

Hispanism and *Humanitas* in the Market University

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As we look back at the inaugural volume of the now well-established *Hispanic Issues On Line* series, we are struck by the remarkable degree of disciplinary self-awareness displayed by the volume contributors, and also by their willingness to air Hispanism's dirty laundry, so to speak, in their quest to expose and transcend internal divides and potentially paralyzing forms of institutional inertia. Indeed, the range of the discussion is nothing short of unprecedented in this type of essay collection, moving from questions of object selection and the place of canonical texts vis-à-vis underrepresented fields and constituents, to geo-political rifts, most notoriously between the Peninsular and Latin American sub-disciplines and/or between center and margins, to methodological debates on the relative merits of philological, historicist, and theoretical approaches, and the promise of new horizons of plurality and inclusion associated with the rise of transnational and transdisciplinary directions.

While these debates and the issues that animate them have not lost currency, they seem to have receded into the background in recent years within the circles of Hispanic Studies in the United States. This may be due, in part, to the emergence of a "quiet" consensus around the notion that the existence of a plurality of perspectives, different interpretive methodologies, and differing political views is ultimately a sign of disciplinary health. Yet, we would argue that the withering of internal debates within Hispanism, as with other literary, linguistic and artistic fields, and indeed other Humanities and Social Science disciplines, such as Media Studies and History is also, to a large extent, a byproduct of the "survival mode" in which we find ourselves since the latest proclamation of crisis for the Humanities. Let us be clear, the newest "crisis of the Humanities" is a deceptive misnomer, a largely performative statement that says less about the actual condition of Humanistic fields than it does about the views and interests of the social, political and cultural powers that have redirected significant economic resources away from "speculative" disciplines and towards more "practical"

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(that is, market-driven, market-defined and market-compliant) academic enterprises.

The Vice-President of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Philip Lewis, hit the nail on the head when he predicted in February of 2014 that the most pervasive and potentially widespread danger that the Humanities would face in the immediate future would not necessarily be the outright closing of programs, as in the highly controversial axing of French, Italian, Russian, Classics and Theater that took place at SUNY Albany in 2010, but the less conspicuous “shrinkage by attrition and reorganization.” As Lewis writes:

[This] process of resource reallocation is one that can occur with little fanfare . . . the natural result of the principle that allows the intra-institutional market, defined through the lenses of enrollment patterns or student demand, to dictate the ongoing reshaping of the academic structure . . . The cost of this subtle, incremental diminution of support for the language and literature, for the liberal arts and humanities, for education as a broad intellectual project is far greater than that of the visible closings and mergers we have witnessed up to now. (Lewis)

While Lewis focuses the lens on the ongoing reallocation of resources in “intra-institutional” markets, it is clear that the shifting of priorities and the internal reorganization of resources that goes with it are a direct response to external pressures and the collapse of the public funding model of higher education. As the new “old joke” goes, public universities used to be “state funded,” then “state assisted,” and are now “located in a state.” The defunding of public universities in the United States, and the shifting priorities that cash-driven (euphemistically enrollment-sensitive) intra-institutional funding models reify are of course a reflection of the logic, priorities and values of the global market economy. When we identify our students as “clients” and attach a dollar value to them in our quest to comply with artificially generated enrollment expectations and revenue-driven demands, we have simply succumbed to the pressures of the ideology that defines the world (with the people in it) as a global market made up of nothing but objects exploitable for profit.

As political philosopher Michael Sandel wrote in his 2012 *New York Times* best-selling book, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, in the era of market triumphalism we have “drifted from *having* a market economy to *being* a market society . . . in which market values seep into every aspect of human endeavor [and] social relations are made over in the image of the market” (Sandel 10–11). In the context of the market society, just about everything is (or is presumed to be) up for sale. Moreover, the global market has attained a kind of axiomatic status that

comes with real world directives, purportedly neutral and dispassionate, yet clearly discriminatory and objectively violent.

Hunter Rawlings, the former president of Cornell University and current president of the AAU, writes in a recent Op-Ed article in the Washington Post:

...most everyone now evaluates college in purely economic terms, thus reducing it to a commodity like a car or a house. How much does the average English major at college X earn 18 months after graduation? What is the average debt of college Y's alumni? How much does it cost to attend college Z, and is it worth it? How much more does the "average" college grad earn over a lifetime than someone with only a high school degree? (The current number appears to be about \$1 million). There is now a cottage industry built around such data. (Rawlings)

The problem with this way of thinking, however, is that, in truth, college is almost entirely unlike the vast majority of commodities we encounter, consume, and exchange in the global market. As Rawlings points out, unlike a car, a college education depends as much on what the "consumer" brings and puts into it as it does on the "product itself." Yet despite this essential difference, "most public discussion of higher ed today pretends that students simply *receive* their education from colleges the way a person walks out of Best Buy with a television" (Rawlings).

The results of this categorical mistake can be deadly for our institutions of higher learning, especially public universities not protected by a healthy endowment and independence from political winds. Governors and legislatures from North Carolina to Wisconsin, basing their arguments on the model of the college degree as a commodity, have moved both to link professors's pay to the number of hours they teach and to decimate tenure, the ultimate safeguard of academic freedom. But at a more general level this attitude is toxic for the very spirit of higher education as it is felt in the classroom at every level of academia. In Rawlings's words again, "Students get the message. If colleges are responsible for outcomes, then students can feel entitled to classes that do not push them too hard, to high grades and to material that does not challenge their assumptions or make them uncomfortable. Hence colleges too often cater to student demands for trigger warnings, 'safe rooms,' and canceled commencement speakers" (Rawlings). The core of the college experience, what humanities classrooms have traditionally excelled at offering, is in danger: the seminar discussion as a place for unfettered thought, led by a professor who challenges students to come to new insights of their own accord.

Such a practice, it should go without saying, could be seen as the mirror opposite of the behavior of those entities that produce and sell commodities, namely, corporations. Some scholars—among them English Professor David Schmid—have noted that the expected behavior of corporations in the socio-economic environment of the current neoliberal order is virtually identical to that of the psychopath. Schmid draws from Joel Bakan’s assertion that the corporation is literally a pathological institution whose “legally defined mandate is to pursue, relentlessly and without exception, its own self-interest, regardless of the often harmful consequences it might cause to others” (Bakan 2).

With regards to the seeping of market values into educational institutions, linguist Noam Chomsky is, as one might expect, among the academics who have recently warned against the ongoing corporatization of higher education. He refers to this phenomenon quite simply as “The Death of American Universities” (Chomsky). In case one might take Chomsky’s rhetoric for extreme, Terry Eagleton comes to the same prognosis, arguing that “an event as momentous in its own way as the Cuban revolution or the invasion of Iraq is steadily under way: the slow death of the university as a center of humane critique” (Eagleton). The scenario Eagleton describes in the UK is dark indeed, as he draws parallels with United States private institutions like Stanford and MIT while noting that the safety net of affluence is largely absent in the UK university. He talks about the corporatization model as the conversion of the university into a product mill more focused on the bottom line than on the students who ostensibly are there to learn more than just skills. In the case of one university in Ireland, he cites the case of “security staff [who] move students on if they are found hanging around,” concluding that, “the ideal would be a university without these disheveled, unpredictable creatures” (Eagleton).

In the stripped down, cutthroat marketplace that Eagleton describes, it is easy to see how humanities departments and faculty find themselves in increasingly precarious straits. The universities are forced by conservative governments to validate their missions economically at the same time as they are deprived of resources. The result is an ethos of almost constant evaluation of faculty productivity focusing on the “impact” of their research, a standard that is hard for any humanist to concretize but that is interpreted by most in terms of numbers of publications, footnotes, and citations, rather than the far more impactful yet amorphous influence they may be having on the insight and intellectual development of the young people whose lives they touch. Forced to fund themselves increasingly through tuition, universities further pressure faculty to lower their standards, lest their customers leave dissatisfied, and “sex-up” their offerings, leaving generations of students deprived of a rigorous training in literature, philosophy, or history.

These warnings have been around for more than a decade and yet they do not seem to have inspired anything akin to a change of course. Henry Giroux, for example, has been denouncing the corrosive effects of corporate culture in our university system at least since his 2002 article “Neoliberalism, Corporate Culture, and the Promise of Higher Education: The University as a Democratic Public Sphere.” According to him, the corporatization and commodification of the university has come with the erosion of faculty governance and the rise of managerial powers that have championed the cause of “greater efficiency”—a rather shortsighted version of “efficiency” that does not allow for broadminded discussions and long term planning, much less for questions of public responsibility and professional ethics. The short-circuiting of debate is often predicated on the need for nimble decision-making in times of crisis. Beyond the downsizing and restructuring of departments, the growing numbers of adjunct instructors, and the abrupt reallocation of resources, the importation of market-oriented, market-defined and market-structured “efficiency” models has resulted in a sort of permanent emergency status that clears the way for the managerial high-jacking of academic freedoms and program-specific goals. This constant state of alert also has the pernicious effect of priming humanities faculty to react suspiciously even to the best-intentioned attempts of administrators who do fully support the humanities and wish to enhance and expand them. Such a pervasive sense of grievance has created a culture of *resentment* even and perhaps especially among faculty at elite institutions, where their teaching load and quota of research leave are the stuff of dreams for colleagues at public institutions and can be a cause for friction with colleagues in their own science departments, themselves buckling under the weight of their oversubscribed service courses and the expectation to irrigate their institution’s budgetary garden with their hard won research dollars.

While the effects of the corporatization of higher education are most visible today, its origins can be traced back to the aftermath of the financial problems of the 1960s and 1970s, as Ellen Schrecker reminded us in *The Lost Soul of Higher Education* (2010). Schrecker does not see an end in sight to this process, certainly no “happy ending . . . in the history of America’s colleges and universities . . . unless faculty members can overcome their own divisions and make the rest of the country understand how central their interests are to the system of higher education as a whole” (7).

As we bring the discussion back to disciplinary and field specific considerations, we would like to pick up Schrecker’s thread in calling for:

1. Greater and more publicly expressed awareness that *we are all in the same boat*. Whether we are thinking of colleagues and students in other subfields, other foreign languages and literature departments, other

Humanities programs, or even the hard sciences, the collapse of the public funding model of higher education and the corporatization of the university hurt us all, regardless of our obvious differences and any other “objective interests” that may define us in institutional terms.

2. A re-definition and re-appropriation of highly charged terms such as “efficiency” to mean beyond the narrowly demarcated bottom-line of corporation-style profitability. In the case of literary and foreign language fields, we could, for example, compile and display samples of the growing evidence of the long-term benefits of skills such as public speaking, professional writing, and multilingualism. With regards to the latter, for instance, one could refer to the body of scholarship that shows overwhelming evidence of the “efficiency” of a bilingual education— even occasional or temporary exposure to another language or culture— not just in terms of “marketability” or “employability,” but in enhancing cognitive abilities and other eminently transferable qualities. One such recent example, picked up by *The Economist*, May 30, 2015, is “Do You See What I See? Children Exposed to Several Languages are Better at Seeing Through Others’ Eyes.”
3. An explicit contextualization of our pedagogical and scholarly missions above and beyond, and even more crucially, *against* the objectifying logic of the market society.
4. Despite and against an implicit condescension on the part of some toward the demand that our disciplines show their “relevance” to the world at large, a concerted attempt to make our ideas public, to speak and write in clear and accessible language, and to ask of ourselves and our students that we explain and explain again what is urgently *human* about our work.

The second half of this intervention will be devoted to an explanation/illustration of these last two points for which we rely heavily on Cervantine motifs. In the process we hope to outline a strategy of pedagogical/public engagement consistent with the Humanistic values (*Humanitas*) of the University as the imperfect expression of the perfect ideal of all-inclusiveness (*Universitas*).

While the ideal of *humanitas* is generally said to have made its appearance in ancient Rome in and around the circle of Scipio, Cicero has been credited with the development of this relatively loose notion into a philosophical concept that combined a keen sense of man’s worth with a charge of moral and political responsibility tied to a healthy dose of skepticism vis-à-vis the day’s orthodoxy. The concept would later make the

rounds first among the scholars who championed the Renaissance of the classics in the sixteenth century under the moniker *studia humanitatis*, and then again in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the political thought associated with the French Enlightenment and the philosophical writings of German idealists, from Kant to Schiller, the latter movement explicitly theorizing the universal attribute of *humanitas* as freedom. In Kant's case, the movement of history toward its natural end in a universal government of equals required the public exercise of this freedom in the form of unfettered debate; Schiller, in turn, would find the core expression of that freedom in aesthetic experience.

From the vantage of literary studies in general and Spanish literary history we propose a model for reclaiming the critical and publicly oriented spirit of *humanitas* in the legacy of the Spanish baroque, especially in the work of Miguel de Cervantes, not in order to reestablish a Humanistic influence or political genealogy (Marcel Bataillon and others have done this more effectively than we could, not only with Cervantes, but with a host of other authors and texts of the Spanish Golden Age), but rather with the more modest goal of foregrounding the value of baroque and especially *Cervantine skepticism* as a key contribution to the modern humanistic tradition. Insofar as we recognize political as well as ethical dimensions in the Cervantine cultivation of responsible skepticism, our proposal or proposition is in line with Anthony Cascardi's reconstruction of Cervantes as an eminently political writer in *Cervantes, Literature, and the Discourse of Politics* (2012). Yet our focus on media is indebted to the work of those literary historians like Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Luiz Costa Lima, who advanced an understanding of the Renaissance not only as movement of rediscovery of past greatness, but also of an assertion of centralizing control over proliferating forms of subjectivity, and of Hispanists, such as Nicholas Spadaccini and Jenaro Talens, whose *Through the Shattering Glass: Cervantes and the Self-Made World* (1993) interpreted Cervantes as a cultural critic whose writings invite reflection on the effects of mass-culture in his time and ours.

While related (whether directly or indirectly) to the Ciceronian notion of courageous skepticism as the necessary act of detachment from the day's orthodoxy, an essential precondition of responsible citizenship, the Cervantine version refocuses it and sharpens it to illuminate the cultural loop that ties social norms and values to artistic, theatrical, and literary conventions; the kind of formal structuring—representation or reinvention—of the world that we associate with media framing. This explains why in the Cervantine textual universe, the designated placeholder of courageous and responsible skepticism as the ultimate expression of *humanitas* is the reader herself, who is explicitly entrusted with the *discerning gaze*.

Today most specialists have come to accept the notion that the work of Cervantes invites reflection on the different products and formats of the media of his time, from chivalric, pastoral, and Christian romances, to exemplary and picaresque novels, to theater, and the arts. Beyond “in-house” conversations about the origins and reach of Cervantes’s work and its critical dialogue with the literary and artistic traditions of his time and the cultural authority they may have channeled, we would argue that the legacy of the Cervantine baroque should be reclaimed more broadly today as we try to wrap our minds around the ethical dilemmas and political consequences of the modern culture of the spectacle (Maravall; Debord) in the globalized environment that legal scholar Richard Sherwin has called “the Age of the Digital Baroque.” Thus, as we travel back to our own social and cultural context, we propose to refocus the discerning gaze of the Cervantine reader on the “media condition” that defines us, what we have called in a different context our *medialogy*. This medialogy is coextensive and virtually synonymous with the current market society. Indeed, as we reexamine such classics as *Don Quixote* I and II, *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*, “El Coloquio de los perros” and “El licenciado Vidriera” (*Novelas ejemplares*), “El retablo de las maravillas” (*Entremeses*) and other Cervantine “classics” in pedagogical contexts, we see opportunities to discuss the pressing issues of our time while reflecting on our own mission as facilitators of media literacy in our digital culture of the screen, “the glass cage,” as New York Times best-selling author Nicholas Carr has aptly named it.

The goal of such pedagogical endeavor would not simply be to interest foreign language and literature students in Cervantes’ oeuvre or other works associated with the Spanish literary canon, but to engage all university students (language, literature, humanities and beyond) in a critical (courageous and responsibly skeptical) examination of our media condition and the market society that is coextensive with it. Furthermore, through the choice of venues for our publications and the style of writing we use to convey our ideas, we should deliberately aim to engage a broader public in a praxis of textual commentary and cultural analysis. In this regard, our own strategy involves “situational readings” that place the literary classics alongside other media products of their time and ours in an effort to illuminate the myriad ways our medialogy positions us as docile consumers of a certain repackaged form of truth. This is what we call media literacy. As a precondition of responsible citizenship, media literacy is key to the survival of the old *humanitas* ideal and indeed the ideals of the educational institution that fosters it: the University.

To be sure, we are calling for a classroom experience and a strategy of public engagement that would stimulate and nurture attitudes of skeptical detachment from the day’s orthodoxy in order to reflect on our existential condition in the market society. We could start with the question recently

posed by the above-mentioned scholar Richard Sherwin in his *Visual Law in the Age of the Digital Baroque*: “Who and what do we become when we live on the screen, when we internalize the screen’s optical code as our own?” (171).

Substitute “screen” for “stage” and we would argue that Cervantes provides a lucid frame within which to reflect on Sherwin’s question in a short comedic piece that he published in 1615, the same year as *Don Quixote* II. While unmentioned by Sherwin, this theatrical interlude titled “El retablo de las maravillas” (“The Theater or Puppet Show of Marvels”) is the quintessential critical or *minor* baroque statement on the interdependence of truth and visibility in the context of the modern culture of the spectacle. Here, Cervantes realigns the theatrical frame to reveal the workings of the code that determines not what is there, but what we ought to see as a community of “believers.” The Cervantine strategy involves recognizing that, at some essential level, the codes that sustain our social identity are theatrical in nature.

Thus, the makers of “The Theater of Marvels” (Chanfalla and Chirinos) are quick to inform their prospective audience that the marvelous nature of their famous tableau consists of nothing but its ability to separate the healthy members of the community from those contaminated by racial and moral illness. Their enunciation of the conditions of visibility of their theater of marvels comes with an explicit warning: “no one can see the things that are shown in it if they belong to a tainted race or were not conceived by their legitimately married parents . . . So let’s proceed, and keep in mind the qualities that those who dare to gaze at the marvels of the tableau must possess” (Cervantes, *Entremeses* 220–222, our translation).

According to the logic of the tableau enunciated here by Chanfalla, “seeing” is indeed “believing,” or more accurately, “seeing” is showing our belief as members of the exceptional community (in this case *purebred legitimate Christians*). Not seeing, or seeing something else, amounts to revealing that we are not *it*; that we don’t have what it takes; that we are tainted by otherness. There is no doubt that the audience of Chanfalla’s theater or puppet show understands what is at stake. As Benito says, “Leave that to me, and I say to you that I can surely stand judgment” (Cervantes, *Entremeses* 222). Capacho’s response is even more telling: “Todos le pensamos ver señor Benito Repollo” (222). Not “we shall all see it” but more accurately “we are all planning on seeing it.” But it is Castrada’s warning to her cousin Teresa that most candidly shows the determination of the audience to perform “their belief” in accordance with the requirements of the tableau, that is, to act out what they must accept as their belief: “and since you know what qualities [‘condiciones’ in the original, literally conditions] must those who gaze at the tableau possess, make sure you do not behave carelessly, for it would be a great disgrace” (225, our

translation). Later on, we learn from the asides of several characters that no one sees the marvels of the tableau, for in truth there is nothing to see, yet they all act as if they see them in order to maintain their social identity. The governor is most explicit when he confesses to us, the external audience, “I don’t see, but alas I will have to say that I see on account of my honor” (229, our translation).

Cervantes employs anamorphic techniques to reconstruct, from an oblique perspective, the scene of the social contract that names us as members of the community proper. Whether we truly see the theater of marvels is irrelevant; what’s important is that we act out our belief; for as long as we perform the foundational beliefs of the community, as long as we are willing to embody the community’s belief in its own exceptionalism, then we are all safe as spectators of the theater of marvels and participants in the ideological game! We are legitimate (read uncontaminated) members of the (exceptional) community because we show ourselves seeing the truth of that exceptionalism: we, purebred Christians, true Spaniards, can “see” while the others are blind! The real danger comes not when we don’t see, but when we stop pretending to see, when we stop acting as if we see the foundational beliefs of the community. And of course daring to show our disbelief would be the truly subversive act, which is why any public demonstration of disbelief is preemptively defined as the mark of radical otherness. Who are the puppets of Chanfalla’s tableau if not the spectators who are forced to blindly perform the community’s mythical beliefs in order to secure their social identity?

In our day, we can see this Cervantine strategy at work in the comedy of Stephen Colbert. The comedian discusses American exceptionalism in his 2012 book *America Again: Re-Becoming the Greatness We Never Weren’t*. He quotes from Newt Gingrich’s 2011 political best-seller *A Nation Like No Other*: “America’s greatness [writes Gingrich], America’s *exceptional* greatness, is not based on that fact that we are the most powerful, most prosperous—and most generous—nation on Earth. Rather, those things are the *result* of American Exceptionalism” (qtd. in Colbert, *America Again* 12). Colbert’s satirical commentary drives the point home: “Amen! America is Exceptional because of our Greatness and the source of all that Greatness is how Exceptional we are” (13).

This is not unlike the circularity of Tigger’s familiar song: “The wonderful thing about Tiggers is that Tiggers are wonderful things”; “the wonderful thing about America is that America is a wonderful thing.” In the process, the circularity of Tigger’s song about *us* establishes a corresponding circularity about *them*: “the terrible thing about *them* is that *they* are a terrible thing!” And again *Them* are defined not just as external or foreign enemies, but also as internal non-believers; those who refuse to act out the

community's beliefs. As Colbert writes, "bad boys and girls who don't say 'under God' in the Pledge of Allegiance" (13).

Our medialogy doesn't only affect how members of a nation like the United States conceive of themselves in relation to explicitly excluded others or national enemies, though. As the sociologist Joe Feagin has argued, how many Americans think about such a fundamental social category like race is largely determined by an overwhelming and largely unconscious set of conditions he calls the "white frame." The way this frame works is precisely like the one that Cervantes simultaneously lampoons and causes his readers to reflect on. As Feagin says:

Most whites think racial inequalities reflect differences they see as real—superior work ethic, greater intelligence, or other meritorious abilities of whites. Social science research is clear that white-black inequalities today are substantially the result of a majority of whites socially inheriting unjust enrichments (money, land, home equities, social capital, etc.) from numerous previous white generations—the majority of whom benefited from the racialized slavery system and/or the de jure (Jim Crow) and de facto overt racial oppression that followed slavery for nearly a century, indeed until the late 1960s. (Feagin)

Just as the villagers in Cervantes's sketch implicitly all agree to believe in a reality that is not there in order to safeguard their privileges and sense of self-worth, white America in Joe Feagin's analysis invests in notions of merit and hard work in order to obscure the uncomfortable reality that their privilege is built on a history of abuse and injustice. As he continues:

In the white frame's pro-white subframe whites are said to be the hardest-working and most meritorious group. Yet the sociologist Nancy DiTomaso has found in many interviews with whites that a substantial majority have used networks of white acquaintances, friends and family to find most jobs over their lifetimes. They have mostly avoided real market competition and secured good jobs using racially segregated networks, not just on their 'merit.' Not one interviewee [out of approximately 150 to 200] expressed seeing anything wrong with their use of this widespread system of white favoritism, which involves 'social capital' passed along numerous white generations. (Feagin)

To sum up, as humanists and scholars of literature, we find in the study of such an exemplar of the literary canon as Cervantes an opportunity and indeed a calling to reflect on the intricacies of our own medialogy and its ineluctable social and political influences. While not all literature focuses with the clarity and intensity of Cervantes's genius on the contours of

otherwise largely invisible frames, literature, like all media practices, is always ensconced in and related to a time and place's dominant mediology. By engaging students and the public in a robust and open-ended conversation about the relation of the products of the human mind to the medial conditions of their production and reception, we are not, as some would have it, contaminating the great works of the past with current fads; rather, we are being true to the core value of the university: the freedom to see the limits of what we take to be true in order to discover and disseminate new truths.

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