

WellBeing International

## WBI Studies Repository

2010

### Becoming Rabbit: Living with and Knowing Rabbits

Margo DeMello

*Central New Mexico Community College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://www.wellbeingintludiesrepository.org/acwp\\_habr](https://www.wellbeingintludiesrepository.org/acwp_habr)



Part of the [Animal Studies Commons](#), [Other Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

DeMello, M. (2010). Becoming rabbit: Living with and knowing rabbits. *Spring: a journal of archetype and culture*, 83, 237-252.

This material is brought to you for free and open access by WellBeing International. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the WBI Studies Repository. For more information, please contact [wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org](mailto:wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org).



# BECOMING RABBIT: LIVING WITH AND KNOWING RABBITS

MARGO DEMELLO

**T**he rabbit-human relationship is one of the most schizophrenic of all human-animal relationships. Rabbits have been sacrificed, hunted, bred, skinned, slaughtered, experimented on, and consumed; they have also been worshipped, cherished, and represented in countless myths, folk tales, children's books, and pieces of art. But they have rarely been considered as intelligent beings worthy of psychological inquiry. This is in part due to the rabbit's long history as a food animal, but also because even when kept as companion animals, rabbits have long been housed in outdoor cages, where they appear passive, reserved, and uninteresting. And because rabbits vocalize on only very rare occasions, they are rendered not just silent but invisible.

But rabbits, like all animals (human and non-human), have rich internal lives, as people who live intimately with rabbits can attest.<sup>1</sup> Living with house rabbits—where rabbits live indoors, without a cage or with minimal caging, as part of the human family—is, to me, the best way to gain some understanding of the rabbit psyche. In addition,

Margo DeMello, Ph.D., teaches anthropology and sociology at Central New Mexico Community College, writes on animals and body modification, and is the President of House Rabbit Society, an international rabbit advocacy organization.

living closely with rabbits opens up the possibilities of the human-rabbit relationship—a relationship which, until very recently, was one-sided and based on exploitation. Today, however, with the rise of the house rabbit movement,<sup>2</sup> the subjectivity of rabbits has been exposed, leading to the possibility of a human-animal relationship that is rich with possibilities—both for human and for rabbit.

#### RABBITS AND HUMANS: A BRIEF HISTORY

Rabbits were originally domesticated by French monks for food about 1500 years ago—long after the dog (15,000 years ago) and the major livestock animals (about 7,000 years ago)—but had been hunted for food and for fur for thousands of years before this time.<sup>3</sup> In fact, rabbits were not seen as anything but an economic resource until as late as the eighteenth century, when the notion of pet rabbits<sup>4</sup> first slowly emerged. Even then, rabbits remained primarily a source of food and fur, and later, medical information. Even though rabbits being raised for food were most certainly kept as pets by farmers' wives and children for centuries, as well as by hunters and gatherers who kept some game animals as pets, the idea of defining rabbits as pets—rather than as strictly food or fur animals—did not gain widespread acceptance until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the fancy breeds were developed. The development of the rabbit as pet coincided, not coincidentally, with the rise of the commercial pet industry<sup>5</sup> and the idea that keeping pets could instill positive values and behaviors in children;<sup>6</sup> rabbits, thanks to their long symbolic association with women and children, became the ultimate “children’s pet.”<sup>7</sup>

But a pet rabbit is not necessarily a family member. For at least two hundred years, pet rabbits have been most commonly kept as outdoor pets, living in isolation in wooden and wire hutches, with little protection from the elements, and little to no companionship or comfort. These rabbits were typically fed and watered once a day, and occasionally taken out by the children to play. Thus the human-rabbit relationship was hampered and defined by the lack of sustained, intimate contact between human and rabbit. As a result, rabbits, their personality, culture, and psychology, remained virtually unknown outside of their storybook representations.

There were, of course, exceptions to this. William Cowper, the eighteenth-century English poet, wrote movingly about living with and loving three hares he named Puss, Tiney, and Bess.<sup>8</sup> In letters and poems, Cowper wrote about his relationship with the hares, and noted that Puss, with whom he was the closest, would tug at his pants to let him know he wanted to go out to play, leapt in his lap and licked him for attention, and often fell asleep on his knee.<sup>9</sup> In a time when the notion of animals having personalities seemed fantastical to most, Cowper wrote, "Such they were in fact, and their countenances were so expressive of that character, that, when I looked only on the face of either, I immediately knew which it (sic) was."<sup>10</sup>

Author and illustrator Beatrix Potter was another early rabbit lover. In 1889, she purchased her first rabbit, a Belgian hare she named Benjamin Bouncer; Peter Piper followed soon afterward. She described Benjamin as "an impudent, cheeky little thing,"<sup>11</sup> and both lived with her at least part time in the house and went with her on walks on a leash. When Peter died at nine, Potter wrote, "Whatever the limitations of his intellect or outward shortcomings of his fur, and his ears and toes, his disposition was uniformly amiable and his temper unflinchingly sweet. An affectionate companion and a quiet friend."<sup>12</sup> Ironically, while Potter truly loved Benjamin and Peter, her books did not lead to a change in the prevailing attitudes towards rabbits. In fact, rabbits were seen, perhaps more than ever before, as a "children's pet," and as such, continued to be trivialized. Rabbits continued to be associated with children, either as simple, uninteresting pets, or as stuffed rabbits. But it took another century for rabbits to make the leap from children's pet to family member.

#### HOUSE RABBIT SOCIETY TRANSFORMS THE HUMAN-RABBIT RELATIONSHIP

Beatrix Potter and William Cowper notwithstanding, rabbits remained a useful, but largely invisible animal for most people until the late twentieth century. While in the West, they were well-represented in art and children's literature, rabbits mostly were used to signify nature (in art) or children (in literature); in non-Western countries, they have a long and rich history as a symbolic and folkloric animal.

For instance, rabbits are linked to sexuality, and particularly female sexuality and fertility. In the rituals, myths and symbols of Ancient Greece and Rome, hares were sacred to Venus and Aphrodite (goddesses of love), as well as Diana (goddess of childbirth), and they were often used in love spells, as aphrodisiacs, and to aid in fertility. Rabbits are similarly associated with female sexuality in Native American cultures, ancient Britain, Medieval Europe, China and Japan. In eastern cultures as well as in Meso-America, ancient Europe, the Arab cultures, and Africa, the rabbit is also linked to the moon, which itself is linked to fertility and childbearing, with lunar goddesses commonly represented with or dressed as a rabbit or hare. And thanks to the rabbit's fertility, rabbits are also used in myths and rituals to signify rebirth, explaining the rabbit's role in the symbols of Easter.

But the *real*/rabbit was generally absent from human thought. And the repercussions of this absence are very real.

Rabbits are slaughtered in the hundreds of millions per year for food, fur, and medical research; and, much of that slaughter has gone unnoticed and unremarked upon. In *Stories Rabbits Tell*, Susan Davis and I wrote:

The fact that a species is unknown—as the rabbit is—means that we as humans can project all sorts of characteristics on the animals that would deem them unworthy of protection. We can even project a trait of blankness on them; that is, because we don't understand the rabbit, we assume there is nothing to understand, that the rabbit is a creature with neither sentience nor subjectivity. And once we assume that, creating what in other species we would recognize as “suffering” becomes acceptable.<sup>13</sup>

Rabbits are thus “disappeared:” they are removed from sight and kept in backyard cages (or in laboratories); they are considered passive and stupid; and they are silenced—through our ignorance and their lack of voice.

This situation began to change in 1985 with the publication of Marinell Harriman's *House Rabbit Handbook*,<sup>14</sup> the first ever book on living with a “house rabbit,” a term coined by Harriman and now a common expression to refer to rabbits who live in the home with a human family. Written to honor the memory of Herman, a stray rabbit who found her way into Harriman's backyard and then home, the book

inspired tens of thousands of people to adopt rabbits as house pets, and inspired Harriman to found House Rabbit Society (HRS),<sup>15</sup> the first and only international rabbit advocacy group of its kind. In fact, like William Cowper before her, whose love of Puss, Tiney, and Bess inspired him to take an active stand against hunting, Harriman's love of Herman led her to become a vegetarian and to become the most influential rabbit advocate of the twentieth century.

In the twenty-five years since the first edition of the *Handbook* was released, the idea that rabbits could be treated on the same level as dogs or cats—that they could live indoors as part of a human family, that they could receive veterinary care, that they could be spayed or neutered and live with companions of their own species—has gone from being laughable to being almost commonplace.

Thanks to the *Handbook* and House Rabbit Society, tens of thousands of people who now live with house rabbits have taken the rabbit-human relationship to an entirely new level.<sup>16</sup> Rabbits don't just share our homes—they occupy an enormous part of our lives, and have influenced the creation of an entirely new cottage industry that is dedicated not to the selling of rabbits, but to providing for the needs of the house rabbit, from rabbit toy makers to specialized food and hay producers to rabbit condominium manufacturers to healthy snack companies. Humans now serve rabbits, not the other way around.

Perhaps because rabbits have been domesticated<sup>17</sup> for a much shorter period of time than dogs or even cats (and did not co-evolve alongside humans, as did dogs<sup>18</sup>), rabbits are not the easiest animal to integrate into a human household. They chew, sometimes voraciously, leading house rabbit advocates to devise creative means of keeping phone and electrical cords, baseboards, walls, and furniture safe from sharp teeth. They are curious, and spend more time than one might imagine climbing, digging, and jumping into and onto furniture, crevices, and counters, often causing much trouble in the process. Rabbits do not always come when called, obey their caretakers, or behave in an appropriate “pet-like” fashion. They are intelligent, using tools like toys, bowls, furniture, or cage bars to communicate their desires to humans and other animals. And they are messy, not so much with their waste (they are relatively easy to litterbox train), but with their toys, as well as with whatever they choose to claim as their own. All of these assessments must be understood not as judgments but rather as

measures of how distinct rabbit psychology and behavior are from more traditional domesticated pets.

Thanks to the work of House Rabbit Society volunteers and the ingenuity of thousands of rabbit lovers, plus the knowledge that they have compiled, issues like these are now managed through “bunny-proofing” the house, through purchasing and creating toys out of cardboard, wood, wicker, and wire, and through creatively re-imagining housing for rabbits inside of human homes. Rabbit veterinarians have learned how to safely treat rabbit illnesses and to spay and neuter them, allowing for the possibility of rabbit-rabbit relationships, and making living with rabbits in the home a cleaner proposition.

The upshot? Not only have tens of thousands of domesticated rabbits enjoyed the benefits of their new status as “house rabbits,” and their guardians likewise reap the benefits of developing intimate relationships with these intelligent, playful, curious, and willful animals, but we have begun to gain some entrée into the psyche of these once-inscrutable animals. Becoming a house rabbit not only changes one’s living conditions; it alters the way in which rabbits are perceived, and thus treated. House Rabbit Society and the house rabbit movement have, in creating the concept of house rabbit, given rabbits some measure of personhood, and have changed rabbits from objects used as food or fur to subjects of a life.

Living with rabbits in the home—where they are underfoot in the kitchen, looking for snacks; where they watch television (as much as any companion animal watches television) with the family; where they wake up many a surprised person before dawn, with their demands for breakfast or snuggles—is intimate. While most house rabbits do not sleep under the covers as, say, a Chihuahua, and remain for the most part quite independent, they still lead lives that are closely intertwined with the rest of the household members—human and non-human.

In my house, I live with Igor, who was adopted by a couple through the St. Louis House Rabbit Society and returned to me when the couple had to return to Romania, and with Charlotte, who was dropped off at Albuquerque Animal Services with her entire family, all of whom were to be euthanized because of their congenital jaw problems. Igor and Charlotte make their home primarily in the living room, but Igor also goes wherever he likes—into the bedroom (cautiously, so as not

to alert Nigel, the French lop who lives there, to his presence), into the courtyard (before the other rabbits come out to play), into the dining room (where he scouts for snacks), and down the hallway to observe and monitor household activities.<sup>16</sup> I spend evenings in the living room where I simultaneously watch television and the continuing relationship between Igor, Charlotte, and their newest companion, three-legged Molly, who arrived from a hoarder's home and whose leg was removed due to a bone infection. My vantage point on the couch allows me to follow my television "stories" as well as the soap opera that revolves around Igor and his ladies. Here I am privy to his emotional ups and downs—from his pride over his beautiful girlfriend Charlotte<sup>20</sup> (whom he shows off to constantly) to his anger when I bring another rabbit into the room or one of the dogs tries to eat his food or drink his water.<sup>21</sup>

#### CULTURAL TRANSLATION: SEEING RABBITS

House Rabbit Society volunteers have long said that rabbits make ideal companions for people who are quiet, both because rabbits have long been thought to dislike loud sounds, and because we must be *quiet* in order to really *see* these animals who are themselves so quiet and have been so long ignored. But while I am not a quiet person (quite the contrary), I make it my business to really *see* the rabbits who share my home. (I also think that Igor, in particular, enjoys the hustle and bustle of this household, with the noise of the television, the dogs barking, and the bird shrieking. While many rabbits are indeed fearful of loud noises and too much excitement, this is more a function of individual personalities as well as the type of background that the rabbits came from.) That I am a cultural anthropologist and am trained in observation of humans probably helps me to better observe and understand the non-humans with whom I live, but it's not just that. And it's not just learning rabbits' body language—the meaning behind the thumps, ear swivels, tail shakes, and nose twitches. It's being willing to see them for what they are, and to meet their needs, even when those needs conflict with my (or my husband's) desire for a clean house and a "normal" life.

Anthropology is the science of the Other, developed to understand the lives of people whose cultures differ, sometimes greatly, from our own; yet, at least in its postmodern form, it is inter-subjective, relying



on a give-and-take relationship between researcher and subject, rather than an objective, objectifying approach that separates researcher from subject, and subject from object. Anthropology's holistic approach, participant-observation methodology, and its current rejection of reductionism does not privilege the perspectives of the researcher above those of the subject, but allows for a representation of the Other which is historical, contingent, and contestable.

Talal Asad, in a discussion about the problematics of cultural translation, discusses how the translation of other cultures can be highly subjective and problematic due in part to the "inequality of languages."<sup>22</sup> The ethnographer is both the translator and the author of that which is being translated, because it is he or she who has final authority in determining the meaning of the behavior being studied. Cultural translation, thus, is inevitably enmeshed in conditions of power. This problem, while not yet resolved within anthropology, is partially addressed by the use of reflexive accounts, in which the subjectivity of the author is made explicit in the texts produced.

This same problem exists, arguably to a much greater extent, when trying to understand and put into human words the minds of non-human animals. For me, the solutions to this problem exist in setting up a space in which human and non-human can co-exist as equitably as possible, which not only begins to undermine the power differential separating the species, but which opens up the possibility of understanding other animals on their own terms.

#### RABBIT-CENTERED LIVING

Julie Smith, a House Rabbit Society volunteer and English professor living in Wisconsin, writes of the problematics of living with house rabbits, and whether or not house rabbits are subjugated by this condition.<sup>23</sup> Does keeping a rabbit in a cage, even part time, unduly control him or her? What about using pens to keep rabbits inside, or outside of, certain household spaces? And on a bodily level, what about the control exercised over the rabbit body by removing their reproductive abilities? And even more fundamentally, to what extent does domestication enslave them? According to ecologist Paul Shepard, "the benefit to animals of being domestic is fictitious, for they are slaves, however coddled, becoming more demented and attenuated as the years

pass.<sup>24</sup> Smith writes of her attraction to the philosophy and practices of HRS:

One reason I found it easy to think about rabbits as free and equal within the human house was that I took them, not from the wild, but from oppressive domestic circumstances, often the outdoor hutch. To me, the outdoor hutch was the icon of human control over the rabbit because of its failure to address rabbit needs for space, companionship, and protection and also because of its association with practices of the American Rabbit Breeders Association (ARBA)... Taken from these traditional contexts, rabbits who entered the HRS house seemed to be entering an arena of freedom.<sup>25</sup>

But Smith is still troubled by the level of control that living with rabbits entails. Keeping rabbits as house pets is, without question, more complicated in practical terms than keeping a dog or a cat. Core aspects of house rabbit existence clashes with normative modern human dwellings and values. For instance, because of their need to chew, they can cause considerable damage to furniture, carpets, or even the house itself. (Our living room has a grapefruit-sized hole in the wall courtesy of Igor.<sup>26</sup>) While rabbits are easily litterbox trained, many still drop occasional “pills” or feces around the house. Because of these two issues, many people who live with indoor rabbits will cage their rabbits, at least part time, and many others will use children’s gates or other barriers to keep rabbits out of certain areas of the house, or confined within specific areas. In addition, like cats and dogs, rabbits are more easily kept as house pets when spayed or neutered. The integration of rabbit and human within the confines of typical human living necessitates additional levels of corporeal control, thereby limiting rabbit agency and ability for the full subjective experience. The practical constraints then translate into and simultaneously are reified by human representations of “the animal.”

But while living with house rabbits entails perhaps more *explicit* control than is generally exerted over a household dog or cat, for many HRS people like Smith and myself, it also involves heavy compromises—on both the human and rabbit end. Not only do we bunny-proof our houses, covering electrical cords and parts of the furniture, carpets, or walls that may be chewed, but we purchase or make chew toys to give our rabbits their needed physical and intellectual stimulation and the

ability to be instruments of their own lives and decision making. We also tend to be a relatively tolerant lot, accepting with resignation and even sometimes humor the occasional damage or ruined piece of furniture.

But many of us who live with house rabbits—Smith and myself included—go much further in accommodating rabbits into our lives. As Smith writes,

Many of us found it easier to change ourselves than the premises. At present, the rabbit who lives in the bedroom is excavating my mattress. She bounces around inside the dust cover and chews the wooden frame around the metal springs. Because of the HRS, I know I could staple hardware cloth around the bottom of the mattress or I could buy a large cardboard box sold for shipping mattresses and put it under the bed with materials in it for her to shred. Probably I will do neither. Indeed, I have heard HRS members laugh about taking turns with their human partners sleeping on the wet spot in the bed; putting fencing around their beds at night to keep rabbits from urinating on their pillow or barbering their eyebrows; and catering to rabbits who nip ankles, box hands, or trip-up human bodies when caretakers are too slow with the treats. Frankly, I love this way of living, this version of “becoming animal.”<sup>27</sup>

I would argue that the contemporary rabbit-human relationship, as it has been creatively reconfigured by house rabbit lovers today, is moving away from not only the one-sided relationship represented in the meat rabbit business and through the old-fashioned child/hutch rabbit relationship, but away from the typical human-pet relationship as well, which is marked at least in part largely by dominance and control. While most people who live with rabbits today still exercise at least some control over their rabbit companions (as mentioned above), many are creating ways in which their rabbits can exert more freedom to be themselves than ever before, and perhaps more than many pet lovers give to their dogs, cats, or birds.

What kind of people would willingly live in a home in which hay is scattered all over the floor, a litterbox occupies the space in front of (or even inside of) the fireplace, cardboard boxes filled with newspaper are shredded and urinated on in the living room, and the couch is set up so that Trudy the disabled rabbit can spend evenings on it in front

of the TV? I live like this, and other rabbit people do as well, illustrating the great lengths to which many people today will go to share their lives with an animal on as-close-to-equal terms as can be accommodated. While it remains a struggle to give the rabbits in my home as much freedom as they would like, especially because I share my home with another human whose willingness to patch the holes in the wall or repair the chewed electrical cords is sometimes strained, it remains my goal.

To me, what Smith calls “becoming animal” is not just a new way to live with a creature who is, after all, much more recently domesticated than the cat and the dog and who thus retains much of its wildness. It also offers us insight into rabbit consciousness. Changing one’s house (or building a new one from scratch, as my husband and I did six years ago) to accommodate rabbits involves, at one level, trying to understand how rabbits see the world and a willingness to take up their culture as part of or own.

It also means remembering who they were, just 1500 years ago. Our domesticated rabbits are really just a hop away from their wild ancestors. That means that the behaviors found in wild European rabbits are still very much present in domesticated rabbits. Unlike hares and cottontails who are solitary, European rabbits live in large underground warrens of dozens to hundreds of rabbits. Their social nature explains why European rabbits were domesticated but hares and cottontails were not. Unfortunately, rabbits raised or kept for human use are almost always kept in solitary cages, away from contact with other rabbits (or other animals), which stifles much of their natural behavior, and as we now understand, has a devastating effect on them psychologically and physiologically.

Knowing this simple piece of information about where rabbits come from allows us to create a life for our companion rabbits that not only allows for as much freedom and equality as is possible in a human-controlled world, but it also opens up the door for rabbits to once again enjoy the social life which is so important to their kind. House Rabbit Society has, since our beginnings twenty years ago, encouraged people to adopt companions for their rabbits, so keeping rabbits in pairs or threesomes is now quite common.

In my household, I have a group of 50 rescued rabbits who live together.<sup>28</sup> They spend their days chewing on cardboard, foraging for

food (in my protected courtyard), lounging on their hammocks; and, they spend endless hours communing with each other—grooming, nuzzling, playing, “gossiping,” or just hanging out. While these intra-species relationships tend to mean that the rabbits will not bond with me (in fact, most will not even tolerate me touching them), it is much more important that they experience the richness of rabbit-rabbit relationships. (I admit that the rabbits who live in my bedroom and living room must tolerate much more attention from me than those in the large group, and thankfully, some, like Charlotte and Trudy, reciprocate it. I am certainly not immune to the need to share affection with my rabbits.) This is especially true given the fact that these rabbits have all been abandoned, and many come from environments of either cruelty or neglect. They come to me scared and insecure, and sometimes aggressive. Living with other rabbits in a safe environment with a variety of activities to engage in and a minimal amount of human intervention and control is one way for them to gain confidence.

I also try to put much of the rabbits’ days into their own hands (or paws). While I do set mealtimes (mornings and evenings), there is hay out all day so that they can eat when they like. Their room has two doors—a human door for me to go in and out and a rabbit-sized door for them to use whenever they like. While they are all inside at night, during the day they can go in and out, regardless of the weather. Regardless of where they came from, most rabbits who end up in my home lacked control over any aspect of their lives. By providing an environment where they can go to bed when they like, eat when they like, go inside or outside when they like, interact with whom they like, and modify parts of their physical environment as they like, they appear not only to be happier, but more “rabbit-like.” Even my disabled rabbits are given as much freedom as possible; I have specially made carts that rabbits with little use of their rear legs can use to roll around the house, and I have seen their confidence soar once they begin using the cart.

Finally, like most people who live with companion animals, house rabbit people talk to their rabbits. Rabbits who live in outdoor cages are rarely communicated with; many are lucky if they get fed or watered daily. We know that talking to non-human animals serves as a way to bond the human to the animal, to incorporate the animal into the human’s social world, and allows for the human to talk *about* the animal

as well, which is another way of making that animal family. Rabbits who do not live in the home are typically excluded from such communication, so talking to them is an important way of relating to them and interacting with them that feels good both to the person and to the animal. In addition, seeing and reading how rabbits communicate, with their ears, their noses, their tails, their bodies, is a way to respect them and their needs. When we can understand, even to a limited extent, what rabbits are saying to us, we can then give them what they need, which will go a long way towards making them feel like *their interests matter*. We can also respond to rabbits in kind—by using their communication styles, as much as we are able, to reach out to them on their own terms. House Rabbit Society has long advocated sitting or laying on the ground as a way to interact with rabbits at their own level, and house rabbit people have learned, from observing how rabbits groom and communicate with each other, how to approach, touch, and interact with them.

#### CONCLUSION

In an editor's note accompanying a *House Rabbit Journal* article about giving rabbits what they want, Amy Espie writes:

Do you ever get the feeling that articles about companion animals are required by law to mention that petting a rabbit/cat/dog lowers our blood pressure? Another inescapable truism extols the unconditional love bestowed on us by these our steadfast companions. On first, fourth, and perhaps fourteenth reading, these appear to reflect well on us; but eventually we discern the decidedly less admirable note that is the underlying message: what's in it for me?<sup>29</sup>

As important as the research into the human-animal bond is, I think it's important to ask the question: what's in it for the animal? Living in a home with a human family certainly does provide measurable physical and emotional benefits for companion animals who, after all, have been domesticated and can no longer be "wild" again. And rabbits who are fortunate enough to live in homes where a greater-than-normal amount of freedom is afforded to them and where their needs are given priority benefit even more from their status as companion animals.

But rabbits—and other animals—benefit in other ways as well.

Many people who live with rabbits today not only work to make their own relationship with rabbits as equitable as possible, but use their love of rabbits to advocate for change for all animals. House Rabbit Society was formed out of one woman's love for rabbits, and countless other rabbit lovers now not only work to better the lives of rabbits, but to improve the lives of other animals as well. Because of their use in the meat, fur, and vivisection industries, many animal lovers empathize especially with rabbits, and use that empathy to try to secure better lives for all animals. In that way, rabbits are a sort of bridge animal, allowing those who live with and love rabbits to empathize with other animals as well—even those we once ate or wore.

My own life has been radically transformed by rabbits. I do not just live with dozens of rabbits in a house custom-built for them and filled with their hay, toys, and poop. I also devote hours each day to managing House Rabbit Society, and most of my friends are rabbit people. In addition, like Marinell Harriman before me (and William Cowper before her), my love for rabbits has fueled my animal activism outside of HRS, as well as my involvement in the field of human-animal studies. And finally, my identity has changed. I am, like so many others, a rabbit person, whose life is partially defined by my relationship with rabbits. My life without rabbits would not just be different; it would be unimaginable.

#### NOTES

1. Susan Davis and Margo DeMello, *Stories Rabbits Tell: A Natural and Cultural History of a Misunderstood Creature* (New York: Lantern Press, 2003).

2. I date the rise of the house rabbit movement to the publication of Marinell Harriman's *House Rabbit Handbook* in 1985 and the founding of House Rabbit Society in 1988.

3. Davis and DeMello.

4. Pet rabbits are rabbits who are kept primarily as companions and not for food, fur, or medical usage. However, "pet" does not necessarily imply "household" animal.

5. The commercial pet industry includes animal breeders, dealers, and pet stores, as well as the advocacy groups which support them. In 2009, the American pet industry made 45 billion dollars in sales of

animals and pet supplies (American Pet Products Manufacturing Association). Over 2 billion dollars was spent purchasing live animals that year, with an unknown amount being spent to purchase rabbits.

6. Katherine Grier, "Childhood Socialization and Companion Animals: United States 1820-1870," *Society and Animals: Journal of Human-Animal Studies* Vol. 7, No. 2 (1999): 95-120.

7. Davis and DeMello.

8. Rabbits and hares both belong to the order Lagomorpha and the family Leporidae, but are of different genera and species.

9. H.S. Milford, ed., *The Poetical Works of William Cowper* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

10. Barbara Purchase, *Rabbit Tales* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1982).

11. Judy Taylor, *Beatrix Potter: Artist, Storyteller, and Countrywoman* (London: Frederick Warne, 1986).

12. *Ibid.*

13. Davis and DeMello, pp. 348-349.

14. Harriman.

15. See <http://www.rabbit.org>

16. According to the American Pet Products Manufacturing Association, there are now 7.8 million pet rabbits in the United States. Approximately 10,000 of those are HRS members, and Bunspace, the social networking site for rabbits, has 3,000 members. House Rabbit Society's website currently receives a quarter million page views per month.

17. I define domestication as the process of maintaining animals in captivity, selectively breeding them for human purposes, and controlling their food supply, reproduction, and other aspects of life, thus creating a dependency on humans for survival, and a marked alteration in appearance and behavior. (See Juliet Clutton-Brock, *A Natural History of Domesticated Mammals*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, for a more detailed definition.)

18. By co-evolution, I am referring to the way in which dogs and humans each modified their own behaviors and cultures to accommodate the other. This process did not occur with rabbits, who were domesticated as tools, but not as partners, to humans.



19. Visit the Trans Species Living page of the Kerulos website to see videos and photos of my household, including Igor and Charlotte: <http://www.kerulos.org/projects/t-s-rabbits.html>.

20. See Charlotte and Igor here: <http://www.youtube.com/user/margobun#p/u/8/bND3L-vlxzs> and here: <http://www.youtube.com/user/margobun#p/u/2/OMrKgwRLQ4o>.

21. See Igor with Taz, one of the dogs, here: <http://www.youtube.com/user/margobun#p/u/15/GRsydKpfess>.

22. Talal Asad, "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology" in James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.). *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1986), p. 156.

23. Julie A. Smith, "Constructing a 'Performance Ethic': The Discourse and Practices of the House Rabbit Society," *Society & Animals: Journal of Human-Animal Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2003): 181-197.

24. Paul Shepard, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human* (Washington: Island Press, 1996), p. 267.

25. *Ibid.*

26. See Igor chewing here: <http://www.youtube.com/user/margobun#p/u/5/7PYUAVux3yg>.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Visit the Trans Species Living page of the Kerulos website to see videos and photos of my household: <http://www.kerulos.org/projects/t-s-rabbits.html>.

29. Michele Lockers, "What Rabbits Want: Ask Not What Your Bunny Can Do for You," *House Rabbit Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 10 (Summer 2004).