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Welcome Home, Cat!

Throughout my early childhood, I owned a variety of small pets. These pets, which included hermit crabs, fish, chameleons, and hamsters, were fun for a while, but I quickly lost interest in them. After a short period of time, they would usually die, or I would give them away to a friend. There was very little emotional attachment between myself and these pets. My experiences with animals, however, changed dramatically at the age of eleven when my mother brought home a kitten. All of my previous pets had lived and made their homes (umwelts) in bowls or cages. They were confined to a small, designated space within my home. Their bowl or cage served as their home within my home. A certain distance is created in such a situation. The enclosed pet can only interact with your world, or umwelt, as far as its bowl or cage extends. Because I was accustomed to distancing myself from my pets, I was very concerned about sharing my entire space, my home, with this kitten. After the first exhausting evening spent intently watching over the kitten to make sure it did not get stuck behind the refrigerator or eat something it was not supposed to, I looked over at my mother and said, "Mom, I don't think we're cat people."

Ten years later, that same kitten, now an old cat, still lives with my family and me in our house. Today, it is hard for me to imagine life without my cat. The concept of a human inviting an animal to share the same space prompts one to ask: How are these human and animal worlds constructed? In *A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men*, Jakob von Uexkull uses the metaphor of the soap bubble to illustrate the make-up of

these human and animal worlds. Uexkull first creates the setting of a meadow, full of insects and flowers, and further describes the framework of these worlds:

Perhaps it should be called a stroll into unfamiliar worlds; worlds strange to us but known to other creatures, manifold and varied as the animals themselves. . . .To do so, we must first blow, in fancy, a soap bubble around each creature to represent its own world, filled with the perceptions which it alone knows. When we ourselves then step into one of these bubbles, the familiar meadow is transformed. . . .A new world comes into being. . . .the world as it appears to the animals themselves, not as it appears to us. (5)

Animals and humans occupy the same earth and spaces, such as Uexkull's meadow, but man and animal have different worlds, different *umwelts* (Broglie 22).

Once in our homes, pets live distinctly both within our world and in a space that is their own (Broglie 21). This is similar to the bowl or cage that serves as a home within a home, but my cat's *umwelt* completely overlaps my own space. Helene Cixous, a French philosopher, says, "The cat, as pet, and *insider*, has certain freedoms in the space of the house" (Baker 187). My cat is not confined to one area of my home, but is given the freedom to roam each level and every room. However, the worlds of both the human and the animal are still very different despite sharing the same space. For example, a veterinarian once told my family and me that cats only require the size of one bedroom to live happily. It is not only the quantity of flat surface the cat needs, it is also the height of the room that is of great importance. In *The Postmodern Animal*, Steve Baker notes that unlike humans, "cats stop at thresholds that we do not see, where they sniff some 'present

beyond” (184). My cat is able to notice the little things I pass by everyday, such as a small fly in the room or a loose thread in the carpet. One of many reasons for this is because he is much smaller than I am. As a human, I find there is little difference, in terms of the space between the floor and the kitchen countertop. My cat, however, views the kitchen countertop as a whole new area of his space to explore. Even when human and animal worlds overlap, each being experiences the space in a different manner.

Despite the fact that humans and animals still live in their separate worlds while sharing the same space, there is some form of interaction that takes place between these two worlds, or *umwelts*. These interactions can be viewed as contact zones. With my cat sharing a space with my family and me, the collision of these worlds is quite evident. My cat leaves the entire house caked in cat hair. Traces of my cat can be seen on upholstered chairs, bed linens, and luggage. After I have held my cat, I must always use a lint roller to extract the cat fur that has woven itself into my shirt. Cat vomit on the carpet is also a regular occurrence, which must be cleaned immediately upon discovery. In addition to these nuisances, my family and I have also changed the subtle ways in which we live in order to live in harmony with our cat. Drinks, food, and clean clothes are never left on a surface that is low enough for my cat to gain access to. Bathroom doors are now always shut because my cat began licking the toothbrushes of each family member because he discovered that he likes the taste of mint toothpaste. Board games and their accessories are never left out because the cat will steal them and hide them in some unknown corner of the house. These contact zones allow humans to better understand the world of the animal.

As one can see from my earlier examples on cat fur and vomit, contact zones can be quite messy. Houses, which humans and animals share, are built specifically for humans. When an animal enters a house, it makes this space its own, and de-centers the human(s) in the process. When man and animal share the same space, equality is created between the two *umwelts*. Just as we domesticate animals by bringing them into our homes, our pets “animalize” us to the extent that our homes become cultured animal dwellings where we humans bed with the fur and flesh of other beasts (Broglio 25). A cat can allow a human to “see something of the otherness of all non-human animals” (Baker 186). The contact zones created in such circumstances allow us to see this “otherness.”

Each animal is in “nature” when they are in a house. When my cat sleeps in the sink, he does not realize it is a structure designed for humans to wash their hands in. My cat was also extremely uncomfortable when I took him outdoors for the first time. His idea of “nature” resides within the walls of my house. Because contact zones are usually quite messy, friction in these human-animal relationships can arise. Cixous points out, “To live inexpertly is sometimes to live uncomfortably, the alliance with the animal sweeping the human off into the unfamiliar” (Baker 188). However, there are changes humans can make to alleviate such friction. As new cat owners, I thought my family and I were not “cat people.” The friction generated between our two worlds was overwhelming for me, but over time, I began to identify the ways in which the human world clashes with the cat world, and can make adjustments to lessen the friction in the relationship.

The way we think about animals establishes a particular way of seeing them in the world, in our world (Broglio 22). When an animal, such as a cat, is invited into the space of a human, the human and animal umwelts, or soap bubbles, overlap one another. Because the worlds of each of these beings interact with each other, contact zones arise. It is through these contact zones that humans are better able to understand the “otherness” of the animal. Such an understanding shapes the way in which we, as humans, think about animals. Because my family and I invited our cat into our home, we have formed a closer relationship to him through contact zones. These contact zones have enhanced the positive feelings my family and I have for our cat to the extent that we think of him as part of the family.

Works Cited

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