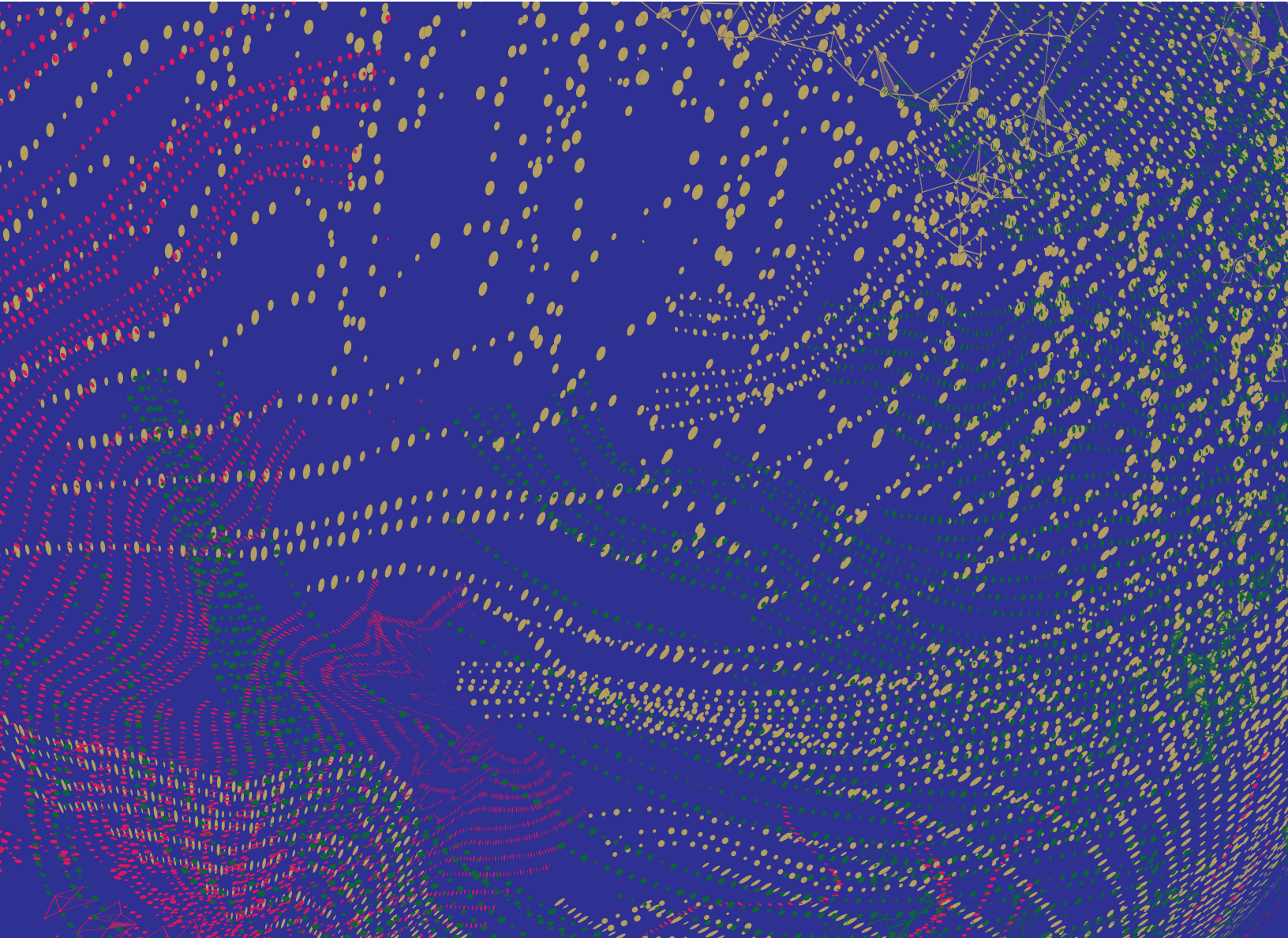


The World Humanities Report

Must We Be So Humanistic?

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Must We Be So Humanistic?

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The panorama in which the humanities are currently developing in Latin America can be considered through the full intensity of their crisis: a decrease in enrollments across departments, crises in the paradigms of reading, the state's abandonment of its historic responsibilities, processes of functional illiteracy, and a growing wave of media barbarism, which has been reinforced by new paradigms of digital information.

A significant part of the “crisis of the humanities,” we should note, has to do with the radical critique to which the humanities have been subject from the second half of the twentieth century through the beginning of the twenty-first, in an arc that travels from Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel Foucault to Giorgio Agamben and Peter Sloterdijk. Formed by such writers, we subjected classical and bourgeois humanism to radical critique as a device of punishment that, sooner rather than later, turned against us, because technocracy is always very capable of taking advantage of hesitations in thought. However, that same crisis can also redefine our sphere of action as humanists and boost the reach of our interventions through the technical tools that the twenty-first century offers us.

I am thinking, on the one hand, about Ottmar Ette's manifesto in favor of a vitalist philology, on the basis of Erich Auerbach's “insistence on the concept of life,” as Ette signals “that for today's philologies, more than ever, it is necessary to *occupy oneself*—in the full sense of the word—*with life*”:

If we want to think about future opportunities for the development of the sciences of culture, of the humanities in general and literary sciences in particular, we should keep in mind that a decisive point is the fact that a constellation of bio-scientific specialties—the so-called life sciences—have appropriated the concept of life in a way so effective and even natural that the humanities, in the face of the life sciences, appear exiled from a knowledge of life, just like scholars, at least conceptually, have been expelled from the realm of the “real” sciences in the face of scientists.¹

A philology thus conceived would allow us to confront what Werner Hamacher characterized as “a completely irresponsible politics of the diminishment

¹ Ottmar Ette, “La filología como ciencia de la vida: Un escrito programático en el año de las humanidades” [Philology as a science of life: A programmatic writing in the year of the humanities], in *La filología como ciencia de la vida* [Philology as a science of life], ed. Ottmar Ette and Sergio Ugalde Quintana (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2015), 39, 12–13 (italics in the original).

of the sciences of the spirit,”² particularly in this historic moment when they are able to grow stronger through the extraordinary development of the so-called digital humanities, with all that they imply for the formation of new forms of erudition. The humanities might also grow stronger through the transformation of paradigms that take on their classic objects, for example, in the context of postmodern and postcolonial theories, perspectives of gender and race, and even openly post-European positions, like that of Jean Bessière for whom “[c]omparative literature should be post-European and post-Western.”³

Bessière’s idea plays with a perspective that is well known across the New World, a perspective that very early established the foundations for decolonial thought on the basis of a certain “exhaustion.”

Our situation might well be understood as an echo of what Ralph Waldo Emerson proposed in a famous speech, “The American Scholar” (1837). The book that Emerson had published anonymously a year before this speech, *Nature*, opened with the question “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” and closed with the exhortation to “[b]uild, therefore, your own world.”⁴ “The American Scholar” has been considered a literary Declaration of Independence, a text that amends or improves the political Declaration of Independence of the United States and the US Constitution itself. In it, Emerson states that our days of dependence have ended:

Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests ... In the light of this hope, I accept the topic which not only usage, but the nature of our association, seem to prescribe to this day.⁵

² Werner Hamacher, “Lo torcido ante todo lo recto” [The crooked before all that is straight] (conversation with Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó and Tamás Lénárt), *Revista de Humanidades* 37 (2019): 235–52.

³ Jean Bessière, “Recomposición de la literatura comparada: De su arqueología a su actualidad” [Recomposition of comparative literature: From its archeology to its present], trans. Valentín Díaz, *Chuy: Revista de estudios literarios latinoamericanos* 1, no. 1 (2014): 16–28, <https://revistas.untref.edu.ar/index.php/chuy/article/view/104/91>. “This can be formulated in another way: the work that best circulates or best gives form to circulation is that which explicitly exposes that paradox and this duality of homogenization and heterogenization. In the heart of unipolarity, the opposite can be said. This defines another literary history for comparative literature and obligates it to undertake comparative histories of European literatures from scratch”; Bessière, “Recomposición de la literatura comparada,” 25–26.

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1, *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, ed. Robert E. Spiller and Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 7, 45.

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar: An Oration. Delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, August 31, 1837,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 52.

For Emerson, accepting opinions established in previous books is a mistake:

Hence, instead of Man Thinking, we have the bookworm. Hence the book-learned class, who value books, as such; not as related to nature and the human constitution, but as making a sort of Third Estate with the world and soul. Hence the restorers of readings, the emendators, the bibliomaniacs of all degrees. This is bad; this is worse than it seems.⁶

It is worse because “[w]hatever talents may be, if the man create not, the pure efflux of the Deity is not his:—cinders and smoke there may be, but not yet flame.”⁷

What Emerson proposes is a new perspective for (from) the world, which already was a decolonial perspective. If, in all likelihood, Emerson’s “The American Scholar” is the original decolonial text,⁸ *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon is the final text. In another essay, “The Over-Soul,” Emerson said that “we have no history,” and in “Intellect” he said that “[o]ur thinking is a pious reception.”⁹ Consequently, we might interpret the Emersonian circle as the figure of writing constitutive of the New World.¹⁰

Everything else will be postcolonial (whether or not everything else wants to be or is aware of it), particularly insofar as decolonization has entailed a decline in the senselessness of positivist classical studies (of the humanities and their ideal of humanity). The humanity that the heterotopia of decolonization reveals, in effect, is much more difficult to understand: it has no history, nor intelligence, nor people. The “philology” that accompanies these processes will be necessarily smaller in size and will require the construction of a history and a people.

Making the new world (or making the world anew), to be of the New World, implies abandoning, according to Emerson, the position of being “the parrot of other men’s thinking” and constructing a circle that encompasses acquired knowledge as much as future experience, since “what is nature ... but always

⁷ Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 57.

⁸ Robert Weisbuch, “Post-Colonial Emerson and the Erasure of Europe,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 192–217.

⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Over-Soul,” in *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2, *Essays: First Series*, ed. Joseph Slater, Alfred R. Ferguson, and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), 174; Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Intellect,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 2, 195.

¹⁰ Antonio Lastra, “De Emerson a Fanon: Una heterotopía” [From Emerson to Fanon: A Heterotopia], Seminario del Grupo de Estudios Peirceanos, Universidad de Navarra, December 13, 2007, <https://www.unav.es/gep/SeminarioLastra.html>.

circular power returning into itself.”¹¹

Unlike the abstract universalism of the sciences, which complements the disciplines’ imperial power, our proposal emphasizes the singularity of that which accepts no name and jumps between disciplinary places. The names of the disciplines are spaces where concepts are not invented or created, but rather where work protocols are administered. We work, then, at the threshold of the transdisciplinary with a singular object.

What would a science of the singular look like? One could imagine an alliance at once public and private (that is, political and economic) between theory, art, and science, registers folded into a threshold of disciplinary indiscernibility. There, perhaps, the conditions of knowledge can be found: those of us trained in philology call this threshold “critical theory.” But one need not even cling to that name.

We would do well to remember Gabriel Tarde, the founder of a microsociology who lost to Émile Durkheim during the discipline’s foundational moment. Tarde maintained a concept inverse to that which classical sociology puts forth: he does not explain the small through the large and the detail through the group, but rather “in the same way that the mass resemblances have been resolved into resemblances of detail, so the gross and obvious mass differences have been transformed into infinitely minute differences of detail.”¹² A sociology of sympathies and velocities, a theory of immanences and folds, a science of the singular and the necessary. A microsociology of molecules and sensations.

A group of us who have worked for more than thirty years at the University of Buenos Aires took these premises into account when designing graduate and research programs that would meet their objectives at the newer National University of Tres de Febrero (or UNTREF, for Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero): a Master’s Program in Latin American Literary Studies, a Master’s in Gender Studies and Politics (the curricula are all designed by specialists who had to reject disciplinary or national specialization in order to develop either a comparative or gender perspective), a Program in Contemporary and Comparative Latin American Studies, and an Interdisciplinary Center for Gender Studies and Politics, all of which are associated with two journals: *Chuy: Revista de estudios latinoamericanos* (Chuy: Journal of Latin American literary studies) and *El lugar sin límites: Revista de estudios y políticas de género* (Place without limits: Journal of gender studies and politics). In the span of just a few

¹¹ Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 53, 54.

¹² Gabriel Tarde, *Social Laws: An Outline of Sociology*, trans. Howard C. Warren (London: Macmillan, 1899), 19. Indeed, Tarde is very present in the Deleuzian method.

years, both of these journals have become internationally recognized spaces.

The Program in Contemporary and Comparative Latin American Studies houses one of our large projects associated with the digital humanities, AR.DOC (standing for Archivo Rubén Darío Ordenado y Centralizado: Obras Completas; in English, Organized and Centralized Rubén Darío Archive: Complete Works).

In 2015 we ascertained the state of neglect in which the work of Rubén Darío had been left. Darío is arguably the most important Spanish-language poet of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and undoubtedly the central figure of Spanish-language Latin American

poetry. In 2016 we presented the project of a new Complete Works to an international congress, a presentation that required deep archeological work beforehand.

Today, the Darío digital repository hosted by UNTREF is the largest dedicated to the poet, with some 1,300 objects available for free download. Rodrigo Caresani (executive editor of the archive), alongside Martín Paz (technical director of collections and archives), works on incorporating new documents to the archive. The previous series of Darío's Complete Works published by UNTREF will be digitalized (four series totaling 10,000 pages). The digital archive will also incorporate documents emerging from research for volumes in development, which draw from Darío's manuscripts in Mallorca, undiscovered or neglected until now.

In terms of collaboration, we work with the National Library of Chile, the Complutense University of Madrid, University of Notre Dame, Harvard University, and the University of Texas at Austin. The last three institutions have more than 8,000 documents. The cataloging of documents is precarious in all of the above cases, which is why we are redoing the cataloging. When these documents are added to the objects that already exist in the archive, it will be the most important repository dedicated to any Latin American author.

We can locate our efforts within a broader concern: specifically, how the era of digital reproducibility affects how we conceive of Latin American writers' archives and also opens possibilities of articulation for work and research that perhaps have gone unpublished. In effect, we find ourselves not only in a context

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of enormous proliferation of digital archives but also where marginalized bodies of work and displaced institutional spaces are able to acquire visibility.

We believe a network of Latin American archives—where we are putting our support and among which the Darío archive occupies a foundational spot—can upset a balance that has not been favorable to those of us who write, research, and teach in universities in the Global South. The possibility of a network of Latin American archives is a long-term goal that arose when we discovered that those of us who direct and research archival sources in Latin America are facing similar challenges. We understand that if we do not connect our repositories, we lose sovereignty, we lose readers, and we are condemned to repeat conceptual errors that our neighbors to the north already overcame.

As I have said, in our posthumanist inquiries we maintain the idea that to be is to be nameable and, at the same time, that we can only exercise a radical critique against the system of names because when all names are complicit in capture and discipline, what remains for us? What remains are the beings that speak, speaking beings.

We can paraphrase the above in the following terms, which are also Michel Foucault's: the problem is not language (as a system of names) but rather the voice, and above all, "the singing voice," which is like a voice in silence (the voice of power, which Foucault analyzed obsessively on the basis of his certitude, or the voice of the dispossessed and the subaltern, that murmur that faintly moves the waters of History). Power is always a voice tempered.

I admit our deep dissatisfaction, not only with regard to hegemonic models of the social sciences but also with regard to urgent thought, as well as the articulation between voice and class. The conditions of a strange knowledge likely pass through these dissatisfactions, a knowledge that cannot be established in positive science. This is a kind of knowledge that is at once delocalized, heterotopic, post-identity, and posthumanist (but not antihumanist).

The problem of names is a problem of the queer, which is a way of designating that which admits no name (no origin and no mandate). The queer should function as an orientation at once strategic and methodological; it is not names but rather unnameable singularities that matter: those are the bodies, those are the speaking beings.

To manipulate such knowledge outside the disciplinary order would allow us to fold it into other kinds of knowledge to give an account of a "Latin American thought" whose comprehensive map we still owe ourselves.

This implies a reconceptualization of the social history of our societies and a radical questioning of their presuppositions.

Naturally, such a perspective requires philosophical speculation as much as

historical, cultural, archeological analysis. It also requires, above all, an analysis of socially circulating discourses the subjects historically taken on by mechanisms of humiliation, subalternization, and fantasies of extermination.

If the relationship of contemporaneity with our present supposes a consideration of the eccentric, the trans, and the queer, not as choice but rather as destiny, the way in which we try to think about communities in the context of a completely broken society is understandable.

The question that unnameable, desubjectivized,¹³ singular voices maintain is not, and never was, about the history of the subject (past or present), but rather its future: “How to reproduce, and to what end?” is the unanswerable biopolitical that is allowed to be read in the fact that criticism (or *critical humanism*) sustains nihilism and Dionysian affirmation at the same time. The relationship of contemporaneity demands that we locate ourselves in a relationship of listening (and expectant silence) with regard to the somber question that unleashes the untimely.

But how to teach, how to develop a nonreproductive or nonreproductivist pedagogy, one that recovers the potential for transformation that the humanities once had, before it was confined to the chest of useless curiosities?

We might answer fantasies of canceling philology with the moth, one of the most ancient symbols of *unio mystica*, that lets itself be burned by the flame that attracts it, a flame that remains until the last instant obstinately unknown:

In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni.

We turn in a circle in the night and the fire consumes us.

Translated from the Spanish by Janet Hendrickson

¹³ *Desujetados* in the original Spanish. This neologism plays with the idea of the loss of subjectivity while also undoing the more literal meaning of its root word, *sujetar*, which can mean to hold, to fasten, and also to subject in the sense of dominate.—Trans.

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