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## **THE UNIVERSITY, ITS IDEAS, AND ITS DISCONTENTS**

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There is perhaps no more intellectually courageous act than for an established scholar to submit an essay for review and critique by a cohort of individuals in an interdisciplinary doctoral program. It is through this frame that Dr. Joseph Pitt's submission of his essay, "On the Idea of the University," to this issue of SPECTRA must be viewed. In forgoing the more traditional avenue of journal publication without concurrently published responses, Pitt has provided the members of the ASPECT program (the Alliance for Social, Political, Ethical and Cultural Thought) at Virginia Tech with an endlessly provocative essay that has inspired the widely varied responses that follow. The topic of "the American Research University" and the dangers it faces is material that is both widely interpretable and, as the responses clearly show, intensely personal. This combination makes for very intriguing reading as all of the following responses are, like Pitt's essay itself, passionately crafted and uniquely situated amidst a bricolage of individual and disciplinary identities that have the single cohesive thread of being positioned, at this particular juncture, within the academy itself.

The first response by Shien-Hauh Leu embodies the core of the ASPECT community's critical orientation by questioning the very concept of "the university" as presented by Pitt. Instead of accepting Pitt's premise of the university, Leu illustrates the dubious and often retroactive intellectual and social practices that are necessary to perpetuate the myth of an ideal university that is home to, and guardian of, a knowledge that is in need of perpetuation. By tracing the post Civil-War history of the American university, the standards of assessment that riddle its contemporary manifestations, and the "tripartite relationship" between students, faculty and "the fantasy of pure

assessment,” Leu suggests that “Pitt’s proposed solution . . . merely externalizes, outsources and postpones engagement with the underlying antagonisms, one of which stems from the constitutive violence of the university as an . . . ideological state apparatus.” Thus the crisis of the university identified by Pitt is not for Leu a unique phenomenon, but rather a constituent part of all American research institutions that is accessible and mutable only if those in the academy are willing to address a number of “longstanding systemic pathologies” that undergird all such institutions of “higher” education.

In the second response, Aaron Stoller accepts Pitt’s presuppositions concerning American universities and the dangers they face, but differs in his suggestion that the role of the educator is but a small piece—a catalyzer to be exact—in the larger process of knowledge exchange. For Stoller, the German concept of *Bildung*, which he defines using the Good and Garrison definition as “an ongoing process of both personal and cultural maturation,” is a much broader and more inclusive idea than “education,” and is better suited to provide insight into how to navigate the . . . Stoller’s unique positioning as both a scholar and an individual who has worked in administrative roles a number of universities enables him to critically examine whether epistemological hyper-rationalization helps or hinders attempts to mitigate the four dangers Pitt articulates amidst contemporary university cultures that emphasize effectiveness, accountability, and repeatable quality assessments. By working with a concept of intellectual community that reaches from the development of the individual to society-at-large, Stoller emphasizes “a radical rethinking of . . . [the] foundations on which our universities are built” that is “at once radically student focused, problem-driven, and interdisciplinary.”

Seth Bartee also emphasizes the importance of the community of the university itself, but does so by returning to the role of the educator with the caveat that understanding the “distinction between scholar, intellectual, and academic” is crucial for comprehending the roles that educators and researchers can and should play in the American research university. Bartee wrestles with Pitt’s insistence that the faculty are

fundamental to the institutional crisis being faced by investigating the insights of the mid-twentieth century “reactionary” conservative scholar Russell Kirk on the rise of the prestige of the “intellectual” within the academy while there has been a concurrent devaluation of the role of the “scholar.” The nature of Kirk’s conservative critique is unexpected because for him the dominance of intellectualism within the academy had a direct tie to the ongoing Cold War and the Western attempt to shun all forms of communalism/communism amidst a global struggle that was both militaristic and cultural in nature. For Bartee, the insights of Kirk are of great importance today in an academic climate where visions of the university as “a community of souls where life and research are of equal importance” are nearly nonexistent.

While many of the respondents note Pitt’s use of the terms “guardians of knowledge” and “our cultural heritage” in passing, the core of Pamela Mullins’ response is an active questioning of the underlying assumptions of these two phrases. Stemming from her unique interdisciplinary training in the fields of Africana studies, continental critical theory and art history/critique, Mullins asks “whose culture and whose knowledge do universities and scholars guard” and “what does it mean to be a guardian of knowledge [in an Western/American university]?” Mullins engages Pitt’s essay not merely as an individual perspective, but as emblematic of a larger trend within the Western academy to make a number of problematic assumptions about the nature, origins, and proprietorship of “knowledge.” Mullins intriguingly questions the efficacy of the role of guardianship by proposing that “the history of human knowledge is in fact a history of loss, augmentation and abandonment.” Like her peers and Pitt, Mullins is intimately concerned with the creation of a genuine academic community, but her focus is situated more tangibly in the diverse fiscal and demographic realities of the twenty-first century American research universities.

Scott Tate also narrows the focus of his response by specifically addressing only Pitt’s fourth danger of the “lack of faculty engagement in the public realm” and his call faculty to pursue the role of public intellectual. At the core of Tate’s critique is what he calls “the undercurrent of faculty exceptionalism [that] permeates Pitt’s essay.” For

Tate, the blanket call for faculty to strive to become public intellectuals is problematic both because of the research showing the underside of such aspirations and due to the narrow scope of the meaning of “engagement” used by Pitt. Like Stoller, Tate’s background in university administration in a community engagement capacity leads him to suggest the identity/position of “engaged interdisciplinary neighbor” as a more functional role, not only for faculty members, but also for all members of a university who seek to meaningfully engage with their local communities. Tate’s response takes seriously the manifold difficulties of crossing the academic-public boundary by forgoing the privilege of the intellectual at the pulpit in favor of the concerned worker who avails herself to the dirty work of toiling in the trenches.

In a deviation from the methodological structure of the other responses, Barbara Hassell forgoes a qualitative analysis of the crises facing universities generally in favor of a quantitative analysis of the salary differentials between the different formal titles of educators at Virginia Tech itself. Drawing on annually published statistics on a cross-section of university positions, Hassell expands the range of education identities in her explicit investigation of the social and economic realities of adjunct faculty. What is perhaps most unique (and, as a result, most troublesome) about Hassell’s response is that in turning the lens on the very institution, academic program, faculty, and students who comprised the entirety of this particular issue of SPECTRA, she illustrates with a concrete simplicity that the crises under review need no abstraction as they exist right on our own doorstep. By detailing “the exploitation of adjunct teachers” at Virginia Tech and universities across the United States, Hassell encourages the tangible action of speaking out for the exploited that challenges us all to put our proverbial money where our mouths are—which in this case requires no money, only the willingness to make some utterance, any utterance, on the behalf of others with whom we share the vocation of educating.

Hyunkyung Cho, a post-Doctoral research fellow in ASPECT, closes out the responses with her extended discussion of knowledge in the age of technology. Using Pitt’s article as a starting point, Cho investigates how “the collaborative action of

technology and (humans) reframes . . . knowledge . . . beyond the logic of opposition” by reconsidering what she deems the three “basic and essential characteristics” of knowledge. The first characteristic is “reflecting knowledge,” which wrestles with how “the human-subject centered dichotomy assumes that [a] human controls actions at his own will, while technology is a simple technological tool” and suggests that a collaborative understanding of humans and technology is a better way to frame our understanding of knowledge. Drawing on the psychoanalytic concept of overdetermination, Cho’s second characteristic is “performing knowledge” which addresses the repetitive action and desire-based processes through which knowledge is conveyed. Lastly, Cho utilizes Derrida’s term “invagination,” in conjunction with her own concept of “Aesthetic Technology” to illustrate an “invaginating knowledge” that actively synthesizes and supplements knowledge in a continual process of striving for addition/completion amidst a perpetual “incompleteness . . . derived from its essential lack.” Cho’s response works to “re-conceive knowledge within knowledge,” and in so doing, complexifies the very concept of knowledge that runs throughout all the perspectives included herein.

In looking at Pitt’s essay and the responses in a textually holistic manner, one cannot help but conjecture that Pitt’s submission of this particular article was skilfully selected as an intentional method of intellectual provocation. As a founding affiliate faculty member of the ASPECT program, Dr. Pitt is an individual who knows better than most the diverse perspectives that would be used to analyse and responds to his argument. Indeed, the responses themselves show a tendency to engage Pitt’s arguments as representative, not merely of an individual scholars opinions, but of a number of larger trends within American Research Universities today. The result of all of these threads being woven together in this issue of SPECTRA, conjectural musing aside, is a text that provides a wide array of perspectives of the state of the academy—and the edifices and individuals who populate its indistinct boundaries—at a moment in which all of those component parts face some of their most pressing fiscal and organization challenges in decades. It is the hope of all of us in the APSECT program

