

The World Humanities Report
**(Post)Humanities
and the University:
A Conversation**

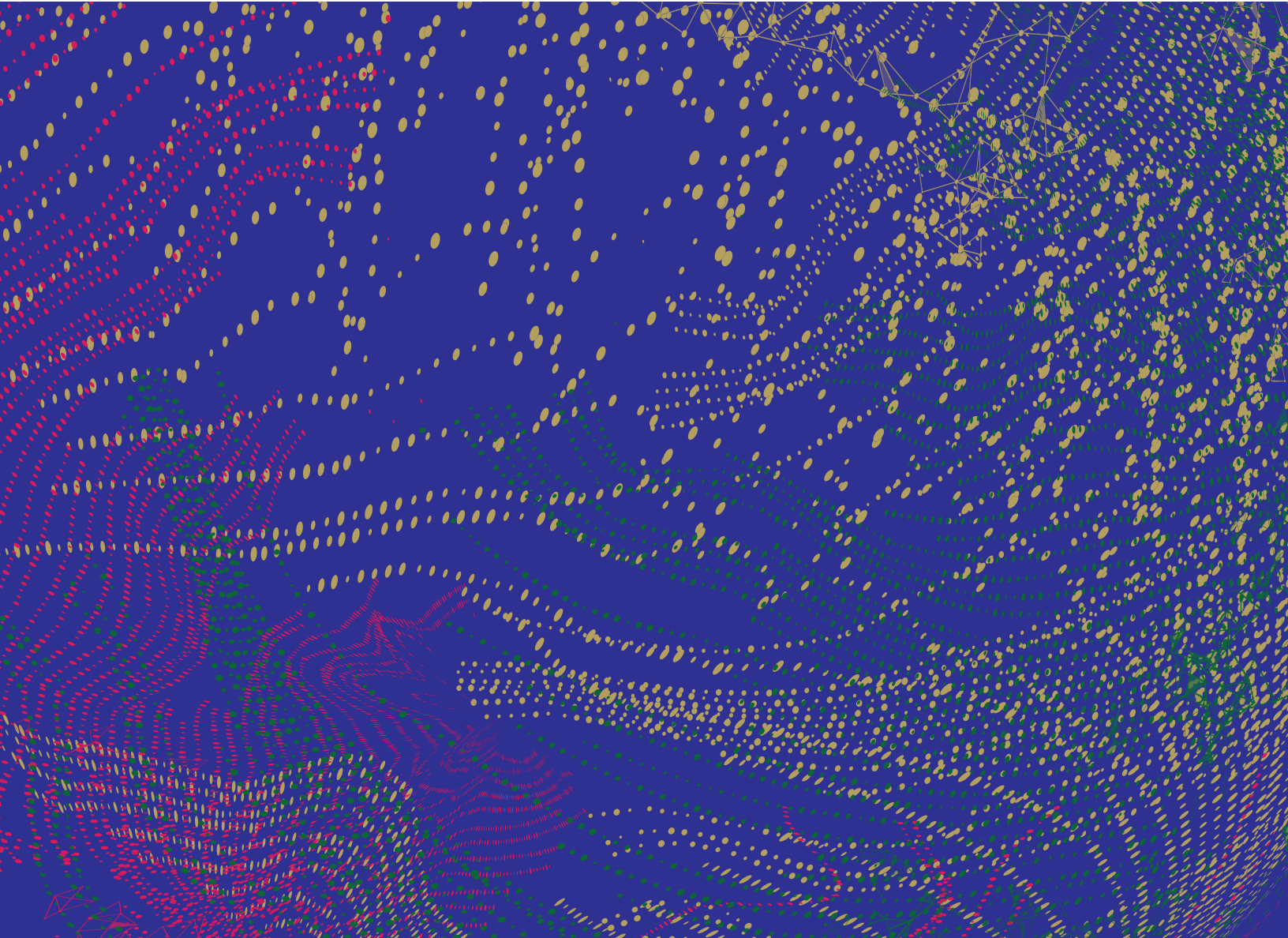
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(Post)Humanities and the University: A Conversation

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Willy Thayer: Resonating through the etymological dictionaries and their referential play, the noun *humanitatis* (humanities) is enfolded and unfolds from within the noun *humanitas* (humanity).¹ The term *humanitatis* (humanities) remains analytically, monadologically concerned with a collection of ethical dispositions specific to “human nature”: kindness, sensitivity, courtesy, friendliness, sweetness, clemency, refinement, goodness, grace, sensibility, ingenuity. To this cast we could add a second collection of dispositions more historical than natural in character: education, study, instruction, customs, culture, fine arts, liberal arts, and so on until we reach a profile of *humanitatis* (humanities) as something like “the most varied knowledges.” To this terminological cluster and the gradation around the word *humanitatis*, Latin dictionaries also seem to suggest a correlation between the terms in the first and second groups, such that friendliness, sensitivity, courtesy find their “equivalents” transported into education, study, and so forth. It is as if the dictionaries constructed a two-way rather than a one-way bridge between natural, ethical dispositions and their historical cultivation. We often notice this “bridge” when at school or on a bus we hear someone say in passing, “How friendly!” or “How polite!”²

What I am suggesting about *humanitas* (humanity) and *humanitatis* (humanities), however, takes place in the historical closure of the Latin dictionary, in its echoes and legacies, institutes and institutions, in its testament and testimonies, in the dialogue, conquest, imperiousness, translatability, war of languages, and linguistic ruins that slowly give form to that grammatically articulated totality we call the Latin language. The Latin language is inscribed, in turn, in the event

¹ This conversation took place during May and June 2021, thanks to an invitation from Sara Guyer and a group of South American academics and scholars to collaborate on a paper for a world report on the diverse conditions and modes of persistence of the humanities both within and alongside universities. To reciprocate, I invited Silvia Schwarzböck, Andrés Menard, Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott, and Elizabeth Collingwood-Selby to the conversation.

² In Spanish, the expression *bien educado*, which literally translates to “well educated,” is also used in common parlance to mean “polite.”—Trans.

of the phonetic alphabet and its writing, but also in the event of nonalphabetic writings refracted in it, or that overlay it, or are subsumed, subordinated, or exterminated along with the nonalphabetic humanities it contains. Genealogically we would have to admit that, when it comes to *humanitas* and *humanitatis* in Latin but also any other language, the identity of a language, of its humanity

What I would call the humanities would be that supplementary pause against the grain of the hegemony of the word itself, of its actual modes of existence in schools, universities, government-commercial programs, UNESCO professorships, consortia of all kinds...

and its humanities, is not the starting point but the effect, the result amidst contingency. To cite a notable bit of posthumously published juvenilia by Friedrich Nietzsche: “In periods of language growth, [one cannot speak of] ‘purity’ of speech; [it is spoken of only with reference] to an established language. Barbarisms, repeated frequently, finally trans-

form the language; thus the *koinē glōssa* [common language (*koinē* Greek)] arose, later the Byzantine *rōmaikē glōssa* [Roman language (‘Roman Greek’)], and finally the completely barbarized new Greek. Who knows how many barbarisms have worked in this way to develop the Roman language out of Latin? And, it was through these barbarisms and solecisms, that the good rule-bound French came about!” “‘Purity,’ then is positively the customary usage of the educated in society, which received its sanction through the *usus*, and the ‘impure’ is everything else which attracts attention in it.”³ Thus, the pure, identical, normal, and abnormal, the more-than-human, the less-than-human, the nonhuman are defined by that which does not surprise or interrupt, that which flows and communicates without creating distance or density in a dominant present, a familiarity. In this regard, we cannot forget that every empire, by virtue of being an empire, is a fragment, an accumulation of universalized ruins, and that a language, a linguistic identity, regardless of the effective reach of its rules of grammar and syntax, is also a fragment. A language is a condition for identity, humanity, or spectral inhumanity; for confrontation (imperial translation “that trips up” that “brings to a fall”⁴); for a supplementary translation, pure immanence, and

³ Friedrich Nietzsche and Carole Blair, “Nietzsche’s ‘Lecture Notes on Rhetoric’: A Translation,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 16, no. 2 (1983): 109–110, 109.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 41.

destabilization. Not the kind of immanence that awaits an action but the act of pure immanence without waiting or rather of pure waiting, destruction (per Walter Benjamin), hesitation.

From now on, I will translate the term *humanitas*—which the Latin dictionary remits to a constellation of natural-ethical or more natural dispositions and to their historical or more-than-historical cultivation—as the “event every time” of *humanitas* and its *humanitatis*, those variables that in each case are refracted according to the written stabilizations—some more hegemonic than others—of race, class, sex, gender, species, nation, territory, other, and their destabilizations. But also according to the kind of destabilization that suspends “human nature”—that compossibility/impossibility each time according to each language and its ethical and cultural dispositions—that makes it hesitate, places it (again) on a supplementary pause that makes the establishment of the hegemonic humanities tremble, that clears a new field *far from trends but intersecting many*. What I would still affirmatively call “humanities” would be that supplementary pause, against the grain of the hegemony of the word itself, of its actual modes of existence in schools, universities, government-commercial programs, UNESCO professorships, consortia of all kinds...

Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott: I would emphasize perhaps a timelier topic: the way that the diagnostic about the crisis of the humanities brings to the debate a politics of restoration and salvation of the canon and of tradition, as well as the ideal image of man with its historical and political limitations. Whether because we are confronting the undeniable contamination of the human sciences by discourses coming from biology; or because we are willing to abandon the signal ideas of Enlightenment modernity such as reason, species, humanity, universal history, subject, and even humankind in the name of “new” postcolonial and non-Western knowledges that have questioned the neutralizing and universalizing bases of modern humanistic discourse; or even because we take for granted the effective canceling of the humanities and the dissolution of the “two cultures” of the modern university since the onset of the naturalized dominion of a neoliberal university subsumed to the imperatives of accumulation and production—it is certain that the very notion of the “humanities” (and humanity) must be returned to the complex plane of its imperial history, its functionality understood either in terms of the Latin logic of the trivium and quadrivium or in terms of the shift from *paideia* to the *institutio et eruditio in bonas artes* that defined and *formed* (programmed) the whole man of classical and modern humanism.

Thinking here the crisis of the humanities cannot lead us to the simple restitution of its presumed centrality, of the *orto-paideia*, or basic pedagogy of the

Western tradition. It demands, instead, thinking the radical, centrifugal mutation of these humanities not only beyond the metaphysical or logocentric definition of man as the rational animal but also beyond the spiritual transformation of the world image from the perspective of culture or teleology. Peter Sloterdijk ironically spoke about “the new rules of the human zoo” not just to condemn Martin Heidegger’s implicit humanism in his “Letter on Humanism,” a letter that, of course, presupposed the humanist and epistolary world of communication among friends, but also to irritate those who advocated communicative reason as the basis for latter-day European democracy, those who still thought of humans as animals in possession of logos and of education as the spiritual programming of behavior.⁵ What is the difference between the spiritual and genetic programming of human beings? wonders Sloterdijk, temporarily allowing humanism’s naturalized presuppositions, which have instrumentalized education and the humanities. What is the Kantian discovery of the transcendental principles of reason when compared to decolonial claims about the complicity of reason and empire, knowledge and power in the Western world? wonder the decolonial thinkers who are determined to push for “de-linking” from every Western contamination. And lastly, What is the critique of ideology and the politics of truth when compared to the biopolitical array of practices for programming, domestication, optimization, and population control, practices that are either pre- or nondiscursive? wonder the analysts of contemporary biopower with its virtual and algorithmic modes of governmentality.

Thinking the humanities, the university, in this context cannot be equivalent to a simple restitution of its habitual modalities, a redeployment of the modern social contract (between the state and the national university), and the restoration of its inherent division of labor (theory and practice, conflict of the faculties). Thinking “the non-modern crisis of the modern humanities” means taking on this complex series of problems.⁶

Silvia Schwarzböck: On the basis of what has been outlined above, I will bring to the conversation three posthuman visions that, like flashes, considerably foreshadow the current state of the humanities: the posthuman humanities, the

⁵ Peter Sloterdijk, “Rules for the Human Zoo: A Response to the Letter on Humanism,” *Environment and Planning, D, Society & Space* 27, no. 1 (2009): 12–28; Martin Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 239–76.

⁶ The reference is to Willy Thayer, *La crisis no moderna de la universidad moderna* (Valparaíso: Ediciones Mimesis, 2020). An excerpt of the text has been translated into English: Willy Thayer, “The Non-Modern Crisis of the Modern University,” trans. Elizabeth Collingwood-Selby and Ramsey McGlazer, *Critical Times* 2, no.1 (April 2019): 59–84.—Trans.

humanities of the once human, and the humanities studied—and taught—by posthuman subjects.

The first vision appears as if in passing in an essay by Georges Bataille (“Hegel, Mankind and History” [1956]). The humanities—thought in the 1950s by a philosopher of the revolt and not the revolution—reinforce class differences; the sciences and technology tend to erase them. Bataille wrote: “The worker does not know what the engineer knows, but the value of the engineer’s knowledge does not escape him, as the interests of a surrealist writer escape him. This is not a matter of a scale of superior values, nor of a systematic scorn of disinterested values. It is a question of encouraging what brings people together and suppressing what separates them. It is, for mankind [in the historical moment of the *end of mankind* and the becoming Book of the Spirit] a reversal of the movement which had brought it to that point.”⁷

The second vision comes from an interview with Silvia Federici conducted by Colectivo Situaciones in New York on May 1, 2009, which appears in the epilogue to the Argentinean edition of Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*.⁸ Federici describes as a “great educational process” her experience living in Nigeria between 1984 and 1986, just as the International Monetary Fund’s structural adjustment program was beginning to affect society and universities, and participating in the student movement against this recolonizing program on behalf of capital and the new international division of labor. That experience made her realize that Karl Marx’s primitive accumulation is in fact ongoing accumulation and that feminism should be debating how to produce “the common.” The notion of the common “is a result of privatization, the attempt to appropriate and commodify the body, knowledge, the earth, air, and water.”⁹ The common, instead of the human, is the subject matter of the posthuman humanities.

A third vision of the posthuman humanities appears in Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik’s *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*, a book produced by Rolnik from the transcripts of conferences and conversations with Guattari during seven visits to Brazil between 1979 and 1982, the year Rolnik died.¹⁰ Actually, the vision emerges from a question Guattari asks himself about a conversation he had with

⁷ Georges Bataille, “Hegel, Mankind and History,” in *Georges Bataille: Essential Writings*, ed. Michael Richardson (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 132.

⁸ Silvia Federici, *Caliban y la bruja: Mujeres, cuerpo, y acumulación primitiva*, trans. Leopoldo Sebastián Touza and Verónica Hendel (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2011); Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004).

⁹ Federici, *Caliban y la bruja*, 392.

¹⁰ Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*, trans. Karel Clapshow and Brian Holmes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

Lula in 1982: Can a worker be the president of Brazil? Recast in Guattari's dialect, this musing becomes a question about the posthuman humanities: If culture is an obstacle to processes of singularization, then can a worker become president of Brazil *and* found universities (more universities than any previous president) that teach humanities for living a non-fascist life?¹¹

Andrés Menard: Our question about the humanities reminds me of a story that paleoanthropologists tell about an era more than 40,000 years ago in which *Homo sapiens* coexisted with “other humanities” (Neanderthals, Denisova hominins, perhaps even *Homo floresiensis*). By separating the definition of humanity from the species, this story, in a sense, entangles the posthuman future with the prehuman past: a future in which plural humanities coexist, biologically distinct but related by a common human denominator supplied by a technological supplement, which would distinguish them from all other primates. A debate arises about how human these other “humans” are—“humans” in quotation marks since they are outside the species—and then a second marker of humanity is proposed, a second supplement that anthropology used to call “the symbolic.” They would all be humanities, but some more human or more truly human than others by virtue of the luxury of making (more) useless things or at least not immediately useful things (adornments, funerals, drawings), things endowed with “disinterested,” or symbolic, value. Thus, we write a kind of origin myth of the humanities as that deviation of a dreaming, dilettante humanity compared to other humanities limited merely to engineering acumen.

According to such a genealogy, the humanities end up taking the place of luxuries, accursed shares,¹² and other forms of the supplement. If in fact they have the arresting potential to affirm the immediacy of mediations over their subordination to the immediacy of use and the useful, they also entail the potential impotency of interrupting themselves upon their actualization in the double utility of paideia or philanthropy. In this way, the interest of the disinterested can be inscribed in the logics of measure and value, as well as in the logics of hierarchy and distribution on the basis of canons and the regimentation of their property.

The transparent universal value of the humanities would correspond to the outlook of an equally universal and equally transparent accessibility. But this pretense of transparency seems to be inseparable from the opacity whether of

¹¹ Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was the president of Brazil in 2003–2010. In 1980 he was a founding member of the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores) and its first president.—Ed.

¹² The term in Spanish is *partes malditas*, a reference to Bataille's *la part maudite*. See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, trans. Robert Hurley, 3 vols. (New York: Zone Books, 1991–1993).—Trans.

this epistolary sect or that aristocracy of disinterest. As if exoteric philanthropy always implied an esoteric pedagogy, an esotericism of disinterested values only made valuable by the more or less arduous work to initiate oneself into them.

In this way, the history of the humanities could be read as the history of the human producing humanities, in the sense of producing its Neanderthals and the symbolic medium that distinguishes humanities from Neanderthals. At the same time, the history of the humanities could be thought of as the inheritance of or competence in ways of symbolically monetizing uselessness. In this context and in this sense of the human and its humanities, posthumanism could be a discipline of the humanities that can afford to broaden its canon to include knowledges that are useless not only for scientific-technical knowledge but also for its own practices of the esoteric valorization of knowledge. Specifically, I am thinking about the current supply (or demand) of local, ancestral, or indigenous knowledges as academic inputs or human heritage, which may mean endowing them with an esoteric value or, rather with, an esoteric condition valorizable as such, which is then standardized to meet the criteria of dissemination and exoteric exchange outlined by the modern university or postmodern “knowledge economies” (and their modulation of rites of passage into learning goals and search algorithms). But inviting these subaltern knowledges to the classroom of the human—in addition to recognizing their potential for humanist valorization, that is, their quantification in terms of units of labor that dissipate their esotericism (knowledges [*conocimientos*], credits, competencies, etc.)—can be read as the humanist version of primitive accumulation, as an academic extractivism taken to new frontiers of uselessness. For this reason, the philanthropic recognition of these other humanities runs the risk of conflicting with their property claims to incommunicability. We will have to see whether this incommunicability will find strength in some more or less paradoxical form of the common (for example, a community of untranslatables or communities in translation?) or if, on the contrary, it will be made profitable as an instrument for speculating on the (posthuman?) humanities market.

Elizabeth Collingwood-Selby: In her call for papers, Sara Guyer, the director of the World Humanities Report, posed a question, among others, about “the forms, platforms, and institutions in and through which the humanities are constructed, both inside and alongside the university,” and she clarifies that the term humanities—a term that “is not always used and may even seem arcane”—refers here “as much to a set of objects (literature, philosophy, arts) as to a set of methods and practices (critical theory, interpretation, philology).” It strikes

me as symptomatic that it would be necessary to define or explicate what we are calling “humanities” in this specific context, namely, the defense of the humanities in the midst of a crisis of the humanities. This symptom is multiplied and radicalized by the forgoing conversation which seems to resist assuming any definition or terminological delineation that might appear merely strategic or pragmatic even when that delineation, that stabilization of terms would likely make possible an unvarnished defense of the humanities in an era of planetary neoliberalism in which the humanities find themselves ever more intensely and concretely attacked, challenged, and threatened.

At the same time, the website that announces the forthcoming World Humanities Report states: “The World Humanities Report is an initiative to demonstrate the rich, varied, and necessary contributions the humanities have made, and are making, to knowledge and society throughout the world. The Report will identify and describe where and how the humanities are flourishing, and, on this basis, it will set forth a strategic agenda for ensuring that they continue to thrive in the twenty-first century.” At least some of the interventions made in this conversation, and I will continue to emphasize this, seem to move in the opposite direction, opening these “contributions” and their “flourishing” to the bottomless bottom of a genealogy that associates them with and implicates them in a historical, political, and pedagogical project of the West’s imperial, colonial, patriarchal linguistic, racial, and speciesist domination, a project that in more than one sense can be read as the keystone of neoliberal capitalist development that has unleashed and exacerbated the crisis of the humanities.

In our conversation, the crisis of the humanities is also the crisis of humanity and of the human. We cannot speak of the humanities without asking about the human of these humanities and in these humanities, about the humanities of the human, and also, of necessity today, about the posthuman and the posthuman humanities. But as Sergio has also pointed out, we would have to ask ourselves about the “nature” of the crisis or crises that we label “the crisis of the humanities.” Is it a humanist or a posthumanist crisis of the humanities? A human or a posthuman crisis of the human? A human or a posthuman crisis of the humanities?

Something in this reminds me of what Gilles Deleuze, in the fourth lecture of his “Seminar on the Apparatuses of Capture and War Machines,” calls “an adventure” in classical political economy. The reference is to marginalism—the “theory of the last object”—which basically holds that value is founded neither on labor nor utility but on marginal utility, that is the value of “the last object or of

the last producer ... [that] fixes the value of all the terms of the series.”¹³ I believe that this occurs to me because of what Deleuze says about this “adventure,” that this theory which “was obviously designed to take account of capitalism and the capitalist market ... shifts direction and is discovered to have a field of application in non-capitalist formations.”¹⁴ Much of what is traditionally a part of this history *turns around* or *is turned around*. Despite belonging to this history—as defined by the canon, period, a certain tradition, and a certain concept of history—this object cannot simply be inscribed in it, cannot be conceived as just another “object” or “practice” among recognized historical objects and practices, because *turning around* alters the very definition of “history,” of the canon, of the period in which it is supposedly inscribed.

A second reason that I’m thinking of this passage in Deleuze actually has a lot to do with the first. I am thinking the following formulation: “the last one before the assemblage is forced to change ... will be called ‘the marginal’ or ‘the borderline object’ or ‘the borderline character,’” the last object or character that can be included in the series “before the assemblage is forced to change.”¹⁵ To make an analogy that likely won’t hold, I ask if one could think about a last object, a last writing, a last theory, even a last “humanity,” even a last crisis, a marginal crisis of the humanities that would determine or would have determined the value of the entire “series,” its whole history, and if one could think the change of assemblage unleashed by the eruption of a new writing, a new theory, a new crisis—the current crisis?—that would force or would have forced a change in the assemblage of the humanities, such that we would no longer know for certain what to call it. Or perhaps, we would have to think, rather, that the critical event of the humanities is and has always been, in every case and in every writing, an event that—in the middle of the series, in the middle of the history of the humanities and of the human—to echo Walter Benjamin, sets off the *continuum* of the series, the *continuum* of its history?

Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott: After this first round, and thanks to Elizabeth’s observations, it is clear that when faced with the question of the humanities, it is not enough to simply take a position, whether in favor of a broad dissolution of its

¹³ Gilles Deleuze, “Seminar on the Apparatuses of Capture and War Machines, 1979–1980: Lecture 04, 27 November 1979,” transl. Charles J. Stivale, transcr. Annabelle Dufourcq and Charles J. Stivale, in *The Deleuze Seminars: New English Translations of Gilles Deleuze’s Paris Lectures*, ed. Nicolae Morar and Thomas Nail, <https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/lectures/en/ATP%20V-4a-StateApp-27-11-79%20Eng.pdf>.

¹⁴ Deleuze, “Seminar.”

¹⁵ Deleuze, “Seminar.”

criteria and canons or in favor of a recuperation in the face of the technocratic threats posed by today's algorithmic governmentality. This is because the very question of the humanities, as Willy and Andrés point out, always entails a conception of the human that is constituted by its demarcation from the in-human, the prehuman,

The task, then, is to reimagine the humanities beyond the economies of nomos (territory) and hegemony (power) that have limited and instrumentalized them according to the imperative of a universalizing project.

and even, returning to Silvia's intervention, the forms made possible by the various discourses about the posthuman. Without exaggeration, we can say that to think the question of the humanities leads us directly to thinking its "history," its "meaning," and even its "future" in the sense that we have

historically thought the humanities as the seat of judgment that allows us to understand our difference from the animal, the condition of our species, our potentialities, and, in a certain sense, our very future.

In modern Western thought, Immanuel Kant's philosophy is perhaps the place where these questions appear fundamentally related to one another, perhaps for the first time. To put it rashly, if Kant reacted to the theological demands of the de facto power of his time as well as the historical events that blazed the path of that extraordinary history (Enlightenment, revolution, war), proposing a certain idea of the university and materialized universality in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, on the inside complemented by *A Perpetual Peace* and the federation of European nations on the outside, a cosmopolitical project that took European humanity as its model, the question of the humanities now in this globalized world traversed by the devastating dynamics of the flexible accumulation of capital and its consequences (the crises of migration, public health, violence, war, etc.) should at least push us to think the humanities beyond the Kantian model and its grand politics, a humanities capable of sheltering the various dynamics that have emerged out of the ruins of modern cosmopolitanism and its republican political model anchored in the figure of the citizen.¹⁶ In fact, what Jacques Derrida has termed democracy to come (*à venir*), that democracy that has never existed but that it would behoove us to make into the very heart of the humanities and the university without conditions, such a concept of democracy to come should allow us to think the interruption of the humanities'

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 1992); Immanuel Kant, "Toward a Perpetual Peace," in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 311–52.

historical continuity, its politics and meaning, which Elizabeth spoke about at the end of her intervention, and to open ourselves to that *à venir* which is the horizon of possibility for a humanities and a university liberated from the rhetoric of endings and crisis and therefore open to the profane, unforeseeable condition of history. These would be non-disciplinary, decentered, non-humanist, non-ethnocentric, non-hegemonic humanities that far beyond constituting a “regulatory lower faculty” of today’s knowledge regime (judgment/critique), would instead become a space of subtraction or a void where institutional knowledges enter into crisis and find themselves adrift in the world.

The task, then, is to reimagine the humanities beyond the economies of *nomos* (territory) and hegemony (power) that have limited and instrumentalized them according to the imperative of a universalizing project, which, in the best case, is related to the expansion of European cosmopolitanism and, in the worst case, appears to be updating the old project of the *pax imperium* based on the metaphysical definition of knowledge and truth according as the logic of *veritas* and *adequatio*. The task now is not to opt for one of these alternatives, *pax universalis* or universalized European cosmopolitanism, as if their differences still made any difference in a world that is effectively globalized. Rather, the task is to imagine the humanities, and along with them the contemporary university, beyond the logic of hegemony that sets the relations between knowledge, power, legitimation, and sovereignty.

But what might all this mean? What can non-sovereign, non-nomic, non-hegemonic, non-disciplinary, and even less humanist humanities do when it comes to the modern university and the legitimating relationship that the modern university has maintained with the modern, sovereign state? It is here that the problem becomes undeniably urgent, not only due to the steady transformation of the university in general, as much in Latin America as in the United States and Europe, thanks to accelerated processes of privatization and modernization (the Brunner Plan,¹⁷ the Bologna Process,¹⁸ etc.) that have reorganized universities’ plans and programs, their curricula and study regimes,

¹⁷ José Joaquín Brunner is one of the leading sociologists of education in Chile who has frequently advised the Chilean government on issues concerning higher education. During the post-dictatorship administration of Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle (1994–2000), Brunner headed the Commission to Study Higher Education and the Council of Technical Assessors, which in 1994 recommended the “modernization” of Chilean higher education. The plan only consolidated the commodification of Chilean higher education, a process begun in 1980 under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.—Ed.

¹⁸ The Bologna Process is an ongoing series of meetings since 1999 among education ministers from Europe and adjacent countries with the intention of harmonizing higher education standards. Critics of the Bologna Process see it as part of the neoliberalization of European higher education through the implanting of audit culture and other managerial forms and techniques that hail from the business sector.—Ed.

their sources of funding and organizational criteria. But also because this general process of accelerated modernization has prompted the very redefinition of the classic social contract between the nation-state and the university upon inscribing private, corporate economic interests in the heart of the university, making possible a new social contract between university, state, and sovereign, post-state market. How do we define the imperative of higher education and the “formative” role of the humanities in this new “neoliberal social contract?” What is the importance of the humanist university in light of the demands of the technical professional market and the management of generalized exchange? How to think the emergence of disciplines responsive to this conjuncture such as critical management, digital humanities, intelligent design, and the cyber disciplines?

And at the same time, how to think the relationship between the humanities and the university, between the humanities and the nation-state in this environment of rapid change? Would the hard-won recuperation of the sovereign state be enough, one with a greater role in setting the mission and goals of the university? Would it still be pertinent to think the university, in general, as a space naturally tasked with teaching and cultivating the humanities despite the university’s clear disregard and its ever-greater subjugation to the productivity standards set by “hard,” or quantifiable, disciplines? If in the nineteenth century a humanistic education was considered an introduction, or propaedeutic, to the liberal, professional life of adults, what can we say today given that humanistic disciplines remain part of general education and liberal formation, that the professional practice of the humanities has been neutralized by the contemporary university’s criteria of relevance and excellence that Bill Readings called at the end of the last century, the *university in ruins*?¹⁹

These many questions do not intend to bury another line of questioning about the historical function of the humanities. I am referring not to the ideal image of their function but rather the overall function of humanities that—as Michel Foucault and Edward Said have so eloquently shown us—served precisely as a counterweight to the West’s imperialism and epistemic regimes for knowing and organizing the world. Political economy, linguistics, philosophy, history, anthropology, literature, and philology even before the human sciences were recodified by today’s social so-called sciences (sociology, psychology, economics now reduced to its technical form), these were all sites for articulating a specific story about humans and other species, about history and its meaning, about the canon and tradition, culture and its values. Above all, the humanities were

¹⁹ Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

discursive instances that legitimated and naturalized a specific image of the world and culture, humanity and its destiny, order and democracy, one always limited to the economy of nomos and hegemony that is proper to modern university thought.

How to think the humanities beyond the conventional notion of crisis and naïve attempts at recuperation? How to think the humanities beyond the frame of the sovereign nation-state but desisting from the technical-managerial imperatives of the sovereign, post-state market? I would dare suggest that what is at stake here is not, cannot be the promise of a new knowledge about the world. Perhaps today, more than ever before, the question of dwelling finally becomes thinkable, that is, the question of a humanities “capable” of thinking the question of dwelling as the condition of possibility for a democracy not limited to the theological-sovereign milestones of modern political thought (identity, citizenship, belonging, community, etc.).

Silvia Schwarböck: Elizabeth’s intervention, like the last one by Sergio, revisits the objective of Sara Guyer’s call for papers—a call that hopes to identify places where the humanities are flourishing and, in this way, institutionally advocate for the flourishing of the humanities, not just for their de(con)struction. Elizabeth asks the question of the last crisis of the humanities, the marginal crisis, one able to endow the entire series with value before it is reassembled. Here one might recall the 1970s in light of Susan Sontag’s new sensibility as the time of the last crisis, the crisis that transfigured the status of the humanities inside out. If the humanities trail behind this new sensibility, they are reactionary (the academy, Parnassus, canon). If in “One Culture and the New Sensibility,” one of the essays in *Against Interpretation*, Sontag can joke about “literary intellectuals and the (retrograde) ways they hold onto old aesthetic categories,” it is because, for her, the new sensibility, the 1970s sensibility, embodies a culture *contrary* to the humanities, that is, a nonliterary culture that includes “certain painters, sculptors, architects, social planners, film-makers, TV technicians, neurologists, musicians, electronics engineers, dancers, philosophers, and sociologists” and, she makes clear, “only a few” poets and writers. The authors of the founding texts of the new sensibility are, for her, “Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Artaud, C. S. Sherrington, Buckminster Fuller, Marshall McLuhan, John Cage, André Breton, Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Siegfried Gideon, Norman O. Brown, and György Kepes.”²⁰

²⁰ Susan Sontag, “One Culture and the New Sensibility,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 298.

Just as Sontag positions herself in 1966 at the helm of the will to resuscitate the humanities under the aegis of the new sensibility (after having killed them), she does so again in the 1996 reissue of *Against Interpretation*, where she writes the famous afterword “Thirty Years Later,” in which she revises her enthusiasm for the new sensibility:

What I didn't understand (I was surely not the right person to understand this) was that seriousness itself was in the early stages of losing credibility in the culture at large, and that some of the more transgressive art I was enjoying would reinforce frivolous, merely consumerist transgressions. Thirty years later, the undermining of standards of seriousness is almost complete, with the ascendancy of a culture whose most intelligible, persuasive values are drawn from the entertainment industries. Now the very idea of the serious (and of the honorable) seems quaint, ‘unrealistic,’ to most people, and when allowed—as an arbitrary decision of temperament—probably unhealthy, too.²¹

With this self-revision and along with the *serious* destinations she travelled to (Hanoi, Cuba, China, South Africa, Sarajevo), Sontag becomes an icon of the crusade for post-1970s seriousness.

When the humanities are rehabilitated as a reservoir of seriousness—and Sontag as the apostle of this rehabilitation—they do it, we might say, as *castrated* knowledges. Just as León Rozitchner speaks of castrated democracy (a democracy of the castrated) when referring to Argentina's post-dictatorship governments, we might also perhaps speak of castrated knowledges when referring to the posthuman humanities: the human is associated with fear, and fear penetrates theory to the point that thought becomes good, soft, self-disciplined, and serious without trying.²² Theoretical satisfaction comes from the fact that posthuman materialisms might not be as dangerous as the old materialisms once were. The posthuman, conceived from within the posthuman humanities understood as castrated knowledges, could be—as Andrés suggests—a prehuman rearguard. The humanity's posthumanism, with its rejection of the human and its materialist rediscovery of the nonhuman, often seems like a way of surviving, to the extent possible, this type of castration that Rozitchner does well to point out is characteristic of post-dictatorship life.

In light of this state of castration, posthumanist materialism should mark a new beginning, a point of return to seriousness (if it is not to be, simply, high

²¹ Susan Sontag, “Afterword: Thirty Years Later,” in *Against Interpretation*, 390.

²² León Rozitchner, “Cuando el pueblo no se mueve, la filosofía no piensa” [When the people aren't moving, philosophy isn't thinking], in *Conversaciones en el impasse: Dilemas políticos del presente*, ed. Colectivo Situaciones (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón Ediciones, 2009), 95–134.

seriousness, institutionalized seriousness, the seriousness of high culture but now with a broader field of possible objects).

This posthumanism of the humanities should be no less than cannibal. Instead of a castrated knowledge, a cannibal knowledge. Oswald de Andrade claimed in the cannibal manifestos the right to cannibalism. The conquistador's culture deserves to be swallowed whole along with the conquistador himself. But the cannibal only devours those enemies he considers courageous, worthy antagonists, not mere enemies. One has to learn, then, how to choose one's enemies. What is imperial about the humanities is their non-knowledge, in other words, the mere self-knowledge of the Idea, the imposition of the Spirit-Book, in short a veritable hegelianade.²³

"Manifesto of Pau-Brasil Poetry" from 1924 and the "Cannibalist Manifesto" from 1928 represent an aesthetic revolt against "Christian and Western culture" that was implanted in America by the conquest (a formulation clarified by Leon Ferrari in his artwork *La civilización occidental y cristiana* [Western Christian civilization] [1965]). There is no irony in the cannibal manifestos (although there is humor, black humor à la André Breton, à la Luis Buñuel, à la Raúl Ruiz). Nor is there paradox, as in the Dada manifestos. There is, to be sure, a seriousness that is inseparable from black humor. There is violence, the violence of the oppressed, Fanonian violence practiced as an aesthetics: the aesthetics of hunger, as in Glauber Rocha's films, an aesthetics of the bad savage. That is why we have black humor instead of self-irony: one who is oppressed, however cultivated, cannot say to another oppressed person, "Cannibalism signifies nothing" or "Have a good look at me! I'm an idiot ... I'm like the rest of you," as Tristan Tzara could say.²⁴ The reader of the cannibal manifestos is no bourgeois in waiting. If he were, not only would the cannibal be like him, but neither of them would be able to eat anyone.

"We were never catechized." "[W]e never permitted the birth of logic among us." "We never had grammars, nor collections of old plants." "We already had Communism. We already had Surrealist language. The Golden Age." "We had Politics, which is the science of distribution." "We already had justice, the codification of vengeance." Spirit, in America "refuses to conceive a spirit without

²³ The reference here is to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The term "hegelianade" is a trope of "robinsonade," a subgenre of survivalist fiction in the mode of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) that emphasizes key elements of Western modernity including individualism, technological progressivism, and colonialist civilizational discourses.—Ed.

²⁴ Tristan Tzara et al., "Twenty-Three Manifestos of the Dada Movement," trans. Ian Monk, in *The Dada Reader: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Dawn Ades (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 183.

a body.”²⁵ Now we have the scholarly side that we learned from the white man: “we made everything erudite.”²⁶ For this reason, we have to learn cannibalism. “Cannibalism alone unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically.”²⁷ “The forest and the school.”²⁸ Together these quotations are in some sense an attack on the castration of the posthuman humanities and a (maximalist, extreme) program for their new beginning, decentered, freed from imperial logos.

Willy Thayer: The first of the three “posthuman visions” that Silvia referred to in her first intervention “appears as if in passing in an essay by Bataille ... a philosopher of the revolt and not the revolution.” I will tarry with this passage by Silvia in order to insert into the conversation the recent Chilean revolt²⁹ refracted through regional revolts in Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Haiti, Colombia—what Sergio has elsewhere called the growing crisis—and the hubris—of neoliberal governmentality under Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Mauricio Macri, Sebastián Piñera, even Iván Duque and the continuation of *uribismo*.³⁰ I will tarry with this passage by Silvia to add to the conversation, in her words, a certain *posthumanist materialism* that seems to resonate in the revolt against the humanism and the humanities of the revolution, a topic that Sergio also alluded to above in passing when he spoke of thinking “beyond the Kantian model.” Rosi Braidotti has argued that the performance of the “posthumanist” and the “posthumanities” shows the fascist nature (blind or dogmatic?) of the general category of revolution—modern, tragic, dramatic, narrative, teleological, imperial—and the epic virility, racism, and sexism that come with it and

²⁵ Oswald de Andrade, “The Cannibalist Manifesto,” trans. Leslie Bary, *Latin American Literary Review* 19, no. 38 (July–December 1991): 38–42.

²⁶ Oswald de Andrade, “Manifesto of Pau-Brazil Poetry,” trans. Stella M. de Sá Rego, special issue, “Brazilian Literature,” *Latin American Literary Review* 14, no. 27 (January–June 1986): 184.

²⁷ Andrade, “Cannibalist,” 38.

²⁸ Andrade, “Pau-Brazil,” 187.

²⁹ The reference here is to the 2019 cycle of protests variously known as the Social Revolt (Revuelta Social), Social Outburst (Estallido Social), and #ChileDespertó (Chile Has Awoken). The protests began in response to mass transit fare hikes in the Santiago metro area and spread throughout the country to indict forty years of social inequality under Chile’s neoliberal development model. The demonstrations were the largest in the country’s history; on October 25, 2019, it is estimated that 1.2 million persons, around 7 percent of the population, protested in the streets.—Ed.

³⁰ Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott, “Neoliberalismo y gobernabilidad: La Revuelta en Chile y sus alcances (parte 1)” [Neoliberalism and governability: The Chilean Revolt and its reach (part 1)], *Revista Común*, November 15, 2019, <http://revistacomun.com/blog/ineoliberalismo-y-gobernabilidad-la-revuelta-y-sus-alcances-1/>. Uribismo refers to the political program associated with Colombian President Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002–2010) that combines neoliberalism, social conservatism, right populism, and corporatism. Uribismo is promoted by the Centro Democrático (Democratic Center), the party of current president Iván Duque Márquez (2018–).—Ed.

that come with its operative ideas about vanguard, advance, progress, break, foundation, antagonism, and drama. But also the pivotal notion of action, the act, facts, judgment, finality, the operative metaphysics of representation that modulates the institutional performativity of the revolution: its theatre and tribunals; its museums, school and universities; its parliament, libraries, and canons; its urban setting; its heroes and altars, triumphal arches and ephemera; its treatises on painting, physiognomy, the passions; its maps, cosmopolitanism, and the pornography of its anthropological albums, clinical and police catalogs, the picturesque and exotic; its economy of accumulation, unending growth of private or state capital, of the violence(s) of the revolution. The continual modernization of the revolution, but also, of course, the modernization of the critical apparatus, of critical philosophy, and of the modernisms that issue from the revolution. From the performance of the revolt, would not the critique and modernism of the metaphysics of representation appear dogmatically constituted without thematizing the racist, sexist, humanist-speciesist legacy of the revolution and its critique? What would be the relationship between revolution, critique, modernism, and *Geschlecht*.³¹ Dogmatism would be—we cannot not suggest a definition after associating it with blindness and with a blindness like fascism—more than the arbitrary universalization of convictions, the implementation of unintentional presuppositions or conditions: “nothing is so firmly believed, as what we least know.”³² Dogmatism would be less the intransigent affirmation of an opinion or doctrine and more the careless application of unforeseen conditions. The effective source of dogmatism turns out to be more the unthematic, inertial use of presuppositions in any environment, assumptions that unknowingly instruct that which they supposedly destroy.

I will go back a bit to pick up and add to the conversation the topic of an a-human materialism that seems to vibrate in the revolt against the grain of the humanism and humanities of the revolution. Because what would be the humanities of the revolt, if any? Perhaps it has none? It seems it could not

³¹ See Derrida’s usage of the German term *Geschlecht*, which signifies race, species, sex, and lineage. Jacques Derrida, “*Geschlecht*: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference,” *Research in Phenomenology* 13, no. 1 (1983): 65–83; Jacques Derrida, “*Geschlecht* II: Heidegger’s Hand,” in *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Sallis, trans. John P. Leavey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 161–96; Jacques Derrida, “Heidegger’s Ear: Philopolemology (*Geschlecht* IV),” in *Reading Heidegger: Commemorations*, ed. John Sallis, trans. John P. Leavey (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 163–218; Jacques Derrida, *Geschlecht III: Sex, Race, Nation, Humanity*, ed. Geoffrey Bennington, Katie Chenoweth, and Rodrigo Therezo, trans. Katie Chenoweth and Rodrigo Therezo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).—Trans.

³² Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Works of Michel Montaigne*, ed. Willian Carew Hazlitt, trans. Charles Cotton (London: J. Templeman, 1842), 93.

have humanities so long as its performance consists only of interrupting, breathing counter the humanist humanities among those that emerge profaning whatever impedes “the ‘anarchic’ distribution of nomadic multiplicities.”³³ This assumes, in more than one way, that the eardrum has been ripped from the humanities in their hegemonically prejudiced institutions. And having ripped it out through those institutions—for there could be no other place, and much less some recourse to the outside—or having *created* an institution that would come into being as it undoes the previous one, that undoing would be its (de) constituting. In this sense, the revolt is an unworking, undoing, or detoxification that erodes the humanities of the revolution, of speciesism, racism, sexism—again—the performative, inertial dogmatism of its institutions and institutes, of its democracy bounded by the state of the revolution. And its modernisms too? A detoxification that preserves without foundation, like “the last one of the series” that Elizabeth talked about, the last one that “turns around” its whole history, the last one that breathes in the abyss of a pure destitution that makes it impossible for the revolt to circumscribe itself in the finality of a “new” constitution of the humanities. If a new constitution of the humanities merely as posthumanities were the horizon of the revolt and not the horizonless mutation of pure destitution, then we would have experienced less a revolt and more a program. The revolt, the conjuncture (its democracy to come?) cannot aim at horizons, goals, ends without extinguishing itself as such, as if it could find refuge and stability without dying in the arena of finality, in an act. To view the revolt through the lens of refounding turns it into a program. Or, rather, that which is programmatic in any constituting must be viewed from the wasteland of the revolt, a revolt that cannot be subsumed to programming, refoundation, revolution. I will interject here, somewhat belatedly, a quote from Braidotti, extremely abbreviated given the limited space we have: “I think revolution today is a fascist concept. I think the people who use ‘revolution’ are the right-wingers ... who see conservatism as the real revolution bringing back the real values, bringing back the real and authentic notion of God nation, family, the usual rubbish.”³⁴ The traditional Left is trapped in the stabilizations of the central conflict of revolutions within the hegemony of the revolution.

The revolt taking place in different locations *drums* the eardrum of

³³ David Lapoujade, *Aberrant Movements: The Philosophy of Gilles Deleuze*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 254.

³⁴ CCCB (@cececebe), “Rosi Braidotti: ‘Revolution is a fascist concept’ A talk with the philosopher about what does it mean to be human in a changing world,” Twitter, April 6, 2019, <https://twitter.com/cececebe/status/1114430101930823682>.

the “Copernican–Kantian revolution,” one could say, as the matrix of the anthropological, humanist revolution, in the sense of humanities and modern citizenship and the central conflict in revolutions and revolutionary imaginaries.

Depending on its differing locations, if the revolution, that fragment among fragments or modes of production (worlds), touches its “internal universe” anywhere, exercising its paideia as an invisible church, functioning through touch, passing through bodies, producing realities (in Michel Foucault’s formulation), naturalizing them in the mythology, the immediacy of common sense and its structures of recognition and perception, then the performance of the revolt cracks the question of institutional humanities and the humanisms of institutions, democracies, dictatorships, states, and revolutions in Latin America, their saints, heroes, signs, symbols, gestures, and cultural documents. Such documents can no longer be considered without fear, to use Benjamin’s words, as soon as you experience them from the cloud of the dust, the testimony that the revolt has kicked up. This does mean to militate for change from within the literal destruction of images and institutions in which the imperial humanities of the revolution glimmer with self-regard. The revolt tears at empathy, shakes the memorial of crimes in the fatuous gesture of their aestheticization, “it eclipses whatever the world has to offer us.”³⁵ This is like saying that the whole world of revolution collapses into the pure, contentless promise of the revolt whose performance not only pushes counter-hegemonically against hegemony but a-hegemonically desists, unworks hegemony. A revolt inscribed only in hegemony, for example, in the conflict structured by Left and Right, is still a revolt within revolution and one that will play along with the neoliberal “revolt,” which is but a homonym for a-hegemonic revolt. The Chilean constitution adopted in 1980 under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet was much more a revolt against the *state* and the *revolution*, but a fascist, neoliberal one that sought to restore certain inclinations as substantive values. In any case, the trace of the October revolt could have germinated only amidst a possibility that enveloped but did not involve it. By the same token, the event of the revolt does not constitute a new organ of perception that was already there but rather the event without organs of a parallel perception. A mutation. As Braidotti suggests, one will have to place metamorphosis at the center (without center), what Deleuze might call *the continual changing of nature*, the continual changing of the event (*acontecimiento*), of the assemblage.³⁶ This would be an event that is always occurring (*acontecer*)

³⁵ Idris Robinson, “The Revolt Eclipses Whatever the World Has to Offer,” interview by Gerardo Muñoz, *Tillfällighetsskrivande*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.tillfallighet.org/tillfallighetsskrivande/the-revolt-eclipses-whatever-the-world-has-to-offer-bsp-idris-robinson>.

³⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (New York: Polity, 2002).

otherwise, an event that avoids stabilizing into a coming-into-being: “I’d have to be really quick / to describe clouds— / a split second’s enough / for them to start being something else. // Their trademark: / they don’t repeat a single / shape, shade, pose, arrangement.”³⁷

The critical event of the humanities is...
the always critical ungrounding of its
imperialism, universalism, sexism, racism,
speciesism, and so on...
This is precisely what it makes sense
to defend.

I will constellate a few formulations that, throughout this conversation, tease the direct or indirect encoding of an *a-human materialism* that reaches out toward the drumming that the revolt wields against the eardrum of the

revolution, formulations that turn out to be rather elusive and should remain so, an elusiveness that need not be seen as a mark of failure in their formulation. In this case, elusiveness would be inversely proportional to the failure of their formulation, and it is this non-failure of the formulation of elusive formulations, this destituent writing, in which the (non)university performance running counter to the humanities of the university of the revolution is engrossed. (Could there even be a university of the revolt?) In this conversation, we find among these names or formulas, as guesswork and citation of scriptural temptations, at least the following formulations: “act of imminence,” “supplementary pause”; “site of subtraction,” “of an emptiness”; “the common instead of the human,” “a posthumanism no less than cannibal,” “an attack on the castration of the posthuman humanities”; “the incommunicable of the common,” “a community of untranslatables”; “limit person or object, the last of its entire series,” the “turning around” the “leap into assemblage,” “castration,” and “à venir.”

Elizabeth Collingwood-Selby: I would like to continue insisting on a kind of unstable diagnostic about the “crisis of the humanities” that echoes through the waves of this conversation, and also about the aporias that today inevitably multiply when it comes to thinking and “effectively” mounting a “defense of the humanities.”

Clearly, as has already been mentioned here, “crisis of the humanities” is not one thing in one historico-political context that might be presumed to be consistent, homogenous, or linear. The crisis of the humanities would be and

³⁷ Wisława Szymborska, “Clouds,” trans. Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh, Wisława Szymborska Foundation, <https://www.szymborska.org.pl/en/wislawa/selected-poems/clouds/>.

would occur as a “crisis of the crisis” and also as a crisis of context, among other things.

Perhaps too schematically I would associate the present crisis of the humanities—a present that implicates “its whole history”—with a kind of ungrounding or, rather, with a double ungrounding, two different classes of ungrounding: one I would tentatively call “internal” and the other “external.”

The “internal” ungrounding of the humanities remits us to the crisis unleashed in the humanities by/in the critical event, always singular, of the humanities—by/in the humanities as events, as critical writings. It is an ungrounding (unfounding) of the humanist revolution by revolt, to go back to Willy’s last intervention. It is the always critical ungrounding of its imperialism, universalism, sexism, racism, speciesism, and so on. It is the ungrounding of the “dogmatism that passes unbeknownst to critical judgment,” in/by the critique that by exposing it suspends judgments, dismantles (*des-arma*) the human horizon of a shared language and history, revealing that language, that history, and that horizon are but one moment, a blind passage that erupts dispossessed of hegemony within and against that “community of untranslatables” to which Andrés questioningly alluded.

It seems to me that what we are paradoxically suggesting here is that this critical ungrounding of the humanities is precisely what makes sense to “defend” if one wants to defend the humanities today. Put otherwise, any defense of the humanities that is strategically articulated and unfolds with the will or desire to consolidate its achievements, to exhibit and expand its victories will irremediably, continually rearticulate with all the fidelity one might want the historical continuum of the sovereign humanities that the critical humanities—posthumanities?—would have to interrupt.

The other ungrounding “of the forms, platforms, institutions, and objects in and through which the humanities are constructed, both inside and alongside the university,” would be the one that treats the withdrawal or reduction of public and private funds to finance the humanities, a topic that directly affects universities (especially their stake in maintaining and developing the humanities), intra- and extra-university research, the school system more generally. And that, as we have seen in Chile and many other countries, is related to the more or less radical decisions and attempts to reduce or even eliminate from school curricula and university “education”—and, we might also deduce, from the “heads,” the sensibility of the “populace” at large—the “luxury” and “unproductive waste” of some knowledges, disciplines, practices that don’t self-finance and don’t finance their practitioners, as they say. For example, in the Colombian newspaper

La Semana we read on April 28, 2019: “Bolsonaro plans cuts to humanities departments. The head of Brazil proposed reducing investment in university

Can the humanities, in what we might call their fight for survival, strategically assume this dominant language without also taking on the course, discourse, and practices of its subjugation?

majors such as philosophy, sociology, and other humanities fields in order to prioritize professions ‘that generate an immediate return to the taxpayer.’”³⁸ It is more or less evident that the problem is not only the purported lack of funds but also, although less obviously,

a question of no longer funding or backing fields and practices that incite their “adherents” or their “users”—whether or not they are professionals—to question the world they live in and the lives they lead, as if that “world” and that “life” were not the only world and the only life there were, the only “available.” The formulation of even these questions, the crucial hesitation, even if only for an instant, at the very least would slow the rhythm of production that is today every government’s, every administrative apparatus’s primary responsibility to accelerate.

With this, I believe I have returned to the point that I would like to revisit in light of several of the preceding interventions.

The “defense of the humanities,” of their forms, platforms, institutions, objects, and practices, is also a fight against this second type of ungrounding, the fight to secure the material conditions that ensure their “reproduction” and hopefully their growth too, a reproduction of their forces and means of production.

On the terrain opened up on this front of the “battle” for the humanities, a *de facto* dominant language would appear to be at work, having imposed itself for some time. Those of us who did not learn it as a mother tongue, those who were forced to acquire it as a second language, I think we feel this dominance or predominance viscerally—we still sense, we still hear its hegemony.

Today, relations between the state as a commercial administrative apparatus and the university as a “bureaucratic corporation,” to use Readings’s formulation, relations between the state and teaching institutions generally appear to be determined predominantly by this language: the language of capital that

³⁸ “Bolsonaro plantea recortes a las facultades de humanidades” [Bolsonaro plans cuts to humanities departments], *La Semana* (Colombia), April 28, 2019, <https://www.semana.com/educacion/articulo/bolsonaro-plantea-acabar-con-la-filosofia-la-sociologia-y-demas-humanidades-en-brasil/611270/>.

colonizes, translates without translation—without any “in between”—as much barbarous language as it encounters; a universally operational language for calculating and measuring value and the valorization of value; a language of “goals, horizons, ends,” profits, investments, capitalization; a language that the contemporary university not only has had to learn to speak and “live” fluently but also has helped to produce, develop, and teach.

Is this not the dominant language that the humanities today—in whatever language and whether they want to or not—must master, assume, and even reinforce as the shared language—the shared language of pure equivalence—in order to defend against their economic ungrounding, among other things? Is it not this language—nonhuman, non-humanist—that the academic humanities have had to cultivate and must continue cultivating to try to assure the institutional survival of their practices, platforms, objects, and so forth?

Here, the question—which I think this conversation has alluded to, time and again—would be: Can the humanities, in what we might call their fight for survival, strategically assume this dominant language, its functional rationality, without getting caught in it, without also taking on—in its speech, its vocabulary, and the supposed transparency and objectivity of its mediation—the course, discourse, and practices of its subjugation, and also, to return to Silvia’s last intervention, without rehabilitating, reconstituting, or otherwise living on as “castrated knowledges,” as castrated practices?

“Defend” the humanities “by making the humanities establishment tremble” *and*, at the same time, defend the humanities by securing, enumerating, *and* celebrating their achievements. What is to be done with/in this “and”?

Andrés Menard: Far from presuming to synthesize, let alone summarize, this series of approximations of the question concerning the current direction of the humanities, I would like to focus on the question of this “and” that Elizabeth has posed, which I believe encodes a certain tension immanent to all the interventions. On the one hand, this “and” indicates the suspensive consistency of the responses, the recognition of the unstable ambivalence that the humanities assert, and that is expressed, for example, in the series of “beyonds” that Sergio uses to indicate the humanities’ necessary dislocation: “beyond the metaphysical or logocentric definition of man as the rational animal” but also “beyond the spiritual transformation of the world image,” or “beyond the conventional notion of crisis and naïve attempts at recuperation” and at the same time “beyond the frame of the sovereign nation-state but desisting from the technical-managerial imperatives of the sovereign, post-state market.” A “beyond” that, I believe, remits

us to the intersection between the two “ungroundings” identified by Elizabeth that undermines the humanities from without and activates them from within. On the other hand, that “and” makes the wager for a non-dialectical space, a space that instead affirms and even adds together all these ambivalences and instabilities, promising a revolt from below or from the margins of revolutionary erections, their hegemonic inertias, their canonical monumentalizations. It is the affirmation of an outlet for substantive discourse that resonates with Silvia’s reference to the cannibal horizon of posthumanism and, to give it a name, the pataphysical breathing room beyond metaphysical seriousness by which that Brazilian avant-garde affirmed its peripheral fate and thus inverted its role as humanity’s rearguard (and as the rearguard of that humanity’s humanities). In this context, that interrogatory “and” reminded me of the cannibal question par excellence, “Tupi or not tupi?”³⁹ To answer “tupi” already implies the cannibal’s resignation to the stabilization of her identity or, rather, to her affirmation in the form of a foreign object, an object that marks the critical point at which an assemblage exceeds its limits but does not yet institute another assemblage.

I am following here Elizabeth’s reference to Deleuze’s revolting usage or, rather, cannibalization of the marginalist hypothesis and of the possibility of conceiving of an object no longer functionally marginal but one that we might call trans-marginal insofar as it is not the last but one that ensures the global value of a series and its assemblage but rather that which is neither the last of the old assemblage nor the first of the new one. Like the last unlocatable hair on the threshold between hair, which despite being sparse is still hair, and a bald spot that despite just growing in is still a bald spot. Or like that animal that, although no longer a wolf, was not yet a dog. Or like that individual who, although no longer (another) animal, was not yet a human (animal).

Following this schema, we can inquire after the marginal condition *of* the humanities “and” the marginal condition *in* the humanities. The first condition implies asking about the status of the humanities as a marginal object within the political and economic knowledge assemblage and therefore about its status as the luxurious limit of a global order of its values. This in turn presupposes inquiring into its power for revolution and revolt—whether vanguard or multitudinous—for overthrowing or throwing into crisis, for disorder or at least the defamiliarization of that order. The second condition implies, as Elizabeth says, inquiring into this last critique or that last crisis by which the humanities mark their forfeiture. The strategic dilemma that these two forms of

³⁹ Andrade, “Cannibalist,” 38. *Tupi* was a generic term for indigenous peoples used in Brazil. The sentence is in English in the original Portuguese-language text in order to make clear the cannibalist’s parody of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.—Trans.

marginality establish would seem to be about knowing how to articulate them, that is, how to ensure that the economic and material viability of something like the humanities would not depend on their cloistering within the condition of a marginal luxury in the knowledge series and would not turn their power of critique—that is, their ability or vocation to throw themselves into crisis—into a museum or a preserve for the staging of that crisis, more or less aestheticized, which is to say more or less castrated.

It has been insisted that the humanities coincide with the history of the imperial. In this, it might be useful to review W. J. T. Mitchell's history of empires or, more precisely, his history of the passage from empires to imperialism and from there to empire (in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's sense) presented through a history of its objects.⁴⁰ On this basis Mitchell distinguishes between, on the one hand, objectivity, understood as the skeptical and indifferent attitude characteristic of the sciences that defamiliarizes and loosens objects from the prejudices that encase them, and, on the other hand, objectivism, understood as the pretense of an exhaustive and total understanding of everything given that is characteristic of the "sovereign subject" of the Enlightenment. And if the first allows for a critical and modern opening of what is known to novelty and change, the second implies its reappropriation within the stabilized and defined place of an encyclopedic sovereignty. But what is interesting is that the "gap" that opens up between them makes their appearance into "the thing," into what resists all objective understanding and classification of objects. From there, various imperial modalities have faced different ways of managing this "thing" in the form of so-called accursed objects: the object to be battled theologically during premodern empires, the fetish as a superstitious stumbling block to nascent capitalist exchange in the era of mercantile empires, the totem as object of ethnographic classification and collection of the nineteenth-century empires, all the way to the fossil as the scientific and biological relic of the age of global empire. On this basis, we might say that the humanities occupy precisely the non-place of that "thing." On this basis, their history can be read as more or less mimetic gestures by those who are invested in more or less parodic supplements to science or secretarial supplements to the sovereign. The humanities, then, could be what speaks for that "thing" and are perhaps themselves that "thing"—which is another way of speaking of that object that oscillates between the marginal and the trans-marginal. And perhaps for this reason the humanities cannot but speak in the language of mimesis and simulacrum, an eminently cannibal language

⁴⁰ W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

but one that does not always recognize itself as such, negatively idolizing itself, fetishizing itself, totemizing itself, fossilizing itself, in other words, assuming the role of patrimonial, testimonial, vanguard exemplars for something else: humanity, spirit, cultural diversity, the people, the revolution. Affirming instead the impropriety of its language, its unoriginality, or, if one prefers, its singular unoriginality may be one way of juxtaposing those two levels of its marginality, the internal and external cannibal marginality capable of reversing the orders of things and discourses and of letting itself be reversed in and by the revolts Willy mentioned, but without giving up revolving on its own and, above all, without giving up a recess or remainder of revolt even or already useless, a recess of remainder of marginal and intransitive revolt.

Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott: I will add to these last interventions and give my comments their final form. My position on the question concerning the humanities attempted to uncover the conditions of possibility of the question itself, which led me to think the status of the so-called crisis of the humanities as well as their history, briefly attending to the way that the humanities, in the general context of the modern university, were organized according to a certain hegemonic-nomic relation relative to modern nation-states and according to their normative, developmentalist, and modernizing imperatives. The university and the humanities were conceived as strategic elements of the education (programming) of the modern citizen. But as Hannah Arendt demonstrated long ago, the modern citizen not only declined with the advance of twentieth-century imperial capitalism but also lost its basic link to the reformist outlook of human rights, being reduced to a functional figure for capitalist accumulation, expropriation, and destruction, namely, *Homo oeconomicus*.

Thanks to cultural, educational, secularizing, and civilizational discourses, those same humanities were instrumentalized, in turn, innumerable times in modern imperialist disputes (per Edward Said), thus preventing our naïve identification with the call for their (simple) “recuperation.” It is this delicate, intermediate position—a position that cannot be made dialectical again in accord with some optimistic calculation about history—that is most interesting here, to the extent that what is at stake in all of this is the possibility of a humanities open to the question of democracy, but a radical and universal democracy, “a democracy that has not yet taken place.”

I want to be very clear in this: humanities that are truly open to democracy

à venir cannot be thought in terms of sovereignty, with the understanding that sovereignty here does not only invoke its philosophico-political sense, that is, a sovereignty that is not limited to institutional order, the law, or the state. This also implies and invites us to think a certain imperial dynamic that permeates and determines our forms of association, of being with each other, and our relationship to our environment. Humanities without sovereignty, or at least humanities capable of suspending the sovereign fiction, would start precisely by questioning the (Aristotelian) metaphysical and (Darwinian, Hegelian) modern grounds of anthropocentrism, that is, of the image of mankind as the rational, logical, productive animal and universal conqueror (Christian, male, white, educated). But this suspension of the anthro-logicentric presupposition that still nourishes the modern humanities also means a loss of sovereignty or, if one will, of power, of critique and knowledge, weakening its “pedagogical, imperial, and pacifying” function. To think the humanities while suspending the sovereign logic of command, control, and what Heidegger identified as the reduction of the world to the standing reserve means thinking beyond the limits of contemporary liberal democracy and its institutional forms (constitutions, nation-states, monolingual communities of equals, etc.) and therefore means thinking new forms of organizing the social contract.

I began my intervention by citing Sloterdijk’s “Rules for the Human Zoo” because that text explores the irritating question concerning the difference between “humanist education” and “biogenetic programming,” showing in passing Heidegger’s implicit humanism when he addresses the reader by resorting to the epistolary mode (“Letter on Humanism”). And confirming receipt of each of your important contributions to this dialogue, I would like to conclude, then, by insisting on the link between humanities without sovereignty and democracy to come (*à venir*), with the understanding that this *à venir*, just as Derrida thinks it, corresponds to a conception of the future that is not linear or determinative, neither future nor project, but is rather the mere possibility of the taking place of the event that is always already with us on the horizon of our practices and “traditions.”

For all this, it does not seem accidental that in Sloterdijk’s most recent intervention (*Infinite Mobilization*), Nietzsche should appear as the philosopher who makes it possible for us to comprehend Western nihilism in the form of affective incorporation or programming, that is, as an organization of affect that predisposes the body to obey commands that emanate, in the last instance, from the metaphysics of the will to power.⁴¹ It would be this will to power (sovereignty)

⁴¹ Peter Sloterdijk, *Infinite Mobilization*, trans. Sandra Berjan (New York: Polity Press, 2020).

that makes mankind replace the inherent passivity of classical nihilism with an inverse nihilism related to forms of action, will, production, pragmatics, technical knowledge, and so on. In effect, this so-called mobilization of affect would be nothing but a way of warding off the fatigue of an immobilized body and also a way to optimize a body lost in unproductive desire, in the impairment of incapacity or disability (a term that in English names a field of study about different forms of bodily “dysfunction”). For this reason, the exit from the nihilist precipitation of affect in unproductivity would be found apparently in the affirmation of a will that, for many, anticipates the logic of total mobilization characteristic of the twentieth century.

Curiously, when Sloterdijk today conceives nihilism and bodily effect and affect, he is not far from the Heidegger of the courses on Nietzsche (1936–46), for the Heideggerian reading also consists in construing Nietzsche as the last link in the chain of Western philosophy, the link that carries it to its highest point and its dissolution in the affirmation that the will to power is the last principle of metaphysics.⁴² Heidegger never stops questioning the nihilist remnant that persists in some complex fashion in Nietzsche’s will to power as last principle of metaphysics. And it is this problem that leads him to incorporate Nietzsche’s thinking as if it were an exemplar through which it becomes possible to interrogate the sovereignty of the modern subject, its will and determination, its decisionism and motive (force).

I don’t want to spend too much time on this intricate problem which demands sustained consideration of the Heideggerian reading of Nietzsche, a reading that allows us to understand not only Nietzsche’s belonging on the horizon of Western nihilism but also the Heideggerian critique of Cartesianism as the ground (*ratio*) of modernity in the forms of reason, subject, and technique. I will dare, however, to maintain that what is at stake in the Heideggerian questioning of Nietzsche is, of course, the identification of the will to power and *last principle* of metaphysics, which, by proposing itself as the overcoming of nihilism, only reinstates it in the form of action, mobilization, confrontation, and the vocational call of destiny. Of course, these forms are not only expressed in the bellicose context of the nationalist-socialist reception of a Nietzsche not far from the Pan-Germanic dreams of the Führer. They also manifest in the militant call to total mobilization in the realm of work, commitment, and productivity throughout the twentieth century, a call which also fantasized about producing a new man, not so differently from the fantasies conjured by the first total mobilization.

⁴² Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, ed. David Farrell Krell, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, David Farrell Krell, and Joan Stambaugh, 4 vols. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979–1987).

What else could explain the calls to sacrifice that characterized both the German campaign on the Eastern Front and the equally monumental and tragic response that mobilized the entire Russian people to defend the communist homeland? And at the same time, what else explains the continual call to sacrifice experienced as the compulsion to work on the capitalist horizon of the free world but also the call to the masses that they assume a heroic posture in building socialism and the new man? It is as if the nihilist logic of total mobilization had substituted the Protestant ethic's demand for sacrifice and had settled into the psychic-organic continuum predisposing bodies to follow the sacrificial script of a biopolitically designed, productivist, optimizing call. In this sense, post-Nietzschean nihilism no longer takes the melancholic forms of fatigue, illness, depression, and apathy but rather hyperactivity, hyperproductivity, and a growing militarization or ossification of the senses that are programmed by a peculiar nihilist aesthetic education, that is, an anaesthetizing and homogenizing one that predisposes the senses to forge themselves into links in a productivist chain that intensifies the devastating logic of contemporary capitalism. The humanities would find their risky and discomfiting place as well as their conditions of possibility in open conflict with this nihilism, at the risk of being folded into the dominant logic of a will to power that we see today in the generalized devastation of the planet. If we have been advocating in these pages for a university and a humanities that are not hegemonic, sovereign, ethnocentric, or territorialized in terms of the juridical logic of the modern nomos of the earth, now we can say in conclusion that we equally need an anarchic humanities subtracted from the principle of reason and its foundational economy, as a metaphysical principle that has organized the relations between power and knowledge in various contexts and "epochs" and under various headings (nature, god, subject, technique): an anarchic humanities subtracted from the principal logic of the *arche* in which the *árchontes* or professors, consuls of the bureaucracy of knowledge, have no place and where disciplines and competencies are weakened by their inability to impose themselves as natural language or state of nature. I would like to insist that only by attending to these multiple dimensions will we be able to begin a dialogue about the so-called medical, digital, and environmental humanities without disregarding but also continually problematizing their urgency.

Translated from the Spanish by D. Bret Leraul

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