If the CLASSE student manifesto lacks a certain elegance, it cannot be dismissed on this ground alone. The text represents a struggle to reinvent a lost language of dissent and to formulate terms of refusal that speak in the vernacular without altogether ceding to a neoliberal Newspeak. In what language might we properly speak of an “apprenticeship in humanity,” the “essence” of the student strike, a collective vision for the democratic educational project?

The manifesto thus reaches beyond tuition increases and suffocating student debt, setting its sights on a “deeper malaise.” The cost of an education is not just symbolic; it is materially concomitant with the violence of socio-economic inequalities, sexism, racism, (neo)colonialism, homophobia, environmental exploitation, the corporatization of higher education, and the antidemocratic thrust of government policies and laws, such as Bills 78 and C-38. In response to demands that students “renounce violence” and return to business as usual, readers implicitly are asked to situate themselves vis-à-vis the systemic and structural violence of the neoliberal state—ideological power more injurious than the repressive force of batons, pepper spray, and tear gas. In this light, the principles expressed in the manifesto are neither idealistic nor without substance, as some pundits have claimed; nor is the text implicitly fascist, as the well-known Québec journalist Normand Lester suggested when he wrote, “Mussolini serait fier.” Rather, the manifesto seeks to expose and critique a system that authorizes, condones, and ultimately profits from systemic and structural violence, now normalized and repackaged as democracy and development. Violence, too, is the high cost of an education—social costs or “negative externalities,” in the language of today. Collateral damage.

The manifesto is, then, a call to language. Foregrounding the problem of political legitimacy—not just legality—it asks, who has the political right to speak? And it demands of us that we claim responsibility for the conditions under which these voices can be heard.

This helps to explain why a vast Québec social movement has gained relatively little purchase in English Canada. Apart from a few souls banging their casseroles, our
complacent and complicit silence carries the day. One wonders, are students outside Québec no less impoverished and disenfranchised? Something must be lost in translation. In reading the manifesto, Anglophone readers are more likely, I suspect, to hear a string of banalities, empty signifiers. The words exist in English, yes, but they are lifeless anachronisms, they do not speak: The common good. Social justice. Equality. Direct democracy. Humanity. We have grown used to the evisceration of our language; it has lost its flesh and blood. Increasingly, shamelessly, it is commodified and deployed in the service of efficiency and utility. These words are lost in a language that itself seems to undermine discourse on the public good, exalting instead in hyperindividualism and privatization. Meaning is suspended in much the same way that special laws suspend democratic rights in the name of democracy itself. If our federal government is in contempt of Parliament, no matter. If scientists of all political stripes decry government policies and find themselves muzzled, no matter. If our minister of state for science and technology holds fundamentalist views about evolution, no matter. We are told that law and science and technology must serve the (“new”) economy. That the invisible hand of the “free” market will guide us. Business as usual.

Meanwhile, within the higher education “sector,” as it is now called, ironically the above terms are often dismissed as “elitist.” Those who question the rampant vocationalization of education and the explosion of profitable distance education courses are also often considered elitist holdovers motivated by a dangerous nostalgia. Courses that explore democratic citizenship, social justice, and class consciousness are unfashionable; budgetary exigencies threaten comparative literature, language, and women’s studies departments, among others; and increasingly, students are taught by armies of underpaid sessional instructors who are hostage to market forces and may rightly avoid “elitist” or subversive texts in their classrooms. The irony is that it is the elites themselves who have a vested interest in marketizing the curriculum and minimizing the education of critique and dissent. Today, universities are run by bloated administrations of high-paid VPs, CEOs, and CFOs, increasingly subjecting education to corporate models of governance, issuing duplicitous statements of “accountability,” and demanding “innovation,” “entrepreneurship,” and “commercializable outcomes.” Officially, students appear to matter only insofar as they are “clients” or BIUs (Basic Income Units) or potential litigants. In the pages of the Chronicle of Higher Education, one Canadian humanities professor even went so far as to opine that the student unrest is caused by fewer job prospects in a bad economy, and that universities should respond by further vocationalizing their curriculum through public-private business partnerships.

It is within this totalizing discourse that our language is co-opted, much in the way that education and health are corporatized, our forests and lands are exploited, and citizens are rendered as human capital—“resources” from which to extract some surplus value or profit. In these narrow terms, the student manifesto will be ignored because it refuses to adopt and endorse the language of managerialism, to state how its mandate will be “operationalized” and to list “deliverables,” “key performance indicators” (KPIs), or the “best practices” that will result. But in its refusal, the manifesto struggles to define and defend a different paradigm, to claim legitimate ownership of
the public sphere, and to open a space for dialogue in a language that belongs to each and to all. The bodies of protesters, in flesh and blood, seek to reclaim language. Here we might imagine a future “life in common,” in which individuals share responsibility for the far-reaching causes and effects of the social, political, and economic systems in which they take part—a reparative political culture in which each and all would reckon with systemic and structural violence, invisible discrimination, and the responsibility to educate future generations. The “how” is a collective project.

Nous sommes avenir / à venir: It is the voice, the rhetorical constitution, of a we, of a we that is promised, yet to come. This is a language that some will find perplexing or threatening, while others will find in it an edifying embrace. We wait to see if these words take root. But in the meantime, I would suggest simply that the manifesto poses a question less of intent than of reception. It is less a matter of how the students have framed their manifesto and more a question of how we, as readers, engage this text. Will we grapple with its language? Will we hear in these words the condemnation of our silent complicity? And will we speak?