

Animal Agency in Community

A Political Multispecies Ethnography of VINE Sanctuary

CHARLOTTE E. BLATTNER
Harvard University

SUE DONALDSON
Queen's University

RYAN WILCOX
Queen's University

Dedicated in memory of Scotty: 1995–2019

Anthropocentric bias and ignorance limit our ability to conceive just ways of living with nonhuman animals, especially farmed animals. We need to learn from animals themselves, in environments where animals retain sufficient agency in their relations with us to allow for a rich and meaningful study of interspecies ethics and the possibilities of just multispecies societies. Using multispecies ethnography and feminist accounts of the self as a springboard, we investigate animal agency in a sanctuary for formerly farmed animals, considering how a careful exploration of dimensions of agency in this setting might inform ideas of interspecies ethics and politics. This innovative extension of multispecies ethnography explores individual and collective dimensions of animals' agency through space and place, through practice and routine, and through social roles and norms, to learn about whether/how animals might want to live with us, and how we can recognize and support their agency through our relationships.

Keywords:
farmed animals; agency; sanctuary; intentional community; multispecies ethnography; social norms; social roles

INTRODUCTION¹

The recent “animal turn” in the social sciences and humanities marks a growing recognition that we inhabit more-than-human communities, cultures, and politics (Noske, 1997). A deeper understanding of society requires attending to its multispecies dimensions, the subjectivities of its animal members, and their agency as co-creators of our shared life worlds. This deeper understanding, in turn, must inform our theories of just and ethical relations with nonhumans. Do some animals want to continue to live in a shared society with us? If so, is it possible for this to be a just form of society shaped by their interests and agency and not just our own?

Longstanding ideological blinders and anthropocentric bias frame animals, especially farmed animals, as limited beings whose lives unfold according to fixed genetic or species-specific scripts, rather than as complex subjects who act with intention and purpose, both individually and collectively.² While humans figure as authors of their own lives through culture, society, and politics, animals are viewed as predetermined by their *species nature*.³ This prejudice tends to be reinforced if we primarily see or study animals in contexts where their agency is radically suppressed or constrained by human aims, structures, practices, and preconceptions (as in farms, zoos, labs, etc.). These contexts offer little meaningful scope for animals to exercise agency in their relations with us

(except in the sense of resistance, adaptation, and coping strategies), and thus little opportunity for us to learn about how they can, and wish, to live, and how we might better live together. The billions of animals farmed by humans are thus caught in a hopeless catch-22.⁴ They are subject to extreme confinement, deprivation, and violence that profoundly limits their opportunities to act as agents, and this lack of *realized* agency is then turned around to dismiss them as fungible entities of limited *potential* for agency or individuality, thereby rationalizing their continued oppression.⁵

The primary aim of this paper is to tackle this catch-22 by studying animal agency in VINE (Veganism Is the Next Evolution) sanctuary for formerly farmed animals. This is a community in which animals' agency is (relatively) enabled rather than suppressed, and in which they have considerable opportunity to co-create social worlds with each other, and the humans who live with them. The study builds on recent work in animal ethics and politics that explores sanctuary or interspecies communities as sites of political contestation and possibility (Abrell, 2016; Chang, 2017; Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2015; Gillespie, 2019; Pachirat, 2018; Scotton, 2017). By studying animal agency in this context, we believe it is possible to gain some purchase on the question of whether, and, if so, how (some) farmed animals might want to live with us, and the possibilities for human-animal co-creation, or co-authorship, of the nature and

norms of shared society, replacing existing relations of tyranny, domination, and exploitation.⁶

In Part 1 of the paper, we describe in detail the reasons for choosing VINE sanctuary for this study, as well as the limitations of this setting. In Part 2 we discuss the concept of agency we are relying on, drawing on feminist accounts of agency as an embodied and relational phenomenon (Côté-Boudreau, 2019; Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2016b; Krause, 2013; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000; Nedelsky, 2011). On this view, agency isn't (or isn't solely) a trait or capacity of sovereign individuals; it arises through relations with others in particular contexts. Animals are intentional subjects, but whether/how they are able to develop their identities and agency, and realize themselves in the world, depends—as it does for all of us—on the responsiveness of others and opportunities created by their social and physical environments. In Part 3 of the paper, we explain our use of multispecies ethnography as a methodology for studying agency at VINE sanctuary, and describe the nuts and bolts of our undertaking. In Part 4 of the paper, we present the results of this study of agency in the VINE community, focusing on individual and collective dimensions of animals' agency through space and place, through practice and routine, and through social roles and norms. Part 5 draws some tentative conclusions about how political multispecies ethnography, employing a relational agency lens, can shed light on the question of whether/how animals might want to live with each other and us, and how we can recognize and support their agency through our relationships with them.

1. VINE

VINE sanctuary is located across 100 acres of hilly terrain in central Vermont. It is a rich environment, featuring diverse flora and fauna, multiple buildings and structures, and a variety of materials and objects. This community of formerly farmed animals includes cows Scotty, Autumn, and Rose; alpaca Domino; sheep Shadow and Broggy; turkeys Hypatia and Paula; and many other individuals who will feature in our discussion. At the time of our visit (April 2018), VINE was home to over 600 nonhuman animals of approximately 18 species (including chickens, cows, ducks, doves, geese, pigeons, sheep, emus, alpacas, and others), as well as three resident humans plus additional staff and volunteers. The sanctuary is subdivided into several areas, including a large upper pasture and forest where a community of semi-feral cows live mostly apart from humans; a lower sanctuary (“the Valley”) where many birds (and some

humans, dogs, and cats) live; and a large middle multispecies commons (“the Commons”) in which residents of many species (including humans) live, and are largely free to commingle on their own terms. It also contains specially designated areas for convalescing, vulnerable, or self-segregating animals, or newly introduced residents.

VINE is explicitly committed to an intersectional ethos of social justice, including interspecies justice.⁷ In a world characterized by human violence towards animals (or relations of exploitation and domination, or indifference and distance, or *modus vivendi*), VINE is a place of “rupture” of this prevailing “topography of enmity.” (Pachirat, 2018, p. 339)⁸ In striving towards a more ethical and just relationship with nonhuman animals, it offers a unique context—richer, more complex, and more respectful—for studying the possibilities of animal agency in multispecies society.

VINE takes seriously the fact that the sanctuary belongs to the animals living there. It does not have a public visitor program, and the animals are not on display.⁹ As much as practicable, its layout, buildings, routines, and practices respond to the needs and wants of the residents, not to the exigencies of fundraising, visitor programs, or managerial parameters. One of the most striking features of VINE is the degree of interspecies mixing and interaction. Unlike many sanctuaries that organize animal spaces and social life by species (and sometimes further subdivisions within species), many animals at VINE have the opportunity to interact freely with individuals of various other species in a complex and fluid environment. As we hope will become clear over the course of this paper, VINE is not simply a collection of individuals of varying species sharing space, nor is it a “federation” of species-specific groupings; it is an integrated *multispecies community or society*¹⁰ whose members shape spaces and practices together, take on recognized social roles, and create and transmit social norms across species lines. This setting opens up opportunities to gain new, unique insights into these animals as both individual agents and creators of shared community.

Once we recognize VINE as a community, this raises the question of the kind of community it is, and which members are genuinely empowered within it. Is this a society largely created and imposed by humans who direct or manipulate animals into complying with certain rules and practices, or adopting certain roles? Or is it co-authored by humans and animals in ways that reflect genuine mutuality and relational agency? Presumably it is a mixture of both. Exploring these questions is

the key aim of this study, but it is important to acknowledge certain limitations at the outset.

While VINE, in relative terms, is a rich and compelling setting for studying animal agency, and animal-human society, it is far from an ideal setting. As noted, VINE exists as a kind of oasis within a larger “topography of enmity,” a topography that imposes severe limits on the kind of community VINE can be. First of all, most VINE residents started their lives in the “outside world” where they experienced the human-inflicted violence, trauma, and deprivation that is the lot of most farmed animals. We should assume that this history has involved distorted or manipulated developmental opportunities, and the creation of adaptive preferences. Also, the physical and mental health of many residents has been deeply compromised by the selective breeding practices of the farming industry. The kinds of society they can create together at VINE are shaped by these realities and personal histories.

The abject moral and legal status of animals in society generally, their commodification in capitalist relations, the existence of restrictive zoning, public order, animal control, and private property laws—all of these factors impinge on possibilities and practices at VINE. For example, if animals in general were no longer farmed, and subject to forced breeding, then animals at VINE might be freer to regulate their own reproductive and family lives. If animals who left the sanctuary territory weren’t subject to killing, impoundment, or medical quarantine, but instead were welcomed as neighbors and visitors, or co-residents of a shared commons (not trespassers on private property), then VINE’s boundaries could be more fluid and open to negotiation between animal residents and outsiders.¹¹

These external realities constrain VINE, and shape the kinds of agency possible for its animal residents. As VINE sanctuary co-founder Miriam Jones states:

Certainly, true freedom escapes almost all farmed or formerly farmed animals. We use the terms “as free as possible” deliberately, as fences, enforced routines, involuntary medical procedures and regimes (including everything from forced sterilization to force feeding), and other impositions certainly do not comprise a free state of being.... (2014, p. 91)

Some might argue that the unfreedom of animals at VINE isn’t just a result of the larger topography of enmity, but an unavoidable aspect of their status as domesticated animals living in dependency on humans (Fran-

cione, 2007). On this view, true freedom for animals requires independence from humans. A troubling implication of this view is that domesticated animals don’t have a right to be here, to benefit from the millennia of civilizational development to which they have contributed, and to make their own choices about their relationships. Our study does not start from any such assumption, but rather, attempts an open-minded assessment of the kinds of agency operating at VINE, including ways that meaningful forms of agency might be made possible through interdependent relationships with humans, not just thwarted by them.¹²

While the decision to carry out this study at VINE was largely driven by the unique opportunities it affords for studying animal agency and multispecies society, the choice of a sanctuary setting also relates to ongoing discussions amongst animal geography and multispecies ethnography scholars about the locations where we undertake research, and our responsibility to animal research subjects (Van Patter & Blattner, 2020; Kopnina, 2017; Collard & Gillespie, 2015). As noted by Kathryn Gillespie, if we study animals in sites of institutionalized violence, we are placed in an impossible ethical situation:

There is a long tradition of studying nonhuman animals in spaces of animal use and exploitation, where researchers and teachers in effect become complicit through passive participation in violence against nonhuman animals.... As an alternative to these clearly fraught spaces, the sanctuary can offer a site to explore a radically different kind of socio-spatial relationship with farmed animal species. (Gillespie, 2019, p. 19)

For example, a great deal of research on farmed animal agency, decision-making, preferences, and choice has been conducted by animal welfare researchers, most of it driven by the interests and exigencies of animal use industries (and complicit in their ongoing operation).¹³ While we can learn important things about farmed animals from this research, we believe it is severely limited in terms of what it can tell us about what animals really want, or who they can be outside of the farming context—as individuals, and most especially as members of co-determining communities. We believe that by instead studying human-animal relations in a context like VINE, we have a meaningful chance of establishing a more ethical relationship with the subjects of our research, and of heeding Gillespie’s call “to push for gentler, more caring, and ethically attuned ways of doing research involving other animals, and to explore the potentially trans-

formative nature of a *politicized* multispecies ethnography.” (2019, pp. 17–18, emphasis in original)

2. AGENCY

Our study of animal agency at VINE draws on, and extends, two key scholarly resources: feminist accounts of relational agency as our conceptual grounding, and multispecies ethnography as our methodology (the focus of the next section). Recent feminist accounts of the “social self” offer a welcome corrective to traditional accounts in political and moral philosophy that conceptualize freedom and agency with reference to highly independent beings capable of abstract forms of rationality, morality, and use of language. Feminist and disability political and legal theorists have developed various accounts of relational or dependent agency and autonomy (Krause, 2013; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000; Nedelsky, 2011; Francis & Silvers, 2007). These accounts have been applied to domesticated animals by Donaldson & Kymlicka (2016b) and more recently by Côté-Boudreau (2019) in his comprehensive account of “inclusive autonomy” for domesticated animals.

At its broadest, agency is the ability to have influence over, or have an effect on something. Agency in this sense is possessed by all humans and animals, but also by viruses, stones, or tornadoes (Carter & Charles, 2013, p. 323). Our focus is narrower as we understand agency as the expression or manifestation of a *subjective* existence; agency means affecting the world in ways that reflect a subject’s desires or will. In Sharon Krause’s definition, it involves “the affirmation of one’s subjective existence through concrete action in the world.” (Krause, 2013, p. 197) Agency can, but need not manifest subjectivity with explicit intention or deliberation. Many of our actions are spontaneous, intuitive, habitual, automatic, embodied, or semi-conscious, and not preceded by full information or contemplation (Wilson, 2002; Zaluski, 2016). We often exercise agency in an immediate, lived manner, acting or reacting intuitively to our life-worlds, and this is fundamental to our freedom.

This focus on how our subjectivity is affirmed through concrete actions in the world differs from both traditional liberal and republican conceptions of freedom. The dominant account within the liberal tradition defines freedom as non-interference by others (Mill, 1859), and hence confers on us negative rights that prevent others from interfering with our most important interests. Republicans argue that freedom should be defined more broadly to also include protection from even the threat of arbitrary interference: freedom requires

non-domination (Pettit, 1997, 2001). However neither liberal non-interference nor republican non-domination suffices to ensure that we are able to affirm our subjective existence through concrete actions in the world. In particular, these accounts do not address the constraints on our agency that arise from the (often unconscious) stigmas or biases of others. If others avoid me because I belong to a socially stigmatized group, I may not suffer from either interference or domination—others may have no intention to interfere or dominate me—but nor will there be any “uptake” of my will or desires or self-hood (Krause, 2013). Social stigma—which refers to insidious habits of thought, selective patterns of social intercourse, and biased processes of social cognition (Loury, 2003, p. 168)—is a powerful example of constraints on agency that do not qualify as domination, pure and simple, and hence fall through the cracks of liberal and republican liberty. These constraints “devalue and confine the individual in ways that systematically undercut her or his ability to be in and affect the world in ways that manifest her or his distinctive subjective existence.” (Krause, 2003, p. 201) Our agency depends on whether and how our subjective existence is taken up by others. The importance of “uptake” highlights the catch-22 for farmed animals. Human anthropocentric bias about who they are, and who they can be, means that uptake is systematically denied to these animals, and their agency systematically suppressed in ways that go beyond direct interference.

Acknowledging this intersubjective dimension of agency, we must pay attention to social contexts and unintentional forms of oppression when we track and evaluate existing forms of agency or propose new ways to secure it (Krause, 2013, p. 198). This “relational” and “distributed” account of agency relies on

a conception of positive freedom that starts from the question, not of how we impinge upon one another, (or retain the threat of doing so), but rather: how do we create freedom together by looking for, and supporting it in each other? (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2018, p. 23)¹⁴

Within these parameters, our analysis explores both individual and collective dimensions of animals’ agency at VINE through space and place, through practice and routine, and through social roles and norms. We try to understand the factors that support and foster relational agency, and the limitations on it. How do humans “take up” the subjectivity of animals at VINE, and vice versa? We attend in particular to dimensions of agency that go

beyond non-interference and species-specific behavior to consider cross-species dimensions of agency, and the key role of environmental and social supports and opportunities. Put simply, we are interested in those dimensions of agency that are realized, and made visible, through the existence of multispecies community.¹⁵

3. MULTISPECIES ETHNOGRAPHY—RESEARCH METHODS AND ETHICS

Political philosophy has a long and mostly unfortunate history of thinking about animals largely for the purposes of asserting a uniquely human nature, and human politics. Superficial and often ill-informed statements are made about animals in order to buttress claims about “distinctively human” qualities or capacities (Kymlicka & Donaldson, 2016). This practice has not required any actual research with animals, or attempts to understand them on their own terms, and continues to reproduce biased and unfounded claims despite repeated challenges from the empirical sciences, and animals themselves.

This study starts from the assumption that to learn about farmed animal agency in community we need first of all to acknowledge the limited and distorted perspective we bring to this question (as to most questions about animals), and to be cautious, and humble in our claims. Crucially, we need to spend time in community with farmed animals, to learn from them, and to be prepared to respond and adjust our learning process through relationships with them. To understand the relational agency of farmed animals in multispecies society—“the affirmation of [their] subjective existence through concrete action in the world” (Krause, 2013, p. 197)—we need to enter and be part of their world. An empirically-grounded methodology is essential: asking these questions *with* animals, and doing so in an environment that respects and fosters their agency as self-determining individuals and members of communities.

For this reason our study draws on the methodologies of ethnography (originating within the disciplines of anthropology and sociology) and its rich practice of learning through brushing up against the subjective worlds of “others” across chasms of difference such as culture, gender, and latterly, species (hence multispecies ethnography, or ME). This practice calls for careful attention to the positionality of the researcher, the nature of the research relationship, and recognition that “becoming with” research subjects needn’t compromise the production of knowledge; it may indeed be the only way to glimpse the world through their eyes. Unlike tradi-

tional ethological study of wild animals (e.g. Bekoff & Pierce, 2009), in which humans are on the outside observing animal behavior and society from a distance, ME is a participant methodology suited to the study of human and animal interactions, including the study of relational agency.

To date, most researchers in the field of ME have focused on cases involving liminal animals negotiating human presence and encroachment. They have explored the shared social worlds of humans and monkeys (Fuentes, 2010), humans and elephants (Locke, 2017), and humans and hyenas (Baynes-Rock, 2015), amongst others, putting “emphasis on the subjectivity and agency of organisms whose lives are entangled with humans.” (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010, p. 566) Many MEs have focused on domesticated animals, including cats and dogs (Alger & Alger, 2003; Meijer, 2014) and some on farmed animals (Gillespie, 2018; Beldo, 2017).¹⁶ Very few, however, have focused on *formerly* farmed animals (but see Abrell, 2016; Gillespie, 2019). Thus our project extends the field of ME by attempting to understand animal agency (and intersubjective relations) in the unique context of a community in which formerly farmed animals live with humans committed to supporting their agency and advancing interspecies justice.

Eight members of our interdisciplinary research group spent four days as participant observers at VINE sanctuary in late April 2018.¹⁷ Our pre-trip discussions focused on a series of themes relating to the nature of interspecies community, agency, and individual and social flourishing. Some of us approached the field work with quite specific questions in mind relating to the management of social relations and conflict, appropriation of space, etc., while others approached it with the more general goal of simply getting a feel for the community and the residents’ ways of “being with.” We did not come with specific hypotheses to test, but rather with guiding questions in a general spirit of open inquiry.¹⁸

In addition to our conceptual investigations related to interspecies ethics and politics, we sought to explore a number of methodological and ethical questions concerning research with animal (including human) participants. Prior to field work, two team members drafted an ethics protocol to guide the research, founded on encountering animals respectfully as research participants, both inspired by, and suitably modifying, research ethics guidelines for humans belonging to vulnerable groups (Van Patter & Blattner, 2020). This protocol included guidelines relating to: How reliably can we interpret an-

imals' nonverbal communication? What is the status of anecdotal information from human informants about the animal residents? How can we gauge animals' voluntary participation during the course of interactions? When should research with animal participants remain purely observational, and when is it appropriate to foster more active engagements? Developing this protocol was necessary given the utter inadequacy of existing research ethics protocols for animals used in research, and their framing of animals as research objects whose interests are sacrifice-able for human ends.¹⁹

Our research experience involved both observing and interacting with the human and animal residents, and assisting with sanctuary activities such as fence-building, feeding, and welcoming new community members. We took written field notes, photographs, and videos. We also gathered secondary anecdotal evidence from human residents, staff, and volunteers, conversing with them opportunistically about topics including animal residents' histories and interactions, and the role of human intervention and decision-making at VINE.²⁰ We transcribed our primary field notes, along with additional post-trip reflections.

The data analysis and writing involved conducting an initial review of pooled field notes, which led to the generation of the four broad themes discussed below. We worked together to define each theme, with definitions evolving collaboratively and iteratively throughout the coding process leading to summaries of key findings. Along with coding the textual data, we reviewed photographs and videos to generate further interpretations of findings for each theme.

4. AGENCY AT VINE

Our analysis is divided into four themes, each focused on a particular form or dimension of agency: (a) *Agency through space and place* is the lens we use to examine how negotiated use of physical space and place-making opportunities help animals to flourish in interspecies communities; (b) We explore how various *practices and routines* play an important role in providing animals structures that support forms of positive freedom and agency; (c) Freely adopted *social roles or identities* (e.g., guardian, teacher) provide another way in which animals create ongoing structures of meaning, and a basis for recognition in the community; (d) And by learning and negotiating *social norms*, or rules of social interaction, animals create and contest some of the terms on which members of the community flourish together. This is obviously a preliminary and somewhat speculative analysis, and we

recognize the profound challenge of trying to understand relational agency in ways that might be most meaningful to the animal residents. Nevertheless, we feel that this analysis captures important ways in which animal residents at VINE, through relationship with others (including humans), have meaningful opportunities to “affect the world in ways that manifest [their] distinctive subjective existence.” (Krause, 2013, p. 201)

a) *Agency through space and place*²¹

VINE is a complex physical space, allowing significant mobility and choice to explore various habitats and structures (woods, clearings, ponds, meadows, hills, barns, and other shelters, raised structures, and climbable structures), as well as opportunities for claiming and modifying places to hide, rest, play, etc. (coops, pens, containers, covered spaces, niches). The extent to which these opportunities satisfy the animal residents varies. VINE sanctuary coordinator Cheryl Wylie notes that some of the birds, like certain pigeons and doves who cannot re-wild due to their individual circumstances, clearly chafe against their confinement to aviaries. The cows in the upper part of the sanctuary are free to use a large acreage of woods and cleared pasture all the way to the sanctuary peak, which they seem to fully make use of and enjoy. But it's possible that they also feel confined by the fenced boundaries, and VINE co-founder patrice jones believes they would happily explore further than current boundaries allow.

For many of the animals in the Valley and the Commons, however, VINE seems to offer ample opportunity to explore new space, occupy it, defend it, make it their own, and use it for various purposes, including getting away from others. For example, two chickens entered the sickbay but refused to leave after regaining their health and have since made the infirmary their home with three other chickens. A group of ducks took over one of the rooster coops and have staked ownership. And, since they aren't keen on the big pond, the geese have taken over a water trough as their favorite bathing spot. It was discovered that one duck, who avoided the big pond, enjoyed swimming in a kiddie pool, and his preference is accommodated. Ducks, turkeys, and the peahen have lots of places to hide their nests. A group of goats have appropriated a corner of the big barn as a preferred resting area, which birds can access, but not the larger cows and sheep. A group of birds have repurposed an abandoned truck cab as a sheltered sunroom on a cool day. Mirena, one of the smaller goats, has found a way to get to the middle of the bale

feeder to access the good hay while leaving everyone else in puzzlement about the shifting stack. A few animals, like the Muscovy ducks, can actually leave the boundaries of the sanctuary and come and go as they please.

As some of these examples show, choosing place is closely connected with the question of whether one wants to share it with others, and if so, with whom. Some residents, like one trio of geese, seem to prefer their own company and places. Two emus have expressed a strong desire to be by themselves. Shadow hangs out with the alpacas instead of the other sheep, sheep Broggy is very attached to the cows, and Valkyrie the pig sleeps with alpaca Domino, not letting anyone else get as close. The cows in the upper pasture live as a partially re-wilded herd, instead of being part of the Commons, whereas cows in the Commons regularly interact with, or lie down beside, sheep, goats, turkeys, chickens, peacocks, and others.

instead regularly deferring to animals, and prioritizing their interests. For example, VINE care provider Kevin Cudabac wouldn't have to spend hours doing safety headcounts of the cows if their range were more restricted, but clearly their preference is for more space.

But the role of humans is not just to step back, but also to monitor, and to alter spaces in response to animals' preferences and actions consistent with their safety and preferences. More generally, humans are crucial in providing the stable, rich, and complex social and physical environment in which animal residents can develop, and to which they can respond. This environment doesn't replicate "nature," or some idea of the pre-domesticated life of cows or goats or chickens. It is a unique multispecies geography made possible through human involvement.²²

VINE also creates opportunities for (some) animals to change their minds and circumstances in regards to key issues of space and access, thus mitigating the im-



Figure 1. Residents of the "Commons" in the big barn. Photo by Darren Chang.

At first glance, it might seem that the opportunities for animals at VINE to explore and claim space simply require the humans to let them be, limiting interaction to serious health and safety interventions. Stepping back and granting latitude for exploration and failure, and respecting animals' choices about how to use spaces and places, is indeed a crucial part of the equation. It requires giving up on the idea that humans know best, and

pact of barriers necessary for safety. For example, the gate separating the Commons from the upper sanctuary operates as a "choice point." The gate is necessary because a few of the cows from the upper sanctuary are too rambunctious or large to safely be part of the Commons (running too quickly in crowded spaces, for example, or mounting small or frail cows for whom intercourse poses a serious risk). The gate limits their free-

dom of movement but enhances the general agency of members of the Commons through protection of a secure and stable environment. Many cows can move between the Commons and upper pasture, indicating their desire to move between these spaces/communities by standing at the gate and waiting for someone to open it. Some of the cows never make use of this option; others use it frequently. As this example shows, and as Instone reminds us, a fence can be “a line of communication, not just a division” and “a space of conjunction, of possibility, and of connectivity” (2010, pp. 97 & 111; see also Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2016a). This is an important reminder that while boundaries and fences impose limitations and barriers, they can also provide security, predictability, and communication touchstones in ways that enable us to be effective agents.

For the most part, animals’ desire to exhibit agency through space and place is respected not just by humans at VINE, but by other animal residents, as well. As the above examples also show, one animal’s agency is sometimes realized when others’ agency is thwarted (e.g., denying them access to spaces or society), raising obvious questions of fairness and inclusion. We return to this in the discussion of norms of belonging and toleration.

b) Agency through practice and routine

Life at VINE is structured around a number of practices and routines, such as feeding schedules, safety protocols, and care and health procedures. At first glance, these routines may seem to be cases of human imposition on animals: the human members of VINE define the routines, and animals are expected to follow them. However, as we will see, the relationship between community routines and animal agency is more nuanced.

To be sure, some routines are experienced by animal residents as interference or restriction at least some of the time. This is especially true of some medical procedures and confinement practices used to cure, mitigate, or prevent injury or vulnerability. Wise from experience after a bout of pneumonia requiring numerous penicillin injections, cow CoCo only allows patrice and Cheryl to approach with open hands to prove they’re not carrying a needle. Rooster Baldy goes to great lengths to stay out of the coop at night, but his wishes are overridden because he isn’t predator-savvy. When hormones are running high, some animals go to great lengths to get to others, which may jeopardize those residents. In an effort to minimize injuries, VINE excludes continuously rambunctious animals from the Commons.

Most male animals arrive at VINE either partially or fully neutered. If intact (or partially intact) individuals pose a threat to others due to continuous mounting, then VINE will use occasional segregation or sterilization as a last resort. VINE is acutely aware of how spaying and neutering compromise animals’ agency and are problematic from a justice perspective, and pursue alternative solutions where possible.

Practices like castration, which are unilateral and irreversible, are at one end of the continuum. Many routines and practices, however, are reversible and negotiable, like daily care routines, or choices about medical treatment. For example, patrice notes that one cow repeatedly indicated her strong preference to be part of the upper cow herd, and was allowed to do this despite her vulnerable health status, whereas the usual practice at VINE is to encourage frail cows to join the Commons (with its much less rugged terrain). Through responsiveness to feedback from avian residents, VINE has modified the daily health check so that birds are handled as they exit the coop in the morning, rather than being approached and handled in the open. The negotiability of these decisions, not just the outcome, is an important dimension of agency—allowing individuals to be heard, acknowledged, responded to, taken seriously, and to have the possibility to change an outcome to their liking.

Routines aren’t just a practical necessity, but a positive opportunity for the exercise of agency and meaning creation that allow animals to anticipate and cherish predictable elements in the daily, weekly, and seasonal round. Food routines are perhaps the most obvious instance, and in particular the twice-weekly distribution of new and interesting castoffs from Hannaford’s grocery store is clearly a beloved ritual. Cows, sheep, ducks, and many other animals are notably excited about this free-gan party, lingering around the food distribution area long before the food-for-all takes place and walking up and down in great anticipation. There are also practices and routines that depend on the weather/season, and which allow for anticipation and pleasant variation. For example, in winter, chickens will bathe in the dirt in the barn, but come summer, they get excited to begin bathing in the dirt on the outside and sunning themselves. Animal residents create their own routines, suggesting that those are a source of comfort or pleasure. The sheep have a typical daily pattern of grazing twice a day in the lower Commons pasture and resting in the upper Commons near the aviary. Checking in with others is another important part of the daily rhythm, sometimes

quite ritualized, at other times more casual; sometimes initiated by humans, sometimes by nonhumans. Most residents check in with their friends over the course of the day, and several of them visibly enjoy those moments when a human friend chooses consciously to “be with” them, sharing a moment or routine of daily life (simply being, petting, or laughing), and conveying affection and good intentions.

The existence of routines allows animals to exercise agency by varying and modifying those routines. For example, many of the animals (cow Maddox, goat Okapi, and alpaca Domino) love the emus’ special diet, paying close attention to their feeding times, and opportunities to sneak their food. Cow Autumn is elderly and doesn’t enjoy the bustle with the other animals during morning feedings in the barn. She has developed her own routine whereby she waits for the others to leave the barn before she enters to eat the grain she knows Cheryl has saved for her, and to share a moment with her. Greeting and checking out visitors offers another kind of “routine with variations,” welcomed by some residents, ignored by others. Domino, the alpaca, Shadow, the sheep, many of the cows (CoCo, Scotty, Rose, Maddox, and Buddy), and several turkeys and peacocks on multiple occasions approached us to check us out, offer acknowledgment, demand acknowledgment, or extend a welcome. It was hard to tell how the emus felt about visitors, and one group of geese often scolded, and seemed to tell us to go away. Some animals, like pig Valkyrie, completely ignored us, or hid away during our visits.

In these many ways, we can see that routines and practices aren’t simply imposed on animals at VINE, or experienced as restriction and imposition. Certainly, some practices, like castration, represent serious and irreversible limitations on freedom and agency. And others (e.g., health checks and procedures) may have paternalistic justifications that are opaque to the individuals affected. But many daily routines and practices provide security and pleasure, stimulation, and meaningful opportunities for contestation, negotiation, creative modification, and variation. This raises intriguing questions about the possibility of deliberately co-creating new practices, routines, and rituals with animal residents as a path to deepening community, creating meaning, and supporting agency.

c) Agency through social roles

A social role is “the behaviour expected of an individual who occupies a given social position or status. A role is a comprehensive pattern of behaviour that is so-

cially recognized, providing a means of identifying and placing an individual in a society.” (Britannica, 2018) The adoption of roles and identities that are recognized and acknowledged by others, indeed mutually constructed with them, is an important dimension of relational agency—one of the ways we can effectively affirm our subjective existence in community. Social roles are inhabited by individual agents and are mutable over time. They are an emergent element of community indicating that VINE and similar interspecies settings are indeed social communities, not mere aggregations of humans and animals.

While it is most easy to identify those roles occupied by human members of VINE (in no small part because they explicitly affirm the occupation of these roles), animal members of VINE occupy their share of social roles. In this section, we will discuss four such roles: guardian, teacher, friend, and parent. This is simply a sampling of roles that seemed particularly salient to us, and we have no doubt that animals at VINE inhabit many other social roles, some benign, others less so. We also acknowledge some arbitrariness in labelling certain behavior as guarding, say, versus caring or teaching.²³

Guardian. One kind of social role occupied across multiple species groupings is that of guardian. Although guardian roles take a variety of forms (including policing, monitoring, and deterrence), the unifying feature is that they deal with (potential) conflict scenarios. VINE affords animals a great deal of freedom, at the expense of some risk, and this inevitably requires careful monitoring and a delicate balancing act when it comes to intervention. The few conflicts we observed between animals at VINE were minor and almost always resolved by the parties involved. The animals at VINE tend to police one another on a regular basis. Illustrating this is an instance where one chicken was chased by another into a shaded area in which a group of geese rested. One goose had remained on alert throughout and rose to intercept the pursuing chicken and offer a honking rebuke.

In rare instances, we observed human members of VINE intervening in situations of potential conflict and taking on a policing role. These situations never appeared particularly hostile, and usually involved chasing, excessive probing, or prolonged sexual mounting. Human interventions varied in scope. Sometimes a verbal reminder was all that was required, whereas in other cases, physical separation was necessary. Human interventions are best read in these cases as preventative measures before behavior could escalate into serious conflict or potential injury.

Aside from the internal policing of affairs, we witnessed animal residents monitoring our presence as visitors. In the Commons, Scotty, the largest and eldest individual, and sporting sizeable horns, spent a considerable amount of time keeping tabs on the researchers. We observed something similar in the upper sanctuary. There, as researchers approached the cows gathered around two bale feeders, a sole horned cow named Equinox interrupted his feeding to periodically check on the group of unfamiliar humans who had approached. This situation replayed itself the following day when Equinox remained focused on the presence of the researchers while other cows ate, rested, and interacted with one another without interruption. The behaviors by Scotty and Equinox were not mere curiosity. They had taken it upon themselves to observe the observers and allow the other animals to continue on in their lives with indifference to the outsiders. According to pattrice, similar guardianship roles can be observed amongst the emus and guinea fowl.

As noted, a constitutive element of social roles is that they garner recognition on behalf of (at least some) other community members. Recognition can take a variety of forms. In both the Commons and the upper sanctuary, we observed what might be termed “embodied recognition” of guardian roles among cows. Cows not taking on the role of guardian appeared to absolve

themselves of any responsibility for monitoring the visitors, indicating through their actions that they recognized the role undertaken by others.

In a different instantiation of the guardian role, some animals aid the community by deterring threatening or otherwise unwanted interlopers, or by signaling their presence. Dogs Storm and Trickster protect the residents of the Valley area from predators such as foxes, coyotes, and raccoons, and a number of cats discourage rodents from making VINE their home. In the Commons, cows and alpacas deter foxes and coyotes. In both areas, the booming calls of the roosters, ever vigilant and on the lookout for hawks and other predators, can be heard whenever a hint of danger is sensed. In some instances, deterrence is active. Roosters and guinea fowl sound the alarm when a threat is near. On one occasion, pattrice notes, the guineas chased away a fox about to snatch a duck. In other cases, the mere bodily presence of a cat leads rodents to think twice before settling down at VINE. As Krause (2013) reminds us, our subjective existence can be effectively affirmed in the world without us consciously or deliberately intending it. Sometimes animals act intentionally as guardians. At other times, the role is enacted without seeming intention.²⁴



Figure 2. A rooster keeps watch over hens and a turkey who have “appropriated” a nook under the wheelbarrow. Photo by Omar Bachour.



Figure 3. The geese seem to be saying “go away,” and we complied with the request. Photo by Omar Bachour.

A different form of recognition of a social role is how it may in some cases engender esteem from other members of one’s community, including humans. Kevin appeared to speak with admiration for the rooster guardians who were ever vigilant in their defense of the hens and willing to put themselves at risk for the benefit of others.

Teacher/learner. Education is vital in sanctuary contexts where new members are constantly joining the community. Those who take on a teaching role benefit new members in a variety of ways. Some individuals take it upon themselves to make new members feel welcome and secure, giving particular attention to more vulnerable individuals. Coco (to be distinguished from the male cow, CoCo, discussed earlier), a cow who passed away earlier this year, took it upon herself to nurture and instruct calves and younger cows who arrived without family members at the sanctuary. According to patrice, the cows and sheep are always particularly welcoming of new members, and eager to show them the ropes. But education extends beyond being welcomed and made to feel secure in the community. For some, it is crucial to basic survival and flourishing in their new environment.

When a new group of rescued hens arrived during our stay, it was clear that they were unfamiliar with drinking from a basin or foraging for food. For the entirety of their lives, they had used sipper water bottles and were provisioned food in a lab environment. We watched as the new hens learned from experienced residents how they could access food and water independently. Here again, it is important to emphasize that social roles may not always be active and intentional, but may instead function on a more passive basis. Some residents occupy the teacher role by (passively) modeling behaviors whereas others, like turkey Fabio, are recognized by human residents at VINE (and perhaps other animal residents, too) as diligent and willing teachers of new birds.

Human members of VINE are also teachers. Kevin teaches smaller chickens to use vertical space to their advantage. By repeatedly lifting the chickens to higher ground, they soon learn to access these spaces on their own. This new space functions both in mitigating conflicts with larger chickens (who cannot access these spaces) and more generally affords these individuals a greater range of decision-making over which spaces to occupy. In many ways, though, VINE humans can rely on animal residents to teach one another the ropes of how to survive and thrive in the community. As visitors, we felt instructed as much by the nonhumans as the humans at VINE about greeting, touching, and feeding, for example. Several members of our group sensed disapproval when we stood or sat and stared at animal residents, recording our notes, and a more relaxed demeanor when we started to participate in the community more “normally” (doing chores, etc.). We took the hint!

Friend. Friendships are readily observable at VINE, both within and across species. For example, Valkyrie, the sole pig at VINE, has developed a friendship with alpaca Domino. While otherwise avoiding contact with other residents, Valkyrie will let Domino touch her with his head. Similarly, sheep Shadow and alpaca Max have developed an interspecies bond. In this case it’s hard to tell if it’s mutual friendship, or more a case of Max taking on a guardian role. At times Max seemed to be keeping an eye on Shadow from afar, whereas at others the two were observed huddled closely together. Friendships, though dyadic in nature, may nevertheless play a significant role in fostering a sense of inclusion within the community.

As one would expect, the role of friend is one that shifts over time. Sheep Lamby and cow CoCo lived together before coming to VINE, and arrived with a close bond. Over time, though, they have started spending

less time together, although they still regularly check in with one another. But like in human relationships, physical proximity doesn't necessarily mean friendship. Cheryl and Patrice note that some of the roosters, for example, stick close to their rivals to keep an eye on them.

Parent. While not available to many animals at VINE, biological parent/child roles are not completely absent. Some animals arrive as family members or are reunited at VINE, like cow Moxie and her son Maddox. VINE human resident Kathy Gorish describes their ecstatic reunion, after three years' separation, as one of her most moving experiences at VINE. Some of the birds are able to brood, hatch, and raise their young, and they go to considerable effort to hide their nests, in or outside the sanctuary, in order to do so. If they show this determination to parent, and demonstrate the savvy/ability to do so safely, VINE staff do not interfere with their reproductive freedom. Domino's father Avalon keeps a watchful eye on his son (perhaps because he knows that Domino is neuro-atypical, and subject to seizures?). He seems to disapprove of Domino's friendship with Valkyrie and breaks them up when he can.

Given that social roles are an important dimension of identity and our sense of belonging to community, we should be deeply concerned by social or institutional constraints on opportunities to assume pro-social roles—especially a role like parenting that is ubiquitous across social species, and seems to be a deep source of meaning for many. Thus the thorny question of sterilization at VINE is not restricted to the issue of bodily integrity and negative rights violations, but also relevant to positive dimensions of agency, like opportunities to realize agency through the social role of parent (or sibling).²⁵

Guardian, teacher, friend, parent—this is just a taste of the kinds of social roles assumed by the residents of VINE. As individuals, the occupation of a social role can be a source of significant meaning and serve as a space for the exercise of agency. It is also bound up with the flourishing of other community members. A number of the above illustrations demonstrate how the performance of a given social role may act as a precondition for the agency of others who receive the benefits of guardianship, teaching, friendship, or parenting. For example, a necessary precondition of any individual chicken's flourishing is the negation of predation threats from wild-living animals. Where dogs, cows, humans, or others take on the role of deterring these predators, an individual chicken is now unencumbered by what is otherwise a very real threat. As a consequence, avenues of

flourishing are opened up (or, no longer closed off) for this individual.

We have explored some ways in which animals' agency at VINE may be enabled through the voluntary adoption of social roles. The flip side of this issue is the importance of *not* imposing social roles on residents, or expecting them to behave in a certain way. Consider sheep Shadow, who chose not to become part of the sheep group but instead to hang out with the alpacas. This choice not to assume a stereotypical sheep role is not viewed as a problem. At VINE, it's also perfectly okay if residents want to be alone and there is no expectation that they be cheerful and energetic all the time. Importantly, there is no expectation that animals engage with humans or be part of the community. Indeed, some animals (e.g., chickens and ducks) partially re-wild and switch back and forth between the sanctuary and the wild, which VINE respects. Many sanctuaries ascribe roles or identities to their residents—as plucky survivors, or fortunate rescues, or enthusiastic friends of humans. One of the most common ascriptions is to identify animals as “ambassadors” representing less fortunate animals. VINE doesn't tend to do this, implicitly recognizing that freedom from being expected to occupy certain roles may be almost as important as positive agency through the assumption of chosen roles. Once again, we see the interplay between ideas of freedom as non-imposition, and freedom as opportunity for meaningful agency.

d) Agency through social norms

Social norms are “the customary rules that govern behavior in groups and societies.” (Bicchieri & Muldoon, 2011, p. 1) They are largely implicit understandings and expectations that help to coordinate and facilitate our interactions, contact, and sharing of space. While typically habitual and unconscious, they are made more explicit when being taught or contested. Think of children learning to say “please” and “thank you.” Or think of visiting a foreign country and adapting to the local customs (greet with a bow? or handshake?). Social norms can sometimes be oppressive if they mandate practices of hierarchy, but they can also promote inclusion and equality, if they mandate practices of consensus, sharing, or turn-taking.²⁶ In our analysis we use the concept of social norms capaciously. Our goal is twofold: to describe some social norms operating at VINE and consider their role in relation to agency and flourishing.

Many non-human animals learn, negotiate, and conform to social norms (van de Waal, Borgeaud, & Whiten, 2013). When observing a single-species community from the outside, it can be challenging to distinguish culturally-transmitted social norms from species-specific behaviors. In a community like VINE, however, members of multiple species form a fluid community that regularly integrates newcomers into a relatively stable, secure, free, and complex environment. They share food, spaces, friends, routines, and activities, and must negotiate these interactions in ways that transcend fixed behaviors or species-specific norms. This offers a unique opportunity to observe how social norms operate, and how a community creates its own “grammar of social interaction.” (Bicchieri & Muldoon, 2011, p. 1)

Our expectation coming into this study was that we would find social norms operating at VINE, and that these might be most readily visible to us in the Commons, where the greatest interaction of individuals and species occurs. The Commons community is indeed remarkably diverse, with individuals of wide-ranging morphologies, physiologies, and communicative repertoires, as well as individual differences in personality and ability. From tiny hens under foot, to Scotty the cow towering over all, they manage to share space with remarkably little injury or aggression, and a general atmosphere of peacefulness and contentment.²⁷ How is this achieved?

Our discussion will focus on three social norms that seem to be operating at VINE: belonging and toleration, carefulness, and contact.

Belonging/toleration. The residents of VINE seem to recognize other residents as belonging to the community, tolerating their presence and participation, and regularly integrating diverse newcomers into the community. The existence of this norm certainly doesn't mean that everybody gets along. There are individual antipathies and difficult relationships—like the two rooster brothers who get along sometimes, and have to be segregated at others. Individuals squabble and get annoyed with one another. They may see certain residents as rivals or competitors, rather than friends. They do not, however, treat others as enemies to be killed or expelled.²⁸ On the contrary, most residents seem to seek others out (within and across species), to want to be with them, sleep near them, look out for them, and interact with them. Others may be less socially interactive but tolerate the presence of others (and avoid those they dislike). Overall, VINE members maintain a remarkable sense of peacefulness and security. As noted by Kathy, newcomers almost immediately recognize this atmos-

phere, and “know they are safe.” It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the levels of self-restraint, patience, and goodwill involved in maintaining this level of tolerant equanimity across such incredible diversity.

But it also raises the question of *who* belongs? To whom does the norm of belonging/toleration extend? Many wild animals who pass through the sanctuary are tolerated but generally ignored by VINE residents, e.g., deer, skunks, and others who come and go without being integrated into the community. Some, like the resident wild turkeys, are in effect part of the community, interacting regularly with VINE residents. Some interlopers are chased away (coyotes), or discouraged (cats keeping rats away). And the chickens don't hesitate to rip apart a frog who makes the “mistake” of entering their space. So the norm of belonging extends primarily to social, domesticated animals (including humans) who integrate into the space, practices, and norms of the community. The cows show great excitement at the arrival of new cows and sheep, making a big fuss over them, and seeking to welcome them. We witnessed the arrival of 35 chickens who were readily accepted by the ducks, turkey, and chickens sharing their temporary quarters. As visitors, our presence was greeted eagerly by some members, much more warily by others, but without apparent hostility from anyone. Over the course of four days, we felt our status subtly changing—from outsiders to potential insiders/friends—as we became familiar and started to adjust to the norms and rhythms of the community.

A possible exception to this general norm concerns the six emus, who are large and powerful flightless birds. Emus have long been subjected to human violence in their native Australia, and quite recently to a brutal process of domestication for their meat and oil. They do not share a long history of co-living with other farmed animals, and many of the residents of VINE (including the cows) are wary of them, and vice versa. VINE humans are also cautious in their interaction with them, especially the female emus, and Cheryl is doubtful about whether emus and dogs can share space together. As noted earlier, two of the emus were stressed by being part of the Commons, and prefer to live in their own segregated territory, but this may be due to their personal history of confinement. Over time, the emus seem to be growing less wary, as are the other residents. The cows and sheep now risk entering (non-segregated) emu territory if they think they can get some highly desirable emu food, even though the emus might give chase. So the status of the emus in the community seems gradually

to be moving in the direction of the general toleration norm. The lingering question mark about their status in the community throws into sharp relief the remarkable general background condition of multispecies belonging and toleration.

Also notable is that for several years VINE has successfully rehabilitated former fighting roosters, slowly and carefully helping them overcome their terror of other birds and reintegrating them into community (Jones, 2011). At a certain stage, the number of roosters had grown quite large, and VINE humans started to notice a change in the atmosphere. In Patrice's words, it started to feel "like a prison yard," where "the bullies were in charge." Birds weren't trying to kill each other, but bullying and intimidation had replaced a more benign atmosphere. VINE speculated that the problem was an imbalance of males and females, and so took in 90 hens, and "almost overnight the atmosphere changed." This is not just because the roosters shifted attention towards the hens, but also because the hens themselves expressed a preference for the roosters who were less violent, and so aggression was no longer a route to status. While it was the humans who initiated the alteration in group numbers, it was the hens who did the heavy lifting of altering the in-group dynamics in a positive way, guiding the roosters towards the norm of greater toleration and peaceableness.

As these examples show, the operation of the belonging norm is fostered and communicated amongst the animal residents themselves, and also supported by careful human monitoring and intervention, e.g., taking care in how newcomers are introduced, and responding to the desire or need to be separated. But VINE fosters its residents' agency by trusting that they can solve many conflicts on their own given the required environment, and by providing latitude for them to develop and cultivate their own norms and reinforcement mechanisms for peaceable community.

Carefulness. On the twice-weekly "Hannaford's Day" the residents at VINE gather for a bacchanalia in which a truckload of spent produce from the local grocery chain is distributed. Humans stand on one side of a fence and start handing or tossing out tomatoes, peppers, melons, leeks, and every other fruit and vegetable imaginable to the excited residents on the other side of the fence. Some animals stay a bit back from the fray—preferring that goodies be thrown over to them. Others, including chickens, turkeys and ducks, will come right up underfoot of the giant cows without apparent concern for their safety. Some, like the alpacas, aren't keen on the food but seem to enjoy being in the middle of the excitement and activity. While there is some jostling for food (on this and other occasions), what is striking is that even in the midst of a kind of food frenzy, the ani-



Figure 4. Carefully accepting a carrot from the Hannaford delivery. Photo by Darren Chang.

imals are remarkably careful not to trample or injure one another.

Unintentional harming seems to be infrequent in general, despite enormous diversity in body types, ways of moving, and interacting that could easily lead to accidents. This suggests that at least some of the animals are being actively careful. We witnessed extraordinary care as cows would step over birds underfoot, and in general as all of the larger animals moved deliberately and carefully throughout the Commons. But carefulness is also evident in other kinds of physical interactions—nudging, pecking, rubbing, etc. Physical contact is ubiquitous at VINE, and for the most part, residents carefully manage their horn, bite, peck, and scratch capabilities within and across species. For example, we expected that cows with horns would more readily use them to secure benefits for themselves and scare away those cows who did not have the same means of negotiation. But horns were never used aggressively to marshal others out and these cows seemed to be very attentive to the presence and proximity of others.²⁹ As new visitors to VINE, some of us were initially quite intimidated by the size of some of the residents, but over the course of our visits, we relaxed considerably as we came to recognize and trust the operation of the norm of carefulness.

Residents seem to learn to be careful by observing how others interact and behave, and by carefully testing reactions of others. Newcomer cows and sheep, for ex-

ample, learn from resident cows and sheep not to run in the barn. The “no running or humping in the barn” rule is explicitly fostered and reinforced by VINE humans to ensure safety in this confined, and sometimes crowded, area. (Usually all that is required is a spoken reminder: “no running!”). And we saw humans intervene on a couple of occasions when cow Maddox and sheep Shadow were nosing turkeys Cleopatra and Paula too roughly. Humans discourage the rare overly rough and rambunctious play throughout the Commons area and take care not to startle the cows into a stampede.

Contact. Physical contact is ubiquitous at VINE. This norm is perhaps most easily appreciated in contrast with usual (Western) human norms around personal space and contact. When humans meet or approach or interact with others, especially for the first time, we tend to do so using words or brief ritualized contact (like a handshake). Physical contact beyond this tends to require verbal negotiation (“can I help you on with your coat?”). The residents of VINE operate with a very different norm concerning physical space and contact. Individuals often touch, sniff, lick, rub, and peck one another, including strangers. They jostle and push to get at food, or to vie for attention. They push, chase, grunt, hiss, and honk when they want someone to move. Their modes of communicating and learning are more embodied and direct than human discourse-based interactions.



Figure 5. Savoring the last scraps. Photo by Darren Chang.

This raised an interesting challenge for us as visitors and our own willingness to adapt to the social norms of VINE. In advance of our visit we were very aware that we didn't wish to behave the way entitled humans often do around domesticated animals—assuming they are available to us, or that we have the right to walk up to animal residents and touch and impose ourselves on them. We decided to wait and see who might want to greet us or interact with us.

While many animals ignored us, or kept a wary eye on us, or simply stayed out of sight, we were enthusiastically greeted and investigated by alpaca Domino; sheep Shadow and Lamby; cows Maddox, Buddy, Rose, Mona, CoCo, and Scotty; turkeys Hypatia, Cleopatra, Paula, and Fabio; and several other individuals. Over four days we were thoroughly sniffed, licked, pecked, probed, and en-

inhibited contact, but as we came to recognize and trust how it operates within the larger context of the carefulness norm discussed above we were able to appreciate its role in fostering connection. We had started out by imposing on ourselves a rule of never initiating contact, but over the course of four days at VINE, we relaxed our “rule,” and began to interact with some VINE residents in a more natural, individual, and nuanced way. We were becoming socialized to the norms of the community, and this gave us confidence that our behavior and interactions were appropriate and inoffensive.

Social norms and the “grammar of social interaction” offer an important perspective on the nature of VINE as a community, the dimensions of agency operating there, and the potential for interspecies justice and flourishing. They show that VINE is indeed a society



Figure 6. Keeping an eye on Ryan in the upper pasture. Photo by Darren Chang.

couraged to engage in rubbing and scratching. If we failed to notice someone, a gentle nudge from behind invited us to acknowledge and physically interact. At first, some of us were made nervous by this norm of un-

whose members learn and negotiate ways of interacting across their differences, enabling a reasonable level of comfort, ease, safety, and companionship for everyone. They make plain that humans at VINE are an important

part of the equation in terms of directly reinforcing social norms, or creating the conditions for valuable norms to emerge and be disseminated amongst the community members.

5. CONCLUSION

Our study suggests that VINE supports rich and meaningful forms of animal agency, including forms of relational agency that might only be possible in a multispecies community that includes humans. By this, we are not claiming that human involvement is necessary for multispecies community or relational agency amongst domesticated animals *tout court*, but the more modest claim that human involvement may support unique forms of agency. Animals at VINE have a relatively secure, stable, and peaceable environment in which they can safely explore and develop as individuals and members of community. This environment is physically and socially complex in ways that allow them to push some of their limits, and explore different identities, roles, and activities. Animals' agency is evident in the ways they negotiate practices, social norms, and decision-making more generally. In a real sense, they are co-creators of their community.

We have identified several enabling conditions for animal agency at VINE. These include the richness and complexity of the physical and social environment, which are not static but open to shaping and reshaping by animal residents. They include routines and practices that provide structure and meaning, while remaining open to negotiation. At VINE, many practices, even daily ones, remain a contested grey-zone, and VINE humans respect animals as competent agents who need sufficient time, space, and opportunity to effect changes or resolve problems. Rather than rushing in to control every situation or solve every problem, VINE humans see various kinds of conflict, contestation, confusion, and irresolution as opportunities for animals to develop as agents. This process involves accepting some risk in exchange for the opportunity for animals to develop their agency, and gradually building up mutual trust and experience. Animal agency is thus often promoted by VINE humans knowing when to back off and trust animals to negotiate their lives together, but it's also clear that humans play a crucial role in actively fostering animals' agency—by responding to animals' expressed needs and wishes, through willingness to negotiate various dimensions of life in the community, and by ensuring a baseline of security and stability that underpins important dimensions of freedom. Some of the forms of agency we observed at VINE would only be possible in

this kind of human-supported interspecies community, and the feminist lens of relational agency adopted for this study allows us to see these forms of agency that might otherwise be overlooked.

We have also noted some of the important limitations on animals' freedom of action and freedom from interference at VINE—e.g., paternalistically motivated limitations and intervention, trade-offs in the name of community-level peaceableness, and unavoidable compromises in the face of the larger “topography of enmity”—but these are only part of the story. Important dimensions of agency are made possible through social life; and living peaceably with others requires that we exercise various kinds of self-restraint, awareness and care of others, predictability and intelligibility in our movements and actions, and willingness to compromise. Internal and externally imposed restraints are the cost of creating the kinds of community that support our opportunities for self-development, intersubjective agency, and social cooperation. It is an ongoing challenge to disentangle those limits on freedom that are a necessary cost of valuable forms of multispecies community and freedom, from those that are simply unjust. The question of justice is not solely whether individuals are subject to limitations on freedom, but also whether weighing different kinds of freedom is justifiable, and whether benefits are distributed fairly amongst all members of the community and subject to ongoing contestation and negotiation. When it comes to the larger questions of whether, and if so how, domesticated animals might want to live in community with humans, it is important to consider the opportunities that might be the counterpart of certain limitations, and to understand their responses to both.

This paper represents a preliminary and modest step—but we think the results justify further investigations of this sort. It is our hope that this paper inspires others to take the courage and time to begin formulating questions and forging avenues like these, but not to provide answers *unisono*. Multispecies ethnography offers a promising approach to conceiving and investigating these questions in community *with* non-human animals. When exploring questions of interspecies justice, we must acknowledge that it is not ours, or not exclusively ours, to provide answers (or indeed questions). Neither are we the spokespeople of animals nor are we their saviors (VINE, 2018a); animals are the true teachers and leaders of a movement for interspecies justice.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sue Donaldson, Department of Philosophy, Watson Hall 312, Queen's University, Kingston, K7L 3N6, Canada. Contact: sld8@queensu.ca.

² Human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism operate both by centring humans and their allegedly superior capacities, and by ignoring and belittling the subjectivities, experiences, and capacities of other animals. This belittlement operates with particular viciousness in the case of farmed animals who are continuously derided as vacant cows, blindly following sheep, pea-brained chickens, etc. On anthropocentrism and farmed animals see Caviola et al., 2018; Everett et al., 2018. Using "farmed" rather than "farm" animals is, we hope, one small way to disrupt ingrained habits of thought that assume these animals are born with a functional purpose, and are indeed incapable of living any other kind of life.

³ For example, the gold standard conception of wellbeing in the animal welfare literature is based on the "5-freedoms:" freedom from hunger and thirst; freedom from discomfort; freedom from pain, injury or disease; freedom from fear and distress; and freedom to express "normal" behavior with other members of one's species. Note that only one of the "freedoms" addresses positive dimensions of freedom, development, and flourishing (as opposed to deprivation of basic needs), and this is defined in terms of species-specific behavior, with no reference to individual personality, subjective good, or self-determination; and no reference to social or community life and identity. For accounts of animal agency conceptualized in terms of species-normal behavior, see Nussbaum, 2006; Rollin, 1995a; Rollin, 1995b. For a critique of such accounts, see Kasperbauer, 2013.

⁴ For estimates of animals (land and sea) killed each year to feed humans see: <https://sentientmedia.org/how-many-animals-are-killed-for-food-every-day/> or

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/02/chart-of-the-day-this-is-how-many-animals-we-eat-each-year/>

⁵ Even some individuals who advocate for wild animals can be shockingly dismissive of farmed animals. See, for example, Ross's comparison of the rich personhood of elephants with the (supposed) minimal consciousness of cows: "Have you ever stood in a field full of cows? It's obvious that they're aware of one another, but in a minimal kind of way... Cows don't gauge how to respond to sights, sounds and smells by carefully studying the subtleties of one another's reactions... When you're with a herd of cows, you're basically alone." (Ross, 2018)

⁶ Many farmed animals have no choice but to live with humans for the foreseeable future, but the extent of dependency varies considerably, as do options for (supported) exit or partial exit from society with humans over time. A key ethical requirement is to support animals' agency in renegotiating the terms of these relations, including exiting them altogether (Kymlicka & Donaldson, 2016).

⁷ From VINE's website: "We work within an ecofeminist understanding of the interconnection of all life and the intersection of all forms of oppression. Thus we welcome and work to facilitate alliances among animal, environmental, and social justice activists." (VINE, 2018a) For example, VINE organizes film showings at local libraries, and potlucks and info displays for Pride Month and anti-racism events, writes for local newspapers, contributes to academic conferences, offers lectures and workshops, and develops outreach programs for local children and youth. VINE actively promotes a plant-based economy for Vermont, challenging its identity as the "dairy state" in part by drawing attention to the region's indigenous past when the "three sisters" (squash, beans, corn) were the centre of the food economy. It is VINE's strong conviction that "those of us who want to live in a more just and peaceful world must begin to build that world in our own backyards." (VINE, 2017)

⁸ Pachirat describes the general topography of enmity for farmed animals as "a never-ending cycle of genetic manipulation, sexual violence, forced separation of family and social units, physical and chemical mutilation, debilitating confinement, and industrialized killing." (Pachirat, 2018, p. 345)

⁹ Donaldson and Kymlicka (2015) discuss how accommodation of human visitor needs and expectations can end up determining sanctuary structure, organization, and programs instead of these being responsive to animal residents' needs, desires, and creativity.

¹⁰ This is not to say that animals within species-specific settings don't also constitute social communities. What's special about VINE is that its multispecies nature makes it easier to see the constructed nature of this society, and more difficult to dismiss the behavior of residents as a simple unfolding of encoded species behavior. Throughout the paper we will be using the terms "community" and "society" interchangeably. "Community" puts more emphasis on the situated and bounded nature of VINE, and its members' sense of belong-

ing. “Society” puts more emphasis on structural and regulative dimensions like social norms. Both terms draw attention to the socially learned and constructed nature of this world, rather than viewing animal behavior as largely genetically encoded, or species-specific responses to external stimuli.

¹¹ As noted on VINE’s website, animals “literally trample all over our so-called ‘property rights’ whenever they get the opportunity.” (VINE, 2018b)

¹² For example, Donaldson and Kymlicka (2018, p. 13) discuss the role of humans in providing “relatively secure and stable environments,” introducing “variety and complexity into social and physical environments,” and developing “new modes of communication geared to co-creation and shared decision-making.”

¹³ The Kimmela Center for Animal Advocacy and Farm Sanctuary are consolidating and summarizing existing research on farmed animal feeling, cognition and sociality as part of “The Someone Project”: <https://www.kimmela.org/kimmela-center-in-action/#farm>. This is an excellent resource for readers wishing to learn what existing farmed animal ethology and welfare science can tell us about farmed animals. Recent developments in animal welfare science are shifting away from a sole focus on objective “measures” of welfare (e.g. appetite, cortisol levels, disease status) to supporting animals’ choice-making opportunities so they can tell us about their own welfare. In the words of Palmer and Sandøe: “autonomous choices made by animals should be considered the primary way of trying to find out what’s best from an animal’s perspective and for helping us to choose between potentially conflicting situations or treatments in welfare terms.” (Palmer & Sandøe, 2018, p. 436) This attention to animal autonomy by welfare science is welcome, but it is still contained within a framework that doesn’t fundamentally question the farming of animals, and the right of these animals to be self-determining. It allows that farmed animals should be given opportunities to tell us about their welfare in terms of choices about bedding, food, and other matters of “micro agency,” (Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2016b) but their lives and purpose as farmed animals are fixed. Animal welfare science is not asking whether farmed animals want to live with us at all, and if so how they can fundamentally shape the terms of the relationship on terms of equality. (Or if not, how they can be supported to rewild or form their own independent communities.)

¹⁴ Note that “positive freedom” in this context refers not to Isaiah Berlin’s concept of individual self-mastery and control, but rather to the social supports, scaffolding, and uptake needed for individuals to develop and flourish in community with others.

¹⁵ It is important to note that we are not proposing relational agency as a complete theory of freedom (or autonomy). It is a complement to other kinds of freedom, shedding light on a different aspect of how we are able to live flourishing lives—an aspect that we believe is particularly important for beings who are non-autonomous in the Kantian sense. For a fuller account of relational agency that develops a theory of

authentic preference formation (to address the problem of manipulated and adaptive preferences) and just paternalism (to address limitations in animals’ capacities to understand their own good), see Côté-Boudreau (2019). Côté-Boudreau also provides a helpful overview of the history of ideas of autonomy and agency in animal ethics, beginning with Regan’s conception of preference autonomy (2004), and explains how some of these earlier conceptions need to be supplemented with more relational approaches. See also Schmidt (2015) and Giroux (2016) for application of different conceptions of freedom to animals.

¹⁶ In general, companion animals have received vastly more attention than formerly farmed animals, including by philosophers. As Woods and Hare (2019) note, the new century has witnessed an explosion of books exploring dog minds, and the possibilities of the human-dog relationship. See Overall (2017) for recent philosophical treatments. In contrast, human relations with formerly farmed animals have received minimal attention, whether through ME or other approaches.

¹⁷ Our group included researchers from the fields of philosophy, law, politics, and animal geography. This interdisciplinary grouping was essential to bringing together some of the conceptual and analytic tools of normative political theory with the place-based attention and methods of critical animal geography.

¹⁸ In general, we were mindful of the dangers of “rushing in to interpret and represent” animals, rather than “holding back, sensing and following,” (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Taylor, & Blaise, 2016, p. 157) and the need to attune “to our own and other bodies ... not just studying the world through the safety of detached mental processes.” (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Taylor, & Blaise, 2016, p. 158)

¹⁹ For additional discussion of the inadequacy of existing animal research ethics protocols, see Collard & Gillespie, 2015.

²⁰ Ethics approval for research involving human subjects was obtained from the Queen’s Research Ethics Board. Our human informants (Kevin Cudabac, Kathy Gorish, patrice jones, and Cheryl Wylie) all requested to be identified using their real names.

²¹ We use “space” to refer to background opportunities created by the environment for mobility, exploration, or evasion of others and environmental conditions. We use “place” to refer to opportunities to claim and alter spaces, investing them with meaning and making them one’s own in a more personal sense. Geographers typically identify space and place in reference to one another. They “operate on a relative spectrum of difference.” (White, 2015) Gieryn’s definition of space and place is particularly illustrative: “Space is what place becomes when the unique gathering of things, meanings, and values are sucked out. Put positively, place is space filled up by people, practices, objects, and representations.” (2000, p. 465, cited in White, 2015) Place is thus dynamic and perpetually

open to change. For an in-depth discussion of space and place in relation to political theory, see Parkinson, 2012.

²² Once again, we note that VINE is an outlier in the sanctuary world in terms of the extent of interspecies interaction and sharing of space.

²³ We should also note that we have restricted our discussion of human roles to those that overlap with the non-human roles discussed.

²⁴ We have been emphasizing guardianship in relation to predator and other external threats. We should also note that many non-threatening wild animals frequent VINE (including deer, wild turkeys, ducks, and geese), and are welcomed by the residents.

²⁵ We should note that parenting does not require a biological parent. Since our visit to VINE, patrice notes that elderly cow Autumn has adopted calf Gemini in a profoundly moving example of the parental role, especially given that Autumn was robbed of 9 calves while at a dairy farm.

²⁶ As Sunstein (1996) notes, social norms (and roles) can in one sense be seen as limiting of negative freedom. “It would, however, be quite ludicrous to deplore social norms, to see them only as constraints on freedom, or to wish for them to disappear. In fact norms make freedom possible. Social life is not feasible—not even imaginable—without them. In the absence of social norms, we would be unable to understand one another. Norms establish conventions about the meanings of actions. Social norms are thus facilitative as well as constraining.” (Sunstein, 1996, p. 917) Social norms and roles present opportunities for the development of meaning and agency, not guarantees.

²⁷ The only injuries we were aware of at VINE were accidental, or the result of overly boisterous activity, not deliberate intent to harm: the young dog doesn’t intend to harm the birds; and the rambunctious cow doesn’t intend to harm anyone by running in the barn. On the contrary, the danger here is a kind of excess of playfulness or exuberance. One exception concerns a former fighting rooster who lost an eye in an altercation, a rare incident in VINE’s generally very successful rehabilitation of these birds.

²⁸ Mouffe (2000) has famously argued that (human) politics does not require citizens to like or agree with each other, and indeed we should expect disagreement and contestation, but it does require citizens to view others as adversaries to be negotiated with, not enemies to be exterminated. So too with animal politics at VINE.

²⁹ These insights stand in stark contrast to the beliefs that help justify the routine practice of dehorning cows in animal agriculture (where horns are removed as a result of concerns about injury to other cows and to humans).

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