Julie Ann Smith[1]

Beyond Dominance and Affection: Living with Rabbits in Post-Humanist Households

ABSTRACT

Nearly 20 years age, Yi-Fu Tuan wrote his influential *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets* (1984), which argued that human affection for domestic animals is inseparable from dominance. Today, cultural critics persist in the view that companion animals are compromised, even degraded, because they are controlled by humans. The essay attempts to rethink the relationship between humans and companion animals beyond the freedom-dominance binary. It argues for a conceptual approach that defers confidant interpretation of animals while dramatically relaxing control of them within human settings. It suggests that this approach be called a "performance ethic" and offered the House Rabbit Society as a model.

As a member of the House Rabbit Society (HRS) who has rescued 200 rabbits and lived with them in my house, I want to live with rabbits as companion animals, including protecting them. But I also worry that this entails considerable subjugation.

In June 2002, Suburu aired a television commercial showing a mother and daughter driving into the woods to "free" a pet rabbit. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) and the House Rabbit Society (HRS) promptly

Society & Animals 11:2
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protested, arguing that domestic rabbits are the result of human intervention and cannot survive by themselves in the wild. The implied discursive contest over the rabbit in this commercial—was it being "set free"or "abandoned"?—foregrounds a troubling tension.

This conflict may be particularly acute because of the species in question. Rabbits cannot roam freely within a human house in quite the way a dog or cat can. This essay attempts to address this ambivalence through both argument and memoir.

However, the condition of the domestic lives of rabbits can speak to our concerns about companion animals of other species. On the one hand, we very much want to think of them as "free." On the other, we are disturbed by cultural messages and personal intuitions that companion animals are considerably compromised. It begins by locating my own concerns within a larger cultural anxiety, which I believe the June 2002 Suburu commercial exploited. It goes on to describe the ways in which I misread the goal of the HRS as an attempt to create the human house as an arena of "freedom" for rabbits. It concludes that when the egalitarian model failed, I came to understand that the HRS offered something richly different from either paternalism or a fiction about freedom and equality. I propose to call this a "performance ethics." Part of what I mean by this is acceptance that domestic animals will never be equal partners to humans only because they live in arrangements for another species. But I also mean attentive provision of opportunities for animal agency and recognition that animals actively utilize these to perform their own natures.

I understand that many human beings do not find problematic the relationship between domestic animals and humans. To them, animals thrive when a benevolent human is in charge. But another side of me finds domestication vexing. It seems to imply a natural right of humans to manage nonhuman animals. It minimizes the agency of animals in the animal-human relationship.

One might trace our present uncertainties about "pet keeping" back to Yi-Fu Tuan (1984), who argued that human affection for "pets" is inseparable from dominance, that the pleasure of dominance—and even the impossibility of

intimate relationships without it—lies deep within the human psyche. From this, he writes, follows the motivation for human creation of pets. According to Tuan, such dominance is evidenced in various ways: Breeding satisfies human aesthetic whim at the expense of animal health, castration uses painful appliances, and obedience training succeeds only through the display of unchallengeable human power. Further, Tuan describes exhibition of animals in shows, as "demonstrat[ing] openly and to public applause the power to dominate and humble another being" (p. 107). These "refined cruelties" service human identity by enabling self-images of power, Tuan maintained, and provide an acceptable outlet for impulses that otherwise might be directed toward humans. Since Tuan's study, feminist theory—that has exposed paternalism as domination in disguise—surely has complicated the concern about domination over companion animals.

Some strains of contemporary culture go even farther than Yi-Fu Tuan (1984), often expressing contempt for the "pet." Valorizing the wild, the free, the actively predatory, environmentalism and postmodernism view domestic animals as tame, denatured, and subjugated.[2] Aggressive, public declarations of scorn for "pets" are common on television and radio. A proposed name change from "pet owner" to "pet guardian" in official documents in Los Angeles recently unleashed disdain for "pets" during a comedy show on national public radio. Commentators described pets as slaves who are being reconfigured as fuzzy people, and they declared that animals are either free or they are pets (*Rewind,* 2002). At the same time, as more humans feel free to insist on the "humanity" of their companion animals, they feel more tension between the presumption of equality and the ways they actually live with animals. Ultimately, what this essay addresses is whether we might construct a "useful fiction" about our relationship to companion animals based on neither equality nor paternalism. I propose a "performance ethics," which will both celebrate the human desire to dismantle the boundary between humans and companion animals and acknowledge its difficulty.

Re-imagining the Rabbit

To look more deeply at the possibility of egalitarian relations, I would like to describe the HRS's extraordinary act of re-imagining the rabbit as a companion animal. I was deeply attracted to the material and discursive practices

of the HRS, at least in part because I saw it as enacting a view of rabbits as free and equal to humans within the domestic setting. But as the descriptions below will suggest, what was going on was really quite different, more creative.

The HRS was founded in California in 1988 by Marinell Harriman and others.[3] Harriman had written and published the *House Rabbit Handbook* in 1985 and started *The House Rabbit Journal* in May 1988. These two publications established the goals of the society and important features of its discourse. Articles about rabbit behavior were authored primarily by Harriman and Amy Shapiro Espie, the behavior editor of the journal. I was the founder of the Wisconsin chapter of the HRS and chapter manager in Wisconsin from 1993 until 1999. From 1993 until the present, I have lived in my house with multiple rabbits at a time, most of whom were taken from animal shelters and eventually adopted out in accord with the mission 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), summarized in the ARBA slogan "Food, Fur, and Fancy." The move to the house was an act of rescuing rabbits from being raised and killed for food and fur and from being treated in most of the ways described by Tuan (1984) as "fancy": forced mating, breeding, exhibiting, and judging. The Society eschewed nearly all the practices mentioned by Tuan as indicators of dominance. It did not engage in breeding; members privately parodied ARBA "standards of perfection" by celebrating such physical features in rabbits as airplane ears and messy spots. It forbade adopters to exhibit their rabbits. Taken from these traditional contexts, rabbits who entered the HRS house seemed to be entering an arena of freedom. As long as I was rescuing rabbits, I had no doubt that I was freeing them.

Once rescued, rabbits had to be controlled within the house, but the Society managed control issues that it could not solve materially by discursive means. For example, it recognized that rabbits are destructive and that chewing and digging in the house are dangerous for the rabbit and damaging to human dwellings. Rather than discard the cage, it revised the concept of a cage in

Figure 1. Indoor rabbit pen in HRS adoptive home. Madison, Wisconsin. 1995. (Photograph by the author.)

this new setting. If the move indoors meant moving the hutch indoors, and if these structures still looked to the observer like animal cages, members of HRS saw them as the rabbit's own space within the human house. Redesigned and renamed, cages were elaborated with multiple levels and ramps and called condos; many were pens made large enough so that humans could enter to visit the rabbit in "his space" (Figure 1). All were places of limited confinement, at least much less than that of the outdoor hutch. These modifications gave rabbits more freedom. Additionally, the discourse surrounding these practices focused on controlling humans rather than rabbits, because humans were the ones having to radically alter their behavior.

Not surprisingly, management of rabbit sexuality engaged very serious and difficult issues about control. Unaltered rabbits untiringly will spray the premises, their friends, and competitors with strong-smelling urine. They often spray while running or shaking, creating an arc of urine that can cover many feet. I lived with one briefly unaltered male, "The General," who could spray all four walls of a room at once and who regularly sprayed me. His capacity—but not his behavior—was exceptional. The HRS and its veterinarians

went to extraordinary lengths to educate other veterinarians to castrate rabbits safely and humanely, including administering pain medication after surgery. Less than 10 years ago, some veterinarians in Madison, Wisconsin were still castrating males by agricultural methods, that is, by tying rubber bands around their testicles. Even if the result is the same, the HRS approach to neutering suggests a very different attitude toward managing rabbit sexuality from the one exposed by Tuan (1984).

Because neutering, no matter how gently done, is an act of considerable control, the HRS also needed to manage it discursively. Espie, who wrote the HRS's official statement on spaying and neutering (1988, pp. 4-5), not surprisingly represented spaying and neutering as better for the animals. In this, she was assisted by rabbit biology: Spaying can extend the life of females for years, because they are susceptible to uterine pathology. Thus, spaying was viewed as medical intervention. But she also argued that it reduced suffering by preventing the birth of unwanted rabbits. In order to understand this argument as something other than an easy answer to animal population control, one must understand that we personally witnessed death and the effects of abuse and neglect on many occasions. I viewed neutering as a way to control people who caused these tragedies: professional breeders, amateur hobbyists, and misguided parents. I viewed these humans as appropriating the animal body for their own purposes while ignoring the predictable effects: human-instigated death of countless rabbits. I used neutering to control these people, not animal populations. When I had a female rabbit spayed, I was relieved that she could never be used as someone's breeding project with all that might entail for her, such as being replaced by one of her offspring or treated as a commodity.

Because male animals could be vasectomized, castration also is done to modify animal behavior to suit humans rather than to control populations. But the Society must promote spaying and neutering to fulfill its mission to find rabbit adopters who might not otherwise be willing to live with rabbits. I do not believe, as some have maintained, that those of us who arrange these surgeries do so to purify or infantalize the animal body. In many other areas, we are not squeamish about bodily function. Rabbits pass their food twice, the first time consuming their feces directly. We see this every day. Additionally, we nurse rabbits with digestive problems by inoculating them with gut bac-

teria obtained from the feces of healthy rabbits. We prepare a "fecal cocktail," which is syringe-fed to the sick rabbit. Also, many altered rabbits will continue to mount. I recall one early morning when I prepared my class lecture on Book I of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene (Holinesse)* while a young male rabbit indefatigably chased and mounted the cat around my chair. Rather than being disturbed, I congratulated myself on living in two interesting worlds.

Espie (1996) addressed the control question of spaying and neutering by framing the discussion in terms of "naturalness versus unnaturalness" and then deconstructing the idea of "natural." She argued that "naturalness" was a vague term that does not apply to the home environment, which is "unnatural" for rabbits. Once one accepts the unnatural as a new kind of naturalness, one no longer confuses the issue by evaluating behavior in terms of wild animals. By making castration the natural choice for rabbits living in the human home, Espie mitigated it as an act of control. Rather, it became human assistance in giving rabbits more freedom of movement and expression within the environments in which they, per force, found themselves. Neutering became a compromise to the human-rabbit relationship that humans, admittedly, forced upon rabbits but reciprocated by different kinds of their own compromises.

The HRS did not simply manage difficult issues of control discursively. In fact, its members surrendered enormous control over their homes. Many HRS members "rabbit-proofed" their houses, a playful word that euphemized extensive modifications. In my own house, rabbit-proofing meant that most of the furniture was made of metal, electrical cords were fastened behind furniture or covered in hard plastic or metal tubing, and protective wood strips were tacked on to wood baseboards and wood trim around closets and windows. In addition, linoleum replaced carpet—or the carpet was abandoned to shredding—and fencing enclosed bookcases. So-called "litterbox training" primarily meant capitalizing on the rabbit habit of urinating consistently in one or two places. We simply put litterboxes where the rabbits decided to eliminate. 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

Figure 2. Rabbit playroom at Wisconsin HRS foster home. Madison, Wisconsin. 1997. (Photograph by the author.)

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." It was the genius of HRS founder Harriman to naturalize this life, so that those of us who came after felt social permission to live as we had always wanted to.

Over time, we came to understand the principles of rabbit space and changed our abodes even more. After many years of living with rabbits, I noticed that they liked free corridors along perimeters. Before this, I would dutifully place litterboxes and toys along the walls of the playroom after I had cleaned each day. By night, the room was a "mess." Eventually I noticed that it was a particular kind of mess: Everything moveable in the room was in the middle of the floor (Figure 2). This observation changed forever the way I live in my house, as did my understanding of other rabbit preferences: spaces along

borders and boundaries, enclosed spaces with more than one exit, spaces that allow them to see out but not be seen. Rabbit ideas of space management often conflicted with my own aesthetics, but I came to value them as indicators that rabbits were making themselves at home. Of course, as HRS members learned more about rabbit ideas of space, they tried to give rabbits space that imitated natural places. Often, these were called toys but really were quite prominent "rabbit furniture." One Milwaukee staff member wired apple branches to all of the legs of her dining room chairs. Others offered sizeable equipment, such as toddler playsets, ramps going to tabletops and window sills, and "townhouses" made of cardboard boxes.

Domestic rabbits are European rabbits who, unlike the North American Cottontail, are highly social and who excavate extensive underground tunnels and chambers (Figure 3). As a response to this, HRS members gave rabbits excavation opportunities within the home—cardboard boxes and tubes stuffed with paper or old bed sheets (Figure 4).

Additionally, no one in the HRS exercised explanatory control. Excluded from interpretive certainty, HRS members were encouraged, once they met the rabbits' primary behavioral needs, to remain flexible, open-minded, and modest about their understandings of rabbit behavior. This meant that intellectual appropriation was much less possible. Discourse on rabbit behavior addressed practical problems such as aggression. In spite of having many members with graduate degrees, the Society had little interest in theorizing rabbit behavior with academic models that might authorize a particular view. Harriman (1994) and Espie (1996) created an entire discourse to talk about rabbit behavior while deferring human explanatory authority. They often used anthropomorphisms playfully, as do many postmodern novelists who write about animals. They also used discussion of behavior to communicate a deep valuing of the animals rather than to explain them. Also, Harriman unfailingly deflected attempts to make her the center of interpretative power by directing attention back to the rabbits as beings quite capable of conveying who they were in their own ways. I believe that this attitude made psychological space for the animal—impossible in highly controlled arrangements with humans whose views are fixed, confidant, and authoritative.

In other major, minor, practical, and discursive ways did HRS members express their vision of shared space. Interaction with rabbits was presented

Figure 3. Entrance to underground tunnels and chambers in indoor/outdoor rabbit facility. New Glarus, Wisconsin. 1994. (Photograph by the author.)

Figure 4. Cardboard tunnels and boxes for excavation; Wisconsin HRS foster home. Madison, Wisconsin. 1998. (Photograph by the author.)

as best happening on the floor. While the human lay quietly, the rabbit would investigate, groom, climb and sit on the human, and allow him/herself to be petted. In this way, rabbits were given freedom to initiate interaction, a key component of relational partnerships (Harker, Collis, & McNicholas (2000, p. 191). Rabbit partners were highly encouraged by the Society. Once rabbits had companions of their own species, the human was decentered within their world. As Espie (1996) expressed the case, "once you live with a bonded pair or trio you will see that even the most devoted human cannot quite fill the bill" (p. 4). And so, we even gave up seeing the rabbits as exclusively "our" companions.

Creating Spaces

And so, why is all this not enough to make me feel that rabbits are "free and equal" within the house where they live with me? Perhaps I am oversensitive to the dynamics of human dominance. Perhaps I recognize that we use some obfuscating discourse to manage "control" issues for which we have no answers. Perhaps I recoil at creating arrangements that make animals look dependent, even though in other circumstances they could take care of themselves perfectly well. Also, I am bothered by the endless neutering surgeries even as I fully recognize their necessity. I am unconvinced that castration is important only to humans because only humans construct gender identity. I believe it has profound hormonal effects, and I wonder if I am taking away something from the rabbits—sexual pleasure? youth? the ability to satisfy strong instincts? Ultimately, I am disturbed because the rabbits cannot resist or reverse the conditions of their lives. Also, my intuition tells me that domestication is not a pure state of which animals are either in or out. Rather, I think that animals must manage the disconnection between their natures and their human surroundings.

Thus, I have come to contextualize my living arrangements not in terms of ARBA and the rabbit hutch but in a more natural setting, one that allows the rabbits to live outdoors in large social groups. Some HRS members have created such spaces as the only way to rescue domestic rabbits who have been "dumped" (as in the Subaru commercial), have connected with other discarded rabbits, and have bred into large colonies that humans have decided to eliminate (Ackerman, 2002). The HRS, however, does not view these as

the most desirable places for rabbits, because the rabbits are exposed to many more dangers, including fighting, injury, and predation. So the problem is one of domesticity itself. Also, the HRS wants to put rabbits in close contact with humans, with the hope of changing human perceptions.

Because I expected to live with rabbits on a free and equal basis, I was dissatisfied with my arrangements. Other people have addressed the need to understand our relations to domestic animals differently, and these ideas were very helpful. As Baker (2002) has said so well, we live inexpertly with animals, and the task must be approached with an experimental attitude, a willingness to get it wrong most of the time (p. 188). In her article on Foucault and animals, Palmer (2001) points out that not all kinds of dominance are alike:

> The idea of a "regime of inequality" masks so many different forms of power relationship (which may be all unequal but are unequal in a multitude of ways) that it is more interesting to look as Foucault suggests at particular contexts and micropractices between humans and animal bodies. (p. 353)

Such an approach might distinguish between a paternalism that instantiates control from a paternalism that attempts to make the best of already compromised situations for the animals. Finally, one might view animal-human relations within the human house from another conceptual framework, one enacted by the HRS and called by me a "performance ethics."

By this, I mean a way of thinking about the disorderly lived-relations I have with rabbits by means of a mental construction that is, itself, messy, even oxymoronic. "Ethics" suggests a code of moral values toward others based on reliable knowledges about their needs and desires, while "performance" relaxes these strictures by gesturing toward imperfect acts based on uncertain understandings. The "ethics" of "performance ethics" contributes a sense of responsibility and suggests that some behaviors are better than other behaviors. In my opinion, those are ones that make physical and mental space for animal agency. "Ethics" does not suggest that the rabbits participate in this ethical framework, although I am not willing to say that they do not have some sense of duty toward others.

But the problem of ethics is not only that it implies a rather strict, joyless understanding of my relation to rabbits. It also fails to tell me whether the

more ethical act is to decline living with rabbits because they will not be free or to accept the domestic framework that entails my control of them. The "performance" part of performance ethics is intended to discompose, enrich, and lighten a burdensome and unhelpful sense of moral responsibility communicated by "ethics." Performance applies both to how I see my own behavior and that of my rabbits and refers to a playful, experimental, tentative sense of who we are in relationship to each. Performance assumes that rabbit behavior is intentional and varied. It communicates that rabbit actions reflect something about them to which they have access, even though I may not know what this is or how they process it. In other words, "performance" corrects the idea of animals as a blank materiality that needs the human mind to be meaningful. I borrow here what Butler (1999) has said about nature in another context, that is, that nature is degraded as "that which is 'before' intelligibility, in need of the mark, if not the mar, of the social to signify, to be known, to acquire value" (p. 238). As in Butler's "nature," animal nature too often is thought to have a neutral relationship to meaning that must be corrected by the human intellect.

Because "performance" speaks to actions rather than to explanations, it opens a place for intuitions about the meanings of what animals do by withholding judgment. I would like the word to refer to my pre-cognitive knowledges that I cannot yet express. Accounts of "pet" behavior necessarily seems trite and unreliable because language is not up to the task of representing the impact that animal acts have on us, the devotion toward animals that they generate. Trust in pre-verbal intuitions fills that gap. I begin to intuit meaning in animal acts by being attentive to the limitations of my own perceptions. As I said above, for many years I lived with the incomprehensibility of rabbit "interior decorating." Rabbits insisted on creating specific kinds of space that were not my kinds. Because I did not understand them, rabbit behavior seemed mindless. Once I gathered the now-obvious point that they enacted a desire for safe spaces, they suddenly became much smarter. However, I do not want to over-read rabbit actions. One way to avoid this might be to understand animal performances as expressing multiple truths about them that are always provisional, open to revision; the point is not which interpretation is right but that meaning is there in some form. Also, I can participate in the HRS's discourse on rabbits. For me, the HRS is an epistemological community that produces knowledges from unstructured conversations:

Among different representations of rabbit acts, some are reiterated, some quietly disappear.

I want a concept for the way I see rabbits that conveys that they have options, make behavioral choices. When I acquired my first rabbit, I puzzled over how he knew to use the water-bottle sipper, since nothing in the natural environment of rabbits would correlate to this device. About 12 years later, when I lived with rooms filled with cages of foster rabbits, all had water crocks. I decided one day to replace the crocks with tube sippers, which I did all at once. What I saw was many different responses to the sipper. Some rabbits grabbed it with their teeth and shook it, some licked the spout up and down, and some batted it with their paws; eventually, all figured out how to use it. I would call these actions "performances" in that the rabbits had a range of possible responses to their experience and selected one or more.

Once I start to think of rabbit activities as performances rather than as behavior, I exchange a fixed set of activities that must all be given play for open-ended possibilities. If one performance is not possible within the setting, others will take its place. One reasons that the HRS knows so much about what rabbits do because its rabbits are not spending time reproducing. Thus, the performance model provides a possible solution to the spay and neutering problem, as Espie (1988) understood. She argued that the sacrifice of one kind of natural behavior can enable another: "because the animals were not neutered they must now be kept separate. The choice here is not between natural and unnatural but between two sets of natural behaviors" (p. 5). To understand her point fully, one needs to know that rabbit-rabbit relationships are more stable and peaceful if both animals are altered. Thus, spaying and neutering affords the animals a chance to express potentialities that would not otherwise come into play.

Crucial to my performance ethics is seeing rabbit actions as transactional, done to elicit responses from audiences. Rabbits replicate each other's behaviors. If one rabbit begins grooming him/herself in a room full of rabbits, very shortly the majority may be grooming themselves. Harriman (1994) videotaped a rabbit instigating "popcorn hops" among a group of rabbits. One rabbit began making these sudden, vertical bursts upward, and others soon responded in kind. Performance ethics values animal actions as signifying or enacting relationship. I remember one special performance that I was drawn

into by a rabbit named Hattie. She and her partner lived in the laundry room in my basement, which has shelves built into the wall and ramps leading up to them. One evening I was tidying the area, and I accidently dropped the rabbits' large water crock. Having just filled it, I was exasperated by the crash, the flood of water, and the shards of broken pottery everywhere. I cleaned the mess and fetched another crock, which I filled and set on the top shelf. I walked away for a moment, then turned to retrieve the crock and watched frozen and horrified as Hattie ran up the ramp and pushed it off the shelf—causing another huge crash and mess. To my mind, this was an example of Hattie's seeing my behavior as a performance, as an act directed toward her, and enacting a response. As I said, rabbits often replicate each other's acts. They also appear to love to make noise by throwing objects around. Still, I was astounded that Hattie treated me like a rabbit. Her act brought me to see us in a relationship as she might see it. Even though each of us experienced the interaction differently, it gestured toward a cross-species form of communication that I deeply valued.

My rabbits execute actions all the time that convey their understanding that they are in a relationship of some kind with me. They constantly shove their noses under my hands to demand petting. I have seen them work out relationships among themselves in ways I would call extended performance: endless marking, bodily postures, directed gestures—all designed to produce a response that will elicit a counter response, which will be modified to evoke a slightly different response. When the rabbit Rose sometimes runs circles around my chair before she flops down beside it, she performs her recognition of our relationship by referencing the ancient ways of rabbit courting. Does she see me as her partner, and, if so, what does partnership mean to her? Has she borrowed an act from another context to express something about the two of us here and now? Rather than providing answers to these questions, performance ethics implies that animals may understand their own actions in ways that human language cannot represent. As Fudge (2002) wrote,

> [o]ur language creates and gives meaning to our world, and animals become subsumed into that world because we lack another language with which to represent them. 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 with those limitations is important and worthwhile, even if it is only the best that we can do. . . . We must have in our minds the fact that

> our perception is based upon our limitations, and the fact that their lives exceed our abilities to think about them. (pp. 159-160)

Even when rabbit activity is not directed toward me, I often think of it as a performance between us. One might say that I imagine our separate actions playfully and extravagantly. When I feel Mattie bouncing around inside the mattress, I am amused by a mental representation of her and me performing a preposterous, post-humanist version of the princess and the pea. Of course, my thoughts are exclusively human. But this imagining directs my attention toward the positive recognition that we share close spaces and our lives, which we connect in unconventional and unpredictable ways. Also, although Mattie's engagement with the mattress has nothing to do with me—I do not read her act as creating a "nest" for us—I take great pleasure in knowing that I have played a role in giving her excavation opportunities. Thus, I think of what we each do separately as a performance between us, even though I have used my human imagination to see it that way.

For other reasons, I like thinking about my own behavior toward the rabbits as performance. It makes me see what I do as a series of open-ended episodes that can be revised rather than as acts to be forever judged in terms of a fixed standard. It allows for increasingly enriched interactions, as the animals and I develop intuitions about each other's natures. It acknowledges that they have a point of view toward me that is more important than the rules that I may devise for myself. It fosters the perception of relationship, ultimately the only cure for human anxieties about companion animals. In sum, it allows me to have a committed life with rabbits without anxieties about dominance and freedom. It does this by providing me with a conceptually messy mix of uncertainties about who rabbits are—intuitions I trust but cannot prove and often cannot even explain—"facts" agreed upon by members of a human community with whom I share experience with rabbits and playful (and wholly human) representations that the rabbits do not share but that affect my behavior toward them.

"Performance ethics" has served me well as a more practical, more positive framework with which to think about my relationships to rabbits than dominance or freedom. I realize that all along, thanks to the HRS, this is what I have been living.

* Julie Smith, University of Wisconsin

Notes

[1] Correspondence should be sent to Julie Smith, Department of Languages & Literature, University of Wisconsin,Whitewater, Whitewater, WI 53170. E-mail: smithj@uww.edu

[2] See Davis (1995) for a critique of the environmental movement's attitude toward domestic animals and Baker (2002) for a discussion of attitudes toward domestic animals by postmodern artists.

[3] A history of the founding of the House Rabbit Society may be found on its website: www.rabbit.org.

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