



CASTAC

# A Failure in Capture: A Text-Based Alternative

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Video and audio description is marked with <angle brackets>. All other text is transcribed from the multimodal post verbatim.

## Begin. Look around. What do you see?

<A wire metal cage sits on cement in the corner of two high curbs with its open door facing outward. Your perspective is at ground level, perceiving the cage at the height that a small animal might see it. It is daytime and the area is lit with indirect sunlight. In the background, you can see the exterior walls of two nondescript buildings and a large leafy green plant that blocks the view of the alley. The cage contains some newspaper and a small food container at the far end. You hear the hum of air moving past the microphone and in the distance a bird cawing and unintelligible human voices.>

## What do you see here?

<The cage is highlighted, drawing your attention. The video and sound pause to display

text.>

What do you see here? This is a cage set up for TNR. TNR stands for Trap Neuter Return. This is one cage of over 30 set up around this apartment building, in nearby alleys, a parking lot, and all areas in between. TNR is an increasingly global phenomenon where the issue of managing outdoor cat populations is accomplished through spay and neutering these outdoor cats and letting them live out the remainder of their lives on the city streets in which they were found. Left alone, outdoor cats can multiply quickly, and the prior method of bringing these cats to shelters, where these cats would be euthanized if not adopted quickly, had led many in Japan to adopt TNR as a more humane way of preventing the suffering of these outdoor cats. While TNR practices vary across Japan, and even within the Kansai region where this study was based, this particular trapping event occurred in late September, 2022, in a suburb of Osaka City. As part of my doctoral research on multispecies relations with outdoor cats in the urban environment, I participated as both volunteer and researcher. This was my second trapping event with this particular “group”<sup>1</sup> in this neighborhood, where I was again trying to record the entire process of trapping cats. Unfortunately this cage did not, in fact, trap a cat.

## On the First Day

<The video unpauses to allow you to listen and observe. The scene is still with slight rustling in the plants as wind passes by. The food container in the cage is highlighted, drawing your attention.>

On the first day of this trapping event, which occurred over four days, we successfully trapped several cats, most within the first half hour. But this “event” involved much

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<sup>1</sup> As I’ll explain a little more later in the video, this wasn’t an NGO or concrete group of any kind, but rather the momentary coordination of many interested individuals as volunteers, who only proceeded to gather and work together for this event, led by one particular individual who lived nearby. This was the second grouping I participated in, but the members were all different from the first one, aside from this leader, his wife, and a woman who lived in the apartment building we were focusing on (though she herself was involved in another TNR group in another part of Osaka, and who also participated in larger activities by NGOs such as “Neko no Kai,” this was not typical).

preparation before the official beginning of the trapping. Volunteers informed all nearby residents when, why, and how the trapping would occur, but they also tried to determine who was feeding the local cats so that they could request that they not feed them the day before the trapping.

They also set up several cages in the week leading up to the event to desensitize the cats to the presence of the cages. Once the cages were set up with food inside, hungry cats would be enticed to enter.

## After the Sun had Gone Down

<The video unpauses to allow you to listen and observe. The scene is still with slight rustling in the plants as a breeze passes by and minute movement brings the image to life. The open end of the cage is highlighted, drawing your attention.>

At some point, after the sun had gone down, one of the volunteers discovered that the food you see here in this cage had been eaten, but the cage was still open, and there was no cat.

Throughout the day I had switched the cameras on this site. What you are seeing here was recorded with a Go Pro 4. You might notice the slight curvature on the image.

I searched through my files for both cameras, but neither camera had captured the incident. This cat had evaded capture physically by eating the food without becoming trapped within the confines of the cage, and technologically, by doing so while a camera was not recording.

## Continue to Observe

<The video unpauses to allow you to listen and observe. The scene is still but unpaused. New birds can be heard chirping in the distance among the ongoing cawing. The distant conversation is barely audible but its ebbs and flows mark progressing time as it dies down and reemerges with laughter and chatter over time. The air moving past the

microphone is the predominant sound. This time no highlights appear.>

<Scanning over elements in the foreground, additional details are offered. The cage is made of wire with a solid metal door that is flipped up. The door is attached to a lever via a wire. Between the door and the lever is a newspaper that is slightly rumped. Behind the lever at the back of the cage is a small, open food container. Barely visible, a sign sits on top of the cage. Which details were you drawn to?>

- <[The open cage door.](#)>
- <[The barely visible sign on top of the cage.](#)>
- <[The food container.](#)>
- <[The lever.](#)>
- <[The newspaper.](#)>
- <[Something in the background.](#)>
- <[Nothing.](#)>

## *The Open Cage Door*

<The scene is still but unpaused. Text is offered as you notice the open cage door.>

The door is held open by the lever, which then snaps shut, trapping the cat inside.

<What do you notice next?>

- <[The barely visible sign on top of the cage.](#)>
- <[The food container.](#)>
- <[The lever.](#)>
- <[The newspaper.](#)>
- <[Something in the background.](#)>
- <[Nothing else.](#)>

## *The Barely Visible Sign on Top of the Cage*

<The scene is still but unpaused. Text is offered as you notice the sign on top of the

cage.>

This sign, or one like it, was on every cage borrowed from the city. It contains an explanation about what TNR is and asks for the reader's cooperation.

<Shifting your focus slightly to the left, a photograph appears that shows the front of the sign. It is a laminated white sheet of paper with black and red Japanese text. The number 66 is typed in a box in the lower right corner. The sign is attached to top of the cage with yellow tape.>

<What do you notice next?>

- <[The open cage door.](#)>
- <[The food container.](#)>
- <[The lever.](#)>
- <[The newspaper.](#)>
- <[Something in the background.](#)>
- <[Nothing else.](#)>

## *The Food Container*

<The scene is still but unpaused. Text is offered as you notice the food container.>

The smelliest wet food is the best choice to lure hungry cats to the back of the cage.

<What do you notice next?>

- <[The open cage door.](#)>
- <[The barely visible sign on top of the cage.](#)>
- <[The lever.](#)>
- <[The newspaper.](#)>
- <[Something in the background.](#)>
- <[Nothing else.](#)>

## *The Lever*

<The scene is still but unpaused. Text is offered as you notice the lever that spans the width of the cage half way into its depth.>

In this cage, this wire bar connects the door to the lever. When the cat steps on the lever to get to the food, the door closes.

<What do you notice next?>

- <[The open cage door.](#)>
- <[The barely visible sign on top of the cage.](#)>
- <[The food container.](#)>
- <[The newspaper.](#)>
- <[Something in the background.](#)>
- <[Nothing else.](#)>

## *The Newspaper*

<The scene is still but unpaused. Text is offered as you notice the newspaper.>

Although the newspaper often gets torn up by the cat, it provides some comfort against the bottom of the cage, and can be easily discarded.

<What do you notice next?>

- <[The open cage door.](#)>
- <[The barely visible sign on top of the cage.](#)>
- <[The food container.](#)>
- <[The lever.](#)>
- <[Something in the background.](#)>
- <[Nothing else.](#)>

## *Something in the Background*

Insects are a constant issue during the trapping process, especially for uneaten food in the cage, which is why cages are only left out while they can be actively monitored for the safety of any trapped cat.

<What do you notice next?>

- <[The open cage door.](#)>
- <[The barely visible sign on top of the cage.](#)>
- <[The food container.](#)>
- <[The lever.](#)>
- <[The newspaper.](#)>
- <[Nothing else.](#)>

## Waiting for Something to Happen

<The video continues. But, text is no longer offered as you observe the details of the scene. After some time, text appears as the video continues.>

What else do you see?

What do you hear?

<The video continues unannotated. After some time, The video pauses and offers text.>

When taking video, audio, or other recordings, it's often necessary to continuously record while waiting for "something to happen." While what happens in the field is beyond our control as ethnographers<sup>2</sup>, we do tend to search for this type of ethnographic

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<sup>2</sup> This point is emphasized in Tim Ingold's book, *Anthropology: Why it Matters*, as a process of collaboration with one's field site and one's informants as a key part of participant observation. However, while Ingold rejects ethnography as a method because of his stated association with collecting data and making a study of others, I am using ethnography in a more expanded sense. Ethnography, in this experimental interactive video, is an ad hoc collaboration of both humans and cats, cages and cameras, editing software and viewing browsers, ethnographer (me) and viewer/reader/user (you). Ethnography is not just an act of capture, but rather a project with many

event amongst our recordings, whatever their medium. In my case, I was hoping to capture a very particular event: the moment of being trapped.

I have hours of footage just like this, and on this day, of just this cage.

On this day, I had four different cameras recording at all times (not including my phone) over different locations. Despite this, I only managed to capture one instance of a cat capture. There are many reasons for this, much of which is included and yet not included in this video.<sup>3</sup>

## What do we do?

<The scene unpauses but remains largely still. Nothing is highlighted and text is no longer offered as you observe the details of the scene. After a few moments of observation a question appears and the video pauses.>

What do we do with all of this "unusable" footage where "nothing is happening"?

## Does nothing happen?

<The scene unpauses and runs for some time allowing you to watch and listen to the subtle details that giveaway the liveliness of the scene, despite a lack of action in the foreground.>

But is it really the case that nothing is happening in this video?

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angles, interfaces, and experiences that continues with every interaction, every viewing, every click.

<sup>3</sup> This day was particularly intense, as trapping events go. We had dozens of cages spread out over a very wide area. I only had four cameras at my disposal to use, and given the dense, yet wide area in which cages were set up, I had to monitor the cameras constantly. I had to make sure that they were safe from other humans and animals in the neighborhood, that they were still recording (one camera stopped recording a few times for reasons I could not deduce at the time), and to move cameras to other sites based on my sense of where most of the cats who were trapped. I also had to regularly check the battery levels and whether the memory cards needed to be switched out. I was only one person, and though there were many volunteers that day, I did not have the benefit of an assistant.



The leaves of the plants behind the cage move and sway with the wind.

Insects occasionally fly in and out of the frame. The cawing of crows and even distant laughter and hints of conversation outside of the frame waft over the scene as your eyes search the frame for something to happen.<sup>4</sup>

## Don't Forget

<The scene unpauses and runs for a moment allowing you to watch and listen to the subtle details that giveaway the liveliness of the scene. The video pauses for a reminder.>

Don't forget, there are "footnotes" for this text.<sup>5</sup>

## What needed to happen?

<The scene unpauses and runs for a moment allowing you to watch and listen to the subtle details of the scene. The video pauses to offer more text.>

What needed to happen for this scene to occur?

As it turns out, a great deal.

This trapping event was organized by a particularly gregarious individual who has taken retirement to be an opportunity to make as much of a difference as possible in his neighborhood where outdoor cats are concerned. For this event, he began months in advance, and by that day he had pulled together a dozen volunteers, organizations, supplies, and donations to make this trapping possible.

While he took the lead, there was work involved for everyone. Volunteers over four days had to be organized, given the appropriate training, involved in meetings of various

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<sup>4</sup> Have you been drawn into this frame by now? How is your hovering and searching for interactive elements drawing you into the video?

<sup>5</sup>In getting this far, you might be questioning what is happening, what you are meant to see, and how you are meant to interact with it. While the nature of a video like this is necessarily linear, how could it be otherwise?

kinds, all of which involved a constant medley of activity, movement, and communication both before, during, and after this scene. Very real people did this work, but they are absent here.

The city of Osaka provides a bundle of services for those involved in TNR, including cage rental, transportation of the cats to and from the vet, and reduced costs for spay/neuter costs, if the individuals or group involved completes the necessary paperwork, registration, and cooperation from local government leaders.

It was, in the end, a phenomenal coordination and cooperation of humans, cats, materials, technology, and so much more.

## Hinterlands

<The scene unpauses and runs for a while allowing you to watch and listen to the subtle details of the scene. The video pauses to offer more text.>

In *After Method*, John Law provides the idea of a hinterland when talking about methods in social science.<sup>6</sup> For the moment, as this video is paused, consider the hinterlands of this video. This could include practices of ethnography, and of course the inscription devices utilized in participant observation and the resulting text. But as Law points out, these sets of relations can expand and continue on forever. Instead, I want to point to the “fluidities, leakages and entanglements that make up the hinterland of research” (2004: 41) by “bringing forward” the sets of relations that include analysis in this experiment (cf Ballesterio & Wintherreik 2021) and what kinds of gaps are revealed or even widened by such an experiment.

When we consider all the things that needed to happen for this video to be recorded, what is truly embedded in this ordinary scene where there are neither people, nor cats,

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<sup>6</sup> By this, he means the “skills, instruments and statements (in-here enactments of previous methods) through the out-there realities so described, into a ramifying and indefinite set of relations, places and assumptions that disappear from view” (2004: 45). While the breadth of his argument is too complex to summarize here, I am particularly interested in the ways that attention to this idea of hinterlands in scientific methods (including ethnography) can also be an attention to other kinds of hinterlands embedded within the expectations of the “reader” of the finished product of ethnographic “writing.”

nor much movement at all? How does it change how we look at methods in multimodal captures where technology fails us, cats evade us, and we are confronted with an image in which to pull something out?

<The scene unpauses and runs for several minutes allowing you to watch and listen to the subtle details of the scene. The distant conversation has increased in volume amid laughter. The scene remains unchanged yet lively with rustling leaves and small movements in the background.>

## Your Hands

<The video pauses and a question mark appears drawing your attention. It offers a question.>

As you search the video with your eyes, what are you doing with your hands? Is your cursor also moving over the scene, searching for something to hover over, click on?

Are you sure you didn't miss anything?

<The scene unpauses and runs uninterrupted for a couple more minutes until it ends without remark or obvious change in the foreground.>

<[Start over?](#)>