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## Doing and Undoing Hispanism Today

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1. The contemporary American research apparatus trains and supports a growing body of professional academics with potentially lifelong positions, in numbers that are simply unthinkable anywhere else. This new class of intellectual began to expand in the United States during the Cold War, with its emphasis on area and international studies as a form of national defense, but it grew into much larger and more influential sphere through the eighties, as postmodernism, cultural studies and globalization steadily voiced a North-American view of humanistic endeavors that supplanted the European paradigm of modern aesthetics.<sup>1</sup> Since that time, projects engendered in the American academy reveal a tendency toward historical sweep and theoretical zeal, often leading to proposals that seek to redefine the field of study in one fell swoop. This is a symptom not only of the reach and ambition of work possible under the auspices of an extraordinary research university system, but also of the mounting pressures for inventive productivity faced by humanist intellectuals in this era of privatization.

2. Regardless of method, focus or theoretical inclination, humanistic endeavors share a common challenge of considerable proportions: How to articulate the legacy of Western culture into a new logic of production and legitimation presently promoted by neo-liberal capitalism, particularly after 1989? The aesthetic and political understanding of postmodernity advanced during the eighties has been deeply challenged by the subsequent crudity of global economies. This has led to many



questions regarding the study of literature, theory and culture in general. At the same time, the teleological project of alternative modernity inspired by Third World narratives lost considerable authority. As a result, the role of critical intellectuals and the theoretical tools at their disposal has come under scrutiny, particularly among those who continue to have a stake in imagining the world as a safer, fairer place, and even more so among those for whom migration to the United States or Western Europe is not an option or a wish.

3. In the case of Spanish-related topics, this new field of force intensified during the last three decades. It reached that magnitude at first due to the import of European high theory and Latin American literature, then more recently by the renewed role of Spain in transnational Hispanic culture. Equally important was the impulse to remap disciplinary paradigms, an energy perhaps comparable to software design, in that it constantly seeks to transform and renew areas and objects of study. Lastly, this timing also coincided with the advent of deconstructive modes of reading and writing, arguably the most productive common denominator behind the myriad theoretical frameworks evidenced during this period. This body of work ultimately became an epistemology of turns, breaks, and interstices that gathered strength through post-structural modes of critique and postmodern experience.

4. The realm of deconstruction imbued various modalities of reading and writing that inevitably turned toward the critique of presence, totality and logocentrism, in short, an incessant commitment to problematize how modern cultures and histories established notions such as reality, identity, and worldviews. It is often thought that such a project only aims to tear down critical paradigms once sacred to the humanities, yet one could argue it has proven equally capable of reconceptualizing them. After all, humanistic endeavors gained considerable prominence as an uncertain interplay between aesthetics and epistemology, particularly through the postmodern aesthetics of the early and middle 1980's. Yet, for those involved in humanistic work after 1989, the plane of concrete differences has increased beyond the reach of models that critique modernity in the abstract. Instead it has brought about a new emphasis on post-colonial, gender, subaltern modes of enunciation, as well as a new focus on cultural studies.

5. Perhaps more dramatic are the momentous changes undergone by departments of Spanish and Portuguese in the United States. These are units whose growing profile deserves special attention in a nation



reluctantly assuming a condition of de-facto bilingualism. Spanish now awakens to the destiny of a second national language in the United States, in spite of this nation's deep-seated disinterest in foreign languages. One must therefore ask what it means-culturally, linguistically and theoretically-to live and work in the midst of 40 million citizens of Hispanic and Latin American background in the United States, with a buying power projected to approach \$1 trillion by the end of this decade.<sup>2</sup> Spanish departments must now attend to the possibilities of an unexpected global realm with uncertain but profound implications for new academic and techno-mediatic links between Spain, Latin America and the growing US Latino community.<sup>3</sup>

6. Mapping such a global terrain would comprise an extraordinary economy texts, services, products and styles, as well as languages. English speakers in the United States (and some parts of Canada) now pay more attention to Spanish, at least as means to gain employment. At the same time, migrant multitudes from Latin American countries continue to retain a relationship with Spanish and their nations of origin even after learning English in the United States. Moreover, this growing bilingual domain contributes to a global sense of Spanish in which Spain has found a unexpected re-entry of sorts, one that is not defined by a sense of national or linguistic colonial empowerment, but rather by the opportunities of investment in cultural and linguistic dissemination, a sort of postnational Spanish marketing that is intrinsically transnational, with its main theater of consumption in the Americas.<sup>4</sup>

7. A post-national understanding of Hispanism could perhaps begin by tracing the following contours: a) the large scale migration from half the Latin American nations to the United States and Europe; b) the onset of Hispanic enclaves—a majority in some instances-in the major urban centers of the United States; c) the growing sense of cultural, if not national pluralism within Spain during the post-Franco era. Together these elements signal a shift within the nation-state equation, albeit in widely different forms that, while specific to each country, evidence certain patterns. It is not an end of the nation, as many have augured, but rather a symptom of its cultural dissemination, if not dispersal, that deserves special attention by those who study culture and literature. It also implies opportunities for shaping the links between new transatlantic Hispanic constellations and American Studies, without abandoning discourses pertaining to Peninsular and Latin American traditions. Indeed, one might even suggest that new comparativism within the post-national sphere could renew our understanding of the Humanist past, as evidenced in Derrida's suggestive re-reading of Marx and Shakespeare,



as well as Negri's and Hardt's poignant re-articulation of Renaissance thought.<sup>5</sup>

8. The need to chart new paths beyond the initial work of deconstruction will likely require a more attentive ear to the exigencies of the social text, especially new forms of nationalism and emancipation movements, various types of fundamentalism and messianic politics, as well as ongoing gender critique. It may also invite a renewed aesthetic realm decoupled from any nostalgia for the old order, one perhaps not envisioned by the new cultural studies hegemony. This pursuit will require novel links between the production of empirical and discursive knowledge, perhaps even a reconfigured plane of academic disciplines aiming to rearticulate the richness of the living social text in both its constructive as well as deconstructive realms.<sup>6</sup>

9. Without these engagements, we attend to a postmodern order that only values economic data or epistemic speculation, a new order of knowledge anchored exclusively in the digital revolution and the stock market on one hand, and epistemological indeterminism on the other. These two forces mirror each other in ways totally unforeseen up to this point, ways that perhaps slip from writing as a self-enclosed deconstructive domain. Again, the critique of the nation provides a case in point, since it has thus far shown much more socioeconomic pertinence than critical acumen. There may be no doubt that global capital finds collective identities, such as the nation, somewhat anachronistic to its ever-widening drive toward new and unobstructed markets, but the work of differentiating how this applies across the plane of varying types of nation-states remains largely unexplored, particularly among literary and cultural critics.

10. Much has been said about the category of "the aesthetic," and the central role of literature within it, particularly as regards to the authoritarian hermeneutic tradition it has left behind, laden with universal value claims that often went unquestioned. But how will distinctions based on quality be articulated or accounted for henceforth? Will literature retain its value as a distinct practice of verbal exploration and multi-layered representation for future critical paradigms? Even market-driven cultural production often implies some form of discernment, if not discrimination, among artistic practices. In the absence of such, one can't help but wonder if the critique of universal aesthetics has been displaced by a universal disclaimer of the aesthetic, an outlook worthy of much more serious examination.

11. Thirty years of theoretical emphasis may have led to a certain exhaustion, as evidenced in Terry Eagleton's *After Theory*.<sup>7</sup> But theory must be challenged rather than dismissed, for literary and cultural studies will always rely on it. What theory begs for now, as Eagleton shows, are differential modes of application, as well as greater awareness of the growing role of the market in both production and consumption of artistic objects. In this pursuit, a much more fluid understanding of the relationship between literary studies and the lettered social sciences will be needed, particularly if we are to move beyond the stereotypes that cast these approaches in narrow terms, i.e., as either verbal relativism or data-driven factualism.

12. The manufacture of desire through television production and computer technologies also begs for greater understanding and critique. This impulse has succeeded in fusing the culture of marketing with the realm of performativity, creating a new epistemic niche in direct competition with universities and other institutions for the best creative talents. Commercial products must go to the market endowed with artistry and self-conscious performativity, at the same time that artistic and cultural products must assume market logic in order to survive. Even the academy and its practitioners must now respond to this logic. As such, it constitutes a deeply contradictory element, since it bridges the culture of globalization and academic production precisely at the time that traditional schooling has become a secondary agent of education—indeed, at a moment in which mass media service industries have managed to bring the acquisition of practical knowledge and training closer to the interests of corporations.

13. These considerations point toward an intricate nexus that links citizenship with consumption, thereby comprising new forms of distributing and packaging the symbolic capital necessary to enter middle class status. It remains unclear, however, whether or how critical discourses will respond to this challenge. The aesthetics of imaging—television, videos, advertisements, the internet, performative arts, and other media constructions of consumer citizenship—clearly exact a totally new relationship with academic intellectuals and their established modes of research. The space once known as “the street” now breaks into the fold with a new force and legitimacy, no longer just an intruder that overturns the high-low cultural divide. The place of the researcher, or intermediary, becomes irremediably more public and ultimately more anxious, because capitalism itself demands it.

14. Has the lettered order of Humanism been dissolved or challenged by the twin forces of deconstruction and global reordering? Some have found reason for pessimism when faced by this particular question; others have sensed a great opportunity to engage the world of knowledge. In either case, scholars must also take stock of their own position within market pressures. This includes an increased emphasis on professional exchange value as the primary mode of academic legitimation. It is no longer feasible to address our object of study in terms of a tradition immune from such exigencies. Perhaps it never was, but our pursuit of new knowledge must now proceed fully aware of the fact that our own subjectivity is being rehearsed in the process.

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Huyssen makes a significant attempt to distinguish the date the first stage of postmodernism and distinguish it from the contemporary moment. “Literatura e cultura no contexto global” *Valores: Arte, Mercado, Política*. Reinaldo Marques and Lucia Helena Vilela, eds. Belo Horizonte, Brazil: UFMG, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> This figure comes from television industry calculations, as reported in the *New York Times* by Mireya Navarro: “Promoting Hispanic TV, Language and Culture,” December 30, 2002, p. C7.

<sup>3</sup> For data and cultural commentary of the Latino urban presence in the United States, see Mike Davis’s *Magical Urbanism*, London: Verso, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Néstor García Canclini details how Spain has strategically positioned itself in the new cultural economy of globalization while Latin American governments have failed to do so. *Latinoamericanos buscando lugar en este siglo*. Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2002. pp. 20-48.

<sup>5</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, London: Routledge, 1994, and Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> See Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd, *Politics of Culture in the Shadows of Capital*, Raleigh: Duke University Press, 1997. See also Antonio Méndez Rubio, *Encrucijadas: Elementos de crítica de la cultura*, Madrid: Cátedra, 1997, and his unpublished manuscript: “Cultura y Desaparición”. Andreas Huyssen, op. cit.



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<sup>7</sup> Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.

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