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9. Writing companions – cat-writing as a pedagogy of messy interspecies entanglements

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Abstract This chapter examines what it would mean to take the ethical implications of human–cat relationships seriously in the practice of writing and knowledge production – or *cat-writing*. The chapter joins Donna Haraway’s feminist thinking and selected discussions of animal ethics together with creative writing, namely, poetry. I argue that cat-writing may invite ethical imaginations for the acknowledgement of the suffering of others, making it potentially a pedagogical practice in ecojustice education.

Keywords cat-writing | companion species | feminist knowledge production | vegan poetics | ecojustice education

INTRODUCTION: THIS MESS WE’RE IN

In *Companion Species Manifesto*, the feminist scholar Donna J. Haraway (2003, p. 3) asks: “how might an ethics and politics committed to the flourishing of significant otherness be learned from taking dog-human relationships seriously [...]?” In 2018, I was suddenly offered the chance to adopt a cat named Sotku. I had lived without a companion animal¹ for my adolescence and adult life, but I remembered very fondly the English springer spaniel, Kippari (Skipper), we had when I was a child. Therefore, I did not hesitate to take a cat into my life, even though there were a few issues that spoke against a successful coexistence with such a creature. Firstly, I had never lived with a cat and had absolutely no knowledge about them.

1 By ‘animal’ I refer to nonhuman (or other-than-human) animals, while acknowledging the problematics of the human/animal divide inherent in this choice of words. I will return to this divide later in this text.

I had, in fact, always considered myself “a dog person”. Secondly, I was allergic to cats. Even though the company of my best friend’s cats during my childhood had, after a long and painful process, desensitised me to cat-allergens, I had become allergic again in my adulthood. Thus, there was no telling whether I would be able to live with this new feline companion. Despite these obstacles, my partner and I decided to adopt the cat. What finally melted our hearts was that she was already 11 years old, and therefore not exactly hot stuff on the animal relocation market. People prefer younger cats, it seems – perhaps since elderly animals tend to need more care.

In the late summer of 2018, a glorious longhaired female cat with a funny name, *Sotku*, came to live with us. According to Google translate (2021 January 22), the Finnish name of our beloved cat, *Sotku*, has many translations: Mess, Tangle, Clutter, Muddle, Entanglement, Hash, Huggermugger, Complexity, Mix-up, Mess-up, Cock-up. This delightfully brings us back to Haraway (e.g., 2003, 2008, 2016), whose work is preoccupied with the messy entanglements between humans and their companion species. As a scholar interested in human–animal relations and an avid reader of Haraway, how could I not start thinking of the messy entanglements inherent in this particular mess, my mess, *this sotku*, that I suddenly found myself in? I soon also found myself wanting to write about the joyful mess of getting to know and love a cat, a member of a species alien to myself. Indeed, the cat could just as well have been a space alien to me: the cat-allergic, the dog-person. During my early attempts of writing about our relationship, a question nevertheless emerged: How can I write about my relationship with the cat, when I do not really understand it myself – at least not on a level easily transmitted into words?²

A year later, I was re-reading Haraway’s *Companion Species Manifesto*, where the messy entanglements between humans and their companion species manifest in what Haraway (2003, 3) dubs “dog writing [...] a branch of feminist theory, or the other way around”. It dawned on me then that if there is something called dog-writing, there most definitely must be a practice called cat-writing, as well. Haraway’s work inspired me to ponder not only the question of writing as in putting things into words but also the materiality of writing as more-than-human knowledge production. If dog-writing is a practice where Haraway “and her dogs co-create and co-construct each-others’ experience right down to the cellular level” (Sayers, 2016, p. 380), cat-writing is also a material – or “material-semiotic”, that is, both materially and semiotically constituted (Haraway, 2008, p. 383n11) – process.

2 Two of my talks on cat-writing that have partly inspired this chapter are (or should soon be) available on YouTube (Koistinen, 2021, 2022).

Cat-writing is therefore not only about producing meanings with the cat but also about the material connections, or entanglements, constructed while *writing–living–thinking–feeling–with* a companion animal (see also Haraway, 2003, p. 5). By 2019, I had, indeed, desensitised myself to my feline companion, so there was no denying that Sotku had materially affected me. Furthermore, in terms of the materiality of the writing process, cats are notorious for their fondness for disturbing one’s writing – and Sotku (the Mix-up, the Huggermugger!) makes no exception. In this chapter, I thus attempt to showcase how cat-writing entails not only my process of thinking-with a cat, but also the material process of writing-with a feline companion.³

TAKING HUMAN–CAT RELATIONS SERIOUSLY

Following Haraway, I define cat-writing as a branch of feminism that takes human–cat relations seriously as part of both academic and creative practice. The research problem of this chapter then emerges as: how to write-with a cat about the process of writing-with a cat? Pondering this question, I soon started to ruminate on the power relations (and even violence) inherent in the process of “taming” living beings with language (see Derrida, 2006/2019; Holmes, 2021) as well as taming them as our pets and companions. The questions asked to tackle the overall research problem are thus shaped as follows: what kinds of poetic and political issues and practices come to the fore in trying to represent the process of *writing–living–thinking–feeling–with* a companion animal, a cat? What kinds of embodied knowledge or *knowledges* – in line with the feminist understanding of situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988, 2004) – and ethical considerations surface when writing-with a cat about writing-with a cat?

To grapple with these questions, I merge Haraway’s feminist thinking with animal ethics. Yet, as I am also a poet, I combine these with creative writing, namely, poetry. The text at hand is therefore a messy entanglement of different ways of thinking and writing, aimed at *tackling/describing/representing* the process of cat-writing. It is also an autoethnographic recollection of how my experiment to produce knowledge with *a cat* transformed into the practice of producing knowledge with *a particular cat*, my Sotku (the Tangle – the Complexity – the Entanglement). The approach could also be called “poetic autoethnography”,

3 I use the concept *writing-with* in the spirit of feminist collective knowledge production, or “thinking-with” (e.g. Haraway, 2016, p. 31). For more about writing-with nonhumans, see Ryan (2021) and Karkulehto et al. (2022).

where autoethnographic inquiry is entangled with pursuits in poetic language (Hanauer, 2021; Räsänen, 2022).

Poetry is used in this chapter to bring to the fore aspects of cat-writing that are difficult to put into words in traditional academic writing (see also Hanauer, 2021; Holmes, 2021; The Monster Network, 2021). Some of the poems presented in this chapter are fragments from my poetry collection *Uhanalaiset ja silmälläpidettävät* (roughly translated as *The Endangered and the Nearly Threatened*,⁴ 2021), where I write about themes such as how to know about/with animals and nature. The collection was, for the most part, written with Sotku purring in my lap or otherwise demanding my attention. These poems were originally written in Finnish, and I have translated them into English for this chapter. In addition, some of the poetry came into being while writing this text and has been written only in English.

In line with ecojustice education, I consider cat-writing as a potential pedagogical practice. Ecojustice education can be defined as a pedagogy that challenges the destructiveness in human cultures while promoting diverse ways of knowledge production that consider the role of the nonhuman in the processes of knowing (Foster & Martusewicz, 2019, pp. 2–8). Art can have a vital role in inspiring this sort of understanding of knowledge (Foster & Martusewicz, 2019, pp. 2–8). Returning to Haraway, the concept “companion species” refers not only to companions, such as pets, but to the broader, messy entanglements between humans and other species (see also Rossi, 2021). I argue that writing-with a companion cat may thus teach us something about the affective, more-than-human ways of producing knowledge in messy, co-species entanglements.

FELINE POLITICS AND THE TROUBLE WITH REPRESENTATION

Following Haraway and other dog-writers, Janet Grace Sayers (2016, p. 377, emphasis original) defines “[f]eminist dog-writing [...] as a type of *écriture féminine*” – a concept created by feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous – that is both “political and material as it aims to create new ways of co-constructing reality with other animal species, and it uses writing as a major vehicle for this objective”. Dog-writing is

4 The name of the collection is based on the categories for animals at risk of extinction. In Finnish, the category of “the near threatened” reads more like “those to be kept an eye out for”. This connotation of seeing, looking, being looked at, and controlling is thus lost in the English translation unless one uses: “Watch list of animals at risk” (which, however, would make a poor title). Due to the semantic, rhythmic, and phonotactic differences between the Finnish and English languages, translating the poetry has indeed been challenging, and some meanings are bound to be lost in translation. For this chapter, changes have also been made in the typographical setting of the poems.

therefore a practice of feminist thinking differently (Sayers, 2016, p. 380). Even though this chapter builds on the concept of dog-writing, there are some specificities in human–cat relations that require that dog-writing must be accompanied by a “feline politics”, meaning “the potential politics that is taking place *between* the human and animal”, namely, a cat (O’Doherty, 2016, p. 421, emphasis original). For example, when compared to dogs, cats have retained more of their wild nature, not becoming “part-human”, which is probably one reason humans find them so fascinating (Gray, 2020, pp. 16–18, 26). Human–cat communication also remains understudied (Humphrey et al., 2020), meaning that cat-writing may require a more attentive attitude than dog-writing.

There is no space here to go deeper into the differences between the relationships between humans and dogs and humans and cats. Yet, for the purpose of this text, as it is inspired by the ruminations on violence and vulnerability, there are at least two more aspects specific to human–cat relations worth mentioning. First, cats and dogs are often not valued in a similar manner. Even though cats have been worshipped in some parts of the world (Gray, 2020, pp. 99–104; O’Doherty, 2016), they have also been gruesomely mistreated by humans, and sometimes still are. To give an example, in early modern Europe, cats were often tortured or killed for entertainment (Gray, 2020, pp. 20–21). Indeed, cats have often been considered either gods or demons – and treated accordingly (Gray, 2020, pp. 99–100). In Finland, where Sotku and I reside, at least 20,000 cats are abandoned on a yearly basis (SEY). Humans therefore seem to act less responsibly with their feline companions than with their canine ones. Second, whereas dogs are more adapted to different diets, cats are strict carnivores. I will return to the specific problems of living with a carnivore later in this chapter.

There have been previous experiments with cat-writing in academia (e.g., Gray, 2020; O’Doherty, 2016; Rossi, 2021), even though they have not been explicitly named as such – not to mention the ventures of writing about cats in the world of fiction.⁵ Perhaps the most well-known academic text that might be called cat-writing is Jacques Derrida’s *L’animal que donc je suis* (The Animal Therefore I Am).⁶ Inspired by the gaze of a companion cat, Derrida (2006/2019) traces the violence inherent in the human/animal divide: how the naming of a vast number of species under the category of “animal”, as opposite to “human”, or the use of nonhuman animals as symbols, does violence to these species. For Derrida, language is a form of violence: it inherits a sort of “carnophallogocentrism”, meaning that by naming

5 In Finland, for example, author Anni Kuu Nupponen has held humorous presentations of using cats as writing aids (e.g., Nupponen, 2023).

6 I refer to the Finnish translation, *Eläin joka siis olen* (2019).

we metaphorically devour the other (Sayers, 2016, pp. 375–377). Even though there is violence in human–cat relations that goes beyond linguistic representation, physical malice towards individual cats cannot be separated from how cats as a species are represented through language. In other words, physical violence towards animals cannot be disentangled from the ways that they are discursively and culturally invested with value. It is therefore important to discuss the (feline) politics of representation also in the present text.

While I write this, lying on the sofa in the most un-ergonomic position, Sotku jumps on my chest. She gazes at the laptop screen, sweeping my face with her furry tale. Blocking the screen, she forces me to pause writing and pet her. I stroke her soft fur and listen to her purr. When she leaves, I reach for the keyboard:

you are history – you are not
 you are animal – you are
 named and nameless

a paw, a claw, a tongue, a purr – the twitch of an ear!

words and bodies whirling in time and space

 hurling a toy mouse
 I chase

I leave these poetic fragments here as a budding endeavour to represent the process of thinking- and writing-with my cat companion.



Figure 9.1: Cat-writing in practice. Copyright: the author.

THE MONSTROUS POETICS OF CAT-WRITING

How, then, to write-with a cat about writing-with a cat? Using examples such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Martin Heidegger, and Friedrich Nietzsche, Sayers (2016, p. 382) argues that “[p]oetic writing is a main writing strategy used in philosophy to respond to the animal”. Indeed, “[t]he call of the animal to the human requires an imaginative, poetic and open response since the necessary break with habits of thought is so profound” (2016, p. 378). Writing on “anthropocentrism and representation in writing the lives of animals”, Jessica Holmes (2021, p. 229) argues that:

Poetry in particular is a literary genre, which has consistently lent itself to expressions of silenced or oppressed voices and bodies, in part due to its capacity to embody loss, fragmentation, and absence. Contemporary poems thus provide a useful foundation for rethinking narratives of anthropocentrism and revisiting vulnerable bodies (both human and nonhuman). [...] Poems offer alternative methods of seeing or bearing witness to, remembering and assigning value to individual subjects.

In fact, Derrida (2006/2019, p. 22) also suggests that the question of whether an animal can think is a question for poetry. It is no wonder, then, that in my attempt to capture my relationship with Sotku, I, too, turn to poetry.

To me, poetic language is a way of venturing beyond the violence of naming and taming, an attempt to “move” from fixed meanings to the processes of becoming in the messy co-species entanglement that is cat-writing. As Haraway (2008, p. 4, emphasis original) notes: “To be one is always to *become with many*.” I write these lines as Sotku lies on my ribcage, comfortably lodged between my laptop and my face. She faces me, purring and warm, sharp little claws burrowing through my shirt and into my flesh. She leaves marks on my skin that take days to heal – I wonder, what is she writing on me? The purring resonates in my body, and I feel a deep connection to this small animal, this cat, *this Sotku*, and beyond. I am grasping to find the words to describe this connection that expands beyond me and the feline, to other species, and to the world. Some of it is, perhaps, expressed in this poem:⁷

I mend my ways, I tame the universe
 into my lap
 if I should transform into a cat, expand
 to the size of galaxies?

7 For the Finnish version of the poem, see Koistinen (2021b, p. 44).

There is no telling, if the cat settles into me,
or I into the cat.

From animal to animal, soft heat flows,
solar plexus.

For poet Audre Lorde (1984/2007, p. 25), poetry allows the writer to express something “nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt”. This makes writing poetry “a monster method, attempting to find (and create) words for embodied knowledges” (The Monster Network, 2021, p. 152). Monster or the monstrous refers here to something that transgresses boundaries, like the boundary of human and animal described in the poem above: something messy and unstable, that can bring forth new ways of knowing and of feeling in and of the world (Hellstrand et al., 2018). Poetic language is, in a sense, like a cat that “occupies a liminal space in the house and largely refuses [...] domestication” (O’Doherty, 2016, p. 415), which is why poetic expression so readily lends itself to the practice of cat-writing.

While Sotku (the Complexity!) purrs in my lap, I can only surrender to the realisation that the process of cat-writing will always remain a practice of chasing words incomplete to describe our relationship.⁸ From this incompleteness the poetic autoethnography of cat-writing is born; a poetics seeking to find new, less violent ways to write-with our nonhuman companions. Lorde’s words are echoed in the following lines (Koistinen, 2021b, p. 62) where I endeavour to make sense of that something “about to be birthed, but already felt” (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 25) present in the material connection between Sotku and I:

we are the-indifference-of-earth
the-feeling-of-words

8 This incompleteness of language in cat-writing could also be discussed in terms of affects and emotions – often separated from each other, affects referring to complex and uncertain bodily sensations and emotions to the sensations defined in language (cf. Ahmed, 2004; Wetherell, 2012). Even though I do not entirely subscribe to this division, since past histories and cultural context influence affective bodily reactions and responses (Ahmed, 2004), there seems to be something affective in cat-writing that is not completely captured by cognition – or by human language.

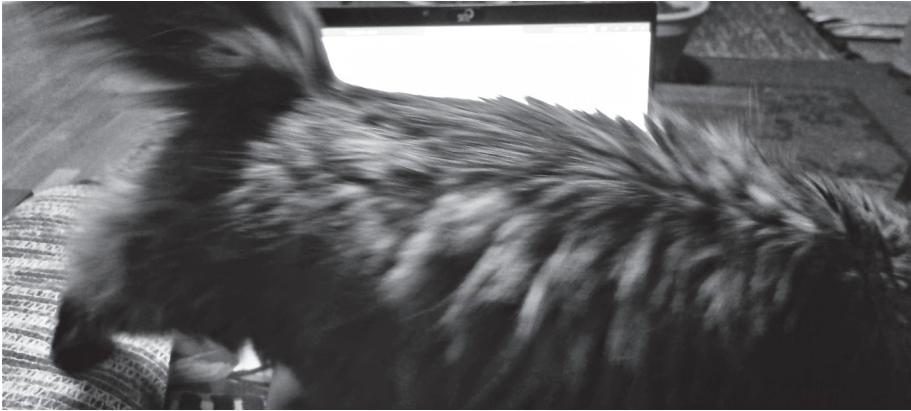


Figure 9.2: Cat-writing always escapes domestication. Copyright: the author.

FROM REPRESENTATION TO PRACTICE – OR HOW CARING FOR A CARNIVORE TURNED ME VEGAN

When Sotku had been living with us for a while, I proclaimed to my partner that I never again wish to live without a cat. When she had been living with us for a longer time, I said to my partner: “I am not sure that I can ever live with another cat.” Should I, then, be talking of *Sotku-writing* instead of cat-writing? Perhaps. In *When Species Meet*, Haraway critiques Derrida for forgetting the actual, living, individual cat. Even though Derrida acknowledges that he is writing about a particular cat, Haraway (2008, p. 20) notices how he quite soon leaves the cat behind while engaging in discussion with white, male philosophers. Derrida therefore “did not become curious about what the cat might actually be doing, feeling, thinking, or perhaps making available to him in looking back at him” (Haraway, 2008, p. 20). In what follows, I wish to consider what kinds of knowledges and practices the process of writing-with a particular cat, Sotku, is making available to me. But Sotku, as an individual, cannot disentangle from the needs of her species, either. Thus, I will also discuss how living with a cat, a carnivore, opened my life to new ethical considerations of the violence between humans and animals.

For Derrida, the inspiration for cat-writing emerges from the shame he feels when a housecat looks at him while he is naked, bare, and powerless. Like Derrida, I, too, experience a stabbing feeling of shame when Sotku faces me, but it is a different kind of shame. I am ashamed that Sotku must live in an apartment and cannot roam free like her ancestors – as all companion animals are essentially our captives (Gruen, 2014, p. 130). When Sotku’s attentive eyes face me, I wonder whether she is content, unhappy, or even suffering, and if she were suffering,

would I ever be able to know. I am slowly learning to read her signs: the narrowed eyelids that cats use to communicate with their humans,⁹ but also the funny silent meows and other habits specific to *this cat*. Sotku has also been diagnosed with tumours in the abdomen, so lately I have been even more preoccupied with the question of how to care for my nonhuman companion.

My shame is also connected to another gaze, the absent gaze of what Sayers (2016, p. 374) dubs “meat-animals”. I face this gaze as I handle the packages of meat that I buy for Sotku. It is impossible to live with companion animals, such as cats and dogs, without participating in the killing of other animals (Gruen, 2014, p. 134). I am thus ashamed of the fact that, for loving Sotku, I need to take part in the massacre of other animals.¹⁰ Since Sotku has been diagnosed with allergies and an irritable bowel, we buy only the best hypoallergenic meat for our beloved companion – and we cannot always be sure of how the meat has been produced. Have the meat-animals suffered? Probably.

Carol J. Adams (1990/2010, pp. 66–67) claims that animals that are used as meat become absent referents. The affective connection between “meat” and “animal” becomes lost, making it more difficult to see the animals in the meat and therefore also easier to consume meat (see also Hall, 2013; Holmes, 2021). Here is where the aforementioned cultural circulation of signs comes to play. For Ahmed (2004), affects and emotions are deeply interconnected and produced discursively: objects and signs become invested by affective power in their cultural circulation. I nevertheless find it hard not to see – and not to feel for – the animals in the meat that I feed for Sotku. Our cat-writing is thus haunted by these broader human–nonhuman relations and the affective cultural practices that maintain that some animals are to be considered so-called meat-animals while others are considered beloved pets.

That said, cat-writing is also a loving and joyous act for me, and hopefully also for Sotku, and even the shame that I feel has inspired moral action (see Aaltola, 2017). When we took Sotku in to live with us, I had been following a lacto-ovo-vegetarian diet (with the occasional addition of fish) for a little over half of my life. I had often considered going vegan, but I lacked the final push. It was only after taking in the carnivore that the ethics of eating animal products started to really haunt me.¹¹ When Sotku climbs onto my chest and brings her face so close to mine

9 On narrowing the eyelids in cat communication, see Humphrey et al. (2020).

10 For a thought-provoking discussion on feminist care ethics and the interdependency of humans and other animals, including the ethical problems inherent in meat-eating, see Taylor (2014).

11 A vegan lifestyle may also not be free of oppression, violence, and death. For instance, culturing crops can destroy the living-environments of wild plants and animals, as well as human beings, and producing crops often includes varied violations on the workers’ rights (for more,

that I can feel the tickle of her whiskers and sometimes smell the stink of her diet on her breath, I cannot help thinking of and feeling for our other companions, the meat-animals. We are all tangled up in this mess together. I let these fragments of a poem express my feelings further (Koistinen, 2021b, pp. 36–37):

as if wandering in the backlight, we do not believe in warnings
about the new, the forthcoming

farm animals galloping in my dreams, I imagine
this is enough

convenience stores filled
with selected absences, cat food packages

For Gruen (2014, p. 135) the messy entanglements of living and dying between humans and their companion species necessitate that “it is important to come to terms with the death and dying, the grief and mourning that come from being vulnerable, embodied, fragile animals”.¹² This is not to say that we simply need to accept, for example, the mass-slaughter of meat-animals, but that the webs of living and dying between human and nonhuman animals are never simple. Gruen (2014, p. 131) suggests that rather than making futile attempts to disentangle ourselves from other animals “we would do better to think about how to be more perceptive and more responsive to the deeply entangled relationships we are in”. Following Judith Butler’s writings on grief and vulnerability, Gruen (2014, p. 137) offers mourning for the dying nonhumans as a solution to make their lives more valued (cf. Haraway, 2016, pp. 38–39). For Butler (2010, e.g., pp. xix, 22), grievability is, in fact, the precondition of a “livable” life – a life that can flourish and prosper.

Faced with the dilemma of caring for one animal while letting others die, I indeed began to actively mourn for the deaths (and the living conditions) of the so-called meat-animals. This eventually led me to adopt a vegan diet. While Sotku and I cannot disentangle ourselves from the lives and deaths of meat-animals – in this sense, we cannot avoid violence – by mourning for the meat-animals,

see Gruen, 2014, pp. 134–135). Moreover, people have different opportunities to choose and maintain a vegan lifestyle due to, for example, food allergies and the availability and prices of vegan products.

12 On grief and meat-eating, see Holmes (2021). On writing and grief, see Hanauer (2021).

cat-writing has inspired me to seek ways to be more responsive and responsible in these entanglements.

VEGAN POETICS AND MONSTROUS INTERRUPTIONS

Returning to poetics, mourning for the meat-animals also inspired me to attempt not to reduce animals to symbols or metaphors in my poetry.¹³ In *Uhanalaiset and silmälläpidettävät* (Koistinen, 2021b, p. 21), there is, for example, a poem commenting on the tradition of using birds as symbols in (Finnish) poetry (see Lummaa, 2017), where a cat is hunting worn-out bird symbols. In this sense, the practice of cat-writing resonates with a “vegan poetics” that strives to make animals visible *as animals* and not only as metaphors in poetic language, asking the reader to contemplate the animals instead of their absence (Holmes, 2021, p. 232). This is not to say that symbols and metaphors cannot function as powerful thinking tools (see also Chapter 3 in this book), “but a vegan poetics does sustain an allegiance to literal animal and human presence, to the singular beings and bodies upon which the human gaze falls” (Holmes, 2021, p. 232).

Sayers (2016, p. 382) develops Derrida’s ideas of carnophallogocentrism and the ethics of eating well and suggests the concept of “meat-writing [...] as a transgressive practice to unsettle carnophallogocentrism in culture”. For Derrida, the practice of eating well means that both the metaphorical (in language) and the actual devouring of others requires responsibility. Thus, meat-writing as a concept and practice could be translated as thinking responsibly with meat-animals, of which Sayers (2016, p. 376) uses the pig as an example. Since eating the other means incorporating the other into one’s body, it also involves breaking the boundary of I/other (Sayers, 2016, p. 377). Meat-writing, as derived from Derrida’s ethics of eating well, therefore highlights the radical interdependencies – the messy entanglements – between humans and “their others”. One could, indeed, argue that cat-writing is also a practice of meat-writing.

What, then, does carnophallogocentrism mean for the reading or writing of actual texts? Sayers (2016, p. 376) paraphrases Derrida as follows:

13 It is not my aim here to assign fixed meanings to my poetry – even if it were, it would be impossible since the reader and the context of reading play a role in constructing the meaning of any text. I simply want to shed light on the circumstances in which the poems were created and the questions that they seek to address.

In response to a question that if all understanding is a kind of eating, what is to become of reading text, his answer is to respect that which cannot be eaten with a similar logic that he uses with regard to what is indeterminate or untranslatable in reading/writing. Derrida says there is always a remainder that cannot be read and that remains alien; this translates to meaning we can never fully comprehend or assimilate the animal. What is left-over must constantly be remade and re-written to keep it alive and present in culture.

Cat-writing as a process could therefore be described as the constant remaking, rewriting, and tracing of that which remains incomprehensible or alien in human–cat relations. This alienness can be represented in written text, for example, through textual “interruptions” (such as repetition or white space) to place emphasis on the monstrous, excessive elements of a text – the collaborative, partial, and often interrupted process of knowledge production through writing (The Monster Network, 2021). This messy knowledge production that is cat-writing could also be examined with Haraway’s (2004, pp. 233–237) metaphor of diffraction, “the production of difference patterns”, that places emphasis on how critical inquiry is always partial and situated.¹⁴

In academic work textual “interruptions call for a slower pace of research, as they invite the reader to pause and think with them” (The Monster Network, 2021, p. 145). This is also true in creative writing. In poetry, interruptions invite the reader to pause and to think and feel with the text. Indeed, interruptions are also material: whereas textual interruptions may affect how the reader thinks and feels, there are also other sorts of interruptions inherent in writing, as our “bodies are endless interruptions, disrupting not only our lives and our writing, but also how we think, where our focus is and may be, and what we are able to do” (The Monster Network, 2021, p. 151). The material, concrete interruptions caused by my feline companion also invite me to pause, think, and feel, and this, in turn, influences the text that I am writing.

Slowness is, in fact, exemplified in the material process of cat-writing: as Sotku crawls onto my lap, blocking the screen, she demands all my attention. Thinking and writing are interrupted, yet also stimulated and shaped, by the presence of my companion animal. These interruptions are also a communication of sorts, outside of human language – a messy, bodily entanglement with the cat and her purring that resonates in my bones – that I attempt to describe in my poetry (Koistinen, 2021b, p. 9):

14 For interruptions and diffractive knowledge production, see Barad (2007).

to define this feeling, this
otherliness
paw against the back of my hand, the chance
of a claw

THE MESSY PEDAGOGY OF CAT-WRITING

In this chapter, I have approached cat-writing as an entanglement of feminist thinking, animal ethics and poetry, and the messiness of living with a cat – and not just any cat, but a specific cat, my beloved Sotku. In the process of writing, Sotku (the Tangle – the Entanglement) has served as my teacher, facilitating a crafting space for me to think, write, and act differently, with a slower pace that is attentive to the disruptions of the nonhuman. In the beginning of this text, I asked: how to write-with a cat about writing-with a cat? This question was connected especially to the vulnerabilities – and even violence – inherent in the process of writing-with a companion animal. I also asked what kinds of poetic and political issues and practices, embodied knowledges, and ethical considerations come to the fore in such writing.

Writing-with Sotku has taught me that there are some sorts of vulnerability and violence that our cat-writing cannot disentangle from, yet there are other kinds that I can seek to avoid in language, in thinking and writing, and in my other daily actions. For me, cat-writing has shaped up to be a deeply material-semiotic process, where I write not only with Sotku, but with the lived histories of humans, cats, and other (companion) species. This includes the materiality of the writing process; where the cat concretely disturbs and takes part in the writing process. In such interruptions, something of the relationships between humans and cats and humans and other species – and the knowledges crafted in such relationships – can be communicated. At the same time, cat-writing has been an effort to craft space for Sotku as well – for her to be better listened to, attended to, and cared for.

The cat-writing behind this text has taken place on at least three levels: 1) Sotku initiating my thought processes in terms of how to live ethically in the messy entanglements between humans and nonhumans, which has not only inspired me to engage with feminist thinking, animal ethics, and poetry but also influenced my daily eating habits; 2) Sotku materially taking part in the writing process of my poetry as well as this very text by climbing on my lap, blocking the laptop, stepping on the keyboard, or otherwise forcing me to pay attention to her and interrupt whatever I might be doing; and 3) me attempting to somehow capture these two aforementioned processes in writing. Others will have to figure out the process of cat-writing for themselves and their companion cats, since I believe that

cat-writing is something that must be rethought and revised in each human–cat companionship.¹⁵

Following Carol J. Adams’s argument that cultural texts about animals (i.e., “*texts of meat*”, emphasis original) transform the bodies of animals into meat, Holmes (2021, p. 238) poetically asks: “If texts can transform flesh in this way, [...] can texts also transform it back, reverse it, unerase individual subjecthoods?”¹⁶ This question leads us to the final points of this chapter, that is, to knowledge production, pedagogy, and action. As stated before, art has the potential to inspire imagination, which is needed for the making of sustainable futures (Foster & Martusewicz, 2019, pp. 6–7). In a sense, my (or, indeed, *our*) cat-writing has been a pedagogical process of opening my imagination to learning with the nonhuman – not only with the cat but also with the so-called meat-animals that she and I remain entangled with.

Based on this experience, I believe that writing-with animals might be used as an imaginative practice in ecojustice education (see also Koistinen et al., 2022). I would not be as bold as to claim that writing-with an animal would necessarily lead to similar kinds of imaginings in each writer, nor would I claim that a vegan lifestyle is the only outcome that cat-writing should inspire (and I, too, sometimes fail to follow the lifestyle). Writing-with a carnivore could, in any case, invite students to pause and face the uncomfortable emotions and knowledges connected to human–animal relations, such as keeping pets and producing meat for food (see also Koistinen & Savinotko, 2022).

It is, in fact, not that far-fetched that writing-with an animal might inspire people to consider their actions towards animals. Pirjo Suvilehto (2021, p. 31) suggests in an essay on animal literary therapy that writing and talking about animals (for instance, writing down memories of childhood pets) can be used to reflect on the treatment of animals. If cat-writing is to be used in teaching humans to relate to animals differently, specific pedagogical tools are nevertheless needed. I leave it with researchers, artists, and teachers, yours truly included, to develop cat-writing – or any other form of more-than-human writing (see Karkulehto et al., 2022) – as such a tool.

15 Much more could also be said about cat-writing as a process of affective becoming(s), which is something that Sotku and I might have to return to later.

16 It should be noted that Adams’s work has been criticised for dichotomous thinking, an anti-sympathetic stance to queer and trans people, and of assuming that a “fully present (essential) referent” can exist (Hall, 2013, pp. 170, 172, 178). That said, according to Lauren Rae Hall (2013, pp. 170–171), “Adams’s framework is one of the earliest attempts to spell out connections between the exploitation of women and nonhuman animals and could be useful in forwarding theoretical models that are more encompassing of marginal sexual identities and practices”.

How, then, to write-with a cat about writing-with a cat? How to represent it? What kinds of knowledges are made available by it? The questions still haunt. Perhaps in this relentless need to ask questions about the ethics of human–animal relations lies the pedagogical potential of cat-writing – or any kind of messy interspecies practice of living, loving, and writing. I look at Sotku (Mess, Tangle, Clutter, Muddle...). I write:

you talk with narrow eyelids
 no taming, just living

 and there is nothing, really nothing
 more to be said

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