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Queering ‘the idea of the university’: Two queer conceptualizations of discursive deployment in higher education literature

Emily F. Henderson, *University of Warwick, UK*

James Burford, *La Trobe University, Australia*

Abstract

‘The idea of the university’ is an expression which is frequently employed in discussions of what the university is, was, or could and should be. This article presents an exploration of the expression ‘the idea of the university’ reconceptualized as a queer signifier. Building on existing literature that works against the assumption that queer studies would always concentrate on people who identify as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, queer), the article takes as its object of study the expression ‘the idea of the university’. Firstly, ‘the idea of the university’ is discussed in relation to the queering potential of figurative language, in particular metaphors. In the formulation ‘the idea of the university’, ‘university’ is placed in subjugation to ‘idea’, which opens up what could be termed queer slippage in the signification process. Secondly, the article uses the political resignification of ‘queer’ as a springboard to address the citation practices that lead to the resignification of the expression ‘the idea of the university’. Thus, the article presents these two interlinked queer theorizations of the discursive use of ‘the idea of the university’ in higher education literature.

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Queering ‘the idea of the university’: two queer conceptualizations of discursive deployment in higher education literature

Emily F. Henderson
University of Warwick, UK

James Burford
La Trobe University, Australia

‘The idea of the university’ is an expression which is frequently employed in discussions of what the university is, was, or could and should be. This article presents an exploration of the expression ‘the idea of the university’ reconceptualized as a queer signifier. Building on existing literature that works against the assumption that queer studies would always concentrate on people who identify as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer), the article takes as its object of study the expression ‘the idea of the university’. Firstly, ‘the idea of the university’ is discussed in relation to the queering potential of figurative language, in particular metaphors. In the formulation ‘the idea of the university’, ‘university’ is placed in subjugation to ‘idea’, which opens up what could be termed queer slippage in the signification process. Secondly, the article uses the political resignification of ‘queer’ as a springboard to address the citation practices that lead to the resignification of the expression ‘the idea of the university’. Thus, the article presents these two interlinked queer theorizations of the discursive use of ‘the idea of the university’ in higher education literature.*

Keywords: Queer theory | queering higher education | idea of the university | metaphors

As others have noted, the expression ‘the idea of the university’ has been used prolifically in the literature on higher education (HE) institutions (Barnett, 2011; Scott, 1993). It is an expression that is often associated with attempts to discuss the purpose, possibilities, and problematics of universities as unique social institutions. Recently, ‘the idea of the university’ has been the focus of various anthologies (e.g. Peters & Barnett, 2018), reading groups (e.g. Peseta, Fyffe & Salisbury, 2019) and conferences (e.g. *The Idea of University and the Future of Knowledge Conference*, 19-20 September 2013, Utrecht), among other indicators of its academic circulation. It is also present in wider public discussions, often scattered through government reports (French, 2019) or featured as the headline in public opinion pieces (Daks, 2019). Given the frequency with which the expression is used, it should come as no surprise that ‘the idea of the university’ has accrued a hefty endowment of signification. Despite its widespread use in public fora and the field of HE, specific engagement with the conceptualization of the expression itself is rare. In particular, many authors use the expression for persuasive purposes without necessarily interrogating the function of the ‘idea’. This article deliberately focuses on investigating this absence. We attend to it by offering two queer deconstructions of the discursive deployment of ‘the idea of the university’ in the HE literature.

We begin the article by situating the impetus for our investigations within our own encounters with the expression ‘the idea of the university’ as early career HE researchers. Next, we unpack the key theoretical resource that we animate in this article: queer theory. We

position our work as contributing to a series of debates in HE research that have sought to understand what else queer concepts might *do*, in addition to focusing on gender and sexuality as objects of inquiry. The remainder of the article demonstrates how queer concepts might be otherwise animated in HE research, particularly with regard to the ‘idea of the university’ expression. The first queer resource that we introduce is Britzman’s (1995) work on signification. We use this conceptual framework in order to identify queer slippage in the signification process when the ‘university’ is placed in subjugation to ‘idea’ in the formulation ‘the idea of the university.’ Secondly, we introduce Butler’s (1993) work on resignification. We use Butler’s work to track the way that the ‘idea’ is cited and resignified as a key tool in the construction of ‘progress’ and ‘loss’ narratives of university education. As such, the article makes two primary contributions to knowledge in the field of HE. First, the article is framed as a contribution to the existing literature on ‘the idea of the university,’ with a particular focus on examining the discursive deployment of the expression. Second, the article is intended as a testing ground for queer theorizing outside of concerns relating to gender and sexuality in HE research (Allen, 2015). By describing and carefully applying two queer conceptualizations to the discursive construction ‘the idea of the university,’ our aim is to provide – and work through – concrete examples of queer analysis in HE studies.

A queer beginning: The idea of the university

The first time that Emily was aware of hearing the expression ‘the idea of the university’ was during the question and answer session that followed a keynote speech at a conference. The keynote speaker was Peter Scott (2013), and he was speaking on the subject of “mass to market higher education: Renegotiating notions of professionalism” (2013). Emily distinctly remembers this occasion, and we have chosen to mention it because of its relation to the resonance of the expression, which is central to the argument of this article. Even as a relative newcomer to HE studies, with no existing knowledge of the origins of ‘the idea of the university’ at the time, Emily sensed the significance of the expression. Just as when someone manages to convey that they are quoting from Shakespeare without necessarily mentioning his name, ‘the idea of the university’ struck Emily as a somewhat hallowed expression, one that needed to be noted and embedded in her own HE discursive repertoire. Since that time, Emily began to register other instances of the expression’s usage, including several mutations, each one imbued with intertextual significance. Finally, intrigued by this troublesome expression, Emily decided to actively seek out different manifestations of ‘the idea of the university’ in its “longstanding” and “grow[ing]” use in the HE literature (Barnett, 2012, p. 2), in order to explore the discursive practice of citing the expression. The resultant corpus, identified through database and library searches (13 peer reviewed journal articles from education journals, chapters from 19 books), tended to be united in its endeavor to speak to overarching discourses around HE *in general*, of which ‘the idea’ seemed to be a signal or integral part. Emily then invited James, a fellow HE researcher to join her in this exploration. Like Emily, James had become curious about what the expression ‘the idea of the university’ *did* in HE scholarship. James had recently joined a reading group that explicitly focused on exploring ideas of the university (Peseta, Fyffe & Salisbury, 2019) and had begun writing autoethnographically about his own early encounters with ideas of the university via family stories and cultural texts (Burford & Mitchell, 2019).

This article aims to take stock of the use of the expression ‘the idea of the university’ in HE discourse. By taking such a focus, our article deliberately occupies a tangential place in relation to previous work on ‘the idea of the university’. In analyzing others’ use of the expression, this article is not seeking to contribute to the conversations about what the elusive ‘idea’ could or should be but is rather contributing to the signification of the expression.

Using deconstructive maneuvers to 'desediment' (rather than 'demolish') (Derrida, 1967/1976, p. 10) 'the idea of the university,' we work through the layering that inheres to the expression. The two principal maneuvers we undertake are, firstly, an exploration of the expression's status as a potentially queer signifier that disrupts naturalized processes of signification (Britzman, 1995), and secondly, an analysis of the processes of citation and resignification that accompany the use of the expression (Butler, 1993). Both of the maneuvers are 'queer' in a different way, and so two different possibilities for 'the idea of the university' to be 'queered' are presented and worked through.

What can queer concepts do in higher education research?

Before we explain the two conceptualizations of discursive deployment that are central to this article, it is valuable to unpack where our project fits within a wider conversation about queer theorizing. There have been ongoing discussions within the larger field of queer studies about the habits of thought that structure queer inquiry, and what the 'now' or 'next' of queer might be. For example, researchers have offered critiques from queer of color (Ferguson, 2004) and queer studies (Johnson, 2000) perspectives which trouble the normative whiteness and class orientation of queer theorizing, and have looked at queer studies "after sex" (e.g. Halley & Parker, 2011) or even after normativity (Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). More specifically, there have been several attempts to understand the mobility of queer concepts within HE scholarship (Allen, 2015; Burford, 2015; Burford & Allen, 2019; Renn, 2010). Across these studies it has become clear that queer concepts are used in multiple and sometimes disparate ways. For example, Burford and Allen (2019) track uses of queer that range from: a composite term to describe minoritized sexual subjects (i.e. the queer community), a personal identity that is asserted "outside heterosexual and binary gender identities" (Renn, 2010, p. 123), a descriptor of non-normative gender or sexual practices, or a political stance that anyone (irrespective of sexual or gender identity) could occupy in order to interrogate social norms. The reason for these multiple (and overlapping) forms of use stems from queer theory's "persistent refusal to consolidate its object of study" (Hall & Jagose, 2013, p. xiv). Queer's resistance to definition is purposeful and is understood as "part of queer's semantic clout, part of its political efficacy" (Jagose, 1996, p. 1).

In this study, we position our own use of queer concepts alongside scholars who might describe their work as 'post queer' (Boyle, 2012) or 'after queer' (Talbert & Rasmussen, 2010). This is a body of scholarship that does not wish to be defined by its engagement with sex and sexuality, and increasingly uses queer thought to theorize settings that do not necessarily include people who identify as queer (Ahmed, 2006; Burford, 2015; Burford & Allen, 2019; Rasmussen & Allen, 2014; Talbert & Rasmussen, 2010). This 'post queer' movement in some ways responds to frustrations with "a closed circle created by what have come to be often negatively cast as narrow identitarian concerns" (Boyle, 2012, p. 272), as well as a desire to experiment with the capacities of queer concepts (Rasmussen & Allen, 2014). Our work responds to Rasmussen and Allen's (2014) call to test the boundaries of the possible with regard to queer concepts in educational research. The core argument made by Rasmussen and Allen (2014) is that queer concepts are often kept "within the cul de sac of studies of sexuality and gender" (p. 434) in educational research. According to Rasmussen and Allen (2014), this tethering of researchers working under the sign of queer to particular kinds of sexual subjects and objects is a policing of the boundaries as to where 'queer' might travel. Rather than fixing queer inquiries in place, Rasmussen and Allen (2014) call for an openness to queer as "productive for thinking and doing educational projects that reach beyond the subjects and objects of sex, gender, and sexuality" (Rasmussen & Allen, 2014, p. 442). For example, the authors suggest that in addition to gender and sexuality related

research, queer concepts might be usefully deployed to consider questions of race, poverty and precarity, or queer theoretical resources offered by scholars such as Berlant (2011) or Halberstam (2011) might be taken up to consider wider educational questions. While terms like 'post queer' (Boyle, 2012) or 'after queer' (Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010) or Rasmussen and Allen's (2014) call for exploration could be viewed as exceeding queer theory, we see them otherwise. We understand these interventions as integral movements that respond to queer's positioning vis-à-vis norms of all kinds. Arguably, such interventions contribute to keeping queer theory queer.

Given our position on these debates, it should be clear that we do not assume that queer studies of HE should be restricted to the inhabitants of HE institutions who identify as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, queer). Instead, the 'object of study' that we have selected for this article is the nebulous and abstract concept of 'the idea of the university.' Our method of offering a reworking of poststructuralist thought (Hall & Jagose, 2013; Kollias, 2012) means that our approach is situated both *at* and *beyond* the recognizable boundaries of queer theory within HE scholarship. As such, the approach for reading 'the idea of the university' will take place beneath the conceptual umbrella of 'queer,' but will simultaneously challenge the conception of what 'counts' as a queer reading.

Britzman's (1995) queer conceptual work: 'Something queer happens'

The reason that the introduction to this article included Emily's and James' discoveries of the expression 'the idea of the university' was to avoid presenting questions around the origins of the expression in Newman's published lectures *The Idea of a University* (1852/1996) as the backdrop to the argument. While the following section of the article engages in the issue of origins as integral to queer work, this section deliberately eschews the question of origins. Instead, the analytic focus here is on the expression itself as a unit of discourse, a linguistic sign, based on the conceptualization offered in Britzman's (1995) article 'Is there a queer pedagogy?' This article is an important text in the history of queer theorizing and is concerned with offering what Britzman calls 'the beginnings of a queer pedagogy' (p. 165). Britzman outlines three key practices that might comprise such a pedagogy: (1) *the study of limits*, or questioning what makes something thinkable; (2) *the study of ignorance*, or questioning whether 'good' knowledge leads to 'good' conduct and exploring what one "cannot bear to know" (p. 154); (3) *the study of reading practices* offering various possibilities to stop reading 'straight'. In line with the theoretical position outlined in the introduction, Britzman stresses that queer theory is not "a stable and singular body of knowledge that supposes a...minor identity", (p. 155) and rather places emphasis on queer as method.

While there are many parts of Britzman's (1995) thinking that could be explored, the most pertinent sections of Britzman's text for the purpose of our article is the introduction, which addresses the relationship between queer theory and meaning-making, or signification. For Britzman (*ibid.*), queer theory is a resource that can be used to disrupt the naturalized production of the linguistic signifier and signified: Queer theory occupies a difficult space between the signifier and the signified, where "*something queer happens* to the signified...and *something queer happens* to the signifier" (p. 153, emphasis added).

The important qualification that Britzman is making here is that you do not have to *be* or identify as queer in order for 'something queer to happen.' Queer disrupts naturalized norms, including the norms of meaning-making. In this article we argue that 'the idea of the university' is a 'queer signifier' and explore what 'happens' to signification when the expression 'the idea of the university' is used.

The expression 'the idea of the university' comes into its own when commentators of HE attempt to talk about universities *in general*, or rather 'the university' as a unified, often ideological concept, as in when the university is discussed as an elite institution, a neoliberal machine or a force for public good. Discussing universities at this level of abstraction is notoriously difficult – how to name and link all the parts within the whole? Indeed the complexity and diversity of universities means that "a university is not the kind of entity that can be cashed out fully and adequately in language" (Barnett, 2011, p. 13). A post-script to Barnett's comment could be that when we do try to express universities in language, 'something queer happens.' In order to think of a university as a totality, abstract and/or figurative (metaphorical) discourse is employed, which overtly and deliberately asks the reader or listener to draw in other signifiers to make the intended meaning.

Metaphorical language plays an important part in expressing the university. Some examples of metaphors for the university include: "Ivory Tower now overgrown with weeds" (Sarles, 2001, p. 406), "not a dinghy which can be jiggled about" (Oakeshott, 1950/2004, pp. 29-30), a "shopping mall" (Maskell & Robinson, 2001, p. 163), and a "service station" (Duke, 2004, p. 311). The creation of these metaphors to express the university is not just a question of entertaining the reader with vivid prose; Robertson (2009, p. 25) has written about the importance of recognizing 'as powerful semiotic moments' the metaphors that are used to express universities. She notes that "we take metaphors for granted", but that they are "key elements in the production of discourses" (p. 30). According to Robertson, in order to "offer alternative visions for the idea of the university", we need to "[a]nalys[e] the role of metaphors" (p. 25). 'The idea of the university' is not a metaphor, but it bears similar qualities to metaphors in terms of the 'semiotic moments' it creates when used. In fact, we could say that Emily's recognition of the expression in the keynote discussion as one to note down was evidence of a "semiotic moment" (Robertson, 2009, p. 25), where her thoughts were directed otherwise, away from the thread of the keynote – we could say that this was a moment where 'something queer happened'.

'The idea of the university' has some qualities in common with "dead metaphors," which are metaphors whose use is so habitual that their figurative reactivity is barely recognized as such (Goatly, 2011, p. 29; Henderson, 2014). 'Dead metaphors' become 'dead' through repeated use, until they take on a degree of familiarity that indicates that the metaphor passes unnoticed. It is in approaching a language as a learner that we discern the sheer number of 'dead metaphors' that are in use; often we might discover a 'dead metaphor' in an embarrassing moment of incomprehension when suddenly vocabulary from nature or sports enters a totally unrelated conversation. Hearing 'the idea of the university' at the conference resembled this moment of discovery for Emily: it was clear that the expression had a particular significance and that both the keynote speaker and the person asking the question were aware of this, but as a listener Emily could only detect the significance, without immediately understanding its purpose or history. The effect was almost onomatopoeic in that she could only hear 'something queer happening' in the utterance and exchange of the expression. Though 'dead metaphors' and 'the idea of the university' share this quality, it is also apparent that 'the idea of the university' is not 'dead.' Quite the contrary, in fact: as we shall see in the next section, it is frequently used as an ideological battlefield (note the 'dead metaphor') for debates around what the university is, and what it could and should be.

If 'the idea of the university' is not a metaphor, what makes it a figurative turn of speech? The expression 'the idea of the university' contains within itself the potential for queer signification, in that it holds a layer of remove, of refraction, in the presence of 'idea.' The question, "What is the idea of the university?" is not just asking, what *is* the university; it is constructing a lens for looking at the university in the form of an 'idea.' The use of the expression works to refract ontological claims about the university, owing to the level of

remove that the 'idea' introduces within the claim *the (idea of the) university is...*. This refraction at the level of signification poses a problem for the user of the expression 'the idea of the university,' who ends up positing the 'idea' as the grammatical subject, thus leaving the university in a strange subjugated position. The 'idea' in 'the idea of the university' operates as a linguistic barrier to directly stating what the university is; in stating *the idea of the university is...*, it is impossible to clarify the extent to which we are stating what the *idea* is, or what the *university* is, or the extent to which these intentions are intertwined or distinct. 'Something queer happens' to the signifier, where we do not know what exactly is operating as a signifier.

We could say that the presence of the 'idea' puts 'university' 'under erasure'. "Under erasure" is Spivak's (1976, p. xiv) translation of "*sous rature*," the Derridean term for deliberately crossing something out in a text but leaving it there. As such, 'university' placed 'under erasure' would look like this: ~~university~~. The function of this textual marking is to show a term that, having been deconstructed is problematic, but, since there is no other term to replace it, it must stand in its deleted-but-legible form. Under erasure means that a term "can no longer be used in an unmarked, familiar way: it has been rendered problematic through analysis of the assumptions that are associated with its use," (Henderson, 2015, p. 43).

In 'the idea of the university,' the grammatical subject of 'university' is placed in subjugation to 'idea.' This construction destabilizes the university as an entity that exists in its own right. Instead, 'university' must be thought *through* the vehicle of 'idea.' 'Idea,' seen in this way as a mediator between the thinker and the university, problematizes the construction of a unified, discrete concept of 'university', and in so doing places it under erasure. We can see the deconstructive potential of 'idea' in Duke's (2004) article, "Is there an Australian idea of a university?" when he replaces 'university' with 'Australia': "the 'Idea of Australia'" (p. 299)? The effect of placing Australia in syntactical subjugation to 'idea' is to destabilize the assumed fixity of the concept of a nation. Duke places 'Australia' under erasure by reflecting on the comparative youth of the Australia as a unified (settler) nation and the difficulty of establishing a national identity. Villa (2012) also uses the 'idea' structure to place a geographical area under erasure: In order to challenge attempts to speak across 'Latin America' as a unified (postcolonial) region, Villa places 'Latin America' in the 'idea' expression. The deconstructive maneuver that 'idea' performs on ~~university~~, or indeed other concepts, is the manifestation of 'something queer happening' in signification of the "precariousness of the signified" (Britzman, 1995, p. 153).

'Idea,' then, can be understood as doing 'something queer' to both the signified and signifier. The signifier 'university' is removed from direct subjecthood to a position of subordination within a prepositional phrase. The expression does not participate easily in descriptive syntax: as stated above, it is not clear how much the 'is' of the expression 'the idea of the university is...' relates to the 'idea', and how much to 'the university,' or how the two interlink. Take Ricken's (2007) expression, where he asks if, in addition to speaking of the "crisis of the German university", we can extend this to speaking of "a crisis of the *idea* of the university" (p. 492, emphasis added). In this case, Ricken is deliberately constructing a difference between 'idea' and 'university'; "crisis of the idea" (p. 492) signifies something along the lines of a crisis in the thinking (or lack of thinking) that is occurring about the university, whilst "crisis of the...university" (p. 492) implies a crisis in the doings of universities as institutions. Once the question of how the expression 'the idea of the university' functions in making wider arguments about universities, this moves away from viewing the expression in isolation as a queer signifier and towards the second type of queering that is proposed in this article. How can the 'queer happenings' that inhere to 'the

idea of the university' as a unit of discourse be developed when explored in the *context of the arguments made using this expression?*

Butler's (1993) conceptual work: Queer citationality

The introduction to this article referred to the 'tussle' over the meaning of the expression 'the idea of the university;' this section takes the 'tussle' as its focus. In changing focus from the expression itself to the contexts in which it is placed, the queering effects of the 'idea' do not disappear; indeed it is the scope for 'something queer to happen' between the 'idea' and the 'university' that allows the expression to be manipulated in such different ways. Furthermore, the question of mutation enters the fray, with its own potential for queer analysis. To what extent can the expression be altered and still be recognizable as a "semiotic moment" (Robertson, 2009, p. 25)? Mutations of the expression can, for example: add adjectives (eg. '*Conservative* or *progressive* idea of the university?', McLennan, 2008, emphasis added); change the noun that is subjugated to 'idea' (eg. *The idea of higher education*, Barnett, 1990); transform the expression into a question ("Is there *any* clear idea of a university?", Rochford, 2006, emphasis in original); all whilst still retaining sufficient resemblance to the expression 'the idea of a university'. All this mutation necessarily requires an original from which to mutate. The origins of the expression 'the idea of the university' are now brought into view. Although Newman's text, *Idea of a university*, is generally posited as the originating source of the expression, this article does not position Newman or his text as the true origin. Instead, the approach taken addresses the *discursive use* of the expression as the object of analysis. Part of this involves examining the relationship that others construct in their arguments between the expression and its origins. This is where queer makes its re-entry.

Butler's (1993) essay "Critically Queer" is another important queer theory text that explores the performative function of speech acts. In her essay, Butler addresses the co-optation of the insulting interpellation 'queer' as a reclaimed marker of non-normative identity and as a mechanism of intellectual critique. 'Queer,' used in this latter sense, retains the reactivity of the insult. The deliberate manipulation of the signifier 'queer,' in Butler's analysis, relates to the citationality of signification: by using a term, we repeat it, and bring with that repetition the context of its previous uses (see also Butler, 1997). 'Queer' has been resignified through its repetition in different contexts, but, importantly, it has retained elements of its other uses (as adjective and as insult), which imbue each usage with descriptive and political connotations. Moreover, 'queer' has been deliberately mutated in its use as a critical tool of analysis: into a verb ('to queer'); a different noun, ('queerness'); a present participle, ('queering', which has itself been modified to combine 'querying' and 'queer': 'queer(y)ing'). We also saw the prefixes 'post' and 'after' being affixed to queer in the literature cited in earlier sections of this article.

The deliberate resignification and mutation of 'queer' and of 'the idea of the university' are not just linguistic games that writers play in order to put their own individual stamp on the term. Resignification that deliberately strives to re-cast a concept in a different light, to open up new meaning, can be considered a political act. Just as "*metaphors are political*" in expressing HE for Robertson (2009, p. 32, emphasis in original), so are the citation and resignification of 'the idea of the university.' To return to the analogy between metaphors and 'the idea of the university,' Robertson lists the discursive properties of metaphors as follows:

...metaphors are effective and necessary in projecting views, in constructing arguments, in enabling the transformation of thinking of others, and in generating anxiety (2009, p. 30, emphasis in original).

This enumeration importantly includes the effects of using figurative language on the reader or listener. The deployment of figurative language can open up new avenues of

thought, 'transformation', and it can also produce intended or unintended 'anxiety.' Both of these effects are relevant to the use of the queer signifier *the idea of...* The slippage between signifier and signified that is created by the subjugation or erasure of the noun to 'idea' has the potential to prompt creative thinking. It also provokes the anxiety of non-fixity, the destabilization caused when we realize that we cannot always depend on language to convey all that we want to convey (as in Barnett's expression, cited earlier in the article: "a university is not the kind of entity that can be cashed out fully and adequately in language" [2011, p. 13]). This is perhaps not the anxiety that Robertson is referring to, though it is closely related. Perhaps she was intending to convey the anxiety that metaphors can cause in evoking catastrophe and crisis in imaginative terms, such as with 'sinking ship, or the "shopping mall" comparison cited above (Maskell & Robinson, 2001, p. 163). This form of anxiety in relation to the 'idea' can be discerned in Scott's (1993) portrayal of the 'idea' as at times a "dangerous", "irrelevant" "impos[ition]" on the university (p. 4). The two forms of anxiety are linked in the production of the 'semiotic moment' in which 'something queer happens:' the very transformative potential of 'idea' is also the source of anxious imaginings.

It is in the nexus of transformative thinking and anxiety that the battle over 'idea' is situated. 'Idea' comes to represent ideological struggles over what Marginson terms "the *meta-institutional* values and ethical regimes" (2007, p. 2, emphasis in original) of the university. 'Idea' is used to represent nostalgia and regret for lost origins and fear of what is happening now and what will happen in the future, but it is also used to posit the irrelevance of origins and the necessity of forward thinking. All of these uses concern the university, or what the university represents, but they are all situated within the slippage zone between 'idea' and 'university.' Though there are myriad ways in which 'the idea of the university' has been cited and resignified, two strands of deployment are selected here for further analysis. The first is the struggle over the function of the 'idea' in the expression 'the idea of the university,' and the relationship between mutations of the expression and the struggle over the origins of the 'idea.' The second explores the relationship between 'the idea of the university' and the proper nouns that are associated with it, especially the name 'Newman.'

'Ideas' and loss narratives

In her study of the construction of narrative strategies in the establishment of feminist scholarship, Hemmings (2011) analyses 'loss narratives' and 'progress narratives' of feminism. As has been argued elsewhere (Henderson, 2015), these narratives also apply to theorizations of HE, in which commentators compete over loss narratives of what has been lost, otherwise termed 'golden ageism' or nostalgia for the 'golden age' of HE (Hey & Morley, 2011), and progress narratives of what HE could be in the future. The 'idea' in the expression 'the idea of the university' can be isolated as a site for the negotiation of loss and progress narratives of the university, as exemplified by McLennan's (2008) article subtitle, "Conservative or progressive idea of the university?"

In attempting to map the disparate literature of 'the idea of the university', Scott has divided the literature into groups, one of which is the literature of 'reminiscence' or 'regret' (1993, p. 5). The 'idea' is used in this literature to express a loss narrative, but its use is not uniform. Loss narratives set up the modern university as in some way lesser than previous manifestations; universities are seen as having become more worldly, functional, and corporate. This, in Minogue's (1973, p. 5) lexis, is the "debasement" of university education. A question that arises here is one of the location of the 'idea' in the historical traditions of universities. Does the 'idea' automatically gesture citationally at a historical version of the university, or can there be a new 'idea' that is developed for the current times? According to Oakeshott (1950/2004), the 'idea' indicates "a knowledge of a tradition" that prevents the

perception of the university as “a machine” (p. 24). In accounts of the ‘idea of the university’ that reflect the same viewpoint as Oakeshott, ‘idea’ is associated with *the* (or *an*) original idea of the university, which has been lost. Ziembinski (1997) echoes this in the piece entitled, “What can be saved of the idea of the university?”, to which the answer is “Not much, I think” (p. 21). In this deployment of the ‘idea’, the ‘idea’ cannot be aligned with modernity. For Duke (2004), however, the ‘idea’ *is* compatible with modernity; it is possible to modify ‘the idea’ to include the adjectives “new” (p. 306) and “modern” (p. 310). Whilst for some authors, ‘idea’ is incompatible with the increasing use of corporate management strategies in universities, for Duke (2004) the “new” or “modern” idea *is* “corporatist managerialism” (p. 310).

In Duke’s (ibid.) account, a loss narrative is attached to the “new idea,” but in other accounts, the modification “new” or “modern” signifies progress, in relation to the Robbins report, for example, which is viewed as offering a “modern ‘idea’” by Smith (1999, p. 156). In his (1993) article “The idea of the university in the 21st century,” Scott views the ‘idea’ as compatible with historical change. The association of the ‘idea’ with modernity in Scott’s article indicates a progress narrative. Reflection on the ‘idea’ is still “central to the proper organization of higher education,” but, in order for it to function as “the idea of the university *in the 21st century*” (Scott, 1993, p. 23, emphasis added), it should ‘be rooted in the institutional constraints and intellectual imperatives that drive the modern university’ (1993). One way of using the ‘idea’ to shore up a progress narrative, then, is to construct the ‘idea’ as dynamic and shifting over time. For Neary and Saunders, for example, each idea is an “ideal-university-type” that is appropriate to its time and context (2011, p. 348). ‘Idea’ in this narrative strategy is pluralized and contextualized, in line with Barnett’s (2011) problematization of the application of the definite article (‘the’) in ‘the idea of the university:’ “given the complexity of modern society, there will be many ideas” (2011, p. 1). The ‘idea’ (singular) is seen to be incompatible with the “runaway world” (Barnett, 2004, p. 198) that is home to “the multiversity of the twenty-first century” (Rothblatt, 2012, p. 24).

‘Idea’ and the signifier of ‘Newman’

Hemmings (2011) and Bourcier (2012) have discussed the use of the signifier ‘Butler,’ the political theorist and author of *Gender Trouble* (1990/1999), to represent a particular kind of poststructuralist, queer thinking around gender. *Gender Trouble* in this case would represent the equivalent of Newman’s *The Idea of a University*: it is not necessary to engage with the text or arguments, but rather citing this proper name and book title *signal* the writer’s allegiance with a particular mode of thinking or conceptual work. Dean, in his article “Queer theory without names” (2012), argues that the action of citing and so establishing queer figureheads for queer theory is not in the spirit of queer theorizing, because it results in the “commodi[fication]” of queer (p. 422). Whilst agreeing with Dean in principle, we would argue that there is potential for ‘something queer to happen’ in analyzing the discursive play around these signifiers in order to deconstruct their function in academic argument construction, especially in conjunction with the ‘queer signifier’ of ‘the idea of the university.’

Just as some of the political potency of the signifier ‘queer’ is located in its previous origins as an insult, the expression ‘the idea of a university’ gains traction from its ‘origins’ in Newman’s (1852/1996) lectures, published as *The Idea of a University*. Loss narratives of HE stress the importance of Newman’s text to the conceptualization of the university (eg. Duke, 2004). A number of commentators have noted that the signifiers ‘Newman,’ accompanied by the expression ‘the idea of a university,’ have come to signify something other than the communication of the ‘idea’ as put forth by Newman. Instead, we could say, in

line with Scott's (1993) comment that "high-minded reference to Newman...[has] been incorporated into the universities' rhetorical tradition" (1993, p. 4), that these signifiers produce 'semiotic moments' of the kind that Emily experienced upon first hearing the expression. We referred to the moment of first consciously hearing the expression 'the idea of the university' as resonant; Dunne (2006, p. 412) comments on the "almost entirely ceremonial" use of Newman's *The Idea of a University*, which is "invoked to lend respectability" (p. 412) to an argument about the purpose of the university. Both Dunne and Ricken embed their jibes at the "ceremonial" use of 'Newman' and *The Idea of a University* in loss narratives, where these signifiers act as a "fig-leaf" that conceals "instrumentalist and managerialist ambitions" (Dunne, 2006, p. 412), "a rhetorical blind covering other, more practical interests" (Ricken, 2007, p. 483).

Just as Butler's *Gender Trouble* is frequently accused of ills and credited for statements that are difficult to find between its covers, the use of Newman's *The Idea of the University* has been "plagued" by "misunderstandings" (Ker, 1999, p. 11), or perhaps resignifications. As certain authors have indicated (Dunne, 2006; Ker, 1999; Turner, 1996), Newman's text is not always perceived as being about the 'idea' of the university. What it *is* about is contested; Dunne (2006, p. 417), for example, states that it is about the idea of "'the educated mind'", while for Ker (1999, p. 11) it is about "the actual historical attempt to found a Catholic University in Dublin." The 'queer' of queer theory builds on its origins as an insult to claim political agency. In a similar manner, the signifiers 'Newman' and '*The Idea of a University*' have taken on resignifications that, because of (not in spite of) their origins, evoke tradition and abstract thinking, without necessarily conveying the content or argument of the 'original' text. The implication of this is that the concepts of 'Newman' and 'the idea of the university,' worn into different meanings by citation, no longer need to signify, or be signified by, an understanding of the 'original' text: "something queer [has] happen[ed] to the signified...and something queer [has] happen[ed] to the signifier" (Britzman, 1995, p. 153).

Conclusion: 'The idea of the university' deconstructed

This article began with the first time that Emily consciously heard the expression 'the idea of the university.' From this starting point, the expression has been deconstructed, or 'desedimented,' its potential located in the expression's *discursive use* rather than in the perceived truth of its origins in Newman's text *The Idea of the University*. Drawing on Britzman's (1995) idea of 'something queer happening,' the expression 'the idea of the university' has been explored as a queer signifier which disrupts naturalized processes of signification. Viewed as a type of figurative language, 'the idea of the university' provides a 'semiotic moment' in which the linguistic expression of the university is opened up to slippage. When the expression 'the idea of the university' is analyzed in situ within the texts that deploy it, the slippage between 'idea' and 'university' is activated for political purposes; the 'idea' is cited and resignified as a key tool in the construction of 'progress' and 'loss' narratives of university education. This deliberate resignification, as with the resignification and mutation of 'queer' from its 'origins' as an insult, both eschews and harks back to the 'origins' of the expression in Newman's text, *The idea of the university*. 'Newman,' in this reading, may come to signify 'origins' as a rhetorical signal, much as 'Butler' has come to signify a particular school of queer/gender thought.

The article has travelled from the representation of Emily's first hearing of the expression 'the idea of the university' through two interlinked queer readings of the expression. As such, the article has constituted an exploration of the discursive signification of the expression. The specific contribution to the 'tussle' over the 'idea' has been to think through the queering syntactical effect that 'idea' has on 'university', which is caught up in a prepositional phrase,

and so cannot act as a grammatical subject. If anything is to act as a grammatical subject, it is the 'idea', which then trails 'university' into its subjectivity. 'Idea', then, acts as a buffer against attempts to portray the university as easily expressible in language; this has been the key tenet of the queer approach that has been adopted throughout.

In addition to contributing to the literature on 'the idea of the university' via tracking its discursive deployment, this article has also contributed to debates about what queer concepts might do in the field of HE research (Burford & Allen, 2019). Building on work that has been described as 'post queer' (Boyle, 2012) or 'after queer' (Talbert & Rasmussen, 2010), we have used queer concepts to interrogate the expression 'the idea of the university', thus troubling assumptions that the realm of gender and sexuality is where queer 'properly' belongs. By working underneath the conceptual umbrella of queer but not advancing an analysis of a queer body or identity, we have sought to demonstrate where else queer concepts might travel in HE research. 'Queer' in this article at least, calls for an awareness of the way that we might unthinkingly use naturalized grammatical constructions to close down, simplify, and unify the very (no)things that it is our responsibility to try to understand in their openness, complexity, and plurality.

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Authors Notes

Emily F. Henderson is an Assistant Professor in the Centre for Education Studies at the University of Warwick, UK. Her areas of specialization are gender and higher education, academic mobility and conferences.

James Burford is a Lecturer at the Graduate Research School at La Trobe University, Australia. His areas of specialization are doctoral education, sexualities and education and academic mobilities.

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