



# Bounds, Governance, Epistemes

## A Response to *Manifiesto Anthropoceno*

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As a textual form, the manifesto was crafted and honed by archly modernist minds, people who sought to performatively proclaim the age of Vorticism, Cubism, or some other politico-aesthetic paradigm. Today, it is a timely form precisely because it is out of joint with our contemporary critical instincts. A manifesto marks a grandiose break, or a cut, in history. Like the stratigraphic Anthropocene debated by geological institutions, the *Manifiesto Anthropoceno* (hereafter the Manifesto) is born of an attempt to mark an epoch; however, unlike those institutions, its authors proclaim their ideologies openly.<sup>1</sup> ¡Que audaz! My admiration for the project of the Manifesto stems from this audacity. Deliberations about “the Anthropocene” have, to date, been both immensely important within academia and marginal to many publics. Geologists have pondered the character and position of definitively human strata while others have sought to trouble this grand task of “making history,” or telling “a historical tale” for all humanity,<sup>2</sup> by asking other questions: When did our collective predicament (whatever that might be) begin? Are there names that provide a better diagnostic of our predicament (Capitalocene, Wasteocene, etc.)? Are there names that provide a more curative or just path ahead (Chtulucene, Planthropocene, etc.)?

While some may be exhausted with the interminable nuanced parsing of “the Anthropocene,” it has yet, in my experience, to become a term of significant public discourse. In fact, there is a present danger that the Anthropocene will become an entity without a demos, or public, particularly if we—humanities scholars, social scientists, artists, activists, and others—fail to articulate our geological entanglements and stony fate.<sup>3</sup> The time is right for us to formulate bold and definite statements of our own to contend with the proclamations emanating from scientific institutions (such as the

1. Baskin, “Paradigm Dressed as Epoch.”

2. Bashford, “Anthropocene Is Modern History”; Armiero and De Angelis, “Anthropocene.”

3. Dibley, “Anthropocene.”

International Commission on Stratigraphy's Anthropocene Working Group). But, bold as it is, this particular manifesto is also modestly multiple. It is the first iteration of potentially several that has been formulated with an explicit commitment to restatement and reframing. This commitment encourages me in my task of writing a response, as I hope my comments may be understood not as criticisms but as grist for the milling of future declarations. The Manifesto declares the necessity of "a pact for coexistence" and, in doing so, draws attention to several of the key tensions faced by any attempt to overturn the logics of anthropocentrism, technicism, colonialism, and capitalism that dominate this planet's Anthropocenic present.

The first tension I would like to discuss is illustrated in the Manifesto's first principle: interdependency (*interdependencia*). "The existence of all species, alive and to come," we read, is "necessarily and vitally entangled in relations of interdependence." This reads initially as a strong refutation of the separations and categorical divisions of neoliberal government and contemporary (modernist) science, which each seek to render their respective objects of attention as discrete units, citizens as governable widgets that can be "nudged" toward a median response, ecologies as generic compositions that can be captured in data and "offset" and traded as required. We are misled in thinking of ourselves or any other life inhabiting this planet as singular or independent. Against claims of human exceptionalism, the Manifesto is not alone in reminding humans that they are, like all beings, reliant on human and nonhuman others for their unfolding emergence. The plants and bacteria that breathe the atmosphere into existence are caught up in relations with humans that are variously violent, caring, and inextricable. "Existence is not an individual affair,"<sup>4</sup> this much is uncontroversial. But, can it possibly be that *all* species are interdependent, now and forever? Are there not beings who are temporarily or permanently complete strangers to others?

Thinking with interdependence sends me down several paths, reconsidering a mental catalogue of diverse forms of relations and their interstices. In attending to the interdependence of species—those whose respirations, movements, or sensed liveliness vaguely resemble our own—perhaps we risk neglecting our entanglement with others, such as the energetic, atmospheric, and geologic actors found on the other side of the tenuous borders of the *geos* or nonlife and the inhuman?<sup>5</sup> Perhaps. I am more concerned, though, about the language of *dependence* than that of species or life, because while dependence would seem to raise the stakes of our entanglements with others, it also flattens them out.<sup>6</sup> All beings and all matter are dependent, but differently so. This is, as I see it, an issue that recurs in those (mis)readings of philosophies of interrelation

4. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, ix.

5. Povinelli, *Geontologies*; Clark, *Inhuman Nature*.

6. It is worth considering, too, if ideas of "interdependence" are smuggling anthropocentric utility back into our considerations. If another being is valuable foremost due to our dependence upon it, or its dependence upon us, then our values are still centered on a human referent.

and intra-action that neglect to think about the variabilities of relation, the spatial and temporal distribution of relational intensities.<sup>7</sup> Thinking with quantum physics, after feminist philosopher Karen Barad, we need to remain aware that just because every particle is entangled in an infinite set of relations with every other particle does not mean that every relation is meaningful or influential. If universal relation is our foundation, we need to be alert to the fact that the strength of many “material” relations is impossibly close to zero and, more important, that the difference between universal interrelation and universal interdependence is difference itself.

So, how might I name the tension within a principle of interdependence? The best name may be “conviviality’s bounds,” as the condition of living with lively others (*con* [with] and *vivere* [live]) is one of both excess and limits. We have a rich literature of theoretical works for us to draw on in thinking relation with others, all of which maintain a sense of relational bounds. One’s hospitality may be “unconditional” and “remain open without horizon of expectation,” but it is available only to those who address us.<sup>8</sup> There is no hosting an absent entity. Community may be “the contagion of relation with others” that makes us who we are, but the community is itself defined by its exteriority to others like it.<sup>9</sup> There is no common without its uncommon outside. As Jamie Lorimer has argued, the growing body of scholarship examining multispecies becoming has often celebrated more-than-human flourishing and conviviality while nonetheless remaining vague about how we might define these terms, and reluctant to think through “lethal and antagonistic” relations.<sup>10</sup> Putting aside our toxic intimacies with chemical agents, how are we to understand species with no apparent interest in mutuality, such as the *Anopheles* mosquitoes and the *Plasmodium malariae* they often host? In my own work I have yet to uncover how we might come to live well with a species like *Andropogon gayanus* (Gamba grass), a hybrid grass that variously chokes, starves, and incinerates its surrounds to produce expanding monocultural colonies in Northern Australia.<sup>11</sup> It seems perverse to suggest to my interlocutors that they should seek kinship with a grass that has no capacity for reciprocity (or interest in it).

In seeking to defend the living world, the *Manifesto* commits itself against “law’s anthropocentrism” and affirms the need “to expand legal rights to all species on multiple time and spatial scales.” Let me make a few brief points here as a way of approaching my second tension. First, the recognition of nonhuman entities’ legal rights—such as the rights of the Vilcabamba River in Ecuador, the Whanganui River in Aotearoa/New Zealand, or the Birrarung/Yarra River here in Narm (Melbourne)—within formal legal systems still requires human advocates and arbitrators to act as mediators, making

7. E.g., Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

8. Derrida, “Hospitality,” 17.

9. Esposito, *Communitas*, 13.

10. Lorimer, “Multinatural Geographies for the Anthropocene,” 604.

11. Neale, “A Sea of Gamba.”

decisions and representations about nonhumans. In these situations of elemental wardship, seeking to defend our present and future cohabitants, we may diminish legal anthropocentrism but not eliminate it, or likely come close. Second, such adjustments do not put existing legal systems in question, and therefore arguably reify the existing system's presumption to arbitrate. Third, the logic of extension undergirding any argument for nonhumans' "legal rights" must have a defensible limit, lest we reach absurd ends where, for example, the use of antibiotics is a crime against *Staphylococcus* rights. The Manifesto does not give us a sense of where this limit might be, or who might be selected for protection. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has written, faced with the realities of the Anthropocene, "Our concerns for justice cannot any longer be about humans alone"; like him, I am convinced that we nonetheless "don't yet know how to extend these concerns to the universe of nonhumans (that is, not just a few species)" such as charismatic trees or mammals.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, while we may have a suitable ethics for the task, we do not yet have a program for *conviviality's governance*. Knowing that our ethical duty is to engage with our relational embeddedness, devoted to an "infinite elaboration of excess" and contingent experimentation, using our respective abilities to respond "to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly," does not necessarily help clarify how this is to be managed and organized systemically.<sup>13</sup> When we come calling on the agents of governmentality with our principles and objections, they will want to know our alternatives, and they will not be convinced by our critiques of practicality and utility. In different terms, then, what might be an alternative biopolitics for the Anthropocene? This is an issue I have found significant guidance about in recent examinations of the governance of toxic wastes and "useless" or killable species.<sup>14</sup> Arguably, profound lessons about how to responsibly governmentalize our interrelations are to be found not only in the attentive care directed toward marginalized forms of life but also by seeking out those species and actors we actively reject. In her discussion of mosquitoes, Uli Beisel raises Donna Haraway's point that there is no way of absenting ourselves completely from participation in the distribution of death.<sup>15</sup> While Beisel suggests that not every species "might qualify easily as companion species," I am tempted to push this further. What if, having staged the Levinasian drama of facing the Other, and deliberated on our troubling response-ability to them, we eventually conclude that some of our planetary cohabitants are not companions after all? I am unconvinced that if we are to do the work of engagement and collaboration necessitated by the Anthropocene, we can engage with scientists, bureaucrats, and others as though they are the only ones coming to the table with categories of the disposable and killable.

12. Chakrabarty, "Anthropocene Time," 30.

13. Grosz, *Becoming Undone*; Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, x.

14. E.g., Liboiron, Tironi, and Calvillo, "Toxic Politics."

15. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 80–81; Beisel, "Jumping Hurdles with Mosquitoes?," 48.

Thinking practically, the *Manifiesto* compliments its principles with a set of proposals as to how people in Chile should reorganize and redistribute their energies to elicit a more just future of coexistence. Among these sound schemes is an insistence on the value of *buen vivir* and a “profound recognition” of Indigenous peoples (or “*nuestros pueblos originarios*”). Chilean society has been “hiding its ancestral cultures,” the *Manifiesto* states, and this needs to end. To a reader from outside Chile, the plain fact is that settler colonial societies across the world have not “hidden” Indigenous cultures, but instead actively suppressed, marginalized, and criminalized them for several centuries. As Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin suggest, it may be that the Anthropocene is better understood from the fallout of European colonial expansion from the fifteenth century onward rather than fallout of nuclear detonations in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, as Heather Davis and Zoe Todd state, the contemporary predicament of irreversible and unequal ecological damages are an “extension of colonial logic” itself.<sup>17</sup> The response of scholars to the Anthropocene’s inextricable material and conceptual entanglement in colonialism has been, as in the *Manifiesto*, to recognize “our” (*nuestros*) Indigenous peoples, focusing on how they “embody knowledge and sensibilities” that must be included or incorporated into the wider political community. Similar sentiments are found in the United Nations’ 1987 Brundtland Report, 2005 Hyogo Framework for Action, 2015 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and legion other documents of international environmental governance.

Some readers will be well versed in critical analyses of the politics of Indigenous recognition,<sup>18</sup> but let me rehearse some key considerations with examples that will allow me to articulate a third and final tension. Over the past several decades, many settler colonial governments—including in Australia; Canada; Aotearoa/New Zealand; the United States; and elsewhere—have engaged in ceremonial and legal performances recognizing the presence and status of Indigenous peoples. These have frequently utilized a “cunning of recognition,” whereby the settler state selects which Indigenous peoples it wants to recognize, continues to marginalize those it does not, and reaffirms its authority through the process.<sup>19</sup> A more everyday version of such appropriative recognition is the use of the phrase “our First Australians” to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, positioning the latter as ancestors of the contemporary colonial state before-the-fact. Further, such recognition rarely changes the material or political conditions of Indigenous peoples. The Australian government, for example, became a (reluctant) signatory to the UN’s Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2009. Nearly a decade later, none of its laws are compliant with the Declaration’s principles of consent or self-determination. That said, such forms of recognition can become

16. Lewis and Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene.”

17. Davis and Todd, “On the Importance of a Date,” 771; see also Whyte, “Indigenous Science (Fiction).”

18. See Moreton-Robinson, *White Possessive*.

19. Povinelli, *Cunning of Recognition*.

social facts, because they necessarily contain judgments about what indigeneity is, or what Indigenous peoples are being recognized as. What happens when non-Indigenous peoples encounter Indigenous peoples who, precisely because of the terrible ongoing impacts of colonial violence, do not simply “embody” recognizably traditional knowledges and sensibilities?<sup>20</sup> Time and again, they move on and continue their search for “tradition.”

For the Manifesto, as for many others, Indigenous peoples’ knowledge of our environmental surrounds are a focus. Presuming that Indigenous peoples are interested in sharing, after everything they have lived through, we are nonetheless left with the issue of how those knowledges can be, at once, in dialogue and sovereign. In Australia, recent engagements with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ environmental knowledge have often followed a “cunning of recognition,” directing resources toward those forms of knowledge that are most easily verifiable by Western scientific methods. Programs that seek to develop a “two toolbox” approach to environmental management—utilizing both Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges—have subsequently been criticized as lacking reciprocity, effectively staging a one-way translation of Indigenous knowledges into standard scientific methods and tools. This is illustrative of the broader tension of *conviviality’s* *epistemes*. While thinking with the Anthropocene requires “celebrating the heterogeneity of knowledges” and expanding “ways of knowing,” the Manifesto also insists on the “need to sustain the design of policies with scientific evidence.” This lays out the division between aspiration and reality in the politics of epistemology. While we may be committed to unsettling, decolonizing, or simply diversifying, the composition of *epistemes* that are brought to bear on the Anthropocene, we also retain an awareness 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. Science as *pharmakon*: (sometimes) ameliorating the regressive effects of populist politics while (often) poisoning us against the potential of other ways of knowing. We are yet to convince others that an “ecology of practices” is fit for this problem.<sup>21</sup>

Some years ago, I realized I would never make a good anarchist, chiefly because I was too interested in the language and problems of institutions and government. The conventional terms of administration and socially distributed power found in the Manifesto—pacts, treaties, policies, rights, and so on—are not simple crutches for a new collective coexistence. They are not solutions. Rather, they are open-source and open-ended devices for navigating the dynamic and difficult problem of how we can each participate in the formation of a more just future. In this response I have attempted to outline only three of the many tensions that such a project of *conviviality* faces: bounds, governance, *epistemes*. Following geographer Lesley Head, the appropriate

20. Neale and Vincent, “Mining, Indigeneity, Alterity.”

21. Stengers, “Introductory Notes.”

response toward the fact of the Anthropocene may be one of both grief and hope.<sup>22</sup> Grief, on the one hand, that our planetary surrounds are not (nor ever were) the stable and secure background for human existence we presumed, and hope, on the other hand, that through grappling with matters of coexistence in our communities we may collectively prefigure a politics up to the challenges at hand. The Manifesto is, I suggest, one such vital prefigurative event.

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22. Head, *Hope and Grief in the Anthropocene*.

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