

Think Outside the Cage: Moving Towards New Understandings of Companion Rabbits

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Abstract

Rabbits are the third most common companion mammal in Western homes, and their popularity continues to rise. However, they are also one of the most broadly used animal resources around the world, commonly being bred for their food, their fur, and their utility as biological models in animal testing. The human relationship with traditional pets (cats and dogs) has evolved over many centuries and is firmly established in Western culture as one of companionship. However, our complex and contradictory relationships with multi-purpose rabbits has complicated their more recent initiation into the process of domestication. Their relatively sudden entrée into human social worlds has forced hurried and awkward adaptations of ways of knowing and living with the species that have been appropriated from their commercial exploitation as resources. Rabbits occupy a liminal space between domestic and wild, challenging Western assumptions of human dominance and control within the human home. The close captivity, stifled opportunities and stunted relationships offered to most pet rabbits reflect the tensions created between humans and animals under the strain of such ambiguity.

In this paper, I endeavour to piece together a panoramic snapshot of rabbit care in Canada, identifying common threads that bind the ways we live with pet rabbits to exploitive traditions and patterns that hinder the potentiality of companionship. Farming and agricultural practice, laboratory animal science, the pet store industry, feed manufacturers, veterinary medicine, animal shelter and rescue groups, rabbit education networks, and all levels of legislation are surveyed as influential domains that contribute to the conceptual framework that sculpts the way we think about and act towards rabbits. Two common themes which are pervasive across domains are investigated in-depth, as a way of opening a conversation to critically engage in a discussion of “companion rabbits.” The first of these is rabbits as creatures who confound categories, pushing

boundaries and defying traditional labels and classifications that disrupt Western assumptions of Cartesian dualism, defined categories and human superiority. The second looks at the ways humans respond to the challenge of rabbits, through physical and conceptual containment and control of their ambiguous natures.

After exploring the influences that shape the way we think about and relate to rabbits, I look at approaches to ethics and education that can help us to decenter and step away from anthropocentrism, leading the way forward towards a new companion relationship with rabbits. I conclude with suggestions for future trajectories that I hope can help us to embrace such an approach.

For Darcy, a true companion

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Foreword

On the very first day I started writing this paper, I sat down in contemplation at my favourite café, hoping to distill what would become the driving force behind what I was about to write. Within seven minutes, I was serendipitously witness to a conversation between the café owner and another patron that would solidify my purpose:

Patron: Do you like dogs?

Owner: Yes, of course.

Patron: I want a dog. The missus says we should get a rabbit. What good is a rabbit?! What, are you going to do, walk it? No! The only good they are is to eat. So we'd raise it and then... whoosh [*makes a chopping motion*]. And that's not a pet, it's dinner.
[*they laugh together*]

Owner: Well, my Dukey was a wonderful boy.

Patron: What's that?

Owner: He was my dog – Duke. A German Shepherd.

Patron: Oh, now there's a beautiful animal! But a rabbit? Comm'on! They don't *do* anything. A waste of time! She's crazy! We need a *real* pet.

In a moment of inadvertent eavesdropping, the patron had (however unwittingly) provided me with proof of some of the most pervasive attitudes towards rabbits: that they do not fit most people's notion of companion animals, and are frequently considered less worthy than dogs and cats; that they are often associated with utilitarian purposes that run contrary to the Western concept of companionship; and that they are perceived as boring animals with little to offer humans from within the confines of their cages. This one short conversation crystalized for me the conceptual obstacles humans have constructed around rabbits (or rather, around ourselves), that keep our species from knowing one another. And so I set out to see what I could do to dismantle them.

Rabbits have been a huge part of my life since I was twelve years old. I have lived with them, fostered them, cared for them in shelters, nursed them in veterinary clinics, and advocated for them through rescues. For me, living and working with rabbits is not just a hobby, nor even a passion, but a way of life. They have indelibly become part of my identity, and I cannot imagine myself being any other way. I will

forever be enchanted by their antics, in awe of their abilities and perceptiveness, and humbled by their forgiving natures. I am through and through a “rabbit person,” and so it is only natural that they should also become a focus of my academic work.

The Area of Concentration of my Plan of Study within the Master in Environmental Studies degree is entitled *Anthrozoology: Ethology and Marginalized Companion Animals*. It is focused on understanding past and present practices of marginalized companion animal care – those animals who, because of their relative minority, tend to be caged, subjected to lower standards of care, and limited by impoverished human conceptions. In particular, it investigates how current practices have evolved, and what limits exist in the conceptual frameworks we apply to the ways we live with these species. It looks to give consideration to the fundamental ethological needs of any particular animal, understanding domestication as a continuum that requires individuals to negotiate tensions between their wild and domestic selves, rather than as an absolute state that supersedes their natural histories. Through the three components of my research– Holistic Welfare, Animal Behaviour, and Humane Education – I aim to be optimistic and holistic in my approach, identifying ways to broaden human perspectives, open us to new potentialities for relationships with animals, and ultimately improve the wellbeing and lived experience of both marginalized companion animals and the humans with whom they are intertwined.

This paper is a case study of the most common marginalized companion animal in the Western world: the rabbit. It uses all three components to investigate the complex and contradictory ways we live with this species, and to exemplify the impoverished paradigms within which we perpetuate the ways we think about and relate to other animals. Within Holistic Welfare, it identifies the evolution of current limited Western practices of marginalized companion animal care, and how

those practices are perpetuated uncritically, resulting in the confinement of our understandings. Within *Animal Behaviour*, it aims to consider the rabbit's natural and cultural histories as crucial components of a new understanding of the species, and to permit the consideration of the species' agency in its historical and ongoing entanglements with humans. Within *Humane Education*, it aims to engage critically in consideration of our interactions with rabbits, and to explore ethics and educational approaches that allow us the space to come to know the species in a new way.

Rabbits occupy a unique position in Western culture: as animals we use more broadly and openly as resources than any other species; as prolific icons that represent everything from childhood innocence to sexual promiscuity, speed and cunning to weakness and timidity; and also as the third most common pet mammal. As such, they have a lot to teach us about the ways we think about and act towards animals, and in particular about the ways we limit and confine ourselves within our preconceptions. *Think Outside the Cage: Moving Towards New Understandings of Companion Rabbits* is the culmination of the objectives of my Plan of Study as they relate to this particular species, offering hope that we can find a path to a new open-minded relationship with rabbits and other marginalized companion animals.

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Introduction: Why Rabbits?

Why Rabbits?

"Once you are real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."

-Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*

Why rabbits? Surely dogs are more typically companionable; chickens more widely exploited; chimpanzees more critically endangered; and cats more blatantly abandoned? While each of these statements holds truth, it is the very fact that rabbits aren't considered *more* anything that makes them so compelling. The question, "why rabbits?" isn't new to me.

Since I can remember, I have been drawn to animals and have delighted in their camaraderie. Every summer I would spend hours communing with the chipmunks, making friends with the ducklings, or being mesmerized by the caterpillars who shared with me and my family their summer homes, on the surrounding land and water of our cottage. Every creature I introduced myself to – or who introduced themselves to me – captured my imagination and my heart, in that way that's only possible in the unhindered middle age of childhood (Cobb, 1959), so that, at the end of summer I felt a palpable loss with the return to city life.

Like many children with a love of animals, I yearned for a pet of my own – someone I could play with and grow with and talk to, and who wouldn't be lost to me with the passing of seasons. Riddled with allergies and asthma, I can still remember my first allergy test, at the age of five, flagging bright red before my very eyes (in the unbearably itchy fashion of scratch tests) an allergy to cats and dogs. At the time, those were the only animals they tested for, so potential allergies to any other species were just conjecture. Why rabbits? I am relatively certain that at no point did my animal preference lie with cats or dogs in particular. But, with both of these symbolically "pet" species (Herzog, 2010) out of the question, rabbits were, to my young mind, a logical alternative to

more traditional “pets” (a not uncommon leap of logic, as it turns out). And so began my fascination with the species.

Be that as it may, without a guarantee that I would not be allergic to rabbits as well, it was not until just before my twelfth birthday that a twist of fate and a serendipitous event led to Sammy, a juvenile Holland Lop rabbit, entering my home and changing my life forever. Sammy was my best friend; he sat on my lap as I did my homework, he lay under my chair as I practiced my saxophone, and we spent hours just being together. Although Western preconceptions have us believe that rabbits live in cages (Davis & DeMello, 2003), it wasn’t long before Sammy taught us how unnatural and unnecessary this was. Naturally tidy and with excellent social skills, Sammy had soon joined the household in its daily activities, hopping around where and when he pleased. Yes, there were some phone cord casualties, and some redecorating ideas involving the stripping of the bottom 12” of wallpaper (our dining room has never looked the same...), but why these acts of agency should be considered less excusable than the conspicuous scratch marks at the end of a couch that belie the presence of feline friends, or a slimy, chewed up slipper that has been claimed by a canine companion, is beyond me.

What I saw was an animal who had, and communicated, his own desires and needs. What I experienced was a deep bond to a rabbit who defied everything Western society was telling me he should be. Why rabbits? Because the incongruity between the ideas instilled in me by my North American socio-cultural upbringing and my experience could not be ignored. Because Sammy deserved to be recognized for who he was. Because humans deserve the chance to know rabbits differently. Because as much as we use rabbits to think *with* (more on that later), they need to be thought *about*.

“Companion Rabbits” and Rabbit Companions

“...rabbits kept as pets were relegated to hutches out in the backyard – never to put their fuzzy little bunny paws inside a human dwelling.”

*- Isabell Pavia, *Rabbits for Dummies**

I realize that, by beginning my paper with my youthful experience, I have put my work at risk of being dismissed as childish and sentimentalist fluff – ensnaring myself in the very preconceptions I am looking to break free of. But our relationship with rabbits is anything but fluffy. We’ve transplanted them around the globe in order to provide ourselves with convenient hunting, and as a result have turned to biological warfare (the introduction of hideous diseases) to control their exploding populations. We’ve carried their amputated feet as good luck charms, used them as bait in dog races, and turned their skin into the glue that sealed the canvases of countless painters’ masterpieces (Dickenson, 2014). We feed them to our exotic pets, and dangle their fluorescent-dyed skins in front of our cats. We eat them, wear their fur, and conduct countless experiments on their bodies (Davis & DeMello, 2003). We use rabbits in so many ways that they have become part of us – their essence is in the pills we ingest, the lotions absorbed through our skin, and the shampoos and soaps we wash with. No, our relationship with rabbits isn’t fluffy. It’s a well-worn rug; uneven, threadbare and tattered beyond recognition in some places, yet full of rich history and the ease of familiarity.

Cats and dogs are comfortable to think about. Western society has labeled their roles as pets (or more recently “companion animals”) and they have become the symbolic embodiment of that position. Our relationship to cows and chickens, though less comfortable to examine too closely, is at least firm in the understanding of their role as resources (Herzog, 2010). Rabbits, however, are fence-sitters – they straddle the boundaries between food and friend, instrument and intimate, clothing and companion. My interest, in this paper, lies with the idea of the “companion rabbit.”

With these creatures, we have a dual relationship – we’re trapped in a paradox that has led us to ambivalence. For, how can we embrace, as true companion, those whom we exploit to our advantage at every turn? The concept of “companion rabbit” is uncomfortable for the simple reason that it illustrates, in miniature, the contentious nature of the Western human-animal relationship.

John Berger (2009) writes that animals’ distinctness from humans precludes their ability to share the same kind of bond of companionship that is formed between two humans; that we lead “parallel lives” (p. 15) that can never cross in life. Yet, Berger goes on to describe pets as something less than fully animal, and defines them as “creatures of their owner’s way of life” (p. 25). This implies that they can, and do, diverge from their separate lives to intermingle with that of their owners’. Erica Fudge (2002) takes this concept further, by presenting the idea that pets, as creatures, “are both human and animal” (p. 28), and dismantle the human-animal distinctness that Berger spoke of. Under this theory, we can ignore the animalness of our pets by giving them human names, sleeping with them in our beds, and going to further extremes such as dressing them in designer clothing, and even conducting “cat and dog weddings.”

Once again, we find that the idea of “pet” is synonymous with cats and dogs. Something about rabbits resists this classification, and this type of animal-human hybrid transformation. Perhaps because of their relatively short history under the influence of the process of human domestication (Davis & DeMello, 2003), rabbits are considered more “animal” than cats and dogs, a reality that is reflected in the ways we live with them. As Victoria Dickenson (2014) notes, we may “treat them as members of our family, but at the same time their evident distance from the human species allows

us to mutilate and murder them with scant regard for [the] shared ‘humanity’” (p. 155) and kinship that we seem to feel for more typical companion animals.

The average pet dog or cat lives in the (relative) freedom of the human home, able to make decisions about their location and their level of participation in the household’s daily activities. The fact that their actions and decisions generally fall within human expectations is an indicator of the success of their domestication, and according to Yi-Fu Tuan (1984), an indicator of total human domination in the creation of a pet. For Tuan, pets are beings bent to the human will, not out of malice, but through the downward flow of affection from a superior (human) to a subordinate (pet). Such a relationship is based on the belief in the *right* of human domination, and pets are expected to be unobtrusive, obedient, and to lack initiative – to lack any meaningful agency.

If we have control over our pets, there should be no need for physical restraint, but most rabbits in the human home are caged. Indeed, to Tuan, cages “are admissions of failure” (p. 168) to create a pet – a last resort to exercise complete control. By their failure to conform to our expectations – by expressing their agency – rabbits threaten to expose the illusion of total human control that Tuan believes we strive to live by. In this context, rabbits make our being human less significant, which in turn calls into question the validity of our actions towards other species in particular and nature in general. Rabbits, as an *idea*, make us uncomfortable, and so we resist exploring the potentiality of our relationship.

Despite this discomfort, the popularity of rabbits as pets is rising, and they are now the third most common pet mammal in Western homes (Davis & DeMello, 2003). Yet, the ways that we care for these “companion rabbits” is deeply rooted in exploitive practices, with an almost obsessive control over both their physical and social lives, and an emphasis on human convenience. Captivity is

endemic, with the average cage offering a space that is roughly akin to a human being locked in a small bathroom for upwards of 20hrs/day. Failure or no, it seems that we are bent on turning rabbits into Tuan's idea of a pet, exercising total domination by whatever means are most convenient.

The pet industry has been able to use this to their advantage. The idea of the "pet rabbit" has been sculpted into an ideal apartment pet, because their captivity ensures they need minimal space to meet current standards (Davis & DeMello, 2003). Closely contained in enclosures, they require little supervision and manageable cleanup. The caged rabbit has been conceived of to fit a busy North American lifestyle – the perfect pet of the 21st century.

What is most interesting is that the standards that have been adopted to suit human desires have also been reframed as stemming from animal needs. Many sources declare that the human home is too dangerous for a rabbit who isn't closely supervised (i.e. Harkness, Turner, VandeWoude, & Wheler, 2010), and suggest offering exercise in an enclosed pen that protects the rabbit (i.e. PetSmart, 2013), rather than modifying the human home to eliminate risks. We're taught that the extreme level of control we exercise over the species is *necessary* to the wellbeing of the rabbits, thus relieving us of any feelings of guilt we may harbour over keeping them captive.

Stifled by their hyper-restrictive and regulated environments, these animals are never able to realize their potential as individuals, let alone as companions. "Companion rabbits" seem to be mythical creatures.

The pet rabbit has long been considered an appropriate ward of children, deemed easy to care for, most likely because of their social and adaptable natures, as well as their relative quiet. This rabbit/child association has only been strengthened by canonic children's literature, from *Alice in*

Wonderland, to *Winnie the Pooh*, to the *Velveteen Rabbit*, to the works of Beatrix Potter, and rabbits today continue to be marketed as ideal children's pets (Dickenson, 2014). As such, there seems to be a way of relating to rabbits that is more akin to toys than to other companion animals. Like toys, rabbits are usually "put away" (put back into their cages) when we are done playing with them, effectively designating times when it is unacceptable (or inappropriate) for them to interact with the family, in much the same way that a child is asked to turn off a video game or clean up their Lego before coming to dinner. There is something "safe" about this conception of a rabbit-object-toy. Not fitting neatly into human-preferred categories, the relegation of rabbits to the realm of children's whimsies and imaginary friends seems to legitimize their abstruse existences.

In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) present the idea that we understand the world through metaphors, and that the language that we use illustrates those conceptions. Consigning rabbits to children's imaginaries is to conceive of them as less real, and of less concern, so that ideas of the rabbit toy and rabbit object are reified and become embedded in our lived relationships with the species. What would happen if we could step beyond our preconceptions, and learn to live with rabbits as rabbits, rather than as toys, objects, or even pets? What if the metaphors we applied to rabbits were those of companion?

The 1990s saw the introduction of the labels "companion animal," and "guardian" into human/animal rhetoric, as alternatives to "pet," and "owner," respectively. The new terminology signaled an effort to depart from the conceptualization of animals as objects, ornaments, or property, and to make room for consideration of animal subjectivities (Irvine, 2004).

Companionship signifies fellowship, and to live by the metaphors of fellowship in our relationship to

animals would mean to recognize them as more than material commodities – it would mean to acknowledge their personhood; to accept them as themselves, and not what they can be for us.

Rabbits, however, have been left behind as “pet.” While it’s not inconceivable to make the conceptual shift from pet-object to companion-person with a dog or cat who we acknowledge knowing in few other ways, it’s impossible to ignore the multiplicity of rabbit existences. The “companion rabbit” highlights human hypocrisy, and beseeches us to think critically about Western human dependence on animal use.

Approaching the Topic

“...and burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after [the White Rabbit], and fortunately was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge. In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.”

– Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

It is not the object of this paper to delve into topics of animal liberation or animal rights. Rather, it is an exploration of our relationship with who we are calling “companion rabbits,” despite the lived realities of the individual animals who are known as such. I also realize that by criticizing the practice of raising pet rabbits in the same manner as resource rabbits, it may seem that I am attempting to elevate the status of the “companion rabbit” over that of their contemporaries. This is not my intention. My critique should not be interpreted as condoning the practices employed in any rabbit industry, but merely as an illustration of some of the ways we have limited ourselves in our relationships with the rabbits we have chosen to bring into our homes.

Over the last decade, I have met and worked with hundreds of individual rabbits in shelters, rescues, veterinary clinics and homes. Through these acquaintances, I have been left in no doubt of their vivid individuality, their agency, and their distinct senses of self. I have engaged in upwards of 1000 conversations with humans on the topic of companion rabbit care, and have witnessed the same basic themes dictate over and over the way we live with these animals. Whereas our relationship with dogs is something that we co-evolved into (Livingston, 1994), allowing us the time needed to grow into our current understanding of the “companion animal,” rabbits are a recent acquisition of the human home that have forced a hurried and awkward adaptation of ways of knowing and living with rabbits appropriated from their commercial exploitation as resources.

From their close captivity and isolation, to the foods they eat and the activities they are permitted, very little of the rabbit’s natural history has been considered or incorporated into their care. Rather than striving to provide rich and diverse environments and experiences, we are trapped by conceptual frameworks that apply to exploitive endeavours, such as “minimum standards of care,” and “best practices.” I, myself, fall into this trap. With a background in animal sheltering I have been in the position of having to define what the “minimum standard” is. To some degree, this makes sense; shelters are meant to be temporary stops en route to an animal’s “forever home.” But, whereas when dogs and cats are adopted from a shelter they usually go home to a cage-less life and family integration, rabbits generally experience little more than a change of location for their caged existence.

This perplexing occurrence led me to investigate current practices of rabbit care in Canada, to help identify common threads that might lead to an understanding of how we conceptualize living with this species. Having quickly identified common ties between companion rabbit care and exploitive

traditions, the breadth of the investigation reached beyond the human home into those industries that treat rabbits as resources, and also into the ambiguous, overlapping domains that intermingle between pet and product, in an effort to provide a panoramic snapshot of where the Canadian relationship with rabbits stands right now. The first chapter is a summary of that investigation, and seeks to illustrate the origins and evolution of our current conceptions of companion rabbit care. Within it, we will look at the standards, practices and advice of rabbit farming and agricultural practice; laboratory animal science; the pet store industry; feed manufacturers; veterinary medicine; animal shelter and rescue groups; rabbit education networks; as well as the Canadian legal status of rabbits, in an attempt to create a conceptual map of our current ideas and actions, in a companion rabbit context.

From this, we will choose two common threads to consider in-depth, which are pervasive as themes across domains, as a way of opening a conversation to critically engage in a discussion of the concept of “companion rabbits.” The first of these, addressed in chapter 2, will be rabbits as creatures who *confound categories*, pushing boundaries and defying traditional labels and classifications. In Western society, there is an assumption that sharp boundaries can be relied upon to denote distinction – the residual effects of Descartes’ fundamental belief in dualism (Evernden, 1993). It is embarrassing, then, to think that rabbits (perceived as a weak and timid animal) can throw these assumptions back in our faces, as if they hold no meaning. Trickster rabbit slips through the fences constructed to neatly pigeonhole components of the world to fit human ideals, and disrupts the stability of our most basic beliefs in our relationship with nature and other animals. Regardless of domain, rabbits inhabit a liminal space – the grey area in between - that belies a shadowy realm of multiple layers and messy intersections, and that challenges the tidy concepts we have come to rely on for our ontological security.

Threatened by such a challenge to our way of life, the second theme, addressed in chapter 3, will look at *containment and control*. How do humans deal with these deviant rabbits who fail to conform to our neatly-drawn boundaries? The obvious answer is the one we can see with our eyes – we place rabbits in cages and enclosures that restrict their movements and abilities to our desired limits, forcing them to colour between the lines. Less obvious, though, are the intangible barriers we place around the way we *think* about rabbits – the ways we allow ourselves to experience our relationships with them. These conceptual cages, though much less obvious, are pervasive in their influence over our thinking. As Neil Evernden (1993) has said, “[r]eality is transformed by what we are prepared to perceive” (p. 48), and there is a long tradition of thinking humans have control – have *dominion* – over other animals. But while this control is often expressed through the process of domestication, leading to predictable responses and fulfilled expectations from both farmed and companion species (Livingston, 1994), attempts to domesticate rabbits have often turned against us and made them more elusive than ever (Dickenson, 2014). Thus, to subdue them with the same certainty we have come to expect from “lower” animals, we must wrap rabbits in a complex conceptual net that matches them trick for trick. It is this net which must be unraveled, if we are to learn to know and accept rabbits for who they are, rather than who we are prepared to meet.

Rabbits challenge anthropocentric thinking, and thus the way we relate to other beings. In the discussion, we will explore ways that stepping away from anthropocentrism and engaging in a process of decentering can help us to reconsider our relationships with rabbits. Education is a fundamental building block of any conceptual cultural framework, and we will look for ways it can be used to help us reflect on and challenge the pervading ideas, rather than blindly reinforce them. Our current cultural maps have led us to road blocks (Evernden, 1993), and we must look to redraw the pathways we rely on for direction.

The paper will conclude with suggestions for future trajectories that move towards a new concept of “companion rabbits,” or, more accurately, rabbits as companions. From specialized breeding that changes their very biology, to training programs that control their behaviour, to doggie daycare that provides them with day-long attention and activity, Western society has been putting unprecedented effort into making animals into ideal pets, and more recently, ideal “companions.” But this careful sculpting is done with an anthropocentric blade – one that we must put aside if we are to come to a new kind of relationship with rabbits. Maybe the question isn’t how we can enable rabbits to be better companions to humans, but how humans can become better companions to rabbits.

Methodology

“Hop Right In”

- Volkswagen Rabbit Commercial, *Multiply*, 2006

I began by collecting documents and resources from the different domains that are involved in propagating current local practices of rabbit care, specific to Toronto, Ontario, Canada. From this, I engaged in an extensive literature review to identify where standards of care, codes of practice, operating procedures, policies, public education handouts and legislation relating to the care of rabbits exist in formal and informal ways, and what these documents endorse. The domains that were investigated include: federal, provincial, and municipal governments; rabbit farming and agricultural practice; laboratory animal science; veterinary medicine; the pet store industry; feed manufacturers; animal shelters and rescue groups; and rabbit education networks. Special attention

was given to citations and sources indicated in the documents, linking them to practices in other domains, and/or historical documents.

Once the materials were collected, practices were divided and categorized under five subtopics: environmental and housing conditions; nutritional provisions; veterinary and medical care; exercise and enrichment; and social interactions with rabbits, other animals, and humans. Data from every source was entered on a spreadsheet, so that similarities and differences in approach and practice of the various domains could be evaluated, and links between them could be made visible. It was found that clear patterns emerged within some of the subtopics, and the practice categories were further refined into three clear areas: housing, nutrition, and enrichment. In an effort to clarify emerging patterns, generalizations were drawn between domains by using key phrase exemplars in the stead of verbatim document wording. A systems flow diagram was created to help elucidate the links between domains, to demonstrate how common practices come to be taken up in the everyday human home, and to explicate the role of texts in the daily actions of people caring for rabbits.

Participant observation, through my experiences working with rabbits and their caretakers at a veterinary clinic, my role as a volunteer with animal shelters and rescues, and my experiences living in a household with multiple rabbits, helped to clarify what current practices are embraced locally, and which misconceptions are being effectively spread throughout Toronto rabbit keeping culture. In order to contextualize each domain's role in perpetuating these locally-accepted practices of companion rabbit care, further literature and document review was required. This investigated the purpose, objectives and motivations grounding each domain, which leads them to the standards of care they have adopted and recommend. Particular attention was given to the gaps in consideration

of the specialized and long-term goals of a companion rabbit-human relationship found in dominant domains, and to the potential flaws in reductionist approaches to specific areas of concern. Critical analysis of the domains' powers of influence on current practices helped to frame the potential deficiencies in local approaches, to illustrate common misconceptions, and point towards the ways these practices can be improved.

After mapping out the ways in which current practices are taken up by rabbit caretakers in local households, it became evident that the prevailing thoughts and preconceptions about rabbits required deeper investigation, in order to understand how exploitive practices are reproduced uncritically in human homes. I engaged in further literature review and reflection on participant observation to explore two key topics that influenced public perception of the species as companion animals. The first was the ways in which rabbits defy human-conceived boundaries, including: a natural and cultural history throughout which humans have failed to control rabbits through typical means; the fictional construction of rabbits in folklore and popular culture; and the conflicting notions that rabbits are a necessary resource while simultaneously attempting to foster relationships as companions. The second umbrella topic encompassed the ways that humans attempt to overcome rabbit ambiguity and defiance of categories through forcible control and containment, including: exclusion or restraint through domestication, barrier fences and cages; and conceptual control mechanisms contained in enacted metaphors, object-making, and trivialization due to the relegation to children's imaginaries.

Although, strictly speaking, I did not set out to write a multispecies ethnography, aspects of my work were drawn from this approach. Multispecies ethnography looks at the ways different lives – human and non-human – are intertwined in human social worlds and how these lives are shaped

through their participation (intentional or unintentional) in political, economic, and cultural forces. Just as important as the subject matter being investigated, multispecies ethnographies consciously look for hope and positive potential in the complex entanglements they explore (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010). Ethnographic work also aims to be transparent in its positionality, and fuses anthropology and autobiography, grounded in the author's ethnographic encounters as they are experienced in the present (Hastrup, 1992). Participant observation is a key method in ethnography (Okely, 1992), although it could accurately be seen as praxis, rather than method. My own integration of personal experience and participant observation throughout the explorations I embark on nod to multispecies ethnography as a foundational influence.

Finally, further literature review was required to explore ethics and educational approaches *for* animals. These were intertwined and tempered by reflections on my personal experiences within various domains, as well as individual encounters, which have been complicated and made messy by the ambiguous frameworks within which Western society attempts to navigate our relationship to animals. I drew key concepts from ideas I explored to form the cautious beginnings of what I hope to be a fruitful approach. Final recommendations stem from a desire to balance information and approaches from both science and social science, as well as drawing from experiential knowledge and intuition.

Chapter 1: **A Snapshot of Today's Companion Rabbit**

The Evolution of the Companion Rabbit

*"The success and happiness of a relationship with a house rabbit
depends rather on the right people."*

– Marinell Harriman, *House Rabbit Handbook*

Before we can hope to understand what "companion rabbit" means in a current North American context, we need to elucidate the circumstances of the rabbit's natural and cultural histories which have led to the relationships we share with them today.

I must first note that when we speak of the "companion rabbit," "pet rabbit," "domesticated rabbit," or even "farm rabbit," or "lab rabbit," the species we are speaking of is *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, commonly known as the European rabbit. Of the twenty-eight known species of rabbit, only the European rabbit lives in large, socially-complex groups in intricate underground warren systems. They exhibit behaviours that are vastly different from the species of cottontail indigenous to North America, who live solitary lives and come together only to mate (Dickenson, 2014). Yet, through works such as Beatrix Potter's *Tales of Peter Rabbit*, and Richard Adams' *Watership Down*, it is the European rabbit who has come to embody "rabbit," in our North American conceptions, conflating these diverse species and muddling ideas of "wild," "tame" and "domestic."

The European rabbit is native to the Iberian Peninsula in Spain, and a small portion of Northern Africa (Dickenson, 2014). Although prolific across much of Europe, Australia, Chile, and many islands worldwide, the pervasive distribution of the species is the result of their translocation by colonial Europeans, to provide themselves with easy access to sources of food and fur (Davis & DeMello, 2003). But these immigrants, who have come to represent the idea of "rabbit," are in fact highly

altered from their Spanish predecessors. The survivors of a European culture of hunting, inadvertent artificial selection created a larger, faster, and stronger rabbit than had previously existed (Dickenson, 2014). This, combined with their wild nocturnal habits (Sheail, 1971) and a tendency to spend much of their time below ground (Davis & DeMello, 2003), has made the European rabbit notoriously difficult to study, and their natural history challenging to piece together (Thompson & King, 1994). Thus, despite our long and multi-layered history with this species, there is much we have yet to understand about them, leaving room for ignorance and prevailing misconceptions.

Unlike traditional pets (dogs and cats), who co-evolved with humans (Livingston, 1994), rabbits do not share the same history of domestication. In fact, as John Livingston (1994) points out in *Rogue Primate*, most progenitors of domestic animals are now extinct – you can't find a wild cat, dog, pig or cow of the same species, roaming the countryside. The same cannot be said for rabbits. Although they are now threatened in their native habitat (Dickenson, 2014), rabbits still live in the wild, as well as in various places along a continuum of domestication (Passantino, 2008), from the feral rabbits who are so abundant around the world, to the larger, fatter rabbits bred for food, to the highly aesthetically altered mini lop rabbits who have come to be popular pets. Yet, even fancy breeds maintain the full behaviour repertoire of their wild progenitors (Davis & DeMello, 2003), a testament to their origins and their resistance to become fully integrated into the human infrastructure.

It is impossible to trace the exact history of pet rabbits, as their breeding has always been intertwined with and overshadowed by the commercial endeavours of the rabbit meat and fur industries (Davis & DeMello, 2003). First actively bred as a source of food in French monasteries

(Flux J. E., 1994), and later in household courtyards, there is evidence to suggest that the occasional rabbit was singled out by their caretakers to be treated as a pet. Beginning in the late 18th century, the nature of pet keeping began to alter. Historian Keith Thomas (1983) identifies this change with the first evidence of pets being given human names, and thus caretakers taking steps to include animals in their social worlds. The change also followed closely behind the massive economic shift that resulted from the industrial revolution, allowing the rising middle class unprecedented access to disposable resources that could be used to support animals for the sole purpose of companionship (DeMello, 2012). It was not until the 19th century that it became common for rabbits to be kept as pets (Davis & DeMello, 2003), when animals became viewed as a means to instill morals and empathy into youths, and parents were advised to provide pets for their children (Grier, 1999). Rabbits, whose sociality and adaptability lent them to easily adjusting to human routines and interactions, were deemed easy to care for and ideal for this purpose. By the Victorian era, backyard rabbit hutches became commonplace to family homes, and rabbit breeding clubs began to popularize fancy breeds (Dickenson, 2014).

In 1888, a single Belgian Hare (a breed of “domestic” *rabbit*) was exhibited across the United States, and initiated a boom in the commercial production of the breed in North America, through promises of profit from buy-back schemes. By 1900, tens of thousands of Belgian Hares were being bred in the United States, mostly for meat. The 20th century saw the rise of a purpose-specific pet rabbit breeding industry in Western Europe and North America, and the steady creation of novel breeds. Today, there are over 100 distinct breeds of “domestic” rabbit, created to satisfy human commercial needs or aesthetic desires, which has forced a fast evolution of their very physiology (Davis & DeMello, 2003). These changes have led to neotenistic (Livingston, 1994) traits, and engineered a new level of dependence on humans for their survival.

Even over the last century (that saw the beginnings of pet rabbit breeding), it has been widely accepted that rabbits are backyard pets, to be kept in outdoor hutches (Davis & DeMello, 2003). In such environments, where natural movements are hindered and social interactions stifled, there has been little opportunity to come to know the potentiality of the rabbit-human relationship. In fact, it is a very recent concept that rabbits are capable of feeling safe inside a human dwelling, and only in the last few decades have we seen a move to bring North American pet rabbits indoors to share our homes (Davis & DeMello, 2003). The greatest push in this direction came with the publication of Marinell Harriman's (1985) *House Rabbit Handbook*, providing rabbit caretakers with information on "bunny-proofing" a home, litter training, neutering, and bonding multiple rabbits, bringing forth new possibilities for coexisting with the species and the potential for new ideas of companionship.

Despite Harriman's guide, and the subsequent formation of the House Rabbit Society (a North American organization that advocates for rabbits as indoor companion animals) the majority of pet rabbits in Canada are caught in limbo between outdoor pet and indoor companion. In over a decade of involvement with rabbit rescues, shelters and veterinary clinics in Toronto, I have witnessed that most rabbits spend the bulk of their lives alone in cages – modified indoor hutches – physically isolated from interaction with their caretakers, other rabbits, and integration into household activities. As a result, rabbits have earned the reputation for being "boring" pets, which is no wonder when they are provided with little opportunity for expressing themselves or bonding with their caretakers (Davis & DeMello, 2003). This reputation, when considered alongside the "exotic" classification given to them by veterinary medicine (CVMA, 2013) and their status as multiple-use animals, consigns rabbits to the margins of pethood, and leaves them vulnerable to misunderstandings and unintentional neglect.

The Legal Concept of the Rabbit in Canada

“Rabbits raised as livestock in Canada do not receive even the pretense of protection given to other animals under industrial codes of practice...”

- John Sorenson, *About Canada: Animal Rights*

In Canada, all animals – domestic and wild – are considered to be the property of humans while in human custody (Bisgould, 2011). This idea is inherently object-making, conceptualizing animals as possession-things, rather than person-beings, and calling into question the notion that animals’ interests can be protected in any meaningful way (Francione, 2005). In general, companion animals, such as dogs and cats, receive certain protections, while livestock, such as cows and chickens, receive others (Sorenson, 2010). For rabbits, however, where oftentimes animals are bred for multiple purposes at one facility, it is sometimes only the desires of the customer that determine the final outcome for an individual (Davis & DeMello, 2003). Rabbits break down the neat delineation that their legal status depends on, falling into both niches and creating a grey area that can’t be distinctly categorized. As a result of this ambiguity, access to either set of protections is effectively nullified for rabbits in Canada (Sorenson, 2010), furthering their marginalization and undermining any claim they may have to companion status.

The *Criminal Code of Canada* (R.S.C. 1985, c C-46) sets out to encourage values, such as respect and compassion, in the treatment of animals, which reflect those values that humans expect from their relations with other humans. The provisions that relate to animals are unique, in that they aim to protect the conflicting interests of both animals (property) and humans (owners/users) (Bisgould, 2011). Thus, expectations are necessarily vague, and what little is laid out prohibits the *willful* injury, endangerment, or *unnecessary* suffering of any animal, *without lawful excuse* (Government of Canada, R.S.C. 1985, c C-46). Lawful excuse abounds in agricultural practice, where it is required

that animals be killed for the purpose of consumption. With the nebulous designation of rabbits in flux between agricultural use and companionship, the species' treatment is left widely open to the interpretation of lawyers and judges on a case-by-case basis.

Provincial legislation in Ontario, under the *OSPCA Act* (R.S.O. 1990, c 0.36) prescribes general standards of care for all animals that loosely require "adequate and appropriate" (s. 22) housing, exercise and nutrition. However, a major loophole of the Act is that the standards of care regulation "does not apply in respect of, (a) an activity carried out in accordance with reasonable and generally accepted practices of agricultural animal care, management or husbandry..." (s. 11.1, ss. 2). Again, their tenuous designation works against the species, leaving pet rabbits open to the potential of being treated in any manner common to intensive farming practices, a concept that is considered unacceptable (even outrageous) if applied to companion cats and dogs, as demonstrated by the public outcries that follow the discovery of a covert puppy mill operation.

The *Toronto Municipal Code* (1999, c. 349) gives us even more insight into the blurry conception of the species. On the one hand, rabbits are clearly categorized as pet animals, as evidenced by the fact that they are singled out (along with cats, dogs, and ferrets) as a species to be included in the number of animals a dwelling unit is restricted to (City of Toronto, 1999, c. 349, p. 349-4). Yet, there are gaps in the animal by-laws that fail to include them, which carry potentially significant ramifications. Most notable is that rabbits are left out of considerations for animals who are found "at large" (stray). While there are provisions for both stray cats and dogs to allow adequate time for their caretakers to find and reclaim them, no such considerations are in place for rabbits. By omission, a rabbit found and taken in by Toronto Animal Services becomes immediately the property of the City of Toronto, and can be sold, adopted out, or euthanized immediately. In this

way, pet rabbits are treated in the same manner as wild animals, and any allusions to companionship are dissolved.

The Influence of Parent Domains

“They keep going, and going, and going...”

– Energizer Batteries Commercial, *Energizer Bunny*, 1989

In order to elucidate the current ways we live with rabbits, I investigated the existing North American practices of rabbit care across several domains: farming and agricultural practice, laboratory animal science, the pet store industry, feed manufacturers, veterinary medicine, shelters and rescue groups, and rabbit education networks. What I found was both surprising and unsettling. Not only were common threads identified, tying all domains together and grounding concepts of companion rabbit care in exploitive traditions, but some of the most consistently reproduced doctrines could not be traced to a reliable source. Perhaps the most profound example of this is the idea of what constitutes appropriate housing for pet rabbits: a cage that is “three hops” in length (a recommendation that is ambiguous at best and completely arbitrary at worst). This and similar recommendations were blindly and unfailingly repeated in so many texts that they had ostensibly become unquestionable fact, defining the realities we are prepared to accept. Our relationships with rabbits have been bound by these ideas – restricting our exploration of new potentialities of companionship.

The American Rabbit Breeders’ Association (ARBA) exemplifies the entwined and conflated ideas across rabbit domains. The largest organization of its kind in North America, the ARBA was founded in the Belgian Hare boom of the early 20th century to represent meat producers of that time (Davis

& DeMello, 2003). Today, it carries on representing rabbit breeders across the United States and Canada, in the food, fur, show and pet industries (ARBA, 2013). One would think that breeding rabbits for such vastly different purposes would require specialized divisions and varied husbandry practices. Instead, this trans-domain organization publishes a single set of guidelines for its members in *all* industries, prescribing consistent care practices for all rabbits, no matter their intended use. Despite the fact that the ARBA now primarily represents show and pet rabbit producers (Davis & DeMello, 2003), the *ARBA Recommendations for the Care of Rabbits* appear to be grounded in the organization's beginnings in meat production, laying out the most conservative and limiting recommendations of any domain I have explored, including the smallest space allocations, most basic environmental conditions, and minimal dietary requirements (see figure 1).

In tracing the development of our current care practices for pet rabbits, what I discovered are two dominant or "parent" domains. These domains are farming and agricultural practice which has led to the current standards employed in the pet rabbit industry; and laboratory animal science which has to a large degree influenced the thinking of rabbit care in veterinary medicine. Each have bred traditions that together draw the current conceptual maps available to the average rabbit caretaker, and define how we think of living with rabbits as companions.

To illustrate the impact that parent domains have on the lives of these animals, let us imagine a hypothetical pet rabbit named "BunBun" (a shockingly common name for rabbits, in my experience). From his birth to his death, BunBun epitomizes pet rabbit life in Canada, and has the misfortune to lead an exemplary average and generalized life, defined by current accepted standards and practices:

The diet of a wild rabbit is almost entirely roughage – a diet that is mimicked in captive environments through the provision of grass-based hays (Harkness, Turner, VandeWoude, & Wheler, 2010). But the *ARBA Recommendations for the Care of Rabbits* points to hay as an optional supplement that need not be provided. Instead, the ARBA (2012) endorses commercially produced pelleted feed as the dietary staple of the rabbit. Pellets are generally high in calories, and low in fibre (Harkness, Turner, VandeWoude, & Wheler, 2010), aiding in the quick growth of young rabbits, an important objective for efficiency in rabbit production industries. Thus, by the time BunBun is sold to a pet store (3-6 weeks of age) (Davis & DeMello, 2003), he may never have eaten hay. Pet stores, attempting to cut costs or simply following the recommendations of the breeders, may also opt to provide a pelleted diet exclusively, and by the time BunBun reaches his human home, he may not recognize hay as a viable food item.

Diets low in fiber can lead rabbits to gastrointestinal disorders and dental disease (Kohles, 2014). With this in mind, BunBun will probably run into some health issues in his lifetime, and if he is lucky, his human caretaker may take him to a veterinarian. While vets with specialized training and experience in “exotics” will usually probe into husbandry issues that may help to identify root causes of the presenting symptoms, those whose practices are focused on cats and dogs often do not have the knowledge necessary to adequately care for rabbits (CVMA, 2013), and may turn to veterinary texts. These texts often cite scientific articles from laboratory medicine, where the abbreviated longevity of the animals means that long-term impacts of husbandry choices can be left unexplored. *Ferrets, Rabbits and Rodents: clinical medicine and surgery*, is one such text, recommended to me by the Ontario Veterinary College, and used in the training of Ontario veterinary students. In it, Quesenberry and Carpenter (2012) indicate once again that hay is a supplement, in this case used to prevent boredom through the stimulation of foraging activity.

Although Bun Bun's symptoms may successfully be treated, the root cause of his disorder has not been identified, leaving him vulnerable to further illnesses and complications. Such complications could include obesity and eventual heart disease, painful dental spurs, gastrointestinal stasis, and even death (Harkness, Turner, VandeWoude, & Wheler, 2010). Can we hope to find companionship in a relationship that forces such debilitating circumstance on one of the individuals involved?

Standards of Care and Common Practice

"The bunny is lucky. He has a pretty cage, clean water and nice food."

– Paula Raubenheimer, *The Bunny and the Cage*

The influence of parent domains can be mapped through the continuity in standards of care apparent in each subsequent domain, all the way to the information most widely available to the human customer (See Figure 2). At the parent domain level, where rabbits are considered products for processing into consumable goods or information, these standards are the most restrictive, aimed at facilitating efficient, productive and profitable conditions for the humans involved, while offering only minimal requirements to the animals in their care.

Ontario Rabbit (2011), an organization that represents some commercial rabbit growers in Ontario, has a vision "for a stable, profitable and healthy industry through increased communication, consumer awareness and product availability" (p. 4). This is an industry with human interests in mind, and the resulting standards reflect that. Thus, recommendations from this domain (and others like it) will propose to lower production costs, time and labour, while boosting production rates and the viability of the product. Husbandry efforts (mostly considered to be housing, environment and nutritional needs) seem to be developed to reduce the time it takes to clean

enclosures, to monitor food consumption and to keep the animals in relative physical health from their birth to their slaughter. The ideal slaughter age for rabbits is 9-10 weeks of age, meaning that considerations of long-term physical or psychological issues are unnecessary to the viability of their product. As a result, farmed rabbits are often housed in cramped conditions and fed diets intended for quick weight gain, rather than long-term health or well-being (Davis & DeMello, 2003) (See Figure 1).

Although there is no official body in Canada that regulates the use of animals in scientific research, the Canadian Council on Animal Care (CCAC) sets standards and policies for the care of laboratory animals that may be referred to by individual Animal Care Committees established within research institutions (CCAC, 2013). Rabbits can live in laboratories for anywhere from weeks to years, depending on the length and intensity of the studies they are involved in. Often, however, scientists monitor rabbits for physiological changes and physical health, rather than evaluating the animals' psychological or emotional welfare. Although the species is highly social, more often than not, rabbits will be isolated from each other in order to reduce the risk of fighting, pregnancy and disease transmission. Some experiments require rabbits to be kept in near-sterile conditions, which preclude the use of bedding and enrichment items, and prohibit any social interaction (Davis & DeMello, 2003). Nutritional intake may need to be precisely monitored, leading to the use of specially formulated pelleted diets. Laboratory rabbits are tools for human use, and the standards of care they are offered reflect this, closely resembling the minimal recommendations as laid out by farming and agricultural practice, in terms of enclosure size, environmental conditions and dietary requirements (See Figure 1).

In both farming and agricultural practice, and laboratory animal science, medium sized, *adult* rabbits are allocated around 0.35m² of floor space, and given approximately 40cm of height. While the ARBA (2012) does indicate that large breeds not provided with more space should be offered weekly exercise or enrichment activities, the CCAC leaves all decisions on exercise and enrichment programs for laboratory animals up to the individual Animal Care Committees, noting that such programs are controversial in laboratory science (Olfert, 1984). In theory, the requirements laid out by these domains should allow enough space for a rabbit to sit up, stretch out and turn around freely, providing the opportunity for at least minimal physical movement and comfort. However, Arlo, the medium breed Florida White rabbit who shares my home, measures over 45cm when lying down, and would touch both corners if stretched out diagonally in a 0.35m² cage. In anything but a crouched position, his ears would touch the roof of the cage. Arlo's movements would be restricted to little more than turning on the spot, a situation that could not but restrict his ability to express himself, and to develop a relationship with his human caretakers.

Rabbits kept alone in small cages that provide little stimulation or opportunities for social interaction show symptoms of boredom, depression or poor health, and have been observed sitting hunched for many hours at a time. In such rabbits, stereotypical behaviours (compulsive, repetitive behaviours with no purpose) often develop (Boers, et al., 2002), and are indicators of poor welfare (Mason, 1991). In research that sought to improve conditions for laboratory rabbits specifically, Boers, et. al (2002) recommend such changes as increased space, social housing, plentiful bedding and various enrichment activities for the rabbits being used. Unfortunately, the recommendations require more space, labour and expense, discouraging many labs from adopting the new ideas, and perpetuating existing practices.

Moving beyond parent domains (further away from concepts of rabbit objects, towards pet rabbits and companion rabbits), we can see space allocations transition from defined dimensions to arbitrary measurements based on the size of the rabbit. References to a cage length that is equal to “three hops” of the rabbit first appear in veterinary texts (i.e. Harkness, Turner, VandeWoude, & Wheler, 2010; Quesenberry & Carpenter, 2012), and can be followed down through feed manufacturers and pet stores to the information available to rabbit caretakers (i.e. Martin Mills, 2010). It is not clear how this imprecise measurement was conceived of, but it is religiously repeated in countless texts, and has become a reified concept in today’s pet culture.

It is possible that, as rabbits moved from exploitive traditions (where they are rarely seen) into human homes (where they often occupy prime visual real estate), the extreme captivity of parent domain cages was considered unsightly and unappealing – a visual tug at our conscience that brings to light all that “rabbit” represents and challenges in the human-animal relationship. This was trickster in our own home, staring us in the face, and laughing at our inabilities to live within the boundaries we ourselves had drawn. In what could be perceived as an effort to disguise this uncomfortable irony, as well as an attempt to accommodate the growing number of toys and accessories made available by the pet industrial complex, pet rabbit cages grew larger than their precursors. Today, the typical pet rabbit cage is approximately 91cm x 61cm, about 258% larger than those in parent domain industries; roughly equal to the length of *three small hops* of a dwarf rabbit breed.

While veterinary texts cite hay as anything from an optional supplement (as extrapolated from parent domains) to a majority staple (as determined through exotic veterinary medicine), information from pet feed manufacturers and pet stores is consistent and adamant in their

promotion of both hay and commercial pellets as necessary components of the rabbit's diet (i.e. Martin Mills, 2010; OxBow, n.d.a). This may, at first, seem contrary to the advice of their parent domains, but in fact it is quite logical. Parent domains are in the business of keeping costs as low as possible - providing more expensive or a greater variety of food does not further their interests. Feed manufacturers and pet stores, on the other hand, are in the business of selling food. The more types of food they can convince their customers to buy, the better off they will be. Suddenly, both hay and pellets are endorsed as essentials.

Of all prescribed standards, recommendations for exercise and enrichment are perhaps the most illustrative of our relationship with this species. It is largely agreed upon that rabbits require daily exercise, but most often this is to be achieved through the purchase and use of elaborate captive contraptions. From multi-level cages, to exercise pens (PetSmart, 2013), to rabbit-proofed rooms (OxBow, n.d.b), rabbits are framed as being too vulnerable to the dangers of the human home (or too damaging to human property) to be left unsupervised (i.e. Axelson, 2009; Harkness, Turner, VandeWoude, & Wheler, 2010; PetSmart, 2013). This framing neatly corners human caretakers into purchasing even further products to be used in their rabbits' daily exercise routines, and speaks to the pet industry's desire to further their own profits and interests, rather than the interests of the animals. The possibility of free-range living is brought up mostly in the public education handouts produced by exotic veterinary clinics (i.e. Drummond, 2012), but even these lay out multiple housing options to fit the needs and desires of their clients.

Stifled Efforts: Rescues and Rabbit Education Networks

“Domestic rabbits are companion animals and should be afforded at least the same individual rights, level of care, and opportunity for longevity as commonly afforded to dogs and cats who live as human companions.”

-House Rabbit Society, *Philosophy*

Despite the common preconception that rabbits need to be kept in cages, throughout the history of human-companion rabbit relationships there have been those who have sought to challenge that norm. In the 19th century, Beatrix Potter, whose stories and drawings have themselves had a tremendous influence on the Western culturally-constructed conception of the rabbit, occasionally allowed her own two rabbits to roam freely inside the house (Davis & DeMello, 2003). Present-day rabbit advocate, Julie Ann Smith (Smith J. A., 2003), seeks to live a mutually-negotiated companion relationship with the rabbits in her home, through which she hopes to offer the rabbits a chance to be rabbits and exercise their agency, rather than be strictly human-controlled pets. Those who wish to change the way Western society perceives rabbits often align themselves with rescues, or come together to build support networks that help to spread their views, but they are also often stifled by the desire to balance rabbits’ interests with human ones.

Whether a shelter, a rescue, or merely a support group, those involved in furthering companion rabbit education seem unanimous in their desire to help the most rabbits live the best lives possible, and to change human attitudes towards the species. With such a mission, these organizations and individuals have a vested interest in promoting choices such as free-range living that can help facilitate a greater human-rabbit bond and ensure that every rabbit’s next home is their “forever home.” The issue develops when their desire to help the most rabbits, butts heads with their desire to provide each rabbit with the best possible home. With a North American population that is resistant to the notion of rabbits hopping around their homes (and nibbling their

belongings), advocates for free-ranging rabbits tend to offer multiple housing options to appeal to a wider audience, ranging from large cages to completely free-range setups. By creating a range, they have established a lower minimum standard for human caretakers to live up to (that is similar to recommendations from other domains), so that any further freedom that is offered is considered a bonus, rather than a fundamental consideration.

Oftentimes, due to restrictions on space, cost and labour, these organizations will paint themselves into a corner by maintaining the rabbits in their shelters and foster homes in conditions that meet only those minimum standards, rather than leading by example and demonstrating alternative concepts. With the best of intentions, organizations with the rabbits' interests at heart can in fact stifle the very philosophies they mean to promote, by setting a precedent that inherently restricts the potential for companionship.

Moving Forward

“The Hare said to him: ‘I wish you would act sincerely by me, and show yourself in your true colors. If you are a friend, why do you bite me so hard? If an enemy, why do you fawn on me?’”

– Aesop’s fable, *the Dog and the Hare*

All of these hazy practices, intertwined across domains, have been matted together in an overwhelming tangle in the human home, as if applying distorted versions of every practice at once will somehow synthesize the ultimate standard. But, while such a culmination has not taken place, this knot of contradictions does offer us a jumping off point from which to explore the reasons behind our confusion when it comes to how we should live with pet rabbits. As we move into Chapter 2, we will explore the idea of rabbits as borderline creatures who, like trickster, mock our

carefully crafted categories and illustrate the deficiencies of the conceptual frameworks from within which we try in vain to manage and control our relationships with this species, other animals, and nature itself.

Chapter 2: **Confounding Categories**

The Rabbit Paradox

“[F]ew animals have acquired such an extraordinary, controversial reputation as the rabbit”

- John Sheail, *Rabbits and Their History*

Rabbits present a conundrum. While they have become the third most popular pet mammal in the Western world (Appleby, 2011), their value as a source of food has also risen in accommodation of a growing human population that must find ways to subsist with less and less available land (Caras, 2002). Their characteristic docility, sociality and quietude, that have helped to fashion them into likely companions, also render them ideal subjects for scientific experiments (Davis & DeMello, 2003). Humankind has purposefully transplanted them around the globe, yet we categorize them as “invasive” and despair at their ubiquity (Thompson & King, 1994). Rabbits have been deemed to have a “high cuddle factor” (Caras, 2002, p. 163), yet we continue to go to great lengths to exterminate them, introducing monstrous and disfiguring diseases into their environments (Dickenson, 2014). The number of rabbit breeds that have been developed to satisfy human fancy seems equal only to the number of ways that have been devised to trap, hunt and kill them to meet our utilitarian desires. Rabbits are symbols of good luck, and also considered bad omens (Caras, 2002). They are admired for their speed, and looked down upon for their vulnerability. They are associated strongly with childhood innocence, but also with sexual promiscuity. Although we use rabbits prolifically in stories that teach morals to our children (Davis & DeMello, 2003), human conduct towards the species seems indifferent and amoral.

It appears that the only consistency in our thinking about rabbits is that we’re inconsistent. Roger Caras (2002) summed up our fickle attitudes neatly when he declared, “[y]ou can have it any way

you want with rabbits. Just pick an end of the good/evil spectrum and believe what you will. No one will argue with you” (p. 163). No matter what territories, categories or symbolisms humans have established, rabbits are adept at defying our expectations and crossing the boundaries devised to contain them. By doing so, they confound us and keep us on edge. They are at once everything and nothing, and this makes it difficult for humans to find an entry point into a typical companion animal relationship with the species.

In this chapter, we will explore some of the ways that rabbits disrupt our neatly constructed categories and elude human order and control. First, we will examine the ways that rabbits’ natural history and the bumpy path the species has followed towards domestication has defied the expectations we have for pets, forcing us to acknowledge their animal nature. Next, we will journey into the world of representation, and look at the many contradictory ways that rabbits have been woven into our cultural fabric – from folk tales, to religious customs, to popular modern animations – shaping our preconceptions and attitudes towards these complex creatures. We will then conclude by pondering the inherent tensions created in our interactions with an animal that is recognized simultaneously as both subject and object.

Natural Barriers: The human-rabbit divide

“The rabbits mingled naturally. They did not talk for talking's sake, in the artificial manner that human beings - and sometimes even their dogs and cats - do. But this did not mean that they were not communicating; merely that they were not communicating by talking.”

- Richard Adams, Watership Down

It is widely theorized that, beginning as much as 100 000 years ago, dogs co-evolved in a slow process of domestication alongside humans – each species bringing benefit to the other and

growing into a co-dependence and mutual understanding. Omnivorous predators, dogs and humans made ideal scavenging and hunting companions and their partnership had a profound effect on the evolution of both species (DeMello, 2012). Brian Hare and Michael Tomasello (2005) believe that it is through this shared history that we have learned to interpret and communicate with these companions. There is now, at the very least, a basic level of instinctive understanding of a mutual “language.” Without needing to be taught, an awareness of certain cues is inborn in our biological makeup, the result of evolving together for so long that our identities as species are irrevocably intertwined. Dogs are the quintessential “pet” of the Western world (Herzog, 2010), and our techniques for integrating them into the human infrastructure have been perfected through the centuries.

Rabbits, however, were only initiated into the process of domestication around 1500 years ago (DeMello, 2010), and their evolution as a species has followed a very different course. Rather than working together in mutuality, the “domestication” of rabbits has been the result of our two species working *against* each other. Throughout history, rabbits reared for hunting and food were often enclosed, but very little controlled. Thus, although they underwent a process of artificial selection, it was inadvertent rather than intentional, and did not focus on traits of neoteny and dependence that are typical of domestic food animals (Livingston, 1994). From their captive courtyard rearing in medieval France (Flux J. E., 1994), to enclosed warrens on 16th century British estates, to the widespread hunting and biological warfare that continues in present day Europe and Australia, rabbits have been forced to become stronger, faster, more adaptive and more resilient (Dickenson, 2014), keeping one step ahead of us at every juncture. Livingston (1994) conceptualizes domestication as the amputation of wildness, metaphorically creating two absolutes – domestic and wild – whereby domestication renders animals entirely dependent on human care and

infrastructure. But while human intervention pushed, forced and manipulated rabbits to evolve into who they are today, they resisted this dichotomy. Rabbits are an ambiguous melange of domestic, wild and feral, fighting against both actual and conceptual human control.

As a result, while domesticated food animals tend to lose their ability to communicate and form bonds with conspecifics, as well as becoming entirely dependent on their human caretakers for security, order, and the provision of stimuli (Livingston, 1994), rabbits have retained their entire repertoire of wild behaviours (Davis & DeMello, 2003), are insatiably curious and stubbornly independent. Yi-Fu Tuan (1984) believes that the attitude towards pets is a blend of affection and condescension – a protective sense of power over another being. In order for this relationship to be successful, Tuan writes that the pet must learn “to be as unobtrusive as a piece of furniture” (p. 107) and completely under the control of their caretakers. Rabbits living in our homes challenge Tuan’s idea of a pet.

Rabbits in the wild excavate extensive burrow systems and spend most of their time below ground, where they are able to rest in relative safety from predators (Davis & DeMello, 2003). Their open-rooted teeth grow constantly (Kohles, 2014), requiring an almost endless supply of food and constant chewing to wear them down. They enjoy climbing (or hopping up) to the highest point they can find, in order to survey their surroundings. How does this translate into the human home? Considering Tuan’s (1984) philosophy of obedience by (and human control over) pets, the rabbits who are lucky enough to spend time outside of a cage may not act in ways that are considered “appropriate” to the nature of pets.

In my own home, my four rabbits demonstrate this deviance from social expectations daily. In a two bedroom apartment, burrowing underground transforms into the excavation of chair linings, the

“renovation” of cardboard boxes, and hiding in the corners of a bookshelf. Regardless of our diligence with a vacuum cleaner, hay is strewn all over the house, finding its way into our bed, our clothing, and even our computer fans. Every surface that is reachable has been explored by an inquisitive nose, and many packs of gum have been picked from jeans pockets, and sips of juice or pieces of fruit have been thieved from our coffee table. No wooden table or chair has been left unscathed, with telltale teeth marks bevelling their edges. And I’m convinced we should have taken out stock in electrical tape, for the number of cords that have required mending over the years. These behaviours are not typical of domesticated animals, who Livingston (1994) would ascribe very little will of their own. Even in our homes, rabbits are somewhere in between domestic and wild, their nature as *animals*, and not just as pets, shining through.

For those who are willing to live with the unconventional consequences of independent (and often mischievous) animals in their homes, the rabbit’s natural history presents further challenges to finding companionship. While our close relationship with dogs may have enabled us to learn their “language,” the frictional relationship we have maintained with rabbits surely stifles the same with their species.

As prey animals who are small enough to be a food source for both birds and other mammals, rabbits have a lot to consider in their day-to-day survival. Remaining physically hidden is crucial, of course, but rabbits are also masters of disguise, carefully concealing any sign of weakness (such as illness or injury) that might flag them as easy targets. Those who live with rabbits often discover that by the time an illness is noticeable, the condition has escalated to a critical level that requires emergency intervention (Krempels, 2013). For house rabbits, this duplicity might seem counter-intuitive, but in fact they are relying on the natural instincts of their enduring wildness, trying to

remain inconspicuous to any potential predators (including their human caretakers). The lack of trust and reluctance to communicate vulnerability and true states of being is an enormous hurdle that every human-rabbit relationship must face, and often relegates them to the fringes of companionship in the face of comfortable and intuitive relationships with animals like dogs.

Even so, rabbits' reluctance to communicate certain information is only one side of the equation. In his extensive ethological study of the species, Ronald Lockley (1954) described rabbit "language" as being "made through the sense of sight, smell and hearing – the hearing of signals made by movement, of body rustling in the grass or in the burrow, or by the thudding stamp of hind feet in the ground in alarm" (p. 26). In Western society, where anthropocentrism is taken for granted in both teaching and learning (Fawcett, 2012), animals are often valued for signs of intelligence that mimic human qualities, such as language use (DeMello, 2012). This results in privileging vocal animals (whose means of communication fit into Western conceptions of language) over less vocal animals who may rely on other methods of communication. Rabbits fall lower on Western scales of intelligence because of their reliance on body language and multi-sensory communication that is largely foreign to us. This is further reinforced by restrictive facial muscles that allow for minimal variation in their facial expression (Pollock, 2010), as well as eyes that can neither focus up close, nor engage in direct eye contact due to their lateral positioning at the sides of the head (Dickenson, 2014).

From my experience working with rabbits and their caretakers, the minimal vocalizations used by rabbits are often misinterpreted by humans as an absence of communication, expression, or even personality. Many humans seem to find it difficult to relate to a non-vocal animal, interfering with their acceptance of animal (and particularly rabbit) subjectivities. To some extent, humans who experience these feelings may be picking up on the rabbits' reluctance to share vulnerable information. More often than not, however, it is (at least in part) the human's inability or unwillingness to step out of their communication

paradigm and into the realm of rabbits that hinders deeper understanding. Rabbits ask us to redefine communication in order to know them better – a complex request from what is perceived to be a simple and passive animal (Davis & DeMello, 2003). If, however, their appeal is ignored, the result often leads to humans who believe rabbits are “boring” or “stupid,” a situation that can be catastrophic to the human-rabbit relationship. The obstacles that hinder human-rabbit companionship offer an easy excuse to hold rabbits at an arm’s length, and perpetuate the contradictory ways we have come to live (and think) with them.

Tales, Tricksters and Television: Thinking with Rabbits

“He is the spirit of the doorway leading out, and of the crossroad at the edge of town [...] He is the spirit of the road at dusk, the one that runs from one town to another and belongs to neither”

- Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*

In 2002, Subaru released an advertisement for their Forester SUV, which encapsulates some of the difficulties Western society has with the transcendent nature of rabbits. The ad, entitled “Outside the Box,” depicted a young girl and her mother covertly “liberating” a classroom rabbit by taking them from the school and letting them go into a forest where (the implication was) they could be “free.” The rabbit featured in the ad was a recognizable “domestic” breed, and the backlash from rabbit caretakers (who believed the ad promoted cruel abandonment of pet rabbits) was immediate and fierce (Davis & DeMello, 2003). Because rabbits exist in suspension between domestic and wild, caretakers looking to dispose of their pets will often set them “free” outside, believing they are capable of immediate adaptation to a wild environment (O’Meara, 1996). But while these rabbits may not belong entirely to our Western human world, as do dogs and cats, the modifications they have undergone through our interventions have also made them unsuited to the wild. Except in

some very particular circumstances, “freeing” (or dumping) a rabbit is almost a certain death sentence, through starvation, predation, or exposure. As a result of the public outcry from the rabbit community, Subaru pulled their advertisement within a week of airing (Davis & DeMello, 2003).

Rabbits are not of one world or the other, but transcend both. They are neither domestic, nor wild; food, nor friend; subject, nor object; and this blurriness confuses us. Nor is our treatment of the species good, nor bad; ethical nor immoral – it is everything in between. It was thus that a commercial that looked to invoke ideas of nature, wildness, and freedom, also sent a message of captivity, domesticity and abandonment. In *Trickster Makes this World*, Lewis Hyde (1998) describes trickster as the “embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox” (p. 7). Could such a character be better portrayed than through the rabbit, who already encapsulates these concepts?

Since rabbits occupy so many different roles, and hold so many contrary meanings, they have long been seen as an obvious choice for the characters in myths and trickster stories of innumerable cultures around the globe (Davis & DeMello, 2003). From Asia, to Africa, to Europe and America, rabbits have been woven into human traditions and ways of knowing, and have indelibly become part of our cultural makeup. While these tales are not about the species itself, and are meant to have broader and more abstract cultural meanings (Radin, 1956), the way rabbits are depicted in folk traditions cannot but have a significant impact on the ways we have come to know and identify with them.

The degree of influence these stories have had on our perceptions of rabbits is no doubt linked to the fact that the characters in these tales invariably exhibit traits of the actual species. This likeness

makes their portrayals seem more authentic, reifying the abstractions and muddling what is real in our understandings. The traits that are highlighted often play with ideas of the species' status as prey animals (Davis & DeMello, 2003), though whether these characteristics are considered positive or negative seems highly dependent on the cultural origin of individual stories.

European stories typically depict rabbits (and by extension, and conflation, hares) as foolish and timid prey who rely on physical ability, rather than mental prowess, to survive (Davis & DeMello, 2003). This is taken to such an extreme, that in the Aesop fable *The Hares and the Frogs*, the hares have become so frustrated by always being the most timid of animals that they resolve to commit suicide by jumping into a lake. The hares are saved from their fate only when their hasty approach startles nearby frogs who flee into the water and the hares discover that there are actually creatures more fearful than themselves (Worthington, 1884).

In contrast, trickster tales, rooted in African and Native American traditions, turn the rabbit's status as prey to advantage. Rather than concentrating on physical ability, these stories depict rabbits as clever and deceitful, allowing them to get out of predicaments through their quick wits and intelligence (Dickenson, 2014). Perhaps one of the best-known rabbit tricksters, Brer Rabbit, is a character of the Uncle Remus stories, first published and popularized by Joel Chandler Harris in the early 20th century (Baker, 1994). Brer rabbit, aware that he is prey, and forever worried that he will be caught and eaten by another animal (Davis & DeMello, 2003), uses his cunning to avoid his demise. In *Brer Rabbit and the Gizzard-Eater*, Brer rabbit becomes stranded in a river, on Brer Alligator's back, when Brer Alligator believes he requires a rabbit gizzard to cure his illness. Brer rabbit uses his quick wits and leads Brer Alligator to believe that he left his gizzard in a hickory hollow on land, since his doctor told him gizzards can't get wet. When Brer Alligator approaches the

spot where Brer rabbit allegedly left his gizzard, Brer rabbit jumps off his back and uses his advantage of land-born speed to run away and escape (Harris, 1983).

The contrast between the perceptions of rabbits in these two traditions is quite marked – the first focusing on the species’ weaknesses, the second on their strengths. Davis and DeMello (2003) muse that the historical position of the rabbit in these two traditions, since colonial times, may be tied to the status of their human creators as either colonizers or colonized. While Europeans may have identified more with the strength of the fox or the bear, and were content to let rabbits be prey, the clever trickster rabbit may have appealed to African and Native-American cultures, with their representation of the oppressed resisting their oppressors through wit and intelligence. Harris (1881), who adapted the stories historical moments after the American Civil War, also believed in the strength of Brer Rabbit’s symbolism for this purpose. Of his fictitious Black American Narrator, Uncle Remus, he wrote:

It needs no scientific investigation to show why he selects as his hero the weakest and most harmless of all animals, and brings him out victorious in contests with the bear, the wolf, and the fox. It is not virtue that triumphs, but helplessness; it is not malice, but mischievousness. (p. 9)

It seems quite apt that the rabbit, itself so pointedly colonized by humankind, may have been used as a symbol to comment on, and perhaps to criticize, the colonial influence, crossing a societal border that wasn’t yet open for human passage, and defying accepted boundaries. Yet tricksters predate colonial conflict, and have long-existed as mischievous catalysts of the stories they pass through, blurring distinctions and flipping expectations on their ends (Hyde, 1998).

Like other trickster characters, trickster rabbit is often depicted as lustful and sexually opportunistic. As a result, he is invariably portrayed as male, neatly avoiding the inevitable consequences these

qualities would produce for female characters (Hyde, 1998). In contrast, the rabbits used in myth and religious tales are often depicted as feminine; long revered for their reproductive capabilities, they have been associated with fertility, childbirth, and female sexuality (Dickenson, 2014).

India, Greece, Japan, Native America, and other ancient cultures linked rabbits with the moon, and the often associated polyvocalic ideas of fertility, fecundity and rebirth. This is perhaps because the moon was thought to possess control over the female reproductive cycle, and its ever-shifting month-long rotation matched the gestation period of rabbits (Davis & DeMello, 2003), who were known as prolific breeders. Rabbits were depicted as either the companions of moon goddesses, or the goddesses themselves, and while Europeans saw a *man* in the patterns created by the craters and shadows on the moon's surface, other cultures saw a rabbit (Dickenson, 2014). In these cultures, rabbits were generally considered good luck, and the harbingers of successful crops, many children and prosperity (Davis & DeMello, 2003).

In the Medieval period, when rabbits were translocated to the British Isles, Celtic superstitions took the rabbit's tendency to sleep with their eyes open, and to live deep underground as proof of their association with the underworld, supernatural powers, and witchcraft, linking the species with bad omens, symbols of ill luck, and subversive desires. Many rabbits were burned in rituals because witches (who could only be female) were said to shift form and take the shape of rabbits (Davis & DeMello, 2003). British sailors considered rabbits to be extreme bad luck, and prohibited eating, bringing on board, or even referring to rabbits on the ship. Considering the importance of the species as food and clothing at the time, this limitation was profoundly restrictive, though it resonates remarkably of the prohibition against bringing women on board (Dickenson, 2014).

Perhaps the most popular and widely-known Western rabbit icon, the Easter Bunny epitomizes the transitory nature of rabbits, combining pagan tradition, Christian religion, secular celebration and commercialism into the holiday that is practiced today. The holiday began initially as a pagan celebration of the spring equinox, and the beginnings of a new season of growth and life. The rabbit (or hare) was a symbol of such celebrations, sacrificed to the Anglo-Saxon moon goddess Eostre (closely related to “estrus,” linking, yet again, women’s cycles, rabbits and the moon), who was often depicted with the head of a hare (Davis & DeMello, 2003). As Christianity spread across Europe, the festival took on the new meanings of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, and the rabbit no longer had to take an active role as sacrifice, with the Easter story standing in as surrogate. Nevertheless, rabbit was still actively eaten during Easter festivities (Rowland, 1973).

The beginnings of the Easter Bunny stem from 16th century Germany, where it may be linked to a German folk tale about a mother who could not afford to buy her children presents, so she painted eggs for them at Easter, and hid them in the woods. The children follow a rabbit into the woods, where they find the eggs, and they conclude that the rabbit must have laid the eggs (Davis & DeMello, 2003). Today’s Easter Bunny is a strange, hybrid creature: usually depicted walking upright and wearing clothing, he is part animal, part human, part ethereal being – closer, perhaps, to the metamorphosed medieval witch-hare than to the actual species.

Like the Easter Bunny, many modern depictions of rabbits tend to be anthropomorphic (walking upright, wearing clothing, and/or speaking). In 1940, Warner Bros. released *A Wild Hare*, a Merrie Melodies animated short film that introduced the world to the character, Bugs Bunny (Sandler, 1998), a modern twist on a traditional trickster (Baker, 1994). From the beginning, the Bugs Bunny animations appealed not only to children through their fun and humour, but also to an older

audience through controversial mature themes that included gender, racism, sex and power struggles (Davis & DeMello, 2003). In many of the Bugs Bunny cartoons, Bugs cross-dresses as a woman in order to fool another male into a certain action, or to evade detection. In “Hare Ribbin’,” Bugs dresses as a beautiful mermaid so that he can distract and seduce the dog who is hunting him. Like traditional trickster rabbit, Bugs is also adept at turning situations of weakness into those of strength. In “Baseball Bugs” he manages to defeat a whole team of bullies through his intelligence and deceptive abilities. Despite his small size and obvious physical disadvantage, Bugs succeeds in turning the tables and beating the oppressors at their own game (Baker, 1994). Bugs’ curiosity gets the better of him many times, and he finds himself in some difficult spots, but like a true trickster, he is always able to use his wits to get out of them (Davis & DeMello, 2003). According to Hyde (1998), “the best way to describe trickster is to say simply that the boundary is where he will be found – sometimes drawing the line, sometimes crossing it, sometimes erasing or moving it, but always there, the god of the threshold in all its forms” (pp. 7-8). Bugs Bunny crossed boundaries of class, gender, race, and also species on a regular basis, problematizing contemporary social and cultural concerns, and opening a window to further discourse (Baker, 1994).

Throughout history, rabbits have inhabited the realm of representation, symbolizing good, evil; male, female; weakness, strength; animal and human. The characters in our stories share enough traits with the living, breathing species that they come not only to represent the story or its message, but rabbits themselves. The fictions, while providing little help with getting to know the animals, do help to inform where we perceive their place in society, and ultimately how we feel they should be treated (Davis & DeMello, 2003). We are so used to using rabbits as a tool to think about the human condition, that we forget they are worthy of thought in and of themselves.

Rabbits are our fairy tale companions – walking, talking and transforming to teach our lessons and

play our games. But these are concepts; abstractions. If we are to learn to find companionship and understand who it is that we *actually* share our world with, we must be open to discovering that rabbits may not be who we have imagined them to be.

Disappearing Rabbits

“Hallo, Rabbit,” he said, “is that you?”
“Let’s pretend it isn’t,” said Rabbit, “and see what happens.”
- A.A. Milne, *Winnie the Pooh*

Since the beginnings of hunting rabbits, their propensity to unexpectedly disappear down their warren holes, mid-chase, has given them an elusive quality that has been difficult for humans to reconcile in such a small prey animal. It is this transitory feature of rabbits that has suited them so well to become partners in traditions of magic (Davis & DeMello, 2003) – masters of disappearance – for who has not seen a rabbit pulled out of a magician’s hat, whether in live performance or in popular representation? Rabbits have always belonged to two worlds: that of our physical, experienced reality, and that of the unknown, where imagination rules our senses. Our continued failure to control their physical existence (Thompson & King, 1994) has perhaps encouraged us to focus on fantastical qualities and abstract representations, rather than real animals. Rabbits are visible everywhere – they inhabit every aspect of our culture – yet, as companion animals, they sit largely ignored in the margins, not visible as worthy of concern. Erica Fudge (2008) cautions us not to concentrate on only the symbolic potential of a pet, but to engage with the presence of the real animal. Has the prolific use of the symbol of the rabbit desensitized us to this potentiality? Has the concept of the rabbit *as an animal* disappeared down the rabbit hole?

Western society tends to compartmentalize species according to their socio-cultural status – a status which is defined by anything from utilitarian use, to exoticism or rarity, to perceived intelligence, to placement on the food chain, to aesthetics (Herzog, 2010). By these qualifications, the perceptions of rabbits fit overwhelmingly into a class of species that can be used as a resource to suit human needs, except in one category: “the ‘bunny’ we know today is the epitome of cute” (Caras, 2002, p. 163). This one characteristic undermines the rabbit’s acceptance as a mere object-resource, and allows them to occasionally step over the line into the realm of subject-companions. It is thus that a tension is created between those who are meant to be used, and those who are deemed too cute to make use of.

In general, animal experimentation takes place away from the public eye (Noske, 1997), and it has become almost taboo to speak of it. Countless cats and dogs are used in scientific experiments every year, though few people know or acknowledge this. As the symbols of pets, who we have come to think of more as family members than animals (Herzog, 2010), experimentation on dogs and cats would be tantamount to experimentation on human children in the eyes of many (Francione, 2005). Rabbits, however, have become the acknowledged symbol of animal testing. The “leaping bunny” symbol on personal and household products that refuse animal testing (Winders, 2006) proudly depict happy rabbits who presumably have been spared subjugation at the hands of science. Why rabbits? Surely dogs and cats, as “higher-status” animals, would recruit more support for the cause? Barbara Noske (1997) writes that “[a]nimal exploitation cannot be tolerated without damaging the principle of inter-subjectivity” (p. 38), a principle that we would like to leave intact in our dogs and cats – our kin. The interstitial placement of rabbits allows us to draw on human sympathies that resist animal testing, while simultaneously risking damage to their subjectivities by acknowledging their status as objects. Since rabbits have never been established in any one

category, we are able to attribute to them contradictory characteristics which, rather than challenging our perceptions of the species, perfectly align with our nebulous understandings of how they fit into the human world.

Animal experimentation, as a concept, requires the assumptions both of similarities between animals and humans (to validate the comparability of the data produced) and the negation of the same (to justify their use in the first place) (Noske, 1997). Who better to symbolize the industry but rabbits, who effortlessly inhabit the same paradoxes? But, while the “cuteness” of rabbits makes it difficult for us to fully accept them as objects for exploitation, their very abundance as resources makes it equally difficult for us to fully accept them as companions. From every angle, rabbits assault our tidy categories, pushing us to think outside of our boundaries that neatly delineate subject and object, human and animal, nature and culture.

Human cultural context, and indeed, human domestication (Livingston, 1994) also plays an important part in what roles we are willing to tolerate and accept for the rabbits in our infrastructures. Although “domestic” rabbits aren’t truly domesticated, and “wild” rabbits aren’t purely wild (Dickenson, 2014), there exists in our minds a hard distinction between the two that echoes frictional ideas of nature and culture (Noske, 1997), and dictates our behaviour towards the different castes of the species. While more and more “domestic” rabbits are entering urban human homes to become pets, “wild” rabbits of the rural countryside remain actively hunted as a source of food (Fudge, 2002). This phenomenon is unique to rabbits in our society – no other species that is kept as a pet is also maintained actively as a game species.

Rabbits change the rules of domestication. While we are used to thinking of dogs, cats and farm animals as “domestic,” and those animals existing outside of human infrastructure as “wild,” rabbits

overlap these distinctions, and illustrate the existence of a continuum of domestication (Passantino, 2008). From Flemish Giants, to Netherland Dwarves, to Mini Lops, the pet rabbits in our homes maintain the full repertoire of their natural behaviours, belying our conquest to “civilize” them (Noske, 1997) as a species, despite their human-distorted aesthetics. In this way, they seem closer to pet parrots (who are considered to be captive, tamed animals) than they do to pet dogs, yet we have altered them enough that they have become dependent on us for their survival. Rabbits are in limbo between two categories we have come to rely on to establish order in our world. Their position as fence-sitters calls into question our established beliefs, and renders woefully inadequate the conceptual maps (Evernden, 1993) we rely on to guide our everyday behaviour.

The fact that rabbits are both domestic *and* wild means that those who live with them may find it difficult to establish meaningful relationships with members of the species, if they ignore their natural history and the importance of their behavioural variety. Such considerations bring into focus the *animalness* of pet rabbits, and can draw attention to the power dynamic that is established in many human-pet relationships (Smith, 2003) – a dynamic that can make us uncomfortable to consider. If rabbits shift along a continuum of domestication, what might that say about other species and the ways we live with them? What if there is more to fulfillment in a dog’s life than being treated like a furry child? Might we need to reconsider our relationships with all of our pets?

John Livingston (1994) proposes the idea that humans are the original domesticates. He believes that the human fixation with technology means that “ways of doing have supplanted ways of being” (p. 12) in human societies, and that technology serves as the crutch that replaces our original interconnectedness with nature. This shift to a reliance on technology to survive means that humans have become placeless exotics who no longer belong anywhere but can exist everywhere –

able to live in a prosthetic universe of our own abstract invention. Livingston goes on to suggest that our efforts to domesticate species have really been efforts to mold those species in the human image, making them more like us, the ultimate domesticates, and stripping them of their wildness and connection with nature.

Pets are a special class of domesticate, because they have been allowed into our human domestic space. Erica Fudge (2002) argues that this invitation to pets to live with us in our homes means that they can be seen both as animal, and as human – the realization of Livingston’s theory. Fudge believes the special status of pet supersedes animal natures, and makes them into a different class of being altogether: “a pet first, an animal second” (p. 32). It is thus that we see terms like “FIDS” (a portmanteau of “furred” and “kids”) (Fudge, *Pets*, 2008) that boldly declare pets as human family members, blatantly and confidently anthropomorphising them, and shaping the way we think about them to be more akin to human children.

Marjorie Garber (1997) carries this further when she declares that although pets prove they are animals through their inability to talk or disagree, they also prove to be the ideal humans, because their caretakers project their own thoughts and ideas onto their pets, so that they are always believed to say or think exactly the right thing. It is only when pets display their *animal* nature (by peeing on the carpet, scratching the couch, or chewing up a favourite shoe) that Fudge (2002) believes the tranquility of the relationship is lost. These echoes of wild animal behaviour disrupt the anthropomorphic illusion, however briefly, and remind us that we are living with another creature who is not entirely in our control – a reality we don’t freely admit.

Rabbits, even when they are established as pets, are rarely separated from their animal qualities, caught by the paradox of their multiple uses, and predisposed to engage in many of the behaviours

that would damage the anthropomorphic illusion. If pets are suspended between human and animal, pet *rabbits* are suspended between pet and animal. A rabbit hopping around the human home will diligently chew baseboards, books, wires, and clothing; they will shred boxes and dig holes in carpets; and they will spread hay into every nook and cranny. These constant reminders that the rabbits in our homes are more akin to the rabbits in our yards than they are to ourselves limit our ability to accept their actions, and often motivate us to create barriers that separate them from our daily activities. It is these barriers that we will begin to explore in chapter 3. When we experience and live with a manufactured and forced divide, we are reminded of the traits that colonizing traditions scorned in the rabbit: they are considered to be weak, timid prey animals. Recognition of such traits inspires contempt and further disassociation, ultimately justifying our elevation over the species, and facilitating the objectification and multiple uses of rabbits. But containing this trickster is no simple matter, and as we will see, rabbits find ways of pushing back – of resisting our control – and of breaking through or distorting every barrier we employ to contain them within our preferred tidy limits.

Chapter 3:

Containment & Control

“Brer Rabbit sorter dance up long side er de fence, he did...”

- Joel Chandler Harris, from *Legends of the Old Plantation*, *Miss Cow falls a victim to Mr. Rabbit*

We have looked at some of the many ways that rabbits, like trickster, defy our expectations and elude the careful distinctions we rely on to be the glue that holds Western cultural frameworks together. But rather than accepting their disconcerting multiplicity and broadening our own limitations to allow for their ambiguity, we seem to intensify our efforts to limit and manipulate them, attempting to force their many-faceted existences into a rigid and ill-fitting mold that meets our narrow-minded requirements.

George and Fitzzy are two of the rabbits who share my home. In their lives, both have had occasion to become acquainted with human-imposed control and objectification, and both have suffered due to their inability to meet preconceived expectations or to satisfy predetermined purposes:

George was found abandoned outside of a Toronto subway station. Unneutered and a typical breed for meat rabbits, he may have been part of a backyard breeding operation. Both of his ears had been cut off at the base, leaving a small stump on one side, while the skin on the other side had grown over the hole when it healed. His incisors were maloccluded (overgrown and misaligned) due to improper diet, making it difficult for him to eat, and he was probably not considered worth the trouble to fix it. When he arrived at the shelter I was working at, he was immediately slotted for dental surgery to remove his front teeth. During the surgery, it was discovered that the skin that had grown over his right ear had trapped an ear mite infection inside, causing what could only have been excruciating pain and the ultimate destruction of his ear drum. Before he could begin down

the road to recovery, George had four surgeries on his head to clear the infection, remove his ear drum and reposition his ear canal.

It was a cold winter's day when Fitzy, an opal mini Rex rabbit, was found stumbling in the snow of an alleyway beside an elementary school. Brought to my shelter by the mother of one of the school's students, we were informed that he may have a broken leg, since he didn't seem able to walk properly, and wobbled when he tried. Upon admittance, we discovered that rather than a broken leg, Fitzy was suffering from a degenerative neurological condition, which had likely been visibly declining for some time. Instead of being taken to a veterinarian or a shelter, he had been left alone in below zero weather, with no hope of being able to care for himself; the easy prey of dogs, raccoons, hawks or owls.

Both George and Fitzy have lived with me for five years now, and I have watched in awe of their quick forgiveness of humankind, and the blossoming of their personalities. George is a sloppy, goofy, laid back rabbit who, despite his friendliness, can be a bit bossy. He sprints around the apartment, jumping on and off the furniture, and then lounges under the coffee table or the desk I'm working at. Fitzy is a sweet and gentle rabbit who continues to astound us with his raw determination. His neurological condition led to the eventual amputation of one of his hind legs, and he is currently learning to use a wheelchair. Although it's hard work, his passion for food ensures that the proper bribe (a dried cranberry!), will get him up and wheeling in the blink of an eye! Although they were both discarded as property, I cannot think of them as such. George and Fitzy have vivid subjectivities, regardless of their legal status, and no single mold or set of expectations could ever adequately define them.

In this chapter, we will be exploring the many ways that Western society attempts to conquer and subdue trickster rabbit, both through physical and conceptual restraints. We will begin by considering the limiting effects of the physiological and social alteration of the species, through the process of domestication. Next, we will examine isolation and containment methods imposed by the physical alteration of rabbits' environments, through the use of fences and cages, and how they impact our abilities to interact with and understand the species. We will then move on to look at conceptual controls we employ to contain the concept of the rabbit, examining the ideas and metaphors that inform the extreme actions we take against the species when they are considered to be "pests" or "invasive." Finally, we will conclude with an exploration of the rabbit's long-time association with children, their popularity as fictional characters in children's stories, and the resulting trivialization that occurs when they are caught between real and imaginary worlds.

Ironically, by building all of these concepts to contain the rabbit, what we are actually doing is limiting ourselves and the possibilities we are able to recognize and experience. While we work endlessly to manage and control rabbits in the Western world, we have trapped ourselves within the limits of our own thinking – a cage of our own making – and trickster rabbit watches all of it from the outside, looking in.

Cages, Containment and Limiting Wildness

Domestication

*“hardly any animal is more difficult to tame than the young of the wild rabbit;
scarcely any animal is tamer than the young of the tame rabbit;
but I can hardly suppose that domestic rabbits have often been selected for tameness alone;
so we must attribute at least the greater part of the inherited change from extreme wildness to
extreme tameness, to habit and long-continued close confinement...”*

– Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*

Henry David Thoreau (1937) famously wrote that “[i]n wilderness is the preservation of the world” (p. 672), an idea that is reflective of the romantic ideology of his time, and that also positions nature and “the wild” as a pristine and natural place that is distinct from a despoiled [Western] human society. Although written over one hundred and fifty years ago, Thoreau’s thinking (which was well-rooted in the Western fundamental concept of the nature/culture divide) is still pervasive in much of today’s environmentalist thought, reifying ideas of static segregations between animals and humans; wild and domestic (Cronon, 1995). The very idea of wildlife, under this framework, requires an acknowledged division between nature and culture (Suzuki, 2007) that often pits one against the other in the proverbial struggle for ultimate human control.

This struggle has played out in many ways, and one of these ways is through the process of domestication. Rebecca Cassidy (2007) highlights how domestication has been rendered the “natural” relationship between humans and other species (despite its being a relatively new phenomenon in the history of humankind) and has even come to be viewed as a “hallmark of humanity” (p. 4). “Wild,” in Western thought, is synonymous with “ungovernable,” and to tame – to civilize – nature has become the human project (Livingston, 1994). It is no wonder, then, that the evasive rabbit, who has resisted our governance, can be troubling to our collective peace of mind, especially considering its perceived strength (or rather, weakness) when compared to humans.

Uncontrollability in nature makes us uneasy and fearful (Livingston, 1994) – emotions we resent feeling with regards to such a seemingly insignificant creature. If we cannot control even the meek and timorous rabbit, our confidence in the sureness of human domination must fall prey to doubt, leaving us uneasy about assumptions of our moral authority over nature.

Domestication is a form of physical (biological) control, whereby an intentional process of selective breeding effectually tethers our subjects to the human existence, through an engrained dependence on our infrastructure. Long-removed from their wild ancestors, we have taken domestic species into human custody, and conditioned them to meet our ideals of a new kind of malleable and biddable nature. We value in them sameness, simplicity, and predictability, rather than individuality, sociality and agency (Livingston, 1994). Evernden (1993) has referred to domesticated animals as “functionally illiterate” (p. 92), due to their stunted and juvenile abilities to communicate amongst themselves. In a dualistic world, these animals have lost their place in nature (Livingston, 1994) and have entered the human cultural context.

I have mentioned, in earlier chapters, how rabbits have failed to meet the expectations of domestication, having been unintentionally forced to evolve with elusive, rather than tractable, qualities (Dickenson, 2014), and perhaps also due to their truncated history as domestic subjects. It could be that they simply have not had the time to fall in with the plans of humanity, and that this frustrates our 21st century desire for instant gratification (Feiertag & Berge, 2008), but other circumstances have also contributed to their breaking of our conceptual domestic mold. Livingston (1994) has described most domesticated animals as placeless beings – their ancestors having been roaming herd animals who were attached to their social group – but not to a physical landscape or

territory. He has described them as being “almost infinitely transferrable” (p. 21), provided they have access to the resources they require for survival.

Rabbits, however, are anything but placeless. They, like successful domesticates, come from large groups with complex social orders, but they are different in that they live for many generations in underground warren systems that were begun by their ancestors and will be expanded by their descendants (Dickenson, 2014). In this way, rabbits are deeply rooted to place, so that when they are plucked from this context and deposited in the human domestic sphere, the contrast cannot be anything but jarring. Resource rabbits are given no place to call their own; trapped in isolation by the confines of their miniscule enclosures. And while “companion” rabbits may be offered more space, they are supposed to defer to their caretakers’ customs, and are expected to live comfortably and obediently within the conceptual boundaries of the human home, rather than establishing their own. Although rabbits may not conform to the rules of domestication, by prohibiting their establishment of home territories – by rendering them placeless – we have found we can control them in similar ways.

Long before rabbits were forced to adjust to life in a human home, they were cultivated as game (Dickenson, 2014), to be objects of recreation and entertainment. Game animals are contradictory by nature: they are always considered to be wild, while being actively *produced* for human enjoyment. This type of production has been referred to as “sustainable utilization”, whereby wild animals are refigured as useful, entertaining, and/or profitable resources, and thus assigned individual and quantifiable values. Game animals are the perfect bridge between nature and culture. By actively breeding, releasing, and managing them, we bring that which is “ungovernable” (i.e. pests and predators) under human control (Suzuki, 2007), and into a Western cultural context.

As I have discussed, rabbits notoriously blur the boundaries between wild and domestic, subject and object, and confound the categories that give order to the world as we conceive it. Perceiving rabbits as game animals lends an air of legitimacy to their inherent ambiguity – situating the border-crossing species on the bridge in-between.

A Rabbit-Proof Fence

Bugs Bunny: *[after being locked in a jail cell]* Gee, I don't get it, Doc. How come you locked me outside?

Yosemite Sam: Outside? Why, you're *inside!*

Bugs Bunny: Oh, no, I'm not; I'm outside. *You're inside.*

Yosemite Sam: *[glancing, puzzled, around the cell]* I am?

[opens the cell door]

Yosemite Sam: Well then, get in here!

Bugs Bunny: *[shrugs, walks out, locks Sam in the cell, then takes the keys and walks away]* Boo-hoo. Now I'll never see my wife and kids again. Boo-hoo-hoo.

- Warner Brothers, *The Bugs Bunny Mystery Special*, 1980

The rabbit's popularity as a game species has been largely responsible for its ubiquitous distribution around the globe, as European colonizers scattered them almost everywhere they landed, hoping to provide long-term sources of food or sport (Davis & DeMello, 2003). Joseph Chapman (1990) hypothesized that if humans hadn't taken the European rabbit from its natural territory in Iberia three thousand years ago, its population would likely have been regulated by the close containment of the oceans and harsh mountain ranges that surrounded it. However, take them we did and, like the Midas touch, we got more than we bargained for, as almost every new place they were located became quickly (sometimes devastatingly) overrun (Dickenson, 2014).

There is perhaps no better example of this than in Australia where, in 1859, Mr. Thomas Austin imported twenty-four wild European rabbits, releasing thirteen of them on his estate with the

hopes of providing “gentlemanly sport” (Dickenson, 2014, p. 45) in the form of game hunting. But the sandy Australian soil lent the ideal burrowing grounds, and when combined with a favourable climate and established human management practices of predatory species, the success of the rabbits in their new habitat was extraordinary (Thompson & King, 1994). The species spread at an astounding speed, swelling outwards at up to 100 Km per year (Flux & Fullagar, 1992). Their impact was devastating on the fragile local ecosystem, and they have been credited with aiding in the disappearance of one eighth of the native mammal populations, as well as transforming thousands of acres into barren desert through their voracious consumption of local vegetation (Dickenson, 2014).

In order to stem the hopping tide of destruction, Australians (like others around the world in similar, if somewhat less extreme, situations) have employed various techniques to keep rabbits at bay. Most of these methods involve direct killing through shooting, trapping, running down with dogs, poisoning, or the introduction of lethal epidemic disease, in an effort to reduce populations, or even to eradicate them. Australia, however, is unique in its use of a second strategy for rabbit control, in the form of barrier fences (McKnight, 1969).

Matt Hayward and Graham Kerley (2009) present fences as both physical and non-physical structures constructed to restrict or prevent passage across boundaries. These can be traditional, free-standing physical barricades or deterrents, or they can be metaphorical barriers, such as those of sound or scent, or even islands. Beyond simply barring access to particular lands or spaces, Christina Kotchemidova (2008) believes that fences convey ideas which have long been associated with property, protection, division, conquest and order – ideas related to dispute and a struggle for control and that inherently objectify that which is being contained. She says that “the fence is an

open declaration of intention” (p. 3) originating as an attempt to curb social conflict, whether between two humans, or humans and nature. In current practice, fences are used to prohibit “undesirable” invaders or threats from coveted resource-rich areas, and to circumvent human-animal conflict by reducing the impact of both predators and heavy grazers on human-managed lands (Hayward & Kerley, 2009). Fences are at once physical and symbolic barriers, helping to shape the cultural understandings we live by (Kotchemidova, 2008). It is fences that have been the primary material and metaphorical tool we have employed in our relationship with rabbits, whose trickster natures are constantly challenging and eluding us, inciting our desire to contain and control them within Western-defined acceptable limits.

Between 1886 and 1929, as the dangers of an exploding rabbit population became frighteningly evident, Australia erected more than 48,500Km of wire barrier fencing, in an unprecedented effort to contain a pending ecological crisis (Dickenson, 2014). Although small-scale exclusion fences had been used worldwide to protect personal property, crops and gardens from rabbits and other unwanted visitors, the “rabbit-proof” fences of Australia marked the first (and only) major effort to exclude rabbits from the larger territories of crown or state-owned lands. The fences were born out of the desperation of the nation against the unyielding spread of rabbits throughout their country, and made possible by the fact that the rabbits had originated in a specific location, meaning their growing trajectory was predictable, and theoretically containable (McKnight, 1969). As animosity towards the introduced species grew, Australia’s cultural attitudes towards rabbits became reified through the erection of the formidable network of fences that literally divided their nation. The country thus openly declared that rabbits did not belong, and that they would go to great lengths to exclude them.

To the detriment of the rabbit fencing idea, the vast breadth of the project meant that certain disadvantages were working against its success: the fences couldn't be built fast enough to prevent the exponentially growing rabbit populations from circumventing them and flowing around their ends (Dickenson, 2014); vigilant upkeep was unrealistic in the harsh conditions of the Outback over such a stretch of land, leading to frequent damage that allowed passage through or under the fences; and the necessity of passage points for humans, livestock and vehicles meant that gates could be left open through mistake, neglect or malice, providing openings to any rabbits who could find them. Thus, the sought-after result of complete exclusion was never achieved (McKnight, 1969) – in character with the spirit of the rabbit, they found their way to both sides of the fence.

There is, however, a less overt manifestation of the fence that has managed to keep rabbits physically contained for centuries. Since 1400-1300 BCE, rabbits have been “liberated” on islands, usually with the hope that the finite boundaries of their territory would better facilitate their easy capture or manipulation, no matter their intended use. This has varied from sport, to farming for human consumption; from the baiting of other animals, to controlling unwanted vegetation; from entertaining tourists to conducting experiments on rabbit control techniques; and even to conserve representative populations from intentionally introduced epidemic diseases. Today, there are over 800 islands worldwide with populations of European rabbits (Flux & Fullagar, 1992), acting as living testaments to these varied and contradictory relationships through the centuries. While rabbit islands may not send the same visually impactful message as a wire fence the length of a nation, their symbolism is just as profound. Kotchemidova (2008) believes that fences are an acknowledgement of the failure to coexist. They are a failure to understand those we live with, and an effort to control the threat of that which we do not understand. Only through complete isolation do we seem content that rabbits remain under our control. We have effectively cordoned ourselves

off from rabbits with metaphorical fences, resulting in limitations not only on their movements, abilities, and agency, but on our own.

Inverted Fences: A Life in Three Hops

“Like other animals when allowed some freedom, rabbits perform beyond their supposed capacity. The key here is opportunity. What individual expression can you expect from an animal who never gets out of a cage?”

– Marinell Harriman, *House Rabbit Handbook*

While the intention of fences has been to keep rabbits *out*, cages are meant for the inverse – to keep them *in*. Rabbit cages are inherently meant to limit the individual animals, confining them to small and manageable areas from which they cannot cause havoc, restricting behaviours (such as chewing and territory marking) that may be considered undesirable to their caretakers. Georgia Mason and Charlotte Burn (2011) point out that “from sending a naughty child to its room to locking a prisoner in solitary confinement, behaviour restriction plays a major part in human punishment” (p. 98). The symbolism of a cage is therefore that of deprivation – from the basic withholding of freedom, to more extreme limitations on the ability to perform certain natural actions, as fundamental as standing up and lying down (Dixon, Hardiman, & Cooper, 2010).

Cages also echo of spectacle, entertainment and exploitation. For thousands of years, humans have kept animals in captivity – in cages – for these purposes: from the gladiator contests of ancient Rome, to the menageries of wealthy Europeans in the 17th century, to the modern-day zoos that grace most major cities of today (DeMello, 2012), each proclaiming, in their own way, human mastery and control over nature.

How have these contexts been translated in the care of “companion” rabbits today? As we discussed in Chapter 1, the majority of house rabbits spend most of their time confined to cages, a tradition of care that has been passed down from exploitive farm practices, and which is reinforced through other domains such as veterinary medicine and the pet store industry. In particular, reference to a cage size that is “three hops” in length, seems to be blindly repeated as the minimum acceptable dimension for a pet rabbit’s cage (e.g. Girling, 2003; Harkness, Turner, VandeWoude, & Wheler, 2010; Martin Mills, 2010; Quesenberry & Carpenter, 2012), an astoundingly restricting environment in which to spend a lifetime. Andreas Steiger (2006) cautions us that:

Often the requirements of housing, in particular measurements for boxes or cages, are taken over uncritically from source to source over many years, or the state of practice is taken as minimal norm or as recommendation without being questioned and without any scientific examination (p. 111).

My cross-domain exploration of rabbit care in Canada indicated that this is, indeed, the case for pet rabbits in our country. In fact, many commercially-available hutches and cages for pet rabbits are of smaller dimensions than are recommended by farming and laboratory practice (Dixon, Hardiman, & Cooper, 2010). Pet stores seem to emphasize the convenience of animals who can be kept in small spaces that don’t infringe on our human homes (rather than looking to meet animal needs), allowing us to create modern private menageries in our homes. Inadequate equipment and accessories continue to be on the market and, with no education mandatory for private pet ownership, insufficient housing conditions are perpetuated by a widespread lack of knowledge or research, on an international scale (Steiger, 2006).

The pet rabbits who endure [what has been culturally ingrained as] accepted and standard housing conditions, must tolerate exceptionally close confinement. When outfitted with the recommended litter box, food bowl, hay rack and toys (Harkness, Turner, VandeWoude, & Wheler, 2010;

Quesenberry & Carpenter, 2012), there is little space remaining in a cage “three hops” in length for the rabbit to actually hop, and they are lucky if they are able to stretch out fully. Mason and Burn (2011) explain how these kinds of captive conditions prevent animals from performing natural, motivated behaviours (as simple as standing up on their hind legs, or moving about naturally), leading to behavioural deprivation. Such a state of being leads to frustration, negative emotions, and ultimately compromises welfare. Small living quarters stifle the drive to explore and avoid the monotony that can lead to boredom. Rabbits in smaller enclosures tend to be less active and alert than those in larger areas. Conversely, rabbits who are given more room have been found to be much more active overall, as well as interactive with their surroundings in particular (Dixon, Hardiman, & Cooper, 2010). The conclusion that is drawn by Mason and Burn (2011) is that standard housing options for pet rabbits likely do not offer enough physical space to permit *adequate* expression of motivated activities, environmental interaction, or social engagement, and ultimately are a threat to their welfare.

In 1979, over a decade after the Brambell Committee Report (1965), which focused on animal welfare needs in intensive farming practices, the United Kingdom’s Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC, 2009) released a press notice whereby they circulated the *Five Freedoms of Animal Welfare*, a framework that has since reached beyond its original scope, to guide approaches to animal husbandry and care in many domains internationally. The fourth freedom is “The freedom to Express Normal Behaviour – by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal’s own kind” (FAWC, 2009, para. 3). Unfortunately, reprinting of the *The Five Freedoms* often sees its fourth truncated to “The freedom to Express Normal Behaviour,” leaving it open to broad interpretation that can render it almost meaningless. A small pet rabbit in a typical cage can sit up,

lie down and turn around – all natural behaviours. But it seems unlikely that these basic actions will alone ensure their welfare.

From all of this, we are left with a conundrum. It is apparent that rabbits who live in small cages are at risk of poor welfare, yet perpetuating such living conditions has become the accepted norm. We can see how cages have been used throughout history as means of deprivation, exclusion, and exploitation, yet we often refer to the caged rabbits in our homes as our “companions.” How can we reconcile these incongruities? Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) believes that caretakers demonstrate their kinships with pets by giving them human names – that this symbolic gesture embraces them as members of the human social group. It has been found that pets kept in cages (including rabbits) are over 50% *less* likely to be given human names than those permitted to move freely in the home (specifically dogs and cats) (Abel, 2007), a striking statistic considering Lévi-Strauss’ theory. It appears that cages, as well as providing *physical* barriers that limit the relationships we can foster with rabbits, may also reinforce the *conceptual* barriers we impose upon them. If it is control we desire, then cages seem a quick solution to our failure to domesticate this species to to same degree as dogs, and thus manipulate them behaviourally (or as Tuan (1984) would argue, our failure to make a pet). Cages are bold and visible statements of our dominion over these creatures, separating them from our social lives and rendering them continuously at our disposal, where they can be called upon to meet our needs.

Conceptual Controls

“As the nature of the rabbit is to dig, care must be taken to sink the wall or fence sufficient to prevent them from undermining and making their escape.”

- C. Bement, *Rabbit Fancier: A Treatise upon the Breeding, Rearing, Feeding and General Management of Rabbits*

In 2009, as part of their *Weird, True and Freaky* series, Discovery's *Animal Planet* aired the episode, “Outback Rabbit Invasion.” From a North American cultural perspective, the language used in the episode was shocking, describing rabbits as “killer creatures” who pose a lethal threat to Australia’s ecosystem, going so far as to accuse them of “food chain genocide” and “eco-annihilation.” Framed as they were as the “furry foes” of humans (Discovery, 2009), the episode exemplified the dynamic that has long been established between humans and the rabbits they consider to be “invasive” species. Aside from its sensationalized presentation, “Outback Rabbit Invasion” positioned the human-rabbit relationship through the use of metaphor, helping to sculpt the conceptual framework of viewers and guide their opinions to support the intensive rabbit control practices featured in the episode.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) believe that human communication is based on the same conceptual system as thinking and acting and, because of this, language is an important signifier of how we interact with the world around us. In their opinion, concepts are chiefly metaphorical, and thus metaphors have an important role to play in the ways we think and act. The metaphors presented in “Outback Rabbit Invasion” encourage its audience to experience their relationship with rabbits in a particular way that satisfies the narrative they are performing: it looks to establish rabbits as an undesirable and violent invader that must be fought and controlled through extreme measures.

Rabbits as Invasive Species

“One is only looking anew at the behaviour which has made the rabbit an admirable success in nature; other mammals persecuted by man [*sic*] have succumbed, but the rabbit seems to have all the answers to its population problems, natural and man-made[*sic*].”

– Ronald Lockley, *The Private Life of the Rabbit*

The European Rabbit has a long history of being considered an unwanted and “invasive” species. As long ago as 30 BCE, Strabo, a geographer, documented an overpopulation of rabbits in the Balearic Islands that originated from a single imported pair. The resulting conditions reportedly led inhabitants of the islands to demand of Emperor Augustus that the rabbits be cleared by a Roman legion, or that the settlers be provided with new lands to occupy (Davis & DeMello, 2003). Later, in the early 15th century, the Portuguese settlers of Porto Santo were forced to evacuate their new island when the descendants of a single pregnant female rabbit altered the local ecosystem to such an extent that it was rendered uninhabitable (Crosby, 1986). In the 19th century, European rabbits came closer to home, when they were introduced several times onto Sable Island, Nova Scotia. Eventually they thrived, until their success led inhabitants to label them as a “nuisance.” In 1889 and 1890 a number of cats were brought over from Halifax in order to extirpate the rabbits, a task at which they were successful (The cats, however, began to overwhelm the island, which led to the importation of foxes. Inevitably, the foxes were hunted by humans, ending the cycle.) (St. John, 1921).

Like the rabbit itself, the very idea of “invasive” or “alien” species is ambiguous. Charles Warren (2007) writes that such terms are relative in both time and space. The definition of an “alien” species is one that has been introduced *by humans*, either intentionally or unintentionally, but such a definition is blatantly anthropocentric. Species have always traveled the globe, albeit at a slower pace. They’ve hitched a ride on a bird, floated across a body of water, or walked across the ice that

temporarily united two lands. Warren (2007) points out that in his own home of Scotland, rabbits inhabited the land in previous interglacial periods but that, for whatever reason, they were absent at the beginning of the present one. Thus, their (re)introduction by humans has resulted in their labeling as “alien” and “invasive” species. Such definite categorization does not actually speak to the history of the relationship between rabbits and Scotland, but stems from an anthropocentric idealist vision of “pristine” or “natural” landscapes, where human-introduced species are stigmatized as intruding, not belonging, and being unwelcome.

It is ironic that we label those who we have transplanted to be actively (intentionally?) invasive, and more ironic still that of all of the species on Earth, humans could be considered, by our own definition, the most invasive of all. Livingston (1994) proposes that technology, and the shift from ways of *being* to ways of *doing*, have domesticated humanity and thus rendered us exotic in every environment. Technology has allowed us to transcend the traditional co-dependence that species have on their specific surroundings and manipulate nature in profound ways. One of those ways has been to broaden our own exoticism by manipulating and domesticating other species into extensions of ourselves – projecting onto them the human ideal. But when those species follow our lead and become manipulators of nature themselves, we lose some of the control we pride ourselves on, and resentfully assign blame to those who we declare do not belong. No better example of these xenophobic attitudes exists than in Australia, where humans have declared an all-out war on rabbits.

The War Against Rabbits

“All the world will be your enemy, Prince of a Thousand enemies. And when they catch you, they will kill you. But first they must catch you; digger, listener, runner, Prince with the swift warning. Be cunning, and full of tricks, and your people will never be destroyed.”

- Richard Adams, *Watership Down*

Although the brunt of the blame for the effects of Australia’s overpopulation tends to fall on the shoulders of Thomas Austin and his 24 rabbits, Austin was just one member of an Australian “Acclimatization Society.” These societies were developed by European settlers to encourage the importation and release of a multitude of game (including rabbits), fish, and songbirds from around the globe, wishing to “enrich” their new colony (Flux, Duthie, Robinson, & Chapman, 1990). It is ironic that the settlers’ desire for novelty ultimately tilted the scales away from the country’s unique biodiversity, in favour of the globalized biosimilarity (Warren, 2007) that ecologists are so in fear of today. Nevertheless, the introduction of rabbits proved so successful, that it was not long before struggling farmers, scientists and politicians united in their opinions that this introduced (“alien” and “invasive”) species had become an active threat, both to the country’s agricultural practices, and to their delicate ecosystem. By 1888, less than three decades after their introduction, an Intercolonial Commission on Rabbits declared the species to be a pest in Australia, and recommended their eradication (Davis & DeMello, 2003).

As often happens, the national and international policies that looked to control the spread of this introduced species were shaped by borrowing ideas from militaristic concepts (Larson, Nerlich, & Wallis, 2005), and a metaphorical reality of being “at war” with the rabbits was established (Dickenson, 2014). In a 1948 Newsreel, *Menace of the Rabbit*, historical moments after the end of the Second World War, the producers were able to use memories fresh in the public psyche (Larson, Nerlich, & Wallis, 2005) to their advantage. In the style of familiar wartime propaganda, the

reel is a call to action against the rabbit, “public enemy number one.” Described as “a foe whose battalions are thousands of millions strong” as the “army of rabbits [heads] to the fertile east,” the narrator appeals to farmers and graziers to engage in the “rabbit war” (Cinesound Productions, 1948). Larson, Nerlich and Wallis (2005) write that military metaphors are a “well-entrenched cultural resource” (p. 244), that offer themselves as convenient framing tools that transcend the boundaries between society and science. Through the employment of a military lexicon, Australians were initiated into a way of thinking about and acting towards rabbits that may otherwise have seemed extreme.

Extreme Measures: Biological Warfare

“Animals don't behave like men,' he said. 'If they have to fight, they fight; and if they have to kill they kill. But they don't sit down and set their wits to work to devise ways of spoiling other creatures' lives and hurting them. They have dignity and animality.”

- Richard Adams, *Watership Down*

As evidenced by “Outback Rabbit Invasion,” the language of Australia’s “rabbit war” has changed very little today, although the tools being used to control rabbit populations have evolved and are more scientifically refined, ranging from more successful poisons to biological warfare (Dickenson, 2014). Identified first in Brazil in 1896, the myxoma virus was the first biological control agent employed by humans against growing rabbit populations, when it was introduced in Australia in 1950. The virus is lethal and highly contagious, spreading quickly through rabbit colonies by way of fleas or mosquitoes (Davis & DeMello, 2003). After its initial introduction, the success rate of the virus was over 99%, decimating rabbits wherever it was released. Virtually stopping the spread of

rabbits in their tracks (Dickenson, 2014), this first attempt at biological control was hailed as a major victory.

Prompted by the Australians' success, French Pediatrician, Armand DeLille was able to acquire a vial of myxomatosis, and in 1952 he inoculated two rabbits on his estate in France, where he was overrun with the popular game species. Within six weeks, almost all of the rabbits on his estate had died (Dickenson, 2014), and the virus jumped his walls to the surrounding countryside. In three years, 98% of the rabbits in France had succumbed, and the virus began to spread throughout Europe. True to the nature of rabbits, Europeans could not agree on what to think about this new development; while hunters were irate by the shortage of one of their favourite game species, and ended up taking DeLille to court, farmers and foresters congratulated his initiative with an award of appreciation (Davis & DeMello, 2003).

Although the myxoma virus can still be found throughout Australia, Europe and South America, after the initial epidemics, rabbits began to develop resistance to the disease, lowering mortality rates from 99% to 40% (Dickenson, 2014). In Australia, however, a precedent had been set for science to solve "the rabbit problem" and, following Livingston's (1994) theory that we have an ever-increasing reliance on technology to govern nature, the people demanded a new biological control. When, in the 1980s, a new disease affecting European rabbits was identified in China, it led Australians to hope another cure for their furry ills had been found. In March 1995, field trials for the new virus, Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease (RHD), began on Wardang Island, off the coast of South Australia. Before the year was out, the virus had jumped to the mainland (despite the efforts of scientists to contain the disease), where it quickly penetrated rabbit populations and drastically reduced their numbers. Renamed Rabbit Calicivirus Disease (RCD) (to disassociate the virus from

images of bleeding) scientists and public officials worked tirelessly to turn what should have been viewed as a scientific catastrophe (the wide release of a biological control agent that had yet to be understood) into a victory against the rabbit enemy, and figured RCD as an allied force that was vital to Australians' reclaiming of their land from this infamous pest. The virus was legalized as a rabbit control in 1996, and has been in use ever since (Landström, 2001).

Bilbies, NOT Bunnies: Cultural Manipulation of the Rabbit Image

"Why, they're the best thing to come along since the Easter Bunny!..."

- Cadbury Cream Egg commercial, 1988

While the rabbit population around the country was returning to manageable levels, there was yet another battle to be won. Instilled in Western culture through such influences as Beatrix Potter, Richard Adams, Bugs Bunny and modern Easter commercialism, many urban Australians thought of rabbits as cute and humorous characters (Landström, 2001). Although it is against the law to keep a rabbit as a pet in Queensland, they are the state's most popular illegal pet (Davis & DeMello, 2003), and sympathy for rabbit control programs, has been tenuous, in favour of the rabbits themselves. In an effort to affect a cultural shift, the Anti-Rabbit Research Foundation of Australia (Now known as Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia), began the Easter Bilby campaign, in an effort to refigure the Easter symbol as an endangered native marsupial, the Bilby. The campaign was broad in scope, and consisted of curricula for school-aged children, licencing manufacturers (such as Cadbury) to make Easter Bilby chocolates and cards, and the publication of a seminal children's book, *Easter Bilby* (FRA, n.d.). Through this book, children are taught that the retiring Easter Bunny split his job between two individuals: Flash Rabbit and Bilby. Flash Rabbit was irresponsible and ate all of his

Easter treats, while Bilby diligently distributed his goods to children all across Australia (Garnett & Kessing, 2006). Although subtle in its execution, *Easter Bilby* is working to change the attitudes of children towards rabbits by framing them as irresponsible and self-serving, and establishing a relationship of mistrust. Australia is raising a generation with new attitudes towards rabbits, who will be more apt to support further extreme control measures.

Conceptual Fences: Issues of Ownership

“People are drawn to rabbits for different reasons. Most of them think rabbits are cute (and they’re right). Others want to breed and show them for enjoyment and prestige. Some are looking for a pet that’s less work than a dog yet different from a cat...”

– Isbell Pavia, *Rabbits for Dummies*

Although the objectification of rabbits is obvious enough in their ubiquitous use in wildlife control and in exploitive practices, how does it play out for pet or companion rabbits? It is not uncommon for me to be asked the question, “how many rabbits do you have?” And, although it seems like this would be an easy answer, I am always mindful of the inadvertent inferences that are carried both in the question, and in how I answer it. Customarily, I reply something along the lines of, “I currently live with four rabbits” (the exact number varying between one and six at any given time). Although, strictly speaking, this avoids the actual question, it better suits my values and seems to satisfy the asker.

What is so different about saying “I *have*,” versus “I *live with*,” four rabbits? *Having* is a declaration of ownership, and it builds a conceptual framework based on culturally-ingrained metaphors of property, through which we can understand our relationships with animals. What can be *had* can

also be bought, sold, created, or destroyed – whether pencil or puppy, radio or rabbit. In ownership, there is implicit objectification of that which is owned.

Fences are used to define property (Kotchemidova, 2008) and delineate between what is mine and what is not; “I *have*” constructs a metaphorical fence that binds an object to its owner. That being said, to say that “I *have*” rabbits is both untrue, *and* true. Out of respect for the clear subjectivity of the rabbits in my life, I try to take a step back from the anthropocentric presumption that I am able to *own* another life (framing my role as caretaker more than owner), but the reality of the Canadian context is such that I am legally defined as their owner, and they as my property (Bisgould, 2011). This gives me the right to make decisions about them based on my own interests, rather than theirs.

In 1999, the international animal rights organization, In Defence of Animals (IDA), developed the *Guardian Campaign* in an attempt to alter North American society’s framework for their perceptions and treatment of animals. The campaign aimed to transform “owner” vocabulary by adopting the term “guardian” in its stead. Through this shift in language, IDA hoped it could dissolve the status of animals as property (subject to mistreatment and exploitation), and to introduce the perception of animals as individual beings with unique needs and the capacity to suffer. Since its inception, dozens of North American counties and cities have since altered their legislation to replace “owner” with “guardian” (DeMello, 2012), impacting the way many people *think* about the relationships with their pets. However, this has done little to alter the legal status of the animals themselves.

While terms like “guardian,” “custodian,” “caregiver,” and “caretaker” have become quite common in relation to cats and dogs (who, as we’ve discussed, generally have freedom of movement within

the human home and are established in daily household interactions), my experience in shelters, rescues and veterinary clinics has demonstrated that this is not the case for caged animals, including most rabbits. The physical boundaries of cages seem to be linked to a conceptual one – one that, unsurprisingly, maintains a tradition of objectification and ownership. However, rather than concepts of property being linked to particular species, I have observed that those who live with free-range rabbits tend to consider themselves to be guardians. These observations would suggest that changing the way we *physically* live with rabbits may impact the way we *conceptually* live with rabbits, having the potential to alter the entire premise of our relationships.

Following the White Rabbit: The Relegation to Children’s Imaginaries

“Well, I’ve wrestled with reality for 35 years, Doctor,
and I’m happy to state I finally won out over it.”

–Elwood P. Dowd, *Harvey*, 1950

The late 19th century saw a shift in the perception of magic, from a sinister and demonic supernatural practice to an entertaining and wholesome engagement with fantasy (Davis & DeMello, 2003). At the same time, Victorian ideals encouraged bonds between children and pets, and rabbits were commonly paired with children in paintings and writings of the time (Dickenson, 2014). The rabbit’s earlier trickster associations with superstition and supernatural abilities combined with their newfound partnership with children, and the species became an icon of this modernized innocent magic, naturally intermingling with the imaginary worlds of children. The effect was that rabbits themselves were transformed in Western perception into “childish” creatures (Davis & DeMello, 2003).

Since that time, the image of the rabbit has become one of the most popular in the manufacture of children's goods and media. Davis and DeMello (2003) write that it is

“impossible to walk into a baby's room or a store selling baby goods without running into myriad cuddly bunny images: on pajamas, sweaters and hats, in the form of stuffed animals, rattles and teething toys, and on swaddling blankets, crib bumpers, lamps, wall hangings and quilts” (p. 208).

Why have rabbits managed to become so ingrained in children's culture? Perhaps because “rabbits' long ears, human-like eyes, silly big feet and fluffy tails delight young human minds, while their soft fur delights young hands” (Davis & DeMello, 2003, p. 183). Whatever the reason, rabbits now populate children's worlds as common characters in fiction and fantasy.

Unfortunately for rabbits, there is a tendency of adults to trivialize the experience of children in their imaginary worlds (Adams, 2011), and rabbits share the consequences of this dismissive attitude. By association, rabbits, like children, have been put in a position of not being taken seriously, and are often dismissed as “cute bunnies.” Those who choose to study rabbits are often accused of sentimentalism, resulting in academic and cultural marginalization (Davis & DeMello, 2003) that ensures the perpetuation of these attitudes.

This relegation to what are considered trivial and non-serious children's worlds is yet another example of the attempted conceptual capture of rabbits – enclosing them in a realm of fantasy and unreality where they can easily be ignored. But fences work both ways, and while trying to fence rabbits *out* of serious consideration, we've effectually fenced ourselves *in*. Trickster rabbits' ambiguities fit right into a magical imaginary world of infinite possibilities. While we dismiss them as insignificant, they dance on the fence that keeps us close to our self-imposed limitations, mocking our inability to reach beyond our borders to potential new perspectives.

Bunny “Tails”: Rabbits in Children’s Stories

“Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.”

— Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*

Even while we position rabbits as insignificant, we also employ them as important teachers - figuring them frequently in the stories that sculpt young human minds. Rabbits are still one of the most common characters in children’s literature, and are especially activated to explore themes of transition between early childhood and adolescence; parental protection and independence; and fantasy and reality (Dickenson, 2014). Like the White Rabbit in Lewis Carroll’s (1866) *Alice in Wonderland*, children can accompany rabbits on journeys that are suspended between material and imaginary worlds –reality and fantasy – that can help them to come to terms with the changes that growing up can bring.

Margery Williams’ (1922) *The Velveteen Rabbit* exemplifies the transient nature of the literary rabbit, as the main character (a stuffed toy, “the Velveteen Rabbit”) goes through two major transformations during the course of the book. The first occurs when the child in the story declares his stuffed rabbit to be “real,” thus taking the rabbit from the material world where he is naught but an inanimate toy, and bringing him into the child’s imaginary world where he is perceived as real. The second transformation occurs when, after recovering from scarlet fever, the child’s toys must be burnt, and the Velveteen Rabbit finds himself discarded along with the other nursery toys. It is then that a fairy (from the realm of imagination where he is currently residing) helps him to transform into a living, wild rabbit. With this final transformation, he returns to the material world, but this time he is a living creature, rather than a toy. *The Velveteen Rabbit* engages the reader in a

dance that moves in circles through real and imaginary worlds, acknowledging that children may intermingle between them.

Bruno Bettelheim (1976) believes that “to the child there is no clear line separating objects from living things; and whatever has life has life very much like our own” (p. 46). With such an assertion, it is only a small step to the personification of animals, a technique that has also helped rabbit characters to straddle the boundary between real and imaginary. Perhaps one of the most iconic works in children’s literature, Beatrix Potter’s (1902) *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, features a young rabbit named Peter who epitomizes characteristics of a naughty human child. Unlike his sisters, who are “good little bunnies” (p. 6), Peter struggles for independence from his mother, Old Mrs. Rabbit, ignoring her warning about the dangers of Mr. McGregor’s garden (“Your Father had an accident there; he was put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor” (p. 3)), Peter ventures into the forbidden garden and gets into trouble. He narrowly manages to escape being caught, and runs straight home to the security and safety of his mother. Despite his rabbit appearance, Peter’s desires both for independence and for the surety of parental protection are familiar to young humans (Davis & DeMello, 2003), and his play between human and animal worlds can help to integrate children’s concerns with reality into the more comfortable setting of imagination.

Whether in ancient myth, folk superstition, classic children’s stories, or modern day animations, for centuries we have depicted rabbits as humans and humans as rabbits (Davis & DeMello, 2003).

Davis and DeMello believe that rabbits have become part of the human imagination in a way that other animals have not – from a long history of comingling images of our two species. Rabbits are such familiar stand-ins for humans, that there is an unconscious acceptance of the juxtaposition

that doesn't disturb our sense of reality. Dickenson (2014) writes, "[w]e see in rabbits an echo of ourselves" (p. 123).

A Lesson in Responsibility

Thumper: He doesn't walk very good, does he?

Mrs. Rabbit: Thumper!

Thumper: Yes, mama?

Mrs. Rabbit: What did your father tell you this morning?

Thumper: [clears throat] If you can't say something nice... don't say nothing at all.

-Walt Disney Pictures, *Bambi*

Whether due to this ingrained familiarity, or just as a matter of convenience, there is a long tradition of using rabbits as tools in both the formal and informal education of human children. C.N. Bement (1859) articulated a sentiment in his early treatise, *The Rabbit Fancier*, which has reverberated through to the modern day: "there is a moral value attached to these animals. They afford an early lesson to the young of the responsibility of having live animals..." (p. 12). Alongside the rise of rabbits as characters in children's culture, the 19th century saw the inception of the widespread Western belief that caring for pets was a good way to foster middle-class values in children, by teaching responsibility and compassion, and building empathy (Davis & DeMello, 2003). Already paired readily with children, rabbits became a popular pet, especially for young boys, in whom they were supposed to encourage more virtuous behaviour (Dickenson, 2014), by providing innocent occupation and diversion.

However much Western society has evolved over the last century, the sentiment that children benefit from caring for animals remains largely unchanged. Recent study has shown that one of the

most popular reasons for acquiring a pet for a child today is “to teach them responsibility and care,” and that this outcome is seen by parents as the primary benefit of pet ownership. Ironically, the children of parents who acquire a pet specifically for this purpose are actually *less* likely to participate in caring for the pet, than those who acquired the pet because the child wanted one, or for the purpose of companionship (Fifield & Forsyth, 1999).

The motivation to teach children responsibility through pet ownership may seem noble, but it is also one that has been widely contested by shelters and rescue groups. Rabbit Rescue Inc., Canada’s largest rabbit charity, posts the following on their website:

“Many parents want to get their child a pet in order to teach them about responsibility. What often happens, however, is the rabbit is soon forgotten, and shortly after a new home is sought. The only lesson a child will learn from this is that animals are disposable” (Lush, 2013, para. 5).

After several years of working and volunteering in Toronto animal shelters with high intakes of rabbits, I can attest to the fact that one of the most common reasons for the surrender of a rabbit is because the child has either “become bored with” or has “outgrown” the rabbit. While children often represent themselves through drawings as being emotionally closer to pets than to family members (Kidd & Kidd, 1995), they have also shown less attachment to caged animals than to dogs and cats (Rost & Hartmann, 1994). It is no wonder that children lose interest in a caged rabbit with whom they barely interact. Exactly what “responsibilities” we wish to teach a child through witnessing the close confinement of an animal is a question that is worth critical examination.

The use of animals as teaching tools in the elementary school classroom is also a longstanding tradition. In one recent study of Ontario schools, the majority of teachers indicated that they believed classroom pets benefitted their students by increasing empathy and socio-emotional

development. With this in mind, many teachers bring pets into their classrooms as part of a humane education initiative, through which they hope that teaching kindness towards animals will ultimately translate into kindness towards other humans. Pets are also used as a tool in science class (to create interest in animal research and to provide data for science projects), and are found to be useful catalysts for creative writing assignments (Daly & Suggs, 2010).

Of interest here is the language that provides the conceptual frameworks for such studies: the *use* of animals as teaching *tools*. While not given to individual children to teach responsibility, classroom pets are still utilitarian teaching aids, meant to execute specific lessons.

In 2009, a four year old white lop rabbit named Rudy was surrendered to my shelter, after spending most of his life in a kindergarten classroom. Rudy had lived in a larger-than average fenced-in area that would have seemed luxurious when compared to common household cages. But Rudy's fence had a gate, and the young students were able to come and go as they pleased, with little to no supervision. Although I have no knowledge of Rudy's personality before he lived in the classroom, by the time of his arrival, he was very withdrawn and hesitant to trust. If a young child walked through the room where he was housed, he would invariably hide in a box until they were gone.

Ironically, Rudy's *use* was carried out under the umbrella of humane education. According to Zoe Weil (2004), one of the principles of humane education is "[o]ffering positive choices that benefit oneself, other people, the Earth, and animals" (p. 20) As we will explore in the Discussion, teachers should look critically at the choices they are offering their students, when they install animals in the classroom as tools for human use, and whether they can truly satisfy a human education curriculum.

Like George and Fitzzy before him, Rudy felt the effects of humans fencing ourselves into restrictive understandings. Rather than controlling the trickster nature of rabbits, we have limited the ways we perceive and can relate to them, hampering our own growth and the potentiality of our relationships with this intriguing and complex species.

Discussion:

Ethics and Education for Rabbits

“Friendship with a rabbit comes with familiarity and by learning to think more like a rabbit.”

– Marinell Harriman, *House Rabbit Handbook*

One of the traditional purposes of pets and, indeed, pet rabbits is to teach children compassion and responsibility; to make them better humans (Davis & DeMello, 2003). This is both a valid desire, and a noble goal. However, the way we have gone about this lesson – with much attention to human interests while all but ignoring those of animals – is counterproductive to developing relationships of companionship with other species, and thus it undermines the potential to learn from the “others” with whom we share our planet. David Orr (2004) points out that traditional education towards aspects of the natural world (which would include animals) “emphasizes theories, not values; abstraction rather than consciousness; neat answers instead of questions; technical efficiency over conscience” (p. 8). But our relationships with rabbits, other animals and nature are not theoretical abstractions – they are lived experience and deserve to be acknowledged and contextualized as such.

Until now, we have looked at the many contradictory ways we live with rabbits, the ways in which they challenge our Western frameworks composed of neat delineations, and the tools – both physical and conceptual – that we employ in attempts to fit them into the preconceived molds of who or what we think they should be. From these explorations, it seems clear that we’ve become trapped by our self-imposed limitations, and that our relationships with this species have been stunted as a result. We’re so busy trying to capture and tame trickster rabbits that we often miss the valuable lessons they can teach us. How can we overcome the barriers we’ve erected, and open ourselves to a new way of knowing rabbits? What is the way forward from here? In the Discussion,

we will explore ways to move beyond anthropocentric thinking by living ethics that encourage us to care for animals, not for their similarities to humans, but because of who they are. We will then consider educational frameworks that employ these ethics within their methodologies, looking to provide humans with the intellectual and educational resources they need to jump the fences that contain us and meet the rabbits (and other animals) that await us in the other side.

Rabbit Keepers: Command and Control, and the human/animal divide

“...remember that the ‘cure should not be worse than the disease’”

- Foundation for Rabbit Free Australia; *Bureau of Rural Sciences,*

Rabbits: a threat to conservation and natural resource management

The traditions of many Western religions have established a dividing line between humans and the rest of nature, including other animal species, isolating humankind as unique (or perhaps *more* unique) and superior to other species. This has often resulted in the rendering of humans as the masters or keepers of nature, with dominion over all living things (Herrmann, Waxman, & Medin, 2010). As the human population has continued to grow, the Earth’s resources have been severely depleted, threatening our own sustainability. However, rather than attempting to work in partnership with nature, our foundations in the belief of human difference and dominance have led us to pursue what Holling and Meefe (1996) refer to as “command and control management.” This approach, which is expected to solve problems both through the forced control of processes that lead to their creation, as well as by ameliorating an issue if and when it occurs, is a deep-seeded aspect of modern Western society and is apparent in every aspect of our governance and legal frameworks. While we rely on the notion of human difference to justify our attempted command of nature, the practice of control reinforces our beliefs, through its implicit assumption that the

problems we are addressing are clearly defined, and can be dealt with easily and independently of each other. However, command and control of the natural environment usually leads to unintentional and unexpected outcomes, such as the long-term collapse of resources and loss of biodiversity.

Defined as they are as part of nature, while being separate from humans, animals are subject to the same command and control approaches as any natural resource. Rabbits can be seen as an exemplar of this: We have purposely released them in thousands of locations across the globe to provide sources of food or sport, only to discover that their adaptable nature enables them to thrive, overrun their new habitats, and disrupt the balance of the foreign ecosystems. As solutions to the resulting problem of an overabundance of rabbits, we have introduced traps, fences, predators and disease, in desperate efforts to contain or cull the unmanageable populations – to command and control them.

How do pets, as a class of animal, fit into the command and control approach? Suspended between notions of human and animal, Rebekah Fox (2006) believes that caretakers often see their pets as thinking and feeling individuals with distinct subjectivities and agency who are looked upon as friends, while simultaneously objectifying them as possessions that are expected to conform to human desires and values if they are not to be discarded. Fox states that pets “are both valued for their ‘animalness’ and subject to practices, such as selective breeding, training and neutering, which attempt to ‘civilize’ them and make them more like ‘little humans’” (p. 526). Dogs are especially illustrative of this: the forced control of their wildness is orchestrated through the process of domestication, while we ameliorate any “inappropriate” behaviours that *do* arise through obedience training, restraint mechanisms (such as muzzles), surgeries and even euthanasia.

Although caretakers of dogs and cats commonly attribute “personhood” to their pets, allowing them a social place within the human sphere and raising their status from animal to a kind of pseudo-human, Val Plumwood (2002) believes this may actually be damaging to the realization of the potentiality of human-animal relations. “Humanizing” pets has allowed us to ignore the Cartesian principle of dualism by erasing the difference between humans and *pet* animals, elevating pets to a station above other “lower” species, and thus reinforcing the human-animal divide.

Pet rabbits, as we discussed in chapter 2, straddle between animal and pet (rather than pet and human), and so the logic that works in favour of cats and dogs to elevate them to the human sphere actually works *against* rabbits to keep them from being accepted as anything other than animal. Even if rabbits were to reach the same semi-human status as cats and dogs, this would do nothing to challenge the dichotomies of the current human-animal paradigm, and would leave other marginalized companion animal species (guinea pigs, rats, degus, etc.) behind to struggle against the animal stigma. Rather than coercing rabbits into performing human behavioural ideals, command and control of pet rabbits tends to mimic that of wild animals by using barriers to prevent the rabbits from damaging human property and limiting the resources they have access to; rather than compelling them to integrate into a human social network, they are purposefully isolated from social interaction. But herein lies the opportunity: whereas we have established ways of relating to cats and dogs that rely on their anthropocentric elitist status as pseudo-human family members or friends, our motley and discombobulated attitudes towards rabbits could enable us to learn to appreciate and relate to rabbits as rabbits, rather than as “furry little humans.” Only when we learn to accept rabbits as who they are can we enter the kind of partnership inherent in the concept of “companion.”

Finding partnership with pet rabbits demands first that we shed anthropocentricity as a base point for our relationships with animals. As an extension, we must also let go of our compulsion to be in control, which stems from the same conceptual framework, ultimately looking to support and serve human interests (Holling & Meefe, 1996). Donna Haraway (2003) acknowledges that the human-pet relationship cannot exist without the complex intersections of certain forms of human-imposed restriction, power and control, and feelings of guilt or uncertainty about the animal's welfare and happiness. However, there is a spark of hope in this muddling through or, "getting on together" (Haraway, 2003, p. 25): the qualms and uneasy feelings, that many caretakers feel, are implicit in their acknowledgement of the personhood of their pets. To worry over the happiness of the animals in their care means that caretakers are already taking steps to empathize with their pets and find common ground – an effort to decenter and come to an understanding of another (Redmond, 1989). If we can provide people with the intellectual and educational resources to break Western anthropocentric habits of thinking, we may find an opening into a different kind of relationship with rabbits, other animals, and nature.

Decentering Ethics

"Rabbits are so human. Or is it the other way round – humans are so rabbit?"

- Ronald Lockley, *The Private Life of the Rabbit*

Before we can address the transformative potential of education in our relationship with other species, it is important to consider the ethical framework within which we hope to understand human-animal relationships. My own understanding of this is constantly evolving, largely undefined and is woven together of many tenuous threads, some of which I will attempt to unravel here. In order to find ethical consonance in my own experience of living relationships with animals, I

appreciate the insight of Katie McShane (2007) with the attention she gives to the importance of feeling in the execution of ethics. She points out that more often than not, ethics focus on what to *do* rather than what to *feel*, but that this is problematic since feeling is integral to how we act. Of special interest in consideration of our interactions with pets, feelings are also an important part of what we value in our social relationships. As McShane acknowledges, we “want [our] friends to like [us], not just act as though they do” (p. 174). Within the boundaries of traditional Western education, however, our feelings may be developing in an impoverished framework. Implicit ideas of human separation from nature permeate not only the material we teach, but the methods we teach with (Orr, 2004), shaping the preconceptions through which we perceive nature.

Grounded in the importance of feeling and everyday lived experience, the feminist ethic of care offers an approach that challenges the historical dualisms of human/animal, culture/nature, and reason/emotion (Russell & Bell, 1996). According to Tony Monchinski (2010), although care theorists differ in many of their views, they seem to agree on two key points: an ethic of care does not employ abstract, generic models of individuals; and an ethic of care should be seen as praxis – we can learn an ethic of care through the action of caring. However, Russell and Bell (1996) add to this that there is an important distinction to be made between caring *about* and caring *for*. It is caring *for* that creates an embodied experience that can encourage long-term commitment to a subject, and it is caring *for* that has the potential to lead to a deeper understanding of and open-mindedness towards animals.

When animals are explicitly included in ideas of ethics, it is often in the context of animal rights. Just as pseudo-human ideas of pets rely on the privileging of certain animals based on perceived similarities to humans, so does animal rights theory rely on drawing similarities between different

species to justify equal treatment of those who are similar *enough*. For those to be *included*, however, others must be *excluded*. While we may conceive of extending certain rights to dogs, for example, we may not feel the same way about a hermit crab. Kelly Oliver (2010) believes that we must move beyond comparing animals to humans as a means of assigning them moral value, and instead look for an ethics that can extend our obligation to *all* animals, regardless of their differences from us. In order to achieve this, Oliver looks towards what she refers to as “an ethics of responsiveness,” that is based on the relationship and responsivity that we must share with animals, by simple virtue of the fact that we live on the same Earth together. She calls on this ethics to “enable responses from others” (p. 280) so that we can find a way of relating to them, not in an assertion of human dominion over the Earth, but in acknowledgement of our interdependence.

I would be remiss if I did not include in my ethical ponderings Leesa Fawcett’s (2000) attention to the power and potential of the human imagination. She speaks of a melding of ecofeminist narrative ethics – which focuses on the joyfulness that identification with nature and animals can bring, and the possibilities of ethical interactions that emphasize the importance of caring, playfulness, empathy and connection with the nonhuman world – with “purposeful attention to developing human imaginative capacities” (p. 137). To enrich the imagination and expand the possibilities within such an ethics, Fawcett encourages broadening our experience of other lives, and to take the time to pause and give attention to other ways of being. With great conviction, she behooves us to nurture our imaginations “so that we don’t reduce the unknown subjectivity of an ‘other’ being to the limited range of our own experience” (p. 140) which is a trap into which we can too easily fall.

What We Can Learn: Education for Rabbits

“Rabbits make a big effort to learn our language. It’s our turn to learn theirs.”

– Marinell Harriman, *House Rabbit Handbook*

The question then becomes how we can teach *with* and *for* these ethics. In each of the ethics I have explored above, there lies a common theme: they are not abstract ideas that can be studied at a remove from their subject, but rather are reliant on praxis – the melding of their theory and philosophies with actions and experience. In order to learn these ethics, we must live these ethics, and the educational approaches we choose must support this by giving us the tools we need to put these values into practice (Orr, 2004).

Humane education can offer a solid foundation for an educational framework that allows us to teach *for*, rather than *about* animals. At its core, Zoe Weil (2004) explains that humane education asks us to think through the butterfly effect of each of our actions, drawing connections between all forms of social justice, and critically examining what we do in terms of its impact on ourselves, other people, animals and the environment. In all of the varied ways we live with rabbits, there is huge potential to critically examine our interactions with the species, and to reimagine possibilities of our relationships in more ethical and fulfilling ways. Humane education concentrates on balancing the exposure to knowledge of disturbing and oppressive practices with the provision of alternative actions and positive choices that empower learners to live the values they are learning through the choices they make.

In Chapter 3 we introduced you to Rudy, a classroom rabbit who was used in the name of humane education, most likely to foster feelings of compassion and responsibility in the kindergarten students he was meant to serve. But had the teacher truly understood the purpose of humane education, Rudy could not have been used in this way. For, to be humane education, the situation

would have had to benefit Rudy, as well as the students, and his objectified instrumentalism could not have passed unnoticed. Only if we fully consider the “other” are we able to embody humane values.

Humane education also borrows from critical pedagogies its commitment to exposing and problematizing oppressive practices and power relations, while fostering concepts of teacher-student mutuality and democratic dialogue (Monchinski, 2010). As we are attempting to learn *for* and *with* animals, the concept of dialogue (which should include the subjects – the animals themselves) may seem problematic. To me, although challenging and not without its dilemmas, this is a place where Leesa Fawcett’s (2000) ideas of nurturing the imagination in consideration of the “other” offers amazing possibilities.

In 2013 I was taking a course in action learning when I decided to see if I could apply what I was learning to the individuals in whom I was most interested and concerned: rabbits. The approach of action learning is to work directly with a group of people to help facilitate the design, organization, and execution of, as well as the education for a sustainable project of their own imagining, that they think will contribute positively to their community (Garratt, 2011). It is an approach that depends highly on communication, dialogue, and the agency of the participants in the expression of their choices. The “community” I chose to work with was the Small Animal Department of the shelter I volunteer with, which housed an average of seven to twelve rabbits in what can only be considered a stressful environment. The rabbits had come from a variety of circumstances and prior relationships with humans, ranging from loving homes to neglectful or even abusive situations, but all of them shared a common experience: they were left at the shelter.

My job, in action learning, was to facilitate these rabbits in a transformative process that would give them the support they needed to empower them to improve their own lives – a daunting task, I assure you. However, given the time limitations of my course and the obvious obstacles I was looking to overcome, I concentrated my time on exploring what “dialogue” could mean between a human and a rabbit, and how I could offer them choices that would cultivate their agency within the unnatural and inhospitable shelter environment. For eight weeks, I spent my volunteer time working through these questions – trying to imagine how it would feel to be a rabbit in this place, and offering them my compassion and understanding. I came to realize that of utmost importance to these rabbits was establishing a relationship of trust. As each individual’s familiarity with me and our understandings of each other grew, so did their willingness to express their personalities and place themselves in more vulnerable situations. I discovered that the rabbits seemed most comfortable when they were in control of their own actions, and so I built them ramps they could use to enter and exit their enclosures, rather than forcing them to rely on human transportation from the cages to the floor and back.

In only two months, although I may not have established a traditional action learning project, I was able to offer the rabbits simple ways to reclaim control over their own lives, and the stress they experienced seemed to lessen. With patience, imagination, and an incredibly open mind, I was able to come to a greater understanding of each individual rabbit, and they of me.

It is the influence of working with the rabbits on this project which stressed for me the validity of environmental education’s emphasis on experiences that allow for intimate interactions with others. However, I agree with Constance Russell (1999) that we need to look critically at what is meant by “experience,” and how it can be engaged in learning. Russell illustrates that there is an

underlying assumption that nature experience (and thus, experiences with animals) leads to caring about a subject, commitment to that subject, and finally action for that subject. It seems to be assumed that by simply providing experience, students will be inspired to take up the topic with purpose and passion.

It is perhaps this logic that led to Rudy being housed in the kindergarten class – by just living in the classroom, he could have been seen as a convenient dispensary of caring towards animals, passively infusing such emotions into the students by the very nature of his presence. If we're not careful to contextualize the experiences we offer, and examine the assumptions embedded in their practice, we risk reproducing and reinforcing dominant human/nature (human/animal) relationships for our students (Russell C. , 1999). Thus it is that the experience I had with the rabbits at the shelter (where I am already critically engaged in the politics and power structures inherent in rabbit issues), was likely very different from the experience of the young students who were offered to play with Rudy as if he were a toy for their enjoyment.

Neil Evernden (1993) reminds us that we see in the world what we have been prepared to see, and Russell (1999) adds to this that our preconceptions are formed through our personal stories. She believes that we interpret our experiences based on our stories or narratives, and that they dictate the expectations we come into an experience with, as well as the underlying assumptions those expectations carry. But Russell maintains that experiences can both influence and disrupt our stories, and thus with attention to critical examination, harbour enormous potential for transformative thinking.

The concept of education for rabbits is a tangled one. It demands from us a psychological, social and emotional commitment to step outside of our comfort zone and learn to relate intimately to a

species for whom we hold so many contradictory opinions. In such ambiguous territory, we must allow ourselves the freedom to be uncertain – we must allow ourselves to lose control and to dissolve the barriers we have constructed to keep humankind separate and protected from the unknown in nature. Education for rabbits is a journey on which we must walk hand-in-hand in partnership with trickster, learning to challenge our presuppositions and stretching the limits of our thinking.

Conclusion:

Think Outside the Cage: Towards a New Companionship

*Well – one at least is safe. One shelter'd hare
 Has never heard the sanguinary yell
 Of cruel man, exulting in her woes.
 Innocent partner of my peaceful home,
 Whom ten long years' experience of my care
 Has made at last familiar; she has lost
 Much of her vigilant, instinctive dread.
 Not needful here, beneath a roof like mine.
 Yes – thou may'st eat thy bread, and lick the hand
 That feeds thee; thou may'st frolic on the floor
 At evening, and at night retire secure
 To thy straw couch, and slumber unalarm'd.
 For I have gain'd the confidence, have pledg'd
 All that is human in me to protect
 Thine unsuspecting gratitude and love.
 If I survive thee I will dig thy grave
 And, when I place thee in it, sighing, say,
 I knew at least one hare that had a friend.*

- William Cowper, from *The Task*, Book III, "The Garden".

When I sat down to write the conclusion to this paper, I first had to reclaim my desk chair from Arlo, who had climbed up in the hopes of thieving a raspberry that I had been snacking on earlier. Unfortunately for him, I had finished the fruits, but he made away with the empty berry container, still fragrant from its former treasures. He will probably spend the next quarter hour tossing it, pushing it and ripping it in the persistent hope that it will magically surrender to him the treat he can smell so keenly. Soon, George will come and sprawl himself out under the desk at my feet, grunting every time an errant toe happens to go so far as to graze his fur and disturb his slumber, an invisible "do not disturb" sign apparent in his entire demeanour. For now, however, as if to tell me, "don't forget to bring all of this back to me!" Darcy, a dwarf rabbit I have had the pleasure (and

sometimes frustration) to live with for the last ten years, is incessantly prodding my foot with his nose as I contemplate how to find an ending to my thoughts. Of course, the thought I just projected on him is a gross anthropomorphism (from experience, it's much more likely that he is demanding I pet him, with whatever limb happens to be up to the task), but it was still an important wakeup call. Why does any of this matter? What is it that I am hoping will change?

When I was still searching for a direction for this paper, I had a conversation where I was asked what about this topic grieved me the most. And while our relationship with rabbits is such that it's difficult to pin down a single greatest despair, after much contemplation I believe that I can say that what saddens me the most is that the current accepted and promoted practices of pet rabbit care employed in Western human homes – and in particular, caging – limit, stifle and prejudice our relationships with rabbits, so that neither rabbit nor human is given a chance to get to know the other in a less impoverished way. Thus, to return to a question I asked in the introduction, how can humans be better companions to rabbits? That, to me, is the question most worth asking.

Before we can hope to meet rabbits as companions, we must tear down the barriers that block our way. Cages provide the most common and tangible divide between caretakers and companion rabbits, deeply impacting the way we act towards and think about these animals. Only if we remove cages from the realities of living with rabbits in the human home can we expect to create opportunities to get to know one another differently. As it is, rabbits too-often live in hyper-restrictive and regulated environments so that Margo DeMello (2010) has written that “the human-rabbit relationship [has been] hampered and defined by the lack of sustained, intimate contact between human and rabbit (p. 238).

Yi-Fu Tuan (1984) believes that cages signify human failure to make a pet, but I see the failure as going deeper than that. Cages are echoes of exploitive traditions that demonstrate our close-mindedness to possibilities of meaningful relationships with rabbits. They are a way of satisfying our own whimsies to own a “cute bunny” while they blatantly ignore the needs or interests of those they contain. They promote human laziness, ensuring that minimal effort needs be put into knowing rabbits through researching, observing, or interacting with them, and instead their choices and agency are largely denied them as they are treated like animated toys. Even those who feel twangs of guilt about the living arrangements of the rabbits in their homes are reassured by a pet industry whose interest in selling rabbit cages overrides any desire to move beyond these limited relationships: cages are framed as a *necessary* means of protecting rabbits from the perils of a human home. If rabbits aren’t caged, this industry is clear that they will come to serious harm through unsupervised access to the human home.

But what if we turned the idea of protecting rabbits on its head? What if, instead of keeping *rabbits* from the dangers found in a home, we looked to keep the *dangers* from the possibility of unsafe rabbit explorations? Under this concept, rather than confining the rabbits, we could confine the dangers they need to be protected from. In fact, those who are living with free-range (cage free) rabbits already think of it in these terms. The House Rabbit Society has been advocating for “rabbit-proofing” human homes for decades. This term is used to describe extensive modifications, such as covering electrical cords with plastic tubing, building fences around bookcases, replacing wooden furniture with metal, etc. (Smith, 2003). To “rabbit-proof” a home takes time and effort, and often clashes with human aesthetic preferences, making confining the rabbits the much easier and convenient way out. However, if we truly wish to meet the needs of the rabbits we live with, we

must be willing to extend our efforts and invite them out of the cages and into our homes to live together.

In disposing of cages, we must also consider where these animals came from, only 1500 years ago as wild European rabbits (DeMello, 2010), and provide them with opportunities to exercise behaviours they have inherited from their predecessors. I don't mean to imply that we should install sand pits where rabbits can burrow in every apartment or house where they live, but rather that general principles can be extrapolated from their natural history and applied to the ways we accommodate them in the human home. In my own home, there are plenty of places to hide, and furniture they can climb and scout from. Before they're recycled, boxes, toilet paper rolls and phone books are offered first to the rabbits (and their co-habiting lovebirds) to chew, shred, toss and renovate. These are simple but effective ways to provide for the desires of the rabbits I live with and, other than forcing me to vacuum more frequently and occasionally offending my desire for a tidy house, they are small prices to pay to get to watch them enjoy themselves. Changing the way we live in our homes is an important step towards companionship with this species – DeMello (2010) writes that it is “at one level, trying to understand how rabbits see the world and a willingness to take up their culture as part of our own” (p. 247).

This kind of involvement in the consideration of rabbits we live with is inherently decentering, and helps us to step away from the anthropocentricity endemic in Western culture. Since I began writing this paper, I have been asked by several people, independent of each other, whether I have looked at ways rabbits can be used as therapy animals in retirement homes and long-term care facilities. This question is fraught with difficulties for me, as it takes us right back to the *use* of rabbits, and therefore their objectification. While I don't doubt that in some circumstances rabbits

could provide benefit to those living in these facilities (and I certainly don't begrudge them those opportunities), in order to find companionship, the question that needs to be asked to balance our interests is, does it provide benefit to the rabbits?

Although we cannot escape the reality that the human-companion rabbit relationship does contain a relationship of power and a certain degree of human control (Smith, 2003), asking these questions – considering the interests of the rabbits in our lives alongside our own – can begin to destabilize these dynamics (DeMello, 2010). Julie Smith (2003) believes that while companion rabbits performe forfeit certain freedoms and abilities, so too can humans make considerable compromises in their homes and way of life, in order to offer rabbits as much freedom as possible. As long as we acknowledge the inherent power that comes with being the caretaker of any companion animal, we can make great efforts to meet rabbits on as equal footing as possible.

One small change in thinking that I believe has the potential to have a profound impact on our interactions with rabbits, is a shift to considering rabbits as participants *in relationship*, rather than subjects to have relationships *with*. This might seem unnecessarily obvious – you can't have a relationship with a rabbit without the rabbit having a relationship with you – but I see the idea of participation as nodding to a desire to work together – to form a partnership – in the navigation of this nebulous territory of human-rabbit relations. Rabbits are individuals who are capable of communicating their own desires and needs and, like Smith (2003), I want to find a way to live with rabbits that “conveys they have options” (p. 194) and learns to acknowledge and appreciate their personhood and agency.

Erica Fudge (2002) eloquently wrote:

“The choice, as I see it, is a simple one: we acknowledge the limitations of our own perspective, but simultaneously accept that what we can achieve within those limitations is important and worthwhile, even if it is only the best we can do” (p. 159).

We have a lot to offer rabbits before we can claim that what we are doing is our best effort, but we can make a start by truly considering them for who they are, and not what they can be to us. It is time we made an effort to meet rabbits as companions; it is time to think outside the cage.

Epilogue:

The (mis)Adventures of the UVic Rabbits

“Mitigating ill-effects of over a thousand rabbits proved to be a challenge, since many community members worried about the well-being of the rabbits and wanted to make sure the issue was dealt with humanely.”

- Beth Parker, “Whatever happened to the UVic rabbits?”

Shortly after completing my paper I began researching the infamous rabbits at the University of Victoria, for use in a project I was completing for an unrelated field course. What I found was profoundly interesting, and extremely relevant to Canada, so that I was hesitant not to include it...

Canada – and the province of British Columbia, specifically – has also seen its share of havoc and controversy caused by the ever-adaptable rabbit when it is transplanted to non-native habitats. But instead of the intentional releases of Australia and Europe, meant to provide stock for hunting, BC’s feral rabbit populations are the result of discarded pets who are frequently found abandoned in green spaces across the province and left to fend for themselves.

The most notorious of the spaces to become overridden with rabbits is at the University of Victoria (UVic), where around a dozen pet rabbits were abandoned in the early 1990s (Slavin, 2011). The mild climate of Canada’s west coast combined with the relative protection afforded on a university campus and allowed the rabbits a unique opportunity not only to survive their abandonment, but to thrive. In such small numbers, the rabbits seemed a relatively harmless and cute addition to the school grounds, and even as their population grew over the following decade, they were regarded as part of the campus experience, and part of the university’s culture (Szpotowicz, 2011). UVic did

nothing to intervene in the initial years – either to stop the population growth on campus or to discourage the public from continuing to abandon rabbits on their property (Slavin, 2011).

By 2008, it was clear that the population was growing at an unsustainable rate; the damage caused to the university's property surged to unmanageable levels, and some began thinking of the rabbits as a menace. The university began a public education campaign in September of that year, aimed at discouraging students from attracting, feeding, or otherwise supporting the rabbits (University of Victoria, 2010), but the attempt proved to be too little, too late, and did nothing to alter the continued expansion of the growing population.

The question of what to do about the campus' rabbit problem became a contentious topic of discussion, with suggestions ranging from trap and return programs to mass rehoming operations, to extensive culling and euthanasia. In March 2009, the debate became even more heated and urgent, when the University's Environmental Studies Student's Association (ESSA), published an article written by Abe Lloyd (2009) in their *Essence* newsletter entitled, "Cook up a pot of Rabbit Restoration Stew," that described how to catch, kill, clean and cook a campus rabbit. The author, an undergraduate Environmental Studies Student, claimed that using the abundant rabbits as a food source for students would not only help campus restoration efforts and slow local habitat destruction, but would also decrease the students' dependence on industrial meats, making it the environmentally-conscious decision.

The article certainly stirred the pot, with local, national, and international organizations reacting loudly to the suggestion that these rabbits could be used in this way. The BCSPCA, especially, issued a statement that they were horrified by the possibility of students following the advice contained in the article. While the author of the article maintained throughout the debates that he believed his

suggestion was the environmentally-friendly choice, and boasted that he himself ate an average of 1 campus rabbit per month, ESSA and the newsletter's editor declared that the article was tongue-and-cheek, and was meant to inspire a debate and bring forward creative solutions to the rabbit problem the campus faced (Lavoie, 2009).

By the fall of 2009, there were an estimated 1600 rabbits on campus (University of Victoria, 2010), attracting an influx of birds of prey (Lavoie, 2011) and the threat of larger predators. Nevertheless, while the school realized by this time that they would have to find a way to control the population, repeated declarations by the university assured students and community members who had become attached to the animals that "the rabbits will always have a presence on campus" (Smith, 2010). However, when the rabbit population expanded into the school's athletic fields, the university's message seemed to change suddenly and profoundly. The rabbits' burrowing in the fields meant that athletes could be injured by falling through their playing fields, and this led to a significant injury to a rugby player who badly broke his ankle (CBC News, 2010).

Shortly thereafter, despite previous reassurance from the university that no culling was planned, the 102 rabbits who inhabited the athletic fields were trapped and/or killed (Geiger & Zacharias, 2011). The public outcry that resulted from this action was quick and fierce, and involved UVic in a very public international controversy. With the spotlight on, the university began developing the "Feral Rabbit Management Plan," which initially looked to trap and rehome the campus rabbits. The university's first attempt to implement their plan in the spring of 2010 was disastrous – of the 51 rabbits they were able to trap, only 11 were able to find new homes. The rest were returned to campus, where they continued living their familiar lives (Moneo, 2010).

The reasons for such a failure were complex. In British Columbia, any animal who is born in the wild, or who has been living in the wild for a period longer than 30 days, requires a special permit to be taken from the wild (Moneo, 2010). Such animals cannot be kept as pets in the province, and therefore the rabbits did not qualify for transfer to animal shelters or for adoption into private homes. Under BC legislation, the only way the rabbits could be relocated was if they could be trapped, sterilized, and transported to sanctuaries that held permits for the transport and housing of the animals. The permit application process was neither quick nor easy, and most sanctuaries were hesitant to subject themselves to the necessary Ministry of Natural Resources inspections (Cassells, 2011).

Frustrated, and feeling pressured to deal with the rabbits before the beginning of the next school year, the university changed tactics and again began considering trap and kill methods of rabbit removal. However, in July 2010, before the school was able to execute its new plan, Roslyn Cassells, a local animal activist, filed and won an injunction prohibiting UVic from trapping or killing the rabbits on campus. Although by the end of August the university was ultimately able to convince the British Columbia Supreme Court to put the injunction aside, the delay was enough time for 4 sanctuaries to acquire the necessary permits to house all of the rabbits living on campus (Jerema, 2010).

By March 31, 2011 (the date that the sanctuaries' transport permits expired), approximately 900 of the university's rabbits had been trapped, neutered, and relocated to approved sanctuaries (Lam, 2011), while the university stated that the remaining 400-600 must have been killed by predators (Geiger & Zacharias, 2011). As of that date, the university campus has been declared rabbit-free, and it is the university's policy that any new rabbits to appear on campus will be trapped and

humanely euthanized. UVic has also been very vocal in its recent support of the BCSPCA's initiative to encourage municipalities to adopt legislation that prohibits the sale of unsterilized rabbits, to prevent this type of situation from recurring in the future (University of Victoria, 2011).

The story of the UVic rabbits does not end with a rabbit-free campus, nor does the controversy they seem to produce. In September 2010, 90 of the rabbits escaped from Earth Animal Rescue Society (EARS – a sanctuary in Coombs BC that ended up taking more than 500 of the campus rabbits) and wandered on to a nearby farm. The owner of the farm, Barbara Smith, immediately called a trapper, who quickly shot 30 of the rabbits (Jerema, 2010a). Smith stated “I am a farmer and these things are inherently dangerous... They have dumped UVic's problem on us, created an environmental disaster zone and walked away” (Smith B. , 2010).

As for the 200 rabbits who were originally sent to the Wild Rose Rescue Ranch in Whitehouse, Texas, their population had grown to around 320 by 2012, despite guarantees that all the rabbits would be sterilized before their arrival. While the rabbits were being transported to Wild Rose, the ranch's neighbours had come together to oppose the rescue's activities and have local bylaws limit the number of animals for any household to 4 (Parker, 2013). If the bylaw was applied to the ranch, it would have meant that all UVic rabbits who had made their way to Texas could have been seized and destroyed by the city. However, Wild Rose was able to file an injunction preventing the city from seizing any animals until lawyers on both sides were able to come to an agreement on how the new bylaws would impact the ranch (Wild Rose Rescue Ranch, 2012). An agreement was eventually reached and the ranch continues to house the UVic rabbits.

Sadly, the University of Victoria is not the only major incident of abandoned pet rabbit populations exploding out of control in British Columbia. In 2000, Victoria General Hospital hired a sharpshooter

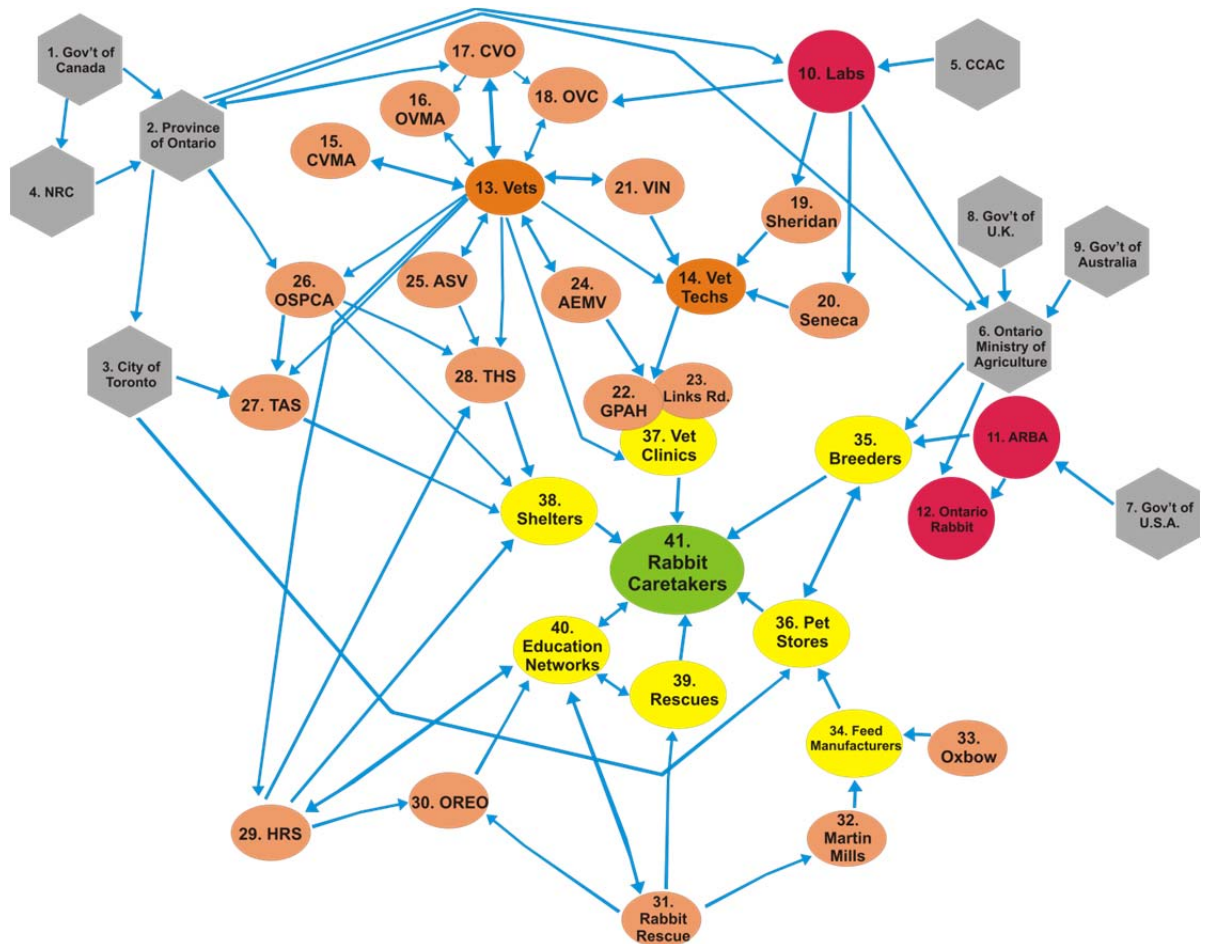
to eliminate the 600 rabbits on the hospital grounds, and in 2008, the city of Kelowna did the same when rabbits had overtaken the resort town (Moneo, 2010).

On a recent trip to British Columbia, I experienced BC's tenuous relationship with rabbits myself. On a walk through Jericho Beach Park at dusk, I witnessed dozens of feral European rabbits, of many common pet breeds, emerge from surrounding brush to graze, play and mate in the park. Despite signs that communicated the dangers of dumping pets or feeding feral populations, many people were engaged in attracting and feeding the rabbits as an enjoyable pastime, ultimately legitimizing the abandonment of these animals, and any actions they may be subjected to, in future efforts to control their populations.

Figure 1: Tracking Common Concepts Across Domains Through Exemplar Phrases

EXEMPLAR PHRASES	ARBA	CCAC	EFRA UK	Ag W AU	Seneca	OVC	City of TO	Pet Valu	Sheridan	Link's Rd	PetSmart	Oxbow	ASV	Martin	THS	OREO	HRS	RR	GPAH
HOUSING - FLOOR SPACE																			
Floor space ≤ 0.56m ²	X	X	X	X															
Floor space ~ 3 hops long						X			X					X	X		X	X	X
Allows Rabbit to turn around, lie down and stretch out				X	X		X						X	X	X				
Separate spaces for eliminating, eating and sleeping								X	X		X	X	X		X	X			
As much space as can be provided										X					X		X	X	X
Free-range Recommended																X	X	X	X
HOUSING - HEIGHT																			
Height ≤ 45cm	X	X																	
High enough for rabbit to sit up straight without ears touching the top			X	X			X												
High enough for rabbit to rear on hind legs and not touch the top					X	X			X			X			X	X		X	X
HOUSING - FLOORING																			
Wire mesh - allows for easy and efficient cleaning	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X							X		
Solid bottom - prevents hock sores						X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
DIET - HAY CONSUMPTION																			
Hay is an optional supplement and enrichment item	X	X	X		X	X													
Hay is the primary diet						X		X	X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X
DIET - PELLET Consumption																			
Primary nutrition from commercial pellet	X	X			X	X													
Pellets are a supplement and fed in limited quantities						X				X		X			X	X	X	X	X
DIET - FRESH GREENS																			
Greens are an optional supplement/treat	X	X			X	X		X				X							
Greens should be provided daily in limited amounts										X				X		X	X	X	X
ENRICHMENT - EXERCISE																			
Exercise outside of the cage is unnecessary	X		X	X					X										
Supervised and/or enclosed exercise may be offered					X	X			X	X	X				X		X		
Require extensive out-of-cage exercise daily						X						X			X	X	X	X	X
ENRICHMENT - PLAY																			
If abnormal behaviours develop, provide stimulation to mitigate behaviours	X																		
Gnawing activities can help prevent expensive dental issues					X					X	X				X	X	X		
Always provide a variety of toys and enrichment activities that encourage the expression of natural behaviours					X	X				X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Figure 2: Mapping Influences in Caretaker Practices



LEGEND

- External and Legislative Influences**
 1. Government of Canada
 2. Province of Ontario
 3. City of Toronto
 4. National Research Council
 5. Canadian Council on Animal Care
 6. Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
 7. Government of the United States of America
 8. Government of the United Kingdom
 9. Government of Australia

- Parent Domains and Origin Influences**
 10. Laboratory Animal Science
 11. American Rabbit Breeders' Association
 12. Ontario Rabbit

- Veterinary Professionals - Influence Prescribers**
 13. Veterinarians
 14. Registered Veterinary Technicians

- Sources for Primary Influences**
 15. Canadian Veterinary Medical Association
 16. Ontario Veterinary Medical Association
 17. College of Veterinarians of Ontario
 18. Ontario Veterinary College
 19. Sheridan College Veterinary Technician Program
 20. Seneca College Veterinary Technician Program
 21. Veterinary Information Network
 22. Greenwood Park Animal Hospital
 23. Links Road Animal and Bird Clinic
 24. Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians
 25. Association of Shelter Veterinarians
 26. Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
 27. Toronto Animal Services
 28. Toronto Humane Society
 29. House Rabbit Society
 30. Ontario Rabbit Education Organization
 31. Rabbit Rescue Inc.
 32. Martin Mills
 33. Oxbow Animal Health

- Primary Caretaker Influences**
 34. Feed Manufacturers
 35. Breeders
 36. Pet Stores
 37. Veterinary Clinics
 38. Shelters
 39. Rescues
 40. Rabbit Education Networks

- 41. Rabbit Caretakers as they are Influenced**

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