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Review / Reseña

Olivera-Williams, María Rosa and Cristián Opazo, eds. *Humanidades al límite: Posiciones en/contra de la universidad global*. Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2022. 296 pp.

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The humanities are under siege. And the threats are many: economic, political, technological, and sociocultural. Economically, declining enrollments and the growing emphasis on utilitarian goals are pushing universities to prioritize "practical" majors linked to careers in STEM, business, and the health sciences, often at the expense of humanistic fields that once thrived even at elite institutions. For instance, in 2022, only seven percent of incoming freshmen at Harvard expressed an intent to major in the humanities, a stark drop from twenty percent in 2012 and nearly thirty percent in the 1970s.[1] Politically, state governments in some parts of the United States are targeting so-called "woke" ideologies, imposing restrictions on fields such as critical race and gender studies and fueling the erosion of academic freedom. School boards are banning books from high school curricula. These actions, coupled with a climate of heightened scrutiny, have led to increased self-censorship among faculty. On the technological front, advancements like artificial intelligence and online learning offer new opportunities for education but also raise concerns about diminishing the kinds of critical thinking skills that flourish only through deep engagement with human-centered disciplines. At the sociocultural level, intensified polarization complicates efforts to

[1] Herman, David. "Are the Humanities at American Universities in Crisis?" *The Article*, March 8, 2023.

cultivate civil dialogue on our campuses, while a pervasive culture of rankings and global competition deters students from "risking" majors in the humanities or arts. Taken together, these pressures constitute a multipronged assault on a range of disciplines that are vital to our understanding of the human experience.

Amid this crisis—what the editors aptly describe as "a juncture in which our disciplines are grappling with the pressures of economic pragmatism and populist anti-intellectualism" (9)—*Humanidades al límite: Posiciones en/contra de la universidad global* (2022) argues that the humanities are essential for addressing the most urgent global challenges of our time such as poverty, environmental crises, and war. Using concrete examples like prison education programs, decolonial historiography, and gender justice initiatives, the volume's nine contributors show how the humanities can drive activism, empower marginalized communities, foster inclusion, and serve as powerful force for social change. At the same time, they highlight global Catholicism as a synergistic force that both amplifies and expands upon the humanities' commitment to human dignity, ethical responsibility, and the pursuit of justice.

Humanidades al límite is shaped by two notable aspects: its connection to two leading global Catholic universities and its function as a bridge for a North-South dialogue within the Americas, specifically between Chile and the United States.

At its core, the book is a gathering of scholars from across various areas of the humanities—history, philosophy, literature, translation studies, and others—almost all of whom have studied or teach at the University of Notre Dame or at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (PUC). Beginning in 2017 and driven by an acute sense of crisis within the humanities, this group convened through a series of in-person and virtual meetings on both sides of the globe. Their aim was not only to interrogate why a global crisis for the humanities was unfolding but, more importantly, to explore how it should be addressed and the humanities defended for the future. Central to their discussions were questions about the unique and significant role global Catholicism might play in this effort, particularly in a world where secular institutions often render discussions of faith inadmissible in classrooms and research agendas. The authors collectively reject the false dichotomy between faith and reason, demonstrating instead how religious and intellectual pursuits can enrich one another by fostering spaces for holistic inquiry into our humanity. Catholic universities, at their best, can serve as counterpoints to the corporatization of education and as beacons for ethical thought and action in a world deeply in need. Motivated by forward-looking optimism, the authors are also courageous in their self-critique. They acknowledge that they write

from the privileged vantage point of scholars who have, in many cases, been both intellectuals and administrators; in those dual positions, they have grappled with the corporate nature of the modern university while defending the value of Catholic education within a largely secularized higher education landscape. In doing so, they demonstrate the courage to critique the hegemonic systems of which they are a part, even as they recognize the contradictions inherent in their positions.

In this dialogue, Chile and the United States serve as compelling case studies for examining the enduring consequences of neoliberalism on educational systems and societal inequalities. Though separated by half a world, the conceptual bridge between the two countries is surprisingly short. The United States played a pivotal role in shaping Chile's modern history, most notably by supporting the 11 September 1973 coup that ousted Salvador Allende after years of working to thwart his democratic rise to power and his vision of socialism. The coup ushered in Augusto Pinochet's military-and-civilian regime, during which the Chicago Boys—a group of U.S.-trained economists—found fertile ground to implement an unrestrained brand of neoliberalism. Their policies, marked by privatization and deregulation, continue to shape Chile's economy today. While subsequent Chilean governments have made strides in addressing socioeconomic inequality—with varying degrees of success—the country remains one of the most unequal in the world. Yet it is on a slow trajectory to reduce inequality, just as inequality in the United States becomes more entrenched. Still, in October 2019, Chile erupted in massive protests as citizens decried the myriad ways neoliberal rule had eroded rights and failed to deliver equitable access to education, healthcare, pensions, and economic opportunities, thus exposing deep fractures in a society still burdened by Pinochet's constitution. Similarly, in the United States, movements such as the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests highlighted growing dissatisfaction with economic inequality and the concentration of wealth, calling attention to how neoliberal policies have exacerbated disparities and enriched the one percent. In both countries, critiques of neoliberalism have included its corrosive impact on education, particularly in undermining equitable access and devaluing disciplines that foster critical reflection and civic engagement.

María Rosa Olivera-Williams (University of Notre Dame) and Cristián Opazo (PUC), both highly acclaimed scholars of Latin American literary and cultural studies, serve as editors of the book and foreground two operative concepts—vulnerability and humility—as mutually reinforcing ideas that can fuel a renewal and defense of the humanities. Their evocation of vulnerability draws on Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The*

Powers of Mourning and Violence (2004), in which the author asks if some human lives are more "grievable" than others and argues that "a dimension of political life has to do with our exposure to violence and our complicity in it, with our vulnerability to loss and the task of mourning that follows, and with finding a basis for community in these conditions" (19). Vulnerability, in Butler's reading, reminds us that all human lives are interconnected and that acknowledging our shared fragility can inspire us to act empathetically and collectively—in community rather than in conflict. Paradoxically, from precariousness comes strength and mutual support. Similarly, the editors foreground Martha Nussbaum's *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), a book that expresses the urgency to move beyond utilitarian, economically driven approaches to education and to foster cultural humility in our students as a cornerstone of democracy and civic engagement. To step outside oneself, to embrace vulnerability, to act on our shared precariousness: this is the promise of the humanities—a promise to inspire a world where violence, discrimination, and poverty give way to justice and community.

The book is organized into three thematic sections, each offering diverse approaches to illuminate and address the crisis of the humanities. Part One, titled "The University: Beyond Ruins," explores how contemporary higher education institutions have strayed from their foundational missions. Vittorio Hösle critiques science's failure to address existential threats like climate change, demographic shifts, and global inequality, noting the Enlightenment's unfulfilled promise to resolve issues such as war and poverty through scientific progress alone. He reflects on the Medieval origins of universities—small, intellectually and ethically united communities—and suggests that today's bureaucratized, market-driven institutions might draw valuable lessons from these earlier models. Similarly, Santiago M. Quintero critiques neoliberal universities, which he argues have fomented the compartmentalization of knowledge. He calls for educational models that dismantle Eurocentric, white, and masculine hegemonies while centering indigenous knowledges, feminist and postcolonial perspectives, and ecological thinking beyond the Anthropocene. Cristián Opazo shifts the focus to language, warning of the dangers that terms like "creativity" and "innovation" pose when co-opted by neoliberal ideologies. Stripped of their critical potential, such terms become tools of market logic, reinforced by metrics, deliverables, Key Performance Indicators, and "impact factors" that dominate today's grant calls and the academic publishing industry. Opazo urges humanists to resist that instrumentalized lexicon by drawing inspiration from Chile's university-based theater movements of the 1960s,

which embraced subversive, imperfect forms of linguistic and cultural intervention and resisted the homogenizing gloss of the market.

In Part Two, "The (Vulnerable) Horizons of Poetry," María Rosa Olivera-Williams builds on Cristián Opazo's focus on language as resistance by positioning poetry, often dismissed as the most maligned and vulnerable of literary genres, at the center of her inquiry. How often do we, as literature professors, hear students say they "don't read poetry," "dislike it," or find it "incomprehensible"? As a marginalized art form, poetry mirrors the sidelining of the humanities in a world that undervalues introspection and the complexity of figurative language. Yet for Olivera-Williams, poetry's vulnerability is also its strength. Poetry can serve as a window onto society; it can enable students to envision alternative possibilities and engage with other ways of being and knowing through its semiotic play. Confident that poetry can foster such connections, she foregrounds the works of Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957) and Uruguayan poet Delmira Agustini (1886-1914), two women who used their writing to question patriarchal norms, probe deep emotions, build solidarities, and challenge constructs such as motherhood.

To close Part Two, Luis Bravo approaches vulnerability through the life and work of another poet from another context and time: Ibero Gutiérrez (1949-1972), a young Uruguayan writer, visual artist, and leftist militant who was killed by a paramilitary group just months before the June 1973 coup d'état. Bravo explores Gutiérrez's intellectual and cultural biography, highlighting the artist's extraordinary ability as a teenager to produce poems, diaries, oil paintings, prison writings, and other forms of creative expression. This flourishing, Bravo argues, was made possible by the Uruguayan educational system of the 1960s, which guaranteed a broad-based humanistic education to all citizens, regardless of socioeconomic standing, and fostered critical—even rebellious—thinking against societal norms. Bravo's reflection is tinged with nostalgia for an education system that was dismantled during the Uruguayan dictatorship (1973–1985), a regime that famously ushered in Uruguay's first neoliberal educational reforms. His chapter serves as a reminder of what is lost when educational systems prioritize market-driven imperatives over humanistic and critical inquiry.

Building on the themes of individual and artistic vulnerability explored in Part Two, Part Three, "Catholic Universities, Global Missions," shifts to consider how institutions, particularly Catholic universities, can operationalize humanistic values on a broader, global scale to address systemic injustices. To provide historical context for this exploration, John T. McGreevy highlights the role of the Catholic Church as the

first truly global institution, driven in large part by the Jesuits' efforts to universalize the Church's reach beyond Europe. Focusing primarily on the lesser-known trajectory of the Jesuits in the nineteenth century, McGreevy demonstrates how this pioneering religious order, dedicated to education and renowned for bridging faith and reason, offers a lens for understanding global Catholicism as one of the "largest multilingual and multicultural organizations in the world" (195). The Jesuits' story is particularly relevant to the contemporary crisis of the humanities. As humanists by formation, they provide a model of ethical global engagement, cultural respect, and a commitment to reducing inequalities. Their example illustrates how education can serve the common good of people and the planet.

Kathleen McDonald builds on McGreevy's work by exploring another lesson from the Jesuits that she finds applicable to all great universities: "Behind every powerful institution lies an arduous process of actions, decisions, and fundraising first to construct a foundation and later to fuel that institution's influence" (218-19). She illustrates this point by referencing the growth of Catholic global education at the University of Notre Dame, in particular, focusing on the Hesburgh Library as a symbolic site where the university's academic mission and Catholic identity intersect. Named after The Reverend Theodore Hesburgh, CSC (1917-2015), who served as president of Notre Dame for 35 years, the library embodies a commitment to education rooted in ethical and intellectual rigor. McDonald uses Cardinal John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University* (1852) as a foundation for her reflections on the enduring value of liberal education in an increasingly secular age. She then examines how Father Hesburgh, inspired by Newman, adapted these ideas for the 20th century, defending two core principles that remain vital for the humanities today. First, he argued that theology is an essential component of a truly universal education. Second, he championed the intrinsic value of learning as a pursuit worth undertaking for its own sake—an ideal that directly challenges the prevailing notion that education's worth should be measured solely by its technical or utilitarian applications.

The closing chapters of Part Three, authored by Ruth Nelly Solarte González and Catherine M. Brix, respectively, highlight Catholic social teaching in action both on campus and in the wider community. Solarte González explores how literature and the visual arts—genres that fundamentally engage with lives, human values, and diverse identities—intersect with Catholic social teaching, particularly through their shared focus on social justice and human dignity. She argues that even works lacking explicitly religious content can align with those principles. Using gendered violence as an example

of a critical issue to address in the classroom, she demonstrates how texts by authors such as Rosario Castellanos (Mexico) and Diamela Eltit (Chile) can help students understand the pervasive nature of violence against women and critically examine its implications. Art and literature, she contends, enable students to interrogate societal structures and consider their own roles in dismantling injustice.

Catherine M. Brix extends this discussion beyond the boundaries of the classroom and the ivory tower, focusing on the vital role universities can and should play in serving marginalized populations. Brix examines how universities in Chile and the United States have leveraged their resources to offer degree programs for prison inmates, many of whom belong to racial or ethnic minority groups. In Chile, Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez (1907-1999), a staunch opponent of the Pinochet regime and a defender of human rights, founded the Universidad Academia de Humanismo Cristiano. During the dictatorship, this university provided political prisoners with the opportunity to earn college degrees. In the United States, the University of Notre Dame, in partnership with Holy Cross College, has operated the Moreau College Initiative (formerly the Westville Education Initiative) since 2013. This competitive and academically rigorous program offers inmates at the Westville and Miami, Indiana, correctional facilities the chance to earn associate or bachelor's degrees within a tight-knit, creative learning community where the humanities play a central role. Reflecting the book's overall focus on vulnerability and justice, the Moreau College Initiative empowers marginalized individuals through education, demonstrating how the humanities can restore dignity and foster inclusion. The program's impact has been remarkable: as of August 2024, it had conferred 125 associate degrees and 40 bachelor's degrees.[2]

The humanities are certainly traversing a moment of crisis. Yet, as the aforementioned examples show, this is decidedly not a time for blind retrenchment, arguments rooted in entitlement, or self-defeating capitulation. Instead, we humanists must rise to the challenges of the present and future with compelling, reasoned arguments and a willingness to collaborate across disciplines and with communities, local and global. This spirit of renewal and openness is essential if we are to address the complex and interconnected issues shaping our shared future.

This is an especially exciting time for the humanities, as new interdisciplinary collaborations emerge. Environmental humanists analyze cultural narratives and draw

[2] Notre Dame Stories. "A Reason to Live." 2024.

historical lessons to promote ecological responsibility and sustainability, while medical humanists tackle ethical dilemmas stemming from medical advancements and inform equitable health policies. Historians investigate the root causes of conflicts, offering insights to avoid repeating past mistakes, while digital humanists leverage data to create storytelling archives and educational materials that address issues such as racial and gender inequities or the effects of global migration.

At the University of California, Davis, where I've taught for 21 years and currently serve as Associate Vice Provost in Global Affairs, we are embracing a "Grand Challenges" approach to solve the world's most pressing "wicked problems."[3] Humanists are central to these efforts, supported by interdisciplinary grants from our colleges, schools, the Office of Research, and Global Affairs. The examples are far too many to name, but I can cite a few. The UC Davis Feminist Research Institute, Energy and Efficiency Institute, and Institute of Transportation Studies, for example, have launched an Environmental Justice Leaders Program to collaborate with local and global communities and address historical power imbalances between academic researchers and environmental justice groups.[4] In the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, the "Humanizing Deportation"[5] project offers a community-based digital storytelling platform to document the human consequences of migration and border control policies in the United States and Mexico, while the Article 26 Backpack[6] project, inspired by the UN Declaration of Human Rights, provides a secure digital platform for refugee students and scholars to store and preserve their academic credentials and documents.

Together, these initiatives demonstrate the broad reach of the humanities and their transformative impact, from producing critical knowledge to advancing real-world applications that promote justice, equity, and sustainability. And they reaffirm what *Humanidades al límite* so powerfully argues: the humanities are not merely about "soft skills," as if empathy, effective communication, and ethical reasoning were somehow inferior to technical or information-based competencies. Quite the opposite: the humanities cultivate the very qualities that make societies and individuals resilient, adaptable, creative, and visionary. They equip us to navigate complexity, embrace uncertainty, and engage with others' experiences and perspectives with humility and

[3] https://grandchallenges.ucdavis.edu
[4] https://energy.ucdavis.edu/education/environmental-justice-leaders-program/
[5] http://humanizandoladeportacion.ucdavis.edu/en/
[6] https://globalaffairs.ucdavis.edu/a26backpack

insight. At their very best, the humanities are a font of endless possibility, a source of continual renewal, and, as this book reminds us, an unfinished task—open to reinterpretation, reinvention, and reimagining that can nourish both our minds and our spirits and shape our collective futures.

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