Imagining Home:

Performing Adoptability in Transnational Canine Rescue and Rehoming

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Abstract: This article explores online performances of adoptability of homeless dogs in transnational animal rescue and rehoming practices in Finland, based on an analysis of the websites of Finnish animal rescue charities, as well as interviews with volunteers at these charities. Drawing on recent work on concepts such as home, care, encounter value, and nonhuman charisma, I explore how homeless dogs in other countries are portrayed online for the purpose of transnational rehoming as pets and, more generally, how animal adoptability and ideals of a pet and a multispecies home are constructed. The dogs' life histories, present situation, and subsequent adoptability are validated in stories based on interpretations of their past and present experiences, subjectivity, and agency. The encounter value of homeless dogs is based not only on the positive affects their portrayals are supposed to evoke, but also on interpretations of their experiences of suffering and the compassion they may elicit in the potential adopter. The adoptability of these dogs, I argue, is constructed on an encounter value based on compassion-evoking charisma rather than promises of sharing a life with an "ideal" pet and their rehoming is presented as an opportunity to create a home with an animal who may never have had one before.

Keywords: *homeless animals, rehoming, dogs, home, care, encounter value, nonhuman charisma*

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"The dark beauty Tuuma is an open, cheerful, and sociable puppy. Her little tail wags vigorously when Tuuma gets to meet new people!"[1] This description of the young dog Tuuma is an excerpt of one of the several online presentations of homeless dogs offered for adoption by Finnish animal rescue charities. These dogs, residing in shelters in different countries around Europe, have become the target of transnational animal rescue and rehoming practices. Through these practices, an increasing number of animals have been rehomed from Southern and Eastern Europe to more affluent countries in the North and West of Europe in the past two decades. The developments contributing to the increased popularity of transnational animal rescue and rehoming practices include concern for the fate of abandoned animals in foreign countries, increased international mobility, as well as current problems associated with dog breeding. In the resulting practices, care for the distant other, animal advocacy, and personal human–animal relations intertwine in a way that is gradually transforming pet culture in the West.

In Finland, there are currently around twenty animal rescue charities importing homeless animals from abroad for the purpose of rehoming, with the largest number of animals arriving from Romania, Russia, and Spain. The overwhelming majority of the animals rehomed are dogs, while a small minority are cats. The charities almost exclusively operate on a voluntary basis and collaborate with local volunteers, groups, and charity organizations in the countries of origin, supporting them in the daily care of the animals in shelters and in the preparation of their rehoming. These practices have emerged in a landscape where most of the canine population are purebred, produced by hobby breeders, but with an increasing presence of puppy mills.

There are clear structural similarities between transnational animal rehoming and child adoption.[2] Despite the species difference, both practices provide a means of adopting a new family member from

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1   "Tuuma", Viipurin Koirat, last updated 19 December 2019, https://viipurinkoirat.fi/tuuma.

2   For the latter, see for example Yngvesson, *Belonging in an Adopted World*; Leinaweaver, "The Quiet Migration Redux".

faraway places that are sometimes labelled as unable to safeguard the wellbeing of the adoptees. Further, in both types of practices, there are specific criteria involved in the selection of the adoptive families. The differences stem from the significance given to the species boundary: animals are not officially considered family members and, thus, the rehoming programmes are not formal in the way that child adoption programmes are. The former are also public in a way that child adoption programmes are not, since dogs looking for a home are individually presented on the webpages of the charities. In transnational animal rehoming practices, the online presentation plays an important part in the adoption process. Because of the geographical distance involved, potential adopters cannot see the dogs in the shelter environment and hence to bring them closer to the public the animals are introduced online. The purpose of these portrayals is to define and describe the dogs' adoptability, in other words, to market their potential for rehoming as companions, and to create a good match between dog and adopter.[3] These online presentations include pictures and videos as well as written descriptions of, for example, the dogs' background, personality, special needs, and their interaction with humans and other dogs at the shelter.

This article draws on an analysis of the presentations of homeless dogs on the web pages of Finnish animal rescue charities, as well as interviews with volunteers at these charities. I am interested in how homeless dogs are portrayed online for the purpose of transnational rehoming as pets and, more generally, how animal adoptability and specific ideals of a pet and a multispecies home are constructed. To answer these questions, I approach the online presentations of dogs as stories that include performances of the animals' individual subjectivity and agency. Theoretically, the article draws on recent discussions within studies of pet–human relationships,[4] with a special focus on the concepts of home,[5] encounter value,[6] and nonhuman charisma.[7]

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3 Balcom and Arluke, "Animal Adoption as Negotiated Order".
4 Fox, "Animal Behaviours"; Charles and Aull Davies, "My Family"; Power, "Furry Families".
5 Douglas, "The Idea of a Home."
6 Haraway, *When Species Meet*.
7 Lorimer, *Wildlife in the Anthropocene*.

There have been several earlier studies on animal rescue and rehoming practices and their implications for human–animal relations.[8] The object of study in this paper, however, differs from the previous work because of the international dimension of the practices studied — the distance and the unknown quality of the dogs' backgrounds. I begin with a discussion on the theoretical aspects of what I see as constituting the adoptability of an animal. I then introduce the methodology before presenting the empirical analysis of how the adoptability of homeless animals is constructed in the Finnish practices of rescuing and rehoming homeless dogs from abroad.

Pet–Human Relationships and Home

Exploring how animals become perceived as adoptable sheds light on the ambiguous place of pets in the contemporary West, that is, as nonhuman animals living in the human home, as part of the family, but also faced with expectations of companionability and love.[9] Pets are generally understood as animals that share their lives with humans in close companionship.[10] Pets are, by definition, not eaten, therefore they are placed in a different category from animals that are destined for consumption by humans or pets. Such categorizing practices serve to maintain "the strongly dualistic boundaries of the 'pet' and 'meat' animal."[11] However, despite their privileged position and due to their legal status as property, pets are still subjected to human power and domination.[12]

The very category of "the pet" itself comprises subcategories that place pets of different species or origins in different positions. For example, rats kept as pets are often not valued in the same way as

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8 E.g. Balcom and Arluke, "Animal Adoption"; Irvine, *If You Tame Me*; Nyman, "Adopting Animals"; Policarpo, "Daphne the Cat"; Weaver, "'Becoming in Kind'".

9 See Redmalm, "Discipline and Puppies". I have used the term "nonhuman" where it clarifies the difference between humans and other animals. Otherwise, I use "animal" generally for nonhuman animals and "pet" specifically for animals that live in human homes, perceived by humans as companions or family members.

10 Power, "Furry Families"; Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*.

11 Plumwood, *Eye of the Crocodile*.

12 Donovan and Adams, "Introduction".

cats or especially dogs.[13] Dogs, who share a history with humans longer than that of any other domesticated species, have become humans' "helpers" in hunting, farming, and shepherding "meat" animals.[14] For dogs themselves this does not guarantee protection from human domination, abuse, or abandonment, rendering their position essentially liminal and illustrating "a conundrum of dog–human natureculture, the inability definitely to articulate the boundary between nature and culture (and animal and human) in the history and agency of this companion species relation."[15]

According to David Redmalm, contemporary Western pet culture can be understood as "a set of practices and discourses that simultaneously creates inhibitions and enables certain ways of being for both humans and other animals."[16] Apart from being produced and maintained by humans, these discourses and practices are influenced by the agency displayed by pets themselves. In this article, I take the agency of animals to include their subjective experiences as well as the actions by which they convey to others (humans and animals) their feelings, emotions, and perceptions and, in turn, shape the actions of others.[17] A pet–human relationship is not created by humans alone; instead, animals with their actions and communication with humans contribute to the interaction on which an interspecies relationship is based. This is consistent with studies on how pet owners who actively share everyday life with their pets perceive them as conscious, sentient, and intentional agents.[18] In such relationships, agency can be traced to the (mostly) nonverbal interaction where both human and animal respond to each other in "the intimate choreography of human/animal interrelationships."[19]

Following Vinciane Despret, such close interaction leads to a mutual transformation and domestication, a process that can also be

13 Schuurman and Dirke, "From Pest to Pet".

14 Plumwood, *Eye of the Crocodile.*

15 Freccero, "Carnivorous Virility".

16 Redmalm, "Discipline and Puppies," 441.

17 McFarland and Hediger, "Approaching the Agency of Other Animals".

18 Charles and Aull Davies, "My Family".

19 Birke, Bryld, and Lykke. "Animal Performances", 170.

considered the aim of a successful pet–human relationship.[20] It is notable that Despret's idea of mutual domestication focuses on the home, the place where pets share their life with humans and, with their own agency, are able to "become with" a human in a sustainable way. Pets are understood to belong to the home, the place where the human–pet relationship is co-constructed by both humans and animals.[21] It has been suggested that relationships with animals in the home have the ability to blur the hierarchical boundary between humans and animals, resulting in "posthuman families".[22] It may be, however, that the boundary is maintained contextually in everyday practices and enforced if, for instance, the owner wants to give up the pet.[23] In a sense different from any other category of animals, the idea of a pet can nevertheless be defined in relation to the space of the home. To explore what rehoming homeless animals as pets is about, therefore, I now turn to the concept of home.

Home, as Mary Douglas defines it, is "a localizable idea" or "a kind of space".[24] Home is not, however, reducible to physical space alone — rather, it is an imaginary space that also includes expectations, perceptions, experiences and memories.[25] This imaginary space is occupied not only by humans but also by different domesticated animals, including those understood as pets. It is through "the historic centrality of home — as a place, practice and idea — to domestication" that the connection between pet and home becomes apparent.[26] The word "domestic" refers to the house or household and, thus, the home can be understood as the space of domestication.[27] Consequently, an animal such as a dog or a cat without a home with humans is perceived as *homeless*, but with the potential to become a pet once *rehomed*. The verb "to rehome" itself includes the prefix "re-", meaning that something is done anew, or

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20 Despret, "The Body We Care for".
21 Fox, "Animal Behaviours"; Holmberg, *Urban Animals*.
22 Tipper, "Everyday Relationships".
23 Charles, "Post-Human Families?"; Redmalm, "Pet Grief"; Shir-Vertesh, "Flexible Personhood".
24 Douglas, "The Idea of Home", 288–289.
25 Kelley, "Emergent Urban Imaginaries".
26 Power, "Domestication and the Dog".
27 Bulliet, *Hunters, Herders, and Hamburgers*.

somewhere is returned to.[28] To rehome an animal can therefore be understood as taking the animal back home again, where they belong — as a pet. In this way pets are closely linked to the idea of domestic stability.[29] "Domestication" for dogs that are rescued and rehomed from other countries into more affluent Western homes may, however, become embedded in different discourses concerning, for example, race or nation.[30] In placing homeless animals in human — or multispecies — homes, the term rehoming is used almost interchangeably with that of *adoption.* The term "to adopt" refers to taking a child (or, as in this case, an animal) into the family by choice, as opposed to by biological necessity.[31] In general, the term "adoption" is used for placing human children outside the family of their biological parents, whereas for animals, both terms are used.[32] Further, the emphasis on rehoming is on the home, whereas with adoption the focus is on the family; I have used both terms accordingly in this article. Whether the adoptee is a human or a nonhuman, adoption implies choosing a new member to the family, to live in the home and to form a kinship with the other family members.[33]

Creating a relationship with an animal through adoption is essentially an act of care. Following Puig de la Bellacasa, "although not all relations can be defined as caring, none would subsist without care."[34] This is especially true for companionships between humans and animals, in which care is what enables them to live together. Even in the private space of the home, however, care relationships have social, political, and cultural dimensions, manifested as widely accepted conceptions and practices.[35] The ways in which animals, typically at the receiving end of care, have been perceived and treated in the practices of care have been the focus of discussions

28 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.vv. "rehome, *v.*", "re-, *prefix*", https://www.oed.com/.

29 Fudge, *Pets*.

30 Kim, "Michael Vick"; Schuurman, "Encounters".

31 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.vv. "adopt", "adoption", https://www.oed.com/.

32 "Adoption" is sometimes used synonymously to "sponsoring" an animal, that is, supporting an animal who permanently resides in the shelter with a small fee.

33 Jerng, *Claiming Others*.

34 Puig de la Bellacasa, "Nothing Comes without Its World", 198.

35 Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*.

of the feminist care ethic. These discussions emphasize the need for a dialogue that recognizes the subjectivity and agency of the animal, supported by Joan Tronto's conception of care relationships as co-produced.[36]

As Jopi Nyman points out, the affective and emotional relationships between humans and adopted pets are not neutral but, rather, shaped by cultural discourse about family and identity, suggesting that "the process of rehoming is a way of reconstructing the identities of both human and non-human participants as well as producing hybrid families."[37] Similarly, discourses about pet keeping include culturally constructed ideals of what a pet and a pet–human relationship should be, and these ideals do not always allow for the recognition of the pets' agency. The significance of the expected emotional bond between the human and the pet is considerable, carrying a promise of long-term companionship and cross-species kinship with shared positive emotions and mutual understanding.[38] In the case of dogs, Leena Koski and Pia Bäcklund discuss the underlying expectations regarding "good canine citizens"—sociable, flexible, co-operative, tolerant of stress as well as able to control emotions—and how these reflect the ideal human being in modern society.[39] This ideal does not only imply docility. As Redmalm notes, pets are also expected to be agents of their own life and "not afraid to speak up" on issues concerning their own life.[40] It is worth asking, however, whether these expectations enable or, in fact, restrict the expression of agency. Do they allow for the acknowledgement of the animal's subjective agency, in the sense of "listening to animals, paying emotional attention, taking seriously—caring about—what they are telling us"?[41] Verónica Policarpo aptly remarks that especially for homeless animals, subjectivity—and thereby agency—may only be granted under specific conditions, that is "adaptation to human

36 Donovan, "Feminism and the Treatment of Animals"; Tronto, *Caring Democracy*.
37 Nyman, "Adopting Animals", 182.
38 Desai and Smith, "Kinship across Species"; Schuurman, "Encounters".
39 Koski and Bäcklund, "On the Fringe"; see also Weaver, "'Becoming in Kind'".
40 Redmalm, "Discipline and Puppies", 445.
41 Donovan, "Feminism and the Treatment of Animals", 305.

lifestyles, not being aggressive, being friendly, and adjusting to the home and its inhabitants."[42] These conditions can be understood as minimum standards for the adoptability of a homeless dog.

To develop an understanding of the construction of the adoptability of animals, I apply the relational concept of *encounter value* coined by Donna Haraway for the purpose of bringing companion species into the analysis of lively capital. Haraway describes encounter value as the "axis of lively capital and its 'biotechnologies in circulation' — in the form of commodities, consumers, models, technologies, workers, kin, and knowledges."[43] In subsequent work on human–animal relationships by several authors, encounter value has been used to analyse the potential value of an animal in creating partnerships with humans, or "making companions". Catherine Nash describes it as "the value of mutually shaping, affective, intimate, yet ethically complex human–animal relations that are neither isolated from nor completely determined by commodification."[44] Moreover, Michelle Gilbert and James Gillett, for example, discuss encounter value in the context of the breeding, marketing, and sale of sports ponies, to describe the equine's capacity to form a relationship with a human: "when the child or adult makes a successful bond with the animal, the value of that animal substantially increases."[45]

In his study of the sale of American Mustangs in Germany, Robert Pütz links encounter value to the concept of *nonhuman charisma,* developed by Jamie Lorimer.[46] As defined by Lorimer, the purpose of the concept is "to describe the features of a particular organism or ecological process that configure its perception and subsequent evaluation."[47] In his work, Lorimer focuses on wild animals, but the concept has later been successfully used for studying individual companion animals and their relationships with humans.

42 Policarpo, "Daphne the Cat," 1292.
43 Haraway, *When Species Meet,* 65.
44 Nash, "Breed Wealth", 851.
45 Gilbert and Gillett, "Equine Athletes", 640.
46 Pütz, "Making Companions," 589.
47 Lorimer, *Wildlife in the Anthropocene,* 39.

Foregrounding the "relationally acquired" agency of animals, Will McKeithen defines charisma as "the affective and agentive capacity of (specifically organic) nonhumans to esthetically and corporeally capture, captivate, and animate humans to action."[48] In addition to affect and agency, aesthetics is one of the key aspects of nonhuman charisma, referring to the appearance of animals in, for example, visual media representations.[49] The ways in which the charisma of homeless animals is performed online contribute to their encounter value and thereby their eventual adoptability, as I will show in my analysis.

Methodology

The materials I have used for the analysis presented in this paper consist of online descriptions of rescue dogs and interviews with Finnish rescue volunteers. I have collected and analysed textual presentations of dogs on the web pages of three Finnish animal rescue charities in 2019: Rescueyhdistys Kulkurit [Rescue Association Hobo Dogs], Viipurin Koirat [Vyborg Dog Association], and Auringonkoirat [Sun Dogs Association]. Each of these charities imports dogs from one specific country, namely Romania, Russia, and Spain, respectively. Rescueyhdistys Kulkurit and Viipurin Koirat are the largest operators in the field, whereas Auringonkoirat is considerably smaller. All of them have imported dogs for several years.

Because these descriptions often take a narrative form, I have approached them as small stories of the dogs' everyday lives and their personal histories.[50] Following Policarpo, I take these narratives to reveal "the ways nonhuman animals and human–animal boundaries are done, and undone, in the context of social media and digital media practices."[51] The stories told about individual animals provide access to how people interpret their agency, including the animals' subjective experiences and the purpose of their actions.[52]

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48 McKeithen, "Queer Ecologies," 130.
49 Lorimer, *Wildlife in the Anthropocene,* 39.
50 Georgakopoulou, "Small Stories Research"; Tovares, "All in the Family".
51 Policarpo, "Daphne the Cat," 1291.
52 McFarland and Hediger, "Approaching the Agency".

The agency of homeless animals has been situationally shaped by their life histories, including past encounters with humans. In the case of homeless dogs, attempts at understanding their agency against the backdrop of their known life history sheds light on how they might experience living in a home with humans. In discussing the agency of animals, however, there is always the methodological challenge of animal otherness, since all research materials are ultimately produced by humans. In stories about animals, the animals themselves are represented by the humans who write the narrative and interpret and reflect on the actions and subjective experiences of the animals.[53] In the stories analysed in this article, therefore, the dogs' actions are interpreted according to the charities' understandings and consequent performances of these actions as part of the dogs' individual agency and subjectivity.

I have chosen to analyse the adoptability of homeless dogs in the online material as *performances*, that is, as material-discursive processes in which human–animal relationality comes into being.[54] As the processes of producing conceptions of animals, including their adoptability, are both material (embodied interaction) and discursive (contextual ideas about animals), they can be understood as performative. As Lynda Birke, Mette Bryld, and Nina Lykke explain, focusing on performativity in human–animal relationality turns the attention to "non-human otherness as a *doing* or *becoming*, produced and reproduced in specific contexts of human/non-human interaction."[55] The performative approach is useful for analysing how embodied interactions between humans and animals produce understandings of animals and their agency in situated practices such as rehoming.

In addition to the online material, I interviewed nine volunteers on the practices of rehoming homeless dogs from abroad at five transnational animal rescue charities in Southern Finland in March 2020. The interviews were recorded verbatim, transcribed, and

53 Nance, "Introduction"; Schuurman, "Animal Work".
54 Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity".
55 Birke, Bryld, and Lykke, "Animal Performances", 169.

anonymized, and for the purposes of this paper I gave the interviewees pseudonyms. The interviews support the analysis of the online material and help to illustrate the context in which the adoptability of the dogs is performed. Both the online material and the interviews were analysed thematically. The themes that emerged from this analysis include adoptability, interpretations of animal subjectivity and agency, the "ideal" pet, expectations regarding the home, and home as a space for care. To understand how the adoptability of homeless dogs is performed and a possible home imagined for them, I now turn to the analysis of the materials.[56]

Performing Adoptability

I begin by analysing the ways in which the adoptability and agency of homeless dogs are performed online. I focus on the construction of the dogs' charisma, which is based on two qualities: their attractiveness as a companion, both in terms of character and aesthetics, and the challenges and compromises created by their temperament, past traumas, and possible health issues. As noted by Nyman, such issues are often also faced in the adoption of human children with an unknown past.[57]

The portrayals of homeless dogs online contain descriptions of their physical appearance, such as "pretty as a picture", "handsome", "lovely", and "cute". There are also references to their individual character, for example, timidity or courage, calmness or wildness as well as friendliness to humans or other dogs. These are coupled with an abundance of photographs and videos of the dogs, usually taken at the shelter, showing the dogs alone or in a group, and sometimes a close-up of the head. To find a suitable home for each dog, online applications from potential adopters are assessed by the rescue charities, and the charities' volunteers consequently confirm that the visual aesthetics in the dogs' portrayals contribute to their adoptability. One of the interviewees, Maria, explains how this may already be evident in the first photos of new arrivals, sent from the shelter

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56 All research material was translated from Finnish to English by the author.
57 Nyman, "Adopting Animals".

to the charity in Finland: "I often see from the picture already, I know that this one will be rehomed in a week."[58] The dogs that attract the most interest are the small ones and those with fluffy fur. Among the unpopular ones are black dogs and dogs that look too "ordinary" and are thereby not likely to evoke a response from the viewer:

> The huge number of average dogs. That is, those middle-aged, middle-height ordinary dogs that are just so common that it is hard for them to stand out in the group. Even if there is nothing wrong with the dog, if they have a really nice temperament and they are perfect, there is such a huge abundance of dogs. And then there are of course the shy dogs, a category for whom it is difficult to find a home.[59]

The dogs with the least appeal and encounter value are big, youngish males that resemble breeds perceived as aggressive. All charities, however, point out that aggressive dogs are not included in their adoption scheme. Puppies are especially popular, due to the promise of a life-long relationship. Age can also reduce the adoptability of older dogs because of the inevitable shortness of a potential relationship: "For many, although they would like to give a home to an older dog, having to part with them is so distressing."[60]

It is often the combination of aesthetics and agency that creates an interest in a particular animal. In the videos it is possible to get some idea of how the dog interacts with humans, dogs, and other animals; whether, for example, they are hesitant, or actively approach the human delivering treats to the dogs. When posted online, such interactions may result in increased interest in rehoming, sometimes to a surprising extent, as is confirmed by one interviewee, Liisa:

> we got an awful lot of replies on [a puppy]. I asked the people what it was that had made them fall in love with her. And then everyone said that she had such a cute video where the cat slapped her across the face.[61]

58 Maria (interview).
59 Kati (interview).
60 Anna (interview).
61 Liisa (interview).

In many of the online accounts of individual dogs, their actions are depicted in such a way as to evoke an emotional response in the viewer or reader: "A dark nose can be seen to peek from the dog-house door again and again, and the cutest pair of eyes follow the goings-on curiously, but there is just not enough courage for making friends."[62] Such small stories complement the visual material and offer an interpretation of the dogs' agency, linking it to the aesthetic and affective dimensions of charisma.[63] As understanding animal agency is always subject to human interpretation, the ways in which the animals' actions are interpreted have a significant impact on how they are imagined *as* animals. Whether, for example, they are understood to have subjective feelings, emotions and intentions and what the content of these are perceived to be in any given situation. In the excerpt above, for instance, the ways in which the dog looks out of the doghouse but does not come closer, are understood as signs of curiosity and timidity.

The contextual interpretations of the subjective experiences of the homeless dogs are based on the practice of reading their gestures, expressions and actions, for example their attempts at making contact with humans. These are interpreted in relation to the specific context of interaction, such as when the dogs communicate with the volunteers at the shelter. The contexts of interaction include situations where human action shapes animal action: "Alaska gets excited when people talk nicely to her and has sweet bursts of joy around her cage."[64] Likewise, canine action is depicted as shaping human action: "Rolle finds people really interesting, and he tries eagerly to get them to pay attention to himself, offering one trick after another to get a reaction."[65] Depictions of agency are also found in

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62 "Fei", Viipurin Koirat, last updated 6 December 2019, https://viipurinkoirat.fi/fei. After re-homing, the webpages where the individual dogs are presented are still visible, but they have been removed from the list of adoptable dogs and placed in the category of "re-homed dogs" [*kodin saanut koira*].

63 Lorimer, *Wildlife in the Anthropocene*, 35–55.

64 "Kodin saanut koira: ALASKA (nyk. Aura)" [Rehomed dog: Alaska (now Aura)], Rescueyh-distys Kulkurit, last updated 19 October 2019, https://kulkurit.fi/alaska/.

65 "Kodin sannut koria: ROLLE (Suomessa)" [Rehomed dog: Rolle (in Finland)], Rescueyh-distys Kulkurit, last updated 10 March 2020, https://kulkurit.fi/rolle/.

narratives where the dogs express intense emotions such as excess devotion to humans, as in the story of Cida:

> Cida is the wild one in the group, absolutely the liveliest of the puppies. Cida was said to be brave and greedy, and she does not seem to have any limits even with strangers. The girl is happy, she just falls in the lap of our volunteers and enjoys the attention. Cida simply loves humans.[66]

These interactions typically take place in the space of the shelter, which emphasizes the homelessness of the dogs, deprived of human companionship and a home. Interpreted in this way, and performed in their stories online, the aim of becoming a pet and the need for a home become central in the way the dogs' agency, subjective experiences and expectations are understood.

At the same time, however, the stories document the lives of animals with compromised welfare, some of them struggling with severe health issues. In order to contextualize their present condition, there is often some attempt at constructing the dogs' past experiences before they were found and taken to the shelter in their country of origin. The backgrounds of the dogs looking for a home vary: for some of them, it is not known, but many have been found on the street, in the woods or in an abandoned building. In many cases, the dog's emotions and actions are interpreted in relation to their known or assumed past, including their life at the shelter and beyond. Some of these experiences can only be guessed at: "Eliisa may have had some bad experiences of men in her previous life, as she is a bit fearful of men."[67] Here, the dog's specific fear has been given a context and a possible reason. According to the interviewed volunteers, it is not uncommon for homeless dogs to be afraid of men, but the exact reasons in each case, such as potential abuse in past life, are not known for certain and are therefore not explicitly stated. Sometimes the dog is interpreted as generally "nervous", but the feeling

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66 "Kodin saanut koira: CIDA (Peltotytöt)" [Rehomed dog: Cida (Field girls)], Rescueyhdistys Kulkurit, last updated 18 November 2019, https://kulkurit.fi/cida-peltotytot/.

67 "Kodin saanut koira: Eliisa" [Rehomed dog: Eliisa], Rescueyhdistys Kulkurit, last updated 14 March 2020, https://kulkurit.fi/eliisa/.

is then contextualized in a situation described in the narrative, as in the story of Ambra who seems to be wary of other dogs:

> When treats are delivered, Ambra would also very much like to join in. But what can the little girl do about her nervousness, and then she just has to content herself with following the party from the sidelines.[68]

What seems to make Ambra nervous is the social act of "joining in" with other dogs and possibly also approaching the human giving the treats. The feelings and emotions expressed by the dog are thus interpreted and performed as part of their character, as in another example: "Underneath, Rolle is not a very strong dog, rather he is the one who steps aside […] if the other one is a very strong character."[69] In both cases, the dogs' emotional states are described as fundamental characteristics instead of spatially and temporally contextual emotions or feelings, possibly transient in their journey of becoming with humans and learning to adapt to life as a pet. Consequently, the representations of the dogs become performances of animality where momentary encounters have the potential of defining the animal.

These examples illustrate the contextuality of the concept of encounter value in creating potential for rehoming, with a possibility of resulting in successful pet–human relations. The adoptability of the dogs is performed through these narrative expressions of encounter value, based on portrayals of the dogs' charisma and agency, and contextualized with interpretations of their background and subjective experiences.

Imagining Home

Expectations of a future home are woven into the narratives of the homeless dogs. Home for them is described as a future space based on close relationships and family. Home, for someone without one, can be understood as an imaginary space, and their family

68 "Ambra", Viipurin Koirat, last updated 10 April 2017, https://viipurinkoirat.fi/ambra.
69 "Rolle", https://kulkurit.fi/rolle/.

an imaginary family.[70] In this section, I analyse the performances of the imagined space of home as part of the adoptability of the dogs, and the ways in which risks and challenges in the rehoming of individual dogs are addressed in the online data.

Often, the home is performed as a place of longing, as is the case for Unto who "already dreams about saying goodbye to the shelter soon."[71] Such an interpretation of the dog's agency not only contributes to their nonhuman charisma, but also reflects the common meaning of the home as the site of human–pet relationships and, thus, the place for a dog to *become a pet* through human companionship and domestication.[72] This also implies that the dogs' well-being and happiness are contingent on their rehoming:

> The future family will be expected to have a sense of humour, as Cida is always where things are going on, and even if nothing has happened, something soon will when Cida arrives. Cida is a dog who enjoys life with every fibre of her being, although at the shelter it is not very special at the moment. Imagine how she will brighten up the day [...] when she gets home. During our volunteers' visit, Cida tried very much to eat one of their coats and almost chewed the gloves off her hands.[73]

The imaginary home is set against the spaces that, for homeless animals, can be defined as "nonhomes"[74]— the street, the forest, and the field where the dogs have been found and, ultimately, the shelter, where they meet the volunteers of the rehoming charities. Seen from the viewpoint of rehoming, these spaces are performed as "other", rendering the dogs themselves other in two distinct ways: as another species,[75] but also as a stranger from a strange land.[76]

70 Nyman, "Adopting Animals".

71 "Unto", Viipurin Koirat, last updated 22 October 2020, https://viipurinkoirat.fi/unto-1.

72 Power, "Domestication"; Schuurman, "Encounters".

73 "Cida (Peltotytöt)", https://kulkurit.fi/cida-peltotytot/.

74 Douglas, "The Idea of Home," 289.

75 Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto*, 50.

76 Schuurman, "Encounters".

There is, however, also a space between these other spaces and the ultimate home: the foster home, a transitory space between the shelter and the home. The selection of the adoptive family ideally happens before the dogs arrive in Finland, but some dogs are imported and placed in foster care before their actual rehoming. This may happen if the charities consider the shelter environment especially harmful for the dog. This is often the case for puppies, who need more human contact than can be provided at the shelter, or if a particular dog does not seem to attract interest in the rehoming programme. Because of its quality of in-betweenness, the foster home can be understood as a liminal space: it is a temporary site of dwelling, a "nonhome" that nevertheless resembles a "real" home in its social environment, routines, and potential for creating relationships.[77]

In a foster home, potential adopters can visit and see how the dog copes in a domestic environment. It is, further, possible to describe the dogs' daily life in the foster home online; their adaptation to family routines and their interest in creating a relationship with humans and other pets. This is the case with Butch, "an individual little dog who is a bit shy with strangers but very attached to his foster carer. […] The foster carer describes Butch as an affectionate and friendly boy."[78] The dog's adoptability can thus be performed in much more detail in the foster home than would be possible at the shelter. This is seen in the story of Eros:

> Eros travelled bravely in the car, explored the place, and made himself at home. He is not afraid of the bigger male dogs but jumps next to them on the sofa. At least for now, he wants to guard his resources against the other dogs, that is, things that he finds important. According to the home carer, Eros will do anything for praise, scratches, and treats, and is a clever dog who learns new things fast. Eros seeks contact with humans all the time and would be easy to train as a hobby as well. Eros goes on walks very well, he mostly follows alongside the hu-

77 Franklin and Schuurman, "Aging Animal Bodies".
78 "Butch," Viipurin Koirat, last updated 16 April 2020, https://viipurinkoirat.fi/butch.

man with a slack leash, at least now in the beginning when everything is new.[79]

The practice of placing dogs in foster homes before rehoming gives volunteers an opportunity to observe the dogs closer and thus interpret their agency and present it in the stories. This practice, therefore, increases the dogs' perceived charisma and encounter value in a way that might not have happened had they stayed at the shelter. This "domestication" of a dog from a shelter environment abroad also enables a further performance of the dog's adoptability in a manner that is accessible to the reader. In the narratives, the accounts of their actions portray the agency of the dogs as it is visible in their active pursuit of encounters with humans, thereby fulfilling the expectations regarding the adoptable pet. In the quote above, for example, being able to adapt to the home and cope with "the bigger male dogs", "learn things fast" and "seek contact with humans all the time" can be interpreted as codes that place the dog in the domain of petness — the culture of pet–human interaction and co-living.[80]

For the dogs placed in foster homes, however, their adoptability is not limited to the specific skills necessary for being a pet — the dog may be performed as adoptable in narratives of spontaneous action in which they display charismatic agency. This can be seen in the story of Mei: "As we pass by the day-care centre, the leash tightens, though not towards the other way but, instead, Mei would so much like to go to the fence to kiss all the children at the day-care centre."[81] Here, the charisma of the dog is situated in an environment — the vicinity of the day-care centre — that is familiar to potential adopters and thus enhances the imagining of a shared home with the dog.

Individual human–animal relationships are co-constructed in close encounters and shared everyday life in which "how to get on

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79 "Eros", Auringonkoirat, last updated 23 January 2020, https://auringonkoirat.com/kodinsaaneet/erosb.html.

80 Schuurman and Syrjämaa, "Shared Spaces".

81 "Mei", Viipurin Koirat, last updated 7 July 2015, https://viipurinkoirat.fi/mei.

together is at stake."[82] Rehoming a homeless dog, as any prospective relationship between humans and animals, is not devoid of risks and expected difficulties in adapting to the new home. Some of these troubles are mild and are typically described in the data as positive challenges that can be overcome with training, often in a charismatic way that evokes affect in the form of cross-species compassion. This is seen later in Mei's story:

> Life in the foster home with children is going well, although the smallest children may be run over by lively Mei […] She has not come to grips with all the basic skills of a pet dog yet and is still learning, but who wouldn't enjoy training lovely Mei? Mei does walk on a leash, but she is still learning the actual walking. In the beginning, the speed and pulling force are considerable when she is taken by the smells. When she has let off some steam, Mei walks nicely without pulling.[83]

In the narrative descriptions of the dogs, any potential challenges that might affect their encounter value are interwoven with the performance of their adoptability. Problems are often depicted in a way to make them appear manageable but, at the same time, not undermining their gravity. Some dogs, however, do have serious difficulties that may complicate their rehoming, and this is made clear in the online material by way of specific warnings. The purpose of the warnings is to avoid problems for the dogs in the rehoming process and, especially, to avoid returns. When writing the descriptions of the dogs on the web pages, according to the interviews, the charities aim to be honest and describe any challenges and problems in detail. Despite these efforts, things do not always work out according to plan. In the next section, I analyse such cases and the role of compassion in the struggle to find the ideal home — or any home at all — for the homeless dogs who may not, despite best efforts, fulfil the expectations that surround the ideal pet.

82 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 35.
83 "Mei", Viipurin Koirat, https://viipurinkoirat.fi/mei.

Rehoming as Care

Sometimes the dog has already been rehomed, but something has gone wrong, and the adopter cannot care for the dog anymore. In such cases, the dog is returned to the charity and is placed in a foster home, once more in need of a permanent home. This happened to Rolle: "Rolle was booked for a home of his own the first time on 6 May 2015, and he arrived in Finland on 17 May 2015. Just before winter 2018, Rolle came back to look for a home for the second time."[84] His whole story is presented online, including detailed descriptions of his behavioural problems and how these are managed:

> At the moment, walks with Rolle are carried out with an appropriate, light, and fitting muzzle. The reason we decided to use the muzzle was that while walking on a leash, Rolle has developed a way of getting very nervous when, for instance, he sees another dog, and in these situations, he may take it out on the dog or the human close by. With the muzzle, we can make sure that Rolle cannot vent his frustration in an undesirable way and thereby reinforce a behaviour that would be undesirable for him in such situations.

As Haraway warns us, embodied communication with animals is not always easy or harmonious and, although the ultimate goal is something special, the everyday effort of working towards shared happiness can sometimes be stressful and intimidating. In Rolle's case, we do not know his whole history, but his nervousness about meeting other dogs can be interpreted as stemming from negative experiences in the past. For him, these emotional — and certainly embodied — memories can evoke unpleasant feelings. These memories play a part in the development that, for Rolle, leads to the application of a muzzle when going for walks.

Equipment to control the dogs is seen in some of the photos in the online material. A typical example is a dog wearing both a collar and a harness, as well as a leash attached to each for extra security, since running free may be risky for a dog that is in transition from

84 "Rolle", https://kulkurit.fi/rolle/.

homelessness to domesticity.[85] The use of controlling devices such as collars, harnesses, muzzles and double leashes may be attributed to human domination over animals, but according to Rebekah Fox, the situation may be much more complex. She reminds us that a human–animal relationship "inevitably involves some forms of restriction, power and control", but that there is often at the same time "a certain degree of guilt, worry or uncertainty about what the animal is thinking or feeling, particularly where the relationship is seen to be unsuccessful."[86] In Rolle's case, the decision to apply the muzzle to prevent any incidents resulting from the dog's nervousness is presented as a solution that might be temporary. In this way, explaining the situation would not drastically threaten Rolle's adoptability but rather increase it by offering a way for constructing a relationship in which the dog's special needs are addressed.

As Nyman suggests, a successful adoption involves "an acceptance of insecurity and relationality."[87] Building a new future for a rescue dog, taking into account their life history with past experiences that we can only guess at, certainly challenges any suggestions that sharing life with animals might be simple. Returning to Haraway's warning, then, Nyman's remark about insecurity brings a complexity to the process of mutual becoming, in which the at times romantic expectations are compromised by the presence of past traumas. This does not undermine the possibility of creating enduring relationships. In many of the presentations of the dogs, their subjective experiences almost appear as weaknesses. Lorimer points out that, in terms of affect, nonhuman charisma is not necessarily only positive but can also be negative, for example, when it elicits feelings of disgust or panic in humans.[88] In the case of the homeless dogs portrayed online, however, negative emotions in the dog do not necessarily evoke negative responses in humans but can, on the contrary, find compassion in the reader. According to Erica Fudge, "thinking about other lives (both human and non-human) and exploring the

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85 Schuurman, "Encounters".
86 Fox, "Animal Behaviours," 529.
87 Nyman, "Adopting Animals,"195.
88 Lorimer, *Wildlife in the Anthropocene*, 48.

possibility of other modes of perception […] is central to compassion and care for others, both human and animal, in that it is by imagining 'that could be me' that fellow-feeling emerges."[89] Compassion contributes to canine charisma in the online narratives, and such affective charisma increases the encounter value of the dog and, ultimately, their adoptability. Thus, in the portrayals of homeless dogs online, their encounter value contributes to their adoptability in diverse ways, depending on their individual life history and present situation.

The act of giving a homeless dog a "good home" is the central act of care that is expected to fulfil an important need for them. When looking for a home for a specific dog, however, their individual needs will have to be taken into account. A dog may need a home in a particular type of area or with a certain kind of family, in terms of house size, outdoor access, area population density as well as other human or nonhuman family members and their experiences of (other) dogs. I call this a *designer home*, as illustrated by the following narrative:

> Other dogs seem to create a lot of safety and support for Fei and so, careful Fei is looking for a home with a brave canine friend waiting for her. […] Fei does hope, though, that somewhere in the world there is a human for her too. The kind of a lovely person who would give Fei time and understanding and would not lose their temper even if things did not go the way you would wish them to. A person who would take Fei in their life as she is and would want to offer her something that every dog living in a shelter is missing — a happy life.[90]

Such examples reveal the effort the charities make to listen to the dogs and acknowledge their agency, including their subjective experiences and needs for individual care, following a care ethic that favours "situational, contextual ethics, allowing for a narrative understanding of the particulars of a situation or an issue."[91] In the same

89 Fudge, *Pets,* 2.
90 Viipurin Koirat, "Fei".
91 Donovan and Adams, "Introduction," 2.

vein, the practice of "special adoption", that is, rehoming homeless dogs with special needs, portrays the idea of *home as a space for care*. One of these cases is Poppy Flower, a dog who was hit by a car in Romania. She was found lying on the street and subsequently taken to a shelter. After recovering from an operation on her broken bones, she became available for adoption as a dog with special needs:

> Despite her experiences, Poppy Flower is a balanced and seemingly easy little pup. Poppy Flower is energetic and perky and enjoys the company of humans. Poppy Flower currently shares a cage with another female and gets on well with her. Poppy Flower would thus benefit from a brave canine companion in her new home.[92]

Later in the text, the injuries of the dog are described in detail, and instructions are given for her future care: "With Poppy Flower it is necessary to be prepared to follow up on the old fracture, also when in Finland, and it may require further care or intervention as well." Here, rehoming the injured dog is presented as an act of care that requires a different kind of commitment from the adopter, including the possibility of potentially expensive veterinary treatment, when compared to a life with a healthy dog. Despite her injuries and need for extra care, however, the dog is portrayed in a charismatic way that emphasizes her "cheerful" nature and love of humans. Further, by suggesting that Poppy Flower would "benefit from a brave canine companion" it is proposed that her care should be organized as an interspecies task, shared between human and canine carers. The adoptability of such a dog is constructed on an encounter value that is based on compassion-evoking charisma rather than promises of sharing a life with an "ideal" pet.

In the online material, homeless dogs are not performed as animals with the potential to become an "ideal" pet.[93] Instead, for them the

92 "Kodin saanut koira: POPPY FLOWER" [Rehomed dog: POPPY FLOWER], Rescueyhdistys Kulkurit, last updated 16 August 2020, https://kulkurit.fi/poppy-flower/.

93 Koski and Bäcklund, "On the Fringe"; Policarpo, "Daphne the Cat"; Redmalm, "Discipline and Puppies".

aim of the rehoming practices is just to cope. This does not mean, however, that they will be faced with a life as "lesser" beings. Instead of fulfilling specific expectations as "ideal" companions, they are encountered as agents with their own life histories and a possibility to communicate their subjective experiences to those who are prepared to listen. From this viewpoint, rescue dogs belong to an altogether different category than purebred dogs, outside the commercialization, control, and biopolitical production of pets. The dogs that are rehomed via transnational animal rescue and rehoming charities come from a world of otherness, vulnerability, interspecies care, and resilience. Inevitably, these animals remind us of disabled people whose agency is often dismissed,[94] or of human migrants for whom achieving a secure life in another society offers the possibility of a better life, despite the challenges faced in achieving this position. Such comparisons call for a contextual scrutiny of the workings of the categorical boundaries surrounding and dividing animals; as Despret suggests, in some situations the most important boundaries are drawn *within* the categories of human and animal, not between them.[95] In the case of homeless dogs, the boundaries between "pet", "feral", and "wild" easily dissolve.

Conclusions

In this article, I have explored the ways in which the adoptability of homeless dogs is performed online in the practices of transnational animal rescue and rehoming. According to the analysis, the dogs looking for a home are presented by the rescue charities as individuals who have experienced hardship and are in need of care but are nevertheless attractive as companions. The dogs' life histories, present situation and subsequent adoptability are validated in stories based on interpretations of their past and present experiences, subjectivity, and agency. These interpretations become part of how the adoptability of the dogs, that is, their potential as desirable companions, is performed online in the form of nonhuman charisma, including aesthetics, affect, and agency, and subsequently the

94 Cf. Taylor, *Beasts of Burden*.
95 Despret, "Becomings of Subjectivity".

encounter value of the dogs.[96] Their stories are spatially situated, in relation to the meanings attached to the home, the spatial core of the idea of adoption.

For a homeless dog, home is an imaginary space of belonging — in contrast to the "nonhomes" of the shelter and the places where the dogs are found, such as the street or the woods. Another nonhome is the foster home, a liminal space that serves as a gateway to the "real" home. These spaces and the dogs' experiences of them, as interpreted by humans, perform the (permanent) home as the space for a dog to be. In Western pet culture, this imaginary space is full of expectations of companionability and love. Moreover, the promise of companionship with an adopted rescue dog, including positive emotions and mutual understanding and trust, reflects that of international child adoption. Due to the international context, the background of the adoptee often remains unknown, bringing a dimension of otherness to both human and animal adoption. In the latter, however, the sense of otherness is further reinforced by the species boundary. In the stories of the dogs, the animals are portrayed against the background of their multiple otherness, as non-domesticated nonhumans from another country and multispecies cultural environment. Consequently, the home becomes a space of domestication, with the specific aim of transforming the homeless animal into a family pet with a new home, home country, and way of living with humans.

In the metanarrative of becoming a pet, the dog is placed in a home, to be rescued and to be happy, thereby fulfilling the expectations of pet culture. The background of homeless animals, however, sometimes presents challenges to their rehoming. While they might seem like easily adoptable pets and companions, their temperaments, traumas and health issues render them living, individual beings in need of personalized care and living environment. The adoptability of homeless dogs is thus not only based on the positive affects they may evoke, but also on interpretations of their past experiences and the compassion they may elicit in the potential adopter. In such

96 Lorimer, *Wildlife in the Anthropocene.*

cases, sharing life with them may seem to be filled with not only happiness and positive experiences, but also worry, stress, and an inevitable acceptance of uncertainty. While it is clear that any interspecies care relationship can be demanding, the difference lies in how the possible challenges of homeless dogs are included in the performances of their adoptability. In so doing, they balance the expectations of happiness inherent in the commercial pet culture. Offering homeless animals for rehoming commodifies them, but many of them are openly described as vulnerable and in special need of care, which frames the act of rehoming as a good deed.[97]

Considering their background, homeless dogs do not represent the cultural ideal of what a pet should be. Their rehoming is, consequently, not presented as an ideal process of mutual becoming.[98] Instead, it is presented as an opportunity for the human to create a home with an animal who may never have had a home before. Imagined in this way, the home becomes a space for interspecies care where the animal is encountered as a whole living being, a subject and an agent with a life history and individual interests, habits, preferences, and needs. By presenting homeless dogs in such a way, the practices of transnational animal rescue and rehoming may well contribute to the development of a healthier, more ethical pet culture.

97 Nash, "Breed Wealth".
98 Despret, "The Body We Care for".

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