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Caring, Hating, and Domesticating: Bird Protection and Cats in Imperial Germany

As many scholars in the environmental humanities have noted, human care for other species is an ecological and moral quagmire.[1] Actively caring for individuals of a certain species almost always entails causing harm to those of another species or even to certain groups and cultures. Through their caring, humans interfere in interspecies relations and in many cases it is inevitable that the lives of some of those involved will become less convenient (or less existent) than before. Ecological systems in which different species share habitats are never serene havens of mutual enhancement and equality, whether cared for by humans or not.

Care is problematic not just because of these contradictions but also because, in themselves, caring practices are entwined with other exercises that we would not usually associate with care. In certain forms of livestock husbandry for instance, care for the healthy development and proliferation of the animal's breed is at the same time an exploitation of their bodies for purely human interests, which often ends in the animals' destruction. Care for wildlife, in turn, sometimes dictates that humans actively avoid contact with the species being cared for. Here care is simultaneously noncare. As such, care is one of the best examples of an unsettled and transgressed category in the spirit of Donna Haraway's scholarship—one that can only be tentatively defined by its incessant intermingling with other categories that are allegedly extraneous to it.[2]

One of the most common interspecies conflicts to be subjected to intensive interference by caring humans is that between songbirds and domestic cats. On the face of it, this avian-feline dispute features none of the complexities that make care such a murky undertaking. From a bird lover's point of view especially, the issue is very simple: cats violently prey on defenseless birds for effectively recreational purposes, thereby "unjustifiably" destroying avian lives. Humans should therefore interfere and take care that bird life is protected from cats by reducing their populations or constraining their move-

1 See Thom van Dooren, "Care," in "The Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities," *Environmental Humanities* 5 (2014): 291–94.
2 See Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, "'Nothing Comes without Its World': Thinking with Care," *Sociological Review* 60, no. 2 (2012): 197–216.

ments. Conversely, the primary concern of cat advocates is care for their welfare and their right not to be targets of human aggression and violence. For them, caring for cats means refraining from meddling in cat-bird relations, regardless of the consequences for bird life. The campaigns to protect songbirds from cats are contested by feline supporters, who fight for their cause as adamantly as their adversaries. Such disputes often lead to verbal wars, conducted on behalf the nonhuman species involved, by quick-tempered animal lovers with an obsession for unverifiable statistics about predations and extinctions. However, the avian-feline conflict goes deeper than these superficial quarrels and represents something of far greater significance; ultimately, it embodies fundamental questions about the degree of intimacy human society wishes to nurture with certain species, and its correlating desire to keep other species at bay. Even more, it reveals how such human endeavors—of integrating and alienating animals—may be both sophisticated and confounding in their realization.

This article focuses on a specific period in modern German history—the *Kaiserreich* (Imperial Germany, 1871–1914)—as it highlights the complex entanglements of care in the songbird and cat conflict. It was in the second half of the nineteenth century, a hundred years before Rachel Carson's dystopia of a world without birdsong triggered the onset of a new environmental consciousness, that so-called bird protection (*Vogelschutz*) became one of the most seminal domains of emerging nature conservation in Germany. As elsewhere, German bird protection grew out of a love and fascination for these feathered creatures. To members of the rising middle class, songbirds exhibited a lifestyle abundant with bourgeois virtues similar to those they themselves glorified as constituents of a decent existence in a civilized age: monogamy, devoted care of offspring, musical talent, industriousness, and cleanliness. Because they believed these creatures to be so similar to their ideal selves, they wanted to befriend them and care for their presence alongside human society.

This strong cultural sentiment gained such momentum that by the beginning of the twentieth century, German bird protection had crystallized into a fully-fledged environmental movement led by the influential "League for Bird Protection" (Bund für Vogelschutz). The league had thousands of members, all committed to caring for the life of songbirds—that is, protecting them from modern developments perceived as detrimental to their (free) lives. Public interest in, and admiration for, the avian way of life was so pronounced in Imperial Germany that there was an almost complete identification between bird love and bird protection, and between bird protection and ornithology.

However, from its early beginnings, bird protection was not only fueled by love, companionability, and genuine feelings of friendship towards birds; it was also shaped by hatred and animosity. For just as much as bird protectors (*Vogelschützer*) cared for songbirds, they despised the alleged enemies of their feathered friends. Before the "barbarous" Italians who were hunting migrating birds on their passage from south to north and the "insolent" sparrows who were reproached for driving worthier birds away from nest boxes, it was the "ferocious" cats that protectors identified as the greatest menace to avifauna in their *Heimat* landscape. Bird protectors—who, as members of the German bourgeoisie and aristocracy usually despised expressions of rampant violence—showed little restraint when verbalizing their hostility towards the domestic cat. For example, Hans Freiherr von Berlepsch, arguably Germany's most important ornithologist at the time, called for nothing less than a "ruthless war of extermination" against the "most dangerous enemy of birdlife."[3] In fin de siècle Germany, where protection of songbirds was unavoidably accompanied by this vehement hatred, it was a clear case of "violent care."[4]

The escalation of the avian-feline conflict in Imperial Germany appeared to be of a simple nature. The direct and antagonistic language of bird protectors reflected their clear-cut view that cats had to be eliminated for the sake of songbirds; one form of life privileged over another. Death was an instrument for sustaining life. Bird lovers not only expounded the benefits to birdlife from the removal of its "greatest threat"; they also vilified cats as ill-natured creatures. In ornithology discourse the domestic cat was portrayed as a malevolent outcast, undeserving of the position of true companion in human society: "The cat has never been a genuine German pet," one bird fancier stated, "her nature will forever remain alien to us, for it is malignant and treacherous."[5] Another passionate bird protector even referred to cats as an invasive species, namely as "foreigners on German soil, . . . enemies immigrated from the East."[6] For Wilhelmine ornithologists, the domestic cat represented the archetypal outsider—an animal that, cleanliness aside, contradicted everything bourgeois society cherished and believed to be personified by songbirds.

3 Hans von Berlepsch, *Der gesamte Vogelschutz, seine Begründung und Ausführung* (Halle: Hermann Gesenius, 1904), 16, 109.

4 See Thom van Dooren, "A Day with Crows: Rarity, Nativity, and the Violent-Care of Conservation," *Animal Studies Journal* 4, no. 2 (2015): 1–28.

5 Quoted in Agnes Engel, *Vogelschutz und Katze* (Berlin-Friedenau: L. M. Weibel und Co., 1911), 7.

6 Friedrich Schwalbe [1914?] "Notwendigkeit und Nutzen des Vogelschutzes im Land- und Gartenbau," Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, GStA PK, XVI. HA Rep. 30, Nr. 954.

This seems like a German version of the kind of cat hatred Harriet Ritvo ascribed to English society around the same period. Similar to bird-loving German *Bildungsbürger*, for middle-class Victorians, cats epitomized "bad creatures" that stubbornly perpetuated their inborn remoteness from human society, even in a modern age.[7] This view of cats as "faithless, deceitful, destructive, and cruel"[8] has become one of the most consistent representations of the animal world by nineteenth-century European (bourgeois) societies. From a long-term perspective, it amounted to a modern form of a die-hard European tradition, passed down from the Middle Ages, of incriminating cats as the associates of witches and the devil.[9]

Interestingly, bird protectors presented this disengagement of cats vis-à-vis human society as the reason that they posed such a threat to songbirds. Free-living songbirds were put in great danger because cats were allowed to roam freely, escaping any form of human control: on the loose "both day and night," cats prey on birds with "slyness and a desire to kill." One ornithologist remarked that "not a single nest, neither at the top of the tree, nor in the bush, nor on the ground is safe from them."[10] This outdoor omnipresence was what bird protectors set out to fight. Their discontent was first and foremost with the cats' incomplete domestication, in a twofold sense—on the one hand concerning space, as cats were not confined to the dwellings of human owners, and on the other hand concerning their character and behavior, which even after at least eight thousand years of co-existence with humans had remained uncivilized, to the detriment of birds.

Shortly after the turn of the century, the love-hate entanglements of anti-feline bird protection in Imperial Germany started to become complicated. For when ornithologists identified the imperfect domestication of cats as the main reason for why cats presented a hazard to songbirds, they proposed as a solution the radical domestication of these yet unbound creatures. While some of the more extreme anti-feline ornithologists were certainly still putting their ruthless ideology into practice—killing not an

7 Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 21–22.

8 Harriet Ritvo, *Noble Cows and Hybrid Zebras: Essays on Animals and History* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 41.

9 See Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 75–104.

10 "Der zweite Vogelschutztag in Stuttgart und seine Beschlüsse zur Katzenfrage" [1911?], Sonderausdruck aus der Allgemeinen Forst- und Jagdzeitung, Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, GStA PK I. HA Rep. 87 B, Nr. 20037.

insignificant number of felines (and even boasting about it)—most bird protectors were not so naive as to believe that the eradication of Germany's cat population was anything more than an unattainable utopia. In fact, many of them possessed a solid scientific understanding of ecological balance (and threats thereto) and did not fail to appreciate the cats' service as exterminators of "unworthy" "pest" animals such as mice and rats. The majority of Wilhelmine ornithologists were thereby too anthropocentric to endorse the extinction of felines. Herein lies the paradox: instead of resolving their hatred with hostility, they suggested *caring* for their feline adversaries; integrating them as intimately as possible into the realm of the human; making them subordinate. They sought to ensure that cats lived *with* people rather than merely alongside them—they were not so much anti-feline as they were anti-loitering. They were fighting cat freedom, not cat life.

So, while extermination should be limited, domestication had to be exhaustive. First and foremost, bird protectors wished for cats to become genuine animals of the home (*Haustiere*) and they conceptualized this feline transmutation primarily in spatial terms. Berlepsch, for instance, stated in his typically uncompromising tone that "the house and courtyard" constituted a cat's sole and "proper sphere of activity." House and courtyard were contrasted with such spatial realms as the "garden" or "forest and field," places where cats were prone to regress to their pre-domestication pasts as "beasts of prey," satisfying their predatory desires uninhibited. Hence, Berlepsch and his kind did not despise all cats equally. They especially sneered at "feral cats prowling around far away from any village or town."[11] They hoped to revolutionize feline existence in space: instead of remaining the liminal animals they had been for millennia, commuting at will between the home and free spaces, cats should be confined to the domestic sphere.

However, feline domestication wasn't only about this physical confinement. It was also a scheme of "pet-making." As ironic as it may sound, through campaigning for the domestication of cats by rendering them unfree, bird protectors themselves metamorphosed into friends of felines, wishing to associate them not merely with the house as a spatial unit, but also with the home, as a prop in the setting of bourgeois domesticity in which caring for subordinate pets was actually another constitutive element of decent family life. They supported the strict notion that each animal has its place,

11 Berlepsch, *Der gesamte Vogelschutz*, 16, 108.

distinguishing between (and glorifying both) the wild and free and the domesticated and subdued. As the authors of a guide to bird protection in agriculture put it, "there's nothing wrong about cat-fanciers whose animals are dear to their heart, and who . . . care for them." Indeed, bird lovers should demand "that cats will be properly cared for, and properly supervised and nurtured, just like other pet animals, especially the dog," in other words, "properly" domesticated. Only as fully fledged pets are they unable to "pursue their passion of hunting birds unfettered."[12] This story of bird protection and cats in Imperial Germany reveals the problem of care "in all of its ambiguity and complexity,"[13] not just because care for one type of animal was embedded in hatred for another, but because the remedying of this hatred dictated caring for the reviled species even more devotedly than for the animals that were actually loved. Hatred was associated with care, and love with noncare.

Until now I have referred only to bird protectors as agents of love, hatred, and care. Yet, Imperial Germany also had its share of people who fancied cats and even fought for their cause; the so-called cat protectors (*Katzenschützer*). Incorporating their point of view into the discussion makes the avian-feline conflict even more intricate. Bird protectors regarded their solution to the conflict as a win-win situation (songbirds will be saved, and cats will become subjects of human care); however, cat protectors failed to see how their favorite animals would benefit from such a radical domestication. They refused to let the animals they cherished become encompassed (and compromised) by human society, and fully subjected to the interferences of human care.

Led by the "German Federation for Cat Protection" (Deutscher Bund für Katzenschutz), cat protectors fought above all for the felines' right to roam unconstrained outdoors—something cats have done for thousands of years. In their opinion, it was not just impossible, but indeed unjust, to forcedly confine cats to the home and to a domestic way of life; they upheld the conviction that it was perfectly natural for cats to prowl, and to "extensively investigate both the nearby and distant environment of their vicinities."[14] In fact, it would be "totally . . . unnatural to keep these animals locked within four walls."[15] For Wilhelmine cat advocates, cats were vested with a right to freedom of movement based on their very

12 *Vogelschutz in der Landwirtschaft* (Munich: Carl Gerber, 1910), 1–2.
13 Van Dooren, "Care," 291.
14 Deutscher Bund für Katzenschutz E.V. to the Chancellor of the Reich Dr. von Bethmann-Hollweg (23 October 1911), Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, GStA PK I. HA Rep. 87 B, Nr. 20037.
15 Gustav Simon, "Vogelschutz und Katzenrecht" [1911?], Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, GStA PK I. HA Rep. 87 B, Nr. 20037.

nature. Cat protectors construed the cats' right to live freely in accord with their nature not only in spatial, but also in behavioral terms, for which they found themselves caught up in an irreconcilable conflict with the ornithologists. In their view, to behave naturally meant, among other things, that cats should prey on weaker animals.

Nowadays, many cat advocates strategically maintain that the harm caused by cats to avian populations is not as considerable as often presumed. In Imperial Germany cat lovers had a more radical standpoint: they did not deny the relentlessness of cat predation on songbirds but at the same time asserted that such predation was not only legitimate, but even favorable, as a vital expression of cats' natural behavior; "a custom conformable with the law of nature."[16] Interpreting things this way, cat protectors relocated the avian-feline conflict into the sphere of "nature." Cats prey on birds, they argued, because "nature is governed by the eternal rule: 'eat or be eaten.'"[17] But furthermore, they classified cats, to some extent, as wild fauna; belonging to an animal kingdom not tamed by humans. Allowing cats to predate on birds meant protecting their "wild dignity"[18] against attempts to transfigure them into bona fide pets. This meant letting them live freely, without restraint from the caring hands of humans—like songbirds, only with a portion of (nonbourgeois) brutality.

The entanglements of bird protection in Imperial Germany reveal how even the most common and natural interspecies conflicts become irrevocably complex once well-meaning humans meddle with their arsenals of care, love, hatred, and violence. But even more than that, the Wilhelmine avian-feline conflict demonstrates how interventions aimed at benefiting certain species to the detriment of others may test the boundaries of prescribed categories of human-animal interactions; in the course of the conflict, hate metamorphosed into care, disdain involved integration, wild behavior was made a reason for radical domestication, and supporting animals entailed keeping them at a distance. This takes us back to cats as the real protagonists of the story; as even today, having become the most popular of domestic companions, the cat's status as a domesticated animal remains dubious[19] due not only to feline nature, but also the convoluted

16 Simon, „Vogelschutz."
17 Deutscher Bund für Katzenschutz E.V. to the Chancellor of the Reich Dr. von Bethmann-Hollweg (23 October 1911).
18 See Lori Gruen, *Ethics and Animals: An Introduction* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 151–55.
19 See Ferris Jabr, "Are Cats Domesticated?," *The New Yorker*, 23 October 2015, accessed 19 February, 2016, http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/are-cats-domesticated.

"nature" of almost any multispecies relations involving humans. This alone is a reason for us to take greater analytical care of them as our imperfect companions.