"*RUINES TIEMPOS*" AND "*LA ETERNA VIRTUALIDAD DE LA VIDA*:" LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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"Miserable times [*ruines tiempos*], in which no art thrives other than that of filling the pantry and sitting on a golden throne and living a gilded life."

José Martí, "Prólogo al poema del Niagara[1]" (1882)

"That which humanity needs, to be saved from all pessimistic negation, is not so much a belief that all is well at present, as the faith that it is possible through life's growth to arrive at a better state, hastened and discovered by the actions of men. Such faith in the future, belief in the efficacy of human energy, are the necessary condition of all strong action and all fecund thought. That is why I have wanted to begin with praising the eternal value of that faith which, being in youth a very instinct, needs the teaching of no dogma. For you all feel it stirring at the depths of your being, and know it for the divine suggestion of Nature itself."

José Enrique Rodó, "Ariel[2]" (1900)

It seems that everywhere one looks, the humanities are under fire. Businessmen, conservative politicians, newspaper opinion columns, and even many university administrators increasingly portray the humanities as antiquated or even irrelevant with respect to the rise of hypercapitalism, futuristic transhumanism, and digital cultures. The ubiquity of the exclusionary acronym STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) in discussions about the future of universities and professional labor devalues fields that are not focused exclusively on technical training for immediate economic gain. This discourse disparages fields like anthropology, the arts, ethnic and gender/sexuality studies, literature, and philosophy as wastes of students' money and time despite their sizable economic contributions to the creation of niche markets, and it minimizes as an externality or even portrays as a moral threat their true value in granting individual lives meaning beyond conspicuous consumption, fomenting collective structures of feeling and solidarity across differences,

and providing a forum for critical reflection on society and discourse itself.[3]

To a certain degree, the current backlash against the humanities in the United States corresponds to the massive expansion in fields related to cultural and linguistic literacy during the 1990s and early 2000s, the peak of the wave of globalization that began following World-War II and ostensibly began to wane with the financial crisis of 2008 and Trump's withdrawal in 2017 from President Barack Obama's signature Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement. In this context, one might view the current contraction in job markets related to the humanities as part and parcel of the monetization and managerial "corporatization" of higher education, which subjected universities to economic boom and bust cycles from which they had formerly been relatively isolated. At the same time, one cannot discount the influence of nativism, economic nationalism, and anti-immigrant sentiment related to the offshoring of economic production, on the one hand, and, on the other, large-scale migration to the US primarily from Mexico in the 1980s and 1990s and Central America and several Asian nations in the 2000s. Likewise, the ongoing right-wing "culture wars" emerged in the 1960s largely in reaction against the deconstructive humanities' challenges to discourses of national exceptionalism, racial and gender supremacy, religious truth-claims, and colonialism. Arts and pedagogy that promote the questioning of hegemonic discourses are clearly inimical to conservative political platforms when conservativism is viewed in general terms as a collective desire to return to the values and cultural practices of an idealized past. This is not to say that all conservatives want to do away with the humanities. As Florida Governor DeSantis's move to transform the New School into a bastion of "conservative values" revealed, culture wars are not really about the humanities, but rather control over curriculum and the status of public discourse; they look to reinstate on a national scale "Western, Christian values," as if whatever those might be have ever existed in a homogenous, uncontested form.[4] Finally, one cannot downplay the intensifying monopolization of literary markets by transnational corporations, which severely restricts writers' creative possibilities and access to the market, nor the substantial contraction of print media and material cultures before the massive expansion of digital media. Electronic devices' ubiquity and hyperstimulation tends to relegate the analog tradition to the category of the "boring" due to the investments of time and mental focus required to engage in extended, close reading.

This probably doesn't need to be pointed out to this journal's readership, but these kinds of debates are, paradoxically, nothing new. In fact, they lie at the heart of the history of the humanities and, particularly, literature. In his book review "Reimagining the Humanities," David A. Bell cites references proclaiming crises in the humanities in 1922, 1964, the 1980s, and the 2010s, clearly delineating anxieties related to specific historical moments in which drastic social changes were catalyzed by technological innovations, generation-

al cultural shifts, political movements, and artistic experimentation.[5] Tropes of cultural decay and the degradation of the arts can be traced back centuries further, however, at least as far as the sixteenth-century epistemological crisis brought on by European global exploration and the concomitant theological crisis provoked by the brutality of the colonization and enslavement of Indigenous peoples in Africa and the Americas. Indeed, they have resurfaced periodically throughout modern world history: e.g., the rise of the seventeenth-century Baroque associated with the Protestant Reformation and the economic crisis of the Spanish Empire; the eighteenth-century political and epistemological crises that followed the invention of modern democracy and science; and the nineteenth-century European industrial revolution and accompanying colonial expansion. Even if one does not ascribe to the notion that "history repeats itself" (which must necessarily be understood in relation to economic boom-bust cycles and corresponding inequalities in political power) or the amplification of Freud's psychological theory of the "return of the repressed" to the cultural sphere, it is evident that historically the humanities have been deeply imbricated within discourses of crisis.

This phenomenon responds at least in part to the discursive construction of modernity itself. As Octavio Paz noted in *Corriente alterna* (1967), in modernity, "tradition is not continuity but rupture and thus it would not be inaccurate to refer to the modern tradition as: the tradition of rupture.[6]" In the same year, Frank Kermode published his *The Sense of an Ending*, in which he argued that there is a "powerful eschatological element in modern thought" itself that relies on crisis as both the motor and end of history.[7] As the dialectical counterpart to modernity's utopianism, the apocalyptic imaginary occupies a central position not only with respect to modernity's constitutive claim of sustained rupture with the past, but also its own future, as it must ensure ongoing disruptions as the condition for its legitimacy.[8] Extrapolating from this point, Janet Roitman affirms that, "crisis is an omnipresent sign in almost all forms of narrative today; it is mobilized as the defining category of historical situations, past and present.[9]" In this context, crisis cannot be defined as any objective set of conditions or even as a historical conjunction or event, but rather as a discourse or constellation of tropes that is simultaneously omnipresent in modern discourse and, at the same time, deployed or intensified at particular historical moments in the service of specific political projects. This constellation of tropes (entropy, collapse, decay, ruin, degradation, etc.) is recognizable across very different contexts, which underscores its origins in a discursive mode rather than the empirical realities these tropes claim to embody. Nonetheless, each historical usage inflects the crisis narrative with its own specificity, with the material and ideological conditions of its moment.

As the case may be, there can be no doubt that "crisis" is an overdetermining term, one that is often used to foreclose the possibilities of dissent. Not

only does crisis impose a sense of inevitability that belies historical causality, but crisis narratives always target scapegoats that distract from understanding the complexity of social interrelations, political power, and historical discourses. It is so much more comforting to view human rights crises such as the Holocaust as Hitler's deranged nightmare than as the product of systematic historical relations and discursive practices that, in a broader context, consistently produce genocide. Moreover, the accumulation and overuse of the crisis trope leads to exhaustion and apathy, effectively minimizing the possibilities for collective agency and historical change. Yet, as Roitman argues, "being bound to its cognate (critique), the concept of crisis denotes the prevailing and fairly peculiar belief that history could be alienated in terms of its philosophy—that one could perceive a dissonance between historical events and representations of those events. Crisis-claims evoke a moral demand for a difference between the past and the future."[10] In that sense, the proclamation of crisis also places a demand for critique and ideological/social change, even as it, as a discourse of endings, disempowers or works against those same possibilities. Under crisis, change cannot be envisioned without apocalypse, that is total systemic collapse.

This dialectic is quite salient in the epigraphs by José Martí and José Enrique Rodó above. Writing at a moment in which nineteenth-century liberal capitalism was radically transforming Latin American education, environments, and social relations, Spanish American *modernismo* emerged as a somewhat conservative defense of the liberal arts against intrusive capitalistic values and U.S. neocolonialism.[11] Similarly to the current social transformations wrought by the new hegemony of digital media, the *modernistas* were concerned about how modern technologies such as the newspaper, photography, and mass marketing and advertising were affecting the quality and social roles of art and writing, placing them at the service of capitalism on the one hand and political populism on the other. As Walter Benjamin made clear in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), commercial photography and film paved the way for mass culture and politics, alienating not only producers but also viewers from the tangible sense of history—the "aura"—that manual artistic production imparts.[12] In that sense, *modernismo* should be seen not only as a reaction against the capitalistic political ideology that threatened the humanistic values of "liberal arts" education during the "Gilded Age" of transnational robber barons ("*vivir todo dorado*" in Martí's pithy formulation), but also as a stance against marketing, against the forcible occupation of the senses in both public space and the domestic sphere by the nascent advertising industry and its appropriation of the realms of aesthetics and philosophy, which had up until that point been monopolized by the arts.[13] As Martí lamented,

> Newspapers deflower great ideas. Ideas don't form a family within the

> mind, like before, nor make themselves at home, nor live long. They are born on horseback, mounted on lightning, with wings. They don't grow within an individual mind, but rather from the commerce of all. They don't slowly benefit, following an arduous emergence, a scarce [enlightened] readership, but rather, newly born, spontaneously take effect. They are mashed-up, elevated, worn like a crown, snatched up in beaks [metaphorically, mouths], erected as idols, flipped over, abused. Second-rate ideas, even if they initially sparkled like high-quality ones, can't withstand the traffic, the mugging, the tidal wave, the rough treatment. [In contrast,] Good ideas arrive late, bruised, but with the virtue of spontaneously healing, compact and whole. Now we wake up to one problem and go to bed with another. Images devour each other within the mind. There is no time to give shape to what one thinks. Ideas lose one another in the sea of the mind, just as circular ripples disrupt one another when a thrown stone wounds the blue surface of water.[14]

Martí argues that media oversaturation with images and watered-down, decontextualized ideas leads to a state in which the individual's critical faculties atrophy, a situation with which we can surely identify in the era of Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram.

Indeed, Martí's complaints prefigure Derrida's discussion of the "hyperbole of speed" in modernity, in which the concepts of history and progress paradoxically become flatlined in an upward curve of endless and meaningless or even destructive technological innovation, effectively collapsing the sense of the future into the present as apocalypse become the only visible horizon.[15] Derrida's essay was referring to the Damocles' sword of global nuclear warfare, but his arguments are equally valid regarding the current apocalyptic end of history stemming from climate change and the so-called Anthropocene. As Dipesh Chakrabarty famously argued in "The Climate of History: Four Theses" (2009), the Anthropocene conceptualizes a "negative universal history," in which (Western) humanity's historical project to dominate environments globally paradoxically collapses the distinction between human history and "natural" or environmental history, effectively redefining history itself as the end of history, that is, apocalypse.[16]

The *modernistas* responded to what they perceived as the loss of individual human agency to mechanical massification and endless consumerism—those "*ruines tiempos*"—with Rodó's Kantian conceptualization of the "*eterna virtualidad de la Vida*" [eternal virtuality of Life], by which he meant the actualization of human creative potential to forge a better future not based solely on material wellbeing, but rather a meaningful and fulfilling life.[17] They proposed a renewal of artistic form and critical thought in education as ways to promote supposedly transcendental or universal idealism and cosmopoli-

tanism (even if Eurocentric) over individual economic interests. While there is much to criticize about *modernismo*'s gendered discourse, unapologetic cultural appropriation, and Eurocentric transcendentalism, it was nevertheless successful in countering the sense of helplessness amidst "*ruines tiempos*" with a discourse of Spanish American solidarity and hope, leading to a pedagogical renaissance that deeply impacted the entire continent in the ensuing decades.[18]

The book I would like to propose as a model for scholarship in the Latin American humanities in the coming decades, Carolyn Fornoff's *Subjunctive Aesthetics: Mexican Cultural Production in the Era of Climate Change* (2024), is reminiscent of *modernismo*'s optimism regarding the possibilities of social change through art at a time in which the crises that the modernistas identified have intensified hyperbolically. Fornoff's book counters the global socioecological catastrophe wrought by (neo)liberal capitalism with an emphasis on the subjunctive mode, which she frames as the "realm of the potential and the uncertain," in contrast to the indicative as the "grammar of *what is*.[19]" Breaking with what she calls the "forensic aesthetics" of critical work focusing exclusively on environmental and social degradation, which have predominated in the Latin American environmental humanities over the last decade, she draws out the "alternative narratives, values, and grammars of territorial belonging" that emerge as both virtualities and practices even in the midst of disaster.[20] While not minimizing in any sense the gravity of socioecological problems or human suffering, she discusses how Mexican artists, writers, and filmmakers draw out the potentialities—the futures made possible—of relations through figures of interdependence between humans, other species, and the environments we inhabit together: "the subjunctive always points away from itself and toward another relation, indexing grammar's structure as an assemblage, a web of coordinates harnessed together.[21]" In the works she analyzes, the eschatological discourse surrounding crisis—its prefiguring of apocalyptic endings—takes a back seat to the reconstruction of the social as a multispecies assemblage in which humans are never alone.

In this sense, I would argue that Fornoff echoes Rodó's concept of the "*eterna virtualidad de la Vida*," even when she does not dialogue explicitly with it. Her book actualizes a facet of Rodó's discourse in ways that he himself would not have envisioned due to the human exceptionalism underpinning his conceptualization of "*Naturaleza*." When Rodó wrote about the "divine suggestion of Nature acting within the depths of your being," he was clearly referring to what he viewed as youthful human nature's inherent optimism and transformative potential.[22] While Fornoff does not reference Rodó in her book, she draws out how a series of recent Mexican literary and artistic works bring to bear entirely different conceptualizations of how nature works from within the human in actualizing life, not only for humans but for all species in a cosmopolitics of hope that combats the nihilism of both the crisis in the human-

ities and the global ecological apocalypse embedded in the discourse surrounding climate change. In these works, nature is not a matter of transcendental spirit, but rather one of more-than-human social relations and community; what are transcended are the discourses of human exceptionalism, economic instrumentalization, and toxic individualism.

Each of Fornoff's five main chapters coalesces around a specific socio-ecological issue and attendant "subjunctive strategy" that disrupts the sense of foreclosure associated with the crisis narrative. The first chapter focuses on poetry and art that rewrite threadbare, nationalistic representations of environments, on the one hand, and universalistic discourses on the other, transforming them from iconic spaces back into concrete, lived places. The second chapter, "Land Defense and Counterfactual Mourning," analyzes representations of murdered environmental and Indigenous activists that refute the (fore)closure of death and the tendency to enshrine them as martyrs or victims, instead working collectively to keep their movements alive and thriving. As she summarizes, "visual and discursive acts of counterfactual mourning refer to death but deny it as such, rerouting back to life in a subjunctive expression of desire for how the world *could have been* or *could still be*.[23]" The following chapter, "Extinction Poetics," ties together the prior two chapters in analyzing poetry that brings iconized, endangered species such as those featured on Mexican peso denominations back to collective life through interspecies relations: "poetry, more than any other artistic form, facilitates interspecies contiguity, or proximity that does not consolidate ontological difference into anthropocentric recognition.[24]" Similarly, the "The Rural Resilience Film" discusses how three films represent the cultivation of "risky attachments" between humans and environments even in the midst of catastrophe.[25] At the same time, she problematizes the neoliberal discourse of resilience, which frames environmental degradation as inevitable and limits human agency to adaptation, downplaying the possibility of systemic change. Finally, the last chapter discusses sustainable practices in filmmaking and distribution as examples of how these systemic changes could be brought about, freeing film from corporate control and reliance on extractive industries such as big oil (with respect to energy production, financing, and the filmic medium—celluloid—itself). She proposes "postcarbon cinema" as a putting into practice of the precepts of the degrowth movement and sustainability, of "film as it could be," a "subjunctive reinvention of infrastructures that serve the commons, a commons that is collaboratively conceived, equitable, and durable in the long term.[26]"

In my view, Fornoff's book simultaneously embodies the culmination of the surge in Latin American(ist) ecocritical studies and the environmental humanities since 2010 and a shift in direction in critical work towards environmental ethics and sustainable ontologies and practices. While her work is by no means the sole example of this trend, it is nonetheless a forerunner in drawing togeth-

er and pushing the bounds of established fields within Latin American cultural and literary criticism. Her book engages with long-standing lines of inquiry regarding counterhegemonic representation and politics, ethnic and gender studies, migration studies, critiques of the state and biopolitics, neocolonial geopolitics, and representations of violence, linking each of them to climate change and other socioecological pressures. In that sense, it both embodies and prefigures what is already becoming a major, perhaps even the main trend in Latin American cultural criticism, if the panels at the 2024 LASA conference in Bogotá were any indication: the reconfiguring of basically all major disciplinary areas over the last several decades to include environmental analysis. This is not to say that the focus on gender, sexuality, ethnic studies, geopolitics, migration studies, socioeconomic themes, urban studies, and other established research areas will necessarily diminish or become subordinated in some way to the environmental humanities. On the contrary, these fields will maintain their emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches, but amplifying their vision of the social and the political to engage with environmental history and the impacts of anthropogenic environmental transformations, whether those of extractive practices and unfettered urbanization or more positive ones like sustainable practices and what I have called elsewhere decolonial "remodernization initiatives" rooted in Indigenous relational ontologies and territorial practices.[27] This is inevitable as the local effects of global climate change continue to intensify even as their impacts are distributed unequally, affecting to a greater degree the economically and politically vulnerable, who are most often the subjects of academic analysis. Anthropogenic climate change and climate-change driven migration are already and will continue to pose enormous challenges to hegemonic structures worldwide. Fornoff's book draws out how these inevitable changes can provide hope for a better future from below, rather than simply giving in to nihilism or relying on technocratic solutions from the industries and governments that have been responsible for implementing neoliberal capitalism and its unsustainable practices in the first place.

While the current situation indeed mirrors that of the turn-of-the-twentieth century era of unfettered liberal capitalism, it is also not the same. For the *modernistas*, the human/nature divide was unquestionable; the role of art and literature was to transcend material reality and liberate the human spirit by subordinating the material to idealized form (as in Rodó's reading of the opposition between Ariel and Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*), a perspective that continues to persist in transhumanist discourse today.[28] Indeed, the Positivist dogma of material and genetic human progress against which Rodó predicated was in fact replicated in many *modernista* texts in the concept of "aesthetic selection," or human evolution through the refinement of "good taste;" the teleology was the same, even if the form and route to human transcendence was posited in antithetical terms in the two movements. Today,

however, the future of both humanity and "nature"—always believed by both Positivists and *modernistas* to be timeless and inexhaustible—have come into question, and along with them not only the historical legacy of humanism (as the beginning of the end), but also the very concept of transcendence from the material world.

After more than five decades of deconstruction and postcolonial thought, the colonial ideologies behind the social and political construction of transcendental "Mankind" and its historical and ongoing exclusions have been exposed, placing into question the validity of the entire "civilizing" enterprise—today called "development" or "modernization"—based on European ideological and economic models. While universal human rights discourse would ostensibly redeem humanism from its ideological origins, the unfortunate reality that massive, systematic human rights abuses continue to occur on a global scale have strained many people's faith in their efficacy. At the same time, the effects of anthropogenic climate change and global environmental degradation have cast doubt on the foundational human/nature divide upon which Western humanism has relied since Ancient Greek philosophy to extract the "human" from the natural world and thereby justify the domination and exploitation of "natural resources." It has become increasingly indisputable that humans are inseparable from our environments and that our actions affect us just as much as all the species living beside us, even if they can be mitigated to some degree in the short term by technological and/or regulatory interventions. The recognition of this reality has given rise to posthumanist discourses, predominantly in the "Global North," as well as a revalorization of traditional and Indigenous knowledges and ontologies, in which environments are often viewed as multispecies societies within which humans are merely one member among many. In either case, humans are viewed on a continuum with other species, not as "exceptional" in existing beyond environments or materiality itself.

The question thus becomes: what lies beyond the human/nature dialectic and its extractivist, sacrificial logic? Undoubtedly, dialecticism à la Marx has been a useful tool, perhaps the most useful one, for understanding the big picture of social relations. But in the end, it is reductive, depending on the binary division between the thesis and its negation to understand the relations between the positive (as the material) and the negative (as the ideology) that operate in feedback loops, co-constructing worlds. Indeed, even Marx's analysis of the relations between capital and production was always interpellated and destabilized by insubordinate factors, by externalities that exceeded the bounds of the economic system. While "Nature" itself figured prominently in his analysis as the source of raw materials, its uncommodifiable species, environments, and labor fell completely outside the parameters of the capital/production dialectic, and generalized environmental degradation only figured as a "metabolic rift" within production.

Later social ecologists like Murray Bookchin and Enrique Leff integrated ecological cycles into economic analysis, but in either case biodiversity would always be subordinated to development, the goal being social equality and long-term economic sustainability. Marxist materialism has always disregarded as unscientific "fetishes" ontologies that diverged from the human/nature divide and viewed the land as something other than raw materials. Caught up in his own Positivist leanings (the quasi-religious belief in human progress toward perfection), Marx failed to take into account that these ontologies were not simply detachable ideologies, but rather alternative forms of world-making bundled into non-exploitative and sustainable modes of production that may offer a beyond to the crisis narrative that simultaneously upholds modernity and prophesizes its apocalyptic ending. Now that modernity's flaws have been placed on full display, should nonmodern ontologies, seemingly outmoded but still persisting, be seen as mere superstitions that must cede to (Eurocentric) logic or can they perhaps be viewed in terms of multiplicities, of other, pluralistic logics equally capable of world-building? Indeed, post-Marxist intellectuals such as Alberto Acosta (the rights of nature), Eduardo Gudynas (*el buen vivir*), Bruno Latour (the parliament of things), Jason W. Moore (the multispecies politics of emancipation), and Isabelle Stengers (cosmopolitics and the ecology of practices) have suggested just such Utopian rapprochements between Marxist economic analysis and "extra-modern" ontologies capable of redirecting both economic production and political practice.[29]

As these thinkers hint, what might be revolutionary at this point could be to reimagine revolution in non-Positivist terms, as something other than the hyperbolic human progression to technological demi-godhood through continual disruption, that is, the social production and/or fabrication of crises. When crisis becomes the norm, narratives of stability, of sustainability, become more revolutionary than revolution itself. Or perhaps they embody the true meaning of revolution, when revolution is taken as neither disruption arising from intensifying social inequalities nor as the *Rota Fortuna*, or cycle of divine fortune popular in Medieval philosophy, but rather as the renewal of life, of ecological cycles and collective world-building without demolition. It's not about projecting a future based on the impossible return to the past, but instead re-imaging the future not as futurity, but as renewing the present, in the present as renewal. In other words, a "re-modernization" whose goal is not continual disruption, but rather continuity. This is not a conservative sense of continuity, of reenacting what Derrida calls the sacrificial carnophallogocentrism upholding the current economic and political world order, but rather that of "the eternal virtuality of Life," a renewal of relations and respect towards the fundamental right of all species to perpetuate themselves.

As Fornoff's *Subjunctive Aesthetics* helps to elucidate, a politics that is not reliant on crisis entails a more-than-human politics of relations, a cosmopol-

itics of friendship, to borrow and amplify Derrida's phrasing.[30] Opposing the biopolitics of exclusion and consensus, this political ecology entails conviviality--living with--and what Donna Haraway, following Lynn Margulis, calls sympoesis, that is, living and building our world as a more-than-human collective, a collective based on concrete intra-relations rather than mass demographics.[31] Fornoff's book gives a sense of how this kind of politics can be put into practice in both art (in the broad sense) and literary and cultural criticism, shifting the focus from the representation of objects toward the representation and enactment of relations.

In conclusion, I would argue that the humanities should not give in to the digital revolution, big data, their disruption of social life, and the sense of no material connectedness to the world, but rather focus on what makes the humanities unique as both academic field and praxis. At a time in which social anxieties are spiraling out of control, I believe that the humanities' strength lies in their historical (if often misused) roles in constructing meaningful lives, collective identities, and a sense of community through the shared experiences of reading and interpretation. Anecdotally, I have found in my own interactions with students and family members that Gen Z does not always attach the same transcendental value to digitalization as the prior generation, as perhaps the abject failure of Mark Zuckerberg's transhumanist "metaverse" shows. Rather than staring at their phones before class, I see many Gen Z students reading actual paper books or even talking to each other. Meanwhile, interest in outdoor activities and visiting nature parks has skyrocketed (leading to its own series of problems, of course). At the same time, however, Gen Z seems particularly anxious and attuned to mental health issues, a state that I believe did not arise solely from the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also from their enormous concerns about climate change and their own futures in times of uncertainty. As I think the disheartening results of the recent U.S. elections reveal, if we as educators do not help provide Gen Z with a sense of collective hope for a sustainable future, they are likely to be swayed by crisis narratives, nihilistic blame games, and the politics of fear. And we all know from numerous historical examples where those kinds of politics lead.

Given the current situation, it may be time to take a step back from—though not abandoning by any means—the deconstructive trends of the last several decades and focus a bit more on the social construction of hope. We have already been successful in drawing out the aporias at the heart of hegemonic discourses; what needs to be done now is to build new, more inclusive and egalitarian communities, communities that are not exclusive to humans but recognize our ties to all the species in our environments and their right to exist in their own ways. We need to help foster a sense of belonging that is not rooted only in struggle against something or someone, but in co-creating fulfilling worlds in which we all want to live. This would not be an unattainable,

totalitarian Utopia of a future free from disagreement or conflict, but rather a daily one, an affective, minor utopia rooted in healthy intra-relations with human and nonhuman others.

In short, while I do not share and do not promote a return to *modernismo*'s Eurocentric aesthetic and moral values, I think we should take a similar approach in fostering and supporting our students' youthful idealism and the "*eterna virtualidad de la Vida*" at a time when the future seems particularly bleak. In terms of teaching, this would involve including texts that not only foreground socioecological problems and critiques, but also those that provide a way forward, a reimagining of social life and political practice. Similarly, our critical work should move beyond the analysis of impacts and draw out alternative ecologies of practices, as Isabelle Stengers calls them, that is, ways of co-producing worlds that recognize and foster multispecies conviviality and community.[32]

In a recent chapter for the *Handbook of Latin American Environmental Aesthetics* (2023), I proposed the following guidelines for putting this kind of critical approach into practice, which I think align nicely with Fornoff's work:

> 1) Approaching difference not through identity or commonality, but rather in terms of multiplicities, of becoming-in-relation or what [Karen] Barad calls intra-activity.
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> 2) Understanding representation as an act of equivocal translation—a matter of common differences—rather than the symbolic overwriting of difference. Reading thus becomes a matter of reading for diplomatic relations rather than interpreting symbols in order to extract the author's worldview.
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> 3) Disavowing the multicultural framework and discourse of relativism in favor of reading representations of human and nonhuman others through the understanding of mimesis as the invocation and activation of the traces—that is the affective singularity—of the other. Representation thus becomes performative and intra-active rather than essentialist or allegorical.
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> 4) Reading literature "against the grain" not purely for deconstructive purposes, but rather to draw out semiotic intra-actions that exceed the bounds of the symbolic representation of worldviews. In this sense, the ecocritic would search out cases of discordance between intra-active mimesis and symbolic representation.
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> 5) Eschewing the hyperhumanistic reading of anthropomorphism as

> the projection of human traits onto nonhumans and instead drawing out the ways in which nonhumans engage with humans semiotically to co-produce worlds.
>
> 6) Understanding polities not as socially-constructed demographic categories, but as aggregative articulations of affective, multispecies communities.[33]

I believe that engaging in critical practices using this kind of methodology will not only help us to reconceive of social relations and politics in terms of multispecies communities, but also to overcome the nihilistic obsession with crisis narratives and fear-mongering in the public sphere, promoting instead discursive practices based on shared differences, mutual respect, and a politics of hope for a sustainable rather than apocalyptic future.

NOTES

[1] "Ruines tiempos, en que no priva más arte que el de llenar bien los graneros de la casa, y sentarse en silla de oro, y vivir todo dorado...," José Martí, "Prólogo al 'Poema del Niágara,'" in *Obras completas*, Vol. 7 (La Habana: Ciencias Sociales, 1975): 228-29. All translations are the author's, unless otherwise noted.

[2] "Lo que a la humanidad importa salvar contra toda negación pesimista, es, no tanto la idea de la relativa bondad de lo presente, sino la de la posibilidad de llegar a un término mejor por el desenvolvimiento de la vida, apresurado y orientado mediante esfuerzo de los hombres. La fe en el porvenir, la confianza en la eficacia del esfuerzo humano, son el antecedente necesario de toda acción enérgica y de todo propósito fecundo. Tal es la razón por la que he querido comenzar encareciéndoos la inmortal excelencia de esa fe que, siendo en la juventud un instinto, no debe necesitar seros impuesta por ninguna enseñanza, puesto que la encontraréis indefectiblemente dejando actuar en el fondo de vuestro ser la sugestión divina de la Naturaleza," José Enrique Rodó, "Ariel," in *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Antonio Zamora, 1956): 168. English translation from José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel*, translated by F. J. Stimson (Riverside Press, 1922), 22-23, https://archive.org/stream/arielrod00roduoft/arielrod00roduoft_djvu.txt.

[3] As David Shumway summarizes, since "neoliberalism rejects the very idea of not-for-profit and insists that all values must be measured by the market, the humanities appear valueless" (10). See Shumway, "The University, Neoliberalism, and the Humanities: A History" *Humanities* 6.4 (2017), 1-10. Indeed, as Auwais Rafudeen notes, the humanities inherently undermine neoliberalism's "quantitative bias" and claimed pragmatism by foregrounding vital ontological questions that it is unable to address through data processing. See Rafudeen, "Human Nature, the Humanities and Neoliberalism," *Religion & Theology* 23.1–2 (2016), 209).

[4] As Nora De La Cour notes, "right-wing classical schooling advocates' tendency to hark back to an imaginary time when things were purer and more virtuous lines up with what Italian historian Umberto Eco referred to as ur-fascism's (eternal fascism's) cult of tradition and rejection of modernism," in "Neoliberal Education Reform Paved the Way for Right-Wing Classical Education," *Jacobin*, February 15, 2023, https://jacobin.com/2023/02/desantis-florida-hillsdale-classical-education-neoliberalism.

[5] David Bell, "Reimagining the Humanities: Proposals for a New Century," *Dissent* 57.4 (2010): 69-75.

[6] "Tradición no es continuidad sino ruptura y de ahí que no sea inexacto llamar a la tradición moderna: tradición de la ruptura," Octavio Paz, *Corriente alterna* (México: Siglo XXI, 1967): 19-20.

[7] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 95.

[8] Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*, 98.

[9] Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 3.

[10] Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*, 8.

[11] Regarding the origins of the liberal arts in the classical Greek tradition and their consolidation during the Medieval period in Europe, see the essays in David Wagner's edited volume *The Seven Liberal Arts in the Medieval Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

[12] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, Translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 2007): 217-51.

[13] Tellingly, Spanish philologist Federico de Onís wrote in 1961 that "*modernismo* is the Hispanic form of the universal crisis of literature and the spirit, which initiated around 1885 the dissolution of the 19th century" ("el modernismo es la forma hispana de la crisis universal de las letras y del espíritu, que inicia hacia 1885 la disolución del siglo XIX"). Quoted in Jorge Luis Camacho, "A Paradigm for Modernity: The Concept of Crisis in Modernismo," *Literary Cultures of Latin America: A Contemporary History*, Vol. 3, Edited by Mario J. Valdés and Djelal Kadir (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 328.

[14] "El periódico desflora las ideas grandiosas. Las ideas no hacen familia en la mente, como antes, ni casa, ni larga vida. Nacen a caballo, montadas en relámpago, con alas. No crecen en una mente sola, sino por el comercio de todas. No tardan en beneficiar, después de salida trabajosa, a número escaso de lectores; sino que, apenas nacidas, benefician. Las estrujan, las ponen en alto, se las ciñen como corona, las clavan en picota, las erigen en ídolo, las vuelcan, las mantean. Las ideas de baja ley, aunque hayan comenzado por brillar como de ley buena, no soportan el tráfico, el vapuleo, la marejada, el duro tratamiento. Las ideas de ley buena surgen a la postre, magulladas, pero con virtud de cura espontánea, y compactas y enteras. Con un problema nos levantamos; nos acostamos ya con otro problema. Las imágenes se devoran en la mente. No alcanza el tiempo para dar forma a lo que se piensa. Se pierden unas en otras las ideas en el mar mental, como cuando una piedra hiere el agua azul, se pierden unos en otros los círculos del agua," Martí, "Prólogo," 228-29.

[15] See Jacques Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead: Seven Missiles, Seven Missives, " *Diacritics* 14.2 (1984): 20-31.

[16] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History; Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 197-222.

[17] Rodó, "Ariel," 167.

[18] I am referring here to the rise of *modernista* "Ateneos" throughout the continent

and the tremendous impact of Rodó's essay, as well as educational reforms carried out by like-minded collaborators such as Pedro Henríquez Ureña (Dominican Republic and Mexico), Ricardo Jaimes Freyre (Peru and Argentina), Gabriela Mistral (Chile), and Alfonso Reyes (Mexico), among many others.

[19] Carolyn Fornoff, *Subjunctive Aesthetics: Mexican Cultural Production in the Era of Climate Change* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2024), 2.

[20] Fornoff, *Subjunctive Aesthetics*, 4.

[21] Fornoff, *Subjunctive Aesthetics*, 5.

[22] Rodó, "Ariel," 168.

[23] Fornoff, *Subjunctive Aesthetics*, 59. The italics are in the original.

[24] Fornoff, *Subjunctive Aesthetics*, 93.

[25] Fornoff, *Subjunctive Aesthetics*, 144.

[26] Fornoff, *Subjunctive Aesthetics*, 172-73.

[27] See the final chapter, "Indigenous Posthumanisms: Rethinking Modernity for Cosmopolitical Practice," of my book *The Rights of Nature and the Testimony of Things: Literature and Environmental Ethics from Latin America* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2024).

[28] Regarding the differences between posthumanism, as the destabilization of human exceptionalism, and transhumanism as an intensification of the Positivist discourse of human progress and full domination over "nature," up to and including at the cellular level, see the introduction to Cary Wolfe's *What is Posthumanism? Beyond Humanism and Anthropocentrism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2009).

[29] See Alberto Acosta and Esperanza Martínez, ed., *La naturaleza con derechos: De la filosofía a la política* (Quito: Universidad Politécnica Salesiana; Abya Yala, 2011); Eduardo Gudynas, "Buen Vivir: Today's Tomorrow," *Development* 54.4 (2011): 441–47; Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Jason W. Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part 1: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 44.3 (2017): 594-630; and Isabelle Stengers, "The Cosmopolitical Proposal," in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Karlsurhe: ZKM; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 994-1003 and "Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices," *Cultural Studies Review* 11.1 (2005): 183-96.

[30] Regarding the amplification of Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship* and the "de-

mocracy to come" to include other species, see my "La cosmopolítica de la amistad: Repensando las relaciones políticas desde *La caída del cielo* de Davi Kopenawa," in *Escrituras de lo posglobal en América Latina: Futuros especulativos entre colapso y convivialidad*, Edited by Gesine Müller and Jan Knobloch (Buenos Aires: CLACSO; Mecila, 2024), 235-66.

[31] Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008): 31-33.

[32] See Isabelle Stengers, "Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices," *Cultural Studies Review* 11.1 (2005): 183-96.

[33] Mark Anderson, "Multinaturalism/Nonhuman Representation," in *Handbook of Latin American Environmental Aesthetics*, Edited by Jens Andermann, Gabriel Giorgi, and Victoria Saramago (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2023): 86.