Beautiful Creatures for Adventures in a Vulnerable World

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Asking friends that have inspired my thoughts and practices to comment on the Manifesto was both troubling and exciting. Troubling because the Manifesto is a creature that is born from a very specific and place-based experiment, with its own set of questions, expectations, and limitations. Who could understand the tender care that the creature needs? Who could connect with the messy although life-enabling compromises that its conceivers had to commit to among each other to see it stumbling into this world? Opening up for scrutiny such a fragile and loved achievement, ungraspable for those that did not attend its earthly birth, was charged with fears and anxieties. And with excitement as well, because asking people from different geographies and inheriting from different intellectual sensibilities to bear witness to this flourishing, with all its vulnerabilities, was a way of making kin. Once friends and conspirators were asked to intertwine their own worlds with the energies and proclivities of the Manifesto, once its existence interconnected to a larger web of histories, ideas, and relations, past, present, and future, it could never be anymore “our” creature. It becomes a lifeway and a community, a potentiality and generative instantiation of multiplying and expanding phyla. And this is thrilling.

The generosity of Marisol de la Cadena, Lesley Green, Timothy Neale, and Jan Zalasiewicz, accepting readily to embark on the community work convoked by the Manifesto, is beyond words. And not just because they spent time and energy writing insightful comments, but also—and most important—because they allowed the Manifesto into their own questions and problems. They rehearsed a mode of attention that critiques by making companionship, that recognizes frictions without trying to flatten them out, that invokes rigor and solidarity in equal terms.

I don’t think my task in this response is to react to the commentators’ insights into the Manifesto. How could I, now that this beautiful creature is theirs as well? I prefer to
highlight some common threads that de la Cadena, Green, Neale, and Zalasiewicz have raised to help think about the ethico-political capacities (and limitations) of the Manifesto, both in Chile and elsewhere. Their comments point at important present absences in the Manifesto, or things that are there but not quite, that should be acknowledged. But before I do that, I would like to give a few words on the “complex I”—following the call made by de la Cadena in her comments—that figures as the protagonist of this response, and on the situation out of which the Manifesto was unearthed, and without which this creature is unthinkable.

While I write this response, the “I” poorly represents the collective effort behind the Manifesto. To replace it by “we” wouldn’t solve the problem either. It is me that is writing this response, but I’m not alone; it is I and not an abstract “we” who takes responsibility for the words in this text, while at the same time I cannot think the “me” in the Manifesto without the “we” that empowered it. “I” and “we” are different, but come alongside. Hence I cannot start but by honoring the people involved in this Manifesto: their names should be declaimed, beginning with Cristián Simonetti, a fundamental force behind the Manifesto. And also Catalina Bauer, Catalina Correa, Felipe Cortez, Martín Fonck, Laura Gallardo, Gabriel González, Román Guridi, Claudio Latorre, Caterine Luco, Sergio Navarrete, Eric Pommier, Sebastián Riffo, Bábara Saavedra, and Carolina Sandoval. The I is the We is the I.

It is also important to honor the specific conditions—material and political—under which the Manifesto was brought to life, for the good or the bad.

While the Manifesto might be seen as the protagonist of this dramaturgy, it was the gathering as an experimental situation for thinking collectively about the Anthropocene in Chile that is really at stake. This gathering took place in Las Cruces, in front of the Pacific Ocean, 120 kilometers away from our daily routines back in Santiago, during one and a half days. The coordination of twelve scholars who had to block thirty-six hours from their schedules was itself a significant complication. More challenging, however, was to tinker with an intellectual atmosphere attentive not just to the object at hand (the Anthropocene in Chile) but also to the multiple and relational outsides at play in our discussions. We had agreed on the terms of our conversation—Chile, Anthropocene, Earth, human, future, politics, and relevance—but we inhabited them differently. How to allow these equivocations to breathe and expand while also creating a working commonality? To start with, the experiment was methodologically designed to find problems, not solutions, and to rehearse a nonhierarchical space for collective thinking. We would ask natural scientists to take carefully the critical parsimony of social scientists and humanities scholars, and the latter to engage in and with the matters and questions of the former—and “scientists” of whichever kin to connect with the speculative register of the arts.

1. Latimer, “Being Alongside.”
The method of choice was the writing of a manifesto. As Timothy Neale indicates in his commentary, the figure of the manifesto has strong political resonances in our Western-modern episteme. We’ve had many, from the Communist Manifesto to Breton’s Surrealist Manifesto and the latest Eco-Modernist Manifesto, and as a genre they are marked by at least one important gesture: they declare an intention, and urgently. Manifestos do not ponder, they assert; they don’t ask, they reclaim; they don’t go for the nuances, they paint in broad brushstrokes. Manifestos are noisy and always in a rush, and hence they simplify and cut apart. But by the same token they disturb and interrupt, they provoke and invoke; they look for impact and change, and thus force readers into a position. Manifestos are political technologies.

The manifesto allowed for the syncopated rhythm—a regular flow out of disturbances and interruptions—that was required to find the many halfways in which we had to meet. It was a way of thinking the Anthropocene as a policy issue without succumbing to technocracy; of calling for action without deserting critique; of doing intellectual work not just for intellectuals. And very important, of doing collective thinking politically, something that we were all looking for. In posttransitional Chile, where the trauma of expression still looms in an academia afraid of corroding positive science with politics, the exercise of entwining science and ethics was both necessary and, at least for me, therapeutic. We set our experiment not just to describe our present condition but also to draw a position, however partial and insufficient, about what this present implies for engaging with the future. We acknowledge the problems involved in such strong futurity. As Lesley Green reminds us in her comments, temporal linearities are one of the most powerful ways of perpetuating colonialism, something that actually the Manifesto aspires to challenge (although perhaps not robustly enough, as I’ll discuss below). The quest for a position, nevertheless, allowed for a sense of relevance that was critical for the kind of commoning that the exercise at hand required.

Now back to the comments. Taking them together, I see them as pointing at three crucial figures for engaging with what is at stake in a manifesto about our Anthropocene times, in Chile and elsewhere. And these are the figure of the state, the injunction of decolonization, and the work of difference. These three elements haunt the Manifesto, lurking around without being completely available for debate: like present absences, they delineate the Manifesto both by what it is said about them as well as by what is silenced, deferred, or assumed about their political significance. The comments, at least in my reading of them, help to front-stage these three ghostly figures.

While reading the comments, I couldn’t help thinking to what extent the debate about the state ran out of steam. After being everywhere in critical analyses in the height of the biopolitical turn, now the parlance of the state seems outdated, pointing at conversations deemed too functional or structuralist or simply too boring in some quarters of anthropology, STS, and environmental humanities. The engagement with the Anthropocene in these quarters has prioritized discussions about otherness, ontology, capitalism, nonhumaness, knowledge production, and colonialism (more about
this later). The comments, however, remind us how relevant the role of the state is if critical change is to be performed in and against the Anthropocene. Behind the call for serious interdisciplinarity made by Jan Zalasiewicz, I see the necessity of redrawing the way we teach the “Earth,” its extrahuman temporalities and our own position on a lively planet. This is not a matter of running interdisciplinary seminars or research projects, but of transforming the educational system at large, including the redesign of curricula at all teaching levels. This perhaps implies the extension of the call for a geologization of politics to education, and certainly, as Lausanne Olvitt argues, the radical reorientation of education systems toward “transformative, even transgressive, learning processes that are relational, humble, interdisciplinary, multi-perspectival, systemic, reality-congruent and contextually responsive.” How can we do that? How can we render our questions, fears, and propositions about the Anthropocene relevant for transforming the educational and research systems? And more amply, how to entice the commitment of the state to collective proposals such as this one? Timothy Neale summons us to be more attentive in our critical engagement with the Anthropocene to the “language and problems of institutions and government.” I second his call, and I wonder whether other manifestos, other experiments in collective thinking, should engage head-on with the complex but urgent task of undoing the Anthropocene with the state.

But of course thinking with the state is not enough. Maybe what is required is another notion of the state. Insofar as the modern state, as Marisol de la Cadena reminds us in her comments, is a function of the distance between man and nature, distance whose geography matches that of race—and which the state in the name of reason and progress is obliged to reduce—the question of the state is also the question of the other ghostly figure that is not fully absent, yet not fully present, in the Manifesto: coloniality.

It seems to me that the comments raise a particularly relevant issue for thinking the capacity (and limitations) of the Manifesto to address the entwinements between coloniality and the Anthropocene, namely the question about what kind of knowledge we need for and against the Anthropocene, and what ontological constellations are at play in the Manifesto’s take on this. Here I want to start from where the Manifesto stops, and that is tolerance: the acknowledgement of multiple ancestral, Indigenous, or otherwise local knowledge practices—and the need, expressed throughout the Manifesto, of validating them for the flourishing of decolonial sensibilities and interventions against the Anthropocene. The commentaries, however, help by rendering visible questions of (de)coloniality that are not exhausted by the urgent yet insufficient gesture toward epistemological conviviality. I take this cue from Lesley Green’s interpellation, which helped me to think about whether, together with avoiding (and denouncing) the divide between scientific and Indigenous knowledge, the Manifesto should also

2. Clark and Gunaratnam, “Earthing the Anthropos?”
scrutinize the very same terms of the divide: not just to problematize the “/” of “scientific/Indigenous knowledge,” but the fact that by retaining untouched the existence of these two figures, irrespective of how hard they call for a substantial encounter between them, the Manifesto is unwittingly imposing in its analytics the conceptual apparatus of one of the sides, namely the modern-scientific.

Timothy Neale extends this equivocation further. The epistemological tolerance rehearsed by the Manifesto confronts the unsolved issue of “how those [Indigenous] knowledges can be, at once, in dialogue and sovereign.” By thinking Indigenous knowledge as always amenable for policy and intervention, that is, by imagining the encounter between science and its other in terms of 
usability, the Manifesto is neglecting the possibility of staging the encounter in the terms of the other, and hence stopping short in its attempt at decolonizing the Anthropocene. Here the Manifesto might need, as Timothy Neale suggests, to be critical of “the widespread prejudice against evidence that is not founded in either the sentiments of politically dominant groups or the calculative enumerations of modern science.”

I wonder if the concept of the “anthropo-not-seen” invoked by Marisol de la Cadena in her comments might be extended as a line of flight into/of this question. In de la Cadena’s words, the concept “signals the world-making process whereby worlds that do not make themselves through practices that separate ontologically humans (or culture) from nonhumans (or nature)—nor necessarily conceive as such the different entities in their assemblages—are both obliged into that distinction and exceed it.” I wonder if the ontological and political possibilities of this excess—the possibilities cracked open when things are allowed not to be (necessarily) this nor that but something else—applied to the encounter between science and its other, can create the conditions for a different analytic. For truly decolonizing knowledge in the Anthropocene, maybe, I wonder whether what the Manifesto should be pointing at is not a rendezvous of sorts between scientific and Indigenous knowledges—the “two toolboxes” approach signaled by Timothy Neale—but rather at practices able to modify what “scientific” and “native” knowledge means, practices rendering possible another this and another that by entangling, subverting, or altering the terms at stake. Practices with the power of multiplying knowledge forms, imaginations, and strategies in our vulnerable times.

And then difference. And the differences of difference. Class and gender for example. As I write this response 400,000 women take over the streets of Santiago to reclaim their sovereignty—spiritual, political, and bodily. “All women against all violences,” reads a large banner, and I can’t help the sublimation, in my mind, of those violences to the “era of man.” But then how are these differences deployed (differently) in the unfurling of and resistance against the Anthropocene in Chile? And how does the Manifesto engage with these differences and the differential labor of multiplying divergences? These questions are not posed directly by commentators but resonate in the

4. See also de la Cadena, “Runa: Human but not Only.”
background of many of their observations, creeping slowly into view. Or at least in my view of the Manifesto.

To put it bluntly, the Manifesto does not engage with gender and class. Not explicitly at least—but when what is at stake is the adamant and violent imperceptibility of differential differences, explicitness is not an option but an ethical imperative. Why the absence? I’m not sure. It wasn’t the lack of women in our experiment that prevented us from raising the connections between the Anthropocene and patriarchy. And I’m sure it wasn’t that we, individually and collectively, hadn’t thought about the homogenizing tendencies of the Anthropocene discourse. But still. The absence is there, present, pressing. And looking retrospectively, perhaps pointing to the commitments sustaining the experiment on which the creature was brought into life—commitments that we need to honor and care for if the creature is to flourish, looking eyes wide open to its own conditions of possibility. Perhaps the composting of an amiable space for open conversation among scholars bringing to the table not just different disciplinary knowledges but different bodies, genders, class positions, ethical compromises, sexual orientations, and political principles required some kind of diplomacy, the not fully conscious equalization of issues and themes to avoid contestation and conflict in post-Pinochet Chile. I historicize the experiment and its conditions to render visible the particular way in which (neo)liberal politics have enveloped knowledge making in Chile with technocratic notions of value, objectivity, and validity, and to wonder about the extent to which the imperative of a purified science cleansed from any normative interference haunted us, still, that morning in Las Cruces. The ghost of Hayekian consensus whispering to us the dangers of dissent and divergence. But the adventure of speculation is risky. It does not come without anxieties, fears, expectations, and compromises. And experiments such as the one in Las Cruces are not called to purge them but on the contrary are summoned to test in situ their potency and limitations.

I stop here, grateful, again, for the kindness and intelligence of the commentators. And hoping this beautiful creature will now find new communities and kin with which to begin her own adventures into worlds, past, present, and future.

References

5. Savransky, Adventure of Relevance.