

‘Die donkie is ’n wonderlike ding’: An ethnography of a farm sanctuary in Pretoria

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Abstract: “Die donkie is ‘n wonderlike ding”¹: An ethnography of a farm sanctuary in Pretoria

Donkeys and their relationship with people are often overlooked in social studies including anthropology. Yet they are vital to the survival of thousands of people across southern Africa. International trade in donkey skins have sparked intense concern among many social activists. In response to what various groups have called a ‘crisis’, several campaigns have been launched to try to protect donkeys and their well-being. This report is an ethnography of a farm sanctuary that rescues donkeys. It attempts to answer questions that revolve around my research participants’ relationships with donkeys and the beliefs that underlie their approach to animal well-being. I collected data by way of participant observation, interviews, and analysis of textual sources. I argue that the sanctuary can be understood as an attempt by the directors and manager to create a model of what they consider the ideal order of humans’ relationships with animals. Central to this argument are discussions around participants’ beliefs about veganism, animal rights, their focus on animals as individuals, and the historical context of donkeys in South Africa.

¹Translated: “The Donkey is a wonderful thing”. This is a lyric from a well-known Afrikaans folksong, “Die Donkie” which was composed by Cissie Cooper and Willie Cooper (1969) and has been sung by many celebrated artists like Chris Bignaut.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	i
List of figures	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Asher’s Farm Sanctuary	2
Methodology.....	5
Ethics.....	7
Chapter outline.....	7
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	9
Animals in the social sciences	9
The animal as a construct	9
A turnaround	11
A South African take.....	13
Donkey the “understudied equid”.....	16
Chapter 3: Donkey ‘die dier van die toekoms’	18
A donkey’s point of view.....	18
The start of an ‘ambiguous” friendship’.....	19
Late to the scene	23
The donkeys’ crisis.....	28
Chapter 4: Bravo, Charlie, Delta.....	33
Donkey yoga.....	33
Breaking new ground in animal welfare	35
Introductions	37
What is in a name.....	39
A story of their own	41
Free agents	44
Animal persons.....	47
Part of the family	51
Plurality: The individual and the symbol.....	57
Chapter 5: ‘I don’t eat my friends’- Purity, pollution and personhood in veganism	61
Veganism as a core part of the sanctuary.....	61
The roots of veganism	61
What to eat?.....	67
Purity and pollution.....	70
What to do?	76
What to think?.....	79
Who am I?.....	83
A new social order	87
Chapter 6: Seeking sanctuary- Creating a new utopia on a donkey farm	89
The basis of Asher’s cosmology and social order.....	89
Social order in disorder	93
Sticking to the rules	97
Spatial representation	100
A model society.....	109
Chapter 7: Conclusion.....	111
References	116

List of Figures:

Figure 1: Second donkey yoga event.....	33
Figure 2: Pig in a bonnet	49
Figure 3: Juliet trying to see India.	54
Figure 4: Rule leaflet.	98
Figure 5: The spacious donkey pen.	100
Figure 6: Layout of the sanctuary.....	103

Chapter 1: Introduction

“I’m telling you. People come and go in this Forest, and they say, ‘It’s only Eeyore, so it doesn’t count’” (Milne, 1994: 252).

Introduction

Donkeys as a species have populated and continue to populate our stories in a variety of ways: as friends and companions, as humble creatures people pity or revere, as fools people mock, or as their master’s saving grace. In an important sense, *Equus asinus* has helped and continues to help humans make sense of and write their own (hi)stories.

Yet donkeys are often overlooked. As so often happens with animals, people do not always treat their issues seriously. Nor are their contributions to our histories properly acknowledged.

Instead, many people tend to consign them to a category of things that belong to the past. To these people, they are relics that have faded from and are no longer relevant to their daily lives.

Recently, however, sections of the mainstream media in South Africa and other countries have begun to highlight a ‘crisis’ facing donkeys (Leithead, 2017). The animals have also started trending on social media platforms, where the very people who have ‘forgotten’ them now try to raise money or support initiatives to protect them or simply lament their predicament. The perceived threat to donkeys’ existence/well-being comes mainly from poaching and the illicit trade in donkey hides primarily for use in a traditional Chinese remedy, ejiao. Ejiao is made by boiling donkey skins to extract the gelatine. This ingredient is used in various medicines to purportedly improve blood circulation, increase libido, as a treatment for gynaecological diseases and as an anti-ageing remedy (Li et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2010).

This dissertation is an ethnographic account of an organisation that has made it its mission to respond to what it regards as the crisis of survival for donkeys in South Africa. Suffice it to say here that Asher’s Farm Sanctuary, where I conducted fieldwork between October 2018 and June 2019,² is located on the outskirts of Pretoria and focuses on the rescue, rehabilitation, and

² When I use the ethnographic present, I refer to this period.

provision of a permanent home for farm(ed) animals perceived to have outlasted their usefulness. It also caters for animals rescued from abuse and neglect and others that have escaped their confinement or were found by chance. Donkeys, many of whom have been rescued from the hide trade, constitute a large proportion of the resident animal population at Asher's. The people involved with Asher's are deeply concerned with the welfare of these donkeys and their status in the country.

But why does this group of people, drawn mainly from South Africa's white suburban middle classes, choose to expend so much time, energy and resources in aid of this cause? Why are they suddenly so concerned with the plight of donkeys? And what does this tell us about interspecies dynamics and the co-constitutive nature of human and animal (specifically donkey) histories?

To answer these questions, I follow a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on anthropological theory as well as on cognate disciplines such as history and sociology. Claude Levi-Strauss (1986: 128) famously considered "thinking with animals" a productive exercise. But animals are more than mere thinking aids. Recent scholarship in history has shown that we should regard animals as historical agents (Mitchell 2018; Swart 2010). Studies in anthropology have similarly shown them to be crucial components of complex forms of biosociality, and their relationships with groups of people as standing central to the negotiation of citizenship and nationhood (Suzuki 2017). In this study, I aim to build on this body of work by showing that the sanctuary and the donkeys it shelters represent an attempt to create a model of an ideal social order. The key themes that I found during my research were those of the personhood and agency of the animals, the welfare of the animals, cleanliness, purity and pollution, and maintaining order. Significantly, I show that my informants view the sanctuary as a means to improve their own moral standing and that of the society around them. But first, a few words to contextualise important aspects of my research such as the field site, methodologies, research objectives and ethical concerns.

Asher's Farm Sanctuary

I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork at Asher's Farm Sanctuary. Situated on the eastern outskirts of Pretoria, the organisation is a registered public benefit organisation (PBO) and non-profit organisation (NPO). The sanctuary was inspired and founded in the name of the late Oscar Hirsch, whose Hebrew name was Asher, hence the name of the sanctuary (Asher's Farm

Sanctuary, 2019a). An architect and property developer by trade, Hirsch had been vegetarian for most of his life and later became vegan. He left money in his will to go towards “animals, education, and ecology” (Asher’s Farm Sanctuary, 2019a) and his wife, Elise, and their children decided to open the sanctuary with these funds. Oscar Hirsch and his family were Jewish and after the family decided to start a farm sanctuary with the funds he left behind, they visited a similar organisation in Israel to get some inspiration for their project.

The family selected a board of directors to oversee the nascent organisation. Spearheaded by one of Oscar’s daughters, Delia, they bought an 8.5 ha plot of land in Pretoria East and established the sanctuary in 2017. They used money from the funds bequeathed by Hirsch to build the infrastructure for the animals on the farm and to cover their initial running costs.

At the time of my fieldwork, the grounds contained a barn, an office, a tea garden, a vegetable garden, accommodation for the labourers employed by the sanctuary, storage buildings and pens for the animals. One of the managers, Oscar’s granddaughter, has a home on the property which is also used to house live-in volunteers from other countries. Animals are kept in the barn, where events are held, and where the running of the sanctuary is organised.

The humans at the sanctuary fit into four broad categories, based on their positions and the division of labour at the sanctuary. The groups are the board, the managers, the labourers and the volunteers. A board of directors manages the trust funds and make all the long-term decisions regarding the structure, running and financing of the sanctuary at quarterly meetings. Members of the board rarely visit the sanctuary (I only saw Delia, who was the treasurer and executive, at a few special events).

At the ground level, managers run the sanctuary. Mikayla is the manager and Oscar’s granddaughter. But she was pregnant and on maternity leave, and therefore most of her usual duties fell to Colette, the assistant manager, for most of my time at the sanctuary. Colette started to work at the sanctuary after she left her job at the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). She had resigned owing to differences with some of the authorities at the organisation because she believed they were not going far enough to make a difference in animals lives. Both women are in their twenties and had been vegan since they were teenagers and had spent most of their adult lives working for animal welfare organisations.

Most of the manual labour at the sanctuary is performed by seven black employees. I have assigned pseudonyms to each of these individuals. The six men, John, Petrus, Thabo, Lucas, Nixon, Mandla and Remy, are called grooms by the managers and board and mainly look after the animals and their pens and stables. Elizabeth cleans the café and the manager's home.

The sanctuary frequently accommodates full-time, live-in volunteers. These volunteers are usually young adults from Europe on a gap year before university. During my time at Asher's, two sets of live-in volunteers were there for approximately six months. There are also locally based volunteers who tend to work on a less regular basis. They are mostly university students who work primarily over weekends and during events. Most of these volunteers were not long term. A few of them I only saw once or twice, while others returned several times throughout my fieldwork. Many of Oscar's and Elise's family members also come over to help in an unofficial capacity during events and on weekends. I have assigned all the volunteers with pseudonyms as well.

In many ways, the sanctuary is a female-dominated space. The managers and some key members of the board of directors are women. So too are many of the volunteers and visitors. Most are white South African women, with a mix of Afrikaans and English speakers (the latter group including members of the Hirsch family). However, all the grooms are men. They mostly converse with the managers and volunteers in English, but their native tongues are isiZulu and Setswana.

The managers and owners belong to the middle classes and the board members to the upper-middle classes and higher. Most of the visitors and volunteers are also middle and upper-middle class. The grooms are from the working classes. These classifications differ broadly depending on the context and the person assessing them. In this case, I relied on the ways in which my informants identify themselves and others around them. Their categorisation is based mainly on their income levels and the lifestyles they can afford. The grooms' pay varies per individual but was approximate to the minimum wage in South Africa, which is R18.68 an hour and worked out to about R4000 per month. On the other hand, the managers receive salaries of around R8000 per month.

The sanctuary takes care of animals conventionally typified as 'farm' animals. The only exception is a dog brought to the sanctuary towards the end of my research. There are animals of various

species, but donkeys are present in the greatest numbers. There are seven donkeys at the sanctuary, three jennies and four jacks. The number of animals kept at the sanctuary fluctuates as new animals arrive. Individuals sometimes bring in animals that they had found or ‘rescued’, while other rescues are transferred from other welfare organisations like the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). But the sanctuary itself does not have the right to seize any animals themselves.

The sanctuary collects money from visitors in the form of donations, sales of branded merchandise and vegan products, as well as tickets to events. The primary source of income is the tea garden or café, which is open during weekends and events and serves exclusively vegan-friendly foods. Asher’s is also sustained by larger donations from particularly well-off benefactors (including some of the directors and regular visitors). The board and managers use these moneys to cover running expenses such as paying staff, feeding the animals, and maintaining and building new infrastructure. Monthly food bills for the animals alone typically run to about R10 000. According to the managers, the bulk of this money is allocated to the high quality feed and supplements they buy for the seven donkeys and four horses. One of the largest expenses can be veterinary bills, with the treatment of a single animal for one month often exceeding R30 000 and as a total per month exceeding R60 000.

Methodology

The research for this project took place over eight months from October 2018 to May 2019. During this period, I volunteered at the sanctuary, visiting once or twice a week for several hours at a time. My visits mostly involved working with the animals, in particular the resident donkeys, and interacting with staff. Participant observation was the primary method of data collection, with all my observations compiled in written field notes.

One of the directors told me that they needed volunteers mainly to ‘just spend time with the animals’. On my first few visits, the managers gave me very specific instructions regarding what to do throughout the day. My tasks generally involved grooming the animals, checking up on sick animals, distributing fresh food, cleaning pens and filling water troughs. At times, I also did more general tasks such as working in the vegetable garden and painting and varnishing furnishings and structures around the sanctuary.

In this way, I gained valuable information about the daily running of the sanctuary, the treatment of the animals and how the different parties interacted. It gave me the opportunity to see for myself how different groups of people interact with the animals. I was also privy to the training of new volunteers. Having grown up on a farm with a pet donkey of my own, I quickly gained acceptance and trust. The fact that my diet was plant-based at the time helped me to build rapport with my informants, which facilitated data collection.

My involvement at the sanctuary was not limited to volunteering, as I visited as a guest both during special events and on regular weekends. I also went on guided tours of the sanctuary. This allowed me to collect data on how the sanctuary and its resident animals are represented to and perceived by guests. I compiled the data and observations from those visits, as well as my time as a volunteer, in field notes. On all these occasions, I engaged in discussions with different people involved with the sanctuary. On days I volunteered, I interacted mainly with the manager of the sanctuary. Occasionally, I also worked alongside the labourers. On many of these days, family members of the owners were present. I also had informal conversations with the owner, and with visitors and volunteers at the sanctuary. I further engaged in formal interviews with my primary participants. This allowed insights into various viewpoints on the sanctuary, veganism, the animals, and specifically donkeys.

Other valuable resources were the sanctuary's publications, social media and website (including a cookbook and pamphlets). These sources provided information about the marketing of the sanctuary and its purpose and allowed for comparative analysis as well as triangulation of data.

My research informants were all involved in the sanctuary in some way. My main informants were the two managers, Mikayla and Colette. But I also gained valuable input from other informants such as members of the board, members of the Hirsch family, the labourers, volunteers and visitors, and – of course – the animal residents including the donkeys. I used ethnographic methods in a similar way to collect data from both the animals and human participants in the study. To do this I spent time observing the animals as they interacted with other animals, humans, and their environment. This meant taking notes on their behaviour such as vocalizations and movements.

I struggled to find an ideal term for the individuals who feature in this study as much of my fieldwork involved engaging with the animals at the sanctuary. I am reluctant to use the term

participants to describe all my informants. Above all, it was necessary to find a way to distinguish between humans and animals at the sanctuary. One point that scholars contest in the extant literature is the terms and categories used to refer to humans and animals. Many scholars involved in contemporary studies of humans and animals prefer to use the terms ‘nonhuman animals’ and ‘human animals’ to express the relatedness between the parties (Fusari, 2017; Overton & Hamilakis, 2014). However, as Morris (2000) points out, these terms are rather long and stilted.

Instead, I chose to use the terms ‘human’ and ‘animal’. By doing this, I am not trying to create or reinforce binary distinctions nor trying to erase their inherent similarities. Rather, it is a matter of convenience. But it also recognises that people at the sanctuary drew such distinctions and thought of themselves as a distinct category. I use the names, species or role of the individual to refer to the humans and animals throughout the text as the occasion warrants. At times, I also use the terms ‘informant’ and ‘participant’ to refer to the humans I had met during my fieldwork.

Ethics

I used the American Anthropological Association’s Code of Ethics (1998:3) to guide my research. I obtained written consent from the board of directors as well as the managers at the sanctuary. I also sought verbal consent from all my other human informants and repeated this process before any interviews.

I have endeavoured to protect my participants’ privacy as much as it is possible. Because it is a public enterprise, the board and managers of the sanctuary insisted that I use the sanctuary’s real name. They felt that they were public figures and thus declined the offer to assign them with pseudonyms. However, I did assign the grooms, volunteers and visitors to the sanctuary with pseudonyms. Protecting their privacy also involved giving them the opportunity to decide what information I could share and use.

Chapter outline

I divided the report into six chapters, the first being this introduction.

Chapter 2 is a review of the relevant literature. In it, I discuss the ways in which animals and donkeys specifically have been explored by anthropologists and social scientists in other scholarly traditions.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the shared history of donkeys and humans. The focus is their past in southern Africa and how they have been perceived and treated over time. This background is necessary to contextualise the current welfare ‘crisis’ of donkeys throughout the world and particularly in South Africa.

Chapter 4 focuses on the donkeys that reside at the sanctuary. I discuss their individual life histories and how my human informants perceive and treat them. The discussion deals with the framing of the animals as unique individuals with agency.

For many of my informants, their perceptions of donkeys as individuals was an important factor in their decision to become vegan. In Chapter 5, I expand on this connection and show how my informants create order at the sanctuary through the reification of veganism. Veganism in this context goes beyond dietary choices. Instead, it becomes a part of my participants’ belief systems and worldviews.

It is in Chapter 6 that I bring all these threads together in support of the argument that the sanctuary can be productively understood as an attempt by my informants to create cosmological order. I further argue that my participants attempt to use this ideal model to bring about change. Through education, social pressure and social modelling, they are trying to influence the world around them to come to resemble this ideal.

I conclude and summarise my arguments in Chapter 7. In this section, I outline how my human informants are able to create a collective cosmology by framing the donkeys and individuals and instating and following taboos and restrictions about the use of animals. Through this, they are creating and reifying their own idea of an ideal social order.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Animals in the social sciences

When I began my review of the literature, it became apparent that little has been written in the social sciences about donkeys specifically. But animals as a category have long been an interest in the social sciences and anthropology. This scholarship often included other types of farm animals, particularly ones that people use in the production of food. In this review, I will discuss some of the key theoretical approaches to studying animals and how they are relevant for this dissertation and how the field has developed over the last few decades. From there, I will discuss literature that focuses on human–animal relationships in southern Africa and donkeys in particular. I will thus move from the general to the specific. The literature reviewed was primarily anthropological with a focus on the relationship between humans and animals. However, I also examined literature from related fields such as sociology which utilized ethnography as a data collection method.

Ethnography is uniquely suited to studying the process by which people construct meaning. Fieldworkers discover these meanings by immersing themselves in unfamiliar worlds. Arluke and Sanders (1996: 18-19) argue that for ethnographers of human–animal relationships “exotic tribes are any group that works with or cares for animals and the ‘bush’ is the countless settings where animals play a part”. For the ethnographer, meaning is negotiable, changing and context-dependent. In short, the fieldworker tries to grasp the meanings of subjects’ behaviour by seeing things from their point of view (Arluke & Sanders, 1996: 19). In this sense, studying people’s attitudes towards animals follows the long-standing ethnographic tradition of documenting the perspectives of humans.

The animal as a construct

Scholars have taken several directions in studying human–animal interactions in anthropology. A survey of the literature shows that one of the key theoretical positions on human–animal interactions in both social and cultural anthropology is symbolic interactionism. Proponents of this theoretical approach argue that all meaning is a product of social interaction rather than a quality inherent in the objects themselves. Although animals have a physical being, once in contact with humans, people assign them a cultural identity as they try to make sense of them,

use them or communicate with them. Through relationships with people, animals are brought into civilisation and transformed accordingly as their meaning is socially constructed. To say that animals are social constructions, we must look beyond their physical appearance, observable behaviour and cognitive abilities to understand how humans will think about and interact with them.

One classic application of symbolic interactionism to the study of animals in anthropology is Clifford Geertz's (2005) 'Deep play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight'. In the study, he uses ethnographic data to show the symbolic dimensions of his participants' relationships with their roosters. To this end, he provides information into the ways the animals are treated by their owners and how they coexist. However, as Mullin (2002) notes in her review of animals in anthropology, symbolic interactionists like Geertz often perceived animals merely as a vehicle with which to explore a social formation or process. I hope to avoid this by placing more emphasis on the relationship between humans and animals as a phenomenon worthy of study in itself and not only on what it means to the relationships between humans. In addition, I have attempted to look at both humans and donkeys as actors and social agents.

In general, studying the significance of the social constructions of animals has been and still is a prominent topic. As social constructions, the meanings of animals are context-specific, and as such, they can potentially reveal much about the society in which they are constituted. One example of this is perceptions of whether animals are wild or tame (Weil, 2012: xxi).

Conventionally, people categorise donkeys as working 'farm' animals, and they are therefore seen as being domesticated but not as household pets. The question arises whether these notions are complicated when donkeys become residents in shelters like Asher's. Furthermore, as Sahlins (1976: 24, 89) notes, even the distinctions drawn between the animal and the human or the cultural are socially constructed. This acknowledges the constructed nature of species categorisation and our relationships.

But these studies still often take an anthropocentric approach. By focusing on animals as social constructions, many scholars do not recognise the animals as agents and subjects. Overall, anthropologists have increasingly begun to question these oversimplified dichotomous views of the human–animal connection (Mullin, 2002) and are exploring alternative ways to approach the issue. Mullin (2002: 4) notes that recent anthropological inquiry is often more willing to engage, albeit cautiously, with social, moral and political questions regarding fauna and flora.

A turnaround

In many research settings where animals are major actors, they are not brought to centre stage. This is one reason why one of my primary research questions focuses on how the actors in my setting interact, both human and animal. As I have mentioned, many of the new movements in the study of animals arose as a criticism of and a response to anthropocentricity – an inclination to evaluate reality exclusively in terms of human values (Ingold, 1988). Ingold (1988: 1) asks “is it possible, even in theory, simultaneously to transcend the limitations of both anthropocentrism and ethnocentrism?” It is this question that the collected and multidisciplinary works in *What is an animal?* explores and tries to answer (Ingold, 1988). To answer this, the contributors challenge long-held notions in the humanities, such as that the meaning of animals is solely socially constructed and that animals do not qualify as agentic persons. A central theme in the book is a focus on human-animal relations and the idea that scholars should explore the relations from both the human’s and the animal’s perspective.

The growing interest in new approaches to the question of animals in the social sciences is evident in the increasing number of publications discussing human–animal interactions. Here the field known as HAS or human–animal studies, which focuses on the relationships between these groups, is of particular significance. Recently, social scientists have even dedicated an entire journal to its pursuit, *Society & Animals*. The field has also been referred to as anthrozoology.

In *Thinking Animals*, Weil (2012) explores the rise in animal studies which has been called the animal turn. He argues that by thinking about animals and re-examining our relationships, we can “rethink our conclusions about who we are, who they are, and how we are all intertwined” (Weil, 2012: xvii). Increasingly, researchers are examining the ways the lives of animals have changed in an industrial world and urbanized settings and how this leads to new types of relationships between humans and animals. Many scholars have also related this area of interest to the ontological turn in anthropology (Kohn, 2007). Even though scholars associated with the animal turn are not necessarily always proponents of the ontological turn, the animal turn is undoubtedly connected to complicating notions of ontology (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Overton & Hamilakis, 2014; Ingold, 1974). The increasing interest in this field is associated with finding new ways of thinking about the world and to breaking down rigid boundaries and categories such as the distinctions we draw between the worlds of humans and animals (Weil, 2012: xvii-xviii).

One way in which researchers have approached this topic is through multispecies ethnography. Multispecies ethnographers study other living organisms whose lives are linked to those of humans (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010: 545). Proponents of this approach focus on how different organisms' livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic and cultural forces (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010: 545). These ethnographers study contact zones where lines separating nature from culture have broken down and mutual ecologies are being created. This approach is allied to Eduardo Kohn's (2007:4) "anthropology of life" which is "an anthropology that is not just confined to the human but is concerned with the effects of our entanglements with other kinds of living selves".

I found multispecies ethnographers' theoretical conceptions about the way in which the lives of human and animals are entangled useful for my dissertation. Donna Haraway (as cited in Weil, 2012: xvii), uses the term "entanglement" to speak of the inseparability of human and nonhuman worlds and the "naturecultures" that have evolved as a result. Multispecies ethnographers also recognise this.

One anthropologist who brings animals to the forefront in this way and has been informative for my report is Brian Morris. In his books, *The Power of Animals* and *Animals and Ancestors*, Morris (2000) explores the role of animals in different aspects of life for the matrilineal people of Malawi. In both these books, he attempts to show the multiple ways in which people relate to animals: pragmatic, intellectual, realistic, aesthetic, social and symbolic (2000: 1). He shows that animals are of crucial importance in the social and cultural life of Malawian people. He thereby dispels the mistaken impression that animals are just not worth bothering about as they are a "topic of marginal interest" to anthropologists (Morris, 2000: 1). He turns other conventional notions on their heads as well, such as that people in Western and non-Western societies see humans and animals in binary terms, in that one is the opposite of the other.

Similarly, in *Regarding Animals*, Arluke and Sanders (1996: 1) note that the commanding presence of animals in our society is largely taken for granted. They state that their primary goal in the book was to make a plea for the value of sociological analysis in discussions of animals in contemporary life (Arluke & Sanders, 1996: 5). They (Arluke & Sanders, 1996: 1) ask, "if animals have such a stronghold on our minds and hearts what accounts for social scientists' lack of intellectual engagement with the meaning and uses of animals in modern life?" One possible

reason for the lack of attention is a lingering ‘false belief’ that animals occupy a far less important place in advanced industrial societies than they do in nonindustrial ones (Arluke & Sanders, 1996: 2). In addition to this, Arluke and Sanders (1996: 2) suggest that social scientists’ belief that relationships depend on the verbal facility and the use of language constrains scholarship in this area.

One theme that stands out in recent scholarship around human–animal relationships is the in-depth look it offers into these relationships. This typically reveals that these relationships are far more complex than they may appear from the outside. In “‘Rats are people, too!’ Rat-human relations re-rated’, Birgitta Edelman (2002) explores three different identities that rats have held in human societies, namely, vermin, laboratory animal and pet. She shows that even these relationships, which seem to be mutually exclusive, often intersect. Significantly, the article demonstrates how an animal could in one context be a symbol that is associated with negative feelings like disgust and in another be seen as an individual towards which people can feel positive emotions like compassion and admiration. Edelman (2002) notes that people who relate to rats as pets not only recognise a basic likeness between humans and animals but also declare that ‘rats are people, too’. In the same way, I argue that the donkeys at Asher’s are people too.

In his article ‘Duties to socialise with domesticated animals: Farmed animal sanctuaries as frontiers of friendship’, Guy Scotton (2017) argues that humans have a duty to become friends with domesticated animals. He advocates that forming friendships with animals can help humans to construct a morally and ethically “just interspecies community” (Scotton, 2017). Sanctuaries for farm animals appear to be fertile grounds for studying human-animal friendships beyond the relationships we have with more typical companion animals (Scotton, 2017) (Parker, 2016). In Chapter 4, I argue that vegans who are involved with Asher’s consciously attempt to form and demonstrate their personal friendships with individual donkeys.

A South African take

Scholars are increasingly bringing animals as agents and actors to the forefront of their studies. However, despite the entanglement of animals with the political and social in southern Africa, so far few studies in the region follow this approach. A notable exception in human–animal studies in southern Africa is Sandra Swart’s work on horses. In 2010, Swart published her landmark book *Riding High: Horses, Humans and History in South Africa*. Swart’s book is ‘history from below’

and an attempt to give agency to horses as historical actors and subjects, not simply passive objects. Their ‘voice’ is heard through the records of those humans who valued them and developed relationships of various kinds with them. She explores the impact of horses on human development (Cherry, 2011: 5). The book looks at the political, historical, social, symbolic and economic impact of horses in South Africa. It is unique in that most scholarship on animals in South Africa only focuses on them as part of the agricultural and economic industry (De Wet, 2011). I argue that you can follow a similar approach to examine the place of donkeys in South Africa.

Nancy Jacobs (2001) specifically linked this type of argument to donkeys in her article ‘The Great Bophuthatswana Donkey Massacre: Discourse on the Ass and Politics of Class and Grass’ discussing the donkey massacre in Bophuthatswana in 1983. The massacre was a major event in the history of donkeys in South Africa. It occurred when the Apartheid government declared that security forces in the area needed to cull donkeys owned by locals to free up resources for cattle farming. Jacobs argued that

... killing donkeys had more to do with relations among people than with those between animals and the environment. Although the intervention targeted animals, it was a violent demonstration of the power of the state over poor and disenfranchised people. Consequently, the subject of donkeys became thoroughly politicised, and the killing became a cause against Bophuthatswana and apartheid (Jacobs, 2001: 485).

She also notes that many of her Christian informants perceived the killing as especially immoral because of a biblical endorsement of donkeys (Jacobs, 2001). This type of research can contribute constructively to reasoned or informed arguments in what are often emotionally charged and highly polarised debates over public policies regarding animals such as this (Arluke & Sanders, 1996: 4; Weil, 2012: xix).

But to put animals in the foreground as subjects is not to exclude humans. Instead, it means looking at subjects that are enmeshed or entangled in relationships with other subjects. This dissertation not only looks at the relationship between humans and animals as a subject of study worthy in its own right and as a co-constitutive process, but also at what this can possibly say about human society. There is a growing interest in studying animals as a window into human thinking and needs (Arluke & Sanders, 1996: 3). It shows us, among other things, how meaning is socially created in interaction even with nonhumans, how we organise our social world and

how we see our connection to other living things (Arluke & Sanders, 1996: 4). Similarly, Weil (2012: xxi) explores the ways in which studying human and animal relations can help us to explore notions of personhood and especially how we see notions of ‘otherness’. Claude Levi-Strauss’s (1986: 128) famous dictum that “species are chosen not because they are good to eat, but because they are good to think with” is apt in this case. This has been recognised by several scholars in the southern African region (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Jacobs 2001; Ferguson, 1985).

In 2001, Jean and John Comaroff wrote a paper titled ‘Naturing the Nation’ which looks at how perspectives and reactions changed in the public and media regarding foreign or so-called ‘invasive’ or ‘alien’ plants in Cape Town after fires that devastated the region. They point out that the plants that were blamed are the same plants that were once much sought after and that there was clearly a dramatic change in how they were viewed. In the paper, they argue that elements of the natural world can mean different things to different people and can become part of identity politics. They based this on Durkheim’s theory that processes in nature are taken to be a direct reflection of processes in society (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001: 26). The authors point to parallels between attitudes towards these plants and concerns about foreigners and believe that these issues are related. In other words, they link perceptions regarding the natural world to the political and to notions of citizenship and nationhood.

Another informative ethnography which involves donkeys in southern Africa is De Jongh’s (2012), *Roots and Routes: Karretjie People of the Great Karoo*. In the book, he does much to increase our understanding of these descendants of the Khoekhoen and Xam who travel through the Karoo by donkey cart looking for work. As De Jongh (2012) states, these are people who are often “ignored” and “invisible” and are the “poorest of the poor”. His book makes these economically and socially vulnerable group more visible. Yet even though they largely rely on the donkeys for their agency and survival, De Jongh does not discuss these animals in much detail.

In much of the literature on white individuals in South Africa, the land and wilderness are significant themes (Ramutsindela, 2016). A prominent example of recent scholarship in this direction in southern Africa is Yuka Suzuki’s (2017) *The Nature of Whiteness: Race, Animals, and Nation in Zimbabwe*. She argues that white farmers in Zimbabwe turned to conservation efforts and wildlife curatorship to help them establish a sense of belonging and recognition in the

country despite ongoing political turmoil. It may be a strategy through which they carved a protected and unique space for themselves in the country.

Donkey the ‘understudied equid’

Despite donkeys being of considerable importance to people (as I expand on in Chapter 3), they are typically understudied. This reflects two things. First, since donkeys are primarily used to transport people and goods rather than being reared for food, export or kept as companions, they are perceived to be of lower economic value and thus attract less attention than other domestic animals. But much the same can be said about horses, yet they are not as overlooked, which suggests that the next reason is more significant. Second, the individuals and communities for whom donkeys are particularly important are themselves typically among the poorer, more marginal sections of the population (Jacobs, 2001). Like the Karretjiemense (De Jongh, 2012), these populations are often overlooked.

One exception to the lack of studies in social sciences on donkeys is *The Donkey in Human History* (Mitchell, 2018). In this work, Peter Mitchell (2018) outlines the role of donkeys in human history throughout the world. He does this by focusing on archaeological evidence. Mitchell (2018: 46) notes that donkeys are the least considered among all the species that have been domesticated and that his book is an attempt to address this gap. Although the broad overview provided in this book is very useful, it does not provide as much detailed information as a more localised study would have.

Both Mitchell (2018) and Jacobs (2001) advocate for seeing donkeys as historical subjects in their own right. As Mitchell (2018: 6) states, “donkeys, like people, exist in a world within which they have a physical presence and leave enduring marks of their existence”. By studying these traces as well as ancient texts, archaeologists and other scholars like Jacobs have uncovered much of the past of domesticated animals such as donkeys.

For different reasons, the informants in my study are also often overlooked. One is that studies related to animal activism are often avoided due to judgements based on their seriousness. Secondly, most of my informants were white middle-class South Africans. In academic scholarship, whiteness became an object of inquiry later than other racial identities. Suzuki (2017:

19) notes whiteness “as the unmarked centre against which other ‘peripheral’ identities were measured”. The field only expanded in the 1990s.

In this dissertation, I attempt to address the gap in the literature regarding donkeys, specifically in South Africa. I do this by shedding light on these animals and their relationships with primarily white middle-class individuals at the sanctuary, which is a type of connection that is uncommon in contemporary society. As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, donkeys are primarily owned and used by black and coloured individuals in the country. Most white middle-class individuals rarely encounter these animals. Hopefully, the report will increase knowledge of the different ways humans and animals interact and relate to one another, as well as the way they bring meaning to each other’s lives.

Chapter 3: Donkey ‘die dier van die toekoms’

“Donkies is nie net diere van die verlede nie. Maar beslis die spesies van die toekoms en moet dus gekoester word”³ (*Die Kwik Styg*, 2019).

Annemarie van Zijl, the director of the Eseltjiesrus Donkey Sanctuary, made the above quote (*Die Kwik Styg*, 2019) in a radio interview. Eseltjiesrus is a donkey sanctuary in McGregor in the Western Cape. With this statement, she is trying to dispel the idea that donkeys are no longer relevant and that their use is a relic of the past. At the same time, it reflects her and other activists’ concerns about the future of donkeys in the face of potential threats like the illicit trade in their hides. For many activists, like Annemarie and my informants, the current moment represents a turning point in the security of donkeys as a species and as individuals. I argue that to understand the concern for the welfare of donkeys and the existence of sanctuaries like Asher’s, we need to unpack the socio-historical context of donkey–human interactions. Therefore, in this chapter, I explore the ways in which donkeys have shaped and have been shaped by their past in this region. To do this, I first outline the approach I have taken to a historical analysis of donkeys as a species. After which I briefly look at donkeys’ domestication and early history with humankind. From there I follow donkeys until their arrival in South Africa. Finally, I situate the creation of Asher’s in this context.

A donkey’s point of view

Historical texts have tended to treat animals simply as passive objects or tools in the hands of humans. However, this position and approach have come under fire. Environmental historians have stressed for decades the importance of understanding the effects of the natural world on human history and vice versa. According to Jacobs (2001: 16), “the challenge to historians is to treat [animals] not just as material objects but also as historical subjects”. Historians have now largely moved beyond demonstrating agency and instead can focus on how agency is understood and what shapes these conceptions.

³ Full quote translated: “Donkeys aren’t only animals of the past. But are definitely the animals of the future and must, therefore, be treasured”.

This kind of approach acknowledges that “history is produced precisely through the social relationships between actors – animals included – that such connections trace” (Swanson, 2015, cited in Arluke & Sanders, 1996). In other words, our world is a “co-construction among humans and non-humans.” (Arluke & Sanders, 1996: 57). The question is, therefore, “what kind of worlds did the donkey make?” (Mitchell, 2018: 224). Such an approach can help serve to make these “forgotten equids” (Blakeway, 2014: 61) visible.

This is not to say that the focus needs to be exclusively on the animals. Instead, reimagining history from this perspective can reveal much about the human societies with which they are entangled, such as the people who are involved in the sanctuary. This point is especially salient as donkeys in their recent past were mostly entangled with marginalised and even oppressed individuals, as this chapter will discuss (Jacobs, 2017). As Sandra Swart (2010: 213) puts it: “If one really wanted to tell a ‘bottom-up’ social history of the marginalized, donkeys [provide] a better vehicle than horses precisely because where both animals are present it is the latter that is favoured by the rich, the powerful, and the socially dominant.”

The start of an ‘ambiguous’ friendship

Modern-day donkeys or *Equus asinus* are members of the equid family (Gallion, 2010: 11). At the time of their domestication, there were two significant populations of wild ass, one group in Asia and one in Africa. Evidence suggests that it was the African variation, the Nubian wild ass, that was first tamed and domesticated (Mitchell, 2018: 16).

People first domesticated donkeys about 7000 years ago in Egypt. A more precise date is difficult to estimate due to the lack of written records and the difficulty encountered by archaeologists in distinguishing the remains of domesticated donkeys from those of other equids (Gallion, 2010: 11). Significantly, they are the only ungulate known to have been domesticated in Africa (Mitchell, 2017).

Domestication can be defined as “the capture and taming by man of animals of a species with particular behavioural characteristics, their removal from their natural living area and breeding community, and their maintenance under controlled breeding conditions of profit” (Bökönyi, 1969: 219). Some definitions such as that of Melinda Zeder (cited in Mitchell, 2018: 34) refers to

the process as a “mutualistic relationship in which humans assume some significant level of control over the reproduction and care of a plant/animal.”

When we attempt to understand the domestication of a species, we need to ask two questions. One is what the motivation for this was? Another is by which path did this domestication occur? To answer these questions, we must look at both the human and the animal side of the relationship.

By using the term ‘mutualistic’, definitions of domestication suggest that animals take part or have an impact in the process, or that it should be seen as a symbiotic process. As Mitchell (2018: 3) argues, these “relationship[s] may not be contractual, still less equal, but neither is, nor can it have been at the outset, wholly one-sided or lacking in benefit for donkeys as a species, if not always as individuals.” One way in which donkeys could be said to influence the process is by displaying characteristics that are favoured by humans. In the case of donkeys, these characteristics are great stamina and endurance, dietary flexibility, and great tolerance of heat (Gallion, 2010: 15-19). Due to these attributes, they are often able to cope in circumstances that are unsuitable for horses, cattle and even camels. Besides this, donkeys are generally considered to be easy to train. This no doubt plays a role in their popularity. These characteristics of “being a donkey’ are grounded in *Equus asinus* biology” and show that the process is at least partly “dictated by the animal, rather than by the human” and donkeys are not “blank slates” (Mitchell, 2018: 226).

As to the path through which humans domesticated donkeys, it seems likely that humans first began to keep donkeys with the intention to acquire resources, namely their strength and endurance (Mitchell, 2018: 35). For these reasons, early pastoralists in northeast Africa found African wild asses useful for transporting both goods and people (Mitchell, 2017; Marshall, 2007). The evidence seems to suggest that people used them as a substitute for cattle as the region became more arid and rainfall more unpredictable (Bough, 2012: 27).

The domestication process often results in morphological changes in the animals involved. In the case of donkeys, Mitchell (2018: 33) points out that evidence of domestication is visible through the presence of certain pathologies in donkey remains. For example, archaeologists have found changes in skeletal remains that are consistent with them having carried heavy loads (Mitchell, 2018: 33). It is pathology, in other words, that sets domesticated donkeys apart. In a

sense, we can, therefore, say that they are clearly marked by the process and not always positively.

From Egypt, donkeys spread throughout the northern and eastern regions of Africa, including locations in modern Kenya, Ethiopia, Libya and Sudan. Wherever they went donkeys extended the reach of human society by making it easier to cover vast distances. Arguably, these animals provided the “first marked improvement on human portage” (Broodbank, 2013: 289). This helped to facilitate their own expansion as well as that of their human owners. From North Africa, they moved across the Fertile Crescent, reaching southwestern Iran by 2800 BC, the Indus Valley just a few centuries later and China by the first millennium BCE (Mitchell, 2018: 225). In the opposite direction, donkeys established themselves among the Bronze Age societies of the Aegean, reached Portugal at a surprisingly early date (c. 2400–2000 BC) and were in use in Italy a thousand years after that. In the Mediterranean, people used them to provide the pulling power for mills to grind grain, press olives and grapes, and crush ore and to pull wagons, and carts (Mitchell 2018: 226).

Although it began earlier, donkeys spread north of the Alps en masse in the wake of the Roman conquest. But later the animals disappeared when the Western Roman Empire collapsed, only being reintroduced during the Middle Ages. It was only in the last half-millennium that they also spread to other parts of the world as part of Europe’s expansion overseas to areas such as the Americas (Mitchell, 2018: 225).

Throughout their domesticated history, people primarily employed donkeys for transport and mechanical tasks such as ploughing. Additional uses were few and far between. Significantly, donkeys were first used for medicine in Egypt. Their dung was used to heal wounds and donkey body parts were also used for remedies (Mitchell 2018: 56). Aside from this, there are few instances of any kind of the ingestion of donkey parts. Even in the distant past, little evidence has been found of slaughter for the consumption of donkey meat. Mitchell (2018: 164-165) notes that there was significant ambiguity over whether people could eat or ingest donkeys or their parts. The few instances are the exceptions rather than the norm and can rather be seen as a niche use for donkeys. In the past as today, the primary significance of these equids has always been as sources of motive power and traction, and as beasts of burden. When the consumption of donkey meat did occur, evidence was usually only found among some of the poorest sections

of society. The absence of the consumption of donkey products could no doubt be linked to conflicting beliefs and perceptions about them as well as economic realities.

On the one hand, donkeys were seen as symbolically significant animals who were also valued for their economic contributions. Interestingly, Mitchell (2018) and Bough (2012) paint the picture of highly prized animals that were associated with royalty and important religious figures. For example, in Egypt, as in Mesopotamia, remains of individual donkeys were found in the tombs of kings. Furthermore, they cost so much that they were not owned by just anybody but were rather rented out for work by those who could afford them (Mitchell, 2018: 41-51). Additionally, evidence has been found as far back as Ancient Egypt of their “religious associations, particularly as an important metaphor for the wild and untamed world beyond the Nile Valley, the abode of the god Seth, with whom donkeys were frequently identified” (Mitchell, 2018: 10).

However, later events have coloured the way we interpret the status and meanings of these animals in the past. Bough (2012) and Mitchell (2018) explore the misinterpretation of Christ’s choice of a donkey as a mount. Nowadays, conventional Christian interpretation is that this “was an act of personal humility” (Mitchell, 2018: 149-150). However, Mitchell argues that this is wrong and that “the term (ani) translated as ‘lowly’ in the King James Bible (or as ‘humble’ or ‘righteous’ in other versions) does not mean ‘meek’. Instead, it is a royal quality, meaning someone who is subservient and respectful to his god”. Donkeys were seen as “god-bearing animals in both Christian and pagan belief” (Mitchell, 2018: 151). However, as Christianity spread the iconography often changed, such as in an Old Saxon retelling that “portrayed Christ as a warrior chieftain riding on a horse” (Mitchell, 2018: 151-152).

Despite their value, the role and status of donkeys seem to have been contested several times in their past with long-lasting and wide-reaching effects. This first happened when horses began to replace donkeys as animals of the elite. The conflicts and competition for resources and status of these two species stretch as far back as the third millennium BC in Egypt. Similarly, their position was threatened by horses and camels in the Near East (Mitchell, 2018: 100). They were also steadily being replaced by their own offspring: the mule⁴ (Mitchell, 2018: 157- 161). Yet even though much of their importance was ceded to these new animals “donkeys retained significance in agriculture and commerce” (Mitchell, 2018: 100). However, the donkey’s image

⁴ Produced by mating a female horse with a male donkey

seemed to have changed from that of a widely prized animal to becoming the animal of the poor. In many places “horses took over the elite associations that donkeys had once held” (Mitchell, 2018: 103-107).

The more the elites devalued and rejected donkeys, the closer they became connected to the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed members of human society. Before their wide-scale social and economic devaluation, there were already portrayals of donkeys as lowly creatures. For example, Greek proverbs reflect a view of donkeys as “inferior, obstinate, promiscuous, incapable of higher culture, and appropriate targets for physical chastisement” (Mitchell, 2018: 142). They were often treated as an “allegory of human weakness and folly” (Bough, 2012: 131), such as in Aesop’s tales. Significantly, these tales are still often used as the basis of modern storytelling. Thus the “myth that donkeys are stubborn and difficult” began and continues to persist (Gallion, 2010). This new image can also be tied to people associating these animals with Dionysus who, as the Greek god of wine, winemaking, grape cultivation, fertility, ritual madness, theatre and religious ecstasy, often represents the uncontrolled urges of human beings.

Another possible explanation of these negative perceptions of donkeys is that interpretations or misinterpretations of donkeys’ temperaments and behaviours shaped these views. Gallion (2010: 65) makes this argument as follows:

The donkey in the depth of its soul is a cautious, conservative, careful individual. It will thoroughly examine the safety quotient of each endeavour. The donkey will not be hurried, nor will it let anyone make up its mind for it. Because of this, the donkey has earned an unfair reputation for being stubborn, bull-headed, stupid, and obstinate. Rather than being respected for its deliberation in an uncertain situation, the long ear is frequently ridiculed. Those who get to know donkeys will quickly come to appreciate their innate intelligence and understand why donkeys may take a little longer to decide but always make the right choice in the end.

Late to the scene

It was once they had already fallen from grace so to speak that donkeys first arrived in southern Africa. This fact contributed to the ‘lowly’ position occupied by them in the region as I will discuss in this section. They reached the southern tip of the continent much later than other parts of the world, as their spread seems to have been halted at some point. Some scholars have

speculated that this might be due in part to the presence of disease in the central regions of the continent such as trypanosomiasis which meant that they donkeys were effectively restricted to drylands where there were no tsetse flies until modern control measures were put in place (Wilson, 2013). Therefore, for overland transport people in these regions had to rely primarily on cattle who had already reached the southern tip of the continent despite also being affected by the disease. Or else people carried the loads themselves.

When Europeans first arrived in southern Africa they found no donkeys in the region. Instead, they only arrived in South Africa in 1656 (Swart, 2010: 20) when Van Riebeeck imported several of the animals from Cape Verde (Swart, 2010: 20). Horses had already arrived in 1653 and were firmly established as the preferred mode of transport (Swart, 2010: 21).

In South Africa, donkeys were far from the white settlers' favoured choice for draught or human transport. Mitchell (2018: 214) notes specific examples of farmers keeping them for haulage on sugar plantations in KwaZulu-Natal in the 1900s and on wheat farms in the Western Cape but these cases were few and far between. As with horses, diseases such as trypanosomiasis continued to pose a great danger to these animals and were particularly rife in the eastern half of the country. This can perhaps partly account for the donkey's distribution. However, this does not explain why the settlers greatly relied on horses despite this. And in fact, they often went to great lengths to try to maintain the health and condition of the donkey's equine cousins. For example, Colesberg, a town in the now Northern Cape, was established to keep horses alive due to its higher elevation and therefore the absence of trypanosomiasis (Swart, 2010: 24).

The preference for horses can rather be explained by the symbolic associations with each of the species. In her account, Sandra Swart (2010) highlights the disparity in opinions and views held about horses compared to donkeys. In contrast to donkeys, horses were associated with the elite and the powerful. There were even rules and regulations pertaining to who could use and own these animals. 'Purity' in the horse breeds was favoured, and they were popular for many of the characteristics that they share with their smaller relations. When speaking about the unpopularity of mules, Swart (2010: 67) notes that the "physical environment was appropriate, but the cultural environment was unsuitable" due to their asinine qualities.

Therefore, instead, it was among the indigenous populations of the region that donkeys and mules found more widespread employment. They gained the most purchase with black and

coloured communities in rural areas (Swart, 2010; Mitchell, 2018). Donkeys have also been more closely associated with poor whites in South Africa (Swart, 2010: 215). The differential preferences and statistics for ownership continued as the animals spread throughout the country when people introduced these animals into what is now South Africa's North West province in 1858. Here they were widely taken up by the region's Tswana inhabitants for use in transport, ploughing and pulling wagons, although additional benefits accrued in the form of meat, dung and milk (Jacobs, 2001).

One significant example of the use of donkeys among the indigenous groups of southern Africa is the Karretjiemense. These individuals trace their descent from both the early Khoekhoen and /Xam and "represent a rural underclass" in the country (De Jongh, 2013: 6). The donkeys are indispensable to their lifestyle. They grant the people a degree of autonomy by facilitating their mobility and transporting them and their possessions. De Jongh (2013) notes that they probably constitute one of the most economically and socially vulnerable groups in the country. And in many ways, these animals still "share the same burdens and hardships as their human owners" (Geiger & Hovorka, 2015a: 13, 15).

From a review of the literature, it is clear that donkeys have played and still play a critical role in the existence of many rural and disadvantaged communities in the country. They are only prevalent among poor people who do not have access to motorised forms of transport or agricultural machinery. In 2001, there were more than 300 000 working equids, including donkeys, in South Africa (Wells & Krecek, 2001). In her book, Swart (2010: 148) shows that from 1911 donkeys at least were dramatically fewer in number than mules and horses. But compared to their equine relatives, the populations of donkeys have remained relatively stable. Furthermore, by 1994 they were popular mainly with smallholder farmers in the north of the country (Swart, 2010: 148). On larger farms, farmers also use donkeys to protect livestock. In 2018, they made up 1% of predation management techniques in the meat industry (Steyn, 2018).

It should also be noted that the value of a working donkey cannot be solely reflected monetarily. They play a key role in their communities by among other things empowering women and providing freedom for children to study and develop. As beasts of burdens, donkeys literally help to lighten the loads that people must carry and thereby saving them time and effort. Aside from this, children often use donkeys to travel to school. Owners therefore can use donkeys as a mechanism for poor communities to save and to self-manage risks. International bodies such as

the United Nations are increasingly recognising their contribution to rural livelihoods (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2017: 1).

Throughout their time in the country, donkeys have become enmeshed in the popular consciousness of many groups in South Africa as they have done throughout the world, although many of these portrayals are derogatory. One sign of this is their memorialization through cultural artefacts like the song 'Die Donkie'. Nowhere is the image of the stubborn, meek and even foolish image of donkeys better portrayed than in the song by Cissie and Willie Copper (1969). One line in this parody goes "hy rol in die sand en hy vreet 'n koerant." In other words, "he rolls in the sand and devours a newspaper". The lyrics reify the image of donkeys as stubborn and unintelligent creatures. Although belittling, the song is not necessarily negative but rather uses these mocking rhymes in a playful manner. Donkeys have also featured in many books and folk tales, especially in Afrikaans (see Bond, Cattaneo & Retief, 1975; Gerrits, 2006). Other portrayals of donkeys in popular culture such as Eeyore in the Winnie-the-Pooh books by A.A. Milne and Donkey in the Shrek movies have found widespread traction here.

A major event in the history of donkeys in South Africa was the so-called donkey massacre in Bophuthatswana in 1983 (Jacobs, 2001: 485). In May 1983, a governmental decree announced that all 'surplus' donkeys were to be exterminated in the Tswana 'homeland', but that people who proved their animals were 'necessary' could keep four. The killings were justified with the argument that cattle needed the available grass and grazing. Consequently, members of the Bophuthatswana Police Force and Bophuthatswana Defence Force arrived in villages in the homeland in trucks and troop carriers. In the small village of Ncweng, people remember that they gathered their animals in preparation for counting, as in previous culls. They did not expect the immediate shooting of donkeys. However, the soldiers immediately started shooting donkeys from their vehicles. To the shock of the residents, simply opened fire without explaining the procedure or counting the animals. After shooting the gathered donkeys, soldiers fanned out across the veld and continued the culling. Similar stories and reports came from across the area. By the end, the local security forces had killed an estimated 20 000 donkeys across the region (Jacobs, 2001).

Jacobs (2001) argued that the killing of the donkeys had more to do with relations among people than with those between animals and the environment. Although the action targeted animals, it was a violent demonstration of the power of the state over poor and disenfranchised people.

Consequently, the subject of donkeys became thoroughly politicized, and the killing became a cause against Bophuthatswana and apartheid (Jacobs, 2001). Jacobs (2001) notes the emotional distress and even trauma experienced by the owners of the animals. To the owners, the animals were more than just beasts of burden. Commenting on the atrocity, a Tswana informant told Geiger and Hovorka (2015a: 11) that ‘donkeys made me who I am today’. As Mitchell says, this statement captures “an important truth about their significance in human history” (Mitchell, 2018:224) and more specifically their place as the means of survival for many poor and coloured communities in the country. In this narrative, donkeys like their owners, fell victim to the apartheid government’s pro-modernisation policies.

Ironically, at about the same time that the donkeys in Bophuthatswana were massacred, monuments were erected by white individuals in Upington and Polokwane⁵ in recognition of the donkeys that worked in local mines. Both monuments have inscriptions acknowledging donkeys’ hard work and contribution to the human economy; in this case, mainly for the profit of white communities. The great discrepancy in these treatments of South African donkeys results from divisions of both race and class among humans. In Upington and Polokwane, donkeys grazed on privately held farms, where owners had rights over the land and its use and their donkeys. Furthermore, donkeys in Upington and Polokwane contributed to capitalization, while donkeys in Bophuthatswana supported those who could not capitalize (Jacobs, 2001). In other words, the memorialized donkeys aided those who had power. Therefore, even though they were appreciated on the one hand and clearly played an important part in society, there was a drastic change in the attitude of the government towards them during the apartheid era (Jacobs, 2001).

Unfortunately, the massacre was in many ways not an isolated incident. Donkeys and their owners have often found themselves in contention with other members of society. For example, De Jongh (2013) discusses incidents of the Karretjiemense’s donkeys being shot by local farmers. In one specific case, the farmer justified this by claiming that one of the donkeys had once bumped into his car. When their donkeys die or are lost, these families are forced to give up their way of life and typically end up in a nearby squatter camp. The loss of the donkey, therefore, results in a loss of their source of income and much of their autonomy and mobility. Once again, donkeys, seen as disposable nuisances and obstacles by one group, are crucial to the social and economic survival of another.

⁵ Then Pietersburg

The donkeys' crisis

Global demand for products of donkey origin has increased dramatically in the last few decades. Recent years have seen the emergence of large-scale global trading in donkey skins, with estimates of a minimum of 1.8 million being traded per year – the destination of most of these products in China (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2017: 6). In China, donkey skins are used to produce a traditional Chinese medicine called ejiao (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2017: 9). In a paper By Richard Bennett and Simone Pfuderer, (2019), they calculate that a total of 4.8 million skins are needed annually to maintain the 2016 production rates of 5,600 tonnes of ejiao. It is made with extracts of gelatine from the hide, which are mixed with herbs and other ingredients. It seems that besides the use of the animals for riding, transport, ploughing and meat, they have also long been used in medicine here (Zhang et al., 2010: 637).

While some of the data on ejiao may be questionable, numerous scientific studies have been published, with scientists claiming significant health benefits such as anti-ageing properties (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2017: 12). The demand within China for ejiao has soared; Chinese agricultural authorities have reported that donkey numbers have reduced drastically, from an estimated eleven million in 1990 to an estimated six million in 2014 (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2017:1, 17). The disparity in the supply and demand for donkey skins appears to be fuelling the global trade. Virtually all countries with significant donkey populations are reporting an increase in donkey slaughter for this market (e.g. Botswana, Kenya). There appears to be two primary slaughter processes: slaughter in legal, government-led or government-sanctioned slaughterhouses; and small-scale 'bush' slaughter, which frequently involves stolen donkeys (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2017: 24).

In an apparent response to the trade in donkey hides, the last decades have certainly seen a growing public concern for donkeys. This is reflected in the number of articles published both online and in printed media (ENCA, 2017; 2018). Donkeys can now be found in most animal shelters, sanctuaries and welfare organisations across the country. The National Council of Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (NSPCA) even has a National Donkey Upliftment Project. Animal welfare organisations in South Africa regularly receive reports of donkeys being slaughtered illegally in rural areas for their skins. As formal donkey farming does not exist in the South Africa, the rise in demand for hides has resulted in donkeys being procured from rural communities where the trade helps support families. The trade has been

associated with a spike in donkey thefts, severe animal welfare abuses and illegal slaughtering. It is currently legal in South Africa to trade and export donkey meat and hides, provided the animals are slaughtered at a registered equine abattoir (Meat Safety Act 40 (Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2000)) of which there are only three in the country. Additionally, the number of hides that may be exported is restricted to 7300 a year. However, this trade primarily seems to circumvent these channels. In one single case earlier this year, the SA Police Service seized 2921 donkey hides valued at R4 381 500, which were destined for China (NSPCA, 2013). A police report on an investigation into export company Anatic Trading revealed that between July 2016 and May 2017 more than 15 000 skins were traded by this organisation alone (Mfaku, 2017).

The trade negatively impacts animals and humans alike. The NSPCA (2013) notes that “donkeys are being stolen, then transported and brutally slaughtered for their skins”. The negative effects of the trade are only expected to increase. Communities reliant on donkeys for their livelihoods may lose the capacity to produce through their choice to sell their donkeys, whilst others lose their income overnight through theft of their donkeys.

Despite thefts and numerous animal welfare breaches being reported, few suspects who are allegedly involved in the trade of donkey skins have been investigated. There is an evident lack of concern at regional and national levels for the welfare of donkeys and the families and the communities whom they support. This is despite ongoing efforts by many organisations to improve understanding of animal sentience and the importance of good welfare (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2017: 53). The lack of visibility of the donkey as a species in many governments’ legal frameworks leads to an inability to regulate the rapidly emerging slaughter trade. Additionally, donkeys are commonly owned by the most resource-limited and vulnerable communities with little voice or access to decision-makers at higher levels. Such marginalisation leaves these communities prone to unethical trading practices, theft and extreme market pricing (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2017).

Future plans of the North-West provincial government are cause for more concern for worried organisations and individuals. A trade delegation that visited China in 2017 determined that “donkey production could be a means of accelerating rural development in the province” (Kriel, 2017). According to representatives, infrastructure and systems are currently being put in place for this industry, and a trade agreement with Chinese authorities is due to be formalised later in

2019. Yet this had not come to fruition by May 2020. Criticisms and concern about the plans have come from several directions. For example, Boeta du Toit, CEO of Agri North West, has stated that he is not aware of any business plan or economic feasibility studies for this industry (Kriel, 2017). People have also raised concerns over donkeys' viability for any type of industrial environment or venture. The animals are particularly vulnerable to stress-related diseases such as hyperlipaemia. What is more, they have notoriously low fertility rates and the returns will be low against the costs to care for the animals (Kriel, 2017). These concerns about the legalisation of the trade do not seem to be unfounded. The Kenyan government legalized the trade in donkey hides and meat in 2012, but the industry is unable to keep up with the demand (Maichomo, 2020). The price for individual donkeys has increased significantly, and the communities who until recently survived by the labour of these animals can no longer afford them. The populations of these animals are dwindling so much that there are fears of the species going extinct locally. For these reasons, the trade has once again been banned in the country (Maichomo, 2020).

People's responses to news of the trade in donkey hides are often extremely derogatory, prejudiced and xenophobic and rely heavily on stereotypes. Before the recent concern over donkeys, people were more concerned with the involvement of China in the illegal trade in rhino horns and abalone. In her article on this issue, Karen Harris (2019: 3) notes some of the comments made on social media in response to stories about donkey hides such as 'We need to get rid of Chinese in SA ... they not welcome ... they steal our economy...dogs. Rhinos and now donkeys ... ' and 'F*#@ the Chinese they are raping this continent.' They tend to lump Chinese people into a uniform whole which is viewed with suspicion that can be traced back to 'anti-sinicism' rooted in the origins of the colony. According to Harris (2019: 5), this narrow viewpoint obscures and ignores "the web of illegal aliens, syndicates, triads and cartels who are the perpetrators of these abalone, rhino and donkey poaching atrocities".

The beginning of rhino and abalone poaching in South Africa can be linked to the arrival of a wave of Chinese immigrants in the 1970s following major trade agreements between the two countries. From the late 1970s, Chinese criminal organisations that were modelled on traditional Chinese and Hong Kong triad societies began operating in South Africa (Harris, 2019: 13). But "while triads and smuggling organisations were and still are at the heart of the industry, there was and still is a wider network of locals and lower-level government officials that contribute to the illuiveness and efficiency of the trade both within and outside of South Africa's borders" (Harris, 2019: 13). After another wave of immigration in the 1990s, "South Africa ranked as the

country representing the highest number of Chinese immigrants in any one African country” (Harris, 2019: 15), which sparked public concern over a ‘Chinese invasion’. In the wake of this, the illegal trade in abalone and rhino horn continues to escalate while the trade of donkey skins has also been added to the list of incriminations.

You cannot help but notice that the people voicing these concerns are not the ones whose livelihood depends on these animals. And they most often have no tangible connections to members of this species like many of the volunteers and even members of the board at Asher’s. Despite their relative proliferation, donkey populations are very concentrated. This is largely due to the fact that they are primarily owned and kept by people at a certain point on the spectrum of economic class. Therefore, there are large sections of South African society who never or rarely encounter donkeys face to face. As Mitchell (2018: 2) notes, most people in the Western world only encounter these animals in fiction. Pearson (2011) argues that the way humans treat the powerless like animals says something about the relevant societies. Significantly, she argues that the shift towards animal protectionism was fuelled by a combination of sentimentalism and liberalism (Pearson, 2011: 16-18). Liberalism, as a political movement in the country, is mostly associated with white middle-class individuals (Lipton, 2000).

A review of the history of donkeys in South Africa reveals a narrative about an animal that held and still to an extent holds great material and cultural significance in human society. Yet their public image has changed substantially over time to that of a ‘lowly’ and ‘stubborn’ beast of burden. Due to this change in perception, and other economic and practical factors, they are now mostly owned by poor and even marginalised individuals. This places individual donkeys and potentially donkeys as a species in precarious positions where their lives are often at risk. But this has only recently become a public concern as fears grow about an apparently escalating trade in donkey skins by Chinese criminal organisations for export to China. These fears are a contributing factor in increases in donkey-related activism among white middle-class individuals and even the formation of welfare organisations such as Asher’s Farm Sanctuary. As I will elaborate on in Chapter 4, the idea of the prosecuted and even martyred donkey plays an important role in my informants’ narrative conceptions of individual animals. The people at the sanctuary use the threat to donkeys to inspire sympathy and to try to secure the animals’ welfare. Above and beyond this, it plays an important role in their quest to establish a model of their ideal social order at the sanctuary. It is society and the social hierarchy as it pertains to the place

of animals that my participants take fault with. The microcosm of Asher's is their attempt to create a world where donkeys are people with more rights, more dignity, and better stories.

Chapter 4: Bravo, Charlie, Delta

Donkey yoga



Figure 1: Second donkey yoga event: Echo and Delta being bribed with food to leave the yoga mats alone. Photograph by Colette Barnard, Asher's Farm Sanctuary, 2019

I arrived at Asher's Farm Sanctuary early on a cold autumn morning for a donkey yoga session. Mikayla met me at the gate and directed me towards the front of the barn where two German volunteers were sitting at a desk. They handed out pamphlets with the sanctuary rules. Before I could enter, they requested me to sanitize my hands with an alcohol gel and even step into a small tub of sanitizer to clean the bottom of my shoes. Each guest had to go through the cleansing process in turn and had to sign an indemnity form.

Afterwards, I went to stand with the rest of the waiting guests. I noticed from the start that most of the visitors seemed to be wary of approaching the animals. Instead, they

tried to take photos with the animals while standing a few metres away, with mixed success.

The yoga instructor briefed us and invited us into the donkey pen where some yoga mats were waiting. She told us that this would be a relaxed session and that we should close our eyes and try to focus on the movements. She also told us not to force the donkeys into an interaction as “this is their home”. However, the donkeys seemed to have completely different ideas.

They were a bit skittish at first. But the longer we sat, the calmer they became and started to approach.

The donkeys, who were oblivious to the need for quiet and mindfulness during yoga, provided ample distraction. To the great consternation of Colette, they started sniffing at the people and the mats. Chaos broke loose when the first donkey realized that they could bite a chunk out of a nearby mat. Mikayla, Colette and John engaged in a wild donkey chase to keep them away from the mats. But despite their best efforts, there were several more missing chunks by the end of the session.

Although the chase seemed to frustrate the chasers, it seemed to excite the donkeys to no end. They hopped and trotted around the circle, waiting for an opportunity to take a bite.

About halfway through I spotted Collette from the corner of my eye carrying armfuls of hay into the pen and trying to silently lure the donkeys away. But for the most part, the animals’ curiosity seemed to triumph over hunger.

This is a description of my first visit to the Asher’s Farm sanctuary. It was an event held to raise funds and increase public awareness of the sanctuary. I found the sanctuary and their event through their Facebook page. I already knew that I was interested in studying the close relationship between humans and animals in South Africa. Before this, I had only heard about goat yoga and similar trends in the United States which were begun as a fundraising initiative for animal welfare. In general, it involves doing yoga in a room or pen with the animals in question.

But as far as I could discern this was the first animal-yoga event in South Africa and the first yoga event that I could find where donkeys were involved.

The donkey yoga event first brought to light many of the key themes that would become significant in my research. One of these was the status afforded to the animals at the sanctuary. In terms of this dissertation, it became essential to recognise animals not only as symbols but as individuals who are capable of acting agentively in relation to others. The purpose of this chapter is, therefore, to explore the ways in which my informants portrayed and treated donkeys in this context. This revealed much about the welfare strategies of my human informants as well as their beliefs about animals and donkeys.

In this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which my human informants established the donkeys at Asher's as individuals and as actors with their own personalities. I will show how this was done using naming practices, formulating biographies and by facilitating interactions between the donkeys and visitors. Through this framing, my informants are trying to show that in their social order animals are persons on a cultural, social and psychological level. Together, my human informants and the animals at Asher's formed part of an actor network where each individual is thought to hold an equally important position. I will start by raising some of the pertinent topics pertaining to farm sanctuaries in South Africa and specifically Asher's.

Breaking new ground in animal welfare

The sanctuary was one of the few focused on so-called farm animals or as my participants referred to them 'farmed animals' in South Africa. It was the first sanctuary of its kind in Gauteng. I immediately became curious about the ways people at the sanctuary would navigate this landscape, especially in a country where so many humans are impoverished and disadvantaged. In this environment, it is not surprising that people tend to be shocked and even disgruntled at the amount of money, attention and effort lavished on animals. To many people across southern Africa, conservation is seen as "white self-indulgence" (Wolmer, Chaumba & Scoones, 2004: 4) or even as attempts to secure national resources for certain groups. From the moment I started formulating my research proposal, I was often confronted with similar views and attitudes. A fellow student asked me: "how do they do this here? How do they justify this where so many people are suffering?"

This is a question that is fraught with complications and is by no means a straightforward one to answer. I have personally always been interested in animals and their welfare. I grew up on a small dairy farm and have spent much of my free time interacting with and learning about animals of all species. For a brief time, this included a lost donkey that had shown up on our farm. Taking care of other creatures might sound simple in some contexts, but it can be seen as a moral dilemma in others when it is weighed against human costs. Martinelli and Berkmanienė (2018) note that both in the academic realm and in the political, veganism and vegan activism as they relate to animals are often not seen as “serious enough” and people who study this topic as well as those who are activists themselves are often confronted by the question ‘why don’t you care about real problems?’ However, as with any ethnographic study, the key was to try to understand the community through an emic approach. From the start, I focused on adopting a “willingly uncritical” and unbiased attitude toward all the participants (see Suzuki 2017: 22).

These questions seemed even more salient in terms of farm animals who, more than any other group of animals, form a key part of their owner’s strategies for making a living. As can be seen in the discussion in chapter three, donkeys were for most of their past seen as farm animals – animals that are kept for agricultural purposes. Like donkeys, members of several species are still often used as working animals, for example animals that people keep mainly to do muscular work. In the case of donkeys, these services are therefore separate from produce. People do not regard these animals as pets either. They are typically only kept in the capacity of working animals by lower-income individuals. Therefore, they are often seen in terms of their usefulness in economic and survival-based activities, rather than their value as companions.

On the other hand, nowadays, most middle- and upper-class individuals will primarily make contact with farm animals through grocery stores or restaurants. Most of the country’s meat and animal products come from animals that are slaughtered and raised for this purpose on industrialised feedlots and commercial farms. This is a far cry from the living, breathing relationships between smallholder farmers and labourers and their animal charges. To them they belong to the world of farming.

One of the few other places where middle- and upper-class individuals do encounter farm animals is in the context of petting zoos. These organizations are particularly popular with parents with young children in cities and suburbs. Here visitors treat animals primarily as sources of entertainment as well as objects of affection. Nowadays, petting zoos often feature restaurants

or cafes as part of the facility. Unlike at Asher's, this leads to the paradoxical situation where people pet and fawn over living chickens or sheep while tucking into a plate of wings or chops.

Both these labels (of 'working' and 'farm' animal) describe and help to perpetuate certain images of donkeys. Unlike typical domestic animals like dogs, people often discuss these animals in the plural form. So, in other words, it is not Eeyore but donkeys as a collective that is typically addressed. For the most part, they are also viewed and discussed primarily as tools or even resources. These types of views are often seen as anthropocentric (Mason, 2005: 7). One reasoning behind this view is that it excludes animals from the category of actors (Mason, 2005: 7). I soon found that my human informants also perceive these types of labelling as deeply anthropocentric and morally problematic, and are actively trying to change how the public perceives animals by framing them as unique individuals who are not defined by their roles.

My informants and other persons who are involved in animal welfare continually refer to the crisis for survival facing donkeys. In fact, four of the donkeys at the sanctuary had been rescued from an illegal donkey slaughterhouse. Through the sanctuary, my informants can be seen as continually trying to find new ways to highlight and increase donkeys' significance for humans. They have made repeated posts on their Facebook page and website denouncing the slaughter of donkeys for their hide and it is a daily topic of discussion. Individuals at the sanctuary treat donkeys as a flagship for the rights of farm animals, thanks to this highly publicized crisis.

Introductions

I was 'introduced' to the animals on my first official day as a volunteer at the sanctuary. After I arrived, the acting manager, Colette, took me to "meet the donks". This is a practice that they repeat for every new volunteer at the sanctuary. Colette continued with a similar introduction process for each animal at the sanctuary in turn. This took over an hour as we spent a few minutes with each of the donkeys. Only then was I shown the tools and equipment that I would use and told about my duties.

It was suggestive of the donkeys' and other animals' status at the sanctuary that I was only introduced to the labourers and other volunteers much later and then only in passing. From the beginning, induction into the daily life and culture of the sanctuary meant recognition of the

central place held by animals at this institution. Humans often played second fiddle to the animals whose needs the management placed above all else.

The training involved learning how I was to treat, view and discuss animals in this context. Arluke and Sanders (1996) show that the treatment of animals at sanctuaries and other animal-focused contexts is often a learnt behaviour. The institutional culture shapes new workers. I was told each of the donkey's names in turn and got an opportunity to interact with them. Colette instructed me on the right ways to 'handle' them and communicate with them. For example, she told me that I should approach them slowly and then give them the chance to make contact first, and if I sat down, they might put their heads on my shoulder and so on.

Colette, Mikayla and the other volunteers distinguished between the different animals of the different species by their stories, physical characteristics and personalities. On that first day, Colette made an effort to point each of these out like that Delta is fluffy and that Tango is the 'alpha'. Tango came over to 'cuddle' first in Colette's words because he was dominant. He did this by pressing his head against both of us in turn. The other donkeys only approached once he had moved away. I found that I had to learn how to recognize and correctly identify each individual donkey as most of them closely resembled one another. This was a process that came from spending time with the animals and becoming more familiar with them. Owing to my ignorance, to my informants I was still an outsider who had to be brought into the fold.

These highly personal descriptions of each animal was one of the first repetitive rhetorical strategies that I encountered during my fieldwork. My informants continually refer to the different personalities and behaviour of the different animals to people in person and on their online platforms. Volunteers and managers do not typically base these descriptions only on objective and physical characteristics. Instead, they often use emotive and subjective language. According to Mikayla on Facebook, "baby, India is the epitome of innocence and joy. Daughter of Charlie and sister to Juliette this fluffy-bum is such a delight to observe. She loves kisses on her perfect little nose, and she chases birds when she is not sleeping in her paddock. India brings us all such joy, and she reminds us not to take ourselves seriously." From the start, then, like all new visitors and volunteers, I was taught to view the animals as unique individuals. The currency here is "emotion" not "rational thinking" (Pearson, 2011: 11).

The introductions signalled a change in my own status at the sanctuary. Visitors to the sanctuary are not allowed to enter the pens unless accompanied by a worker at the sanctuary, and this mostly happened on formal occasions like tours. Even then they could only go into the pens with some of the animals. Although people are reluctant to say this, one reason behind this is that a few of the resident animals are in the words of one volunteer not ‘nice guys’ and tend to be aggressive. Now I could enter the pens on my own when and for how long I wanted to. On that first day, Mikayla told me that I was free to move through the sanctuary as long as I did not hurt her animals. This was a significant aspect of gaining access. I was frequently told by my informants that their policy was ‘animals first’. Overall, their main concern for restricting access to them was to protect the animals’ well-being and keep them from unwelcome interactions.

What is in a name?

Naming each animal changed the way that people view and treat the animals. Beinart (2002: 87) notes how assigning names to wild animals signified “both individuality and partial domestication” and that this could be seen as “an essential element in their absorption into human households, or interactive contexts, where they could become the object of warmth and care”. I argue that at Asher’s, naming practices constituted a way of emphasizing that each animal was an individual who deserves as much recognition as a person, as well as a way of establishing a form of kinship between the people and the animals.

The naming of working animals and farm animals is not unique to this context. But it most often occurs in situations where people form more personal and closer relationships with the animals, which is rare in commercial operations. De Jongh (2012: 80-81) notes that the Karretjiemense named their donkeys and he took this as one sign that they are not only dependent on donkeys as draught animals “but have a close relationship with them as well”. In that case, the names of their donkeys reflect something of their circumstances and how they perceive the world, such as Bloubok, Spantou, Ketting and Boetie (De Jongh, 2012 80-81). Many of the names like Bloubok referred to elements of their natural environment. The Karretjiemense rely on the whims of local farmers for piece jobs to make their living and have few alternative options available to them. Therefore, names like Ketting (chain) and Spantou (tether) refer to their role as draught animals but may also refer to the humans and their own subjection to their position and lifestyle.

Similarly, at Asher's, the board did not choose the names for the animals haphazardly. Sometimes when a member of the public rescued an animal, they are given the opportunity to pick a name. At other times, managers at Asher's hosted Facebook events or votes to allow the public a chance to participate in choosing the names. In the case of the donkeys, Mikayla who managed their Facebook page at the time, gave their followers several options. In the end, they chose names from the phonetic alphabet 'Bravo, Echo, Delta and Tango.' The female donkeys that were adopted later were also assigned names in line with this system, namely, 'Juliet, India, and Charlie'. No doubt, the managers of Asher's gave the public a chance to participate with the intent that it could potentially create an even deeper sense of connection between the public and the animals.

The management followed similar naming conventions with other animal species such as the chickens, which were all named after other types of bird species such as Goose. By choosing thematic names, the names can thus distinguish each animal as an individual, but it also categorizes them as being part of their own species group. This played a critical part in framing the animals as distinct individuals who are valued and treated as such.

In an article on naming practices among women in southern Mozambique, Heidi Gengenbach (2000) argues that women assigned names to themselves to shape their own identity as historical subjects. They could use chosen names to highlight bonds to specific people, places or times. Significantly, she suggests that many of her black informants used their European names at times to assert trans-ethnic kinship with white individuals. At other times, they denied these names when they did not want to be associated with the "world of the whites" (Gengenbach, 2000: 537). I argue that my informants are trying to create and emphasize trans-species kinship bonds between them and the donkeys and other animals at the sanctuary. In addition, naming practices help to sever the bonds between the animals and their past lives in the industry.

In this as in many other things, my participants are trying to go against what they perceive as the situation in the 'industry'. The 'industry' is a blanket term that they use to refer to commercial farms, feedlots, abattoirs and sometimes more broadly, to any situation in which they feel that people were exploiting animals. The term is almost used as a bogeyman they could blame for any injustices against animals. 'The industry' is a frequent target of accusation, whether based on evidence or not. In many ways this is similar to the way participants treat and represent the threat to donkeys posed by the Chinese individuals who produce and consume ejiao. According

to the managers and volunteers, animals are only kept alive in the industry so that their ‘resources’ can be extracted (whatever that may be depending on the specific case). Much of their feelings can be summed up by this quote by Mikayla in a discussion on what they are doing at the sanctuary: “most of us are raised to think of these animals as resources for food, clothing, and as commodities. In all these cases, we are seeing them in terms of their usefulness to humans, and almost no value is placed on the fact that they are complex individuals who feel pain and who have feelings and families.” The idea of the industry and reactions against it is a significant point in Chapter 5. Of relevance in this chapter is how my participants use the idea of the ‘industry’ to create stories and biographies for each donkey.

A story of their own

Another strategy that the managers and volunteers employ to portray the donkeys as actors and subjects rather than as objects is through narratives. Just like humans, each of these animals has its own biography and life story, a fact that volunteers and managers at the sanctuary frequently stressed. Colette told me their stories when I was first introduced to the animals, and again at events, on tours, and when volunteers interacted with new visitors. My informants tell the narratives so often that they have become a central part of the oral and even written traditions of the sanctuary. I reproduce the gist of these traditions, sourced from Asher’s website, below.

The boys

Asher’s Farm Sanctuary is delighted and honoured that we have been able to give permanent sanctuary to four handsome lads, rescued from an illegal slaughterhouse, where they were destined to suffer and die for their skins as victims of the horrific donkey skin trade. We’re so grateful that they were rescued from a terrible fate and can live in peace and with all of the love, care and attention we can possibly lavish on them. We hope that, with them, we can help to educate, reach out and change hearts and that together we can serve as ambassadors for these wonderful beings (Asher’s Farm Sanctuary, 7 February 2019).

The girls

Mother, Charlie and eldest daughter, Juliet were rescued and rehabilitated by Highveld Horse Care Unit⁶ from an abuse & neglect case where they were worked almost to death, tied up when they weren't working, starved and then beaten for escaping to find food.

HHCU was surprised to find three faces staring back at them one morning. Charlie had given birth to another baby, India. She is the epitome of innocence and the only resident to have been born post-rescue, so that makes her the only animal at our sanctuary which has not been abused, neglected or mistreated in any way.

Charlie is still untrusting of humans, and we can't blame her at all. We are slowly gaining her trust, and we make a little more progress each day.

Juliet is an incredibly gentle donkey who loves kisses on her soft nose and will fall asleep on your shoulder if you let her (Asher's Farm Sanctuary, 2019).

The above are excerpts from the sanctuary's website, which had a collective page for the different groups of animals. However, more recently, each individual animal has its own page. These descriptions demonstrate that one of the preferred methods for my informants to communicate about the animals is through stories and anecdotes. This is not only a feature of Asher's but of welfarists and protectionists in general (Mason, 2005; Rudy, 2011). Activists use these stories to try to put a face to a name. This was often in the belief that teaching people more about one animal will forever change the person's attitude toward all of them. In *Loving Animals*, Kathy Rudy (2011) advocates for a new type of animal activism based on this idea.

My informants carefully crafted and rehearsed the stories to elicit sympathetic responses from their audience. Each of these biographies followed a certain narrative pattern. The narratives are usually centred on the transformation experienced by animals when they become residents of the sanctuary. The animal in question was initially in horrendous circumstances that were caused by mistreatment, abuse, neglect or ignorance at the hands of humans. Their well-being was in jeopardy when a good Samaritan found them. He or she had to then overcome obstacles or challenges to rescue the animal. After many trials and tribulations, the rescuer or the staff at Asher's finally brought the animal to the sanctuary, their 'forever home where their lives were changed forever'. According to Pearson (2011: 13-15), protectionists have used retelling of the

⁶ This is the largest equine welfare organization in South Africa.

transformation story as a rhetorical technique since the late nineteenth century to elicit sympathetic responses from the public for both human and animal victims of abuse. People use these stories to demonstrate the transformative powers of care and sympathy.

According to the narratives, each of the animals had a complete change of fortune. Their lives before and after the sanctuary could not be more different. In a sense, my informants represented the one as hell and the other as paradise. They were ‘saved’. Significantly the people at the sanctuary regularly call India a ‘born free’ because she was born after HHCU rescued her mother and sister. This became a critical part of her identity and biography. Joy and George Adamson brought the term to the fore when they used it as the title for a book and films about Elsa, a tame lion that they had raised. The *Born Free* book and films were a turning point in the way the media portrayed animals but also in the place they held in people’s consciousness (Beinart, 2002). It played an important role in the popularization of care and concern for the natural world in the West. Even more saliently, in South Africa, people use the term ‘born free’ to refer to the generation born after the end of apartheid and the beginning of democracy in the country.

Rescue and welfare organisations like the SPCA and the HHCU initially rescued many of the animal residents but not all. The fact that these animals were once legally somebody’s property is rarely if ever referred to. This could be seen as intentionally blurring the lines to help to reinforce the idea that individual people who are involved with Asher’s believe that as individuals, the donkeys can never legitimately be owned. My informants instead treat the animals as having been wrongfully incarcerated prisoners who are now free. This topic is mostly addressed by showing how their new conditions contrast with those of their past. One tool that volunteers and managers employ is showing before and after photos of the donkeys to show how their physical condition and perhaps their wider well-being has improved from the care they received at Asher’s. For example, they noted that Charlie was so thin that no one realized that she was pregnant until India was born. This is what participants referred to as rehabilitation. For them it describes the process of the donkeys recovery from the mistreatment they are assumed to have endured under their previous owners.

A significant part of these stories is, therefore, reframing the identity of donkeys and how visitors and volunteers perceive them, often by highlighting the subject–object dichotomy. According to my informants, donkeys in the industry are treated and perceived as having no

agency or autonomy. Instead, people ‘use’ them as they would normally a tool or an object. My participants not only disagree with this state but are trying to create a world in which this is no longer the case. They do much to frame the donkeys and other animals as being unique entities with a past and a future. In their new circumstances, the animals supposedly have more control over their lives.

Free agents

In addition to viewing the donkeys as individuals, people at the sanctuary view the animals as having agency and being actors in their own right instead of being passive in relation to others, their natures and their surroundings. This could be perceived on several levels. Ortner (2006: 134) as cited in Butt (2007: 115) states that “agency emphasizes individual language and desires, and all the ways in which actions are cognitively and emotionally pointed toward some purpose”. In other words, intentionality is a central part of this definition. This is challenging ground to navigate as the view that non-human actors may be seen as self-conscious subjects with their own thoughts and feelings is still “something of a heresy in ethnological and psychological circles” (Ingold, 1988: 6), although it is being increasingly championed by scholars like Griffin (1984).

My informants regularly infer intentionality in any actions that the animals take. There is a clear tendency on the part of the volunteers and managers to emphasize the agency of animals in the stories they tell about them. One remarkable example of this is in the retelling of one of the pig’s story. A man had picked her up on a highway after her escape from a truck suspected to be on its way to an abattoir. In one specific telling a volunteer told me that “Babe either fell or jumped off a truck in KwaZulu-Natal. At Asher’s Farm Sanctuary, we like to believe that she jumped”. Whether this is true or not, what is significant is that they always try to emphasize that she intentionally took this action. Significantly, this view assumes and suggests that the animals are capable of complex thought and even premeditation.

There were certainly instances where I observed animals performing intentional actions. This was most obvious when what they were doing conflicted with the desires of the humans. India was a typical culprit. She stages escapes from the pen she shares with other donkeys almost every day – despite the electrified fencing. To the consternation of her mother, Charlie, she would keep on grazing along the other side of the fence just out of reach. I almost never found her

wandering more than a few metres away, at least not until you tried to take her back. She is apparently careful to make the actual leap when no human is looking and tries to evade capture for as long as she can. In this way, she began to shape the daily routine and environment of the sanctuary, as everyone began to accept her escapades as inevitable and as permissible if the other donkeys stayed on the other side. Apparently, one loose donkey at a time was enough.

Overall, the donkeys seemed to be the animals that show agency through misbehaviour with the most success, as the torn yoga mats could attest. I observed similar occurrences daily, as when the donkeys ate all the newly applied window putty off the barn's windows. However, they are not alone in this. From the start, I needed to negotiate with the male goat, Basil, during every encounter whether he would butt me or not (usually unsuccessfully on my part). And on at least one occasion I had to use a bushel of spinach to ward off a rooster on the warpath.

Such as in the example of India, the actions of the animals, consciously or not, have a significant impact on their environment. Overton and Hamilakis (2014) argue that “the history of the engagement between human and nonhuman animals is one of co-shaping, and of ‘mutual becomings’” and that “non-human animals are embodied beings that, through their sensorial life processes, co-shape with humans the worlds we inhabit”. In the same way, the people at Asher's and the donkeys are co-shaping their environment and their social order.

Clearly, it is more difficult to accurately infer intentionality in these types of encounters with animals. As with the rooster and the goat, there was clearly some degree of instinctual drive involved. Most people doubt whether animals are even capable of intentionality or whether they are only driven by instinct, teaching or socialization (Carter & Charles, 2013). As Regan (1997) notes, the question of whether animals have autonomy is a controversial one and often one which is more concerned with the question of where the line should be drawn. In other words, which animals are autonomous and which are not? And to what extent can they act autonomously? However, a few factors seem to indicate that this was present at least on some level with the residents at Asher's. For example, the animals often react to verbal cues like a strongly emphasized ‘no’. Sometimes this will deter them completely, but most often this will only delay the action. They will then typically find a more secretive manner to accomplish the same deed at least showing their commitment to certain actions. When discussing the use of horses in medieval English transport and communication networks, David Shaw (2013: 142) says that a crucial element of their power “lies precisely in their potential for unpredictability, the fact

that their compliance cannot be transparently assumed”. According to Mitchell (2018: 237), animals’ ability to make choices comes from the behavioural properties that they share with others of their species, their own history and past interactions. Their biologically grounded traits and propensities, therefore, shape their behaviour but are not the only determinant.

From my evidence, it appears that animals have relatively more agency in this specific context than in the ‘industry’, but mostly still only by proxy. Humans still hold most of the power. They still play a primary role in shaping the daily routine and environment (even if they try to do it all for the benefit and according to the preferences of the animals). Mitchell (2018: 236-237) argues that “in most circumstances [animals’] opportunities for action, and certainly those available to domesticated animals, are constrained by the actions of people, yet even at their most restricted they are never entirely passive or incapable of behaving in ways that may, however temporarily, run counter to human wishes”. No doubt animals will act with intent in any situation.

Nevertheless, at Asher’s, my informants created an environment where the animals could express more agency and autonomy than they probably could have in other captive situations. This could be seen, for example, in how India was allowed to roam free, the keyword here is being ‘allowed’. But it may also be seen in one of the key policies at the sanctuary, which is that no one is to force animals into any interactions. It is always on the animals’ terms. If they no longer wanted to be petted or stand with you, you are to let them go.

Most animals hold marginal positions in the societies they inhabit. Their lives, their freedom and circumstances, are often in the hands of others. In most contexts, they have little to no authority or power. Activists often directly compare the circumstances of animals to those of slaves and prosecuted groups. J.M. Coetzee (Coetzee & Gutmann, 1999) makes a similar comparison in *The Lives of Animals*, where his main character, an animal advocate, compares the situation of animals to that of Jews in Nazi concentration camps. Fusari (2017) argues that animals are by definition an outgroup, as the term, ‘nonhuman’ itself “portrays them apophatically, in other words through negation, by telling us what they are not, rather than adopting a specific term to identify them. Therefore, they constitute a subaltern group in the Gramscian sense, because they are ‘subject to the activity of ruling groups’, in other words, humans, including in the ways they are represented and understood linguistically” (Fusari, 2017). People reinforce animals’ subservience through vocabulary, grammatical phenomena, as well as physical and economic measures. But at the sanctuary, my informants are trying to create an environment where animals are not in this subservient role.

Most often, people seem to define animals in terms of their relationships to us. For example, the ways in which people refer to donkeys as working animals, farm animals or breeding stock in a way that encompasses their whole identity. As a category, people often define animals in terms of the uniquely human characteristics that we lack “thus, the generic concept of ‘animal’ is negatively constituted by the sum of the deficiencies” (Ingold, 1988: 3). However, my human informants, in the end, define themselves in terms of the animals they care for. This is not to say that they do not define the animals in terms of themselves at all. But if you ask the human participants, they would say it works the other way around. On Asher’s website, for example, it says that “Oscar maintained that people are meant to be the animal keepers and protectors, but in today’s world they are, knowingly or unknowingly, exploiting animals for human gain”. Volunteers, managers and owners alike felt that they themselves are continuing this work. This take contradicts common interpretations that animals are there for our use or for us to have ‘dominion’ over, which is often supported by the Biblical passage on the Creation.⁷

Animal persons

Colette and I were sitting on the stoep in front of the café at the sanctuary. This was the centre point of social life at the sanctuary both on days when they were open to the public and ones when they were not. I usually sat there eating my lunch with the other volunteers and the managers. When our conversation began, Colette was visibly impatient because she was waiting for the arrival of a new resident. But the people from Highveld Horse Care, who were bringing the new horse – Duke – were running late.

I waited with her, and as we sat, we got into a deep discussion about the sanctuary and their plans and visions for the future.

I asked Colette why she felt that the welfare of animals was important?

She answered, “for me, animals have intrinsic value, it’s a life, it’s a soul (siel). It depends on what you believe. All life has intrinsic value. It is about the individual – the individual donkey or chicken or cow. I care about the individual. The individual has a right to life

⁷ Genesis 1: 24-26

and to live a good life, as natural a life as possible. People underestimate how important it is to just let them be. To just allow them to be a donkey or a chicken.”

My informants feel strongly that the animals have value in and of themselves. In an invitation to potential visitors, Mikayla made a pretty strong statement in this regard: “they are not sandwiches and shoes. They do count. They do matter. They are intelligent complex individuals capable of feeling the very same emotions humans do. Come see for yourself.” Value, in this case, goes beyond the material. The managers and board at the sanctuary feel that it is not appropriate to give animals an economic valuation as with other types of natural resources. Instead, their value arises on the social and metaphysical level.

By recognizing donkeys as individuals with unique personalities and traits, agency and intrinsic value, my informants are in many ways highlighting the similarities between ‘us’ and ‘them’, such as that the animals express joy when reunited with their favourite human just like the humans did. And at other times they are upset when they are separated. From one perspective, this may be interpreted as a result of anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphic thinking may be defined as the attribution of human dispositions and characteristics to animals (or to plants, artefacts, things or events).

As Morris (2000) and Mason (2005) note, anthropomorphism is often seen as making ‘false’ assumptions or attributions, as animals are often portrayed as being in many ways the binary opposites of humans. Humans’ capabilities for free will, thinking and emotional expression is often viewed as the features that distinguish them from the animal kingdom. However, many of these attributions contain at least a grain of truth. Mason (2005: 157) tries to show in his book *The Secret World of Farm Animals*, “just because cows do not show their feelings does not mean they do not have them”. Researchers have demonstrated that anthropomorphism, rather than being a projection of human characteristics on animals, instead demonstrates a certain level of kinship between humans and animals and shows that the humans in question do indeed have some understanding of the lives of other animals. For example, people in Malawi often engage in anthropomorphic thinking which is based on real first-hand knowledge and understanding of the behavioural characteristics of animals in the wild (Morris, 2000: 38).

The volunteers, managers and labourers undoubtedly have an intimate connection with and understanding of the animals with whom they share their lives, which helps them to predict their

actions and understand them (Noske cited in Morris 2000: 39). Nevertheless, frequently my informants' actions and beliefs went beyond this view by Morris that anthropomorphism is a demonstration of knowledge and that it can be seen as a way of recognizing familiar characteristics in animals. At times the managers and volunteers rather treat the animals as if they are human such as when they dressed the pigs in colourful bonnets and dresses to protect them from the sun. Or when actions by animals such as licking a volunteer are interpreted by my participants as gratitude. In cases where human values, emotions, motivations and preferences are imposed upon animals it is usually done as a strategy to convince outsiders about the animals' 'humanity' and to appeal for their sympathy.



Figure 2: Pig in a bonnet. Asher's Farm Sanctuary 2018

Although my informants regularly recognize similarities between humans and animals, they do not necessarily see animals as the same as humans. There are several ways in which they distinguish themselves from animals. One is that they see animals as innocents, whereas humans are seen as being fundamentally flawed. The animals never seem to act in any way that deviates from moral behaviour. In the case of my participants, they see animals as being able to act morally but only in the 'good' range of the spectrum. I argue that through this, people are creating a dichotomy between nature and culture where animals represent nature and humans culture and where nature is good and culture bad. For them, Asher's is a return to a heaven-like nature as opposed to the human-made hell of the industry.

Recently, many scholars have argued that some species of animals are capable of specific types of moral reasoning that were before seen as impossible. This includes concepts of justice and reciprocity (Waal, 1996; Peterson, 2011; Rowlands, 2012). Mason (2005) suggests that this might not be out of reach for farm animals either. But whether it is or not is not in the scope of this report. The point here is that my participants chose to view it in this way.

Another way in which my informants treat humans as different from animals is in the humans' ability to shape the world. This is a widely held understanding of the distinction between humans and animals. "Human persons are more than creators of meaning - 'being a person is essentially a process of making meaning'" (Morris, 2000: 50). The animals at Asher's could do so through their interactions and choices but not to the same extent. One example that stands out was a statement made by Colette in our formal interview. According to her, the ultimate goal in the board's and managers' worldview would be to let animals roam completely free and do what they want without any intervention. However, she recognized that to achieve this, humans had to create a world where this is possible.

Most Western conceptual schemes dictate that humans and animals are binary oppositions. This perception has begun to change, largely in terms of people's relationships to companion animals like dogs, but overall it is still the dominant schema (Podberscek, Paul & Serpell, 2000).

According to this viewpoint, we define ourselves in opposition to animals; instead, we could be said to define ourselves through our relationships with animals, but this is less so when it comes to farm or working animals. Morris (2000: 5) critiques the idea that people always interpret humans and animals in a dualistic fashion, as in Cartesian metaphysics, where the animal is purely a complex automaton (Ingold, 1988: 2). As I have written, this does not mean that my participants do not make ontological distinctions between natural and cultural phenomena, including humans and animals, but rather the distinction is not radical. This is what Morris (2000: 37) found in his fieldwork in Malawi. Here people did make a clear distinction between humans and animals, but the separation was not an 'abyss'. Instead, people recognized that they share many attributes and therefore had a complex and socially engaged attitude towards animals.

Despite these differences, my participants make it clear that they view animals as persons. This is supported by their focus on animal rights which is a topic of discussion in Chapter 5. In the academic world, there is much debate about the exact definition of personhood. An important

aspect to recognize here is the ways in which the specific society or culture defines a person. Jacobs (2001) notes a similar attachment and orientation towards donkeys in her study. She states that “like other animals, donkeys are dominated and represented by humans. Yet to their owners, they are also fellow living beings”.

Morris (2000: 42) proposes that it is necessary to distinguish between three distinct concepts pertaining to a person. They are the person as a “social being, as a cultural category, and as a psychological self – as a locus of identity and experience” (Morris, 2000: 42). I want to argue that according to these categories, my informants would call all the animals, including donkeys, persons in this context. By recognizing agency, the expression of emotions, personality and unique identities, they are recognising the animals as psychological selves. My participants understood the donkeys as cultural⁸ persons with souls and intrinsic value. People recognized this through naming practices, narratives and their treatment of the donkeys. At the same time, they characterized the donkeys as profoundly social beings with whom they formed personal and long-lasting relationships.

Part of the family

It is from this perspective of animals as persons and active subjects that their relationships to other subjects and the world around them is understood. On this basis, volunteers, managers and labourers formed relationships with individual animals. Therefore, they seemed to like some better than others and get along better with some than others. Colette, for example, saw Babe as her ‘best friend’. They ‘hung out’ and she spends many of her break times with her or Mr T (the 1 ton Friesian bull). But when asked, she said that she loved all the animals at the sanctuary.

Colette, Mikayla and the volunteers are the people who are most involved with the animals as individuals. The workers, visitors and the stay-in volunteers less so. The former spends significant amounts of time with the animals. Moreover, they take the time to greet each animal individually. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, they were also the people who spoke to the animals the most. For example, I noticed that they usually used a higher voice tone like that which people use when talking to pet dogs and making ‘baby talk’. All of them have nicknames for animals like ‘donks’ and ‘bubs’. Also out of the ordinary, is their expression of feelings

⁸ Here as elsewhere in the dissertation, I don’t use the term culture to refer to a single group of people that are conceptually bounded nor to a timeless and ahistorical system of knowledge. Instead, I recognize that culture can be seen as shared understandings that are continually evolving and are shaped and in turn shape human action.

towards the animals They are happy and excited when the animals are happy and healthy but are profoundly worried, upset and even distraught when any harm comes to them. This is closely associated with the way in which they describe their relationships with the animals. In many ways, my informants act and react to the animals as one would to a close human relative. Significantly, however, they treat them as an infant or child. Therefore, although they see donkeys as persons, they view them as having limited abilities and needing people to take care of them.

The managers award and are incredibly enthusiastic towards other people if they treat animals in the same way. One day I was helping Colette clean a wound on Babe that one of the other pigs had inflicted on her. I looked over to her tail and saw that the hairs on the tip were neatly braided. I asked her about it and she exclaimed: “Oh! That’s John. He loves the pigs. He has a special bond with them. He is the only one that braids her hair in this way.” He was one of the labourers at the sanctuary. The managers clearly favour John above the other labourers because of his bond with the animals. They always compliment his work and trust him with the most important tasks such as caring for the donkeys when they are ill. At the same time, the managers are quite critical of people who did not treat the animals in this way. For example, the first live-in volunteers that I met, Joanna and Nicole, never spent time with the animals. The managers labelled these individuals as ‘lui’ or lazy and they were the frequent subjects of gossip and disapproval.

The relationships that visitors and newcomers to the sanctuary had with the animals was visibly and tangibly different. As I have noted before, most of the time, they did not interact directly with the animals. The primary interaction between them was through taking photographs. They seemed far more comfortable with indirect contact. One method of supporting the sanctuary was by ‘adopting’ an animal. According to Asher’s website, you could sponsor a rescue to ‘become a hero’. These types of sponsorships have recently become very popular with zoos and other organizations involved with animals. Such sponsorships make the relationships that always accompany economic transactions visible. Asher’s frames the sponsorship as being mutually beneficial. The animals benefit by getting money to support their care, whereas the humans as heroes get affirmations of their morality and a personal visit with the animal. However, in this case, one party involved is oblivious to the said relationship; the relationship is clearly between the sanctuary and the donor. Anthropologists have recognized since Mauss (1969) that financial transactions, including gifts, are essentially about relationships. Mauss (1969) also argued that

there is no such thing as a free gift, or in this case donation. Sponsors at Asher's receive social recognition for being heroes by other members of the tightly knit vegan community in Gauteng. I repeatedly met and saw many of the same individuals at different vegan events. Many of the visitors to Asher's are also very active on Asher's Facebook page and other vegan Facebook groups based in the province.

Volunteering at the sanctuary gave me the opportunity to experience the relationships with the donkeys first-hand. I learnt that they are very particular about whom they like or want to interact with and when. Over time the animals became more comfortable with me as well as trusting. Eventually, I found that they would choose my company over that of other people. One Saturday, I went on a guided tour with a couple of visitors and a volunteer who was still relatively new. When we came to the donkeys, they were not in the mood to interact with the newcomers despite being enticed by treats, but I was soon crowded by several of them.

I saw many instances such as the above example where the donkeys themselves distinguished between different people. As Argent (2013) argues: "If each swan has the potential to be recognized as an individual, might also each swan have the ability to recognize humans as individuals as do horses" and perhaps other animals as well.

The donkeys have concurrent relationships with other donkeys and animals at the sanctuary. Wild donkeys are known for their high levels of aggression towards one another (Mitchell, 2018: 25). However, their behaviour and preferences are quite different once tamed and even more so among 'domesticated' donkey breeds. Domestic donkeys are known to be very social animals, so much so that they are known to walk in conga lines through their environments (Gallion, 2010: 66).

Bravo, Delta, Tango, Echo, India, Juliet and Charlie are certainly attached to one another. When separated, they would bray continuously until reunited. This was extremely clear when India was recovering from an operation. To aid her recovery, she had to be isolated and kept in one of the stables in the barn. She, Juliet and Charlie were so upset that they eventually put the other two in an adjoining pen for the time being.



Figure 3: Juliet trying to see India. Photograph by Anna James, Asher’s Farm Sanctuary, 2019

To some scholars viewing animals in this way means extending ideas of the social. Morris (2000: 6-7), however, argues that “sociality is a matter of degree and found throughout the animal kingdom ... Social interaction can, therefore, take place between humans and other social mammals”. At the level of sociality between humans and animals, it is felt and manifested through bodily gestures. Society, Sandelands (cited in Morris, 2000: 6-7) writes, is known to us through the body as a feeling, and everywhere affirmed through gesture and ritual. “feel society in a thousand quotidian acts – like a handshake, hug, kiss, embrace, dance, wave, a returned smile or gaze” (Sandelands, 1997: 142). Callon (1986: 4) proposed that the fieldworker should abandon all a priori distinctions between the natural and the social. Instead, he urges that “the observer follows the actors in order to identify the manner in which these define and associate the different elements by which they build and explain their world, whether it be social or natural”.

In the case of the sanctuary, society is expressed through a wide range of interactions, including verbal and gestural contact as well as physical contact. But of course, as Ingold (1974) notes, “both men and deer communicate among themselves, but between populations, communication

can be most imperfect, to the extent that each may effectively play a guessing game about the other”. However, the fact that they do communicate and learn to understand each other over time, at least to an extent, is indisputable. It was a continuous learning process. A regular visitor who described herself as Mr T’s mother explained it to me like this: “love is just two people dancing to the sound of music that no one else can hear.” Not only does this statement point to the way that the humans at Asher’s felt that they had special connections with the animals, but it also further demonstrates the way they frame these bond in the familiarity of familial constructs. Mr T’s mother was a woman who had brought him to Asher’s after taking him from a nearby research facility. In doing so, she felt she had in a sense adopted him and he therefore became her responsibility as a child would. However, it was not only a question of responsibility, it was also one of love and emotional attachment.

My informants see the animals as family members. Each new animal is announced as becoming a “part of the Asher’s family”. This reflects on several aspects of their relationship. First, is that the humans see the animals as equivalent to humans in many ways; they are also persons. Second, it demonstrates that the humans spend as much of their time with the animals as with their human families. Work at the sanctuary continues from 05:30 to 18:00 and does not stop for weekends, public holidays or festive seasons. Third, is that there are clearly high levels of trust and intimacy between all my informants – human and animal. This is not diminished by periods of absence. Or even when humans have to repeatedly administer painful treatments to the animals like injections or scrubbing their wounds.

I found that the donkeys, other animals and humans at the sanctuary can be viewed as being part of a network where the members are tied together by the sanctuary. It is physically, symbolically and socially the locus of these relationships. One way to understand this is through the actor–network theory (ANT). ANT was developed by Bruno Latour (1986, 1987 1996), Michael Callon (1986) and John Law (1986, 1999, Law & Hassard, 1999) and can be understood as an empirical approach rather than a typical theory. Its proponents hold that all the entities within a particular social network or cultural context are interlinked. This includes humans, animals, artefacts and so on. Each of these actors has an agency of their own and can, therefore, impact on the other actors who are present. Latour’s (1999) original proposition was that each of the actors within the network is of equal standing and that their actions carry equal weight. However, as Mitchell (2018: 239) notes, this “is open to criticisms for the obvious reason that animals often occupy unavoidably subordinate positions within flows of interaction”.

The approach has been applied to all kinds of contexts where people interact with the natural world like scallop harvesting, salmon farming, wildlife tourism and more. The theory was at first mainly applied in fieldwork involving scientists and the ‘pursuit of science’. In these networks, like the one studied by Callon (1986) of scientists, fishermen and scallops, the actors shaped each other’s roles through their interactions, choices and negotiations with each other, and did so in the presence of interventions from other forces. They did so without imposing fixed definitions. The individual actors are often defined as representatives of larger collectives like a species or a community. The process through which these separate entities become unified is translation. Callon (1986: 25–26) described translation as building “an actor-world from entities. It attaches characteristics to them [actors] and establishes stable relationships between them. Translation is a definition and the delineation of a scenario”.

Translation is an ongoing process that consists of four main phases: problematization, intersement, enrolment, and mobilisation. During problematization, a focal group of actors define the network by identifying a set of actors and defining their identity and thereby establishing themselves as an indispensable part of this network (Callon, 1986: 6). At Asher’s, this phase is represented by the managers and directors of the board structuring the sanctuary and compiling a list of goals as well as guidelines that should be adhered to and strived for.

The second phase, intersement is when the central actors try to convince others to accept their definition of the network (Callon, 1986: 8). This phase of translation is particularly apparent at the sanctuary as new actors are continually being introduced and incorporated into the network. The directors, managers, and long-term volunteers are always trying to reinforce the institutional culture at Asher’s. Through narratives, naming conventions, training and modelling they try to convince both human and animals that the vegan way and the Asher’s way is the right way.

If intersement was successful, enrolment is the stage during which others accept the definition of themselves and the network (Callon, 1986: 10). This stage like the others, is not one-sided nor uniform as each actor knowingly or unknowingly negotiates their identity and place in the network. For example, the donkeys at Asher’s are not always well behaved like ‘benevolent’ animals should be. They often act in ways that run contrary to the managers’ wishes and thereby alter the initial problematization and definitions. But in the end, their dominant image is that of

kind, good-natured animals that the humans at the sanctuary should care for and that should be treated like persons.

Lastly, mobilisation is when principal actors come to represent the network to the outside world (Callon, 1986: 12). The managers and directors are no doubt the leading authorities at the sanctuary. It is they who are the main spokesperson for Asher's and the other actors who are mainly silent such as the animals and the labourers. It is also they who try to lead the charge in the formation and the maintenance of the relationships and social order in this microcosm.

Significantly, this does not mean that the networks nor their formation fit into a perfect schema. Instead, the process is typically filled with betrayals and controversies as actors mutiny against the roles they are pushed towards (Callon, 1986: 15-17). However, if translation is successful, there will be a dominant discourse that unifies the group. As I will continue to show throughout this dissertation, even though there is some dissent (on the part of animals and humans), at Asher's there is an overarching narrative that the people at the sanctuary project about their network both internally and externally.

In the context of the sanctuary, the actors may be identified as the board of directors, managers, volunteers, labourers, visitors, donkeys, pigs and all the other animal residents. I found that in their own way, each of these actors have agency of their own and can shape their context and environment. Recognizing this does not exclude 'environmental' or 'economic' elements but rather suggests that the actors are involved in a life process of continuous unfolding and becoming, where they are linked in a complex web of associations (Overton & Hamilakis, 2014). They are continually in the process of 'mutual becoming'.

Plurality: The individual and the symbol

There is a collective group called donkeys which is recognised at the sanctuary, but I was surprised at how much attention is paid to the individual animals and how little to the welfare of the species in daily life at the sanctuary. Rescuing and improving the welfare of farm animals appeared to be an essential part of their mission, but this is not what plays out on a daily, weekly, or even monthly basis. However, I soon found out from a further review of the literature that this is a common situation in animal welfare and activism. As Michael Pollan (2007) states: "for the animal rightist concerns himself only with the individual." Arluke and Sanders (1996), for

example, noted the lengths that workers at animal sanctuaries would go to, to prevent their favourites from being euthanized.

This is not to say that this is the only way people approach or view the donkeys at the sanctuary. Even though at first glance it is the individuals that are significant, this does not mean that the donkeys are not also interpreted as objects of cultural meaning, only less explicitly. Animals have always been sites of cultural production for humans, whether they be cocks in Bali (Geertz, 1973) or cattle in Lesotho (Ferguson, 1985). However, the social and individuated understanding and the symbolic are not necessarily distinct. Instead, I found that the different levels of meaning feed into one another. According to Morris (2000: 43), “the relationship between social praxis and cultural representations is a dialectical one”. The symbolic understanding adds another dimension to the identity of each animal.

My participants are clearly concerned and aware of the prevailing views on donkeys. The state of affairs of donkeys is often seen as a result of perceptions of the animals as ‘dom’ [dumb] or even ‘lae status’ [low status]. With their stories and by allowing opportunities for interaction and experience, Asher’s is trying to change this perception. When asked why she wanted to work specifically with farm animals, Colette said, “because farm animals or farmed animals are so overlooked. I mean everyone wants to save the rhinos and fluffy dogs and cats. But no one cares about the animals we eat. I’ve always wanted to, after watching the Ingrid Newkirk documentary, wanted to do more for the animals that we take for granted. Um, I thought I’m the only one who can do it.” They felt that it was unjust that the more glamorous animals were favoured. If all animals are individuals, and all animals are persons, what makes one worth saving and the other not?

Among these forgotten animals, donkeys are seen as the ultimate ‘underdog’. This is a view I found repeated by other welfare organizations like the Eseltjiesrus Donkey Sanctuary. At Asher’s, some of the donkeys are seen as being more unfortunate owing to their personalities which keeps them in the background. This was clearly demonstrated in one conversation I had with a volunteer.

Me: How would you describe your relationship with the donkeys?

Brianna (volunteer): So Juliet is one of my favourite animals here. I love all of them, but I have a very soft spot for Juliet and Delta. They are both underdogs. They don't get as much attention as the others. Bravo has that beautiful chocolate coat and Echo is so fluffy and so on. People sometimes gravitate to them. But all donkeys have much, much more to say if you are willing to listen. I actually like donkeys more than horses. I sometimes think that they are much smarter. And they are so down to earth and soft. Whereas horses can be so snobbish and high and mighty, and even a bit standoffish.

Compared to horses she sees donkeys instead as being 'plat op die aarde' [down to earth]. They are viewed as being extremely good-natured and loyal both as a species and as individuals. The fact that not everyone views them in this way means that they are undervalued, and this is treated as insulting. Interestingly, the layout of the sanctuary mostly reflects this preference for donkeys with them being physically placed at the forefront. The other animals, like horses and the dangerous or riskier ones, are usually in the background, especially at events.

It should also be noted that the managers and board at Asher's hold specific perceptions and assumptions about what the 'natural' state is for a certain species of animal. They are trying to create a space where they can express this identity by 'just being donkeys'. In doing so, they recognise that "every kind of organism, as a species-being (to use Marx's term), is in a sense unique and has some defining characteristics by which it can be identified as an entity different from all others" (Morris, 2000: 35). But this is treated as only one aspect of each animal's identity, not as deterministic of their personalities and behaviour. For my informants, the donkeys' uniqueness trumped their collective identity. They are rather seen as representatives of their species just as each human is a representative of theirs. In other words, on some occasions, such as what Morris (2000: 36) found in Malawi, people recognize the individuality of species being, as well as the processes through which identity is constituted. Not one or the other (Morris, 2000: 36).

The meanings of donkeys at Asher's Farm Sanctuary are thus multifaceted and fluid, just like that of the humans around them. On one level, there is the agent who can act intentionally and thereby shape their experience, relationships and environment. This entity has recognizable characteristics, both physical and psychological, that distinguish it from other species and members of its own. On another, there is the 'person' as the humans around them recognize him or her. These are the identities assigned to each of the donkeys. It is on this basis that the

managers, labourers and volunteers at the sanctuary interact with them and that these individuals form part of a network with others. But there is also the donkey as the symbol. In other words, the donkeys as a cultural representation of certain values, roles and meanings. This is constructed differently depending on the context but of primary importance is the idea of the underdog, as Gallion (2010: 28) puts it, the “underappreciated species”. On this level, individual donkeys are used by my participants as models for the entirety of their species. The way they are perceived and portrayed depended heavily on the context, particularly relating to the people involved – who was discussing them with whom. In a sense, they are living biographies whose identities are constantly being shaped and influenced in this case through their position in a network with other actors. They can be said to be in the process of becoming.

At Asher’s my informants try to paint each animal as an individual with their own stories, as subjects. They establish the donkeys as persons and as actors through various actions, predominantly naming practices, narrative strategies, and facilitating and shaping the interactions between the donkeys and visitors. The managers and volunteers emphasize that they do not see the animals as ‘products’ in the industry who may become ‘useless’ and therefore are discarded after they have been ‘spent’. According to my informants, animals are only kept alive in the ‘industry’ so that their ‘resources’ can be extracted, whatever that might be in the specific case. Above all “their aim [in adopting the first rescues] was to rehabilitate the rescues in order for people to see that they can be transformed and are in fact, loving, gentle and brave” (Asher’s Farm Sanctuary, 2018). Overall, my informants are trying to redefine the donkey residents at Asher’s and change people’s perceptions of animals.

The way that my informants perceive and relate to animals is a critical aspect of understanding the sanctuary and adherence to a vegan lifestyle. These individuals try to approach all animals in all situations as persons who are in many ways like humans. As such, the people approach and treat the animals as individual actors who form part of an actor-network with all the other individuals at the sanctuary. This is a critical part of their worldview and the microcosm that they are trying to create.

Chapter 5: ‘I don’t eat my friends’- Purity, pollution and personhood in veganism

“... the way we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world. Daily, our eating turns nature into culture, transforming the body of the world into our bodies and minds” (Pollan, 2007).

Anthropologists and other scholars have long made similar arguments. If eating is “not a bad way to get to know a place” (Pollan, 2007), what in this case can we learn from eating at the sanctuary?

Veganism as a core part of the sanctuary

Veganism is a central part of Asher’s philosophy. It is one of the core tenets on which the sanctuary is based and around which it is structured. The whole concept of a farm sanctuary is predicated on abstention from the use of animals and animal products. Veganism also plays an important role in the lives of most of my informants. It is therefore crucial to understanding the ways that they organize and live their lives and is once again a critical principle of their collective worldview.

In this chapter, I discuss veganism and what it means at Asher’s. This entails looking at it as a pattern of consumption, sets of behaviours, a lifestyle, a worldview and, significantly, an approach to morality. I link this to my informants’ perceptions of animals as persons and actors with whom they have meaningful relationships.

The roots of veganism

Historically, humans across the world have eaten a widely varied diet. Evidence suggests that our prehistoric ancestors were herbivores, but at some point in our past this changed. As omnivores, we have evolved to feed ourselves with several sources of food. This includes plants, insects, meat, fish and other animal products (Spencer, 1996: xi). It can be argued that not being limited in this way offers evolutionary advantages. But in other ways, this has presented us with problems such as deciding what constitutes a balanced diet and how to fulfil our nutritional

needs. Michael Pollan (2007) argues that this range of choices contributes to the inability of different societies and cultures to agree on a diet based either on taste or health.

Vegetarianism and veganism arose as two possible patterns of consumption, although the latter only appeared much later. From the beginning, a distinction must be made between the voluntary abstention from meat and animal products and the involuntary. The latter mostly occurs due to a lack of access as a result of poverty.

The roots of the vegetarian ideal as a moral imperative arose at around 500 BC. The commitment that ‘thou shalt not kill for food’ first made an impact on India and Greece (Spencer, 1996). Significantly, this was during the lifetime of Buddha and Pythagoras. But for the most part, vegetarianism remained marginal. The only groups among which this became more widespread was among Hindus in India and Buddhists spread across Asia.

Several historical figures are reported as having been ethical vegetarians, including Pythagoras, Seneca, Plotinus, Porphyry of Tyre, and finally the symbol of anti-vegan propaganda, Adolf Hitler (Martinelli & Berkmanienè, 2018: 511-512). These figures are often cited as inspiring people’s commitment to veganism except, of course, figures such as Hitler who are used to dissuade people from adopting vegetarianism.

The first official appearance of the term ‘vegan’ was in 1944 when it was used by a Leicester member of the UK Vegetarian Society, Donald Watson. He led a sub-group of fellows who renounced dairy and eggs and coined the word ‘vegan’. In his quarterly newsletter, we see the first official definition of ‘veganism’ in 1951: “the doctrine that man should live without exploiting animals” (Martinelli & Berkmanienè, 2018: 512-513; Watson, 1951). From this point, the lifestyle gained traction. A growing and increasingly influential movement of philosophers, ethicists, law professors and activists became convinced that the great moral struggle of our time would be for the rights of animals (Pollan, 2002). Some of the key influencers in the establishment of this lifestyle were Peter Singer, Tom Regan, James Rachels, Matthew Scully, Steven M. Wise and Joy Williams.

One of Singer’s (1990) primary arguments is that “[i]f possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his or her own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit nonhumans for the same purpose?” (Pollan, 2002). Therefore, he argues that just because animals are different from humans and less skilled in certain aspects like reasoning, is not a

justification for humans to use them. Instead, he feels that their lack of certain capabilities is the reason why people have a moral imperative to care for animals as in the case of children or people who are unable to care for themselves.

On this basis, animals deserve the same consideration as humans. But this does not mean that they can be treated in the same way as people. To corroborate this, key figures in the vegan movement often referred to utilitarianists such as Jeremy Bentham (Singer, 1990). Equal consideration of interests is not the same as equal treatment. Singer (1990) points out that children have an interest in being educated; pigs in rooting around in the dirt. But where their interests are the same, the principle of equality demands they receive the same consideration. And the one all-important interest that we share with pigs, as with all sentient creatures, is an interest in avoiding pain. To this, people often answer that without human intervention and cultivation, farm animals would not be able to survive. However, vegans often respond that if they were never born, they could never suffer and be harmed (Pollan, 2002). The question is, therefore, not one of similarities and differences, but of interests and specifically what is in the animal's best interests. According to vegans, it does not matter that an animal's interests are different from those of a human; these interests still need to be pursued.

Over time veganism became more mainstream, and more people joined the movement. Their belief that “thou shalt not eat not eat-meat-but-neither-eggs-and-dairy” made vegetarians look conservative and almost as specieist⁹ as meat-eaters (Martinelli & Berkmanienè, 2018: 502). The vegan ideal was not derived, nor did it gain traction, in a vacuum. One of the major influences was no doubt the fact that publicly expressed attitudes in the last half-century have become more protective and benign (Beinart, 2002: 106-107). Suzuki (2017), for example, points to the increase in conservation efforts across southern Africa. Several factors played a role in this concurrently. Beinart (2002) argues that the increase in films and books throughout the 20th century that portrayed wild animals, in which directors and documentarians increasingly created an image of storied animals to which people could relate, played a role. This helped to bring animals into the home and into the fold of culture in a different way. Additionally, there was an influx of knowledge on animals and their behaviour such as Jane Goodall's (2010) landmark work with chimpanzees. But just as the proponents of vegan and vegetarian lifestyles rose, so did their detractors (Tree, 2019; Hall, 2019; Keith, 2009). They level a range of criticisms against the movement, which include that the diet is unhealthy, that it has a negative impact on the

⁹ In other words, they are prejudiced or biased in favour of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species

environment and even that it is anti-human. Therefore, the topic is now often a contentious issue.

At the same time, industrial farming practices reached an all-time high and the global demand for meat is projected to keep on rising (Yates-Doerr, 2012: 12). The advent of farming undoubtedly had a profound effect on the way that humans relate to the natural world, especially toward animal life. It can be represented as a ‘fundamental break’ with hunter-gatherer attitudes and other modes of production that came before it (Morris, 2000: 22). It is a far stretch from views like those held by hunter-gatherer societies which are associated with maintaining a sense of harmony between humans and the natural world (Morris, 2000: 20) and puts emphasis on complementary relations with animals (Tanner, 1988: 52). Serpell (1996: 212) calls the shift to intensive agriculture a ‘fall from grace’. In hunter-gatherer and pastoral societies, people recognize a certain kinship with animals and usually adhere to rituals of atonement when they kill an animal. Intensive farming represents a new approach to the domination and manipulation of nature.

Relationships to animals are often relations of power, especially when they are using them for their resources. Most often, these relationships represent the power of people over animals as species groups, or of specific human individuals over specific animal individuals, and of some people over others (Mitchell, 2018: 5). This situation became even more pronounced as production moved from the household or family farm to industry. The concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO¹⁰) has so far arisen as the most prevalent solution to meeting the demand for meat. These are large commercial operations where more than a thousand animals are kept in one enclosure. The human–animal relations here are exploitative relations that are based on classical capitalist lines where the owners' concern is with the cost-effective organization of the animals' labour and reproduction (Tanner, 1988: 53). One party, the human, clearly gains far more in these relationships than the other, the animal.

To visit a modern CAFO is to enter a world that, for all its technological sophistication, is still designed according to Cartesian principles: animals are machines incapable of feeling pain (Pollan, 2002). If we are to believe eyewitness reports and SPCA inspectors, the conditions in which donkeys are held and slaughtered for their hides are on a similar level; perhaps even worse due to a lack of regulation. Scully (2011) calls the contemporary factory farm “our own worst

¹⁰ These are intensive animal feeding operation in which over 1000 animal units are confined for over 45 days a year. It's the typical operation my informants spoke about when they refer to the ‘industry’.

nightmare”. Many scholars and writers agree that the root cause of the abhorrent conditions is the adherence to industrial capitalism where profits and efficiency take precedence over all other considerations (Pollan, 2002; 2007; Mason, 2005; Podberscek et al., 2000; Leroy & Praet, 2017). In these contexts, animals are treated as the automata of René Descartes, as soulless and destined to serve humankind, possibly as a practical construct to place the problematic act of animal killing beyond moral concern (Leroy & Praet, 2017: 70).

Once the shift occurred to these ‘disassembly lines’, slaughterhouses and feedlots were soon deemed inappropriate for middle-class neighbourhoods. In many countries, including South Africa, they are now relegated to the outskirts of our cities and towns and often to even more rural locations where possible. Michael Pollan (2002) notes that this change was made with intent as “forgetting, or not knowing in the first place, is what the industrial food chain is all about, the principal reason it is so opaque, for if we could see what lies on the far side of the increasingly high walls of our industrial agriculture, we would surely change the way we eat”. The metaphoric and imagined animals remain in our minds, but the “real animals have become marginalized” (Tanner, 1988: 56).

Despite attempts to hide, or at least keep the uncomfortable truth out of sight, confrontations with contemporary practices of industrial meat production are inevitable in the age of the “information revolution” (Leroy & Praet, 2017: 73). This helped to create a reality where for most people eating meat is no longer framed as interaction with animals, but rather as an unquestioned contact with food (Leroy & Praet, 2017: 72).

Agriculture is currently the largest industry in South Africa and is experiencing the highest rate of annual growth. The country is known casually as a nation of meat lovers, with beef and chicken as the top picks and 750 thousand tonnes and almost 2000 thousand tons respectively being consumed from 2014 to 2016 (Steyn, 2018). Consumption of other animal products is also high. Most of the animal products in the country originate from factory farms. Meat consumption in East and southern Africa is expected to more than triple by 2040 (Steyn, 2018).

In both developed and developing countries around the world there seems to be a gradual rise in the consumption of meat and animal products. This often sparks concern not only in terms of the animal cost but the environmental costs as well (Martinelli & Berkmanienė, 2018: 510). People are concerned about the carbon footprint of livestock like cattle, high quantities of animal waste, resources spent on producing animal feed and deforestation for farming lands.

It is in this context that new alternative patterns of food consumption arose. Many of these are centred around a concern with the welfare of animals and the health of the humans who follow these diets. These include such movements as paleo diets, raw diets, happy meat, organic foods and so on. As Martinelli and Berkmanienė (2018: 502) put it:

The choice of a restaurant, previously a simple quality-price affair in the most Gramscian of ways (tasty and cheap: great; tasty and non-cheap: not so great, but good if you have to impress someone; non-tasty and non-cheap: tragedy; non-tasty and cheap: very bad, but at least we haven't wasted too much money), was little by little becoming a multidimensional, multisensorial and multidisciplinary enterprise that would carry out most of the fundamental philosophical questions. Food to see, food to touch, food as history, food as geography, food that goes fast, food that goes slow, food that is near, food that is far, food that is authentic, food that is not. And, inevitably, food as politics.

Unfortunately, there are no reliable statistical data available on the number of vegans in South Africa. But this difficulty is not limited to this region. Martinelli and Berkmanienė (2018: 506) note that one of the major problems in studying veganism is that most wide-scale surveys are conducted by NGOs working within and for the vegan community. Another is that it can be challenging to correctly circumscribe the analytical field. One of the main concerns in this regard is that there is much variation in what people recognize as a vegan (Martinelli & Berkmanienė, 2018: 506).

Yet, information can be gleaned from the statistics of other countries. Roughly 2% of the American population identify as vegan (Martinelli & Berkmanienė, 2018: 507). Of those, the majority, about 74%, are female and tend to be liberal-leftists politically, are generally more educated than carnists and are more likely to take a secular/atheist position on religious matters (Martinelli & Berkmanienė, 2018: 507). This resembles the demographics of my informants. Except for the labourers, employees were almost all female, a pattern that was reflected among the visitors. They certainly lean toward a liberal rather than a conservative approach in terms of values as well as politics. Most of them had completed high school and had completed further studies. A few of my participants were Jewish, mostly the family that founded the sanctuary, but many of the other volunteers and visitors were secular or even atheist.

Veganism has increased dramatically across the West (Martinelli & Berkmanienė, 2018; Pollan, 2002; Spencer, 1996; Leroy & Praet, 2017). Some evidence suggests that veganism appears to be becoming more prevalent as a topic of interest and a diet. For example, according to Google Trend data, South Africa rated as the 23rd country in terms of the popularity of searches on the Google search engine about ‘veganism’ and related terms (Chef’s Pencil, 2019).

Animals in South Africa are legally protected under the Animal Protection Act of 1962. This statute covers domestic animals and birds, and wild animals, birds and reptiles that are in captivity or under the control of humans. The Act contains a detailed list of prohibited acts of cruelty, including overloading, causing unnecessary suffering due to confinement, chaining or tethering, abandonment, unnecessarily denying food or water, keeping in a dirty or parasitic condition, or failing to provide veterinary assistance. There is also a general provision prohibiting wanton, unreasonable or negligible commission or omission of acts resulting in unnecessary suffering. However, as noted in Chapter 3, there are concerns about how the Act is implemented especially in the case of animals like donkeys.

What to eat?

First, I discuss veganism at the sanctuary as a pattern of consumption and restrictions. As Martinelli and Berkmanienė (2018: 510) note, it is not rare to witness (in both the mass media and social networks) a lumping together of various movements within the same melting pot of ‘veganism’. The sets of behaviour and dietary rules that people who self-identify as vegan follow, vary widely. For this reason, it is necessary to delineate what people mean by this term in the context of Asher’s Farm Sanctuary.

Most of my informants appear to agree on their definition of veganism as a diet. For them, it means that they abstain from animal meat and any other animal-derived products and ingredients such as dairy and eggs. Leroy and Praet (2017: 71) note that vegans, vegetarians and meat-eaters alike set up differential scales reflecting the wrongness of killing that runs down from humans over vertebrates to animals that are positioned ‘lower’ in the evolutionary tree. The exact composition of the scale is, however, context-dependent (Leroy & Praet, 2017: 71). In some cases, vegans set out rules such as that they are not allowed to eat anything with a central nervous system. Such a definition means that they can eat some non-plant organisms like

molluscs because they do not have central nervous systems. However, my informants are mostly very strict and excluded molluscs, insects and even products produced by insects like honey.

These ingredients are not to be included or used in the making of anything that my vegan informants ingested. This not only includes food but beverages and medicines as well. The rules also apply to non-ingested items. They do not buy any products that are made using animals. Animal testing is also held in contempt. Though many of the people in the study did use products that companies had developed through animal testing in the past, they now try to only buy products that are currently 'cruelty-free'.

Excluding these items mean that my informants' diets are rather limited compared to people of a similar economic class in South Africa. According to this pattern, as vegans, they are only allowed to use or eat products that originate from plants. For this reason, the diet is also called 'plant-based'. Most of the vegan informants are knowledgeable regarding scientific information and calculations involving the nutritional content of various foodstuffs. This a key point of dispute between them and non-vegans, thus they make sure they are well versed in the scientific and mathematical lingo of grams of proteins, carbs and so forth. They become very animated and enthusiastic while recounting tales of such verbal or written battles with meat-eaters. To use vegan terminology of choice, their diets primarily consist of carbohydrates in the form of bread, pasta and less refined starches like potato and whole grains. It is important for these individuals to substitute meat with plants that are high in protein like legumes and mushrooms.

I often heard informants insisting that veganism was good for their health. Despite this concern with nutritional content, their own health is not always a priority. Colette for one seems to be more concerned for the well-being of the animals than her own. "Look, I'm not vegan for health reasons." As one volunteer, Cathy, said, "as long as no animals die for my cupcakes, I'm happy." Most of the time, they insist that they would never 'revert' to meat-eating no matter the reason. Briana, one of the student volunteers, sought advice from me and others about her persistent skin problems. Apparently, they had started more or less at the same time that she began this lifestyle. The one doctor she had visited had told her that the problems were likely caused by her diet. But since then, she had refrained from visiting a medical doctor as she could not find one who was overtly vegan themselves.

My informants' goal is to never stray from their list of culturally approved foods under any circumstances. Even accidental ingestion causes them much psychological, and according to them, physical distress. According to conversations with Colette and Mikayla, even straying once means complete failure. For the most part, they hold themselves accountable. However, I observed vegans reacting very critically and negatively toward one another both in face-to-face reactions and on social media if they strayed.

But having rules does not always mean complete adherence. I did not hear a single story of these individuals' experiences with veganism that did not include at least a minor relapse or slip-up. None of them made the switch instantaneously. Instead, going vegan was a process. Even though straying was part of all their stories, it belonged solely in the 'past'. No one would admit to having eaten any forbidden food recently. Once they are vegan, people feel that it is permanent and there is no going back. This perhaps reflects a trend among vegan social media influencers and users who tout that people who go back to meat-eating were never truly vegan if they do not adhere to the lifestyle for life. According to one YouTuber, Freelee The BananaGirl, in her video *Why I'm No Longer Vegan Response* (2020), people who really care about animals will never give up on them. Each individual vegan I met felt that there was personally no way they could end their abstinence.

Most of the vegans I met at Asher's became vegan despite their food preferences. One common complaint is their difficulty in giving up cheese. Most of the time people still seem to prefer food made with animal products. There seems to be an overarching concern with food, the options available and how they taste. For example, Colette and Elise (Oscar's widow) make many of the items at the tea garden to resemble foods containing animal products by using 'meatless meats' and other substitutes. The star item was the Beyond Burger, its key ingredient the Beyond Patty, which is praised for its resemblance to meat.

I spent most of my lunches outside the tea garden with the other volunteers and the managers. More often than not, their packed lunches resembled dishes that would normally contain meat. For example, one of Colette's favourite meals was a 'tuna' mayo sandwich that she made with chickpeas instead of tuna. My informants' preference for animal products as an ingredient is not only based on taste. In some cases, they lamented the differences in other properties between the original food and its alternative, like that nothing bakes like 'real butter' and 'real egg'. However,

when they were talking to newcomers and visitors, they would stress how delicious vegan food was.

This is one of many contradictions that I noted. In theory, my informants' views might be binary. But in practice, they are often complex and multifaceted. Significantly, my analysis shows that the primary foods these vegans treat as disgusting are meats, in other words, actual flesh. Products like dairy that do not necessarily involve killing an animal are still taboo but are treated with less contempt. The feelings of kinship that Collette, Mikayla and many of the individuals have towards the animals can help to explain the feelings of disgust that often-accompanied descriptions of meat. Disgust can be related to anything that reminds humans of their own mortality and animal nature, although other factors such as “aversive texture” are also important (Leroy & Praet, 2017: 73).

On this basis, anything made from the body of a donkey is seen as problematic. This included meat, milk, hides and ejiao. In the eyes of the most militant adherents, there is no purpose at all to ingesting animal flesh or animal-derived products. Brianna, another volunteer, told me one day: “I feel there isn't any reason why people today should still eat animals. There is just no excuse.” By drawing on their own past experiences, they felt they could at least relate more comfortably to eating the meat or products from more conventional animals like cows, whereas the use of any ingredients derived from donkeys seemed like the most unreasonable and extravagant indulgence because it was so uncommon in South Africa. It appears that for most of the world eating donkey meat is still being avoided (Chapter 3), or even tabooed, as the global outcry showed after a study found that donkey meat was being packaged and sold as beef in South Africa (*The Telegraph*, 2013).

My informants do not see meat or any other animal-derived ingredient as something necessary or beneficial to them or other humans. Instead, they see it as an unnecessary indulgence of unsavoury desires. It is treated as completely superfluous, which in their perspectives makes it even worse if people continue to eat meat. However, as Michael Pollan notes (2002), by asking that people stop eating meat they are asking that we act toward animals in a most unanimalistic way. Therefore, animals are allowed to eat as they would, but as humans, we should somehow be above this. This questions commonly held scientific understandings of humans as omnivores.

Purity and pollution

On one of my first days at the sanctuary, I was instructed to clean the chickens' bedding. The board was having trouble with the sanctuary's finances and its suppliers that month and had been unable to replace the bedding as regularly as they normally would. For this task, I was given a bucket and a rake and told to use the rake to turn over the shavings and then use my bare hands to 'sift' out some of the bigger pieces of faeces.

I had expected a fair share of 'dirty' work (cleaning stalls, grooming animals and so on), but this was not exactly what I had in mind.

After an hour or so one of the hens made a commotion in a corner on a makeshift nest of straw. Colette rushed in and immediately starting crooning to Hazel. She said that she thought Hazel was going to lay an egg. She explained that they screamed like that because the process caused them so much pain and distress. Once Hazel was done, Colette gently lifted her and said "I'm sorry baby. I feel so bad when I have to take away their eggs, sometimes I hollow them out carefully and put the empty shell back. But it's for the best. Otherwise, they keep on sitting on them, but they are unfertilized. We take them and keep them in the fridge and once we have a few make some scrambled eggs and give it to the chickens. You have to keep an eye out for me. Sometimes the workers take the eggs. They know they aren't allowed to, but they still do. So, we try to take the eggs as soon as possible."

Once she was done with her explanation, I noticed a rubber egg replica lying in one of the nests.

Anxiety about the eggs was a frequent theme during the course of my fieldwork. At times, Colette or Mikayla even scolded or interrogated the labourers if they suspected one of them of taking an egg. It is a source of ongoing tension. This incident was one of the first glimpses I had of a more complex understanding of the sanctuary, and my informants' approach to animals, veganism and, more importantly, to their specific taboos.

My informants' abstention from certain ingredients is based on taboos. Robertson Smith (1889: 142 cited in Douglas, 1966: 10) used the word 'taboo' for restrictions on "man's arbitrary use of natural things, enforced by the dread of supernatural penalties". The concept of taboo means 'uncanny', 'dangerous', 'forbidden', and is primarily expressed through prohibitions and

restrictions (Freud, 2002: 21-22; Radcliffe-Brown, 1939: 8). These forbidden items or behaviours are often linked to notions of uncleanness. But upon further analysis, they often say something about the values of the specific society (Douglas, 1966: 66). Traditionally, food and dietary rules are often sites of concern over ideas of purity and pollution.

Freud (2002) lists many of the potential objects of taboo of which two are here most relevant. First, the safeguarding of the weak, and second, the protection against the dangers of coming into contact with corpses or eating certain foods (Freud, 2002: 23). The source of taboo is a peculiar magical power which is inherent in the person or object – in the case of my research, the donkeys. This power is usually attached to uncanny things, like sickness and death, exceptional states like menstruation, and special individuals like babies and kings (Freud, 2002: 26). I try to show in this chapter that the power of taboo around donkey products derives from the fact that animal products are associated with being unclean, and the living animals are seen as special individuals.

People who do not observe cultural restrictions become taboo themselves (Radcliffe-Brown, 1939: 6). They are in a state of danger and if they do not follow customary precautions may become ill and even die. My informants do not see the punishment for transgressing their restrictions as vegans as coming from a spirit or a ghost as did the Maori (Radcliffe-Brown, 1939: 14), but rather as coming from pollution owing to the supposedly ‘unhealthy’ properties of animal products and moral pollution for their souls.

There are certainly similarities between the way my participants viewed the consumption of animal products and flesh and classical accounts of taboo. But unlike those accounts (Freud 2002), I observed this among a completely different demographic – white, middle-class individuals. Interestingly, Freud (2002: 32) calls the same type of prohibitions in his own white European patients “obsessional sickness” and not taboos, although the former is a type of psychological neurosis and the latter is part of a social institution. Furthermore, my informants do have some reasoning behind their restrictions, whereas Freud argues that taboos are prohibitions for which there are no grounds and no reasons. But this understanding was potentially due to past scholarly biases regarding the nature of the so-called ‘savage’.

In the case of the sanctuary, meat and meat-eating, as well as the use of other animal-derived ingredients, are deemed to have a polluting effect on humans. Animal-derived ingredients or items are described as ‘poisonous’, ‘gross’, ‘disgusting’ ‘sickening’ and ‘rotten’. These foods are characterised as ‘decaying’, ‘pus-filled,’ ‘slimy’ and ‘unnatural’. On the other hand, the labels

attached to plant foods are related to cleanliness, purity and wholesomeness like ‘clean’, ‘healthy’, ‘natural’, ‘organic’, ‘whole foods’ and ‘nutritious’. The ingestion or even use of animal products affects individuals negatively on several levels, one of which was their morality. Eating contaminated products could somehow change a person’s moral status even if done by accident. This may help to account for the tales that always circulated in conversation about informants’ food being ‘spiked’ and their high levels of suspicion about this. One volunteer told me one day that “[she] would never forgive a friend if they gave her meat secretly, they are not [her] friends”. It is not the intention that mattered but the substance itself. Significantly, even food that is cooked on the same grill as a meat product is seen as contaminated and inedible. They would rather throw it in the trash than touch it with their lips. But the chickens could eat their own eggs.

Animal products are treated as being polluted in two ways. One is that animals are like us and thus eating them resembles cannibalism. By killing another ‘person’ and/or consuming their flesh one was participating in an immoral and unethical act. My informants emphasize that in their view only the deluded would eat ‘corpses’. However, again this is not consistent with their belief that chickens could eat their own eggs.

According to my research, the most likely explanation for this is my participants’ beliefs about morality and how it manifests in animals. As I discussed in Chapter 4, my participants treat animals as being incapable of performing immoral actions. The animals’ actions are not necessarily good or bad. Where according to these vegans people eat eggs purely as a result of selfish indulgence and greed, the chickens eat them for their nutritional value.

Secondly, because animals in CAFOs are treated so cruelly and poorly, the meat becomes polluted. The meat is affected by the unhygienic and unwholesome conditions in the industry. This combines both the expressive and instrumental levels of taboo (Douglas, 1966). Animal products that are produced in unhygienic conditions do have a greater chance of containing dangerous bacteria like salmonella, but it is symbolic of their understanding of the animals as well.

Colette: You become so much more, not just emotionally mindful, but spiritually, and biologically as well. I think you (on an omnivorous diet) get a build-up of bad hormones, especially if you think of the stressful lives that animals live. The adrenaline and cortisol that they excrete when they are being transported and how they have to live on top of

each other. I know the stuff's half-life probably isn't that long. But if you think about how much meat a person eats over their lifetime, then it must eventually build-up and it must have one or other effect. I'm not hocussy pocussy. But you can really feel the difference.

My informants' understanding of the effects of meat is not so much based on scientific explanation, although they sometimes use scientific jargon and concepts to provide validity to their arguments. For these individuals, a primary motivation is their perceptions of purity and pollution as these affect them personally, socially, physically and morally. It is a matter of principles and values. As such, the managers began to include the following message with any invitation or advertisement for events: "We are a vegan sanctuary, and therefore ask on behalf of and out of respect for our rescued residents, that you do not bring any animal products onto the property." They framed the sanctuary as a pure place where the impure is not allowed to enter.

Mary Douglas (1966) shows that the concept of purity and pollution is often used to define boundaries between different categories. These are treated as negatively affecting each other when there is confusion or overlap. At the sanctuary, chickens could eat their eggs, but humans could not eat the chickens' eggs. Eating of their own bodies and flesh would not have a negative impact on the chickens as it does not cross the human–animal boundary. It is a morally neutral action as it is seen as acceptable for individuals who belong to the category of animals to use and eat each other but not when individuals who belong to the category of humans eat and use them. There are some inconsistencies however, as my participants did not for example, consume human flesh nor would they. Furthermore, Colette and others at the sanctuary often mentioned that modern chickens that are bred for the industry lay more eggs than is natural and normal. They believe that this causes the chickens 'pain and distress' and that it in some way takes away some of their vitality. After all, the animals use some of their nutrition and energy to produce the eggs. Therefore, my participants seem to reason that it is only right that these same eggs are used to replenish the chickens own stores.

One strategy they use to try to convert non-vegans was to draw comparisons between the use of products from animals labelled as farm animals and other categories of animals. On a guided tour, a volunteer, Megan, asked the guests to imagine drinking dogs' milk or even eating dog flesh. "Would you drink a cat's milk? Do you drink dog's milk? If you won't do that, why would you use donkey hides or milk cows? Isn't it just ridiculous?" My participants thus try to convince

others that the species of animal involved does not matter. It was when culture tried to absorb nature, so to speak, that they believe the problems arise.

This is not an issue that is unique to Asher's, as it seems to be a controversial topic in vegan sanctuaries all around the world and a point of contention with the public (Griffler & Zee, 2018; Shields, 2017; Magee, 2019). Indeed, some people push the boundaries of the definition of veganism by including eggs in their diets. On some occasions, they call themselves flexi-vegans. They argue that it would not be morally wrong for humans to eat animal products such as eggs that were unfertilized, because nothing had to die in the process. But especially when the egg is not a product of exploitation and cruelty. The egg already exists, does it not? The chickens are treated with the utmost care and their diets are supposed to be healthier than that of industry chickens. The question is yet again one of interest. Their utilitarian ideals seem to reach a roadblock here. There is something else at play. Is it really more beneficial for the interests of the chickens to eat the eggs themselves than for the labourers who need to survive on a minimum wage? The labourers are neither vegan nor vegetarian and do not plan on changing that any time in the future, so allowing this would not easily encourage egg eating, nor is this a concern raised by my informants. It is the symbolic dimensions of consumption with which they are concerned.

Rituals of purity and impurity can be seen as positive contributions to atonement (Douglas, 1966: 2). By adhering to their beliefs about taboos, people are aligning themselves with whatever they see as 'good' in their society whether that be based in a religion or more secular ways of life. More than once, I heard from my informants that they feel extremely guilty about their meat consumption in the past. In almost every story regarding the change to veganism, the teller would emphasize their regrets. A common theme is also that they had been trying to go vegan for years and, in some cases, had gone back and forth as if to highlight that they had at least tried. It is important for them that they would raise their children, if they were to have any, as vegan so that they would not also have to deal with similar feelings of guilt and resentment. For them, abstention in the present, and work at the sanctuary, provides a way to help them correct their moral compass. They can atone for their past and move closer to the realm of purity.

But all this does not mean that my informants' notions of what is pure/impure, bad/good, moral/immoral and edible/inedible are fixed or static. As Douglas (1966: 5) notes, notions of impurity and purity are as fluid and ever-evolving as are the societies in which they exist. In this way, food that was once viewed as pure could become polluted. Two examples of this in this

context were the issues of avocados and figs. Avocados especially were a staple of many of my participants' diets as a 'pure', 'healthy' and plant-based source of fats. However, their position on the scale was called into question when media reports began to question their status as a vegan food because some farmers keep bees to pollinate their crops. Similarly, figs are now on the list of taboos because wasps lay their eggs in their centres. The female wasp dies and is digested by enzymes from the fruit. The wasp's offspring feed on the protein released from this and then exit the plant to pollinate other flowers. Therefore, figs contain dead insects which is problematic.

What to do?

For individuals at the sanctuary, veganism is not purely a dietary choice. Instead, it is seen as a lifestyle. My informants feel quite strongly about this. As such, it could be understood as a specific set of behaviours. Most of this relates to prescriptions regarding the treatment of animals both inside and outside the context of the sanctuary.

As with food, my informants defined veganism as much in terms of what they can do as what they are not allowed to do. Their behaviour can be summed up by the statement 'thou shalt not exploit, neglect or abuse animals'. For them, exploitation refers to any use of animals for personal gain, whether it is in terms of material, financial, status-related or about convenience. In one conversation, I asked Mikayla about her opinion on the use of animals by small-scale farmers. She admitted that in the country's socioeconomic circumstances, it is challenging for some people to not rely on animals to some extent. But she remained solid in her resolve that "people actually should not use animals at all". When asked about her opinion on government plans to begin an official industry around donkey skins in South Africa, as an attempt at job creation, Colette echoed this view. She responded, "I don't think it is about helping people at all. The government does not care about people. Its poor justification. Simply poor justification."

Collette, Mikayla and the other vegans who are involved at Asher's have set up their own moral hierarchy of the treatment of animals. This can be seen in their views on the different types of environments in which animals find themselves, for example, the difference between family farms and the industry. Colette once remarked that "you do get good owners and bad owners". The same type of degree system can often be seen in their views on veganism and vegetarianism. The killing of animals and using their parts as a food source or product is held to be most

contemptible. My informants thought that if we stopped seeing animals as products that we eat, cruel treatment would end. In this sense, killing and eating animals is the greater of the two evils. I have already noted that these individuals see the use of animals for products that they do not have to be slaughtered for as slightly less reprehensible. Thus, they are more concerned about the welfare of donkeys as it is affected by ejiao; that is, use as a food source or medicine to be ingested than their abuse as working animals. This is significant in light of their primary use as beasts of burden in South Africa and the concerns of other welfare organisations like the SPCA and other sanctuaries like Eseltjiesrus. Overall, the volunteers and the managers measure the suitability of the treatment of animals according to a checklist of items that they believe is necessary to maintain a donkey's well-being. In their view, they are at the top end of this scale of treatment, as they provide everything the animals need without benefiting from it themselves.

At the sanctuary, it is not only about not causing suffering but also about relieving it where it exists. Managers, volunteers and labourers take exceptional care whenever one of the animals falls ill. Significantly, in the 'industry' diseased animals are often culled to prevent illness from spreading. They are never treated to relieve their discomfort. Arluke and Sanders (1996), for example, note how lab monkeys were often subject to experiments that caused disfigurement and disease, yet were in many institutions never given any pain relievers or a modicum of comfort.

In contrast, at Asher's people take significant care to help make sick animals more comfortable. Over the course of my research, several of the animals fell ill. Whenever this happened, the individual became the centre of attention. I arrived at the sanctuary one morning to find that Echo was affected by a mysterious condition. Mikayla instructed me to spend the day observing his condition and trying to alleviate some of his discomfort by trying to feed him treats, keeping him company, giving him "kisses and cuddles" and trying to lower his fever with cold water. He was clearly distressed. There was drool dripping from his mouth and he had fits of tremors. Contrary to his normal lively and loving demeanour, his head was hanging and he was extremely lethargic. Everyone was extremely worried, and Colette spent much more time than usual giving him affection. I found a book in which the labourers and managers wrote hourly reports of his condition. They paid the vet to check up on him every morning and they called her with several updates. My informants show similar levels of concern, no matter the animal or condition by which he or she is affected until they recover.

This type of approach is dependent on people recognizing that the animal is in pain and then caring about their discomfort. Some people seem to care less about the suffering of certain types of animals than others. The clearest example of this is the way people will spend much money caring for their pets but do not necessarily do the same for farm/ed or wild animals. James Serpell (1996: 18-19) argues that there is a paradox where we have pets at the one extreme who make “little or no practical or economic contribution to human society, yet we nurture and care for them like our own kith and kin, and display outrage and disgust when they are subjected to ill-treatment”. But we treat pigs who make “outstanding contributions” to humanity like “worthless objects devoid of feelings and sensations” (Serpell, 1996: 19). The fact that the animal industry is hidden from public view probably helps to explain the fact that many people are unaware of the extent of the cruelty and mistreatment. But according to my informants, ignorance is no excuse, and they regularly get upset by what they see as the hypocrisy of meat-eaters who are willing to eat farm animals but not dogs or people who are unwilling to eat donkey meat but would eat cattle or sheep.

Everyone at the sanctuary is concerned with showing that they are not exploiting the animals. One place where this is reflected is in the use of the word ‘grooms’. The term is usually used solely with regard to horses and the person who generally cares for their wellbeing through tasks like mucking out stalls, feeding, administering medicine, and of course grooming. It highlights the idea that the labourers are there to take care of the animals- to work for them so to speak. It also carries associations of a higher level of care as horses typically receive far more attention than other farm animals. “Many days I would just spend some time with the donkeys,” says Mikayla. I was told several times how important this is. That I had to do this, instead of just grooming and taking care of them and the like, shows that they are not just treated as objects, farm animals or working animals. Instead, they are individuals who are worthy of having a social relationship and spending time with.

Once again, however, my informants changed the definition of veganism to fit their own values. Not all creatures are treated with the same deference. For example, Colette stated that she strayed from veganism in certain regards: “I am not vegan with everything like dangerous bugs such as spiders and ticks, especially when they can endanger the animals.” For her, it is not acceptable to use bees to farm honey, but it is acceptable to kill ‘dangerous bugs’. This indicates that they are making their own judgements on whether some creatures like donkeys are worthier than others and need to be preserved even at the cost of others. So ‘all animals deserve to be

loved and allowed to live free from harm and suffering' as long as they belong to the right category.

What to think?

The question of personhood is central to the ideology of veganism. Their conception of animals as individual actors is central to my informants' subscription to veganism. According to them, once the 'truth' about the nature of animals dawned on them, they had no other choice but to go vegan. It is essentially a question of what is other enough to eat. It is often the similarities that they recognize between themselves and the donkeys and other animals that make exploitation so repulsive. If they cannot imagine doing something to another human, it should not be done to an animal. For Jacob's (2001) interviewees, killing the donkeys was like killing people.

Unfortunately, illness often means that the managers have to take the lives of the animals into their own hands. It is their decision whether to euthanize a distressed animal or not. This is a fact that affects them deeply. The chickens are particularly vulnerable. After one difficult week during which two chickens passed away and one had to be euthanized, all the people at the sanctuary were visibly upset. For my informants, this is the worst part of the job, as Colette said: "it's like having to break your child's ... yes, that's the most difficult." The thought was so distressing that she could not finish her sentence.

Most of the individuals who are involved with Asher's cited animal protection and ethical reasons as their primary motivation for going vegan. They identify themselves as animal rightists, not welfarists. In *Loving Animals*, Kathy Rudy (2011) discusses the different types of directions that are commonly followed in pursuit of animal welfare. "If animal rights in the strong sense want to elevate nonhuman animals to the level of human rights, animal welfare as an ideology desires to leave everything in place, and simply appeals to humans to be kinder to animals." Seeking rights of citizenship for animals is, therefore, more in line with my informants' beliefs in the personhood of animals and the need to try to serve their interests. For them all, meat-eaters and even sometimes vegetarians are specieist. In this context, it is as serious as being a racist or a sexist. I once accidentally implied that they were welfarists, a statement my listeners took as very offensive. By their standards, welfarists "were not going far enough". They believed their approach would bring about changes from the ground level to that of the state, whereas welfarists were only putting "plasters" over festering wounds.

Once again it is necessary to pay attention to the use of the distinction and category of ‘working’ donkeys and ‘farmed’ animals. By using the term ‘farmed’, these vegans are trying to emphasize that the animals do not belong by nature on a farm. Instead, as a verb, it emphasizes that this is only how they are being used by humans, like the term ‘farmed salmon’ for example also denotes. Their primary motivation for doing this is to show that all animals are similar and deserve to be treated equally, be they donkeys, elephants or dogs. Insisting on calling them ‘farmed’ animals puts them into the category of subjects that are treated as objects.

In my informants’ vision of the ideal world, there is an assumption that there is a natural way of living for the donkeys. What this meant is not typically clearly articulated. I argue that this is part of broader ideas of the nature–culture dichotomy, where everything that is centred around humans is unnatural. But my informants contradict themselves in that their ideas on what is natural for donkeys are not necessarily based on the behaviour of wild asses. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 6, they repeatedly argue that they want the donkeys and other animals to live naturally at the sanctuary. However, instead of letting the donkeys live as they would in the wild, the volunteers and managers circumscribe their behaviour and try to domesticate and socialize them.

The views of vegans differ in fundamental ways to those of so-called meat-eaters. In their study, Bilewicz and colleagues (2011: 201) showed that people who eat omnivorous diets dehumanize animals far more than do vegetarians or vegans. People who eat meat also believe far more strongly in the idea of human uniqueness and exceptionalism. They (Bilewicz, Imhoff & Drogosz, 2011: 201) argue that these mechanisms among others are strategies for moral disengagement that help to justify their meat consumption and make their food more palatable. Besides this, vegetarians ascribe more secondary emotions to animals than do omnivores. These are feelings such as love, hope and melancholy that were once attributed only to humans (Bilewicz et al., 2011: 201) as opposed to primary (animalistic) emotions like anger, joy and pain. Vegetarians also recognize other psychological characteristics that are often perceived as distinctively human in animals such as higher cognition and certain personality traits (Bilewicz et al., 2011: 204). Overall, as I found with my informants, they ascribe more humanity to animals. As such vegetarians feel more disgust when confronted with meat and animal slaughter (Bilewicz et al., 2011: 203). In their worldview, denial is associated with seeing animals as objects and disgust with seeing them as subjects.

Although the concept of equality is important to a vegan ideology, this mainly applies to animals, not to humans. On the one hand, my informants try to erase distinctions between different species, including human animals and non-human animals. But at the same time, they emphasize the distinction between humans and animals. In many subtle ways, they put animals and their needs above those of human beings. The donkeys are people too but worthier.

No expense is spared to ensure the comfort, welfare and even happiness of the animals. This is a fact that is evidenced by the significant amounts of money spent on medical expenses. The managers and board decided to have veterinarians operate on India to correct shortened tendons that were likely caused by her mother's malnutrition. If not corrected, she would have gone lame. The operation was the first of its kind ever performed on a donkey in South Africa and cost R10 000. This was not the most expensive treatment regime. Sometimes treatments cost double or even triple this price.

Yet the labourers at Asher's are still paid minimum wages. At one stage, John and a few others were struggling as they could not afford winter clothes for themselves. The managers' response was not to assist them in buying clothes but to ask for second-hand donations on the sanctuary's Facebook page. The donkeys and other animals at the sanctuary live a life of luxury when compared to that of animals on commercial farms. Moreover, their lives are far more comfortable than those of the grooms who care for them.

In another incident, near the start of my fieldwork, Mikayla insisted that I not work too hard on my volunteering days. There was a clear division of labour at the sanctuary between the managers, volunteers, live-in volunteers and labourers. They did not want me to take over some of the regular jobs at the sanctuary. Mostly I was told to take care of tasks that were only necessary once in a while like distributing fresh fruit and vegetables. Mikayla did not want the grooms "to get used to it. They will get lazy. I need them to do their work". A month or so later, I offered to help two German live-in volunteers in painting newly covered seating areas. I was met with similar protests. "You really don't have to do that. Rather spend time with the animals. They've been very lazy, and they need to earn their stay." Although it is understandable that they wanted their labourers and live-in volunteers to uphold their end of the bargain, their attitudes are sometimes quite hostile and suspicious, especially against individuals who are not vegan. The

elephant in the room seems to be that animals are too innocent to work to earn their keep, but people are not.

Overall, the behaviour of the management and organisational structure of the sanctuary seems to suggest that different people at the sanctuary are better than others. It can be said that the labourers are expected to work in conditions that are similar to those expected of working animals like donkeys in other contexts. In other words, John and the others are expected to work long hours performing hard labour for little compensation. In terms of their salary, hours and amenities provided their circumstances are similar to those of the majority of farm labourers in South Africa if only slightly improved (Eriksson, 2017; Roberts & Antrobus, 2013; Vink & Tregurtha, 2003). This seems out of place at a sanctuary which touts revolutionary ideas about the rights and welfare of animals. These labourers do most of the work that is needed to provide high living standards for the animals. But the way they are treated does not suggest that they are as valued as the vegan volunteers, managers or guests, and this is not to mention the ‘donks.’

Despite Apartheid having officially ended, conditions for black workers especially on farms have not necessarily improved. Wages are low, living conditions are often poor, and allegations of mistreatment are common. In the last decade there has been numerous protests mostly led by labourers from wine farms. A Human Rights Watch report (2011) noted that on many farms basic labour rights are denied and conditions are dismal and even dangerous. Issues include lack of proper safety equipment, exposure to dangerous chemicals, lack of access to drinking water and toilets. As Louisa Warries a member of the Women on Farms advocacy group exclaimed ‘we are not animals, we want to be treated with dignity’ (Maregele, 2018). At Asher’s, working conditions and compensation are markedly better and the laborers are far more content. Yet, it still bears similarities to systems where black workers on South African farms have been historically underpaid and overworked.

Unfortunately, the treatment of animals is often prioritized above the treatment of humans, particularly Africans. Swart (2014: 700) points out that the British Parliament passed the Animal Protection Act in 1823 a full ten years before passing the Emancipation Act, which established a plan to free all the slaves in its West Indian colonies in 1833. Considering these discrepancies, Swart (2014: 689-690) suggests that Sol Plaatje’s refrain, in *Native Life in South Africa*, that the Natives Land Act 27 of 1913 was ‘cruel to animals’ was both a response to the detrimental impact on African livestock and an act of political theatre to call attention to the plight of their

black owners as well. The Act expelled Africans and livestock from land they occupied often forcing both into starvation among other hardships. The sight of a herd of emaciated stock made Plaatje (1916: 55) realize that “it is as bad to be a black man’s animal as it is to be a black man in South Africa.”

In a sense, the labourers’ situation at Asher’s is reminiscent of the ways in which Sol Plaatje used animal advocacy to highlight the plight of black South Africans. It can perhaps be said that they too are not only concerned with the welfare of animals but are trying to improve their lot through caring for animals. In *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question*, Bénédicte Boisseron (2018) asks whether comparisons between the suffering of animals and of black individuals can be a productive exercise or whether it trivializes human plight? Boisseron (2018: xxv) tries to show how the subjectivities, animal and black, “can defiantly come together to form an interspecies alliance” in opposition to the hegemonic dominating voice. It is certainly telling that even at Asher’s, where people are standing up for the rights and dignity of oppressed animals, some humans might still not be getting equal consideration.

Who am I?

Humans often use fauna and flora and specifically their relationship to them to shape their identity. Yuka Suzuki (2017) notes how white farmers in Zimbabwe used wildlife production and conservation to reinvent their identity. She relates this to the larger theme of white individuals tying their sense of belonging to what they feel is their ‘exceptional’ relationship with the natural environment. In this case, converting to veganism and becoming involved at the sanctuary is used by my informants to define themselves. They are not merely following a vegan diet or lifestyle; their entire identity has changed. They frequently introduced themselves by saying ‘I am a vegan’.

It is often openly acknowledged that vegans struggle to adhere to the diet and lifestyle (Herzog, 2014; Smith, 2017). Unfortunately, as I have said, there are no large-scale studies on vegans in South Africa, but it may help to look at studies from other regions. According to the Humane Research Council in the United States of America, 10% of people surveyed in a representative sample of the country were former vegans/vegetarians. Of this 10%, one third dropped the lifestyle after three months or less, one half within a year, and only less than 20% “resisted” for more than a year (Martinelli & Berkmanienè, 2018: 507). I noticed that many of the regular

volunteers and visitors had themselves quit during my research. But in conversations, my informants treated their current transformation as permanent. They believe that there is no going back, they are like new people.

Me: We call you a new vegan but is that fair? Do you feel this is it now? Do you still feel new? Or are you a vegan?

Darren: I don't know how to classify it. I don't think I've been in the game long enough to say that.

Colette: Not part of the cool kids yet.

Eating is a profoundly social act. It is not only an issue of interpersonal politics. It bound my informants together as a group and is an important part of forming their networks. My informants actively seek out other individuals who are vegan and often formed friendships on this basis. One example of this is their activate participation in multiple Facebook groups for vegans in South Africa and Gauteng. Through their interactions with fellow vegans, they can validate their feelings and views on the movement and also give each other advice and support. By identifying as vegans, people relate themselves to the larger global movement. They often refer to the growth and rise in this lifestyle as justification for their choices and as giving validity to their worldview, "people are waking up".

Even though veganism is such a core aspect of the sanctuary, not everyone who works or volunteers there is vegan. This is not a requirement, but often these candidates would receive preference because of their knowledge about the lifestyle. However, although meat-eaters are allowed to work at Asher's, they are discouraged from eating or using any animal products at the sanctuary. They are expected to act in many ways as if they were vegan and their behaviour is restricted while at the sanctuary. Interestingly, I noticed that volunteers who are not vegan are treated as outsiders in many ways. They are not privy to all the gossip between managers and the other volunteers. Instead, they are typically the objects of gossip, judgement and derision.

In many ways, vegan individuals are defining themselves in opposition to nonvegans. In their worldview, the meat-eaters were the 'other'. It is their choices to abstain from meat and animal products that make them different and allows them to define themselves as being morally

superior. According to them, they are moral, ethical and good-natured people, as opposed to the unethical, deluded and even cruel omnivores. As socially and historically disadvantaged animals, donkeys are apt targets for this type of moral activism. Like in the story of the Good Samaritan, the social and moral impact of an act of charity is somehow enhanced when it is directed towards underdogs like Echo and the other ‘donks.’

The meat-eaters’ identities are polluted by their use of animals and animal products. Mitchell (2018: 6) suggests that the construction of analogies between humans and animals forms a fundamental basis for self-understanding and meaning. As an example, he points to the ways that people call others ‘asses’ or ‘mules’ as a way to insult their intelligence, which in turn reinforces negative views about donkeys. If this is true, trying to portray animals and donkeys specifically in a better light, will change how people treat them, view others and view themselves, and construct images of themselves where these people are now more caring and ‘better’. Suzuki (2017) also notes that white Africans often feel a strong connection to nature due to their perceived past achievements and skills in conquering and dominating their environment through hunting, agriculture and the like. My informants are extremely critical of other types of relationships with animals and are actively trying to align themselves with a new form of relating.

The vegans at Asher’s are not only defining themselves in opposition to meat-eaters as a broad category, but also in opposition to specific-to-specific groups or individuals who use and consume animals. The most marked example of this is in relation to the somewhat vaguely identified Chinese who smuggle and trade donkey hides and produce and consume ejiao. Harris (2004; 2010) has written on the preindustrial and industrial roots of anti-Sinicism in South Africa. Harris (2010) suggests that past and present blanket negative stereotyping of Chinese is not only the result of fear of economic threat, or even threat to natural resources. Instead, by creating and perpetuating an image of the Chinese ‘other’, European settlers were helping to construct a group of identity and sense of cohesion among themselves (Harris, 2010: 228). For the mostly white supporters of Asher’s, this new form of anti-Sinicism might hark back to similar attempts. Through their campaigns against the trade in donkeys hides, they are both emphasizing their ethical behaviour and claiming autochthony. The so-called ‘Chinese threat’ is worse for being a foreign and ‘unAfrican’

One significant narrative or rhetorical tool that people often use at Asher’s is the conversion story. It involves the conversion of people from meat-eating to vegetarian, vegetarian to vegan,

and meat-eating to vegan. It often follows this pathway but twists and turns on the path are also common, especially involving reverting to meat-eating for periods of time. My informants themselves identify it as conversion. Their tales often resembles religious tales of the sort where a flawed individual is finally able to accept the ‘truth’, their road to Damascus moment.

Me: When did you first become interested in veganism?

Colette: I came from a family of animal lovers. We were really animal people and always had pets around the house. Then one day we walked out and a baboon was sitting on the roof of our house. He didn’t want to leave so my mother called the SPCA. I was so excited when they arrived. As soon as they left, I told my mother I also want to become a ‘diere polisie’.¹¹

Then one day in high school I watched an Ingrid Newkirk¹² documentary. And it changed my life forever. I immediately went vegetarian although it required some negotiation with my dad. He was furious that we had to replace my brand-new leather school shoes.

Once I left high school, I went to work at the SPCA. I became one of their inspectors and worked there for several years. At one point I went back to eating meat. I think it was a type of coping mechanism. I was so disillusioned with the meat industry and the slaughterhouses. The job wore me down. We were fighting a losing battle. Even the so-called good abattoirs were the stuff of nightmares.

That experience made me believe fully in the cause of veganism. Ja, I just couldn’t align myself morally with doing something that I couldn’t agree with. I have never been able to do that.

It began to seriously affect my mental health and I began to butt heads with some of the people at work. So I just quit without any job prospects at all. I was unemployed.

¹¹ Animal police

¹² President of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), the world’s largest animal rights organization. The title of the specific documentary is *I Am an Animal* (2007), which focuses on the lengths she has gone to in her animal activism.

Then, luckily, I saw Asher’s advertising for a manager post. I immediately contacted Mikayla. I met her when I was assisting with the relocation of Babe from the SPCA and we had gotten quite close. It worked out perfectly and I haven’t looked back since.

The narratives typically identify one or sometimes a few distinct events that instigated the individual’s transformation. But an important element of these stories is choice. Darren, a volunteer, was introduced to the diet by his girlfriend and converted several months later but he insisted, “it wasn’t peer pressure. It was a choice; it was a lifestyle change. I gave up smoking in December. It’s a lifestyle choice. You need to look forward. If you keep doing the same thing, you are going to stay in the same place.” In most cases, they emphasize their own agency that helped them to make the transition despite many obstacles like conflicts with relatives over their choice or their own ‘weakness’. Doing this served to highlight the strength of their beliefs and also helped to increase their sense of moral superiority. Unlike the people who continued to ‘lie to themselves’ they had taken a stand. They had done the ‘right’ thing. There is almost something religious or Biblical in the way they were transformed once they had ‘converted’.

For them, meat-eating almost formed part of a collective delusion. They themselves think that they had deluded themselves in the past. According to Colette, “you become desensitised, you must. The easiest way to do this is to eat meat again. You know you can’t beat them so join them.” My informants strongly believed that they would be able to convert other people. They themselves once ate omnivorous diets after all, even the honoured Oscar Hirsch, who was the inspiration and the initial donor for the sanctuary, was once an omnivore, then a vegetarian and finally near the end of his life became vegan.

A new social order

In the lives of my informants, veganism is more than a set of dietary restrictions, even more than a lifestyle. Instead, it would more accurately be called an ideology. In this case, the ideology is not operating at the level of the state or dominant class but rather through and for the benefit of the managers and board of the sanctuary who could control the dominant narrative in that context. Their specific ideology of veganism represented their views and beliefs on their relationship to the world; but also through their engagement with food and animals gave it a material existence. During the run-up to the public elections in South Africa in 2019, Mikayla said: “We vote with our choices every day. Whenever you choose the cruelty-free meal option,

you vote with your fork.” Their in-group notions of morality are a key motivating factor behind their decisions to go vegan. But for them, the choice has political ramifications as well, on both an interpersonal and an intrapersonal level.

The way the informants interact with animals and animal-derived products is a key site of meaning-making at the sanctuary and in their lives beyond it as well. It is one way in which they express their identities as a lived experience and represent their views of donkeys and other animals. By trying to influence others, veganism formed a crucial part of their strategies for changing their lives as well as trying to shape those of other humans and animals. It formed the basis of a collective reasoning from which they could protest the slaughter of donkeys and their use as working animals. The people who carefully follow these restrictions and prohibitions are part of the ‘cool kids’. To apply classical anthropological theories, those who do not follow these rules absolutely become taboo themselves and are treated as outsiders. They do not belong, at least not comfortably, in a vegan social order.

Chapter 6: Seeking sanctuary- Creating a new utopia on a donkey farm

In this chapter, I analyse the ways in which my informants are creating order through their practices, social interactions, and organization of the sanctuary. Through this, they are trying to make the natural world more culturally and socially acceptable. In doing this, they are both expressing and reifying their cosmology by trying to create a utopian microcosm that represents their ideals. I draw inspiration from Heinz Kuckertz's (1990) book *Creating Order*.

I argue that, for my informants, the sanctuary is a model that is representative of their worldview. To substantiate my argument, I first discuss the basis of their social order, the status of the individual actors, and how they try to create order through rules and spatial representation. A significant part of the argument is that Asher's is the donkeys and other animals' home. My informants try to stress this on a daily basis. The managers want the sanctuary to be the animal's 'forever home' and try to create an image of a 'haven' where they are safe from all harm. The chapter shows how the people at Asher's are trying to shape the world and thereby improve the individual and the collective lot of donkeys.

The basis of Asher's cosmology and social order

In the book, Kuckertz argues that each individual homestead in Caguba, where he conducted fieldwork, acts as a symbol of people's world and cosmology. For Kuckertz, the homestead stands central to understanding Caguban society as its layout, social divisions and social behaviour are expressions of idealised cosmological and social orders. It is the site at which and through which order is constituted from the ground up. Through the construction of and living in the homestead, actors create the social order rather than it being a structure that is imposed on them.

Symbolic anthropology is the study of cultural symbols and systems of symbols and what those symbols can say about a specific society. According to proponents of this approach like Geertz (1973: 5), humans are "suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun". A key point in this approach is that the relations between peoples, things and events are conceived and enacted by people (Dolgin, Kemnitzer & Schneider, 1977: 43). Kuckertz (1990: 273) writes:

Social life and social order are created through the actions and interactions of individuals. Thus, individuality appears again in the very symbolizing of universality. How is this possible? The answer is that the homestead, as an ideal spatial organization, is a symbolic representation of the world and its order, in which the living and the dead, kinspeople and non-kinspeople, seniors and juniors, men and women share.

Kuckertz (1990: 113-18) defines cosmology as people's "system of thought explaining the world, its origins and structure, and its ultimate principles". As I attempted to show in Chapters 4 and 5, the main concern of my informants is the welfare of animals and specifically the animals with whom they have become so closely acquainted. They believe the animals to be persons who should be treated as such and accorded equal or similar status to that of other persons. As such, these people felt it is their moral imperative to campaign and attempt to protect the donkeys' and other animals' welfare. By extension, this led them to believe that they are better people than others who do not agree with their vegan lifestyle.

My informants' beliefs about the nature of animals and their relationships with humans is a pivotal point in their worldviews. As I show in Chapter 5, it was the primary motivation for their change to veganism, influencing their relationships, their diets and their behaviour. It also played a significant part in shaping their ideas around the ultimate principles of the world and how they orientated themselves morally. Their convictions hold some resemblance to some of the commandments set down by the group in *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1945: 21): "Whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy. Whatever goes upon four legs, or has wings, is a friend ... No animal shall kill any other animal. All animals are equal."

However, some animals are more equal than others. In the context of the sanctuary, the board of directors held the most overall authority. They could decide whether to take in an animal or not, how money is spent, and when to appoint new labourers, among other things. Below them are the managers who are granted almost as much power by proxy. Due to their proximity to the sanctuary, it is more practical to let them handle most of the daily decisions. The different types of volunteers and labourers are subject to their authority and decisions, both in terms of their roles as labourers and what is acceptable behaviour and what is not at the sanctuary. It is a complex task placing the animals in this hierarchy. The number one rule at Asher's is that the welfare of the animals comes first. Colette even insisted that "if five people show up at the gate

today and say they would each pay R5000 to pet Echo, but he was not up to it that day, we would say no way”. As I have attempted to show in Chapter 4, the animals display a degree of agency and do shape the sanctuary through their interactions with others and their environment. But their actions are nonetheless constrained by their caretakers and the same environment that the humans had built. However, they are held in higher regard than all the other actors who are involved with the sanctuary and hold the greatest symbolic and material significance. Without them, there would be no sanctuary.

In an early conversation with my supervisor, we initially anticipated that the motivations of my participants would be linked to issues of citizenship. As primarily white middle-class individuals, we anticipated that this was a way for them to reassert and justify their own presence and welfare in the country. Our thinking was influenced by Suzuki’s (2017) argument that wildlife production and protection in Zimbabwe’s Matabeleland province were “inextricable from ideas about race, identity and difference”. This was clear from her data and fieldwork as she found that “people made continual references to nature based on the assumption that the ability to manage the environment was constitutive of whiteness itself”. She found that nature was used physically and metaphorically to establish belonging. A similar argument had previously been made by Comaroff and Comaroff (2001) regarding reactions to the ‘alien’ flora in the Western Cape following a series of devastating bush fires.

However, the evidence gathered during my fieldwork did not overtly support such an argument. This is not to say issues of race did not have an impact on the situation. Longer-term research might reveal more in this regard. My participants are still distinguished in terms of race as well as class. The volunteers and managers are mostly white women who are middle class while the labourers are black working-class men. But these differences were never explicitly discussed, mentioned, or even alluded to during my research. Both during the fieldwork and the data analysis, it became clear that my informants’ activism is rather an issue of cosmology.

Woman or man, black or white, rich or poor, South African or foreign, the question that mattered most is: are you vegan or not? Once again, this is not to say that participants are free from other forms of bias and social prejudice, but rather that at Asher’s these are pushed to the side-line. What distinguishes one person from another most significantly is whether they adhere to the pattern of eating, behaviour, and beliefs that people there refer to as veganism.

I observed this pattern repeatedly in the way vegan participants including volunteers and managers treated guests, volunteers, and labourers who do not follow this lifestyle. Collectively people who eat or use animal products are called (behind their backs) ‘ignorant’, ‘cruel’, ‘inhumane’, ‘dangerous’, ‘bad’ and even ‘murderers’. They do not fit the mould of what a moral and good person should be in this social order. Typically, so-called ‘meat-eaters’ are also treated with a sense of mistrust as is demonstrated by the anxiety around eggs. Another example of this is how nonvegan volunteers who do not display as much affection to the animals are micromanaged. Whereas vegan volunteers are given free rein to move around the animals and the sanctuary. The more a human treat the donkeys and other animals like persons, the higher that individuals standing at Asher’s. Here the dominant prejudice is against nonvegans.

Clearly, not everyone at the sanctuary holds uniform views on veganism, donkeys and other animals. But there are some widely held shared understandings. Or in the least, there are shared sets of behaviour and conduct. Some of the labourers, volunteers, and guests might eat meat in their own time. However, at the sanctuary, they are expected to treat animals with a certain level of respect so to speak. Humans are only welcome if they do not mistreat animals, do not speak of them as objects, do not discuss eating them or members of their species, and care for their well-being. These are social canons that are rarely breached.

Thus “cultures are not rigidly demarcated, timeless systems of meanings” nor do they consist of “one single, symbolically consistent universe” (Douglas, 1966: 85), yet it is still important to recognize the “force of culture” (Morris, 2000: 12). As Strauss and Quinn write, some cultural understandings which are widely shared among members of a social group are “surprisingly resistant to change in the thinking of individuals, broadly applicable across different contexts of their lives, powerfully motivating sources of their actions, and remarkably stable over succeeding generations” (1997: 3 cited in Morris, 2000: 12). Culture is always plural, at both the individual and societal level. Within any individual or society there “exists a ‘repertoire’ of cultural ideas or problems” (Morris, 2000: 12). Culture can instead be viewed as a process that forms part of lived experience both social and material. It is constantly being shaped and influenced by the changing contexts and its actors. Therefore, its structures of significance (configurations, cosmologies, paradigms, normative values, epistemes) are both the products of human action and are ‘conditioning elements’ of further social action. Significantly, I found that sociality plays an important role in my informants’ cosmological order and how they try to recreate it.

Social order in disorder

Each day at the sanctuary is rung in with a cacophony of sound. The grooms arrive first at the barn at about 05:30, winter or summer. They put the show on the road so to speak by preparing the sanctuary for the day. When they open the doors, they are greeted by grunts and squeals and braying, as each animal tries to make their voice heard in eager anticipation of food. It is deafening.

The animals are fed and watered by the grooms who rush around trying to dole out the food as quickly as possible to prevent the animals from getting too rowdy. Soon after one of the managers arrives to give out orders. This typically involves the rather complicated task of deciding which animals will go where for the day. The decision is dictated by endless factors such as which donkey is being picked on by the others and which chicken has not stretched their legs in a while.

Daily life at the sanctuary runs on a strict routine which is mapped out on a roster on the barn wall. There are some differences from day to day, most often due to animals falling ill and needing extra attention. But the labourers and managers try to stick to the general flow of things. According to the managers, the routine helps the animals to feel secure.

While each animal eats its fill, the grooms go to inspect the outdoor pens to make sure they are ready, and then the animals are corralled one by one. It appears chaotic at first, but over time I learnt to observe the patterns and order in the ‘disorder’. All the animals know more or less where to go and what to do, although early morning escapes are common.

When all the animals are settled, the grooms go about cleaning the indoor stables. They then proceed with all the other tasks of the day like moving food and supplies while the animals are usually free to roam their pens, eat and interact with one another. On the other hand, volunteers are usually told to groom the animals; a task which is far less laborious but does involve some chasing. The managers check up on all the animals several times throughout the day and just ‘hang out’ with them. The rest of their time is split between delegating tasks, taking care of sick animals, organizing the café, arranging events and so on.

By three o'clock, the grooms begin preparing to bring the animals in again. Their water troughs and feed bags or troughs are filled again. The doors in the barn are opened one at a time to let their specific occupants in. There is a wood-carved nameplate for each resident on their stable door. The pigs usually come in first and so they are the first to take up the chorus. As the groups of animals enter, the din rises. And once again the pigs and donkeys seem to be competing to see who is the loudest.

The donkeys and horses each have a dedicated groom. They are their main handlers and take care of their individual needs. They brush them down and check their hooves. And at least twice a week the donkeys receive a similar treatment before they are all settled in for the night.

This takes at least an hour and usually closer to two. The managers and grooms then finish off any tasks that are left before checking the animals one last time and closing the barn for the day. This is repeated day after day, every day of the year, even on weekends and public holidays. Keeping the sanctuary running is a full-time job which keeps the grooms at least on their feet from dawn to dusk.

Kuckertz (1990: 21) states that “in each individual homestead, the basic concepts of Mthwa society are repeatedly recreated; they become an enacted reality in the process of the homestead’s constitution and its existence over a limited period.” Kuckertz (1990) argues that this is primarily done through social interactions. Through cooperation, my informants similarly create the sanctuary as a place that represents their worldview. By agreeing among themselves that the interests of the animals came first, by deferring to the authority of the managers and board, adhering to the schedule and following the rules, the volunteers and labourers are daily contributing to creating the authorities’ ‘ideal’ social order.

The inner and outer worlds of my informants are tied together through the ideology of veganism and, thus, the act of eating or not eating, as well as more broadly to people’s relationships real or imagined with the donkeys and other animals that reside there. Overton and Hamilakis (2014) argue that the consumption and use of animals are more than just economic strategies for survival and existence. Instead, they serve as processes that reaffirm and rework the relationships connecting humans, animals, activities and places within the landscape. As Marx (1857: 265) wrote: “society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of the relations within which individuals stand... to be a slave, to be a citizen are social characteristics, relations

between human beings” (cited in Morris, 2000: 8). As such, the identities of actors at the sanctuary are constructed by their interactions and connections with one another.

There are some disagreements between the humans at the sanctuary and between them and the animals. But these are uncommon, and their shared understanding of the mission of the sanctuary is the frame of reference within which the actors’ decisions are made and shaped. Therefore, the humans act in a field of possible choices. Not all the actors agreed on everything, but the sanctuary is organized in a way in which differences of opinion are often minimized or hidden from plain sight by order of those in authority such as the board of directors and managers. These included, for example, that workers and volunteers are asked not to bring any animal products onto the premises. When the workers do eat any on the property, it is behind the walls of their living compound. Unity at the sanctuary is thus the result of agreements between individuals even though this is not necessarily on an equal footing, as the managers could dictate much of the volunteers’ and labourers’ behaviour. The play could not take place if the actors did not play their respective parts. The donkeys had to be agreeable, smart, relatively obedient yet interesting. Moreover, the humans had to be benevolent, moral and just.

The language shared between the humans is a critical way in which they reflect their respective roles, and it distinguishes Asher’s from other institutions. The animals are confined to pens and stables, and never cages. One morning Colette and Mikayla were searching for a temporary way to contain a particularly aggressive rooster, who had been injured by another rooster in a recent conflict, while he healed. They found a metal cage in one storage room and compared its merits with a wooden alternative. The gaps in the wood one were large enough for a chicken to fit through, however, so the metal container seemed to be the best option. As a result, Mikayla exclaimed: “I know, but I just do not like it, it’s a cage. I hate that word.” Colette responded, “Yes I know, but the other one is too. I guess it’s just made of wood.” For them, these minor distinctions often made for big differences, like the labourers being called ‘grooms’. The term puts an emphasis on caretaking and serving and bears connotations with the keeping of animals by elites who did so for recreational reasons, not explicitly for work or producing food. The use of this word also places emphasis on the relatively subservient role of the labourers compared to the managers and the animals at the sanctuary. A similar strategy can be seen in the language that is used to discuss ‘industry’ versus their own endeavours (Chapter 5). In fact, the use of the word groom helps to further distance the sanctuary from industry as it helps to mask the capitalistic connotations of the word ‘labourer’. The industry is after all based on exploiting animals in the

name of profits, wages and greed. Through the use of a certain lingo, they therefore further distinguish themselves as being markedly different from the industry.

Sociality seems to exist on several levels at the sanctuary. On the one hand, are the relationships the actors have among themselves within the context of the sanctuary (Chapter 4). On the other are their relationships as representatives of the sanctuary with the outer world. There is a clearly defined boundary between outsiders and insiders, what happens here and what happens there. The sanctuary is a microcosm situated in the macrocosm; as if a world of its own following its own directions. In many ways, the actors define themselves in their peculiarity as opposed to others.

The network of the sanctuary is embedded in a web of interactions with the world outside it that often takes the form of economic transactions. The sanctuary, although it often operated as if independent, could not exist without its ties to the outside world. They rely on outsiders for financial support and in doing so often rely on the very meat-eaters they frown upon.

To gain visitors and donor support the sanctuary must offer something in return. In this case, it is the opportunity for ‘kisses and cuddles’ with ‘fluffy bums’ like India. They could not, therefore, continue keeping the animals without some cooperation on the animals’ part. This is often put on full display such as at events where animals often ‘drew’ raffle tickets by picking which buckets of carrots to eat from.

The guests – meat-eaters, vegetarians and vegans alike – are clearly amused and, in a way, enchanted by these displays. The café is usually full on weekends and there is a steady flow of visitors. It is clear that animals hold a certain appeal for many people. Holtorf (2000) suggests that “perhaps the most important appeal of zoos is the ‘magic’ of encountering live wild animals which may be comparable with or even superior to the ‘aura’ of authentic artwork. There seems to be a magic in connection with real live animals that no camcorder could compete with”. The animals at the sanctuary are not considered to be as exotic as most animals in a zoo. Although donkeys, goats and other domesticated animals can often be found in the petting zoo section. However, in many ways, the donkeys have become as rare to urbanites as lions and tigers.

The appeal that animals hold for humans seems to heighten if animals display human-like behaviour or if they are anthropomorphised. It has been shown that the popularity of an animal

is directly correlated with the number of anthropomorphic features it possessed (Morris, 1999). Morris (1999) showed that younger children preferred bigger animals while older children found smaller ones in zoos. He argued that people often saw animals as child substitutes. Older people are more likely than other age groups to become involved in animal preservation and conservation initiatives. Morris (1999: 204) argues that this is because these individuals are “about to become personally extinct and so employ rare animals as symbols of [their] own impending doom”. Although such explanations might sound simplistic and crude, it is a fact that zoos’ conservation efforts and campaigns are most popular among many adult and elderly zoo-goers, as is the case at Asher’s. As I have shown, visitors, volunteers and managers alike often take on the role of parents in relation to the animals.

Like the volunteers and managers at the sanctuary, visitors feel that supporting the welfare of animals makes themselves better. By supporting the sanctuary, they are becoming ‘heroes’. Fusari (2017) notes that “from the point of view of public communication, portraying themselves as sites of conservation is quite advantageous for zoos, as it projects a morally appealing image – making visitors feel that they are contributing to a good cause”.

Sticking to the rules

Not only are the social order and interactions at the sanctuary structured, but the layout of the sanctuary and behaviour of individuals on the property are also controlled. These guidelines make up the practices of the sanctuary. Much of these controls are based on the ideals that my informants are trying to uphold and are an effort to try to preserve a sense of order. Order at the sanctuary is instituted and maintained through several different measures. A few examples are rules governing people’s behaviour at the sanctuary, electric wires, other types of fencing, access control and the organisation of the pens.

The managers and board wrote some of these rules into the labourers’ contracts. When I first started my fieldwork, the rules were verbally communicated to guests during announcements at events or when greeting the visitors. But they were soon formalised in a written form as the number of visitors increased. Soon they began to hand out pamphlets with the rules on them as visitors arrived. These written documents hold more authoritative weight than did their verbal counterparts. Figure 4 below is one version of these rules.

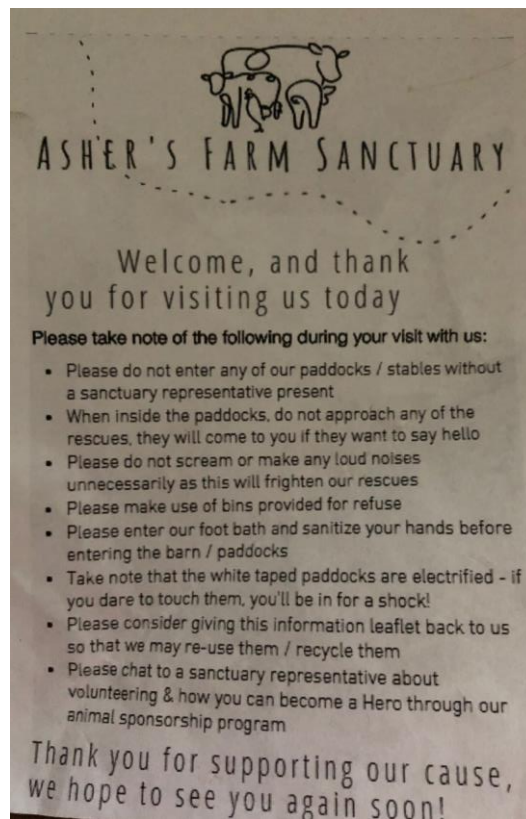


Figure 4: Rule leaflet, Asher's Farm sanctuary, 2018

Other guidelines are not formalised in this way, such as their requests to visitors not to bring any animal products onto the grounds. However, these seemed to be adhered to just as strictly. I rarely saw any of the guidelines breached. The one which is most often circumvented is the one stating that visitors should not approach the rescues of their own accord. Most of the time the animals retreat when this happens, especially if the person is not a regular guest. These rules, as well as others, reflect several of the key themes that I found during my research. They are those of the personhood and agency of the animals, the welfare of the animals, cleanliness, purity and pollution, and maintaining order.

One of the most impactful rules of the sanctuary is that they will not take on more animals than they can care for at the same level as those they currently have. By the end of my fieldwork, the board and managers felt that the sanctuary was at capacity. Financially, they were merely breaking even. They did not want to spend less money on each individual animal and by extension need to lessen the level of care that they could provide to each. Since then, exceptions have only been made when animals have no other place to go and would not drain their resources too much, such as the adoption of a pair of rabbits. However, Colette stressed that limited financial resources are not the main reason. According to her, the issue is that they could

not give the individual attention that each animal ‘deserved’ if they accepted more animals. She is specifically concerned about the health of the animals. They would need to appoint someone with more education and knowledge on animals to work there. At this time, only she really fits that bill. The concern over time as a resource is not just about how much they could spend on regular caretaking activities. It was also about more ‘social’ endeavours like simply spending time with animals, talking with them and petting them.

Overall, the managers and volunteers feel that no farm animal as a species, no donkeys, cows or sheep, should at present, increase in numbers, neither at the sanctuary nor as species on a global level. A frequent controversy facing vegans relates to what they expect to happen to these animals if they are no longer used in the production of food and other products. If they are no longer bred for ‘harvest’, these species would most probably die out as the animals would likely not be able to survive on their own (Levy, 2018). I quizzed my informants on this, and the vegan volunteers, managers and board agreed that they would rather let the species die out than continue this ‘unnatural and cruel existence’. They believe that in the industry, animals have little to no quality of life and their biology has already been altered so that their lifespans have been greatly reduced. The animals are ‘bred to die’. Animals kept in the industry for production are killed at an unusually young age. For example, chickens have a natural life span of about ten years. In contrast, modern broilers are killed at around six weeks, and most commercial breeds have genetic vulnerabilities that mean that they often could not survive much longer even if given a chance (Leroy & Praet, 2017: 72). As such, one way in which the well-being of animals is measured at the sanctuary is through the incidence, reason and nature of their death (slaughtered, suffering, euthanasia etc.). At Asher’s deaths are treated as being qualitatively different. And being brought to life only to die in the industry is in my informants' opinion the worst way to go. The managers and volunteers believed that this is not a life worth living.

This viewpoint affects the regulation of individual animals at the sanctuary. All the animals that can be are sterilized such as the donkeys. Some of them arrived at the sanctuary already sterilized, but the rest were operated on soon after they arrived. None of them can reproduce. The ones that could not be sterilized, such as the chickens, were separated according to sex. In the case of donkeys, sterilization apparently renders them more docile as well. Gallion (2010) for example notes that jacks (intact male donkeys) are “hormonal time bombs” that can be “deadly and dangerous” animals when they are attracted to a jenny or perceive a threat. Sterilization is one of the most extensive operations of power of the humans over the animals. Additionally, it

is a clear contradiction of my informants' insistence that the donkeys' lives must be natural and that this is necessary to keep the animals happy. This rather seems to once again be a way to make the natural culturally acceptable and make the situation more comfortable for the humans involved.

Spatial representation



Figure 5: The spacious donkey pen. Anna James, Asher's Farm Sanctuary, 2019

Many of the rules at Asher's pertained to the way people at the sanctuary constructed the environment to represent their cosmology. Kuckertz (1990) argues that order was similarly constructed and represented in Caguba through the observance of rules in daily life and through rituals such as beer drinking. Morris (2000: 43) agrees that "cultural representations are embedded in the practical constitution of everyday life, both social and material". This is how my informants' cosmology is constantly being reinforced. In many of these cases, the rules apply to the physical layout of the environment and how people interacted with it and moved through it.

The sanctuary acts as a homestead for the animals and in many ways for the people who are involved here as well. I argue that my informants' conceptions of veganism extend to the

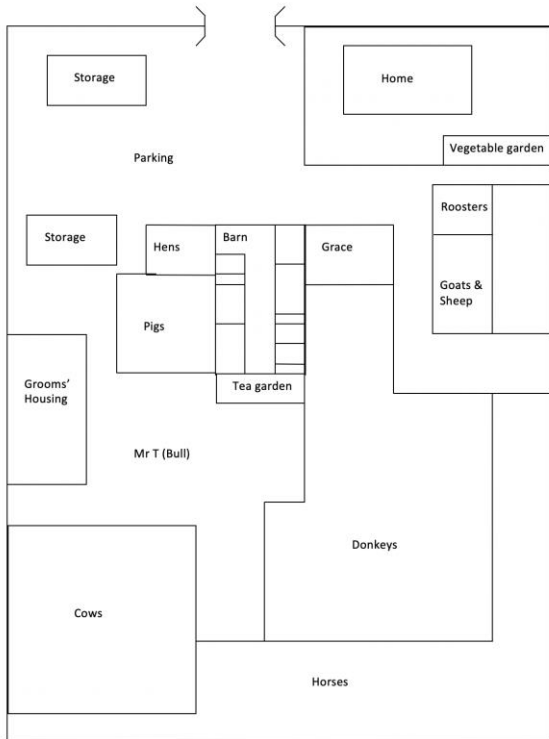
physical environment as well. My informants are concerned with creating an environment that is ‘animal-friendly’, which offers the donkeys and others safety. This means that they need to keep the animals protected from potential threats from the outside whether they are real or imagined.

The use of the word ‘sanctuary’ to describe the institution is in itself significant. Initially, the word was used in religious settings to refer to a sacred place where people could find protection and immunity from persecution (Fusari, 2017: 149). From the nineteenth century, however, it was increasingly used to describe wildlife conservation sites. Fusari (2017) suggests that the term is often evoked by organizations such as zoos to legitimatise keeping animals captive now that their captivity is often seen as ethically problematic. She notes that animals in welfare-based and non-profit sanctuaries often enjoy much more freedom than ones in zoos, while the intentions underlying their confinement in sanctuaries are also different. But “different intentions do not ensure different effects, and the principled differences between zoos and sanctuaries may not be obvious or meaningful to casual visitors, especially young children” (Fusari, 2017: 150).

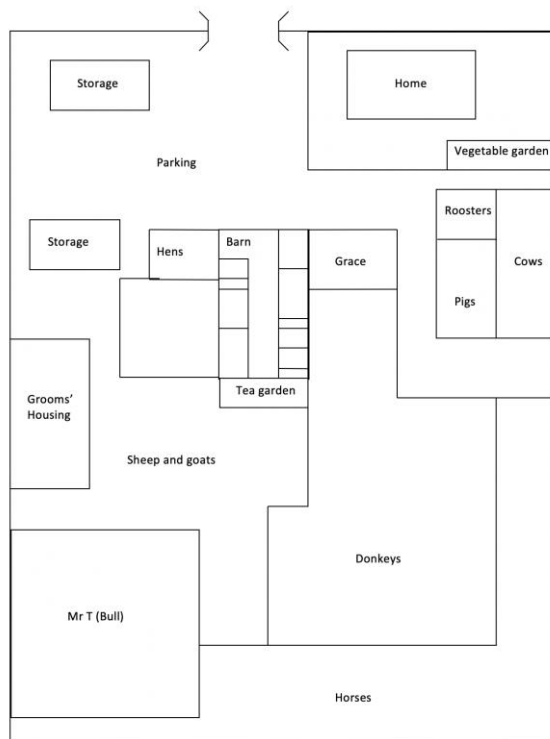
The key point here is that the animals at Asher’s are still being kept in confinement even if they have more space. As such, the managers use the layout and structure of the sanctuary to further impose their ideas of order on the world. Visibly, this is done with the use of electric fencing, pens, gates and so forth. Most of these have the effect of restricting and controlling much of the movement of the animals. Many scholars have recognized that institutions where animals are kept, such as zoos, “have hidden roots in the exercises of human power and domination over nature” (Holtorf, 2000). Once again, I found an apt quote in *Animal Farm*, a political allegory that says as much about humans as it does about our relationships with animals: “besides, in those days they had been slaves, and now they were free, and that made all the difference, as Squealer did not fail to point out” (Orwell, 1945: 94). It was the intentions that seemed to matter for my informants at Asher’s. In other words, the moral imperative separated them from a petting zoo.

The managers normally do not allow the animals to roam free. They are kept either in their indoor stables or outdoor pens. However, there is one regular exception. The managers choose one animal or a group of animals each week that could roam free on a weekday when there are no visitors around. This is done to give them the chance to get more exercise both mentally and physically and is also motivated by the excitement this seemed to elicit from the animals who could now explore the grounds freely. Once again, freedom is only permitted if the action or belief complies with the established codes of behaviour that the managers have construed.

Layout Asher's Farm Sanctuary Nov 2018



Layout Asher's Farm Sanctuary Feb 2019



Layout Asher's Farm Sanctuary March 2019

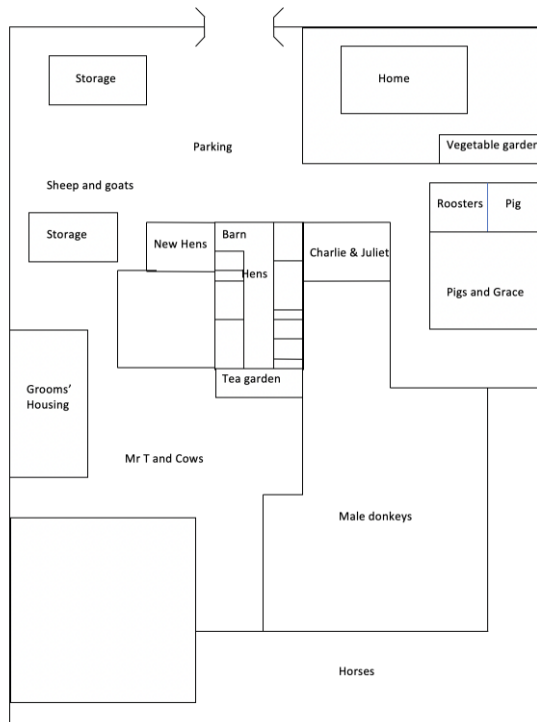


Figure 6: Layout of the sanctuary

The creation of order in the environment is not only limited to its physical layout. Within the microcosm of the sanctuary itself, the managers and board are very concerned with cleanliness. Replacing bedding in the stables in the barn is, for example, one of the main tasks of employees and volunteers. Their concern with cleaning extends to the bodies of the animals as well. Significant effort and time is spent grooming the animals. This peaks the day before an event or a weekend when visitors are expected. In fact, most of my time was spent grooming the animals.

Arguably, this is a central part of maintaining the welfare of animals in any type of confined environment. However, there is more to it than this. Significantly, it is another way in which my informants are making the natural more socially and culturally acceptable. It is a way of making the sanctuary comfortable not only for the animals but for human visitors too. Interestingly, many visitors comment on social media and in-person on the cleanliness of the environment. The focus on cleaning and hygiene can even be seen by looking at the list of common tasks for volunteers as listed on the sanctuary's website. But even more significantly, this is another attempt to define the sanctuary in opposition to the industry which is a place that my participants' see as both physically and morally 'dirty.'

In Chapter 5, I noted how many of my informants' views on veganism are related to notions of purity and pollution. These notions are also present in the rules, specifically the ones pertaining to the sanitization of visitors' hands and feet before entering the sanctuary. Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment. (Douglas, 1966: 2). In this case, one key reason why dirt offends is because it came from the outside world. I was told to get used to getting dirty if I wanted to spend time at the sanctuary. For example, the volunteers and managers often eat with soiled hands. But this is acceptable as long as the dirt comes from within the boundaries of the sanctuary. Problems arose when it is brought in from outside. In this case, they use chemicals to sanitize and prevent potential contagion. As Douglas (1966: 41) argues, dirt and uncleanness constitute "matter out of place".

As I have said, my informants view the sanctuary as an island of morality in a sea of immoral and unethical conduct such as meat-eating. They do not want potentially dangerous outside influences, both physically in the form of potential germs and symbolically in the form of ideas

and practices, to cross the boundaries of the sanctuary and pollute it. Douglas (1996: 3-4) argues the following regarding the imposition of notions of purity and pollution by authority figures:

The ideal order of society is guarded by dangers which threaten transgressors. These dangers are as much threats which one man uses to coerce another as dangers which he himself fears to incur by his own lapses from righteousness ... The whole universe is harnessed to men's attempts to force one another into good citizenship. Thus, we find that certain moral values are upheld, and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion, as when the glance or touch of an adulterer is held to bring illness to his neighbours or his children.

These types of ideas can help impose order on the messiness of life. Managers' insistence that visitors need to sanitize and clean their hands is perhaps one way they are forcing outsiders 'into good citizenship'.

My participants continuously insist that it is critical that animals are allowed to express their inner nature. In fact, Colette stated in our interview that it does not help if you provide everything else that animals needed to be "happy and healthy" but "don't allow them to have natural behaviour". Many people agree on this point that a good or happy life for an animal rests in being able to express its essential 'pigness' or 'wolfness' or 'chickenness' (Pollan, 2002; Mason 2005). Importantly, my informants try to create an environment where the donkeys can express this. But only the aspects that are deemed acceptable in a vegan worldview.

My informants envisioned nature as a physical place, a type of environment, as well as an ideal. As a material place, it is linked to their ideas around the type of environment to which the donkeys and other animals are most suited and as such something to be created and preserved. No doubt one of the things that complicate these relationships is the fact that farm animals are not always seen as part of nature in the same way as wild animals. They have been more closely and deeply entangled in the human connection and have been changed by this human connection. Therefore, it is difficult to say what exactly would be natural. But the managers and volunteers are also talking about nature in the romantic sense: as a longed-for existence that is free from the vices of a modern and industrial life. As a wider movement, animal protectionists are often motivated by romantic sentiments about an idealized natural world (Pearson, 2011: 7).

In this sense, protecting donkeys could suggest a desire to move closer to a more natural, if somewhat romanticized way of life.

Some scholars and authors have likened vegan conceptions of the world to a utopia – an imagined society that possesses nearly perfect characteristics and is nigh-on impossible to create. In many ways, Asher’s could be said to resemble the “‘Edenic myth complex’ so often presented by conservation projects” (Neumann, 1998, cited in Suzuki, 2017: 16). The vegans I met during my fieldwork seem to see themselves as part of a worldwide vegan community who share certain characteristics and beliefs, of which one of the most significant is that they believe themselves to be morally superior. This community shares some similarities with Anderson’s (1983) imagined communities. He applies this term to nations specifically, which are “‘imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 1983: 6).

People struggle with the vegan agenda of preserving animal lives without human interference. As I have mentioned, domesticated species like donkeys largely rely on human assistance for their survival. There are scattered feral communities of donkeys as in Botswana and countries in South America. But their populations are constantly under threat, in some cases due to lack of access to care and resources and in others because people see them as a pest that needs to be exterminated. In one way then, “to think of domestication as a form of enslavement or even exploitation is to misconstrue the whole relationship, to project a human idea of power onto what is, in fact, an instance of mutualism between species” (Pollan, 2002). My fieldwork, for instance, showed me to what extent the donkeys and other animals benefit from the care they receive even though their lives are not exactly natural. It has been suggested that a vegan model for the world “can only thrive in a place where people have lost contact with the natural world, where animals no longer pose any threat to us – a very recent development, and our mastery seems unchallenged” (Pollan, 2007).

My informants themselves sometimes struggle to reconcile the ‘facts’, so to speak, of nature and their ideals. In our interview, I asked Collette what type of future she would want to create through her activism. She replied:

Total animal liberation. I'm not impractical about it, we have already messed so much up but that is my dream. If they could be completely free and do what they want and go where they want and everyone living in harmony. Ideally, they won't even eat each other. But we have already fucked things up so much.

Western conservation efforts, in general, proclaim that from “now on it shall be man who determines the conditions of life for animals (even those still technically wild shall be ‘managed’) and who shoulders the responsibility for their survival or extinctions” (Ingold, 1988: 12).

One point that stands out from all the vegan sanctuaries that I have found so far is that they all own only herbivorous and, specifically, farm animals. Most of them seem to find it easier to associate themselves with herbivores instead of predators, especially ones which do not form part of ‘natural’ ecosystems but are exploited by humans in artificial circumstances. The fact that they are the ones mostly being eaten and now outnumber other species certainly plays a role, but also perhaps because as herbivores they fit more neatly into their ideologies and worldviews.

A similar view seems to be expressed by similar organizations. The sanctuary was initially modelled on the Freedom Farm Sanctuary in Israel. Veganism has become so popular in the country that Tel Aviv is often hailed as the vegan capital of the world (Phull, 2017; Burshtein, 2019). As Oscar and his family were Jewish, his daughter Delia and his widow Elise who founded Asher's felt a connection with the Freedom Farm Sanctuary. On the latter's website, they state that they are a “Garden of Eden” and that “anyone entering the Sanctuary will not leave the same; nor will they remain indifferent” (www.freedom-farm.org).

Once again, hand in hand with this conception of what should be is their ideas of what should not be. The farm could hardly look any more different from the industry feedlots which they criticize. A volunteer once painted me this picture: “You must compare us with Karan beef's feedlots. If you fly over there, the place is just covered with pens with thousands upon thousands of cattle that are crowded in on top of each other. And there isn't even a tree in sight for some shelter, so they all have a permanent sunburn.” My informants are trying to create a material environment that is kinder to and more comfortable for animals. This is one of the significant ways they try to create order in what they see as a chaotic world.

Yet despite attempts to keep everything the same, the sanctuary is in constant flux. I would arrive one day to find that in the past few days several animals had passed away and that new residents had been brought in. Or that for example India, who had been fine two days before, had become lame and was now under constant observation. My human informants are constantly trying to adapt to events that are constantly moving forward. One way in which this is most visible is the layout and physical environment of the sanctuary. Every day brought with it a new organization of pens and the animals in them. Examples of this can be seen in the figures of maps I drew at regular intervals during my fieldwork. One day, Shira and Kiya the formidable Nguni duo were outside, the next day Basil would be trying to chase me in and around the barn. What I would find at the sanctuary was always a surprise.

The flux might point to a desire for change and innovation. But I would rather suggest that they are attempts to maintain the relative status quo on a long-term basis. They are mainly attempts to try to keep all the animals “happy and healthy”. For example, when one of the female donkeys went into heat, Colette or Mikayla made sure that the males and female were kept separate to avoid any “unnecessary upset”. Or when the cocks were split into two groups and separate pens because they had grown hostile towards each other. Whether because of illness, aggression, need for space to roam, the managers always try to be acutely aware of the mental and physical status of the animals and what they could do to address any imbalances or disruption. But it does show that social life never stands still. Even a well-ordered organization such as the sanctuary is a process in motion with several moving components rather than a fixed structure.

A model society

An essential point that Kuckertz (1990) makes is that people in Caguba’s cosmology and social order are not necessarily perfectly presented in their homestead nor society at large. Instead, what people are striving for in the homestead is to try to come as close as possible to creating a model of the ideal. By doing this, individuals could directly and more indirectly shape the world around them to suit this ideal. The model did not show the world as it is, but rather as they wished it to be.

Here again, I can draw many similarities with what I observed during my research. After the first few months of my fieldwork, I was left with the strong impression that my informants were trying to create a model of a utopian ideal. Further analysis only made this picture clearer. Unlike

other animal welfare, protection or activist organisations, they are not involved in any outreaches, not even on a small scale. All their energy is focused on the sanctuary. Very little of their money, effort, and time is spent trying to directly bring about change in the outer world. This is related to their overriding concern with the individual donkey. They are trying to construct a model of the ideal where the individual donkeys are representatives of their species.

Colette: We aren't here to save all the animals. The animals here are ambassadors. Echo is an ambassador for the donkeys like Mr T is for the dairy cows. We want people to form a personal connection with the animals. So, if they visit here once and they drive away and one day they go through the Free State and they see somebody hitting a donkey they would say "but perhaps he is just like Delta, perhaps all he wants is to give you hugs".

On their website, the board of Asher's states: "Your generous contribution enables us to cultivate a better world for us all." It continues, "we wish we were able to house every farmed animal out there, but the reality is that we just do not have the means." They, therefore, hope that people will see the model and realize that this is perhaps a better way of doing things.

For my informants, the creation of a model goes hand in hand with educating the public. The importance that they place on education is a central part of how they are trying to change the larger society. A principle used by Asher's and the wider world of animal protection and conservation is that learning about animals will lead to a greater regard for them. The concept is and still is central to people's approach to conservation in South Africa. One early figure in the conservation efforts argued that "knowledge would quickly lead to love and care for them" (Beinart, 2002). The owner of Freedom Farm Sanctuary (Freedom Farm Sanctuary, 2019), on which the sanctuary is based, for example, says, "that knowledge is power, and therefore we are all privileged and obligated to make our choices out of a thorough examination that will bring new insights – even those that may change us – but these are still better than those relying on convenient and offensive habits of denial".

My informants are obsessed with seeing the 'truth'. The vegan volunteers and the managers are almost obsessive about exposing or relaying the 'truth' at the centre of their cosmology. They are also concerned with what they see as the 'lies' and what nonvegans in general believe. One example of the extent to which they hold their beliefs as true is that Mikayla once responded to a

visitor who tried to associate the animals with meat that it was not just offensive, it was ‘inaccurate’. Through a physical and visible model of the sanctuary, the people who work for Asher’s are trying to show people that there are different ways of relating to and living with donkeys. Hence, the emphasis they place on trying to arrange for schools to come to visit the sanctuary.

It is unclear how many of the visitors changed after or learnt something from visits to the sanctuary. Evidence on zoos, for example, seems to show that they are not always “educational in the sense that visitors actually know more about animals after their visit” (Holtorf, 2000). However, my informants often cite stories of people who had gone vegan after one visit to the sanctuary or who at least had said they had done so. Although I never met one of them, I had met a few people on the tours and at events who ate omnivorous diets. Some of them, especially if they were children, found the information they received impactful, but none of them declared that they would go vegan.

But for my informants, their truth is so glaring that they feel that anyone who accepted it would have to stop eating animal products. The only reason why some resist is their denial. As Mikayla once said, “a lot of us know but refuse to believe it.” My informants never question the validity of their cosmology and believe firmly that they could educate people about this. Their beliefs are unshaken that it is morally incorrect to kill donkeys or any animals for ‘selfish’ reasons as well as to keep them for any work or other reasons such as milking. Their way is the only way.

Through this sanctuary, my informants are trying to create order. The managers and board want to establish Asher’s as a model that represents their worldview and ideal social order. Instead of trying to change the lives of donkeys as a species directly, they are trying to create the perfect lives for a few individual donkeys and use this example to influence people to view the donkeys as unique and valuable persons who need to be treated as such. The animals held a place of central importance in my informants’ cosmology, and they often elevated the animals’ needs above those of humans, including their own and those of the labourers at the sanctuary. To this end, people at the sanctuary emphasize whenever possible that the donkeys are persons. To create order is to create boundaries, to keep what they consider to be morally and physically impure out of the sanctuary. As vegans, they believe themselves to be living ‘truthfully’ and making themselves better people. They are the ‘cool kids’.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Perceptions of donkeys have changed dramatically since their domestication. From being highly valued and elite animals in ancient Egypt to being devalued as stubborn and foolish animals, to now being hailed as the worthy underdog, their identities are in constant flux. This helps to show the ways in which animals' value in human societies constantly changes and how these meanings are constructed in a specific context. Much of today's outcry over the slaughter of donkeys for their hides can be seen as a response to the increasing cruelty towards animals in the meat, dairy and egg industry. But also, the intrusion of industrial capitalism into people's lives.

By caring for the animals at Asher's, my informants are trying to carve out a new identity for themselves as moral and thoughtful individuals who could enter into a relationship with donkeys as named individuals instead of the typical relationship between consumer and product. "If we can move past the trope of the human exploitation of animals, we see that they can mean more to us than dinner," Argent (2013) suggests. The interactions of my informants with animals is therefore not a simple economic transaction as the relationship between people and farm or working animals may often be considered. Thus, showing that our relationships with animals are usually not as simple as they may seem.

The relationship my informants have with donkeys is complex and multifaceted. I found that my informants do not hold dichotomous or binary views regarding themselves and the donkeys, as is often expected from white people in Westernized or industrialized settings (Morris, 2001). They acted against views such as that "animals [are] considered soulless and destined to serve humankind" and in which the "problematic act of animal killing [is placed] beyond moral concern" (Leroy & Praet, 2017: 70). Neither are the donkeys treated merely as political symbols through which people are trying to carve a place for themselves in the world, a sense of belonging. For people at Asher's, donkeys are fully-fledged persons with whom they could connect on a social and emotional level. It is, therefore, immoral to harm them or treat them as lesser than any other person. As Pearson (2011: 5) notes of animal protectionists, my informants are trying to eradicate the "sin of cruelty" from the hearts of humans.

In Chapter 3, I discussed the ways in which the status of donkeys has changed in human societies with a particular focus on South Africa. Although they might have been prized as elite animals in certain contexts, they only arrived in the Cape in the 1600s when opinions of them

had already fallen. As people considered them to be lowly pack animals, they were not the favoured animals for the white colonials and were mostly owned and used by indigenous populations. Together with the humans who shared their lives, their welfare was often uncertain, and they often fell victim to state intervention and, in more recent times, commercial interests. The trade in donkey hides is seen by activists such as my informants' as the most significant crisis that has ever faced these animals. As such, the current status of donkeys in South Africa plays a major role in the way my informants view and treat the animals at Asher's Farm Sanctuary.

In Chapter 4, I show that my informants are not only concerned with the plight of donkeys as a species. Instead, they relate to the animals on a far more personal level. They do not see the animals as objects but as subjects. They relate to the donkeys as Charlie, Delta, Echo, Juliet, India and Tango. Together they formed a network that could be understood through actor–network theory where each individual occupies an equal position and is invested with a degree of agency. They try to teach other people that each animal has a unique personality, temperament and set of physical characteristics. My informants' understanding of the nature of the animals and their relationships to them are central to their cosmology and is the frame of reference through which they approached the world. To them, these animals are family.

The donkeys are not devoid of symbolic significance for them. Rather, this is merely a single facet of the way they are viewed. The individual donkeys were ambassadors of an 'underappreciated species' that formed part of the unfortunate category of the overlooked and mistreated farm animals. They are the underdogs who are facing a crisis. Their treatment and slaughter through illegal practices are for my informants symptomatic of a societal problem where people had dehumanised animals and deluded themselves about the true nature of the world. For them, it is an issue of morality and ethics. As it is immoral to treat a human being as a slave, so it is to treat animals as objects who are only valuable in terms of the work they perform and the resources that could be harvested from them. In this way, killing donkeys for their hides is a crime with material, symbolic and moral dimensions.

Viewing animals as persons is a key part of my informants' practice of the vegan ideology, as I discuss in Chapter 5. This feeds into the ways they identify themselves, eat, consume products, navigate the world and relate to other actors. Taking part in any 'use' of animals would pollute both their bodies and their souls. According to them, all exploitation of animals should be

abolished if either animal kind or humankind is to be saved. Where this is not possible people should at least not ‘go looking for new ways to abuse them like in this donkey trade’. Through this stance, vegan participants are not only trying to create a new lifestyle for themselves. They are also fulfilling their conditions for being a moral and ethical person as opposed to meat-eating others – not to mention the people who they see as representing the Chinese threat to donkeys.

The future of veganism is uncertain. However, the movement seems to be gaining momentum as concerns about the environment and the welfare of animals grow among certain sectors of society. Many people question the sustainability of the diet in terms of human health and environmental impact, as it would require extensive crop farming even in areas that are not suited for this (Leroy & Praet, 2017: 82; Pollan, 2002). But as the amount of these dietary outcasts grows, it is no doubt important to study their role in society. Governments and activists are increasingly finding ways to define animals and their place in the Anthropocene whether that be by declaring them sentient, campaigning for legal personhood or other protective measures. At the same time, they are finding new ways to use animals as resources whether that be through eco-tourism (Suzuki, 2017) or new industries or the move by South Africa’s government to reclassify thirty-three wild species as farm animals (Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2019). The legislation which encompasses lion, rhino, zebra, and cheetah among other species provides for the breeding, identification and utilisation of genetically superior animals in order to improve the production and performance of animals (Pinnock, 2019).

For my informants, veganism is an important part of their worldview and how they try to improve the world around them. In Chapter 6, I expand on the ways in which my informants are trying to improve themselves and the world around them by eliminating any polluting influences. Their primary concern is changing the world and the fate of donkeys and other farm animals. But they are not trying to do this by acting on it directly. They are trying to create order at the sanctuary – to construct it and its social order as a representation of their cosmology. It is to be a model and a symbol of their worldview. Through this and through their behaviour towards the individual donkeys, they hope to influence people’s perception. My informants believe that people would no longer be able to use ejiao or allow the poaching to happen if they see the animals as “intelligent, affectionate, brave, and gentle”.

My participants recognise that animals are subjects who themselves have had a role in shaping their own lives, their surroundings and the lives of those around them. Anthropologists and

other scholars have increasingly come to recognise the agency of animals (Swart, 2010; Mitchell, 2018). Further studies on donkeys from this approach could perhaps shed more light on the donkeys, the humans with whom they share their lives and the relationships between them. I also suggest that further research could help to shed light on the complicated and context-specific meanings of meat and animal products and how people try to negotiate the moral implications of eating another ‘person’. Another potentially rich area of investigation would be to compare donkey rescue centres with a variety of other animal rescue organisations particularly ones associated with horses. I believe that the social hierarchies among humans at animal rescue centres requires additional investigation and analysis. Such research can reveal much about the ways in which people can act agentively to shape their identities and personal narratives by becoming “good Samaritans.” Significantly, it can also help reveal how existing inequalities are reproduced even in the context of charitable organisations where the concepts of freedom, rights and dignity are supposed to hold pride of place.

As Mitchell (2018: 239) warns, if we create narratives of the past that emphasise animals as “unminded objects”, then those narratives may reinforce – and lend credibility to – treating animals in that way today, perpetuating their objectification and exploitation. If, instead, we try to include animal voices and experiences and to recognise that they retain a degree of agency and choice in their own lives, then this “not only provides a means to fresh interpretations of the societies that lived with them, it also is work we might do in good conscience” (Overton & Hamilakis, 2013: 143). At a moment when narrow nationalistic, protectionist agendas encourage a more selfish, exclusionary approach to public affairs, such work may even feed through from the animals and the people who live with them to the wider society. In the case of donkeys, they and the people who continue to depend upon them are still too often caught up in “mutually detrimental processes of marginalisation” (Geiger & Hovorka, 2015b; Mitchell, 2018: 240).

The 2019–2020 coronavirus pandemic has brought the relationships we have with animals and with food into sharp relief. As the country where the virus was first transmitted to humans, China and its food practices have come under intense scrutiny and criticism. Detractors seem especially concerned about the link between animal abuse and public health (Cohen, 2020). But the current wave of concern transcends this pandemic (Foer & Gross, 2020). For decades now movements have increasingly sprung up to advocate for new ways of eating and for better ways of treating animals. Veganism, the slow food movement and the local food movement are just a few. If this trend continues, our relationships with animals are set to continue to become more

complex and multifaceted as they increasingly become entangled with notions of morality, politics, personhood, welfare, environmentalism, friendship, family and identity.

Asher's is one of these sectors of society that believe the way we approach both animals and food needs to change. For them rescuing farm animals and following a vegan lifestyle is a way to validate themselves and to cement a place for themselves as morally superior individuals. And as white middle-class females who live in a city, their actions speak of a longing for a deeper personal connection with animals and nature. What they are doing at Asher's holds a candle for the romantic and pastoralist ideals of the nineteenth century. They are anti-industry and anti-capitalism as long as it involves the use and exploitation of animals, be they donkeys, cats or pangolins.

Once again, as Claude Levi-Strauss (1986: 128) famously said, "animals are good to think with." Our perceptions of them and mind sets regarding them can tell us much about the way humans view the world and how and why they want to change it. Humans do not see donkeys freely, instead we see them through a cultural lens of personhood, symbols, hierarchy, social construction and ideology. Therefore donkeys, even the donkeys at Asher's, are "all beasts of burden, in a sense, made to carry some portion of our thoughts" (Thoreau, 1854: 165).

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