present in the workplace. However, the reactions to and treatment of non-human animals in work spaces have, for the most part, been to view them as outsiders, or as “Other” (Ritvo, 2007). With the status

of Other comes accompanying reductionist assumptions that have ideologically positioned humans in a place of dominion over all animals (Arluke and Sanders, 1997; Derrida, 2008; Haraway, 2003; Ritvo, 2007). However, with the *animal turn* in the humanities and social sciences conventional Western understandings of animals are being re-examined, opening up the possibility of seeing and thus behaving toward non-human animal species in more inclusive ways. In urban geographer Jennifer Wolch's terms, we might "re-animate" (2002: 726) discussions and visions of life in cities. This article proceeds on the idea that reanimation and its goal of re-considering animals in the urban landscape is applicable to workplace domains. However, this is a challenging undertaking because *work* as a cultural "field" (Bourdieu, 1993) is not simply a physical and geographic place; it is a social organization with a set of orienting practices, customary relationships and embodied practices that are essentially at odds with conceptions of it as a place where humans and other animals co-exist. That is, the moral landscape of the workplace comes with a non-conscious ideological bias of seeing 'animals' there as not belonging.

The college campus is one of those places that operates under the unquestioned assumption that the workplace is exclusively a human domain. The bracketing and exclusion of non-human animal life is evident in the character and content of built environments on campuses. Aristotelian and Cartesian systems of classification that rank humans on the top of the chain of life (Calarco, 2008; Spiegel, 2008) and the resulting anthropocentric and exclusionary practices toward non-human animals abound in the social spaces of university life, as exemplified by the standard "No Pets" rule for offices, dormitories, athletic venues, administrative offices, etc., with service or therapy animals being the only exceptions to the rule. But, no matter how resistant some of its human inhabitants are to acknowledging and cohabiting with other species, college and university campuses are diverse ecosystems where an abundance of non-human animal life resides. Moreover, there is active resistance by individuals and groups on campuses who are working to expand the meaning and place of non-human actors in these spaces.

This research focuses specifically on the efforts of Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) groups and individuals who seek to create campus environments where cats, humans and other species live and work side-by-side. My theoretical grounding is interdisciplinary,

drawing from sociology, critical and animal geography, philosophy and human/animal studies. I draw especially on a framework for understanding space and place that stems from the long-standing body of work that uses geography as metaphor to explicate difference in the social and cultural worlds (Bourdieu, 1996; LeFabvre, 1974/1991; Philo and Wilbert, 2000; Wolch and Emel, 1998). Also, the work of sociologist Erving Goffman (1959, 1963, 1967, 1971) is used in the analysis to understand the conflicts surrounding and the stigmatization of cat caretaking. Finally, the social interactionist perspective on emotion management, primarily the work of Arlie Hochschild (1979, 1983), will be helpful for illuminating the emotional experiences of TNR workers whose behavior crosses cultural and behavioral boundaries.

Data and Methods of Inquiry

This study is based on four years of fieldwork with Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) groups on university campuses, participation in a feral cat coalition group located in a large metropolitan area in the United States and participation in several online communities focused on TNR. The events, conversations and disclosures described are derived from hundreds of hours of participation in TNR work and interaction with TNR volunteers. The names used for both humans and non-human animals are pseudonyms. Other identifying information (e.g. street names, colony locations, office names, university names) is omitted to safeguard the identities and locations of TNR workers and ensure the safety of colony cats.

Methodologically, this work constitutes critical ethnography (Madison, 2012; Thomas, 1993). Critical ethnography is informed by critical theory, which acknowledges the inseparable relationship between researchers, subjects and the social and cultural context. Moreover, it “begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular *lived* domain” (Madison, 2012: 5). Thus, this approach is also deconstructive (Clifford and James, 1986), and is intended to disrupt the status quo, identify social arrangements that produce inequalities, and move social relations from “what is, to what could be” (Madison, 2012: 3). To those who would say that critical ethnographic research is somehow less valid than other forms of scientific inquiry because it reveals its positionality and subjectivity, Donna Haraway (1988) and

Norm Denzin (2001) wisely inform us, through their critiques of the positivist paradigm, that all research is socially and politically situated, whether revealed to be so or not.

The analysis that follows relies on three major sources of data: 1) my experiences and observations derived from full participation in TNR, 2) interactions with cat caretakers recorded in daily field notes for the duration of the study and 3) the narratives of TNR workers as revealed in emails, group communications, and Internet discussions. This research illuminates (1) the goals and nature of TNR work; (2) the multiple sources of stigmatization for TNR workers; and (3) how TNR workers individually and collectively manage their identities and emotions as they struggle to establish cats as belonging in the spaces of work.

Trap-Neuter-Return Groups and Their Goals

TNR groups provide care and humane management of feral cats with the goals of humanely reducing their numbers, improving their quality of life and recognizing their right to live in the environments they colonize. Faculty, staff and students who care for feral cats through TNR programs view their work as conciliatory action that joins human and animal geography in humane ways. Through their actions, feral cat caretakers' define workplaces as ecologically integrated urban environments where feral cats and other animals are legitimate and appropriate co-residents. Their work fosters view of non-human animals in ways that emphasize their subjectivity and agency and recognizes animal life as valuable in itself. They possess complex and practical views of animals in the workplace taking into account kinships between species, and differences and interdependencies between humans and other animals. Their efforts expose many of the unexamined habits and *visual logics* (social order represented in the visual landscape) that shape life at work (Hinchcliffe, 2003; Wolch, 2002). Moreover, by acting on their views of cats as belonging in the spaces of work, they necessarily challenge the status quo and in doing so risk being labeled as deviant.

Trap Neuter Return (TNR) groups are comprised of volunteers and are increasingly common in urban areas and university campuses in urban and suburban areas across the United States and other countries. TNR volunteers use special humane traps and methods to catch adult cats and transport them to local veterinarians or clinics

where they are examined, spayed/neutered, vaccinated, micro-chipped and/or ear-tipped for future identification. Ear-tipping refers to the widely accepted practice among TNR groups and animal control organizations of removing the upper tip of the cat's left ear in order to visually identify feral cats who have been sterilized. Easy identification helps colony caretakers know which cats have been trapped and altered, and identify newcomers who have not, which prevents unnecessary disturbance of and surgeries for cats that have already been vaccinated and altered. Ear tipping (unlike ear cropping in dogs, which is painful and can lead to complications) is considered a safe procedure that is performed by a veterinarian while the cat is already under general anesthetic during spaying and neutering.

After the cats are spayed/neutered and deemed healthy they are released back into their home territory where they are fed and monitored by TNR volunteers. Any kittens born in that territory who are under 6 weeks of age are humanely trapped, socialized, neutered and adopted out as companion animals. Because cats as a species are territorial, TNR managed cats who are released back into their territory form stable colonies. Colony cats are periodically re-trapped for vaccinations and or medication, and sick or injured cats are removed from the colony for treatment or euthanasia to relieve suffering and prevent the spread of disease. The stated impact of TNR is that it *decreases* the overall number of free-roaming cats on campuses and assures that cats that are on campus grounds are healthy and non-reproductive. For the most part, TNR groups manage colonies effectively and have been successful at reducing the overall number of feral cats.¹ As these groups have multiplied in number and the method for managing stray cat populations has become more widely understood and accepted, some U.S. cities have come to their aid by drafting and adopting agreements and feral cat ordinances that protect the groups and the cats they must rescue.² Yet, TNR efforts continue to be contested by many citizens and members of campus communities who likely either do not understand the TNR philosophy or for a variety of reasons reject the re-animation goals implicit in that philosophy. While TNR programs on some campuses have made progress in educating citizens about the win-win consequences of humane colony management, there are powerful cultural forces and attitudes that promote a view of feral cats as a negative characteristic of urban environments. These forces cast reanimation

efforts as a transgression of the traditional human/animal divide.

The goals of TNR are consistent with the visions of critical geographers, like Wolch (1998 and 2002) and Philo (1998) who have forged a trans-species urban theory that challenges the socio-spatial practices of the Western nature/culture dualism that have shaped urbanization in ways that de-naturalize environments and marginalize non-human animals (Hovorka, 2008). While TNR group members do not express their actions and value commitments in the formal language of social theory or critical geography, they do embody what can be considered a trans-species urban approach to human-animal relations on their campuses in at least three ways. First, their work is grassroots practice that seeks to alter the “nature of interactions between people and animals in the city” (Wolch, 1998: 131). Second, their work is unapologetically aimed at defending the interests of urban non-human animal life. Third, they work against and call into question extermination-based animal control policies that operate on the ecologically destructive platform of excluding most non-humans from everyday life. Relying on critical animal geography (Wolch’s work in particular) as a backdrop for viewing TNR, this analysis will show that the way TNR workers think, feel and talk about cats demonstrates their awareness of how *geographic Othering* places feral cats in “worldly places and spaces different from those that humans tend to occupy” (Hovorka, 2008: 97). Also, as the accounts of caretakers reveal, they are keenly aware that TNR work is stigmatizing and devalued by many because it transgresses an urban imaginary that normalizes the domination of cats and their habitats.

The Liminal Status of Cats

Historically, the socially constructed and imposed divide between nature and culture has made the species *Felis catus* (the domestic cat) categorically challenging for humans, which, to some extent, explains the incongruous definitions and qualities bestowed upon them. For example, cats are variously considered to be dependent and independent, wild and tame, lazy and vigilant, loving and aggressive etc. Correspondingly, they have appeared in the human imaginary as angels, demons, prophets, killers, protectors, companions, vermin and as surprisingly good meteorologists (McNeill, 2007). Noted zoologist Desmond Morris (1986: 10), appreciating the

inscrutable nature of the domestic cat, referred to its “double life” when observing that cats are both tame pets and wild animals. He and others have also noted that the so-called domesticated cat has changed very little from its predecessors, the European and African wild cats (McNeill, 2007; Morris, 1986). Unlike dogs, the domestication of cats can be seen as incomplete inasmuch as cats resist human attempts to dominate and control them (Bradshaw, 1992). Correspondingly, domestication as a conferred status for cats refers more to where they are located *vis-à-vis* humans than how they relate to humans (Kirk, 1977; McNeill, 2007).

The lack of categorical certainty becomes even more complicated, problematic and injurious when considering feral cats who are technically “domestic” cats that are considered to have “gone wild.” The feral qualifier itself imposes an outlaw status upon cats because it dramatizes the fact that such cats are outside the control and domination of humans. Thus the feral domestic cat’s status is liminal, in between domestic and wild, which is evidenced by the tensions that emerge when people talk about them (McNeill, 2007). For instance, their liminality is understood and demonstrated in the definitions produced and used by advocates on their campus related TNR websites. They state,

Feral cats are domestic cats or the descendants of domestic cats that have reverted to a wild state (Aggie Cat Services, 2011).

Feral cats are 'wild' offspring of domestic cats and result from pet owners abandoning and/or failing to sterilize their pets, allowing them to breed uncontrollably (Feral Cat Coalition, 2009).

Feral cats are unsocialized, unowned free-roaming cats (Griffin, 2002).

The notion of being born into “the wild” in descriptions of feral cats disguises the fact that such “wild” areas are typically found in human built, planned, managed and tamed environments, and it stigmatizes any cats who are not themselves tamed and under the control of human masters. Thus, it appears that the problematic status of feral cats is rooted in their existence outside of their assumed proper place and apart from human control. That “problem,” as such, frames the everyday discourse about such cats, even

among their protectors, and can have very real consequences for the cats. As Arluke and Sanders (1996: 169) have pointed out, a species or an individual animal's worth or moral status to humans is directly related to the willingness or ability of the animal to accept subordinate positions to humans and to conform to human expectations. Domestic cats are seen as wild, out of place, and out of control. They are outlaws commonly seen as needing to be displaced, managed or re-placed in very intentional ways by humans. Likewise, in caring for and resisting the displacement of cats, caretakers often find themselves at risk for stigmatization as they transgress the socio-spatial and behavioral limits of traditional human-animal borders.

Stigma: Outlaws at the Border

Erving Goffman's (1959; 1962; 1967; 1971) now classic and broadly applicable works have influenced scholarship across a multitude of fields and subfields, which are important foundations for this work. In *Stigma* (1963) and *Relations in Public* (1971), Goffman illuminates the social process of stigmatization and the negotiation of identity in public spaces. Stigma is seen as a matter of social definition and its application is relational and more or less salient across contexts (1963: 3). Stigmatization results in the social devaluation of individuals and groups. This analysis reveals three notable sources of stigmatization that stem from cat caretaking. Two of these involve notions of trespassing space and the third is a type of guilt by association, or as Goffman refers to it, tribal stigma (1963: 4).

To explicate the tensions of place and space for cat caretakers it is helpful to distinguish between social and physical space (Bourdieu, 1996). Social space refers to all of the patterns and relationships that constitute social life, whereas physical space is the ground, literal and metaphorical, upon which social life takes place (social location). For caregivers physical space in which they perform caregiving is laden with social and cultural meanings that translate into normative expectations about behavior and belonging. Because this work is rooted in critical ethnographic practice, Lefebvre's (1974/1991: 101) observation that space is socially produced and that the processes of its production are evident in social practices and relations is especially relevant. Space is an indicator of power and influence. Having physical space, and the nature of that space, is

socially derived and relationally maintained. For example, those who have no legitimate physical space which to call ‘home’ have no legitimate social existence (Wright, 1997). Moreover, contradictions within and conflicts over space reveal the political character of space and its social production. The normative boundaries of space are never more clearly visible than when they are breeched or transgressed and powerful normalizing forces push back in an attempt to re-situate and re-establish boundaries. As the narratives below reveal, the attitudes and actions of TNR caretakers push against the contours of social relations and its established hierarchies of power and belonging. Therefore, their activity can be seen as boundary work.

Trespassing the physical space of work

According to Goffman (1963), groups establish the means of categorizing persons as normal in keeping with attributes and actions that appear appropriate for the social setting and the routines of social intercourse established for those settings. Behavioral expectations also center on how props or objects in a social setting are to be used and this is especially important for those working with feral cats. The built environment is part of the stage for social interaction and there are physical and organizational aspects of sites that influence and constrain behavior in important ways (Milligan, 1998). A place or site for interaction is part and product of the “world” of interaction, according to Blumer (1969: 10), and corresponds to Goffman’s (1959) notion that physical spaces and associated props position and contextualize social performances. One of the major norm violations committed by feral cat caretakers that leads to stigmatization is the re-appropriation or, according to some, mis-use of the physical areas of the workplace.

Only thirteen of the 50 states in the U.S. have laws that specifically pertain to feral cats and those that do generally do not address the complexity of the domain needs of the species. The vast majority of those with such views, as well as the remaining states that simply address cats as domestic pets, shift responsibility for defining law to local governments (Fry, 2010). Consequently, the legal terrain for managing feral cats is inconsistent across and within state jurisdictions.² The majority of laws that pertain to cats define them as domestic pets and classify them as property needing to be identified and under control of the owner at all times. Because of these standard conceptual and

legal definitions of domestic animals as property and standard notions of criminal trespass, feral cat colony volunteers and managers often find themselves standing with the cats on contested legal and geographic terrain. As TNR groups have multiplied in number and the method for managing stray cat populations has become more widely understood and accepted, some cities have come to the aid of those groups by drafting and adopting agreements and feral cat ordinances that protect the groups and the cats they rescue. Yet, TNR efforts continue to be contested by members of campus communities who either do not understand the TNR philosophy or reject the re-animation goals implicit in that philosophy. As the following email communication between caretakers regarding the lack of university support demonstrates, local and state laws can undermine the legitimacy and/or impede the work of feral caretakers,

Yep... there is a city ordinance that says if you feed it you own it. [College name] doesn't want to claim ownership of the cats and they tell us not to feed. I've explained to [Paul] on more than one occasion that we HAVE to maintain them and feeding is how we see them, see new ones, see injuries, see kittens, see ANYTHING.

Another email communication, posted to a group of caretakers after a campus neighbor objected to feeding near her property, shows the collision between natural space and social space and the confusion and frustration over the legal definitions of land and cats as property. The email stated,

[June] and I are going to walk and scout this afternoon. Are you around to walk and talk solutions? We need to see where she's talking about moving her feeding station. I can't believe this woman is so unreasonable and thinks she can tell us where to feed but I guess we are trapped, the cats are basically trespassing on her property. Guess we're lucky they don't call the cops...

Feral caretakers necessarily violate normative expectations for the appropriation and use of the physical workplace as a locus of non-work related activities. As a result, their behavior at work does not conform to the expected routines of occupational social intercourse. Because feral cats on campus are not in their "proper" place, as in a human household, and because in general feral cats have not given over completely to the domestication attempts of humans (Anderson, 1997; Digard, 1990; Russell. 2002), they

are a reminder of human failures in trying to appropriate, partition and control nature (Griffiths, Poulter and Sibley, 2000). Thus, those who care for, defend or attempt to work alongside feral cats are often called into question by others who view their actions as incomprehensible because they represent such a radical departure from the dominionist perspective that guides most plans for and use patterns of physical space on a campus. In fact, most TNR programs experience formidable opposition and vast amounts of red-tape when volunteers first propose a TNR program to campus administrators. Eventually, many are successful at gaining approval, but some groups are not as fortunate and must do their work “under the radar” without explicit permission from administration to operate. Whether sanctioned or not, campus TNR programs continue to experience resistance and in some cases open hostility from faculty, staff, students, administration, and/or campus neighbors. An example of this comes from a story told to me by a TNR volunteer at a campus coalition meeting. One afternoon she was calling cats to the feeding station after her official workday had ended. She was there for a while because she was counting them in response to a report from another feeder that one of the cats might be missing. As she was packing up to go, a person she assumed to be a university employee approached her and inquired about what she was doing. She said that “he seemed very irritated and bossy.” She responded pleasantly that she was feeding and doing a census of the cats that belong to the feral colony she helps to manage on campus. He responded in an alarmed tone, “You feed them here? Do you have permission?” She responded, “Yes” to which he responded “Unbelievable” and walked on to his car.

The following excerpt from a story relayed through an email represents a less common but more positive example, which demonstrates that the questioner simultaneously understood that cat caretaking on campus violates the physical use of space, but also accepted the redefinition of that space. She wrote,

Hey, we might have a new volunteer. Last night I fed late and I had a student come over very interested in knowing why I was feeding the cats.... She wanted to know if I needed her to watch out for me while I was feeding to make sure no one was coming. I assured her it was okay for me to be here.... She was thrilled to know it was okay and like she loves cats and wants to help us out. One more on the page—a good day.

This example shows that those who inhabit the borderlands of human/animal space are sometimes fortunate enough to find sympathetic others (Goffman, 1963: 30) who are willing to assist. In this illustration the student not only shares an understanding of the boundaries being crossed, but is also willing to protect those who dare to cross them.

Trespassing normative space

A second source of stigma, also a form of trespass, involves being out of bounds in ideological or normative space. As a work community, employees and students at colleges and universities share common spheres of normative experience. As Erikson (1966) and Lefebvre (1991) explain, humans create social and cultural spaces, which in turn influence spatial practices and perceptual fields. Groups share cultural space, on which they write and rewrite the boundaries of social existence. The mental and social activity of cultural space imposes itself upon physical space; or as Lefebvre observes, “practical activity writes upon nature” (Lefebvre, 1991: 117). Social space articulates social and spatial arrangements and vice versa. For example, social power is symbolically realized and consolidated in the appropriation and organization of space. Thus, the logics of social space reflect internal hierarchies of power. Social codes tell us who is in and who is out, and those who defy the logics of space are out of order, out of place, deviant.

However, there are always insurgent forces in everyday life that defy codification, resist domination and create conflict within the totalizing forces of hegemony (Lefebvre, 1991). The liminality of feral cats and the ambiguities and resistance that arise from their position in the moral landscape creates challenges and opportunities for the re-colonizing of space. In trespassing the spatial and social arrangements of work and its related hierarchies of power and meaning, cat caretakers open up spaces of consideration, not just for cats, but for all species. For example, feral caretaking is discredited because it challenges the modern definition of pet ownership and the traditional views of moral obligation regarding the care of undomesticated non-human animals. While it is true that in recent times cats, as pets, have come to hold special roles and relatively high status in the lives of some humans, millions of healthy cats are euthanized each year in the U.S alone simply because they are homeless. The TNR philosophy calls upon humans to treat cats as semi-autonomous beings, not wild and not pet, deserving of care. While the logic

of TNR seems to resonate with some, many more find it alien and are unable to broaden the horizon for cats. An email to a caretaker from a staff member who became aware of an attempt to establish a TNR group on a college campus reveals common assumptions about which animals deserve care, who should provide care and where that care should occur. Part of the email read,

...I received the flyer [about campus feral cats] and don't get me wrong, I have a cat and like cats a lot. Unfortunately these are wild cats and I don't think they really belong on campus. I tend to think that cats belong in homes where they can be cared for properly and not cause problems for others.... I think it would be best for them to be moved to farms or homes.... I keep coming back to the question, why is this [university name's] problem to solve? This is[city name]'s or a wildlife department problem.

The following example is also a negative reaction to the expansion of the normative boundaries of caretaking into the workplace. Upon overhearing a portion of a conversation in the office between a TNR volunteer and a co-worker, her supervisor walked out of his office and said with all seriousness, “[Virginia] you do know you don't work for a zoo?” He laughed afterwards, but she said that, to be safe, she decided not to talk about TNR work in the office. His comment not only demonstrated the normative expectation of the physical divide of work and home, but also signaled that her care taking behavior was out of order in this work environment. Even though her job performance had never come into question, his comment served as a form of informal social control to displace cat talk and indirectly to signal the devaluation of cat care in the work environment.

The next example shows another way in which everyday spaces are powerfully charged with hegemonic conceptualizations of normative space. In this situation caretaking of cats at work is interpreted by a colleague as compensatory mothering—possibly suggesting a kind of psychological substitution on the part of the caretaker. An untenured faculty caretaker was in a minor conflict with a tenured faculty member over a feeding station that he felt was too near the front entrance of their office building. The resolution was that she agreed to move the feeding further away from any of the building's entry points. After their meeting she let the other caretakers know of the

agreement and said that afterwards he said, “I understand that you don’t have kids and that these cats are your substitute children.” She said she wanted to let him know that most of the TNR volunteers on campus do have children, but she was just happy to have the conflict with someone she likes and with whom she must work so closely resolved. In this example, her concern for the cats, coupled with the hierarchies of power at work, allow the tenured faculty member to have his say without objection. Also, his language reveals that he considered her cat caretaking as dis-placed care resulting from another socially stigmatizing status, that of childless woman. In this situation, gender stereotypes map onto the distribution of power in the workplace, thus reinforcing status hierarchies that view caretaking and motherhood as essential features of womanhood. In this situation the cat caretaker’s attempt to redefine space was met with an attempt to place her in a devalued position within a powerfully charged normative framework that sees socially constructed aspects of gender identity as ‘natural’.

Often, within the normative frame of work, caretakers who defend or attempt to work alongside feral cats are seen as violating the expectation that home, and not work, is the place for caretaking. This rigid separation of domestic and work spheres, a remnant of industrialization (Lefebvre, 1991), is gendered and problematic for those whose efforts represent a redefinition and re-appropriation of workspace as a safe place for both human and nonhuman animals. My own work as a TNR advocate and caretaker shows the confusion bystanders experience when encountering caretaking out-side of traditional spaces of care. My field notes read,

I was feeding a lone feral cat on the edge of campus that is bordered by a very nice residential area. A young woman was walking down the sidewalk toward the library. Her face seemed familiar and I tried to remember if she had been in my class or if I knew her through my animal work on campus. Before I could place her, she called out in a friendly inquisitive tone “Dr. Thompson, is that your cat?” Assuming at that point that I did know her and that perhaps she knew something of my work with TNR, I said, “well, not exactly, but, he is one of the cats in the feral colony.” She looked pleased and said, “after you tame it, are you going to take it home?”

The student’s assumption that my actions regarding the cat naturally would be to move

him into a normative place of care, which would be an adoptive home or my own, illustrates how the extension of care can create confusion and tension with friends, colleagues and family members. One feral manager told me that after an unusually negative set of interactions with several people on campus her boyfriend said to her “I do see where they are coming from. You can’t go around treating the campus like it is your home, people don’t like it and what do you get? Just heartache.” Another feral cat manager was approached by a friendly colleague who said that, unlike some, he didn’t mind her caring for the cats. However, he wanted her to explain “after you trap them and fix them, why can’t you just bring them home?” Each of these cases exemplifies the non-conscious acceptance of the work-home dichotomy and the breach of the normative expectations of care by feral cat caretakers.

Guilt By Association: Tribal Stigmatization

The third source of stigma experienced by feral caretakers is that their activities in the workplace indirectly connects them and their charges through *tribal stigmatization* (Goffman, 1963). In other words, the evaluations of an individual are based upon attitudes, stereotypes, myths, and impressions of a stigmatized group to which the individual belongs or sympathizes. One of the most important contributors to stigma attached to those who work with feral cats is deep seated prejudice against cats, which originates in myth, folklore and common misperception that cats are dirty, evil, diseased, mean, parasite carriers. Such erroneous assumptions result in the wholesale categorization of cats as ‘dirty’ or ‘bad’ animals by some (Arluke and Sanders, 1996; Smith, 1999). Cats are disparaged through negative stereotypes and those who care for them are demeaned by association. For instance, in the following email regarding a complaint made about cats on campus by a staff member, we see a clear example of how a strong dislike of cats can result in their negative images becoming attached to those who care for them,

...We have had another complaint....the complaint made it sound like crazy cat ladies had taken over this side of campus.....and we [caretakers] are causing health problems near campus by feeding the cats.

And another example, from my field notes, concerns a confrontation that occurred on the

edge of campus, near an apartment complex,

After my class, I went over to the north campus parking lot to check on [Plato] and [Erasmus]....[Plato] was out sunning on the apartment side. I called him over. A resident heard me ... came out in a lather and told me to please stop feeding those stray cats....that the landlord is upset about all of those damn cat people feeding around here....

In yet another incident, as retold by a staff member, the anger and bad feelings that can occur when cat lovers and cat haters collide on campus reveals another form of tribal stigmatization at work. Faculty and staff members were gathered informally in the front region of their office space where some volunteers were having informal conversations about how and where to move the cats because there had been complaints about fleas and feeding. One of the faculty members overhearing the conversation said ‘I wish I had a bb gun. I could get rid of them for you.’ Several people overheard him and the volunteer feeder in the room said, “You don’t mean that do you? You wouldn’t really hurt them?” He replied, “Of course not, but they are a definitely a problem.” This case illustrates how cat caretakers are treated callously, faced with hostile views of their work and the cats through insensitive pseudo threats.

Another campus also had a problem with fleas at a temporary building near a TNR feeding spot. The flea outbreak was immediately blamed on the feral cats in the area and the caretakers for feeding near the building. Accusatory emails were sent to the TNR manager on campus. The faculty members housed in the building who were complaining had not stopped to consider that other animals lived in and around the temporary building and might be the source of the fleas. TNR caretakers initially felt this would be an easy situation to clarify since the feral cats in that area had been treated for fleas consistently for many months, making it likely that the flea infestation had come from raccoons, mice, rats or squirrels living in and around the building. Despite reasoned explanations as to the likely origins of the flea problem, the following email response was sent to the colony manager from a lower level administrator officed in the building: “Feral cats don’t have fleas.....Riiiiight!”

Another increasingly common and powerful source of tribal stigmatization experienced by feral cat caretakers is being associated with political and ideological

groups aligned with the animal rights movement, and consequentially to a set of hotly politicized ideological tensions on university campuses. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and Animal Liberation Front (ALF) are two such groups that are sometimes unfairly vilified by some faculty, staff and students on university campuses, especially those whose political ideologies run counter to animal rights. For example, several TNR program managers reported being questioned at various times by professors from departments that used animals for research. One TNR manager said the following:

A prof from the [X] department emailed to ask if I had time for coffee. He wanted to know more about the TNR group on campus. I naively thought he might actually be an advocate. It was a weird conversation. Turns out he was just interested in whether or not we were an animal rights group and I can understand that given his research. Of course I haven't heard from him since.

A graduate student from the sciences who advocated and volunteered with campus and city TNR groups on a regular basis recounted that his faculty advisor was disturbed when he became aware that he was participating in TNR. His advisor said, "being associated with an animal rights groups could hurt your job chances."

To complicate matters further, there is a great deal of public ignorance about animal interest groups because media accounts rarely distinguish whether a group's primary aim is welfare, protection, or rights. Debates over TNR often result in intense disagreements among, and sometimes within, groups because of divergent goals and ideological stances. For example, PETA does not support the TNR method for managing cat populations (PETA, 2010). As their website states,

PETA's experiences with trap-alter-and-release (abandon) programs and "managed" feral cat colonies have led us to believe that these programs are not usually in cats' best interests... Having witnessed the painful deaths of countless feral cats instead of seeing them drift quietly "to sleep" in their old age, we cannot in good conscience advocate trapping, altering, and releasing as a humane way to deal with overpopulation and homelessness (PETA, 2010).

The National Audubon Society also has a general policy against TNR (Williams, 2009), with the exception of a few state and city chapters that have found it effective to work with TNR groups to reduce the overall threat to birds that stray cats pose in those areas

(Wilson, 2009). However, the Humane Society of the United States and many cat rescue groups wholeheartedly endorse TNR (Humane Society of the United States, 2009). It appears that most feral caretakers on college campuses do not belong to or affiliate with animal rights groups, rather they are typically active members of animal welfare organizations that pertain specifically to feral cat welfare and companion animal rescue. The most common affiliation among the volunteers is Alley Cat Allies, a national organization that works to protect and improve the lives of cats by providing support, information and funding for TNR groups (Alley Cat Allies, 2010).

Ironically, TNR work is also sometimes stigmatized by other animal protection groups. As a strategy for discrediting TNR, Internet blog posts and articles published by groups such as The Wildlife Society (TWS) and The Audubon Society present information laced with hyperbole that portrays TNR groups as irrational animal rights advocates who protect an ‘invasive’ species. One possible motivation for discrediting TNR is species competition and turf wars among advocates. For example, an Audubon related blog summarized the problem this way,

The debate over TNR (Trap, Neuter, and Return) programs and how to deal with feral cats often pits animal-rights activists [meaning TNR advocates] against wildlife advocates [Birders]. Bird lovers contend that wild cats kill hundreds of millions of birds each year. Cat lovers say that the felines don’t deserve to die (Berger, 2009).

The competing species claim also has the effect of deemphasizing the many human contributions to species loss. This is demonstrated in an *Audubon Magazine* article titled “Feline Fatales” (Williams, 2009). The article states,

With something like 150 million free-ranging house cats wreaking havoc on our wildlife, the last thing we need is Americans sustaining them in the wild....TNR causes “hyperpredation,” in which well-fed cats continue to prey on bird, mammal, reptile, and amphibian populations so depressed they can no longer sustain native predators.”

In the campus workplace setting competing species rhetoric is a force with which TNR workers must contend and are susceptible. For example, on one large campus with a well-managed program a faculty member sent the following email to a feral colony

manager who in turn forwarded it to volunteers for feedback on how to proceed:

I applaud [name of group] for its emphasis on spaying and neutering the feral cats on campus. But, why are you releasing the cats to kill what little wildlife we have left? Cats belong indoors. Your group needs to have greater respect for wildlife on campus and notably the ones that belong here [referring to birds, not cats]. Is there not another plan to pursue that would not imperil birds? I implore you to desist in releasing predators into the campus environment.

The colony volunteers emailed back and forth among themselves and with the faculty member debating on how to respectfully handle this complaint and plea by the ‘birder’. The resolution was that the TNR manager agreed to keep better records to show reductions in numbers of cats on campus. The skeptical faculty member agreed to be open to future evidence that TNR, although not a perfect solution for birds, is better than the kill method for reducing cat populations. These examples show that even among animal advocacy and rights groups, TNR workers and groups sometimes find themselves marginalized for trying to shape social spaces where humans and cats can co-habit. Even though there are myriad reasons for bird loss, including urban sprawl, campus construction, pollution, etc., the message again echoed in these debates is that cats are out of place and TNR workers are called into question for aiding outlaw cats.

Managing Emotions

Those involved in TNR understand that they must contend with the emotional realities of working with, for, and against others on behalf of the cats. As one volunteer jokingly, but earnestly said, “working for cats is exhausting.” Previous research on service sector work by Hochschild (1979; 1983) and Copp (1998) is helpful for illuminating the dynamics of emotion management when working on the edges of ideological landscapes, especially those that relate to hierarchies of occupations, professions or workplaces. For cat people, emotion management in the forms of suppressing, transforming, or expressing feelings when performing at work is complicated by the ideological and structural complexity of the college campus as a workplace. Nevertheless, emotion management is vital to the survival of the TNR group and colony. Because of the open nature of campuses, students, staff, faculty, and visitors

are constantly coming and going through physical space, which means that the foci of potential interactions and conflicts with others are numerous, variable and unpredictable. Cat caretakers often experience emotional dissonance derived from the disjuncture between their genuine emotions and those they are required to display as part of keeping their work life intact. Further complications arise due to the conflict between the roles they play at work as professionals, which are structured and formal, and the roles people play as part of TNR, which are unstructured and emergent. Moreover, colony time is 24 hours a day, whereas work time is temporally circumscribed for staff and administrators and, to a lesser extent, for faculty members. The colony is an ever present preoccupation with caretakers and what happens with the colony bleeds into work and non-work time for TNR feeders and managers. In such an environment, TNR managers and feeders must be constantly on guard and ready to lend a hand to co-caretakers, and/or do a bit of impression management to deal with others while also feeding and trapping. This can become difficult to navigate. A TNR feeder communicated that while she was setting a trap early one morning she encountered a faculty group coming back from a breakfast meeting. She was surprised because the group included one of the anti-cat “troublemakers” on campus and another faculty member who had helped raise money for the TNR program.

I played it cool—just said hello to them and finished my work by covering the trap with a brown towel and hoped that one of them would say something to me so I could say something positive about our work...and I kicked myself all morning for not thinking of something to say that would have been good for him to hear while I had [Georgia] as backup. But knowing me, it is probably better I kept my big mouth shut.

In this example, the caretaker is painfully aware of the disjuncture between her genuine feelings and the need to project positive emotion in this situation. At the same time, she is also unsure she can pull off a good surface performance, by saying the right things, due to the intensity of her emotional dissonance. In this way the conversation is a world of its own with its own boundary maintaining tendencies and where landscapes of the self are negotiated (Goffman, 1967: 113). Her uncertainty reflects, to some extent, her degree of alienation at work. She is unable to conjure up a competent performance and she

understands that this has further alienated her by leaving her out of the conversation.

In another case, a feral manager who is normally calm and collected fails to suppress her emotions in an encounter when she was questioned at the end of a workday. She told me:

I know better than to take the bait. But, you know it had been a long week. My husband was sick and the baby was coming down with it. I had to get the traps set and get to the drugstore before going home and wouldn't you know he caught me right as I was walking out of the door and said something like, 'I don't see why you spend all of your time on those cats when there are so many people starving in the world'... Without thinking I shot back telling him, 'well, I don't see you spending any time on either'...I know that was mean, but gracious what a mean thing to say to me."

As this response shows, interpersonal conflicts over cats can result from lapses in emotion management. Normally, she might have used humor in her inflection or chosen different words to uphold interactional deference, but her external preoccupation (Goffman, 1967: 118) alienated her from the conversation and she reacted defensively when her identity was called into question by someone who had a history of being critical of her cat caretaking. In this case, he devalued her work with cats in light of the needs of human beings, and she reacted in kind as she rushed out of the office to provide care for both humans and animals in need.

The area of greatest need for emotion management among caretakers comes when dealing with the potential or actual harm to cats. Very bad things can happen to cats when they are living in social and physical spaces hostile to their presence. As Arluke's (2010: 37) work documents, animals, often cats, are victims of extreme cruelty, sometimes for motives as unjustified as adolescent curiosity. Within the realm of an urban campus, cats live in dangerous places. Their territories map onto human geography and stretch across a conglomeration of dominated and cultivated 'natural' spaces. Human built environments pose many threats to cats as the following email communicates:

I have sad news everybody. We found [Jonah] today, he crossed over the rainbow bridge. He was probably hit by a car. I found him up in the grass on his turf, and I am so hurt and sad, I can't express how sad. As many of you know, he had a bad

habit of running across the street and parking lot to the feeding place. Many of you will be heartbroken too because we have all known him since he showed up 5 years ago. I know the point of the TNR is that the cats will eventually die off but personally it breaks my heart every time we lose one, especially from the original crew and in this way. Can I get some help this morning to deal with his remains? I don't think I can do it by myself—I need some support.

Unfortunately, on many of the campuses, cats take the leftovers and wastelands of campus space—parking lots, the areas behind food service areas, construction areas, the green spaces near roadways and the perimeters of campuses. Their caretakers, by virtue of standing with them in the areas where they live, experience a visual landscape of the campus that is quite different than the one the typical employee sees. Volunteers care for and understand cats *in situ*, a fact exemplified by a kitten rescue on my home campus. My field notes read:

A student calls me alarmed. A kitten in front of the dorm construction site and it has been there all day and it is really sick. It is rainy/ icy and the temperature is dropping rapidly.... I question, how big, thin how is it acting, can you approach, fearful? [Student] says it gets close enough to take food, but runs if you try to reach for him. I tell him I will come with a trap and be there in less than a half-hour. When I arrived tabby kitten near death; wobbling, emaciated, diarrhea, wet, covered in thick fluid, smells rancid. We set the trap with turkey and rice baby food and wait in the sleet/rain for an hour. With the cranes, piles of rubble, machinery, and noise and now these temps and weather, how did he even survive this long? Finally he goes into the trap. Rushed to vet, named him Tom Brown after the dorm where he is found.... [Vet] says Tom is covered in thick grease. His guess is kitty had been living in a dumpster where grease traps are dumped. Tom may have a chance, has tested negative for all of the terrible things. [Vet] says we can try to save him.... [February 6, 2008]. Three days of hand feeding, watching him suffer, wasting away, cleaning diarrhea...rallied yesterday afternoon, but then worsened last night. Tom Brown died today. [February 10 2008].

This example shows that cats on university campuses are subject to the worst aspects of

constructing the built environment. And, in their attempts to render aid in these dominated spaces, cat caretakers find themselves in unusual and trying circumstances. Also illustrated here are the day-to-day emotional roller coaster and the intense stress of direct care for cats in hostile environments. Managing emotions related to death, uncertainty, conflict, interruption, anger, fear, finances, and work responsibilities make the life of cat workers difficult. As was said to me by a staff member who has worked in rescue for a decade and almost as long with TNR on her campus, “You have to be tough, tough like the cats.” But, as becomes clear from working in TNR, even the toughest among us can experience fatigue and burnout (Figley and Roop, 2006).

One example of emotional meltdown and lingering resentment, relayed to me by a long-time caretaker, occurred when a she was confronted by a close colleague of many years. She said:

He let me have it over the cats, right there in the parking lot...I was so shocked I can't even remember most of what he said. I was dumbstruck. He threatened the cats I sure remember that...and his words were so cruel. I am sure he was displacing some aggression and it found an outlet in his hatred for cats. But, I don't care. I hate him now, I really do. I can honestly say something changed in me permanently that day. I don't like it, but that is the way it is...I'm just not the same.”

This caretaker suffered emotional trauma and lost a valuable friend as a result of the fallout from her caretaking. My own experiences merge with the sentiments of a caretaker of a failed TNR group on a college campus. The resistance and lack of support for their work finally got the best of their small group. She said, “Every once in a while you just have to take a break, or it will break you.” Observing and listening to feral cat caretakers do the “emotion work” (Hochschild, 1979) necessary to survive in the moral landscape of the workplace reveals the situations and important others who make them feel out of place in their own work spaces. Like the feral cats they manage they are constantly positioned as outsiders and it wears on them.

In contrast to the negative emotions experienced when interacting with humans in these environments, cat caretakers have an overwhelming number of positive experiences when interacting with the cats. The result of this is that, in many cases, associating with

cats at work is more gratifying, predictable and relatively more positive than associating with people, especially disapproving others. One TNR caregiver said:

I feed at 6:00 in the morning, just so I won't have to see anyone—that way it is just the cats and me, it is really peaceful in the mornings before the people get to campus.

Moreover, the clarity of the role of caretaker with its short and long term rewards is readily apparent. Unfortunately, the reinforcing nature of cat care in contrast to the hostility sometimes shown by co-workers results in a kind of species alienation for humans who save non-human animals. People in the workplace are often overworked, overcommitted and under-rewarded and seeing cat caretakers give their time, energy and resources to cats can produce inter-species jealousy. This was conveyed, indirectly, in an earlier example where a colleague accuses a caretaker of caring more about cats than people. Having colleagues be critical, accusatory, and intolerant of cat caretaking creates the interpersonal dynamics of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more critical and antagonistic humans are about cats, the more likely caretakers are to prefer cats to some of their human co-workers. Moreover, the implicit rewards of caretaking coupled with being defined as a deviant for caretaking, sometimes results in greater species alienation and stronger identification with cats.

Conclusion

Whether or not the proliferation of TNR programs on college campuses represents a fundamental change in how some people view and live among non-human animals, their work does provide a small and growing space for re-animation of the campus. However, although illuminated somewhat by a light at the end of the tunnel, TNR workers operate in the face of cultural, social and institutional resistance in the form of:

- Strong normative frameworks that see animals as property to be owned and controlled by individuals,
- Strong patterns of behavior rooted in tradition that fail to consider animal agency,
- Legal and moral frameworks that cannot reconcile the blurring of the binary categories such as wild and domestic, and
- A political economy that continues to approach nature and non-human animals as

part of it in anthropocentric and exploitative utilitarian modes.

Cats, while experts of their own space and time, lack the voice with which to resist the definitions placed on them and the spatial boundaries superimposed on their territories by humans. Their lives and ours intersect in consequential ways, although the weight of these intersections is disproportionately borne by the cats. The configuration of workspace in the context of the late industrial model of appropriation and ownership and the concomitant view of land and non-human animals as property, places cats and their caretakers in the role of trespasser. Consequentially, for the cats their homes are often designated as off-limits to them. They are not ‘owned’ so they make no sense in the logics of human habitat. They are infeasible, but they persist. They are at work before us, with us and after us. They greet, socialize, hunt, lurk, peer, sleep, sun themselves in places where they live, but don’t belong. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), Derrida’s pronouncement that we are naked under the gaze of the cat (p. 10) reminds us that our actions toward other species reveals much about who we are and emphasizes that, like it or not, we are all “unimpeachably, near” (p. 11) the animal. If he was right that “the relationship of the living and of the living animal” (p. 402) is the most important question, then perhaps the everyday resistance of feral cat caretakers in the colonized spaces of the workplace represent a small contribution to the reanimation project and ultimately to the deconstruction of spaces in ways that allow for the *subjectivization* of animals. Thus, such work presses for the re-storying of ‘animal’ subjectivity, which has been denied by humans in their constructions of the social and natural worlds.

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Notes

1. TNR groups are typically self-funded through volunteer work, grants, and donations. Most TNR groups are registered non-profit groups. Conservatively, these groups save their cities and states thousands of dollars each year by taking care of cats that would normally be under the domain of tax-funded animal control agencies. On university and college campuses without official TNR programs the general practice is to trap and euthanize free roaming cats. This practice has had no impact long term on reducing or eliminating the presence of cats and has drawn fire from students and cat advocates who oppose cat extermination programs on moral grounds (Alley Cat Allies, 2010). A few forward thinking universities have taken the lead and through their Veterinary Schools run or assist official TNR programs as part of their overall mission. These schools have

been critical players in TNR research and program evaluation. Example of such programs are Texas A&M University School of Veterinary Science <http://vetmed.tamu.edu/afcat/>, Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, <http://www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc/>, and Purdue University School of Veterinary Medicine, http://www.vet.purdue.edu/cpb/faculty_profiles/beck_alan.html.

2. City ordinances that protect feral cats are reviewed and updated by www.animallaw.info. Only thirteen states and the District of Columbia have any laws that even mention feral cats (California, Connecticut, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Nebraska, New York, Rhode Island, Texas, Virginia, and Vermont). Generally, the state laws that do address these issues simply (1) define feral cats and (2) enable local governments to adopt their own solutions. The result of this approach, though, is that the law of feral cats can, and often does, vary drastically within the same state. An example of a feral cat protection ordinance can be found at: http://dallasanimalservices.org/trap_neuter_return.html

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