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Dreaming Borders: On Cats and Trauma

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By Malini Sur

I dream of a black cat. She jumps over a barbed wire fence, and across it. She leaps from one side of the fence to the other. Her coat glistens in the moonlight. Except for the gentle sound of her purring, the village where I stand is silent.



Devi, London (Pen and Ink)

The silence was unnerving. Even remote villages were rarely silent along the heavily militarized 4095-kilometer India–Bangladesh border. They buzzed with the sounds of wireless radios that the Indian and Bangladesh border forces carried. And the sounds of trucks that smuggled cows and coal.

When I started fieldwork in 2007, India had begun to construct a new multi-layered fence along its borders with Bangladesh. This barrier was intended to guard India against Islamic terrorism, smuggling, and unauthorized migration from Bangladesh.

In a region known as Northeast India where I conducted fieldwork, Indian security forces and border troops aggressively contained demands for

self-determination from Assamese and then Garo political dissidents. Bangladeshi border forces, for their part, intercepted Garo bootleggers ferrying cheap alcohol from Northeast India to prevent the potential corruption of the moral fabric of Bangladesh, which officially bans alcohol.

Even partially recorded statistics confirmed that Indian troops had shot at least one undocumented border-crosser every three days (Human Rights Watch 2010). Traders and transporters frequently told me, “We fear the troops and their guns.” Death haunted our conversations. Many reminded me that I might not see them again—as one “never knows this border.”

I feared the border; I felt unsafe. I had never seen so many guns.

Cats

In 2008, when I returned to Amsterdam to write after a year of fieldwork, the black cat crept into my dreams. In my dreams, I encountered her in a remote Garo village where I had lived for extended periods of fieldwork from 2007 until 2015. Indian border troops especially patrolled this stretch to contain the movements of Garo dissidents.

The black cat held me hostage. She blurred the boundaries between fieldwork and after, between night and day. Her agile body made mine immobile in fear: awake, I sat on my bed, unable to move.

I failed to register the concern that my supervisor, friends, colleagues, and university administrators showered on me. The cat of my dreams preoccupied me. I did not know what to do with post-traumatic stress.

While there were many other animals—cows, bulls, pigs, chickens, rats, elephants, dogs, rabbits, and snakes—that I either encountered or feared during fieldwork, and the three goats I shared a room with in one village, I don’t recall the presence of cats. Except for a Catholic convent in the Garo borderland where I had resided for extended periods, where the nun-in-charge had a furry white cat. Despite her never-ending official duties, she cooked for her pets. Every time she had a moment to spare, she rushed to the backyard to speak to them.



A white cat in a convent, Garo Hills, Meghalaya, Northeast India, photo by author.

In *Animal Intimacies*, Radhika Govindrajan has powerfully underscored how our lives as humans come into being through our relationships with animals. She argues for the explicit recognition that human pasts, presents, and futures are intimately tied with the time-scales of non-human animals. Our worlds are knotted, as she so elegantly writes (2018: 3-4).

At other times, when drivers braked and the buses and auto-rickshaws that I travelled in suddenly came to a grinding halt, I became conscious that a black cat had crossed our path. Everyone regarded black cats as an inauspicious omen.

Night/Day

Despite the innocuous presence of actual cats during my fieldwork, the black cat of my dreams made my nights as bright as the days. Soon the light from the high-intensity floodlights replaced the moon. I had seen a few floodlight posts being constructed on the Indian side of the border. These were situated in Garo villages that constantly plunged into darkness because of erratic and low-voltage electricity.

In this region, nurses and health workers struggled to keep medicines and vaccines refrigerated. Newly posted Indian border troops, primarily rural recruits from other states of India, would regularly arrive at a clinic where I

volunteered to request medicines for unexplained body pains and headaches.

They wanted to chat. They needed to remedy the pain of their isolation in a remote region. The free paracetamols offered a magic cure for a few days. Then, they arrived again.

Bodies at Borders

In my dreams, the black cat leaped over India's barbed-wire fence and reached Bangladesh, but its razor-sharp wires did not touch her body. My ethnographic obsession with the new infrastructure, which I edged close to but did not yet dare to touch, would ultimately produce a total loss of control over my own body.

Franck Billé has powerfully argued that the correspondence between skin and national borders is both somatic and a political phenomena that can productively enrich border ethnographies. Inspired by Serres, he suggests that scholarly engagements with topology benefits from a close reading of the elasticity and textures of the skin in ways that clearly establish the palimpsests of sovereignty (Billé 2018: 61-62).

The border released my skin of its sensory capacities. The tactility of violence—always emergent and anticipated near a lethal border—had rendered my skin non-tactile. Yet its pores continued to expose my nerves and organs to the border.

My nerves ached with the “nervous jerkiness” made famous by Michael Taussig's elegant writing on the brutality of political violence (1997). I jumped out of my skin at the sight of green patchy-uniformed men—even when they were not border troops and soldiers.

Like the guy in a soldier's uniform who came to do a routine maintenance check of our Amsterdam office every weekend.

Or the hundred American soldiers that filled the small aircraft that I took from Turkey to Dubai to attend a conference. The sight of their muscular bodies in green uniforms eroded my sense of well-being.

I was unsure about my body. Where did it start and where did it end?

Where did the border start and end?

Strangely, my skin had registered the two nations whose rough edges I sought to study. Yet, my pen constantly failed to give meaning to their dangerous margins.

Pain

Pain refused to leave my body. Pain was as stubborn as the black cat. Paracetamol could not cure it.

The aftereffects of fieldwork in the “tropical” nations of Bangladesh and India led me from my general physician’s chambers to a large hospital in Amsterdam.

For the next six months, doctors specialized in tropical medicine struggled to find a cure for the various infections and pains that had afflicted my body. Nurses drew blood from my veins every week.

The intensity of my pain escalated during the nights the black cat did not surface in my dreams. Her absence frightened me. Where did she go?

Did she join the other black cat who I looked after my return to Amsterdam—and who had suddenly died one night after a single, loud painful cry?

My visits to the hospital progressed alongside my conversations with M.V. a medical anthropologist and specialist in trauma dreams. We agreed to move between academic and therapeutic registers, but within a day she realized that I was refusing to submit myself to a therapeutic relationship. Her interventions shattered my academic poise.

M.V. paid special attention to the black cat of my dreams. She noted the times and frequency of the cat’s appearances on a white notebook. She asked me detailed questions about the cat’s movements. We both poured over the notebook in which she scripted the cat’s pathway.

Each time I visited her, I lost my way. I either arrived well in advance and made my presence felt by dropping cups in the kitchen, or I was completely lost. Every road and every equidistant tree seemed like any other.

My spatial disorientation in The Hague took me back to the border. Within six months, I had lost my sense of orientation. I did not know whether I was standing in Bangladesh or in India. Sometimes when I was confident that I stood within Indian territory I had actually intruded into Bangladesh. Those I lived and travelled with asked, both humorously and with concern, if I was insane to come to such remote and dangerous regions. I started disbelieving their intentions about protecting me from harm. I no longer believed myself.

Tintin

At the big hospital in Amsterdam, I sat with heavily tattooed bodies. Patients either needed vaccinations or, like me, were waiting for a cure for their “tropical” diseases. Here, the “tropics” were also visible in the guise of bright, cheerful leopard-skin printed curtains.

The day before I left to see my dying aunt in India, the patient next to me, who was travelling to Indonesia, and I determined that the prints reminded us of Africa. Africa was far away.

Tintin appeared suddenly in our house in Calcutta. A cat with a light brown and white coat, he sat at the bedside of my dying cat-loving aunt. My aunt had just another day to live. She had degenerated with Alzheimer’s and a broken femur. Although she gazed at Tintin, I will never know if he compensated in her final moments for the twelve cats she had raised as pets.

As the legend goes, one cat was named after a famous Brazilian footballer. He routinely guarded my grandma’s kitchen, preventing the other pets from eating fish fries and curries. Another was rumored to tap his head against my aunt’s chair to the beat of classical music.

When I was born and my mother came to live with them temporarily, two white cats with bushy tails had guarded my infant bed, laying down on either side of it. My aunt showered me with both parental love and discipline, threatening that she would will all her property to her cats if I were too disobedient.

“Dreaming”

As Christians, the Garos hesitated to talk about their dreams and ghosts. Yet, I shared a room with women whom ghosts possessed at night. Their stories about ghosts and spirits changed from one day to another. Like the border. From only nominally dividing Garo clans, forests, rivers and farmlands, the new fence sought to make the borderland Garos more Indian and Bangladeshi than tribes and ethnic minorities as they were respectively recognized.

Scholars of the Garo world who explore the transformation of humans into animals known as *Jasrea* in the A’chik language argue that the idioms of spirit and soul enable such shifts. The soul’s psychic potential provides humans with the power to engraft themselves into animals. Shapeshifting is nocturnal; it is the human self that activates the animal form in sleep. Garo shapeshifters are attributed with special powers of premonition (Sangma 2016:77-78).

In deep sleep and trance, the life soul of humans, their “vital essence,”

exits the body and travels to inhabit and share an animal's body. Tigers, with whom the Garos once shared a habitat, populate dreams. Dreams make possible a dual mode of existence, enabling the tigerperson (*Machapilgipa*) to share the body of the tiger for the rest of his or her life (Brighenti 2017:101-103).

Did the tiger from the Garo dream world morph into a cat in mine?

In M.V.'s analysis, the black cat represented a part of me that "against all odds" had kept me relatively safe on a very dangerous border. She elaborated that in the language of biology, we may call this intuition; in more spiritual language the cat was a totemic animal or ancestral spirit. In the Jungian metapsychology that she followed, an animal could be a psychopomp, a mediator between the conscious and unconscious realm. In her words, the cat had enabled me to move from "a non-material to a material realm."

In Stanner's elegant writing on "dreaming" in Aboriginal Australia, we read how dreaming represents the unity of personhood, nature, animals, body, spirit, ghost, shadow, and totem—a unity of the past, present, and future. He argued that dreaming foregrounded ontologies that were reducible to neither time nor history, nor to deductive interpretations of science and philosophy. Dreaming was as a "metaphysical gift" that was expressed in the ability to transcend oneself and yet make productive connections between the universe, oneself, and others (2009: 59, 63).

I had not bothered to tell M.V. how important cats were to me or about the one in my recent care who had suddenly died.

By the time I was nine years old, my aunt's cats were all dead. A cat-hater in the neighborhood had poisoned her last pet, a black cat.

My aunt had generously willed all her assets to me.

Breath

By the time I returned to Amsterdam, the Dutch medical system had up-scaled me. When tests revealed an intense lung infection, the tropical specialists transferred me to the heart and lung department.

While in Calcutta Tintin's presence had made the black cat disappear from my dreams, she resurfaced in Amsterdam. Her leaping body made me breathless. I struggled to breathe while sitting in airy canal-side cafes.

The shift in medical attention from my intestines to my lungs corresponded with my spatial relocation from the tropical basement to the elegant fourth

floor of the hospital. The minimalistic furniture contrasted with the bright curtains and colorful masks below.

The age, class, and even the skin of the patients had drastically changed. I encountered elegant elderly bodies whose skin shone despite their wrinkles. Even the free coffee and cookies tasted better.

I once consented to an examination of my lungs for medical students. I laid bare-chested with little nodes that carried images and signals from my lungs and heart to a monitor. My organs had leaped out of my body. For twenty minutes the doctor and his trainees debated my insides visible on the screen.

A robust dose of antibiotics cured my lung infection, but the doctor-in-charge could not explain the regularity of my irregular heartbeats. The young specialist held, "You are missing home in India." I insisted that I had also missed home two years earlier, but then I could breathe.

He shook his head, unconvinced. I was equally unconvinced.

While the Dutch medical system made my lungs and heart worthy objects of pedagogy, it also easily dismissed me as a non-European homesick subject.

Anger infiltrated my skin and nerves. Even under the headiness of the anti-depressants that our family physician in Calcutta had prescribed to "take off the edge," I felt angry. But the dark bubbiness of the drugs also made me unusually happy. I felt inclined to hug every British tourist sauntering down Amsterdam's canals. But I ran away from the youth who came to hug me on international hugging day.

Within a month, my Dutch physician weaned me from the anti-depressants. Electricity infused my frayed nerves.

One morning, unable to bear the weight of my breathlessness, the sight of my skin, and the black cat, I screamed:

"Serves you right for jumping across!"

The cat lost its sheen. Like me, she was exhausted from looping in and out of the wire fence. In my dreams, the moon no longer shone.

My Cats, Their Ghosts, and Mine

A year later, I landed in Calcutta with two dislodged vertebrae after a fall in a bathroom. During the two months I stayed there, Tintin also fell ill.

After I was physically cured, I returned to Amsterdam. Once again, I started living with the black cat in my dreams. This time, it was far more harmonious than before.

In life and death, the significance of my totem—the cat—gradually dawned upon me.

But I also wished that the black cat would just disappear.

Instead, Tintin did.

Tintin left as suddenly as he arrived. Never to return.

I have continued to search for Tintin. I have found him many times, in other cats. Even in Sydney.

My cats, their ghosts, and mine convey the embodied implications of shape-shifting – of transgressing physical and psychological boundaries and human and non-human ones. Their presence in my life – which makes me move between nations and medical systems – still conveys to me far more than the limits of my dreams.



Tintin in Sydney, 2016, photo by author.



Street Art: Gyeongju, South Korea: 2014, photo by author.

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Malini Sur studies borders and bicycles. She divides her time between the [Institute for Culture and Society](#) and teaching in a newly inaugurated [B.A. program in anthropology](#) at Western Sydney University. Malini has written on [political violence](#), [barbed wires](#), [smuggling](#), [what it means to eat with one's fingers](#) and [the color blue](#). Here is a link to "Life Cycles" – her recently completed documentary film on bicycling cultures in India: <https://vimeo.com/159908467/d29bbbf65a>

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