Humanity lives in the neon-lit world of the city it believes to be its own. After all, we built these cities, built them for our use according to our standards of aesthetic and use value. Everything in the city is defined by its relationship to us: our homes, our workplaces, our streets for our cars. But alongside ours there is another world, unseen by most, a world of creatures living in parallel with us, living under our feet, behind our walls, under our streets. I speak not of the species inhabiting the encysted pseudonature we call parks, nor of the servile creatures we bring into our homes for companionship, but of the species that have long since learned to harvest the waste of humanity’s largesse, species that can be conveniently lumped under the label “vermin.”

Vermin is an apt word for describing the creatures I wish to discuss here, for it contains no explicit or implicit species designation, but refers instead to the propensity of these animals to live with and among us, opportunistically harvesting our food, water, and shelter resources to promote their own genetic heritage.¹ Vermin are animals that live with humans against our will, animals that, in an age of extinctions, prosper despite our best efforts at their extermination. Vermin are rats, cockroaches, lice, flies, and others. They are distinct from what are often known as “varmints,” the predatory animals that competed with ranchers during the nineteenth century, but which during the first half of the twentieth century were largely successfully re-categorized as “wildlife,” one of the positive categories on the sociozooologic scale. They are animals far more aware of us than we are of them, animals whose success depends on their ability to observe us and our environment in ways that we are physically and psychologically unable. Vermin therefore provide a unique lens for viewing the city not as a built environment, but as a found environment; not a deliberate construction, but

an excrescence of our species that, like a coral reef, provides a habitat for innumerable species.

Vermin also provide an ideal perspective with which to shatter the “lack of totemic imagination”\(^2\) that leads to humanity’s inability to conceive of itself as “animal subjects.”\(^3\) That it took Jacques Derrida, one of the great thinkers of our age, essentially his entire life to embrace his animal nature is indicative of our weakness.\(^4\) According to Sabloff, the totemic imagination in earlier peoples allowed them to conceive of animals as possessing godlike powers, powers that could infuse humanity with positive characteristics. If the route to breaking through this “poverty of discourse”\(^5\) is to see in animals more of “what we consider valuable in ourselves […] above all, agency,”\(^6\) then vermin must play an essential role, because they express an agency that is above and beyond that of other animals. Mary Fissell suggests that vermin have lost their status as true competitors with humanity since the Early Modern period as they have come to be seen with more disgust,\(^7\) but this essay argues to the contrary. What other type of animal has directly faced off with the worst humanity has to offer and survived? All our efforts to “control” vermin have led to little progress, and they remain, more than any condor soaring over the California coast, potent symbols of the animal subject: free of human bondage, masters of their world and ours.

Despite their significance as symbols of the potency of nature and as viewpoints through which to observe ourselves, vermin have been conspicuously neglected in the recent waves of ecocriticism and “animal anthropology.” For example, Sabloff focuses her analysis on two other categories of animals, pets and farm animals, despite the fact that the latter appear in cities only as artistic representations and as their products: steak, milk, and eggs. Nor is Sabloff alone. In Animal (2002), Erica Fudge follows Sabloff’s lead, focusing on literary representations of farm animals and pets. John Simons, in Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation (2002), builds his study around the issue of animal experimentation. Indeed, the majority of essays and books devoted to considering the relationship between humans and animals

\(^2\) Annabelle Sabloff, Reordering the Natural World: Humans and Animals in the City (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2001), 9.
\(^3\) Ibid., 11.
\(^4\) See Introduction, 9.
\(^5\) Sabloff, 11.
\(^6\) Ibid., 180.
\(^7\) Fissell, 47, 1.