



# **Animal Activism, Nonhuman Charisma, and Ethical Considerations when Working with Captive Animals and Animal Agency Employees**

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## **Abstract**

When activists, multispecies ethnographers, or scholar-activists disrupt official narratives about how animal control agencies manage captive animals, the public pressure can result in increased vulnerabilities for both animals and agency employees. This paper unpacks an example where activists used public archives and records (methods widely used by multispecies researchers) to raise awareness about the story of a cat named Nina. Her case provides a reminder that bringing attention to injustice may result in punitive consequences for employees as the agency tries to appease the public rather than address internal policies. There are consequences for telling animal stories beyond simply giving animals a voice. How agencies respond to pressure resulting from the publication of animal stories demands ethical considerations beyond those currently required for research with human and nonhuman participants. This paper specifically addresses the use of public records to make captive animal experiences visible to a broader public and the potential for negative consequences these actions may have on the animals and employees of the animal agencies. The discussion suggests ways to mitigate these risks for captive animals and agency employees, beginning with preliminary research that situates the animal story within the political history of the agency, critical triangulation of data about the case, analysis of the internal policies that resulted in the situation, and the way the agency mitigates public criticism both internally and officially. These considerations weigh the risks and benefits of the short- and long-term impacts of confronting injustice against animals held in agencies' custody and control.

## **Keywords**

Captivity, nonhuman charisma, activism, ethics, multispecies ethnography, animal shelters



## Introduction



**Figure 1.** ASD Kennel card for Nina. Retrieved from public records requests.

In 2011, an orange tabby cat and her four nursing kittens arrived to the Animal Services Department (ASD) of Miami-Dade County. They were carried through a long hallway lined with barking dogs to the intake room, where they awaited their fate in a wire holding cage. The intake experiences of the mother cat, Nina, and her four kittens, Tita, Lina, Lili, and Pipo, were standard at the time. Her story is representative of animals entering shelters across the U.S. Yet, the events following the intake of this particular family of cats had lasting consequences for cats entering the shelter, agency employees, administration, and local politicians. The case demonstrates the need for careful ethical considerations when conducting multispecies research about animals in government agencies' custody and working with the activists who purportedly speak for these vulnerable animal populations.

This paper unpacks the potential vulnerabilities associated with crafting critical stories about animal and employee experiences in politicized animal agencies like ASD. Animal shelters are spaces of extreme power dynamics between incarcerated animals, low-wage employees, politically inclined administrators, animal owners, unpaid volunteers, and external activists (Dayan 2015; Guenter 2020). While activists or scholars may have noble intentions, the consequences that result from making animal

stories visible can result in unforeseen vulnerabilities. Incorporating multispecies ethnographies into theorizations of human-animal relations demands researchers remain grounded in the complex and contingent entanglements from which these relations emerge (Ogden et al. 2013; Kopnina 2017). This case study helps highlight some of the potential ethical concerns that may arise when bringing animal stories out of captivity and into public debates.

Writing animal stories through multispecies ethnography involves tracing the entanglements through which human and nonhuman lives influence and are influenced by the contingent political forces of encounter (Haraway 2008; Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010; Kopnina 2017; Gillespie 2019). There are many methodological approaches to telling these animal stories (Ogden et al. 2013). Triangulating data collected from official records with in-person observation or bearing witness are methodological approaches used by both multispecies ethnographers and activists (Gillespie 2018). This paper specifically addresses the use of public records to make captive animal experiences visible to a wider public and the potential for negative consequences these actions may have on the animals and employees of the animal agencies. Specifically, this paper asks: What happens when public attention focuses on a specific animal? What does this individualized attention mean for the employees that are directly engaging with this animal? How does increased animal visibility create political pressure for the agency, and how do agencies respond?

To situate Nina's story within the larger politics of animal sheltering, the following subsection of the paper explores the history of animal sheltering and shelter animal activism. The polarizing politics of animal activism is then unpacked through a discussion of my positionality as an animal activist, a former animal shelter employee, and my current role as "scholar-activist" (Derickson and Routledge 2015). Integral to this discussion of emergent ethics is the researcher's need to be reflexive (Van Dooren 2017). I begin by following the methodological approach of activists who published Nina's shelter story on social media by acquiring public records, then tease out the subsequent events for the shelter administration, employees, and future animals. In these three sections, I explore the vulnerabilities experienced by each. By weaving a narrative of shared multispecies vulnerability resulting from telling stories about animal experiences, the final discussion of the repercussions employees may face when animal stories are told highlights additional ethical considerations suggested for activists and multispecies researchers. Nina acts as a guide who helps define this contribution to multispecies research ethics and articulates the need for more politicized animal shelter analyses.

### **Multispecies Ethnography: Intersecting Activism and Research**

The political and ethical dimensions of animals encountering humans through systems of industry and within spaces of captivity are the subject of ongoing debates in political and animal geographies (Wolch and Emel 1998; Urbanik 2012; Gillespie and Collard 2015; Buller 2016; Hovorka 2017; Gibbs 2020). Some of this work focuses on animal sheltering and includes investigations into the biopolitical narratives that justify life or death management practices for stray dogs (Srinivasan 2013), mapping activist pushback on death-making practices to control stray dogs (Crețan 2015), and the ways volunteers resist animal sheltering practices and policies (Guenther 2017). Human-animal relations in other non-laboratory spaces of captivity explore the history and colonial practice of harboring exotic animals for displays in menageries and zoos (Anderson 1995), how we engage with companion species like the dog (Haraway 2003, 2008), the need for individual consideration for captive animals such as an octopus in an aquarium (Bear 2011), ethical frameworks through which farmers engage with their pigs (Driessen 2012), the role of captivity in conservation efforts (Braverman 2014), and contested human-animal relations in spaces where dolphins are held captive (Neo and Ngiam 2014). Less is written about the interconnected vulnerabilities that emerge for humans, animals, and environment in such spaces of animal captivity. However, a notable contribution to this emerging debate includes research on industrial pig farming (Stoddard and Hovorka 2019).

The case study discussed in this paper contributes to the burgeoning debates about the politics of domestic animal shelters and the subsequent impacts animal activism and multispecies research may cause for captive animals and shelter employees. Animal activism and research involving captive animals span a wide range of spaces beyond the laboratory, and there is a growing interest in social science research about animal shelters (Arluke and Sanders 2010; Taylor 2010; Irvine 2012; Guenther 2017, 2020). Current debates about multispecies research tend to focus on ethical considerations researchers face while in the field and the challenges of bearing witness (Collard 2015; Buller 2016; Van Dooren 2017; Rose and Van Dooren 2017; Gibbs 2019). While considering the ethical implications of conducting research both in the laboratory and when confronting difficult situations in the field are well developed (Haraway 2008; Buller 2015; Kopnina 2017; Greenhough and Roe 2019), fewer case studies have focused on the shared vulnerabilities animals and employees experience in spaces like government-run animal shelters.

Animals in government agencies' temporary custody merit specific consideration since the agency can decide to keep the animal alive or kill them with impunity. From the inception of animal-control-type agencies in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, the standard policy was to retrieve stray animals and kill them to "prevent suffering" (Irvine 2017). The mass killings included the destruction of approximately 13.5 million dogs and cats annually (Rowan and Williams 1987). Over the past two decades, a "no-kill" movement has gained popularity, and activists have focused on raising public awareness and applying political pressure to government agencies to reduce or end the wanton killing of pets (Arluke 2003; Winograd 2007; Johnston 2021). The growing awareness of these death-making practices has inspired an increasing number of activist communities that contest animal shelter agencies' politics and policies (Srinivasan 2013; Crețan 2015; Guenther 2017; Johnston 2021; Guenther 2020).

ASD acutely experienced the political momentum of the "no-kill" movement beginning in 2010. ASD handles over 30,000 dogs and cats per year, and before activists applied significant political pressure, the shelter routinely killed over half of the animals in their custody. How the shelter makes animals visible to the public became one of the most prevalent activist critiques. While some adoptable shelter pets are available for viewing by visitors, many others are held in restricted areas and only visible through online pictures released through their public website. These pictures represent a crucial way for the captive animals to be seen and provide activists an opportunity to promote the pets on social media. Any time an animal's picture is not made visible, it piques activists' interest and often results in scrutiny and distrust about the situation. Activists will frequently claim that the shelter is trying to "hide" animals and kill them without anyone knowing. ASD is subject to public inspection of most of their records, including all animals' internal medical files<sup>1</sup>. Activists or volunteers seek out additional information through public records requests, go to the shelter to get pictures, and then publish this additional information on social media threads.

Trapped, caged, numbered, and killed, shelter animals are among the most evocative populations of animals to influence millions of animal rights activists (Guenther 2020). Animal activists and multispecies researchers both use public records to raise awareness about these animal experiences. This shared methodology also indicates a shared ethical responsibility for assessing the risks of bringing these stories to a broader audience. Making these animals more visible also makes their stories political by using the stories as calls to action. Making shelter animals visible through activism and/or research increases positive attention for the animals and confronts alleged injustices; however, as Nina's story illustrates, this visibility may also increase risks for animals and shelter employees.

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<sup>1</sup> In Florida, Chapter 119 "Sunshine Law" makes government agency records available to the public (with a few exceptions); animal sheltering agencies are required to maintain and release records upon request, as per § 823.15.

## Researcher Positionality and Methodology

I have been involved with animal rescue, activism, volunteering, and fostering shelter pets since 2005. In 2011, frustrated as an outsider activist, I took a position as clinic supervisor at ASD. I oversaw thirteen full-time veterinary technicians, collaborated with shelter veterinarians, monitored the shelter animal population, and coordinated veterinary services. One of my job responsibilities included communicating animal medical information to activists and answering emailed requests for specific animals' information. My goal was to use my position to streamline high-quality medical care and convey the shelter animals' specific needs to rescues and the public to increase their chances of leaving the shelter alive. After being laid off when my position was "eliminated from the county budget" in 2014, I decided to transition from shelter industry employee to scholar-activist. In 2016, I became an academic researcher full-time by pursuing a doctoral degree. My dissertation is inspired by my experiences working at various animal protection agencies, and one of the empirical chapters focuses on Nina's story.

While I remember Nina's story as a shelter employee and have heard the story told by activists, I approach *this* telling of her story as a multispecies ethnographer. By drawing from memory, ethnographic interviews, and public records requests from the shelter, her story emerges from the margins, and her killability as nonhuman is questioned and made political (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). I invite Nina to drive the narrative, who, despite being locked in a cage, inspired activism and agency responses as a formidable, lively being in a contentious political assemblage (Ogden et al. 2013). Building on engaged multispecies ethnographic work investigating exploitation and violence against nonhuman animals (Kopnina 2017), this case argues for specific ethical considerations when confronting injustice by making captive animal experiences visible. Multispecies ethnographies about animals like Nina include both human and nonhuman experiences and help unpack deeply political systems of power inequalities in such industries (Locke 2018). For this reason, the consequences of activists using Nina's experience to confront the shelter's policies highlights the need to consider how the shelter will respond and the shared vulnerabilities of both the animals and employees.

I decided to include the shelter's name and specific details about Nina because her case is well-documented in public records, and related issues have been part of several external investigations into agency conduct and response to activist pressure. ASD is an agency that has responded with increased reluctance to be transparent when confronted with activist inquiry since the beginning of severe activist criticism in 2010. It is my opinion that this case is a robust cautionary example for others when deciding how to confront perceived animal injustice through activism and research. The political involvement between the county administrators and the animal shelter persists; this power struggle between animal agencies, politicians, and activists is representative of so many communities throughout the U.S. where "no-kill" ideology has created deep rifts of mistrust on all sides. This paper provides an opportunity for activists and researchers to reflect on the potentially negative consequences their actions may have for agency employees by documenting this history. Further, I hope to encourage greater compassion through ethical research that welcomes conversations with activists and the agencies as well as lower-level agency employees.

I focus on Nina's experience because she was the first shelter animal who singularly highlighted the political power of one animal's story to force a politicized response from the shelter administrators, the mechanisms through which activists manifest public pressure on the shelter, and the risks and retribution that such attention may cause within the shelter for both animals and employees. I want to acknowledge and thank the activists who shared archives of public records to develop this historical account from the point of view of the activists that were involved with this case. Once I found these old social media posts, I used Nina's animal identification number contained therein to request her medical file and all emails about her case through public records.

Shelter animal data are situated through document triangulation to politicize the seemingly arbitrary decisions and agency reactions. As I wrote her story, I drew from my experiences working in the cat rooms to better understand what these spaces are like for the animals held in custody and the humans charged with daily care. I triangulated these data with details ascertained from official agency documents, case notes, medical records, personnel files, grievance letters from employees, medical histories, and standard operating procedures (SOPs). It took years to acquire all the records and cost hundreds of dollars in fees to develop this story. Finally, I analyzed the data according to the SOPs governing animal care and data production techniques when Nina was at the shelter. It is critical to this kind of research to make sure that situations are analyzed according to policies that governed the agency's approach to animals and employees at the time of the incident; ASD's cat policies have since changed.

Some of the details about employee reactions to Nina's case come from semi-structured interviews. Several of the forty participants from my dissertation research recall Nina's story and shared their opinions of the events that ensued. These participants include current employees, former employees, and local activists who work with four large animal welfare agencies in Florida, including ASD.

Animal shelters that the government runs are spaces where administrators, employees, and activists have very contentious relationships. For this reason, and in furtherance of keeping the story focused on a cat named Nina, I exclude the names of the humans who generously shared their thoughts and archives with me. The participating activists agree that this story is best told without being cluttered with individual human identifiers or organizations or groups' names. Removing all participant names also further reduces the risk that a current or former employee could be recognized. Employees are vulnerable to agency retaliation such as demotion or termination, and activists risk losing their privileges to rescue pets from the shelter. It is critical for multispecies researchers to be aware of these risks. Shelters frequently require employees and volunteers to sign non-disclosure agreements and routinely terminate employees and volunteers if the agency perceives they are talking about the agency in a negative tone. Full-time employees who have passed a one-year probation period have some protection through union collective bargaining agreements, but most are still concerned that their jobs hinge upon not being perceived as critical of the shelter or administration. Volunteers, part-time employees, per diem contractors (like veterinarians), and newer employees who have no union protection can be fired for any reason, at any time. Supervisors and administration are exempt from union protection, so they share some of the same fears as lower-level employees, although they are more directly concerned with how local politicians perceive them.

Government-run animal shelter employees experience acute fear of retaliation for speaking out regarding animal injustice and the structural power dynamics specific to captive animal care industries. I approached approximately one hundred potential participants, and two-thirds of those who were directly related to the animal shelter (either as volunteers or employees) declined to participate in this research for fear of retaliation or termination from their position at the shelter. The fear experienced by employees and volunteers is palpable. One current employee was so concerned about not having any identifiable markers associated with the interview they threatened to kill me and leave my body in the Everglades if this research revealed their identity. While conducting these interviews, I also remained aware that there was the potential for unequal power dynamics since I had been a former supervisor with some authority over employees in the past. I spent time discussing my current role as a scholar-activist with each participant and reviewing the ethical standards that govern qualitative data collection and ethnographic academic research to address this potential conflict.

Public opinion and activist pressure directly impact the way agencies respond. I hope this discussion provides an opportunity for activists, multispecies ethnographers, and scholar-activists to reflect on the potential consequences of telling captive animal stories. I argue that making these encounters and experiences public, both through activism and research publications, impacts the animals

and the animal caretaking employees. Ethical frameworks that only focus on human participants and laboratory animals fall short of considerations for shared vulnerabilities in spaces where politically driven agencies react to animal stories with direct consequences for the animals and employees. The lessons from this case study open up the potential for generalizing these ethical considerations in a wide range of other spaces of captivity where power dynamics impact animal and caretaker experiences, including animal rehabilitation centers, sanctuaries, entertainment venues, non-profit animal shelters, and other government agencies charged with harboring or processing animals (such as the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service).

### **Political Pressure Experienced by Animal Agencies**

As Nina and the four kittens were impounded, the employee took them out one by one to take a quick picture with a low-resolution web camera. Nina was also assigned a kennel identification number, A1390316. Animal shelter names are not unique, so ASD tracks animals by their numbers. After arrival, cats are moved into a holding kennel in the main cat intake area; the kennels are made of stainless steel and are solid on five sides. The sixth side is metal bars that face the intake area. The smooth surface is ideal for cleaning and disinfecting, but the cold metal creates risks for young kittens who struggle to regulate their temperature. Nina was likely placed in a standard multiple unit kennel, lined with newspaper on the bottom, a small cardboard litter box, and two small stainless-steel bowls. The five kennel cards printed upon intake were placed in a plastic sheet cover suspended from a small metal ring dangling diagonally from the bars.

The picture shows the intake employee holding Nina in their arms, her body balanced on the one hand cupping her chest so that her face is close to the camera. Nina is alert, slightly tense, but her ears are not pinned, and she is not showing any overt signs of discomfort at being held by the human. This is the picture made visible to the public through the shelter website. Next to her picture, the following basic information was listed:

NINA (A1390316)

I am a female orange tabby Domestic Shorthair.

The shelter staff think I am about 1 year old.

I was found as a stray and I may be available for adoption on 10/22/2011.

The employee listed Nina's intake status as "stray" and her condition as "nursing." No behavioral notes were added to her file to indicate she was reactive, aggressive, fearful, or feral. The four kitten pictures were not populated to the site since they were nursing (too young to be adopted on their own), and the employee made the decision to list their status as "unavailable." Due to being classified as unavailable, as per shelter policy for nursing kittens, the kittens remained invisible to the online public.

Outside the shelter, a virtual world of shelter animal pictures was erupting. Nina's picture received little attention from the public initially, but activists worked to build up interest in her story on the first day she arrived. When volunteers became aware of the kittens, activists immediately questioned why the shelter would keep them "a secret". Within hours of her picture going online, activists began emailing about Nina's kittens, requesting their status. Several emails asked why the kittens' pictures were not posted on the agency website and insinuated the shelter probably already killed the kittens. This kind of skepticism about the shelter's euthanasia policies had been gaining momentum through online activist groups who criticized the shelter kill rates. The shelter responded by explaining that the kittens were too young to be adopted out alone and that their pictures were not on the website because they were unavailable for placement separate from Nina. The emails' tone is tense; the relationship between activists and shelter administration was already strained due to past high kill rates and the "no-kill"

political pressure. Since 2010, dog and cat shelter activists on Facebook tracked individual animals posted on the ASD website. Activists post each photograph and shelter number to dedicated Facebook pages to track their intake, evaluation notes, and outcomes. Some of these activist pages have over 100,000 followers. Controversial posts include the email addresses of local politicians.

Agencies that control captive animals and their outcomes also control how these animals' experiences are represented and made available for observation to volunteers, researchers, activists, and the public. Any threat to those official narratives resulting from activism or research increases the chances that the agency will respond by changing internal policies in ways that create additional risks for the animals (Johnston 2021) and, as this case argues, employees. Making life and death visible in spaces of captivity is risky. The way we story stories matters (Haraway 2016); when we tell stories to confront a perceived injustice, agency reactions to the story may create additional injustice. Nina's story contributes to ongoing debates about the intersection of activism and research during the production of knowledge that confronts a singular dominant version of lived experiences (Nagar 2019). Animal services and other animal management agencies, both government and non-profit, depend on specific narratives to survive. Like most animal welfare agencies, ASD depends on positive public perceptions about their work and favorable political support to gain continued funding and funding increases from local government.

When the "no-kill" movement began applying pressure to the county commissioners and shelter administrators to reduce the kill rate for dogs and cats, individual animal stories became a primary way activists garnered public support for the cause (Winograd 2009). Public scrutiny regarding animal shelter killing often results in changes to shelter policies (Srinivasan 2013; Crețan 2015; Guenther 2017; Johnston 2021; Guenther 2020). When animal stories incite scandals about the shelter, administrators feel pressure from the politicians who control their budgets. During years where there are public protests against ASD, or when scandals like Nina go viral, it is less likely for the commissioners to support the shelter fiscally. The pressure for politicians is even more acute in election years.

The politics of animal sheltering consists of reactive maneuvers to activism and public demands. For ASD, this meant the need to rethink the internal policies that made Nina's situation contestable. However, before addressing policy, they shifted responsibility away from shelter policy and onto an employee. Before discussing the employee impacts, the next section focuses on how Nina's story helped activists contest the current shelter policies that made so-called "feral" cats killable.

### **Nonhuman Charisma and Online Animal Activism**

Five days after their arrival, Nina's family gained online attention due to the publication of the family pictures taken by a shelter volunteer (Figure 2). The nursing mother's pictures were more evocative than the individual, low-quality intake picture of Nina posted by the shelter – the public was moved by the tender pictures of a mother cuddling her babies in a way that the sterile and contrived intake picture could not achieve.

Nonhuman charisma produces affect and becomes a fundamental motivation to "get involved" in a cause (Lorimer 2007). Whereas charismatic nonhuman animals in the wild have become central named characters in conservation activism (McCubbin and Hovorka 2020), so too do shelter animals like Nina become charismatic nonhuman personalities that mobilize activism and public engagement. Nina and other cases like her produce an ontological shift in the way animal advocates and "no-kill" activists engage a broader audience to apply pressure to the shelter. However, becoming charismatic also results in increased vulnerability for the animal. The more attention her pictures received, the more vulnerable Nina became. The activist emails about her were drawing shelter attention to her family. It was not uncommon for animals to remain in kennels relatively unnoticed by supervisors and administrators, but when animals went viral, administration noticed. Pets who gained social media attention inspired more

public requests for information. The shelter was already receiving over 800 phone calls and dozens, sometimes hundreds, of emails per day. In many cases, social media attention helps the animal find an adopter or rescue. However, when this attention does not result in the immediate live release of the animal from the shelter, the animal may be granted an extension of time by shelter employees, or alternatively, may be subject to expedited euthanasia as a way for the shelter to resolve the public pressure.



**Figure 2.** Volunteer pictures of Nina and her kittens were posted on a public social media site in 2011. Reproduced with permission of the page administrator.

While Nina gained public attention online, early morning activities in the cat intake room on November 2 proceeded much like every other morning. A kennel employee turned on the lights and began distributing small paper trays with wet food. They cleaned the kennels, threw away ripped or dirty newspapers, filled up dry food, refilled water, and exchanged used litter boxes for new ones. In the afternoon, Nina would receive a second plate of wet food. This was the schedule Nina experienced since her arrival eleven days prior. Later that morning, a different kind of employee approached Nina; he had a soft voice, was dressed in medical scrubs, wore gloves, and smelled like chemicals and dogs. He brought a rolling table filled with small bottles, a scale, and syringes. Tita, Lina, Lili, and Pipo were individually removed from the kennel, weighed, and then returned to Nina. The technician decided they were too small to administer any medical services, so he logged their weights in each medical record along with a template about caring for young kittens. These records indicate that the kittens were in good health and would soon be big enough to be placed for adoption. While this must have been a stressful process for Nina, there are no notes in the records indicating that she reacted aggressively to the handling of her young kittens.

Around midday, the kennel supervisor came into the cat intake room and made a list. The employees began loading cats into the small wire holding cages; they stacked four or five cages on top of one another, insecurely balanced on a flat cart with wheels. Nina and her kittens were placed in a single wire cage and added to the pile. The cart was rolled down a hallway; the cats could see thirty or so dogs tied up to a chain-link fence. The pile of cats would then wait next to the dead animal removal truck filled with euthanized bodies ready to go to the landfill. At this point, someone might cover the entire stack with a sheet. A strong smell of bleach used to clean the room might mask the smells of the animals who just recently perished, but we will never know how much the cats can smell the bagged bodies in the truck. Each cat in this stack would wait and listen to the cats above them get removed and fall silent; the pinch of a needle would soon bring death to every one of these cats.

According to internal policies, the veterinary technician must select the reason for the euthanasia, based on the observations in the euthanasia room, and input that information into the computer prior to completing the injection. Since the kennel supervisor did not specify a reason for Nina's euthanasia, the technician selected "feral" as the reason due to her scared behavior at that time and as was policy for any cat that "could not be handled." The technician's decision to label her "feral" was a momentary selection that would ultimately become a central debate among activists.

Since she could "not be handled," the technician probably injected Nina through the wires with a syringe attached to a long stick, navigating the injection into her intraperitoneal area in her abdomen, and her body slowly grew limp. After she was rendered unconscious, Tita, Lina, Lili, and Pipo would be taken out one by one and injected in the stomach as well, before getting placed back next to Nina's body to die.

Nina, Tita, Lina, Lili, and Pipo were dead before the shelter closed at 6:00 PM, but news of their death did not reach the social media threads for another two hours. Activists posted the following comments under her intake picture:

8:02 PM      So sorry Nina RIP sweet angel!!! Very sad  
 8:03 PM      Did they kill her babies too? The whole family?  
 8:07 PM      yes  
 8:08 PM      Was this the one with orange and calico babies?  
 9:35 PM      This is so sad. R.i.p. Girl and family  
 9:38 PM      Ugh! And someone was trying to adopt her.  
 10:01 PM     This makes me so f\*\*\*\*\* mad.

The morning after, an activist requested the family's outcome details, and they received the information, including the outcome condition for Nina as *feral*. That day, activists shared Nina's intake picture with the following caption:

The quarantine cats weren't killed but the MOM & HER BABIES WERE and guess what the reason was? FERAL!!!!!!!!!!!! Hello jackass, you are holding her!!! Feral ????????

This is the activist comment that ignited the scandal. The public made dozens of phone calls and sent emails to administration. According to interview participant recollections and emails attained through public records requests, an administrator called the employee into her office, questioned him about the incident, and fired him. He was not aware of the hateful comments and emails that blamed him for Nina's death – he was the person who injected her with an overdose of barbiturate solution, as his job required, but he was *not* the person who *selected* her for death. All he knew was

that he followed a directive to euthanize the animals given to him on a list that day, according to shelter policies. It was not his job to question a supervisor's decision. Further, according to employees who recall the story, he did not understand the nuanced difference between "feral" and "fearful" in English, since he was a native Spanish speaker.

As with Nina and her kittens, most cats entering the sheltering system have unknown backgrounds. Intake employees are faced with making behavioral and medical assessments in just the few minutes it takes to move them from cage to kennel and take their pictures. A systematic review of sheltering assessment techniques revealed that cats are often misidentified as feral during these intake assessments, and often, fearful cats that would otherwise be friendly are assigned the label erroneously (Slater et al. 2010). When they fired the employee over Nina's outcome classification, I presented this study to the administrator, but they did not reverse the decision. The decision to fire him was political; it was a reaction to misdirected activist pressure. The fact that veterinary medical science proves the two classifications are indistinguishable in a sheltering environment was irrelevant to this political decision.

During fervent efforts to confront injustice, activists may blame an employee rather than focusing on the entanglements of internal policies responsible for how an animal was handled or killed. Nina's story could have been an opportunity for activists to confront the classification mechanisms imposed on "feral" cats and the policies that allowed all feral cats to be killed without question. Instead, Nina's story resulted in the termination of an employee known for being compassionate with shelter cats. Had the activists asked about the policies or spoken to other employees about this case and the employee in question, the administration may not have reacted this way.

The dismissal of the employee was a strategic move to appease the activists without addressing the systematic abuses that resulted from incoherent and outdated internal policies. Since confronting systemic injustice against animals in such spaces (both in activism and multispecies research) often relies on drawing attention to specific animals and examples of injustice, it is critical that we learn from Nina's case and proceed with greater ethical considerations for the way we frame these stories and how this may impact the employees.

### **Activism and Employee Vulnerability**

Telling animal stories is political. By situating the effects of nonhuman charisma evoked by activists who use social media to bring captive animals' plights to a larger public, Nina's case signals the need for ethical considerations that include not only captive (non-laboratory) animals but also the lower-level employees who are their primary caretakers. Multispecies ethnographers have an opportunity to share lessons learned with animal activists, and activist-scholars who share their research beyond academia have a substantial opportunity to expand ethical considerations when confronting injustice and agencies' official narratives. When scholar-activists engage with alternative publication outlets, the potentials for bringing about change require a critical assessment of its possibilities and limits (Sandoval 2009). We must not only tell the compelling, charismatic stories of animals, but we must remain grounded within the precarious experiences of the humans who work with these animals (Haraway 2008; Greenhough and Roe 2019).

It is not common knowledge outside of the shelter that the person administering the fatal injection usually does not select the animals to be killed. The kennel supervisor may have ordered the euthanasia technician to destroy over one hundred cats and kittens that day; mass euthanasia was part of everyday policies at that time. The *reason* the supervisor selected individual animals for euthanasia was usually not listed nor explained to the technician. There were no formal internal systems for making these decisions. From the euthanasia technician's point of view, they followed

directives and input reasons for euthanasia in the computer following the basic verbal guidelines for classifying animals at intake or at the moment of euthanasia (such as, if you cannot handle the cat, it is feral).

When the technician was fired, the clinic staff's backlash was immediate; they threatened to walk out. The fired technician was known for being the best kitten handler at the shelter. He could pull blood from the tiniest of kittens without causing them to faint, and the clinic technicians admired his skills. The other technicians felt vulnerable and feared they might also lose their jobs due to activist posts and public pressure. Experiencing and reacting to these vulnerabilities signals both a condition of present and future risk as well as the potential for resistance.

Nina became symbolic of employee resistance since they interpreted her story as one that made visible their own vulnerabilities. Shelter employees became acutely aware that they were at risk of becoming an agency scapegoat any time activist pressure increased. Employees recall feeling a shared vulnerability, where the administration could make decisions to end employment or euthanize an animal for any politically motivated reason. In the decade since Nina's story went viral, the term "Facebook fired" has become a mainstream concept describing social media's impact on employee termination (O'Connor and Schmidt 2015). Studies that look into the phenomenon include studies about K-12 teachers fired for their personal use of social media (O'Connor and Schmidt 2015), risks to employers when employees post negative comments on personal social media outlets (Miles and Mangold 2014), government employees and the consequences for using personal social media (Jacobson and Tufts 2013), and the potential legal and ethical issues regarding employee privacy when employers use employee social media use as the reason for termination (Abril et al. 2012; Binder 2019). This debate remains grounded mainly in legal and business literature, and each of these studies focuses on the *employee's* use of social media. Far less has been written about social media, activism, and employee vulnerability in the social sciences or in multispecies research. Studies of human-environment relations are beginning to explore social media, including the potential for using visitors' social media posts about their engagement with protected conservation areas (Hausmann et al. 2018), methods of uncovering illegal wildlife trade by using data collected from social media platforms through machine-learning algorithms (Di Minin et al. 2018), and tracking possible cases of animal cruelty through social media (Gillespie 2018). These are helpful theoretical frameworks through which to unpack the risks that emerge for employees regarding social media use.

Nina's case contributes an example where employees faced increased vulnerability due to *external* activist use of social media. Animal shelters are one space where such an investigation is possible, but many other spaces exist where animals and employees are at the whim of administrative responses to activism and public pressure. There are an estimated 14,000 animal shelters in the U.S., not counting the thousands of rehabilitation facilities, sanctuaries, rescues, and other organizations that harbor unowned animals. These organizations handle millions of animals every year, and hundreds of thousands of employees work in these spaces. As scholar-activists, these politicized spaces of human-animal relations offer opportunities to further explore the animal and human risks that emerge as a result of confronting injustice by bringing animal stories to the public. Much animal activism focuses on speaking up for "voiceless" animals, but our ethical duty as researchers extends beyond reflecting on how we bear witness (Collard 2015; Rose and Van Dooren 2017). The way the agency experiences and responds to pressure resulting from the publication of animal stories demands ethical considerations beyond those currently required for research with human and nonhuman participants.

Furthermore, it is critical to separate the employees from the protocols. When researching animals held in spaces of captivity, researchers may witness situations where the employees follow

protocols, but the protocols themselves inspire questions about the ethical treatment of the animals or even abuse (Collard 2015). As Nina's story demonstrates, when employees are targets of activist criticism of an agency, one risk may be that the agency reacts by punishing the employee and not addressing the systemic problems inherent in the policy itself. In these spaces, it is critical to analyze human stakeholders' motivations to produce written policies and data that positively portray animal experiences. Multispecies researchers must analyze each human's investment in making decisions for nonhuman animals and producing data about captive animals (Van Patter and Blattner 2020). A direct animal care employee, for example, will necessarily have a different set of attachments and motivations when describing captive animals' experiences. Donors or high-level administrators for the same organization are very different stakeholders, and these differences must be used to situate the data gleaned from their interviews. Staying with the messiness of human-animal relations requires a careful tracing of histories, motivations, and entanglements (Tsing 2015; Haraway 2016). Nina's story underscores the need for an "emergent ethics" that demands researchers wallow in the contingent complexities of specific spaces of human-animal relations (Van Dooren 2017). Researchers must go beyond the required set of ethical guidelines that stop at the laboratory doors and think ahead to how the practice of storying animal experiences may cause reactions within the agencies about which they publish.

By 2012, just one year after Nina, ASD changed its internal policy regarding "feral" cats. The term was almost removed entirely from agency SOPs. They changed to a mandatory trap-neuter-return program where all cats coming into the shelter experience a different form of vulnerability by being returned to the urban streets from which they came (Johnston 2021). Cats coming in through the current program receive no publicly posted pictures, no names, and no opportunity for activist or public interest. Nina not only galvanized resistance to administration reactivity when the shelter came under severe activist and public pressure, but she also changed the policy for a hundred thousand cats who have gone through ASD since (Beal 2021). The activists who confronted the cruel "feral" cat policy by exposing stories like Nina's never meant to make it impossible to track these cats in the future. Additionally, according to current employees, the fear of making a mistake that becomes the target of activist pressure remains high. They continue to fear agency retaliation for speaking up about situations, defending themselves, or even just communicating with anyone perceived as an activist, journalist, or researcher.

## **Conclusion**

When activists, multispecies ethnographers, or scholar-activists disrupt official narratives about the way government agencies manage animals, the public pressure can result in increased vulnerabilities for both animals and agency employees. By drawing on an example where activists used a method for telling an animal story that is widely used by academic researchers (public archives and records), Nina's story provides a reminder that bringing attention to injustice may result in agencies sacrificing an employee to appease the public rather than addressing the policies that made the injustice possible. The way activists confronted the alleged wrongful killing of Nina and her kittens did not result in an immediate change in the policies regarding the destruction of shelter cats. The publication of her pictures and story caused the termination of one skilled cat caregiver and galvanized shelter employee's awareness of their vulnerability when the agency responds to public scrutiny. While the policies that made Nina's death possible were eventually changed a year later, the resulting changes increased shelter cat vulnerability by removing most cats from public view entirely.

The public outcry could have challenged the policies that made cats killable through ferality and used veterinary science to prove that such policies result in the classification's erroneous use. Shelter administrators could have focused on the shelter policies of keeping some animals invisible

and of killing all cats labeled feral. In the end, however, the emotional and non-specific complaints about Nina's death allowed the administration to create a scapegoat for the incident and fire a probationary employee who was not even aware of the controversy. The activists ought to have looked beyond the last employee to engage with Nina to ask how Nina was selected to be killed. As a scholar-activist, I remember this moment when deciding which questions to pursue and how to ground individual situations within the broader systematic procedures within an agency.

Nina's memory continues to inspire me. The vulnerability of the employees and shelter animals keeps me grounded. I invite multispecies researchers to consider the repercussions that may occur as a result of making animal life and death visible in spaces of captivity. When approaching a research project in an agency with which one is not as familiar, I suggest beginning with preliminary research that includes: (1) a thorough review of public critique of the agency including news and social media, (2) analyze these data for any evidence or claims that specific animals were targeted with retaliatory action after an injustice was voiced by activists, (3) look for any data that reveals specific identifiers about employees or cases where specific employees were the target of activist campaigns, (4) collect as much information about internal policies as possible, including SOPs, memos, disciplinary files, and training manuals, and (5) include a series of questions when screening possible ethnographic interview participants that asks if any employees or volunteers have suffered punitive consequences as a result of public or activist pressure, social media stories, speaking up about concerns within the agency, are required to sign non-disclosure forms that prohibit speaking about the agency, or have observed any increased risks or repercussions for the animals as a result of any of the above. These considerations will help scholar-activists weigh the risks and benefits of the long-term impacts of the way we tell stories to confront injustice against animals held in agencies' custody and control.

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