

# Beyond the Survival of the Global Humanities

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*Over the past several years, scholars and critics have begun to talk about the survival of the humanities rather than its crisis. This essay traces the emergence of a rhetoric of salvation and survival in academic advocacy literature, evident in the genres, arguments, and metaphors that writers use to describe the academic humanities. Focusing, first, on a set of recent books that advocate for the humanities as a resource for deliberation, community formation, and critique, the essay then turns to the origin of the contemporary humanities in European philology as a background for the dualism of survival and crisis in narratives about the humanities. The essay concludes by arguing that we need a new framework for understanding the survival of the humanities as global humanities, in particular, one that does not emerge from a European and Christological sense of survival. Drawing upon research conducted as part of the “World Humanities Report,” the essay identifies some of these alternative frameworks based upon the humanities in China, South Africa, and Argentina.*

The survival of the humanities is on our minds. While for decades the humanities were ensnared in the rhetoric of crisis, our lament has recently turned to strategy, argument, and manifesto, and with this turn, implicitly and explicitly, to life and survival. Recent book titles like Sidonie Smith’s *A Manifesto for the Humanities* and Eric Hayot’s *Humanist Reason: A History. An Argument. A Plan.*, and collections like *A New Deal for the Humanities* suggest that change is afoot. Judith Butler, in her President’s Address to the Modern Language Association, called this *persistence*, evoking a form of feminist stubbornness.<sup>1</sup> Further, those who continue to hold on to the crisis discourse of the humanities do so now not to indicate an event that could be overcome, but rather a condition that may be permanent, which is nowhere more clear than in Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon’s *Permanent Crisis*. Permanent crisis is nothing if not a name for endurance and survival. But what does it mean to talk about the humanities in terms of survival? What kind of survival are we talking about? And what exactly is going to survive: where and in what form and at what critical cost?

These questions resonate throughout the *World Humanities Report*, a collaboration between the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes and the Inter-

national Council of Philosophy and the Human Sciences, which I have directed since 2018. The organizing questions of the report – Where do the humanities live in the world today? And what are the conditions of their flourishing? – suggest survival more than crisis. Further, the report’s ground-up approach, organized around contributions from distinct national, regional, continental, and linguistic settings, has the secondary effect of reflecting survival as a global condition. In the report, the humanities appear as other than a lasting European formation and colonial/imperial project whose legacies continue to shape disciplines and institutions. Rather, the humanities are a multitudinous, vast, and uneven set of engagements with interpretation, criticism, judgment, representation, translation, preservation, voice, experience, and aesthetics that are not exhausted by European humanism and its disciplinary effects.

The report’s contributors account for a wide range of institutional, disciplinary, and financial interventions, as well as policies and commitments, that will serve today and for the future. It shows further that the institutions of the humanities are modern universities on the European model as we know them, but also NGOs, museums, public humanities projects in radio and podcasts, informal “street” universities, scholarly societies, academies, summer schools, and independent research institutes. These alternative formations include the Forum on Contemporary Theory in India, a mobile winter school that includes participants from across the subcontinent; the Africa Institute, a new graduate program in the arts and humanities based in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates; and Les Ateliers de la Pensée, a collaboration of scholars, artists, and intellectuals focused in the francophone world working through books, a media campaign, conferences, and an intensive program for early career scholars.<sup>2</sup> Yet the new rhetoric of survival focuses almost exclusively on the university-based humanities: hiring faculty, maintaining levels of undergraduate enrollment, ensuring lively academic presses, and envisioning forms of collaboration and interdisciplinarity through which the humanities become embedded in all areas of the university, from AI to public health to urban studies.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, they raise questions of reproduction and reproducibility, of legacy, and of the difficulty of breaking from dominant legacies that include colonialism and myriad forms of institutionalized political violence. In what follows, I provide an overview of the emergence of this powerful rhetoric of survival in academic advocacy literature, before suggesting the risks of this new discourse and asking whether there are alternatives beyond crisis and survival.

**I**n her account of the precarious state of the humanities within the university, Sidonie Smith, former president of the Modern Language Association, frames the challenge faced by the humanities in terms of “sustainability,” borrowing a framework typically used to describe the future of the planet.<sup>4</sup> Implicit in sustainability is that a set of collective choices and strategies, whether conceived as

imaginative or sacrificial, has the power to change the lifespan of the humanities and guarantee a future. In Smith's account, the humanities will need to be reconceived in order to be durable; their (our) practices and protocols, particularly as they relate to reproduction (graduate education), will need to be reenvisioned to shift from risk of extinction to *survival*. The newly sustainable practices she enumerates include collaboration, flexibility, open access, innovative teaching, networking, and inclusion. What I find notable in this example is the way that a long-held attachment to crisis and near-death in accounts of the humanities (a crisis that once dominated popular, administrative, and scholarly discourse) has been subsumed by a "life drive." If the earlier account of near-death left many to wonder whether the end already had taken place, whether our time was both that of an ever-deferred future crisis and a past event that had escaped us and for which we were constantly making amends, I want to suggest that this new attention to life in the humanities might also correlate to what Cathy Caruth has called "a different history of survival," one less preoccupied with death and newly consumed with life.<sup>5</sup>

Another version of this preoccupation with life is more subtle in its appearance, less about sustainable strategies and more about the very conception of the humanities and its (their, our) value. Take, for example, Amanda Anderson's Clarendon Lectures on "Psyche and Ethos," in which *life* is the concept and condition through which values are established and affirmed. There, the examined or moral life becomes the vehicle for the survival of the humanities within "transdisciplinary collaborations and precisely around questions of value clarification and understanding of human experience."<sup>6</sup> In other words, affirming moral life and value as an overlooked (even disparaged) priority of humanities scholarship is also the condition under which the humanities will take on a new and more sustainable life in the university and society. (This is in distinction from the humanities conceived as engaged with precarious life, the hermeneutics of suspicion, irresolution, or futurity.) For Anderson, when understood in relation to *moral life*, the humanities become increasingly valuable to *actual* sustainability: climate science, global health, good governance.

As both of these examples imply, the life or death of the humanities is almost inextricable from an analysis of the one place where we know the humanities are supposed to live: the university.<sup>7</sup> This analysis has been brewing over many decades, for example, in Jacques Derrida's account of the humanities in his lecture on the university without condition or Bill Readings's collection *The University in Ruins*. Taking Readings's understanding of ruins one step further, Chris Newfield recently asked, in the title of his article, "What Are the Humanities For?" Newfield begins his response by making abundantly clear that the place where the humanities should live – the public university – is itself already dead. As Newfield explains: "Public universities . . . seem not just unable but unwilling to save them-

selves. Given their inertia, public universities will have an easier time moving forward if they start from the idea that public universities as we knew them are dead.”<sup>8</sup> One wonders who is this public university that is coming into self-awareness of its own death? Is it merely the board of regents, the senior administration, the academic senate, or – insofar as it is not just a single university but the many “flagships” that he lists, in Berkeley, Madison, Ann Arbor, and Chapel Hill – is this merely an impossible or fictional instance of recognition, as impossible as the dead recognizing themselves as dead?

Similarly, one wonders whether life in Newfield’s account, however metaphorical, is a *physical* condition, a matter of *motion* (inertia), or *biological*, and whether sustainability and survival are the same as “movement.” (As if “no motion has she now, no force” describes not a child but the public university.) Newfield continues to qualify what exactly he means by death (if not salvation), describing an institution that lives on as a corpse or ghost, hollowed of the intellectual and socially transformative project at its core. He writes:

Obviously, the institutions and their activities carry on – the building mortgages, the student activities, the administrative hiring, the sports programs, and the academic labor. But their public missions do not . . . they no longer present themselves as forming the destiny of humanity. . . . The mid-twentieth-century public university, in short, is dead.<sup>9</sup>

Newfield concludes his essay on the use (or position) of the humanities by arguing for a reversal of strategy that would amount to revitalizing and reanimating the public university, lifting it from its grave. I am less interested here in the accuracy of his account of universities (though having worked at two of the universities that appear on his list, I can say that it is not so much the abandonment of mission as it is a turn away from the humanities as the steward of that mission, a turn that can be reversed, which Newfield acknowledges) than I am in Newfield’s reliance on a passage from death to life, especially to a life that is ghostly and unfulfilled.

Newfield makes five suggestions for what universities could do to salvage the humanities: three are speech acts (proclaim, admit, define), events in and through language that would also be the evidence of salvation and recovery; two are financial commitments, reinvestments in research and teaching, that also take the form of agreements. He concludes by responding to the question that provides the title of his essay: “My answer to what the humanities are for is that they are for putting mass *Bildung* back at the center of the postcapitalist university that is now in the *early agonies of birth*. The public university is dead. Long live the public university.”<sup>10</sup> For Newfield, the humanities are for saving the university as a public university and for reestablishing its values; the humanities remain the unit within the university that attends to these values. In other words, by saving the universi-

ty, the humanities save the person, and save the people. They turn the infant into a subject and even a citizen.

But this account of a recovered and reformed university as “forming the destiny of humanity,” and of the humanities not just as forming selves or a commons but as a project of *mass bildung*, possesses the over/undertones of twentieth-century populist movements. The evocation of birth agony, destiny, monarchy, sovereignty, and immortality, even if only in order to issue a somewhat hyperbolic call for a public good, cannot ultimately shed its tinge of redemption, a sticky association that attaches onto this rhetoric of the humanities’ salvation and survival. To borrow from the insights of a recent “theological-political genealogy” of survival, I wonder whether the rhetoric of the survival of the humanities, for all of its strategy and pragmatism, recasts the humanities in a quasi-theological, redemptive mode at the moments when the humanities are being recognized as a public good and as valuable to the university’s research mission. And, taking this further, because the humanities issue from a conception of the human and the humane with which they continue to struggle, I wonder too whether any turn to salvation and survival also hosts a history of Christianity, imperialism, and Euro-nationalism. If the university, saved by the humanities, stands in the place of the sovereign, especially at the moment when Newfield announces that the (public good) university is dead – and lives on – what does this mean for the global humanities?<sup>11</sup> Can the humanities survive in modern universities beyond their European and Christian origins? Or is the only method of overcoming their origins one that seeks not survival but a radical reconception of the humanities as global humanities?

Put more explicitly, I am asking whether the shift from *crisis* to *survival* that I have been tracing, the shift from a preoccupation with death to a preoccupation with life and living-on, cannot be extricated from a Christological account of the humanities. I am asking whether this reasserts – rather than rearranges – the descent of the humanities from a Latinate and ultimately European framework with the powers of civilization and redemption that it animates (and that animate it). In other words, the survival of the humanities is not just the survival of the humanities. It is the survival of the humanities as “human destiny,” “life beyond death,” and redemption through the university. In this logic, do we need a new concept for their survival, one that opens a global frame and resists destinal thinking?

In what follows, I would like to draw out this example even further, looking first to a somewhat traditional history of the humanities that borrows this figuration (in distinction from the more advocacy-oriented work of the literary scholars I already have introduced), then revisiting the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) definition of *humanities* (and its location), before finally considering a Chinese example in which the humanities, modeled after a European or “Western” history, are evoked as part of a nationalist project of survival. In conclusion, I ask wheth-

er there is an alternative to the crisis/survival or apocalypse/redemption framework, and what it might be.

I am following this line of thought not only in order to ask about the conditions of the humanities flourishing in a scholarly or abstract sense, but because I spend a great deal of time arguing for the importance of the humanities within the public university and the value of humanities centers and institutes as sites of possibility and collaboration. At my own University of California, Berkeley, and in national and international contexts, I insist, like Smith and Anderson, that we must think further about “what is to be done,” whether that means redesigning graduate programs or confronting “the question of the moral life more directly, without fear of sounding didactic, benighted, or insufficiently political.”<sup>12</sup> I also am aware that when it comes to substitutions of life for death (and death for life) that we should linger and see how the specter of life and death is overdetermined and how the rhetoric of survival draws not only from ecocriticism and allegory, but equally from ethnonationalism, theology, and the variety of administrative regimes that issue from them and that have led to multiple forms of colonial violence and the repression of Indigenous and minority knowledges. These are projects that universities and humanities scholars often have facilitated rather than resisted.

While I have been looking at Smith, Anderson, and Newfield and their inquiries at the intersection of analysis and institutional activism, even more traditional scholarly accounts of the humanities deploy a survivalist frame. Take, for example, historian James Turner’s *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities*. Turner’s argument is that despite their disciplinary diversity – ranging from anthropology to visual culture to philosophy – the humanities, as they have come into being at least since the nineteenth century, are indebted to and entangled with the study of language and literature. Yet Turner’s account of this history of the humanities registers still another version of the rhetoric of survival. In the book’s introductory chapter, he describes his own contribution in this idiom: “Despite many fine monographs, no one to date has ventured an overview of . . . the birth of the modern humanities in the English-speaking world from the womb of philology. . . . This book tells that story.”<sup>13</sup> Here, the feminized biologization of philology as womb and the humanities as progeny, the suggestion that there is an (unacknowledged) event, following a period of gestation, that occurs in a moment that could be dated, and further the implication of infancy, growth, and, implicitly, death reflect an imagination of the humanities as a living being. More than this, Turner positions his study as having a particular role to play in the obscure birth of the humanities becoming knowable. It is only through his “venture,” his “over-view,” made possible by his fictional stance as a historian who exists outside, above, and beyond the humanities, that the birth and the proper life of the humanities become visible.

When, a few paragraphs later, Turner explicitly talks about survival, it is not the survival of the modern humanities that interests him, but of the “antiquated” practices of philology that are their predecessor, leading him to explain: “Because philology’s legacy *survives* in the ways we build knowledge today, the excavation of the philological past becomes an effort at once of historical reconstruction and present-day self-understanding.”<sup>14</sup> Turner’s history itself is in the mode of *bildungsroman*. But what of this mother-child scene and the humanities as “bless’d babe”? Is it a Kleinian moment of betrayal or a Christological moment of grace? The mother, while the hero of the tale, is also merely a womb. She ends up dead and buried, incapable of telling her own story, and in need of excavation and historical reconstruction, a project Turner enthusiastically takes up. And yet it is she, silent vessel, who is also the very condition of the reconstruction of which she is the object.<sup>15</sup> Just as Newfield’s vision of survival rides on a logic of redemptive sovereignty, so too does this image of maternal death and recovery also make manifest a dichotomy between biologization (and the mortality it implies) and symbolization (and the immortality it invokes). The humanities, here, become merely human, and this is a story of resurrecting the mother – unless, of course, the progeny (the humanities) is Christ himself.

The origin story that Turner recovers focuses on the early (and ongoing) use of *the humanities* at Oxford to refer to the secular study of Latin or Latin and Greek: the classics. Turner, once again absorbing the rhetoric of institutional survival, writes:

It is telling that John Edwin Sandys’s venerable *History of Classical Scholarship*, when it reaches the western Middle Ages, becomes no longer a history of scholarship (of critical editions, commentaries, and scholia) but of *survival* – of where knowledge of ancient texts persisted, of where grammar and rhetoric were still taught.<sup>16</sup>

He goes on to refer to the relationships across time and geography in the biblical idiom of “begetting.”

Even here, in resonance with Newfield, institutional survival displaces scholarship, a move whose overdetermination indicates the high stakes of this history. While Turner is compelled by a return of philology in the humanities, his account of that return is somewhat underdetermined. That is, it misses some of the more visible recent returns of philology. While they are not strictly historical in outlook, if included, they might have shaken some of the book’s more confident claims. Here, I am thinking not only of Nietzsche, whose relation to philology was ambivalent, but also the late work of Paul de Man and Edward Said, both of whom, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham points out, despite their differences of style, project, and understanding, wrote essays at the end of their lives with the title: “The Return of Philology.”<sup>17</sup> If, for Turner, philology is the origin of the humanities that he is at work to recover, for de Man and Said, philology already has found its way back to

the humanities, whether as speculative science or as theory. Philology will not just save the humanities, rather it is, as Harpham explains, a way of naming its crisis.

**I**n a very different history than the one we find in Turner, Harpham carefully recalls the origins of philology as the study of languages that for a brief moment served as a model for science – and appeared to be more scientific than science itself. In this context, he also recalls the deep imbrication of philology and racial (racist) theory.<sup>18</sup> Passing from Darwin to Gobineau to our present, Harpham argues (without reference to Turner) that we do not merely get the humanities from philology, we also get from philology the *crisis* of the humanities, and the response to crises outside of the humanities (crises of identity, the nation, and belonging). We get the antagonism between science (theory) and criticism, scholarly and generalist practices, complicity with racism and the resistance to racism, professionalization and skepticism of it. He argues that after the Cold War ended,

the humanities lost something of their reason for being, the legitimating crisis in which they were to have played a necessary part. Moreover, as the humanities, like other academic disciplines, became professionalized, they became insular – self-validating, self-legitimizing, self-referring, self-interested. The link between the humanities and the state on the one hand and the individual on the other became attenuated. Detached from its rationale and isolated from its supporters, the humanities, conceived as a response to various crises themselves fell into crisis; and as higher education took a pragmatic, scientific turn, other sectors of the university, particularly the sciences and professional education, came to command more attention, resources, and prestige.<sup>19</sup>

Moving *from* Turner's redemptive account of philology as grounding the humanities *to* Harpham's account of philology's unsettling and contradictory returns, we see that, whether understood as the return of science and theory or the return of pseudoscience, mere criticism, and speculation, whether framed in relation to the *impossible* return to (or of) a stolen homeland (Said) or the *refused* return of a repressed complicity (de Man), philology is not simply an empty vessel to be recovered from the ruins of the present humanities. It is a mobile signifier whose repetitions are entangled with the crisis of the humanities in a scene that the humanities are called upon to witness. In other words, the return of philology can be both central to an account of the living humanities and a source of crisis (and death). While life or death narratives surely raise the stakes of the humanities, these stakes also precede the critical and historical interventions that I have been describing. I have been suggesting that the survival of the humanities and its rhetoric does not merely replace crisis with optimism and a new framework of creative interventions. It also harbors an enduring set of risks and attachments that we cannot ignore.



This confusion of life and death is inscribed in the English definition of the humanities – and in that definition’s displacement. The OED has no stand-alone entry for *humanities*. Instead, *humanities* in English remains a definition within the entry for *humanity*. *Humanize*, *humanitas*, *humanistic* – I could go on – all have their own entries, but to get at a definition of *humanities*, one must access it as the plural of *humanity*, which it is, of course, but which it also is not. Here *humanities* is identified as a subset of the primary definition of *humanity*. It is the plural of *humanity* defined as *humane*, recalling the Latin and the study of Latin letters, and suggesting that the humanities are an index not of the human understood as race or species, but rather as disposition, behavior, and character, as civilized and civilizing. It is *humanity* as *ethos*, not *bios*, and this suggests that ways of relating and ways of knowing are inextricably linked. The fact that there is no stand-alone entry for the humanities in the OED introduces a set of further questions about what we are talking about when we talk about survival. In this defining moment, we can see (and hear) how the *humanities*’ persistence – the value and persistence of methods, disciplines, or practices – do not just evoke, but are indissociable from *humanity*’s persistence. The inclusion of the humanities within this single entry that includes collective and species identities as well as civilizational practices also evokes the long history of the humanities as a violent force within nationalist, colonial, and postcolonial networks and the reproductive force of the humanities at home and in the world. I am suggesting that recent academic narratives of the humanities’ survival, however liberal in their claims, remain burdened by logics of resurrection and redemption that are doggedly Eurocentric and Christological, leading us to question whether there can be a future for the humanities that is at once affirmative and detached from colonial violence and repression.

While I have focused until now on Europe and its legacies, particularly in U.S. academic discourse, I now want to turn to the case of China. From a philological perspective we have seen that *humanities* as a concept and word is *untranslatable*, troubling an account of the global humanities. It is also a word and concept that increasingly circulates in a globalized system of knowledge dominated by English and in the negotiation of institutional forms modeled after those in the United States and Europe.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, some historically European institutions today are turning to China (and by extension to the Chinese state) for institutional and financial support, rearranging the global academic order and establishing a new ecosystem for the humanities.

In China, where the fraught relationship between the humanities and human rights continues to play out, it seems that violent force was always part of the modern university’s “public mission” (to use Newfield’s language). As historian Wang Hui has explained, the modern Chinese university emerged with the founding in 1881 of Beiyang Naval School, which connected philology to its global project, re-

quiring daily study of Chinese classics and English language, as well as technical courses taught in English and embedding the humanities within a military education.<sup>21</sup> Beiyang was the precursor of Peking University, which expanded its offerings in the humanities to include not only classics, but also literature and history, as well as sciences, law, agriculture, and the professions. Wang Hui uses this example to reflect upon the entanglement of the Chinese, American, and European university systems and identifies three stages in the recent history of the humanities in China. These include the removal of all international and scholarly standards, whereby the humanities became pure ideology, followed by the establishment of a university system that had scholarly and intellectual relevance outside of China in the mid-1990s. However, the latest developments in China suggest still another stage. The former relevance and influence of the humanities have been supplanted by a new international strategy that incorporates, rather than overcomes, violence and ideology.

In many ways, it appears as if the humanities in China are flourishing, leading to international conferences, collaborations, and commitments. They certainly have gained the attention and influence of a number of international organizations, including the International Council of Philosophy and the Human Sciences (CIPSH), an NGO formed in the last century to serve as the conscience of UNESCO in the aftermath of European fascism. CIPSH is known for its publication of a massive study of *The Third Reich* that was designed as a platform for European intellectuals to recognize and expose the forms of political violence that led to the near destruction of Europe's Jews, and it also is one of the leading partners for the *World Humanities Report*. Yet because the humanities are underfunded in the United States and Europe, CIPSH today is a benefactor of the contemporary Chinese state that Wang describes, and it is as much a Chinese organization as it is European. But can the humanities flourish even as censorship and repression are the norm? Can they have international resonance while ignoring political violence? Increasingly well endowed and well supported, the state-supported humanities in China have become a source of "soft power" made more powerful by the defunding of the humanities in the rest of the world. Their new stability, unlike the precarity and risk experienced in the United States, is correlated to what Wang calls a "new orthodoxy," which also produces what he does not explicitly state: a set of distractions and justifications for ongoing abuses of freedom and human rights. I read in Wang's history of the humanities in China that the humanities – and the university – today can be made to live and apparently flourish, but they do so in a context where "inquiry without condition" is foreclosed. The history that he tells reminds us that the Chinese university today is, despite its explicit commitments to the humanities, as it was at its outset, a project "with military, industrial, and political motivations . . . the product of 'national salvation and survival.'"<sup>22</sup> The place in the world where the humanities are most apparently alive and most ro-

bustly supported is also where they have been left for dead. The life drive here is a cipher and a veil.

I would like to conclude not by outlining a set of new strategies or fashioning a new polemic, but by asking, in light of the account I have provided, whether there are – whether there could be – nonredemptive, nonapocalyptic strategies for the humanities. Can we break from these dramas of life and death and the violences that they permit? Or can we only become increasingly aware of them and commit to reworking them and sustaining the humanities in this way?<sup>23</sup>

Returning to Sidonie Smith's *Manifesto*, where I take *sustainability* as another example of the new life drive in the discourse surrounding the humanities, I also find in its somewhat modest and deeply pragmatic tone (that is, this is not mass *bildung* or even moral life, but mere sustainability in what she calls, after D. W. Winnicott, "good enough times") the seed of possibility. First, the way that Smith understands sustainability is, surprisingly, as a form of nonreproduction. Similarly, many arguments about sustainability in an environmental idiom also focus on the nonreproduction of our practices and institutions. This logic, whereby the future is dissociated from reproduction, evokes, even as it differs from, arguments like those Lee Edelman laid out in *No Future*. Even more recently, in an essay on queer philology, Daniel Link asks another version of these questions: "But how to teach, how to develop a non-reproductive or non-reproductivist pedagogy that recovers the power of transformation that the humanities once had, without being confined to the cabinet of useless curiosities?"<sup>24</sup>

Yet for all of our efforts at preservation, nonreproduction is also one of the significant methods of the humanities. In *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, for example, stakes out a new set of scholarly alliances and practices to reflect on his own version of non-self-reproduction and his break from postcolonial theory. He explains: "The fact of the planet . . . coming into view in the everyday lives of humans leads us to question whether the relationship of mutuality between humans and the earth/world that many twentieth-century thinkers *inherited, assumed, and celebrated* has become untenable today." He goes on to ask: "How do we move, in the face of the current ecological crisis, toward *composing* a new 'commons,' a new anthropology, as it were, in search of a *redefinition* of human relationships to the nonhuman, including the planet?"<sup>25</sup> Even more radically, and somewhat perversely, Claire Colebrook, in a bleak account of human extinction, suggests that nonreproduction means the artifacts of the humanities will remain without anyone to read them: "the earth's strata will be inscribed with scars of the human capacity to create radical and volatile climactic changes." Because there will be no one left to read, she is left to ask, "how do we account for the fossil records or archives borne by the stone?"<sup>26</sup> And, returning to the genealogy of *survival* that I mentioned earlier, Adam Stern leaves us at the end of the book

with the same question with which he began – “Who is speaking of survival?” – a question that he proposes to answer by inventing a new, imaginary figure of scholarly perseverance.<sup>27</sup> The questions in each of these texts, by Link, Chakrabarty, Colebrook, and Stern – which also belong to distinct traditions in the humanities (Latin American studies, postcolonial history, critical theory, and religious studies) – and the alternate futures and practices they anticipate suggest a path that might be neither a life drive nor an apocalyptic collapse, even as they each are fully engaged with the histories and theories of life and survival. And all of this leads me to ask whether it is the question itself, “inquiry without condition,” and the other questions to which we have looked – *Can we loosen our grip on survival? Can we let go of life? What would this look like?* – that will enable the humanities to persist, persevere, endure.

I am convinced that these are not merely rhetorical questions, nor strictly theoretical ones. They are the same questions that almost every academic humanities department in a U.S. university asks as hiring season comes around. At that moment, the question inevitably surfaces of whether to replace faculty who have retired with those in the same fields, or to create spaces for new fields and new voices, often in interdisciplinary, emergent, or historically under-recognized areas of research and teaching. Do these new voices have a place in the university if it means having to give up areas of study that it seems *always* belonged there and thus always should belong? Is nonreproduction a form of risk or a form of survival? Can it be both? These questions and strategies of differentiation give us some sense that there can be nonreproductive substitutions. So too do the emerging sites of the humanities with which I began – mobile, adjacent, temporary, instrumentalist, and activist – reveal how collaborations within and beyond the university, even as they appear to be acts of abandonment, are also instances of survival. These ongoing negotiations, which cut across the boundaries and disciplines that we know, are and will be worked out in time.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, “Stumbling, Errancy, Persistence: The Struggle for the Humanities,” The Presidential Address, MLA Convention 2021, January 8, 2021. See also Amy B. Wang, “‘Nevertheless, She Persisted’ Becomes New Battle Cry after McConnell Silences Elizabeth Warren,” *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2017.
- <sup>2</sup> See Forum on Contemporary Theory, a Member of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes, <https://fctworld.org>; The Africa Institute, <https://theafrica.institute.org>; and les Ateliers de la Pensée, <https://www.lesateliersdelapensee.org>.
- <sup>3</sup> At my own university, three examples come immediately to mind: the Kavli Center for Ethics, Science, and the Public; the establishment of the new College for Computing, Data Science, and Society, which includes society as part of its mission; and the multiyear program “The Art of Writing,” designed to integrate writing as an art of persuasion and inquiry into courses across the campus, and not only in the arts and humanities.
- <sup>4</sup> Sidonie Smith, “Manifesto for a Sustainable Humanities,” in *Manifesto for the Humanities: Transforming Doctoral Education in Good Enough Times* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 108.
- <sup>5</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 17.
- <sup>6</sup> Amanda Anderson, *Psyche and Ethos: Moral Life after Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 13.
- <sup>7</sup> The Humanities Indicators and the National Endowment for the Humanities have made a point of identifying the place of the humanities in American life, but that realm of inquiry will await another occasion.
- <sup>8</sup> Christopher Newfield, “What Are the Humanities For? Rebuilding the Public University,” in *A New Deal for the Humanities*, ed. Gordon Hutner and Feisal G. Mohamed (New Brunswick, N.J., and London: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 160.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> My emphasis. Ibid., 176.
- <sup>11</sup> On a somewhat different topic, Smith in her recovery of the humanities turns not to a set of speech acts and the monarchy but to the workers, evoking Lenin in a chapter she calls “What Is to Be Done?” See Smith, *Manifesto for the Humanities*.
- <sup>12</sup> Anderson, *Psyche and Ethos*, 104.
- <sup>13</sup> James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Humanities* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), xiii.
- <sup>14</sup> My emphasis. Ibid., 185.
- <sup>15</sup> My thinking here is indebted to a set of analyses of mothers and poetry, including those by Cathy Caruth and Barbara Johnson. See Barbara Johnson, *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); and Cathy Caruth, *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions: Locke, Wordsworth, Kant, Freud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).
- <sup>16</sup> My emphasis. Turner, *Philology*, 25.

- <sup>17</sup> See Paul de Man, “The Return to Philology,” in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Edward Said, “The Return to Philology,” in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Humanities and the Dream of America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).
- <sup>18</sup> I am here glossing over a history of literature and science that Amanda Jo Goldstein more completely tells. See Amanda Jo Goldstein, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).
- <sup>19</sup> Harpham, *The Humanities and the Dream of America*, 189.
- <sup>20</sup> See Barbara Cassin, *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, ed. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).
- <sup>21</sup> See Wang Hui, “The Humanities in China: History and Challenges,” *History of the Humanities* 5 (2) (2020): 309–331.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.
- <sup>23</sup> See Ralph Hexter, with Craig Buckwald, “Conquering the Obstacles to Kingdom and Fate: The Ethics of Reading and the University Administrator,” in *The Humanities and Public Life*, ed. Peter Brooks and Hilary Jewett (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).
- <sup>24</sup> Daniel Link, “Why Should We Be So Humanistic?” in *World Humanities Report* (forthcoming).
- <sup>25</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 19–20.
- <sup>26</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman: Essays in Extinction, Vol. 1* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Open Humanities Press, 2014), 23.
- <sup>27</sup> See Adam Stern, *Survival: A Theological-Political Genealogy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).