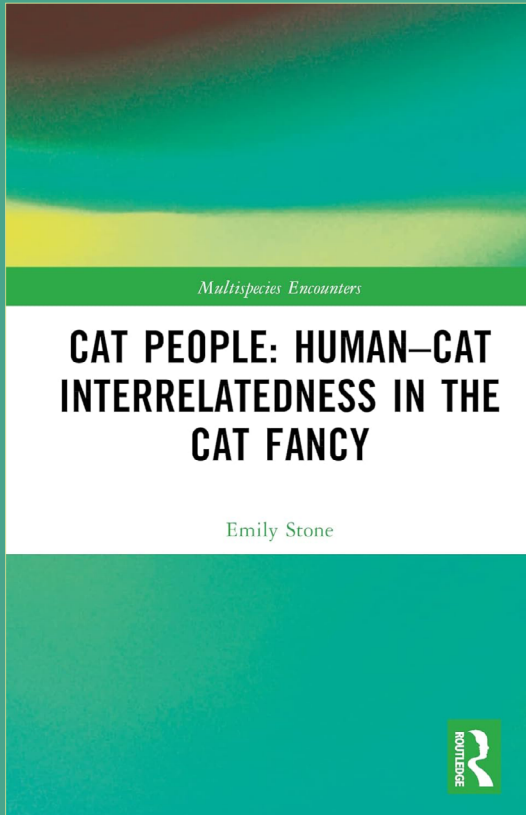


Into the Cat Show Ring

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Review of:

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Emily Stone's *Cat People: Human-Cat Interrelatedness in the Cat Fancy* turns to the world of pedigree cats to consider concepts of agency, work, and the ethics of care across species. The newest instalment of Routledge's Multispecies Encounters series, *Cat People* adopts online and in-person multispecies ethnographic methods to explore how cats' expressiveness and agential choices are variously heard, obscured, and ignored in "cat fancies". Fancies are events of pedigree cat showing and breeding in the United Kingdom. Stone, a self-proclaimed cat person who has long lived with cats and volunteered in shelters, draws on what she calls "a species-specific knowledge of cat behaviour" (7) to examine both human and feline sensibilities in the cat show ring. From the outset, Stone distinguishes between animal welfare, which she defines as "making improvements to the lives of animals 'within the status quo'", and wellbeing, the central focus of her study, which "questions the system within which the cats sit" (7). She urges animal studies scholars to shift their focus from merely addressing the conditions of human-animal interactions—where incremental changes often serve to justify the continuation of these activities—towards a deeper examination of the ethical and relational aspects of the interactions themselves. The form of the book is linear and historically organized, beginning with feline domestication and ending with uncertainties about the social sustainability of current pedigree maintenance practices, including cat showing and confirmation. The intermediary chapters connect socioculturally to multispecies aesthetics, eugenics and biopower, work and leisure, and responsible care.

In Chapter One, Stone traces how cats came to be companion animals, following the cat's domestication journey "from Mouser to Catwalk". Following the lead of many evolutionary biologists, Stone questions the accuracy of centring human dominion in domestication. Instead, she maintains that domestication is not a single event or time, but rather a process of mutual adaptation that continues in contemporary human–animal relationships. Stone points out how cats retain behavioural and morphological traits that make them excellent hunters, exemplary evolutionary self-selectors, and perfect

liminal species that are dependent on and independent of human care. Even so, Stone argues that cat's apparent "autonomy" (21), the very thing that is considered to distinguish them from other companion species, becomes lost in selective breeding, opening felines up to a variety of behavioural and health issues. Moreover, she suggests that the prevailing idea of the "selfish" cat is likely due to "a level of misunderstanding and lack of knowledge regarding cat personalities, behaviour, and communication" (15). Increasing knowledge about feline sociality, Stone says, disproves perceptions of their aloof indifference.

Chapter Two provides a vivid and detailed description of the cat show itself, of the loud and busy halls in which judges and their assistant handlers (called stewards) examine cats one-by-one according to the established breed standard. Paying particular attention to the feline Umwelt, the cat's specific sensorium and perception of the world, Stone explores how the olfactory and auditory qualities of the show ring can be particularly stressful during weekend-long shows. Many instances of feline stress, such as learned helplessness or freezing, are misinterpreted at the cat show as relaxation or passivity. Speaking with a veterinarian, she is told "I think there's probably thousands of cat breeders and showers who have got cats who are bloody terrified, and they think they are just sitting there chilled" (55). Owners tell Stone that they participate in shows for their cats' enjoyment, but what the book argues is that the cat fancy, as a place of heightened cat visibility and spectacle, is also a zone in which cats are neglected and made invisible (51).

When Stone argues that many owners may misread their cats' body language, it raises questions about the construction and politics of what is a legitimate human interpretation of feline feeling. Stone navigates this by emphasizing the importance of recognizing cats as individuals. She rarely affords them the same level of attention and contextualization as her human participants, however. Stone advocates for "guardians to attend to their cats individually on their own terms, not just human terms" (165) and acknowledges the unique personalities, needs, and preferences of cats. Yet she tends to treat

behavioural science as a universal approach to understanding all her feline participants. Cats are often assessed here through broad behavioural generalizations, such as when Stone notes that vocalizations are merely “a sign of frustration” (55). Spending more time observing and documenting the emotional expressions, preferences, and quirks of specific cats, as Stone does with her human participants, could offer a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between behavioural science, breeders’ interpretations of feline behaviour, and the lived experiences of cats. This deeper exploration of the interplay between generalizable science and individual feline experiences could enrich discussions on interspecies harm, as explored in the subsequent chapters (particularly chapters five and six), and help bridge some of the epistemological tensions between breeders, veterinarians, and the cats themselves. In short, given the diverse certifications, moral dimensions, and schools of thought in companion animal behaviour, social scientists and multispecies ethnographers must consider how individual animals might deviate in their expressiveness from established behavioural norms couched in frameworks of legitimacy.

Chapters Three and Four offer valuable insights into the interplay of aesthetics, selective breeding, and biopower. Stone highlights the role of nonhumans in categorizing and regulating various forms of life, positioning the pedigree cat within a complex web of power that Gwendolyn Blue and Melanie Rock describe as trans-biopolitics — a theoretical framework that identifies nonhuman actors within technologically-mediated networks of life and death.¹ This framework serves as a foundation for exploring how layers of speciesism, anthropocentrism, and biopolitical control manifest on non-human bodies. By examining these intersections of power, Stone presents three thought-provoking arguments in these chapters that offer rich avenues for further exploration. The first point concerns how cats serve as a vehicle for breeders’ agency: rather than being seen as individual beings, pedigree cats often embody the labels and accomplishments of their breeders. In this sense, pedigree cats

1 See Gwendolyn Blue and Melanie Rock, “Trans-Biopolitics: Complexity in Interspecies Relations,” *Health* 15.4 (2011): 353–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363459310376299>

are transformed into art objects that reflect the breeder's aesthetic vision: "the cat as an aesthetic 'object' becomes a marker of the breeder's skill in a similar way to a piece of art acting as an 'index' of the artist's skill" (71). Although *Cat People* lacks a thorough analysis of how the aesthetic values of specific breeds are intertwined with broader social frameworks, future research might investigate how literal and embodied aspects of feline physiology ground breeders' artistic sensibilities as expressed through selective breeding.

Second, Stone gestures toward notions of purity and the mythologies surrounding breeds that often slip into racialized discourses of eugenics. She briefly explores how the concept of purity transcends both ethnicity and animal breeds, revealing a colonial fixation with the exotic through the romanticized origin stories of cats like the Birman and the Egyptian Mau. This concern with invented histories emerged in Stone's fieldwork, as cat fanciers decorated their feline's cages according to these perceived origins: "the Australian Mist breed was covered with Australian paraphernalia such as flags, toy koalas, and kangaroos, the Turkish Van cats were sitting on cushions decorated with Turkish flags, and a Maine Coon had multiple American flags draped across her pen" (93). The book therefore makes a striking connection between fabricated histories of breeds and the imperialist aesthetics of exoticism.

Third, the conflicting points regarding breeding practices in Chapter Four are particularly intriguing: on one hand, female cats (referred to as queens) can refuse mounting from potential mates; on the other hand, breeders often undermine this sexual agency by keeping the queen and stud in close proximity so as to produce desirable offspring traits. Under what conditions can the queen's refusal be recognized? Or perhaps, under what circumstances is her refusal legible to human interpretation? While Stone acknowledges the uncertainty in understanding how cats select their mates, she argues that "breeding practices represent a true human intervention and lack of consideration for the feline *umwelt*" (100). By presenting these moments, Stone opens up important avenues for future exploration, particularly in locating nonhuman bodies, especially

companion animals, within our biopolitical framework, where scientific research renders certain animal agencies and choices visible, while others remain obscured by interspecies power dynamics and reproductive control.

Stone's strongest argument lies in Chapter Five, in which she details the difficulties in establishing absolute boundaries between work and leisure for both cats and cat people. Resisting such binaries, Stone aptly points out human–nonhuman working relationships can be based on love and respect as well as domination. With this in mind, she approaches cat and human work and leisure with a refreshing curiosity, finding the cat fancy to be a form of work for cats and a form of commodified leisure for humans: although pedigree showing is considered a hobby mainly motivated by social connection with fellow cat people, research participants also exert physical labour in caring and transporting cats and invest significant financial resources which lead Stone to conclude work and leisure exist on a continuum that with categories that can be experienced simultaneously. Compared to scholars such as Donna Haraway, who find instances of co-creation and collaboration in human–animal working relationships,² Stone concludes pedigree cat breeding and showing is “focused on human–human interactions, with the cats acting principally as conduits for this interaction” (141).

Lastly, transitioning from the show ring to the home, *Cat People* delves into the complexities of pedigree cat-keeping and husbandry. Stone thoughtfully engages with anecdotes that might otherwise be dismissed as inconsequential, such as participants describing cats knocking chicken off a bedside table (148) or meeting kittens over FaceTime (153), to emphasize the individuality and relational subjectivity of humans and their cats. Despite her focus on the everyday interactions between cats and their people, Stone maintains a critical eye on how feline behavioural science either reinforces or challenges the qualitative data she gathers. Stone applies this understanding to various aspects of husbandry, including the intricate dynamics of managing multi-cat households, decisions related to litter delivery

2 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

and sterilization, and considerations surrounding outdoor access. By examining how harm can occur both at the population and individual levels through breeding practices that protect cats from external threats yet restrict their mobility and freedom, Stone aligns with other scholars on the ethics of care, ultimately concluding that “care can do good yet simultaneously oppress” (160). She grounds this argument within the specific context of companion animal husbandry and breeding, where universal standards are challenging to establish and implement, as “particular aspects of the cats and particular ways of relating to them are brought to the fore at different moments in different contexts” (165).

These evolving moral considerations shaped by veterinary and behavioural science contribute to what participants in the United Kingdom perceive as a decline in cat fancy culture—a focus of the final chapter. As the number of judges and new participants dwindles and the costs and regulatory measures rise, the future of cat fancy appears increasingly uncertain. Reflecting on the Five Freedoms of Animal Welfare, established in 1965 to guide legislative changes for animal rights and adopted by major animal interest groups worldwide, Stone challenges readers to consider which aspects of cat fancy culture should be preserved, even if doing so might come at the expense of the cat’s well-being. She points out that instead of questioning the fundamental principles of these activities, we often make minor adjustments to justify their continuation—shifting the focus of inquiry from animal welfare to animal wellbeing. Nevertheless, she presents the intertwined components of the discourse on the decline of cat fancy with relative even-handedness, recognizing that while breeders and exhibitors understand the ethical concerns, they view themselves as essential to preserving the integrity and future of specific breeds.

I eagerly anticipate the future theoretical insights that may emerge from Stone’s ethnographic research, particularly in the areas of interspecies harm, biopower, and the gendered interpretations of sexuality and agency in relation to care and reproduction. The qualitative data presented throughout the book opens up potential for

future more thorough explorations of specific themes, such as the representation of cats as artistic objects, the role of cats in expressing breeders' agency, and the establishment and enactment of interspecies harm within the contexts of behavioral science, colonialism, and biopower. A deeper examination of these issues may not only enhance the reader's understanding of the complexities within cat fancy culture, but situate this niche community to broader discussions in human–animal interaction and critical animal studies. Nonetheless, the book delivers a compelling account of human–cat relationships in pedigree breeding, offering valuable insights into these dynamics while paving the way for future research on selective breeding, aesthetics, and class-based analyses of pet ownership. It is particularly well-suited for graduate students preparing to engage in both in-person and digital multispecies ethnographic research involving companion animals for its relatively straightforward structure and presentation of data.