
I must admit that upon first bending the spine of Academic Callings: The University We Have Had, Now Have, and Could Have (2010), I thought that I might emerge disappointed. I mistrusted the form. I had only modest expectations that this selection of personal reflections on the discourse and reality of the university would be sufficient to meet the challenge of properly addressing the crisis in higher education that Canada faces today. When met with a crisis, the individual craves a definitive reading of the situation. Previous, and perhaps more ambitious interventions on the topic, such as The University in Ruins (Readings, 1997) and Unmaking of the Public University (Newfield, 2008) provided authorial, analytic, and sustained theses on where academia ran awry; and yet standing alongside them, Academic Callings (2010) achieves something altogether different, subtle, and informal in its tone, scope, and intention.

Editors Janice Newson and Claire Polster have achieved a rare and delicate balance in their editorial direction, where personal narratives, rather than breaking up or obscuring the larger picture, speak to the complexity, the tensions, and the shifting ideals extant in the Canadian university. While the autobiographical genre is the norm, and political partisanship and narratives of resistance constitute a distinctive feature, these build and combine toward the question of the nature and condition of generational memory, its transmission, and its uncertain future in academia. As one of the contributors Barbara Godard writes, “transmitting complex knowledge across generations has long been a responsibility of the university” (p. 26). Academic Callings (2010) extends that responsibility one step further in its efforts to transmit a plural but unified memory of the university itself to the next generation.

Does the university have a memory? Whom, or what, remembers the university? When “memory” surfaces as a political signifier, normally it signifies that it is somewhere under threat. Indeed, Newson and Polster (2010), citing the accelerated pace of faculty replacements and commercialization, suggest that Canadian universities are experiencing the “loss of this extensive institutional memory” (p. 3) and intend this book to pass on institutional memory and the experiences, accomplishments, and disappointments of members of the retiring generation as well as of mid-career faculty members whose conceptions of academic life were shaped by the university in the 1960s and 1970s, but whose careers unfolded in the 1980s and 1990s. (p. 3)

Given the generation of scholars providing voice throughout the work, the “institutional memory” offered here is rather limited in scope. While it transmits personal experience and its concomitant critical vantage point, it does little to flesh out the history of the university, which is vast considering the university’s complicated role in Western culture. The “long view” offered here spans only a few generations. The informal and subjective stance espoused by most of the twenty-nine contributors precludes the ability of the historical to decenter the generational specificities of the book.
This collection instead speaks to the moment of its publication: the baby boomers, who experienced the university as an extension of the welfare state, are vacating their offices and find their legacy potentially undermined and thwarted by the corporatization of higher education. The form and content of *Academic Callings* (2010) privileges the individual as the site of remembrance, but the witness-function of the narratives underscores the very real hurdles to the transmission and communication of remembrance when cultural discourse, institutional reforms, and the rituals of academic culture are in transformation. The selection of retiring and mid-career academics provides critical witness accounts of the shift in the 80s and 90s away from a public-service mandate towards the corporatization and privatization of universities, championed by neo-liberalism. The authors have either witnessed the transition themselves, or are juggling careers within the new status quo. The contrast between the university we “have had” and the university we “now have” takes a distinct refrain. The university of the past was comparatively more closed to women and ethnic minorities, but without question provided better labour conditions and aspired to meet the needs of the public; in contrast, today’s university is more welcoming to women, and to sexual and ethnic diversity in ways unimaginable before, but the future of the institution’s public mandate, the job security afforded faculty, and the open pursuit of truth or thought are facing new constraints and/or existential threat as they are opened to the pressures of the market. The consensus of this book is that the university has not improved for the better. Public interest is threatened as public funding diminishes and as universities embrace private-oriented approaches to knowledge (and its transmission, production, dissemination and application), such that administrators and scholars invest their efforts toward securing external funding through grant competitions and private sponsorship.

Memory is dangerous; it is self-serving if not checked and it tends to forget details that are prone to contradict or counter the image one holds of the past. This book could be chided for its nostalgia—the chosen form makes it vulnerable to such a charge—except that nostalgia embodies a form of memory politics that is not altogether compatible with the work’s general intentions. *Academic Callings* (2010) is nostalgic to the extent that the reader clearly senses that a return to the model espoused in the 1960s and 70s would benefit the university, but the exigent need to carry over an institutional memory suggests that another burgeoning politics may be emerging. As Allan McNeill (1998) explains, nostalgic individuals are secure about their identity, but insecure about the present. Those who are insecure about their identity alternatively turn to memory as a means to secure and authenticate their sense of self. *Academic Callings* (2010) manages to hold the two trends in tension. While several narratives might speak to the nostalgic, not all contributors follow in the same vein.

Where memory might serve as a necessary but fragile foundation for one’s identity ultimately rests with a specific reader, one invoked repeatedly and regularly: the novice academic, the PhD candidate considering higher education as a career, the next generation upon which the renewal of the university is at stake. It is that reader, perhaps more than the contributors, for whom nostalgia is beyond reach but for whom memory is requisite. *Academic Callings*’ (2010) intention is that the next generations might
come to register what is lost in the university’s commercialization; that while they may not remember the public university of earlier decades, they still might know and transmit its ideals. Parts 1 and 5 of the collection, “Against All Reason: Wake-Up Calls” and “Re/generating Publics: Calls to Collectivity,” in particular communicate the urgency of renewing and nurturing academic public spheres and collective action against a university culture, increasingly fragmented and specialized, which effectively erodes the university’s democratic function. To be sure, certain readers will object to the book’s partisan character, with very little stated in favour of the university’s recent developments. This corpus never aspires toward a journalistic definition of objectivity where both “sides” get to present their argument. Instead, Newson and Polster (2010) offer an admittedly partisan but politically focused, provocative, and rich collection of essays that provide more in structural, personal, institutional, and historical analysis than initially meets the eye. Those firmly anchored in academia, and those reaching retirement, may read it and consider what they might bring to the conversation. PhD candidates and initiates to the university will benefit greatly from reading its contents as they debate, imagine, and fight for a university on the wane.

References

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