



COMMENTARY

The Moderns' Amnesia in Two Registers

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"The West is living in a triumphant euphoria." So wrote the celebrated late Uruguayan writer, Eduardo Galeano.¹ This euphoria, he explains, is blind to its foundations: past and ongoing violence, tragedy, poverty, and suffering—inequity that is rife not only elsewhere, but also within the West's richest countries. In an announcement of Galeano's death in the *Buenos Aires Herald*, he is quoted as having described himself as "obsessed with remembering" in a "land condemned to amnesia."² Amnesia. If there is a singular trait to describe *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*, this is it. Amnesia. In two registers. First, amnesia about the deeply uneven and violent nature of modernization. And second, about the struggles that have underpinned every effort to alleviate inequality and violence.

(1)

We start with Galeano because he died two days before the manifesto was released. The disjuncture between Galeano's vision of modernization and that put forward in the manifesto is striking, to say the least. It is hard (impossible?) to reconcile these two visions; it is as if they were written on different planets. For Galeano, underdevelopment is "an integral part of the history of world capitalism's development. [Latin America's] defeat was always implicit in the victory of others; our wealth has always generated our poverty by nourishing the prosperity of others—the empires and their native overseers."³ In contrast, the ecomodernist manifesto

¹ Eduardo Galeano, "To Be Like Them," in *The Post-Development Reader*, ed. Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree (London: Zed Books, 1997), 222.

² *Buenos Aires Herald*, "Writer Eduardo Galeano Dies," (15 April 2015), accessed 6 October 2015, <http://www.buenosairesherald.com/article/186654/writer-eduardo-galeano-dies-at-74>.

³ Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973 [1997]), 2.

articulates a vision characterized by amnesia about precisely the kind of past and present struggles that Galeano was “obsessed with remembering.” As memory challenged as goldfish, the ecomodernists offer the promise of “universal human development, freedom, and more nature through continued technological and social modernization.”⁴ Triumphant euphoria, indeed.

Modernity, which includes liberal ideas of universal justice, is built on displaced and dead bodies. Slavery, for example, is essential to the history of modern capitalism, to the emergence of mass consumption enjoyed by the privileged few.⁵ However, the manifesto dismisses this history while masking the unequal distribution of modernity’s benefits. For instance, its authors alternate between abstract invocations of “humanity” and specific identifications of places or communities, thereby revealing how their specific vision—poised to benefit a few—masquerades as a neutral plan to benefit the many. Thus, the authors glory in how “humanity has flourished over the past two centuries,”⁶ while worrying that “human flourishing has taken a serious toll on natural, nonhuman environments and wildlife.”⁷ At the scale of humanity, the beneficiaries and drivers of this “toll” disappear. Yet, any indicators of human flourishing, even those mentioned in the manifesto (life expectancy, resilience to infectious disease, disasters), are distributed in deeply uneven ways, not only between nations but also along class, race, and gender lines.⁸ Similarly, the burden of responsibility for the “toll” on the environment is not shared equally. As any undergraduate student of environmental studies or geography learns, certain countries disproportionately drive environmental change—historically and today—often with severe social justice implications. For example, climate scientist Damon Matthews calculates that the US owes the world \$4 trillion in “carbon debt” —the price of all the carbon it emitted beyond baseline levels since 1990.⁹

⁴ Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, “An Ecomodernist Manifesto: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Birth of Ecomodernism,” *The Breakthrough Institute*, accessed 5 October 2015, <http://thebreakthrough.org/index.php/voices/michael-shellenberger-and-ted-nordhaus/an>.

⁵ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (Oakland: Autonomedia, 2004); Caroline Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

⁶ John Asafu-Adjaye, Linus Blomqvist, Stewart Brand, Barry Brook, Ruth de Fries, Erle Ellis, Christopher Foreman, David Keith, Martin Lewis, Mark Lynas, Ted Nordhaus, Roger Pielke Jr., Rachel Pritzker, Joyashree Roy, Mark Sagoff, Michael Shellenberger, Robert Stone, and Peter Teague, “An Ecomodernist Manifesto,” accessed 9 October 2015, <http://www.ecomodernism.org/manifesto>, 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸ Galeano, “To Be Like Them”; Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Ruth Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, *Black Wealth, White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality* (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2006).

⁹ Brian Merchant, “The US Owes the World \$4 Trillion for Trashing the Climate,” *Motherboard*, accessed 10 October 2015, <http://motherboard.vice.com/read/the-us-owes-the-world-4-trillion-for->

In the few places where the manifesto *does* achieve specificity about which humans are invoked, the examples are disturbingly racialized. For instance, New England is held up as an example of modern reforestation,¹⁰ while “people who depend on firewood and charcoal for fuel cut down and degrade forests; [and] people who eat bush meat for food hunt mammal species to local extirpation.”¹¹ No mention is made of the genocidal colonial violence that removed Native Americans from the region now known as New England, which allowed for reforestation,¹² nor do the authors mention the possibility that people who “over-rely” on firewood or bushmeat have suffered displacement from colonialism as well as contemporary corporate land grabbing for intensive agricultural production.¹³

Galeano’s work demonstrates that modernization offers the pretence of universalism—all will benefit—while his historical and geographical readings show how it tends to serve elite, male, white, colonial and bourgeois interests. Tends. This word matters, because we do not want to fall into amnesia either, by pretending that nothing good has come out of modernity’s particular cultural-political-economic configuration. There is plenty that is good, but it is primarily for some. And gains that have been made to more fully distribute these benefits have been achieved through struggle.

(2)

The ecomodernists are quick to thank modernization (twice) for liberating “women from traditional gender roles”¹⁴ and “chattel status.”¹⁵ We are grateful every day that we are not someone’s property, but we do not thank modernity for this. Instead, we are thankful for the incredibly hard battles fought by women (and their allies) to be recognized as persons rather than property. Moreover, we cannot forget the reminders offered by Silvia Federici, Arlie Russell Hochschild, and other feminists, showing us that capitalism, modernity’s partner in crime (although the eco-mods deny this on page 28), has involved a deepening of patriarchal control over women’s bodies and reproductive labours, in ways both spectacular (i.e. witch hunts) and mundane (i.e. unpaid housework).¹⁶ Similarly, when the manifesto credits modernization with liberating “ever more people from lives of poverty and hard agricultural labor ... children and ethnic minorities from oppression, and societies from capricious and arbitrary governance,”¹⁷ we cannot help but see continued and even deepened poverty, oppression, and arbitrary governance alongside vibrant and passionate struggles to remove the

trashing-the-climate; Damon Matthews, “Quantifying Historical Carbon and Climate Debts Among Nations,” *Nature Climate Change* (2015).

¹⁰ Asafu-Adjaye *et al.*, “An Ecomodernist Manifesto,” 13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹² Denevan, William M. “The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (1992): 369-85.

¹³ Neumann, Roderick P., *Imposing Wilderness: Struggles Over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Joshua Linder, “African Primate Diversity Threatened by “New Wave” of Industrial Oil Palm Expansion,” *African Primates* (2013): 25-38.

¹⁴ Asafu-Adjaye *et al.*, “An Ecomodernist Manifesto,” 8

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁶ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*; Arlie Hochschild with Anne Machung, *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2012).

¹⁷ Asafu-Adjaye *et al.*, “An Ecomodernist Manifesto,” 28-29.

chains of these conditions.¹⁸ The manifesto's authors forget that justice and liberation were never intended for all.¹⁹ And the kind of fairer and more just future for which Galeano fought, for which others fight, involves precisely that: a fight. A struggle. Any liberation is hard won, eked from the contradictions embodied in universalist claims and particularist implementations.

Why might ecomodernists be "condemned to amnesia," to borrow Galeano's phrasing? In part, we suggest, it is because amnesia makes a brighter future look so easy. The manifesto's vision of the future does not ask anything from anyone in the global north, where moderns appear to be at the right end of the teleological path to modernization, having already reached the right stage. The ease of the manifesto, its promise of a smooth path to universal flourishing, is the ease of privilege, of preserving the status quo, of speaking a common sense that seems to have no history or social location. Sara Ahmed compares the ease of privilege to "an old garment," writing, "if it has acquired the shape of those who tend to wear it, then it becomes easier to wear if you have that shape. You do not have to pass because you do not have to think about it, you just pull it on; you just move on. Easier to wear: this is why I think of *privilege as an energy saving device*. Less effort is required to be or to do."²⁰ From this perspective, easiness should be grounds for suspicion. Easy, according to whom? When has justice ever been easy? And what ways of living can just "move on" or fit like an old garment into this easy future? The ecomodernist manifesto claims to apply universally to all, but it is actually a particular and partial vision, offered from a specific place and time (in this case, from an institutional base in Silicon Valley, California), and poised to benefit the same groups who are already at ease in the status quo. The authors of the manifesto actively pursue a future that would intensify the project Galeano and many, many others resist. In their pursuit of a kind of Enlightenment human on steroids—wanting to achieve that final, pure transcendence of messy, pesky nature—ecomodernists are propelling the same old patterns into the future.

¹⁸ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ed., *Another Production is Possible: Beyond the Capitalist Canon* (New York: Verso, 2006); Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Pub, 2011); Makere Stewart-Harawira, *The New Imperial Order: Indigenous Responses to Globalization* (New York: Zed Books, 2005).

¹⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993); Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981); Jaimes, M. Annette, ed., *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992).

²⁰ Sara Ahmed, "Some Striking Feature: Whiteness and Institutional Passing," Feminist Killjoys Blog, accessed 5 October 2015, <http://feministkilljoys.com/2015/06/14/some-striking-feature-whiteness-and-institutional-passing/>.

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