

Article

Crisis, Change, and the Humanities: Parameters of Discussion

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Abstract: Dynamic metacritical, systemic, paradigmatic thinking about our times is a direct outcome of the work of the humanistic disciplines, for they provide us with the language to understand the operative and abusive functioning of power and inequality. The humanities also teach us that we internalize these systemic operations as new contradictory “locations”, as new experiences of space and identity, that destabilize and make more difficult our need to feel anchored in our social realities. This prefatory essay outlines a pertinent paradigmatic framing of our neoliberal context and reclaims higher education's key role in the development of democratic traditions of civic engagement. It offers a hopeful regeneration of our times of crisis through the work of the humanities and highlights the long tradition of cultural critique already in place in gender-sensitive disciplines that opt for a reimagining of the future grounded on social change and justice.

Keywords: humanities; crisis; neoliberalism; gender; precarity

Gender in Times of Crisis: A Multidisciplinary Conversation is a special issue dedicated to feminist methodologies that highlight the productive outcomes of crisis, contradiction, and fracture. Taken together, the essays model a type of “disaggregate thinking” (Davis 2012), whereby things that appear to be separate are thought together; and where natural, common-sense connections are made uncomfortably less so. The essays deal with the struggles of social change in a wide array of areas that range from higher education to welfare activism, from queer gardens of memory to new models of citizenship, from gender violence to the school-to-prison pipeline, from community activism to the brutal effects of neoliberal economic policies on dignity and quality of life. These articles offer an imaginary for change that is multidimensional and based on a tense dialogue between the different axes that mold the strands of experiences that structure our lives; knowledge that crosses and questions facile identity lines, and which unites and disaggregates in a contestatory and transformative fashion. The scholarship reflects this approach by refusing to confine itself within the borders of traditional fields of research or within the formats of the expectations of customary academic writing. The collection is multi- and inter-disciplinary in nature, and unconventional in format. It is an example of how collaboration between scholars, students, artists, and activists in a non-hierarchical fashion produces an increasingly more sensitive field for thinking about the crisis of our times. The writing stems from the research and discussions facilitated by the “Times of Crisis” seminar held at Dartmouth College's Gender Research Institute in the spring of 2014 (http://www.dartmouth.edu/~grid/events/2013_2014/times_of_crisis_2014.html).

This introductory article proposes a set of reflections on the notion of crisis, its contemporary origins, and its use as a trope of emergency. Conceived spatially, as a metaphorical roadmap for this special number, we discuss three areas imagined as three increasingly smaller concentric circles: the instrumental logic of neoliberalism; the regenerative impact the humanities potentially have upon this

logic within higher education; and the value of programs of study like those of women's, gender, and sexualities studies within the framework of the goal of "rehumanizing" the flow of lives and learning, facilitating social change.

1. Democracy and Systemic Inequality

In today's world, the profound connections between democracy and the role of the humanities in the cultivation of the public sphere are hardly self-evident. We are made to believe that the world of the arts and letters is too solipsistic, too removed from matters of social importance, too isolationist in its towers of beauty to be a motor for innovation, growth, or social change. This is, of course, a caricature of the power underlying humanistic inquiry. It is a distortion, however, that reaches wide audiences, even in the world of education. It would appear that we have lost some basic skill of perception, blinded by nebulous complexities that hide today's grotesque state of affairs. So, let's pause and think again about how to find ways to recover our place in the world.

In times of crisis, in times of heightened systemic inequality, finding alternatives to how things came to be would seem to demand that we look for better methodologies of analysis and critique in precisely those terrains that are conducive to social change. The goal is to assist the hard questioning of the status quo of our times of precarity. Identifying a language and a way of doing things better is increasingly more difficult; for we live in times that brutally attack the value of the public sphere, the power of education, and the need for alternative modes of interconnectedness, of imagining our lives together. One could say that we live in dishonorable times; for the basic constituents of a moral and ethical stance towards life go frightfully unchallenged and are undermined by simplicity, i.e., by an all-encompassing economic rationale of instrumentalization and easy profit that permeates our thinking, our relationships, our imaginings of the future. We live in times where precarity, or what Judith Butler terms "the politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler 2009, p. 10), begins to sound excessively familiar; and where globalization, i.e., our transnational interdependencies, has actually turned dilapidated world economies and bankrupt social welfare systems into the new "normal". Unbridled markets and speculative neoliberal capitalism reduce the complexity of reality to a seemingly straightforward financial logic, hence transforming the prospects of imagining equity and justice in human, animal, and planetary affairs (the core of humanistic inquiry) into a chimera of sorts, for these pieces fall on the outside of what really matters.

There is a specificity, though, about how we live our times of precarity, at least in terms of the levels of pitilessness and unhappiness that our societies are willing to tolerate. For if, historically, humanity has always been able to imagine sets of beliefs that have allowed societies to face "the cruelty of life with dignity and some flashes of hope" (Berger 2007, p. 94), if we have always been able to hold onto a sense of community that was still inspirational, is that possible today? What kinds of grand societal shifts and rifts do we face? Movements that have, for example, dislocated kindness, or "the ability to bear the vulnerability of others, and therefore of oneself" (Phillips and Taylor 2009, p. 8), from of the aspirational realm of subjectivity and turned it into a sign of weakness? Who bears witness to the suffering and inequalities around us, to the barriers that have been relentlessly erected to keep us all in place? Who or what facilitates the interrogation of this binary world in which the free, gain; and the condemned can only dream?

In *Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance*, John Berger writes that we live in times of "walls"; of concrete, bureaucratic, surveillance, security, and racist walls (Berger 2007, p. 94), not only palpable on the outside but also inhabiting our minds and souls. For Berger, our greatest social and moral challenge today lies in deciding which side of the wall we are attuned to, not because one is good and the other evil, but because at the core of this dilemma resides a choice between "self-respect and self-chaos" (Berger 2007, p. 94). We can either try to re-imagine our humanity in this world together; or allow neoliberalism to plunge ahead in its reckless devastation and wall-building frenzy, keeping us neatly separated through fear and disaffection. We need to decide if we will complacently allow

our world to be sprayed with “ethicides” (Berger 2007, p. 89), i.e., with “agents that kill ethics and therefore any notion of history and justice”, or struggle to recuperate the kind of imaginative space that every “central public forum represents and requires” (Berger 2007, p. 89), a space that attends to our “need for sharing, bequeathing, consoling, mourning, and hoping” (Berger 2007, p. 89), for these are the conditions of humanity (and of the humanities).

Modern day capitalism has no qualms with exercising this type of literal and figurative violence on our societies and communities. We have even reached the point where we need to be reminded that our lives are marked by the finite and not the capitalist infinite, that death and the end of things is what grounds us and not the race for more, as we fear and recoil from death’s breath on our shoulders. Capitalism’s frenzy is a rebellion against finitude, against the limitations of the human condition yet this is an artificial and unnatural way to live, for it is based on the illusion that we can somehow surpass our natural limitations and exercise a kind of warfare on our humanity. Spanish philosopher Santiago Alba Rico has satirically termed capitalism’s insatiable appetite as its power to reduce the activity of society to that of a never-ending digestive process, as being so voracious that it has actually created a society of absence and not of “things” (abundance) (Alba Rico 2012, p. 120), like it prides itself in thinking. For Alba, this is the first time in history that “things” have a radically different ontological status because they have “disappeared”. Objects no longer carry any value in and of themselves, their worth limited to being one step in a chain of endless (and futile) consumption, what Julian Stallabrass theorized as an object’s ontological status of being “deferred trash” (Stallabrass 1996, p. 172) within the chain and life cycle of consumer goods.

Objects have a fundamental role to play in all societies for, as Alba suggests, they underscore the basic features of our humanity: time, memory, and fragility. If objects outside of our capitalist frenzy were fundamentally different at one point in history, it was because they were able to (a) slow us down and invite admiration; (b) be a repository of cultural memory, of uses, of their own genealogy and materiality; and (c) remind us that sooner or later, they, like us, inevitably become fragile and break (Alba Rico 2012, pp. 120–21). In other words, “things” brought us closer and reconciled us with our own mortality: they made us human. The post-human condition that capitalism proposes for us today eliminates these processes and rhythms and fundamentally rewrites the ontological prerequisites of all things human: finite reason, imagination, and memory (Alba Rico 2012, p. 123). Capitalism’s obsession with, and rebellion against, these limitations places us on the threshold of becoming a society that foolishly believes in its own immortality, recklessly displaces vulnerability from its social imagination, and unforgivably justifies the absence of justice and compassion for all—but especially for the most vulnerable—as subsidiary elements in its social policies (or lack thereof).

Given this radical economically-driven context, it comes as no surprise that we would be living in times that do not pay enough attention to a field of inquiry that the unbridled markets deem their dangerous nemesis. Dynamic meta-critical, systemic, paradigmatic thinking about our times is a direct outcome of the work of the humanistic disciplines, though not exclusively. Literature, philosophy, history, the fine arts, etc. provide us with the language to understand the operative and abusive functioning of power and inequality, maybe not with quantitative methodologies, but certainly through other logics equally important for understanding the complexities of our times, namely, those of metaphor, abstraction, approximation, and, of course, emotion. These strategies are particularly relevant when trying to understand, for example, the effects of precarity. Precarity is not only an economic reality but also a “spatial” entity, given how we internalize these systemic operations of oppression as new contradictory “locations”; as new experiences of place that destabilize and make more difficult our need to feel “anchored” in our social realities. In other words, understanding how and why the social contract dissolves is part and parcel of humanistic inquiry.

The arts might offer some answers to these questions of our time given how they interrupt the dominant logic of profit and economic exchange by foregrounding the less obvious: that there are and have always been spaces for societies to instill a civic and reconstructive culture in their midst. We would be wise to look for inspiration in how the Greeks placed the arts at the core of civic space; given

how that society anchored the emotional education of the citizen, in part, on the power of the arts to evoke and educate; on their decisive emphasis on public pedagogy. In *El gobierno de las emociones* (2011), Spanish philosopher Victoria Camps theorizes the implications of rescuing a moral education—a sense of how things “should be”—as the starting point for theorizing individual and social behavior in our post-human context. Beginning with classical Greek philosophy, Camps pays special attention to how that society avoided the inoperative split between affect and reason as she tries to rescue for our world the collective social processes that lead to moral thinking (*paideia*), so displaced from public discourse. Cultivating a “moral leash” might not curb the excesses of neoliberalism, but it will certainly facilitate citizens being better prepared for critiquing the apathy and inoperativeness of the status quo within the different contexts of our societies. Affect, that internal impulse to respond, should not, then, be extrapolated from political theory, from the scaffolding of the polis, quite the opposite: social affect is the end result of a long educational process, one that enlivens our awareness of inequity and is as important to the health of the community as is a fair and just legal system. In Camps’ terms:

A person with a moral character or sensibility affectively responds to immoral acts and to the breaking of basic moral rules. She feels indignant, ashamed, or furious with regard to what transpired in the extermination camps, to the horrors of war, to torture in prisons, to famine, to the corruption that undermines public institutions and those who administer them. This affective response is key so that behavior can be redirected against what is deemed unacceptable or unjust. (Camps 2011, p. 17)¹

When the individual feels in this manner, Camps suggests that we are in the presence of a moral being, an individual that is accustomed to responding affectively in a wide variety of ways—with prudence, with fairness, magnanimously, with valor—as demanded by context because s/he *feels* these values as part of his/her identity (Camps 2011, pp. 14–15). This type of citizen has been educated ethically in the governance of emotion, so that upon encountering different situations, s/he responds and exhibits his/her capacity for fairness, tolerance, responsibility, etc.; i.e., the values needed to live in a cohesive and just social order. Since morality operates in the realm of “what otherwise could have been”, how then do we educate and refocus our sensitivities towards “happiness”, to that state of affairs that the Greeks deemed profoundly dependent upon fairness and peace and not on individualism and personal success, as configured in our neoliberal world?

Some might consider these hazardous endeavors. Remixing the arts back into social life would mean being less productive in strictly economic terms. It would involve looking for means to reconnect with fellow “precarious” (i.e., encouraging acts of solidarity), acknowledging our lives and our identities as “sites” where the axes of civil life (gender, race, sexuality, class, ethnicity, language, ideology, etc.) unite and differentiate, bond and contest. The humanities are not the “removed”, “elusive”, or “ivory tower” entity that neoliberalism would make them seem, disqualifications that owe more to their mostly uncomfortable, anti-capitalist ethos than to any inherent epistemological shortcomings. But if we are to turn things around in these times of difficulty, we would need to facilitate conversations in our own institutions and areas of civic engagement on just how important the work of the arts and humanities actually is. We need to make clearer that their good analytical probing and interdisciplinary mode of thinking are not any less relevant for human survival than that of the omnipresent market (prison). Let’s think through this carefully.

The humanities certainly offer answers to the questions of our time, for who bears witness (who emotionally educates) to the suffering and inequalities around us? Many, but especially writers,

¹ Translations are my own. Page numbering corresponds to the Spanish original. Trans: “Una persona con carácter o sensibilidad moral reacciona *afectivamente* ante las inmoralidades y la vulneración de las reglas morales básicas. Siente indignación, vergüenza o rabia ante lo ocurrido en los campos de exterminio, los horrores de las guerras, las torturas en las cárceles, las hambrunas, la corrupción que corroe a las instituciones públicas y a quienes las administran. Esa reacción *afectiva* es necesaria para orientar la conducta en contra de lo que se proclama como inaceptable o injusto” (Camps 2011, p. 17).

filmmakers, documentarians, philosophers, photographers, musicians, poets, painters, individuals, all of whom, like the humble electrical converter, make “energy (in this case, intellectual energy) usable in different places and in different contexts” (Hutcheon 2006, p. 229). Here lies the potential for the transformative politics of the humanities, in their “disorienting” ethos (Ahmed 2006), in their engagement and celebration of “failure” (Halberstam 2011), in their promise to reverse the inevitable, the likely, in their strategies for upsetting our alignments and allegiances. The good work of the humanities unmask and reveals the invisible systemic logics (Morrison 1987; Hooks 1994a, 1994b) and by doing so makes room for new possibilities. They expand our epistemologies and they amplify the commonsense notion of reality, too anorexic in our times, too dependent on the crumbs of the economic. This all works in favor of stimulating civic engagement in that the revelation of a complex story usually encourages a call for change and justice.

2. Pedagogies of Crisis: Educational Story-Telling

We know there is a story that guides this particular historical moment. It is a dark, dystopian one that privileges gain over process, quantifiable results over the more intangible, the precarity of the many over the security of the few. We live in calamitous times or in times of imprisonment, as John Berger would have it (Berger 2014), with only fragmentary glimpses of freedom or of a better way. We know that a utilitarian logic dominates us as human beings, and reduces the complexity of our humanity and of the world to its usefulness within a frightful economic schema geared exclusively towards profit and the instrumentalization of all things tangible (people, animals, resources) and intangible (ideas, social relations, emotion).

This framework of harrowing financial gain, what is usually termed neoliberal ideology, has a long and painful history stemming from the economic turn that the gradual and hopelessly unstoppable fragmentation of the social welfare pact unleashed in the late 1960s. This market-prison erects imaginary “walls” (Berger 2007, 2014), not to keep fellow citizens (“the prisoners”) *in* but rather to keep most of humanity *out* so as not to disturb the safety and privilege of the few. This is the prison-house neoliberalism has designed: a penitentiary in reverse terms; a gated-community where the promise of a golden key that will bring about upward mobility blinds most into believing that the upward redistribution of wealth is the product of “entrepreneurship”, and not the outcome of a new vision of national and world order that places, in Lisa Duggan’s words, “competition, inequality, market discipline, public austerity, and law and order” (Duggan 2004, p. X) at its core. It is a schema that allows self-interest to masquerade as creativity; explains poverty and discrimination (failure) in non-systemic ways; and, in doing so, incites suspicion and justifiable exclusion between those on different sides of the wall. In today’s world, where elusive “market-forces” or, more precisely, the unequivocal rules laid out by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, the US Treasury, the European Central Bank, Wall Street, and all other international speculative financial centers sequester the nation-state and democratic alternatives to this state of affairs, it is more urgent than ever to find a better story.

Because neoliberalism teaches us to live in society as discrete, isolationist, self-sufficient entities, it behooves us to be able to recover a notion of the political that does not mock democracy with a type of social amnesia that erases “critical thought, historical analysis, and any understanding of broader systemic relations” (Giroux 2014, p. 2). If John Berger is correct in assuming that most of us are on the “outside” of this world order looking in, it should not be so terribly difficult to realize that it would serve our interests better if we stopped facing the wall that keeps us out and instead recognized in each other a route towards a different kind of civic disposition. We are, after all, the majority. Instead of striving to achieve a senseless and futile upward ascent that only secures the position of those inside, further by reaffirming the operative schema, we could try to heal from the brutality of this global economic logic and attempt to reconfigure the state of affairs by promoting what Cornel West terms as “a democratic living of the world” (West 2004, p. 13) or an ethos of democratic life. Can we protect each

other from this continued assault, from this paralyzing state of nihilistic apathy, from the desensitizing effects of this race to nowhere?

We do need to wonder, though, if any of this can be accomplished without recovering a notion of progress and well-being that is linked to a healthier equilibrium between the public and private. In order to bring back to life the social and systemic knowledge that is being erased from our collective memories, it is key that we embody an ethos that will allow us to find a place in the world where the public sphere can once again become the site where “people learn to translate private troubles into public issues” (Giroux 2014, p. 2), where “truth telling” (West 2004, p. 38), or the unmasking of this farce, becomes the law of the land. In other words, we are being called upon to design a site of resistance so that instead of living our lives collaborating with the “mass regimes of civic death” (Berger 2014) that “confuse, divide, distract, and sedate” (Berger 2014). We, on the contrary, must promote new forms of democratic energy that help to unmask what secures us on our side of the wall. This, of course implies a democratic “*paideia*—the critical cultivation of an active citizenry” (West 2004, p. 39) that understands that coming together is an unromantic prospect, full of difference and incompatibilities, and yet it is celebratory as well, for it involves building a better and more accurate story about our times. One avenue is, certainly, that of public and higher education.

One of the pillars of the neoliberal world order resides in its successful appropriation of educational institutions making them succumb to the values of economic brutality. Whether it be in the guise of the misshapen and paltry funding of public schools, of the race to win revenue producing grants at colleges and universities, or of the substitution of complex critical thinking for rote memorization of standardized content, educational institutions have been held hostage by policies that emphasize the facile numeric quantification of “skills” instead of the probing and questioning of ideas, methods, and the processes of access to or the communication and dissemination of knowledge itself. It is important to denounce how schools, colleges, and universities are subject to the rise of an increasingly powerful managerial-administrative class that is removed from the educational mission of helping students thoughtfully understand and critique the world, instill values of civic responsibility, and re-sensitize their moral core so that self-interest is not the guiding principle to decision making. If, as stated in Henry Giroux’s *Neoliberalism’s War on Higher Education* (2014), the university has become a “disciplinary apparatus that views [itself] not as a place to think but as a place to prepare students to be competitive in the global marketplace” (Giroux 2014, p. 17), this translates into particularly disturbing examples of skill-based curricula that prioritize the predominance of technology over the arts and humanities. This shift towards quantitative, result-driven methodologies waters down the kind of epistemological excitement that needs to be in place in order to stimulate critical thinking based on an appreciation for experimentation, the unknown, and difference; logics of learning that welcome the stories, histories, and experiences of others, so that one’s own universe can accommodate change and discomfort. If our curricula are “revamped to fit the interests of the market” (Giroux 2014, p. 17), we are making a “mockery of the very meaning and mission of the university as a place both to think and to provide the formative culture agents that make a democracy possible” (Giroux 2014, p. 17).

As educators, we need to implement pedagogies in the classroom that will allow students to piece together a better democratic project, a wiser and more accurate story about our pasts and futures. It is time to stop allowing neoliberal policies to be presented as “neutral, managerial precepts for good government and efficient business operations” (Duggan 2004, p. XIII). Likewise, the teachings of the humanities make it unacceptable to propose that “economic policy is primarily a matter of neutral, technical expertise” (Duggan 2004, p. XIV) separate from politics and culture and therefore not “properly subject to political accountability or cultural critique” (Duggan 2004, p. XIV). This is the kind of story our institutions of public and higher education should be piecing together for our students, teaching them to be suspicious of models that keep the economic realm separate from our political and cultural realities; an economic stratum somehow uncontaminated by the messiness of social experience, of issues pertaining to race, class, sexuality, language, imperialism, etc., i.e., the

“stuff” of humanistic inquiry. Our instructional strategies must make it possible for our students to realize that:

[c]lass and racial hierarchies, gender and sexual institutions, religious and ethnic boundaries are the channels through which money, political power, cultural resources, and social organization flow. The economy cannot be transparently abstracted from the state or the family, from the practices of racial apartheid, gender segmentation, or sexual regulation. (Duggan 2004, p. XIV)

How else can we turn our desires, identities, modes of relationship, and aspirations for the future into issues of civic engagement, fairness, and justice? We cannot afford any longer to relegate the value of ethical responsibility to the wasteland political thought has become in our times (Giroux 2014, p. 15); isolationist in its dismemberment of the interconnected realities of our daily experiences. The humanities teach us that this convenient decoupling of the economic from its socio-political contexts and complexities is a grave operation that goes beyond poor logic. It is a deadly epistemology that reduces, as Lisa Duggan wisely suggests, the objection to material inequality to class warfare, or dismisses race, gender or sexual inequities as merely cultural, private, or trivial (Duggan 2004, p. XIV). In her words:

In order to facilitate the flow of money up the economic hierarchy, neoliberal politicians have constructed complex and shifting alliances, issue by issue and location by location, always in contexts shaped by the meanings and effects of race, gender, sexuality and other markers of difference. These alliances are not simply opportunistic, and the issues are not merely epiphenomenal or secondary to the underlying reality of the more solid and real economic goals, but rather, the economic goals have been (must be) formulated in terms of the range of political and cultural meanings that shape the social body in a particular place and time. (Duggan 2004, p. XVI)

One can see that a perverse dogma lies at the heart of this market epistemology, a belief that proposes, in David Harvey’s thinking, “that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2005, p. 2). Within this logic, the role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. This will include setting up military, police and legal structures required to secure private property rights and to “guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets” (Harvey 2005, p. 2); and not creating or supporting institutions of knowledge that run counter to its decrees. Our task as educators aspiring to understand, critique, and improve the social interconnectivity in our communities is to resist this corporate cloaking of reality. These operations hide deep social inequality and a perversion of the social welfare project whereby the state turns into a guarantor of war, punishment, and revenge instead of being the underwriter of justice and fair play. Our times are witnessing how an unbridled worldwide neoliberal platform is gradually facilitating the rise of authoritarianism within our liberal democracies in the guise of governing plutocracies. Very recently, Greek society mobilized a “no”-vote to protest the economic terrorism (Varoufakis 2015) that the neoliberal protégés of Europe wished to impose on Greek society, if, however, only to succumb to the law of the land. This is what awaits all movements of change and revolt if we do not demand profound structural reforms and elaborate alternate visions of the world and its systems. How might our institutions of learning bridle this unmanageable beast?

3. Practices of Civil Engagement Close to Home

In order to jumpstart this project, in order for our students to understand that we are facing a core confrontation of paradigms—one that explains inequity and injustice as an issue of *performance* instead of as an issue of *design* ((Duggan 2004) emphasis our own)—we need pedagogies, tools,

methods, and content that will help students imagine a much more critical mode of subjectivity, politics, and stance in the contemporary world. In our classrooms, it would be helpful to embody methods of critical pedagogy that pave the way for responsible and engaged citizenship and provide the language and critical resources so that our students understand why the dismantling of prior institutional frameworks (access, curricula, administrative design) that favored a more democratic mode of social outcomes and aspirations actually matter deeply. Making this project come to life will involve complex and treacherous navigation, for the ethos of neoliberalism covers our bodies and social relationships with a cloak of blindness. The financialization of everything (Martin 2002; Harvey 2005)—the logic of the market—includes the corporatization of our educational systems, a process that witnesses the “squelching of academic freedom, the rise of an ever increasing contingent of part-time faculty [. . .] and the view that students are basically consumers and faculty providers of a saleable commodity such as a credential or a set of workplace skills. More striking still is the slow death of the university as a center of critique, vital source of civic education, and crucial public good” (Giroux 2014, p. 16). If our institutions of learning are no strangers to the logic of our times, how can we offer alternatives to this myopic race to mediocrity? How do we teach students that better practices can lead to better storytelling about our past, present, and future? How do we make students realize and appreciate that a more accurate and complete picture of our times is the only route toward social justice and democracy? Let’s pay attention to humanistic practices that also have strong ties to gender and sexuality.

One of the most interesting cognitive overlaps between the humanistic and gender-centered endeavor is their operative framework of acknowledging the role the micropolitical plays both in understanding power and in embodying optimal pedagogical practices. As Kristen Locker writes in the prologue to Jean Fox O’Barr’s classic *Feminism in Action* (1994); long before social scientists became aware that inequality gets built at the micropolitical level, feminist thinkers had established “that the politics of touch, of language, of how we think of things, all come to structure what we think is possible” (O’Barr 1994, p. X). If the micropolitical, then, is the origin of both our social and individual identities and of the range of possibilities for social and interpersonal interaction, in the classroom, this means that we need to translate the project of “possibilities”—i.e., that of critical thinking and interrogation—into a critical pedagogy that, among other things, makes “classroom content and personal experience shuttle back and forth for each learner” (O’Barr 1994, p. 19). This is a process that is usually not contemplated in most classrooms but that is essential in the learning process. This type of engagement between individual student interests and course content demands that we ask ourselves very frank questions about the type of educational opportunities our institutions facilitate and encourage.

Historically, gender studies classrooms have been one of the most innovative sites of pedagogical and research transformation. It is well known that the ethos within feminist research and teaching originates in that (a) it is an interdisciplinary and unifying mode of cognition; (b) the WGST classroom teaches skills in critical analysis; (c) the discipline assumes a problem-solving stance; (d) it clarifies the issue of value-judgment in education; and (e) it promotes knowledge for socially useful ends (O’Barr 1994, pp. 60, 90). In pedagogical terms, the WGST/feminist classroom is conceived as an emancipatory site of education and not one of disciplining (Hooks 1994a, 1994b; Freire 2001). It is a site that encourages active, student-centered learning instead of adhering to the passive-receptacle model of education rooted on the hierarchy of the professor “expert” and student “learner”. On the level of research, the WGST context allows for a qualitative shift as well, in that women are no longer “merely” new objects of study or authors of a different sex; instead, research that follows this ethos “allows students to choose what subjects to study, to question how subjects would be studied, to challenge ideas of objectivity and power within research, and to create knowledge that would support the changes occurring on local, state, and national levels due to feminist organizing” (Berger and Radeloff 2011, p. 33).

It would seem then that the intellectual work of these programs is aimed at transforming higher education (how we teach and learn), at finding better ways of doing research (better questions, better probing of methods and suppositions, adding a broader diversity of voices), and at creating a new kind of subject or citizen-activist: informed, responsible, aware, empowered, and critical of his/her social realities. These changes and reformulations of teaching, learning, and researching have very concrete implications for the broader social context, implications that sometimes go unnoticed and that are not acknowledged as transformational. The women's and gender studies context has always been on the vanguard of social analysis. This makes its research and praxis key for the challenges our world faces today. Surprisingly, though, despite its well-established legacies in the areas of cognitive, theoretical, political, and educational development, we still find an extremely low profile of gender-related issues, courses, and pedagogies in most of our university curricula. Our neoliberal times account for manipulating gender (understood in all of its intersectional complexity) into being guilty of a "political" (non-academic) agenda or of being "partisan" (only relevant to women).

Catherine (Orr et al. 2012) has explained quite eloquently why the liberating impulse that feminism fosters is particularly dire in our times:

From my vantage point, Women's and Gender Studies at this particular historical moment appears as a multivalent, poly-vocal site of convenience for multiple overlapping and at times contradictory conversations about social change, social justice, human empowerment, environmental restoration, and, increasingly, spirituality. [. . .] My objective is to deepen students' commitment to personally making the world a better place in some way or another and heighten their ability to do so from a place of conscious awareness about multiple viable strategies in the context of deep introspection about themselves and awareness of the relationship between self-change and world-change. (Orr et al. 2012, p. 29)

The ethos behind the WGST project is "much more than a gender equity project; the discipline of WGST investigates issues of power, privilege, and difference at the course level and helps students connect those investigations to various means of social transformation" (Orr 2011, p. 7). The intellectual power of the discipline resides in its being able to teach students how social problems "emerge from interconnected systems of inequality *and* simultaneously learn how to challenge those systems" (Orr 2011, p. 10). These pedagogical experiences, though, are the product of much hard work and self-critique of the status quo within our "normal" classrooms, and also of the acknowledgement that the overspecialization of research, teaching, and even administration leads to a divorce from civic impact. In the quest for better answers to the issues of our times, intersectional gender-based scholarship with a deep commitment to the humanistic ethos (the micro-political) can, of course, wisely serve institutional change, should that be the charted course. Unfortunately, despite its multiplatform approach to teaching, research, and activism and its core deliberations about power and injustice, most institutions of higher education still overlook the key lessons learned in this long history of disciplinary, institutional, and political critique. It is painful to witness just how institutions bypass the opportunity to embed civic engagement within the curriculum; a process that would connect with histories of radical politics one that, in Cornel West's words, must revive:

[a] long tradition of excoriating, painful, and powerful critiques of the arrested development of our democracy—critiques of the ravages of our imperial expansionist genocide of the Native Americans; of the crushing of the lives of workers by the callous machinery of capitalist excesses; of the wholesale subjugation of women, gays, and lesbians; and most especially and centrally of the deeply antidemocratic and dehumanizing hypocrisies of white supremacy. (West 2004, p. 13)

These are the sites for dissent citizenship and stronger democracy but they are also the sites for creative and empowering teaching. We know that intersectional approaches to power, inequality, and gender allow us to better examine global-local connections, acknowledge "sexism and its relationship to other

forms of oppression” (Orr 2011, p. 11) and produce “life-long learners and critical inquiry toward social transformation” (Orr 2011, p. 11) even if administrators feel trapped by the so-called exigencies of market productivity.²

As (Orr 2011) points out in the Teagle Foundation white paper on “Big Questions in the Disciplines” dedicated to gender and civic engagement, one of the most pressing issues jeopardizing the long-term commitment of higher education with its civic responsibilities is the way the ever-increasing specialization of academic disciplines “pushes aside the meaning and value of liberal arts learning” (Orr 2011, p. 4). The overspecialization of university curricula to the detriment of the liberal arts core makes our institutions especially vulnerable to the forces of neoliberalism, for these are pressures that quickly apply measurements of profitability to the subtle processes involved in learning and creativity. The liberal arts core runs counter to the profit-motive criterion, given its “anachronistic” goal of strengthening the strongholds of citizenship, democracy, and civic engagement.

Not all academic disciplines within our institutions have had a successful history of resisting these pressures; nor have all the institutional players been on the same side with regard to the corporatization of the university. And one must remember that colleges and universities in the United States, especially, come in very different sizes (small private liberal arts campuses versus large publicly funded state flagship institutions and everything in between), have very different pedagogical missions (from those that emphasize student independence in their fields of specialization to those that follow more standardized disciplinary tracts), and serve a widely different set of students and faculty depending on location, funding sources, etc. Yet embedded within these differences, there are academic and administrative areas within our campuses that have found it easier to accept the market-influenced logic of accountability as its measurement of success, whether due to their historical disengagement of knowledge from critical pedagogy, or originating in a lack of diversity in all of its inceptions in those departments (i.e., hyper-specialization that masks radical parochialism). There are other sectors, however, that aspire to be the bastions of the ethical commitment of higher education to the common good; areas of study-teaching-activism that are well-seasoned in the labor of critique, diversifying content and pedagogy, awakening the soul to the grounding of dissent citizenship. While we do not claim any type of academic “purity” or political fundamentalism for these areas of our universities, there are departments and programs that have a very long history of promoting “dissent” in its many manifestations. And it is no coincidence that many are interdisciplinary and humanities-oriented, even if grounded in the social sciences.

In *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues against the empiricist, market-driven blindness that guides much of the reform policy of higher education world-wide. She defines the model of education needed for democracy as a platform of “mediation” that challenges the logic of economic profitability as the grounds for success in the realm of learning. In her words:

Given that economic growth is so eagerly sought by all nations, especially at this time of crisis, too few questions have been posed about the direction of education, and with it, of the world’s democratic societies. With the rush to profitability in the global market, values precious for the future of democracy, especially in an era of religious and economic anxiety, are in danger of getting lost. [. . .] We should have no objection to good scientific and technical education [. . .] My concern is that other abilities, equally crucial, are at risk of getting lost in the competitive flurry, abilities crucial to the health of any democracy internally, and to the creation of a decent world culture capable of constructively addressing

² The new Bologna model, implemented in the EU in 2010, would be another “learning-for-profit model” that illustrates this conundrum. The European Commission bases the modernization of the European university curricula on the notion of “training systems” which are to “meet the needs of a changing labor market” given how “the proportion of jobs requiring high skills grows, and the demand for innovation and entrepreneurship increases” (see higher education Bologna process website in reference section (European Commission n.d.)).

the world's most pressing problems. These abilities are associated with the humanities and the arts: the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a "citizen of the world;" and finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicaments of another person. (Nussbaum 2010, pp. 6–7)

The liberal arts are not adornments or a surplus in Nussbaum's understanding of the public sphere but rather sites for political, ethical, and citizenship-making. The imagination has the power to question, to challenge, to re-imagine, to cure and heal; but through a kind of symbolic "discomfort", by making each of us, in Deleuze and Guattari's words, "strangers within our own languages" (Deleuze and Guattari 1985, p. 26), or by allowing ourselves to be "disoriented" (Ahmed 2006, pp. 1–20) out of our familiarity. If students, researchers, and practitioners are to have this kind of "defamiliarizing" effect on audiences; if in order to live democratically within our public and private spheres we need to live as "foreigners", i.e., uncomfortable with the given, questioning and probing reality, asking the questions of the child-theorist (the "why's?" and "what if's?"), what Adrienne Rich called the imagination's questions (Rich 2001, p. 167), what kinds of content and practices should our university curricula model? This is the core question guiding our article.

As a mode of cognition, art withholds this power of vision, of highlighting our interconnectedness and civic obligations, because it follows an epistemology that requires comparison. Art's work with metaphor, with the imperfect correlation between life experiences and representation, with the struggle of language to name the unknown, always places its results in the realm of approximation, of the "not quite", of the "close enough." On the other hand, this imperfect encounter also adds a political dimension to this "comparative imagination" (McClennen 2010, pp. 8, 43) for it challenges the idea that there might exist "discursive formations [like that of the market—our own clarification] that arrogate to themselves the immunities of incompatibility and the impunity of exceptionalism" (McClennen 2010, p. 8). In other words, because of their work in the realm of representation, the humanities teach us that discursivity (language and metaphor) is not unique to the world of art and letters – it is a universal, unlike the market.

Art's function is not to endorse reality, especially today when we live in times of such profound historical disappointments. Instead, through close observation of the everyday, of our faces, of how people protect themselves from disaster, of how we speak to each other, of how we imagine the future and remember the past, we endure, discover, and critique—but with rage (and love). This is the only path towards a glimpse of truth and morality. In Berger's thinking: "For us to live and die properly, things have to be named properly. Let us reclaim our words" (Berger 2007, p. 48). No more living within an empty and hopeless tautology (Sarrionandia 1991, p. 51) provoked by fear, grounded on our feeling small and hopeless in the face of reality, like the child who can only respond to the question of "Why?" with "Because . . ." as an answer (Sarrionandia 1991, p. 52). Let us reclaim language; let us come to terms with truth being grounded in metaphor; let us leave certainty for the technocrats and bad politicians; and let us reclaim science and poetry because both "are grounded on uncertainties and conjectures" (Sarrionandia 1991, p. 148).³

If Nussbaum argues that the capacity for critical thinking and reflection is crucial in keeping democracies "alive and wide awake" (Nussbaum 2010, p. 10), the ability to think well about a wide range of cultures, groups, and nations in the context of the global economy is crucial in order to enable democracies "to deal responsibly with the problems we currently face as members of an interdependent world" (Nussbaum 2010, p. 10). Could this not be the mission statement of many academic programs within our institutions? If our universities prefer their curricula to be skill specific, focused on tangible and quantifiable outcomes, redefining education as "training", let us resist this move; or better yet, distinguish between a specific subset of disciplinary skills that students should gradually master and an psychological-ethical proficiency defined as each student's ability to imagine what Nussbaum

³ Original: "se erigen sobre la duda y la conjetura" (Sarrionandia 1991, p. 148).

terms “the experience of another” (Nussbaum 2010, p. 10), a capacity she believes almost all human beings possess in some form but that need to be “greatly enhanced and refined if we are to have any hope of sustaining decent institutions across the many divisions that any modern society contains” (Nussbaum 2010, p. 10).

It should be the goal of all university curricula to encourage a deep self-awareness on behalf of its researchers, students, and practitioners of the supreme complexities of the world through the development of an interdisciplinary paradigm for continued, life-long learning. To ignore the liberal arts, the humanities, or gender and sexuality studies as one of the core threads of any course of study is to condemn any given program to obsolescence and to short-change its students from developing critical thinking skills, interdisciplinary dexterity, openness and awareness of diversity, more intricate and better-formulated research questions, and avenues for applying knowledge for social transformation. In today’s context, this is something we cannot afford. Universities have an integral role to play in the health of the social contract and in creating a meaningful diversity of players in the public sphere.

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