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Feral Athens – Stray cats between urban planning, heritagization and ecofeminism

Summary : Stray animals are part of the ecological, social and cultural functioning of cities. This paper aims, in an exploratory way, to reflect on the specificity of the athenian cats. They are part of the formal and informal planning of the city and this is particularly a women-led planning and it shows a form of « athenian ecofeminism ». Moreover, the cats are part of the identity of Athens and are involved in a process of heritagization.

Key words : cats, environment, heritage, urban planning, Athens

Thématiques de l'Atlas : Culture, Infrastructures, Urban Planning

Biographie :

Clément Dillenseger is currently PhD Student for urban studies at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Lyon (Laboratory EVS). His research links urban geography and environmental geography. More precisely, he studies the issues of cleanliness and dirt in different european cities. Currently, he's teaching at the University Jean Moulin – Lyon 3.

In his novel , *Οι επτάψυχες των Αθηνών* (2001), writer Takis Theodoropoulos imagines that Socrates, Plato and other ancient philosophers have been reincarnated as cats and meet to meow and philosophize, between the Pnyx and the Ceramic Cemetery. There, women of "a certain age" look after them on a daily basis, and worry about the policies aimed at sacrificing them on the altar of urban salubrity, ahead of the 2004 Olympic Games. Philosopher-cats are seen in the book as legitimate inhabitants of the Greek capital, with their own territories superimposed on those of humans.

While many inhabitants pass by cats without paying them any attention, trivializing their presence in urban space, this article aims to demonstrate that their presence is not insignificant. Cats in Athens are feral : it means that they are neither totally wild nor perfectly domesticated. Philosopher Donna Haraway has coined the term "natureculture" (2003) to describe this reality, in which the wild is mixed with the domestic and the natural is mixed with the cultural.

This hybrid, "nature-culture" status implies several types of relationship between humans and cats: these relationships are not only social and emotional, they are also ecological. These particular ecological relationships, mainly maintained by women, are the subject of urban planning and heritage development, both ordinary and touristy. In addition to analyzing the patrimonialization of Athenian cats, this article aims to consider these felines as actors in their own right in the formal and informal making of the city of Athens.

To carry out this research, which is still at an exploratory stage and whose first lines of thought are outlined here, I am basing myself on a corpus of 5 interviews with women involved in the feline cause in Athens: on their own, with an NGO or working for the municipality. Several observations and a documentary analysis (press articles, websites) complete this corpus of interviews.

Athens : an urban ecosystem where humans cohabit with cats.

Animal geographies have been of particular interest for the past twenty years (Blanc, 2000). They are part of the broader field of "more-than-human" geographies. This involves shifting the generally anthropocentric focus of the discipline towards a reading that inserts humans into a network of relationships with other entities, living and non-living (Isaacs, 2020).

These geographies help to overcome the idea that the city is the human environment *par excellence*. While the city is indeed a space largely dominated by the human species, humans cohabit with many other species : stray animals, insects, viruses and bacteria are all part of the everyday urban life. The city is in fact an ecosystem where, more than anywhere else, ecological relations are mediated by technical artifacts... but they remain ecological relations nonetheless!

Cats in Athens are thus part of the ecosystem of the Greek capital: they live with ticks, fleas and numerous bacteria or viruses that they are likely to transmit to other animals and humans (Diakou *et. al*, 2017). Conversely, viruses can be transmitted from humans to animals, including stray cats, as was the case with Covid-19. Humans and stray animals thus inhabit the city as one and the same environment, made up of their interrelationships. The history of animals (Baratay, 2021; Estebanez, 2016) has shown that the presence of cats in the city is ancient, and that the significance of their presence evolved over time before they became invisibilized in urban functioning. They were even used for their ecological function, since there's a word for the cats (and dogs) used to hunt rats and other urban pests: ratter.

So when volunteers use empty feta cheese ramekins to place cat food inside, they are producing an Athenian "natureculture", maintaining an ecological relationship with the cats. They contribute to feeding (literally and figuratively) the ecological chain that nourishes all the species that make up the urban environment. There's hardly a street in Athens where you can't find little bowls of kibble or water.

Women : players of the formal and informal planning of the cat city

Cat food containers are a visible sign of feline presence everywhere. These containers are regularly filled with food scraps : in a way, they help to reduce human waste by being reintegrated into the trophic chain. Most of these feeding devices occupy very small portions of the public space (photo 1), but others are sometimes the object of a micro-arrangement. This is the case, for example, of a feeding device installed in the Theseio district by C., a volunteer feeder who obtained the agreement of a pope to install an ingenious distribution system on a plot belonging to the church This kind of system can be found in other places, notably on the many urban wastelands in Athens (photo 2).



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Photo 1 and 2 - Two stray cat feeders in Pagrati (1) and Thiseio (2)

In the same way, there are numerous animal huts, testifying to the peaceful cohabitation and even solidarity between cats and residents. More or less visible, these shelters for felines

inscribe the presence of cats in the city and their legitimate them to be part of urban life. This idea is reinforced by the anthropization that characterizes some of these informal settlements: sometimes, as in photo 3, the huts take on the human codes of housing.



Photo 3 – A cat’s shelter that has an anthropomorphic form

In addition to feeding the cats and building shelters, part of the volunteers' work involves catching stray cats for sterilization and veterinary follow-up, before reintroducing them into the urban environment. The cats are then chipped and can be recognized by the small notch on one of their ears. This particular urban practice involves a lot of work from the volunteers: the first phase consists of spotting the arrival of new cats or the presence of pregnant cats in certain urban areas. Since cats are territorial animals, they settle in colonies and generally spread out around a wasteland or ruin. Volunteers therefore need to have a detailed knowledge of feline territoriality in order to spot them successfully. Once the animals have been spotted, volunteers must coordinate to find a time slot of several hours to try and catch the cats (photo 4). This involves baiting them in a cage, a process that can take several hours. Then it's time to take the cat to a partner vet and pay the fees, often collected at flea markets in aid of animal causes or, in C's case, by selling cat accessories she makes herself.



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Photo 4 – A cage to bait a stray cat before sterilization

But the presence of cats in the city is not something everyone agrees on. It even generates an urban and ecological micro-geopolitics in which animal shelters are sometimes destroyed, as explained by this little note calling for the preservation of the hut (photo 3). The cats of Athens sometimes arouse sympathy, sometimes indifference, but sometimes even hatred. This is what E., a volunteer in the municipality of Nea Smyrni, reminds us when she mentions having found poisoned cats' bodies next to garbage cans: according to her, cat attackers put poison in the middle of garbage when they know that cats come to feed there. This "urban and ecological geopolitics", is taken to the highest political level since since 2020, an animalistic party has been created in Greece: Κόμμα για τα Ζώα. In the summer of 2023, the animalistic candidate for deputy in the Athens constituency, Violet-Therese Valtzik (Βιολέττα-Τερέσα Βάλτσικ), presents herself as a stray animal feeder.

Alongside the individual and voluntary actors, municipalities manage the presence of cats as a "public problem". The large presence of animals in Athens is regularly presented as a threat to health (cats can transmit diseases) or to cleanliness, understood as an urban aesthetic order. In the run-up to the 2004 Olympic Games, the municipality of Athens deployed a large-scale sterilization and pupping program for stray cats, with the aim of cleaning up the city. According to several associations defending the cause of cats, this campaign was accompanied by the illegal poisoning of animals, especially dogs.

The Urban Wildlife Service (αστική πανίδα) was created in 2004, at the time of the Olympic Games, to manage the "problem" of stray dogs. Its mission is to raise awareness of animal welfare among residents, ensure respect for animal welfare in the city and manage stray animals found in public spaces. While the offices of the municipal service are located in the hypercentre of Athens (in Psyri), the industrial district of Eleonas/Botanikos saw the opening of a municipal shelter in 2021. On the shelter's pediment is a street art fresco depicting Socrates, a stray dog from the Plaka district, known by many Athenians and whose death was much publicized in animal rights circles and beyond. Alongside Socrates is a cat, another animal symbolic of urban life in Athens (photo 5).



Photo 5 - Athènes between cats and dogs : the pediment of the new municipal shelter

The shelter's main purpose is to take in stray or abandoned dogs for adoption by private individuals or tourists. Although this important and recent facility has the merit of existing, it remains relatively small and its peripheral location in relation to the center can give the feeling of a spatial relegation of the animal question. As shown in the figure below, the shelter is located in a relatively narrow area, between the large migrants camp of Eleonas and a place where garbage cans and trucks are stored. It is in the middle of an industrial district where there are many recyclers, an activity that is socially depreciated in Greece and associated with the Roma minority. Migrants, waste and stray animals are thus placed on the same spatial plane: they are undesirables to be dealt with, they are part of the city, but they have to live their lives on its margins.

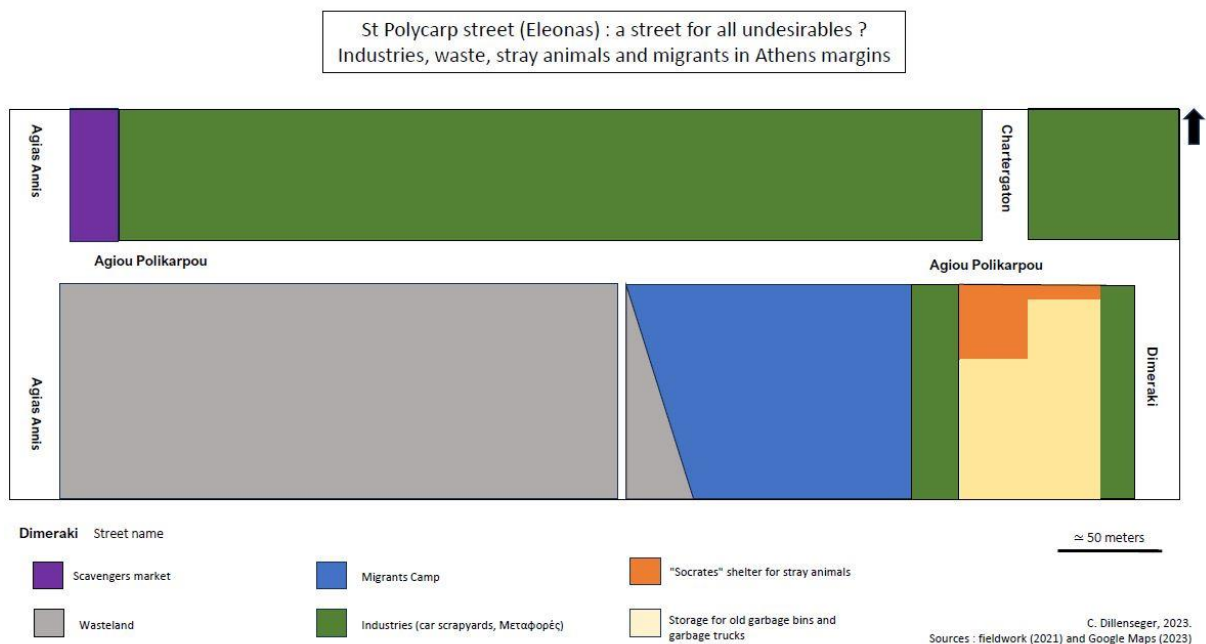


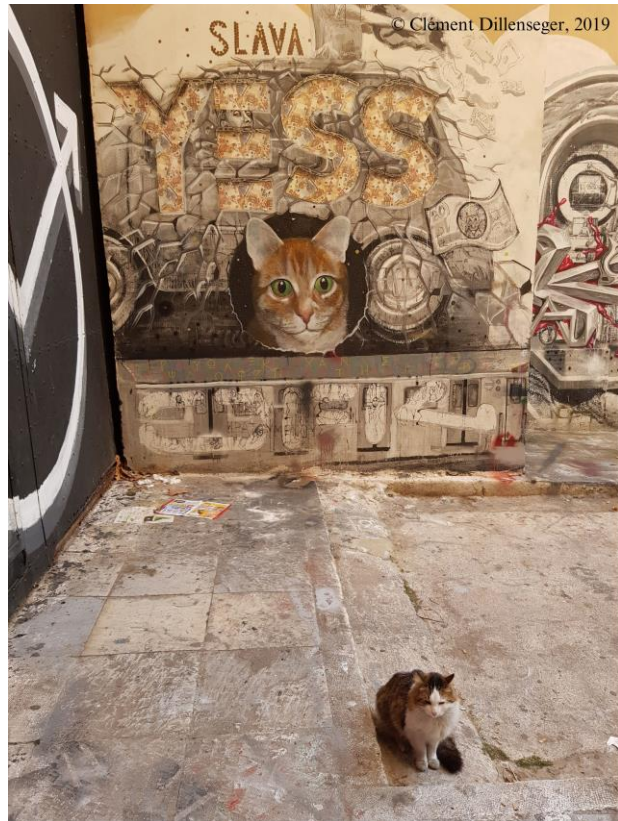
Figure 1 – Spatial relegation of the undesirables in Eleonas

All the people interviewed, whether from the municipality or from animal associations, were women. While men are not entirely absent, their statements confirm that the management of stray cats in Athens is predominantly the work of women: "*Most of our members are women. In general in Greece, most animal welfare volunteers are women*" (Interview with 9Lives Greece, April 2020). Women's investment in the ecological cause and in concern for others (care, (Tronto, 1993)) has been widely documented in the social sciences. Philosophers Catherine Larrère (2012) and Emilie Hache (2016) use the term ecofeminism to refer to this

reality. In Athens, the management of stray cats is a perfect illustration of this concept of ecofeminism.

Athens' feline ecology as heritage: from the ordinary to tourism in Thiseio and Plaka

While the presence of felines may seem anodyne, even invisible because commonplace, in the eyes of most Athenians, this is not the case for foreign observers (myself included), and certain players in the tourist industry have understood this. Indeed, over and above the mere presence of the cats themselves throughout the city, Athens is also saturated with images and presentations of cats.



Photos 6 (Panepistimio) and 7 (Kolonaki) - Cats, classic objects of street art in the streets of Athens

First of all, a harmless form of « citizen-based patrimonialization » of the feline presence emanates from the many graffiti that feature them (photos 6 and 7). The presence of cats in many works of street art is proof of their belonging to a local culture. If cats are depicted in graffiti rather than cockroaches, which are also present in the city, it's because they are "charismatic" (Blanc, 2004; Lorimer, 2007). This means that they are associated with positive, affective representations, that they occupy a special place in the Athenian (and no doubt, more broadly, Greek) cultural and identity system.

In a more institutionalized way, various actors have seized on the feline presence in Athens to turn it into a tourist attraction. The Thiseio district, for example, is being "cat-touristed", as evidenced by the presence of several guided tours in Plaka and Thiseio, two very touristic districts near the acropolis.

Les chats de Thiseío

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Partager Enregistré



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Photo 8 - Discovering cats and the Thiseio district thanks to the AirBnB platform

Source : Website of *AirBnb Expériences* (August 2023)

The AirBnb Experiences website is a platform that offers tourists various activities. Among the most highly recommended activities in Athens is the "Cats of Thissio" tour, which offers, in its description "to discover secret neighborhoods and more than 30 cats whose stories deserve to be heard" (photo 8). This tour is particularly popular: it is rated 5/5, and more than 270 travelers have already left a positive review. A tour costs 20 euros per person and the funds raised are used to finance the daily feeding rounds of C., who looks after several colonies and

offers to be accompanied around three times a week in her daily voluntary work. During the tour, she identifies each of the animals with a specific first name: she has identified them all and helped to catch, sterilize and microchip them thanks to registrations from tourists, who mainly come from other European countries. This visit is also a way of learning more about the presence of these cats and the way in which different actors look after them (or not).

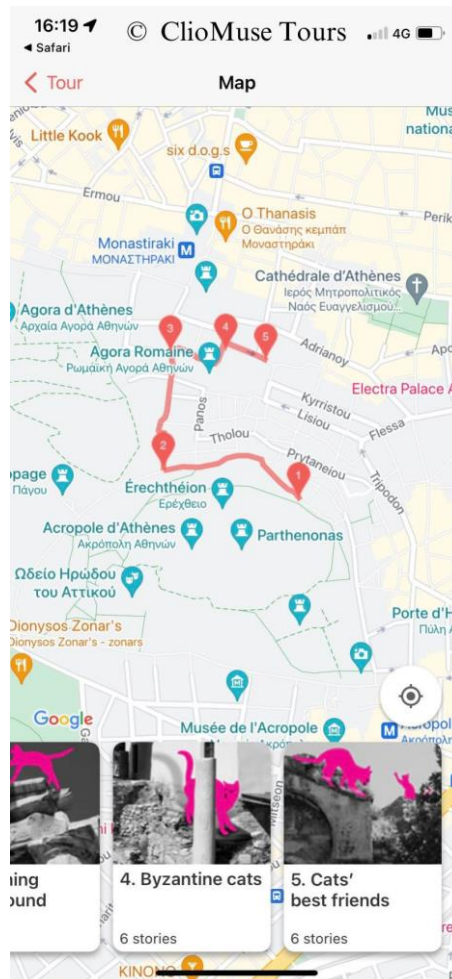


Photo 9 - Tourism of Athens' history through the presence of cats

Source : Screenshot of the *Clio Muse Tour* App, presenting the tour dedicated to the athenian cats (August 2023)

Another medium, relayed by Athens-based tourism agency *ThisIsAthens*, is a mobile app created by Greek company ClioMuse Tour. This company offers self-guided tours via a mobile app, and is present in over 35 countries worldwide. Here, the guided tour is superimposed on the classic tourist circuit (photo 9), passing through various points of interest (Anafiotika, the Roman agora, the ancient agora, the Byzantine church) and covering different historical periods (from Antiquity to the early 19th century). In this purely "historical" tour, the

present cats invite visitors to project into themselves the past presence of felines in the city, but there is no discourse on the integration of these animals into the contemporary fabric of the city. They are integrated into the narrative of Athens as the eternal capital of Greece and, in so doing, they are commodified without regard for the ecological relationships that bind them to the city. Cats in Athens become symbols of the city, and are featured on postcards and other merchandise for tourists (photo 10). All of this testifies to a putting to work (Barua, 2017) of the Athenian fauna.



Photo 10 - Cats, symbols of Athens as souvenirs for tourists

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