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Introduction: Interrogating Captive Freedom: The Possibilities and Limits of Animal Sanctuaries

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Abstract

In the last few decades, animal sanctuaries have proliferated around the world as advocates for animals have sought to save them from a wide array of contexts in which they are exploited, harmed, or killed by human actions. Sanctuaries take different forms and employ different approaches to animal care, varying in accordance to the kinds of species they save and the arenas of human animal-use they challenge. A non-exhaustive list of kinds of animal sanctuaries includes sanctuaries for farmed animal (rescued from agricultural contexts), 'exotic' animals (such as elephants or big cats, often rescued from being kept as pets or used for entertainment or exhibition), primates (often retired from use in laboratory research), equines (often rescued from use for carriages or in competitive events like racing); and companion animals (for animals like cats and dogs that cannot, for various reasons, be adopted out to individual homes).

Introduction: Interrogating Captive Freedom: The Possibilities and Limits of Animal Sanctuaries

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In the last few decades, animal sanctuaries have proliferated around the world as advocates for animals have sought to save them from a wide array of contexts in which they are exploited, harmed, or killed by human actions. Sanctuaries take different forms and employ different approaches to animal care, varying in accordance to the kinds of species they save and the arenas of human animal-use they challenge. A non-exhaustive list of kinds of animal sanctuaries includes sanctuaries for farmed animal (rescued from agricultural contexts), ‘exotic’ animals (such as elephants or big cats, often rescued from being kept as pets or used for entertainment or exhibition), primates (often retired from use in laboratory research), equines (often rescued from use for carriages or in competitive events like racing); and companion animals (for animals like cats and dogs that cannot, for various reasons, be adopted out to individual homes).

The massive scale and pervasive impacts of the many kinds of violence perpetrated by humans against animals is a constant specter hanging over and motivating sanctuary work. The influence of this specter is both obvious – reflected in the mission statements and visible on the bodies of many sanctuaries animals – and subtle, as illustrated by how, upon its publication in 2014, the novel *The Awareness* became instantaneously popular among the animal caregivers and volunteers at a sanctuary for farmed animals where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork (Stone and Doyle).¹ Told through the points of view of a bear, a dog, a pig in an industrial pig farm and a circus elephant, it tells the story of what happens after all non-human mammals on earth spontaneously gain human-like consciousness. Following their sudden ‘awakenings’, mammals rise up en masse to enact revenge against the human population that has exploited, abused, and killed them for centuries. Given the daily experiences of caring for animals who suffered from chronic diseases and injuries as a result of industrial agricultural husbandry practices, it is not surprising that the novel seemed to provide a bit of emotional catharsis to sanctuary caregivers through its vicarious power-inversion fantasy of animal retribution for the myriad crimes of humans against the animal world. But as suggested by the following quote describing the internal thoughts of the bear (who has just led an army of animals in a deadly attack on a human city), underneath its cathartic revenge story the book also highlights the centrality of power relations in shaping human encounters with other animals:

He understood power. He understood that humans knew more of power than any other species, that this knowledge alone made them special. He understood that he had

power, that he'd seen his own power in the face of the hare, the humans, the beavers, the mice, but he hadn't been able to harness it like humans' (146).

Standing, as many sanctuaries do, in such stark contrast to conventional modes of human-animal power relations, how are we to understand these spaces for interspecies care? In their study of a sanctuary for chimpanzees formerly used in medical research, Julietta Hua and Neel Ahuja describe sanctuaries as both social institutions and conceptual apparatuses 'defined by and through the daily practices of sociality taking place between human caregivers' and the animals in their care (2013: 619, 634). My research in sanctuaries supports this understanding, and I have found that these practices of sociality are frequently influenced by a variety of interrelated dilemmas that arise in determining how best to care for animals. For example, the mission of most animal sanctuaries – to provide permanent homes to animals rescued from situations of exploitation and mistreatment – is arguably utopian in a society that largely treats animals as a source of both use and exchange value. This contrast with larger societal trends in the treatment of animals is further underscored by another goal shared across many sanctuaries: enabling animals to live as free as possible from human control. Such ideals, however, are not so easily implemented in practice. All sanctuaries must balance animals' freedom against concerns for their safety and wellbeing, albeit a relative freedom within the bounds of captivity (see Jones 2014). Indeed, despite these aspirations toward freedom, sanctuaries necessarily entail some degree of control.

Philosopher Karen S. Emmerman, raising another related dilemma, calls attention to the fact that sanctuaries can never provide complete restitution for the original acts of confinement and exploitation inflicted against rescued animals, yet they may run the risk of giving that impression to many sanctuary supporters.

Once an animal is in sanctuary and people get to meet her, know her, hear her story of exploitation and trauma, a caring response ensues. The animal is romanticized, thought about, and held in awe in much the same way the animals in zoos are. We feel relief at seeing an end to her suffering and have a sense that things have gone well in the world. (2014, 229)

Emmerman argues that it is important not to lose sight of the fact that sanctuaries are ‘one step in the work of moral repair rather than the final destination’. They are sites of ‘new beginnings wrapped in an inescapable past and captive present’ and, for many animals who continue to bear the physical and psychological effects of their previous captivity, ‘also of continued trauma’. Although she sees sanctuaries as ‘places where we get a glimpse of humans doing the very best kind of moral work’, she argues that ‘even the very best kind of moral work is tainted in some sense’ when ‘lifelong captivity is the best we can offer animals’ (230). What Emmerman draws attention to here is the paradox inherent in sanctuary work: despite the goals of providing animals with the best living conditions and most freedom possible, both sanctuary animals and caregivers are still inextricably caught up in the broader power relations that buttress human-animal inequality across human societies.

Despite the effects of these broader power relations, some of the various modes of interactions between humans and sanctuary animals described in this special sanctuary-themed issue of the *Animal Studies Journal* represent examples of what can be understood as a praxis of empathic engagement. Specifically, they reflect efforts to engage in what philosopher Lori Gruen describes as ‘entangled empathy’, a process through which people imagine themselves in the position of another animal and then make judgments ‘about how the conditions she finds herself in may contribute to her perception or state of mind and impact her interests’ (Gruen 228). It requires both an awareness of the differences between the empathizer and the other animal and an understanding of the animal’s ‘species-typical behaviors as well as her individual personality’ (229). In employing this empathic praxis, caregivers can engage with animals like ethnologists attempting to understand other cultures. As anthropologist Barbara Noske argues in her call for an anthropology of animals, ‘[g]ood participant observation is basically an exercise in *empathy* while at the same time one is aware of the impossibility of total knowledge and total understanding’ (1997, 169). The understandings gained through these efforts to cultivate entangled empathy are provisional and remain open to change as caregivers continue to reassess the accuracy of their interpretations.

Like the bear in *The Awareness*, sanctuary animals, in their own way, understand power. Unlike the bear, though, they do not need an anthropomorphic consciousness to do so. Power

inflects all inter-subjective relationships, but with the efforts to engage in empathic praxis described above, many caregivers are attempting to respond to animal understandings of power. And this kind of engagement in turn can expand animals' abilities to influence the conditions of their own care. Una Chaudhuri writes that the 'real meaning of animals is that they always escape the systems of meaning we construct for them' (9). The sanctuary is perhaps an example par excellence of this sentiment. When caregivers endeavor to cultivate empathic entanglements, human and animals can create new systems of meaning together.

With that possibility in mind, I return to the question of how we are to understand these spaces for interspecies care. Much as Jack Halberstam argues that space can be queered 'in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction ... according to other logics of location, movement and identification' (qtd. in Mortimers-Sandilands and Erickson 2010, 22), the relationships formed between animals (including humans) in many sanctuaries are in opposition to the institutions of industrialized animal exploitation, the objectification of animals, and human supremacy. Through their transformation of conventional human-animal power hierarchies, humans and sanctuary animals are arguably co-creating species-queered heterotopias. While sanctuaries reflect a utopic vision for human-animal relations free of the oppression or exploitation of animals, utopias are, as Foucault argues, 'sites with no real place'. Heterotopias, on the other hand, are real places that exist as 'counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' (3). As models of alternative modes of interspecies engagement, many sanctuaries thus function as heterotopias, counter-sites to the political-economic arenas of animal use that spatially manifest an ethical critique of such use by enacting different ways of living ethically with animals. However, they also struggle with the reinscription of some of the same modes of interaction they subvert, such as the restriction of animal freedom to the spaces of the sanctuary. Even if sanctuary animals are no longer captives of systems of animal abuse and exploitation, they are still not completely free from human control. Nonetheless, within the spaces of sanctuary fences, animals and their human caregivers are co-creating empathic entanglements with the potential to expand the bounds of captive freedom.

With the goal of exploring these bounds and identifying some of the liberatory opportunities they provide as well as some of the limits they impose, this special issue brings together a wide range of articles – from both academic and first-hand perspectives – to consider animal sanctuaries as unique sites of human-animal interaction that simultaneously influence and are influenced by the way animals are treated and understood in larger social contexts. Amy Fultz and Erika Fleury draw on their extensive experience with chimpanzee sanctuaries to examine the many practical and ethical dimensions of caring for chimpanzees as well as facilitating their transition to sanctuaries from both research laboratories and situations in which they were kept as pets. Similarly, Catherine Doyle draws on her years of experience with a captive wildlife sanctuary to highlight the kinds of issues that arise in caring for and meeting the unique needs of large wildlife species like elephants and big cats, with particular attention to how these kinds of sanctuaries may influence public perceptions of wildlife captivity. Guy Scotton takes up the philosophical question of whether humans may have a moral duty to socialize – and even befriend – domesticated animals and examines how sanctuaries for formerly farmed animals could provide an opportune space for fulfilling such a duty. In her case study of Aotearoa New Zealand’s program to eradicate the stoat – a small non-native mammal – Anna Boswell exposes how ideologies of sanctuary and settler colonialism have mutually influenced each other while shaping policies toward both indigenous and colonizer-introduced wildlife. Sabrina Fusari traces the historical linguistic development of the term ‘sanctuary’ as it came to apply to protected spaces for animals and identifies contemporary examples of how the term may be getting co-opted by other spaces of animal captivity, like zoos, in order to take advantage of its positive connotations with the public. Finally, in the ‘Provocations from the Field’ essay, captive animal law expert Delcianna Winders emphasizes the importance of accreditation frameworks for sanctuaries as she further documents the problems that arise from the growing trend of captive animal institutions misrepresenting themselves as sanctuaries in order to ‘humane-wash’ their exploitative and abusive treatment of animals.

Ultimately, this special issue on animal sanctuaries seeks to address the ‘big questions’ raised by this increasingly influential form of direct action on behalf of animals, such as how do animal sanctuaries contribute to the animal protection movement more broadly, what limits and

challenges do they face, and what sorts of new models for living with and caring for captive animals might they provide? The authors collected here have provided some answers to these questions and others, but our hope is this that this collection of articles can also serve as a springboard for further discussions and research on these unique and important spaces for human-animal care and cohabitation.

Notes

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