

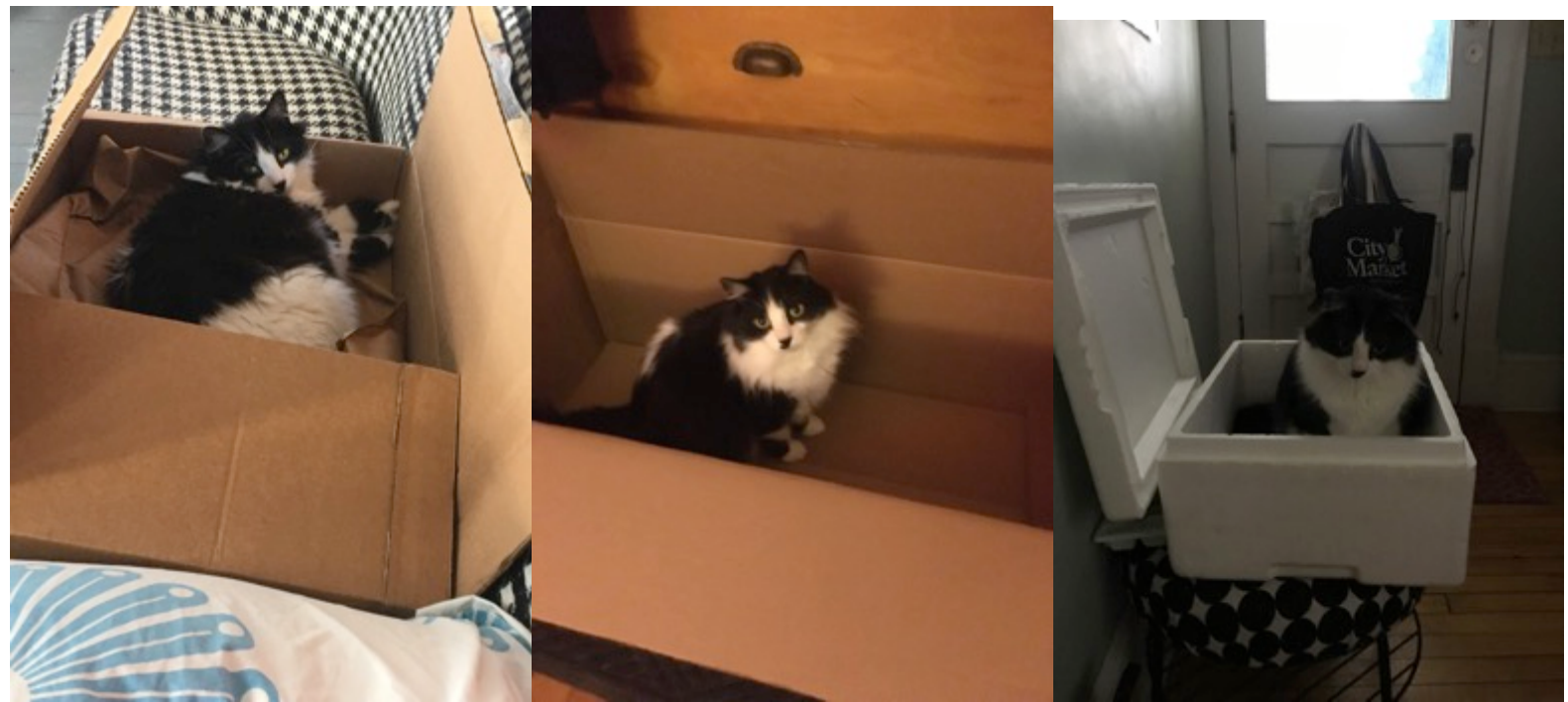
lost cat. found identities



As Karl Marx famously declared, “The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of cat struggle” (1848). Despite, or perhaps because of, these struggles, cats are superior to all other animals, domesticated and wild (with the possible exception of the red panda (Firefox 2014)). But what is the source of their greatness? This investigation shows how their advantages are not based on a fixed and stable cat-like identity, but rather on a flexible performance that reinvents even while reinforcing this catness. In fact, the cat’s identity is less a product of any individual cat, or even collective cat consciousness (Durkat 1898), but rather social, constructions of feline personality and “catitude.” This fixed yet flexed identity allows people to locate cats (and thus also themselves) within a larger hierarchy of clearly distinct animal and human attributes while still leaving room for cats to just be cats (or not, as the situation demands.)

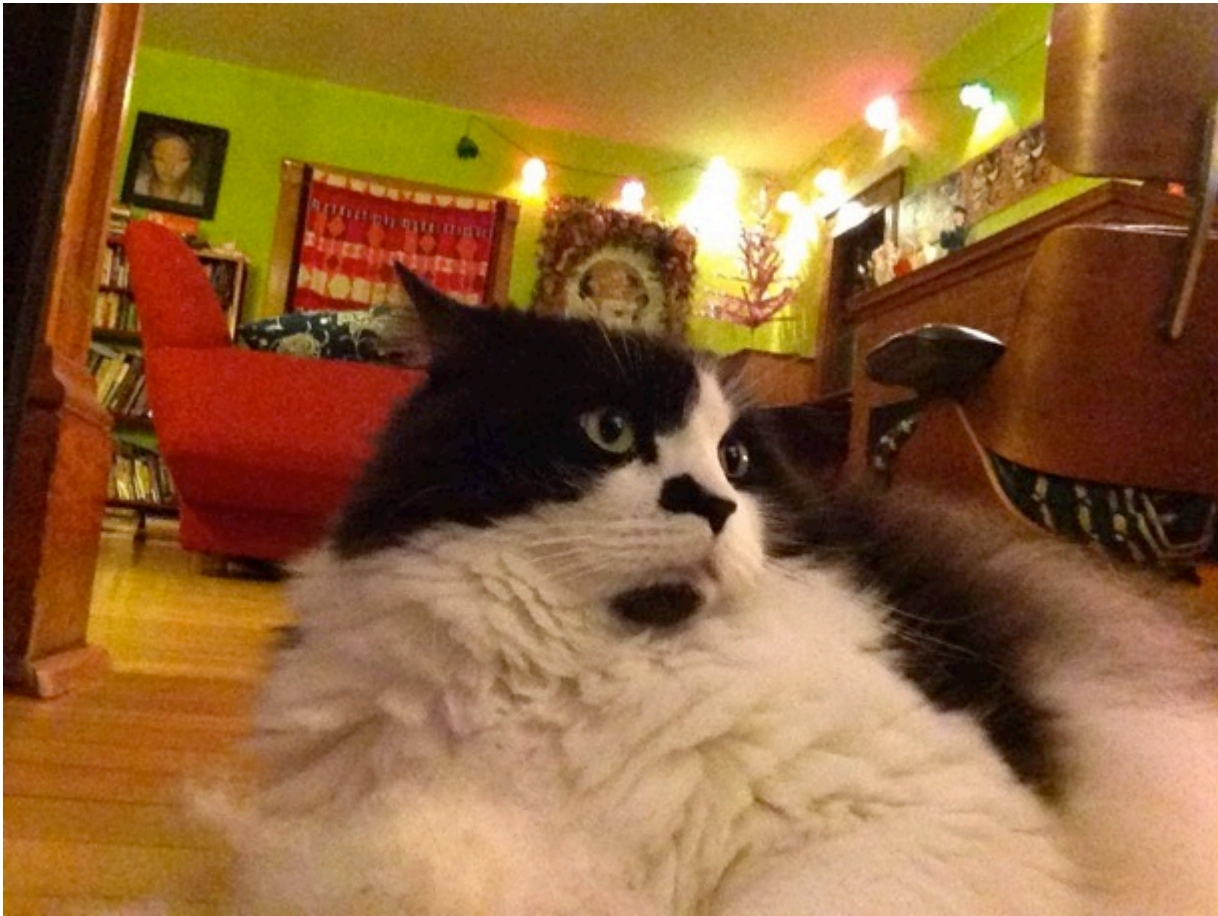


Consider the common house cat. We all know what to expect when we meet one. Research has long shown that cats share a recognizable set of basic characteristics (Feline 2015). Cats are well known for being distant and aloof (Mouser 1997). In this image, we see a cat fixing a cold, withering stare on others in the room, claiming property as if it were his own, not giving the slightest thought to how his actions may affects others, including the person the slipper belongs to.



Cats, of course, love boxes. While they may be more than happy to forgo the warm embrace of humans, they do take comfort in the confines of a simple box (Carton 2017). Here we see several examples of a cat appropriating boxes for his own personal use, ranging from large to small. We also see his creative streak (Maru 2009). Unwilling to narrow his horizons to cardboard constructions, he treats a Styrofoam cooler as a box for his purposes.

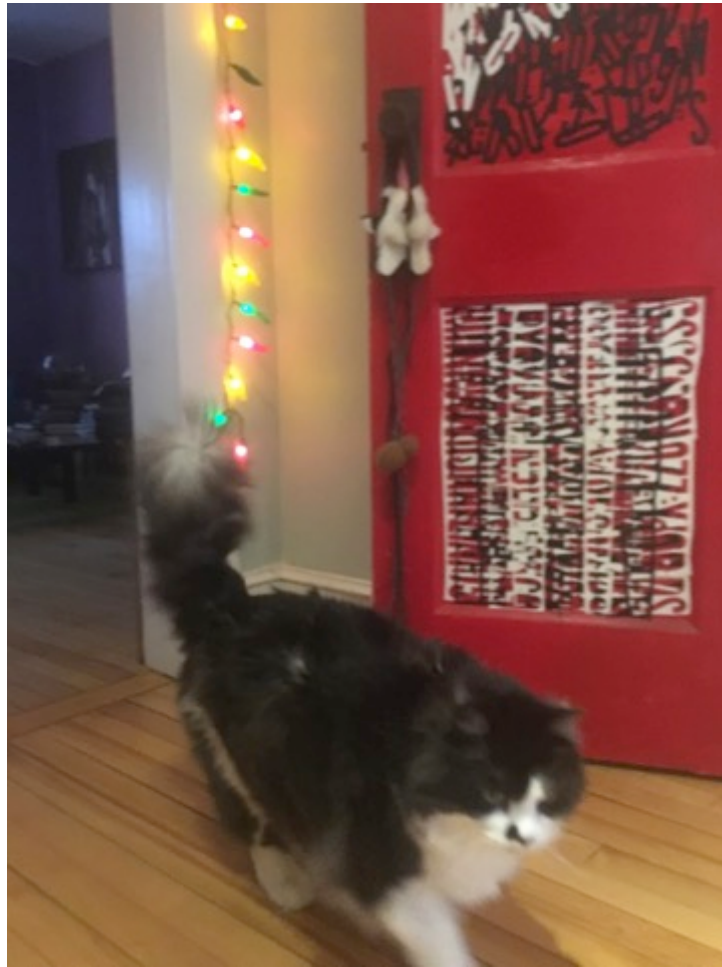




But what if the cat identity we take for granted is not nearly as stable and clear cut as we generally assume? If there is more than one kind of cat, does that simply mean there are two kinds of cat? Or even that there aren't any kinds at all? No kinds, simply cats, in all their unclassifiable complexities.



Some cats, contrary to their reputation, actually love people. Still others don't just love people but, in fact, want to be around people as much as possible. Recent studies of cats' sociability find that cats are not nearly as "anti-social" as we have come to define them (Cuddles 2016). This image shows a cat who not only tolerates being picked up by humans, but actually actively demands it, tugging at people's legs and arms to demand constant attention, unwilling to relent until he gets exactly what he needs.



Things get even more complicated when we consider not just cats that have “non-cat-like” qualities, but when we are confronted by those who are downright dog-esque. This cat not only comes when called, and follows from room to room, but is even an avid tail wagger. Usually, cats’ tail shaking is associated with aggression (Wagner 2011), but in this case, it clearly expresses love and excitement.

If dogs and cats are the quintessential opposites (Canine 2013), what happens to our categories when they blur into each other so easily without forcing any kind of serious reassessment of their meaning and use? What work is being done to maintain this stability in the face of chaos? And who does it?



Clearly this contradiction is not an issue for the cats themselves. Here two very different cats – one stereotypically cat-like and the other actively subverting cat identity – find it quite easy to make common cause on a cold winter's day.



We should look not to the cats for any essential identity, but rather to the humans standing behind them, pushing their simple conceptions of cat and non-cat onto the quite complicated and ever-changing cats they live with. Pets, after all, do not just provide emotional comfort and support, they also fit and fill into a larger world view. This uncovers important relations of power and ownership (Pinkitty 2016) Even the flippant cat-owner cliché, “I don’t own a cat, the cat owns me!” depends on a concept of ownership based on power and control, even while inverting the expected direction of flows.

This distinction is further grounded by the construction of the identity of “cat person.” For this identity signifies more than the simple liking of cats (Catlady 1999), intended to say far more about the kind of person they are. For this concept to remain meaningful and recognizable, it requires a stable cat identity that can fix and stabilize itself in reference.



Grocer Cat bought a new dress for Mommy. She earned it by taking such good care of the house. He also bought a present for his son, Huckle. Huckle was a very good helper today.



John Levi Martin (2000) argues that this may all stem from childhood socialization. Using Richard Scarry's classic 1968 children's book, *What do people do all day?*, which used animals to tell the story of people and their work, Martin shows how fixed and stable conceptions of animal identity serve as a tool for explaining human class hierarchies.

When we specifically consider cats, we can further see how this plays out across gender lines, with cats consistently feminized, the polar opposite to the masculine dog (Kitten 1991).



Identity is in flux, yet it (mostly) remains consistent enough to be recognizable from day to day, year to year. But when we reflect on this consistency, we recognize that it is not only (or even mostly) produced internally by some essence of self (or species/being), but rather emerges out of an ongoing negotiation between individuals, their forms of belonging, their audiences, and the social needs that certain identities fulfill for others. To understand identity requires taking all of these into account, which means that to better get at what it means to be a cat and/or perform catness, we should start not from essence but from action and performance.

Thus, we should anchor our future work on feline identity by first thinking *inside* the box.

Bibliography using the style of your choice (just be consistent)

If this fits at the end of the conclusion page, put it there. There's no need for an extra page unless there is a an actual need for one.

Self evaluation and reflection

I'd like to quote Caesar here – *veni, vidi, vinci*, but alas, I think it's more appropriate to use a different Caesar line, "Et tu, Kitty?" That is, while I eventually came out the other side, it wasn't until I was able to get past my initial fixation on cats as cats that I finally felt like I was able to understand the questions I was actually asking and answering.

The biggest challenge was that I waited until the day before to start working, so I had to make due with found images rather than having time to make my own. This meant I was probably finding images that confirmed what I wanted to find, which is why I initially also worked on finding "the opposite." Along the way, however, I learned that "the opposite" was actually just as much a construction (in my mind, but also socially) as "normal." At first, this was defeating, one more banal sociologically insight. But I started looking at it from different perspectives, namely the social, and was able to turn my initial "conclusion" into the basis for the *real* analysis. Late, but better than never.

Evaluation: considering how hastily I put things together, I think it worked out okay. But I realize that I was lucky and that luck won't always hold. Also, I realize that the structure and thesis still reflect the process of discovery (transparency!) but could be revised to better reflect the big finding rather than have it show up along the way. Next time, I will be better. I just know it.

Grade: smiling emoji + tiger emoji + chin-scratching emoji + shrug emoticon

(pretty good + catlike in focus and brilliance, although perhaps suffering from delusions of grandeur + it made me think + although I'm not sure about how well it made the audience think.)