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CRISTINA HANGANU-BRESCH
SAINT JOSEPH'S UNIVERSITY, PHILADELPHIA, USA
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6426-7941
changanubresch@sju.edu

Deconstructing speciesism in writing and rhetoric studies: A programmatic agenda
Dekonstrukcja gatunkowizmu w studiach nad pisaniem i retoryką: propozycja programu badawczo-dydaktycznego

Abstract

This paper offers a programmatic agenda for de-centering humans in one of the last bastions of academia that has resisted an animal turn in its pedagogical practices: writing and rhetoric studies. Non-human animals enjoy robust systems of communication and meaning-making, which they transmit through their cultures and which they evolve in constant dialogue with other species, humans included. As academics who teach language arts, we can and should use rhetorical tools to dismantle speciesism in the classroom. The four pillars of the nonspeciesist rhetorical pedagogy outlined in this article are rhetorical listening, reframing speciesist linguistic scripts, considering animals as rhetorical agents and putting ecosophy at the center of human and nonhuman animal rhetorics.

Artykuł przedstawia propozycję programu badawczo-dydaktycznego mającego na celu odejście od antropocentrycznej perspektywy w jednym z obszarów akademii, który wciąż w znacznym stopniu opiera się wpływowi zwrotu ku zwierzętom (*animal turn*) w praktykach dydaktycznych – studiach nad pisaniem i retoryką. Zwierzęta pozaludzkie dysponują rozwiniętymi systemami komunikacji i wytwarzania znaczeń, które przekazują w ramach własnych kultur oraz rozwijają w nieustannym dialogu z innymi gatunkami, w tym z ludźmi. Jako badaczki i badacze zajmujący się edukacją językową oraz sztuką komunikacji możemy i powinniśmy wykorzystywać narzędzia retoryczne do demaskowania i przezwyciężania gatunkowizmu w przestrzeni dydaktycznej. Zaproponowana w artykule niegatunkowistyczna pedagogika retoryczna opiera się na czterech filarach: retorycznym słuchaniu (*rhetorical listening*), przeformułowywaniu gatunkowistycznych skryptów językowych, uznaniu zwierząt za podmioty sprawcze retorycznie oraz umieszczeniu ekozofii w centrum ludzkich i pozaludzkich praktyk retorycznych.

Key words

pedagogika retoryczna, retoryczne słuchanie, gatunkowizm, ekozofia
rhetorical pedagogy, rhetorical listening, speciesism, ecosophy

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CRISTINA HANGANU-BRESCH
SAINT JOSEPH'S UNIVERSITY, PHILADELPHIA, USA
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6426-7941
changanubresch@sju.edu

Deconstructing speciesism in writing and rhetoric studies: A programmatic agenda

"None of us sees animals clearly. They're too full of the stories we've given them."
– Helen Macdonald, *Vesper Flights*, 2020, 256

1. Introduction

Anthropocentrism has long rested on the conceit that humans are the only meaning-making, symbol-using animals. It has been apparent for quite some time that this is simply not true. The move toward posthumanism has sought to deconstruct human exceptionalism as the center of epistemological efforts. In the past few decades or so, we have witnessed an "animal turn" in most humanistic disciplines; nonhuman animals now inform and shape knowledge agendas and ways of thinking and practicing in philosophy, political science, history, economy, literary studies, religious studies, sociology, critical geography, and so on. We have also witnessed the rise of the rich, multidisciplinary field of critical animal studies, which has an explicit liberatory agenda, aimed at eliminating speciesism (discrimination against other beings based solely on their nonhuman status) and violence against animals, and establishing moral and legal rights to our fellow earthlings. Rhetoric lags somewhat behind in this respect; while there is a slowly growing body of rhetorical scholarship that attempts to take animals seriously, such attempts remain to date largely theoretical. The highly anthropocentric view of communication prevalent in writing and rhetoric studies all but ensures that pedagogical practices in this field by and large exclude nonhuman animals. In this article, I invite rhetoricians to walk the bridge from theory to practice. Because rhetoric and adjacent disciplines (communication, writing and composition studies, technical and professional communication among others) have such a strong pedagogical component, enmeshed as they are with core curricula and competencies in the modern university, I argue that nonhuman rhetorics should

also be invited into the writing and rhetoric classroom in ways that are aligned with the emancipatory goals of critical animal studies.

This essay addresses the exclusion of nonhuman animals from the rhetoric classroom and urges rhetoric instructors in any related disciplines to consider ways in which they might cultivate a nonspeciesist rhetoric, which serves a more compassionate and just vision of the world. I am aware that pedagogical processes that involve rhetoric cover a wide array of courses and even disciplines—from freshman composition to more advanced writing and rhetoric courses, from communication to literature and linguistic classes. All such courses have language and writing at their core, and I argue that explicitly addressing the inherent speciesist assumptions of our combined disciplines is a necessary step toward multispecies justice, and can furthermore engender more innovation, fairness, and joy in the way students use language. I survey work done in the field to date on animal rhetoric and argue that writing and rhetoric scholars should accompany these largely academic efforts with a compassionate and liberatory pedagogy that purposely resists speciesism and promotes a multispecies rhetoric of care in the writing classroom. I attempt to understand why writing and rhetoric instructors may want to resist such impulses and address some common misconceptions regarding animals' capacity for meaning-making. Finally, I detail a programmatic agenda for deconstructing speciesism in the writing classroom, centered on four pillars, and provide a few examples to illustrate how they may work in practice.

2. Animal rhetorics, rhetorical animals

George Kennedy's famous "A hoot in the dark" (1992) article, which argued we should expand our views of modalities of persuasive communication to include animal rhetoric, is probably the first work of modern rhetorical theory that takes animals seriously. In it, Kennedy sought the source of persuasive communication and found that humans and animals share a "deep, natural rhetoric" codified in our DNA, perhaps, and manifested as "rhetorical energy." While exploring the roots and evolution of rhetoric, George Kennedy stumbled upon a trove of ethological research that eventually made him feel uneasy about proclaiming rhetoric and even writing as exclusively human endeavors. Rather, they are evolutionary adaptations that are both prior to speech (rhetoric is prior to writing and writing is prior to speech, in this ad-hoc hierarchy). Rhetoric exists as energy (Parrish will call it intentionality): "Speech would not have evolved among human beings unless rhetoric already existed." (Kennedy 1992, 4). For Kennedy,

> Rhetoric in the most general sense may perhaps be identified with the energy inherent in communication: the emotional energy that impels the speaker to speak, the physical energy

> expended in the utterance, the energy level coded in the message, and the energy experienced by the recipient in decoding the message. In theory, one might even seek to identify some quantitative unit of rhetorical energy—call it the "rheme"—analogous to an erg or volt, by which rhetorical energy could be measured. I leave that to the experimentalists. (1992, 2)

Nobody took Kennedy up on rheme experimentation (a rhetorimeter or rhemometer has yet to be invented), but the fundamental intuition that rhetoricity is a quality intrinsic in all living beings, human and nonhuman alike, was a revolutionary move at the time the article appeared. Kennedy's call in the dark remained unanswered for some time by rhetoricians, even as the field witnessed the steady rise of posthumanist studies (especially through the work of Cary Wolfe). The tide seemed to turn by 2010, with the publication of a special issue of the *Journal of Advanced Composition* (*JAC*) on animal studies, followed shortly by a *Philosophy and Rhetoric* special forum on "Extrahuman Rhetoric" in 2011. Both issues call for a shift toward posthumanism and toward recognizing the symbolic value of animals, and fall largely in the shadow of Derrida's 2002 "The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," where Derrida argued that human identity is fundamentally constituted through its relationship with, and exclusion of, the animal other. Lynn Worsham's introductory editorial to the *JAC* issue is particularly interesting as it emerges from the author's long-standing preoccupation with violence (especially pedagogical violence). In an earlier article she had postulated that "…our most urgent political and pedagogical task remains the fundamental reeducation of emotion" (1998, 216)—especially negative and violent emotions that emerge from a highly stratified capitalist society and codify ingrained violence against various minorities (race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, etc.). In "Thinking with Cats (More to Follow)," she also highlights structural violence that links interhuman violence and our systematic and cruel exploitation of animals. Urging us to shed the hybris of anthropocentrism, Worsham calls for an admission of our fundamental interconnectedness as humans with other beings who share a mortal body.

The Derridean tradition is also exemplified by Diane Davis, both in the special *Philosophy and Rhetoric* forum contribution ("Creaturely Rhetorics," 2011) and the follow-up article, "Autozoography" (2014). Davis troubles Kennedy's intuition with a Derridean reading of rhetoricity. She expands the notion of "rhetorical energy" into what she calls

> an always prior rhetoricity, an affectability or persuadability that is due not to any creature's specific genetic makeup but to corporality more generally, to the exposedness of corporeal existence. To be affectable, persuadable, is to be always already affected, persuaded, which means: always already responsive. Rhetoric is not first of all an essence or property "in the speaker" (a natural function of biology) but an underivable obligation to respond that issues from an irreducible relationality (2011, 89).

Drawing on Derrida, Davis re-asserts the primacy of the trace as preceding meaning and as "the heart of any sign" (2014, 547). Human language is a code of traces, but it is one among many that animals (or, as both Derrida and Davis prefer, *animots*) have employed to organize their world.

Breaking with the budding Derridean rhetorical school of thought in animal rhetorics, Alex Parrish took Kennedy's project of evolutionary rhetoric seriously in *Adaptive Rhetorics* (2013), where he attempted to trace the evolution of rhetoric as a biological adaptation that most probably started with animal signaling (both as honest and deceptive means of communication and, most importantly, as intentional acts of persuasion). "It is time to reunite," Parrish writes, "studies of human persuasion with the persuasive acts of other animals" (2013, 51-52). He sees a solid start to this project in analyzing animals' powers of deception, since they are manipulative and intentional in nature, and "manipulation of others … is the primary function of communication" (2013, 55 – citing Dawkins and Krebs). Rhetoric evolves—adapts—from particular forms of animal signaling, therefore it is a "special form of animal signaling, one based on the ability to attribute beliefs to others, beliefs that we can attempt to change." (Parrish 2013, 59). Parrish has continued this project in various articles as well as in *The Sensory Modes of Animal Rhetorics: A Hoot in the Light* (2021), a book building upon the biocultural paradigm he established in *Adaptive Rhetoric* through a transdisciplinary exploration of how senses function rhetorically within unique environments. The goal remains to respect how intertwined human speech and persuasion are with sensorial abilities shared by human and nonhuman animals, and ultimately dismantle the anthropocentrism characterizing the communicative arts.

Debra Hawhee's *Rhetoric in Tooth and Claw* (2017) likewise takes its cue from Kennedy's work. She builds on his notion of rhetorical energy, reinterpreted as the Aristotelian term *energeia*, which refers to vivification, motion, and a "vigorous style"—a style for which nonhuman animals turn out to be our most steadfast models and instructors. She subsequently coins the term zoostylistics to describe how animal images—such as a rushing lion or a writhing serpent—are used to provide *energeia* to rhetorical style. Using classic rhetorical texts as her starting points, Hawhee argued that the animals' sensuous nature invokes a world that is otherwise untranslatable into words, and that animals can transmit otherwise incommunicable pathos, but also connect us to the sensual and therefore non-rational aspect of language, capable of strumming hidden, atavistic chords in our psyche. "In the context of zoostylistics," writes Hawhee, "animals for the most part do not emote in a strictly human way, which is precisely why they become touchstones for style. Instead, through their vivid, weighty, kinetic presence, and through movements that lie outside human capacity, they draw out the nonrational

features of *logos*" (2017, 42). Furthermore, zoostylistics highlights "the nonrational features of words, their animated materiality, their ability to intensify visual effects through sounds that are not—or not quite—speech per se. Such sounds challenge the linguistic principle of arbitrariness and emphasize the role of bodies, sensation, and nonhumans in forming words." (Hawhee 2017, 42). Hawhee takes the "persistent presence of nonhuman animals in rhetorical theory and rhetorical education" (2017, 170) as a sign that animals are good to think with, persuade with, teach with, and make sense of the world in a way that awakens notions of the materiality of speech that we have long forgotten. The book concludes by calling for a "fuller picture" of rhetoric that rejects disembodied concepts in favor of an account that brims with moving, lively, and entangled cross-species partnerships.

These attempts to understand animals' role in rhetoric are a welcome foundation, but are often steeped in an instrumental view of animals, and, for the most part, do not consider notions of social justice and/or ecological cooperation; even as both Parrish and Hawhee gesture towards a sort of rhetorical kinship (based in sensing and feeling) underscoring *human* and nonhuman communication, such a partnership remains subsumed to the goal of understanding and producing persuasive human text. There are some notable exceptions. Marilyn M. Cooper's book *The Animal Who Writes: A Posthumanist Composition* (2019), while less devoted to animals, centers the practice of writing in a conscious, environmentally-minded philosophy that she dubs "enchantment ontology." Within this framework, we need to be mindful of our entanglements with/within naturecultures and reclaim the ethical persuasion at the core of meaningful writing that creates positive change in the world. Amy Propen's book *Visualizing Posthuman Conservation in the Age of the Anthropocene* (2018) analyzes how we represent nature, and nonhuman animals in particular, and envisions "a visual-material, posthuman environmental rhetoric informed by an ethic of compassionate conservation" which would study "the implications of visual and material artifacts and things in the world for vulnerable, nonhuman species" (2018, 21). Propen also raises the question of responsibility, power, and accountability—how do our technoscience tools exert that power over the world in a compassionate way? What is at stake in the "practices of visualizing vulnerable beings" (2018, 24)—and, one could extrapolate, in the practices of writing about vulnerable beings? How do we flourish on this earth, and how can we get everyone to understand "we" as encompassing human and nonhuman animals alike? Propen's work can be complemented with the idea of solidarity and kinship central to Haraway's later work, or Salmón's notion of kincentricity, based on Indigenous philosophies (2000), which postulates that everything around us—from rock to plant to animal—is our relative. As Propen shows, current practices of nature "management" can manifest in ways that are pure violence for animals.

Interweaving a compassionate vision of nature and animals (human or nonhuman) entangled in benevolent, thriving ecologies should be part and parcel of every human and posthuman discipline.

3. Meaning-making in a multispecies world

At their best, writing and rhetoric classes help students find, articulate, and transmit meaning to others, which is an essential function in academia and in life. But in some ways, the work of writing and communication instructors is one of accommodation, of helping students conform to academic writing norms, and by extension to the anthropocentric norms academia upholds, which are deeply speciesist, which is to say, they confer special status to a certain subset of humans while tacitly or overtly endorsing discrimination against all other species we share our earth with. This anthropocentric view is enforced in the writing and rhetoric classroom through what sort of arguments we pay attention to, what sorts of interests and common assumptions are valued, and what sort of language and stylistic norms are endorsed. As is evident from work on ape cultures, bird songs, whale songs and culture, prairie dog language (e.g., Slobodchikoff's work on prairie dogs [Slobodchikoff et al. 2009]), elephant culture and communication, bee communication, and many other examples (see Frans De Waal's [2017] or Carl Safina's work [2016]), nonhuman animals are essentially fellow earthling civilizations intertwined with ours, engaged in different, nonhuman dimensions of meaning making, symbolic expression, and persuasion. And yet, whereas nonhuman animals now inform and shape knowledge agendas and ways of thinking and practicing in a multitude of disciplines, human exceptionalism remains central to rhetoric, writing, and communication studies broadly defined. Because, at least in the U.S., our discipline involves a widespread pedagogical practice in first-year as well as upper-level writing and communication courses, the question I pose is: how do we rethink both rhetorical theory and writing pedagogy to promote nonspeciesist practices in the writing classroom and beyond? How can writing, rhetoric, and linguistic programs in our higher education institutions help "animalize the university," to borrow Eva Meijer's phrase? (Meijer 2019a).

Eva Meijer and others (e.g., Rowan et al. 2021; Leach and Fairhead 2025) synthesize an ever-growing body of evidence proving other species' ability for deliberation, cooperation, strategic, and symbolic thinking. Pamela Banting urged us to admit that at the very least, "Animals' lives are vocal, textual and significant in the sense that they are rich in signs. We are not the only creatures who can read and make sense of cougar tracks, bear or coyote scat, the "clock, clock, clock" of ravens, or indications that the weather is about to change." (Banting 2009, 30). Nature is a semiotic laboratory teeming with meaning—much of which we have

yet to decipher and fully understand. Yet without such an attempt, we risk further alienation and foster further destruction on our earthly home. At the same time, this is a transitive relationship: we are both the agents and subjects of semiosis, as we open ourselves to being interpreted by our "fellow creatures" (a phrase I borrow from Korsgaard 2018). Baptiste Morizot, part of the new wave of French ecophilosophers, wrote about the symmetrical practice of tracking animals, which always involves the certainty of being tracked in return:

> To live is to be generous in signs. It is to give out signs to everyone, against your will, without wanting to—signs that cannot be appropriated. And this is the phenomenological definition of a pure gift. Giving and receiving signs, exchanging them, is the foundation and nature of the great vital politics that weaves living beings together in the ecological community (Morizot 2021, 106).

Because we are animals who speak and are so language-centered, we need to reframe our discourses and stories about nature and other species to be inclusive rather than exclusive of such rich semiosis. Inspired by Derrida among others, Morizot also urges us to consider the rich entanglements between us and the natural world and its creatures – a complex, bio-cultural ecosystem within whose structures and interpretation we live:

> What we track in the contemporary world is never living creatures, out at a distance, in a 'natural' world outside, but rather the interweaving of our stories and theirs, the biotic imbroglio that is the hidden name of ecosystems, as soon as we restore to them the contingent historicity, made up of unforeseen encounters, which constitutes them (2021, 124).

The rhetorical theorists reviewed in the previous section of this essay focused on the act of persuasion, on the rhetoricity inherent in the natural and animal world at various levels of sentience, and on the shared reserves of sensation and feeling that allow human and nonhuman animals to partner at some level and engage in communicative acts that have an effect on our world. They don't quite dismantle the idea of linguistic exceptionalism—or present democratic ways of making and sharing meaning that would promote harmonious multispecies coexistence (the only nod towards rhetoric's nonviolent aims comes from Worsham, and it remains theoretical). Admitting that nonhuman animals are capable of semiosis (often in ways that transcend human abilities to understand it) is a preliminary step toward cooperative meaning-making. Such semiotic partnership is at the center of a recent book on interspecies biosemiotics by Leach and Fairhead (*Naturekind: Language, Culture, and Power Beyond the Human*, 2025), which argues, among others, that language and culture are not uniquely human constructs—they can be passed on or modified, and can evolve independently or in relation and conversation with other species, including humans. How animals communicate and their ways of being in the world *do* and *should* have direct bearing on human communication practices

and ways of being. If as a civilization we are to move toward a more evolved ecological consciousness that would permeate every domain of human thought, we need to be cognizant of all the earth inhabitants that we need to preserve, protect, and share a planet with, acknowledge their needs and roles in our ecosystems, and furthermore heed their voices and collaborate with them towards collective futures. It is well documented that many indigenous cultures nurtured this connection to the land and its inhabitants, so I should specify my position here: the "we" I am using refers to western cultures and in particular to our academic cultures, which have a deep pedagogical responsibility toward the next generations. I am looking forward to the possibility that academia adopt Lestel and Taylor's rejection of boundaries between animal and human in favor of recognizing that the only way forward is to find ways towards a "shared life": "It is therefore wrong to say that we live with animals; it is more correct to say that we are animals and animals are us" (2013, 183). This is not only the moral thing to do but it is also a matter of sustainability and ultimately of self-preservation: what kind of world do we want future generations to inhabit? If it is one that is ecologically rich, with thriving biodiverse environments, and offering equitable ways of thriving for all creatures, it is our duty as academics and yes, as writing and rhetoric specialists, to listen, understand, and foster ways of communication with all species, to reconsider the privileged place of human language as just one semiotic system among many, and to become better attuned to the many ways of meaning-making of the natural world.

Acknowledging that how we frame our discourses about animals both reflects and perpetuates our treatment of them and has momentous consequences for their wellbeing and for our environmental wellbeing as a whole, I propose that rhetoric and writing studies consider animals and animality, broadly defined, as a term of engagement and a basis for rethinking the way we theorize rhetoric in our discipline, in the writing classroom, and beyond. Rhetoric studies how discourse does things in the world; but rhetoricians must expand their understanding of world as entangled naturecultures in which we co-exist with a multitude of other species, often to their detriment and our benefit (Haraway 2007). Can rhetoric-related disciplines decolonize writing as an Anthropocene-building practice? As rhetoric instructors, how can we compose with animals? How are writing and symbol-making broadly construed connected to our animal natures? What can animals teach us when it comes to building, interpreting, and disseminating arguments? A project focused on "paying attention to animals" (to borrow Marian Scholtmeijer's phrase 1993) in rhetoric and composition would grapple with these and other questions, and offer, hopefully, a blueprint for enlarging and enriching current rhetoric and writing pedagogies.

4. Deconstructing speciesism: a four pillar programmatic agenda

Critical Animal Studies scholars call today for abandoning the paradigm of anthropocentric dominance and cruelty and embracing one of cohabitation, cooperation, and compassion. It is not enough to think about animals; we should think "with" them (Meijer 2019b; Daston and Mitman 2005). Meijer's analysis of "animal languages" and the political consequences of our recognition of that fact are hugely inspirational; she urges us not just to cohabitate, not just to try to decipher animal language, but to talk to them as well, and, intriguingly, to write with them—in the spirit of Barbara Smuts's writing about apes and dogs from a more-than-human perspective (Smuts 2001). Likewise, Worsham's call towards an educational goal of reducing, if not eliminating violence of all kinds (including violence against animals) should be foundational in a nonspeciesist rhetoric.

Situated at the intersection of eco-composition and rhetoric, disability studies, and (eco)-feminism, a non-speciesist, animal-studies informed pedagogic rhetorical practice would acknowledge nonhuman animals' powers of persuasion and their agency. Furthermore, it would encourage students to critically examine the artificial boundaries between human and nonhuman animals, explore the bodily animality of the composition act, and consider places of intersectionality and of thinking and writing with (not just about) animals. Following Eva Meijer's advice that "Other animals should be invited into processes of thinking and writing differently" (2019a, 239), I sketch below some preliminary suggestions for such an inclusive program, along four main pillars: listening to animals, reframing nonspeciesist linguistic scripts, considering animals as rhetorical agents and partners, and centering ecosophy. Each of these deserves more elaboration than I have space to do here, but I hope they can generate discussion and, hopefully, more concrete ideas for rhetorical pedagogical practice.

Pillar I: Listening to animals

The first step would be to deploy rhetorical listening (Glenn 2004; Ratcliffe 2006; Glenn and Ratcliffe 2011) in our writing and rhetoric classrooms, and teach students to apply it to all relationships—human and nonhuman alike. Silence and listening are powerful rhetorical arts as well as prerequisites for speaking and engaging in action; however, as Glenn and Ratcliffe argue (2011), they were left out of the Western canon of rhetoric, and often groups or communities who employed them at the core of their rhetorical practices have been marginalized as well (e.g., women, indigenous populations). Listening with a view to truly understand the other, rather than react or seek ways to "win" is a rhetorical art too easily forgotten. As we teach our students to listen to the world around them, we must teach them

to expand their notion of "world" and have them listen and re-interpret both the language and the silence of animals as rhetorical acts. As rhetoric students and scholars, are we doing enough to listen to others—especially marginalized groups and nonhuman animals? Are we aware of how, for example, animals listen to us and choose to engage or disengage depending on their own purposes?

Rhetorical listening is a basic form of respect, in line with what Despret has called "polite curiosity" in our relationships with animals (2016). "What would animals say if we asked the right questions?" Despret asks. The wrong questions, the ones that center human rather than nonhuman abilities, the ones asked without us pausing to listen to them—make animals stupid (*rendre bêtes les bêtes*). When judged against a human measure, animals suffer what Despret calls "ontological amputations"—the wrong questions function as blinders that let us see only what animals lack by comparison to us, rather than what they are capable of in the context of their own environments and needs. (Nussbaum would reframe this idea into her "capabilities approach"—i.e., allowing animals to flourish according to their own capabilities). The correct questions foster "response-ability" and center the nonhuman animal's interests. Asking what it might be like to live the life of a cat, a purple martin, an orca (as opposed to how their existence affects humans) emerges as a result of rhetorical listening, which helps individuals and communities "discern and implement actions that are more ethical, efficient, and appropriate" (Glenn and Ratcliffe 2011, 3). We can ask students to be open to other types of discourse through the act of rhetorical listening, to rethink animals' silence and listening in their interactions with us; this is a start for opening ourselves to other ways of being and meaning-making.

Ratcliffe considers "rhetorical listening as a trope for interpretive invention" which is:

> a performance that occurs when listeners invoke both their capacity and their willingness (1) to promote an understanding of self and other that informs our culture's politics and ethics, (2) to proceed from within a responsibility logic, not from within a defensive guilt/blame one, (3) to locate identification in discursive spaces of both commonalities and differences, and (4) to accentuate commonalities and differences not only in claims but in cultural logics within which those claims function (2006, 204).

Thus, when students write about things that matter to them and the world, about, say, any aspect of our ecological entanglements or nature-capital conflicts, what would happen if they started from a place of rhetorical listening that would lead them to a more nuanced understanding of self and animal others, that would encourage identification and empathy based on shared horizons? Writing is a bridging act, and as such draws its power from the acceptance of the fact that we are all interconnected, and that we can understand each other through what we share,

that there is a listening ear at the other end. In an era of ecological disaster and "omnicide" (Pedersen 2011) in which the consequences of our atrocities against nature have turned out to be also suicidal for the human species, learning the power of silence and rhetorical listening with all its possibilities is a prerequisite and necessary act that needs to occur if we are ever to reverse course. The goal is for students to learn not just to write about, but with, and for other species, and to do so by learning to discern not just human voices, but nonhuman ones as well—as well as learning to interpret their silence. As Ratcliffe writes,

> By championing a responsibility logic, not a guilt/blame one, rhetorical listening offers us the possibility of getting past the guilt/blame tropes of accusation, denial, and defensiveness—all of which are associated with authorial intent and all of which usually result in a stalemate that preserves the status quo. By championing a responsibility logic, rhetorical listening asks us, first, to judge not simply the person's intent but the historically situated discourses that are (un)consciously swirling around and through the person and, second, to evaluate politically and ethically how these discourses function and how we want to act upon them. (2006, 209).

Ratcliffe later preferred the term "accountability" to responsibility—playing on the meaning of account as both a recounted story, in writing or otherwise, and as an ethical duty by which we exercise our kinship with other human or nonhuman species. Accountability is related to what Donna Haraway calls "thoughtfulness" (2007) picking up a clue from Hannah Arendt's analysis of Adolf Eichmann. Lack of thoughtfulness brings trouble in the world—it mechanizes our labor, dismisses ethics as irrelevant for the task at hand, and rusts our empathy apparatus, leading, in Eichmann's case, to wartime atrocities. Speciesist rhetoric is, in this sense, a form of Eichmannian thoughtlessness: animals are made absent from discourse by the rhetorical conventions that render them objects rather than subjects. Rhetorical listening promotes, by contrast, thoughtfulness, by considering the other and their needs on a par with ours.

Rhetorical listening creates a place from within one can ask the right question. One example comes to mind: on a panel I organized at a past Rhetoric Society of America conference, a speaker commented that we have to find a way to stop mountain lions from coming around human developments and threatening people inside their houses, as it had been happening one too many times in California; in turn, I pointed out that those big cats had been displaced by unchecked development and the growth of exurbia, and perhaps they also had something to say as they were trying to reclaim their old haunts—an idea that the speaker had not considered seriously (the audience's opinions on the topic were divided). Such potential "trouble spots" in human-animal relations could serve as generative areas of invention or prompts for argument analysis or building, provided we teach students to dare to ask questions from the perspective of the nonhuman.

To give another example: recently, Gwendolyn Innocencio analyzed a series of social media utterances hostile to purple martins migrating through a major college town (College Station's Northgate, the primary entertainment district for the Texas A&M University student community). Even though the area is a natural, protected migratory corridor, many people felt importuned by the passage of the birds and encouraged local authorities to engage in what she called a type of abatement featuring "violent care" and "destructive ethics" (Innocencio 2026). When we render ourselves deaf to the voices and interests of other species, we are more likely to enact violence to alleviate mere human inconvenience. There are many other examples of multispecies rhetorical collisions that we could use to teach students how rhetorical listening from the point of view of the sentient other could have dramatically different results and contribute toward an ecology of care. As educators, we also need to teach students to recognize their own cognitive dissonance (and embrace ours in the process as well): few of us would contest that we can communicate with our pets, but we choose to actively bracket and silence the sentience (including communication capabilities) of the billions of animals trapped in the factory farm system and condemned to a brief and brutish life of abuse, torture, and misery. Using the rhetorical listening trope may be one way to bridge that chasm, and open spaces of genuine rhetorical intervention.

Pillar II: Reframe speciesist linguistic scripts

The second pillar of my program is about eliminating exploitative, demeaning, and objectifying language uses when representing animals, drawing on Mel Y. Chen's concept of hierarchical animacy (2012) and ecolinguistics (Stibbe 2021). Chen demonstrates how language codifies degrees of animacy, from inanimate object to human, and how in the category of human of course hierarchies abound, with queer non-white, non-male folks lower in this hierarchy for full "soul" rights. Examples of such linguistic hierarchies abound – for example, using "it" to refer to animals, or using a nonhuman animal to refer to a human one. Animals are often used as insults—for example, Donald Trump's incessant use of "dog" as a slur in a variety of contexts, varying from sexual and misogynistic to racist and classist betrays an intersection of marginalization and oppression, first of the human in question, and second of the nonhuman animal. A nonspeciesist use of language would recognize animal subjectivity, individuality, and personhood, and use this reframed ontology to reorient rhetorical practices. Thus, we could help students recognize phrases that reproduce violence toward animals (English is full of them) and ask them to find better ways to express themselves. Animal rights activists, prominently among them the late Jane Goodall, have been fighting to change the use of "it" as a generic standard for animals consecrated by the AP style manual

(Scott-Reid 2022). And PETA is making deliberate, if slightly awkward efforts to replace idioms that are based on violence towards animals (see Fig. 1).



Figure 1. List of proposed equivalencies for "harmful" idioms that engender violence against animals (source: peta.org; see also an update here: https://www.peta.org/teachkind/lesson-plans-activities/animal-friendly-idioms/)

Ecolinguistics, an offshoot of critical discourse analysis championed by Stibbe, takes an ecological approach to language by studying "the life sustaining interactions of humans with other humans, other organisms and the physical environment" (2021, 9). Ecolinguistics looks at how those interactions are enacted in language, for example, through what Stibbe, following Lakoff's "metaphors we live by," calls "stories we live by" – by which he means "a mental model" that influences how we think and act. Human exceptionalism, the idea that we are somehow apart, better, or above nature, and different or outside the animal kingdom, is such a story or myth that is so deeply ingrained we have forgotten it is just that—a myth. There are many other mental models whose stories we have assimilated to the point that they become part of our nature—that we need to pursue prosperity and unlimited growth, or the scientific idea that all life is an explainable sort of mechanism. Some of these stories function as schemas upon which an argument is built or action is taken. Helping students recognize these schemata or stories in their own composition process may help them gradually dispel them, especially the myth of human distinctiveness, which is deadly and ferociously defended, implicitly

or explicitly, in mainstream culture. Some basic interventions could be pointing students to the use of "it" as a pronoun for nonhuman animals and discussing its implications, or questioning the usage of animal-based idioms (in either student writing or source materials) and pointing out their violent origins.

Ecolinguistic maps can uncover speciesist prejudices—let's take the use of "rat" as a metaphor (as in a snitch, or some other pest-adjacent usage like "gym rat" or "mall rat"): what makes the rat so universally maligned other than our speciesist biases? We have undisputed scientific evidence by now about the sentience, intelligence, and emotional sophistication of rats; we rely on them to develop a whole gamut of human-targeted pharmaceuticals for ailments ranging from cancer to depression to baldness (if rats become happy on Prozac, is that not proof they have an emotional life?). Rats show empathy and altruism and are highly social animals, yet we have conceptualized them as "pests" (another highly charged rhetorical term that deserves its own discussion) because we have internalized a script in which they have antagonized human settlements. We can also point out how these sorts of metaphors are used to demean certain categories of humans and serve a logic of violence we should resist, starting at the level of speech (see also Kasperbauer's 2018 and Hakansson's 2024 work on the concept of "subhuman").

A pedagogical practice informed by nonspeciesist rhetoric will gently steer students toward interrogating such linguistic scripts and reframe this type of narratives going forward, prompting them to question demeaning language and rethink discursive paradigms of dehumanization as they become aware of the convergent linguistic roots of human and animal exploitation. We could also help students critique mediatized animalities and develop humane, just alternatives to represent and relate to nonhuman animals, using what I call "digital animals" as a starting point (i.e., the use of animals in internet culture; see Berland 2019, for an early critique of such use). Indeed, the use of nonhuman animals as affective props or regulators in social media could offer rich opportunities for rhetorical engagement in the classroom. The production, consumption, and representation of food of animal origin could also be considered in this context, and we should help students examine their role vis-à-vis such practices. Carol Adams's *Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990) could offer an entry point into the link between sexism and sexual violence and animal exploitation, for example—which is perpetuated via linguistic and visual metaphors.

Ultimately, a pedagogy sensitive to our speciesist linguistic scripts should help cultivate metaphysical "indigestion" (to use Haraway's term) to animal exploitation and the way it manifests in our uses of discourse; one would hope that the students' own actions would eventually follow suit.

Pillar III: Consider animals as rhetorical agents and partners

My third point of programmatic change in the teaching of writing and rhetoric is exploring strategies to help students rethink rhetorical production of texts as not inherently the province of humans, consider the persuasive capabilities of animals independent of human observation and intervention, and find ways of exploring interspecies partnerships. If my first two pillars had to do with an attitude adjustment oriented to the self, this one has to do with recognizing rhetorical agency for animals and reorienting interpretations, interventions, arguments, and so forth in light of that fact. Kennedy and Parrish are great starting points in this endeavor. Hawhee's zoostylistics in particular could provide a useful entry point into fashioning text that is alive with "rhetorical energy." Hawhee invites us to consider how our most vivid language is already brimming with animal dynamism:

> Words about animals in action are themselves stirred to life; animation begets animation. Their near constant presence in discussions of vivified style is owed in part of course, to their constant presence in the daily lives of the ancients. [...] animals' distinctive colors and forms …. can easily conjure—make for a highly efficient *energeia*. Words about animal bodies can almost function like modern-day binoculars, bringing forth the crispest of animal sightings. The strong, switching tail of the Homeric lion, the snaky, red-eyed Furies, the flinching flanks of horses all serve up images so vivid as to carry with them, according to Longinus, traces of the emotional state that first gave them form. Animals move through words with ease, and vividly, with something that might be called character" (2017, 46).

Zoostylistics could be used to teach students to *compose together* with animals (rather than instrumentalize them); budding rhetoricians can train to access the trove of *shared* feelings and sensations to find and hone their own voice and fashion unique creations while they acknowledge the nonhuman animal as co-creator in this rhetorical process.

Students can also explore further pathways to knowledge and communication that emerge from studying animal signaling, call systems, and other ways of communication, and perhaps, gradually, learn to normalize animals in positions of decision and even authorship, taking a clue from Barbara Smuts, Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, Len Howard (who lived in mutuality and kinship with birds), and others. For example, Sue Savage-Rumbaugh lists the bonobos that she writes about (Kanzi, Panbanisha, and Nyota) as co-authors on an article describing how captive apes would like to be treated (Savage-Rumbaugh et al. 2007); the controversy surrounding this researcher and the Great Ape Trust she cared for would also be an instructive case study on the limits of communication and on cooperating with nonhuman animals (see Stern 2020). Likewise, Barbara Smuts finds herself altered by the encounters with the animals she is supposed to write about—or with, such as baboons and dogs, urging us to open ourselves up to the *presence* of the other,

honor it, and care for it. Smuts is a model for the observer who considers her subjects as thinking partners, not as objects. This willingness to be altered by the presence of the other can open a space of rhetorical co-creation for students—a space of "caring intersubjectivity":

> The capacity for such intersubjectivity exists at birth in many kinds of animals. It flourishes or languishes depending on the social worlds we encounter — and deliberately create. Experience suggests that by opening more fully to the presence of 'self' in others, including animals, we further develop that presence in ourselves and thus become more fully alive and awake participants in life (Smuts 2001, 308)

The co-created shared reality between human and nonhuman animals Smuts talks about (echoing the shared sensorium Parrish and Hawhee have noted in their work) is akin to the kind of cooperation and entangled worlds of Haraway's naturecultures, in which human, animal, plant, fungi, microbe mix in a fertile, fermenting compost that is ecologically and spiritually regenerative (2016). Compost is one of the metaphorical gifts of Haraway's poetic ecosophy, which is linked to her communicative and political project: making kin, making worlds, making meaning, all as collective, fermentative processes rather than individual productions. Students can grasp decomposition as a model for how arguments, identities, and disciplines break down, recombine, transform, and regenerate. They can also explore the role of authorship and circulation of ideas and form through this metaphor.

Haraway is truly exemplary of ways to think with animals as serious rhetorical partners, and inspires another creative avenue for rethinking composition in ways modeled by nonhuman life. In *Staying with the Trouble*, she takes inspiration from octopuses and spiders and plant life to theorize "tentacular thinking" (from the Latin *tentaculum* = "feeler"; *tentare* = "to feel" and "to try") as a philosophical method for conceptualizing interconnectedness, feeling, and "making-with" (what she calls *sympoiesis*) on a damaged earth. A tentacular rhetoric offers an alternative to the rhetorical model most composition courses implicitly teach: the autonomous individual sender transmitting a bounded message to a receiver. That model is, in Haraway's terms, *autopoietic*, that is to say, self-producing, boundary--maintaining, centrally controlled. Tentacular rhetoric proposes its opposite: *sympoietic* communication, "collectively-producing" and without self-defined boundaries, where "information and control are distributed among components" and the system is evolutionary and has the potential for surprising change." A text, rather than being the work of an individual (or homogenized group) and created independently, would come alive as a sequence of what Haraway calls string figures—best exemplified by the game of cat's cradle, where a series of hands take over a string configuration and rearrange it into new shapes. Thus, tentacular

rhetoric *feels* its way, rather than *aims*: it reaches, attaches, detaches, reattaches; it weaves and is woven. It is a mode of communication that understands texts as nodes in multispecies, material-semiotic webs, that holds the writer's "self" as a temporary knotting rather than a sovereign origin, that cultivates response-ability toward human and nonhuman others rather than treating them as evidence or background, and that favors the process over the goal (or meaning-making rather than "winning" a debate).

A rhetoric classroom where students are encouraged to think tentacularly (with each other, but also with nonhuman partners) offers endless opportunities for rhetorical work. To take one example, students can create a text in relay, as in the cat's cradle game: each student picks up the essay (or some other genre) from the last, adds to it, and passes it on, with the constraint that they cannot delete or significantly alter what was passed to them, only continue and complicate it. The topic can be an entangled multispecies situation (factory farming, companion animals in urban spaces, a specific ecosystem under pressure); ideally, students should be invited to add nonhuman animal perspectives and voices to the mix--via engaged observation (the Smuts model), empathetic imagination, negotiation, or advocacy[1]. Students can then reflect on the result using Haraway's string figure language: what emerged from the relay that no individual could have produced? Where were the knots? What got dropped? This enacts *sympoiesis* rather than describes it, and challenges the assumption that a good essay has a single autonomous author with a single thesis. This sort of nonspeciesist pedagogy should also encourage students to imagine their own forms of multispecies rhetorical collaborations and thus become co-creators of their own educational curriculum. I sincerely hope that such assignments and practices can buoy joy, creativity, and collaboration and teach students ways of being and meaning-making that they can apply beyond the classroom.

Pillar IV: Put ecosophy at the center of human and nonhuman animal rhetorics

A final but crucial point in my program would be to reconceive our rhetorical education with an ecologically-minded core and more inclusive of non-human animals by drawing on Stibbe's ecolinguistics, Propen's visual and material rhetorics, Cooper's "enchanted ontology," Wright's "vegan studies" project, and Haraway's compost- and tentacular thinking among others. Wright, whose work stems from literary studies, defines vegan studies as an ecofeminist framework for critiquing and reimagining our culture from a liberatory perspective (Wright 2015). Vegan studies thus aim to expose oppressive ideologies perpetuated in the media and beyond, and thus reintroduce agency and power to the voiceless. Stibbe

1. The work of Vinciane Despret (2016) on ventriloquism and negotiation could be of great help here.

puts at the center of his ecolinguistics project an ecosophy (a term he borrowed from Arne Naess, short for "ecological philosophy") that values living, wellbeing, care, environmental limits and reduction of consumption, social justice, and deep adaptation in the face of imminent ecological disaster (Stibbe 2021, 14-15). There can be, of course, multiple ecosophies that may inform our rhetorical approaches, and they can all be valid as long as they emphasize environmental justice and compassionate care towards all beings. Given global circumstances and outlook, and the near certainty of ecological and socioeconomic upheaval, we as educators and academics need to make some form of ecosophy central to rhetorical studies and rhetorical education in general. Haraway's ecosophy, in particular, should be a fertile source of pedagogical inspiration.

Furthermore, building on the budding literature that considers animals seriously in the field of rhetorical studies, rhetoricians should design inclusive rhetorical pedagogies that open new ways of writing and persuasion based on an ethical, inclusive, nonviolent and non-speciesist definition of "change" in the world. How can we explore and restore agency to non-human animals in a world in which they are continuously constrained by human choices, development, poaching, and environmental catastrophe? There are a multitude of pathways to achieving this goal—e.g., via syllabus readings, guided class discussion questions, formative feedback that uses ecosophical principes (for example, pinpointing speciesism in student drafts, or directing students toward considering multispecies interests), assignments that use cooperative and tentacular networks, etc. The writing and rhetoric instructor can and should also cooperate with students toward a shared ecosophic vision that would inform the course, thereby demonstrating the values of rhetorical listening and mutual respect and cooperation that underscore a nonspeciesist pedagogy. One of the many ways this cooperation can take place is via syllabus-building activities in the first week of classes in which students are invited to democratically contribute to a shared vision and reading list for the course.[2] I am leaving this section deliberately open and loosely defined because there are so many permutations this particular principle can take in the classroom.

5. Conclusion

In practice, a nonspeciesist rhetorical pedagogy is an educational project for both our students and us as their instructors. Rethinking who is at the nexus of

2. During one such set of syllabus building activities for a writing classroom focused on the question of the animal, one student revealed they were Jain, a religious denomination defined by their nonviolent practices and deep respect for all living beings. This caused a very interesting classroom discussion and prompted me to add to the syllabus Michael Tobias's article "The Anthropology of Conscience" (1996) where he discusses three ethnic and religious groups (Jains included) that evolved to adopt nonviolent and vegan practices.

arguments and why, whose voices and lives we exclude, undermine, and diminish in academic discourse and why, and all the ways in which we take refuge in human exceptionalism whenever evidence to the contrary is presented, is a difficult task. In the nonspeciecist writing and composition classroom, we should encourage students to reexamine their assumptions in the way they use language—even if it is starting with a simple step as assigning rhetorical agency and personhood to animals instead of dissolving them into objects, into the unnamed "it." And, of course, as academics committed to social justice, we should also direct the same ecocritical gaze toward our own writing and living practices.

The four programmatic pillars I have outlined here are merely starting points of deliberation; in no way do I present them as dogmatic tenets. They are interconnected—united by ecosophical threads, rooted in a practice of rhetorical listening that affirms the rhetorical agency and cooperation potential of nonhuman animals, and aiming to reflect that agency in our linguistic practices. Throughout the essay, I have used the collective pronoun "we" mainly to reflect on the role that our own discourse community can play in instilling a just vision of interconnectedness in a multispecies world. As rhetoricians and educators, we should be committed to promoting the type of knowledge that can help decrease suffering and increase cooperation with the hope that we can eventually help to solve the thorny, wicked problems created by human hybris.

Rhetoric—one of the oldest arts—can help reshape a world subjected to self-inflicted ecological disasters if its practitioners work to achieve the emotional reeducation Worsham aspired to so that we may reduce and eliminate violence—between humans, and in human-animal relationships. We can do so by retraining our minds, ears, tongues, and eyes to listen, see, feel, and express ideas in inclusive, nonspeciesist terms that make possible rebuilding this world based on more just, inclusive, and ecological premises.

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