Punishment and Pedagogy: The Casual Future of Teaching Literary Studies

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'Are you a servant or are you waste?'
Justin Clemens

I COULD FOLLOW JUSTIN CLEMENS' POINTED QUESTION IN HIS 'MANIFESTO FOR AN International University' with a rhetorical 'or both?' It seems to me that to pick either debasement or disposability would bypass the combined insult and injury of working as a casual teacher in *a state of offense* to the University; I mean you—if you are a casual teacher—carry an unwelcome status as simultaneously the University's disobedient citizen, near-superfluous to its educational structure and its legal liability. The problem of casual teaching remains a postscript to the bulking literature of *cri de coeur* about the 'crisis' of the corporate University (for example see Connell). This crisis has launched hordes of 'defences' for literary studies on the grounds of its shifting relevance to labour-capital relations, characterised by the erosion of institutional guarantee, and the perpetuation of precarity. It is hardly a head-scratcher that it remains within the domain of the hypothetical 'rare tenured critic' to strive for 'different answers' to questions about what constitutes the program, and how the classroom can keep it alive (Kornbluh). As for answers, think of a whole book of lamentations for the loss of the discipline's cultural repertoire, appeals to its economic contribution to the 'creative industries', and counsel on how to repurpose the transmission of literary knowledge—often all at the same time. In one recent example, Rita Felski has called for new 'justifications for the costs of the humanities' by focusing on the alliterative sequence of 'curating, conveying, criticising, composing' (Felski).

I am convinced if I was ever in doubt; but why bother re-calibrating the discipline to make it fit the commercialised future with the once-sexy vernacular of global knowledge economy? I worry that having to argue that teaching literature is not too costly, and perhaps even good for the public's moral health would start a language game played to exhaustion, only to the benefit of a handful of scholars who manage to squeeze their work into funded research clusters with signature acronyms and pop-up banners. What is in it for the rest of us—the casuals? What comes between emerging knowledge bearers—assuming that the conditional legitimacy of institutional learning holds—and the next generation of students? Who will teach at the future University?

One could only speculate; for it is precisely the attachment to the future of the program within the paradigm of academic capitalism that diminishes the classroom in present time. In *The Teaching Archive*, Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan have emphasised consideration of the literature classroom not so much as a fixed historical placeholder as a malleable locus for literary formation, subject to extrinsic institutional practices and priorities. They warn that the current malaise of low enrolment and budgetary cuts has reinvigorated the return to the tacit 'origin stories' of the fundamental separation of 'historicists and formalists' in the English department; as if, on one side of this false divide, researchers upheld the institutional prestige of the discipline through excellence metrics, while teachers carried the burden of the symbolically 'valueless' and economically 'valuable' labour. Buurma and Heffernan point to the issue of the negligible impact of emerging teachers on the governance of the English department, and the degraded role of the classroom as merely a surrogate for literary knowledge. The question of what will happen to the future classroom can take us so far without picturing the fate of the emerging teacher, especially if we consider that terms such as 'early career' and 'pre-tenure' tether the current praxis to a sense of (pessimistic) futurism.

In the aftermath of the University of Sydney's decision in 2019 to discontinue the Chair in Australian Literature, Julianne Lamond took issue with the media's abstraction of national literature as a separate entity from the norm of insecure employment in the academy, pointing out that the 'battle for survival' can be won only if the University begins to hire younger academics in tenable work circumstances (Lamond). Sticking around in the hope of securing an ongoing affiliation with the University—any university—has indeed become the main action plan for most recently graduated PhDs. Nonetheless, the results of ARC funding for literary studies are consistently dispiriting—rare as hens' teeth and subject to historical interception by Australian politicians—which leaves most early career academics with teaching on sessional contracts as their only option. It is true that casual pedagogical labour is crucial to the maintenance of the English

department, even though the duty of care is by no means reciprocated; the University, by and large, has zero interest in supporting any other dimension of casual teachers' professional development, including their research.

I want to suggest here that such 'caretaking' (Felski's term) for the sickly University has taken a decisively punitive turn—in the sense that it is not only difficult to sustain, it also induces fear of punishment as a form of calculated control over the means of economic production. I am thinking here with Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer's famous assertion in their 1939 classic *Punishment and Social Structure* that '[e]very system of production tends to discover punishment which correspond to its productive relationships' (Rusche and Kirchheimer 5). The University's business-solution model galvanises its own political economy of punishment in the faulty loop of impoverished work conditions and formalised coercion. As a result, we are witnessing the rise of the discourse of legal consequence—and that is nothing more than a natural extension of the logic of governing the underemployed and the overworked that the extreme financialisation of the academy has brought about through steady subtraction of opportunity and reward.

During the COVID pandemic, the University has moved one palpable notch into a techno-capitalist pedagogy. In some cruel irony, most of us casuals at the University of Melbourne feel lucky to be back to teaching—knowing that thousands of jobs were cut in the Australian University sector in 2020—on contracts that terminate at the end of each semester and accommodate no sick or annual leave. Some have returned to campus with lingering injuries caused by haphazard workspaces that we erected at home last year during a succession of lockdowns (anecdotes of makeshift desks on dinner tables, couches, and bathroom cabinets make a whole dystopian genre in itself). The gymnastics of casual teaching, underrated as it was, has carried through teaching online in a workplace-fluid campus. Relegated to hotdesking in a communal room, we have to teach on Zoom, sometimes in the same room where fellow tutors prepare for their classes. This is paired with the common complaint that students refuse to turn on their cameras, which feeds into the affective resistance to the demands of theory and close reading.

To add to it all, the anxiety around payment has been heightened to a new pitch. We are in constant negotiation about how much we can be paid for various components of teaching—delivery, marking, student support, lecture attendance. The implicit consensus is that between claiming longer hours and doing a perfunctory job, it is in everyone's best interest to stick to the latter (Duffy). Rumours circulate that coordinators who are more realistic about the tutors' time commitments can get into trouble for approving of hours that the managerial class find excessive or avoidable. The implication is that some subjects that we are

teaching are too expensive for the University to run again next year. While casuals may get blacklisted by universities for raising the alarm on underpayment, investigations into allegations of the University's payment of casuals by the Fair Work Ombudsmen are in full swing (Zhou). Casual academics teach in an incriminating workplace, tense with allegations of wage theft and overclaiming. The result is the feeling that you are always being watched, and you are always watching others, and that your performance is constantly measured, monetised, and potentially disputed. To continue like this will mean that the University will mutate ever more comfortably into a surveillant society for casual teachers, where the fear of punishment, becomes a more pronounced element in moulding academic behaviour.

Thinking about punishment might be useful to disabuse us of residual notions of the University as a permissive laboratory open to the possibility of revolt—a *real* University—for, Bill Readings wrote in *The University in Ruins*,: 'no such institution has ever existed' (Readings 5). It also helps to avoid the well-implied dichotomy of the professoriate as the good guys versus the managerial class as the bad guys. The ambivalence (if not downright adherence) of some senior academics towards the neoliberal agenda peeks through in occasional op-eds, which disingenuously blame the fiscal punishment of the university sector on the Left's political overcorrection, and intolerance. In *What's the Use?* Sara Ahmed has shown that the Benthamite utilitarianism of the modern University is not so much an external political intervention into the university as its sophisticated mechanism of governance. However, even the more cynical observers are finding the sheer speed of the dissipation of the University baffling; for, as its ultimate trick, it has somehow managed to hold on to amateurish disinterest in the intellectual outcome and merge it with a mad pursuit of the maximisation of efficiency, through outsourcing academic labour. Stefan Collini reminds us that the University and capitalism coexisted for at least 150 years without such a passionate embrace for the better part of this period. One of the foundational principles of the University's existence since the 19th century has been precisely its 'alternative ethic or antidote to the commercial world' (16).

Why is it, then, that the University is unravelling at an astonishing rate despite many advocates for an intervention into, or at least a deacceleration of, its submission to extreme marketisation? Thomas Mathiesen's concept of *synopticon* may allow a way of appreciating the rabid syncretism of the University and the market's increasing dependence on technocorrective machinery. In a 1997 article, 'The Viewer Society', Mathiesen warned against the function of technology for its potential to become a tool for biopolitical discipline and punishment through controlling 'many by many'. The synopticon surveillance neutralises the dissenting ideological inclinations and resistance towards the ever-present regime of surveillance. This 'vast hidden apparatus' would render individuals

'unable to point concretely' to it which, in effect, makes us 'arrange our affairs accordingly, perhaps without being fully aware of it. We remain, in our attitude, communists, left-oriented, or what have you, but adjust in terms of behaviour (229).

Since 2017, when the rumours of wage theft at the University of Melbourne surfaced, the University has done everything to cut down on expenses without legal or financial repercussions, including multiple and contradictory announcements vis-à-vis payment for attending lectures. These decisions may reinforce the anxiety that speaking out against it might be regarded disruptive for the new order. This is apparent from a number of recent media pieces by casual academics which are either published anonymously or take a stifling amount of caution in voicing the issue. The flip side to the absence of 'formal voice' is the prevalence of organisational gossip, which symptomises careerist rivalry rather than collegial dialogue for any real political change (Fleming 4). These punitive measures further alienate casual academics from less privileged backgrounds. Those who can persevere in their genteel poverty usually have either their family's financial support or, for better or worse, are tapped on the shoulder frequently enough by senior academics to coordinate and tutor leftover subjects. The 'contingent faculty of color'—parents of young children, graduate researchers and ECRs from the Global South on insecure visas, those with chronic illness or disabilities—will find it increasingly unviable to tie their future to the University's Amazon-style gig economy (Santos 186).

The increasing reliance on centralised operating systems, such as LMS, Canvas, and Moodle, which registers the exact amount of time of services offered to the University, including marking and attending lectures, will leave an imprint on young academics to monitor their own behaviour. Canvas, for example, is designed in a way that gives everyone involved in teaching a subject to view exactly how and when their colleagues have marked essays, any time they want. At the same time, the system has been set up to give you the impression of autonomy and convenience to no real effect, except reinforcing a lexicon of efficiency (there is nothing speedy about marking on Canvas, Speed Grader). It is not entirely implausible to envisage this level of surveillance technology as the early stages of more aggressive incorporation of what Ajunwa Ifeoma, Kate Crawford and Jason Schultz have called the use of 'limitless worker surveillance' already prevalent in other service economies (743). In the context of Australian universities, this is further complicated by the fact that subjects are often inherited from previous teachers, and content is already delivered with restricted input by tutors. This leaves little in the way of the steady move by the University not only to administer education cheaply, but, more disconcertingly, to reimagine the role of the teacher and student as replicable commodities. We become—to draw on Stephen Turner and Sean Sturm's term—'template' tutors for 'template students' in an institution

where pedagogy is curtailed to turn these predictable 'funding units' into the 'new model citizen of a neoliberal global commons.' (17) This applicatory conception of the pedagogical outcome will be the University's enduring contribution to closing the gap between the possibility of revolt in the face of most pressing social and ecological issues. To imagine a less cruel future remains a potential inside the literature classroom. But who would know for how much longer?

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