



Deconstructing the ubiquitous university: A review of *Imagining the Academy: Higher Education and Popular Culture*

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Imagining the Academy: Higher Education and Popular Culture examines the changing landscape of higher education in relation to different forms of popular culture. This work is divided into three sections, with the first entitled *Constructing and Contesting the Image of the Ivory Tower*. In this section, authors examine, critique and deconstruct popular representations of the academy as an ivory tower – a haven in which scholars criticize, discuss, and evaluate the perils and triumphs of society. In these discussions, authors are concerned with notions of perpetuated marginalizations that underpin these popular representations, and their impact on the freedoms and forms of knowledge that inform and/or restrict our conception of modern society. Drawing from film, movies and other popular texts, contributors to this collection illustrate the normalizations that feed popular culture and re-construct the image of the academy. Ultimately, their call for reflection and contemplation (or rather condemnation?) is extremely valuable to developing an understanding of the academic self, and something that has been very meaningful to my own experience of this process.

The critiques of *Good Will Hunting* and *Beverly Hills 90210*, in which the authors discuss the ambivalent and paradoxical nature of the university as presented in these shows, is particularly compelling. As Keroes explains, “the intellectual life involves engaging in reasoned dispute and critical speculation about the nature of knowledge...essential for the development of critical intelligence[. W]e tend to cluster these goals under the rubric of the humanities...paying weak homage to their honorable past” (p. 48) and instead grant power and prestige to departments of business and technology.

As popular culture acts as a conduit of knowledge and a laboratory of cultural capital, the role of (mis)education to inform these developments and transformations is not misleading. In analyzing the content of *Beverly Hills 90210*, Byers conceptualizes this (mis)education as “the process by which media images concretize themselves into everyday life[. G]ender, race, class and other axes of difference are performed through hegemonic and sometimes transgressive televisual discourses” (p. 68). However, this transgressive suggestion is the minority, as (mis)education, through depictions of this program, reproduces hegemonic discourses as positive outcomes, an insidious form of normalization.

The last chapter of this section, *Rap(in) the Academy: Academic Work, Education and Cultural Studies*, implies the inadequacy of academic work by revealing its rejection of the underpinnings of cultural studies. Daspit and Weaver parallel the existence of rap with the anatomy of cultural studies as “it is in tune with the hybridity of life, it

understands the ambiguity and fluidness of everyday experiences” (p. 92). The use of rap to society and cultural studies to academic work is reflective of a larger (mis)conception of and within the academy. This suggestion underpins the entire first third of the book and provides a succinct, yet provocative conclusion – “the challenge is for scholars to overcome their limitations and to ask themselves how heterogenous the academy is and how much freedom it offers” (p.96).

The second section of this book, *The New Vocationalism and the Marketing of Higher Education*, is most relevant to the current discussion of the corporatization of higher education and commodification of knowledge. Given the increasing credentialism within society and the appropriation of managerialism and related discourses within the academy, these chapters explore the public perception of the university and of academia in response to the acquisition of credentials and of marketable skills and expertise. Here, the arguments are less engaging than the previous section since they are based upon tones of sensationalism, and because the structuring of the individual pieces was problematic. Hudak, as an example, draws from psychoanalytic literature to build his argument, but fails to provide an adequate backdrop upon which to hang the remainder of his argument. The psychoanalytic references are not only isolated from the remainder of the book, but are disengaged from his writing and need better integration and explanation.

Anijar attempts to document the rise of proprietary institutions and the subsequent corporatization of higher education, but her tone is sensationalist and the narratives throughout the piece are disconnected. Anijar writes, “wealthy and powerful stockholders will still send their progeny to elite schools... [creating] a system that sustains exploitative exchange of dominance and oppression” (p. 137). While the increase of proprietary institutions feeds the commodification of knowledge, the extent of this commodification and its documentation need not be sensationalized. Although some scholars suggest that sensationalism has a place in academic writing (see Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), especially if the situation is sensational, I contend that communicating the scope and intensity of commodification within higher education can be established without turning to exaggeration. Perhaps this particular conceptualization of the corporate agenda is more prevalent in the United States than in Canada, because of the increased stratification and marketization of higher education, and because the opportunities for exploitation are greater than in Canada (although that may very well be changing).

The exception within this second series of chapters is John G. Ramsay’s account of meritocracy in higher education. Ramsay articulates meritocracy as double-minded, paradoxical, even contradictory. These themes are woven throughout the piece and Ramsay ends the piece in recognition that “meritocracies express both our certainty and confusion about deeply held values” (p.176). In addition, he suggests an alternative reflection on the discourse of corporatization in the academy by inquiring whether we as citizens are asking too much of our system of higher education and the institutes within it. Given the increase in credentialism, the commodification of knowledge, and the appropriation of managerialism within the halls of academia, are we asking too much of the university? Have we misplaced our convictions for education?

The final section of the book, *Exploring Identity and Difference in the Context of Higher Education*, provides a provocative and engaging discussion of key issues that align well with the underpinnings of popular culture. The formation of identity and

related concerns revolve mainly around analyses of specific movies and their themes with the exception of one piece, a critique of David Mamet's critically acclaimed play, *Oleanna*.

Kelahr Young discusses the experiences of lesbian professors within the academy. To underpin her explication, she pits integrity or legitimacy against authenticity. Situating herself as "doubly de-legitimized" (p. 198) within the academy, Kelahr Young asks, "is the academy open enough to individuals' authentic identities? ... Can any of us have integrity in the context of higher education?" (p. 198). In discussing *Oleanna*, Papa attempts to articulate the relationships in the play and within the academy by highlighting the processes of academia and their interconnections with the outside world. In *Vampires on Campus*, McDermott and Daspit articulate identity through the lens of vampirism, drawing analogies to the process of transformation for both the vampire and academic. The argument of authenticity in the context of identity within the academy morphs, as McDermott and Daspit suggest, as "fragments of self ... are continuously reshaped into shifting mosaics of multiple selves in the context of community" (p. 243).

This final section explores higher education and, more specifically, the academy, as a site of transformation, reflection and (de)construction. The authors assess the ability of the academy to contribute to and limit identity formation through struggles of power and authenticity. At times, the descriptions of these popular artifacts may not explain or capture the complexities and subtleties of such themes since, fundamentally, arguments grounded in popular culture necessitate a concretization of material by individuals as they experience the material. That is to say, discussions predicated on popular cultural practices or notions are most salient when the audience has or can experience the specific cultural practice. Yet, this section forces us to consider, appraise, and evaluate not only the academy of which we are a part, but also how the academy makes us (a)part of/from it. This reflection underscores the impact of this section upon our own conception of higher education, the institutions that serve it, and the values, beliefs and purpose that underpin its creation and evolution.

Imagining the Academy is a worthwhile resource for both the upcoming academic and the tenured scholar, but its attractiveness is not limited to those in the ivory tower. In fact, the strength of this collection is located in its ability to appeal to any individual who has or will engage the university. Higher education and its changing landscape, with fragmented goals and multiple constituents, necessitates critical reflection both individual and personal as well as of the institution and its purpose. Linking the transformations of higher education within the context of popular culture is most alluring. To discuss education outside of the context of traditional classrooms and institutions suggests a pedagogy that reflects a deeper concern – a commitment to citizenry – that, hopefully, resonates with all of us.

References

Holm, G., Edgerton, S., & Daspit, T. (2004). *Imagining the academy: Higher education and popular culture*. London: Routledge.