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'Landing on Earth:' an educational project for the present. A response to Vanessa Andreotti

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ABSTRACT

This paper responds to Vanessa Andreotti's keynote address. In it, I draw out some educational implications of facing the everyday denials of the climate emergency. In particular, I mobilise Bruno Latour's phrase 'landing on Earth' to indicate that the very terms through which we understand education, particularly as it relates to the future, require a profound shift.

KEYWORDS

Climate emergency; Bruno Latour; Vanessa Andreotti; environment; critical zone

As everyone learned in school, when our idea of the position of the Earth in the cosmos is modified, a revolution in the social order may ensue. Remember Galileo: when astronomers declared that the Earth moves around the Sun, it felt as though the whole fabric of society was under attack. Latour and Weibel (2020, 12)

Vanessa Andreotti speaks with prescient clarity about the afflictions borne by all forms of planetary life at this very moment. Whether writing about the end of the Anthropocene or calling for a new politics of the Critical Zone, scholars from across all disciplines have underscored what Andreotti here has called the 'end of the world as we know it'. What is so striking is that it is a refrain that is not only of this time of climate crisis, but comes from a very old song. 'The end of the world as we know it' is not new for indigenous peoples, for species already extinct, for languages and cultures lost, for those who have been enslaved or whose homes and lives have perished through the effects of environmental neglect and colonisation (which have gone hand in hand), or for the disappearance in some parts of the world of the very plants, trees, ice, clean air and water that make life possible on this Earth.

The denials that Andreotti speaks of are further evidence of how difficult it is to hear, to really listen to, the roar of this loss. And it is not only those committed to authoritarian post-truth politics that have difficulty facing reality and retreat into denial. Each one of us, at least in the global north, no matter our political affiliations or habitus, constantly dances at the edge of these denials, at times out of wishful thinking, grief, paralysis or fear. We dance at their edge, because words fail us, and they fail us, because we cannot conjure

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a future with any surety. Our familiar habits of observation, description, and explanation are inadequate for dealing with the enormity of not only factual information, but the affective displacement that accompanies our exposure to it. Even Tim Flannery (2020), an eloquent, impassioned and award-winning author and environmentalist, is at a loss for words when it comes to talking about the climate crisis to his seven-year-old son; not because his son cannot understand the meaning of the devastation, but because he understands all too well. What is at stake in these intimate exchanges is nothing less than the next generation's ability to survive, his own son's ability to survive. In the face of this, we can see how denial comes easier than words.

However, these forms of denial that Andreotti speaks of undermine our capacity for repair and restitution – dare I say atonement – since they are so strongly internalised as part of our inner landscape, with all its flaws as well as its rational powers. The denial, for instance, to see ourselves as entangled (Andreotti's third denial), inextricably and persistently, with other life forms, is founded on a deep cut – or wound – that separates what we call 'me' from the necessary multiplicity of 'others' with whom life is made possible – from the bacteria within our bodies, to the organisms that constitute much of the food we eat, from the minerals and salt we depend on from the earth and sea, to the composition of the air we breathe (to say nothing of the viruses that need us to survive). Understood in this sense, our denial of entanglement is not merely a conceptual refutation but is an act of necrophilia – which is not about facing death which would be to see death as part of life, but more about a drive toward death as an outright denial of the living world – a denial that is quickly pushing us to the brink of extinction.

When I say that 'we' dance at the edge of denial, this is to suggest the subtle ways denial can work upon all of us; our political commitments, our philosophical outlooks, our worldviews are consistently challenged by the way we live our lives in the global north. We live lives of compromise, both in terms of the decisions we make and those that are made for us: the CO2 emissions for flights we take to see family; the decision to buy, use, and recycle plastics and seeing how plastics are destroying our oceans; our food choices that rely on unsustainable agricultural practices; the amount and kinds of energy we use and the poisoning of the air we breathe; the extent to which our toxic waste from our phones and computers ends up on doorsteps of communities we don't ever have to face. These are the uncomfortable and disarming complexities to which Andreotti draws our attention. One's complicity is thus difficult to bear because it entails violence on a grand scale, reinforcing centuries of colonisation of people, of animals, of land that modernity's so-called progress has depended upon. No wonder we dance at denial's edge!

There now exist a proliferation of terms for living in and with this age of loss and complicity: eco-anxiety, climate depression, climate sorrow, climate grief, and solastalgia, to name a few. Coming to face these states of being is a project

Andreotti identifies as analectic and ontogenetic, a project that disrupts our desire to override sitting with complexities and paradoxes. While Gayatri Spivak (2004) has argued that education is about the 'non-coercive rearrangement of desire,' Andreotti extends this further in suggesting that we need to face our current desires and investments in order to make any real change or rearrangement possible. While this may be non-coercive work in the sense of non-violent, it is nonetheless difficult and painful. For Andreotti, this work constitutes what she calls a 'depth education' or a 'non-western psychoanalysis' – an education that analyses the conditions under which we continue to live life as if nothing is happening and turn it into an opportunity for profound realignment of our living arrangements, politics, and ethical commitments. For Andreotti, education cannot afford to be based on presuming the continuity of the existing system, with all our comforts, acts of disposal, and unequal distribution of who gets to live and how, but one that opens up possibilities for students, at all levels, to imagine and create alternatives. To think themselves and the world anew.

Simply educating for a system that is so out of joint with the consequences of environmental violence indeed is educating for denial – and irrelevance.

So what is the option? Andreotti introduces us to a thought experiment that brings us into 2048, into a future that now no longer seems entirely fictional, but *unheimlich*. There is thus a familiarity to the uncanniness experienced when we look into the gaping maw that is the future – a space where life is beyond precarity and a time that is seeking its own renewal.

When asked what kind of education system is now desirable, Andreotti is neither posing a question of artifice nor one that is easy to answer, for in order to respond to the question, there is a need to reflect on our own conditioning and capacities for moving beyond the given. It requires a shift, not unlike Galileo's, a radical decentring of ourselves and a radical centring of the world.

But of what does this world consist? As Latour (2017) puts it, the west has been built on seeing the world in two ways: the world we live *in* and the world we live *from*. The world we live in – the social, scientific, intellectual, and material ways we go about our everyday – is now colliding with the world we live from – the air, water, plants, animals, bacteria and other micro-organisms upon which we depend. The two worlds, traditionally separated, like the wound mentioned above, can no longer be held apart. For Latour (2017), this is a truly revolutionary moment, a moment to face Gaia; not to face the world as one organism, but the world as a network of pulsating forms of Life. Gaia, as Latour drawing on James Lovelock conceives it, is not a unity but a proliferation of Life itself, including the co-relation between animate forms and 'many other participants not usually counted in its balance sheet – atmosphere, soil, rocks, seas clouds, minerals, continents – that have been transformed, mobilized, generated, inhabited, engineered by life forms over eons of time' (Latour and Weibel 2020, 18). It is Life as it occurs in the Critical Zone – that is, those few kilometres that make up

the surface of the Earth: from the depth of bodies of water to the atmosphere above the mountain peaks. Life forms alter materia, materia alters life. At one level we 'know' this from archeology, geology and oceanography, and through wisdom traditions and cosmologies, as well as through the effects fertilizer has on our house plants – it is a deep entanglement that defies our strategies for denial. Yet, on another level, we have not yet made this Critical Zone our home.

Latour, in a slightly different but complementary vein from Andreotti, thereby calls on us to 'land on Earth', to land in the Critical Zone, as a singular instance of Gaia that draws together the two worlds that have been separated. We, at least in the west and global north, have not lived on Earth recently; we are like strangers to our own home – another experience of *unheimlich*, but this time not one from 2048, but from 2020. The present is now the future, or is the future now the present? Moreover, we no longer have the luxury not to face it. "This historical moment – rendered earlier by euphemisms such as 'ecological crisis' or 'climate change' – now would best be taken as an existential crisis, a matter of life and death" (Latour and Weibel 2020, 13). How do we create an education for 'landing on Earth', where the world we live in and the world we live from come together?

As Andreotti observes, this requires activating the imagination, along with creating new sensibilities, new frameworks through which we can embody life differently in order to decolonise and generate alternative conditions of living with others, and recognise the deep interdependency that is Life itself. And, it also requires developing new languages, so that Earth becomes a place of home, a place of significance where the rent of separation can be mended. As Wall Kimmerer (2013) writes, 'to be native to a place we must learn to speak its language' (48). We need to speak anew, to listen to the language of Earth, not as some romantic recuperation of a lost past, or as a way of moving forward in a straight line of progression, but as a way of deepening a sense of place. We are at a loss for words because we are out of place.

But if landing on Earth is to be more than a metaphor, it needs to reinvent the very terms of education, not as a preparation for the world as it is, nor for some pre-defined future, but as a foray into what it could be. I see this as a profoundly aesthetic act, a way of engaging sensibilities. Aesthetics, as Latour and Weibel (2020) put it, 'renders one sensitive to the existence of other ways of life . . . and the shape of things to come' (19). Whether through conventional art practices, acts of imagination and creativity, thought experiments and the generation of new sensibilities, education is nothing less than that which supports a 'revolution of the social order' to return to the epigraph, something we have all been taught in school, but have forgotten. This, to me, is what Andreotti's depth education is calling for: a re-membering of future possibilities by facing complexities in the present.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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