

Differences that might matter? A manifesto diffractively read

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To write a manifesto is to expose oneself – to make oneself vulnerable to critique. In the case of a co-authored piece, it is also to show oneself to one’s co-writers (colleagues and perhaps friends). Yet, such vulnerability, which is moreover a vulnerability to one’s self, forces one to take a close look in the mirror, and this includes those who are invited to deliver a reply as well. I find myself in that fortunate position. It is indeed with much gratitude to, and respect for, Naomi, Joris and Piotr (and with equal humility) that I offer the following thoughts on their Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy. Hastily assembled as they were “then”,¹ and clumsily put on paper as they are “now” to reflect the spirit of the actual reply, they are theirs and the reader’s to further critique.

On to my first thoughts, then, which I believe were to ask the question of why we needed yet another manifesto, while hinting at the inevitable political dimension of a manifesto. There are some notable historical examples of clearly political manifestos, such as the 1776 *United States Declaration of Independence*, which served as an inspiration both for the 1789 *French Revolutionary Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* and the 1790 *Manifesto of the Province of Flanders* – a little nod to fellow-Fleming Joris – but also the 1848 *Communist Manifesto* and the 1919 *Fascist Manifesto*. No less political, in the (post-?)feminist domain, seemed to me Donna Haraway’s 1984 *Cyborg Manifesto*² in which I have become intrigued through collaborative research on body-machine entanglements in the field of education.³ In this domain, it is hard not to reference the “Manifesto for Education” issued by Gert Biesta and Carl Anders Säfström in 2011.⁴ That manifesto aimed “to speak out of a concern for what makes education educational”, and to address “the question of how much education is still possible in our educational institutions”.⁵ Perhaps, like the manifesto considered here, it was both ambitious and modest in scope, and understood, if anything, as “an ironic form – or as an ironic performance – ... an attempt to speak and, through this, create an opening, a moment of

¹ This response was first prepared for the launch of the “Manifesto for Post-Critical Pedagogy” at Liverpool Hope University on 17th October 2016.

² Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century”, in *The Cybercultures Reader*, eds D. Bell & B.M. Kennedy (London/New York: Routledge, 2000).

³ Frederik Herman, Karin Priem, and Geert Thyssen, “Body_Machine? Encounters of the Human and the Mechanical in Education, Industry and Science”, *History of Education* 46 no. 1 (2017): 108-127.

⁴ Gert Biesta and Carl-Anders Säfström, “A Manifesto for Education”, *Policy Futures in Education* 9 no. 5 (2011): 540-547.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 540.

interruption”.⁶ In any case, a few things struck me while (re-)reading the Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy *diffractively through* that of Biesta and Säfström. Perhaps these terms warrant a brief explanation.

Rather recently, and thanks to Joyce Goodman,⁷ I have become intrigued by the work of Karen Barad, and particularly by the diffractive approach she develops in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007).⁸ This approach builds on the writings of quantum physicist Nils Bohr concerning “diffraction”. As a “physical phenomenon”, the latter figures both in classical physics and in quantum physics.⁹ Classical physics sees it as “to do with the way waves combine when they overlap and the apparent bending and spreading of waves that occurs when waves encounter an obstruction ... , including water waves, sound waves, and light waves”.¹⁰ It does not consider it as pertaining to particles “since they cannot occupy the same place at the same time”.¹¹ Quantum physics, however, has pointed to diffraction patterns in the form of “wave behaviour” in particles and to “particle behaviour” in waves.¹² Crucially, “diffraction patterns [point to] ... the indefinite nature of boundaries”,¹³ and as theories of quantum mechanics apply do not only to electrons and atoms, that is, to matter of the smallest size, but also to all matter of the cosmos, Barad argues that there may be something to be gained from using diffraction as a prism through which to engage with all “naturalcultural practices” (p. 32, 49, 90, 135).¹⁴ Used previously by Donna Haraway as a metaphor to denote a way to figure “critical difference within”,¹⁵ Barad sees a diffractive approach in research as “a way of attending to entanglements in reading important insights and approaches through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge: how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how those exclusions matter”.¹⁶

It is against this background that I have attempted to read Naomi’s, Joris’s, and Piotr’s Manifesto through that of Biesta and Säfström in search of that which Barad calls *differences that matter*.¹⁷ I would like to present some differences I have noted as question marks, as *differences that might matter*. One such difference relates to specific recurring vocabulary.

⁶ Ibid., 542.

⁷ See, for example: Joyce Goodman, “Circulating Objects and (Vernacular) Cosmopolitan Subjectivities”, *Bildungsgeschichte: International Journal for the Historiography of Education* 7 no. 1 (2017): 115-126.

⁸ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁹ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 71-72.

¹⁰ Ibid., 74.

¹¹ Ibid., 81.

¹² Ibid., 83.

¹³ Ibid., 135.

¹⁴ Ibid., 32, 49, 90, 135.

¹⁵ Donna Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others”, in *Cultural Studies*, eds L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P. Treichler (London/New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁶ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 30.

¹⁷ Ibid., 36.

Whereas in Biesta's and Säfström's text the word "freedom" predominates, in the Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy one reads about "hope", "belief" (that is, belief in the possibility of transformation), "love" (love for the world), and "care" (care and protection). Obviously, these words have quite particular meanings, historically and philosophically. To me it seems there is a distinctly religious feel to this set of words¹⁸ – and this aligns with the choice of five principles – five being one of those numbers that has particular religious significance in the Western world (hence, for example, the "five senses" one supposedly has.¹⁹ Like Biesta's and Säfström's freedom, I guess hope, belief, love, and care are conceived of *relationally* here: anchored in a sense of "commonality". Still, I wonder whether a notable difference in word choice here points to an enduring tension enshrined within the post-Enlightenment education project, namely, that between secularization and sacralization – a tension that is perhaps better not thought of in such binary terms, let alone framed within a presentist, teleological lens. Having previously touched upon this tension in my research, and thereby hinted at the religious in the secular,²⁰ I would be curious to know to what extent the post-critical pedagogy proposed is in fact religiously inspired. I assume it is no longer conceived of as a salvation project, but then what is it conceived of precisely, and might there be some religious dimension to that conception?

Another difference between Biesta's and Säfström's manifesto and the one considered here that intrigued me as an historian of education is to do with time. In Naomi's, Joris's, and Piotr's manifesto we read about hope for "what is still to come", about the/a "*status quo*" (i.e. "neo-liberalism"), and about "good in the world worth preserving", whereas Biesta and Säfström in their manifesto hint at the tension between the "what is" and "what is not" of the "here and now", in which one needs to stay within an "atemporal" approach that nevertheless takes "education as fundamentally historical – that is, open to events, to the new and the unforeseen – rather than as an endless repetition of what already is or as a march towards a predetermined future that may never arrive".²¹ In that the manifesto analysed here affirms "the value of what we do in the present" and stresses the need to create a "space of thought that enables practice to happen anew", it arguably shares with that of Biesta and Säfström an "interest in an 'excess' that announces something new and unforeseen".²² But in also being concerned with the potential of the present for the future, unlike Biesta and Säfström, Naomi,

¹⁸ See, in relation to hope, e.g. Oliver Bennett, "The Manufacture of Hope: Religion, Eschatology and the Culture of Optimism", *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 17 no. 2 (2011): 115-130.

¹⁹ Geert Thyssen and Ian Grosvenor, "Learning to Make Sense: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Sensory Education and Embodied Enculturation", *The Senses and Society* 14 no. 2 Special Issue (forthcoming, 2019).

²⁰ Geert Thyssen, "The Stranger Within: Luxembourg's Early School System as a European prototype of Nationally Legitimized International Blends (ca. 1794-1844)", *Paedagogica Historica* 49 no. 5 (2013): 625-644.

²¹ Biesta and Säfström, "Manifesto for Education", 541.

²² *Ibid.*

Joris, and Piotr seem to linger not in the tension between “what is” and “what is not”, but in that between “what alas is no longer” and “what is hoped to come”. Indeed, the very name of the post-critical pedagogy project seems to embody and perform a *harking forward to a future past*. The present is defined either in terms of its (future) potential or of its (out-dated) inertia (the current/given “order of things”), and the closer one comes to the final parts of the manifesto, the more its stress on the “possibility of transformation” appears to be counteracted by a stress on things “worth preserving”. To me it seems that both making the present pregnant with hope and reducing it to the *status quo* entails an emptying of the present as a “gathering” of possibilities in which order and disorder imply each other.²³ I would also argue, however, that working with(in) the tension of “what is” and “what is not” in education, as Biesta and Säfström advocate,²⁴ does not and need not remove temporality from the very conception of education. Again, Barad’s diffractive approach might point to a different conception of time/temporality in relation to education: one that emerges in “processual historicity” as “an open process of mattering through which mattering itself acquires meaning and form through the realization of different agential possibilities”.²⁵ In such a conception of time as a manifold of “entangled” (mutually constitutive) agencies (“intra-actions”), a diffractive approach to education crucially shifts attention to “effects of difference” resulting from “knowledge-making” and other “practices we enact [that] matter – in both senses of the word” (both materially and discursively).²⁶

This brings me to a final difference spotted and perhaps worth pointing to, which is to do with the attention paid in Naomi’s, Joris’s and Piotr’s Manifesto to “subject matter”: the study of, or initiation into, which purely “for its intrinsic, educational, rather than instrumental, value” is associated with education proper. True to what Piotr mentioned during the seminar at which the manifesto was presented, the “pedagogy” it proposes is “poor in a Masscheleian sense”,²⁷ in that it “does not specify tools or outcomes”, not even in relation to that subject matter, but rather focuses on “the experience of education”. In their turn, Biesta and Säfström refer to “a number of ways of speaking and doing and thinking about education that ... run the risk of keeping out or eradicating the very thing that might matter educationally”,²⁸ but even more so perhaps than is case here, their text is concerned with form – “forms of theory and theorizing ...

²³ Tim Ingold, *Lines* (London/New York: Routledge, 2007). The idea of “gathering” he uses derives from Heidegger.

²⁴ Biesta and Safstrom, “Manifesto for Education”, 541.

²⁵ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 141.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 71, 72, 91

²⁷ Cf. Jan Masschelein, “E-ducing the gaze: the idea of a poor pedagogy”, *Ethics and Education* 5 no. 1 (2010): 43-53.

²⁸ Biesta and Säfström, “Manifesto for Education”, 543.

[whose] resources are ethical, political and aesthetical in character”²⁹ – rather than with content. Again, with Barad’s work and her “posthumanist performative account of the material-discursive practices of mattering” in mind,³⁰ I am left wondering whether it is at all possible to reflect on educational experience without “incorporating” into that reflection “tools” co-constitutive of that “experience”, that is: all *matter*, not just subject matter, that matters and perhaps *should matter in education*. Indeed, to conclude my response to Naomi’s, Joris’s, and Piotr’s Manifesto, I would like to pose a provocative question: where and how do the “materialities”,³¹ or (other) bodies shown to have been anything but marginal to projects of education across time and space,³² figure within a post-critical pedagogy? What statute and functions does such pedagogy attribute to educational technologies? Or to the hands and feet, the eyes, ears, noses, and skin of those involved in education? In Barad’s view, such (material-discursive) “bodies” (and co-constitutive agencies) “intra-act” as part of “dynamic (re)configurings of the world”.³³ When “asking again what education, upbringing, school, studying, thinking, and practicing are”, then, perhaps it is also worth reflecting on material-corporeal dimensions to these processes in a “posthumanist” vein. Inspiration for this could well be found in Donna Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto, the first chapter of which she considered “an effort to build an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism and materialism”.³⁴

Politics, irony and faith: *a perfect marriage à trois?*

²⁹ Ibid., 542.

³⁰ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 146.

³¹ Martin Lawn and Ian Grosvenor, *Materialities of Schooling: Design-Technology-Objects-Routines* (Oxford: Symposium Books, 2005).

³² Catherine Burke, ed. “The Body of the Schoolchild in the History of Education”, *History of Education*, 36 no. 2, Special Issue.

³³ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 169.

³⁴ Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto”, 291.