

Debating Ourselves; Towards Garden Cities

Katarzyna Beilin

The challenge of becoming critical not only towards others' ideas, but also towards one's own, is an exciting part of the ethos of humanities. For the last few years, I constantly return to Mike Davis's essay "Who Will Build the Ark?," which does precisely that. Its first part develops a very pessimistic scenario for the future of humanity plagued by the Global Warming that most likely cannot be stopped as up-to-date failures of international efforts to reduce CO₂ emissions show. The second part of his essay, however, rebels against the doom of the first part and argues for utopian thinking that can inspire action and stop or slow down the rising of the seas and other climate catastrophes. I want to propose adopting the dual structure of Davis's essay for our debates with ourselves, keeping in mind that we may be working the very kernel of the humanities whose future similarly hesitates between collapse and survival.

Today the humanities are in trouble. As nation states share their power with interconnected global corporations and most wars are fought for resources, there is less and less need to invest in the humanities to shape nation-loving citizens. Patriotism, more than a love of one's land, is now defined in economic categories as an acquisition of power and the love for products and brands, which serves big businesses. Global business foresees a different role for the humanities through a mere construction of skills. Humanities scholars shall teach languages, writing, speaking, and aspects of culture to future salesmen and executives so that these business people may be more successful in their pursuits. The citizens of today's world need to know how to construct a convincing argument, and be able to question and improve business strategies, but they do not necessarily need to be critical of the context in which they are embedded, especially not in ways that would make them question their employers impact on poorer peoples, nations, or their environments. On the other hand, the rebellious and critical humanities are down on an academia that is slowly accepting to be corporatized and reduced to the role of a service provider for business just to keep jobs. The

humanities, as they used to be, are attacked and dismantled by those in power and those in opposition. A set of changes are unavoidably on the way and it may be that saving the humanities will require a very deep questioning of the up-to-date paradigms and then a questioning of the questioning. In order to find our place in the new world order, we need to debate ourselves thoroughly. What is our role?

On June 9, 2015, during a debate at an emergency meeting of the faculty senate at the University of Wisconsin–Madison focused on faculty reactions to the state lawmakers’ proposed removal of tenure protection, Professor Bassam Shakhashiri raised the issue of our service to community, known on campus as the “Wisconsin Idea.” Shakhashiri argued that we should not count on being protected by our constituents if we do not serve them, because this is a public University belonging to the Wisconsin people. “Service to the people” is different than “service to the business.” The range of human needs is much larger than financial gain. But, perhaps, Shakhashiri is right in suggesting that we indulged too much in thinking that anything we research and teach is precious and essential for our constituents and we forget to build bridges between our research and our place, however that place is defined. After all, we are not only citizens of our respective states and countries, but also residents of the world.

There are different ways of engaging with the community and imagining place. In our volume, *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates*, the most directly engaged essay is by Luis Prádanos. Prádanos’s essay on “Degrowth and Ecological Economics in Twenty-First-Century Spain” is deeply enthusiastic for both fields of thought because they elaborate a fuller and more true picture of the world’s affairs than traditional economics, and because they may offer us recipes to redesign our involvement with the environment in order to avoid or slow down the emerging climate catastrophes. Prádanos is also very critical of the dominant economic model. He writes that, “the neoliberal model is addicted to economic growth and, therefore, cannot be socially and ecologically sustainable” (144). By contrast, authors whose work he studies elaborate alternatives “based, instead, on conviviality, voluntary simplicity, slowness, and the reduction of the social metabolism of some populations in order to stay within the ecological limits of the Earth” (144). Engaging too directly with the issues and problems of the world has always been frowned upon in academia that judges it as not fulfilling the academic drive for objectivity. Faced with threats of unheard of dimensions and possible deadly consequences for millions, however, can we still remain distant from reality and ‘objective’ in the sense of thought for thought’s sake? Injustice and harm justify direct, impulsive engagement against wrongdoing. In this sense, writing in times of climate change reminds one of writing in times of war except that it is an

interior battle that humanity fights with itself and no one wants anyone's death.

Sebastiaan Faber's essay, "Accounting for Violence, Counting the Dead: The Civil War and Spain's Political Present," although different in argumentative style than Prádanos's, is not any less engaged. Considering political atrocities of war and peace from the point of view of a value of life, in its depoliticized nakedness, while counting the lives lost, moves the stress from deliberations on history to understanding its links with the present. This search for links between the past and present subverts the practice of academic history whose 'objectivity' makes it 'apolitical.' When Faber suggests that the discussion of the Spanish Civil War should not remain "clinically isolated in its proper historical context," but that it should "inform a debate about forms of violence that continue to be operative in the present" (299), he motivates his readers for to engage with current affairs. Considering painful times through 'memory' rather than 'history' is political precisely because it connects what was done to people in the past and what they feel, think, and how they need to act because of it today. Faber starts his essay by referring to United States President Obama's speech and pointing out that his rhetoric of loss of life does not dehumanize the victims of violence. Obama's claim that the drone attacks that caused life losses were "meant to prevent a greater loss of innocent life in future" (296), as quoted by Faber, could be debated. But, the very comparison of the two distant wars, one of which has been fought recently by the United States in which we live and work, points to the need to build bridges between research and citizenship, and as Faber admirably does, to connect research and activism through public humanities, writing and working not only for the academic public, but also for others. If our tenure is supposed to protect our academic freedom, why has there been so little engagement of academics against so many recent wars?

John Beusterien's essay teaches a surprising lesson on how to build a bridge between the object of research and the place from where it is done. It analyzes representations of animals in Spanish newspapers, placing their meaning in the context of the reality of his students at a university in the West Texas region. Beusterien explains how the class that he teaches connects Spanish animals to the animals on the Llano Estacado in West Texas. After examining the past and the present of animal lives in both locations, "the class inspires students to imagine new futures for the region" (290). Thinking of the meaning of animals for both places transforms these places from national territories to not-only-human spaces unfairly shared between different species. The fact that animals provide a bridge between two distant areas for the sake of comparison moves the focus from the human cultures to more 'marginal' domains that are both human and non-human. The human and non-human subalterity and the patterns of cultural

and the animal extinction can be seen in parallel as shaped by similar power dynamics. The heritage speakers in Beusterien's class, a minority in United States culture, can question their cultural marginality through a debate about marginalized animal life.

Most of our contributors to *Ethics of Life* opted for including different forms of non-human entities as they reconsidered politics of life and its representations in literary texts, film, press articles as well as through forms of resistance. Essays by John Trevathan, Eugenia Afinoguénova, Carmen Flys and Tonia Raquejo, Matthew Feinberg and Susan Larson, as well as my own and Sainath Suryanarayanan's focused on the relations between human economy, science, and culture, and the degradation of Iberian environments and human health. Flys and Raquejo and Feinberg and Larson analyzed practices of resistance that redefine ethics of life, understood by them as networked human and non-human domains, through art, architecture, and practices of urban life. John Beusterien, Daniel Ares, and William Viestenz challenged human/animal divides together with various discourses and concepts that rest upon these divides. Even Sebastiaan Faber, Paul Begin, and Pablo de Lora, whose essays considered mainly human reality, did it through a transformed understanding of 'human' that addresses the questions of suffering flesh (rather than of spirit) that is common for human and non-human animals.

Including the 'non-human' as a focus in literary and cultural studies has been an issue of considerable contention. The very category is questionable since, encompassing everything except humans, it reproduces the humanistic worldview that it criticizes and that constructs 'human' as distinct, unique, and separate from its context. On the other hand, according to Immanuel Levinas, Laura Bossi, Adela Cortina, and others, placing humans in unprivileged places of the network, created by hubs of live and dead matter, equates people with animals and things and this equation endangers human rights. Finally, one of the most frequent arguments raised is that we cannot really access non-human ways of being. As the argument goes, all attempts of freeing ourselves from anthropocentrism can be compared to blowing at the sail of one's own boat from its board; they do not generate any movement because they lack appropriate positioning. We are condemned to be only human and our attempts to understand animals and stars reproduce anthropocentrism through anthropomorphism as we humanize the non-human, rather than freeing ourselves from the human perspective. As Cary Wolfe admits, all concepts we use to talk about the non-human are human and reflect our way of experiencing life and world. How can we truly express anything radically different from us with these as our concepts?

Literature and film have been valued as ways of imagining lives of others that, without these representations, may be inaccessible and unimaginable. Through a close observation, the first instance of realism, it is

possible to understand a dog's needs, emotions, and desires as Miguel Cervantes does in *El coloquio de los perros*, and Leopoldo Alas (Clarín) in "El Quin." Fiction can be defined as a device allowing the reader to 'be' what he is not, get out of himself and look at himself with others' eyes, like in Julio Cortázar's "Axolotl." Daniel Ares López's essay focuses on the real experiences of Marcos Pantoja, who lived among wolves, almost becoming one of them, and the film *Entre lobos* is inspired by his story. Ares López shows how non-human animals' lives can be understood by someone like Pantoja and misunderstood through discourses of nature documentaries and sensational Hollywood dramas. According to this essay, anthropomorphism may be as much a problematic simplification in questioning the otherness of non-human realms as also a step towards understanding its real relatedness to 'human' experience and life. During the process of Ares López's analysis, important aspects of cultural discourses are deconstructed and their fallacies become obvious. An effort to imagine a non-human perspective is here crucial for cultural criticism. Regardless of whether there is a way to really understand the lives of wolves, efforts to do so open new discursive spaces from which to deal with human problems in relation with the non-human world around us.

While the division between human and non-human worlds does, in fact, reproduce the humanistic worldview, in order to transform it, we need to take it as a point of departure. While moving away from it, we search for inspiration in alternative cosmologies, ontologies, and epistemologies (see Descola), and examine where our conceptualization of the world is in fact fraudulent, in what context human and non-human mix and co-construct each other. Viestenz, for example, points out that political discourses are constituted by animal concepts and that transforming these concepts can change politics. In particular, Viestenz shows how the notion of bestiality is an invitation to subdue and kill 'beasts.' Viestenz and Beusterien show that it is through the humanizing of animals (rather than maintaining the divide between the human and the non-human) that respect for human rights can be improved. Viestenz points out the urgency of seeing the significance of the symbolic (and real) meaning of the bull in Hispanic discourses and possible alternatives for the Iberian studies. Questioning the symbolism of the bull opens up for investigation the areas of Iberian culture that were made invisible by the popularity of the bullfighting spectacle.

Eugenia Afinoguénova's essay discusses the concept of 'quality of life' as a *dispositif*, which is an apparatus of policy making in a tourist driven development in the post-war Spain and until today. Afinoguénova shows how this concept, associated with happiness, becomes a tool in the process of expansion of global capital that learns local cultural meanings and values and, in their name, forsakes local environmental resources. Afinoguénova's *planteamiento* in these debates online contains a brief survey of the

discussions about alternative concepts of happiness, such as ethically inclined *bem vivir* (good living) and *dignidad* (dignity), coined by Spanish *Indignados*. I want to argue that a scholarship like Afinoguénova's (as well as others contained in the volume) and deconstructing official discourses and concepts—political and economic—are the most needed contributions to the community, since they allow readers to see through the manipulations that they are subjected to as our pleasures are constructed in the interest of the financial gains of business worlds. It is precisely these kinds of research that resist the interests of the current administration in transforming the humanities into a service provider for business. One can notice, however, how subtle is the difference between teaching culture in a way that would allow global capital to adopt local meanings to get to the local resources and teaching it in a way that would equip future citizens in understanding, motivation, and strategies to question and possibly resist this order of things. Further difficulty lies in the fact that concepts, even those alternative and rebellious ones, can be and are systematically intercepted by forces whose interests are contrary to the original meanings of these concepts. We need to search for the conceptual frameworks most resistant to being intercepted and redirected. As Afinoguénova's and also Matthew Feinberg and Susan Larson's essays show, incorporating non-human realms and considering life as 'an ecosystem' makes it harder to prioritize economical prosperity that destroys everything around it.

Feinberg and Larson's essay on the "post-crisis Madrid" argues that "cultivating the Square," that is, incorporating the non-human where we live, is a form of fighting for the city space. In their "cultural ecology" of the city, Feinberg and Larson do not abandon the human perspective, but rather perfect it by placing people in their biological and environmental reality synergizing in "an ecosystem of cultural, political and material relationships" (115). This placement of human in the non-human is essential for the true democracy that should have never forgotten about its responsibility for the not-voting lives (see Riechmann). Feinberg and Larson quote Swyngedouw's claim that incorporating other-than-human life in city-thinking would create "ordenes socio-ecológicos más igualitarios" (Swyngedouw 62 qtd. in Feinberg and Larson 116) (socio-ecological orders that are more egalitarian). The Spanish architects, Iñaki Ábalos and Juan Herreros, who were commented upon in Feinberg and Larson's essay, imagine the city as a "latent garden," where space is rediscovered and revalued from the perspective of planting. In their view, the future work of the architect will have to be fused with the work of a gardener.

This 'new naturalism' appears in the Davis essay I mentioned previously. According to Davis, cities need to be concentrated and self-sufficient in terms of food and energy production in order to decrease gasoline usage for transport and minimize energy consumption for all other

human purposes. Concentrated garden cities will grow up and limit their horizontal expansion so as to free space for other forms of life. Contrary to humans, forests left alone to grow will gradually heal the climate imbalances and slow down the doom. In the meantime, the humans of the garden cities will relearn the taste of healthy food from plants and from their slower time will learn to reflect and talk. I am not sure about the conclusion of the debate about the future of the humanities and about the shape and the degree of their survival in the world to come. But, I think that the vision of garden cities and the humanities are intimately connected. If the current economic model pushes the world forward until it submerges like the Titanic, the debate about the humanities is pointless. If, however, we manage to transform the current industrial and urban landscape, the garden cities will contain the chronotope for literary conversations.

Works Cited

- Alas, Leopoldo (Clarín). "El Quin." *Cuentos completos*. Madrid: Alfaguara, 2000. Print.
- Beusterien, John. "Animals in Contemporary Spanish Newspapers." *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates*. Ed. Katarzyna Beiling and William Viestenz. *Hispanic Issues* 42. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press (2016): 279–294.
- Bossi, Laura. *Historia universal del alma*. Madrid: Antonio Machado, 2008. Print.
- Cervantes, Miguel de. "El coloquio de los perros." *Instituto Cervantes*. N.d. Web. 6 Apr. 2010.
- Cortázar, Julio. "Axolotl." *Todos los fuegos del fuego*. Madrid: Alfaguara, 2014. Print.
- Cortina, Adela. *Las fronteras de la persona: El valor de los animales, la dignidad de las personas*. Madrid: Taurus, 2009. Print.
- Davis, Mike. "Who Will Build the Ark?" *New Left Review* 61 (2010): 29–46. Print.
- Descola, Philippe. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. Print.
- Faber, Sebastiaan. "Accounting for Violence, Counting the Dead: The Civil War and Spain's Political Present." *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates*. Ed. Katarzyna Beiling and William Viestenz. *Hispanic Issues* 42. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press (2016): 295–318.
- Feinberg, Matthew and Susan Larson. "Cultivating the Square: Trash, Recycling, and the Cultural Ecology of Post-Crisis Madrid." *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates*. Ed. Katarzyna Beiling and William Viestenz. *Hispanic Issues* 42. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press (2016): 113–142.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Quelques réflexions sur le philosophe de l'hitlersme*. Paris. Édition Payot & Rivages, 1997. Print.
- Prádanos, Luis I. "Degrowth and Ecological Economics in Twenty-First-Century Spain: Toward a Posthumanist Economy." *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates*. Ed. Katarzyna Beiling and William Viestenz. *Hispanic Issues* 42. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press (2016): 143–162.
- Riechmann, Jorge. *El socialismo puede llegar sólo en bicicleta*. Madrid: Catarata, 2012. Print.

Wolfe, Cary. *What Is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. Print.

Beilin, Katarzyna. "Debating Ourselves; Towards Garden Cities." *A Polemical Companion to Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates*. Ed. Katarzyna Beilin and William Viestenz. *Hispanic Issues On Line Debates* 7 (2016): 41–48. Web.
