



Gender pronoun use in the university classroom: A post-humanist perspective

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Background: This article explores the political impact of using gender neutral pronouns in the university classroom.

Aim: We explore how the gender neutral pronoun 'they' denaturalises essentialist models of gender identity. We follow 'they' toward a consideration of the gender neutral pronoun 'it.' 'It' advances – at the same time that it problematises – the political project of non-binary communities to denaturalise gender by challenging an anthropocentric model of equal rights.

Setting: We examine the latent humanism of pronoun use through our contrasting approaches to gender pronoun use in our writing courses.

Methods: First we discuss the role of genderneutral pronouns in building a more inclusive classroom environment for gender non-conforming students. We then consider our respective pedagogical approaches to pronoun use. Andrew avoids pronoun use in the classroom, addressing his students by their first names instead, while Marcos makes pronoun use and gender identity a central part of his course curriculum. We then consider the pronoun 'it' from a posthumanist perspective, arguing that 'it' might help to overcome the violent legacy of humanism by building a more inclusive classroom environment for gender-nonconforming students.

Results: The analysis of 'it' as a gender neutral pronoun has revolutionary potential. Deconstructing our conceptions of equal rights from a posthumanist perspective can transform higher education for the better.

Conclusion: The article concludes that college educators should consider discussing the significance of the pronoun 'it.' Given its dehumanising potential, this discussion should be presented in light of the posthumanist critique of anthropocentrism, and must affirm students' existing identifications.

Keywords: post-humanism; gender pronouns; trans and gender non-conforming; university culture; gender inclusive pedagogy.

A man said to the universe:

'Sir, I exist!'

'However', replied the universe,

'The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation'.

– Steven Crane, 'A Man Said to the Universe'

Introduction: Gender pronoun use in higher education

In recent years, questions of gender identity on campus have moved far beyond the confines of the classrooms conducting gender studies, as colleges and universities have moved to develop institution-wide protocols to build more inclusive environments for transgender students and those not conforming to gender, whose needs and concerns have long been neglected.¹ Personal pronouns have emerged as a focal point in these efforts, leading to extensive discussion around best practices for establishing the pronouns that each student uses. While some students not conforming to gender use the traditional *he* and *she* with their

1. According to the non-profit organisation *Campus Pride*, which strives to build queer inclusive college communities through advocacy programmes and policy reform, 259 US colleges, as of February 2020, permit students to change their first names on campus records and official legal documents, 60 colleges permit students to change their gender identity without the proof of medical intervention and 41 colleges permit students to indicate their pronouns on course rosters. See 'Colleges and Universities that Allow Students to Change the Name and Gender on Campus Records', *Campus Pride: Building Future Leaders and Safer, more LGBTQ-Friendly Colleges and Universities*, <https://www.campuspride.org/tpc/records/>.

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standard declensions, others go by the gender neutral *they* or more recent coinages like *xe*, *ze* or *ve*.²

As could be expected, the use of gender-neutral pronouns in college and university classrooms has spawned controversy, mostly in the form of conservative resistance to the language protocols followed by the academic left.³ On one side of the debate are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, asexual (LGBTQIA) advocates and allies who view traditional pronoun use as limiting, discriminatory and symptomatic of a deeper problem in society. The rigid application of *he* and *she* to persons, respectively, assigned as male and female at birth grows out of a patriarchal, heteronormative tradition that conceives of gender as biologically determined. Under the social dictates of this normative gender ideology, transgender and non-binary people are regarded as deviant, delusional or just plain difficult. The hate crimes committed against transgender and non-binary people are largely motivated by an ideological worldview that is systematically reinforced through the daily, widespread use of normative gender pronouns.⁴ This is why many colleges and universities have moved beyond implementing non-discrimination policies to actively promoting the use of gender-inclusive pronouns in their student handbooks, classroom rosters and student housing assignments. Cautioning against gender prejudice and other insensitive behaviour through a non-discrimination policy simply is not enough, they say; a more active approach is needed to transform how the overall society thinks about gender identity. 'Caution tape delineates where someone shouldn't go, but it doesn't stop someone from going there', Assistant Professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs, Z. Nicholazzo, states in a 2017 interview with *The Chronicle of Higher Education*:

I can't carry around a nondiscrimination policy and say, You shouldn't look at me weird because look here ... While that policy is necessary, it's insufficient at actually changing the way we think about gender, and how gender structures college environments. (Gardner 2017)

2. See Hartocollis (2020). Discussing the best practices of pronoun use, Hartocollis notes how students at New York University can now indicate their pronouns in an online system that provides course rosters and seating charts to faculty; she notes that the University of Minnesota's faculty senate recently approved of a policy that allows students access to school facilities designed strictly for their gender identity; and she also notes that students at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government are now given four pronoun options ('He/Him', 'She/Her', 'They/Them' and 'Ze/Hir') on official name tags distributed at the beginning of the semester.

3. For good examples of this, see Hillard (2019) and Williams (2020).

4. In 2016, a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, Jordan Peterson, uploaded a series of YouTube videos protesting the Canadian government's Bill C-16, which sought to revise the *Criminal Code and Canadian Human Rights Act* to protect gender identity and gender expression from discriminatory practices. Peterson opposed the bill on the grounds that it would compel speech. He argued that, under the law (which was officially passed in 2017), misgendering a student or refusing to use a student's preferred pronoun could itself result in the instructor being charged with a hate crime. Others have accused Peterson of mischaracterising the bill, and others still have claimed that, while Peterson's fears are valid, no court would actually rule the violation as a criminal offense. Regardless of its legal repercussions, misgendering someone is still widely considered a hate crime by LGBTQIA+ advocates and allies because it robs the individual of their personhood and denies them access to the goods and services only afforded to their gender. According to Stephanie Julia Kapusta, 'politically dominant gender categorizations have a real effect on human lives', causing transgender and non-binary individuals 'microaggressive psychological harms' and exposing them to 'possible abuse and discrimination' (2016:505, 502, 505).

For this reason, many instructors ask for their students' pronouns on the first day of class, even giving short lessons on the pronoun options available to them and how they correspond to gender identity. 'We rarely reference race, income, or other social identities unless we are actually talking about them – unlike the pervasive use of gendered pronouns', Eric Anthony Grollman states in a 2013 op-ed for *Inside Higher Education*.

Frankly, I think it is worth it to push cisgender students, at least once in their entire lives, to answer the dreaded question, 'What are you?!', that trans* and gender nonconforming people face too often.

Grollman writes; 'It is my hope of hopes that the students leave the class taking this practice, or at least knowing its importance, into other arenas in their lives' (2013). Asking for students' pronouns on the first day of class has now become a fairly common practice among college and university professors. To keep the conversation going and reinforce its institutional authority, many instructors list their personal pronouns with their email signatures.

Moreover, the past 20 years have seen the emergence of a distinctive non-binary gender community within the broader queer community, characterised by linguistic innovation around gender identity and expression. This transformation of the language of gender functions both to critique a naturalised gender binary and to articulate new forms of gender experience. Pronouns play a significant role in this project because conventional pronouns are a vehicle of habitual and unwitting binary gender construction. Indeed, it is remarkable that we cannot use conventional personal pronouns without making gender determinations, and that gender is the only information about the referent that pronouns convey. To address this problem, activists have innovated an array of gender-neutral third-person pronouns, but *they* is the most popular alternative to the *he* or *she* binary, and is of particular ontological and ethical interest to us here.

The politics of personal pronouns

Third-person pronouns have several distinctive linguistic features that shape their capacity to represent gender.⁵ Although his work precedes contemporary discourses of transformation in gender identity and practice, the structural linguist Emile Benveniste proposes a lucid understanding of the function of third-person pronouns, which, he writes, 'predicate ... someone or something outside the instance [of utterance]' (1971:221). In this account, conversation takes place between subjects who speak from the first-person

5. In 1975, the linguist Ann Bodine argued that '[b]ecause of the social significance of personal reference, personal pronouns are particularly susceptible to modification in response to social and ideological change' (1975:130). Bodine explains that the singular *they* was used uncontroversially from the 14th to the late 18th century, when prescriptive grammarians began to insist upon *he* as the generic (purportedly non-gendered) third-person singular pronoun. This account has been expanded in different directions by Bronwyn M. Bjorkman (2017) and Mark Balhorn (2004). Balhorn notes psychological studies have repeatedly demonstrated that listeners interpret the generic and supposedly genderless *he* as male (Gastil 1990; Martyna 1978). In this context, the use of the singular *they*, advocated by feminists in the 1970s and more recently by trans, non-binary and genderqueer communities, actually represents a return to long-standing practice.

subject position. By speaking, we perform the act of announcing ourselves as a first-person subject because, as J. L. Austin argued, any claim is implicitly preceded at a structural level by the words 'I declare'. When the first-person subject speaks, the second-person addressee responds in the first person and claims their own subjectivity, defining the conversation as a reciprocal exchange between subjects grounded in mutual recognition. The grammatical third person stands outside of this exchange between the addresser and addressee. In fact, the referent of a third-person pronoun cannot claim their own place in a speech situation without claiming the first person. Until I join a conversation, I am relegated to the third person, but as soon as I join, I enter the dyad of first and second person, and thereby leave the third person behind. The third person thus indicates a referent that can neither address nor be addressed. For Benveniste, this impossibility of address entails that 'the "third person" is indeed literally a "non-person"' (1971:221) – one who is structurally absent, and whose absence is amplified by the contingency that defines all shifters (including *I* and *you*). The result is that the third person is radically anonymous: the third person may become 'an infinite number of subjects – or none' (1971:309). Yet, this expansive structure of third-person reference is quickly counteracted by the gender determination of *he* or *she*, restricting Benveniste's infinite subjectivity to a well-defined horizon of gender expectations. Indeed, Benveniste's account of this anonymous and potentially infinite third-person subject seems to apply most concretely to the contemporary usage of the gender-indeterminate *they*, a usage he could not have foreseen.

The structural exclusion that defines third-person reference will have significant consequences for the relationship between gendered pronouns and gender identity, and may suggest a renewed understanding of the distinctive political charge of gendered pronouns. Put starkly, third-person pronouns designate beings that cannot speak for themselves. When we are indicated but have not yet claimed our place – or cannot claim our place – we appear in the third person. We are spoken about; we are summoned as an object for others. As Barbara Johnson writes in *Persons and Things*, 'A person who neither addresses nor is addressed is functioning as a thing' (2008:6). Insofar as it cannot speak for itself, an absent and thereby objectified referent is uniquely vulnerable. It lies in the care of an exchange from which it is structurally excluded. Our intuitive sense of this structural exclusion grounds the commonplace that it is wrong to speak negatively about someone 'behind their back' when they cannot 'speak for themselves'. Third-person pronominal reference thus confronts the ethical challenge of designating someone who, at least at the moment of utterance, cannot claim their own designation.⁶

⁶The grammar of personal reference is an established problem in human rights discourse; Sunny Xiang discusses the third person as the site of contested personhood, invoking Edward Said's imperative, 'They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented' (Xiang 2018:135).

We should understand the politics of gendered pronouns in relation to the exposure of being spoken about, linking gender identity to the problem of grammatical reference. The third-person pronoun appears when one is the object of an exchange between others. In traditional pronoun usage, the third-person object is not merely referenced, but also designated and reified as male or female. Pronominal reference objectifies, excludes and defines in a single movement. The politics of pronoun use are thus located within the structural exclusion that defines third-person reference. By claiming non-normative pronouns, subjects of language attempt to assert agency within the structure of language. A chosen pronoun expresses a desire to define the self even in the subject's absence, even when the subject is reduced to the voicelessness of a grammatical object. Yet, the affirmative decision to claim a non-normative linguistic designation can also reduce the identity content of the subject's presence in language. When someone claims the designation *they*, they decide to refrain from adding gender marking to the act of reference. While identifying with the pronoun *they* is often understood as the affirmation of a genderqueer, agender, trans or non-binary identity, it may also be understood as the subtraction of gender from one's place in language, which is why many people who do not identify as non-binary may nonetheless prefer the pronoun *they*. *They* reduces the ontological freight of indication, highlighting how conventional pronouns are not simply indicative, but also evaluative. Here, Benveniste's structural description of the third person as 'non-person' becomes prescient. The notion held by some English speakers that *they* is overly 'ambiguous' suggests that we expect our language of reference not just to indicate, but also to define the personhood of the referent. *They* challenges this desire to categorise the beings to which we refer.

This strategy of reduced predication has been important for scholars like Igi Moon, who describes a shift in trans-subjectivity from identity to feeling. For Moon, a 'genderqueer or agender' identification 'removes the need to define social practices and meanings as cis-gendered and therefore removes the need to define the body as "feeling" male or female' (2018). While these forms of identification do unsettle connections between gender and social practices, they do not lead to the elimination of gender as such, but rather allow gender to emerge in the practice of living, and to shift with time, either over slow duration or in periods of day-to-day flux. By reducing designation, *they* allows the subject space for movement and transformation within the frameworks of gender and the structure of language. This mobile identity is often indicated by the term 'gender-fluid'.

Conceived along these lines, gender fluidity does not simply challenge the gender binary, but also challenges the sense of self as occupying a stable position. In this context, the reduced form of reference offered by *they* can become a strategy to express selfhood as malleable and multiple. The emergence

of the singular *they* has drawn cultural fascination in recent years: to much fanfare, the American Dialect Society named the singular *they* its 2015 Word of the Year, and in 2017 *The Associated Press Stylebook*, the standard reference for American journalistic writing and an important arbiter of usage, included its first guidelines on the use of the singular *they*, while explicitly proscribing other gender-neutral pronouns. Yet from our perspective, it will become crucial that *they* remains open to a plural interpretation.

Pedagogical approaches to pronoun use in the classroom

Classroom practices concerning pronoun use are changing rapidly. The practice of requesting students' 'preferred pronouns' at the beginning of class now frequently drops the adjective 'preferred', a response to the unwanted implication that gender identity is a preference on the order of a favourite colour. In some courses, students are invited to volunteer alternative pronouns if they wish, while in other courses everyone is asked to state their pronouns. The latter practice may help to normalise gender-nonconforming identities and establish greater solidarity with gender-nonconforming students, but as Rachel Levin argues in *Inside Higher Ed*, this practice may also risk outing 'young adults who are in the process of figuring out who they are' (2018). Elizabeth Reis has taken up this point in the *New York Times*: requesting each student's pronouns 'at best contradicts the reality that our gender may be ambiguous, and at worst forces students to reveal a potentially vulnerable part of themselves' (2016). While some students may value the opportunity for collective affirmation of their identity, others may feel uncomfortable declaring a gender identity for which pronouns would be proxy.

As colleges and universities develop policies to address gender identity across various spheres of campus life, these dilemmas surrounding pronoun practice in the classroom point towards a broader dynamic. To date, these institutional policies are largely focused on the category of 'transgender', under which many non-cisgendered students may find identification and recognition. Yet for others, the discourse of transgenderism may fail to adequately address their gender identities. The nascent project of creating safer institutional space for trans-identities is thus already introducing its own reifications and exclusions. An initial response to this problem might begin with analysis of the discursive work of gender categorisation, recognising our attachments to gender at the same time that we scrutinise the construction of gender as such. However, as Reis notes, responding to these issues could prove particularly difficult in courses that do not thematise gender because given time constraints, rigorous analysis of gender may not be possible in many classrooms. Indeed, Toby Beauchamp (2008) has outlined the difficulty of developing a pedagogy that can recognise and affirm yet also historicise and critique emerging discourses of identity, even within a focused transgender studies curriculum. For those of us teaching outside of transgender

studies, it is no less urgent that we grapple with these issues, and that we continue to reconsider, challenge and update our own practices.

As educators ourselves, we have developed contrasting approaches to pronoun use in the classroom. Andrew teaches writing and introductory literature courses of 18–30 students at a community college and a liberal arts university, to students that vary significantly in age, race, gender identity and economic background. These courses centre on argumentation and often engage – but do not specifically focus on – questions of gender and identity. Andrew's approach to gender identity in the classroom sidesteps many of the problems that can arise if the instructor asks students to declare their pronouns: he does not use them at all. Consider, how often do we actually use the third person to refer to students in the classroom? Andrew's classes are almost entirely staged between the first and second person, addresser and addressee – I, we, you. Third-person reference to someone in the class is largely limited to two circumstances: in class-wide discussion where Andrew gestures to what a student has previously said, or when he mentions one student to another student, which is rare. In both cases using the student's name has pragmatic, pedagogical and personal significance; it conveys the information that, even though it may only be the second day of class, he knows who each student is, and he remembers their contributions. Names bear respect and dignity. Calling a student by name and pronouncing their name correctly can have the vital effect of acknowledging the fullness of their personhood. When we reference students by pronoun, we subject them to the dynamics of anonymity that Benveniste described. The use of the name returns the student from an anonymised, objectified referent to a person – a person that we identify in their singularity, by the word that stands for their particular being. In Andrew's literature courses and writing seminars, it is crucial that students feel that they are recognised immediately, and that he is with them as the class makes its way through the difficult readings and assignments of the course. In this setting, a pronoun is a superfluous shortcut for a person. It is Andrew's belief that the name is the most conceptually and pedagogically sound form of reference.

Yet, while this strategy may deactivate the problem of reference from instructor–student interactions, it does not remove the issue altogether. Nor is it clear that the question of pronouns *should* be removed because, as Grollman argues above, our classrooms can provide a unique space for cisgendered students to confront the challenges of self-reference that shape the experience of many gender-nonconforming people. Moreover, we can refer to students exclusively by name because we need to learn their names. Yet, however, we may structure the class to encourage mutual familiarity; our students do not share this obligation. There is no guarantee that they will follow our lead and make an effort to learn each other's names, and while Andrew does state that he will be calling everyone exclusively by name,

this gesture does not thematise the problem of reference in the way that direct discussion of pronouns can.

More fundamentally, while Andrew's pedagogy works to individuate and humanise each student, these gestures do not by themselves address ongoing historical struggles over belonging in the categories of the individual and the human. And while Andrew continues to believe that the affirmation of student identity is fundamental to teaching, we also bear the responsibility to interrogate the construction of identity categories as historical phenomena. The challenge, in the words of Beauchamp, is to 'balance care for individual identities with sustained critical analysis of identity categories themselves' (2008:32). At stake here are two contrasting forms of egalitarianism. One form strives to recognise an ever-widening scope of personhood and experience as fully human. This is the path that emancipatory movements follow, towards the admission of new entrants into the shared rights, privileges and recognitions that constitute liberal subjectivity. However, the alternative route, which has been elaborated from various theoretical perspectives but rarely emerges in historical practice, centres on the critique and diminution of the category of the human. This is the path that Marcos's pedagogy follows.⁷

Marcos has taught a combined 20 sections of first- and second-year writing courses at community college, state school and a private research university, where he is currently a doctoral candidate of English, so his students have come from various cultural, ethnic and economic backgrounds, showing a vast range of educational training and college preparedness. Marcos frames his writing classes of 18–30 students as a general introduction to public discourse, with a special focus on identity politics and social justice. On the first day of class, Marcos encourages (but does not require) his students to share their pronouns during attendance, which ordinarily takes the form of a hockey icebreaker game. But the discussion surrounding pronoun use and gender identity does not end there. Within the first couple of meetings, the class dives headfirst into the topics of feminism, men's rights activism and the representation of gender in society. Marcos teaches his first- and second-year writing courses from the perspective of Gerald Graff's and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*, which promotes empathy – or the capacity to view the world through someone else's eyes – as the most important quality of strong academic writing. With this rather provocative framing in place (we say *provocative* because, in a move that clashes with the tendencies of our

7.The following sections summarise the content and structure of Marcos's writing classes. Marcos leads his students through a series of essays and supplementary materials that help students unpack this alternate model of egalitarianism. Marcos's approach to the question of gender pronouns is clearly more suitable for humanities courses, where questions of identity, politics and social justice may be discussed at length. In classes outside of the humanities, however, where course content is information-driven and more rigidly organised, such an invested approach to the issue of gender pronouns is most likely not possible. Moreover, introducing the pronoun *it* to students as a viable option for self-identification may be unwise in this context if the instructor is not subsequently able to contextualise its use as an equalising critique of humanism. Legitimising self-objectification may be offensive to trans, non-binary and genderqueer students who have been victims of discriminating speech. For reasons both practical and ethical, then, we do not recommend implementing *it* in courses not suitable for its thorough discussion.

tribalist political culture, the students are asked to empathise with their enemies), Marcos walks the class through a civil discourse that moves first from a discussion of feminism and men's rights activism to the hot button issues surrounding trans, non-binary and other queer identities, which finally gives way to a discussion of sexuality, racial identity and – to nearly everyone's dismay – a discussion of animal rights. This final transition to the topic of animal rights is unnerving for students because many of them, up until this point in the semester, have vocalised their moral commitment to feminist, queer and anti-racist positions. As they come to find out, however, these discourses derive their moral authority from humanist presuppositions about the superior value of human life, upholding a distinction between human and animal that logically justifies the latter's objectification and mistreatment.⁸ The arc of the course leads the students to become invested in emancipatory humanist movements only to find those movements radically undermined by a discussion of animal rights that brings into question the brutal logic of humanism, upon which these emancipatory movements depend.

While class conversations are free to wander in accordance with the students' personal interests, the primary purpose in leading these discussions is to underscore how oppression has operated historically through the human or non-human divide. Using feminism as a jumping off point, Marcos shows that, from a biblical perspective that has strongly influenced nearly 2000 years of Western, patriarchal society, Adam was made in God's image as superior to Eve, who was created from Adam's rib. Indoctrinated under this theological worldview, women have assumed the role of a 'weaker vessel' for centuries, for just as man is not quite God, so too, Eve is not quite human, in a manner of speaking (1 Pt 3:7). To compound matters, Adam's first wife, Lilith, in the Talmudic tradition, was banished from the Garden of Eden for her insubordination. She is later demonised, often being depicted with wings, horns or a serpent's body, by a Rabbinic tradition that animalises the demonic. Introducing his students to various sources on the topic, Marcos suggests to the class that *animalisation* is a tool of oppression that repeats itself time and again in the theological West, reducing marginalised people to an objectified status that logically justifies their mistreatment. Among those sources is Jean-Paul Sartre, who writes in the preface to Frantz Fanon's 1961 *The Wretched of the Earth* that 'no one can rob, enslave, or kill their fellow human beings without committing a crime' because human beings – as superior creatures made in the image of God – are protected by European law (Sartre 2013). European colonisers 'establish the principle that the colonised are not fellow human beings' to justify the horrific crimes they commit against their own kind, Sartre says; making use of this human

8.The animalisation of social and political difference has been subjected to various forms of analysis. One influential thread runs from Hegel and Freud, through Fanon, into forms of feminist and postcolonial critique that see a repressed animality within the self-projected onto a racialised and sexualised other. This analysis posits a Western imperialist ideology that identifies itself with reason and universality, projecting its own repressed tendencies towards domination onto an otherness considered to be base or savage, constituted variously by women, mixed race people or colonial subjects. This internal repression, once externalised, necessitates the violent suppression of difference in the name of a civilising project. Accordingly, notions of animality become, as Kay Anderson argues, 'a crucial reference point for constructing sociospatial difference and hierarchy in Western cultures' (2000:4).

or non-human distinction, the European 'strike force ... reduce[s] the inhabitants of the annexed territory to the level of superior monkey' (Sartre 2013). Marcos presents his class with passages like this and others for close analysis and reflection. Among such passages, he will also share longer excerpts, like the following statement by Frieda Ekotto:

Fanon writes clearly in *The Wretched of the Earth* that for the colonist, the boundary between native and colonist must be actively maintained for the colonist to justify his presence within the colonies. The 'native' must be seen as animal – as savage – to justify the most important colonial fantasy: the dream of *civilizing* the savage as the 'white man's burden'. But for that burden to even exist, the native must necessarily be *made* to be savage – even if he or she may hardly be such to begin with. The mythology of savagery, of the inhumanity of the 'native', is at the heart of the colonial fantasy. Without it, the fantasy falls apart. ... the book attempts to enter – and to change – the colonial fantasy of the black 'savage' and white European hero through what Freud considered the most important element of human psychology: *sex*, the suppression of which is key to becoming a subject within modern European society. Freud even likened the sexual drive to the 'Dark Continent' – the disturbing *id* which must be contained by the ego in order for the subject to enter into society and to perform his or her proper role. The containment of this sexual drive – also known as repression – is central to the building of the individual, of turning the individual from an uncontained, uncontrolled animal into a civilized subject. (Ekotto 2011:84–85)

The colonial fantasy, like other instances of social oppression, is legitimised, according to Fanon, through an animalisation of the oppressed. Following Freud, Fanon argues that Europeans attain their subjectivity through the censorship and repression of their animal natures, that subjectivity is itself an internal cognitive fracture that divides the human from the non-human, and the ego from the *id*.⁹ Marcos uses long passages like this in combination with essays from *The Norton Reader* (e.g. Orwell 2017) to help guide his students through conversations about this essential – *and troubling* – component of the humanist project: animalisation.

We see animalisation enacted again; Marcos will point out to his students as they transition to a discussion of race, in the form of American chattel slavery, which reduced enslaved Africans to the status of livestock to be carted around, branded, exploited for labour and brutalised. Ironically, it was southern slaveholders in search of more congressional representation who, in 1787, convinced the north to include enslaved persons in the population census as three-fifth of a person. Being only 60% human, however, the enslaved population – which was widely considered evolutionarily closer to apes than to *homo sapiens* – was not granted the legal protection and individual rights of U.S. citizens. Native Americans too were reduced to an animalised status by their colonisers. The writers of the Declaration of Independence, in

⁹Significantly, Freud's English translator, James Strachey, chose to replace the German terms used by Freud, *Ich* and *es*, with the Latin terms *Ego* and *id*, rather than directly translate those terms into English as *I* and *it*. Why Strachey made the editorial decision to replace a direct English translation with quasi-scientific Latin terminology is unknown, but the Freudian originals – *I* and *it* – are the more revealing, in our assessment, because they accurately frame subjecthood as the separation and repression of our animal natures.

fact, referred to Native Americans as 'Savages', a word that refers to wild, untamed animals, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. By highlighting these and similar examples of animalisation, Marcos shows his students that, historically speaking, violent oppressors have relied on the human or non-human distinction to logically justify their mistreatment of marginalised people groups.

As an intelligible concept, 'human identity' is a double-edged sword. Without it, there is no basis for equal rights, as one must first standardise human identity to conceptualise a universal measure of social justice and what it means to be treated *equally*. With it, however, there is no escaping social inequality, as our divisive representations of human identity – and, concomitantly, of equal rights – necessarily devalue by excluding anything that is not properly human. In other words, because humanity can only ever be defined in contradistinction to the non-human, its very representation dehumanises the other as less valuable. By its very nature, then, equality breeds inequality, as *the human* provides the basis for dehumanisation in this zero sum game. To confront his students with this perturbing conundrum, Marcos carefully walks them through *post*-humanist arguments of the last two decades that seek out a new form of justice beyond our violent representations of humanity, a form of justice that neutralises social hierarchies by lowering humanity from its exalted station as a superior being. It is in this context, and under the theoretical framework outlined in this section, that Marcos broaches the topic of gender identity and personal pronouns with his students, exploring, among other things, how women have been dehumanised in a male-privileged society, how lesbian and gay people have been dehumanised by heteronormative society and how transgender and non-binary people have faced dehumanisation under the militant strictures of traditional gender binarism. But, as they enter the final discussion of animal rights, exploring the critique of humanism advanced by select *post*-humanist philosophers, students are confronted with a deeper problem, namely, that granting someone their pronoun preferences affirms their personhood by first establishing their *humanity* – which is to say, their inherent superiority to non-human beings.

Considering social justice in light of post-humanism

As an academic discipline, *post*-humanism usually appears as a cybernetic critique of the essentialist, anthropocentric view of human identity espoused over centuries of liberal humanism. Through their extensive analyses of modern technological science, Donna Haraway, Ihab Hassan, Katherine Hayles and others have made use of cyborg figurations to deconstruct the traditional boundary lines between the human, the animal and the technological. In contemporary scholarly discussions, *post*-humanism tends to focus on dismantling the boundaries between human and machine intelligence, reimagining cognition in the digital age as an interaction between A.I. and cyborg. According to Haraway, however, who is often accredited with spearheading

the post-humanist movement in her landmark essay 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', the

[C]yborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed. Far from signaling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling. Bestiality has a new status in this cycle of marriage exchange. (2004:10)

So, while many articulations of the post-human have focused on technological advancements in cyborg identity, particularly as they pertain to machine intelligence, other articulations have taken the form of animal studies and ecocriticism. The latter of these two schools of thought questions the boundaries between the living and non-living, while the former questions the boundaries between human and non-human life. We recognise that the discipline has taken off in multiple directions, but we maintain that, at its heart, post-humanism remains a critique of anthropocentrism, the deconstruction of human identity and its supremacy over non-human forms of existence. For pedagogical purposes, Marcos focuses this critique through the lens of animalisation, even though a thorough account of post-humanism exceeds this somewhat limited scope. We find that students are already resistant to a deconstruction of the human or animal divide, so including a cybernetic critique of human intelligence as part of the classroom discourse seems like an impractical step too far, especially because this theoretical angle does not help to advance our study of social oppression. For this reason, we present the cyborg, with Haraway, as a transgression of the human or non-human distinction and choose to focus our study on figures whose core purpose is the deconstruction of anthropocentrism. To this end, we look at sustained efforts by famed philosophers Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben to elaborate the organisational impact of *humanity* on our world and the violent political endeavours to which this concept has given birth.

In his 2008 lecture *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida challenges a tradition of humanistic philosophers from Descartes to Kant to Heidegger and even to reputed anti-humanists like Jacques Lacan and Emmanuel Levin as, both of whom maintained a clear separation between humanity and the 'wholly other they call "animal"' (2008:14). Derrida objects to the word *animal* partly because it subsumes a vast array of species under a single term that papers over their many significant differences. From the earthworm to the house cat to the rhinoceros to the deep ocean squid, what matters most to this long tradition of anthropocentric philosophers is that animal life is fundamentally non-human; in other words, its *inhumanity* is the animal's defining characteristic. Moreover, because animals lack a soul, in Descartes's view, he will argue that they are comparable to machines, so animal behaviour that appears to exhibit rationality or emotion is really just a chemical reaction to physical stimuli. This objectifying mechanisation of the animal stands in direct contrast with our own species' humanisation under the Cartesian tradition, which attributes to mankind the autobiographical capacity to tell its own story

through language. 'The animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other', Derrida writes (2008:23). Or, as the political philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, says, '*man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human*' (2004:26). What distinguishes mankind from the rest of the animal kingdom, for these philosophers, is not his rationality, his emotional intelligence, or his use of language, as even popular society believes to this day, but the fact that man thinks of himself as a superior form of life. Very simply, the word *animal* designates inferior life; the word *human* or, alternatively – and especially when viewed from a feminist perspective – the word *man* designates superior life. Because of this, political violence naturally emerges wherever the human or non-human distinction is instituted. For Derrida as for Agamben, one cannot conceive of human identity – which depends on its structural opposites for meaning – without instituting violence against non-human forms of existence.

Like other post-humanists, Derrida and Agamben question the superior station afforded to man by theological and secular humanism, both of which have contributed to the inhumane treatment and mass genocide of so-called inferior beings – the non-humans, or *animals*, that have been categorised as such to justify humanity's unconscionable use of them. We quote the following passage from Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* at length because it underscores for a society indoctrinated under the human or non-human divide the meticulously organised and infinitely cruel nature of animal agriculture. Nothing that Derrida says in the passage is exaggerated, but its length and excess should help break through the anthropocentric blinders of an audience that ordinarily fails to see just how violent the industry actually is:

It is all too evident that in the course of the last two centuries these traditional forms of treatment of the animal have been turned upside down ... by means of farming and regimentalization at a demographic level unknown in the past, by means of genetic experimentation, the industrialization of what can be called the production for consumption of animal meat, artificial insemination on a massive scale, more and more audacious manipulations of the genome, the reduction of the animal not only to production and overactive reproduction (hormones, genetic crossbreeding, cloning, etc.) of meat for consumption, but also of all sorts of other end products, and all of that in the service of a certain being and the putative human well-being of man. ... It gets more complicated: the annihilation of certain species is indeed in process, but it is occurring through the organization and exploitation of an artificial, infernal, virtually interminable survival, in conditions that previous generations would have judged monstrous, outside of every presumed norm of a life proper to animals that are thus exterminated by means of their continued existence or even their overpopulation. As if, for example, instead of throwing a people into ovens and gas chambers (let's say Nazi) doctors and geneticists had decided to organize the overproduction and overgeneration of Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals by means of artificial insemination, so that, being continually more numerous and better fed, they could be destined in always increasing

numbers for the same hell, that of the imposition of experimentation, or extermination by gas or by fire. (Derrida 2008:25, 26)

The psychological torture and physical violence forced upon the animalised creatures of our world is because of a hierarchy of power that privileges human identity. Cows, pigs and other livestock are farmed for their meat because humans enjoy eating them, or, rather, as it is often said to justify the brutal practices of the meat industry, humans *need* to consume animals for their protein and nutritional value. Contemporary society is outraged to hear that, in the last century, black people, Romani people and orphans were subjected to experimental medical testing, but, to this day, monkeys, rodents, amphibians, birds, cats and dogs are subjected to torturous commercial testing and virtually no one bats an eye. The problem here is not simply that animals have been objectified as less intelligent, unfeeling beings, but that animals have been objectified in the service of humanity, a *superior* being whose appetite, comfort and fashion preferences matter more than the animal itself. Before orphans, black people and Roma were legally granted their innate rights as equal members of society, they were dehumanised in the service of humanity just as other animals are dehumanised today. The representational boundaries of human identity shift in the service of its political aims. The human or non-human divide is a moving barrier that animalises the oppressed to the benefit of the powerful.

To combat this violence, Derrida does not raise up animals to the superior status of humans by attributing to animal life the same characteristics that afford humanity its privileged status, as animal rights activists are accustomed to doing. As before, the problem is not that animals lack the same rights that we have; the problem is that human beings have been given any rights at all. There is a tendency in the Judeo-Christian tradition to think of 'human rights' as a God-given reality – as moral protection only afforded to those who bear the divine image – when all such religious narratives must be taken on faith. The truth is that human beings, just like any other creature, do not have the inherent right to anything. One would think that secular society would expunge itself of this theological myth, evacuate human identity of the *imago Dei* and demote this supercilious beast to a lower station, but human rights are nevertheless thought of as *inherent* by secular society, even though it lacks logical justification under a secular worldview. Lagging under the weight of its long theological heritage, the secular tradition continues to think of humanity as sacred – that is, as *set apart* by God – despite its being just one among countless other species to naturally evolve on our planet. Human rights are something we created on our own behalf in order to justify our self-importance. Because these rights are unique to humanity, they come at the expense of the non-human. This is why, following in the philosophical tradition of Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze, Agamben advocates, what he calls, a deactivation of the *anthropological machine* – by which he means an erasure of the hierarchical distinctions between man and animal, superior

and inferior, that provide the basis for human rights. Agamben seeks to remove human identity from the picture entirely to bring an end to the power hierarchies that mar our existence. To advocate on behalf of animal rights would only exacerbate the problem; it would mean raising up animals to the sacred status that affords human life its moral protection in the popular imagination when, to effectively combat this violence, we should instead rid ourselves of the hierarchy altogether.

We can observe this tension between the anthropological machine that elevates humanity at the expense of animals and emancipatory struggles for human rights and whenever animal rights are rhetorically coordinated with human rights. The organisation People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has frequently been criticised for comparing the speciesism that justifies the slaughter of animals for human consumption to historical forms of human oppression. In 2018, the organisation's Twitter account proposed a series of alternatives to idioms like 'beat a dead horse', suggesting:

[/]Just as it became unacceptable to use racist, homophobic, or ableist language, phrases that trivialize cruelty to animals will vanish as more people begin to appreciate animals for who they are and start 'bringing home the bagels' instead of the bacon.

This prediction was mocked both within and outside of the vegan community, and CNN reported that the 'comparison with racism and homophobia was met with anger on Twitter, with some arguing that PETA was trivialising race and gender issues' (John 2018)—notably ignoring the tweet's reference to ableism. It is true that PETA's tweet is disturbing on a number of levels. It can be read to imply a linear vision of progress in which historical forms of majoritarian violence have disappeared, consigned to an antiquated past. In the process, it seems to assume that the human communities it references are no longer engaged in massive political struggles for recognition and equality. To the contrary, the link between dehumanising rhetoric and violence is, of course, a central problem of contemporary politics across the globe.

Moreover, the tweet's analogy between animals and marginalised human communities could be read to give solace to the notion that people of colour, queer people and people with disabilities are less than human. Twitter user Nicky Clark attempted to parse this issue in response to PETA, writing (Clark 2018):

It's a strong enough statement to say don't be cruel to animals @peta I'm not saying people are more important than animals, but you appear to be saying that some people are the same as animals, and that's what racists, homophobes and ableists say.

Clark proposes a distinction between, on the one hand, claims about the *identity* of humans and animals, and on the other, claims about the *relative importance* of humans and animals. Yet, the precise nature of this distinction is difficult to specify. As we have demonstrated, the category of the

human is the vehicle through which rights are distributed, and the human is, in turn, defined against the category of the animal. Within this framework, there is no secure way towards valuing animals *like* humans without defining animals *as* humans.

This problem becomes especially acute in PETA's recent letter urging a publisher of children's books to change the pronouns it uses in reference to animals from 'the inanimate "it" to 'he' or 'she'. Here, PETA claims that the pronoun *it* classes animals as 'inanimate objects rather than living beings with feelings' (2018). Using the rhetoric of 'inclusive language', PETA thus argues that only the personal pronouns *he* and *she* can properly recognise the nature of animals as sentient beings. This is a pragmatic move: while the letter does not claim that animals are human, it perceives that if animals are to be recognised as 'living beings with feelings', they must be *humanised*. And while PETA knows that many species cannot be divided into stable binary sexes, it understands that the construction of the human, along with the rights that this construction entails, depends upon the naturalised gender binary exhibited in conventional human pronouns. While the tweet comparing speciesism to racism, homophobia and ableism tries to absorb animal rights into these human political struggles, this letter affirms the binary gender ideology that threatens non-cisgendered people by advocating the use of *he* and *she*.

One conclusion here might be that PETA seems to find it difficult to formulate arguments without animalising marginalised human communities. But these incidents also suggest how the spectre of animal rights has continually haunted the expansion of human rights. Emancipatory movements towards the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage and gay marriage have each faced the same form of reactionary concern trolling: 'What about the animals? Are you going to include the animals in your newly expansive vision of humanity?' While this kind of questioning intends merely to deride, it does suggest the way that the subjugation of animals – and in turn, the concept of the human on which this subjugation depends – presents a radical limit to any desire for the elimination of human violence.

Stepping back into the classroom

By the time students in Marcos's writing class reach the assigned readings on animal rights the majority of them seem to have been persuaded of the view that humanity is an inherently violent concept. They agree – women, LGBTQIA, people of colour, and other oppressed communities have been animalised to justify their oppression over the centuries. But, as the ensuing discussion of animal rights activism reveals, the students are persuaded by these claims largely because they already believe that women, LGBTQIA and people of colour are in fact human. *Actual* animals, they explain to their instructor – as in real, biological animals – are not human and never can be. Their animalisation is not a violent political act, but rather an accurate description of their

animal nature. This is why, for many of them, the pronouns *he*, *she*, *they* and *it* are perfectly acceptable when applied to an animal, but, when applied to a person, the pronoun *it* is dehumanising and dangerous, especially if that person's identity has already been subjected to dehumanisation in their lifetime.¹⁰

Marcos's students, like many critics of human objectification, often begin with the intuitive assumption that humans are ontologically distinct from non-humans and should therefore be treated differently. Without this ontological distinction, objectification would not be intelligible as an ethical problem because the difference between people and animals or objects would have no particular significance.¹¹ Objectification is only a problem when applied to human beings, whose rights afford them a superior station to lifeless objects and objectified life. Under this paradigm, the pronoun *it* sets its referent at the furthest possible distance from the speaker, who thereby emerges as a human subject in the very act of objectifying the referent. In this respect, the pronoun *it* objectifies the other by humanising the self. The real issue with objectification is that it aggrandises personhood and, in the process of doing so, authorises the self to make use of non-humans. When objectification works to distance the self from the other by humanising the self at the other's expense, it should be understood as a form of ideational violence that may, in turn, licence physical violence at the hands of humanity.

Accordingly, calling animals *it* – or, more accurately and more to the point, refusing to apply *it* to ourselves – upholds the brutal logic of humanism, a system of oppression that produces mass genocide, horrific torture and the objectifying utilisation of our fellow creatures. Even after buying into the idea that humanism only ever exists at the expense of the non-human, these students, like the vast majority of our society, participate in verbal practices that PETA and other animal rights organisations regard as horrifying, immoral crimes against the dehumanised. But animals are *actually* non-human the students repeat, to which Marcos replies (Holmberg 2019):

Okay, but remember that, much like you, the racist slaveholder *actually* believed that enslaved Black people were less than human, the British colonist *actually* believed that Native Americans were barbarous animals, and the homophobe *actually* believes that gay sex is a violation and betrayal of natural human behaviour.

10. To this point, studies in the field of Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Rudman & Mescher 2012) have shown that trans women, and especially trans-women of colour, are more likely to be subject to sexual objectification than cisgendered women, often in concert with racial fetishisation (Flores et al. 2018). Bonnie Moradi (2013) has argued that an integrated, 'pantheoretical' framework is required in order to analyse experiences of objectification for people who occupy overlapping marginal identities, since marginalised identities contribute to both the likelihood and the impact of dehumanisation. Indeed, for gender nonconforming persons, objectification can have life-or-death consequences, as trans persons, and especially trans persons of mixed race, are much more likely to be victims of homicide than cisgendered individuals (Dinno 2017).

11. Martha Nussbaum makes this point in the process of defending certain forms of objectification (including certain forms of sexual objectification) as benign or even healthy under specific conditions, where there is a mutual respect among the parties involved and the mutual assumption of risk. But Nussbaum accepts the ontological distinction between human and non-human, and with it, she accepts the moral intuition that leads us to evaluate the treatment of humans according to special criteria that do not apply to the treatment of non-humans.

This is precisely how power operates. Humanity believes itself to be superior to the non-human, so it affords itself inherent rights at the animal's expense. The history of oppression is marked by a series of parallel binaries: self or other, man or woman, white or non-white, straight or gay, cisgender or transgender and gender nonconforming, human or animal, subject or object, they or it. The final pair on this list – *they* and *it* – represents opposite ends of a power hierarchy enacted everyday by the pronouns we use.

This prospect got us thinking more about pronoun use in the classroom. We both encourage the use of *they* not only because it makes room for gender fluid, gender neutral and non-binary modes of identifying, but also because its plural form challenges us to think about identity in new and unconventional ways. While there is a journalistic discourse centred on the grammatical phenomenon of the 'singular *they*', we should not take the pronoun's singularity for granted because the numerical ambiguity can bring to mind important questions of identity: are we, in fact, singular and autonomous, or are we multiple, shifting and self-divided – an identity or set of identities in process? The conceptual challenge of thinking persons as *they* thus converges with the work of thinkers like Gilles Deleuze, who sought to displace the traditional ontology of the one and the many (singular or plural) with an interwoven terrain of *multiplicities*, interlocking sets of plural entities that may enter into combination, but never reify into an ontological unity or singular state.

They captures this multiplicity for gender fluid people who may take on practices, actions and expressions disembedded from their conventional gender contexts. Igi Moon describes this process as 'trans-emotionality', a sense of a fluxing relationship to bodily expression that is not the marker of a specific gender identity (e.g. 'non-binary'), but instead may be experienced 'in any body at any time' (2018). In trans-emotionality, the precise significations of conventionally gendered moods, feelings, and expressions become 'disoriented' from their gendered meanings, and are no longer easily definable as masculine or feminine. Gender here is no longer an originary ontological phenomenon, but rather an ephemeral happenstance that emerges reflexively out of sensitive practice.

Conclusion: Fostering inclusivity through the critique of anthropocentrism

Our teaching needs to affirm our students' attachments to their own understanding and language of identity. This is not simply a pedagogical matter: a gender-inclusive language is essential to those whose humanity is, at this very moment, subject to both symbolic and physical assault. But we should also seek to understand how our identifications – even at their most expansive and sensitive – rely on the power of exclusion. In this context, the indefinite nature of *they* becomes its most significant feature. *They* is reticent not only with respect to gender and number, but also towards a whole range of binary

distinctions that structure our thought. Crucially, *they* includes the plural of *it*, that boundary line between the human and the animal, with its history of objectification and violence. *It* can be read as the latent force within *they*, carrying within our fullest language of human identity the presence of the excluded animal, with the mass violence that exclusion licences. The most far-reaching consequence of the use of the pronoun *they* therefore lies in its potential to objectify, and in so doing, to call the human into question. At the point where *they* verges on *it*, its critique of discursive power proves its sharpest. Rather than raise people up to an 'equal' status, where they become superior to the non-human others in the world, what if each of us were to step down to the level of animality, nature and objecthood, to a plane of total immanence where literally everyone is equal because no one claims the right to transcendental worth, where literally no one has 'rights' because everyone has surrendered their claims to superiority and exceptional value.

The reimagining of gendered language advanced by non-binary communities has consequences for our understanding of the human. As we teach our students the histories of struggle that have expanded the meaning of humanity, it is worth considering how our language continues to construct who we are, and who (or what) is not counted among us. We can ask our students to consider what it might mean to move not only towards an expansion of humanity, which remains an urgent project, but also to wonder at the other egalitarianism: what would it mean to follow *they* all the way to *it*, and find our place there, in that most undistinguished and indefinite pronoun? What ethical possibilities emerge at the point where we are forced to consider ourselves stripped of the distinctions that licence our domination? Pursuing these questions with our students as they pertain to pronoun use in the classroom may be our next step towards constructing a more inclusive society.

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