

Keep Cats Safe and Save Bird Lives: Ecological Responsibility in Margaret Atwood's *Angel*

Catbird



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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's comic series *Angel Catbird* (2016) follows the adventures of the hybrid human/owl/cat Strig Feleedus and other half-animals while they fight against the half-rat Muroid. Incorporated in this superhero tale are banners referring to Nature Canada's campaign "Keep Cats Safe and Save Bird Lives" informing the reader about the correct ways of taking care of their cats so that other species, particularly birds, are not harmed. This thesis examines how *Angel Catbird* represents the relationship between humans and animals in order to make the reader feel ecologically responsible for the well-being of other species. Using Giorgio Agamben's theory on the anthropological machine and Dominic Pettman's notion of the humanimalchine as a conceptual framework, I show how the comics destabilise traditional boundaries between human/animal/machine. By focussing on the similarities and differences between the three entities, like emotions and ability for communication, the reader is asked to acknowledge the animal inside the human and understand their interconnectedness with other species. The comics also position humans as the cause of ecological violence and animal abuse. Strig's behaviour exposes the unintended harm of pet-owners, while Muroid functions as an allegory for the violent consequences of human superiority over animals. Although the comics critically reimagine the relationship between humans and animals, I argue that they also reproduce problematic workings of the anthropological machine because the text represents the rats as a form of bare life with no ethical or legal status. Similarly, the comics provide over-simplified information about confining cats indoors and fail to give the nonhuman animal a voice on the changes in animal behaviour that the text advocates.

Introduction

In February 2016 the national conservation charity Nature Canada launched an initiative named “Keep Cats Safe and Save Bird Lives” to raise awareness about the deaths of cats and birds. The campaign aims to reduce the number of unsupervised house cats roaming outside, as this leads to an increase in feral cat populations, cat deaths related to vehicle confrontations and cat diseases (Fast n. pag.). Outdoor cats are also responsible for approximately 100 to 350 million bird deaths per year which makes cats the primary source of bird mortality in Canada (Blancher 1). Bird populations have declined by 12% since 1970 and the number of bird species that are of special concern, threatened or extinct has increased from 47 species in 2001 to 86 in 2014 (Catsandbirds n.pag.). To prevent a further increase, cat owners have to take responsibility for the actions of their pets. Executive director of Nature Canada Eleanor Fast states that “[w]hile cats’ independent natures might lead some people to treat them like something between pet and wildlife, we owe them the same level of care we give dogs” as most people would not let their dog wander outside freely. The campaign thus advocates that keeping cats from roaming outside unsupervised will lead to safer lives for cats and save the bird population (Catsandbirds n.pag.).

Support for “Keep Cats Safe and Save Bird Lives” also comes from the Canadian author Margaret Atwood. In collaboration with comic artist Johnnie Christmas and comic colorist Tamra Bonvillain, Atwood published the comic series *Angel Catbird* which comprises the three volumes *Angel Catbird: Volume 1* (2016), *Angel Catbird Volume 2: To Castle Catula* (2017) and *Angel Catbird Volume 3: The Catbird Roars* (2017). The trilogy follows the adventures of the young genetic engineer Strig Feleedus who accidentally merges his blood with the DNA of a cat and an owl and in doing so becomes a hybrid human/animal persona. Strig then meets Cate Leone, a half-cat who introduces him to the world of half-animals which includes other half-cats but also the half-raven Ray, the half-owl Atheon-owl and the half-vampire-cat-bat Count Catula. The series focusses on Strig’s exploration of his new identity and his fight against the half-rat Muroid who wants to turn all rats into hybrid figures to achieve world domination. Atwood complements this narrative with statistics and facts placed at the bottom of several pages throughout the trilogy. These statistics include the numbers of bird deaths related to cats and how and why cats should not be left outside unsupervised. The informative banners refer to the website of CatsandBirds and urge the reader to actively change their behaviour in regard the safety of other species. Atwood appeals

to an ecological responsibility of cat-owners as she herself experienced “a burden of guilt from my many years of cat companionship” when she realised the damage cats cause to bird populations (AC1: 7).¹

Due to its recent publication date, the comics have received little to no attention in academic discourse, but they have been well received in the mainstream media. Most reviews are positive about how the comics refer back to the tradition of Golden Age Comics as “a good old-fashioned superhero romp” (Holub n.pag.). Several reviewers also point out how the hybridity of the characters can be read as an allegory for the current discourse about gender: “In our era of transphobia and white nationalism, *Angel Catbird* is a clever metaphor for people’s discomfort with those who don’t fit into the accepted binaries” (Wappler n.pag.). Another review interprets the series as “an extended metaphor for a man getting into furry culture” which leads to something “strange and niche” becoming mainstream (Finn n. pag.).² The comics have been described as “half pulp adventure and half environmental treatise” (Polo n.pag.), yet most reviews only focus on how hybridity functions as a metaphor, instead of commenting on the half animal-human figures as an appeal to ecological responsibility.

Although *Angel Catbird* is the first graphic narrative Atwood has published, her interest in environmentalism and the representation of animals has been present in her oeuvre for a long time. She has repeatedly advocated “both as novelist and scholar, to neither neglect the animals’ perspectives nor leave out their fate – however gruesome that might be” (Moss 134). This becomes clear from how different forms of animal life like pets, animals living in the wild or in laboratories, are represented in her literary works to demonstrate the mutual dependencies of humanity and animals (122). For example, her dystopian novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003) focusses on a post-human world in which the fate of genetically created humans is intertwined with new races of genetically altered animals. Science and rationality have eradicated all traces of the ‘natural’ in animals in order to maximize efficiency and profit (129). Another example is her short stories collection *Moral Disorder* (2006) which explores the relationship between animals and cruelty. In these stories Atwood exposes the need of people and society to hide the involvement with animals from ourselves in order to maintain large-scale practices and structures of animal abuse (131). Atwood’s work points out how humans “both affect and are affected by the larger environment in which we evolve, and [...]

¹ The three volumes used in this analysis will be referred to with abbreviations. *Angel Catbird Volume 1* will be referenced to as AC1, *Angel Catbird: To Castle Catula* as AC2, *Angel Catbird: The Catbird Roars* as AC3 and *Angel Catbird* will refer to the entire series.

² In furry culture or furry fandom people are interested in anthropomorphic animals and often identify with or assume characteristics of the nonhuman animal.

asks us to bear that interconnectedness firmly in mind” (Hengen 84). Exploring insight into the experiences of nonhuman animals in comics like *Angel Catbird* can be particularly productive because graphic narratives are a multimodal form that provide a complex environment for the negotiation of meaning (Herman, *Storyworld* 164). The reader is an active participant trying to create meaning by filling in the conceptual space on the page and making connections between panels (Jacobs 9). Animal comics also decentralize human narratives because the reader constantly is reminded of the undeniable traces of a character’s animality (Baker 137). Thus Kelly Sue DeConnick argues that because of the multimodal and interactive nature of comics, *Angel Catbird* functions as “a storytelling medium that is so cognitively engaging as to be a powerful tool for education [...] or persuasion” (AC3: 6).

If we want to change our relationships with other species, it is an important first step to understand how these relationships are reimagined. Nigel Rothfels argues that the stakes of representing animals will be high as this representation “will be of profound importance in coming years as arguments over global climate change ... and the precedence of human needs continue to build” (11). Marian Scholtmeijer adds that the representation of animals which denies and represses animals’ subjectivity and agency encourages “aggression against real animals by implying that nonhuman animals are devoid of experience worthy of human consideration” (qtd. in Donovan 111). To move beyond discourses in which nonhuman animals are passive objects, it is important to analyse how *Angel Catbird* represents the animal as living agent because “[a]nimal comics have functioned, in effect, as a narrative technology for [...] (re)imagining the dynamics of self-other relationships that cross the species boundary” (Herman, *Introduction* 12).

Therefore, this thesis examines how *Angel Catbird* represents the relationship between humans and animals in order to evoke an ecological and critical responsibility for the welfare of nonhuman animals. Although the comics sometimes fail to see their anthropocentric position and reinforce problematic notions of human superiority, *Angel Catbird* visually reimagines the relationship between human and animals in three phases. First, the comics question the boundaries between the human/animal/machine in order to create empathy for other species based on the similarities and unique differences between humans and animals. Secondly, the comics address the harmful and destructive behaviour of humans, whether it is active abuse done by figures like Muroid or the unintended result of loving pet-owners like Strig. Lastly, the comics propose alternative ways for taking care of cats to save other species, particularly birds. These three phases are heavily interwoven with each other because the comics use hybridity and destabilisation of traditional boundaries as critical approach for the

entire text, but for the purpose of coherence this analysis will follow a similar three-part structure.

The first chapter “The Humanimalchine” introduces the theory of Giorgio Agamben on the anthropological machine and the concept of bare life, which Dominic Pettman has appropriated and incorporated in his theory on the humanimalchine and the cybernetic triangle. Agamben and Pettman will function as a conceptual framework to examine how *Angel Catbird* disrupts the inclusion/exclusion mechanisms of the anthropological machine. Although the main focus of the thesis will be on the consequences of destabilizing the boundaries between human and animal, I will also examine the role of the machine. Language as technological mechanism is used to bring attention to the similar method of communication between entities while also emphasizing the complex differences. The second chapter “Representing Violence and Human Superiority” examines how Muroid can be read as an allegory for how humans position themselves as superior over other species and the violent consequences for animals. Although the comics criticize the general abuse of animals, the text reinforces the status of rats as bare life and undermines the idea of changing their position by framing Muroid’s effort as evil. The third and final chapter “Keep Cats Safe and Save Bird Lives” examines the over-simplified ecological message the comics are promoting and how the working of the anthropological machine is altered, but not completely disrupted.

Chapter I: The humanimalchine

In order to critically engage with the hybrid characters in *Angel Catbird*, the dynamics between what is understood as human/animal/machine have to be examined. According to Giorgio Agamben, humanity is produced through the anthropological machine because “man is the being which recognizes itself as such [...] man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human” (26). The machine functions as a mirroring mechanism to determine human/animal distinctions through a dual process of inclusion and exclusion, and in doing so nurtures a sense of human exceptionalism and superiority (Pettman 8). The anthropological machine isolates the animal aspects of the human animal by animalizing modes of human life in “an attempt to separate out—within human beings themselves—what precisely is animal [...] and human” (Calarco 91). Because this process includes the animal but then expels it, “the machine necessarily functions by means of an exclusion (which is also always already a capturing) and an inclusion (which is also always already exclusion)” (Agamben 37). Thus the anthropological machine produces the human as the exceptional animal who is not really animal after all (Oliver 7).

The workings of the anthropological machine are inevitably caught up in biopolitics. Michel Foucault defines biopolitics as the way in which modern sovereignty “is shaped by biopolitical rationalities that direct attention towards managing the biological life of (human) populations” (Wadiwel 25). Politics govern the lives of populations through the deployment of resources for public health, education, fertility and family planning and as such the government focuses on the functioning of the human as “an organism on an individual and collective level” (25). By having the ability to foster life through politics, sovereign powers are also capable of excluding and violating life. For Agamben, biopolitics is an ongoing form of differentiation between human and animal: “The decisive political conflict, which governs every other conflict, is that between the animality and the humanity of man. That is to say, in its origin Western politics is also biopolitics” (Agamben 80).

Because the anthropological machine as biopolitical mechanism of the sovereign continuously reinforces and revises the divide between human and animals, it creates a space which “is neither an animal life nor a human life, but only a life that is separated and excluded from itself—only a *bare life*” (Agamben 38). Bare life is deprived of any legal or ethical rights, yet it is simultaneously included into the political realm as an exception to the law, exposing bare life to death and violence. Bare life is not only unsavable and deemed killable by law, but also unknowable and without meaning (Oliver 14). Biopolitics as the conflict

between animality and humanity has defined the horizon of human politics because animals as subject embodying bare life are caught in the exceptional spaces of the political system (Wadiwel 274). For example, anti-cruelty laws have always provided an exception for animals used in science and food production (82). Animal welfare legislation is meant to reduce suffering, yet it rarely challenges the fundamental practices of violent regulation, experimentation and slaughter of animals (37). Political systems also maintain institutionalized animal abuse by legally framing animal activists as domestic terrorists (DeMello, *Animals and Society* 417). The production of bare life is a necessary part of politics as “it is only in attempting to identify and exclude a form of life that is undifferentiated and stripped of humanity that political life can be established” (Campbell 97). Therefore Agamben insists that the anthropological machine must be abolished for its distinctions between human and animals are always deeply political and ethical. In order to stop the production of bare life, we have to work towards a form of politics beyond the present democratic and humanist systems (Calarco 94).

Dominic Pettman appropriates the function of the anthropological machine for his concept of the cybernetic triangle which comprises “the unholy trinity of human, animal, and machine, including the various ways in which they have been figured, and reconfigured, conceptually over time” (5). Although traditionally these three entities have been seen as fixed and strictly separate, they are in essence all a humanimalchine because each concept contains dimensions of the other two: “The human, animal, and machine are lodged within the core of each other’s being” (Mazis 21).³ Similarly to Agamben, Pettman points out that there is no such thing as a ‘full’ human because the three realms can only be thought through together and thus the human subject is only achieved through the continual redefinition of a space beyond the animal (Wadiwel 75). Using the cybernetic triangle to accentuate different reconfigurations of the human/animal/machine can expose the workings of the anthropological machine as we are confronted with the nonhuman in the human itself. A better understanding of the interconnectedness, similarities and differences between the three realms can deconstruct notions of human superiority which have been employed to justify how contemporary democracies maintain the massive institutionalised abuse of animals (DeMello, *Animals in Society* 42). As Glen Mazis argues:

³ The concept of machine is not limited to technology as physical entity, but can also include social/governmental/educational or religious mechanisms. As Glen Mazis argues, “the machine lurks in many dimensions of human existence having nothing to do with metal or silicon” (4).

If we can see the unique excellence that each can bring to our interconnectedness, then we might avoid the implosions of boundaries that are *violating to these beings*, whether of livestock taken as cogs in a food production machine and made to exist in suffering and disease, or of humans seen as livestock to be harvested for parts or seen as machines to be reengineered into efficient producers at the cost of the meaning of their experience, or of machines treated as one undifferentiated mass of mere matter with no gradations of aesthetic, moral, or meaningful dimensions. If we can recognize the differing excellence distinctive to humans, animals, and machines, and at the same time their interconnectedness, then we can create an enhancing encounter among all three. (86)

Agamben and Pettman function as a conceptual framework to examine *Angel Catbird* because the way in which the comics reconfigure the humanimalchine exposes the nonhuman inside the human. Instead of excluding the animalization, like the anthropological machine would do, the animal is embraced in its full complexity while the ‘full’ human remains absent in the narrative.⁴ The nonhuman animals in the text are regarded as “individuals who do have feelings, who can communicate those feelings, and to whom therefore humans have obligations” (Donovan & Adams 3). *Angel Catbird* confronts the reader with their ethical responsibility towards other species by visualising the humanimalchine on the page. Because the ‘full’ human does not exist, the comics appeal to the ethical responsibility of the reader to care for the welfare of other species that are not so different from us. Although Agamben provides important insight into the production of the human and the political consequences for animals, Pettman’s cybernetic triangle regarding the relationship between human and animals is more productive for the hybrid characters in *Angel Catbird*. The metaphor of the machine is central to Agamben’s analysis, but he never considers actual technology in relation to the other two categories (Oliver 12). Because different forms of technology play a vital role in the comics, the humanimalchine can be used to examine how the three entities intersect. Thus the remainder of this chapter will focus on the visual reconfiguration of the human/animal and how language as technology emphasizes interconnectedness in the cybernetic triangle.

⁴ ‘Full’ human refers here to humans with no animal DNA or animal like characteristics and who can be considered ‘normal’ humans in society. ‘Full’ humans are barely mentioned in the text, only Strig can be read as ‘full’ human protagonist before his accident with the genetic serum.



Fig.1. Cate and the Alley-cats as hybrid figures (AC1: 51).

Reconfiguring the human/animal

The human/animal is reconfigured visually as the hybrid characters have animal characteristics like tails, beaks, or wings, while they are also recognizable as human due to walking on two legs, heavily sculpted torso's, and other human features (figure 1).⁵ Most half-animals like Strig, Ray, or Cate, follow general human conventions in their daily life such as wearing clothes and going to work. Yet they also convey the inner-world and lived experiences of animals. For example, the half-cats express animal instincts like playing with the rodents they caught, rummaging through bins and they mostly eat natural sources of food for cats such as fish. Another important element in the reconfiguration is the display of emotion. The half-cats feel angry and sad when they find a dumped half-kitten (AC2: 44) and promise to avenge the death of another half-cat (figure 2). The portrayal of emotion emphasizes the overlap between humans and animals in the ability to experience love, pain and anger. Although the hybrid characters seem to balance being human/animal equally, there are moments when the human entity is positioned as superior. The half-animals in the comics

⁵ The notion of freak in this panel also emphasizes how the hybrid characters destabilize traditional boundaries between human and animal and therefore have no real place in society. Particularly Strig's embodiment of birds and cats, two natural enemies, often leads to contradictory behaviour and confusion, like when Strig hunts for the first time: "Did I...just...eat a...rat? BLECH! Tasty, though" (AC1: 21). When admiring the half-cat Cate, he thinks: "Rrr! What a woman! I mean, what a cat!" (31) and "I'd love it if you had my kittens? Or laid my eggs? Whatever" (70).

embody hybridity in two different forms. Characters like Cate, Strig or Ray lean more closely to human and can look ‘fully’ human, while for characters like the Alley-cats or Count Catula the animal side is dominant. Instead of transforming to full human, they become full animals. Cate calls it “tough on them” (AC1: 61) that these characters can only exist in full animal form or half-animal, but not completely human. The characters almost appear exclusively in the most human form available to them which suggest that when given the choice, the hybrid characters prefer to be as human as possible. Implying that animals prefer to be human undermines the destabilisation of boundaries and the idea of taking the inner-world, agency and subjectivity of nonhuman animals seriously.



Fig. 2. Promising revenge for the death of the half-cat (AC1: 77).

The human traits of the hybrid characters can be explained because they are genetically part human, but the human behaviour of the ‘full’ nonhuman animals does not have a genetic explanation. Thus the human behaviour of the nonhuman animals can be described as an act of anthropomorphism, attributing human traits, beliefs, thoughts, and emotions to other species. In *Angel Catbird* animals clap their paws to celebrate, the rats of Muroid wear clothing, there are laughing owls and the way the animals talk to each other is also very human. For example, figure 3 shows how the rat on the left brings her claw to her

head to indicate that Muroid is “bonkers” (AC2: 17). However, anthropomorphism often conflates with anthropocentrism when “humans project their own thoughts and feelings onto other animal species because they egotistically believe themselves to be the centre of the universe” (Daston & Mittman 4). This may lead to anthropocentric interpretations in which the nonhuman animal’s experience is excluded and the animal only functions as allegory for specific human situations (Harel 49).



Fig. 3. Anthropomorphised nonhuman animals (AC2: 17).

There are indeed several instances where anthropomorphised nonhuman animals are used as allegories. Take for example the Anonymouse, mice wearing masks from the graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (1988) by Alan Moore and David Lloyd. These nonhuman mice rewire power lines and servers to gain access to data, publish on Wikisqueaks and use the squeaker phone, their version of the mobile phone. The Anonymouse actively fight for the well-being of their species and therefore can be read as an allegory for the activism needed to change the position of animals in society. But even if anthropomorphism functions as allegory, the comics do not erase the emotional experiences of the animals. The Anonymouse for example emphasize their agency. When Atheen-Owl comments that all mice look alike, the mouse tells her: “Maybe to you we look alike, species-ist! But each of us is a mouse in his or her own right!” (AC3: 42). Because there is a genetic explanation for the similarities between human and animals in the hybrid characters, the comics use anthropomorphism as critical approach to reinforce how actual nonhuman animals experience much of “what we once considered to be ‘human’ emotions, that they have self-recognition and self-awareness, that they can

communicate with each other (and with us) through sophisticated communication systems” (DeMello, *Animals in Society* 42).

Language as Technology

When examining the reconfiguration of the human/animal, it is important not to diminish the role of the machine in *Angel Catbird*. Language as a form of technology is used in the comics to accentuate differences and similarities as the hybrid characters and animals share similar linguistic mechanisms. Language is not the emanation of the human spirit but functions as an external and material reality which humanity has created as tool or machine (Mazis 101). By defining language as technology and part of the cybernetic triangle, “humans are *the animals* who think things through in extending the range, scope, and structure of their thought by using machines—first language itself, then [...] other extensions into the environment” (102). But imposing what society considers to be human language as technology onto nonhuman animals that have different ways of communicating can have problematic implications. Any text that assigns a voice to the nonhuman animal “is a case of speaking for others [and] the practice of speaking for others [...] carries a real danger of misrepresentation and, in particular, of erasing difference, of turning the other into the same” (Armbruster 19). Talking animals have often functioned as literary and symbolic acts voicing human perspectives and this has led to erasure of their identity (21). However, the machine entity confirms the ability of species to communicate with each other while also acknowledging the unique differences within these shared abilities.



Fig. 4. First encounter with talking nonhuman animals (AC1: 26).



Fig. 5. Talking cat (AC1: 39).

The hybrid characters can communicate with other animals without having to be the same species as they are. In these conversations, the comics sometimes visualise both methods of communication and translate the animal utterance into human language (figure 4).⁶ The translation is placed in a separate text-box, implicating the difference between the utterances but also reinscribing the animal language into structures of human text. But in the majority of the dialogue between nonhuman animals and hybrid figures, the text directly appears in speech-balloons without translations (figure 5). It is noticeable how the cat in figure 5 tells Strig: “How come you talk like a cat?” (AC1: 39). This suggests that the communication between animals and hybrid characters is translated to suit each participant in the dialogue. The use of speech-balloons does not indicate that the nonhuman cat possesses the ability to speak in human language but rather that the hybrid characters are able to communicate with animals in an equal manner. This acknowledgment of difference decentralizes the idea of human language as dominant over how nonhuman animals communicate and experience the world.



Fig. 6. Interpreting languages (AC3: 44).

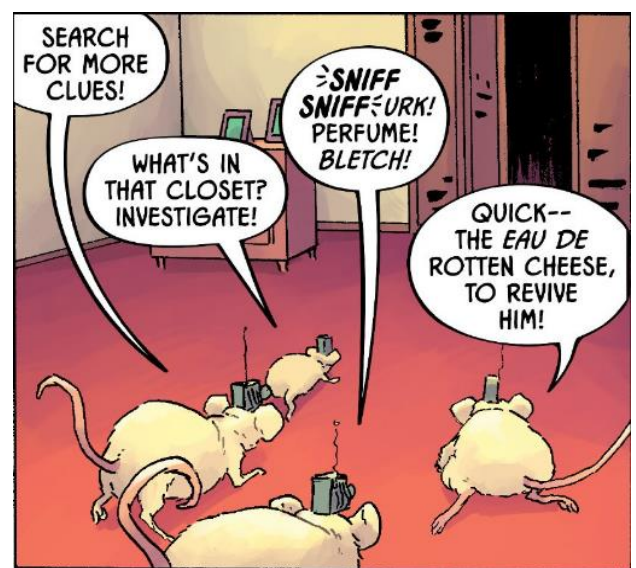


Fig. 7. Talking nonhuman rats (AC2: 24).

⁶ The black lines drawing attention to Strig’s emotions and face in figure 4 do not fit into the panel which emphasizes Strig’s surprise when he hears the voices of animals. Breaking the boundaries of the panels is a recurring strategy in *Angel Catbird* to thematise the literal destabilisation of fixed categories, in this case the conventional fixed borders of panels in comic books. Other examples are the tail of Strig’s cat Ding breaking out of the panel when he escapes the house (AC1: 17) and a paw of the technological controlled rats stepping out of the frame (AC2: 25). Sometimes a body part of the hybrid characters will not in fit the panel, like Strig’s ear (AC1: 61), the cape of Count Catula (AC1: 68) and the wings of the half-owls and nonhuman owls (AC2: 67). All characters, whether they are nonhuman animals or hybrid figures, break the boundaries of the panels, except Muroid, which reinforces the idea that he represents humanity’s stern belief in superiority and fixed binaries between other entities.

There are also situations when it is unclear whether hybrid characters are capable of understanding all forms of animal communication. When Strig answers the bird call of Atheen-owl, it seems that Cate does not understand what the owl sounds mean (AC2: 14). Similarly, when the Anonymouse consults with his colleagues, both the hybrid figures and the nonhuman rats have trouble understanding what he says: “Languages! So difficult!” (figure 6). The linguistic machine exists in many different structures and utterances, both for humans (think of all the different languages in the world) as for nonhuman animals. Even if most characters seem to communicate effortlessly with animals, the comics acknowledge the complexity of communication between different species by using different medium specific structures of the comics, like the speech-balloon and translations. However, the comics could have gone a step further with the representation of language. When there are no hybrid characters present to focalise the conversation between nonhuman animals, the animals’ language is represented directly in speech-balloons. They do not use translations to indicate that there is no figure in the frame to interpret the language of the nonhuman animal for the reader (figure 7). If the comics had continued the use of translations like in figure 4, the role of the reader as interpreter of the nonhuman animals and the differences between species would have been emphasized even more.



Fig. 8. Anonymouse and the balance of nature (AC3: 44).

The importance of understanding differences and similarities between species is also illustrated by how the hybrid characters deal with these issues in the animal world. When Strig is imprisoned and asks a mouse to help him, the mouse replies: “Why should I do you any favors? You’re a cat. Face it. To you, I’m just animated kibble” (AC3: 46). The owls first refuse to help the cats as they “have starved to death because feral cats have eaten all the mice” (AC2: 53). Yet despite the differences between species and prejudices against others, the hybrid protagonists and nonhuman animals come together because the domination of rats threatens the existence of everyone. The mice even propose a truce on mouse eating as long as there is no long-term disruption of the food chain: “All life forms must accept their role, provided there’s a balance. And no species extinctions” (figure 9).⁷ The hybrid characters show that by acknowledging differences and similarities, they are able to respect and take responsibility for the well-being of other entities and thus reflect the larger aim of reconfiguring the humanimalchine in the comics.

It has become clear that the characters in *Angel Catbird*, be it the hybrid protagonists or the nonhuman animals, are what Pettman has called humanimalchines. In contrast with the anthropological machine, the animal within the human is not excluded but visually merged and explored through its unique differences and similarities. The reader cannot identify with the human behaviour of the hybrid characters without acknowledging the lived animal experience as well. Because there is an identification with the pain, loss and happiness of the animals, the reader as humanimalchine is reconfigured as well. In doing so, the comics appeal to an ecological understanding of animals as deserving something much more than the treatment of bare life like Agamben has conceptualized. However, as we will see in the next chapter, the comics make a distinction between the ethical status of birds, cats and rodents as not all animal life in the comics is elevated above the status of bare life.

⁷ Directly under this panel is an informative banner telling the reader that letting your cat outside unsupervised also disrupts the balance of nature. The banner’s placement under this panel of agreement between species suggests that if predators and prey can come together to fight for their survival, surely humanity must understand the necessity of helping animals as well.

Chapter II: Representing Violence and Human Superiority

Agamben's focus on biopolitics and the relation of animals to bare life provides a theoretical framework to examine the representation of violence towards animals in *Angel Catbird*. The comics implicate humanity in the violence towards animals through the character of Muroid, who despite his half-rat nature can be read as an allegory for the superiority of humanity over other species.



Fig. 9. Muroid as dominant leader (AC3: 56).

As antagonist of the series, Muroid wants to change all rats into half-rats so that they can infiltrate every level of society and take over power in order to establish a “rattish empire” (figure 9). But there is no equal relationship between Muroid and the nonhuman rats as they are his “rat minions” (AC1: 35). He views the nonhuman rats as replaceable: “Hundreds of murines will perish...but let them die! I have hundreds more! Nothing must stand in my way!” (AC2: 28).⁸ Muroid threatens with violence if the rats do not act according to his will: “Faster, you sewer scum! Or do I have to use the whip?” (AC2: 64). He is also the

⁸ “Murines” refers to the special military rats Muroid uses and is a pun on marines. Similarly, the “Rattish Empire” in figure 9 is a pun on the British Empire. The use of humour and the enormous amount of animal related punning in *Angel Catbird* places the comic in the tradition of the funny animal comics. For example, ironically playing with words is seen in the names of the characters. Strig Feleedus refers to the Latin family names for owl and cat and Muroid refers to the family of the rodents. Other examples of humour and wordplay are Cate’s repetitive use of the word “Purrfect,” “catastrophe” as name for their nightclub (AC3: 43) and Muroid calling his colleagues “comrats” (AC3: 54).

only one in *Angel Catbird* who cannot understand the language of other species which illustrates how far he is removed from the nonhuman animals. He does not acknowledge their subjectivity or agency but deems the animals as replaceable and only worthy as an object to be controlled and abused. Even the reader has more knowledge of the lived experience of the animals because their language is made accessible for us. Yet the rats do understand Muroid and this miscommunication leads to a scene of charades in which the rats try to explain the concept of a half vampire-cat-bat (figure 10).⁹



Fig. 10. The rats communicating with Muroid (AC2: 27).

Muroid also keeps two female rats prisoner because he wants to change them into hybrid “[r]at-a-licious hot rat babes” (AC2: 16) to be part of his “delectable harem” (AC1: 13), something which the rats describe as “a fate worse than death” (AC2: 75). It is noticeable how they are coded as feminine and positioned as sexualised and objectified women. The female rats are named Esmeralda and Ophelia, have eyelashes while other rats do not and they escape their imprisonment through flirting with a wild male rat. Like in many of Atwood’s works, the cruelty towards animals is mirrored with the cruelty toward women as the two are inextricably linked (Moss 132). Animals are treated as objects, killed and consumed as meat while women are similarly objectified as sexual objects to be consumed through porn or sexual violence: “When women say that they ‘felt like a piece of meat,’ they are referring to

⁹ In these situations the comic as multimodal and thus visual medium is being highlighted as Muroid can only depend on what he sees the rats doing through the cameras, just like the reader is observing the characters.

degrading and dehumanizing treatment that is reserved for women and animals” (DeMello, *Animals and Society* 264). The rats are in constant danger of being consumed sexually by Muroid and literally by the half-animals. Count Catula calls the rats “tidbits” (AC1: 64) and half-cat Trash says that the rats are “so cute I could eat them” (AC3: 14).¹⁰ By inflicting sexual violence onto the female rats, the comics position the animals as a victim in a human discourse of abuse to create sympathy for the rats and awareness of their hardship. Similarly, this reinforces the evil nature of Muroid as capable of inflicting violence onto animals and women. The close-up of Muroid’s face in figure 11 emphasizes his sadistic enjoyment of enslaving the rats and the wired cage in the panel reinforces their helplessness.¹¹



Fig. 11. The two female rats (AC2: 16).

¹⁰ The conflation of sexual consumption and food is also interesting because according to Agamben, sex and food are key areas in which the human “is forced to acknowledge his animalistic aspect, hence the amount of effort lavished on sexual and erotica (not to mention cuisine) to convince ourselves that we are in the realm of the cooked rather than the raw” (Pettman 53). The notion of literal and sexual consumption of animals thus draws attention to the distinctions made between ‘proper’ human behaviour and animals.

¹¹ Like with his dominated rat army, Muroid cannot communicate with the female rats. Every time Muroid is present while the rats talk, his words appear in speech-balloons while the rats communicate in thought-balloons (figure 11). In the rest of the series the thought-balloons indicate the private thoughts of a character, but the rats respond to each other and thus the words in the thought-balloons are a way of communication which is not accessible to Muroid. When the rats escape and talk to half-animals or full animals, all their language takes place in speech-balloons. Only with Muroid present their communication is depicted in this manner which again illustrates Muroid’s inability to understand other species.

As part of the cybernetic triangle, the machine plays an important role in how Muroid is abusing animals. His massive army of nonhuman animals is only under his command because he uses technology to dominate them as they are his “digitally controlled rat slave[s]” (AC1: 18). His “enhanced-nose bloodhound rats” (AC2: 15) indicate that he also experiments with the animals. Because of this technology the comics suggest that no rat is following Muroid willingly. All the rats are abused and brainwashed into acting under his command, without wanting to and thus no nonhuman animal is actually supporting Muroid’s plans for world domination. Muroid turns his rats into machines through which he can spy on Strig and his friends, but also creates machines resembling animals. He traps Strig in his underground dungeon using the drat, an irresistible drone rat with “twirling feathers and fluttering wings! Multiple wiggling rat-tails! A catnip and rotting salmon aroma!” (figure 12). The drone embodies different characteristics of rats and birds which destabilises the boundaries between the machine and animal. Although Muroid utilizes technology to increase his dominance over animals, others hijack the machines to use against him. Count Catula manipulates the transmitter of the spy rats to steal Muroid’s plans and the Anonymouse hack the drat to escape the dungeon. The machine is not portrayed as inherently evil, but rather as an entity which can be incorporated either negatively or positively into the humanimalchine.



Fig. 12. The drat (AC2: 38).

Rats as Bare Life

The way in which Muroid is violently abusing rats can be read as an allegory for the institutionalized practices of animal abuse by humans because the animals are treated as replaceable objects without any agency. By framing Muroid and his destructive behaviour as antagonist of the series, the comics criticize the general violence towards animals and establish why an ecological responsibility for other species is needed. But Muroid's emphasis on using humanity as slaves when he succeeds with world domination can also be interpreted as revenge for the way rats have been treated as bare life. Rats are animals that particularly move in the exceptional spaces of the law because rodents do not have any legal or ethical rights while pets have gained some form of legal protection. For example, the European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals protects companion animals from abandonment, abuse and suffering (DeMello, *Animals and Society* 409). Although companion animals are conceived as property and have no rights of their own, they are at least acknowledged in the political system while the rodents are not. Another example is how the Animal welfare legislation in the United States does not cover mice, rats or birds in the Animal Welfare Act because they form 95% of the laboratory animals (Dockery n.pag.). Similarly, Canada has established a voluntary program for the surveillance of the care of experimental animals, but there is no national legislation pertaining the use of rats in research (CCAC n.pag.).

If we choose to read Muroid as someone who wants to change the status of the rats, even if he partakes in the same human discourses of abuse and power, the comics' focus on Muroid as antagonist implicates that society should repress people who want to change the position of bare life animals. This interpretation is supported by how *Angel Catbird* upholds rats as bare life and reinforces tropes of rats as dangerous vermin that have to be eradicated. Rats representing the worst aspects of humanity could be read as ironic because “[r]ats are probably the only species to resemble humans in both their evolutionary success and in their destruction of ecosystems and biodiversity” (Beumer 11). Muroid's rats confirm how rats are regarded as “dangerous vermin that spreads illness and destruction” (9). His rats are spies, moving through the sewers, lurking around people and difficult to get rid of. The harsh red colour scheme used every time Muroid addresses his army or is present in his dungeon also emphasizes his evilness (figure 13). By reinforcing the destructive nature of rats, the comics represent rats as creatures not worthy of any ethical safeguarding against violence of humans.



Fig. 13. Muroid as half-rat (AC1: 36).

In addition, the lives of rats do not seem to matter ethically in relation to hunting activities. If the premise of *Angel Catbird* is that cats as companion animals should not hunt and roam unsupervised because they are well-cared for, fed and not wild animals, the need for the hybrid characters to hunt can be questioned as well. The characters frequently consume rats, particularly as a way of fighting against Muroid by eating his rat-army (figure 14). The half-cats express how much they enjoy eating rats while the surprised facial expressions of the rats suggest that the animals are still alive. But as the hybrid figures are able to change into forms in which they can consume pet food, fish and other less harmful products, the hunting characters seem to imply that eating rats is fine, particularly if it saves the lives of other species. The Anonymouse also discuss the balance of nature in relation to cats, birds and mice, but the status of the rats is never mentioned. This is particularly striking because the rats are digitally controlled and die for behaviour over which they have no control at all. The

comics advocate the protection of birds, but reinforce how rats resemble bare life which does not have any ethical status and can be killed without consequences.¹²



Fig. 14. Eating rats (AC2: 50).

Although the comics do not question the status of rats as bare life, the female rats Esmeralda and Ophelia demonstrate that not all rats should be portrayed as evil vermin, but that they are also the victims of scientific research. Muroid has stolen the female rats from a biology laboratory to use them as test-subjects for the serum. When the female rats see the Anonymouse for the first time since their childhood together in the laboratory, the mouse's comment "[g]lad you didn't get centrifuged" (AC3: 39) emphasizes how laboratory rats are exposed to violence and death. When Muroid is defeated, Cate tells the female rats that their "brave service in a noble cause shall not be forgotten" to which they respond that "it probably will be forgotten" (AC3: 82), which underlines how the lives and sacrifices of rats are not acknowledged by society. The female rats also have to deal with the patronizing comments of the half-cats: "The pipsqueaks have, like, an idea! In their teeny-tiny brains! An itty-bitty wittle thoughty-wotty..." (AC3: 36). The negative tropes assigned to rats such as being small and cunning are the things the female rats use to escape their imprisonment. Thus the negative

¹² This is not to say that rats do not form an ecological problem regarding the balance of nature or should be protected at the cost of other species, but the comics do only focus on one particular problematic image of rats instead of nuancing their status.

stereotypes of rats as violent creatures are opposed by the female rats as victims who recognize Muroid's destructive behaviour and act against it.¹³ But even if the female rats counter some of the problematic representations of rats, *Angel Catbird* does not question the lack of legal or ethical rights regarding rats. With Muroid as rat-antagonist, the comics seem to produce a general critique on abusing animals without actually considering changing the status of bare life.

Ultimately, the representation of Muroid as antagonist, half-rat and allegory can be problematized in two different manners. If we read Muroid as allegory for human behaviour, his animal experience and subjectivity are erased while the animal experiences of other hybrid characters are valued. Interpreting animals as symbols for human experiences is precisely one of the recurring problems in animal representations. Secondly, Muroid can be interpreted as a human whose destructive and violent behaviour is animalized as rat according to workings of the anthropological machine. Humanity's behaviour is animalized as rat, included and visualised in the comic, but by representing Muroid as the antagonist the message is to exclude this violent animal like behaviour from ourselves. In this sense, the anthropological machine produces an image of humanity which upholds the problematic division between humanity and animals, even if it is used to criticize the violence toward other species. The next chapter will focus further on the workings of the anthropological machine and how *Angel Catbird* engages with the conservation of birds and cats.

¹³ Rats are seen as hostile in human environments, instrumental in laboratories but also amiable in pet relationships, although rats are not commonly accepted as companion animals. Because of these different relationships with rats, they are characterized as fundamentally ambivalent and contradictory. They are even described as boundary crossers or shape-changers and this contributes to the theme of destabilization of boundaries in the comics (Beumer 12).

Chapter III: “Keep Cats Safe and Save Bird Lives”

After examining the reconfiguration of the humanimalchine, let us now take a step back and focus on the conservation efforts of the comics as a manifesto advocating the campaign “Keep Cats Safe and Save Bird Lives.” Throughout the series informative banners educate the reader on the threats and dangers to the lives of cats, such as getting hit by a car, poisonous foods and parasites. They also point out the ecological problems cats cause due to unsupervised behaviour, like the extinction of bird species and increase in feral cat population. The message most emphasized in the narrative is to prevent cats from hunting animals by not letting them roam unsupervised: “Hunting is a natural cat instinct. It’s also ‘natural’ for dogs to hunt cats, but we don’t let them do it! Cats and dogs have been domesticated for thousands of years. They’re pets, not wild animals” (figure 15).¹⁴ A similar banner appears in the second volume: “Cats are hunters, but they’re not monsters – they’re just doing what comes naturally. Cat owners are responsible for their pets’ behaviour” (AC2: 32). The last volume concludes that “[i]t’s natural for cats to hunt birds and wildlife, but letting our cats hunt disrupts the balance of nature. That’s because cats aren’t native animals” (AC3: 44).¹⁵ The comics establish that hunting is natural behaviour for cats, but that it is a negative instinct which should be repressed in order to save other species. The informative banners write against how humanity has “assumed that animals’ fate is part of a world of circumstance, of misfortune, and even of tragedy, perhaps, but not one of human responsibility” (Mazis 245). Therefore pet-owners carry an ecological responsibility for the environmental problems cats cause because humanity has created the cats’ position in which they are no longer wild and native animals.

¹⁴ This banner is ironically placed under a panel in which an Alley-cat bloodily kills and eats one of Muroid’s rats. The banner proclaims that cats should not hunt, but as discussed in the previous chapter, rats are the exception and can be killed without consequences.

¹⁵ The over-emphasis on individual actions as a strategy to change the position of animals has been criticised because it creates the perception that solely individual decisions “have a significant impact upon large scale systems of domination” (Wadiwel 30). By asserting that changing lifestyles or attitudes can prevent animal violation, the biopolitical systems which maintain the position of animals as bare life remain unquestioned. This is a recurring problem in animal rights activist discourses. But if we look at the kind of behavioural change *Angel Catbird* advocates, emphasizing the action of the individual can be very productive because ultimately pet-owners have to take action to keep cats indoors.



CATS ARE NATURAL HUNTERS

Hunting is a natural cat instinct. It's also "natural" for dogs to hunt cats, but we don't let them do it! Cats and dogs have been domesticated for thousands of years. They're pets, not wild animals.

www.catsandbirds.ca/blog/isnt-it-natural-for-my-cat-to-hunt/

46

Fig. 15. Cats are natural hunters (AC1: 46).

However, *Angel Catbird* advocates only one side of the indoor/outdoor cat debate by not addressing how many pet-owners are highly critical about the idea that the welfare of cats requires them to be indoors: "While typical proponents of keeping cats confined indoors seem to focus on safety as a key feature of cat welfare, opponents focus on other aspects of a 'good life' such as freedom and naturalness" (Sandøe & Corr 81). Scientific studies weighing the potential pleasure of roaming outdoors against risks of endangerment of other species suggest that confined cats "may pay a significant price for being spared the risks of traffic accidents and other outdoor hazards" (89). Prohibiting cats to roam outside may lead to behavioural problems and increases the risk of diseases such as obesity. Although these studies do not consider the subjective state of the animal such as how much pleasure a cat derives from hunting or climbing trees, they illustrate that there is not a clear-cut answer for the debate on the indoor/outdoor cat (90). The way in which *Angel Catbird* presents its information about confined cats and the benefits for the balance of nature as the ultimate scientific truth is problematic because the discussion about indoor/outdoor cats proves to be much more complex and nuanced.

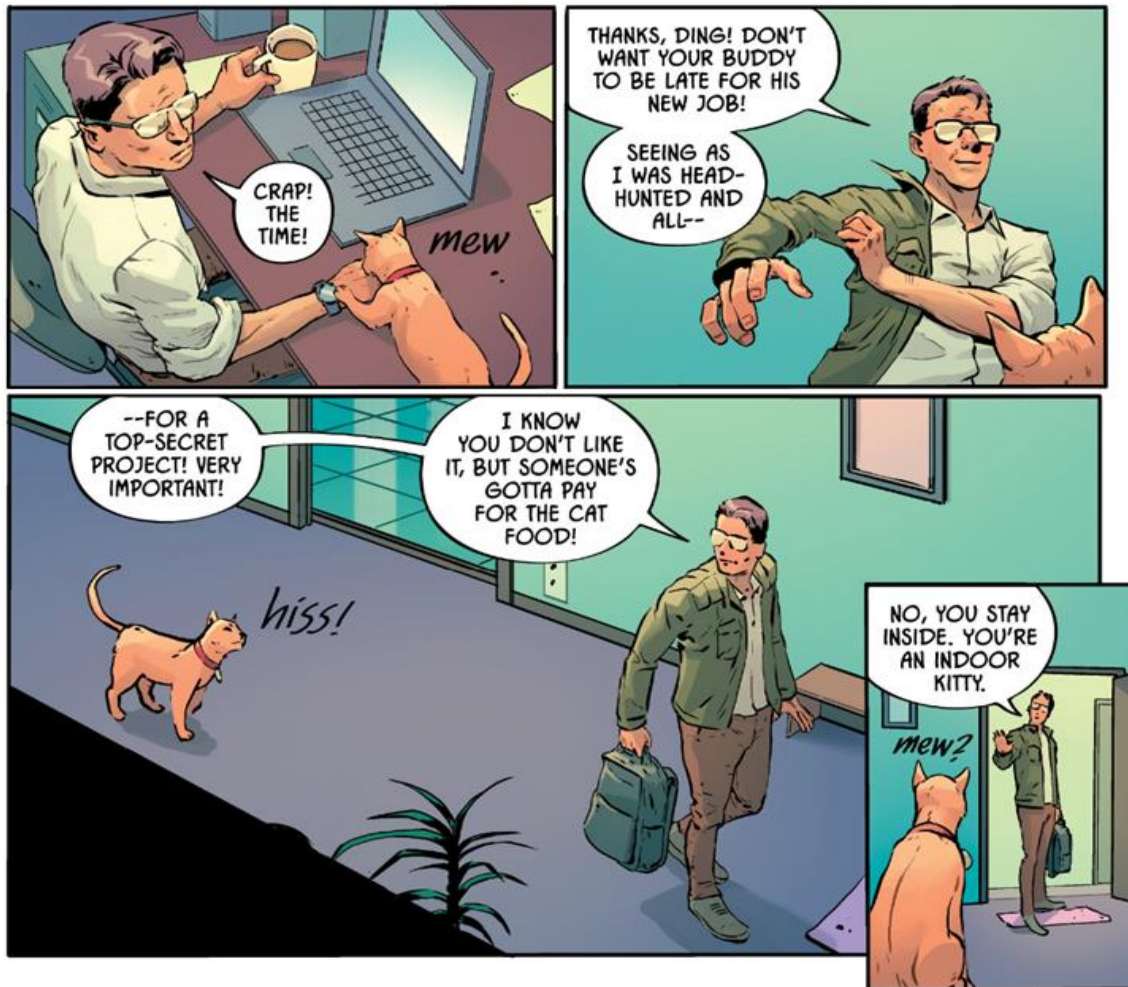


Fig. 16. Strig and his pet Ding (AC1: 11).

The warnings about the welfare of cats and birds are incorporated into the comics through the characters. But like the ‘full’ human, pets are also surprisingly absent from the narrative for a comic series which focusses so much on the behaviour of companion animals. It is only in the first few pages of Volume 1 that we encounter the relationship between Strig as ‘normal’ human and his pet Ding. Pets already destabilise fixed boundaries of the cybernetic triangle because companion animals are valued for their ‘animalness’ but are also seen as ‘little humans’ (Fox 526).¹⁶ According to Leslie Irvine “the intimate nature of pet-keeping relationships and everyday practices of interaction [...] can gradually undermine hegemonic views of them as ‘other’ and become an ‘individualized act of political resistance to society’s disregard for non-human life’” (qtd. in Fox 534). The anthropomorphism used by pet-owners shows how they acknowledge the reciprocal role in the pet-human relationship

¹⁶ Similarly, the boundaries between animal/machine have been destabilised as companion animals in pet-breeding often undergo technological procedures in order to conform to the artificial requirements of their breed (DeMello, *Animals in Society* 93).

and respect the pets' subjectivity which is also visible in Strig's interactions with his cat Ding (532). Ding draws Strig's attention to his watch, reminding him that he needs to leave for work (figure 16). By interpreting Ding's utterances Strig has a conversation with his cat about his new job: "I know you don't like it, but someone's gotta pay for the cat food!" (AC1: 11). Although Strig is anthropomorphising his pet, he acknowledges the cat's ability for feeling and communication. The emotional connection between owner and pet is also emphasized when Strig mourns Ding's death.¹⁷ The death of his pet is used to represent all the threats the information banners warn the reader about. Ding was supposed to be "an indoor kitty" (AC1: 11) but ran out of the house to chase a rat and was hit by a car. The banners repeatedly tell the reader that cat owners have to provide enough play stimulation for a cat to stop hunting. Strig clearly cares deeply about his cat, but Ding chasing the rat ultimately shows Strig's unintended lack in responsibility for his cat's behaviour. Strig's actions emphasize why an awareness of the proper methods to take care of pets is necessary because even the most loving pet-owners can unintentionally harm other species.

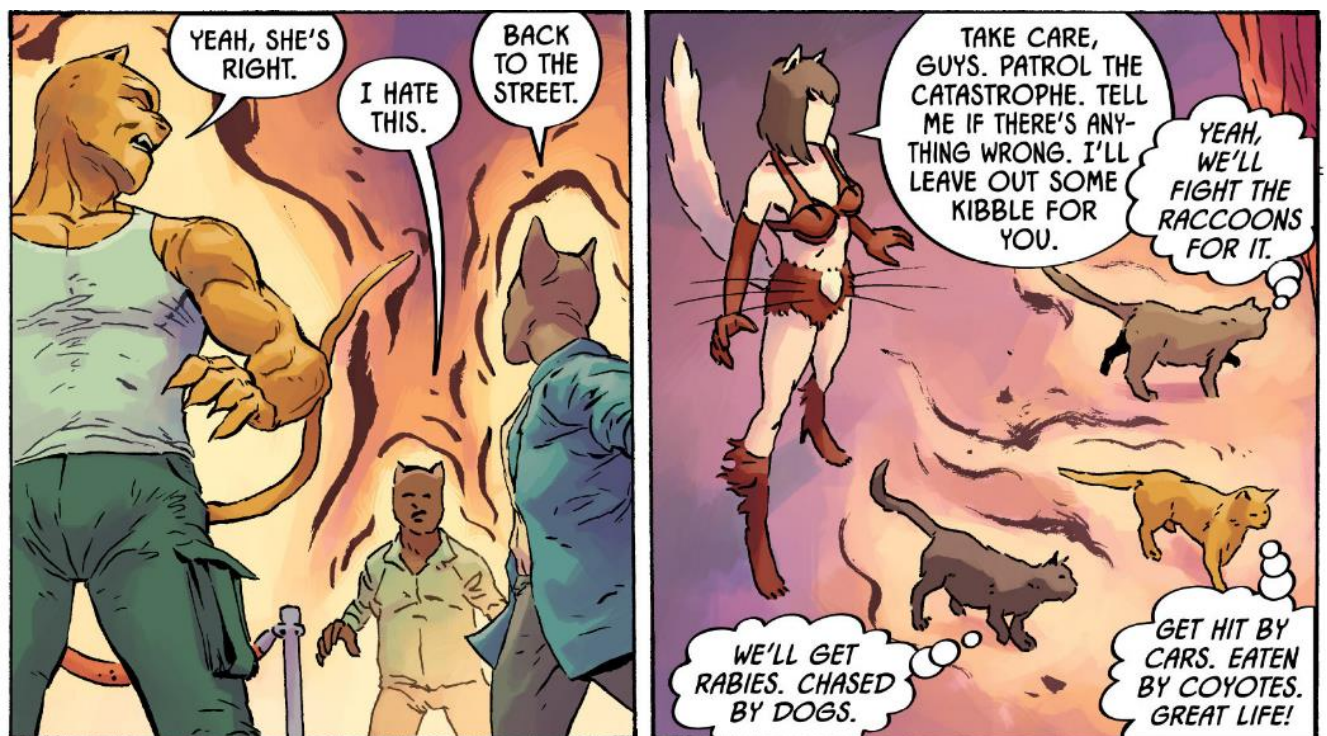


Fig. 17. The Alley-cats going back to the street (AC1: 60).

¹⁷ Ding's name also reflects the discussions about seeing animals as passive objects or as subjects with an inner life as Strig tells Cate that Ding is "short for Schrödinger" (AC1: 29). Most people will agree that animals are alive, but just as with the cat in Schrödinger's thought experiment being both dead and living, there are various opinions about which part of animals is thinking and alive like humans or in which instances we should see animals as being 'dead' objects. Ding the cat is also both dead and alive because he was killed in the car accident but his DNA, or "his spirit" as Cate calls it, lives on in Strig (29).

The thoughts of the Alley-cats also illustrate the informative banners which explain the dangers for cats living outside (figure 17). Voicing the information through characters with an emotional response to the problematic situations, such as the discomfort of the Alley-cats, reinforces the need to reshape how humans act with animals. But it is noticeable that not all information is represented by the characters. The main focus of *Angel Catbird* is on repressing the hunting instincts of cats and forbidding the animals to roam outside freely, but the comics fail to give a voice to the nonhuman cat about this message which would impact the daily lives of cats the most. Both the cats and the birds in the comics do not speak about hunting or roaming outside. By keeping the nonhuman animals silent, the comics suggest that their voice and agency regarding this issue does not matter. Even if *Angel Catbird* illustrates how humans are connected with animals in many ways, the comics abuse the interconnectedness to reinforce anthropocentrism and suggest that ultimately humans know what is best for nonhuman animals. The domestication of animals by humanity seems to legitimize why how humans decide which behaviour of animals should be tolerated. Margo DeMello articulates this anthropocentric position as follows: “[T]oday’s domesticated animals are so highly bred and engineered for human benefit that they could never again survive on their own. In short, we care for them because they could not live without our care, and they live with and obey us because they no longer have a choice in the matter” (*Animals and Society*, 94). This suggests that humans have taken away the agency of the nonhuman animals by domesticating them and the comics uphold this position by not giving any voice to the nonhuman animals about their hunting instinct and need to roam outside.



Fig. 18. Last panel of the series (AC3: 85).

Despite its anthropocentric position, the text acknowledges the limitations of its conservation efforts because the hybrid characters do not completely defeat Muroid. As Muroid notes before he escapes: “I may have lost the battle...but I will win the war!” (AC3: 80).¹⁸ The comics acknowledge that violence towards animals is not the ill-doing of one individual, but embodied by many people, institutions and politics. Similarly, the hybrid characters emphasize at the ending of the comics that their work is not done. The open ending of the trilogy underlines how the fight against human dominance and abuse of animals will not end with one campaign aiming to reduce bird deaths and promoting cat safety, but is a continuous struggle (figure 18).¹⁹ Just like Strig and his friends who function as superheroes, the reader is encouraged to take on their ecological responsibility to animals and continue to make the world a safer and better place for other species.²⁰

¹⁸ Muroid runs a global network of half-rat henchmen poised to take over all countries, with partners such as the Norwegian half-rat and the Polynesian half-rat whose names refer to the common brown rat and the pacific rat which are two of the most widespread rat species in the world.

¹⁹ This is one of the few panels in which Muroid is portrayed most closely to being a rat. Like discussed in the previous chapter, the connection between his rat-like nature and his desire for violence and dominance reinforces the tropes of rats as dangerous vermin.

²⁰ *Angel Catbird* extensively borrows from traditions of the Golden Age of Comic Books (1935 – 1955), particular from the funny animal comic and the superhero genre. Walt Kelly’s comic *Pogo* has been major influence to *Angel Catbird* as Atwood describes how her comics are filled with “Pogo-esque talking animals” (AC2: 5). The persistent focus of *Pogo* on multiculturalism, sustainability and respect for the natural world “did more to advertise the animal’s precarious position in twentieth-century life than any other comic of the time” (Yezbick 41). Similarly, Kelly Sue DeConnick argues that “*Angel Catbird*’s feather booty shorts and sculpted nude torso would have been right at home among the virile heroes of the Golden Age” (AC3: 5).

Producing the reader

Because of the persuasive nature of the text to alter the behaviour of real-life pet-owners, it seems paradoxical that the 'full' and normal human is placed at the margins of the comics. The series undermines how the human is superior because all the attention is focused on the experience of birds, cats and other half-animals, yet the goal of *Angel Catbird* is to address the 'normal' human outside the text. In this sense, the comics cannot escape its anthropocentric position because it actively needs to address the implied reader to actually create an ecological responsibility. Agamben's theory on the workings of the anthropological machine and its produced mirror image of humanity can help to further examine the production of the reader. As discussed before, the anthropological machine "is the sociocultural apparatus designed to regulate and produce the subject through a complex interplay of recognitions" (Pettman 35). If the comics confront the reader with the inclusion of the animal/machine inside the human, what kind of human subject does the text produce? A comparison between the workings of the anthropological machine in the hybrid characters and Muroid shows that, on the one hand, *Angel Catbird* disrupts the anthropological machine by creating characters in which the human/animal cannot be separated while simultaneously reinforcing problematic divisions of animals as bare life. Muroid's behaviour can be read as the animalization of humanity's treatment of animals which the comics try to exclude. Even if the 'full' human is absent from the narrative which eliminates the most evident mirror image of humanity, the comics still generate a reflection of the human that reinforces exclusionary mechanisms.

While Strig and Muroid have a different position in the anthropological machine, the characters also function as mirror image of each other. Both are scientists using technology to create different figurations of the humanimalchine and they are both interested in Cate, but while Strig is in love with her, Muroid wants to declaw her and eat her eyes (AC3: 17). These images are distorted, because Strig's hybridity gives him a loving group of friends and a connection with the animal world while Muroid as humanimalchine is interested in reinforcing militant dominance and sexual violence. Yet both characters are also mirrors of human behaviour. The representation of Strig as ordinary pet-owner is part of the anthropological machine because it functions as mirror for cat-owners while Muroid is a reflection of humanity's worst treatment of animals. The interconnectedness between Strig and Muroid reflects how humans are implicated in several forms of violence towards animals. We might take proper care of our pets, but individuals are still part of larger institutions and biopolitics which maintain practices of animal abuse.



Fig. 19. The tagline of Muroid's company visible on his building (AC1: 12).

The complexity of the problem of identification and violence towards animals is also illustrated by the tagline of Muroid's company; "Living Solutions" (figure 19).²¹ The tagline reflects the conservational message of the comics addressing the need for a solution for the several problems pets and humans cause for the animal world. "Living" emphasises that the reader actively has to change the interactions with pets in their everyday life in order to help other species. The focus on living also illustrates how on multiple levels in the narrative the comics produce the reader as a human subject with an ethical responsibility for the welfare of other animals as living beings. But because it is Muroid's company, the tagline also raises questions about what Muroid considers to be the solution. Muroid's desire to reconfigure the cybernetic triangle and to make rats half-human through technology can be interpreted as the solution for the abuse of animals as bare life. Repositioning rats to rule over humans as their slaves would not disrupt discourses of biopolitics and power but merely reverse the ethical status of humans and animals. Yet by representing Muroid as antagonist, the reader is discouraged to consider his method a productive solution. Thus *Angel Catbird* might rewrite the status of cats and birds as living agents, but the anthropological machine and its biopolitical divisions of animal life and the construction of the human remain intact.

²¹ Although the tagline is never discussed in the series, it stands out in this panel because the background and surroundings in the comics are never finely detailed but rather vaguely coloured. There are almost no panels where letters or logos can be read so the panels in which text in the background is clearly visible are noticeable.

Conclusion

In order to give a voice to the experiences of nonhuman animals, Karin Armbruster argues, a text should remind us “of the real animals that hover outside the human-created text, both inviting the reader to identify with the nonhuman animal as a fellow living being and reminding him or her of the inevitable differences between humans and other species” (22). By incorporating informative banners in the narrative and destabilising the boundaries between human/animal/machine and the workings of the anthropological machine, *Angel Catbird* visually reimagines the relationship between humans and animals in order to remind the reader of their ecological responsibility for other species. Acknowledging similarities between humans and animals, like the ability for emotion or communication while also portraying the complex differences between entities, enhances the understanding of the reader of animals as unique fellow living beings. Similarly, the comics address the need for an ecological responsibility by portraying the violence towards animals caused by pet-owners like Strig or institutionalized structures of animal abuse in our society through the figure of Muroid.

However, despite establishing a new approach for thinking about humans and animals through visualising the humanimalchine, the comics still reproduce anthropocentric workings of biopolitics by differentiating between the ethical status of pets and rodents as bare life. The narrative exposes how humans violate animals but simultaneously discourages the reader to identify with the implicit reason why Muroid is using violence, namely to change the position of rats as bare life. The anthropological machine is altered in so far as the text rewrites the ethical position of cats and birds, but the exclusionary workings of the machine remain intact because the rats are continuously represented as killable vermin. In addition, the ecological message regarding indoor/outdoor cats is put forward as the only solution to restore the balance of nature, while the question of confining cats indoors in relation to their welfare is more complex and nuanced. The comics suggest that because humans have domesticated the cat and are responsible for its resulting ecological damage, they deserve to decide how pets should behave. The fact that the cats and birds in the comics remain completely silent about this issue that is advocated the most, reinforces anthropocentric views on who is actually dominant over other species.

Atwood has often talked about the importance of the arts and the imagination because literature helps us to come “to a better understanding of who we are and what we want, and what the limits to those wants might be [...] If we can imagine it, we’ll be able to do it” (qtd.

in Hengen 76). Graphic narratives literally imagine what relationships with other species can look like and as important cultural texts exploring anthropocentrism, the welfare of animals and the position of the humanimalchine, they deserve more attention in literary discourse. Despite its anthropocentric issues, *Angel Catbird* is an example of a critical attempt to reconfigure and expose what it means to be human and animal in a society with normalized violence and abuse toward other species, whether it is intended or not. The comics visualize a new way to rethink human/animal relationships and our responsibility to nonhuman animals so that real-life animals might be recognized by the reader as fellow living beings deserving empathy and care.

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