

**Sanctuary Politics and the Borders of the Demos:
A Comparison of Human and Nonhuman Animal Sanctuaries¹**

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Abstract

Sanctuary traditionally meant something different for humans and nonhuman animals, but this is changing. Animals are increasingly seen as subjects, and, similar to human sanctuaries, animal sanctuaries are increasingly understood as political spaces. In this article I compare human and nonhuman sanctuaries in order to bring into focus underlying patterns of political inclusion and exclusion. By investigating parallels and differences I also aim to shed light on the role of sanctuaries in thinking about and working towards new forms of community and democratic interaction, focusing specifically on the role of political agency and voice.

I begin by briefly discussing the political turn in animal philosophy, in which nonhuman animals are conceptualized as political actors. I then discuss “Zatopia”, a thought experiment that shows that viewing sanctuaries as separate from larger political structures runs the risk of repeating violence, and I investigate parallels with certain practices and policies in farmed animal sanctuaries. In order to overcome the obstacles thus identified, I turn to the concept “expanded sanctuary”, which explicitly focuses on connections between sanctuary and larger political structures. I discuss two examples of expanded sanctuary in which the agency and voices of those seeking or taking sanctuary are foregrounded: VINE Sanctuary, and the Dutch migrant collective WE ARE HERE. In the final section I briefly touch upon the consequences of these considerations for our understanding of sanctuary in relation to political membership and reforming communities.

Keywords

Animal Sanctuary, City of Sanctuary, Expanded Sanctuary, Interspecies Relations, Political Animal Philosophy, Political Philosophy

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Introduction

The sanctuary movement in Europe and North America is growing (Carney et al. 2017; Lenard and Madokoro 2021). Responding to global crises and the rise of populist regimes, churches, campuses, cities, counties, and even states declare sanctuary status to protect the human rights of all, and to provide safety. These sanctuaries focus primarily on assisting migrants with precarious status, often refugees, but may also assist others who are in need of safety. The nonhuman animal sanctuary movement is also growing, especially in the US (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2015; Gillespie 2018). There are many different types of nonhuman animal sanctuaries, which for example provide permanent housing and care for formerly exploited farmed animals, assist stray animals living in urban areas, or rehabilitate and release wild animals.

Originating in the context of religion, human sanctuaries are seen by many as apolitical spaces, which provide a safe haven for those who fall outside of the legal and political order (Lenard and Madokoro 2021; Squire and Bagelman 2013). In this view of sanctuary, those seeking sanctuary are regarded as outsiders or guests, in contrast to citizens (Derrida 2000), and connections between sanctuaries and political institutions and practices are often not made explicit. Conceptualizing sanctuaries in this manner, however, runs the risk of reproducing exclusion and hierarchies of power (Yukich 2013) and even of legitimizing certain injustices, because the underlying power structures are not challenged, while their effects are mitigated. New sanctuary practices challenge this and offer a more political model of sanctuary, which focuses on political agency, resistance, and redefining the *demos*, the people (Carney et al. 2017; Délano Alonso et al. 2021; Lenard and Madokoro 2021).

Animal sanctuaries are currently often seen and presented as safe havens. This is perhaps most clear in the farmed animal sanctuary movement, where nonhuman animals who are “rescued” from the intensive farming industry can “live out their lives” in peace. Even though this is often combined with vegan outreach, which is aimed at societal change, and even though these sanctuaries save lives that are seen as worthless, which is a political act, this way of formulating the situation – by society at large, but also sometimes by the sanctuaries themselves – runs the risk of reinforcing the underlying anthropocentric hierarchy that sees humans as saviours and nonhuman animals as victims. This attitude is reflected in different practices, some of which are directed at other humans, such as for example visitors’ programs, and some of which concern the lives of animal residents, such as deciding where and with whom they live, as I will explain in more detail below. Similar to the human case there are however also animal sanctuaries which explore more political models of interaction with animal residents and the outside world (Blattner, Donaldson and Willcox 2020; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2017; Jones 2014).

While sanctuary traditionally meant something different for humans and non-human animals, there have always been parallels. In both cases those seeking sanctuary

fall outside of the borders of the political community. Their political agency is contested, they have no fundamental rights or citizenship rights, and thus they often depend on the goodwill of others for safety and basic needs, like housing or medical care. In the case of humans there is a basic structure of universal rights. However, these often collapse when humans leave the political community to which they belong (Arendt 1951, 1996 [1943]; Agamben 1998). While humans generally find it easier to recognize that other humans are political agents and (possible) bearers of rights compared to other animals, there is a long tradition of viewing certain human groups, such as Blacks, women, Jews, and refugees, as less-than-human (Spivak 1988). If these groups are awarded rights inequalities often remain, because dominant practices and institutions are designed to benefit the historically powerful groups. In processes of exclusion and stigmatization members of these groups are furthermore often animalized: they are portrayed as animals, in language and/or images, and sometimes treated similarly (Adams 2010 [1990]; Derrida 2008; Gruen 2015; Ko and Ko 2017; Taylor 2017).

Further conceptualizing parallels and differences between human and non-human groups can be helpful towards better understanding exclusionary mechanisms in current nation states, and, perhaps, in moving beyond them. This works both ways. Thinking about justice for nonhuman animals is often based on insights about human justice, but the treatment of nonhuman animals can also shed light on ways in which humans are silenced and their agency is not taken seriously.

This comparison is especially relevant given that the status of nonhuman animals in society and theory is changing. In recent years there has been a ‘political turn’ in animal philosophy. Building on insights from the life sciences and social justice movements, it is argued that the interests of nonhuman animals should be taken into account in political decision-making, some even claiming that they should be considered as political actors. Before I turn to discussing parallels between different types of sanctuaries, I therefore first briefly discuss this political turn.

The Political Turn in Animal Philosophy

In *The Politics*, Aristotle famously stated that only humans are political animals, because they speak, or, more specifically: they have *logos*, which means reason, or rational speech, and therefore can distinguish between good and evil (Aristotle 1991 [350BC]). He connects this rationally informed political agency to the borders of the *demos*: other animals, who may have voices and express themselves but who lack *logos*, cannot be part of the political community. Contemporary political philosophers from different theoretical backgrounds still follow Aristotle’s views, both in the sense that they only regard humans as political animals and in making a strict distinction between humans on the one side and other animals on the other (i.e. Habermas 1981; Rancière 2014; Rawls 1971).

But there are reasons to resist this strict distinction. It is impossible to draw a firm line between all human and all nonhuman animals on the basis of capacities; moreover, the lives of humans and other animals are intertwined not just socially but also politically.

The inner lives of nonhuman animals have become a serious topic for research in the past decade. Studies focusing on agency, cognition, emotion, culture, and language

challenge a strict border between humans and all other animals (Despret 2016; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Meijer 2019; Smuts 2001). Furthermore, the image of the human as a rational being, separate from nature, has in the past decades also been challenged in poststructuralist, decolonialist and feminist thought, which has had consequences for who we see as political actors, and which acts are seen as political in the case of humans (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Meijer 2019).

Following evolving views about animal subjectivity, recent years have seen within political philosophy an interest in animals (Cochrane, Garner and O'Sullivan 2016; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Meijer 2019). In philosophy animals were traditionally mostly considered within the field of ethics. Ethics focuses on how humans should treat other animals, for example whether it is morally allowed to eat them, kill them, or keep them captive (Regan 1983; Singer 1975). Political animal philosophy focuses on a different set of questions. For example, it investigates the relations between groups of nonhuman animals and human political communities, what kind of relations other animals would desire with humans, and how existing institutions can be extended to incorporate their interests. Concepts such as justice, democracy, citizenship, resistance, and sovereignty are used to reflect on why we should, and how we can, reformulate relations with animals.

Many authors in the political turn in animal philosophy argue that human institutions should take into account animal interests for reasons of justice (Cochrane, Garner and O'Sullivan 2016) – for example, that animal interests should be taken into account in democratic decision-making regarding their lives (Garner 2013). There are also theorists that question the existing system more fundamentally, and argue that non-human animals should be seen as political actors (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Hobson 2007; Meijer 2019). The lives of humans and other animals are interconnected in many ways. Other animals are part of myriad social, economic and cultural practices through human consumption and trade; they are companions, neighbours, used for amusement and food. In these – sometimes political – relations, they are not passive objects, but agents who, when possible, actively shape their lives (Hobson 2007).² Different groups of animals, such as domesticated animals or wild animals, stand in different relations to human political communities, leading to different rights and obligations.³

Viewing nonhuman animals as political actors and investigating questions of community and justice concerning them raises many challenging questions: about justice and citizenship, but also about what other animals want and how we can find out (Donaldson 2020; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Meijer 2019).

Mainstream animal rights theory traditionally focused on abolishing relations with nonhuman animals, because these relations were seen as necessarily inherently oppressive (Francione 2008; Regan 1983; Singer 1975). While currently they usually are so, this view is problematic since we share a planet with the other animals, and better relations are possible and often already exist (see Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011 for a longer version of this argument). Furthermore, an abolitionist standpoint reinforces anthropocentrism in the sense that it again relies on humans deciding what is just for other animals. Taking seriously animal agency and subjectivity implies reformulating relations and societies with them (Donaldson 2020; Gillespie 2019; Meijer 2019).

The role of animal sanctuaries in the political turn

In order to find out what other animals want, we need to develop new forms of conducting research (Blattner, Donaldson and Wilcox 2020; Despret 2016; Gillespie 2019), new ways of living together (Smuts 2001), and new political experiments (Meijer 2019). These aspects are interconnected. The questions humans ask in research determine the framework in which other animals can answer. For a long time research into animal behaviour was mostly conducted in order to find out more about humans (Despret 2016; Meijer 2019). Furthermore, much of this research involved captivity or even solitary confinement. But studying animal agency at sites which limit that agency will influence the outcomes of the study (Blattner, Donaldson and Wilcox 2020; Gillespie 2019). Also, in many studies researchers projected the social norms of their time onto their animal research subjects, for example with regard to gender and power hierarchies within groups (Despret 2016). To move beyond this and to be able ask other questions, as well as to allow the animals to respond in new ways, we need a different starting point.

Animal sanctuaries challenge existing human-animal hierarchies and take animal subjectivity seriously. Therefore they can play an important role in developing new forms of knowledge production (Blattner, Donaldson and Wilcox 2020; Gillespie 2019). As Kathryn Gillespie writes: sanctuaries “pose a possibility for exploring other nonnormative ways of creating livable spaces for formerly farmed animals that do not reproduce farming models of species segregation, farm-based practices of care, and highly uneven power relationships between human caretakers and animal residents” (2018:127). An important aspect of exploring new ways of living together involves deliberation about collective decisions: “One way to mitigate captivity and transform knowledge about the care of farmed animal species is to incorporate animals in the decisionmaking process” (*ibid.*, see also Blattner, Donaldson and Wilcox 2020; Meijer 2019).

However, not all sanctuaries share the same commitment to foregrounding animal agency and creating new societies with the animals, but instead focus on abolishing relations, or simply on rescuing animals and highlighting suffering. Sanctuaries that are committed to reforming society may also adopt practices and policies that carry traces of this attitude towards animal residents.⁴ This is unfortunate, because (partially) viewing them as victims or patients of care obscures their agency and leaves intact part of the existing power hierarchies which might reinforce the patterns of exclusion sanctuaries aim to challenge (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2015). An image of nonhuman animals as not capable of political agency or as having no interest in democratic interaction lies at the basis of the political exclusion of other animals in western societies, and stands in the way of reformulating communities together with them (Donaldson 2020; compare Meijer 2019 on speaking for other animals in activism).

In the literature about human sanctuaries, understood broadly to include, for example, refugee camps, shelters, and City of Sanctuary practices, this is a familiar theme (Délano Alonso 2021; Squire and Bagelman 2013). When sanctuaries only focus on rescuing lives – which in the case of humans too is an act of resistance in a world in which these lives are not valued – they are not automatically addressing the larger political logic of insider and outsider, nor the injustices that led to the need for sanctuary for certain groups in the first place. In other words, rescuing refugees, or even assisting them

to become citizens in a given nation state, treats a symptom and does not address the underlying problems (Agamben 1998). A narrative based on helping or rescuing also leads to a risk of repeating hierarchical relationships in the sanctuaries themselves. In order to explore this dynamic in more detail, I first turn to Zatopia, a thought experiment about a human sanctuary, and then discuss farmed animal sanctuaries.

Sanctuary as Utopia and the Risk of Repeating Exclusion

In the essay *Nergensland* (2017, Nowhere Land), Dutch green left politician Femke Halsema introduces Zatopia. Zatopia is an imaginary city, located at the border of Jordan and Syria, where refugee camp Zaatari is currently located. On the 200 km² that Zatopia would rent from Jordan, refugees would be able to work and study, and have access to rights. They would build an economy and have democracy and freedom of the press, as well as a police apparatus trained by the United Nations. The UN and the UNHCR would guard Zatopia and have the right to keep people out. After a year of good behaviour refugees would receive a refugee passport, with which they would be able to travel and regain their freedom of movement. The government would be shared between the refugee community and the UN. Zatopia should be seen as a common: a space outside of the borders of existing nation states, where those previously without a right to rights would have them. Written in response to the European “refugee crisis” that began in 2013, Halsema’s rationale behind developing this utopia is that Europe cannot simply open borders and welcome all refugees, for this would lead to too much pressure on existing European countries. However, many humans are currently stuck in refugee camps without the possibility of continuing their lives, a situation that can last for many years. In order to overcome this impasse we need a common, a new type of location, in between the countries the refugees fled and Europe.

The idea of establishing a Zatopia has rightfully received criticism from Dutch antiracist and decolonial thinkers (a.o. Nduwanje 2018; Prins 2018). They argue that borders remain closed, which leaves intact the idea and physical reality of “fortress Europe”: a wealthy utopian society that needs to be protected from outside. The logic of the nation state within this framework is not adequately challenged. Furthermore, the hierarchy between white and non-white bodies is left intact, violence against non-white humans is not taken seriously, and the historical and present exploitation of other countries by European countries, both in colonial times and in the current age, is not addressed. Olave Nduwanje (2018) calls Zatopia, for this reason, “more of the same”.

This criticism can be summarized by saying that the idea of Zatopia is a mere palliative: instead of changing political and legal structures so that humans do not need to leave their countries, challenging structures of economic exploitation, and/or turning Europe into a welcoming place (see also Agamben 1998; Arendt 1996 [1943]), we would found a large sanctuary which would in the end function as a sort of nation state for the stateless, with increased monitoring and control of the movements and behaviours of residents. While this could indeed improve the opportunities of individual refugees to lead a good life – they would be able to study and work, as would their children – it leaves intact structural inequalities, and could even legitimate them because it mitigates excessive violence.

Problems with viewing farmed animal sanctuaries as utopias

Many farmed animal sanctuaries (FAS) bear similarities to Zatopia. Farmed animal sanctuaries are committed to offering formerly exploited nonhuman animals a home and care. The animal residents at these farms can “live out their lives” in safety until they die of natural causes. Many of them are portrayed as ambassadors for their species. Their personalities and relationships with one another and with humans are often made public through social media posts and visitors’ programs, which aim to educate individual consumers about animal individuality and promote veganism.

Similar to Zatopia, FAS offer a space where nonhuman animal residents can live in safety and build relationships, thereby realising and developing themselves over time. There is border control in the form of fences, and their behaviours and relations are monitored (see Emmerman 2014 for a discussion of the similarities between sanctuaries and zoos). They live in a site outside of the nation state, in which they have certain rights, and which is developed in order to offer a permanent solution for those lucky individuals who make it there, as the outside world cannot provide them with rights or guarantee their safety. With some imagination we can also compare the structure of government: animal agency provides input for how sanctuaries are run on a daily basis, with human caretakers playing the role of the UN, providing additional knowledge and protection. For example, the animals decide upon certain activities – they play, eat, sleep, make friends, or negotiate social structures – while humans decide who lives where or decide upon meal times, intervene in conflicts, build shelters, and allow visitors from outside or not.

There are of course also large differences. Nonhuman animal rights are currently not recognized in the way that human rights are (flawed though the system is in the human case), and their position is therefore even more precarious. They did not flee their country, but are without rights in their country of origin (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011). In contrast to humans in Zatopia they do not receive a passport after a year – they usually can never leave the sanctuary because they would not be safe in the outside world.

Part of the criticism that Zatopia attracted also applies to certain practices and policies of farmed animal sanctuaries; for example, where sanctuaries focus on rescuing individual animals and changing the behaviour of individual consumers by promoting veganism, but do not address the larger structure underlying the political exclusion of animals. Placing violence against nonhuman animal bodies in the forefront of outreach actions to the larger public, online and offline, and mentioning their exploitation, does not automatically challenge the epistemic and cultural hierarchy between humans and nonhuman animals (see Gillespie 2018 Chapter 6 for a careful discussion of this problem).

This can be visible in attitudes towards political animal agency. Micro-agency – for example, regarding what foods animal residents eat, which friends to hang out with, preferences in interaction with visitors – is often respected in animal sanctuaries, but nonhuman animals are thought not to be capable of, or have an interest in, making decisions that concern the larger structures or their lives, specifically the political structures (Donaldson 2020; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2015; Meijer 2019). In line with

ideas about animals in larger society, political nonhuman animal macro-agency is often not taken seriously (for discussions of how micro-agency connects to macro-agency, see Abrell 2019; Gillespie 2018; Jones 2014; see also Emmerman 2014). For example, in FAS residents cannot usually choose to opt out of relations, they cannot leave the community; there is sometimes species separation, which limits their options for social choice; while they can choose not to engage with visitors, they cannot always choose not to participate in visitor programs (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2015; Gillespie 2018); and while how sanctuaries are run is often shaped by animal agency, there is often no co-government, based on democratic negotiations about what the good life means to them (*ibid.*; see Jones 2014 for an alternative; see also Donaldson and Kymlicka 2015, 2017). This focus on micro-agency can be visible in the narratives about the animal residents in larger society, but also as sometimes provided by the sanctuaries themselves. Animals are for example said to be “rescued” and can “live out their lives safely”, implying there are human saviours who know what is best for the other animals.

When farmed animal sanctuaries are presented as utopias for animals living there, emphasizing that they finally live the life they deserve (Abrell 2016; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2015), they seem to be end stations where all is well. This glosses over the difficulties of caring for and working towards equality with formerly exploited animals, but also obscures the new forms of agency that can arise in these settings, as well as the possibilities for moving beyond anthropocentrism and the given power relations that follow from that (Donaldson 2020; Emmerman 2014).

There is, furthermore, an additional problem, one that we do not find in Zatopia. Animal sanctuaries often rely on donations in order to be able to sustain themselves, so they need to invest time and effort into fundraising and having visitors, which sometimes compromises the wellbeing of residents and invades their privacy. Nonhuman animal residents are in some farmed animal sanctuaries also expected to perform emotional labour, such as, for example, cuddling with visitors. Elan Abrell (2016) argues sanctuary animals in these cases can be seen as “sacrificial citizens” because their interests and rights are sometimes compromised by the practical, financial, and educational priorities of sanctuaries.

Statism and Pastoralism

Zatopia is a thought experiment that can shed light on problematic features of sanctuary practices and policies. Specifically, it draws our attention to the risks of repeating, within sanctuary structures, the very political and social hierarchies that led to the need for sanctuary in the first place.

Vicki Squire and Jennifer Bagelman (2013) point to two possible dangers associated with human sanctuary, namely statism and pastoralism. Statism refers to dividing people into categories of citizens and noncitizens, which reaffirms state hegemony and the logic of inclusion and exclusion. Pastoralism refers to a hierarchy of protector and protected, and in this categorization certain lives are deemed worthy of protection and others not; for example, refugees are often portrayed either as victims or criminals (*ibid.*). Pastoralism affirms statism because it constitutes the noncitizen migrant or refugee as apolitical.

Both pastoralism and statism can be found in nonhuman animal sanctuaries too. As we saw, a focus on victimhood obscures their political agency as well as possibilities for new political relations and engagements. Not recognizing political animal agency is interconnected with their exclusion from the *demos* (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Meijer 2019).

The need for sanctuaries follows from unjust political and economic systems. The examples of Zatopia and farmed animal sanctuaries that replicate hierarchies in their practices and/or policies make clear that instead of viewing sanctuary as a place, or a set of practices, which support the integration of outsiders into a given people, the underlying political structure needs to change. This requires rethinking membership both in relation to national borders but also within nations, where we find exclusionary mechanisms regarding nonhuman animals but also human citizens. Moving beyond statism and pastoralism requires not only a different attitude towards those needing sanctuary, as (co-)authors of change, but also towards larger political (and economic) structures (Abrell 2016, 2019; Délano Alonso et al. 2021).

In both human and animal cases there are sanctuaries and sanctuary practices that address this challenge and focus explicitly on connecting to larger society. The concept “expanded sanctuary” captures this intersectional movement which strives towards justice for all (see also Abrell 2016, 2017, 2019; Délano Alonso et al. 2021; Emmerman 2014; Pachirat 2018).

Expanded Sanctuary and Transforming Society

Nonhuman animals and refugees are not the only groups in society who fall outside of the borders of the *demos*, either completely or partially, by being denied certain rights, justice, or political voice. In the US, organizations such as BYP100, Mijente, and Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) call for sanctuary for all communities that experience criminalization, policing, and incarceration, especially Black communities. For example, social justice scholar Monique Worris and attorney and researcher Andrea Ritchie (2017) argue for an expanded sanctuary that centres Black women, girls, and femmes who experience racial profiling, criminalization, and exclusion in their daily lives.

Expanded sanctuary means that in providing and thinking about sanctuary we should take into account not just those who come from abroad, but also those suffering from injustices within societies. Furthermore, sanctuary requires a commitment to changing the economic, political, and ecological structures that force refugees to leave their country. This also requires providing support in countries abroad because wealth is unequally distributed and countries in the global north have contributed to, and are still involved in, the exploitation of other countries.

Providing sanctuary is in this understanding interconnected with working towards social justice for all (Abrell 2019; Ferdowsian 2018), within and beyond state borders (Délano Alonso et al. 2021).

Alexandra Délano Alonso (2021) shows that sanctuaries in places where the economic and political conditions are insufficient to guarantee protection and safety for their own inhabitants can transform local communities, such as, for example, the

Las Patronas group of women who hand out food to migrants in freight trains passing by their town of La Patrona, Veracruz, near the Gulf of Mexico. They do not view their work as a hierarchical situation in which citizens assist migrants, but rather as an egalitarian process which is not just about food, but also about sympathy, sharing and solidarity. In this process, the groups are equal. Through the interactions the women are transformed, and the rest of the community is too. This transformation can concern gender roles, social awareness, or education about structures of violence that bring about migration processes. The actions of these women not only form a critique of violent structures, they also present the alternative. Délano Alonso describes this form of sanctuary as a critical, dynamic and transformative practice which focuses on building new forms of community and relationships, aiming to challenge existing structures of inclusion and exclusion. These practices of solidarity are not just a response to unjust laws, or forms of civil disobedience, but rather consist of a new form of politics that begin with a perspective of the equality of all, ultimately aiming to rebuild social structures (see also Délano Alonso et al. 2021).

In order to further investigate what expanded sanctuary could mean in the case of humans and nonhumans I will discuss two examples: VINE Sanctuary and the Dutch migrant collective WE ARE HERE.

VINE Sanctuary

VINE Sanctuary is a farmed animal sanctuary that offers refuge to nonhuman animals who were rescued from, or escaped, the egg, dairy and meat industries, cockfighting, or zoos (Blattner, Donaldson and Wilcox 2020; Jones 2014; Jones 2014, 2019). The residents include chickens, cows, ducks, doves, emus, geese, pigeons, and sheep. In addition to creating a multispecies community with the residents, VINE conducts research and educates on local and national levels. By creating and sharing knowledge they aim to contribute to systemic change in agriculture, trade, and consumption, as well as change human attitudes in these matters. Working from an ecofeminist perspective, they actively seek out alliances with other animal, environmental, and social justice organizations.⁵

Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of taking seriously animal agency in their community (Blattner, Donaldson, Wilcox 2020, Jones 2014; Jones 2014, 2019). The spaces, practices, routines and relations in VINE sanctuary are almost all co-formed by the animals (see Jones 2014 for a discussion of how this works with chickens). While there are limitations on the residents' agency for reasons of their safety, a hostile larger society, and the fact that agency is always influenced and limited by living with others, the humans who live and work with them actively search for ways to foster subjectivity, communication, and relations (*ibid.*). The animal residents express themselves in myriad ways: they take on different social roles in the group, choose their own spaces to live, make friends of different species, shape social norms and co-author governments. Humans in VINE and similar sanctuaries no longer behave as hosts or rulers who have predecided what is the best way to act, but engage in sometimes difficult processes, with uncertain outcomes, of question and response with the animal residents in order to find out (Blattner, Donaldson, Wilcox 2020; Jones 2014; Jones 2014, 2019).

Sanctuaries like VINE can have a transformative effect on society. Donaldson

and Kymlicka (2017) argue that they are spaces for deep learning and slow transformation.⁶ This “slow transformation” model does not aim to attract visitors from cities in order to convert them to veganism, but instead invests in connecting with the local rural community they are part of, and in intersectional justice by “becoming a good citizen of the local community (...) and planting the seeds of alternative rural economy in Springfield” (2017, 4).

This model proposes to learn about care and justice with nonhuman animals. In this understanding, both building better interspecies relations and connecting to other social justice movements can contribute to changing larger political and economic structures.

WE ARE HERE

A second example of an expanded sanctuary is the work of the Dutch group WE ARE HERE. WE ARE HERE is a collective of undocumented and illegalized migrants, based in Amsterdam, who campaign for human rights. The group came together in 2012, when they decided to collectively squat a building. Shelters in the city of Amsterdam can only be used between 5 pm and 9 am, and the collective wanted a real place to live. Many members were in the Dutch asylum system for years or even decades without receiving a residence permit. The first real place of residence was the *Vluchtkerk* (the refuge church). Their squatting of the building and the activities they organized received a lot of attention in Dutch media. Celebrities performed there in solidarity, and they organized a Christmas dinner which was open to everyone. Since then they have squatted a series of buildings, and have been visible in different ways. They spoke to journalists, participated in street demonstrations, gave concerts, and worked together with a theatre collective. This allowed them to bring to light their precarious position, and to voice their opinion about the Dutch system. WE ARE HERE members take their own position as a starting point for bringing to light problems with the Dutch shelter system, focusing specifically on the situation in Amsterdam. Instead of hiding, as most undocumented refugees do, they make their daily realities visible. While they are supported by volunteers and people who work for Vluchtelingenwerk, a Dutch organisation that supports refugees, they are the ones in charge and speak up for themselves.

The collective is constantly in flux – some gain Dutch residence permits, others disappear. It currently exists of different sub-groups, such as a women’s collective and a Swahili collective. While some group members plead for citizenship, others explicitly state they do not want citizenship, but basic human rights. They keep emphasizing that all should have access to medical care, education, work, housing, freedom of expression, and so on. The collective believes the right to speak up is extremely important for those without rights.⁷

While adequately addressing the injustices WE ARE HERE face requires institutional change, with their acts they already change the script and contest the violent structures they are subjected to. When WE ARE HERE squat a church and publicly speak out against an unjust system in the media, they claim the citizens’ rights to housing and freedom of expression. With their acts they call the law into question in creative ways and develop new ways of being heard and of expressing themselves

politically. By doing so, they put issues on the agenda that would otherwise not receive much, or any, attention.

Sanctuary as Starting Point

In this brief exploration I explored the role of sanctuaries in working towards new forms of political community, and mapped obstacles to this process. In both cases of human and nonhuman sanctuaries, working towards a more just future requires more than providing safety: it also asks for a critique of larger political, economic, and ecological structures, and for being aware of the dangers of replicating hierarchies in the contexts of sanctuaries.

Both VINE Sanctuary and WE ARE HERE explicitly challenge social and political injustices beyond the scope of sanctuary. They also challenge the dichotomy between citizen and non-citizen. While members of the WE ARE HERE collective do not have official citizenship, many of them participate in society and have done so for a long time. De facto, they are members of society, even though they are formally and legally not recognized as such (see also Isin 2013; Johnson 2012; Sassen 2002).

In farmed animal sanctuaries such as VINE Sanctuary nonhuman animals also exercise political agency and are members of the *demos*. While they do not take part in street demonstrations, theatre plays, or are interviewed by newspapers, they do participate in building new forms of community with others. The humans who form these communities with them make sure of paying attention to their expressions and agency in this process, and of learning from them (Abrell 2016, 2019; Blattner, Donaldson and Wilcox 2020; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2015; Jones 2014; Jones 2014, 2019). Jones (2014) points out the importance of observation and learning from the animals themselves in VINE, especially in relation to freedom.

For those engaged in the human sanctuary movement, learning about these processes in animal sanctuaries can be useful because they can shed light on the ways in which humans seeking sanctuary can be silenced and not be taken seriously. They present new ways of working towards equality, and show the importance of taking seriously the political agency and voice of those who have no right to speak within official democratic practices and institutions, and who might have internalized that deprivation. These new interspecies societies also present a different perspective on political membership which can inform new understandings of citizenship as a practice instead of something that is given.

Working towards alternative forms of community and relationships with others, and developing alternative political structures inside and outside of sanctuaries, requires setting aside fixed views of the *demos* and citizenship. It asks for discussing difficult questions, changing unjust institutions, and listening to others. In these processes sanctuaries and sanctuary practices can provide safety or assistance, and offer a new starting point: for conversation, imagination, and new relations.

Notes

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2 In this context Hobson (2007) makes a useful distinction between “Politics” and “politics”. “Politics” is often understood as the institutional arrangements of the state and international relations. This is however not the only space where political acts occur. There are also peoples, spaces and practices that challenge these institutions through non-traditional political avenues, such as social movements, as well as a politics of the ‘everyday’. Hobson calls these acts, actors and movements “politics”. While Politics often relies on rational deliberation in human language, politics might include street protests, acts of civil disobedience, art and music. Hobson argues convincingly that other animals also take part in politics.

3 In their book *Zoopolis. A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (2011), which is one of the most influential works in the political turn in animal philosophy, Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka focus on these relations to develop a theory of political rights. They propose to view domesticated animals as co-citizens of shared multispecies communities, wild animals as sovereign self-governing communities, and liminal animals – those who live among humans but are not domesticated, such as pigeons or rats – as denizens.

4 As mentioned above, there are many different types of sanctuaries that have different practices and philosophies. In what follows I focus on farmed animal sanctuaries. I recognize the wide variety of practices that take place in farmed sanctuaries, as well as outside constraints on nonhuman animal agency (for example, the need for fences; see Jones (2014) for an exploration of this issue in relation to chicken freedom). My point here is not that there are “good” or “bad” sanctuaries, but rather to zoom in on a certain aspect of human/nonhuman animal relations in certain sanctuaries.

5 See <http://vinesanctuary.org> for a longer description and photographs.

6 One example of deep learning in the context of farmed animal sanctuary is in veterinary medicine. Currently, there are not many places where farmed animals can live until their natural death – they are usually killed when they reach adulthood. In sanctuaries people have learned about medical care for older farmed animals, and through internships and connections with other vets and scientists brought these insights back into veterinary knowledge (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2017).

7 <https://wijzijnhier.org/tijdslijn/what-did-we-achieve-in-four-years/>

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Biography

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