Bringing out the beast(s)
Supporting and engendering transvaluing practices within academia

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Abstract
This essay explores the tension between the poetics of value and the politics of value in the context provided by an experimental seminar-series Heritage-as-Common(s) – Common(s) as Heritage within Critical Heritage Studies at the University of Gothenburg, and it’s following publication, scrutinizing some of the ramifications and challenges of transvaluation within academia of today. The focus of the essay is the seminar as device or apparatus and how it might support and engender transvaluing practices within a research-climate, which at best can be characterized as paradoxical. Here the Chimaera, the beast of beasts, is used as figure to rethink and reconceptualise this landscape, as model and in a certain performative sense – as method as well.

Keywords: Seminars, Publications, Transvaluation, Knowledge production, Chimaera
HEADS

As a boy I had a passionate interest in Greek mythology. I was well acquainted with numerous stories, how Hephaistos got his hump, how Hades kidnapping of Persephone gave rise to the seasons, how Heracles cleaned the Augean stables, how Theseus slayed the Minotaur - the bull-headed beast – in the labyrinth of Knossos, just to name a few. I have previously worked with the legend of Echo and Narcissus but it was just recently, through the work of Linda Shamma on the notion of the hybrid and hybridity – I found myself once again confronted with the beast of beasts – the Chimaera.

We recognize the Chimaera as the monstrous beast, fire breathing with two heads - lion and goat, with the body of a lion and the tail of a serpent, that eventually was slayed (suffocating on a block a lead melting in its throat) by Bellerophon, mounted on another mythological beast – Pegasus – the winged horse. For reasons unsure, it might be that the monstrous character of the Chimaera and it’s violent death in the end offer a more complex figure than the more likable Pegasus, the Chimaera has taken on meaning beyond the anecdotal and mythological. Today a chimaera also would mean, quoting Merriam-Webster, is “an illusion or fabrication of the mind” – an imaginary or fantasy never to be realized (fore fronting the whole pantheon of mythological
beasts, dragons, gryphons, hippocryphs, minotaurs, medusas, mermaids, nymphs, satyrs, centaurs). It has also has taken on new meaning within genetics and genetic engineering. Here, again according to Merriam-Webster, a chimaera signifies “an individual, organ, or part consisting of tissues of diverse genetic constitution”.

As such the chimaera can be seen as a figure or even relay connecting orders or even ontologies otherwise set apart. Where the chimaera as beast and as individual/organ, not only subscribes to, but also retains, the logic of the “whole” parallel to the logic of the “part”. The Chimaera as beast in it self, as well as a beast made out a lion, goat and serpent, exist side-by-side as equal orders.

This double logic, which I will refer to as chimaeric from now on, is particular evident in the game called “Heads, Bodies, Tails” – when the motives stem from the animal kingdom – and “Heads, Bodies, Legs” – when the motives are human – a game most of us would recognize. A paper is folded in three or four equal parallel parts. Then you take turns in drawing head, body and legs (if three parts) or head, torso, abdomen and legs (if four parts). After having drawn a segment, for instance a head, the paper is immediately folded in a way that hides the drawing of that particular segment from the one making the drawing on the next segment (a body or torso). In order to ensure the coherence of the drawing the stubs from the head (at the first segment) are extrapolated into the second (segment) and so on.

“Heads, Bodies, Tails” is not merely a game but could, for instance within a letterist and situationist tradition, like with the work of George Perec, Raymond Queneau and OULIPO – “Ouvroir de littérature potentielle” which roughly translates into the "workshop of potential literature", be understood as a way creating new meaning, knowledge and experiences. That is, to use a contemporary lingo, as a method for “knowledge production”, which - like the better-known method of derive - makes use of chance and the non-ordered as a key element.

The “seminar” – as we know it today and as the story goes was invented at the universities in Halle and Göttingen in Germany during the 18th century. Prior to this a seminar was primarily a situation where teachers “corrected” the students understandings of various subject matters. It was first in Halle and Göttingen that the radical idea that new knowledge might emerge within such a context was developed, something which eventually was picked up by Wilhelm von Humboldt when forming that which have come to be known as the Humboldt-university in Berlin in the 19th century. Then, in an era where rapid advancements were made within fields such as technology and natural sciences, Humboldt envisioned the “seminar” as a humanistic counterpart to the scientific “laboratory.”
For Humboldt the seminar was a part of larger package, or a mechanism within a larger machinery - a cog in the clockwork - which included among many things the notions and practices of “lehrfreiheit” (that the scholar should have the freedom to teach in whatever subject they saw suited) and “lernfreiheit” (that the students should have the freedom to pick the teachers and classes which they saw as most rewarding). In an era of emerging modernism, the idea of freedom of choice was thus intimately coupled with the idea of the new. From our contemporary horizon we recognize this figure as a key component within the neo-liberal paradigm. In this sense the notion of the “new” or “new knowledge” is not to say the least problematic - an imaginary, a ghost that since then have haunted the university.

A ghost that does not only haunt this particular contribution but as I see it most definitely haunt this symposium - Transvaluation: Making the word matter – as well. Indeed, the very notion of “transvaluation” in itself could be regard as a particular humboldtian imaginary – in that that the new is something which emerges in-between the given or old, in planned or serendipitous encounters, in configurations and relations rather than within compartments and bodies (which also was part of Humboldts construct) – where difference is the drive of the new (another figure we recognize).

But neither the university nor knowledge is solely about the new it is also about that which in a teleological perspective would be framed as the old, given or even obsolete. Given the contemporary discourse on these matters, a neglected and urgent issue would be the problem of how to account for and sustain the kind of knowledge that cannot re-invent itself as “new”? And the challenge for university (following this) would thus be accounting for and sustaining a less dichotomic and teleological view on knowledge and “knowledge production”.

BODIES

As tradition calls for I would like to address this subject matter by means of a specific case. The case at hand is a seminar-series called Heritage-as-Common(s) – Common(s)-as-Heritage or H-A-C-C-A-H. To begin with the very existence of this particular seminar-series is a product of this new knowledge economy that in various ways opt for the “new” knowledge that might emerge in-between already existing fields and bodies of knowledge. At Gothenburg University “Critical Heritage” became a prioritized research in part due to its potential capacity to enrol and create interaction between various research fields and perspectives in a cross-faculty and trans-disciplinary setting. In my particular case it came down to (as a representative from the Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts and The School of Design and Craft (within this faculty)) coordinating a research cluster with a counterpart from the Faculty of Natural Science and The Department of Conservation (in this case Ingrid Martins Holmberg) – with a focus on “urban heritage”. Two post-docs were also attached to this cluster: Feras Hammami (at the Department of Conservation) and Evren Uzer (at the School of Design and Craft). There were (and still are) other research clusters as well – Staging the Archive and Globalizing Heritage – also them with cross-faculty leadership - as well the Heritage Academy, focusing on the collaboration with non-academic partner such as museums.

As it proved the different “clusters” adopted different strategies on how to expand upon their specific subject matters (another interesting subject). In the case of our cluster “Urban Heritage”
with two coordinators and two post-docs on-board we immediately started out mapping our “backpacks” and platforms in order to identify possible joint trajectories or at least trajectories which would be of mutual benefit. Out of the discussion came the idea of running a joint seminar-series, which not only would address a subject matter which we had a shared interest in, but which also would help us mapping a specific field, enabling us to connect and network with various stakeholders within that field. That is, we elaborated on the seminar not only as fora for discussion and problematization in itself but were also drawing upon the seminar as ordering mechanism within a larger machinery (the university). As such our ambition was, at least in part, to stretch beyond the subject matter in itself, and in a humboldtian manner re-inventing the “seminar” within a university context.

Having identified the relation between heritage and the commons as possible field of mutual interest we made a shortlist of people, with varied background and expertise, whom we´d like to invite to contribute to discussion on this, as we saw, overlapping field. But to truly map, and especially stretch the survey beyond the working groups limited perspective we, after having invited a number of people at the shortlist, asked our invites to in turn invite scholars or practitioners, contribution to the subject, as well. The only restriction was that it shouldn´t be people that they had worked with before. Consequently there were two invited guests on each seminar (in some case three) who presented a short paper each and commented the short paper of the other guest (which hade been distributed amongst them in forehand) – and vice versa. In addition, to take care of discussion at the seminar but also to bring in people from our local context, we always invited a “commentator” as well, to reflect upon the seminar in a short paper afterwards. At the end of the series all papers were to be compiled into a publication. In all there were 7 seminars with a total of 21 guests and commentators, more or less following the pattern of: A presents, B comments, B presents, A comments, C comments, X comments.

The strategy was thus to “outsource” a large part of the decision-making and orientation of the seminars to colleagues throughout the world, to address in any manner the saw fit. The obvious gain was new networks and new perspectives but as consequence there was also as a loss of coherence and the specific kind of quality that goes with coherence (in particular stressed within university). This became clear, if not earlier, when we had the opportunity to discuss the seminar series and the future publication with Michael Ashworth. What kind of publication was it supposed to be and what was our editorial approach to it? It was not a proper edited volume but more of a collage or a fragmented edited volume. How were we to “package” the seminars into a publication? Clearly each seminar had its own momentum and logic depending on the different
contributions but the relations between the seminars was of a random character, i.e. – the
coherece was weak. But what kind of problem was this? Was it an editorial problem – a flaw in
the setup which where to be edited away or alternatively be reframed within a larger editorial
narrative in order to become a proper edited volume? Or was it perhaps an issue of form, as in
lack of forms or formats to take care of the material at hand? In line with the seminars-series, (as
we thought) we went along with the second possibility – namely that an experimental seminar
consequently also required a publication-format that somehow took care of this experiment in
relevant way.

There are in particular two of the proposed concepts that attracted my attention to this call on
transvaluation – namely the “poetics of value” and the “politics of value”. With the poetics of
value issues of making (value(s)) and the conditions of making (value(s)) is stressed as an
interplay between maker(s) and (subject) matter(s), where the collective efforts in particular is
highlighted. This perspective is particular apparent in the first part of H-A-C-C-A-H – the
seminar-series - where the triadic setup – with our guests and our guest’s guests and our invited
commentators, with the preparatory work of producing the first drafts, and commenting them
during the seminar, followed by additional comments and in most cases revisions on the original
drafts – was truly an collective effort - where strands of thoughts and ideas made their way
between the single contributions and so on.

Similar the politics of value is also shift away from the individual and as a stated “concerned
with surpassing the possibly atomic relation between researchers and their objects, towards more
complex meanings and frameworks of human transactions, attributions and motivations”. In other
words it addresses the ways value are and can be brought about, exchanged and disseminated and
how this bringing about is preconditioned, formatted and expanded upon – ”beyond sheer
knowledge-accumulation.” In parallel the second part of H-A-C-C-A-H – the publication – can
be understood as operating within this kind of logic. Few guests and guest’s guest, or other guests
(audience) had the opportunity to take part of the seminar series as a whole. Each seminar was a
single event, and in order to move beyond that, a new setting had to been invented – in this case
an experimental publication.

But that, which H-A-C-C-A-H, in its two manifestations can shed some light on, is the
potential conflict and tension between the poetics and politics of value. One does not easily
translate into the other and the other one cannot exist without the other. Still what H-A-C-C-A-H
points at is that this trans(re)lation cannot be taken for granted – it has to be negotiated and cared
for. The alternative, that we already see happening, is were one becoming the other. That is a
situation were the poetics of value, in a research context in particular, have been genuinely
informed (and transformed) by the politics of value. This situation is not new, but the instrumentalization of the politics of value (publishing and funding structures) alongside with the scale of this transformation, are without precursors. A situation where act within the first order (poetics) more or less urged to align with the second order (politics) in order to come into being.

These two concepts, the poetics and politics of value, are particular interesting in relation to the notion of "transvaluation" – and the overcoming of "scientific monoculture". This issue was also at the core of H-A-C-A-H - addressing a field with no strong disciplinary affiliation and providing a transvaluing setting, first of all through the cross-reading and cross-commenting of the guest who always were from different fields and secondly through the comments and contributions of the audience and the commentator. That is, the particular setup of the seminars, could be understood as a transvaluing device – or transvaluing apparatus - “literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings” (Agamben 2009).

But before we go further we ought to ask ourselves why we seek this position and how it is underpinned? The general argument would of course be the challenges that follow the compartmentalization of disciplines and discourses – the transfer of knowledge (between research fields and between academia, private and public organisation and civil society) and societal relevance (as in dialogue with private and public organisation and civil society).

One way of making a rough characterisation of a "strong" field or a discipline would be in terms of the coherence between the poetics of value (produced within that very field or discipline) and the politics of value (i.e. the way this value in various ways are assessed within that field or discipline and how this is brought in relation to society at large). Here, as always, medicine would be the perfect example, with a highly elaborated relation between ways of conducting and disseminating research, and (in comparison) perfectly legible in a broader context. As parallel, artistic research, as another example, are still struggling with (both) the ways of conducting and disseminating research – with what values to produce and how these values are valued internally as well as externally. This is also the issue with more transdisciplinary ways of conducting and disseminating research. For natural reasons there is an uncertainty both in terms of what values are produced and how these values are valued, among peers as well in relation society at large. Time is a critical element here it is said and such an argument goes back to Ludwik Fleck, arguing for that every figure of thought, every discourse, needs to be supported by, as he calls it – a thought collective, that is a social/discursive milieu in which this figure of thought can strive and gain momentum (Fleck 1981). For obvious reason, the building or coming
about of such a milieu takes time. That is any transdisciplinary research, and various practices of transvaluation, in the end must be supported by a larger community or milieu supporting these ambitions. Such it milieu is not yet there, it might be, but to be frank, the university of today, fully occupied with in various ways safeguarding and compartmentalizing subjects, definitions and discourses - is not that community. The dilemma becomes even more apparent if you look at international, national and regional research policies where transdisciplinary is stressed in a variety of calls, either as a prerequisite or as a component. In the end however, when results and highly rated publishing is what counts, transdisciplinary research falls short simply because it fails to deliver on those terms.

In this perspective it is interesting to note that H-A-C-C-A-H, both as seminar series and publication was funded through strategic funds (and not research funds) – and developed to promote research. One way of describing it (H-A-C-C-A-H) would rather be in terms of pseudo-research or pseudo-administration very much in logic with the general sway within university from research to administration and strategic development. And failing to match the hardcore criteria of research in terms of delivering result, we see a situation where the development of research is migrating into education and strategic development. That is situations where research is a long-term and secondary effect rather than a primary goal, which has to be accounted for – i.e. situations were the values produced immediately do not have to be evaluated.

The increasing number of calls, regionally, nationally and internationally, for this kind of pseudo-administration/research – that is various strategic funds made available for those who want to develop research collaborations, networks, partnerships and structures, is if anything a sign of this development.
The argument here, and where H-A-C-C-A-H serves as an example, is that the critical issue when it comes to transvaluation (in relation to research), is not so much the poetics of values and the politics of value in itself but rather the relationship between them (paired the existence of multiple and parallel values). In a schizophrenic situation where both transdisciplinarity and expedient results are stressed, research in this regard is nearly impossible and makes its escape into administration and strategic development (as with H-A-C-C-A-H). Where the immediate effect of H-A-C-C-A-H was 1) the establishment of an extensive network, proven useful for various research bid (by means of the seminar series) and 2) the production of a publication which adds to the publications list, creates identity and possibly discourse and so on (activates which gets filed into the "management" account). A publication, which in more rigid sense does not qualify as research. This has to do with two things – firstly – it never was "research". It was financed by strategic funds in order to promote research. And secondly, we failed to turn it into proper research when editing the volume and choosing not to turn it into a peer-reviewed publication. Still, many of the contributions could most definitely be considered to be research, but the publication as a whole – with its lack of coherence – in a narrow sense is not. Further on,
according to the heads-bodies-tail-logic of the seminar-series, we also asked the designers of this publication Pascal Prose and Jonas Fried to address the subject matter as a part of their commission, and they in turn asked Hanna Nilsson and Rasmus Svensson (PWR Studio) to also make their contribution to subject matter.

Sticking to the initial setup, the tension between the poetics of value and politics of value is neither highlighted nor resolved. If anything it is prolonged or sustained in its current state as an open question. In this regard the seminar-series and the following publication sustaining the initial logic of the seminar-series can be regarded as chimaeric device (or apparatus). That is a device, which like the Chimaera sustain the logic of the “whole” parallel to the logic of the “part”. In this case putting a rich material of multiple orders - discursive as well as non-discursive – research as well as non-research – side-by-side. And as such opens up for having a more chimaeric understanding of the university and contemporary knowledge ecologies and

But let us have a look at the Chimaera once more. Whereas Chimaera was part of huge family of monstrous beasts (Sphinx, Cerberus and Hydra just to name a few) - and the offspring of Typhon – “the father of all monsters” – and Echidna – the mother of all monsters – Bellerophon and Pegasus had a lineage of a nobler kind. Bellerophon was the son of Euronyme and Glaucus – the king of Corinth (in his turn son of Hephaistos and known for a particular beastly death – eaten by his horses) or possible Poseidon. Pegasus on the other was also offspring of Poseidon (then possibly Bellerophs half brother), and born (together with Chryston) when Perseus decapitated the gorgon Medusa. In the image in the beginning of this essay you see Chimaera below turning her three heads – lion, goat and serpent towards the winged Pegasus mounted by Bellerophon (with a spear in his hand) hovering above. Whereas Pegasus, partly beast, is tamed (by Bellerophon) lived on, Chimaera on the other hand, fully a beast with no hope of being domesticized was slayed (with the help of the tamed beast Pegasus).

In this regard this image might also serve as an image on the contemporary conditions of knowledge production within academia, and in particular transvaluing practices. By tradition the university, stuck between funding and publishing structures, only can deal with already domesticized or internalized forms of knowledge production. Where the actually ambition and possibility to have a dialogue with forms of knowledge production which have not yet been domesticized and may not ever be, is very limited. Beasts, non-domesticized, such as Chimaera have no place within university, simply because they cannot be dealt with.

On the other hand university it self can be considered a beast or hydride of impure chimaeric character – education, research (the heads), administration (body) and strategic
development (tail) – (which also would be true for both Bellerophon and Pegasus, both having a mixed lineage but also together forming a particular man/beast). And the undoing of the Chimaera or non-dogmatized (from a university perspective) forms of knowledge production could be understood, (in a classic scheme) in direction proportion to the inability to face the beast within. That is that the university as something which paradoxically, in its search for general, universal or coherent standards and frameworks, always have been in a process of transvaluation. As beast tamed by research policies, entrenched by funding opportunities and dissemination possibilities.

The seminar as imagined by Von Humboldt and as performed within the Critical Heritage Studies, as H-A-C-C-A-H is part of that beastly lineage, part of the university genome – of its heritage. Our task, I argue, is to acknowledge this heritage. In this our situation is very similar to that of Hank McCoy, the mutant genius scientist in the Marvel Comics universe and one of the X-men, who faced with the fact of having a X-gene (a superhero mutation), and when failing to undo the impact of the X-gene through various scientific interventions (as a modern Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde), finally came to terms with being Hank McCoy, a.k.a. Beast. In the end, acknowledging the full scope of his genome as a mutant scientist (see image in the beginning of this chapter) he chose not to reduce himself (neither to beast nor beast), but chose both. Such an ethos is also at the heart of Heritage as Common(s) – Common(s) as Heritage both as seminar-series and publication. Implying ways and forms for the beast to co-exist side-by-side with the man, for the domesticized to co-exist side-by-side with the non-domesticized, for the new to co-exist side-by-side with the old. It does so with the hope that it will engender and support further transvaluing practices as well as promoting the inherent chimaeric character of the university – bringing out its beast(s).

References
