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Matters of Concern: Survival Strategies

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"[B]asic concepts of the humanities [need to] be reconsidered," writes Katarzyna Beilin in her compelling essay for the polemics section of this project, "among them importantly the concept of 'human' and the way it relates to 'non-human'" ("Iberian Studies" 1). The humanities, she argues, should free themselves of their institutional confinement to the purely cultural—a constriction that has also limited the field's critical potential. Daniel Ares López and other contributors make similar points.

The underlying argument here is double. On the one hand, the idea is that Beilin's proposal for expansion—entering fields that have traditionally been considered off-limits—will help the humanities overcome their institutional crisis. Here the logic is one of corporate self-preservation: helping the humanities weather an environment that is increasingly unlikely to acknowledge their value. On the other hand, the hope is that humanists' superseding the boundaries of their disciplines will in turn help those other fields, including the physical and life sciences. Here the logic is one of shared advantage, a win-win: *all* scholarship will gain by this change and so will, therefore, all of humanity. Or actually—since the goal is to overcome the human/non-human divide—the gain will be the entire Earth's. This is, I think, what Beilin means when she talks about "mak[ing] the world a better place" ("Iberian Studies" 1). And the task is urgent. "In a future not so-distant," she writes, "the discursive separation between the human and the non-human and the excessive development resulting from it may be disastrous for all": "The construction of both 'the humanity' and 'the humanities' provides for the superiority of humans, especially the reach of powerful humans over other earthlings justifying destruction of dehumanized domains" (3).

I would like to take up the challenge that Beilin lays down and address it in more practical terms. In addition to reconsidering "the concept of 'human' and the way it relates to 'non-human,' I would suggest we reconsider the concept of "scholarly" and the way it relates to "non-scholarly." The first

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reconsideration is necessary to save the earth. The second is necessary to save the humanities.

First, though, let me play the role of the skeptic. Among the keywords in Beilin's argument and in this collective project are "crisis" and "change." The notion of crisis is associated with a problematic status quo, and that of change with crossing boundaries—so far so good. As Geoffrey Harpham pointed out some time ago, however, it is hard to find a time when the humanities did not consider themselves in crisis. Disciplinary boundaries, for their part, have had a bad rap since at least the 1940s. Since then, it's been hard to find defenses of disciplinarity for its own sake, except as straw men in arguments for *inter*disciplinarity. The American Social Science Research Council, for instance, issued a report in 1943 that advocated for "a weakening of the rigid compartments that separate the disciplines" (qtd. in Wallerstein 197). Yet, we still manage to get excited about escaping what we continue to see as restrictive silos. It is the same mindset that informs the tremendous excitement that Luis I. Prádanos transmits in his contribution. "[T]he ongoing transnational debate rethinking the humanities within this post-humanist framework," he writes, "has never been so dynamic, agile, fascinating, and relevant" ("Exploring" 50). While the excitement is genuine, I also fear it is a sentiment that will not be felt or understood by anyone not already invested in the scholarly realm.

I point out this continuity in diagnosis (crisis) and prescription (change) not to dismiss the reality of the current predicament or the need for action. Rather I want to suggest that feelings of crisis and calls for change are themselves part of the status quo, long bound up with our daily institutional practice. One might even argue that they, too, help limit the critical potential of our work. The feeling of crisis, for instance, may well help maintain the illusion that what we do matters, in the same way that disasters lend a sudden depth of meaning to what normally seems unimportant. This illusion of importance may blind us to the fact that what we do is often irrelevant. The call for change, for its part, helps fuel the constant need for ever-accelerated innovation—new critical concepts, new currents, new fields, new objects of analysis—that is a basic feature of the neoliberal university, defined by its pursuit of prestige, high rankings and other forms of "branding," as Prádanos and others in this collection point out. Seen from that angle, even a concept like Post-Humanism runs the risk of becoming the scholarly equivalent of the new model iPhone, demanding an upgrade of our apps and a new, expensive charger. As Ares López writes, "If Marxism demanded new ways to talk about class relations, Feminism a new conception of gender, and Post-colonialism new narratives about race relations, Post-humanism is asking for new languages and stories too" (9).

But how do we diagnose a crisis and advocate for change in ways that escape this trap? As Beilin writes, it is not just a matter of "questioning [the]

paradigms" but of "questioning … the questioning" ("Debating Ourselves" 42). One way forward, it seems to me, is to force ourselves, as scholars in humanistic fields, to take up Beilin's call, via Bruno Latour, to rethink the humanities "in a way that they participate in identifying and connecting with *'matters of concern'*" ("Iberian Studies" 1)—but to do so by thinking much more seriously about relevance, audience, and form. My proposal is that, as humanists, we invert our ingrained habits of communication. Instead of writing or speaking primarily for audiences within our field and only occasionally for a potentially broader public, I would like us to begin writing and speaking *by default* for a broader audience and only occasionally for a narrowly specialized one.

This is a big change. Rethinking *with whom* we communicate will require not only that we reconsider *what* we write or speak about, but *how* we do it. Even more scarily, it will force us to rethink notions of scholarly rigor, relevance, and quality, and the textual forms we associate with those three notions.

Current institutional structures associate quality, rigor, and relevance almost exclusively with standard scholarly formats: the peer-reviewed journal article, the university-press monograph, or the academic conference paper. Of course, these are precisely the formats that exclude non-specialized readers. My argument is that, for many of the fields we think of as belonging to the humanities, these standard formats are in fact detrimental to rigor, relevance and quality. Broadening our implied audience, on the other hand, will improve them.

To explain my thinking, it is helpful to take a quick look at developments in academic spaces outside of the United States. The global hegemony of the United States academy is beyond doubt, but the contradictions of the United States system are most visible in those spaces that, from an awareness of being peripheral, attempt to emulate it, or their image of it. (Rather how Spanish politicians who embraced of GMO technology "by wanting to be more European became less so" (28), as Beilin and Sainath Suryanarayanan put it.) In the Netherlands, for example, where almost all of the universities are public, government policy toward the academic humanities has in recent years been shaped by an influential report that associated the humanities with *sustainability*—not in an environmental sense, but in a financial and institutional one (Cohen). The authors considered our fields as threatened with extinction and in need of preservation, albeit a limited preservation given the equally limited resources. The Cohen report has in turn generated a series of other reports from state funding agencies setting out lines for the future. Most of these reports acknowledge the reality of shrinking finances, while also clearly affirming the value of humanities research and teaching. Their most important innovation has been their emphasis on the *social relevance* of

humanities research—not only as a given, but as something to strive toward. Specifically, they have urged humanities scholars to show society—that is, the taxpayers who finance their work—why what they do is *useful*. Tellingly, in the Netherlands the translation of academic research into social usefulness is called *valorisatie* (valorization) and implicitly or explicitly associated with a form of capital gain, be it cultural or monetary capital. The affirmation of relevance is good, but the association of that relevance with usefulness and monetarization puts the humanities from the outset in an almost impossible position.

This is a first problem. A second problem touches more directly on our daily lives as scholars. At the same time that they affirm the social relevance of the scholarly humanities, these reports have increasingly underscored the importance of *academic quality*. The notion of quality is—quite conventionally—associated with the traditional, peer-reviewed channels of academic communication. Less conventionally, it has become the dominant currency in a global economy of prestige. In the Netherlands, but even more so in countries like the UK, Belgium, and Spain, determining academic quality has become a matter of administrative bean-counting in a cut-throat competitive environment. The number of publications, journal rankings, impact factors, and citation indices have become metrics directly associated with funding streams. As a result, they directly, and constantly, shape scholarly practice: how scholars write, what they write about, and where they send it. As a result, the imperatives of social relevance and academic quality are not just conceptually distinct, but actually pull scholars in opposing directions. After all, it is the most restricted, most specialized venues that yield the highest quality scores.

For the humanities, I would argue, this dynamic is unhealthy to the point of being lethal for two reasons. First, because in the case of most humanities research, relevance is a function of *interest* more than *usefulness:* the kind of insights the humanities yield may not result in a new patent but they can enrich peoples' lives. Second, because in our fields the distance between specialized interest and non-specialized interest is potentially much smaller than in other fields. The issues we address—narrative, meaning, history, ethics, love, memory, beauty—are part and parcel of the human experience. Adapting Gramsci's well-known phrase about intellectuals, we could say that everyone is a humanist, even though not everyone has the social function of a humanist.

I would go one step further. Given both the nature of our topics and the implicit social, political, or cultural commitment that drives much of our work, restricting ourselves to traditional formats and an audience of specialized peers encourages habits that *run counter* to academic quality as defined by the values that constitute the core of humanistic practice—clarity, creativity, and communication. In the face of the logic of professional

evaluation in most academic institutions, there is no reason why addressing a potentially broader, non-specialized audience should imply a loss of rigor, quality, or relevance. For one thing, it forces us to write better (more clearly, more engagingly). For another, it obliges us to account for all the assumptions that go unexplained when we speak to a small group of like-minded peers. It forces us to think about the *interest* and *scope* of our arguments beyond the confines of our collective investments in the field as such. In other words, it allows us to escape the circular logic of corporate self-satisfaction and preservation, in which scholarly work becomes entirely self-referential, closed off from any concern or justification beyond it, however much it gestures toward sociopolitical or ethical concerns. In a word, broadening our audience may save us from falling into what Prádanos calls "meaningless intellectual games" ("Spanish Cultural" 26). At our own institutions, we complain about the growth of an administrative-managerial class that, as Benjamin Ginsberg has pointed out, ends up inventing new functions in order to justify its ever-increasing size and compensation (33). But scholarly fields that are not accountable to an audience that is not already invested in them are likely to fall prey to a similar logic.

Let's face it: the question of audience is marginal to our current scholarly practice. I would venture to guess that most of us don't ask ourselves very often for whom we write. And our texts show it. "[W]e forget," Beilin writes, "to build bridges between our research and our place" ("Debating Ourselves" 42). Changing this mindset, moving the question of audience to the center of what we do, is a necessary first step. It will not only change our practice in terms of style and structure. It will also force those of us who work on Spain from outside of Spain, to consider what John Beusterien, in his piece for this section, calls our "responsibility owed to beings" (30).

If the goal of our work is to effect change, it would be strange not to ask ourselves *where* and *how*. In fact, it's the first question any reader from outside the field would pose. Are we looking to change the objects of scholarly attention or the configuration of syllabi, reading lists, and scholarly fields? Are we hoping, as Beusterien is, to make "concrete pedagogical interventions at the local level" (61)? Or do we aim to shape debates and practices beyond our immediate academic environment? If so, are we looking to intervene in the space that we study (in this case, Spain), in the place where we live and work (the United States, for example), or to play some kind of mediating role between the two? Susan Larson and Matt Feinberg are right to urge us to "to make place and space central to what we do as humanists" (65). But *how* will the kind of work we tend to do, the kind of knowledge we hope to generate, actually be able to accomplish that in practical terms? What channels and alliances are available or could be developed for that purpose? There are no easy answers to these questions.

But not asking them to begin with is throwing in the towel before the match has even started.

Let's take this very collection of scholarly essays. The table of contents is compelling. Its ambition, the scope of its topic, and its obvious ethical drive make it a prime candidate for a potentially broad public interest—especially in Spain, where many of the topics addressed by the contributors strike an immediate public chord. And yet somehow it's difficult to imagine an audience for this collection of texts beyond the relatively small group of United States- and United Kingdom-based specialists in contemporary Iberian cultural studies. Why is that? Format and language are a factor: the book is in English, in print, and in the United States. All three of these features respond to an institutional logic that runs counter to the *intellectual* nature of the project, and yet manages to trump it. Other factors that almost automatically exclude a broader readership are stylistic habits and assumed frames of reference that are bound to confuse or repel readers not already familiar with or invested in the Anglophone version of Iberian cultural studies as it has been practiced over the past two decades. This is a pity, because—as we humanists well know—meaning and knowledge only emerge through the *interaction* between text and reader. And text that remains unread also remains meaningless. The larger and more diverse the readership, the more meaningful a text becomes.

Of course, it's wonderful that the editorial team and the publisher have agreed to an online, open-access version of the collection that includes summaries of the print chapters and this section of shorter debate pieces. Still, it would be interesting to imagine what this collective project would look like as, say, a special issue of the print monthly *La Marea*—one of the new, cooperative news venues that have sprung up in the wake of the 15-M movement. What elements of our essays would survive the ruthless, skeptical sieve of an editorial team with a strongly developed allergy for needless complexity and academic posturing? What would these debates look like with comments from informed, engaged readers from outside of the academy? More importantly, how would our need to explain ourselves to a non-specialized audience force us not only to clarify our arguments, but actually to sharpen and deepen them?

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