

# Impossible Subjects: The Figure of the Animal in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

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## **Abstract**

*Freire's influential text, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, relies on both anthropocentric and speciesist arguments to articulate a pedagogy for human liberation. While Freire's anthropocentric understandings of "nature" have been more thoroughly critiqued, less attention has been given to his construction of nonhuman animals, in particular. I argue that Freire figures nonhuman animals in three main ways: as non-communicative and non-dialogical, as non-agential and non-transforming, and as without history or culture. Within his pedagogical paradigm, humans alone are understood as Subjects who can achieve liberation. Freire strategically uses the figure of the animal to highlight human potentiality, which is realized by transcending an oppressed/Object/animal state. My critique of Freire is meant to complement humane and critical environmental education approaches that draw on his work.*

## **Résumé**

*Le texte influent de Freire, Pédagogie des opprimés, s'appuie sur des arguments tant anthropocentriques que spécistes pour formuler une pédagogie prônant la libération de l'humain. Tandis que la conception anthropocentrique de Freire de la « nature » a été critiquée exhaustivement, une attention moins assidue a été accordée à sa définition des animaux non humains, en particulier. Je suis d'accord que Freire classe les animaux non humains en trois grandes catégories : non communicants et incapables de dialogue, non obéissants et incapables de transformer la matière, et sans histoire ni culture. À l'intérieur de ce paradigme pédagogique, les humains seuls sont considérés comme Sujets pouvant accomplir leur libération. Freire emploie stratégiquement l'analogie de l'animal pour mettre en évidence le pouvoir de l'humain, en transcendant un état opprimé/Objet/animal. Mon analyse critique de Freire a pour but de compléter les approches humaines et critiques de l'éducation environnementale trouvant leur source dans son œuvre.*

**Keywords:** Freire, speciesism, anthropocentrism, subjectivity, critical pedagogy, humane education, environmental education, animal liberation

The figure of "the animal" features prominently within Freire's enormously influential text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Here, I primarily examine the ways in which Freire relies on reductive, fixed, and speciesist constructions of "the animal" and animality throughout the text. My use of the term "the animal" is intentional, as Freire actively negates and denies the multiplicity and diversity

of nonhuman animal life, instead offering representations of animals<sup>1</sup> as singular, monolithic, and debased. Comparatively, Derrida (Derrida & Mallet, 2008) writes against the collapse of all of animalkind into a single signifier set against humanity, and proposes instead the term “*animot*” to indicate “an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals” (p. 41). Rather than understanding Freire’s constructions of “the animal” as merely incidental or peripheral to his main claims about dialogical education, and its antithetical counterpart, “the banking method of education,” (2007, p. 109), I argue that “the animal” serves as a foundational Other against which Freire contrasts his fully realized (“transcend[ed]”) human “dialogical” Subject.<sup>2</sup>

Freire’s ontological claims regarding nonhuman animals have garnered scant critical commentary. Indeed, despite the arguably progressive thrust of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the speciesism<sup>3</sup> and unrelenting anthropocentrism<sup>4</sup> of the text remains largely unchallenged (Bell & Russell, 2000). My main concern is that the consequences of these discursive gestures include the implicit and explicit denial of animal subjectivities, and in relation, animal oppression. For example, according to his pedagogical methodology, animals are crucially placed outside of the capacity for dialogue (for Freire, the defining capacity and activity of the Subject) and consequently placed outside of the possibility of liberation. For Freire, “an act is oppressive only when it prevents people from being more fully human” (pp. 56-57). That kind of ideological orientation, representative of the anthropocentric and speciesist underpinnings of the entire text, should garner serious attention, especially if we draw upon the text in our teaching. To be clear, my point here is not to dismiss Freire. However, this paper is primarily focused on critique for a few reasons: (a) There is an existing gap in the literature regarding a sustained discussion of the function of “the animal” in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, despite the fact that the text is still heavily drawn upon within those fields that directly attempt to promote the value of the nonhuman world; (b) other authors have already adeptly shown how Freire’s ideas can serve both environmental and animal liberationist pedagogy (e.g., Kahn, 2010; Nocella, 2004, 2007); and (c) I understand this article as supplementary to the aforementioned literature.<sup>5</sup>

As a foundational work of critical pedagogy, Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* continues to inform the fields of both critical environmental and humane education. Relying on a text whose theoretical assumptions actively negate the inherent value of “nature” may unwittingly undermine our pedagogical efforts. Further, in absence of careful scrutiny, we fail to recognize the unique and significant symbolic role that nonhuman animals play within the text, one that cannot be sufficiently encapsulated by more general critiques of its constructions of nature. Importantly, it is not just anthropocentrism that permeates the text, but *speciesism* against nonhuman animals. To challenge Freire’s understandings of nature without also carefully acknowledging his *particular* negation of nonhuman animals is to miss a key aspect of how he structures his argument.

We need a focused analysis that names and exposes the species prejudice of the text, which is not just an issue of human-centredness and disavowal of nature. Indeed, as Davis (1995) astutely notes, many environmentalists regard multitudes of domesticated animals as mere human artefacts, not only as ecologically placeless and thus outside both ecological and *ethical* niches, but also as nature's very *antithesis*. Environmental perspectives (resonating with Leopold's [1966] land ethic) frequently concentrate more on species integrity than the plight of individual animals: those cast as somehow outside of nature are neither valued as humans nor as members within that broad category of the "nonhuman" or even the "more-than-human world" (Abram, 1996). In other words, we should not ignore the specific positioning of nonhuman animals within *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In part, my hope is to further encourage critical environmental educators to attend to *all* nonhuman animals, even those too commonly considered "unnatural," domesticated, or somehow stripped of wildness, as beings worthy of consideration within our (ideally) holistic and intersectional anti-oppression pedagogy. Simply put, analyses of speciesism should be part of critical environmental education (Andrzejewski, Pederson, & Wicklund, 2009).

How "the animal" is figured throughout *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* should perhaps be of even greater concern to humane educators who have centrally struggled to include the exploitation of all nonhuman animals within the purview of ethical concern (e.g., Weil, 2003; 2004).<sup>6</sup> If we teach the text without analyzing and then explicitly highlighting the ways in which "the animal" functions as a primary Other for Freire, we again risk complicit ideological reinforcement of the very speciesism and anthropocentrism we hope to disrupt. This kind of critique can also directly complement Freirian-informed animal liberation theory, such as Nocella's original piece "Unmasking the Animal Liberation Front Using Critical Pedagogy: Seeing the ALF for Who They Really Are" (2007), which encourages engagement with *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* but does not explicitly challenge its foundational speciesism and anthropocentrism.

We can use some of the most problematic aspects of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to beneficial pedagogical ends: The text offers an excellent opportunity for environmental and humane educators to examine how ideas about the nonhuman world are constructed. For example, helping students critically read for nonhuman animals and attend to the speciesist workings of the text can help illuminate its deep-seated biases, which are not unique to Freire's writing but are characteristic of much of Western thought. We can continue to take what is positive from the text while drawing attention to the complicated ways its methodologies for liberation are frequently predicated upon the debasement of nature generally and nonhuman animals in particular.

We need not struggle to simply infer who animals are to Freire via a laboured interpretation of their absence throughout *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as one might perceive a background shape made visible through an artist's use of negative space. Instead, animals are also directly rendered non-Subjects (i.e.,

objects) in the text. Latently, they serve as humanity's shadow Other (along with the rest of "nature"), but they are also explicitly constructed, called out, and metaphorically sacrificed as a key comparative figure in Freire's constructions of the human Subject. When they are overtly named, as they are often, their presence is defined through their assumed *lack* of capabilities (Bell & Russell, 2000).

To this end, as previously noted, my argument is that Freire's deeply anthropocentric text is also a deeply speciesist one. His humanist project is riddled with speciesist descriptions of nonhuman animals, none of which he substantiates with any ethological or other research. (While such research surely does not offer the objective "truth" about animals' lives, and indeed can work against animals' interests and recognition of their subjectivities, at minimum there is some acknowledgement within ethology that claims about animals should be supported with information beyond opinion alone.) Within *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, we are to take Freire's assertions simply as fact, their truth evidenced by virtue of sheer repetition and/or larger cultural resonance. Comparatively, his and others' experiential knowledge presented in the text lends weight to his claims about people and the nature of human socio-cultural change. Unfortunately, not only is there a distinct exclusionary quality to his theory that precludes the possibility of nonhuman animal subjectivities, but there is also a direct prejudicial attack on animals throughout. While his claims about humanity are also at times unsubstantiated, at least they are arguably to positive effect, while animals are relentlessly negated. The "oppressed" of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* are always assumed to be human, while in specific regards to nonhuman animals, the text ironically reproduces the very kind of hierarchical power relations that it seeks to both make visible and eradicate.

Considered collectively, Freire's representations of nonhuman animals are invariably constructed *in relation* to humans. There is a necessary dual and interdependent construction at play. The essentialized differences between humans and other animals rest on Freire's intertwined assumptions for both groups. Animality is conceived by Freire as a key limit against which humanity can define itself. Animals must be rendered static and debased for Freire's logic to hold: He is most interested in soci-cultural change, such that there is identifiable movement from an oppressed state into a liberated one. Animals serve as embodiments of the first state, in which the achievement of liberation is made visible through ascension from a base animal object state into a fully human elevated one. For Freire, animals are a fixed, immutable, non-labouring, non-transforming Other against which the essence of humankind is thrown into sharp relief (see also Bell & Russell, 2000). Such common logic presupposes that humanity achieves its identity through that which it is not. Animals' presumed inadequacies highlight our achievements. Their supposed inferiority marks our superiority. This narrative strongly resonates with other evolutionary and socio-cultural Western discourses that rely on the disavowal of "the animal" to constitute "the human" (Lippit, 2000; Oliver, 2009; Wolfe, 2003).

A short caveat before proceeding: Following eco-pedagogue Kahn (2002), my observations on *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* are offered in the spirit of Freire's work, which is centrally interested in critical and active engagement with ideas. While Freire has been criticized for his anthropocentrism and lack of environmental consciousness (e.g., Bowers, 2005), and more widely regarding his obfuscation of various human power dynamics (e.g., Ellsworth, 1989), echoing Kahn, I am unwilling to completely disregard Freire's contributions (nor rigorous engagement with his theories). As Kahn (2002) maintains,

In light of his over-reliance upon Marxist productivism, we must take Freire to task for his problematical discourse on the distinction between humans and animals. The language in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* wherein he codes animals as mindless, timeless and merely instinctual beings, no different in "the forest or the zoo," lost in "an overwhelming present," and lacking individuation is unfortunate and politically regressive in the context of our current [ecological crisis]. (p. 7)

This paper is a response to Kahn's call, drawing on discourse analysis to demonstrate the functions and limitations of Freire's rendering of animals in the text. It also directly builds upon and extends Bell and Russell's (2000) insightful (though brief) commentary on the construction of nonhuman animals within Freire's work, which they argue is characteristic of the ubiquitous and frequently unacknowledged anthropocentrism in critical pedagogy more generally. "Beyond Human, Beyond Words: Anthropocentrism, Critical Pedagogy, and the Poststructuralist Turn" (2000) remains one of the few sources to directly touch upon Freire's representation of nonhuman animals specifically within *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Bell and Russell ask how poststructuralist analyses of "the language we use, the meanings we deploy, and the epistemological frameworks of past eras" could serve critical pedagogy, such that we might "extend this investigation and critique to include taken-for-granted understandings of 'human,' 'animal,' and 'nature'" (2000, p. 191). Here I seek to highlight exactly those sorts of insidious and ironically pervasive understandings of animality, and their interdependence to notions of humanity, within *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Like Bell and Russell, I want to challenge the deep-seated assumptions of humanism while also opening spaces where nonhuman animals (and other forms of "nature"—ourselves included) can be thought of in different terms, with greater humility and respect.

Freire's representations of nonhuman animals can be grouped into three major themes or clusters: First, animals are foremost defined as non-communicative and similarly non-dialogical. Second, they are likewise conceived as non-agential, specifically unable to transform their worlds. Third, they are represented as without history and culture. Below I discuss these overlapping sets of categorizations.

Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* lays out a pedagogical methodology for liberation that is defined by and grounded in dialogue. This practice is necessary to Freire's central goal: the actualization of the fully liberated, and thus

fully human, Subject. The notion of the Subject is inseparable from Freire's conceptualization of humanity, such that "subjectivity" and "humanity" can easily be understood as synonyms throughout the text. In this way, his pedagogical approach not only precludes nonhuman animals from liberation, but also from any consideration of their subjectivities. Animal subjectivities become unthinkable within his paradigm. The Subject is an agential, transforming, and communicative being: These are capacities that are essential to what it means to be human, according to Freire.

Throughout *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire's dialogical education, or "problem-posing education" (p. 40) is set against what he calls the fundamentally flawed "antidialogical and non-communicative 'deposits' of the banking method of education" (p. 109), which supports the polarization of students from teachers. It is this fundamental contradiction that Freire seeks to redress; he argues, "banking education maintains and even stimulates the contradiction... which mirrors oppressive society as a whole" (Freire, p. 73).

Macedo (2007) observes that critique rests at the heart of Freire's "dialogical education" or "dialogical practice," the pedagogical approach that is explained throughout *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Macedo emphasizes this point in response to educators within the United States who, he claims, despite their allegiance to the pedagogy, ultimately misinterpret Freire's approach, such that they disproportionately celebrate lived experience while neglecting its relationship to history, agency, and power: "[E]ducators who misinterpret Freire's notion of dialogical teaching also refuse to link experiences to a politics of culture and critical democracy, thus reducing their pedagogy to a form of middle-class narcissism" (Macedo, 2007, pp. 17-18). Conversely, dialogue (in the Freirian sense of the term) is a continual process intended to produce a fuller understanding of the object of knowledge, which is named and engaged by a given learning community. As part of that process, Freire's pedagogical orientation values lived experience, yet the public articulation of experience is not regarded as an end goal (Macedo, 2007).

As alternatives to oppressive banking-style education, Freire discusses both subjectivity and humanization at length, establishing a stark contrast between his proposed pedagogy and the banking model he rejects, wherein the dialogical model—an instrument of liberation—treats the oppressed as Subjects, while the banking model—an instrument of oppression—regards them as objects. Crucially, instead of natural, fixed, and inevitable, through dialogical pedagogy, oppressed people come to view reality as transformable. Freire states, "To resolve the teacher-student contradiction, to exchange the role of depositor, prescriber, domesticator, for the role of student among students would be to undermine the power of oppression and serve the cause of liberation" (p. 75).

In Freire's view, dialogue is the antidote to oppression. It serves as the catalytic practice that enables the oppressed to become liberated. Whereas the banking model of education dehumanizes the oppressed, the dialogical model

humanizes them. It is through dialogue that people—“dialogical man [*sic*]” and “dialogical human” (p. 168)—become fully actualized as human beings. Consequently, Freire states that “[d]ialogue is thus an existential necessity” (p. 88). He advises,

The earlier dialogue begins, the more truly revolutionary will the movement be. The dialogue which is radically necessary to revolution corresponds to another radical need: that of women and men as beings who cannot be truly human apart from communication, for they are essentially communicative creatures. (Freire, 2007, p. 128)

Centrally, for Freire, as suggested above, dialogue is the practice that allows people to become more fully human. Indeed, dialogue enables the oppressed to fulfil their true ontological vocation, which is, according to the author, the *pursuit of a fuller humanity* (p. 85; see also pp. 44, 47, 48, 55).<sup>7</sup> As stated earlier, for Freire, “An act is oppressive only when it prevents people from being more fully human” (pp. 56-57). He also states,

To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity. But the struggle to be more fully human has already begun in the authentic struggle to transform the situation. Although the situation of oppression is a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress, it is the latter who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle. (p. 47)

Freire repeats this particular understanding of oppression throughout the text; such dehumanization and oppression are presented as existing concurrently (e.g., pp. 44, 48, 54, 66-67, 145). Freire’s methodology for shifting from oppression to liberation necessarily mirrors a shift from dehumanization to actualization of the (always assumed, and by definition, human) Subject.

In contrast, animals are conceived as incapable of such a shift: They cannot transcend, because it is their very ontological state that represents human non-actualization. Their environments and species ontology are distinctly and inescapably prescriptive, defined as they are by Freire as lacking the capacities to communicate and to labour: “Animals, which [*sic*] do not labor, live in a setting which they cannot transcend. Hence, each animal species lives in the context appropriate to it, and these contexts, while open to humans, cannot communicate among themselves” (Freire, p. 125). For Freire, nonhuman animals are never individuals; instead they are defined strictly in terms of species membership: Variability among individuals and group-specific differences among populations within species are flattened. They simply do not exist within Freire’s theoretical paradigm. For humans to remain at the debased animal/object state is to stay dehumanized and oppressed.

Freire's critiques of leadership provide another example of his dehumanization/oppression pairing. Leadership, even that which is meant to positively serve people for liberatory purposes, reproduces the conditions of oppression by ultimately dehumanizing those it hopes to liberate. Subsequently, liberation must be led from below, motivated and informed by the *conscientização* (critical consciousness) of the oppressed:

...not even the best-intentioned leadership can bestow independence as a gift. The liberation of the oppressed is a liberation of women and men, not things. Accordingly, while no one liberates himself by his own efforts alone, neither is he [*sic*] liberated by others. Liberation, a human phenomenon, cannot be achieved by semihumans. Any attempt to treat people as semihumans only dehumanizes them. When people are already dehumanized, due to the oppression they suffer, the process of their liberation must not employ the methods of dehumanization. (pp. 66-67)

Liberation is achieved through true dialogue, which is reflected in the shift from object to Subject, from “beings for others” to “beings for themselves” (p. 74). This is, crucially, a process in which one becomes fully human. Liberation is exclusively available to humans, as only humans can participate in dialogue. Indeed, the *essence* of humanity lies in this capacity for dialogue: Again, we must remember Freire's claim, “[W]omen and men...are essentially communicative creatures. To impede communication is to reduce men to the status of ‘thing’” (p. 128). Further, Freire maintains,

[D]ialogue is the essence of revolutionary action. In the theory of this action, the *actors* intersubjectively direct their action upon an *object* (*reality*, which mediates them) with the humanization of men [*sic*] (to be achieved by transforming that reality) as their objective. (p. 135, italics in original)

Communication is specifically rendered as the critical defining capacity of humanity, as that which differentiates humans from all that is not human. There is a sharp cleavage between “dialogical man” and the rest of nature, which is cast as passive detritus, whose ontology is (constructed by Freire as) predetermined rather than developed and transformed:

Men who are bound to nature and to the oppressor...must come to discern themselves as *persons* prevented from *being*. And discovering themselves means in the first instance discovering themselves as *Pedro*, as *Antonio*, or as *Josefa*. This discovery implies a different perception of the meaning of designations: the words “world,” “men,” “culture,” “tree,” “work,” “animal,” reassume their true significance. The peasants now see themselves as transformers of reality (previously a mysterious entity) through their creative labor. They discover that—as people—they can no longer continue to be “things” possessed by others. (p. 174, italics in original)

Succinctly, Freire's pedagogical method is structured around two major sets of polarized dualisms. On the one side exists oppression, dehumanization, and objectification; on the other side exists liberation, humanization, and Subjectivity.

Dialogue is the necessary catalyst that transitions the oppressed from the first state into the second. Given that the capacities for dialogue and communication are defined exclusively as human capabilities and, crucially, ones that rest at the heart of what it means to be human, we can understand Freire's pedagogical method as essentially and primarily a humanist discourse.

Related to their inability to communicate and dialogue, another central motif indicative of animals' impoverishment, as defined by Freire, relates to their supposed inability to act as agents or transformers in and of the world (Bell & Russell, 2000). They are portrayed in strictly passive terms, beings of stimulus and reaction rather than beings of active engagement and response. For example, Freire begins Chapter Four, a chapter dedicated to analysis of the "theories of cultural action which develop from antidiological and dialogical matrices" (p. 125), with a description of the essential ontological difference that distinguishes humans from nonhuman animals. His differentiation is grounded in an assumption regarding the type of activity each respective group can engage: He names animals "beings of pure activity" (p. 124) who do not have the capacity to transform the world, while he names humans as "beings of the *praxis*" (p. 125, italics in original), who, through a combination of action and reflection, transform the world.

Indeed, according to Freire, the "world" does not even exist without human beings to name it as such. He highlights this point through his retelling of a story in which "the peasant" has the epiphany that without human beings to name the world, there is no world. The "world" is made possible only through consciousness, and humans alone have this capacity within Freire's schema. He recalls,

In one of our culture circles in Chile, the group was discussing (based on a codification) the anthropological concept of culture. In the midst of the discussion, a peasant who by banking standards was completely ignorant said: "Now I see that without man there is no world." When the educator responded: "Let's say, for the sake of argument, that all men on earth were to die, but that the earth itself remained, together with trees, birds, animals, rivers, seas, the stars...wouldn't all this be a world?" "Oh no," the peasant replied emphatically. "There would be no one to say: 'This is a world.'"

The peasant wished to express the idea that there would be lacking the consciousness of the world which necessarily implies the world of consciousness. (p. 82)

Consequently, we can logically conclude that animals are understood as worldless and without consciousness.

Likewise, we can see Freire's speciesist bias and his reductive and biologically deterministic construction of animals in his descriptions of the possibility of human development and transformation. Animals and other nonhuman life, such as seeds, *develop but they do not transform*. Following a discussion of the impacts of cultural invasion, in which oppressors impose their values and understandings onto the oppressed, Freire offers the following argument. The

passage is worth quoting at length due to its revealing layered assumptions regarding nature, animals, and animality:

Thus, while all development is transformation, not all transformation is development. The transformation occurring in a seed which under favorable conditions germinates and sprouts, is not development. In the same way, the transformation of an animal is not development. The transformations of seeds and animals are determined by the species to which they belong; and they occur in a time which does not belong to them, for time belongs to humankind.

Women and men, among the uncompleted beings, are the only ones which develop. As historical, autobiographical, “beings for themselves,” their transformation (development) occurs in their own existential time, never outside it. Men who are submitted to concrete conditions of oppression in which they become alienated “beings for another” of the false “being for himself” on whom they depend, are not able to develop authentically. Deprived of their own power of decision, which is located in the oppressor, they follow the prescriptions of the latter. The oppressed only begin to develop when, surmounting the contradiction in which they are caught, they become “beings for themselves.” (p. 161)

Stripped of capacities to dialogue, communicate, possess consciousness, transform, and actively transcend their prescribed natural destiny, Freire also constructs nonhuman animals as ahistorical; this equally negating argument overlaps with themes I have just discussed, particularly in relationship to transcendence and consciousness. Occurring just after the text’s midway point, Freire’s diatribe on the ahistoricity of animals acts as a fulcrum for his previous and subsequent speciesist arguments; he leverages his argument against this central hinge to reinforce the inferiority of animals, and in relation, the unique superiority of humans. Although there are numerous sections throughout *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in which Freire discusses animals, the following passage certainly offers one of his most sustained and detailed descriptions:

Unable to decide for themselves, unable to objectify either themselves or their activity, lacking objectives which they themselves have set, living “submerged” in a world to which they can give no meaning, lacking a “tomorrow” and a “today” because they exist in an overwhelming present, animals are ahistorical. Their ahistorical life does not occur in the “world,” taken in its strict meaning; for the animal, the world does not constitute a “not-I” which could set him apart as an “I.” The human world, which is historical, serves as a mere prop for the “being in itself.” Animals are not challenged by the configuration which confronts them; they are merely stimulated. Their life is not one of risk-taking, for they are not aware of taking risks. Risks are not challenges perceived upon reflection, but merely “noted” by the signs which indicate them; they accordingly do not require decision-making responses.

Consequently, animals cannot commit themselves. Their ahistorical condition does not permit them to “take on” life. Because they do not “take it on,” they cannot construct it; and if they do not construct it, they cannot transform its configuration. Nor can they know themselves to be destroyed by life, for they cannot expand their

“prop” world into a meaningful, symbolic world which includes culture and history. As a result, animals do not “animalize” their configuration in order to animalize themselves—nor do they “de-animalize” themselves. Even in the forest, they remain “being-in-themselves,” as animal-like there as in the zoo.

In contrast, the people—aware of their activity and the world in which they are situated, acting in [the] function of the objectivities which they propose, having the seat of their decisions located in themselves and in their relations with the world and with others, infusing the world with their creative presence by means of the transformation they effect upon it—unlike animals, not only live but exist; and their existence is historical. Animals live out their lives on an atemporal, flat, uniform “prop”; humans exist in a world which they are constantly re-creating and transforming. For animals, “here” is only a habitat with which they enter into contact; for people, “here” signifies not merely a physical space, but also an historical space.

Strictly speaking, “here,” “now,” “there,” “tomorrow,” and “yesterday” do not exist for the animal, whose life, lacking self-consciousness, is totally determined. Animals cannot surmount the limits imposed by the “here,” the “now,” or the “there.”

Humans, however, because they are aware of themselves and thus of the world—because they are *conscious beings*—exist in a dialectical relationship between the determination of limits and their own freedom. As they separate themselves from the world, which they objectify, as they separate themselves from their own activity, as they locate the seat of their decisions in themselves and in their relations with the world and others, people overcome the situations which limit them: the “limit situations.” Once perceived by individuals as fetters, as obstacles to their liberation, these situations stand out in relief from the background, revealing their true nature as concrete historical dimensions of a given reality. Men and women respond to the challenge with actions which Vieira Pinto calls “limit-acts”: those directed at negating and overcoming, rather than passively accepting, the “given.” (pp. 98-99, italics in original)

Freire’s denunciation of animals continues further, seemingly unencumbered by any critical reflection on whether his claims are actually true. Animals are reduced in such a totalizing manner that the richness and agency of their lives is wholly obliterated within his theoretical framework.

In conclusion, humanist and speciesist bias runs throughout *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire’s text rests upon a foundational anthropocentric prejudice, which conceives of humanity’s liberation (the only kind of liberation possible; only humans can be oppressed) as a process of transcending the status of Object, animal, and nature more generally through a dialogical method. Lamenting his anthropocentric “discursive frame of reference,” Bell and Russell state that according to Freire,

We have the edge over other creatures because we are able to rise above monotonous, species-determined biological existence. Change in the service of human freedom is seen to be the primary agenda. Humans are thus cast as active agents whose very essence is to transform the world—as if somehow acceptance, appreciation, wonder, and reverence were beyond the pale. (p. 192)

Part of what is troubling is not only his oppressive characterizations of nonhuman animals, but also Freire's seeming lack of compulsion to justify his ubiquitous normative statements. There is no attempt to "dialogue" with animals, to humbly open to who they are and how they experience their worlds as other scholars attempt (see, for example, Smuts 2006), for animals are already determined to be incapable of dialogue. Assumed to lack this key capacity, the door to animals' actual epistemologies and ontologies remains firmly locked and in its stead, Freire constructs image after degraded image. He simultaneously denies animals' communicative and dialogical capacities, while he also heaps his own degraded representations upon them, all without any kind of substantiation or accountability. First he silences them, and then he defines them. These processes are strategic of course, to serve noble ends: the clear articulation of a methodology of human liberation, in which the problem of oppression is laid bare. Animals are convenient targets—metaphorical collateral damage, if you will—who cannot challenge in human language such abject characterizations.

Concerns raised in the academic literature about Freire's anthropocentrism are generally related to critiques of his simultaneous neglect of ecological concerns and, in their more negative incarnations, his perpetuation of the very mindset that contributes to ecological destruction. Bowers (2005), for example, wages a number of scathing critiques against Freire, among them that his work is not only inherently anthropocentric, but also that it reproduces the same kind of Enlightenment assumptions that made the Industrial Revolution possible and actually *contribute* to the ecological crisis.

Undoubtedly, Bowers is less optimistic than Kahn (2002) that Freire's theories can be modified to help address said crisis. On the one hand, Kahn argues that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* can be updated in service of eco-justice (indeed, according to Kahn, Freire would want this sort of ongoing critical engagement with his ideas as a matter of pedagogical principle); on the other hand, Bowers (2005) suggests that Freire's methodology is so enmeshed in Enlightenment thinking that if his followers "were to recognize the cultural roots of the ecological crisis, they would have to engage in a process of reconceptualization that could only be carried through by their ceasing to be Freirean theorists" (pp. 142-143).<sup>8</sup> Despite these authors' concerns about Freire's anthropocentrism, neither has specifically focused on the key function of Freire's construction of "the animal" in the text, though as noted, Kahn does encourage critique in this direction.

As Kahn would agree, we must question those theorists who treat nonhuman animals as objects and synonyms, exclude them from the possibility of liberation, and make claims about their essences (e.g., non-labouring, incapable of intercommunication, lacking consciousness, etc.), especially without offering any evidence to substantiate these arguments. That Freire builds his dialogical method off unfounded and profoundly speciesist claims should give us serious pause. By placing animals outside of the possibility of dialogue—indeed

they *must* be outside of dialogue for Freire's logic to hold: humanity must have something (or someone) to transcend—animals are silenced, objectified, and reduced; the possibility for their voices remains necessarily precluded. Their liberation is a non-possibility; their oppression does not exist.

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* suggests a kind of continual presupposition that animals are not dialogical or relational, nor can they possess or create knowledge. Importantly, to Freire, animals can neither experience oppression nor be Subjects. For Freire, humanism is a tightly sealed discourse. Despite the radical intention of his theory and its liberatory potential, he nonetheless perpetuates a deeply anthropocentric and speciesist understanding of animals. Rather than plain truths, such assertions are actually highly political claims with ethical implications. Such passages are, unfortunately, not exceptions: These sorts of claims infect the whole text. Freire layers essentialist assumption upon essentialist assumption. The ontology of “the animal” is presented as self-evident.

The temptation at this juncture is to scramble to present counterevidence to challenge each of Freire's claims about nonhuman animals. Certainly there is a rich literature that could be mobilized to serve such a purpose: on nonhuman animal subjectivities (e.g., Noske 1997; Smuts, 2001, 2006), on the relationality and communication of nonhuman animals (e.g., Bekoff & Pierce, 2009; Horowitz, 2009), on nonhuman animal cultures (e.g., De Waal & Bonnie, 2009; Rendell & Whitehead, 2001), on nonhuman animal consciousness (e.g., Allen, 1997; Griffin & Speck, 2004), on nonhuman animal agency (e.g., Haraway, 2008; Hribal, 2010). However, I think we should be cautious about approaching Freire on the defensive. As others have noted, when human measurements are used to evaluate the worthiness of animals, what is deemed as morally relevant criteria too often shifts or becomes further restricted in light of challenging evidence (Bryant, 2007).

Freire gets it wrong about animals, to be sure, but more than that, he dramatically fails to open himself and others to the incredible diversity of nonhuman animal life imbued with myriad unique qualities. The consequences for animals are enormous: With billions of nonhuman animals each year held captive, tortured, and slaughtered,<sup>9</sup> to deny the very existence of their oppression represents a truly gross enactment of power and a great act of complicity. Freire dedicates *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* “To those oppressed/and to those who suffer with them/and fight at their side.” Animals deserve to be counted among his numbers. As critical educators, we can help in that process by attending to the particular and overwhelmingly negative constructions of nonhuman animals throughout the text.

By sharpening our own critique of speciesism and anthropocentrism, we work against a dominant Western cultural logic that reifies animals, and casts them in the perpetual role of humanity's degraded Other. Understood this way, we can further engage with *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in the spirit in which

it was written: as an opportunity for critical reflection on a methodology of liberation. If we embrace such an analysis as a launching pad for additional inquiry, we encourage a reconceptualization of nonhuman animals as Subjects with their own perspectives, desires, and epistemologies, neither inferior nor superior to our own.

## Notes

- 1 While I do not mean to elide the fact that humans are also animals, unless otherwise stated, I use the word “animal” to denote nonhuman animals as a matter of both convention and avoidance of overly cumbersome language. The term “nonhuman animals,” which I also frequently use, does a better job of flagging us as animals. However, “nonhuman animals” does not seem like an ideal fit either: Those not belonging to our species are still primarily defined in relation to us, as being “non” to who we are. Nonetheless, I have yet to find a more appropriate linguistic solution.
- 2 Freire capitalizes “Subject” throughout *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and for the sake of consistency and in appreciation of his choice, I also capitalize the term.
- 3 According to Ryder (n.d.), who coined the term “speciesism,”  
The word refers to the widely held belief that the human species is inherently superior to other species and so has rights or privileges that are denied to other sentient animals.... ‘Speciesism’ can also be used to describe the oppressive behaviour, cruelty, prejudice and discrimination that are associated with such a belief. In a more restricted sense, speciesism can refer to such beliefs and behaviours if they are based upon the species-difference alone, as if such a difference is, in itself, a justification. (para. 1).
- 4 Following Fawcett (in press), I define “anthropocentrism” as a perspective that “assumes that human interests matter the most and that environments are important only in terms of how they instrumentally fulfill human needs, desires and goals.”
- 5 I ended up writing this article somewhat accidentally at first. I was reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to gain a deeper understanding of how Western social movements rely on notions of voice to articulate their arguments. Scholars and activists such as hooks and Giroux, both directly influenced by Freire, continually deploy notions of voice throughout their writing. I hoped that studying Freire’s interest in dialogue might lend insight into these authors’ use of voice, which seemed to be related concepts. Throughout this process, I was repeatedly struck by Freire’s negative descriptions of nonhuman animals, and how central such descriptions were in his arguments. When I mentioned this to a friend of mine, a fellow animal advocate and fan of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, she did not recall him writing about animals at all, which was also shocking to me. It was the blatant nature of his speciesism that could seemingly pass by unnoticed that seemed remarkable and worthy of further commentary. A subsequent literature review, and discussions with a couple of key authors who write about

animals and critical pedagogy, confirmed that there has been little published about speciesism within the text.

- 6 Weil, co-founder and President of the International Institute for Humane Education, states,  
As a comprehensive field of study that draws connections between all forms of social justice, humane education examines what is happening on our planet, from human oppression to animal exploitation to ecological degradation. It explores how we might live with compassion and respect for everyone: not just for our friends, neighbors, and classmates, but for all people; not just for our own cats and dogs, but for all animals; not just for school and home environments, but for the Earth itself, our ultimate home. (2004, p. 4)
- 7 As an additional example, consider the following text summation by Freire: This book will present some aspects of what the writer has termed the pedagogy of the oppressed, a pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to gain their humanity. (p. 48, italics in original)
- 8 Bowers (2005) continues,  
And too many reputations would be threatened for them to acknowledge that their emancipatory pedagogy is based on early metaphorical constructions that did not take account of the fact that the fate of humans is dependent on the viability of natural systems. (pp. 142-143)
- 9 For an excellent contemporary survey of some of these issues within Canada, see Sorenson's *About Canada: Animal Rights* (2010).

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