

# The Cat sits on the Map: Some Reflection on Post-Human Cartography

(for Pushkin)

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*The city of cats and the city of men exist one inside the other, but they are not the same city. Few cats recall the time when there was no distinction: the streets and squares of men were also streets and squares of cats, and the lawns, courtyard, balconies, and fountains; you lived in a broad and various space. But for several generations now domestic felines have been prisoners of an uninhabitable city; the streets are uninterruptedly overrun by the mortal traffic of cat-crushing automobiles; in every square foot of terrain where once a garden extended or a vacant lot or the ruins of an old demolition, now condominiums loom up, welfare housing, brand-new skyscrapers; every entrance is crammed with parked cars; the courtyards, one by one, have been roofed by reinforced concrete and transformed into garages and movie houses or storerooms or workshops...*

Italo Calvino, The Garden of Stubborn Cats

Calvino's famous short story was written in 1963 as the post war boom in city rebuilding was taking off in Italy; a version of architectural modernism was transforming many historic urban neighbourhoods into up or down market versions of Le Corbusier's dream of the city as a 'machine-for-living'. In the process, the human and non-human worlds, the city of flesh and the city of stone became radically separated. Where previously different kinds of humans, plants, and animals had co-inhabited the same buildings and squares on more or less equal terms, new principles of segregation intervened to reorganise the urban fabric according to the logic of land values and the laws of capital accumulation. The granularity of the urban landscape becomes opaque. As Calvino puts it 'where a rolling plateau of low roofs once extended, copings, terraces, water tanks, balconies, skylights, corrugated iron sheds, now one general superstructure rises wherever structures can rise, the intermediate difference in height between the low ground of the street and the supernal heaven of the penthouses disappears'.

It has been left to radical pedestrians, parkour aficionados, urban explorers, skateboarders and counter mappers to re-inscribe an embodied human scale on this otherwise abstracted environment, and to insist that the city of stone, including its transport and communication systems, is a jumping off point for activities which show that its planification is not the only game in town. The city of flesh with its emotional geographies created through everyday

encounter, storytelling and memoryscaping, may not be so rigorously mapped but its lines of desire are just as important in making places happen out of spaces.

Cats, those intrepid urban explorers, have been especially hard hit by the densely networked and stratified infrastructure required to keep the engines of global heating going. Calvino observed 'the cat of a recent litter seeks in vain the itinerary of its fathers, the point from which to make the soft leap from balustrade to cornice to drainpipe, or for the quick climb on to the roof tiles'.

In the story the narrator, Marcovaldo, follows in a cat's footsteps as it carries a piece of fish which it has filched from him across the city rooftops to its communal lair, a garden where all the feline exiles have gathered and are fed by an eccentric and decidedly misanthropic countess. En-route we are given a cats' eye view of the city, and a convergent perspective of both human and cat on the fish as a source of dinner. A narrative counter map then of the entanglement of human and non-human worlds plotted on a common line of desire.

As it happens, I have recently had an opportunity to observe first hand some of the processes Calvino is describing going on in my own back yard. I have a flat on a large Peabody estate in Central London and tucked behind my block was a large piece of waste ground filled with the household detritus of several generations of tenants: old mattresses, broken hoovers, a couple of bike frames, a skeletal pram, plus a sprinkling of used condoms, syringes, fag packets and other bric a brac familiar to the connoisseur of urban material culture. A wide variety of plants had taken root amidst this metropolitan rubble: London Pride mixed promiscuously with Japanese Knotweed, nettles and thistles jostling with Rose Bay Willow herb. A population as diverse as its human neighbours.

The site was also home to a large extended family of feral cats. As this feline playground was directly opposite my kitchen window, I was able to watch their comings and goings, their fights and caterwauling rituals with some regularity. One somewhat unfortunate impact of their presence was to drive the mice and rat population away into the relative safety of the buildings where they only had humans to contend with. My neighbour on the ground floor was worst affected, and when the usual methods of pest control failed he decided to temporarily abduct (or as he put it, adopt) one of the feral cats and employ it as his mouser in residence. It turned out however that this particular individual preferred the wide open spaces to home comforts and at the first opportunity fled back to its previous den leaving behind it a thriving population of fleas.

After numerous complaints about the situation from tenants, Peabody decided that it was time to take action. One morning a steam roller appeared and cleared the site, followed by a team of asphalters. As a result of their efforts, I could now look out from my breakfast table on a wide expanse of tarmac, on which from time to time a few puzzled cats would sit briefly before scuttling into the undergrowth of building materials which the tarmackers thoughtfully left behind.

A snapshot then of the scorched earth policies which municipal authorities and many home owners are currently pursuing in towns and cities across the country, leading to a widespread loss of biodiversity. In fact the only interaction most of us townies now have with animals is with those we regard and treat as domestic 'pets', that is as objects of emotional attachment onto whom we project all kinds of feelings we otherwise only reserve for our family and friends. Being

kind to animals and horrible to humans is in danger of becoming a normopathic response to our current environmental crisis.

One response to the strategy of urban 'desertification' has been to encourage rewilding. This is already happening spontaneously. The emergence of urban foxes is now a well known phenomenon, I saw one a couple of days ago confidently sauntering down Islington High Street. However, the re-introduction of sparrows and pigeons may be less popular. To say nothing of Wolves.

Another approach may be to ensure our pets can take a walk on their wild side whenever they feel like it. As cat owners can testify, these critters do not need much encouragement. Just what our cuddly moggies get up to when our backs are turned is all too graphically demonstrated when they drop a mangled bird or headless mouse on to our lap. A love offering it aint.

Those of you who are keen cartographers can now buy a cat tracker for less than the price of GPS and follow Tiddle's adventures on a google map as s/he stakes out territory, shits in your neighbour's garden and finds other hands to feed it. No doubt invaluable in geo-locating missing presumed lost or run over cats, these devices have proved no less useful as human monitoring devices. Prisoners who have drink or drug problems will soon find that to obtain early release they will have to agree to be fitted with a 'tag' to monitor their whereabouts 24/7, triggering an alarm if they go into a pub or find their way to crack alley. No walking on the wild side permitted there.

The electronic tagging of animals in order to study their migration and other behaviour patterns has become a major growth area in non-human cartography in recent years. In their brilliant atlas 'Where the Animals Go' James Cheshire and Oliver Uberti argue that in the past the study of animals' movements was literally about following physical traces, and indeed there were specialist trackers who could read from animals' droppings, bird feathers, or ground markings their likely direction of travel. The difficulty of non-intrusive observation in these settings led wildlife researchers to team up with computer engineers to devise alternative ways of studying animal behaviour using a host of digital devices, satellites, radar, cellphone networks, camera traps, drones and accelerometers to observe them close up from afar. As Cheshire puts it: 'through the use of tags, we can gather gigabytes of behavioural and environmental data, from the spirals of a soaring vulture to the flight of the bumble bee'. What such mappings reveal, of course, is the impact of environmental change, and more specifically global heating, on the behaviour of fauna across the biosphere. Indeed, the maps and infographics in this atlas are essentially a left-field commentary on the environmental crisis.

It may not be long before the monitoring technologies used to show us the impact of the Anthropocene on humpback whales, polar bears, or penguins, become subsumed into the apparatus of human surveillance mobilised by states to ensure that mass migrations from areas in the global south most affected by global heating are headed off before they can enter Fortress Europe. Cheshire and Uberti have a concluding section entitled 'Where the Humans Go' which uses digital phone data to map the 'home ranges' of people in different parts of Greater London and its environs. Their chilling conclusion is that 'location is everything. And the way we study it is the same whether it relates to an ant, a diving whale or a person with a smartphone'.

It is one thing to wonder at the social complexity of ant colonies, quite another to look down on some of our fellow humans as a less intelligent version of ants. The role of tagging technologies in facilitating an apparently frictionless slide from appreciating the 'more than human' aspects of the natural environment, to identifying and depreciating certain socio-cultural groups as 'less than human' requires further critical investigation.

### **Letting the cat out of the bag**

We are currently living through a time in which the terms and conditions of our co-habitation of this planet with other species has become a site of intense political debate. Perhaps one reason why cats have been such a source of fascination for writers and philosophers, from T.S. Eliot and Doris Lessing to Montaigne and Spinoza is that they pose in a peculiarly acute way the complicated relation between humans and animals, and how this becomes simplified in some anthropocentric discourses. This is the burden of a recent book written by the English moral philosopher, John Gray. In 'Feline Philosophy' he argues that cats are good to think with precisely because in their interaction with us they exhibit spontaneously that balance of intimacy and distance, presence and absence, which is such a necessary part of the human condition, but which it is so difficult for us to sustain. For Gray, this is a moral equilibrium whose profound disturbance has led to an epidemic of alienated isolation and superficial sociality, or what the American sociologist David Riesman once called the 'lonely crowd' and, more recently, Robert Putnam, termed 'bowling alone'.

A similar theme is pursued in a more imaginative, and at times surreal, vein in Nick Bradley's recent collection of stories, 'The Cat and the City'. Set in Japan, each story explores what happens when the intricate balance between the city of flesh and the city of stone is upset and how the enigmatic figure of the cat sets in motion a narrative in which it plays a key mediating role.

The opening story is set in a tattoo parlour in Tokyo. One day a high school girl comes in with a most unusual request. She wants a map of the whole city tattooed on her body. At first, Kentaro, the tattooist, thinks the task is impossible and refuses. The city is just too complex, the project would take years, and cause her too much pain, not to mention the cost. But then, seduced by the girl's beauty and insistence, he agrees.

He sets to work, attempting to capture the granular detail of the streets and buildings while finding it near impossible to keep in mind the city as a whole, as its outline spills down her back to her arms, thighs, and buttocks. He then considers putting in some people, but the girl brings him up short. 'I want the city, not the people' she tells him. 'But it won't be a city without people' he replies. 'I don't care it's my back, my tattoo. I'm paying' she snaps back...

During the girl's weekly visits, they talk of many things and one day she starts looking at book about cats, and in particular the illustrations of Kabuki actors dressed as cats, a disguise imposed on them by the emperor to prevent them performing in a 'debauched' way. The girl is fascinated by the story and this gives Kentaro an idea. If she doesn't want people in her city, then perhaps he could draw in some cats instead. Since she cannot see her back, she will never know until it is done. And so he sets to work. The following week he looks for his handiwork but cannot find it.

The cat has disappeared! Perhaps he just imagined drawing it? But then he looks at the bodymap again and sees that it *is* there, only not where he drew it. The cat has somehow moved.

From then on, every week the same thing happens. The cat continually changes its position. It's like a game of hide and seek – of perhaps cat and mouse. One session he spends most of the time looking for it until at the very last moment it emerges from a subway exit on Naomi's left shoulder, tail high as if taunting him.

The map is nearly completed and for the final session Kentaro plans to take his revenge and cut the cat out of the girls flesh with a knife, to get rid of it once and for all. But as he goes to sign off the work with his name on the drawing of his own shop on her left buttock, he sees the cat sitting outside. He experiences a sudden reversal of the map/ territory relation: 'he knew then, with a terrible certainty, that if he were to glance up from the tattoo on Naomi's body and look outside the door he would see the cat sitting there, its green eyes watching him'.

The story ends with a brilliant description of a special kind of cartographic delirium, first analysed by Laura Kurgan in her account of the zoom effect engineered by Google Earth through the use of satellite photography. In the story this process occurs not through a prosthetic technology but directly in the intricate entanglement of mental and bodily mapping.

'The city was still there but it was like he was seeing it from space. His mind's eye was a camera looking down on it. Then the camera began to zoom in, down onto the globe, onto Japan, onto Tokyo, all the way down to street level. It flew through the red roof of his tattoo parlour and there he saw himself working on Naomi's perfect back on the tattoo of the city. The camera didn't stop. He'd lost control. It flew once again into the tattoo and kept going down: through Japan, through the roof of his parlour and into the tattoo once more. And on and on endlessly.'

As the membrane which separates map and territory, his mind and her body thins, the threat of an implosive unmappable reality can no longer be held at bay. 'He kept his eyes shut. For when he opened them there would no longer be space to sign his name on the roof of his parlour. It would be filled with a real red roof. He'd be faced with a city with millions and millions of people moving around, through subway stations and buildings, parks and highways, living their lives. The city pumps their shit around in pipes, it transported their bodies around in metal containers, and it held their secrets, their hopes, their dreams. And he'd no longer be sitting on the other side watching through a screen. He'd be part of it too. He'd be one of those people. With his eyes still shut, he reached under the table hand desperately scrambling for the knife. He trembled as he opened his eyes. The muscles in Naomi's back flexed and came to life. And so too did the city.'

Through this play of substitutions and inversions, the city of flesh asserts its power over the city of stone. As the knife cuts into Naomi's body, the city becomes palpable; by the same stroke, the cat, the now- you- see- it, now- you- don't instigator of this egregious action becomes, like Shroedinger's famous feline, simultaneously alive and dead.

We think we know our cats, but it turns out they have another life which withdraws from us as soon as we reach out to grasp and map it. So it is with our children. And with the city. The attempt of the official cartographic gaze to fix the totality of its chosen territory through a process of radical scopic and scalar abstraction mirrors capital's own power of abstraction; such a

standpoint not only disavows the concrete labour of mapping, which is always a socially embedded and situated process, but imposes a grid of graphic rationality, of space time compression, in which what is most familiar becomes reified and suddenly mysteriously othered.

We find a similar effect of misplaced concreteness operating in common sense cartography. We say we know our neighbourhood 'like the back of our hand', but in fact the back of our hand is largely terra incognita, especially when it forms itself into a fist. It is the palm, with its myriad lines which simulates the inscriptive power of the map and which offers a hostage to fortune in the shape of the pseudo-science of palmistry. Palmistry is to what is written by hand on the body what Cartesian cartography is to the everyday practices of mapping: at once an alibi, an allegory and a screen onto which is projected an omniscient but disavowed project of mastery. In challenging that project, we also have to recognise our complicity in it. Why was the cat sat on the map? Not because it was lost and could not find its way home! But because we put it there in the hope that it might mark as yet uncharted and unclaimed territory, where the human and non-human worlds reach some kind of planetary equilibrium. The cat itself, once let out of this particular bag, may however have other ideas...



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