Many scholars in the last few years have been alarmed by both the rapid neoliberalization of academic institutions as well as the so-called crisis of the humanities. Well, it just so happens that these are two deeply connected issues.

On the one hand, we certainly should be terrified about the ongoing pervasive expansion of neoliberal rationality into all aspects of life. Wendy Brown argues that, in the last three decades, “neoliberalism, a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms, is quietly undoing basic elements of democracy. These elements include vocabularies, principles of justice, political cultures, habits of citizenship, practices of rule, and above all, democratic imaginaries” (17). Thus, individuals in general and students in particular are conceptualized and perceived as “self-investing human capital.” Brown further states that these “responsibilized individuals are required to provide for themselves in the context of powers and contingencies radically limiting their ability to do so” (134). This asymmetrical context of plutocratic powers in the hands of a few and risky contingencies for the lives of many is characterized, among other things, by the disturbing anthropogenic transgression of ecological planetary boundaries and by the rapid increase of the social inequalities exacerbated by neoliberal globalization. Such a context of great asymmetries in the distribution of power and vulnerability is obvious to many of the contributors of this *Hispanic Issues* volume, *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates*, as they understand—and sometimes articulate—the inseparability of the unprecedented ecological crisis, the social crisis of inequality, the political crisis of liberal democracy, and the cultural crisis that prevents us from thinking outside the neoliberal dominant imaginary. There is arguably a disturbing correlation between the rise of neoliberal globalization and the rapid collapse of the living systems of the Earth (Nixon, “The Great Acceleration”).
On the other hand, in some essays within this volume of *Hispanic Issues*, some of us are cautious when we refer to the crisis of the mainstream humanities and attempt not to imply that it is necessarily something to regret, since the traditional humanities may be nothing but one side of the outcome of the obsolete epistemological apparatus related to anthropocentric and hubristic human exceptionalism and its problematic ideologies of disconnection (the pieces by Ares López and Beilin elaborate on this point). This epistemological framework allowed and facilitated the emergence of the destructive neoliberal reason that we must suffer (and many times perpetuate) and of the pervasiveness and globalization of its fantasies. These “neoliberal fantasies” have devastating semiotic, social, and material consequences (see Connolly). For that reason, rather than fighting to protect the mainstream humanistic modes of thinking at all cost, some of the essays in this volume prefer to invest their energies in transforming—or trying to transform—the humanities in general and our field in particular into something radically different and more meaningful that does not perpetuate the traditional tendencies of hierarchical disconnection. This entails embracing and shaping the emerging environmental humanities debate. The fact is that the ongoing transnational debate rethinking the humanities within this post-humanist framework has never been so dynamic, agile, fascinating, and relevant. So when we talk about the crisis of the humanities, we should ask what kind of humanities we are referring to. It is undeniable that the humanities in general are threatened by their shrinking budgets, which is a symptom of the worrisome expansion of neoliberal rationality, but that does not mean that their intellectual dynamism is not, perhaps in part as a reaction to this threat, more stimulating than ever. I assert that a cultural criticism that embraces environmental humanities has the potential to navigate through the interstices of the aforementioned neoliberal fantasies and expose their perverse implications in the unsustainable transformation of imaginaries and ecologies.

It is not a secret that a number of scholars dealing with the literary and cultural criticism of the Iberian Peninsula have been disappointed for some time with some reductionist tendencies and obdurate directions within our discipline. Especially frustrating for me has been to witness the disturbing way in which literary and cultural studies ignore the ecological crisis and its connection with the culture(s) of global capitalism. Some of us had even been tempted at some point to abandon the field for good (life, other than simultaneously fragile and resilient, is also too precious to be wasted in boring banalities). However, I have experienced renewed excitement and expectations about our field during the last couple of years. This is due to the fact that, lately, a few critical interventions are emerging that aim to radically transform our field, as is the case with this publication of *Hispanic Issues*. As I was reading the provocative essays of *Ethics of Life*, I began to
feel my excitement growing in intensity. It seems that the number of scholars wishing to transform the field to facilitate a more systemic and integrated approach to the current Iberian cultural complexities is greater than any of us expected.

The question, however, is how to start advancing that desired change when we do not have many proper models to follow and, on top of that, we are unconscious victims of the inertias of our lengthy academic trainings. So, if we want to be able to imagine, envision, and create something radically different, we have to unlearn and rethink our discipline. We have to think together with other disciplines and regions (the recent creation of a MLA Global Hispanophone forum and discussion group is a great starting point). It is crucial to know “how to break with some disciplinary legacies, learning to reform and reshape others, and unlearning the many constraints that sometimes get in the way of our best efforts to reinvent our fields, our purpose, and our mission” (Halberstam 10). Unlearning requires an effort “to undiscipline ourselves, free ourselves from our training, and find new narratives to tell about life, literature, and learning, narratives more attuned to the harsh realities of human frailty and less calibrated to the rhythms of late capitalism” (12). Thus, radically transforming our field does not mean merely to propose new canons, since “literary canons are closely related to an increasingly outdated genre: the national literary history” (Fraser, Larson and Compitello 84), “the real discussion is one in which we simultaneously confront the whole of our discipline” (74).

In the age of mass extinction, climate change, ecological collapse, and unacceptable inequalities, cultural criticism needs to be rethought in a posthumanist, postnational, and decolonial fashion. This change in thought would hopefully help to avoid the temptation of creating and recreating exclusive identities in opposition to humans and non-human others (since this could easily be deployed to justified exploitation and domination practices, as Beilin’s essay notices referring to Agamben’s work). However, at the same time, it is necessary to deconstruct and expose the bio-political intricacies with the historical formation of national identities and cultural discourses that we have inherited and that are silently but effectively operating and actively affecting bodies, institutions, and semiotics (the pieces by Suryanarayanan and Beilin, Faber, and Afinoguenova are good examples of this). The question that remains is if Iberian studies will be able to provide an adequate framework for these challenges, one capable of enacting eco-cosmopolitan logic (Heise 205–210) and embracing transnational ethic of place (Nixon, Slow Violence 143), rather than substituting current borders for others within the existing global neoliberal rules? Can it encourage a post-canonical debate rather than an alternative cannon with new inclusions and renovated exclusions (Fraser, Larson and Compitello)? Can it serve as a platform for a decolonial and postnational
critique rather than reproduce different neocolonial modes and exclusivist national sensibilities (Gabilondo)? Can it generate counter-narratives to the dominant imaginary of economic growth and resist the neoliberal fantasies of disconnection and their false promises of achieving biophysical impossibilities? Put otherwise, we need to push the limits (and test the potentialities) of the political ecology of Iberian studies. To me, this is what this *Hispanic Issues* as a whole intends to do. The outcome remains to be seen.

To conclude, I will focus on one brief example of the potential for a transformed and transformative decolonial and postnational approach to environmental cultural criticism in the Iberian context. In the last years, we have witnessed a proliferation of what Benjamin Fraser calls urban cultural studies, a convergence between cultural studies and urban studies. There are a number of relatively recent publications and special issues dealing with urban representations and cultural production in Hispanic literary and cultural studies. Even though most of them deal with notions of space and its cultural implications, almost none of them consider ecological consequences of urban cultures.\(^1\) Such an absence is paramount, since it draws our attention to the blind spots of our theoretical radars or, in other words, shows that we cannot see what we cannot see (and what we cannot see exposes our epistemological limitations).\(^2\) For that reason, I found the contribution by Matthew I. Feinberg and Susan Larson especially refreshing as it explores the “new ecology of urban space” in post-crisis Madrid and elaborates on the connections among neoliberal policies, the repurposing of discarded urban space by social movements of resistance, as well as a few ecological implications.

Urban ecology, in its broadest sense, should be an important part of urban cultural studies in the Anthropocene as it encompasses the massive distribution of invisible violence in time and space that this new epoch entails (Rob Nixon’s notion of slow violence). Thus, I suggest that a desirable urban *naturecultural* (if I may) studies research program should reflect the fact that urban metabolisms now reach and disturb the whole globe with the flux of energy and materials mobilized by their socioeconomic activities (this is still more amplified in the case of the so-called global cities). These urban metabolisms, in order to maintain their functions, pillage material and energy from other territories and generate toxic waste. Thus, they are disturbing and depleting virtually all non-urban spaces as well as the ecological cycles of the biosphere on which they depend. This unleashes massive processes of human and non-human displacement and, consequently, leads to a rapid global extermination of biodiversity and cultural diversity. I encourage scholars to have these considerations in mind when approaching Iberian urban cultural production. In order to do this, it would be beneficial to familiarize ourselves with the
emerging global debate on urban ecocriticism as well as with a few concepts, such as “metabolic rift,” that would help us to understand the multifarious cultural and ecological intricacies of urban processes well beyond their urban spaces.

I recommend the following books for those who wish to explore in detail some of the aforementioned concepts: The Ecological Rift. Capitalism’s War on the Earth, in which environmental sociologists John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York elaborate on Marx’s often ignored notion of metabolic rift; El antropoceno. La expansión del capitalismo global choca con la biosfera, in which Ramón Fernández Durán explains the global impacts of the “metabolismo urbano-agro-industrial”; Introducing Just Sustainabilities. Policy, Planning, and Practice, in which Julian Agyeman explores the connections between environmental justice and urban planning; and finally, Creating Regenerative Cities, in which Herbert Girardet builds on relevant concepts such as urban metabolism, cities and entropy, Petropolis, and so on.

These socioecological approaches to cultural production can be fruitful in order to illuminate and articulate the systemic connections amongst neoliberal rationality, urban and rural transformations, energy depletion, ecological and social degradation, social movements, and cultural imaginaries. I hope that this Hispanic Issues volume and debates will encourage Iberian studies to come to terms with the unavoidable agency of the non-human in all human matters, or what Jane Bennett calls “the political ecology of things.”

Notes

1. See Prádanos.
2. For Niklas Luhmann, “observing of observation” or “to see what others cannot see (and to accept that they cannot see what they cannot see) is, in a way, the systemic keystone of epistemology” (143).

Works Cited


