

“FROM OUT OF THE RUINS OF LATINAMERICANISM:”  
ON REMAINDERS, NEW BEGINNINGS, AND  
GROUNDLESSNESS IN THE  
CONTEMPORARY (LATIN AMERICAN) HUMANITIES

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**H**ow has scholarship in the field of Latin American criticism and theory developed over the past two decades, and what questions or concerns should shape its trajectory over the next 25 years? So reads the prompt from the *FORMA* editors in their invitation to contribute a position paper on the state of Latin American literary and cultural criticism and theory. When I received the invitation, the first thought that occurred to me was of Paul de Man’s essay from the early 1980s entitled “The Resistance to Theory.”<sup>1</sup> De Man’s piece was originally commissioned by a Modern Languages Association committee for inclusion in an introductory volume on contemporary trends in scholarly approaches to literatures and languages. As his essay took the path of calling into question the possibility of categorizing theoretical work in terms that would be recognizable to literary scholars and transmissible to students, however, it was rejected by those who commissioned it. De Man’s reflection on resistance refers only superficially to the ubiquitous (and nearly always uninformed) outright dismissals of theory. Those explicit manifestations of a resistance to theory are merely the displaced symptoms of a deeper unease residing within theory itself. De Man’s essay assigns itself the task of interrogating this subterranean discord within theory that paradoxically at one and the same time proves integral to theoretical inquiry and dooms theory to lose sight of its prey while becoming indistinguishable from what it would criticize. As a tendency or disposition that is proper to no particular field, what de Man calls theory turns out to encompass two antithetical impulses: a systematizing drive that strives to produce unifying knowledge that can be transmitted through publication and teaching, on the one hand; and an anarchic drive that seeks out the absence or impossibility that haunts all ground, on the other. De Man’s interrogation of this internal conflict within what we call theory can perhaps be extended, as I will try to make clear, to the question of an academic field and its constitution.

The quarrel in which de Man’s essay intervenes, which pitted anti-theory cultural conservatives and liberal humanists against the allegedly nihilistic tendencies of high theory, seems quaint in comparison to the dire existential

threats faced by the university—and by the humanities in particular—today. But it is my contention that the central concerns in “The Resistance to Theory” remain relevant today, in part because we have not yet begun to read de Man’s text. In fact, the field has emphatically moved away from deconstruction and from Paul de Man in particular, embracing approaches that seem more in line with concerns of substance—materiality, phenomenality, the body—and less preoccupied with language, thought, and abstraction. We’re now done with language, or so it would seem. But this is not to say that the problems that preoccupy de Man in “The Resistance to Theory” have been put to rest. Quite to the contrary: the fundamental questions that motivated that intervention remain for the most part as yet unheard.

The second thing that occurred to me was to return to the journal editors their own question in inverted form: On what basis, I am tempted to ask, do we presume that there is still something that could be called a field of Latin American literary and cultural studies today? To be sure, many of us continue to be employed in departments whose academic missions include teaching and research on Hispanic or Latin American literature and culture. We continue to attend conferences and publish articles and monographs in these areas. We apply for tenure and promotion, and we participate in various forms of institution building. But do the activities of teaching and research in themselves provide sufficient conditions for the constitution of an academic field? My answer is an unhesitating no: to speak of a field of study, as I understand it, is to presuppose the existence of a set of problems and fundamental questions that inform—explicitly or implicitly—the teaching and research programs of those who call the field their own.

During the last few decades of the twentieth century, the academic field of Latin American Studies (including but not limited to literary and cultural studies) was engaged with questions of identity and difference, and these issues in turn contributed to the emergence of antagonisms and alliances between competing perspectives. Debates concerning identity and difference shaped the ways in which the Boom novel and *testimonio* literature were studied while also informing the production and circulation of concepts such as *mestizaje* and hybridity, transculturation and heterogeneity, hegemony and subalternity, and so on. Angel Rama’s *Transculturación narrativa en América latina* (1982), Doris Sommer’s *Foundational Fictions* (1991), Antonio Cornejo Polar’s *Escribir en el aire* (1994), and John Beverley’s *Subalternity and Representation* (1999) were, each in their own unique way, informed by these emergent concepts, and each of those monographs argues for a specific understanding of what we might term a *Latin American difference*.<sup>2</sup> At the pinnacle of that configuration of the field around the double question of identity and difference stands Alberto Moreiras’s *The Exhaustion of Difference* (2001).<sup>3</sup> Moreiras’s intervention, unparalleled in its innovative rigor, also announces the end of that epochal

configuration of the field. The dissolution of the identity-and-difference paradigm was enacted in the professional arena with the public breakup of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group at the 2001 Latin American Studies Association Conference. Less than a week later, the expiration of the “identity and difference” debate was punctuated brutally by the September 11 terrorist attacks and initiation of the U.S.-led War on Terror.

A little more than two decades have transpired since that early-twenty-first century upheaval, and a lot has happened in and to the university model that we inherited from the previous two centuries. It comes as news to nobody that things are going badly for the humanities today, and the old refrain about *años de vacas flacas* followed by *años de vacas gordas* is no longer capable of generating optimism about the future. If we are currently on a (long) historical downswing, it is far from clear whether anything of the humanities will be left standing once the contraction and reconfiguration is over. In addition to the much-discussed fiscal and administrative challenges faced by the humanities today, there is another sense—perhaps not unrelated to the economic and political conundrums we currently face—in which the state of our field today finds itself more unstable than ever and very much in doubt as to its future.

What I have in mind here has to do with the status of knowledge production and conceptual innovation: can we continue to affirm that what we do as scholars, critics, and teachers today is defined by a set of shared and debated problems and questions, and that the totality of our academic labor is auto-regenerative in the sense of a totality that generates new ideas? My sense, admittedly based on anecdotal evidence—I am speaking of a professional intuition attuned through conversations with colleagues together with observations of conference programs, journal indices, and academic publishing lists—is that there is no such thing as a shared set of guiding questions and/or catalyzing problems today. I am not making any claim about whether or not most of us feel that our work responds to specific and exigent concerns (I hope and expect that most of us do feel that what we do responds to some kind of urgency), and in many instances those personal concerns will surely be shared by others with whom our work intersects or has shared affinities. But personal passions and circles of friends on the one hand, and academic fields on the other, are two very different things.

Erin Graff Zivin’s 2020 monograph *Anarchaeologies: Reading as Misreading* offers a timely intervention that both registers and responds to the fraught state of Latin American literary and cultural studies today.<sup>4</sup> It is a book about which I have written elsewhere and have praised as an exciting, innovative, far-ranging, and intellectually ambitious intervention that pushes Latin American Literary and Cultural Studies beyond its historically regionalist orientation.<sup>5</sup> While much of the book is concerned with contesting what Graff Zivin laments as the abandonment of the question of reading, the

introductory chapter engages in a specific and long-standing debate among Latin Americanist scholars concerning how to weigh the ethical and political stakes of the work we do. While the antagonism between politics and ethics among Latin American humanists for the most part understands itself as a struggle between universality and singularity, Graff Zivin asserts that the debate itself has failed to consider what ethics and politics might have in common. In this respect, partisans on both sides have shown themselves disinclined to interrogate the limits of their own positionality. Not unlike the identity and difference debate of the late-twentieth century, the academic debate between politics and ethics has run its course, Graff Zivin argues, and by now is only capable of reproducing more of the same knowledge from the same entrenched positions.

Latin American studies is in trouble today not due to polemics but because we no longer have a commonly held sense of what is at stake in the intellectual work we do. As a field, we have become content with merely replicating existing knowledge, applying theory to context, and defending intellectual territory. The problem I am describing is not specific to Latinamericanism. It is endemic to the humanities as a whole, and it has arisen in the context of the contemporary university, a space in which job stability for humanists has become precarious, in which support for research is practically nonexistent, and in which institutional power projects the message that intellectual inquiry only has merit insofar as it can be monetized. As a field, we respond to these pressures by fashioning ourselves as entrepreneurs of our academic selves.

*Anarchaeologies* arises, as the author puts it in her introductory remarks, “out of the ruins of Latinamericanism” (2). As Graff Zivin tells it, Latinamericanism as a field has always relied on polarizing structures of oppositionality—Europe and Latin America, center and periphery, *nuestra América* and *la América del Norte*, imperialism and the national popular, elitism and populism, theory and literature, and, of course, ethics and politics—that have informed conceptual production while also shaping association and dialogue. The logic of oppositionality compels us to choose sides, to defend one viewpoint as the true and proper one and attack others as false, alien. Something has happened, however, that renders oppositionality incapable of generating new directions in knowledge production. Or, perhaps opposition and polemic were never capable of engendering new thought. But in that case, whatever unknown source did give rise to innovation and new paths for thinking alongside those structures of oppositionality would seem to have dried up. It may be, as Brett Levinson taught us in his landmark *Market and Thought*, that positionality itself—of which all oppositionality is an offshoot—is indistinguishable from the logic of the market, in which competing differences ultimately turn out to be serving the master: the market or capital itself.<sup>6</sup>

While the figure of the ruin never acquires an explicit place in the critical

lexicon of *Anarchaeologies*, I take it that the phrase “out of the ruins of” offers something more than a mere rhetorical device to be discarded after use. Indeed, the book can be understood as a concerted effort to take seriously the ruin *qua* ruin. To take seriously the ruin would mean, for one, to interrogate the remainders or leftovers (*restos*) of an older edifice insofar as the parts now lie scattered and disarticulated from the structure from which they received their meaning or purpose. The ruin, however, is not simply an instance of negativity, a reminder of the destruction and loss of something substantive. As uncanny remainder, it is the bearer of a peculiar insistence, a resistance that only now, after the race is run, can be seen to have inhabited the structure all along: resistance to destruction but also, and perhaps foremost, resistance to the imperial domination imposed by institutionality. The ruin insists as the afterlife of meaning and belonging, as what inhabits determinate being and structure but without being subsumed by unity, sameness, or positionality. The ruin, then, would name the other of the Latinamericanist field, at once internal to it—of the archive and cultural history of the region—and irreducible to the field’s unifying impulses. To take seriously the ruin, moreover, would also mean to interrogate the ground that opens up and exposes itself in and through the ruin, a ground that was previously obscured by the standing edifice. A brief detour into an earlier work by Jacques Derrida, from the early 1980s, concerning the modern university and the question of ground, will help to clarify this point.

Derrida’s 1983 essay “The Principle of Reason,” based on a lecture delivered at Cornell University,<sup>7</sup> addresses the connection—at once historical and ontological in nature—between the modern university and philosophical discourse on the foundations of knowledge production. The modern university refers to the model of combined research and higher education that began to take shape in the early-nineteenth century, first in Europe and a bit later in the United States and Latin America, in the wake of the Enlightenment but also in response to the emergent need for new forms of specialization and scientific research driven by industrial capitalism. The modern university is organized as a conglomerate of specialized disciplines and fields of inquiry, each tasked with developing its own methodologies and knowledge base. While each field of inquiry possesses relative autonomy over its specific form of knowledge production, the idea of the university presumes the existence of a higher unity that would encompass and preside over the multiplicity of fields or fiefs.

A reciprocal logic joins the modern university and modern philosophical discourse on rationality. On one hand, the modern university is founded on the premise that rational inquiry is best pursued through the development of specialized knowledge. In this sense, the idea of reason provides the ground for the modern university: advancement of reason is the *raison d’être* and the legitimating purpose for the university and its practices. On the other hand,

the special claim that reason holds in our post-Enlightenment world would not have been possible without the institutional presence of the modern university.

While exploring the origins of the modern university model, Derrida's essay also concerns itself, albeit obliquely, with the possible end of the modern university, the exhaustion of the historical mission that it inherited from philosophy in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. At issue is not whether the university will continue to exist or not, but in what form and to what end. For Derrida, it is a matter of whether or not the unifying promise continues to preside over the teaching and research mission of the university. If the university were to abdicate its responsibility toward the unification of the specialized forms of knowledge that are generated within its environs, it would thereby become indistinguishable from the world of commerce that surrounds it, producing information and expertise at the behest of corporate interests and in a manner identical to the competition that takes place between brands in the capitalist market.

At the time Derrida gave his talk, the prospect of such an end would likely have seemed to most a pessimistic outlook: this was the heyday of high theory in the U.S. academy, at a time when literature and language departments were thriving. By now, however, we have arrived at a point where the end of the modern university is at the very least fully conceivable. The "death of literature" and the decline of Latin Americanism alluded to by Graff Zivin are but the regional symptoms of a more profound and far-reaching seismic upheaval that is now affecting public universities and the humanities to a disproportionate degree. The dynamics through which this overturning makes itself known are all too familiar: shrill ideological attacks from the far Right against the institutions of tenure and academic freedom; administratively imposed austerity measures that have little or no connection to the actual fiscal health of the university, reflecting instead a profound shift in the regard that society as a whole has for intellectual inquiry and knowledge production. There is no question, however, that Derrida's talk anticipates the upheavals that have unsettled the early twenty-first century university. More importantly, in my view, "The Principle of Reason" provides an account that obligates us to reexamine the assumption that the exhaustion or end of the modern university is something that happened all of a sudden in recent decades and in association with neoliberalism. Derrida helps us to see how the possibility of the modern university's exhaustion was already inscribed in its very blueprint.

The seeds of this fate can be found in the historical process of translation and reinterpretation that leads from the Greek *logos* to the Latin *ratio* to modern terms such as *raison*, *razón*, *reason*, *Grund*, and *Vernunft*. In his *Parmenides* seminar,<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger reflects on the consequences that incur with the translation of the Greek *aletheia* into the Latin *veritas*; the Greek experience of truth as "disclosure" or "unconcealment" gives way to the Roman equation of

truth with rectitude and correction. I propose that a similar process obtains with the translation of *logos* into *ratio* and then reason, Grund, Vernunft. All of this, of course, is highly relevant for *Anarchaeologies*. While the Latin *ratio* does translate the connection between *logos* and reckoning or account, it obscures the association with speech—and with that association, the fact that, for Greek thought, sight and vision were not capable of accounting for knowledge by themselves, and that hearing too might have a role to play in learning and discovery. The Latin translation of *logos* as *ratio*, meanwhile, strengthens the association of inquiry and knowledge with quantification and calculation. From there, only a short step is required to cement the modern understanding of reason as linked inextricably to technics. Once inquiry and knowledge production can no longer be distinguished from technicity, Aristotle's account of knowledge as end in itself is no longer sustainable; from that point on, inquiry and knowledge production will be obliged to justify themselves in terms that are not their own: utility, efficiency, outcomes, customer satisfaction, etc.

This is not to say that an obscure deterministic force doomed the historical project of the modern university in advance, or that the true explanation for the ailments of the present lies buried in the classical archive awaiting discovery. The exhaustion of the modern university is the result of an ongoing historical process that has been shaped and impelled by contingencies as much as by logical necessity. My point is that this exhaustion cannot be explained simply as an accident. If the modern university project has run aground, part of the task that awaits us today as those who inhabit its ruins is to think the heretofore unthought connection between that historical project's possibility and its collapse.

The philosophical doctrine that provides the framework for modern discourse on rationality is Leibniz's Principle of Reason. Over the course of his philosophical career, Leibniz gave several different formulations to the idea of reason as first principle for knowledge of all that is. While the most commonly cited version asserts that "nothing is without reason, no effect is without cause," the formulation that most interests Derrida—and, before him, Heidegger in his 1955-56 lecture course on Leibniz—is found in the *Specimen inventorum*, where Leibniz asserts that "there are two first principles in all reasoning, the principle of non-contradiction . . . and the principle of rendering reason" [*Omnis veritatis reddi ratio potest*].<sup>9</sup> While the first of these two principles is logical in nature, the second is grounded neither in logic nor theory, nor for that matter does it draw its legitimacy from ethics or practice.

In "The Principle of Reason," Derrida spends considerable time discussing what might be meant by Leibniz's mysterious phrase, *reddere rationem*, "rendering reason."<sup>10</sup> It is a strange idiom that once existed in English but long ago fell out of usage. In the two seventeenth-century English-language sources discussed by Derrida—a church doctrine issued by John Pearson, the bishop

of Chester, and an essay by John Locke entitled “An Essay concerning Human Understanding”—to render reason meant both to give an account of oneself before an authority (it thus implies both explaining the motives behind one’s actions and recognizing an authority that stands poised to pass judgment over one’s deeds) and to give back to the thing of which one speaks—the object before which the speaker projects himself as speaking subject—its reason: its truth or its essence. Between these two meanings and the configurations they set up (i.e., principial authority and the establishment of the subject-object relation as sole legitimate basis for all knowledge of the real), there is in the Leibnizian formulation a demand and a responsibility: one *must* provide reasons for one’s actions; one *must* seek to give back to the things of this world their real essences instead of contenting ourselves with whatever ideas we may already hold about them in our heads.

The question of this reason cannot be separated from a question about the modal verb “must” and the phrase “must be rendered.” The “must” seems to cover the essence of our relationship to principle, it seems to mark out for us requirement, debt, duty, request, command, obligation, law, the imperative. Whenever reason can be rendered (*reddi potest*), it must.<sup>11</sup>

In his lecture course on Leibniz, Heidegger characterizes the imperative sense of *rederre rationem* as *Anspruch*: a demand or a claim that is spoken [*Anspruch*: from *An-* (towards) and *Sprechen* (to speak)].<sup>12</sup> The must, as Heidegger emphasizes, is something to be heard, not seen. The command to thought, that it deliver its reasons, would thus impose on us, among other things, the formal and phenomenological requirement that we prepare ourselves to listen. As I indicated earlier, if the Leibnizian *rederre rationem* is linked in a fundamental way to the modern university as a primary site of knowledge production, one important implication is that the age-old equation of knowing with the visible (seeing, being seen) is less certain and less monolithic than is sometimes supposed.

The origin and authority of Leibniz’s principle of reason cannot be ascertained as reasonable, nor for that matter can it be deemed unreasonable (which would still entail a function of reason). Reason cannot ground itself, cannot provide its own reasons or explain its own necessity. If it could render reason for itself, then this reason rendered would in turn need to account for the reasonableness of itself, and so on. The *must* that grounds rational inquiry, and from which inquiry derives its exigency, precedes the philosophical distinction between theory and practice. What, then, would ground the need for reason, assuming that reason itself can be said to have a ground or that its ground can be ontologized as a *what*?



The principle of reason installs its empire only to the extent that the abyssal question of the being that is hiding within it remains hidden, and with it the question of the grounding of the ground itself, of grounding as *grunden* (to ground, to give or take ground: *Boden-nehmen*), as *begründen* (to motivate, justify, authorize) or especially as *stiften* (to erect or institute . . .).<sup>13</sup>

When we turn to interrogate the ground beneath the Principle of Reason, we no longer remain fully faithful to that principle's command. But neither do we simply stray from that law; there is nothing irrational or anti-rational in such questioning. The peculiar force of this question about the grounding of reason, moreover, arises precisely from the inherent tension between the inquiry, which repeats the form of questioning proper to *rederre rationem*, and reason's manifest inability to provide a reasonable account of its own origin and necessity. This questioning of the ground of the principle of reason—of its origin and its law or necessity—brings to light an obscure double movement whereby the principle of reason establishes its law through a certain seclusion or withdrawal. The withdrawal of being in the very disclosure or flowering of what is?

As Heidegger notes, the principle of reason emerges and becomes dominant within a determinate epochal history. Leibniz's account does purport to describe how Western philosophy has always treated the relation between the real and the rational, and thus it seems to deliver a transhistorical verdict on the relation between reason and being. In the *Physics*, Aristotle asserts that all humans possess the innate desire to know and that knowing is an end in itself—as evidenced by the fact that even sensations that have no explicit purpose prove pleasurable. But if the Principle of Reason lays claim to a truth that has been accepted since the dawn of Western philosophy, there remains the stubborn fact that it is only in Leibniz's time—at the end of the seventeenth century, beginning of the eighteenth, which is to say, the dawn of modern techno-scientific thinking—that the principle first announces itself as thought-worthy. For Heidegger, it is only once Western thought has been drawn into the framework of the representing subject and represented object, the framework of *Gestell*, that this principle's command can be heard as such.

What if the epoch in which the principle of reason together with its necessity first made itself heard, has by now reached a point of closure? Closure does not mean that the dominant principles of Western modernity have been replaced by something else. Closure names a line beyond which first principles are no longer capable of generating new questions and new paths for thinking, and in which time no longer adheres to the progressive chronology of modernity. The demise of the modern university might be a major symptom of this closure.

Kant averred that the University should be governed by an “idea of reason,” the idea of the whole field of what is presently teachable. As it happens, no experience in the present allows for an adequate grasp of that present, presentable totality of doctrine, of teachable theory. But the crushing sense of that inadequacy is the exalting desperate sense of the sublime, suspended between life and death.<sup>14</sup>

The Kantian university understood itself to be regulated by the idea of reason, or by the presupposition that the wide array of specialized knowledge produced within its walls can be unified under a single idea. We could call it a regulative idea, since the self-presentation of this idea by and to the university turns out to invoke an impossibility: there is no vantage point from within the totality that could afford a perspective on the totality as such. Totality, in other words, is only ever what Borges would term a conjecture—but a necessary one without which the research and teaching missions of the university could not be carried out. The failure, the inaccessibility of this idea of reason to itself, is itself generative with respect to how the institution operates and understands itself; it does not cancel or diminish the feeling that the totality of knowledge stands unified by reason—if only we could find that elusive site from which the unity that we feel must exist were finally perceivable. Derrida, lecturing at Cornell University in 1982, was still capable of associating that constitutive impossibility with an experience of the sublime. Let us not forget that the sublime, as Kant conceives it in the third *Critique*, begins with the disagreeable experience of the imagination’s failure but culminates with the triumphant self-assertion of reason.

We today are no longer there. The demise of the humanities and of the modern university, as we experience it today, is neither sublime nor generative—at least not of the kind of direction and purpose associated with a field of inquiry. Work continues to be produced, and some of it at a very high level; but we as Latin Americanists and humanists no longer have a shared sense of what is at stake in the teaching and research that we do, no longer have a set of shared problems or questions that inspire and trouble our teaching and research. And we have no shared conviction or confidence that the work we do is contributing to the advancement of a higher purpose, albeit one that can only be intuited through the limitations of perception and imagination. The only unity that could be conceived as presiding over the contemporary university is that of an administrative reason that cynically aligns itself with the monetizing logic of today’s global capitalist system while capitulating, to a greater or lesser degree, to the reactionary form of cultural warfare being waged by the far Right.

The dominant tone of *Anarchaeologies*, it must be said, is not nearly as

gloomy as the picture I am painting here. Indeed, I would describe Graff Zivin's book as optimistic in the sense that it envisions the demise of academic Latinamericanism first and foremost as an epistemological opportunity, a potential opening onto something new. If *Anarchaeologies* is not simply writing off Latinamericanism as a relic destined for the dustbin or the museum, this is because the death of Latinamericanism is an occurrence that has not stopped taking place. To move on from this death would require, first and foremost, a concerted reckoning with what the institution as such—not only Latinamericanism in particular but the logic and the language of institutionality in general—tends to suppress or render illegible. Graff Zivin's book does not call for the founding of a new field but rather calls into question the possibility of reconstituting a field in the wake of Latinamericanism. To call into question is not simply to renounce the possibility of something. It is not a euphemism for refutation or negation. This questioning entails an effort to think with the experiences of loss, destruction, precariousness, and destitution that define our contemporary scene. By the same token, it also enjoins us to reflect on what is at stake in this thing we call a field. What is to be gained with the existence of a field or with the affirmation that *there is* a field? And what price is demanded of us when we adhere to such demands which, regardless of how radical or revolutionary they believe themselves to be, can never fully separate themselves from institutional mechanisms of control? To think with ruins is also, unavoidably, to bring into view the philosophical question of ground, of a substrate that would make possible rational or critical inquiry together with its aims: understanding, knowledge production, etc. The ruin is the site where ground or *lack of ground* lies most exposed, all edifices having been abandoned and left to collapse in upon themselves. It is thus also a site for questioning what is at stake in the postulation of ground, for asking what is understood and, perhaps also, what is covered up by the positing of ground, whether in Leibniz's grounding of philosophy in the principle of *rederre rationem*, or in Leftist militancy's grounding of violent revolutionary struggle in the sacrificial and productivist rationale of "*el hombre nuevo*."

*Anarchaeologies* is divided into five parts. The first part proposes a break away from traditional humanistic methodologies of interpretation, all of them based on the premise that reading aims to recover a hidden meaning or truth, not unlike the way in which an archaeologist unearths long-buried artefacts and structures in order then to formulate hypotheses about the lifestyles of inhabitants. The equation of reading with disinterment of a preexisting but buried truth, Graff Zivin maintains, leads to an intellectually conservative and impoverished understanding of truth as self-identical origin. The reduction of interpretation to a matter of faithfulness and constancy to the origin comes with a price: it rigidly excludes any possibility of dynamism, plurality, or uncertainty, and it likewise enforces an understanding of time as a linear, sequential

chain of self-contained moments (first the origin, then occlusion, then recovery, etc.). Thus understood, reading is nothing other than orthodoxy, a mode of correction (*orthos* or *orthotes*) that keeps thought and opinion (*doxa*) in line with the way things are. Under such an “archaeological” hermeneutic regime, there can be no thought of asking how *the way things are* might have come to be seen as truthful, of how this or that truth has managed to set itself in place. Such orthodoxy, which for Heidegger goes by the name of ontotheology, is not only ahistorical, it is profoundly antihistorical. *Anarchaeologies*, in its return to the archive and its interrogation of the ground (*arkhē*) of Latinamericanism, invites renewed attentiveness to the historicity of knowledge production as well as to the limits that attend reading and all other forms of transmission. In this respect, the monograph title gestures in more than one direction. “Archaeology” alludes to the preconception of truth as origin awaiting recovery, and the *arkhē* in “archaeology” points to the ground: *arkhē* as first principle of a signifying system, and also as the authority or command that governs that system. The prefix *an-*, meanwhile, suggests the exhaustion of archaeologically-based critical practices and also, perhaps, a withdrawal of ground there where hermeneutics and archaeology seek truth as origin. A withdrawal of ground: not simply an absence of ground but an impossible thought of ground as both underlying bedrock and as the retreat of that which gives rise to appearance.

In sympathy with what I have already said about the ruin and as alternative to the presence-oriented vocabulary of the tradition, Graff Zivin’s book deploys a series of “fallen” terms, words long ago written off as devoid of truth and as ontologically empty registers. Some of these terms, which Graff Zivin describes as “conceptual cousins,” are drawn from a particular thinker while others resonate more generally as indicators of non-truth: *irresponsibility*; *betrayal*; *misunderstanding* (Rancière); *Marrano thinking* (Derrida); *error*, *blindness*, and *misreading* (de Man). *Anarchaeologies* proposes to take seriously these *disjecta membra* of the tradition, to listen to what they might have to say to us and to consider how their sayings might give rise to new practices of reading and alternative ways of thinking, remembering, and associating with others.

Beginning with the Latinization of the Greek *aletheia* as *veritas*, the Western tradition has conceived truth as rectitude and uprightness in contrast to the false, construed in turn as lying fallen (*falsus*: deceiving or self-deceiving; from *fallō*, to deceive, trick or mistake something for something else, and earlier from a Proto-Indo-European word for “to stumble”).<sup>15</sup> Truth understood as uprightness presents itself as self-standing and unrelated to any of its surroundings, while rectitude asserts itself as purified of all decline, decay or deception. But uprightness and rectitude are concepts or positionalities that establish themselves over against that which is fallen or lacking, and thus the figuration of fallenness—the *fallen* but also the *trope* that enacts falling or

fallenness in exemplary fashion for us to see—is a constituent but suppressed moment in the determination of truth.

The concept [of] “error”—and in a sense *every* concept—can be thought only at the point of mutual exposure, or encounter, between discourses, disciplines, fields. An encounter between literature and philosophy (to give one example) would expose the constitutive flaw or lack in each (one could say, the “error” of each).<sup>16</sup>

Whereas the field of Latinamericanism has always thrived on and reproduced itself through the either/or logic of oppositionality between ostensibly fixed positions, *Anarchaeologies* proposes that it is the interval between concepts that in fact offers the real impetus for thinking. What matters for thinking, and what gives cause for thought, is not the unity of the concept but a difference that inhabits conceptuality without being captured by and subsumed under any higher unifying power. The concept lies exposed to its constitutive outside or other, and this exposure logically precedes any presumptive unity. A concept is not just a composite of other concepts (e.g., “bachelor” is made up of the concepts of “man” and “unmarried”), it is also the product of its contiguity with, and difference from, other concepts: “betrothed,” “spouse,” “widower,” “youth,” and so on. This is precisely the differential logic identified by Saussure to describe the dynamic of the linguistic sign. But Graff Zivin’s proposal goes further than the linguistic model I am proposing, it seems to me, in that it invokes not just the concept but discourse and field. The claim being made in *Anarchaeologies* is that a particular perspective or methodology (e.g., postcolonial studies, feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, etc.) emerges and flourishes only through its exposure to and contact with other disciplines, other approaches or perspectives. The key point here is that a field or perspective only comes into its own when it engages something—an object or another voice—with which it cannot fully come to terms. Between one discipline and another, and also between methodology and object, there is “disagreement” or “misunderstanding” or “differend” or “différance”—there is no proper term for this intervallic contiguity that both impels thinking forward and resists conceptual grasp. It is only through such exposure that a given perspective or approach can begin to grapple with the cognitive excesses and leftovers that cannot be synthesized by its discursive system. For example, in its exposure to Marxism, psychoanalysis must confront the presence of a shared term and concern, alienation [*Entfremdung*, *aliénation*], that arises in philosophy (Hegel), Marxism, and also psychoanalysis (Lacan); these iterations of *Entfremdung* occur in dialogue with one another—Marx and Lacan are both thinking of Hegel when they introduce this term into their own conceptual vocabulary—but the term not only means something different in each of these intellectual tradi-

tions, it presents an irreducible difference between them: whereas for Marxism, alienation is precisely what must be overcome in order for there to be true (“human”) emancipation, for psychoanalysis there is no such thing as a human subject prior to alienation; the point for Lacan is not to overcome alienation but to come to terms with its unassimilable scars, strictures, and gaps.

Exposure, as my methodological example seeks to illustrate, marks the limit at which a specific intellectual tradition both takes shape and encounters the resistance without which it would rapidly become inert. An approach that would close itself off from all others and all difference would necessarily fail to grow, its ideas turning stale in the absence of any contact with the outside. The vitality of intellectual inquiry and theory depends on resistance, on the encounter with something that does not speak its language or which, in speaking the “same” language, understands something different. The famous polemic between Derrida and Lacan concerning the status of the signifier, or the debate between Derrida and de Man over the status of the ribbon in Rousseau: these are not accidents that happen to theory at some point along the way; they are instances of an opening-to and a being-exposed-by that is endemic to, and indeed necessary for, intellectual inquiry of any kind or persuasion.

*Anarchaeologies* betrays this sense of betrayal, or rather, it *embraces* betrayal, impropriety, and transgressions . . . . This book advances a reading practice . . . that would guard the errors, blind spots, and misunderstandings that I argue, following the work of Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and others, comprise the most potent aspects of literary texts.<sup>17</sup>

The gesture of guarding “fallen” terms comes up several times in *Anarchaeologies*. The intent is to highlight the importance of these non-concepts for thinking and to preserve these moments from inevitable suppression. The motif, moreover, prompts Graff Zivin to entertain the possibility of developing “a theory of misunderstanding as the constitutive quality of literature itself,<sup>18</sup>” and it similarly generates reservations when it comes to Paul de Man’s efforts to locate instances of blindness and error in the writings of others while saying nothing about the possibility of reading his own work in the way that he reads others.<sup>19</sup>

Such gestures, I want to propose by way of conclusion, point to a fold in the fabric of *Anarchaeologies*, a moment of overlap in which purposes turn out to be at odds with one another. A “theory of misunderstanding” would, in the end, be precisely a theory of what theory itself is constitutively unable to grasp and master without turning it into something it is not. As de Man’s “Resistance to Theory” essay teaches us, resistance both enables theory to flourish—theory in its difference from philosophy and as mode of inquiry that listens to those

moments where the systematizing drive of philosophy fails or encounters an excess with which it is not prepared to deal—and marks the point where theorization falls short or proves incapable of doing justice to its object of inquiry. There can be no theory without this resistance between thought and its object, no theory that does not take seriously such missed encounters.

By the same token, there can be no theory *with* resistance, that is to say, no resistance per se once theory gets hold of it: what once showed itself as resistance becomes, through theorization, yet another point in a series of equivalencies, yet another concept in its purported unity. To guard the errors, blind spots, and misunderstandings that haunt the Latinamericanist archive, to protect them and to watch over them: would this not amount to turning those moments of insistence of the real into stable entities, positions, identities, concepts? By the same token, to call de Man to task for his failure to allow for the errors, blind spots, and misreadings that might plague his own readings: is this not in fact to ask of a thinker that they account for the unaccountable? And, once accounted for, would not those errors and blind spots cease to be limits or excesses, having been brought fully back within the visual field and accounting regime of theory? At such moments, *Anarchaeologies* appears to have difficulty fully separating itself from the archaeology out of the ruins of which it springs. It seems to be unable to avoid reproducing archaeological gestures in the process of framing its own critical objects for our consideration. What seems less certain, however, is whether what I am calling a fold in Graff Zivin's anarchaeological turn should be understood as a logical inconsistency that could be ironed out or, on the contrary, whether it is inherent to the very nature of the critical and theoretical enterprise.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Paul De Man, "The Resistance to Theory," *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> See Angel Rama, *Transculturación narrativa* (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1982); Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991); Antonio Cornejo Polar, *Escribir en el aire: Ensayo sobre la heterogeneidad sociocultural en las literaturas andinas* (Lima: Editorial Horizonte, 1994); John Beverley, *Subalternity and Representation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Alberto Moreiras, *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Erin Graff Zivin, *Anarchaeologies: Reading as Misreading* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> See Patrick Dove, Review of Erin Graff Zivin's *Anarchaeologies: Reading as Misreading*, *A Contracorriente* 19:1 (2021): pp. 308-317, <https://acontracorriente.chass.ncsu.edu/index.php/acontracorriente/article/view/2181>.

<sup>6</sup> Brett Levinson, *Market and Thought: Meditations on the Political and Biopolitical*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils," *diacritics* 13:3 (Fall 1983): pp. 2-20.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, Translated by André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> Cited as quoted in Derrida, "The Principle of Reason," 7.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida, "The Principle of Reason," 2-20.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, "The Principle of Reason," 8.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, Translated by Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, "The Principle of Reason," 10.

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, "The Principle of Reason," 6.

<sup>15</sup> Heidegger, *Parmenides*, pp. 17-57.



<sup>16</sup> Graff Zivin, *Anarchaeologies*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Graff Zivin, *Anarchaeologies*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Graff Zivin, *Anarchaeologies*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> De Man, "The Resistance to Theory," 130-31, 173.