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Feral cats in the city

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Introduction

In a recent advertisement for the Cat Action Trust, cute 'little Darcy' is shown stepping from an existence in the wild towards a 'normal' domestic life as a pet kitten. The text of this advertisement signals a particularly negative view of feral animals in urban environments. It maintains that:

This little kitten was born in the wild and was facing a life of hunger, disease and terror.... Within a few months, little Darcy would have been on his own. Feral cats are *the inhabitants of dereliction*. They gather wherever they can find food and shelter. The colonies MUST be controlled or the neighbours complain and the cats are killed by the authorities. Please help us to save cats and kittens by sending a donation to help our work. We have Groups, nationwide, saving and caring for feral cats who need love and so much attention if they ever hope to have a happy life.

(our emphasis)

The clear message of the Cat Action Trust is that these cats need to be saved from their feral misery.

This representation of feral cats conveys nothing of the ambiguity of people's attitudes towards cats, and yet, whether domestic or feral, they evoke various responses which demonstrate a mixing of affection, fear and distaste. In the case of feral colonies, we suggest that their material environment also influences views of cats, whether benign or malign. Our study of feral cats in Hull suggests a number of possible relationships between people, animals and place, and a complexity which is at variance with the singular, negative view projected by the Cat Action Trust. More generally, representations of feral cats in their relationship with the built environment and urban 'wilderness' provide a commentary on attitudes to nature and civilisation.

The domestic and the feral: human-animal relationships in the home and in the wild

Human responses to animals can be captured in a dialectic of desire and disgust, domination and affection. Perin (1988:117) remarks on '[a] remarkable ambivalence...built into the dog—human bond'. On one hand, dogs serve to complete a person or a family, and are treated with affection similar to that given to people. On the other hand, as Perin (1988:118) points out, in common English and American usage, 'a dog's life' is an unhappy, slavish existence; and a "dog's death" is a miserable, shameful end.' Tuan (1984) argues similarly that the treatment of pet animals by people manifests a mix of affection and cruelty, and that affection itself cannot be separated from a desire to dominate. A pet may be expected to fit into the home, to become, as Tuan (1984:107) puts it, 'as unobtrusive as a piece of furniture'. This may be achieved by de-naturing them, by spaying females and castrating males so that they become 'less smelly and dirty'. The spayed or castrated and regularly shampooed animal is thus rendered suitable for home life. Also, de-clawing, although illegal in the UK, is still practiced, as it is in other Western European countries. Cats' and dogs' defiling traits are removed, and the animal becomes a suitable object for affection. This suggests a common aversion to *untamed* nature if it appears as such in a domestic setting. Baker (1993:104) suggests that

animals—and cultural constructions of 'the animal'—will invariably figure as the negative term when used in binary oppositions. This is perhaps why, in the post-Cartesian West with its continuing appetite for the dualistic and oppositional, animals seem to figure so overwhelmingly negatively in our imaginative and our visual rhetoric.

In some cultures, it is the 'naturalness' of familiar animals which renders them unambiguously defiled. Thus, for Gypsies, cats are defiled because they lick their genitals and thus fail to maintain a distinction between the 'pure' outer body and the 'impure' inner body. For this reason, they are totally excluded from Gypsy space. Similarly, Gypsy dogs, which have the same defiling traits as cats, are only kept because they work—as hunters or as guard dogs—and they are never allowed in the living space (except, occasionally, if small breeds like Yorkshire terriers—so much for pollution taboos). Agee and Evans in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1965) made a similar observation about dogs in poor rural communities in the American South in the 1940s. They might have been useful, like farm cats kept as ratters, but they were not objects of affection. According to modern Western standards of animal welfare, they were neglected.

There are a number of themes here: domination, domestication and, through the elision of the animal and the human, racism and a more general dehumanisation. These relationships between people and animals in the recent past, and in societies other than the dominant ones in the West, serve to highlight their cultural specificity. Historical changes in the treatment and perception of animals underline

this point. Thomas's (1996) history of animals in British society demonstrates that a number of species have moved from inside to outside of the domestic economy, and have been variously treated with affection and disgust. In seventeenth-century England, for example, bees were allegedly treated as if they were a part of the human community. 'Bees would hate you, said an authority, if you did not love them' (Thomas 1996:96), but what Thomas refers to as the 'Eastern' view of dogs as filthy scavengers was still current in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. 'In 1662, the preacher Thomas Brooks classified dogs with vermin,' and, jumping a few centuries, Freud also saw dogs as reprehensible because they had no horror of excrement and no shame about their sexual functions (Thomas 1996:105–106). Thomas's historical survey and cross-cultural comparisons demonstrate that there is nothing necessary or immutable in people's responses to the wildness of animals. Their inclusion or exclusion, whether or not they are treated with affection or disgust, depends on their placing within a particular cosmology.

Clearly, animal categorisations do have particular cultural and historical contexts, but they can also be rather slippery. Animals may resist categorisation. Pet cats in modern Western societies are interesting in this regard because it is generally accepted that they will retain some of their wildness. The designation 'pet' generally indicates belonging: a placing in the home, either sharing space with people, adorning the carpet or sleeping on the settee, or confinement within domestic space as in the case of goldfish, lizards or budgerigars. In the case of dogs, moving beyond the confines of the home is usually under the control of a human. However, 'putting the cat out at night' signals incomplete containment in the home, only a partial domestication, even though cats may be cosmetically modified to fit conceptions of the homely and domestic. Similarly, the cat-flap is a breach in the domestic boundary, and cats bringing mice or birds into the home may still be seen as polluters of domestic space. In this respect, pet cats are transgressive, breaking the boundary between nature and culture.

Feral cats occupy a zone somewhere else on the domestic—wild spectrum. As members of the same species as pet cats, either ex-pets, dumped cats or born into a feral colony, they are all potential pets—they could be 'rescued', as the Cat Action Trust suggests that they should be—but the feral cat also embodies wildness, more so than the domestic version. Some ferals may live in close proximity to humans, even occasionally occupying domestic space, whereas other feral groups live entirely apart from people while depending on resources generated by human settlement such as vermin, scrap food, buildings and waste materials (the latter two providing shelter). Perceptions of these feral animals then overlap with those of the Wild Cat (*Felinus sylvestris*) from which the domestic cat (*Felinus catus*) is descended. Thus, the pet/feral/wild boundaries are blurred.

'The wild': cats on the margin

In overdeveloped societies, cats as wild animals also have a place on the fringes of civilisation, as a real or imagined and occasional threat to the settled population, and

this is probably reflected in attitudes to feral animals in appropriate settings: that is, in marginal spaces characterised by dereliction or uncultivated nature. Berger (1980: 9) has asserted that '[a]nimals have gradually disappeared. Today, we live without them,' meaning that we no longer have that intimate relationship with animals which characterised peasant cultures. Particularly, we could argue either that urban living has resulted in the incorporation of animals into the private sphere (as pets), or that urban culture has removed them to a real or imaginary 'wild' or to some rural past (in Baker's terms, to 'the authentic reality of the good meat-eating peasant': Baker, 1993:13).

We can see this removal of animals as a loss which might be compensated to some extent by imagining or encountering wild animals on the fringes of cities and in interstitial spaces. There seems to be a need to retain a space for wildness or to recover a time when people had a more intimate relationship with animals. Jackson (1981:66), in her writing on fantasy and the Gothic, has suggested that people's fears (and desires) are commonly located in unnatural figures, but we could argue that animals which are imagined or whose wildness and danger are exaggerated similarly embody deeply rooted fears and desires. In Jean Genet's portrayal of dusk (quoted by Minh-ha 1996:101–102), he captures the ambiguity of this transitional time in the expression *entre chien et loup*, between dog and wolf, that is, a time of day when one cannot be distinguished from the other, and he also describes it as 'the hour of metamorphoses when people *half hope, half fear* that a dog will become a wolf' (our emphasis). This quotation exemplifies the ambiguously *unheimlich*, the strangely familiar, which, according to Freud, entailed

that class of the frightening which 'arouses dread and horror in the old and long familiar' (Freud, 1919 [1990]). [The uncanny] has 'the power to signify the development of meaning in the direction of ambivalence, from that which was familiar and homely [*heimlich*] to that which has become unfamiliar, estranging [*unheimlich*]'.

(Chisholm 1993:436; see also Wilbert 1998; Wilton, 1998)

Wildness in cats is, on the one hand, 'unsettling'¹ because it contradicts the idea of the cat as a domestic, pet animal close to humans, and, on the other hand, it is a source of desire. In psychoanalytical terms, a fascination with wild cats and with wildness in cats signifies a repressed longing for intimate contact with the natural world.

Representations of the wild cat, often 'sighted at dusk', convey a sense of the *unheimlich*, a repressed relationship with wild nature. There have been hundreds of 'sightings' of large wild cats annually in Britain since the Surrey puma in the 1960s, and some of the evidence—footprints, prey which could only have been killed by a large cat like a puma—is quite convincing. However, many of the sightings are probably imagined or they could be ferals of exaggerated dimensions (Bottriell 1985). Some of these reports convey a strong sense of dread. Thus, in regard to the celebrated Beast of Bodmin:

Another farmer...is so convinced that the Beast exists. He told *The Independent* that 'you'll know when the Beast's there. There'll be no rabbits or foxes about and the birds stop singing.'... And [a local builder] told reporters that he'd had an eerie late night encounter with the Beast near the famous Jamaica Inn.

(The case...' 1998)

As sources of fear and excitement, the large feral cat, panther or lynx glimpsed at dusk is akin to the wolf in medieval Europe (Fumagalli 1994), an element of the wild which threatened the precarious hold of settled society over nature (and which has now returned to the fringes of the city in Spain, reforming this boundary between the civil and the wild). The large feral animal, either seen or imagined 'out there', represents both a loss, something now enjoyed only vicariously in TV wildlife programmes, and a threat (to the boundaries of urban civilisation).

Those animals which transgress the boundary between civilisation and nature, or between public and private, which do not stay in their allotted space, are commonly sources of abjection, engendering feelings of discomfort or even nausea which we try to distance from the self, the group and associated spaces (but which we can never banish from the psyche). This is clearly the case with cockroaches and rats which invade public and domestic space, emerging from where they 'belong', out of sight on a stratum below civilised life, and eliding with other cultures in racist discourse to symbolise racialised 'others' (Hoggett 1992; Sibley 1995). But larger animals, like foxes, badgers and wild boar, may also be perceived as transgressive ('out of place') and abject. Thus, while there may be a sense of a loss of contact with animal nature, there is at the same time a sense that the boundary between urban civilisation and animal nature has to be maintained, a fear of the merging of culture and nature. In Britain, this concern is expressed in boundary maintenance and surveillance by environmental health officers, animal welfare organisations and—in the case of sightings of big cats, 'beasts' of Barnet, Brookman's Park, Bodmin and Barnsley, even the Norfolk Gnasher—by the police.

Ideas about which animals belong and which do not belong in urban society result in feral cats, like urban foxes, being regarded as highly transgressive and ambiguous. The feral cat occupies a range of relationships with human populations, from a proximal but non-tactile one to a distant relationship, collapsing in the extreme into these fantastic images of a threatening animal 'other'. They may be perceived as both inside and outside of urban society. This provides one starting-point for understanding feral cat colonies as they vary across the city. The second is a categorisation of urban 'cat spaces'.

Wild things in an ordered urban space

The urban environment is one where nature has been contained and transformed. The city is subject to an ordering process which signals what can be included in urban space and what does not belong, what Foucault referred to as epistemic

principles 'defining what objects can be identified, how they can be marked and in what ways they can be ordered' (Bannet 1989:144). The idea of an ordering system which can be used to characterise a society does, however, need considerable qualification. We have suggested above that people are ambivalent about wild nature, including animals, which can be simultaneously despised and admired. Thus, the place of animals in the city is uncertain and often contested, rather than being determined by epistemic principles. These principles constitute the basis of a power structure or an ordering system, but one which is clearly resisted at the local level.

Some more light is cast on this problem by Peters, who, in a remarkable essay written in 1979, anticipates recent psychoanalytical readings of the city. She uses the metaphors of 'the forest' and 'the clearing' to describe the changing relationship between people and the built environment. The forest, she suggests, 'is still present in our inner lives. It is our pre-conscious stage. Generally, it is so overlaid that we are not aware of it. It surfaces only in dreams and myth' (Peters 1979: 80). The clearing is a place of comfort and security, but also of fear, 'for the security is never secure enough. There is always more work to do, excluding the forest, categorising and creating' (Peters 1979:80). Peters (1979:80) then claims that '[we] push back the inner forest by rejecting everything that does not fit into our self-image, pretending these rejected instincts and emotions do not belong to us.' She cites the case of a woman whom she knew who had an intense dislike of dandelions, recognising the dandelions as a scapegoat, like immigrants or dogs:

[I]t doesn't matter what we fix on. [We] imbue it with all the characteristics which we refuse to recognise in ourselves. Then we spend all our hatred on it, pushing it outside the city, outside the clearing. We destroy it and, in the process, we destroy ourselves.

(Peters 1979:84)

This argument anticipates Kristeva's thesis on abjection (Kristeva, 1982), and elsewhere in her book Peters suggests that we can reconnect with nature by purposefully breaking down this urban order, and by accepting 'weeds' and other natural elements that are 'out of place' according to hegemonic ordering principles.

In this vein, we could argue that 'wild spaces' in the city which provide the habitats of feral cats may be particular sites of aversion, signifying 'the forest' intruding into the city, although some people will see the same sites as valuable refuges for those features of wild nature which we have otherwise lost. Thus, such wild spaces may be sites of conflict. Overgrown derelict spaces might fall into this category. Clearly, there will be no necessary tension over the presence of feral colonies in such places if they are avoided or off the map. It is likely that feral cats will be seen as most discrepant where the land is ordered and managed, with pressure from some people to have the cats removed while others enjoy their wildness. Thus, in Palo Alto, California, in 1995, there were complaints about

ferals, which suggested that the animals were decidedly 'out of place' in a residential neighbourhood. One of those unhappy about the presence of ferals claimed:

There are health issues associated with cats going all over in flower pots, sand boxes and yards.... Granted they were here before us, but how can you have wild animals in a residential neighbourhood?

(‘College Terrace...’ 1995)

In support of acceptance of ferals in the wild, Remfry (1996:520) maintains that feral cats are ‘intrinsically interesting and a source of pleasure to many people who feed them and care about them’. In particular, feeders will defend what they see as the interests of cats, perhaps by refusing to give information to either pest control officers or others who may be seen as potentially hostile. A third, probably less common situation is one where feral cats are a familiar part of the urban landscape and are generally accepted as belonging, such as the Fitzroy Square colony in London which was admired by members of the Bloomsbury set, provided the subject for T.S.Eliot’s cat poems, was celebrated in music by Andrew Lloyd Webber, and was still in existence in the 1970s (Remfry 1996).

Feral cats in Hull

These arguments about the relationship between people and wild nature, linked to the placing of animals, helped us in thinking through the relationship between people, place and feral cats in the city of Hull. We were able to locate thirty-one feral cat sites in the Hull area. This was done, first, by one of us (IP) contacting environmental health officers in the city who had addresses from which complaints about ferals had been received. As the agency responsible for pest control, the Environmental Health Department of the City Council has an obligation to respond to these complaints. Additionally, information came from a voluntary organisation, Hull Animal Welfare. In some of the locations it was possible to make contact with friends of ferals, including feeders, as well as people antagonistic to the cats, and these contacts provided further information on other sites. Thus, we were able to build up a ‘cat map’ of the city. Fourteen of the sites were close to houses; five in industrial areas, including derelict industrial sites; and five were in or around institutions, including residential homes for the elderly and a hospital. Three colonies, including one of the largest, were found on allotments, and there were single groups in a cemetery, in the grounds of a church and, allegedly, on grassland next to the River Humber. Residential locations are probably over-represented, clearly because it is in residential areas that the presence of ferals is most likely to seem discrepant, an offence to domestic order, and thus to prompt a complaint to the local Environmental Health Department. Conversely, ‘wild’ areas, remote from houses, may have feral colonies which are unobserved and unreported.

At the sites we visited, we spent time observing cat behaviour and site characteristics, as well as, in a few instances, talking to people with an interest in the

cats about the histories of the colonies. It was not possible in every case to contact people who might have had a view on the presence of a feral colony, and in some places identified by the environmental health officers the cats were elusive. However, our observations did allow us to order the sites, this necessarily rough ordering being based on the perceptions of the three of us about what constitutes wildness in urban landscapes. Generally, in an urban context, wildness is suggested by dereliction, a lack of maintenance, with weeds and brambles asserting themselves, or more densely vegetated vacant land. Cats which are perceived as wild may then 'fit' into such patches of urban wilderness, although, as we suggested above, derelict landscapes and feral cats occupying such areas may both be sources of aversion. In other locales, particularly in residential areas, the problem is more complex and more likely to be conflictual than in 'wild' areas. Feral cats may belong according to those who do not discriminate between pets and ferals, but they may be viewed as transgressive and polluting by those whose distinctions between the domestic and the wild consign ferals to the latter category (as in the Palo Alto, California, case, cited above).

The following notes on a selection of sites give some sense of the range of habitats identified:

- 1 A completely overgrown garden, next to a Catholic church in a formerly residential street in the inner city, now used primarily for warehousing. This site was the closest approximation to wilderness. The cats stayed hidden in the bushes when people were present (see [Figure 3.1](#)). They were fed by the church caretaker, who had once appealed to the bishop to let the cats remain after objections from one hostile priest. The present priest is quite tolerant.
- 2 An industrial estate where a colony lives on a disused site. The cats are fed by workers from an adjacent factory (see [Figures 3.2](#) and [3.3](#)). Apparently, no-one has objected to the presence of the cats.
- 3 An allotment, where feeding bowls and shelter are provided for a large feral colony of between twenty and thirty animals. This colony has survived since the 1950s with the support of most of the allotment holders, who are very protective and suspicious of representatives of outside agencies, particularly the City Council. (However, on an allotment elsewhere in the city, feeders were in conflict with other allotment holders who had threatened to kill the cats.)
- 4 A cemetery, a well-ordered and manicured site where cats stay among the bushes and trees around the edge (see [Figure 3.4](#)). A grave digger at the site when we visited seemed unconcerned about the presence of the cats, although a local resident claimed that the cemetery was overrun with about twenty cats. Someone, she said disapprovingly, was obviously feeding them.
- 5 Outside a shoe repairer's in a small suburban shopping precinct (see [Figure 3.5](#)). The shop owner feeds the cats and has provided shelter and bedding. No-one complains, and they have become an attraction for shoppers and children.

Of these sites, the ones where there was a high level of management, and where people felt a sense of attachment and responsibility for the place, were the ones where opposing views on the feral colonies were most clearly articulated. These were the allotments and the cemetery, where the presence of wild nature was seen both as a good thing—the cats were admired and, in the case of the allotments, seen as useful in keeping down vermin—and a bad thing—they were ‘out of place’ in a cultivated and ordered space (particularly in the cemetery). Thus, in these spaces, the presence of feral colonies served both to fracture and to cement social relationships. Even on the wildest site, next to the church, there was a history of conflict. Only in the left-over space on the industrial estate, colonised by weeds and cats, and in the familiar space of the shopping precinct, where the cats were decorative and pet-like (so long as no-one attempted to touch them), was there an absence of conflict. Interestingly, another (active) industrial space, a British Petroleum (BP) oil refinery, was also in a sense a part of the ‘wild’, being a habitat for foxes, deer, rabbits and rats as well as feral cats, and the cat colony here was tolerated by the company, which paid for neutering to control the population.



Figure 3.1 A wild space in the city: invisible feral colony with feeding bowl, lower left.

Source: Authors' photograph

Clearly, the local environment is important in relation to the acceptance or disapproval of animals in the city, but attitudes to feral cats are also affected by the ambiguous position of the species in its relationship with people—an object of affection and a wild animal, admired or feared for its wildness. Our project hints at another interesting aspect of human—animal relations: namely, that those people who are close to ferals or who try to engage with ferals, particularly the feeders, may themselves be viewed as discrepant by both council officers and neighbours. See p. 68 for two examples from our field notes.



Figure 3.2 Feral cats on an industrial estate.
Source: Authors' photograph



Figure 3.3 Shelter and feeding bowls provided by factory workers on an industrial estate.
Source: Authors' photograph



Figure 3.4 Feral cats in suburban cemetery.
Source: Authors' photograph

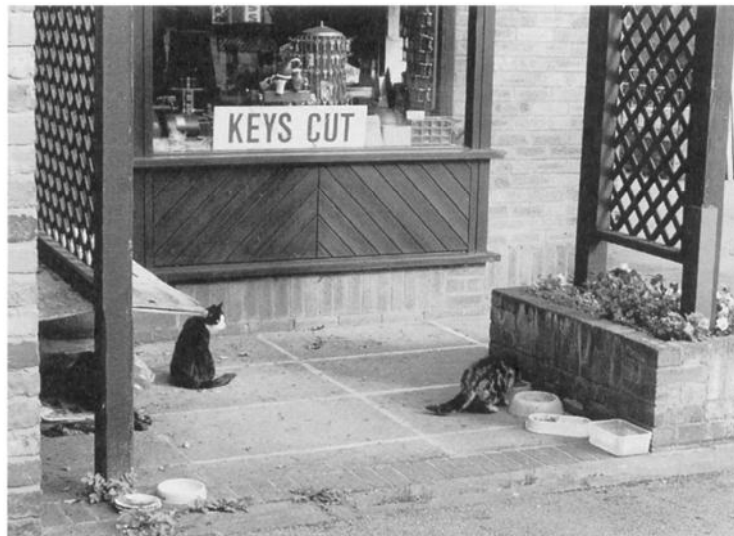


Figure 3.5 Feral colony in small suburban shopping centre: feeding bowls and shelter provided by owner of hardware store.
Source: Authors' photograph

Lady, used to cycle round and pick cats up and take them home in her basket [according to an environmental health officer]. About a dozen cats. Became a member of the CPL [Cats Protection League] but wouldn't let anyone take a cat if they [the CPL] came to re-home them. Extension of house solely for cats, built wire fence for them. 'Roger' [environmental health officer] heard she'd moved house and left the cats, so he referred the case to the RSPCA.

Private house with large walled garden, lady had a cat, adopted a stray, had lots of kittens which started a colony. Neighbours complained...can't go and visit as lady is a bit schizophrenic [sic], although 'Steve' [environmental health officer] will talk to her.

These comments are suggestive, with their intimations of peculiarity, eccentricity and 'madness', even maybe echoing a pre-modern stereotype of 'witch with cats'. While it would be easy to read too much into these observations, and we certainly do not have enough material to draw any firm conclusions about perceptions of cat feeders, it would be interesting to explore the idea that perceptions of feral supporters are gendered and that feeders dangerously transgress domestic norms.

Conclusion

Returning to 'little Darcy', it is evident from our study that feral cats are not necessarily the 'inhabitants of dereliction', as the Cat Action Trust advertisement asserted. As well as retaining their freedom in the wild, feral cats may be well looked after. This view is supported by Remfry (1996:523), who has argued that 'feral cats can thrive in a free-living state, usually enjoying more interesting lives than those pets confined indoors, so long as certain criteria [relating primarily to shelter, feeding and supervision] are met.' This is also now the position of the Royal Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). However, it is apparent that human responses to feral cats are affected by constructions of the built or cultivated environment, which render cat spaces either discrepant or acceptable features of the urban scene, and by representations of ferals as wild or potentially domestic. The interplay of imagined cats and imagined landscapes contributes to the definition of places where ferals belong or are discrepant. The many associations of animals and place, between cat-friendly Fitzroy Square or the shoe repairer's and the mini-safari park of the Catholic church garden or the oil refinery, are reflected in complex human responses.

The problem could be seen as an instance of the much wider issue of what, in the constitution of space in a modern urban society, is defined as belonging or not belonging. At the level of the home, the neighbourhood and the city, visions of strong and clear boundaries and predictable, recognisable geometries can be seen as a response to heterogeneity, with the consequent uncertainties about social relationships, and the precariousness of urban living: that is, the precariousness of the

control of nature within the city. Wild nature might just reassert itself and disturb the urban order. In a reflection on early human efforts to gain security through the medium of architecture, Le Corbusier (1927:71) suggested that

in order to construct well and distribute his [*sic*] efforts to gain advantage, to obtain solidity and utility in the work, [the builder] has taken measures, he has adopted a unit of measurement, he has regulated his work, he has brought in order. For, all around him, the forest is in disorder with its creepers, its briars and the tree-trunks which impede him and paralyse his efforts.

The desire to eliminate nature, nature as abject and inimical to domesticity, is still there in the (post)modern city. At the same time, though, wild nature is desired. Its absence in the city figures as a loss, and there is a need to reconnect, if only vicariously or in the imagination. Just as nomads transgress and disturb the urban order but, at the same time, represent a romanticised freedom, so uncontrolled nature is a source of both anxiety and desire. Thus, people ‘need’ to imagine marginal places, both as abject spaces to which feral cats, Gypsies and other elements of ‘the wild’ can be consigned and as spaces of desire where wildness can be recovered.

The politics of modernity, however, have been concerned with the *elimination* of both the nomadic (an almost taken-for-granted violation of human rights) and unregulated nature, or their containment and transformation through the imposition of order (zoos, English and Welsh Gypsy sites, nature reserves). But the elimination of the abject, as Kristeva reminds us, is impossible. These removals and purifications can never be more than temporary or partial, and hence the recurrent tension between transgressive nature, resisted and desired, and the ordered city. The presence of wild nature in the city signals a loss of control, just as nomads cross lines which mark secure, predictable and commodified categories of urban space. The realisation of an ordered city, like removing bodily odour or staying young, is an impossible project.

Acknowledgements

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Note

- 1 Erik Swyngedouw helpfully suggested ‘unsettling’ as a translation of *unheimlich*, in preference to ‘uncanny’.

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