

Animal Subjectivities and Anthropocentrism in Richard Adams' *Watership Down*

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But learn we might, if not too proud to stoop
To quadruped instructors, many a good
And useful quality, and virtue too
– William Cowper, *The Task*, Book VI

1 Introduction

We live with them, we fear them, we love them, we eat them – human relationships with nonhuman animals are diverse and multi-faceted, and yet the underlying idea that dominates most of our conceptions of animals is that of human superiority, and of animals as non-subjects; for it stands to reason that a fully-fledged subject would not be possessed, purchased or hunted, kept in a cage or led on a leash. While animals have always featured strongly in the lives of human beings, humans have concurrently proven to be a tremendous influence in the histories of nonhuman animals, not only through practices such as domestication and breeding, but also through the systematic eradication of animal habitats and lives. As the destructive age of the Anthropocene progresses, it is becoming more and more urgent to focus on, rethink, and possibly reconfigure the way humans perceive and relate to nonhuman animals. In this regard, cultural products have been a significant means to form and disseminate human conceptions of animal beings, and the medium of children's literature, with its frequent focus on animals and its influence on young minds, can be seen as

particularly formative. While historically, animal fiction tended to perpetuate human dominance, especially since the twentieth century there has been a trend to increasingly attempt to understand the world through the eyes of nonhuman animals and to represent animal characters as subjects in their own right. A reversal of perspectives, of representing the world through the eyes of the other, can be immensely powerful in changing dominant perceptions of a specific group.

As Karla Armbruster elucidates in “What Do We Want from Talking Animals?”, only with the recent development of cross-disciplinary animal studies have analyses of literary animals, especially readings of animals as animals instead of as mere allegorical devices, gained more momentum (20). In a parallel to feminist literary criticism that centers on exposing disrespectful representations of women, Kenneth Shapiro and Marion Copeland argue for a critical, animal-based perspective that encourages scholars of animal studies to “[d]econstruct reductive, disrespectful ways of presenting nonhuman animals”; to examine how the animal other is represented “both as an experiencing individual and as a species-typical way of living in the world”; and lastly, to analyze the animal-human relationships as depicted in the work of fiction (345). In the following, I will abide by this set of guidelines by examining human-animal relationships and representations of rabbits, both on a species-level but also individually, in Richard Adams’ novel *Watership Down*. All in all, I hope to lay bare possible reductive as well as respectful ways of representing nonhuman animals in fiction.

Watership Down came to be an immediate success after its publication in 1972, which means that for almost half a century it has been able to disseminate its ideas about animals and human-animal relationships. While *Watership Down* is by no means the first nor the last novel to explore the world through the eyes of nonhuman animals, it has been formative in many ways; in *Presenting Young Adult Fantasy Fiction*, Cathi Dunn MacRae notes that its influence on subsequent animal fiction ranges from the creation of a distinct animal language and the inclusion of fictional myths to the idea that animals are “more highly evolved than brutal humans,” and she refers to the novel as a “prototype” for later animal fantasy (303). Its appeal lies among other aspects in its combination of numerous genres, encompassing “a beast fable, a fantasy, a mythological tale, an epic, a political/Utopian novel, and an allegory” (Miltner 63). However, *Watership Down* has received little scholarly attention until now, which is surprising given the potential for literary analyses within and considering the prominence of the novel; for instance, in *Penguin Classics*’ list of the hundred best children’s books, *Watership Down* ranks on place seventy (“Children’s Books”). Having touched so many lives, one can only assume that the novel has been influential regarding contemporary understandings of animals, and one might therefore even go so far as to argue that an in-depth analysis of animal representations in *Watership Down* is pressing. According to John Pennington, this lack of scholarly interest might be attributed to the idea that the book is an “over-inflated children’s novel” that is faulted “for its obvious conservative proselytizing that upholds traditional middle-class values” (“Mythmaking” 34). Although this may be true, especially

in its representation of conservative gender roles, it would be too simplistic to dismiss the entire novel and especially its exploration of animal subjectivities on these grounds. *Watership Down* thus makes for an appealing object of research as much might still be explored in this novel, and makes for a necessary one as it has contributed in its own way to the shaping of our cultural perceptions of animals, prompting especially an anti-anthropocentrist reconceptualization of rabbits. In this thesis, I argue that *Watership Down* rejects anthropocentrist notions by representing complex and rich animal subjectivities and by emphasizing the ubiquitous unnaturalness of so-called civilized humans. I further contend that, as a move away from anthropocentrist humanism, the novel proposes the idea of an inclusive animality that dissolves human-animal dualism and centers on interspecies empathy.

The first part will explain the necessary concepts and ideas that will recur throughout this thesis, beginning with anthropocentrism, a pervasive ideology deeply ingrained in much of human thought and action, and the related concept of speciesism as put forward by Richard Ryder and Peter Singer. Important for my understanding of these two concepts is especially Weitzenfeld and Joy's "An Overview of Anthropocentrism," which identifies the roots of contemporary forms of anthropocentrism in eighteenth-century humanism, and I further draw heavily on works by Bryan Moore and Rob Boddice that consider anthropocentrism and speciesism with their varying definitions. My main focus in this thesis lies on the concept of animal subjectivities, which goes against Descartes' and Heidegger's anthropocentrist conceptions of animals and centers on Jacques Derrida's influential essay "The Animal That Therefore I Am." The idea of animal subjectivities that was and often still is withheld from animals is especially well theorized in Amy Ratelle's *Animality and Children's Literature and Film* and Matthew Calarco's "Theorizing Animals," which examine Heidegger's as well as Derrida's conception of animals in detail. In this context, I will further focus on the status of animals throughout the last centuries and accompanying shifts in ideas about animal consciousness, sentience, and suffering. Next, I will trace the usage of animals in British children's fiction from its origins in the eighteenth century to the present, identifying conventions used to represent animal subjectivities as well as recurring (anti-)anthropocentrist themes. While eighteenth- and nineteenth-century animal stories tended to reinforce the idea of unquestionable human dominance over the subjugated animal, thus reflecting the prevailing belief of Western cultures, animal fiction in the twentieth century increasingly questioned this anthropocentrist worldview. *Watership Down* is such a novel, as it combines various aspects that aim to destabilize the idea of animal beings as inferior and valueless creatures. A multitude of sources traces the prominence and sometimes even subversive role of animals in children's literature, among them Catherine Elick's *Talking Animals in Children's Fiction* and Kathleen Johnson's *Understanding Children's Animal Stories*, both of whose works are crucial in my thesis as they outline (anti-)anthropocentrist conventions in animal fiction. Finally, in the last section of this chapter, I will focus specifically on rabbit stories in children's literature and ex-

plore how rabbits have traditionally been typecast as cute, toy-like, and over-anthropomorphized creatures. In this context, I will examine how *Watership Down* fits into this tradition and ask whether the novel can be seen as a children's story.

The next chapters constitute a close reading of *Watership Down*. Throughout the novel, different rabbit warrens with distinct mindsets and habits are featured and my analysis will begin with a focus on the main warren led by the rabbit Hazel. The rabbits of this warren are depicted as "natural" as they are framed to be living as wild rabbits are "supposed to" live. In the following, I will use the terms "natural" and "unnatural" as based on Adams' understanding, yet it should be clarified that these designations are problematic: they attempt to compartmentalize the world into two contrasting categories, are vague terms that are loaded with value, and can be conceptualized according to different needs and ideologies. An appeal to nature, understanding something as natural and good because it can be found in nature or in wild animals, and the subsequent belief that all that is unnatural is undesirable, will be addressed and criticized in this thesis. Even the idea of an external, "wild" nature can be problematic because it plays into a nature/culture dualism: as Julia Corbett points out in *Out of the Woods*, "there is just one intertwined, vibrant nature" that humans are invariably a part of (7).

I will first examine how the rabbits of Hazel's warren are represented on a purely physical and behaviorist level and how rabbit facts are conveyed to the reader. While writing the novel, Adams drew heavily on a book by naturalist Ronald M. Lockley, *The Private Life of the Rabbit*, and its influence on *Watership Down* can be traced throughout the narrative. In this regard, it is not within my capacity nor is it my aim to judge whether Adams' and Lockley's representations of rabbits are factually accurate. Rather, I will examine how the inclusion of rabbit teachings lay the groundwork for later explorations of rabbit subjectivities and I will especially focus on the way the human narrator is foregrounded as an authority on rabbits. The next part of this thesis will explore the representation of rabbit subjectivities and how these serve to frame rabbits as agential, complex subjects. Animal subjectivities are conveyed through an emphasis on the rabbits' distinct way of inhabiting the world and through aspects that are conventionally seen as exclusively human: I will first examine their sensory navigation through the world, their worldviews and knowledge, the rabbit language Lapine, complex rabbit societies, and cultural practices with an emphasis on rabbit mythology and religion. These aspects depict the rabbits as sentient beings with thoughts and feelings and simultaneously engender a sense of otherness and kinship: depictions of human traits in animals may engender empathic responses in the reader, while representations of otherness can stimulate the reader's imagination regarding the lives and worlds of other animals, in the best case even initiating a new way of regarding animal beings as creatures with intrinsic rather than instrumental value.

Seeing the point of view of the other can be an effective means to dismantle harmful anthropocentric notions. But while there is definitely potential in this kind of fiction that privileges animal subjectivities, it can have its pitfalls, since it is always

by necessity a human being who takes it upon her- or himself to “translate” animal others and to give them a human voice, which means that anthropocentrist tendencies are apt to sneak even into overtly anti-anthropocentrist fiction. This ambiguity mirrors the complex and oftentimes contradictory views of animals that humans tend to hold, and I will therefore aim to uncover not only *Watership Down*’s anti-anthropocentrist messages, but also its underlying speciesist notions. Notably, while the representations of rabbit subjectivities in general work against anthropocentrism, a few instances display a sense of rabbit exceptionalism and even superiority over some other animals; in this regard, I will question whether this leporine-centrism can be seen as a justification of anthropocentrism via an appeal to nature.

While the first part of the close reading focuses on the exploration of rabbit subjectivities, the second part will turn to the representation of human-animal relations in *Watership Down*. While I argue that the novel’s main aim is to represent rabbits in their own right, it simultaneously constitutes a comment on humanity. By representing humans through the eyes of wild rabbits they are othered, which engenders, to use a term coined by Viktor Shklovsky, a sense of defamiliarization. Human cruelty and unnaturalness and their anthropocentrist worldviews are expressed in *Watership Down* firstly through humanity’s contaminating effect on their fellow earth dwellers, i.e., on Cowslip’s warren, on hutch rabbits, and on the totalitarian warren Efrafa; through their active involvement in ruthless killings of animal beings; and through ubiquitous human-made objects and noise that are consistently termed unnatural and disrupt and disfigure the rabbits’ worlds. By dwelling on humanity’s unnaturalness, the novel first appears to perpetuate a dualism that frames animals and humans as essentialist and contrasting categories. However, this is quickly complicated by the novel’s claim that it is only “civilized” humans who have become unnatural, while so-called “primitive” human beings have not renounced or conceptualized themselves against animality. While this opposition with its racial implications is highly problematic, it simultaneously reveals permeable boundaries that challenge the Cartesian divide between animals and humans. As a tentative solution to the inequitable relationship between animal beings and “civilized” humans and as a shift from anthropocentrist humanism toward an inclusive animality, Adams offers the idea of interspecies empathy that makes possible a more harmonious and sustainable coexistence among earth’s inhabitants. In this context, central works I draw upon which theorize human-animal relationships in terms of interspecies relatedness are Donna Haraway’s *When Species Meet*, Barbara Smuts’ exploration of intersubjectivity in “Encounters with Animals,” and Lori Gruen’s concept of entangled empathy in her eponymous book.

Lastly, as animals are at the center of this thesis, I will turn to a consideration and problematization of this generic term as it encompasses all creatures on earth that are not human, thus negating any kinship between humans and animals and disregarding the gulf of difference that exists between species and individuals. Derrida especially criticizes the singular form “the animal” as it nullifies the complexity and ambiguity of animal life. To him, it is “an appellation that men have instituted,

a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to another creature” (392). The alternative term “nonhuman animals” can of course also be construed as anthropocentric, as again all creatures are defined in relation to humans; Marianne Dekoven, for example, shows how problematic the term can be by comparing it to “[n]onwhite, non-European, and non-Western” (363; emphasis in the original). But on the other hand, it has the potential of pointing to kinship between humans and other animals, thus dethroning human beings by emphasizing their own animality. At the moment, the term is therefore arguably the most useful in writing about our nonhuman kin.

2 Anthropocentrism, Speciesism, and Animal Subjectivities in Children’s Literature

2.1 Anthropocentrism and Speciesism: An Overview

History tells us that human beings especially of Western cultures frequently choose to believe that their species is at the center of everything and that they are often indisposed to accept the alternative. Copernicus’ and later Galileo’s assertion that the earth, and by extension the human, does not exist at the center of the universe was decried; similarly, Darwin’s theory of evolution putting human and nonhuman animals on a continuum is even today sometimes met with resistance. The pervasiveness of anthropocentrism is thus still deeply embedded in human worldviews and practices and can be defined as the idea that “Man,” as Protagoras famously said, “is the measure of all things,” or in other words, that humans are the center of “meaning, value, knowledge, and action” (Weitzenfeld and Joy 4). Weitzenfeld and Joy differentiate between the terms anthropocentric and anthropocentricist, a distinction that will be utilized throughout this thesis: the former denotes the “to some degree inescapable” perspective of humans that is determined by human cognition and the human body which encompasses, for example, a distinctly human sensory apparatus, whereas the latter refers to an ideological construction of human supremacy rather than to an innate quality (4). While anthropocentricist worldviews can be traced back for thousands of years, Weitzenfeld and Joy argue that the specific form of anthropocentrism as perpetuated today is the “historical outcome of a distorted humanism in which freedom is founded upon the unfreedom of human and animal others” (3). Especially in the Age of Enlightenment, humanism took on an anthropocentricist coloring as it was based on the pillars of “human exceptionalism, perfection, and dignity” (5-6): exceptionalism here relates to qualities that are deemed exclusively human, such as reason, speech, or consciousness; the notion of human perfection manifests itself in the idea of human consciousness as an autonomous entity which enables “self-realization and self-determination”; and dignity refers to the belief that those beings who possess consciousness and thus self-determination,

i.e., humans, have intrinsic worth (6). These three aspects are seen as lacking in animal others, and as a corollary, human beings were and often still are conceptualized “over and against animal beings” (5). As will be shown in the last part of this thesis, however, *Watership Down*’s concept of animality extends these fundamental principles of anthropocentric humanism to nonhuman animals as well.

Anthropocentrism may manifest itself in different forms and to different degrees. The two most pervasive forms are firstly the idea of an animal-human dualism that creates two essentialist categories, and secondly seeing all species on a continuum which “ranks humans and animal others along a scale by the degree to which they are ‘human’” (Weitzenfeld and Joy 5). The latter case is, as Bryan L. Moore terms it, a “softer” form of anthropocentrism that ascribes some, mostly instrumental, value to animals, although it is not comparable with humans’ intrinsic self-worth (6). Scholars usually cite Aristotle’s understanding of animals, the God-given right of human dominion over other species in Judeo-Christian belief, and René Descartes’s influential idea of animals as “automata” as the main roots of anthropocentric worldviews: the ideology can be traced to the Platonic-Aristotelian conception that came to be known as the Great Chain of Being, a hierarchy that saw animals placed firmly beneath, and existing to serve, humanity (Smith 350). Similarly, the Judeo-Christian creation story frames humans as masters over all animals, as God decrees that Man shall “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” (*King James Bible*, Gen. 1:26); this idea of human sovereignty, as Moore demonstrates, is consistently accentuated throughout the Bible (7-8). Further formative for contemporary Western understandings of animals have been the ideas put forth by Descartes, who insisted on the notion of an insurmountable gulf between humans and animals. Descartes maintained that, unlike animals, humans have reason and are therefore “aware of their experience” (Smith 349). His idea of animals as instinct-driven machines persists even today, and thinkers following in his footsteps employ this conception to justify any form of animal exploitation and abuse by denying animals even “such basic experiences as physical pleasure or pain” (Smith 349), thus giving “modern science, industry, and agriculture even greater license to maltreat” animal beings (Elick 18).

Even the most pervasive instances of dogmatism and oppression, however, usually incite counter-movements that question such dominant thought systems. Anthropocentric beliefs may be omnipresent, but they have always had their opponents, and non-anthropocentric currents have invariably attempted to move against their discriminatory opposite. Anthropocentric dogmatism was most deeply shaken by the Copernicus revolution that decentered humans from the universe, by Darwin’s theory of evolution that introduced the idea of kinship between humans and other species, and by the advent of psychoanalysis with its proposition of an unconscious “that undid the primacy of conscious processes, including the reason that comforted Man with his unique excellence” (Haraway, *Species* 11-12). Still, these

“three great historical wounds” inflicted on “the primary narcissism of the self-centered human subject” (Haraway, *Species* 11) have not been able to expunge the deeply-rooted anthropocentric worldviews that continue to inform the acts and thoughts of many. For instance, scientific communities even today are usually disinclined to use such terminology that recognizes emotions and consciousness in animals, persisting instead in “mechanistic animal behavior” (Smith 350); although with the rise of interdisciplinary critical animal studies, the negation of animal sentience, emotions, and consciousness in the sciences is more and more questioned and criticized.

The term speciesism, an idea related to anthropocentrism, was coined by psychologist Richard Ryder in his treatise “Victims of Science,” in which he criticized experimentation on animals, and became popular through Peter Singer’s well-known work *Animal Liberation*. In Singer’s manifesto, speciesism is defined as “a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species” (7); it is thus understood as a form of discrimination that is likened to other types of injustice such as sexism and racism. Regarding the sometimes rather obscure correlation between speciesism and anthropocentrism, one can observe two dominant viewpoints: Weitzenfeld and Joy define anthropocentrism as a form of speciesism; although other forms are possible, anthropocentrism has proven the most pervasive and destructive one (10). On the other hand, scholars such as Tony Milligan attempt to steer the definition of speciesism, which they see as too “species-neutral,” toward the idea that it is conversely “a form of anthropocentrism” so as to highlight that it is “very clearly a species-restricted fault. It is a human fault and only a human fault” (224). It thus becomes almost synonymous with anthropocentrism as it focuses on humans who posit themselves at the top of a constructed hierarchy of value, often followed by apes and other mammals, and ending with such animals as fish and insects. Although this latter definition lends itself to criticism of distorted ideas of human supremacy, in this thesis I will utilize the more traditional and “species-neutral” idea of speciesism as put forth by Weitzenfeld and Joy, as it will serve to reveal a form of speciesism in *Watership Down* that does not center on humans, namely what I will come to call leporine-centrism.

Ethologist Marc Bekoff holds that speciesism and anthropocentrism, in their conscious as well as unconscious forms, ultimately “[reinforce] the property status of non-human animals and [undermine] our collective efforts to make the world a better place for all beings” (“Speciesism” 16). They uphold dangerous and human-made dualisms, hierarchies, and boundaries between “the animal” and “the human” that disregard humanity’s membership in the animal kingdom as emphasized by evolutionary theory. As a preemptive strategy to prevent anthropocentric notions from putting down strong roots already at an early age, Bekoff stresses the significance of dismantling anthropocentric ideologies in children’s minds “by supporting programs in humane education and conservation education that stress and encourage coexistence and peaceful relationships among all beings” (25). In this regard, I argue

that children's literature with its pronounced didactic intentions is crucial in solidifying or dissolving such mindsets, and stories that actively strive toward portraying individual, agential animals and dwell on more respectful human-animal relations can become important means to combat anthropocentrist notions. Especially those narratives that represent complex animal subjectivities can challenge traditional conceptions of animals as non-subjects, an idea which the following chapter will explore more fully.

2.2 The Status of Animals and the Concept of Animal Subjectivities

Pervasive anthropocentrist worldviews have led to what is now widely referred to as the Anthropocene,¹ the current geological age marked by environmental destruction, climate change, pollution and waste, an explosion of the human population, and certainly not least, animal exploitation, extermination, and extinction. Especially the last fifty years have seen an acute alteration of animal-human relationships

by means of farming and regimentalization at a demographic level unknown in the past, by means of genetic experimentation, the industrialization of what can be called the production for consumption of animal meat, artificial insemination on a massive scale, more and more audacious manipulations of the genome, the reduction of the animal not only to production and overactive reproduction (hormones, genetic crossbreeding, cloning, and so on) of meat for consumption but also of all sorts of other end products, and all of that in the service of a certain being and the so-called human well-being of man. (Derrida 394)

It is a violence that every human must be aware of but which is often ignored or deliberately forgotten. A technique to skirt responsibility and an excuse for continuing the systematic exploitation of animal beings is to maintain that they cannot suffer. The question of animal suffering has been an important theme that thinkers such as Aristotle, Heidegger, Descartes, and Kant have discussed for centuries (Derrida 396). At the end of the eighteenth century, philosopher Jeremy Bentham famously argued that the most crucial question regarding animal treatment is not to ask, "Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?" (311; emphasis in the original). The idea that animals are not able to suffer merely because they cannot tell of their sufferings in a human language is not sustainable; and even if there were reason to doubt whether animals could feel pain, even if one possessed the ability to willfully blind oneself to all evidence that points to the fact that nonhuman animals

¹ The term also has its critics (see e.g. Jamieson's "The Anthropocene"). Alternative names for our current geological age that are geared toward "decolonizing" the overly broad concept of the Anthropocene are especially those of the Capitalocene and Plantationocene (e.g. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*), which aim to place blame where it belongs and thus raise questions of accountability. Haraway's idea of the Chthulucene further emphasizes the inextricable entanglements that make up our more-than-human world.

can and do suffer, it would seem like the only and just course of action to start from the basis that they can instead of cannot, because the implications would otherwise be unthinkable.

Just like the ability to suffer, human intelligence is often considered a central quality that elevates humankind from the rest of animality. Already in the sixteenth century, philosopher Michel de Montaigne pointedly ridiculed the human naivety of denying animals intelligence by asking: “How does he [man] know, by the force of his intelligence, the secret internal stirrings of animals? By what comparison between them and us does he infer the stupidity that he attributes to them?” (331). This crucial quote puts human-animal relations throughout history into a nutshell: humans are either granting or withholding intelligence, sentience and by extension rights from animals because of a belief in their own superior intelligence and other qualities that are seen as exclusively human. Yet these comparisons across species lines and the subsequent denial of nonhuman intelligence is problematized by scholars such as Peter Godfrey Smith; studying the complex intelligence of octopuses, he states: “When we try to compare one animal’s brainpower with another’s, we [...] run into the fact that there is no single scale on which intelligence can be measured” (50). The best way to understand another animal’s intelligence, he explains, is by observing “what they can do” (51), especially by heeding their idiosyncrasies and individualities, which, he argues, are the particular markers for intelligence.

However, even today, with the abundance of scientific facts that reveal the complex lives and individuality of animal beings, many continue to hold on to the idea that animals are valueless and without the ability to feel and think. One might wonder how such a view continues to be possible, but on the other hand, what would it say about themselves if humans acknowledged that animals are sentient, subjective beings, and about the centuries of mass murders and ill-treatment that every single day adds to and in which most humans have played and continue to play a part? It is exceedingly more comfortable and convenient to embrace ignorance, absolving oneself from guilt by adhering to the notion that humans are the only creatures on earth that matter, that have intrinsic value, that are able to feel, to think, to suffer. Fueling and upholding this mindset is to take a step back and look at the bigger picture, the widespread capitalist interest in profit maximization, which is to a great part based on the reduction of nonhuman lives to mere resources. When the accumulation of wealth and the comfort of current lifestyles are valued above the lives of our nonhuman kin and the well-being of our planet, then it cannot come as a great surprise that attitudes that perpetuate nonhumans as incapable of thought and feeling are willfully upheld or oftentimes at best tentatively questioned.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw increasing debates about animal consciousness. Mental capacities in animals as well as the possibility of their sentience challenged the Cartesian idea of animals as machines and slaves to their instincts, although the question of sentience is to an extent still debated today, for example by behaviorists and mentalists (Spencer 470). It was especially in the twen-

tieth century that exacerbation of animal exploitation went hand in hand with a gradual intensification of anti-anthropocentrist attitudes; especially the second half of the century saw different movements calling for a reconfiguration of human-animal relations, supporting the “view that animals are to be valued for what they are and not simply for what they can do for us” (Johnson 25). Richard Ryder names different reasons for this more rapid shift since the 1960s and 1970s: hippie movements with their focus on a return to nature and new ideas on compassion were influential in changing conceptions of nonhuman animals; additionally, in the wake of liberal movements against racism and sexism, heightened awareness of injustices toward human groups was also increasingly extended to animals; and furthermore, discoveries in sciences continue to generate and disseminate new ideas about animal intelligence, sentience, cultures, and languages, and “have helped to ‘demystify’ the human being, putting us on level with the other animals” (3-4). Especially compelling is Dekoven’s argument that a renewed focus on animals and the shift of emphasis in popular culture from sensationalizing animal violence to focusing on their intelligence, resourcefulness, and meaningful relationships, is due to the realization that these animals are becoming increasingly endangered and that their habitats are in the process of being destroyed (364). The disillusionment of their own species makes many humans

[turn] away [...] in dismay at what [the human species] has wrought and [turn] toward other animals as a locus both of the other who calls us to ethics and of many of the things that, in our various modes of ethics, we value: purity of affect, unselfish altruism, absence of genocide and infrequency of random, unmotivated violence, and connection to what is for us a source of powerful spiritual experience. (367)

Kathleen Johnson sheds a somewhat less noble light on the reasons for this upsurge of anti-anthropocentrist movements, arguing that they have come into existence in such a number because “the wild animal” is no longer seen as threatening to people living in urban areas while working animals have become mostly unnecessary: “when subjugation of others is no longer viewed as necessary, it begins to lose its appeal” (25). Whatever the reasons for these new conceptions of animals, working against anthropocentrism and speciesism will remain crucial in the future. Oftentimes, one might not even be aware of one’s deep-rooted and socialized anthropocentrist attitudes. By reflecting on them and recognizing that they are based on detaching, dangerous chauvinism, they may be questioned and perhaps even disappear.

In the vein of battling anthropocentrism, the concept of animal subjectivities aims to counteract harmful ideas about animal beings by focusing on their rich inner lives. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* describes subjectivity in general as “[p]ertaining to the subject and his or her particular perspective, feelings, beliefs, and desires”; further, subjectivity “is phenomenological experience, or ‘what it’s like to be’ a certain conscious being” (Solomon 857). It is an interdisciplinary and complex concept

that is defined differently in fields such as psychology, philosophy, and literary studies; however, the particular notion of animal subjectivity should not be confused with ideas of and discourses on human subjectivities, as its main preoccupation is to elevate animals from the status of objects or machines to that of agential subjects and to insist that animal beings have distinct and rich ways of living in and perceiving the world (Corbey and Lanjouw 6).

To understand the concept of animal subjectivities, one should examine Heidegger's and Descartes' conceptions of animals more closely, as the concept is defined in opposition and in relation to the ideas of these two thinkers who have been particularly formative for contemporary ideas about nonhuman animals (Calarco 248). Descartes, as has already been touched upon, understands animals as "automata" by conceptualizing them without soul, reason, and consciousness. He denies animals the ability to suffer, thus refusing them any moral consideration. Although his idea of animals as machines was immediately and widely contested, it is nonetheless a notion that has survived until today and has justified animal maltreatment throughout the last centuries (Allen and Trestman). Another influential figure is Martin Heidegger who conceptualizes animals primarily to define humanity. He adopts an understanding of humans and animals in which both are "[delimited by] an absolute, insuperable abyss" (Calarco 252, 248), whereby the difference between humans and nonhumans is represented as essentialist rather than as a difference of degree. In *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik*, Heidegger proposes the theses that the stone is *weltlos*, the animal *weltarm*, and the human *weltbildend* (284); in this context, *welt* denotes "access to other beings," which Heidegger understands as a requirement for subjectivity (Calarco 250; Ratelle 109). While the animal as "poor in the world" does have some access to other beings, it is "impoverished" when compared to humans and their relations to others; further, the animal is limited by its "constrained, captivated behavior" and can thus never "be struck by or notice other beings as such" (Calarco 250, 251). Regarding this idea of the restricted subjectivity of animals, Amy Ratelle holds that as a corollary of Heidegger's ideas, "the bare life of animals is acknowledged in human law and philosophy, but only so that it can be explicitly excluded from a specifically human conception of subjectivity" (107). Heidegger's understanding of animals is often contested as he ignores the complexity and diversity of animal life and relationships, but his idea of reducing "animality [to function] as the definer of humanity" persists even today (Tonutti 184). In fact, it is increasingly questioned whether the category of "the human" is really a "value-neutral biological fact" or if it is not rather a "political fiction" defined stringently in opposition to the other (Weitzenfeld and Joy 8).

Jacques Derrida opposes Heidegger's notion of an exclusive human subjectivity in his influential essay "The Animal that Therefore I Am," which can be understood as the cornerstone of the concept of animal subjectivities. Derrida speaks about his experience of finding himself naked before the gaze of his cat, his shame at that moment elucidating that he feels himself in the presence of a subject rather than a passive object. Derrida is very particular that he is not generalizing, but that he is

speaking about one particular and subjective cat: “I see it as *this* irreplaceable living being” (378-79; emphasis in the original). Crucial in his essay is his differentiation between responding and reacting. Philosophers before him traditionally denied animals the ability to respond, an idea which he sees to “[bring] together *all* philosophers and all theoreticians *as such*” who write about animals (401; emphasis in the original). What is disregarded by these thinkers from the seventeenth to the end of the twentieth century is, according to Derrida, the fact that an animal “could *look* at them and [without a word] *address* them” (382; emphasis in the original). The cat’s gaze that addresses Derrida thus contradicts the Cartesian notion of animals as machines that can only behave reflexively and instead reveals the cat’s subjectivity. The contemplating gaze further announces that the cat is “struck by [and] notice[s]” the man standing in front of her (Calarco 251), that she is entering into a relationship with Derrida, thus repudiating Heidegger’s notion that all animals are poor in the world. However, while commending Derrida’s emphasis on the cat’s responding gaze, Haraway criticizes that he does not imagine “an alternative form of engagement,” that is, he does not discuss how to look back and shows no curiosity regarding what she calls the “intersecting gaze” (*Species* 21). To understand animals as subjects rather than objects, Haraway holds, one must return the gaze, attempt to understand and be understood, and express respect; “response-ability,” the obligation to respond to our fellow earth-dwellers, is at the center of her understanding of human-animal relations, which thus moves away from Derrida’s rather unilateral approach (71).

Before turning to animal subjectivities specifically in literature, one should add that in the following, the idea of the intersecting gaze out to be taken more figuratively than literally: not all animals have eyes or sight in the human sense, and one may presume that not all animals place the same emphasis on eye contact as humans do; rather, some animals might have different means of entering into relationships with others that are not based on visual cues. Therefore, to move away from a more human-centered understanding, the moment of meeting the other’s gaze should be understood as the idea of entering into a relationship with another that is based on response-ability, reciprocity, and respect.

2.3 Animal Subjectivities in Children’s Literature

2.3.1 *Historical Overview*

For thousands of years and across cultures, animals have been featured in folktales with the ability to speak human languages. Some of the earliest known animal stories are Aesopian fables in which animals mostly stand for an aspect of human behavior; it was not Aesop’s intention to delve into the minds of his fictional animals to explore or imagine how they would see the world (Spencer 471). Such animal fables have, according to Margo DeMello, the potential to “[help] us to understand what it is to be human”; however, in order to understand what it is to be another animal, it

oftentimes makes sense to turn to more contemporary literary animals, which tend to be increasingly written as creatures in their own right instead of as allegorical stand-ins for human beings (1, 4). DeMello contends that this shift stems from “the human desire [...] to get inside animal minds, to try to understand what they think, how they see the world, and to share, a bit, in their *umwelt*” (1). To add to this, I propose that in many cases this shift can also be ascribed to the attempt to question prominent anthropocentric worldviews in order to find adequate responses to the age of species extinction and exploitation, or, to refer to Anna Tsing et al.’s eponymous work, to cultivate “arts of living on a damaged planet.”

Catherine Elick and Jane Spencer trace the history of talking animals in children’s literature from the eighteenth century onward and point out some significant changes that coincide with paradigm shifts in Western cultures’ conceptions of animal beings. Stories about animals underwent a significant change in late eighteenth-century fiction with the emergence of the first novels written specifically for children. According to Spencer, children were seen as closely connected to nature and less rational than adults, which is why they were often considered to have “a special affinity with animals,” an idea particularly explored during the Romantic era. It was at this time that animal stories “[shifted] from the fabular, the allegorical and the satirical to the naturalistic, the empathetic and the inwardly focused” (470). Especially the idea of empathy became important, as talking animals in eighteenth-century fiction were mostly utilized to express anti-cruelty messages and to promote children’s ability to empathize. Oftentimes, however, this promoted empathy was entwined with ideas of human superiority, as young readers were encouraged to show kindness to animals as a form of responsibility toward lesser beings. Thus, the prevalent anthropocentric belief of God-given human dominance over other species is manifest in stories such as Dorothy Kilner’s *The Life and Perambulations of a Mouse* (1784) or Sarah Trimmer’s *The History of the Robins* (1786), which use animal characters more as devices to teach their young readership what it is to be human rather than to represent them as agential animal subjects (Elick 7). Along with a focus on empathy, teachings about animals became an important theme in eighteenth-century texts. Novels, poems, essays, sermons, and letters had the purpose of promulgating new “observations of animals’ form and habits” (Spencer 470), something that is taken up in *Watership Down* and other more contemporary animal fiction. Including naturalistic elements can, according to Spencer, promote both empathy and, especially in post-Darwinian narratives, the idea of kinship between humans and nonhuman animals (473): learning about the other may facilitate empathic responses as potential fear or misunderstanding can fall away, while these new scientific observations of animals further help to demystify animal lives and point to similarities between humans and nonhumans.

The early nineteenth century was pervaded by an abundance of animal testimonies and autobiographies, culminating in Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty* (1877). Especially the founding of the first English animal welfare organization in 1824, the So-

ciety for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, saw a rapid upsurge of animal narratives mostly written from the first-person perspective whose animal protagonists tended to speak of their suffering caused by humans. Although these stories could appeal to the reader's compassion, Elick argues that "as literary characters most nineteenth-century talking animals remain *objects* of human cruelty or kindness rather than fully fledged *subjects* in charge of their own destinies" (8; emphasis in the original). Further, nineteenth-century animal fiction mostly did not aspire to imagine the distinct otherness of animal minds. As Craig Smith points out, Sewell's "protagonist's experiences could only have befallen a horse, but his voice and emotions are recognizably human" (348). While animal subjectivities were thus not yet fully explored, these first-person narratives could have important effects on human conceptions of animal beings and on animal rights, as the example of *Black Beauty* shows perhaps most directly in the subsequent banning of the bearing rein (Hansen 209). These autobiographical narratives thus paved a way for the exploration of animal subjectivities that were to follow in their wake.

It was only in the twentieth century with the emergence of radical animal rights societies and Singer's *Animal Liberation* that there came a shift "from viewing animals as property to viewing them as bearers of their own rights" (Elick 8). In animal fiction, this translated into the desire to give animals a voice and agency, to elevate them to subjects "whose worth and welfare are not entirely dependent upon humans and whose power relations with people are more productively unstable than hierarchical" (Elick 1). Literary representations of animals tended to be more naturalistic while anthropomorphism was increasingly denounced, partly because of its relation to sentimentality (DeMello 366). Spencer argues that sentimentality in animal fiction was especially challenged in the mid-twentieth century because many of these stories were seen as wallowing in "self-indulgent emotionalism" (476) that sometimes even aimed toward perpetuating human superiority; although one should add that the pejorative view of sentimentality can, according to Dekoven, be a product of "instrumental rationality" that equates sentimentality to "weakness," "inferiority," and "emotionalism," and that its denunciation "[forbids] empathy for other animals" (366). While anthropomorphizing techniques and representations of literary animals were and are still used, the focus in the twentieth century shifted more and more toward representing animals as actual animals (DeMello 4). Today, there is a trend in animal fiction to explore the complexity of animal lives, "showing them capable of unbalancing human hierarchies and enjoying equitable relationships with people" that may enable readers to discard ideas about animals as serving humanity and instead to adopt less discriminatory conceptions of nonhumans and human-animal relationships (Elick 6).

2.3.2 (Anti-) Anthropocentrist Themes and Conventions

Kathleen Johnson argues that our understandings of animals are human constructions that are created and dispersed through their inclusion in cultural products (12, 17). She claims that anthropocentrist ideology is traditionally reinforced in animal

stories, for instance through an “us” versus “them” dichotomy and such themes as the taming of animals and the foregrounding of pet-master relationships that are often represented as “the only or most valuable way to relate to animals” (56). Simultaneously, however, anthropocentric ideology is oftentimes reversed, especially in narratives that are told from an animal’s perspective. A single story can simultaneously reject and perpetuate anthropocentrism, as ambivalence and contradictions are likewise prevalent in our diverse relationships with animals (17).

Arbuthnot and Sutherland group animal stories into three different categories: animals that behave like humans, animals as animals but with the ability to talk, and animals as “real” animals (392). While the first category can reveal much about humanity, the last two groups have the potential to portray animals in a more “credible” manner and to focus on representations of animal subjectivities. Regarding the choice of protagonists, Johnson shows that companion animals feature predominantly in children’s literature, that wild animals are a close second, but that domesticated animals are only very rarely given a voice and are mostly represented as dumb, mindless creatures, which reinforces their status as disposable objects. Further, animal protagonists tend to be mammals; a reason for this may be that it encourages identification, as mammals might not seem as alien to humans as, for example, fish or reptile protagonists (40-41).

In “Talking Animals in Children’s Fiction,” Elick names some themes that are shared by a majority of children’s fiction featuring talking animals. An important theme is that of animal agency: in more contemporary children’s stories, animals often attain subject status, sometimes even gaining “temporary authority over humans” (21). Struggles for power between animals and humans have the potential to undermine rigid boundaries and clear-cut categories as they indicate that “the species hierarchy is not as unassailable as it seems” (21). Literacy in animals, for instance, can become such a subversive tool regarding animal-human relations, as in O’Brien’s *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, in which the rats’ acquired literacy sets them above humans (20). Elick further discusses the bond between children and animals as a recurring theme: both groups with arguably little power often “achieve authority” (18), for instance in E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*. She also mentions an emphasis on rodents in children’s fiction, perhaps, as Margaret Blount proposes, because “it is easier to imagine [mice as] members of their own hidden social systems and to think that when out of sight they might be a part of a miniature mirror world” (152), which, of course, can also be said about rabbits in *Watership Down*. Further, animal artistry is another prominent theme, as, for example, web weaving in *Charlotte’s Web*, poetry in Kenneth Graham’s *The Wind in the Willows*, or singing in George Selden’s *The Cricket in Times Square*. Elick argues that this theme emphasizes “animal agency and empowerment” (20) and one can argue that it might foster admiration and respect in human readers. The role of art in *Watership Down*, however, is an ambiguous one, as it is often seen as evidence of rabbits transgressing species boundaries, which is consequently framed as unnatural.

The perhaps most contested theme is the practice of letting animal characters speak in a human language, which the remainder of this chapter will discuss. One might argue that human language is a vehicle for human identity, consciousness, and subjectivity; it follows that in putting animal experiences into human words, portrayals of animal characters are susceptible to misrepresentation as they are distorted by underlying human perspectives, perceptions, and frames of value; even translations of other human cultures tend to be somewhat subjective and can create power relations (DeMello 5). There is thus a danger of misrepresenting animals when putting human words into their mouths. What, however, would be the alternative? Derrida argues that

in forbidding myself thus to assign, interpret, or project, must I conversely give in to the other violence or stupidity, [...] that which would consist in suspending one's compassion and in depriving the animal of every power of manifestation, of the desire to manifest to *me* anything at all [...]? (387; emphasis in the original)

Humans have always been intrigued to know what nonhuman animals think or would say if they had command over a human language. By negating this urge to imagine and interpret, Derrida argues that one dismisses the animal being's ability to respond and to address, which, as a corollary, checks all compassion toward animals. It is the capacity of human language, therefore, to represent their inner worlds to us in terms that we understand, and that can thus engender empathy and curiosity.

Yet giving literary animals a human voice is often rejected on the grounds of anthropomorphic fallacy, as the divide between humans and nonhumans is frequently based on the animal's apparent lack of language. Aristotle, for instance, saw the ability to speak and rationalize as the main elements that separate and elevate the human from animality (DeMello 5). The assumption, however, that animals have no language just because it is not like human languages is not feasible. An abundance of scientific discoveries, not to mention personal experience with animals, clearly show that communication and complex languages are by no means restricted to the human species. Already five hundred years ago, Montaigne criticized the way humans withhold the idea of speech from animals by asking,

[F]or what is but speech, this faculty we see in them of complaining, rejoicing, calling to each other for help, inviting each other to love, as they do by the use of their voice? How could they not speak to one another? (335)

In this sense, one could even go so far as to argue that in many cases, the charge of anthropomorphism, seeing aspects like language as exclusively human, can be an act of anthropocentrism. This idea is shared by Dekoven who, to an extent, defends anthropomorphism by stating that it is sometimes used as a charge against those who dare ascribe qualities such as language, culture, intelligence, and emotions to animals (366); primatologist Frans de Waal terms this "anthropodenial," the rejection to recognize traits in animals if they are also shared by humankind (258). In

general, these different and contesting ideas about animal language can be traced back to one's definition of "language"; it can be understood as more inclusive, a way of communication via distinct, complex signs that is probably central in the lives of all animals, or as exclusive, defining it specifically so as to delimit humans from animals in a typical attempt to define humanity by that which other animals do not possess.

Further, by representing animal speech in literature through human language, animals are given subject status, as it is, according to Elick, a strategy to give animal characters a way toward self-definition: "When authors include animal utterances competing with human ones," she argues, "a novel's world becomes more equalitarian, its sense of truth more dialogic" (6, 19). This technique of representing animals as subjects, however, is complicated by the English language. As Julia Corbett points out in *Out of the Woods*, English, in contrast to some other languages, perpetuates an anthropocentric worldview as it "shapes and disconnects us and reinforces a hierarchy of humans over nature" (123). She mentions especially the subject-object basis of the English language that robs nonhumans of animacy by seeing everything apart from humans as objects, for example, through the usage of "it" and "which" when referring to anything that is not human (129). In a refreshing attempt to demonstrate how language can influence our sense of nonhuman animacy, she writes: "the flowers who smelled so sweet, the wind who was so alive, the trees who gave me this book" (130). In the following, I, too, will attempt to make aware of and challenge such discriminatory structures that permeate the English language by utilizing designations that indicate the subject status of animals.

2.3.3 *Rabbits in Children's Literature*

While I have so far dwelt on literary animals in general, this section will focus specifically on rabbit characters. Talking rabbits in animal fiction are no rarity: especially Beatrix Potter's canonical *Peter Rabbit* books come to mind while further well-known stories centering on rabbits are, for instance, Margery Williams's *The Velveteen Rabbit*, Robert Lawson's *Rabbit Hill*, and Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon* trilogy. Most of these stories overtly anthropomorphize their rabbit characters by letting them walk on their hind legs and wear human clothes, and they are generally depicted as cuddly, toy-like creatures. In contrast, in an introduction to a revised edition of Lockley's *The Private Life of the Rabbit*, Richard Adams wrote: "Far from being childishly cute, [wild rabbits] possess [...] by nature great courage and resourcefulness" (qtd. in Meyer, "Myth" 142). His stance can be clearly traced in *Watership Down*, which represents rabbits less as "childishly cute" animals but rather as wild, fighting creatures struggling for their survival. Adams might thus have chosen rabbits as his protagonists in order to work against conventional, stereotypical rabbit representations in children's literature. In addition, as rabbits are ubiquitous in England, their lives intersecting with those of humans, rabbit protagonists have the potential to meet human characters frequently, thus revealing complex relationships between both species. In this regard, the common conception of rabbits as both pests and

pets lends itself not only to plot building, but also to explorations of the contrasting and illogical notions humans sometimes harbor of one and the same animal species.

Edgar L. Chapman, who sees Adams' rabbits as mere allegories for humans, holds that they are chosen as protagonists because rabbits, similar to "enlightened" humans,

are a non-aggressive species who rise to heroism only on special occasions. [...] Since enlightened moderns (for the most part) tend to distrust warriors and warrior cultures (justifiably I would say), we might be more uneasy about the heroism of a society of wolves. (7)

He likens the choice of rabbits to that of the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*, as it engenders identification with and compassion for the underdog. However, Chapman's claims are contentious in multiple ways: I will attempt to show in this thesis that, while the rabbits in *Watership Down* are definitely used to reveal something about human affairs, it would be too simplistic to reduce them to the role of allegorical stand-ins for humans; the careful and detailed representations of rabbit subjectivities clearly emphasize that the rabbits are first and foremost rabbits in their own right instead of humans dressed up in fur. Of course, Chapman's binary opposition between enlightened and warrior cultures is more than problematic, a contrast that is also employed in *Watership Down* and to which I will dedicate the chapter "'Primitive' and 'Civilized' Humans."

Considering its breaks with conventions of classical rabbit stories, the question arises whether one can consider *Watership Down* a children's novel. It developed out of bedtime stories for Adams' two daughters (Adams, "Interview") but its exploration of themes such as death, violence, and totalitarianism may indicate that the novel is not predominantly aimed at younger audiences. In fact, it seems as if Adams were bent upon elevating his novel from the confines of "mere" children's to "serious" literature, the most obvious example being the epigraphs that introduce every new chapter. Adams mostly chose distinctly highbrow and canonical texts for these epigraphs, such as Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Yeats's "A Woman Young and Old," Lorenzo da Ponte's *Così fan Tutte*, and W. H. Auden's "The Witanesses." By including epigraphs in multiple languages by ancient Greek dramatists, philosophers, and well-known British as well as international writers, Adams portrays himself as erudite and arguably aims to place his novel on the same level as these texts. Additionally, aspects such as the considerable length of the novel and the lack of pictures and drawings that are, for instance, so crucial in *Peter Rabbit* depart from the above-mentioned rabbit stories for children; and yet, *Watership Down* is consistently classified as a children's book. I argue that this is due mainly to its inclusion of animal protagonists. Animal stories are usually categorized as less serious literature, reflecting poorly on our culture's view of animals as something to amuse children with, but not as serious or important enough for much of

adult literature. This is reminiscent of the reception of Virginia Woolf's novel *Flush*, which narrates the life of a dog and about whose little scholarly attention

there persists a faint odor of professional embarrassment. [...] It is as if, in writing about a dog, Woolf were doing something not merely atypical but unworthy of a great writer. (Smith 359)

3 Animal Subjectivities in *Watership Down*

3.1 Representations of Rabbit Behavior and Appearance

The following chapters will constitute a close reading of *Watership Down* with a focus on the rabbits from Hazel's warren. This first part will examine how the narrator describes animals "from the outside," so as yet without delving into their minds, while the second part focuses on the inner lives of rabbits as based on both the authority of naturalist Lockley as well as on Adams' imagination – a combination that can be found in animal fiction since the advent of children's literature. I will repeatedly emphasize that it is the combination of sameness and otherness that makes these rabbit representations work: rabbits are depicted as similar and yet different from humans, which evokes a sense of identification while it simultaneously acknowledges the otherness of rabbit lives. However, representing animals can be a double-edged sword: Armbruster argues that if they are depicted as too similar to humans, they are bound to be criticized for anthropomorphism; if too different, they are in danger of alienating too much, which has been used as an argument for animal destruction (25). As a way out of this difficulty, Armbruster names a focus on accuracy in the representation of animals and the inclusion of contemporary research as a basis for fictional accounts of the animal's inner worlds (23). The best animal representations for her are those that

remind the reader of the real animals that hover outside the human-created text, both inviting the reader to identify with the nonhuman animal as a fellow living being and reminding him or her of the inevitable differences between humans and other species. (24)

I will show that *Watership Down* attempts to walk this fine line: by basing representations of literary rabbits on the then-contemporary research of Lockley's *The Private Life of the Rabbit*, which, according to the book's foreword, gave "naturalists an entirely new picture of the rabbit's way of life" (Willock), *Watership Down* is able to portray rabbits both in terms of kinship and otherness in relation to their human readership.

3.1.1 Lockley's *The Private Life of the Rabbit*

Some animal narratives draw on scientific texts in order to teach about animals and are thus part of the genre of "scientifically oriented" stories (Bernaerts et al. 82-83).

Already before the story itself begins, *Watership Down* reveals itself to be such a scientifically guided text: in his acknowledgments, Adams voices his gratitude to Ronald M. Lockley and his book *The Private Life of the Rabbit*, published in 1964, which Adams used to learn about “rabbits and their ways.” He states that

[a]nyone who wishes to know more about the migrations of yearlings, about pressing chin glands, chewing pellets, the effects of over-crowding in warrens, the phenomenon of reabsorption of fertilized embryos, the capacity of buck rabbits to fight stoats, or any other features of Lapine life, should refer to that definitive work. [s.p.]

Lockley is mentioned and quoted a few times in the novel itself, as for instance when the narrator remarks that “[r]abbits (says Mr Lockley) are like human beings in many ways” (159), an idea that correlates with Lockley’s repeated assertion throughout his book that “humans are so rabbit” (24). Lockley’s influence on *Watership Down* can, in fact, be traced throughout the entire novel, as the narrative is pervaded by information and facts regarding rabbit life that aim to create a foundation of realistic behavior and habits on which the exploration of the inner lives of rabbits can rest without seeming too far-fetched.

Before examining Adams’ inclusion of rabbit facts, one should first turn to Lockley’s book itself. In a 1973 edition, the foreword written by wildlife documentary writer Colin Willock constitutes a perfect example of a thoroughly anthropocentric standpoint, as he states that the “reasonable claims for people, their need for food, water, industry, housing, must, in most cases, take priority over the claims of wildlife.” Just exactly why human needs are put over those of nonhuman animals is not discussed further, and when he finally speaks of the need to protect wildlife, he does not do this out of recognition of the animals’ right to live, but because “people are beginning to realise that they need wildlife as much as they need many other amenities for their own pleasure and delight.” Wildlife is reduced to a mere amenity and the worth of animals is based on their ability to give “pleasure” and to “delight” the human species. While the foreword already shows clear anthropocentric ideas, Lockley himself can by no means be called an animal rights activist. In fact, he dedicates the first chapter of his book to describing how he sporadically tried to wipe out the entire rabbit population on his newly leased island in Wales, killing about 20,000 rabbits to make way for another breed that he intended to keep for its fur. Over the span of a few years, Lockley used steel traps and snares for this purpose and tried to introduce artificial myxomatosis on his island to learn more about this rabbit sickness, although this experiment failed. Following this, he allowed the Universities Federation of Animal Welfare to use calcium cyanide dust on the rabbits as a “demonstration of human rabbit control” (18), which killed about 10,000 rabbits. In his last attempt to exterminate the remaining rabbits, he used gas, something that Adams takes up in his novel. However, despite Lockley’s best efforts, the rabbit population would not be eradicated, and only a few years later the island was again

populated by a large number of wild rabbits. Lockley thus gave up on trying to exterminate them and instead chose to observe their behavior over the course of five years, as a result of which he wrote *The Private Life*.

Despite his desire to kill them, Lockley professes an interest to know what goes on in rabbit minds, stating that although much is known about the anatomy of rabbits, their minds are still mostly a mystery to humans. He sees them as creatures with reason, “not just automatons,” thus openly positioning himself against the Cartesian view of animals (28, 22). Just as Adams’ rabbits might also be seen as metaphors for humanity, as will be discussed in a later chapter, so does Lockley employ human-rabbit parallels throughout his book by highlighting similarities between both species. Especially salient is the twist of anthropocentric language which the last sentences of the book display: “Rabbits are so human. Or is it the other way around – humans are so rabbit?” (164). Lockley states that the difference between humans and rabbits “is rather in degree than in kind” (27) and goes on to describe the similarities between organs, nerves, and senses of rabbits and humans, stating that rabbits’ perception of the world is probably “[n]ot as near as Beatrix Potter’s caricatures would suggest, but perhaps nearer than the skeptics suppose” (22-23). Lockley’s writing, then, is pervaded paradoxically by both the idea that rabbits’ lives are far less valuable than human ones and simultaneously by the insistence that rabbits have thoughts and feelings and complex social lives, not unlike humans. He recognizes rabbits as sentient beings and yet has no inhibitions about killing them; which, one might argue, is even worse than if he exterminated rabbits while believing them to be non-sentient. One might call his attitude a soft form of anthropocentrism in which rabbits and humans are not divided by an insurmountable divide, but are on a continuum “which hierarchically ranks humans and animal others along a scale by the degree to which they are ‘human,’ with some human capacity – usually reason – privileged as the most essential and valuable” (Weitzenfeld and Joy 5).

Throughout his book, Lockley consistently anthropomorphizes the rabbits he observed, for instance referring to rabbit kittens as “children” (104) and to the doe as a “woman” (102). A continuous analogy he makes use of is calling the dominant buck the “king” (77), his doe a “queen” (48), the area he dominates a “royal palace” (54), and the other rabbits “subordinate subjects” (51). When speaking thus of kings and queens and rivals who “usurped [the king’s] throne” (51), the book at times reads like a medieval account of the rise and fall of a kingdom, which might be an attempt to make it more accessible to wider audiences. Further, Lockley consistently uses the concept of marriage to make sense of rabbit relationships: two rabbits are “happily ‘married’” (42), the doe is a “wife” (47), and the buck “[behaves] like a loyal, courteous husband” (46). In this regard, Lockley introduces the idea of male dominance over does: the buck “easily ‘dominated’ his two females, [...] [he] possessed the two does” (99). Lockley then goes on to project his ideas of rabbit behavior on human women as well: he observes two does “who, like the majority of women the

world over, loved, lived and stayed at home” (76); further, he claims that the rabbit Bertha

exhibited the conservatism and love of established home which proved characteristic [...] of the mature female rabbit, as it is of many other animals, including man, where woman makes the home and usually does not wish to leave it unless compelled by necessity. (55)

In his discussion of does, Lockley evokes the outdated model of separate spheres which focuses on gendered difference and sees woman’s place in domesticity. It is one thing to narrate one’s observations regarding the behavior of does, but another, of course, to interpret it along sexist worldviews and to project it on the entirety of womankind, especially as a political means to highlight and even attempt to naturalize one’s opinion of the place of women in human societies. This can be seen as an appeal to nature, as Lockley argues that, because some wild rabbits display this kind of gendered behavior, it must be natural for humans as well. Lastly, although Lockley anthropomorphizes consistently and with abundance, it is only when he portrays rabbits with feelings that he concedes that some may fault him with this fallacy, voicing his worry that “no doubt we shall be accused of anthropomorphism if we insist that rabbits can feel lonely” (54). The idea that rabbits have emotions such as loneliness seems to him more alien and far-fetched than that their lives are governed by ideas of conservative gender roles, marriage, and forms of patriarchy. All of this shows that on the one hand, Lockley recognizes the animality of humans by putting them on a continuum with other animals, thus rejecting one outdated idea, namely the notion of the Cartesian divide; while simultaneously reinforcing another, that of conservative gender roles. As later chapters will show, this is an ambiguity that is emulated in *Watership Down*.

3.1.2 *The Human Narrator and Teachings on Rabbits*

Already *Watership Down*’s acknowledgments, in which Adams refers the reader to *The Private Life*, shows that the novel aims to arouse the reader’s interest and curiosity regarding rabbit lives. In the following, I will examine how Adams makes use of the scientific information he derived from Lockley’s book. A narrative technique that is used throughout the novel is to foreground the extradiegetic human narrator who often overtly intervenes to address his human readership. The humanness of the omniscient narrator can be identified in various instances: for example, the narrator mentions the locations featured in the novel by their human names, such as Newton Common (48), Hampshire (187), and the eponymous hill Watership Down, which the rabbits simply call the hill. The narrator’s identification with humankind is especially evident in passages that use such words as “us” in contrast to animal others: “The wise Mr Lockley has told us that wild rabbits live for two or three years. He knows everything about rabbits” (470); a quote that not only emphasizes Lockley’s influence but also highlights both the reader and the narrator’s membership in the human species.

The narrator is framed as an authority on rabbits who consistently aims to teach about rabbit lives. To name just a few instances, he informs the reader that “[r]abbits avoid close woodland, where the ground is shady, damp and grassless and they feel menaced by the undergrowth” (22); that “[l]ike all wild animals, rabbits can swim if they have to” (31), or that “[r]abbits are lively at nightfall” (89). Regarding rabbit bodies, the narrator inserts in parentheses that “a rabbit’s foot has no pads” (43), and when speaking of differing behavior in does and bucks respectively, he asserts that “[b]ucks do not usually dig much [...]. Real digging is done for the most part by does preparing for litters” (127). The narrator further corrects wrong assumptions about rabbits: “Some people have the idea that rabbits spend a good deal of their time running away from foxes [...]. But many rabbits go all their lives without seeing a fox” (280). Finally, on rabbit movements, he explains that

[m]any rabbits spend all their lives in the same place and never run more than a hundred yards at a stretch [...]. They have two natural gaits – the gentle, lolling, forward movement [...] and the lightning dash for cover that every human has seen some time or other. (24)

This quote again emphasizes that the human narrator is speaking to a human audience by relying on the readers’ experiences and observations of rabbits.

While the narrator teaches predominantly about rabbits, other animals are also touched upon; for instance: “A fox trying to catch a rabbit usually creeps upwind under cover [...]. It is said that sometimes he fascinates them, as the weasel does, by rolling and playing in the open, coming closer little by little until he can make a grab” (280) – this fact, like so many others, Adams derived from Lockley who describes this behavior in *The Private Life* (159). Regarding a burying beetle, the narrator explains that “these beetles come to dead bodies [...]. They will dig away the earth from under the bodies [...]. and then lay their eggs on them before covering them with soil” (44). Further, concerning black-headed gulls, the narrator informs that they “are gregarious. They live in colonies [...]. They move southwards in the breeding season” (183). All of this shows that Adams took care to ground the behavior of the literary characters in naturalistic facts, thus infusing the fictional plot with a note of factual objectiveness, as if an ethologist were repeatedly stepping into the story-world to instill knowledge not only about rabbits but also about other animal species that feature in the rabbits’ worlds. The didactic purpose of the narrator thus aims to create a framework of authority and reliability that is geared toward making his accounts of rabbit subjectivities all the more tenable.

While mediating animal facts, the narrator, similar to Lockley, sometimes uses human parallels to explain the behavior and being-in-the-world of animals in terms that humans can more easily understand:

A man walks upright. For him it is strenuous to climb a steep hill, because he has to keep pushing his own vertical mass upwards. [...]. The rabbit is better off. His forelegs support his horizontal body and the great back legs do the work. [...] Rabbits can go fast uphill. In fact,

they have so much power behind that they find going downhill awkward, and sometimes, in flight down a steep place, they may actually go head over heels. (123)

With the help of this juxtaposition, which tries to evoke a sense of the differing physiology of both species, the reader can more readily imagine what it would be like to inhabit the body of a rabbit. The narrator then goes on to directly address the human reader: “The rabbits’ anxieties and strain in climbing the down were different, therefore, from those which you, reader, will experience if you go there” (123). This sentence makes it absolutely clear that the narrator and the readership are outside of rabbit experientiality but that it is the narrator’s aim to make accessible the worlds of the other, to arouse curiosity, and to stimulate the reader’s imagination. The direct address in this quote contributes to this by including the readership in the storyworld, thus for a moment breaking the fourth wall which might have inhibited the reader from stepping into the world of the rabbits.

Yet the reader’s submersion into rabbit lives is complicated by the overt humanness of the narrator. Although the rabbit focalizers “other” the narrative, the intervention of a human voice minimizes the effect of defamiliarization – an animal narrator would perhaps be able to immerse the reader more thoroughly in a nonhuman world. The interposition of the human narrator reminds the readers of their humanness, which creates a gulf between them and the animal worlds, yet in the next moment, they are pulled back into these worlds via the animal focalizer; it is a constant stepping in and submerging oneself, identification, and being pulled out again, alienation. In a way, one could argue that the overtly human narrator thus prevents readers from delving into the minds and bodies of literary animals and inhibits them from intensely experiencing the worlds of the animal characters. On the other hand, the human narrator is able to arouse the reader’s curiosity as he can teach about rabbit lives, which enables a deeper understanding of rabbits and might invite a more curious and interested gaze in the Derridean sense. Curiosity is what Haraway calls a key component in meeting the other’s gaze, wanting to know “more at the end of the day than at the beginning” (*Species* 22, 36). Thus, the teaching narrator makes possible what Haraway calls the intersecting gaze by creating the desire and curiosity to meet the animal’s gaze in the first place.

The detailed descriptions of the behavior, physical appearance, and overall facts about the lives of different animals stated in an authoritative manner correlate with Armbruster’s assertion that credible animal representations should “remind the reader of the real animals that hover outside the human-created text” (24). Learning scientific facts about rabbits is a first step toward understanding the other, as they emphasize the highly complex lives of rabbits, introducing them to the reader in a way that may seem familiar and yet different: the teachings emphasize that rabbits have their own, distinct rabbit ways, accentuating their otherness, while kinship is simultaneously stressed by revealing that in many cases their lives share similarities with human ones. The creation of a storyworld aimed at believability is not only manifest in these teachings about nonhuman animals, however; Adams’ focus on

accuracy in his novel can also be identified in his choice of setting. In a section at the beginning of the novel called “Notes,” he writes that “Nuthanger Farm is a real place, like all other places in the book,” and the settings are often described in detail with a particular focus on the local flora. Further, a detailed map of the part of Hampshire through which the rabbits travel is included for the reader’s orientation.

3.2 Imagining the Inner Lives of Rabbits

As has been shown, the descriptions of rabbit lives via a human narrator reveal Adams’ reliance on scientific observations for creating frameworks of credibility. However, regarding the inner lives of animals, even natural sciences, which are so often framed as dominating the production of truth and knowledge, have not sufficiently been able to establish how animals experience their worlds. In his influential essay “What Is It Like to Be a Bat,” philosopher Thomas Nagel famously pointed out that there can be no way of knowing the subjective experience of another. It is impossible to ever understand with certainty how animals of other species experience their lives; we might come close to knowing, perhaps, in ephemeral moments of empathy or in instances of transcending imagination. Yet at the same time, we can never know what it is like to be another member of our own species, either – although we might be able to take a more sophisticated guess, as we share the same senses and similar bodies. Yet with regard to literature, as Bernaerts et al. argue, this unknowability “is quite unproblematic, since the significance of literary practices lies elsewhere”: instead of “producing new scientific knowledge” (76), these animal representations can be seen as taking off where science ends: from the imagination, crossing the apparently unbridgeable divide between human and animal, self and other, and delving into the body and world of another.

Especially forms of writing such as fiction and poetry have the advantage of going beyond conventional boundaries as they possess the potential of “thinking with animals,” which Daston and Mitman define as the “yearning to transcend the confines of self and species, to understand from the inside” (7). But also other methods have been undertaken to attempt to enter the minds of animal beings: from writer Charles Foster describing his experiences of digging a burrow and eating earthworms to try to live like the badger, to ethologists like Barbara Smuts who learned the social conventions of baboons and the way they think, feel, and live by spending two years almost entirely in their midst. There is no indication that Adams also relied on first-hand observations of rabbits or that he established a personal relationship with members of the species he so intimately tried to depict. Rather, he derived his information from second-hand accounts mediated by another human being. Although Lockley’s representations of rabbits are certainly detailed, these rabbits were already “translated” once and are mostly described “from above” as well as imbued with personal ideologies. In addition, as has been shown, his book reveals strong anthropocentrist mindsets, especially in his emphasis on how he relentlessly attempted to exterminate rabbits for his own gain. Although *Watership Down* relies

heavily on Lockley's information, it simultaneously criticizes such practices like gassing, snaring, or infecting rabbits with myxomatosis which Lockley espouses, and instead imagines what it would be like to be a rabbit in such a situation, thus attempting to think with animals rather than about them. Further, one might argue that while Adams perhaps did not interact with animal communities as Lockley or Smuts did, this lack of in-depth knowledge leaves room for imagination, a potential he makes the most of in his endeavors to delve into the worlds and minds of rabbits.

Instead of as mere automata or with only little access to *welt*, the rabbits in *Watership Down* display rich subjectivities that enable them to have sentience, phenomenological experience, and to form their own ideas about the world. Notably, in *Watership Down* it is not one rabbit that is elevated from her or his species or that is portrayed as exceptional as in some other children's stories; in *Charlotte's Web*, for instance, one pig attains exceptionalism and the plot follows the attempt to prevent the farmer from killing him – in all probability in expense for another unnamed farmyard animal that must be killed in his stead. In *Watership Down*, it is another matter: all rabbits are made exceptional, all are given subjectivity, unique characteristics, and individuality.² The rabbits are distinct subjects while simultaneously experiencing life, as Barbara Smuts terms it, as “selves-in-community” (299), which is made especially clear through Adams' description of wild rabbits as “creatures who think of themselves primarily as part of a group and only secondary, if at all, as individuals” (16). Their relatedness, which is emphasized throughout the novel, correlates with Haraway's statement that “[t]o be one is always to *become with many*” (*Species* 4; emphasis in the original), an idea that the close-knit warren life of the rabbits is able to illustrate in a very concrete way.

The belief in human exceptionalism is based on the idea that human beings can boast of features and qualities that are unique to their species, such as reason, language, and cultures. In the following chapters, I will examine how *Watership Down* goes against this dogmatism by portraying rabbits as possessing many of these apparently human traits but also by emphasizing that their being-in-the-world is different from that of humans – rabbits are, after all, more than human beings clad in fur. Collective rabbit subjectivities in *Watership Down* are revealed through their distinct ways of sensing the world, leporine worldviews and knowledge, their rabbit language, complex social structures, and cultural practices. All of these aspects aim to create representations of rabbits that reject reductive Cartesian and Heideggerian conceptions of animals and instead represent them as subjects in their own right.

² One should say, all *male* rabbits; does, as will be discussed in the chapter “Society,” are granted very little agency or subjectivity throughout the novel.

3.2.1 *Sensing the World: Smell, Sound, and Sight*

Fiction that aims to convey nonhuman subjectivities often focuses on differences between how humans and animals sense the world. Virginia Woolf's *Flush* is an illustrative and well-known example, as the canine protagonist Flush's perceptions are contrasted with those of humans:

The greatest poets in the world have smelt nothing in the world but roses on the one hand, and dung on the other. The infinite gradations that lie between are unrecorded. Yet it was in the world of smell that Flush mostly lived [...]. To describe his simplest experience with a chop or biscuit is beyond our power. (86)

In this anti-anthropocentric passage, *Flush*'s narrator recognizes the impossibility of a human writer to convey or even fully grasp the experientiality of other animals. This passage thus decenters the human, granting animals subjectivity that goes beyond what human beings can understand. The focus on the rabbits' different perception of the world is also a consistent and important way in which Adams creates distinct rabbit subjectivities in *Watership Down*. He seems to comply with Lockley's claim that "[t]o know the mind of an animal, one needs at least some knowledge of the physiology of the senses of the living creature" (22). Having read *The Private Life*, Adams must have known that rabbit anatomy especially favors smell and hearing (Lockley 24, 27); throughout the novel, therefore, the rabbits' navigation through the world occurs on an olfactory, an auditory and sometimes more secondarily on a visual level. As the rabbit Blackberry remarks, they are safe as long as they "can smell and see and hear" (129).

Smells are depicted as essential in the rabbits' day-to-day survival. Especially regarding predators, this sense is key as it is directly connected to instincts. The smell of an enemy results in an immediate impulse to act accordingly by running, hiding, or staying still: "There was no smell of ferret or weasel. No instinct told him to run" (8), although later, "a terrible miasma of dog-smell [...] gripped him with fear and called 'Run! Run!' down every nerve" (432). But it is not only threatening smells that hold information for the rabbits' survival: at one point, Hazel notices "a strong, fresh, sweet fragrance [...]. It was healthy enough. There was no harm in it" (39). It turns out to be a beanfield, and Hazel can immediately tell by its scent alone that these unfamiliar plants are not edible (40). The rabbits' olfactory navigation through the world further comes to their aid as it helps them avoid sickness, for example, when they can smell if there has been death or disease in an abandoned rabbit warren (126). Further, scents help them to tell the time while being underground: "some time after sunrise, by the smell of it. The scent of apple blossom was plain enough" (80). It is especially at night that they rely heavily on this particular sense: in the unfamiliar surroundings of a dark forest, it tells the rabbits of an "extraordinary, rank animal smell" that turns out to be a predator (25). They can even tell where the other has been by using their noses alone: "your feet smell of farmyard – hens' droppings and bran" (204).

Hearing seems to be of equal importance for rabbit survival and navigation through the world, and specific sounds and the meaning that they convey to Hazel's rabbits can affect their mood and well-being. In the darkness of an unfamiliar wood,

the breeze brought distant night-sounds across the open common. A cock crowed. A dog ran barking and a man shouted at it. A little owl called "Kee-wik, kee-wik" and something – a vole or a shrew – gave a sudden squeal. There was not a noise but seemed to tell of danger. (48-9)

After this anxious night in the woods, an unexpected sound cheers Hazel up:

At this moment, [...] he suddenly realized that something had lightened his spirits. What could it be? A smell? A sound? Then he knew. Near-by, across the river, a lark had begun to twitter and climb. It was morning. (31)

The song of the lark as well as the subsequent calls of a blackbird and a wood pigeon hold information and meaning that influence Hazel even before he becomes consciously aware of them. Further, rabbit hearing is generally depicted as more sensitive than that of the human reader. From rather far away, they can identify the number of rabbits that are approaching: "I can hear only two rabbits [...]. And one of them sounds exhausted" (221), and Adams sometimes uses human parallels to convey differences in human-rabbit hearing; regarding the cries of bats, the narrator states that "[a] human ear would hardly have heard them, but to the rabbits the air was full of their calls" (288). To a human readership, the representation of leporine smelling and hearing in comparison to their weaker human senses might seem like an impressive ability that alters the very fabric of one's experience in the world. The emphasis that is laid on these two senses helps to establish the distinctness of rabbit lives and encourages readers not only to imagine how different senses entail a different being-in-the-world but also to feel awe and respect in the face of such capabilities.

While the senses of smell and hearing are especially dwelt on throughout the novel, the importance of vision is less emphasized, thus moving away from the prevalent oculo-centrism of many human cultures that privilege sight over other senses. Especially because the rabbits spend so much of their time underground in the dark, "touch, smell and hearing convey as much or more to them as sight" (71). Rabbit vision is mostly mentioned to stress their different height perspectives, as objects that would seem small to humans are described as looming above the rabbits. For instance, when they find themselves in an unfamiliar area full of "peat, gorse and silver birch," the rabbits feel anxious and frightened: "They hesitated among the thick heather, unable to see more than a few feet ahead" (48). The scene goes on to explain how the ground looks to them in detail, as it is almost all that the rabbits can see in the heather: "The ground was broken by rifts and pits of naked, black peat, where water lay and sharp, white stones, some as big as a pigeon's, some as a rabbit's skull, glimmered in the moonlight" (48). One might assume that humans, with their

difference in stature, would derive a completely different picture of the same area. This quote, as the next subchapter will discuss more in detail, also shows a familiarity with death that humans may be less accustomed to, as deceased animals are, of course, not buried or cremated, but lie where the animal has died. Further, with their eyes so close to the ground, the rabbits have a completely different relation to smaller animals, as “[e]verywhere they came upon beetles, spiders and small lizards, which scurried away as they pushed through the fibrous, resistant heather” (48). The entirety of this passage conveys an unfamiliar perspective, imagining what the world would look like from less than half a meter above the ground, while the perspective of quadruped creatures is also frequently emphasized: “Hazel, like nearly all wild animals, was unaccustomed to look up at the sky. What he thought of as the sky was the horizon, usually broken by trees and hedges” (124). The rabbits’ perceptions of the world are thus portrayed as distinctly different from human ones as their bodies and senses engender a thoroughly leporine being-in-the-world.

3.2.2 *Leporine Worldviews: Death, Sympathy, Violence, and Romantic Love*

This chapter will explore distinct leporine worldviews, specifically how the rabbits in *Watership Down* understand death, sympathy, violence, and romantic love. All in all, it is salient that both otherness and similarity are merged in rabbit worldviews, and that representations of their ways and perspectives serve to walk the fine line between excessive anthropomorphism and disconcerting alienation from the literary rabbits. In their views on death, it is especially rabbit otherness that is accentuated. The narrator states that “[r]abbits live close to death” (185), which is why they can be remarkably nonchalant when other rabbits are killed. For instance, when suspecting that one of their lot has been caught by a predator, the rabbit Dandelion remarks: “What a shame to lose him, though, [...] just when we’d reached Fiver’s hills without losing anyone” (125). Similarly, when a doe is killed by a fox, a variation of these words is reiterated: “Poor little beast [...]. Never mind, [...] these things happen” (386-87). The death of a companion is depicted as a regrettable but common occurrence in their everyday lives, not to be avoided due to the great number of predators that hunt rabbits. The threat of death is therefore seen as a part of a harsh reality, and although it is lamented, the grief for deceased companions soon makes way for the everyday claims of their lives: “Would that the dead were not dead! But there is grass that must be eaten, pellets that must be chewed, hraka [rabbit droppings] that must be passed, holes that must be dug, sleep that must be slept” (160). Further, there are no traditions as in human cultures that mark the death of another rabbit. In fact, the narrator explains that when rabbits are badly wounded or grow so old that they sense that death is upon them, they leave their warren quietly to die in solitude: in this way, a doe “had felt that she was going to die and, in the manner of animals, had slipped away” (380).

Together with this emphasis on otherness expressed through a somewhat callous view of death, similarities to humans are also evoked: after Hazel is shot by a farmer and has seemingly died, the rabbits experience their grief in a manner similar

to a child, who, when he “is told [...] that a person he has known is dead, [...] may well fail to comprehend it and later ask [...] where the dead person is and when he is coming back” (228). Rabbit emotions are thus likened to that of a child who does not entirely grasp the idea of death, indicating a sense of innocence and naivety and thus playing into the pervasive idea in animal rights discourses that aims to place intelligent mammals on the same level as children or mentally challenged humans (Dekoven 363). In another passage that shows the rabbits as less indifferent, the rabbits find Bigwig caught in a snare and deem him dead, upon which Hazel resolves to “get the others away before the dreadful loss could drain their courage and break their spirit [...] and he must do his best to see that all of them – even he himself – put what had happened out of mind, forever” (110). The more intense feelings that the rabbits experience when they believe Bigwig and later Hazel to be dead can, on the one hand, be ascribed to the fact that these two rabbits are seen as the leaders of the warren and are looked up to by the other rabbits; but the rabbits’ shock and grief can further be attributed to the manner in which Hazel and Bigwig have been hurt: when rabbits are killed by other animals, it is seen as part of the natural order, but Hazel is almost killed by a shotgun and Bigwig by a snare, and such human-made death devices are seen as deeply unnatural, unpredictable, and barbarous, and thus evoke deeper reactions from the rabbit onlookers.

While the last chapter of this thesis will consider instances of empathy among different species, this part will examine sympathy among the rabbits themselves. Although sometimes used synonymously, *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* explains sympathy as the sharing of feelings while empathy refers to “understanding the feelings of another but [...] not necessarily [sharing] them.” As the following will show, when analyzing rabbits among themselves, one should speak of sympathy rather than empathy. While the rabbit Holly recounts how humans exterminated almost all the rabbits of Sandleford Warren, the narrator describes strong emotions and excessive sympathy in the listening rabbits:

Hazel and his companions had suffered extremes of grief and horror during the telling of Holly’s tale. Pipkin had cried and trembled piteously [...] and Acorn and Speedwell had been seized with convulsive choking as Bluebell told of the poisonous gas that murdered underground [...]. To themselves, they seemed to struggle in the poisoned runs. (159)

The rabbits feel the tragedies of others as if they are happening to themselves; as the narrator later states, “To watch another in danger can be almost as bad as sharing it” (376). This highlights the rabbits’ collectivism, their beings so entangled with each other that they feel the other’s pain and fear as their own; in these fleeting moments of sympathy, the boundaries between individual bodies and minds of rabbits almost seem to dissolve. This display of rabbit grief further goes against anthropocentric beliefs that see humans as the only beings who are able to suffer, an idea that has been used for centuries to justify animal exploitation. Richard Ryder shows that

powerful classes often diminish or negate the suffering capability of groups they see as inferior; as an example, he remarks that African slaves were seen as devoid of this capacity, which was consequently used as an argument to uphold slavery (8). By emphasizing rabbit suffering in this as well as in other passages throughout the novel, Adams works against human chauvinism and responds to Jeremy Bentham's influential question "Can they suffer?" in the affirmative.

Even though their sympathy is strong in the moment, the rabbits quickly leave the pain behind, as "the very strength and vividness of their sympathy brought with it true release" (159). Sharing the feelings of another thus acts as a catharsis and experiencing the terror and fear of the rabbits' former warren is "their way of honouring the dead" (159); yet once the story is told, the pain becomes a thing of the past. The narrator describes that

[t]hey have a certain quality which it would not be accurate to describe as callousness or indifference. It is, rather, a blessedly circumscribed imagination and an intuitive feeling that Life is Now [...]. The story over, the demands of their own hard, rough lives began to reassert themselves in their hearts, in their nerves, their blood and appetites. (159-60)

This indicates that rabbits need to live in the moment to react instantaneously in the face of danger while the idea of a "circumscribed imagination," so the notion of limited mental functions, is taken up in the following chapter on abstract thought.

The literary rabbits, even when connected through friendship, are rougher around each other than is usual in most human circles of friends. There is a kind of violence among friendly rabbits that gives testimony to their harsh lives in the wild where toughness is a requirement for survival: "One respect in which rabbits' lives are less complicated than those of humans is that they are not ashamed to use force" (103). For example, when trying to get Pipkin on the self-fashioned boat that would bring him to safety, "Blackberry [...] bullied the stupefied Pipkin to his feet and forced him to limp the few yards to the gravel pit [...]. Blackberry almost drove Pipkin on to [the piece of wood] with his claws" (36). Similarly, once the badly injured Hazel returns to his warren after he was thought dead, the others welcome him joyously with rough play; Hazel defines this as "a test as well as a welcome" to see whether their leader is still physically strong enough to be Chief Rabbit, and he is sure they would throw him out of the warren if he proved too weak (250). Further, although he likes Pipkin very much, Hazel is aware that some of his other rabbits are more valuable in their fight for survival. He thus puts Pipkin right behind him when entering the unknown and potentially dangerous warren of Cowslip, thinking: "if the leaders *do* get attacked, I suppose we can spare him easier than some" (70; emphasis in the original), showing that in rabbit cultures, the survival of the warren sometimes overshadows the affection for the individual.

Lastly, love and companionship among rabbits are described differently from corresponding human conceptions. The narrator states that “the ideas that have become natural to many male human beings in thinking of females,” such as romance and fidelity, are human-created constructs that are not natural to rabbits: “although rabbits certainly do form exclusive attachments, [...] they are not romantic” (246). This correlates with ideas put forth by scholars who define romantic love as a social construct that changes across cultures and in different time periods (Majerhold). Further, in *The Psychology of Romantic Love*, Nathaniel Branden holds that romance is a product of Western Europe that has its roots in the courtly love of the Middle Ages and that the idea of romantic love as we know it today has been principally developed in the nineteenth century. He shows that various anthropologists and psychologists in the twentieth century, such as Morton M. Hunt and Margaret Mead, claim that this concept is or has been absent in some nonliterate societies (22, 30). Branden himself contends in a very generalizing passage that “[s]o far as we can ascertain, in primitive cultures the idea of romantic love did not exist at all” (11-12). This belief already indicates *Watership Down*'s emphasized closeness between wild rabbits and human beings who Adams terms “primitive,” an idea that will inform the latter part of this thesis.

Because the rabbits in *Watership Down* lack ideas of romantic love, the narrator explains that does are often seen “simply as breeding stock for the warren” (246). This not only displays the rabbits' worldview regarding companionship between does and bucks, but it also expresses the narrator's gender bias that privileges the male point of view, which the aforementioned quote with its emphasis on “male human beings” already revealed: while the companionship between bucks is depicted as deep and meaningful and is explored in detail, does are not seen as companions but simply as objects whose worth lies in their fertility. However, some passages seem to contradict the idea that romantic love is absent in rabbit societies. The buck Strawberry, for instance, is “touchingly devoted” (81) to his mate Nildro-hain and his behavior once she is snared shows that he was exceedingly attached to her, as he is almost out of his mind with grief (115-116). So there does seem to be affection between rabbit partners that goes beyond seeing does as mere “breeding stock.” The ambiguous status of does in rabbit warrens will be explored more fully in the chapter on society and gender.

3.2.3 *Rabbit Knowledge and Abstract Thought*

After having saved a mouse's life, Hazel ponders if he could not tell him more about the foreign place the rabbits find themselves in, but Bluebell interjects that mice can only tell them “[w]hat mice know. Not what rabbits need to know” (161). Different species are represented with different types of knowledge necessary for their survival; rabbit knowledge means, for instance, appreciating the dangers of “feeding under bushes on the windward side of a wood” where predators might easily catch them (387). Animal knowledge in general is further delimited from human knowledge: “Creatures that have neither clocks nor books are alive to all manner of

knowledge about time and the weather; and about direction too, as we know from their extraordinary migratory and homing journeys” (43-44). An example of rabbit knowledge that humans are lacking is the rabbits’ distinct manner of determining the passing of time when they while away the afternoon in a beanfield:

The changes in the warmth and dampness of the soil, the falling of the sunlight patches, the altering movement of the beans in the light wind, the direction and strength of the air currents along the ground – all these were perceived by the rabbit awake. (44)

Clocks and books are framed as objects of “civilized human beings” (43) and are an indicator of humans being out of touch with their environment, unlike rabbits, to whom these almost imperceptible factors which they sense in the beanfield hold valuable information.

While the rabbits in *Watership Down* are depicted with knowledge that humans do not necessarily possess, their cognition has its limitations. For instance, the narrator remarks that “[r]abbits can [only] count up to four” (4) or that “[r]abbits, of course, have no idea of precise time or of punctuality” (16). A recurring idea throughout the novel is that the majority of rabbits lack the ability to think abstractly, which correlates with certain views of anthropocentrist thinkers who see this as one of the elements that divides the human species from animality (Allen and Trestman). Most of the rabbits that are framed as natural have a hard time understanding the concept of art, laughter, floating matter, bridges, and the sea – anything that is unfamiliar to them or not part of what Adams depicts as their natural way of life. The narrator, for example, states that “the idea of a bridge was beyond” them (293), and when the seagull Kehaar tells them about the sea, the rabbits are puzzled: “a long way from here the earth stops and there isn’t any more [...]. He says there’s a vast place of water, going on and on [...]. Oh, I don’t know – I must admit I can’t altogether understand it” (184). This incapability to understand such concepts is especially emphasized when the rabbits attempt to cross a river; one of their lot is too weak to swim, and Blackberry, who is characterized as the smartest of the rabbits, finds a plank of wood in the water. Because he has seen something similar near their warren, he concludes that “[i]t must have drifted down the river. So it floats. We could put Fiver and Pipkin on it and make it float again” (36). Blackberry can thus draw a logical conclusion and use empirical knowledge to his advantage. Most of the other rabbits cannot follow, however, as is made clear through the representation of Hazel’s bewildered state of mind:

Hazel had no idea what he meant. Blackberry’s flood of apparent nonsense only seemed to draw tighter the mesh of danger and bewilderment [...]. [T]he cleverest rabbit among them had evidently gone out of his mind. (36)

When Fiver and Pipkin find themselves floating on this improvised raft, Dandelion exclaims: “Frith and Inlé! [...] They’re sitting on the water! Why don’t they sink?” (36). Once all have reached dry land again, this event is immediately dismissed from

their minds: “Most of them had not understood Blackberry’s discovery of the raft and at once forgot it” (37-38); this seems to be a coping mechanism, dispelling that which makes no sense to them. However, while *Watership Down* represents general species characteristics, the individuality of the rabbits is also emphasized: while most rabbits do not understand the idea of wood floating on water, Blackberry can make sense of it, as can Fiver. Thus, rabbits are not represented solely *en masse* but also on an individual basis, displaying different levels of the ability to think abstractly. Also, while in some instances the rabbits display a lack of abstract thought, in others it is detectable: architectural inventiveness, for instance, so envisioning what the burrow they are digging might look like and understanding that the vertical roots of a tree could be helpful in building a particularly large warren, is a possible thought process for them (141). But then, one might argue that planning a burrow is a more “natural” occupation for rabbits than building a raft.

Thus, while rabbits are represented as having their own rabbit knowledge, most of them are simultaneously depicted as being unable to comprehend such ideas and concepts that are not part of what Adams frames as the rabbit way of life. One should add that this difficulty in thinking abstractly only holds true as long as the rabbits lead so-called natural lives. As will be discussed later, the rabbits of Cowslip’s warren have had to alter their lives in such a way that makes it possible for them to appreciate and integrate aspects like abstract art and poetry into their culture, but as a corollary, the narrator frames them as unnatural – abstract thinking thus becomes an indicator of their aberrant way of living that forfeits a central part of what it means to be a rabbit.

3.2.4 *Animal Languages: Lapine and Lingua Franca*

As has already been discussed, language is traditionally deemed one of the exclusively human traits that anthropocentrist thinkers consider as proof of human exceptionalism and superiority. Descartes, for instance, denied animals “meaningful communication” (Allen and Trestman), something that various studies with animals, for instance Barbara Smuts’ research with baboons, continue to undermine. As Margo DeMello shows, extensive research conducted, for example, on prairie dogs, dolphins, nonhuman primates, and parrots reveal that the restriction of complex language to the human species alone is an act of ignorance (6), and it is only plausible to assume that many more species will be added to this list. However, the languages with which talking animals in literature usually communicate are human ones, and the implications of this will be discussed in the following.

Some stories that feature talking animals attempt to justify why these animal characters happen to be able to speak a human language. One might look, for example, at the rats in *Mrs. Frisby*, whose acquisition of a human language is a result of experimentation in a lab. In Saunders’s *Fox 8*, the eponymous fox hero learns English by secretly listening to humans reading aloud, much like the nonhuman monster in *Frankenstein*. Other stories let animals speak in a human language without offering any reason for it whatsoever. In this case, even though both humans and animals

speak the same language, they cannot understand each other, as in *Charlotte's Web*; or they can, as in *The Wind in the Willows*. Another technique that is used is to indicate by sporadic inclusions of invented words that the human language is merely a translation of a distinct animal language that the author has taken upon her- or himself to mediate to a human readership. This strategy has the advantage of creating the illusion of an entire system of language that the handful of fictitious words indicate. In *Watership Down*, this latter technique is applied, as the narrator clarifies that the rabbits' English words are a translation from their own language Lapine. This is reminiscent of Sewell's *Black Beauty*, whose subtitle promises that it is "[t]ranslated from the Original Equine"; however, the horse's autobiography is consistently written in English, whereas *Watership Down* integrates about thirty different Lapine words and expressions in its narrative which are mostly italicized to emphasize their foreignness. The narrator's role as a translator is most notably indicated in a footnote that refers to Bigwig's usage of the word "vagabond" and which reads: "Bigwig's word was *bleszil*, which I have rendered in various places in the story as wanderers, scratchers, vagabonds" (127; emphasis in the original). Not only is this the only time the narrator foregrounds himself through the use of "I," but this passage also clearly indicates that the narrator is aware of the problems of translation. Rabbit lives and experientiality cannot be wholly captured and conveyed by a human language, and the narrator recognizes that humans cannot have complete access to the lives and worlds of other animal beings.

Most of the Lapine words used in the text are either translated into English in a footnote or in the text itself. For instance, recurring Lapine words are *elil*, referring to the entirety of the rabbits' enemies; *silflay*, which means to feed above ground (78) and is a compound noun made up of *silf* (outside) and *flay* (food); *brududu*, a car; and to pass *braka*, which means to defecate. The plural of a noun is formed by replacing the final vowel with -il, such as *brududil* for *brududu* (46), *yonil* for *yona*, a hedgehog (47).³ Such grammatical structures reveal that Adams took care to indicate a complexity in Lapine that is traditionally seen as a characteristic feature solely of human languages. To lend further verisimilitude to the rabbits' worlds, a footnote sometimes indicates the correct pronunciation of a Lapine word: the name of the mythical rabbit trickster El-ahrairah, for example, is stressed "the same as in the phrase 'Never say die'" (23). To enrich the rabbits' language, Adams also includes some leporine sayings and proverbs. For instance, a "ribald Owsla [rabbit police] lampoon" goes as follows: "*Hoi, boi u embleer Hrair / M'saion ulé braka vrain*," which a footnote translates as "Hoi, Hoi, the stinking Thousand [the rabbits' predators], We meet them even when we stop to pass our droppings" (41). Rebuking a rabbit for stamping underground, Hazel declares: "My mother used to say, 'If you were a horse the ceiling would fall down'" (81). Other rabbit sayings and proverbs are: "There is a rabbit saying, 'In a warren, more stories than passages'" (90); "it can't be changed now, till

³ For a list that includes all Lapine words featured in *Watership Down*, see McBride's "The Lapine Dictionary" (<https://calrah.tripod.com/lapine.html>).

acorns grow on thistles” (146); and “You’re trying to eat grass that isn’t there. Why don’t you give it a chance to grow?” (339).

It is also rewarding to examine the rabbits’ Lapine and English names. All wild rabbits have individual names that refer to some plant, such as Hazel, Acorn, Cowslip, and Dandelion; or to a rabbit idiosyncrasy, color, or trait, such as Silver and Bigwig, a name derived from a strange patch of fur on the top of his head. It is indicated that each of these names is a translation from Lapine and it seems to be for the reader’s benefit that English translations of the names are used. Their names can reveal much about the rabbits’ worlds, such as the importance of plants in their lives, and also about leporine perspectives; for example, Pipkin’s Lapine name is Hlao, which “means any small concavity in the grass where moisture may collect, e.g., the dimple formed by a dandelion or thistle cup” (17). It is thus a word that features in a rabbit’s life but for which there does not exist a single word in English, emphasizing how a different being-in-the-world can influence one’s vocabulary. Regarding animal names, Sarah McFarland emphasizes that “[t]o name something is to accord it subjectivity, to recognize that it has a unique perspective on the world and meaningful relationships” (156). By being named, the rabbits are not represented via the pronoun “it,” but mostly by “he” or “she” in an anti-anthropocentric shift, similar to Corbett who, as has been shown, argues for the extension of animacy to non-humans in the English language. However, subject status is sometimes simultaneously granted and withheld from the rabbits in *Watership Down*, as the following passage reveals: “Without Hazel, without Blackberry, [...] Bigwig would have died. Without himself he would have died, for which else, of them all, would not have stopped running after such punishment?” (121). While the “himself” gives Bigwig subject status, the “which else” again reduces the rabbits to objects. Especially Kehaar, a male bird, is alternately referred to as “it” and “he.” These inconsistent representations of subject status through language reveal the ambiguous standing of animal beings in our culture and further show that anti-anthropocentric depictions of animal subjectivities are rather complicated by the English language with its tendency to dismiss all that is not human as objects.

Lapine is spoken across various warrens, although it is remarked a few times that Cowslip’s warren, the hutch rabbits, and the Efracans respectively speak in a slightly different accent. But communication across species boundaries is also possible with the help of a lingua franca. It is not indicated that animals actively learn this language, it rather seems to be innate knowledge. This lingua franca is mentioned for the first time when Hazel saves a mouse from a kestrel by offering him the protection of the rabbits’ warren: “Mice do not speak Lapine, but there is a very simple, limited *lingua franca* of the hedgerow and woodland” (143). This language makes use of fragmented speech (“You stay now. Go later” 144) and indicates that among different species, there are different ways of speaking. Mice, for instance, have a stereotypically Italian sound to their speech when they attempt to speak the lingua franca: “‘Go now,’ said the mouse. ‘No wait owl. But a what I like to say. You ‘elp a mouse. One time a mouse ‘elp a you. You want ‘im, ‘e come’” (147). The mouse omits the “h” and adds

the sound “a” apparently at random, telling the reader that the language structure of mice seems to be quite different from Lapine. The same applies to the seagull Ke-haar’s more guttural speech, whose usage of the lingua franca almost sounds like a German attempting to speak English. For instance, after his wing has healed, he proposes to look for female rabbits, whom the bucks need for the continued survival of their warren: “I get peeg, fine plan. I go fine now. Ving, ‘e better. Vind finish, den I fly [...]. Find plenty mudders, tell you vere dey are, ya?” (187-188), or: “Und here ees town of rabbits” (190). In contrast to the rabbits’ sophisticated speech, he sometimes expresses himself in a more vulgar way: “Piss off!” (180), or: “You ‘urt me, I ‘urt you like dam” (181), indicating different speaking habits as well as mannerisms.

As has been discussed by Elick and DeMello in the preceding chapters, letting literary animals speak is a contested practice as it is oftentimes seen pejoratively as an act of anthropomorphism. Yet, while rabbits do have a verbal speech, this is only one aspect of their communication practices:

They did not talk. [...] But this did not mean that they were not communicating; merely they were not communicating by talking. All over the burrow, [they] were accustoming themselves to each other in their own way and their own time; getting to know what the strangers smelt like, how they moved, how they breathed, how they scratched, the feel of their rhythms and pulses. These were their topics and subjects of discussion, carried on without the need of speech. (72)

Just as Smuts observed that baboons communicate, for instance, via sounds, facial expressions, body movements, and physical contact (295-96), such cues are also essential in rabbit communication. Stamping, for instance, is described as a central communicative device: “‘You silly blockhead!’ cried Bigwig. ‘We’ll all be finished! We’ll –’ ‘Don’t stamp about,’ said Hazel. ‘You may be heard’” (35). One might maintain that Bigwig’s stamping at that moment only accompanies his verbal speech, but it is also tenable that his seemingly spoken words are translations of such rabbit communication as stamping. Another passage reveals an instance where stamping is obviously translated into English: “suddenly there was a stamping of ‘Hawk! Hawk!’” (142). Lapine can thus be understood as more than spoken words, as it encompasses the entirety of subtle cues and signs the rabbits use to communicate.

The last aspect explored in this chapter is that of animal literacy. While in some stories, animal characters are represented as literate, *Watership Down* highlights the fact that rabbits cannot read or write. This is already established in the very first chapter, in which Fiver and Hazel are unable to understand the “sharp, black lines like sticks” (224) on a signpost. A notable scene in which illiteracy is represented as an aspect of differentiation between humans and animals occurs shortly after Hazel has been shot by a farmer. In a dream, Fiver encounters a man who is setting up a board and who “[turns] to Fiver with the kind of amiability that an ogre might show to a victim whom they both know that he will kill and eat as soon as it suits him to do so” (224). This already summarizes the dominant rabbit-human relations featured

throughout the novel, in which rabbits perceive humans as monsters and humans conversely see rabbits as food items. Fiver cannot understand the words on the sign, for which he is subsequently mocked by the man: “That’s where we knows what you don’t. That’s why we kills you when we ‘as a mind to” (225). This quote expresses the common anthropocentrist idea that qualities such as literacy indicate human exceptionalism, which, as a corollary, is seen to justify animal subjugation and destruction. Although it is a dream that is unfolding in Fiver’s subconscious, as a seer who can make predictions and penetrate truths his dreams and intuition bear more weight than a dream by another rabbit. Fiver senses that humans deem themselves superior to animals based on their apparently higher intelligence, in this scene expressed through literacy. However, by using Fiver as a focalizer and by putting this idea so blandly in the mouth of a man portrayed as a rabbit killer, the reader is invited to empathize with Fiver and to question the belief that literacy sets humans above other animals. Further, rabbits are differentiated from humans through their use of language, which can be observed very clearly in this scene where both speeches are contrasted: the man resolves to hang Hazel up on the sign, “[s]ame as you’d ‘ang up jay, like, or old stoat. Ah! Gon’ ‘ang ‘im up,” upon which Fiver cries: “No, you shan’t!” (225). The man’s grammatically incorrect speech is contrasted with Fiver’s sophisticated English, in a subversive twist inverting the man’s claim that humans are more intelligent beings.

3.2.5 *Complex Rabbit Societies: Hierarchy and Gender*

Rabbit societies in *Watership Down* are depicted as complex, as every rabbit occupies and is aware of a specific role in her or his community. For example, a “yearling and still below full weight” (4) belongs to a lower social class, as she or he is one of the “‘outsirkters’ – that is, the rank-and-file of ordinary rabbits in their first year who, lacking [...] unusual size and strength, get sat on by their elders and live as best as they can – often in the open – on the edge of the warren” (4). This idea of hierarchy based on “unusual size and strength” correlates with Lockley’s observations who depicts such social structures in his book, showing that Adams took great care to model the social structures of his literary rabbits after real ones. At the top of a warren presides the Chief Rabbit, a buck who usually has the power of a king and who is addressed by adding a “-rah” to the end of his name. He has at his command a group of rabbits called *Owsla*, which in a footnote the narrator explains as follows:

Nearly all warrens have an *Owsla*, or group of strong or clever rabbits – second-year or older – surrounding the Chief Rabbit and his doe and exercising authority. *Owslas* vary. In one warren, the *Owsla* may be the band of a war-lord: in another, it may consist largely of clever patrollers or garden-raiders. Sometimes a good story-teller may find a place; or a seer, or intuitive rabbit. In the Sandleford Warren at this time, the *Owsla* was rather military in character. (5; emphasis in the original)

In Sandleford as well as in Efrafa, the Owsla is depicted as something like a police force, executing the Chief Rabbit's laws, sometimes abusing its power by brutally controlling the other rabbits. This quotation also demonstrates the variety within the rabbit world: a warren may differ in character as much as one human civilization from another. The idea of a military warren or a warren built around a warlord challenges the tradition of cute, tame rabbits as depicted in the majority of rabbit tales. While Sandleford and especially Efrafa rely on a dictatorial regime, Hazel and his group of deserters establish a warren that is remarkably democratic in nature, even though Hazel, by showing strong leadership, intelligence, and compassion, is finally called Hazel-rah by his friends. Decisions, however, are still made by the group and the end of the novel shows them to have a "very free-and-easy Owsla" (465). The complexity of rabbit communities that Lockley, based on his observations, already argued for in *The Private Life* is thus taken up in *Watership Down* to counter reductive ideas of unsophisticated and homogeneous animal societies.

It is made clear that positions of power are exclusively held by bucks; for example, the narrator explains that the Chief Rabbit is always a male rabbit, and overall, does only play a minor role throughout the novel: of all the rabbits mentioned in Sandleford and in the early days of Hazel's warren, not one is a doe. In fact, the first time a doe is mentioned by name is only in chapter 13 in Cowslip's warren, and here her speech is reported indirectly as her partner Strawberry speaks for her (74). The first doe speaking directly is a female hutch rabbit halfway through the novel. While the friendships, character developments, and relationships among bucks are explored in depth, does are mostly represented in terms of fertility and reproduction as they are described as the warren's "asset" (228) or "breeding stock" (246). In his afterword to *Watership Down*'s 1993 Puffin edition, Nicholas Tucker criticized the negation of female agency in Adams' novel, stating that does are portrayed as "little more than passive baby-factories." This directly mirrors Lockley's representation of does in *The Private Life*, in which they are imbued with his personal gender ideology and mostly mentioned in passing while the lives of bucks constitute the main concern.

However, some aspects of *Watership Down* go against the idea that does are nothing but "baby-factories." Female rabbits do get a voice and play an important part in Efrafa, where it is a group of does that asks the Council for permission to leave and start a warren somewhere else. It is they who suffer the most in the overcrowded warren, as they reabsorb their embryos in such stressful conditions and are "under orders" to mate with any Efracan officers that choose so (316). The group of does behaves aggressively and rebelliously against the Owsla, displaying even a kind of rabbit feminism, as when the young doe Nelthilta provocatively asks an Efracan officer why there are no does in the Wide Patrols (315). Yet the Efracan does' stated purpose in life is to reproduce (328) and of the ten does who are brought to Watership, only two are mentioned by name. It is further notable that, unlike bucks, the names of does are only given in Lapine, which has an exoticizing effect; an alienating

distance is maintained between readers and does while the bucks, their names translated for the readers' benefit, appear more accessible and familiar. Thus, while *Watership Down* in many aspects works against anthropocentrism, one might argue that it upholds and perpetuates a form of androcentrism in which the male perspective is privileged. As Johnson holds, even those animal stories that challenge the status quo by including subversive ideas in the next instance may espouse traditional or conservative notions (17).

3.2.6 *Cultural Practices: Mythology, Religion, and Customs*

Influential thinkers such as Johann Gottfried Herder, Edward Burnett Taylor, and Franz Boas understand culture as one of the exclusively human qualities that "saves humans from animality" (Tonutti 186). However, just as with language, contemporary research has made it increasingly evident that cultural behavior can be observed not only in different species but that it also differentiates in sub-groups of one and the same species, just like it does in human societies (196). *Watership Down* rejects the idea that animal beings are without culture by especially emphasizing rabbit religion, mythology, games, and habits and customs.

Watership Down displays a leporine religion that reveals similarities to Judeo-Christian orthodoxy. For one, rabbit religion is based on binary oppositions: on the one hand, they believe in Frith who is the actual sun as well as the rabbits' god and who features as a protagonist in some rabbit myths. Inlé, on the other hand, denotes night or death, and the Black Rabbit of Inlé is understood by the rabbits as "fear and everlasting darkness" (267). He is something of a Grim Reaper who nonetheless serves Frith, keeping the balance of life and death intact: he "bring[s] about what must be. We come into the world and we have to go" (268). The rabbits sometimes even pray similar to Judeo-Christian traditions, evoking either Frith or their mythical rabbit forefather El-ahrairah in an apostrophe: "O El-ahrairah! [...] Let it be the right thing that I'm doing" (68). While the rabbits thus practice a certain human-like religion, it is especially their myths that are highlighted in *Watership Down*. Of all the aspects in the novel, the invention of rabbit mythology has probably received the most scholarly attention, Charles Meyer even going so far as to call *Watership Down* "a mythologist's gold-mine" (Introduction 3). The literary rabbits have oral cultures that focus on storytelling and mythology, and the novel dedicates several whole chapters to the telling of these stories. Most center on the rabbit hero El-ahrairah and his loyal sidekick Rabsuttle, who embody the stereotypical image of rabbits as quick-witted tricksters who make it a habit to raid gardens. El-ahrairah is the prototype of leporine values, embodying the rabbits' ideals to use all of one's resources and wits to get out of a predicament. He is further made into a powerful hero with super-rabbit qualities: "Some rabbits say he controls the weather, because the wind, the damp and the dew are friends and instruments to rabbits against their enemies". (24)

The creation of myths in rabbit culture is made transparent at the end of *Watership Down* when Hazel overhears a doe telling her litter a story about El-ahrairah,

which, however, has a very familiar ring to it. The reader will recognize it is a loose telling of their own adventures that have been narrated throughout the novel, although imbued with magical elements. This shows that the myths that tell of the heroic deeds of El-ahrairah are based on true events and are embellished adventures of different rabbits. These stories are then used to teach young kittens leporine values and morals, such as the importance of being resourceful and brave. At the end of the novel, the rabbits even mention a story called “Woundwort Dismayed” (394), in which Efrafa’s leader General Woundwort is turned into the cousin of Inlé:

And mother rabbits would tell their kittens that if they did not do as they were told, the General would get them – the General who was first cousin to the Black Rabbit himself. (471)

Woundwort is made into a sort of bogeyman as used in human cultures to scare children into behaving. This happens six weeks after their fight with Woundwort, but already Hazel seems to be forgetting his adventures as he cannot rightly remember where he has heard this story before, telling of the rabbits’ distinct perception of time and different memory structures. This is emphasized in the epilogue, in which Hazel, an old and almost senile rabbit now, reflects that

sometimes, when they told tales on a sunny evening by the beech trees, he could not clearly recall whether they were about himself or about some other rabbit hero of days gone by. (470)

The past quickly becomes blurred and, to keep important events alive in the collective rabbit memory, they are turned into stories. One myth even coincides with the story of Noah’s ark: “Frith had to go on a journey, leaving the whole world to be covered with rain. But a man built a great, floating hutch that held all the animals [...] until Frith returned to let them out” (206). This might indicate that the rabbits’ collective memory goes as far back as biblical stories; further, it draws a parallel between human and rabbit history, showing that the species have always been related while the substitution of an arc with a hutch tells of a distinct rabbit perspective that demonstrates an awareness of rabbit hutches but an unfamiliarity with boats. While this story refers to a time many centuries ago, some myths feature men with guns and cars, which shows that their stories do not make a distinction between different time epochs: everything becomes part of one long narrative of the life of El-ahrairah. Another myth addresses the does’ reabsorption of embryos in crowded warrens, which Lockley observed and mentioned in his book (127). Here, the god Frith presents this ability as a gift to the rabbits so that they never have to be born dead or live a poor life in an overcrowded warren (192). It is thus mythology’s main purpose to explain and make sense of the world in leporine terms.

Other cultural practices that are mentioned in the novel are, for instance, the traditional rabbit game Bob-stones, which is played during long stays underground; it is a sort of easy gambling contest played with small stones and sticks that the narrator likens to the game Odds and Evens (272). Further, as a medicinal or healing method, rabbits are shown to lick their own wounds and also, in a rather self-evident

manner without having to be asked, the wounds of others, emphasizing their close-knit fellowship (43, 140). The literary rabbits also have specific leporine habits and customs: for instance, their way of greeting each other is done by companionably nibbling grass together, and they usually spend long winter days telling stories and playing games underground (129, 462). The narrator further states that rabbits do not force artificial conversations as humans do, but that their speeches are “short by human standards” (72) whereas their discussions are usually “long, disorderly, [and] intermittent” (191). Overall, the novel displays in much detail distinctly leporine cultural practices that encourage readers to wonder whether similar practices could not to a certain extent be fact rather than fiction and part of everyday life in real animal communities.

3.3 Speciesism among Animals? Leporine-Centrism and Species Exceptionalism

The representations of rabbit subjectivities that have been explored in the preceding chapters emphasize the rabbits’ distinct way of living in the world and depict them as agential subjects. However, while these representations aim to contest the idea of the human species as the measure of all things, in various instances the rabbits themselves display a centering of their own species. This leporine-centrism is firstly emphasized through the idea of the rabbit species as exceptional and secondly through instances that display the belief of their own superiority over smaller creatures. Especially the rabbits’ origin myth is revealing regarding the idea of leporine exceptionalism, beginning as follows:

Long ago, Frith made the world. He made all the stars too and the world is one of the stars. He made them by scattering his droppings over the sky and this is why the grass and the trees grow so thick on the world. [...] Frith made all the animals and birds, but when he first made them, they were all the same. (25)

First of all, it is shown that Frith is male, a “Lord” (165), revealing again a rather androcentric worldview. Further, Frith’s action of scattering his droppings represents him as a leporine figure, as the rabbits’ excrements are also referred to as droppings throughout the novel. Just as many human religions center on a male anthropomorphized god, the rabbits, in a leporine-centrist twist, seem to envision a rabbit-like god who rules over all. However, the myth also shows a remarkably humble worldview, as the rabbits believe the earth to be a star just like any other; unlike anthropocentrist thinkers, they do not see themselves at the center of the universe. The origin myth continues to narrate how all species become who they are owing to the obstreperous El-ahrairah, as Frith bestows different qualities on different species to punish the rabbits’ forefather. Voicing his belief in the rabbits’ exceptional standing in the world, El-ahrairah states: “My people are the strongest in the world, for they breed faster and eat more than any of the other people” (26), and he claims that

the rabbits are “faster than any creature in the world” (28). In fact, the story is framed in a way that, were it not for Frith’s intervention, rabbits would rule the world, as the god states himself: “El-ahrairah, your people cannot rule the world, for I will not have it so. All the world will be your enemy [...] and whenever they catch you, they will kill you” (28). Rabbits, however, seem to have a special relationship with Frith that even borders on friendship, as they “could be impudent to Frith and get away with it,” revealing “the great indestructibility of the Rabbits” (28) – note the upper-case letter “R” which emphasizes rabbit importance and distinction in the world while further evoking the idea of rabbits as the “chosen people.”

Along with a belief in their own exceptionalism, the rabbits also display a sense of superiority over smaller animals. The origin myth begins with the assertion that a long time ago all animals lived together in peace: “the fox and the rabbit were both friends and both ate grass” and the birds ate “both seeds and flies. [...] And there was plenty of grass and plenty of flies, because the world was new” (26). While it is indicated that carnivores and herbivores live together in harmony and do not prey on each other, flies are framed as non-animals and are equated with seeds. They are turned into food units instead of animal beings, which reveals a typical speciesist attitude toward insects. Similarly, after an initial disgust of the task, the rabbits find beetles and worms for the hungry Kehaar, indifferent to the fact that they are killing insects. A third prominent instance that reveals a speciesist attitude toward invertebrates can be detected in a rabbit saying that goes: “A rabbit who does not know when a gift has made him safe is poorer than a slug” (279). This quote evokes the Heideggerian idea of animals as poor in the world, although for rabbits this holds true only for those animals they deem inferior, namely insects and mollusks, which are also often seen by humans at the bottom of a speciesist hierarchy of value. The rabbits in *Watership Down* consider invertebrates with only little access to *welt*, thus lacking meaningful relationships and a sense of self.

Additionally, some rabbits reveal a rather condescending attitude toward small mammals. When Hazel saves a mouse’s life who promises to help the rabbits should they ever need it, Bigwig vents his feelings by crying: “Frith in a pond! [...] And so will all his brothers and sisters. I dare say the place’ll be crawling” (147-148). Speedwell does not seem to know how to refer to the mouse, revealing a patronizing view of rodents when he informs Hazel: “your – er – visitor – your mouse. He wants to speak to you” (147). This seems to indicate that mice are unworthy to be considered a rabbit’s visitor; especially the phrase “your mouse” implies ownership, as if the mouse were a mere possession without the status of a full subject. The rather prejudiced Silver even directly contends that “[t]hese small animals are more to be despised than relied upon. [...] What good can they do us?” (161). Later events, however, reveal that their relationship with the mouse demonstrates parallels to the Aesopian fable of the lion and the mouse, in which the latter eventually saves the life of the lion, and in this case, that of the rabbits. While Bigwig feels himself superior to smaller animals, opining that “[t]hese little creatures say anything and change it five times a day” (407), he shows awe and something akin to envy when he befriends

Kehaar, as he is “fascinated by the strength and courage of the bird” (182). He admires Kehaar and actually comes up with an exclamation that reveals his wish to be more like him: “Oh, my wings and beak, that won’t do!” (465). Kehaar, on the other hand, has a rather condescending view of rabbits, revealing a sense of seagull exceptionalism: “he could not help despising them for timid, helpless, stay-at-home creatures who could not fly” (373); and sometimes, when rabbits do not understand what he means by bridges and boats, he has a rather “short way with landlubbers” (299), growing quickly impatient because they do not know much outside of their small worlds and have not gotten about like he has (191). Lastly, all wild animals seem to feel themselves superior to pets, especially to dogs who are seen as sycophantic servants of humankind; companion animals and their relationship with humans will be examined more thoroughly in the chapter on domestication and breeding.

Watership Down thus appears to propose that it is not only humans who consider themselves exceptional and superior to other species. One might argue that this ultimately aims to justify anthropocentrism with the help of an appeal to nature: because wild rabbits and birds display this centering of their own species, it is framed as a natural practice: humans are merely doing as other animals do. However, there is an obvious difference between anthropocentrism and leporine-centrism, a difference that the novel emphasizes repeatedly: unlike rabbits, humans use the belief of their own superiority and exceptionalism to exploit, subjugate, and domesticate in order to satisfy their needs and ensure their comfort. As the following chapter will show, *Watership Down* makes it abundantly clear that humans twist and “denaturalize” their environment and their fellow earth dwellers, bending the laws of nature this way and that to benefit from them in the greatest possible way. Furthermore, the rabbits learn to overcome their condescension of small mammals once they realize that they can be useful to one another, which partly undermines the idea of leporine superiority – although insects and mollusks are never elevated from their object-status, perpetuating the speciesist assumption that negates their intrinsic value.

While rabbit superiority is partly undermined, the belief in their exceptionalism remains. However, it is emphasized that the rabbits also recognize the exceptionalism of other species, which is again expressed in their origin myth: “And when the blackbird came, he [Frith] gave him his beautiful song, and when the cow came, he gave her sharp horns and the strength to be afraid of no other creature” (26). It is noteworthy that cows are mentioned, as animal stories usually portray domesticated animals as disposable, mute objects (Johnson 40). The myth thus does not only highlight leporine exceptionalism but also celebrates that of other species who have their own unique and remarkable qualities and distinct ways of living in the world. Rabbit exceptionalism, or exceptionalism of all species for that matter, should therefore not necessarily be understood pejoratively. Rather, it is the misplaced belief of superiority that is bred from exceptionalism and coupled with arrogance and ignorance of the world that has wrought such destruction on this earth. Marc Bekoff likewise

promotes this idea, proposing that “[p]erhaps we should replace the notion of human exceptionalism with species exceptionalism” as it would dethrone the human with the recognition that all species are exceptional in their own way (“Speciesism” 26). He then goes further and argues that a focus on “individual exceptionalism” would be even more appropriate, as “it is *individuals* who matter when discussing their unrelenting abuse” (26; emphasis in the original). He holds that classifying all beings into species categories can be disadvantageous, as it undermines “individual differences within species that often are greater than the differences we observe between species” (18).

So although there does exist a form of speciesism among the rabbits in *Watership Down*, it only lends itself to a comparison with anthropocentrist speciesism to a certain degree. While the rabbits’ conception of insects and mollusks is undeniably discriminatory and can be seen as most similar to anthropocentrist attitudes toward nonhumans, the rabbits are portrayed as overcoming their superiority over small mammals and further recognize the exceptionalism of other animals – although they remain deeply suspicious of humans and those animals that have become influenced by human “unnaturalness,” a theme that the rest of this thesis will explore.

4 Human-Animal Relations in *Watership Down*: Unnatural Humanity and Empathic Animality

On the surface, it may seem as though the novel were chiefly concerned with animals, as human characters are only rarely featured directly. However, a closer look reveals that the theme of human influence pervades the plot like a counterpoint, turning *Watership Down*, like most animal fiction, also into a statement on humanity. I argue that even though *Watership Down* includes only a handful of human characters, human ubiquity can be identified indirectly throughout the novel, as most if not all so-called unnaturalness that is featured can be traced back to a human cause. Although, as the last chapters will show, it is not all of humanity that is deemed unnatural, and I will examine whether the novel may even propose a way toward what Bekoff terms the process of “rewilding our hearts” (*Rewilding* 5).

4.1 Rabbit Unnaturalness and Its Human Causes

The naturalness of Hazel and his friends is frequently stressed by representing their way of life as the “right” one for rabbits and by contrasting their warren with the unnatural. It is remarkable how often the word “unnatural” is used throughout the novel, especially regarding human beings and rabbit warrens that have come in contact with humans. However, the distinction between natural and unnatural rabbits is not completely antithetical. The novel seems to promote the idea of acceptable unnatural behavior in otherwise natural rabbits that rises out of necessity and unacceptable unnatural behavior that has its roots in human influence. Thus, even Hazel’s

warren is represented as acting unnaturally at times: at the beginning of their journey, the narrator states that

Hazel and his companions had spent the night doing everything that came unnaturally to them, and this for the first time. They had been moving in a group, or trying to: actually, they had straggled widely at times. They had been trying to maintain a steady pace, between hopping and running, and it had come hard. (24)

Further, to encourage the bucks to dig holes on Watership, something that is usually only done by does, Blackberry says: "I'm quite sure, myself, that if we don't change our natural ways we shan't be able to stay here very long" (131). This can be read as a form of survival of the fittest in a world that is turned upside down by humans, as it is because of human interference that they had to leave their warren and journey into the unknown in the first place. Especially Fiver's reaction is telling about the difference between acceptable and unacceptable unnatural behavior: Fiver, who as a seer is established as the moral compass of the novel, is paralyzed with fear when he comes into contact with the unnatural practices of Cowslip's warren, while his friends are first beguiled into believing that the unknown rabbits' way of life is superior to their own. On the other hand, he is the only rabbit who cheerfully agrees with Blackberry that the bucks should dig burrows, something that the other rabbits are very skeptical of at first. These instances of atypical behavior in Hazel's warren can be seen as attempts to ensure the future existence of their warren, and in the process, they do not forfeit their natural way of life like those rabbits discussed in the following for whom unnaturalness is not temporary but has become an internalized state.

4.1.1 *Cowslip's Warren: Transgressing Species Boundaries*

Cowslip's warren is the first group of rabbits Hazel and his friends meet after their escape from Sandleford. The rabbits of this particular warren live in an environment of fear and repressed truth: they are frequently snared by farmers for their fur and meat, but they try to suppress this knowledge as humans feed them with produce and shoot predators in the area. However, living in such a strange way has resulted in a distortion of what is framed as the rabbits' "right" way of life, as they reject typical rabbit behavior and instead integrate aspects into their lives that are not usual for their species.

Hazel's warren first encounters Cowslip on his own and his unnaturalness is emphasized throughout this meeting. Cowslip moves through the open without showing any concern for predators and meets Hazel's wary rabbits, who are prepared to fight him, with a calm politeness that they do not know how to respond to (63). His appearance and behavior already strike the rabbits as singular:

he was a big fellow, sleek and handsome. His fur shone and his claws and teeth were in perfect condition. [...] There was a curious, rather unnatural gentleness about the way in which he waited for them to come nearer. (61)

He smells “unusual,” reminding Hazel “of good feeding, of health and of a certain indolence, as though the other came from some rich, prosperous country where he himself had never been,” and he is described as having the air of an “aristocrat” (61-62, 98). Hazel is perplexed by his “un-rabbit-like melancholy,” he finds the strange rabbits “detached, almost bored” and, above all, “terribly sad” (98, 62, 79). In this first encounter, the somewhat blunt and straightforward manner of Hazel’s rabbits is contrasted with the courteous Cowslip. In this regard, Cowslip and his warren are first framed as superior and more sophisticated than the newcomers, who in comparison feel ashamed of themselves, Hazel even deeming himself “a ragged wanderer, leader of a gang of vagabonds” (64, 62). However, later revelations invert this opposition by exposing Cowslip’s airs of detached superiority as performative, despairing pomposity which clashes with Hazel’s rabbits’ simple honesty.

Cowslip’s warren repeatedly reveals a rejection of typical rabbit behavior and worldviews. While Hazel and his rabbits greet newcomers by sniffing them, the rabbits of Cowslip’s warren perform dance-like movements with their heads and paws that disconcert Hazel and his band of rabbits (70). Almost strangest of all is their form of art that the rabbit Strawberry proudly presents to Hazel: they push stones into the earth which they call “a Shape” (76) and which is supposed to represent El-ahrairah. On beholding this shape, Hazel feels completely nonplussed:

[he] had not felt so much bewildered since Blackberry had talked about the raft beside the [river]. Obviously, the stones could not possibly be anything to do with El-ahrairah. It seemed to him that Strawberry might as well have said that his tail was an oak tree. (76)

Hazel cannot make the abstract connection between the form of a real rabbit and stones artistically laid out to portray one, showing once again that he can only make sense of things that are natural to the lives of rabbits. Hazel is also deeply confused by the fact that the rabbits of Cowslip’s warren sometimes exhibit an “unnatural smile” (83) and that they can even laugh: “The phenomenon of laughter is unknown to animals. [...] The effect on Hazel and Bigwig was overwhelming. Hazel’s first idea was that Cowslip was showing the symptom of some kind of disease” (78). *Watership Down* thus argues that so-called natural animals act as dictated by the typical behavior of their species, whereas imitating the behavior of other species is considered pejoratively as anomalous, a point highlighted by further occurrences: to make their kittens fall asleep, the does in the warren “sing like the birds,” which makes the listening Blackberry “feel queer” (79), and when the rabbits of Cowslip’s warren carry vegetables in their mouths, Fiver insults them by referring to them as different

animals: “Those are rabbits down there, trotting along like a lot of squirrels with nuts. How can that be right?” (86), and “Dogs – you’re like dogs carrying sticks” (86).

Another art form that is employed to emphasize their move away from a natural rabbit way of life is poetry. While Hazel’s rabbits sometimes come up with playful little rhymes, Silverweed’s poem is much more sophisticated and structured, and a brief analysis of it will grant insight into his warren’s state of mind. The poem follows a repetitive structure, three stanzas with 7 lines, the last stanza 6 lines – in comparison, the spur-of-the-moment rhymes of Hazel’s warren are much simpler and shorter. The first three stanzas address the wind, the stream, and autumn leaves respectively, all natural phenomena that have in common that they are not static, but always in motion, able to leave hardship and woe behind. The poet begs: “Take me with you” or “I will go with you” (100-101), indicating the desperate urge to leave the death warren. The last stanza expresses the twisted logic of these rabbits: while first the dropping sun is implored to let the rabbit go with it, the last two lines read: “For I am ready to give you my breath, my life, / The shining circle of the sun, the sun and the rabbit” (101). This tells of their death wish and simultaneously expresses a sanctification of the snare, “The shining circle of the sun,” the sun of course indicating the rabbits’ god Frith. In a blasphemous attempt to cope with the frequent snaring, the murdering device becomes a divine object and Frith is equated with death. It has been shown that the theme of animals displaying artistry is often an empowering strategy that aims to give animal characters agency and points to kinship between animals and humans (Elick 20). However, in the case of *Watership Down*, art fulfills, for the most part, a different role: while it does show a parallel between Cowslip’s warren and what Adams comes to call “civilized” humans, this closeness is framed as something deeply unnatural as it functions to distance the rabbits from their natural ways.

Not only do adjectives such as “unnatural” and “unusual” convey to the reader that there is something amiss about these rabbits, but especially Fiver’s fear and distrust of them (“it’s simply that I *know* there’s something unnatural and evil twisted all round this place. [...] The roof of that [burrow] is made of bones,” 87; emphasis in the original) indicate how the reader is supposed to feel about the warren. Summarizing his conception of Cowslip’s warren, Fiver explains:

The rabbits became strange in many ways, different from other rabbits. [...] They forgot the ways of wild rabbits. They forgot El-ahrairah, for what use had they for tricks and cunning, living in the enemy’s warren and paying his price? (113)

While myths centering on El-ahrairah, as has been shown, reinforce the rabbits’ exceptionalism and create a feeling of unity, the rabbits of Cowslip’s warren are detached from rabbit myths, revealing a condescending attitude by calling them “traditional” and “old-fashioned” (99). Cowslip even states that “El-ahrairah doesn’t really mean much to us,” and when one of Hazel’s rabbits interjects that rabbits will

always need tricksters like the famous rabbit hero, a member of Cowslip's warren replies that what rabbits really need is "dignity and above all, the will to accept their fate" (99). While the notion of dignity is later in the novel shown to be a positive thing that all wild animals possess, the idea of accepting their fate indicates that, instead of planning to flee, they have resigned themselves to their lives governed by constant fear and in a way have accepted human sovereignty. Thus, the example of Cowslip's warren clarifies what Adams means by his recurring differentiation of "natural" and "unnatural": the rabbits make shapes on the wall and recite poetry that terrifies Hazel's rabbits, they dance, smile, and laugh like humans, sing like birds, carry food in their mouths like dogs and squirrels, and twist and deride the rabbits' sacred myths and religion. In short, they have transgressed the rabbits' species boundaries, resulting in what Fiver calls a rabbit way of life "for El-ahrairah to cry at" (113).

Lastly, the rabbits of Cowslip's warren are conspicuously put on the same level as unnatural and violent humans. Immediately following the horrific mass extermination of Sandleford Warren by human hands, the four sole survivors happen on Cowslip's warren and, in their traumatized, hurt, and exhausted state, they are immediately attacked while one of the four is even killed: "So after all he'd been through, poor Pimpernel was killed by rabbits. What do you think about that?" (157). Especially since both of these occurrences directly follow each other, the reader is invited to equate Cowslip's warren with the cruelty of humans.

4.1.2 *Hutch Rabbits: Captivity, Breeding, and Companion Animals*

As Johnson shows, a majority of animal literature features companion animals, a theme that usually, if subtly, perpetuates anthropocentric structures in its depiction of power relations between master and pet (28). While so far only wild rabbits have been characterized, this chapter will be dedicated to the representations of companion animals in *Watership Down* and how the novel engages with questions of captivity and breeding.

At one point in the novel, Hazel attempts to liberate four rabbits who live in a hutch on a farm, two "short-haired black Angoras" and two Himalayans (201). Their names are Laurel, Clover, Boxwood, and Haystack, and especially the latter two give testimony to their captivity, as they are named after things that surround them in a man-made environment. While wild rabbits have Lapine names that are translated into English, there is no indication that the hutch rabbits have any other names but the ones mentioned above. One may assume that a human being, presumably Lucy the farm girl who is later stated as their owners, has named the rabbits and that they identify with these given names. This calls to mind Derrida's discourse on name-giving practices that often indicate power relations and can become a means of subjugation. He illustrates this with the example of Genesis, in which Adam names the animals "without allowing himself to be seen or named by them" (386). Adam thus regards the animals but does not let them reciprocate his gaze, he is distanced, un-touchable, and by naming them pulls himself out of, even negates relationships of

equality with animals, creating an abyss between himself and other animals. The hutch rabbits are given a name by a member of a different species, which symbolizes their status as her possession: they are named but do not name in return, they are looked at but their responding gaze is not registered.

The narrator explains that the hutch rabbits speak in “a slightly strange but perfectly intelligible Lapine” (200); Lapine is thus not like a human language that is taught and learned but rather a universal language understood by all rabbits, which supports the earlier discussed idea that Lapine does not exclusively rely on verbal speech but includes other cues such as stamping and smelling. To persuade the rather timid hutch rabbits to flee with him, Hazel enumerates the advantages of living in the wild, and the captive rabbits are “at once bewildered and fascinated” at such prospects of freedom (201). They experience their life in captivity “as dull but safe” (201) and seem incapable of making the decision to follow Hazel:

Hazel realized that although they were glad to talk to him and welcome his visit because it brought a little excitement and change into their monotonous life, it was not within their capacity to take a decision and act on it. They did not know how to make up their minds. To him and his companions, sensing and acting were second nature; but these rabbits had never had to act to save their lives or even to find a meal. (201)

Their lives in captivity and dependence have thus stripped them of their ability to act and think on their own accord and they feel utterly overwhelmed once they have broken out of their hutch: “They did not know what to do or understand what was expected of them. [...] They had no more idea of what was involved than a small child who says he will accompany the climbers up the fell” (214). They are depicted as child-like, ignorant, and undeveloped as they have been taken care of to such an extent that they never had to forage for food or ensure their survival in any way. Thus, the idea of keeping rabbits in a small hutch for all their lives is shown as denaturalizing: it alters their physical abilities, as their senses are weaker and they run slower than wild rabbits (250, 386); it influences aspects such as their breeding habits, as they do not have real breeding seasons like the wild rabbits (464); and it even affects their mental capacities, which can be seen in their inability to make decisions and think for themselves. Primatologists Birkett and McGrew make a statement against animals in captivity, although focusing predominantly on apes. They argue that humans bear responsibility for the animals’ welfare when they place them into human-made environments, and that evidence of “unnatural behavior” shows that captivity is exceedingly harmful to their well-being (142):

The chimpanzee mind – like the minds of all species, including humans – has been shaped over millions of years. Thus, when chimpanzees and other animal species are placed in environments that are so very different from their EEA [environment of evolutionary adaptedness], their minds are vulnerable to distortion, and the visible effect of this is the abnormal behavior demonstrated by the chimpanzees and many other

captive species. As abnormality is likely to be an indicator of suffering, the abnormal behavior displayed highlights a welfare problem with unavoidable ethical implications. (155)

But it is not only captivity that has made the hutch rabbits the way they are. While the Efracan does are also kept in similar conditions of captivity, they have not been bred and therefore, beneath their strange behavior, there is a naturalness to be found that the hutch rabbits are framed as lacking. Unlike the Efracans, Hazel states, the hutch rabbits will

never be quite like our kind. Clover, for instance – she'd never go far from the hole on silflay, because she knew she couldn't run as fast as we can. But these Efracan does [...] have been kept in by sentries all their lives. Yet now there aren't any, they wander about quite happily. (386)

It is thus not captivity but breeding that is portrayed as the decisive factor in the hutch rabbits' unnaturalness. The idea of breeding, of changing animals to fit human purposes and rearing fellow beings into dependence, is of course a thoroughly anthropocentric practice based on the human desire to have ultimate control over nature and nonhumans. In a godlike move, species are created: "Based on selective breeding of individuals according to the domesticator's desired characters" and looks, nonhuman animals are altered "for human benefits" (Harel 51); rabbits like the Himalayans and Angoras are thus "creatures who are created for our pleasure" (Smith 356). Especially the mentioning of Angora rabbits emphasizes the harms of anthropocentric breeding, as these rabbits have been bred in such a way that their fur grows incessantly so as to be exploited by the textile industry. However, Angora rabbits cannot cope with their long hair, and they often suffer and die from hairballs that their bodies are not able to regurgitate. As a result, their fur has to be harvested regularly, which entails extreme stress to these timid creatures. This is an example of *Qualzucht*, sometimes translated as torture breeding, a process in which animal bodies are deformed to gratify humans' egocentric wishes (Ullmann). Angora rabbits are an example of how beings are bred into absolute dependence and their bodies distorted in ways that are not only harmful to them but make it impossible to live independently from humans. The two Angoras mentioned in *Watership Down*, however, are short-haired, which makes their lives in freedom difficult but not impossible.

Regarding the bond between children and animals that Elick names as one of the main themes in animal stories (19), the relationship between the hutch rabbits and Lucy is not depicted as particularly deep and loving but rather as indifferent, at least on the rabbits' part. They mention that the farm girl Lucy takes care of them: "A child takes us out and puts us in a pen on the grass" (200), but there are no displays of deep affection for this child, and they do not consider her at all when they think about leaving the hutch – they are more daunted by the dangers that might await them outside of their safe environment. Johnson calls the relationship between

humans and their pets ambiguous: while on the one hand, they serve to foster empathy with animals as subjects rather than objects, these companion animals are usually not on an equal footing with their human masters, and she argues that “petkeeping functions, at least in part, as an exercise in domination” (56). Here, one might additionally argue that rabbits are often not understood as “companions” like cats and dogs, but that they are more like “[slaves], confined and forced to live with humans against [their] will” (Davis).

Along with the hutch rabbits, other companion animals, namely cats and dogs, are featured in *Watership Down*. They are deemed unnatural by the wild rabbits precisely on account of their relationship with humans. Dogs, unlike other rabbit predators, are depicted as rather obtuse, indicating the effects of breeding, for instance when Hazel uses the farm dog’s stupidity to save his warren from the Efrafa rabbits. There is even a rabbit story about a dog called “Rowsby Woof and the Fairy Wogdog,” in which dogs’ obsequiousness toward humans is denounced. Rowsby Woof can be seen as a character standing in for all dogs as seen from the rabbits’ point of view: he is “the most objectionable, malicious, disgusting brute that ever licked a man’s hand” (395) and is described as “foolish,” “conceited,” and “ridiculous” (395). As he guards a man’s vegetable garden and does not eat the vegetables himself, El-ahrairah holds that “anyone might have thought that he would be ready to let a few hungry animals have a lettuce or a carrot now and then” (395); which he is not, of course, showing him lacking in animal solidarity. El-ahrairah tricks Rowsby Woof into thinking that the magical queen of dogs will visit him soon, upon which he debases himself by crying: “What joy it will be to grovel and abase myself before the Queen! How humbly I shall roll upon the ground! How utterly shall I make myself her slave! What menial cringing will be mine! I will show myself a true dog!” (401). The rabbits thus see dogs as slaves, and even proud ones at that, whose decisive characteristic is to wallow in their subordination to humans. Cats, on the other hand, are represented as more intelligent but malicious, who take joy in playing with and torturing their victims, exemplified by a cat taunting Hazel once she has caught him (433). Unlike other predators featured in the novel, they kill for their amusement rather than to satisfy their hunger. Cats serve humans as they are bred to be “ratter[s]” (210) and kept on farms to kill “vermin,” which the farmer elucidates when Lucy complains that their cat was trying to kill Hazel: “Cat was doin’ ‘is job then” (454). Further, cats and dogs share their lives with humans and are thus influenced by them; at one point, the narrator states that the rabbits “[do] not talk for talking’s sake, in the artificial manner that human beings – and sometimes even their dogs and cats – do” (72). The artificiality of human conventions and habits seems to rub off on their companion animals, and much like Cowslip’s warren, they are understood as having lost the naturalness and solidarity of wild animals.

Thus, *Watership Down* firstly criticizes the practice of keeping animals in captivity, exemplified by the case of the hutch rabbits who, by spending their lives in such a confined space, have become dull creatures with weakened senses and lacking in self-sufficiency. The notion of breeding is, from the anthropocentrist viewpoint of

the farmer, a positive thing, as cats and dogs have specific functions that benefit him while the hutch rabbits serve to entertain his daughter. However, from the wild rabbits' point of view, the idea of breeding is condemned, as it has served to denaturalize the rabbits, cats, and dogs featured in the novel, demoting them from unfettered subjects to a position of servitude. Unlike many animal stories, *Watership Down* is thus not a celebration of the bond between humans and companion animals, but it rather explores, with wild animals as the focalizers, the negative effects these processes of breeding and captivity have on various "companion" animals.

4.1.3 *Efrafa: Fear, Power, and Rabbit Control*

While Cowslip's warren and the hutch rabbits' lives are touched by humans and are thus represented as being influenced negatively by them, Efrafa is the only warren that has no relation to humans at all. It is precisely this, however, that can be seen as the root of their unnaturalness, as they actively avoid coming in contact with them: it is their biggest fear that men might discover them, for which reason the warren's oppressive system has been established in the first place (231).

Efrafa is a large, overcrowded warren, whose rabbits are divided into different groups called marks. The rabbits are bitten after birth and are thus given a scar at a specific place on their body that denotes to which mark they belong, e.g., the Right Flank Mark. If unknown rabbits happen to cross the path of Efracan rabbits, they are either killed or forced to become part of Efrafa, as they are afraid that stray rabbits might "attract the attention of men" (232). Efrafa consists of a strict hierarchy: at the top presides General Woundwort who controls the Council and the Council police. These two rabbit bodies supervise the Owsla whose captains, sentries, and officers are in charge of the marks. Efrafa is thus an exceedingly hierarchical and well-managed place whose primary goal is to conceal the presence of the warren: their holes are hidden, the rabbits bury their droppings in specific places, and the marks are only allowed to go above ground taking turns at different times of night and day, under the strict supervision of the Owsla. As Holly remarks, "You can't call your life your own: and in return you have safety – if it's worth having at the price you pay" (231). Every aspect of the rabbits' lives, from feeding to breeding, is controlled by the Council, and they spend most of their lives underground. Living in such oppression "alters them very much" (232), they have become "very subdued and docile" (236), "their instincts are weakened by life in the Mark" (386), and "[m]ost of them can't do anything but what they're told" (232). In these respects, they are not unlike the hutch rabbits.

While Hazel's warren is based mostly on democratic thinking and decision-making, Efrafa displays a totalitarian regime. It is made clear that this system with its extreme precautions which aim to hide the warren's existence has been established out of fear of humans infecting them with the "white blindness" (231). Taking a look at Lockley's *The Private Life*, one may safely presume that Adams refers to myxomatosis, a rabbit sickness that plays an important part throughout Lockley's book and profoundly influenced the rabbit population in Britain in the twentieth century.

According to Lockley, myxomatosis induces blindness and deafness in rabbits and is spread via rabbit fleas; *Watership Down's* remark that the "white blindness" "is carried by the fleas in rabbits' ears" (276) thus supports the idea that the sickness mentioned in the novel in all likelihood refers to myxomatosis. Lockley explains that until the nineteenth century, the rabbit population in Britain had been relatively small and kept in check by predators and farmers. The introduction of the Ground Game Act of 1880 allowed landowners to kill wild rabbits, which formerly had not been allowed because of game preservation, and they tended to use steel traps that killed not only rabbits but a great number of their predators as well; which, however, was seen as a positive side effect, as it ensured a greater number of rabbits to be caught by humans. As a result of the reduction of rabbit predators, the rabbit population increased excessively over the next decades, causing "intolerable damage to agricultural production of cereals, kale, roots and grass crops" (143). Myxomatosis, a rabbit sickness originating in the Americas, was artificially introduced in France in the 1950s as a means to control rabbit numbers, as well as in other countries like Australia and Chile, and it quickly spread to Britain in 1953. Lockley narrates from personal experience how British landowners and farmers traded infected rabbits to obliterate the warrens that ate away at their crops. This caused an epidemic that reduced the rabbit population to about one-tenth of its former number, as a consequence of which some rabbit predators became almost extinct (44).

It is precisely this anthropocentric idea of "managing" and "controlling" nature that Julia Corbett criticizes in *Out of the Woods*: anthropocentrism is based on the idea that "humans can and do control nature," an idea in which "[n]ature is the machine and humans the engineers" (132; emphasis in the original). This notion of governing nature is prominent in much of human thought and is even part of governmental legislation; for instance, the UK's official governmental website "Rabbits: How to Control Numbers" calls it the responsibility of its citizens "to control rabbit numbers on [their] property and land"; legal means to do so are the usage of gas, traps, snares, shotguns, ferrets, and erecting fences to keep rabbits out. Lockley adds in his book that poison is not allowed, as it might risk the lives of other animals, especially domestic ones, which shows a clear division between the worth of pests and pets (169). However, humans act on this desire to control mostly without considering the extensive consequences their interference might have, as they are often ignorant of the complex interdependence that forms the basis of ecosystems. It was human laws that increased the rabbit population in Britain in the first place and human's artificial creation of an epidemic that reduced these numbers again once realization struck that the high rabbit numbers did humans more harm than good; not to speak of the near extinction of some rabbit predators and the steel trap's "bycatch" of foxes, stoats, badgers, dogs, and cats who had to die because of human whims and ignorance.

While fear of the white blindness is one reason why Efrafa has become a totalitarian regime, one might argue that the warren's abnormality emanates mostly from Woundwort and that the majority of the Efracan rabbits are natural rabbits who had

the misfortune to be born under the eye of a powerful and unnatural rabbit; as Strawberry puts it, “[T]here are rabbits there who’d be the same as we are if they could only live naturally” (251), and an Efrafa officer holds that “[t]hey want to be natural, the anti-social little beasts. They just don’t realize that everyone’s good depends on everyone’s cooperation” (312). Woundwort’s unnaturalness even affects Hazel’s warren: after they have fought Woundwort in the summer and the Efracan does have born litters in non-mating seasons “because they’d had no natural life in Efrafa” (464), one of the rabbits remarks: “Frith never meant us to go on fighting in the high summer.[...] Everything that’s happened is unnatural – the fighting, the breeding – and all on account of Woundwort. If he wasn’t unnatural, who was?” (464).

To understand the character of Captain Woundwort and the reason why he is so atypical a rabbit, one has to take a look at his backstory, which *Watership Down* dedicates half a chapter to. The unfolding of his history begins with the statement that “Captain Woundwort was a singular rabbit” (301), and the chapter narrates that he was born three years ago near a cottage garden that his father frequently raided until he was consequently shot by the cottager. The man then proceeded to dig out Woundwort’s mother and her litter and managed to kill all of his siblings. Woundwort and his mother were the only ones to escape, although not before the cottager wounded her with his shotgun. While through the eyes of rabbits, this event is framed as horrific and barbaric, the cottager’s side is also briefly mentioned, as he only acted “[a]fter two or three weeks of spoiled lettuces and nibbled cabbage-plants” (301). From a human perspective, especially farmers and gardeners would probably agree that this would be a valid justification to make away with the tiresome creatures. However, the shift of perspective shows the traumatic and brutal effects this bloodshed has on the rabbits as sentient beings. Woundwort’s bleeding mother was finally chased and caught by a weasel and her son had to watch “while his mother was killed before his eyes” (301). The weasel, having killed only to satisfy his hunger, left the young Woundwort untouched. Although two brutal scenes follow each other in Woundwort’s life, this shows the contrast between animal predators and humans, a theme that is repeated throughout the novel: predators kill to survive and only when necessary while humans and their companion animals do not exclusively kill to satisfy their hunger, but out of annoyance or detached indifference.

The young Woundwort was found by “a kind old schoolmaster from Overton” who saved the rabbit by taking him home with him. However, Woundwort was not a rabbit to be kept in a cage: soon he was “big and strong and had become savage” (302) and subsequently managed to escape from his hutch. This relates to Lockley’s statement in *The Private Life* that young wild rabbits who are raised by humans can seldom if ever be tamed (28). One might thus argue that the traumatizing event of the cottager killing almost his entire family is the root of Woundwort’s unnaturalness and his fear of humans, which he projects on all his rabbits in Efrafa. His time in captivity probably also contributed to this, as it went against his dignity that he, a strong, fearless rabbit, had to live as a pet. Together with this humiliation, his stay

with the man may have augmented his fear of humans; he has no inhibitions about fighting cats, stoats, seagulls, and even a dog, but he knows himself powerless before so large and cunning an animal as a human being. Thus, the unnatural totalitarian regime that he imposes on his rabbits is a response to his two encounters with members of the human species. In fact, he is depicted as so unnatural, having so flagrantly transgressed the species boundaries, that he is declared more than once a non-rabbit: “He’s not like a rabbit at all. [...] Flight’s the last thing he ever thinks of” (362), and: “Frith sees you! [...] You’re not fit to be called a rabbit!” (357).

So one can detect two forms of rabbit control in the analysis of Efrafa: on the one hand, the control of rabbit numbers by humans via “the white blindness,” and of course General Woundwort’s control of the Efracan rabbits influenced by his history with humans. One should add, however, that to a great part, humans have become an excuse for Woundwort’s totalitarian regime. He would not relinquish his power now even if he knew his rabbits completely safe from humans, as he shows when he rejects Hazel’s proposition to merge both warrens, in a moment that tests “whether he was really the leader of vision and genius which he believed himself to be, or whether he was no more than a tyrant” (419); so his hunger for power is also a decisive factor in Efrafa’s unnaturalness. Lastly, it is notable that the rabbits of Hazel’s warren feel themselves inferior to the Efracan rabbits, as they call themselves “a dirty little bunch of snivelling hedge-scrappers” in contrast (231), just like when encountering Cowslip they see themselves as poor and ragged (62). Before warrens that one might call more “civilized” or orderly, they feel their simplicity; yet it is this simplistic lifestyle and their faithfulness to what they perceive as the right way of living that not only lets them live self-sufficient, gregarious lives, but that also helps them survive while both the other warrens are doomed: Cowslip’s warren has become nothing more than a food source for humans while Efrafa perishes together with Woundwort, the General having at last succumbed to his unnaturalness:

He was a fighting animal – fierce as a rat or as a dog. He fought because he actually felt safer fighting than running. [...] But it wasn’t natural; and that’s why it was bound to finish him in the end. He was trying to do something that Frith never meant any rabbit to do. I believe he’d have hunted like the elil [predators] if he could. (464)

4.2 Human Unnaturalness and the Technique of Defamiliarization

It has been shown that the misery that has befallen Cowslip’s warren can be traced back to human influence, that hutch rabbits have become unnatural through the process of domestication and captivity, and that the unnatural case of Efrafa has its roots partly in the fear of humans. How, then, are humans themselves represented in the novel? The adjective “unnatural” almost always accompanies representations of human beings and man-made things, and the following two chapters will explore how both feature in the rabbits’ worlds.

4.2.1 *Human Cruelty and Destruction*

Even before the narrative begins, *Watership Down* presents the short excerpt “Master Rabbit I Saw” from Walter de la Mare’s poem commonly known as “As I Was Walking.” Looking at the poem in its entirety, it is noticeable that it already establishes the tension in human-rabbit relations as represented in the novel. After depicting an idyllic evening in the English landscape, the lyrical I encounters a rabbit:

Master Rabbit I saw
 In the shadow-rimmed mouth
 Of his sandy cavern,
 Looking out to the South.
 [...]
 Lank human was I,
 And a foe, poor soul –
 Snowy flit of a scut,
 He was into his hole,
 And – stamp, stamp, stamp!
 Through dim labyrinths clear,
 The whole world darkened,
 A murderer near. (809)

The rabbit’s tranquil repose is disturbed by the appearance of a human who is “a foe,” even a “murderer,” in the rabbit’s eyes. Although the human in the poem does not seem to have bad intentions, instinct and perhaps experience seem to tell the rabbit that humans are best to be avoided. The novel’s epigraph thus already introduces the clash of pastoral idyll and the threat of human cruelty and destruction that the first chapter continues. The first three paragraphs of the novel paint a picture of an idyllic evening in the countryside: in the “May sunset,” the “dry slope [is] dotted with rabbits” whose safety is reinforced by the singing of a blackbird that tells them “that there [is] nothing alarming” (3); the narrator assures that “[t]he warren [is] at peace” (3). This image of tranquility, however, is disrupted once Fiver is introduced, who is emanating a nervous energy because he as a seer senses the warren’s impending doom. When he perceives the sign telling of the imminent plan to turn the field into a housing estate, his foreboding culminates in a fearful outcry: “The field! It’s covered with blood!” (7). Regarding this first chapter, John Pennington holds that the contrast of “the pastoral setting of the warren with the visions of Fiver” symbolizes “the invasion of man into their Arcadia” (“Peter Rabbit” 73-74).

This already introduces Holly’s first-hand account of the annihilation of Sandleford Warren via gas and guns, the horror of which Fiver could sense by looking at the sign. Holly’s narration is arguably the most brutal episode of the novel but also most revealing regarding *Watership Down*’s message about animal-human relations, and it will thus constitute the main focus of this chapter. A method used throughout the novel to represent humans and human-made objects is Viktor Shklovsky’s technique of “defamiliarization.” In his essay “Art as Technique,” he explains it as a

means to make “the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object” and further by “[describing] an object as if [...] seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time” (13). In *Watership Down*, this technique serves to convey a certain credibility and otherness when it comes to the representation of animal minds, and it further emphasizes the unnaturalness of human behavior and objects as perceived through the rabbits’ eyes. Most notable is Holly’s description of men using gas to kill the rabbits: after filling up most of the warren’s holes,

[t]hey took down some big, long things – I don’t know how to describe them to you – they were made of the same sort of stuff as a hrududu [car]. [...] Then, another of the men fetched some long, thin, bending things. I haven’t got words for all these men-things, but they were something like lengths of very thick bramble. Each of the men took one and put it on one of the heavy things. There was a kind of hissing noise and – and – well, I know you must find this difficult to understand, but the air began to turn bad. (151-152)

Holly’s awkward repetition of the word “things” expresses his helplessness in explaining these human-made objects for which there are no Lapine words; in fact, he uses the idea of a plant to clarify to the other rabbits what he means: gas hoses become “lengths of very thick bramble,” a toxic death device invented by humans is described via a plant simile. As will be shown in the following, Adams’ rabbits often make sense of human-made phenomena with the help of plant analogies that serve to reinforce the natural-unnatural dichotomy of rabbits and humans respectively. After all rabbits have either succumbed to the gas underground or have been shot when trying to flee the burrows, Holly describes how a large yellow *brududu* approached, for which he also makes use of a plant simile: “It was [...] as yellow as charlock,” he explains, and “in front there was a great, silver, shining thing that it held in its huge front paws” (154). The rabbits cannot comprehend that something that seems to move on its own accord can be anything but alive, which is why this bulldozer must be some kind of animal and is described as having “paws.” Holly tells the listening rabbits that the bulldozer blade “looked like Inlé, but it was broad and not so bright” (154). The Black Rabbit of Inlé, as has been discussed, is the rabbits’ figure of death, and the black blade thus evokes the idea of death and destruction: “it buried itself in the ground and pushed great masses of earth in front of it until the field was destroyed” (154). The words “bulldozer” or “gas hose” are never mentioned: the readers must figure out for themselves what Holly is referring to in his narration, thus seeing these defamiliarized objects with new eyes, namely with those of wild rabbits.

The rabbits’ focalization is central for conveying anti-anthropocentrist messages: if one of the men were to be the focalizer, the rabbits would possibly be framed as vermin, a nuisance to be taken care of to make land development possible. However, the animal perspective frames the men as ruthless and villainous, and instead of simply making way for a housing estate, they are destroying an entire rabbit world.

Defamiliarization thus compels the reader “to reconsider familiar ideas” about what it means to be human (Bernaerts et al. 73), and in this case also what a rabbit’s life means to humans. The usage of gas and guns to kill rabbits, as it is described in *Watership Down*, are nowadays still legal means to make away with rabbit “pests” (“Rabbits”). However, by showing these forms of destruction from a rabbit’s defamiliarizing perspective, the novel questions the human right to do so while even being encouraged by law. This scene thus invites the reader to take the side of the rabbits, evoking empathy in its detailed narration of how the rabbits suffer in their last minutes underground, how they tear over each other to get out of the poisonous runs, and how does desperately try to protect their kittens. Humans are impelled to imagine it is they who are choking in the fumes and who are trying to save themselves and their children. According to Bernaerts et al., defamiliarization and empathy, or “distancing and identification” (73-74), tend to go hand in hand in animal fiction, and in *Watership Down* they prove to be powerful techniques to represent rabbit-human relations.

The chapter on the annihilation of Sandleford can be seen as the epitome of human cruelty in the novel. Holly remembers that after having escaped the blood-bath, another survivor, Toadflax, realized why men wanted the rabbits dead:

Bluebell had been saying that he knew the men hated us for raiding their crops and gardens and Toadflax answered, “That wasn’t why they destroyed the warren. It was just because we were in their way. They killed us to suit themselves.” (155)

Here, the novel overtly condemns the view that the lives and deaths of animals are mandated by the whims and anthropocentric attitudes of humans. It seems that the rabbits could understand if humans killed out of fury, as other animals might do, but they cannot comprehend this cold, detached, and indifferent annihilation of their warren only “because [they] were in their way.” Toadflax senses that rabbit lives hold little or no value in the eyes of humans, which the scene of the destruction of Sandleford makes most painfully clear. To underline the centrality of this chapter’s message regarding human-animal relations, it is the only one, excepting the epilogue, that is headed by two epigraphs instead of one. The first epigraph is taken from Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* and goes: “Love the animals. God has given them the rudiments of thought and joy untroubled. Don’t trouble it, don’t harass them, don’t deprive them of their happiness, don’t work against God’s intent” (148). This quote expresses the idea that by going against animals, one is going against God. It moreover emphasizes that animals have thoughts and feelings, thus indicating sameness with humans, a technique used by many contemporary animal rights activists. However, the quote also indicates a speciesist hierarchy by stating that animals only have “rudiments” of thoughts and joy; further, animals are represented as ever-joyful, which can be seen as negating their suffering, a notion which the chapter tries to work against through in-depth explorations of leporine agony and torture. The second epigraph is taken from W. H. Auden’s *The Ascent of F.6*: “Acts of injustice done

/ Between the setting and the rising sun / In history lie like bones, each one” (148). Although the quote originally does not refer to animals, in the context of *Watership Down* it emphasizes the significance and atrocity of every single act of cruelty done to animals as experiencing subjects, and that these crimes can be found scattered throughout history. Of course, in the context of animal killings, the skeletons also have a literal meaning, as they refer to all animal beings who were killed unjustly by humans, like, for instance, the rabbits of Sandleford Warren. Both epigraphs thus underline the novel’s condemnation of the needless killing of rabbits that is made possible through the deeply ingrained belief in the triviality of other-than-human life – so deeply ingrained, in fact, that it becomes a legitimized practice upheld by law.

4.2.2 *Human-Made Objects and Noise*

Human ubiquity is especially emphasized through miscellaneous human-made objects that the rabbits encounter on their journey and that are repeatedly framed as unnatural via the technique of defamiliarization. One example in which defamiliarization, a plant metaphor, and a charge of unnaturalness are combined is the rabbits’ idea of “iron tree[s]” (121) that emit an “unnatural humming” (120) and that turn out to be pylons. The most frequently mentioned objects by far are cigarettes, which in most cases announce the approach of a human being. The rabbits defamiliarize cigarettes by referring to them as “little white sticks that they burn in their mouths” (59) and which are accompanied by “[a] dangerous smell, an unpleasant smell, a totally unnatural smell” (80). Its stench becomes representative of humans and mostly incites sentiments of horror and fear in the rabbits. The first chapter, which already features its first cigarette, also includes another instance of human presence that strikes the rabbits as deeply strange and ominous: the sign that foretells the calamity which is about to befall the warren and that inspires such horror and bloody visions in Fiver. Even the shape of the characters on the sign speaks of the cruelty of men: they are “sharp, hard letters that cut straight as black knives across its white surface,” and the words themselves inform that “this ideally situated estate, comprising six acres of excellent building land, is to be developed with high class modern residences” (8). The field, having encompassed the rabbits’ entire world for many generations, has become, in the minds of humans who have turned from nature to capitalism, merely “six acres of excellent building land” (8). Blackberry, the most intelligent rabbit of the lot, remarks “that he had always felt sure that men left these things about to act as signs or messages of some kind, in the same way that rabbits left marks on runs and gaps” (13). A sign is thus likened to a territorial marking practice whereby rabbits, for instance, use urine and scent from their chin glands to claim “ownership” of a certain area. By erecting the sign in the field of the rabbits, humans designate their ownership of this area that they later occupy by exterminating its former inhabitants and by turning the rabbits’ homes into their own “high class modern residences.” Thus, by defamiliarizing human writing on a sign as a

marking of territory, it is imbued with new meaning as it becomes a means of encroachment, a display of power, and a symbol that the home of the rabbits is now irrevocably possessed by humankind.

Roads and cars, or *hrududil*, also feature consistently in the rabbits' journey. When the rabbits first come upon a road, Hazel defamiliarizes it by calling it a "black, smooth and straight" river (46). Once he recognizes its "strange, strong smells of tar and oil," he comments: "But that's not natural" (46). Bigwig explains that it is man-made and that humans "put that stuff there and then the hrududil run on it – faster than we can; and what else can run faster than we?" This evokes the rabbits' origin myth in which Frith bestows on the rabbits the ability to run "faster than any creature in the world" (28). The idea that *hrududil* are even quicker than themselves tells the rabbits that cars cannot possibly be part of Frith's plan for the world, that it must therefore be a godlike move on the part of unnatural humans to defy Frith and create something even faster. Cars themselves overwhelm the rabbits' senses and fill them with terror: the passing of a car "in a flash of man-made, unnatural colour" engulfs "the whole world [in] noise and fear," and the exhaust fumes emanate "a hostile, chocking smell" (46, 47, 218). The car's lights in the night scare the rabbits almost to death as the glare paralyzes their instincts: Bigwig explains that "the hrududil have great lights, brighter than Frith himself" (48), which is again an instance of blasphemy, as humans dare to compete with Frith who, according to rabbit mythology, is also the humans' god. The danger of the cars and roads is emphasized when the rabbits find "a flattened, bloody mass of brown prickles and white fur, with small black feet and snout crushed round the edges" (47). It is a hedgehog, or *yona* in Lapine. Blackberry is appalled, because, as he puts it, "What harm does a yona do to anything but slugs and beetles? And what can eat a yona?" (47). Cars are thus seen as dangerous predators of inoffensive animals that "draw creatures towards them and if they shine on you, you can't see or think which way to go. Then the hrududu is quite likely to catch you" (48). Like with the bulldozer, the rabbits have difficulties understanding that cars can move on their own but are inanimate, as can be seen by their confusion: "See? They don't hurt you. [...] As a matter of fact, I don't think they're alive at all. But I must admit I can't altogether make it out" (47).

Further, the railroad, or the "iron road" as the rabbits call it (286), is also featured a few times throughout the narrative, and again Hazel takes offense at "its unnatural smells of metal, coal-smoke and oil" (286). After a train divides Holly from the pursuing Efracans, he recounts that it was

as big as a thousand hrududil [...] [and] full of fire and smoke and light and it roared and beat on the metal lines until the ground shook beneath it. It drove in between us and the Efracans like a thousand thunderstorms with lightning. I tell you, I was beyond being afraid. (239)

As the train is a phenomenon that cannot be explained by the rabbits, it is regarded as something sublime and awe-inspiring, not part of the natural world but rather "a fiery, thundering angel" and one of the "great Messengers" of Frith (286, 239). Thus,

defamiliarized human-made objects are used throughout the novel as alienating strategies to imagine how wild rabbits would understand cigarettes, pylons, written signs, cars, and trains, and to underline, from the perspective of wild rabbits, humanity's unnaturalness.

Throughout the novel, Hazel and his friends search for a pastoral ideal where the effects of industrialization and urbanization cannot be felt. Their safe haven on the top of Watership Down is described as a sort of Utopia where they can finally live in peace: "a high, lonely place with dry soil, where rabbits can see and hear all round and men hardly ever come" (33). But even here, they are not entirely able to escape ubiquitous humanity: from up on Watership, they have a view of a "pylon-line stalking away" to the horizon (132), and especially noise traverses the distance that divides rabbits from the nearest human dwellings. The novel makes its position especially clear in the following quote:

Nowadays, among fields and woods, the noise level by day is high – too high for some kinds of animal to tolerate. Few places are far from human noise – cars, buses, motorcycles, tractors, lorries. The sound of a housing estate in the morning is audible a long way off. People who record birdsong generally do it very early – before six o'clock – if they can. Soon after that, the invasion of distant noise in most woodland becomes too constant and too loud. During the last fifty years the silence of much of the country has been destroyed. But here, on Watership Down, there floated up only faint traces of the daylight noise below. (128)

This expresses an ecocritical warning, an appeal to humans to change their behavior lest silence, especially the pastoral silence of the English countryside, will disappear for good. Although human beings are mostly absent on Watership, their presence can be found everywhere, and even this safe haven has been penetrated by noise. As Pennington argues, the rabbits are ever in search of an Arcadia, but as the utopian place on the hills has been invaded by humanity, it is only in death that Hazel is able to reach "El-ahrairah's arcadian world" ("Peter Rabbit" 77).

4.3 From Anthropocentric Humanism to Empathic Animality

4.3.1 "Primitive" and "Civilized" Humans: Overcoming Human-Animal Dualism

So far, the natural-unnatural dichotomy explored in the preceding chapters has mostly framed humans and those animals who have not been influenced by humanity as two separate and antithetical categories. However, this human-animal dualism is complicated with Adams' reference to so-called "primitive" people who are depicted as similar to wild animals and who are in turn contrasted with "civilized" human beings. The novel indicates that there does exist a gulf between animals and civilized humans, but rather than basing the distinction on human exceptionalism founded on the belief of exclusive qualities such as reason, speech, or consciousness,

the novel proposes that what differentiates animal beings from so-called civilized humans is nothing other than the unnaturalness of the latter.

Watership Down's recurring reference to "primitive" people who share similarities with animals might be traced back to Lockley's influence, as he, too, mentions similar parallels in *The Private Life*, for example when likening the rabbits' social structure to that "of a primitive community" (64). In *Watership Down*, various passages establish a closeness between animal beings and "primitive" humans. For instance, when explaining that rabbits have no concept of "precise time" and "punctuality," Adams writes:

In this respect they are much the same as primitive people, who often take several days over assembling for some purpose and then several more to get started. Before such people can act together, a kind of telepathic feeling has to flow through them and ripen to the point when they all know that they are ready to begin. Anyone who has seen the martins and swallows in September [...] – the hundreds of individual birds merging and blending [...] into swarms, and these swarms coming loosely and untidily together to create a great, unorganized flock – [...] anyone seeing this has seen at work the current that flows (among creatures who think of themselves primarily as part of a group and only secondary, if at all, as individuals) to fuse them together and impel them into action without conscious thought or will. (16-17)

"Primitive people" are likened to rabbits and birds through the claim that they are connected by a sort of tribal telepathic connection that creates unity and incites instinctive and synchronized reactions. Just as the narrator is fashioned as an authority on rabbits, the assertive tone of this passage indicates that this information should be taken at face value. In a next instance, the narrator states that when the rabbits encounter something unknown that they cannot comprehend, their indifferent reaction is reminiscent of

simple African villagers, who have never left their remote homes, [and] may not be particularly surprised by their first sight of an aeroplane: it is outside their comprehension. But their first sight of a horse pulling a cart will set them pointing and laughing at the ingenuity of the fellow who thought of that one. (293)

Here, Adams elucidates that for him, the term "primitive people" at least in some cases denotes Africans: "African villagers" are portrayed as child-like and "simple," whose mental functions are represented as undeveloped, and who have never seen an airplane or even a horse pulling a cart before. Another example depicts "primitive" humans with strong feelings and sympathy as contrasted with civilized people: "Yet, as with primitive humans, the very strength and vividness of [the rabbits'] sympathy brought with it true release. Their feelings were not false or assumed. While the story was being told, they heard it without any of the reserve or detachment that the kindest of civilized humans retains as he reads his newspaper" (159). This quote

creates a sharp division between “primitive” and “civilized” humans, in which the latter have lost the ability to feel strongly for others. The mentioning of the newspaper indicates a rather detached form of empathy, as it daily supplies humans with a multitude of horrors that are received in a disconnected way and blunt the ability to sympathize with others.

Of course, the appellation “primitive people” and their demarcation from “civilized” humans is highly problematic as both categories are framed as binary oppositions and are respectively imbued with values; fundamentally generalizing and reductive, the novel’s notion of and ideas about so-called primitive people represented as facts are possibly the products of Adams’ imagination fed by Romantic accounts of “the noble savage” as well as of travel reports and notes from settlers and colonizers who mostly described “from above.” His depiction of African villagers reflects a stereotypical image of Africans as “primitive” and “simple” and mirrors the prevalent conception that Africa is one homogeneous country instead of a continent comprised of diverse cultures. Regarding the term itself, in his article “Primitive Society,” A. F. Robertson traces its usage throughout the last centuries: until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the designation “primitive” was used to simply denote “first” or “earliest”; it was only in the context of European colonization that the term was imbued with connotations like “inferior, backward, rude” and was used to contrast and celebrate Western societies that were seen as having attained civilization. In the middle of the twentieth century, influenced by postcolonial discourse, the term fell into disfavor, while the two World Wars contributed to the growing suspicion that civilized societies were not as progressive as believed (12046, 12048). Instead of “primitive,” scholars began to adopt terms such as “preliterate” and “non-literate” that are still in usage today (12049). However, the 1970s saw a revived interest in the term, as “the primitive social structure supposedly set up antibodies for the development of inequality, leadership, capitalism, the state, and the other vices of modern civilization,” and it came to be seen by many as something ideal rather than backward (12048). According to Robertson, the main reason why the term continues to persist even today is due to nostalgia which is produced by contrasting “the noble savage” with “the vices of civilization,” and which is based on the idea that one can find in nonliterate societies “redemption” and “moral [virtues] lacking in so-called civilized societies” (2049).

Watership Down, written at a time when interest in the term was rekindled, partakes in the trend of nostalgia as it espouses the “image of our natural selves before we were corrupted by the rise of capitalism” (Robertson 12050). The novel proposes consistently that there is a natural way of living for each species, and that transgressions of these boundaries result in unnaturalness. By placing primitive humans on the same level as “natural” animals and by insisting that civilized human beings lack the ability to sympathize with others and are excluded from unifying and meaningful relationships with each other and their environment, *Watership Down* indicates that the “right” way of life for humans is that of nonliterate societies. Adams’ stance regarding the degeneration of civilization and the ideal “primitive state” is not a new

thought as it can be traced especially to ideas put forth by Jean Jacques Rousseau, who understood civilization as the source for moral corruption. Rousseau saw so-called “savages” as leading the most natural lives, holding that

[t]he example of savages, most of whom have been found in this [primitive] state, seems to prove that men were meant to remain in it, that it is the real youth of the world, and that all subsequent advances have been apparently so many steps towards the perfection of the individual, but in reality towards the decrepitude of the species.

Thus, following in Rousseau’s footsteps, *Watership Down* emphasizes that by leaving this “primitive state,” humans have fallen out of their deep and rich relationships with the earth and with fellow earth dwellers and have become “civilized” and unnatural.

Insisting on parallels between groups of human beings and animals plays into racist ideas that aim to establish these groups as “sub-human”; it is offensive as it is implied that animals are subordinate to humans. In *Watership Down*, however, this is complicated as it repeatedly emphasizes that wild animals are in some ways superior to civilized humans; further, that “primitive people” are even living an ideal state of being that civilized humans have forfeited and slowly eroded via factors such as urbanization, industrialization, capitalism, individualism, and rationalism. In a way, *Watership Down* attempts to invert the discriminatory duality that sees nonliterate societies as inferior by depicting civilized people as having lost an essential part of what it means to be human. However, this does not change that the conceptions of “African villagers” or “primitive people,” which in themselves are already excessively vague and generalized terms, are of a deeply patronizing and stereotypical nature. The novel thus paradoxically expresses a condescending view of nonliterate societies while simultaneously arguing that their way of life is ideal for the human species. I contend that this contradiction reveals that *Watership Down* does not really argue for a return to this model “primitive” state: the novel revels in a certain kind of nostalgia, but it is nostalgia for something that is portrayed as irreversibly gone for civilized humans, and racist implications illustrate that a return to this state would not be desirable now. As an alternative, I argue in the next chapter that the novel proposes that there is another way to regain access to a state of interspecies respect and response-ability by becoming aware of one’s relatedness with other beings and living in a network of empathy.

With all its racist overtones, the proposition that “primitive” people are similar to nonhuman animals depicts permeable boundaries between humans and animals and thus challenges the Cartesian and Heideggerian divide. The novel argues that humans are much more “animal” than they are aware of themselves and that it is under layers of civilization that one can find one’s animality. This idea is emphasized in a central passage of the novel, in which the rabbit Strawberry explains:

Animals don't behave like men. [...] 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. (235)

Adams additionally accentuates the importance of this idea by emphasizing animals' "dignity and 'animality'" in an introduction to a revised edition of *The Private Life* (qtd. in Meyer, "Myth" 142). The recurring contrast between primitive and civilized humans throughout the novel elucidates that with "men," Strawberry refers here particularly to those human beings who have rejected their equitable relationships with other species. Parallels between rabbits and "primitive people" indicate that the latter are part of this animality like any other species, as they lead lives in harmony with the earth and with nonhumans; civilized human beings, on the other hand, have, through the process of changing nature to suit themselves, changed themselves, and have become detached from their animality by conceptualizing themselves as non-animals. However, *Watership Down* argues that they should and could be part of animality if they abandoned the idea of anthropocentric humanism that puts them into a different category from all other species on earth.

This concept of animality can thus be seen as a move away from anthropocentric humanism, which Weitzenfeld and Joy define as the roots of anthropocentrism as we know it today (3). Unlike humanism, the idea of animality is of course much more inclusive, as it encompasses all animal species instead of elevating a single one. As has already been mentioned earlier, Weitzenfeld and Joy contend that anthropocentric humanism is based on the ideas of human exceptionalism, perfection, and dignity, which are withheld from nonhumans, and in *Watership Down*, these three fundamental principles are extended to all of animality: human exceptionalism with its insistence that only humans possess such qualities as reason, consciousness, culture, and speech is made to include nonhumans by emphasizing animal subjectivities which encompass these qualities as well; similarly, human perfection, the idea that "human consciousness is conceptualized as an individual and autonomous entity capable of [...] self-realization and self-determination" (6), is likewise opened up to all animality: the rabbits are themselves actors rather than "objects of human cruelty or kindness" (Elick 8) as they actively seek their Arcadia in the form of Watership hill – although the idea of autonomous entities will be questioned in the following chapter. Thirdly, human dignity, the notion that those beings who have self-determination possess intrinsic value, is also expanded to encompass all of animality. This is made clear through Strawberry's emphasis that animals have dignity, and especially through *Watership Down's* constant insistence that animals are agential subjects who do not possess merely instrumental value or no value at all, but rather intrinsic self-worth. Thus, *Watership Down* overcomes the human-animal dualism so central to "hard" anthropocentric ideology by emphasizing an inclusive animality to which all humans could belong if only they accepted their animalness and relinquished the destructive ideas of exclusive exceptionalism and superiority. As Marc Bekoff holds,

“We are animals and we should be proud and aware of our membership in the animal kingdom” (“Speciesism” 16).

Lastly, within the context of the novel’s proposed similarity between “primitive” humans and rabbits, I will turn to the question of whether the rabbits in *Watership Down* can be read as allegories. By reexamining the preceding chapters on rabbit subjectivities, one can assume that some aspects of the literary rabbits are partly modeled after ideas of nonliterate societies, such as the rabbits’ oral culture, their rejection of Western ideas like ocularcentrism and social constructs of romantic love, and a strong focus on collectivism. In a next step, one can read Cowslip’s warren as an analogy of civilized humans. To Hazel, Cowslip smells “of health and of a certain indolence, as though the other came from some rich, prosperous country where he himself had never been” (61-62). Cowslip’s politeness and his stated aristocracy further remind of the polite society especially of eighteenth-century England and can be interpreted as a criticism of such a way of life; like Cowslip’s warren, “civilized” people can be seen as having turned from lives centering on close relationships with the earth to performative, detached courteousness. According to Fiver, this creates an emptiness that the rabbits of Cowslip’s warren attempt to fill with practices and behavior that generate condescending attitudes toward “primitive” rabbits and erroneous notions of their own exclusive exceptionalism:

They found out other marvellous arts to take the place of tricks and old stories. They danced in ceremonious greetings. They sang songs like the birds and made shapes on the walls; and though these could help them not at all, yet they passed the time and enabled them to tell themselves that they were splendid fellows, the very flower of Rabbitry. (113)

Both “civilized” rabbits and “civilized” humans are shown to have distanced themselves from their species’ natural way of life: the rabbits reveal their own chauvinism by deeming themselves “the very flower of Rabbitry,” which is a thinly-veiled criticism of anthropocentrism, the belief that the human species is the very flower of all life on earth. Civilized humans, like Cowslip’s warren, can thus be seen as transgressing their species boundaries by conceptualizing themselves as the apex of evolution. While the compartmentalizing and generalizing nature of the primitive/civilized dichotomy employed throughout the novel and especially reductive representations of the “primitive” cannot but be discredited by contemporary readers, this allegorical reading at least has the potential to point toward a criticism of Western cultures which not only place themselves above other cultures, but which essentially understand themselves as the self-proclaimed rulers of planet earth.

Are the rabbits in *Watership Down* thus allegorical devices used to show humans of Western cultures what they have lost and how they ought to live? How to solve the question of rabbits either as allegories or as actual rabbits? I argue that it is not a question of either/or, but rather a fusion of the two: to use Charles Meyer’s words,

“Watching Adams’s rabbits [...] means simultaneously watching dignified wild animals *and* ourselves” (“Myth” 140; emphasis in the original). This combination does not only have the potential to represent complex animal subjectivities and to portray rabbits as animals in their own right, but the rabbits can further embody messages about humanity and about man-made and constructed human-animal dualism, thus working against anthropocentrism in multiple ways.

4.3.2 *Interspecies Empathy: A Hopeful Outlook?*

Joseph Krutch proposes that animal stories are not only about the animals themselves but

also about the [people] who have been moved, for one reason or another, to write on that subject. Sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously (but always inevitably) the writer implies an answer to one or more of the questions which any concern with an animal must raise. (Qtd. in Arbutnot and Sutherland 393)

One major question that the novel puts forth is how species relations can be ameliorated, so what humans can do to move toward a healthier relationship with their nonhuman kin. *Watership Down*, I argue, proposes that the first step toward a more respectful, less anthropocentric world lies in interspecies empathy. *Watership Down* is far from the first animal story that encourages compassion toward animal beings; it is, in fact, a theme as old as the genre itself. Interesting in *Watership Down* in particular, however, is that Adams not only takes care to depict empathy between different human characters and rabbits but also among different species of nonhuman animals, which serves to illustrate all the more clearly the webs of interdependence that define the world. The first part of this chapter will therefore focus on human-animal empathy while the second part will explore the other multiple instances of interspecies empathy as portrayed in the novel.

Watership Down features three human beings who feel empathy with animals: the “kind old schoolmaster” who saves Woundwort’s life (302) and farm-girl Lucy and Doctor Adams who set Hazel free. The schoolmaster is only mentioned in passing: when he finds the young Woundwort next to his dead mother, he nurses him back to health in his own kitchen, “feeding him with milk from a nasal dropper until he was old enough to eat bran and greenstuff” (302). Although Wordsworth is far from thankful as this incident has fueled his fear of and aversion for humans, it still shows that the schoolmaster has good intentions. Much more productive for the current analysis is the case of Lucy and Doctor Adams: their empathy is especially explored in a later chapter that breaks unexpectedly with the rest of the novel. Generally, the focalizers in *Watership Down* are rabbits, which means that the readers are invited to judge humanity from the rabbit perspective. Chapter 48, however, shocks the reader into a human-centered perspective as it is suddenly told from the point of view of the farmer’s daughter Lucy. The chapter portrays a strikingly human consciousness

that differs from that of the rabbit focalizers; for example, while the rabbits repeatedly use plant similes to make sense of the world, the first paragraph of the chapter tells that Lucy's dream drains "like water out of a wash-basin" and that the morning sounds seem to her "like the first strokes of a paint-brush on a big sheet of paper" (452). These similes illustrate a difference in being-in-the-world as they highlight the way humans are surrounded and their consciousness influenced by human-made objects.

After Lucy saves Hazel from the cat's claws, which the chapter's title calls an act of *deus ex machina*, she first intends to keep him. It is her father the farmer who informs her that a wild rabbit in a hutch would quickly die, although he does not tell her this out of empathy for Hazel; instead, he holds that Lucy should have let the cat finish the rabbit and contemplates killing Hazel himself. He sees Hazel as vermin because the rabbit has no utilitarian value for him while on a farm, a loose rabbit could "do all manner o' bloomin' 'arm" (454). Lucy, however, begins to cry as she is "upset by the idea of killing the rabbit in cold blood" (454): unlike most of the human characters featured in the novel, she does not think unnecessary killing right. Lucy presents the rabbit to Doctor Adams, a gentle and slightly eccentric man who shows kindness to children as well as to animals and who shares her father's opinion that wild animals cannot live in cages: "he wouldn't live shut up in a box. If he couldn't get out he'd soon die." However, instead of proposing to kill him, he declares: "I should let the poor chap go" (456). Doctor Adams shares the same last name as the author and might be seen as speaking for him. This is emphasized by the "Note" at the beginning of the book, in which it says that "Mr. and Mrs. Cane, their little girl Lucy and their farmhands are fictitious and bear no intentional resemblance to any person known to me." It is noticeable that the name of Doctor Adams is excluded from this list, the only other human character with a name. In a way, Doctor Adams is the only person who acknowledges Hazel as a creature with the right to live in freedom rather than as vermin or a food item, and he devises the plan to drive Hazel some distance away from the farm and set him free.

Lucy, on the other hand, initially sees Hazel as a potential pet, an animal to be held in a cage for her own amusement, like the hutch rabbits she "owned" until most of them were able to escape. It is only after Doctor Adams teaches her that Hazel as a wild animal would not survive in captivity that she agrees to set him free. However, although she first saves him from the cat and then from her father, one could argue that she does not acknowledge Hazel, or other animals for that matter, as fully-fledged subjects with the unconditional right to liberty, or even as individuals. Barbara Smuts shows that before she traveled with baboons and chimps in Africa, she mostly did not recognize the individuality of animal beings, either; when encountering a squirrel, "I would enjoy its presence, but I would experience it as a member of a class, 'squirrel,'" and Smuts had to learn to become aware "of the individuality of each animal" (301). This experience of species generalization is probably shared by many, yet spending time with a particular animal – as anyone finding themselves in a relationship with a companion animal can probably assert – will reveal this animal

as a distinct, idiosyncratic individual. Lucy's ambiguous understanding of nonhumans is made clear when she mentions her collection of "things she has found": she lists a bird's egg, "a Painted Lady fluttering in a jam jar," and a fungus (454). Putting the captured butterfly, and also the fungus, on the same level as an egg and calling them "things" demotes them to mere objects. Further, she describes Hazel as "a damaged rabbit" (454), the adjective representing Hazel more as a broken thing than an injured being. Lucy would probably not have called a wounded human "damaged." At least, Lucy seems to credit Hazel with limited subjectivity: Hazel's squeal conveys to her that he is "frightened" and "desperate" (453), implying that he is not perceived as an emotionless machine in the Cartesian sense, and Lucy seems to think she can communicate with him to a certain degree, saying: "'Old still! [...] I ain't gon' 'urtcher!'" (453). This conflicting perception of Hazel as both a thing and a subject as well as the varying conceptions of him as displayed by the farmer and Doctor Adams tell of the complex and oftentimes contradictory view of animals that pervades many human cultures, in which an animal can be deemed sentient, even a companion, while in different situations this same animal being is conceptualized as vermin whose life holds no value.

The two empathic human beings Lucy and Doctor Adams thus suddenly break with the depiction of cruel and ruthless humanity upheld so far. *Watership Down* promotes the idea that it is especially male adults who have lost the ability to feel empathy, as it is consistently human men who hunt and kill rabbits throughout the novel, while Lucy is shown to have retained an empathic connection to nonhumans. This can be read as a legacy of Romanticism, in which children were seen as especially close to nature. The figure of Doctor Adams, however, may aim to demonstrate that grown men can also remain empathic; the novel thus attempts to instruct not only its young readers to show empathy to animals, like most animal stories throughout the centuries, but also addresses its adult readers to become aware of the disconnection that characterizes much of human's relationship with other-than-human life, stressing that this connection can be regained if, similar to Doctor Adams, one keeps an open mind and heart. Bekoff as well emphasizes the importance of empathy, yet he holds that "[p]eople who care about animals and nature are often made to feel they must apologize for their views. They are disparaged for 'romanticizing' animals or being sentimental" (*Rewilding* 5). *Watership Down* aims to contradict this idea with the introduction of the empathic doctor who demonstrates that there is no disgrace in feeling for animal beings. Empathy thus becomes the key to more respectful and sustainable relationships, as it is the first step toward questioning the deep-seated belief of the centrality of humankind.

Although human empathy is an important theme in *Watership Down*, it is salient that both of these instances of empathy are unilateral: the human characters in the novel choose to bestow compassion on animals just as they bestow pain and death; to a certain degree, they recognize that animals can respond, but they do not really attempt to reciprocate the animal's gaze. The following examples show that among other animal species, reciprocal empathy exists and that it can become a necessary

means for survival. One instance of interspecies empathy within the narrative is Hazel's compassion for the mouse that prompts him to save his life from a kestrel. Bigwig, perhaps the most callous and prejudiced of the rabbits, asks: "I know you're not stupid, but what did we get out of that? Are you going in for protecting every mole and shrew that can't get underground?" (144), reflecting the opinion that it is not the rabbits' duty to save other animals, especially in the world of predator and prey where being eaten is not out of the ordinary. Hazel explains that, even though he did not save the mouse with an ulterior motive, he might be of help to them:

We're in a strange place we don't know much about and we need friends. Now elil can't do us good, obviously, but there are many creatures that aren't elil. [...] Rabbits don't usually have much to do with them, but their enemies are our enemies for the most part. (161)

He encourages the others to help any non-predatory animals in need as they might be able to help the rabbit community in the long run. While the quote expresses the idea that species mostly stay among themselves, Hazel recognizes that what connects the rabbits with other prey species is their fear of predators and that working together could therefore prove crucial for their survival. Hazel's moment of kindness is repaid, as the mouse later warns the rabbits of the approaching Efrafan rabbits bent on attacking the warren on Watership, arguably saving the entire warren from destruction. The information reaches the rabbits via a network of mice and yellow-hammers (407), showing that interspecies exchange of information can be a significant means for survival. Another instance of empathy occurs when the rabbits happen upon the injured and starving seagull Kehaar. Again, it is Bigwig who criticizes the idea of helping the bird: "That's a savage brute. You can't make a friend out of that" (181), although it turns out that it is Bigwig himself who grows closest to Kehaar: "Bigwig made himself his companion, [...] making no secret of his admiration" (183). Again, this act of kindness inspires a reciprocation: Kehaar plays a crucial part in the finding and liberation of the Efrafan does, helping to secure the continued existence of Hazel's warren.

The animals thus create a life-sustaining network of compassion and empathy, one act of kindness exciting a reciprocal one, ensuring the survival of other animals as well as of themselves. This relates to ethicist Lori Gruen's idea of entangled empathy that emphasizes the interwoven relatedness between beings. She describes it as

a type of caring perception focused on attending to another's experience of wellbeing. An experiential process involving a blend of emotion and cognition in which we recognize we are in relationships with others and are called upon to be responsive and responsible in these relationships by attending to another's needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes, and sensitivities. (3)

This central idea of being "responsive and responsible" recalls Haraway's notion of the intersecting gaze that acknowledges and returns the animal's responding gaze in

the Derridean sense. The animals in *Watership Down* are represented as existing in this entangled empathy in which they “recognize [they] are in relationships with others”; contrary to Heidegger’s thesis, they are depicted as “rich in the world,” i.e. with access to *welt*, which means that they enjoy meaningful relationships with each other that ensure their mutual survival. In this regard, while the concept of animal subjectivities aims to elevate animal beings from objects to subjects, in this entangled empathy in which the animals find themselves, one might go one step further and speak of “inter-subjects”: not subjects existing in a vacuum, but touching, influencing, and shaping the lives of others while being influenced and shaped in return. Donna Haraway emphasizes this relatedness in *When Species Meet*, in which she states that the continuous process of “becoming with,” so the idea that “I am who I become with companion species,”⁴ shapes the subject as “all the actors become who they are *in the dance of relating*” (19, 25; emphasis in the original). Similarly, Barbara Smuts proposes the idea of “intersubjectivity” which ensues when beings recognize the subjectivity and individuality of the other and experience profound relationships among each other. Intersubjectivity means meeting in “mutuality” and centers on the recognition that “inside this other body, there is ‘someone home,’” which means becoming aware of a presence that, for Smuts, goes beyond scientific ideas of “self-awareness” or “consciousness” (307-08). I thus argue that the concept of animal subjectivities could benefit from Gruen’s entangled empathy, Haraway’s idea of becoming with, and Smuts’ notion of intersubjectivity, as these theories problematize the conception of autonomous, independent subjects that remain untouched by fellow earth dwellers and their environment; a conception that, if the current age of the Anthropocene has taught us anything, is a deeply dangerous one, as it becomes an instrument of detachment that negates the repercussions of human actions and diminishes notions of responsibility. This idea of intersubjectivity is reinforced in the novel’s final passages, in which Hazel, in his old age, is visited by El-ahrairah and leaves his body behind to follow the mythical rabbit hero into death. While pausing a moment to watch the rabbits of his thriving warren, he notes “the extraordinary feeling that strength and speed were flowing inexhaustibly out of him and into their sleek young bodies and healthy senses” (472). The spirits of the dead thus nourish the living in an endless cycle, and Hazel literally becomes part of his rabbits. Incidentally, this quote also goes against Descartes’s idea of animals as soulless (Allen and Trestman), as Hazel leaves his body behind but does not cease to be. There is something, be it soul, spirit, or consciousness, that exists independently from rabbit bodies.

It is thus notable that *Watership Down* does not only argue for one-sided human-animal empathy but that various passages emphasize the importance of reciprocal empathy among different animal species. The reason for the unilateralism of human

⁴ Note that for Haraway, companion species are not synonymous with companion animals; instead of denoting only such animals like dogs and cats, the idea of companion species should be understood “less [as] a category than a pointer to an ongoing ‘becoming with’” which encompasses “species of all kinds, living or not” (*Species* 16, 4).

empathy and the apparent negation of interdependence between humans and animals as depicted in *Watership Down* can be traced to the anthropocentrist belief that the human species exists outside of the connectedness of all other animals: as Haraway asserts, human beings think themselves separate from “a spatial and temporal web of interspecies dependencies” (*Species* 11). Instead of becoming part of the web of interconnection, the three humans who are shown to act kindly toward animals are represented as (and in one instance even directly called) *dei ex machina*, descending godlike into the worlds of the animals and wielding power over Hazel and the young Woundwort. They may be kind, but they are kind from an elevated position, allocating life and death however it suits them. Further, most humans in *Watership Down* do not even show unilateral empathy, similar to some rabbits who do not comprehend why Hazel chooses to save the mouse’s and Kehaar’s lives, but the novel justifies Hazel’s behavior through a narrative of reward: mice, as well as the seagull, end up playing crucial roles in the survival of Hazel’s warren. This learning process is most overt in Bigwig’s case and could also be a message for human readers, showing that if humans overcame their insistence on their own superiority and acknowledged their entanglement with other species, reciprocal empathy could be a means to work against the bleak future that the Anthropocene holds in store for all earth dwellers. One might also argue that humans are excluded from the webs of interdependence due to the language barrier as all the above-mentioned animals could communicate, if brokenly, in Lapine or the lingua franca. Taking into consideration my earlier argument that Lapine goes beyond verbal signs and partly refers to communication via bodily and behavioral cues, one might contend that empathy is a lingua franca in itself, understanding the needs, feelings, and desires of other animals. This lingua franca of empathy is something that humans are not lacking; as Smuts states,

Until recent times, all humans possessed profound familiarity with other creatures. [...] Our ancestors’ survival depended on exquisite sensitivity to subtle movements and nuanced communication of predators, prey, competitors. [...] Each of us has inherited this capacity to feel our way into the being of another, but our fast-paced, urban lifestyle rarely encourages us to do so. (294-95)

Living with the baboons made her realize that, “plunged back into the wild world from which we emerged, ancient skills come alive, and once again human and animal minds meet on equal ground” (295). In *Watership Down*, this ideal form of communication between humans and animals does not exist; in fact, it is shown that both species do not understand each other: the humans featured in the novel almost never attempt to comprehend rabbit desires and needs while Bigwig once asks: “Who knows why men do anything?” (59).

The main reason, one could argue, why humans do not take part in this web of interdependence and empathy is because they are the rabbits’ predators, and it is made clear that all *elil* are excluded from it. But the novel shows a crucial difference

between humans and all other predators that can be seen as the novel's main message regarding human behavior: just like the weasel who spares young Woundwort's life because his stomach is already full, or the fox who does not kill the rabbits as he is "obviously not hunting" (281), the novel argues that for humans to (again) become part of the web of interdependence, they need to take only what is needed. In a central passage, Holly states that "[t]here's terrible evil in the world" and continues that this evil comes from humans, who, unlike animal predators, destroy and kill not out of necessity: "All other elil do what they have to do and Frith moves them as he moves us. They live on the earth and they need food. Men will never rest till they've spoiled the earth and destroyed the animals" (149). Animal predators are seen as part of the food chain as upheld by the god Frith, but humans have fallen out of this natural cycle on account of the needless and systematic destruction of their fellow species and the earth, their own home. In the age of the mechanization of animal mass slaughters, waste on a massive scale, and widespread conceptions of animals as nothing but disposable commodities, this message becomes all the more crucial. Marc Bekoff argues that to combat these destructive practices, we must begin by "rewilding our hearts," an idea that understands caring as the first step toward compassionate coexistence and entails "becoming reenchanting with nature. It is about nurturing our sense of wonder" (*Rewilding* 5). This idea of rewilding correlates with Adams' plea to rediscover one's empathic animality and to overcome the self-made gulf dividing humans from the rest of animality. Further, Bekoff argues that to bring about actual change in our relations with nonhuman animals and to heal, if still possible, the anthropogenic harms inflicted on earth, "we need a mindset and social movement that centers on compassion and being proactive" ("Speciesism" 24). While *Watership Down's* proposition that the world would become a better place if we as individuals only showed empathy might be considered somewhat simplistic – especially given the systematic and historically entrenched practices by large corporations geared toward profit maximization, agricultural branches such as factory farming, and, as preceding chapters have shown, even laws that continue to uphold widespread ideas of animals as inferior and valueless – it is nonetheless still individual human beings and their decisions that enable the reduction of animals to resources and that can consequently make a change. As long as the recognition of the subjectivity of other animals has not become a firm and dominant idea within society, there can be only little incentive or pressure to change such systems. Thus, a reorientation in the world, of what it means to be human, and a reconceptualization of our nonhuman kin is a powerful and necessary means toward more sustainable and respectful relationships within the Anthropocene. Vague suppositions of the possible intrinsic value of other animals are not enough: it is a knowledge that must be internalized, become a conviction born out of, and engendering, empathy.

5 Conclusion

For almost fifty years, *Watership Down* has been able to introduce readers of all ages to a conception of nonhuman animals that goes against reductive notions of mechanistic, purely instinct-driven, and valueless creatures. To examine how the novel contributes to anti-anthropocentric discourse, I have combined two analyses of *Watership Down*: a close reading of animal subjectivities and an exploration of humans in relation to other animals. In the first part, I have argued that in its representation of rabbits, *Watership Down* repudiates anthropocentric ideas about nonhuman animals, especially those promoted by the formative thinkers Heidegger and Descartes: animal beings in *Watership Down* are not unfeeling automata or poor in the world but are represented as agential subjects in their own right. Naturalistic teachings about rabbits arouse curiosity and the desire to meet the rabbit's gaze while paving the way for explorations of rabbit subjectivities that focus on their distinct sensory perceptions, leporine worldviews and knowledge, the language Lapine, the rabbits' complex and diverse societies, and a variety of cultural practices. These aspects aim to show that other ways of thinking, feeling, and being-in-the-world are possible, even though the representations of rabbits are of course always restricted by the limits of the human imagination and the necessity of a human language to convey the minds of animal others to a human readership. While a tendency toward leporine-centrism could be seen as a justification of anthropocentrism, the rabbits' speciesist beliefs are mostly overcome at the end of the novel while the exceptionalism of other species is celebrated. The evocations of rabbit subjectivities thus effectively dismantle the belief that sees humanity at the center of all things by emphasizing that human beings are not the only species on earth with sentience, reason, cultures, languages, and other aspects conventionally seen as exclusively human properties.

The idea of superiority over animals, in fact, the idea of superiority of any group over another, is mostly rooted in the perceived difference of the other and the consequential conclusion of one's own preeminence. Therefore, animal rights movements often focus on similarities between nonhuman animals and humans and eschew discussions of otherness (Ryder 6; DeMello 9): to elevate them from automata, animals must usually "show" how they are – at least a little – "human," and "if they fail, that is taken as a 'lack' in some ability" (Tonutti 197). Yet in this regard, the crucial question that must be asked is why otherness has to become an indicator of inferiority. I argue that it is essential to learn to embrace otherness rather than to use similarities between nonhuman species and humans as measurements of worth. A species lacking human characteristics is not wanting or inferior, but very probably possesses other characteristics that make up for this apparent lack or that humans,

in turn, are without.⁵ As I have shown throughout this thesis, *Watership Down* negotiates between emphasis on kinship and otherness in its portrayal of rabbits and is thus able to walk the fine line between representing the rabbits as too similar to or too different from humans. This is achieved, to use Bernaerts et al.'s words, through "strategies of distancing and identification" (73-74), so becoming aware that animal beings have unique ways of inhabiting the world but also recognizing that differences between nonhuman animals and humans are, as Darwin famously asserted, of degree rather than of kind.

The second part of this thesis has examined the novel's criticism of humanity's harmful and destructive influence on fellow earth dwellers. I have focused on three cases in which humans have interfered in the lives of wild rabbits, albeit to differing degrees, and have altered them to a point where they have forgotten the ways of the wild rabbit. Another method that humans in *Watership Down* use to serve their own ends is to simply annihilate an entire warren – in a sense, the novel seems to convey the message that everything humans touch either becomes unnatural or is destroyed. In this regard, anti-anthropocentric animal stories have the potential to question the ethical implications of our actions, and in *Watership Down*, the questions are posed whether it is ethical to keep animal beings in hutches for all their lives, to deform animal bodies for personal gain, or to destroy rabbit warrens to make way for housing developments. Depicting the world from the perspective of the other can be a productive and provocative means of conveying defamiliarizing perspectives of human beings and their relations to other animals, possibly even inspiring more responsible and caring ways of relating and living. The emphasized unnaturalness of much of humanity is shown to be a corollary of humans conceptualizing themselves against and above all nonhumans, yet *Watership Down* promotes the idea that "civilized" humans are different from all other animal species not because of their superiority, but because they have forgotten what it means to live on a planet of which they are not the only or principal inhabitants, but which they share with an immeasurable number of kin. Within this rather pessimistic depiction of humanity, *Watership Down* underlines the deep-seated but forgotten animality in civilized human beings by using the example of "primitive people" who have not renounced their membership in "animality," a concept that, as opposed to anthropocentric humanism, centers on inclusivity. While dividing the world into primitive/civilized dualism is a compartmentalizing and discriminatory practice, the novel uses this idea to dissolve human-animal duality so central in anthropocentric ideology, thus again espousing an ambiguous stance that upholds one reductive idea while dismantling another. In a last part, I have argued that *Watership Down* expresses the conviction that all creatures on earth are part of life-sustaining webs of interdependence which could and should include civilized humans if they only acknowledged their inherent animality

⁵ An interesting nonhuman (although non-animal) example is Michael Pollan's text "The Intelligent Plant" which points out that the absence of neurons in plants does not indicate a lack of intelligence, but that a brain would not be of advantage to them due to their "sessile life style"; instead of neurons, one might say that plants rely on internal networks.

by meeting the other in instances of entangled empathy; as Julia Corbett puts it, “We live in a circle of animals, one community of countless beating hearts, whose fates are far more intertwined and synchronous than we can fathom” (30).

In its representation of rabbits, *Watership Down* crystallizes the ambiguous and inconsistent ways members of this species are perceived by most humans: if domesticated and bred, they are regarded as pets and have the equivocal standing of both companion and slave. All other rabbits are either vermin or exploitable units bred for their fur or meat. I argue that this mirrors the complex and ambiguous conceptions not just of rabbits but of all nonhuman animals that can be found in many human cultures. The smallest number of animals are seemingly granted subject status, yet in relationships with their human “masters,” they find themselves in a perpetual position of inferiority so that it seems more like a variation of the well-known slogan in Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, “all are subjects but some are more subject than others.” All other countless animals are only granted utilitarian value or become pests, an emotive word employed by speciesists to check compassion for animals (Ryder 9). It is in a way ironic to see humans categorizing certain animals as pests when, objectively speaking, the ultimate and most destructive pest on earth for centuries now has been the human species itself. As eminent biologist Edward O. Wilson states – also notably addressing the speciesist hierarchy positing insects at the bottom, which *Watership Down* lamentably upholds –, “If all mankind were to disappear, the world would regenerate back to the rich state of equilibrium that existed ten thousand years ago. If insects were to vanish, the environment would collapse into chaos” (qtd. in Bekoff, “Speciesism” 22). The insensibility of the grave effects the human presence has on earth, the practice of even elevating the human species to the top of a self-constructed, speciesist hierarchy, shows how out of touch many human animals have become with the world around them. Boundaries are erected to bring clear-cut and comforting frontiers and order into a world that thrives on diversity and difference: animals are categorized as “good” or “bad,” usually depending on whether they can benefit humanity in some way, nature is sharply delimited from culture, and humans from animals. Yet these divides are constructions: they disregard that all animal beings are subjects with inherent value and that even humans themselves are part of nature, just as they are of animality. This distancing mechanism, seeing human beings outside of the realm of animals, of the natural world, and of webs of entanglement, has led to the idea that eradication of abstract, “exterior” nature and of animals who apparently have no relation to humans does not affect humanity, while in reality, destruction of the earth and animal beings ultimately means the gradual destruction of humans.

Humanity’s habit to strip fellow earth dwellers of their inviolable and unconditional subject status is largely upheld and disseminated by cultural products, which is why I argue that nowadays the emphasis on animal subjectivities is so crucial. In this regard, *Watership Down* is able to introduce a perspective of rabbits that to a great part transcends the pet-pest dualism by portraying rabbits as subjects in their own right. Considering the cultural context of *Watership Down*’s publication, the novel

came at a time when awareness of animal mistreatment in Britain was reaching a new peak. *Watership Down* manifests some crucial ideas of that decade and has contributed to informing many minds, young and old, of rabbit lives and their mistreatment by reversing perspectives, representing distinct rabbit subjectivities, and also by exposing discriminatory human-animal relationships. The novel can be seen as marking a period in time in which the British mindset turned more toward the possibility of animal sentience and subjectivities, toward a desire to explore the minds of animal others, a shift culminating in Singer's animal rights manifesto published only three years later. Regarding the development of animal subjectivities in children's literature, earlier stories such as *The Life and Perambulations of a Mouse* or *Black Beauty* are less concerned with representing the minds of animals and instead focus on teaching human readers a lesson of empathy; they do not, or only to a small extent, convey the wish to know the other, and animal characters rarely achieve subject status. In *Watership Down*, however, the rabbits are not merely objects "of human cruelty or kindness" as Elick puts it (8), but instead take their destinies into their own paws and act as self-sufficient agents. Of course, human kindness and cruelty do play crucial roles in their lives: it is human kindness that intervenes when the cat is about to kill Hazel, saving the warren's leader, and it is human cruelty that initiates the story, as Fiver and Hazel leave Sandleford Warren because of it. Yet the rabbits are portrayed not as passive creatures that lie down before the inevitable, but as agential subjects who actively journey into the unknown to find their utopia in the form of Watership hill.

In the context of the rabbits' subject status, it would make sense to further develop the concept of animal subjectivities, which is as of yet woefully undertheorized. I believe the concept to be crucial in the rethinking and reconfiguration of our conceptions of nonhuman animals that are still largely infused with vestiges of Descartes and Heidegger's pervasive ideas. I argue that it can especially benefit from theories that emphasize the relatedness of subjects, such as Haraway's, Gruen's, and Smuts' ideas which center on interrelations: animals are not only subjects but inter-subjects, they do not live in detached isolation but share the world and are shaped by their relations. This idea of relatedness is becoming more and more crucial as the Anthropocene progresses and humans are gradually coming to realize that their acts do indeed affect the nonhuman world, which, of course, is also the human world – as Corbett points out, this chasm between "their" and "our" world is another human construction that is based on the idea that they "are somehow two separate places and not one in the same" (26). Within this idea of interrelations, it would further be compelling to examine how animal stories portray human inclusion in webs of interdependence. *Watership Down's* message in this regard is comparatively weak: it does show instances of human-animal empathy, but, as has been discussed, they are unilateral, and humans are mostly represented as existing outside of networks of entanglement. This kind of thinking is at the roots of anthropocentric belief, and it would be interesting to explore whether and how more contemporary fiction emphasizes human dependencies on nonhumans in an attempt to raise awareness of

the intricate and entangled interrelations in which humans find themselves; we live, after all, in a more-than-human world.

I would like to close with a turn to the resigned outlook that some people might share in the face of the daunting future that the Anthropocene appears to hold in store for us, an attitude of surrendered acceptance that sees “the state of the world as inevitable, that nothing can be done to make changes for the better” (Gruen 7). How, especially, to ameliorate the seemingly irreparable relations to animal others of whose exploitation and extermination there does not seem to be an end in sight? Anthropocentric worldviews linger on even though all evidence points to the obvious conclusion that human beings are not, after all, the godlike rulers of all life on earth. In a way, the species divide makes it even more difficult to fight for nonhuman animals – one might argue that if in large parts of the world, respect and equal standing are not even achieved among humans, how rights and equality can be extended to nonhumans. However, just as the struggle for all marginalized human groups will hopefully not cease until true equality is established, so, I trust, the struggle for the rights of our nonhuman kin will continue. There will always be those people who recognize animals for what they are, namely as beings with the right not only to live, but to live in dignity, with claims to unconditional freedom, and especially as fully-fledged subjects in their own right – because anyone who has ever gotten to know another animal being as an individual; anyone who has ever reciprocated the gaze of another animal must be struck by the unquestionable truth that one is indeed in the presence of a being who experiences life in the fullness of their subjectivity.

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