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The Ghost University: Academe From the Ruins

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I.

The academic community was horrified in January 2021 when an Art History student at Concordia University (Montreal) posted a tweet that went viral. Like many other students around the world, his classes had been abruptly moved online following the COVID-19 pandemic. After watching a pre-recorded lecture by François-Marc Gagnon, the undergrad Googled the historian for his contact details. It turned out Professor Gagnon had been dead since 2019:

HI EXCUSE ME, I just found out the prof for this online course I'm taking *died in 2019* ... I looked up his email to send him a question and PULLED UP HIS MEMORIAM INSTEAD that just THREW ME OFF A LITTLEit's a great class but WHAT

The incident revealed the sinister flipside of edtech and its rapid transformation of higher education. With so much course material being delivered online, who owns the intellectual property rights and can it be used in perpetuity? Concealed behind a new wave of corporate buzzwords - blended learning, hybrid instruction, digital scaffolding, synchronous and asynchronous learning, micro-credentials – lies a rather ruthless economic rationality that has distressing implications for the profession.

Squeezing yet another semester's work out Professor Gagnon following his death is emblematic of deeper permutations occurring in the neoliberal university. The days when academics led a decidedly idyllic existence, leisurely writing books and discussing abstruse subjects in the smoking room are long gone, if they ever existed in the first place. Numerous studies have confirmed that academe is now one of the most overworked professions in modern society (Grover 2016; Morrish, 2019; Erickson, Hanna and Walker 2020). The so-called 'adjunctification' of higher education and reliance on precarious workers is one facet of this. The widely reported deaths of Margaret Mary Vojtko and Thea Hunter in the US, for example, revealed just how bad these 'ghost jobs' can be. However, in the wake of COVID-19, even comparatively secure jobholders are experiencing significant labour intensification. New and challenging technologies, the threat of redundancy, ramped up Key Performance Indicators and living rooms converted into makeshift lecture halls have put academics under acute pressure (Gewin 2021).

Professor Gagnon made his spectral appearance on this forlorn backdrop, giving the episode a creepy salience. There's no doubt that an 'Edu-Factory' stands today where the traditional university once did. But surely there are limits to the surplus labour time it can extract. As Marx observed regarding factory work, although the length of the working day is elastic and socially mediated, a certain baseline 'law of life' ultimately presides: namely, restrictions imposed by the body and *bios* or life itself. Professor Gagnon's spectralization heralds a new frontier in this respect. Not even death will release you from your duties in the neoliberal university. Concordia University have managed to transcend that once indefatigable boundary between the living and not-living. Now toiling beside us are colleagues who are technically deceased. Yet, in a preternatural moment of solidarity with the living, they too endure the vagaries of techno-managerialism. This raises a disconcerting proposition. Does not the figure of Professor Gagnon signal something important about our own status in the corporate university today? In his ghostly academic labour, analogous qualities can be recognized in the work we do as well. In other words, this digital apparition does not primarily evoke *bios* (the living academic) as a counterpoint in our minds, but the *undead* in our own professional lives.

Bill Reading's classic *The University of Ruins* (1996) is an instructive anchor for giving perspective to this eerie phase in higher education today. Writing in the mid-1990s as the managerialization of universities was well underway (but still deemed extreme and unworkable), Readings argued that the founding Fichtean mission of tertiary education - to inculcate the exercise of critical judgment - was in danger of being killed off. And if that happened, the university "no longer participates in its historical project for humanity" (Readings 1996, 5-6). Notwithstanding its bleak title, what's interesting about *The University of Ruins* is the undertone of prodigious hope. The university was still worth fighting for. And that struggle would be waged by living labour, vibrant and full compared to the petrified husk of academic capitalism. Today the mood feels very different. Contemporary readers of *The University of Ruins* are left with an anachronistic, even nostalgic impression. Either Readings' fight never occurred or was over before it began. Thus we now dwell in the ruins. But we do so as shadows, background figures who bear little resemblance to Reading's confident agents of refusal.

Developing the portmanteau of ‘hauntology’, Jacques Derrida examined the contemporary significance of ghosts in *Spectres of Marx* (1994), revealing the enigmatic afterlife of communism following the triumph of global capitalism. To haunt does not mean to be present, he argues, but to be *absent-present*, a heterodidactics conjoining life and death. Suspended between the new world and a dead one that won’t let go, spectres warn us that “the time is out of joint. The world is going badly” (Derrida 1994: 96). Similarly, most academics today understand that the university is no longer *theirs*. It belongs to the victors, the university C-Suite, the wall of spreadsheets and invasive edtech. Yet an academic spirit persists in spite of this, bearing witness to its own passing. I’m very interested in this affective residue. The real subsumption of academe within the corporate university is painful not because of its completeness, but the opposite. It’s replete with unfinished business, hairline cracks and underground perturbations. The vestiges of a lost world linger still, even within the most punitive and anti-academic settings. These are the ghosts of our lives. Now we must confront them.

This paper unpacks the spectralization unfolding in universities today by focusing on a key ambivalence. On the one hand, academics are haunted by its bygone values, solidarity and praxes that Bill Readings urged us to defend twenty-five years ago. That opportunity was squandered, although not forgotten. On the other hand, which is just an alternate aspect of being haunted, we ourselves have assumed an uncanny (*unheimlich*) semi-presence in this space. I call this the ghost university. We may debate whether the remnants of higher education are still worth fighting for. It should be noted, however, that Derrida did identify an emancipatory kernel within the phantasmagoria. The haunting carries not only the weight of the past, but the resonance of unforeseeable futures-to-come (*l’avenir*) that the vanquished are unable to ignore. If we inhabit the university as background radiation, an afterimage of a world that no longer is, then can these remnants be transposed into a subversive gesture? I remain doubtful. The reasons why will be discussed in the final section of this paper.

II.

As COVID-19 emptied university campuses across the globe in 2021, the ghost university took on a literal expression. Over the past three decades, universities have

grown in size, commanding expansive precincts and sizable capital investments. In countries that have neoliberalized higher education, it constitutes a major export industry, vying with petroleum, iron ore and manufacturing. Just days after Coronavirus was reclassified a pandemic, these expensive buildings lay dormant and many still are in Australia, England and the US. Furthermore, as the lucrative international student market dries up – which Western universities have been milking for years – the dire fiscal implications are now dawning.

Some commentators predict that only ultra-elite universities will be able to weather the storm, since their cash reserves, brand value and influential social networks are considerable (Walsh 2020; Boyd 2020). As for mid and low-tier institutions, they risk morphing into zombie universities as the market collapses and governments turn the screws on funding. Forecasting exercises like this are notoriously inaccurate, of course. But whatever the future scenario will be, it's not likely to be pleasant for non-elite colleges and universities.

Although the damaging disruptions wrought by the pandemic are certainly significant, it would be a mistake to define ghost universities only in these terms. Many of the trends that have ruined higher education predate COVID-19. The crisis merely amplified these extant tensions. Over the last thirty years, universities have been commercialized, corporatized and financialized beyond recognition, especially the public ones. These changes were pursued in the name of transparency, financial responsibility and taxpayers' value for money – largely a pretext for a more hostile policy-stance by neoliberal governments. The enmity is probably linked to the Conservative and New Right's anti-intellectual bent. In any case, when the pandemic hit, little sympathy was forthcoming from governments, who seemed genuinely pleased that a massive 'market correction' was underway.

We are now witnessing the dark undercurrents connected to this decades-long campaign to transform universities into large business enterprises. Out of the ruins has emerged the ghost university and its haunted/haunting faculty. The defining characteristics of dark academia include the following:

1. Universities have taken an authoritarian turn whereby top-down management hierarchies have replaced academic collegiality and collective decision-making. Staff are now managed through KPIs, performance metrics and

individual incentive structures. Although the governance ideal of collegiality – a collegium of peers – had never truly been realized previously, it still functioned as a constituent aspiration. Not anymore. How many academics today think of their Dean or President as ‘colleagues’ instead of bosses?

2. Once believed to epitomize good work, academic labour has undergone extensive proletarianization. What Azmanova (2020) calls ‘precarity capitalism’ - the massification of insecurity - has made substantial inroads into higher education. 70% of academic staff in UK elite universities (the so-called Russell Group), for example, are on casual contracts. This has polarized the workforce, fomenting resentment among its burgeoning underclass. Importantly, precarious employment systems don’t just hurt its direct workers. Zero-hour and fixed-term contracts indirectly set the tone for regular jobholders as well, reminding them that they shouldn’t get too comfortable since all roles are ultimately expendable.
3. Following marketization, universities have become centres for the mass processing of students, a veritable Edu-Factory. More fee paying customers, more revenue. This commercial *modus operandi* has fundamentally changed the nature of pedagogy for the worse.
4. The over-financialization of access to higher education has produced the scandalous expansion of student debt. This occurred when government policy stopped viewing education as a public good (worthy of public investment) and reclassified it as a private asset (i.e., human capital), one individuals should pay for. Personal indebtedness is an inevitable corollary.
5. Universities themselves have become financialized. Harvard is the archetypical ‘hedge fund university’, with a total endowment portfolio of US\$40 Billion (all tax free due to its charity status). Most universities do not enjoy such surpluses, especially following COVID-19 and dwindling government spending. Many instead have turned to debt facilities and ‘pull forward’ bond issuance for help, installing finance capitalism into the heart of its operations and further widening the rift between rich and poor institutions.

For the latter, loan serving requirements can be used as a pretence for inflicting austerity on academic staff.

6. Depression and anxiety are rife in both the academic and student body. Stress, overwork and precarity has fuelled a mental health crisis, something universities have only reluctantly acknowledged.
7. Because universities are now considered 'job factories', teaching is evaluated on the basis of student *employability* rather than the inherent attributes of a curriculum. STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects thrive in this context whereas the humanities face extinction.
8. Universities are now mandated to demonstrate their impact and relevance to big business. More troubling developments here include commercial partnerships with arms manufacturers and the military industrial complex.

Combined, these shifts have seen academics become increasingly alienated from the institutions they once believed was theirs. We still undertake all the teaching and research, of course. But universities are no longer perceived to be a straightforward proxy for an academic vocation. "I *love* my work, but *hate* my job" is a common refrain heard throughout higher education today (Osbaldiston, Cannizzo and Mauri 2019; Mathews 2018). And more often than not, this love is unrequited and self-defeating (Barcan 2018). As a result, mourning has mutated into melancholy, a cloying despair that touches almost everything. If the old is dying and the new cannot be born, then in the interregnum ghosts appear.

III.

The itemization above calls for a number of qualifications in order to gain a more accurate picture of the ruins. Let's think about the state first. For public universities at least, the pressure to act as *if* they were private enterprises (which they generally do badly) mainly derives from government directives. Each country can identify landmark interventions that dramatically altered its higher education system. The 1997 Dearing report and 2010 Coalition reforms in the UK; The Higher Education Amendments of 1972 in the US; the 1994 Todd Report in New Zealand;

the Dawkins Reforms in Australia during the late 1980s. Back in the 1990s, no doubt some university executives embraced commercialization with alacrity, loving the idea of becoming overpaid CEOs and entrepreneurial (post)industrialists. However, many were also reluctant, reforming their institutions only because funding was tied to it. In any case, we cannot understand the ghost university fully unless we also posit a theory of the state, something I have attempted elsewhere (Fleming 2021).

Second is the predicament faced by students. Too many studies decrying the ‘fall of the faculty’ (Ginsberg 2014) omit students from the analysis. This is problematic for several reasons. Many postgrads are exploited members of the adjunct underclass and are therefore integral to the profession (Childress 2019; Kezar, Scott and DePaola 2019). Furthermore, the outrage of student debt cuts deep into the university’s core purpose. Narratives about meritocracy and social mobility have half-heartedly legitimated this financialization of access. But for the multitude of indebted graduates stacking supermarket shelves, it feels like a bad joke. And finally, the mental health crisis in universities deeply affects students too. For example, thirteen student suicides occurred at Bristol University over an 18-month period. In 2016 seven students committed suicide at Columbia University only months apart. University of Pennsylvania was another hotspot and included the executive director of Counselling and Psychological Services, 52-year old Gregory Eells. His job was to help at-risk students. Eells died after jumping from a skyscraper in downtown Philadelphia.

Third, a non-romanticized view of ghost universities is imperative, particularly when examining its causes. For instance, nostalgic longing for a golden past is a popular motif. But the assumption that universities were once serene and utopian democracies is misleading. Before being opened to mass participation, universities were highly elitist, class-based institutions. Furthermore, they have always had hierarchies and authority structures. Only today they play a different and more menacing role, which we can criticize without painting an unrealistic picture of the past.

Crucial also is an unromanticized understanding of academic complicity in this neoliberalization process. It is tempting to proffer a kind of ‘victimology’ to explain why faculty have become ciphers in their own jobs. We often hear that academics

were dragged kicking and screaming into this hellish universe of metrics, digital dashboards and brazen managerialism. That's only partially true, however. As Mike Marinetto (2019) avers, we've played our own part in creating the malaise, gaming the system for individual career advancement, coveting 'badges' of prestige from management, worshiping academic 'stars' and allowing hardnosed administrators to take control.

Are so-called 'neoliberal universities' truly neoliberal *stricto sensu*? This is the fourth nuance we should be mindful of. The concept implies laissez-faire, minimal government intervention, privatization, competition and non-unionized workforces. However, most universities today only approximate this ideal, and are hardly the flexible, entrepreneurial corporate tigers so venerated by neoclassical economists. The adoption of New Public Management, for example, stimulated formidable levels of bureaucratic collectivism, including surveillance, micromanagement and endless paperwork (Lorenz 2012). Even the precarious adjunct class - who are meant to epitomize the Hayekian fantasy of bossless 'free agents' - encounter near Stalinesque volumes of centralized administration. The classic dichotomy of markets versus hierarchies (as popularized in transaction cost economics) doesn't make much sense in this context. Higher education has implemented the worst of both worlds. As an academic, you may be *on your own* when it comes to economic life chances; but you will never be *left alone*.

The fifth qualification concerns the notion of critique itself. More attention needs to be given to the social logics that have stretched and twisted it in various directions. Critique of the corporate university is obviously not new. I can think of no other profession in which its members write about their own industry in such vituperative terms. It is commonplace to find books with titles like, 'The Toxic University', 'The Zombie University', 'The Great Mistake', 'Lower-Ed' and (exploring the ludicrous side of the managerial university), 'Whackademia'. Some analysts suggest we ought to eschew this left-wing melancholy and present a more upbeat and affirmative critique of higher education (see Berg and Seeber 2017; Gannon 2020; Connell 2019; Fitzpatrick 2019). I disagree. Optimism would be a category error here. For me the problem is how *ineffectual* leftist critique has been. No matter how much vitriol academics direct at the neoliberal university, none of it seems to make a difference.

There are also vocal critics of the university on the *political right*, of course. Sadly, they appear to have been more successful in finding a receptive audience among influential decision-makers. While market libertarians are thankfully still considered nuts, conservatives advocating deeper commoditization of higher education have the ear of governmental policy-makers and university executives. Indeed, the most ferocious detractors of the neoliberal university today remain neoliberals themselves. They argue that further market discipline is the best medicine for this highly dysfunctional sector (e.g., see Brennan and Magness 2019; Caplan 2018). At any rate, we must tread carefully through this discursive minefield lest our pessimism unintentionally supports the very ideological matrix we seek to escape.

IV.

The impact of COVID-19 on higher education had another interesting effect. In the early days of the crisis, it inadvertently revealed how essential academics still are in universities. It goes without saying that senior managers seldom teach. Many are not even academics and have never grappled with overcrowded lecture halls in the Edu-Factory. So when presented with the formidable task of moving lessons online, they were mostly bystanders to the real action. Not so for academics, who emerged from the shadows and picked up the slack in an *unghostly* fashion. The self-organization, improvisation and sheer amount of unpaid labour-time evoked by teaching staff ensued not *because* of authority but *despite* it. Ironically, academics drew on qualities (e.g., dedication to the intrinsic values of our vocation, ignoring bureaucracy and working around the rules, etc.) and resources (e.g., home Wi-Fi, childcare, etc.) that the corporate university had discounted for years. As for senior executives, many disappeared or issued edicts via email. Amidst the pandemonium and the remarkable feats of resourcefulness, it appeared that the university did belong to academics after all.

This promising conclusion was drawn by numerous academic unions and activists. It was no time for jubilation, of course, given the great suffering caused by the pandemic. But when it came to the crunch, universities needed academics more than it needed elite administrators. Almost two years later, the sentiment obviously misjudged how entrenched the managerial university really was. Senior executives

certainly didn't let a good crisis go to waste, finding in it an excuse for draconian reforms. But there is a less mentioned obverse side too: academics actually *letting* a good crisis go to waste and receding into spectral darkness once again.

The inability (and unwillingness) to reclaim the academic means of production - when it was literally in our hands - during the initial phases of the pandemic tells us much about the ghost university. The troubled UK tertiary education sector provides a useful illustration. In January 2021, Leicester University President – Professor Nishan Canagarajah – embarked on a controversial redundancy program, targeting academics irrespective of their publication record or kudos in the community. Quality metrics no longer mattered, representing yet another transition beyond orthodox neoliberal governmentality. Scholars researching 'critical political economy' were especially singled out as no longer fitting the institution's strategic purpose. That many were also active union members was not lost on observers.

At the same time Leicester University was announcing its plans and Professor Gagnon's student made his morbid discovery, consultant giant PwC (2021) released a report on the future of British universities called, 'COVID-19 Recovery and Improvement: Locking in the Benefits and Overcoming the Challenges.' Although it mostly went unnoticed, the report represents a bellwether for the attitudes now circulating among the university C-suite. Chief Executive Officers (CFOs) across the sector were asked this question: "what are the positive changes that have been made in response to the pandemic and what plans are there to embed these going forwards?" No mention of the devastating human costs inflicted by Coronavirus here. PwC instead invited executives to reflect on "embracing the positives."

Not unexpectedly, the speedy move to online learning was identified as a key benefit according to CFOs. That transformation would have been unimaginable in pre-pandemic times given the inevitable union opposition and lengthy consultation process. Here it literally happened overnight and did so with the full consent of academics. The report urged this 'Digital Acceleration' and 'Blended Tuition' be quickly embedded by universities to leverage further cost reductions and efficiencies. Hence Professor Gagnon being put back to work post-mortem.

University leaders can also learn lasting lessons about productivity improvement. The pandemic has prompted "a mindset shift within the workforce

away from a model of presenteeism to a renewed focus on more beneficial productivity metrics.” Afraid of losing their jobs, constantly online and already consummate self-regulators, academics have freely streamlined their labour process and expelled ‘wasteful’ activity. No more comatose commute to work, long lunches in the local cafe or idle chatting with colleagues. What PwC deems ‘wasteful’, of course, others consider being a rounded human being. But times are changing.

CFOs also appreciated how COVID-19 woke academics up to the cold financial realities of tertiary education. Neoliberal ideologues have been trying to achieve this for years with little success. Most academics understand that economic ‘reason’ is in the eye of the beholder, informed by normative and political assumptions. Simply encasing an agenda in numbers and tables doesn’t change the fact that it is still an agenda, with potential alternatives and counterpoints. The pandemic changed this. What we might dub a ‘CFO-mentality’ has seeped into the very fabric of university culture. Balanced budgets, capital/debt ratios, modified direct total costs and Full Time Equivalent is no longer the vocabulary of a partisan viewpoint (i.e., management). It describes reality in an objective and incontrovertible way. All staff, from exhausted adjuncts to erstwhile union militants were accepting this. In short, academic consciousness had been financialized. As one CFO commented:

We have seen a greater focus on financial performance amongst all teams. Particularly within our academic departments who are starting to appreciate the need to consider the financials of each course, embed the positives of our transformation and take on responsibility for cost management.

The most relevant insight gleaned from the crisis, according to CFOs, returns us to the ghost story; namely, that unilateral top-down decisions involving minimal consultation will be tolerated by staff. As one CFO observed, “before, higher education was like an oil tanker, change was slow... The speed that we responded and adapted to COVID-19 has given us confidence that we can continue to transform our operations.” This might consist of, for instance, “establishing structured ‘gold command’ meetings to expedite decision making, with less consultation required.” PwC celebrate this as a significant triumph for university executives,

presaging a governance paradigm where the messy business of consensus and dialogue is kept to a bare minimum.

The PwC report lends insight into the otherwise rarefied thought-processes of university executives. It's mostly wishful thinking, of course, telling CFOs what they want to hear, peppered with edtech buzzwords. But there would be no ghost university if academics had actually been converted into spreadsheet-obsessed (mini) management accountants. In other words, successful totalization would have ended the haunting since spectralization turns on a remainder or remnant. Yet a disjuncture persists. What is this ember of dissonance, conjuring the living-dead today in the gloomy ruins of higher education?

V.

If we gently fan that cinder to inspect its structural qualities, a number of elements appear in stark contradistinction to the governing institutional flows of dark academia: rather than operating as a pseudo-corporation obsessed with financial targets, the university advances civic goods and the democratization of reason; instead of obediently following top-down chains of authority, faculty work as a trusting collegium and determine internal governance structures together (e.g., electing leaders, open debate, participatory budgeting, etc.). Teaching doesn't demand we behave as production-line knowledge workers or handmaidens of the labour market. On the contrary, pedagogy is motivated by the Fichtean precept of critical reason, instructing students to think for themselves and explore the wonders of non-instrumental inquiry.

As the remarkable efforts by academics during the COVID-19 crisis demonstrated, these embers still inform the profession, albeit in latent form. It took the abstention of authority and the savage discontinuity of the pandemic to surface them as dialectical praxis, and only then fleetingly so. Adding a complex twist to this are the frequent evocations of academic 'collegiality' by management itself within these otherwise autocratic institutions. For sure, collegial collaboration is often encouraged as a *horizontal* form of control (in departments, units, etc.), much like self-managing teams in Japanese automobile factories. *Vertically*, the gulf between workers and executives remains. By and large, however, few universities openly acknowledge the technocratic tenets that underpin them. Glib pronouncements

about public purpose, open dialogue and consultation abound. A carefully crafted simulacra of academic ethics characterizes the neoliberal university and is usually exposed in times of conflict. However, this superficial dissymmetry does not explain our spectralization. That begins with the vestige of an academic ethos, which is anathema to the travails of the corporate university. The interstice between this remnant and current praxis is what Derrida (1994, 81) calls “*diastema* (failure, inadequation, disjunction, disadjustment, being ‘out of joint’)”. But even that disjuncture is not enough to underwrite the haunting, since it places too much weight on fully realizing the (academic) ideal. A big ask in anyone’s book. The haunting really stems from our failure to *defend* those ideals, irrespective of whether they are realizable or not. In other words, *resistance* in favour of a real abstraction, instantiating the value (if not fulfilment) of those academic freedoms now languishing before us in residue form. It is this ‘inadequation’, to use Derrida’s terminology, that has rendered us ghostly in our own profession.

We can find isolated and scattered cases of collective resistance, of course. But overall, none have moved the needle in any substantial way. More generally, the quietism demonstrated by scholars has been embarrassing. Unlike other high-skilled professions, including medicine and law, academics have generally kowtowed to the steamroller of managerialism. Thomas Docherty (2016, 22) claims that university staff are “among the most conservative, ineffectual and disorganised of workforces” in the post-industrial economy. Some even speak of *academic zombies* on this score (Ryan 2012). Nevertheless, and to restate my earlier point, if the totalization process was comprehensive, there would be no ideological friction. And that’s not the case. In private conversations or on the pages of esoteric journals there’s much lamentation about the fate of higher education, anger even. It would therefore be more accurate to speak of compliance rather than approbation. Regardless, this dismay hardly ever translates into collective action. *Fear* of retribution is one reason why. Webb (2018, 97) explains how dissensus is interpreted in what he calls the corporate-imperial university:

Individuals with goals not in line with those of their employer are deemed a “moral hazard,” to which increased discipline, managerial control and technologies of intimidation are the rational response. “Mind your language”

and “be careful what you say” are common exhortations ... on the whole, the academic community has lacked the will to fight.

Occupational fear is acquired by observing what happens to peers who *do* speak out. US professor Ron Srigley (2018) presents a striking case in point. When a vice president (research) instituted an unpopular performance management system, few openly resisted since all “were petrified of losing their positions.” However, one professor did email colleagues about his misgivings and suggested they raise it at the next faculty board. Several days later, the professor was called into the president’s office and told [in Srigley’s words] “... he was naïve to think his university email account was not ‘transparent’ to his ‘managers.’ No discussion, no context, no actual accusation, and no reprimand. Just a thinly veiled threat that if he didn’t watch out he’d find himself at the bottom of the academic East River”. The professor later discovered that the university wasn’t spying on his emails. A colleague had simply forwarded his message to senior management. If that betrayal was not depressing enough, it also “means the president was just having a little fun threatening him.”

In the corporate university, conformity counts as a highly valued principle. The authorities reward it not with preferential treatment but the abeyance of penalties. No wonder then that so few are prepared to defend the academic ethos and withdraw into ghostland instead. Of course, it’s easy to decry this state of affairs in theory. In practice, however, the circumspection is understandable given the standover tactics used by some senior managers. For example, in 2014 University of Warwick Professor Thomas Docherty (quoted above) was accused of directing “inappropriate sighing” and “negative vibes” at his Head of Department. This earned him a nine month suspension. Recently in Australia, a mathematics lecturer appeared on a television news report about universities fudging English language requirements for international students. His employer was furious and announced legal proceedings against the academic, stating he was liable for millions in lost revenue. The move was widely condemned as needlessly intimidating. However, it probably had the desired effect, dissuading faculty from speaking out in the future. If Mark Fisher’s (2009) concept of ‘market Stalinism’ has an analogy in higher education today, then it probably looks something like this.

Given the capacious side of power in universities, what Bauman (2006) terms ‘liquid fear’ assumes a diffuse and generalized presence, an expectation of rebuke even when there’s no rational reason for it. Hence why anxiety is so prevalent in academia, underscoring the occupational stress and overwork, as Rosalind Gill (2010) explains with pathos. If resistance does survive, it’s often pushed underground and individuated in ways that reinforce this performative setting. For example, tactics to evade micromanagement and expand one’s individual autonomy – to write journal articles and read books, for example – can provide some temporary respite. But the institutional effects are frequently counterproductive. According to Bansel and Davies (2010, 144), the trouble with much academic resistance today is that it actually entails *indirect obedience* to the corporate university, “not through a love of neoliberalism, but through a love of what neoliberalism puts at risk”. Protecting our individual time to study and write is not necessarily anathema to the integrative machinations of the ghost university. Nor do these bolt-holes provide a sound basis for collectively refusing aggressive administrators, who often pay lip service to academic freedom as they bully dissenters into silence.

A nexus can form between self-protection and complicity. Think about performance metrics, for example, including quantifiable research outputs, journal rankings and so-forth. Some academics have obviously joined forces with the Edu-Factory and embody the cutthroat careerism these metrics encourage. An entrepreneurial and instrumental pursuit of institutional rewards (promotion, grants, stardom, etc.) drive these workers. On the other side of the coin are scholars who bemoan managerialism and are motivated by a vocational love of inquiry and research, qualities that are intrinsic to the job. They skilfully avoid time consuming bureaucracy and its petty demands, carving out a space of autonomy for genuine work. From the corporate university’s perspective, *mutatis mutandis*, these two academic personas are not entirely distinct. Those dedicated to a labour of love still wish to be recognized by employers and peers. Accordingly, institutions have calibrated this desire to measurable performance criteria, which have increasingly become disciplinary. Moreover, a labour of love is a great productivity booster. As Gregg (2009) points out, few professions today display such a readiness to excavate work from *all* hours of the week, including evenings, weekends and holidays. And do

so voluntarily. Most importantly, both types of academics are – from the external standpoint of management, at least – supine and eminently governable.

VI.

I can summarize the argument as follows. Because we cannot see ourselves in the corporate university today, academe has entered a ghostly state. It arises from an *unincorporated* vestige that lies beyond the tenets of neoliberalization. Within the debris something untimely remains. While it is tempting to list the hallowed ideals of academe and romantically pine for their return, that is a futile strategy. There is a better way to formulate the problem. Our ghostification is symptomatic of being separated from the academic means of production for sure. But it's our failure to resist in their name that turns this into a true ghost story. It involves a *diastema* between critical reason – as charted from Kant through to Adorno – and contemporary academic praxis. Dialogue, debate, discussion and 'agonism' are indispensable to knowledge creation, of course. However, genealogies of the contemporary university note that this dissent extends also to material labour process of academia (Jencks and Riesman 1968; Hook, Kurtz and Todorovich 1974; Newfield 2011). Or at least ought to. Once again, no undue romanticism need feature here. Derrida's (2002) much discussed 'university without condition', for instance, aspires towards deliberative self-governance not because it is gentler or nicer. No, it's preferred because participatory governance is the best model for organizing a workforce with these idiosyncratic attributes. Our spectralization is thus the product of an authoritarian turn in universities and our troubled relationship with dissent, which emits a faint signal in the night that cannot be ignored.

For Derrida and Fisher, hauntology is a theory about *losing*, describing a situation where the conquered linger as a painful afterimage of what should have been. Those subsumed by capitalist realism, Mark Fisher (2014) argues, are particularly haunted by the radical democratic experiments of the late 1960s and 1970s: feminist socialism, eco-anarchism, black power, libertarian communism and so-forth. All eventually succumbed to the juggernaut of neoliberalism and its one-dimensionalization of humanity. Nonetheless, these past interventions still reverberate and disturb the present in uncanny ways, opening up possible futures. Therein lies the emancipatory potential of ghosts. As Fisher (2014, 27) puts it,

What should haunt us is not the *no longer* of actually existing social democracy, but the *not yet* of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but which never materialised. These spectres – the spectres of lost futures – reproach the formal nostalgia of the capitalist realist world.

This kind of ‘retrofuturism’ sidesteps the problem of nostalgia by framing the haunting as a portent of new realities to come. Our case is more complicated, however. For we’re not only haunted by ghosts... we are the ghosts. This is induced by a double alienation. Academe is haunted by an annulled ideal (a binary relationship between us and history). And then that annulment is indexed to a third-party regulator, the technocratic university (a ternary relationship). This external authority – which frequently harbours anti-academic tendencies - makes all the difference. After losing that struggle we become primary manifestations of the haunting, switching from the haunting’s *target* to its primary *carrier*. In this sense, we haunt managerialism.

In most depictions of a haunting – supplied by Hollywood films like *The Others* and *The Sixth Sense* – ghosts seldom realize what they are. There is little self-consciousness. That’s not the case for us, however. That begs the question. Can this sullen reflexivity be pivoted towards effective resistance, especially when spectralization is the product of submission? Yes, a dialectical relation still obtains if our theory of an incorporated remainder is correct. Several options are available. We might attempt to collectively weaponize our haunting of managerialism. *Ghosting* is a colloquial term for ending a relationship – with a partner, employer, etc. - by literally disappearing, with no explanation or further communication. Text messages remain unanswered. Phone calls unanswered. We know they are still there, so the silence takes on an oppressive presence. The victim soon interprets this external emptiness as an unbearable vacuum within themselves. Ghosting management would aim for something similar: the radical withdrawal of labour that technocracy depends upon yet cannot acknowledge without questioning its own superfluity. The question is whether voicelessness can be repurposed to overcome its own impotence via further (however disruptive) silence. I’m not convinced.

To cease the haunting, root causes should be treated. In other words, repossessing the academic means of production and radically revising its

organizational norms. A number of major hurdles clearly stand in our way. Given the atomization of academic careers over the last three decades - which has instilled fear, self-interest and auto-exploitation at the centre of the labour process - the likelihood of sustained collective action seems unlikely. The age of management is truly upon us. At the sector level, the majority of universities have had their DNA significantly recoded by the market mechanism, especially public ones. That would have to be challenged too. And finally, public universities (and some private ones) generally reflect the sociopolitical degradations of the state apparatus. No attempt to exorcise the academy can proceed without also neutralizing this formidable power. Together, the constellation of management, market and state is the engine block of our haunting. And reversing it in the current context seems nearly impossible. Or perhaps that's only the ghost in me speaking.

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Biography

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