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‘Lost futures’, and undermined pasts of the pandemic; digital lecturers’ ghostly reflections of time, self, and the university.

Abstract

This paper seeks to bear witness to the spectres of uncertainty and anxiety experienced through workplace isolations as university teaching occupied solely digital environments during the early weeks of the pandemic. We reflect on the ways lecturers experienced uncanny and fearful moments as orders of organisational time and its expected realities were abruptly abandoned, exploring working life and its unsettling, ghostly insights during this singular moment of social pause.

Using Derrida’s hauntology as a theoretical framework, this study fuses reflections from previous research using three-level image and content analysis to trace the covert realms temporarily inhabited during the liminal episode of lockdown. Alternative and hitherto unnoticed understandings residing in real-time narratives and curated images enable a recognition of lost and stifled futures alongside a tracing of working histories during a moment of crisis. The spectral lens provides an understanding of how a temporary disjuncture in organisational time, coupled with disembodied work in the digital sphere sees individuals questioning self and role and struggling with reincorporation. The paper also reflects on possible implications of professional and personal isolation, relating how pandemic discomforts haunt subsequent trajectories and working relationships in university life.

Keywords: Hauntology, pandemic, digital teaching, narrative, visual methods

Introduction

The pandemic was a liminal time (Turner, 1977), when the ‘historically constituted divide between the social and the individual, the abstract and the concrete, the analytical and the imaginary’ (Radway, 2008: ix) was opened for questioning. Lockdown caused modern

societies to cease functioning in expected ways, impacting basic human rights and expectations alongside curtailing economic activities. Individuals and groups experienced being ‘betwixt and between states, roles and/or identities’ (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2020:471), and accepted distinctions between the specific troubles of individuals and public issues (Mills, 2008:8) of social and organisational life were newly rendered ambiguous with rapid and dramatic changes to ways of living and working.

This paper reflects on academics’ emotional responses to those temporary changes in mediation processes between themselves, their students, and institution during the rapid pivot to solely online teaching as the sector responded to the pandemic crisis. In the UK, campus buildings were shuttered, and face-to-face and blended tuition abandoned for solely online spheres. Here, provider tendencies to position unembodied and less-communal (Eringfield, 2021) online teaching as of secondary value were upturned, and less celebrated or considered (Collins et al 2022:207) elements of digital teaching cultures and practices were rendered newly visible.

Today, post-pandemic learnings on rapid adaptations to teaching and management practices during this time are providing useful scholarly inquiry in relation to impacts on students (see Bebbington, 2021), university operations (De Boer, 2020), and strategic approaches to hybrid-teaching norms (Nordmann et al, 2022). These sector-specific insights accompany wide-ranging research into short and longer-term challenges to pre-pandemic ‘organization-as-usual’ (Simpson et al, 2023:4). These include discussions of post-pandemic changes to work practices, emergent autonomies and accompanying surveillance (De Vaujany et al, 2021), and contested organisational responsibilities (Geiger and Gross, 2023).

However, reflective accounts of other imaginaries experienced through professional and social isolation and their impacts on management learning have lagged. The silences of the

pandemic, as opposed to the bustle of previous everyday work practices, were, as Gabriel (2020:326) relates, anxious times in organisations, with narratives ‘of covert and silent meanings’, overlaid by subsequent individual and collective traumas of economic downturn. Normal situations and well-defined workplace activities became anything but, provoking anxieties and tensions. This is raised empirically by Kim et al (2022:1574), whose study of teachers’ agency during the pandemic captures experiential nuances, recording psychological stressors and coping strategies.

In response, this paper revisits elements of our own study of temporarily-enhanced autonomies in teaching and learning during the pandemic (Glover et al, 2024) to explore the less-considered but nonetheless powerful ‘agency of the unseen’, (Kociatkiewicz, 2022:317) lurking at the edges of our research participants narratives. Our original study had its *declared* themes in analysis of changed organisational behaviours produced by the abandonment of organisational routines, linear time, and communication issues. Writing-up, however, slowly generated our awareness of other, latent perspectives and differing interpretations of empirical material (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000:249-50) we might construct. Although we drew our initial inspiration from Corlett’s (2012) approach to management learning by revisiting a previous dataset, we were not explicitly ‘struck’. In this case, we slowly felt the breath of ghostly encounters troubling our participants as they ‘glimpsed another, gloomier future’ (Pors, 2016:1642) whilst we documented their lockdown challenges. These echoes stayed with us, and formed the basis for revisiting the material.

This paper therefore aims to make two contributions in capturing ‘elusive and emotional aspects’ (Pors, 2016:1643) of that liminal time, and secondary empirical meanings produced, as one participant noted, ‘in the margins’ (R8) of the main study. Firstly, extending analysis to a ‘re-telling that reaches deeper into the context of the text’ (Kociatkiewicz, 2022:317) capturing traces of what otherwise might be lost (Del Pilar Blanco, 2012:81) of the lockdown

teaching experience, and how these tracings might inform current and future navigations in our professional contexts. Secondly, to use haunting as a conceptual frame for exploring insights thrown up around past, present and future for everyday teaching practices during a period of disjointed time and organisational stasis. Here 'the ghostly' offers different perspectives on working life during that altered social condition of lockdown and helps frame implications for renewal as organisations reopened.

Three themes are used as a way of organising ambiguous and uncomfortable data (Wolfreys, 2013:72) to convey learning about our lecturers' experiences during the pandemic. These include *new worlds and a sense of ending*, *ghostly selves*, and *accepting liminality and preparing for reincorporation*. They focus in turn on the abrupt cancellation of expected futures (theme one is a quote from a respondent), adjusting to a ghostly life as online lecturer, and finally on acceptance of the rites of transition, exploring tensions around the disjuncture of non-contemporaneity of present time and coming and going from Derrida (2006:29). In all our themes we consider the legacies of history disquieting the present and occupying the future (Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren 2013:92-5), alongside the multiplicity and proliferation (Derrida, 2006:173) of ghosts disturbing our respondents and how they might recall the spectres of empty teaching rooms, an abandoned academic year, and previous working lives.

The first section of this paper considers the notion of liminality as one way of framing the social context of that unsettling temporal and social space of pandemic life and work. Next, we introduce the concept of haunting; and its relations to time and organisation, as we consider the presence of ghosts in the university calendar. In the third section of the paper, we discuss the research context - generating our 'ghosts' through applying our previous study to tell a story of manifestations affecting teaching staff in lockdown life. We then analyse the rites and rituals of that life and associated emotional responses through thematic discussion. Finally, we discuss the value of the ghostly for exploring tacit and less-acknowledged

feelings and understandings and the importance of acknowledging impacts on lecturer emotions in post-pandemic organisational life.

Literature: Into different realms

Liminality

As highlighted by Bamber et al (2017:1518) liminality has become an important concept for contemporary researchers. Developed from social anthropology, the extension of liminality into organisational studies ecology evokes compatibility with ‘fluid, temporary and... ambiguous elements’ (Söderlund and Borg, 2018:880) and blurrings of modern life and work, many of which were exacerbated during the isolations and vulnerabilities of lockdown.

For those living and working through a lockdown ‘world of contingency’ (Thomassen, 2009:5), of a recognised pause between their expected daily lives and future possibilities, many found themselves unsettled in transient, and potentially extended conditions of ‘betwixt and between’ (Turner, 1977:95) in both a personal and collective sense. Adopting temporal configurations set out by Thomassen (2018:49) we can tentatively bind the initial lockdown period (Walker et al, 2020) as a liminal ‘moment’ affecting individuals, groups, and society, but also offer insights for post-pandemic situations where transitions might continue, and individuals remain emotionally ‘outside’ newly accepted working arrangements.

In *The Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep [1909](1960) initially conceptualised three distinct phases of ritual for social transitions, which may be individual or collective experiences. Derived from the Latin *limen*, (threshold), the anthropological tradition observes an initial temporary ‘separation’ from previous social contexts, through a liminal ‘position of ambiguity and uncertainty’ (Beech, 2011:287) towards a phase of (re)incorporation into a new, and changed state of normality within a social system. Van Gennep’s empirical explorations of ritual social passages such as weddings and funerals were developed and

extended by Turner (1982) to emphasise the centrality of the liminal process through social ambiguity and invisibility. Experiences include ‘sudden foregrounding of agency’ (Thomassen, 2009:14) and ‘intense emotion’ (Szakolczai, 2018:20) generated through the attempt, and reflections on the attempt, to cross a threshold between ‘two worlds’ (Izak et al, 2023:214).

Recent reconceptualisations such as by Ybema et al (2011:22) ‘stretch’ anthropological terms beyond original understandings of a ‘temporary state’ to consider implications for when an individual/collective does not reach (re)incorporation, such as during consultancy or short-term role. Two potential states produced by liminal experiences are then summarised by Beech (2011:288) as either a bounded ‘temporary transition through which identity is reconstructed’ and/or a protracted experience of uncertainty and lack of resolution ‘within a changeful context’. In the second of these, a ‘persistently ambiguous’ (Ybema, 2011:24) insecurity of failed or perpetual transition may manifest, shorn of ‘many of the positive aspects’ (Bamber et al, 2017:1519) of changing work role or organisation, and ripe for unsettling thoughts. This second state of ambiguity is further teased out by Bamber et al (2017) who conceptually detangle categorisations of permanent liminality, of crossing and recrossing a threshold (which they consider may be under conditions of necessity or by choice) from a trapped state of forgottenness, or limbo. During a collective and imposed liminal experience, such as during the pandemic, individuals may rationalise that the ‘changeful context’ may resolve for many, yet fear their own aggregation delayed, impermanent, or refused. Society itself will reopen, and move on, yet they themselves may be left behind. It is in such conditions of anxiety where the ghostly may be most felt.

For, while that ‘neither here nor there’ (Turner, 1977:95) ‘moment’ of liminality is intense, emotional, and ambiguous, it may unsettle, but is not required to point to repression or denial. It is rather within the fear of persistent ‘changeful concept’, where respondents struggled with

their emotions from a sudden temporary collapse of expected working routines that the stage is set for that ‘figure of the ghost’ (Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren (2013:2) at the edge of lockdown working lives. As theorised by Pors (2016:1642), the spectre is one way we ‘sense and intuit’ complex consequences of transition and change, ‘unseen and unheard’ outside moments of reflection or revelation, (Fiddler, 2019:464).

A ‘spectral turn’

Whilst the term ‘hauntology’ belongs to Derrida (2006:10) in describing Hamlet’s time ‘out of joint’ (p.1-2) and the Prince’s declaration to follow whither the spectre may lead, the idea has inspired development across a broad range of subsequent mainstream and academic encounters. Sometimes considered as a thoughtful conversation with past or possible future options, roads not travelled, and encounters with previous selves as ghosts, the concept has affinity for working with ambiguities from crisis and change. These often stem from Derrida’s reflections on the subsuming spread of capitalism amid the vestiges of previous socialist alternatives. Following outputs include pop culture concepts of ‘broken time’ (Fisher (2014:25) and ‘lost futures’ for innovation (Fisher, 2014) alongside recent academic interest that seeks to address the ‘particular moments’ when and where ghosts might appear to individuals and in society, (Good, 2019:412).

Good (2021:xiv) ties continuing interest in a ‘spectral turn’ over the last generation of Western cultural studies to a number of factors. These range from the translation of Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* into English to growing interest in memory and trauma studies based on difficult events that ‘haunt societies and demand repair’, illustrated through his own work on the aftermath of 9/11. He draws from Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren (2013:10) who connect previous turns toward history and memory that support analyses of personal and collective trauma alongside growing interest in organisational hinterlands and exploring the boundaries

of social norms. Here ghosts and haunting provide what the authors term a ‘conceptual metaphor’, as analytical tool for theorising complex social, ethical, and political questions. For the authors, the ghost inhabits a liminal space ‘between visibility and invisibility, life and death, materiality and immateriality’ (p.2). It denotes, and draws attention to, that unsettling *spectacle* created where ‘matter is out of place’ (Hall, 2001:330).

In terms of interdisciplinary affinity, the topic dovetails with studies of organisational time, histories, and conceptualisations of change and change management (Suddaby and Foster, 2017), alongside ideas of historicity in individual and collective identity work (Suddaby et al, 2016:299). Hauntology disrupts expected chronologies and conventions of history and time, ‘haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not dated, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of a calendar’, (Derrida, 2006:3).

Notions of identity as a negotiated process of belonging (Beech, 2011) might be threatened when the significance of time itself becomes ambiguous, such as during the pandemic, providing conditions where we might encounter the past, and past selves in unexpected ways. Gordon (2008:xvi) refers to the distinctive nature of haunting as altering the ‘experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future’, and highlights it as a ‘moment (of however long duration) when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed...something else, something different from before...’

Ghostly purpose in organisational life

In an organisational context, ghosts can signify ambiguities, times when we know we lack full understanding. This study therefore uses Pors (2016:1642) conceptualisation of the ghostly, which rather than focus on the typically fictional story of the dead coming back to haunt the living, consider it a framework for ‘being attentive to the ways in which, once in a

while, the different pasts and the alternative futures...resurface'. They are 'experiences that bring organizational actors into contact with doubts and ambiguous feelings...in an indeterminate and hesitant way', (Pors, 2016:1646). Centring that notion of 'once in a while' alongside moments of traumatic events theorised by Good (2019:412) are important for solidifying the spectre. Instances of specific circumstance such as working life in lockdown conditions also help avoid circularity and cliché, (Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, 2013:294), guarding against the tendency to 'replicate tropes' from interdisciplinary affinity by retaining precision and historicity, (Luckhurst, 2002:535).

Those early weeks of the pandemic crisis was such an event, and this paper considers metaphors and narratives drawn by teaching staff as they explored consequences of sudden, imposed change. Like Pors' study, the paper reflects on uncanny experiences when a seemingly linear sequence of organisational time collapses and individuals question both previously familiar orderings of time and self as well as 'lost, forgotten or silenced futures' (p.1646). As noted by Kociatkiewicz et al (2023:313) in this context, the ghost is an active agentic presence that can 'throw light' on generally side-lined aspects that might otherwise 'have escaped scrutiny and evaded understanding'.

Ghosts in the university

Lockdown teaching presents close affiliation with Turner's (1977) conceptualisation of liminal time in exploring transition between the comfort of a fixed point of expected social conditions and reaggregation into new states. Firstly, separation from an established fixed state, in this case the expected university year, before entering a 'cultural realm' (p.94) of ambiguities during the liminal period identified here where people were working solely in a digital sphere. Finally, we may return to stability (incorporation) with post-covid working. It is this isolated period of emotional responses to potentially perpetual ambiguity, reduced or

abandoned organisational structures, and liminality that this study seeks to trace through a working 'social limbo' (Turner, 1982:24) of the pandemic. Universities have traditional and expected understandings of chronological time and priorities, couched as 'seasons' of academic rhythm and content for teaching, assessment and results by Back (2016:1-2). Lockdown, however, imposed a temporary interregnum of academic routines, and markers of change to pedagogies and assessments, creating discontinuity between present and expected, and not-present and unexpected work. The pause from expected contexts left staff 'unmoored' (Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, 2013:14), evoking Steinbeck's (1975:68), 'strange and contradictory' intervals of eventlessness, with 'no posts to drape duration on'.

Other conceptualisations of sociological and personal time (Urry, 2012) became possible when 'standardised and regularised' (Gault, 1995:154) chronological time was suspended. These might be experienced as the kairological time of anthropological studies discussed by Gault, awaiting future possibilities but focused anew on the present, the now – of an online tutorial engaged solely with students' learning rather than teaching to assessment. Or perhaps human moments of vertical time 'anchored in the body' which enable us to 'connect with something bigger through our writing', conceptualised by Helin (2023:387, 382), from Bachelard. Or, for those experiencing grief and loss, the stretched, then concertinaed time stealing into work routines recognised by trauma studies, (Gusich, 2012:513).

Such apparent contradictions in experienced time and temporality impacted on roles and identity work of lecturers who experienced feelings of being *other* during the pandemic. Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren (2013:3) conceptualise the state of disjointed emotions and *otherness* in such times as 'encounters' and 'negotiations' with disturbance, whether in relation to the self, or social contexts. The ghostly burden here may shift locations, with the concept able to convey 'both haunting (of others) and feeling haunted (by others)' (Orr, 2014:1058).

In relation to organisational practice, this uncomfortable and transitory ‘space between’ and the opportunity it presents is considered by Orr (2014:1044). He explores the capacity of ghosts to ‘look in at least three directions’, firstly to organisational pasts of inheritances and path-dependent decisions, a present of current practice and reproduction of organisational traditions, and futures yet-to-come. These are tantalisingly considered as fateful, highlighting a choice for continuity or transformation but also demonstrating the value of how past organisational voices shape the present and are considered authoritative and truthful. Ghosts tell us that there were once, and will be, other ways of thinking and working.

We can now reflect upon a liminal time of pandemic university practices as an historical event that helps explore how we ‘arrived *here*’ (Gallagher et al, 2023:644) in recently accepted, if not institutionalised, states of hybrid working, albeit haunted by ‘motifs of mourning, inheritance and promise’ (Derrida, 1999:235). Gallagher et al (2023) use hauntology as a lens for charting the curation of digital spheres, noting that digital education itself is ‘often framed as a break’ from historical education practices, but also where a generation of teaching expertise in online/hybrid environments has produced its own expected states and legacies of structure, routines and path dependencies.

In summary, dovetailing conditions for haunting with the concerns of liminal time may provide a productive tool for exploring individual sensemaking undertaken by lecturing staff in situations of fear and ambiguity alongside subsequent emotional repair work. We therefore propose the ghostly as a framework for sensitive analysis of such uncertainties and indeterminacy as discussed via empirical work below. Here otherwise hidden perspectives of a liminal experience might be rendered visible and productive through the metaphor of the spectral, shedding light on how we construct our present post-pandemic difficulties.

However, as we turn to our analysis, we also wish to consider two implications for working with hauntology, as problematised by Wolfreys (2013). Firstly, we acknowledge that we are

seeking to reanimate text conceived in trauma to capture learning, implying that engagement with haunting and the ghostly is, in itself, an emotive and unsettling task. Secondly, working with the ghostly means working with a notion that ‘resists conceptualisation’ (p.70). As hosts, Derrida (2006:173) counsels us of difficulties in attempts to classify the ghost, that it ‘proliferates’ and multiplies and we may ‘no longer count its offspring or interests’. While sympathetic with times of social anxiety and disruption, the concept forces us to live with doubt, to ‘stay with the ghost’ and to resist ‘resolving’ and smoothing (Pors, Olaison and Otto, 2019:16) through attempted linear explanations, and to be affected by how a multiplicity of ‘inheritances of the past’ haunt ‘the struggles of the present’ (Orr, 2014:1042).

In light of these insights, we therefore note that whilst the main focus of our paper dwells upon lecturers’ experiences of the ghostly, that the space is crowded. For our participants, the ghosts of students in empty teaching rooms jostle with tracings of an abandoned timetable, alongside echoes of temporarily-stilled bureaucracy. As researchers too, we saw lecturers recognising themselves as ghostly figures to their students online, denied their usual physical teaching presence and fearing for future implications. And, over it all, the spectre of the virus, stretching silent fingers across a moment of crisis.

Therefore, in our empirical section we pick up three themes and directions for ghostly activity during the pandemic: past, present and future-facing. Firstly, an exploration of *new worlds and a sense of ending* in the (non) ‘materiality, spatiality and temporality’ (Hunter and Baxter, 2021:286) of university life at the lockdown order. This theme is full of disquiet, as lecturers are haunted by the ghosts of the immediate past and a sudden loss. Second, to consider real-time interplays of identity work for respondents at a liminal moment of separation in *ghostly selves*. During this theme, we see our respondents experiencing a duality of ghostly experiences – whether haunted by the legacies of past teaching experience, or an awareness that they too, were appearing as ghosts to their students online. Finally, we

consider the strange impermanence of pandemic rhythms as our respondents oscillate between their chosen artefacts and perceptions of a new normal and fearful implications for future societal renewal via *accepting liminality and preparing for reincorporation*.

Methodology:

Previous study

This paper draws on previous empirical material from a UK context focused on changes to lecturers' routines and autonomies during the pandemic, with the original study taking place real-time during the first COVID-19 lockdown during spring 2020 and reported on by Glover et al (2024). Here, participants from Business and Law were asked to produce a reflective written account of their digital teaching experiences and accompany these with relevant images (photographs or artwork) with a narrative explaining the significance of these to the participant. Respondents explored their everyday encounters (Kelly, 2020), practices, and accompanying situational analyses as we asked them to reflect upon perceptions of physical and online teaching spaces and the tensions between physical and digital work, as they suddenly shifted entirely online from a previously blended environment. In that study we adopted a hermeneutic approach, defined as 'a search for underlying meaning, by seeing empirical material as clues or indicators of a phenomenon' (Alvesson and Stephens, 2024:8) We then used three axes to structure our subsequent discussion, *precarity and security, time and perceptions of time, and communication*.

Main findings for teaching and learning were that the pandemic provided an accelerant to digital pedagogies and the development of hybrid approaches. We found communication strategies were confusing and muddled during this temporary state of crisis. Here, we concurred with Orr (2014) who found that when middle managers experienced this sort of ambiguity they would normally look to other managers during social interactions, 'water

cooler moments,' to seek clarity. However, due to the pandemic, these modes of informal communications were cut off. Thematically, the analysis showed mechanisms of university control such as surveillance and managerialism temporarily receding as participants accounts reported 'a moment' of greater autonomy alongside intensity in extreme work conditions and a greater emotional burden of supporting themselves and students at a difficult time.

Material as revenant

In recent years, the need for other theoretical approaches that help pick a path through the temporary, fluid, and often covert aspects of organisational life and work have challenged academics who feel that there are potentially alternative meanings in their empirical analyses. This includes the 'something more' (Pors, 2016:1644) permitted by concepts such as haunting to foregrounding responses that might otherwise be overlooked or excluded from analysis where insights are less fully formed or outside stated study parameters.

This secondary study therefore aims to reflectively respond to less-considered aspects of that original investigation, putting 'life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible' (Gordon, 2008:22). It engages with the first of Gordon's explorative questions, namely, the quest for an alternative story that we ought to tell. In this case, about the hidden responses and relationships between disruption, isolation, and application of existing know-how for online teachers during the pandemic, using haunting as conceptual metaphor 'to reveal the powerful agency of the unspoken-of and the unseen' (Kociatkiewicz et al, 2022). Taking inspiration from Corlett's (2012) study of the value of revisiting experiences as a way of making meaning, this study consciously reconsidered our initial dataset. It looked for ways of understanding and 'ghostly' constructions of knowledge that took place in the margins, less noticed at the time but on reflection, yielded deeper insights into teaching and learning and the liminal experience of the pandemic.

This was not the active ‘ghost hunting’ for digital pasts undertaken by Gallagher et al (2023), nor quite the sudden ‘struck’ moment of realisation at the time or later stage that is the centrepiece of Corlett’s (2012) work. Rather a slow realisation around an alternative lens of how our respondents, and we as researchers in turn, were haunted by teaching pasts and possible lost futures through that dialogical process for management learning that highlights explorations of tacit knowledge and marginalised assumptions set out in Cunliffe’s seminal article (2002). These were our ‘ghosts’, the ‘others’ present in university tutors’ accounts of working online during the pandemic, as we revisited our wider empirical study of teaching experiences online during the pandemic.

In revisiting material, we therefore consciously discarded aspects of written accounts which straightforwardly considered issues of practice, analysis of developing pedagogies, and narratives of management or student behaviour, instead actively seeking out emotional metaphors of loss and potential renewal underway during the pandemic pause. Similarly, we set aside photographs or stock images where respondents simply described a representation, such as a photograph from a Zoom tutorial, instead focusing on those where the image produced a contextual reflective engagement, moment of learning, or emotional response. We also related these ideas back to other times of fear and turbulence; if participants discussed their emotional responses to known cultural artefacts such as famous artworks from other troubled times. This left us with 12 accounts, 11 images, and reference to four artworks where something *other* was present in either text, image, or participant’s image description.

In relation to ethical considerations from revisiting data, we reapproached participants to reaffirm consent where more sensitive material emerged, ensuring their comfort. Finally, we acknowledged our own researchers’ perspectives (Weick, 2002:894) in responses to the data.

In this way we linked the theoretical concept of haunting with explicit framings of narrative, professional identity and social construction undertaken by Watson (2009). It was an attempt at an alternative study, of ‘biography, of history and their intersections within a society’ (Mills 2000:4) at a specific point of social ambiguities. As Watson (2009:430) argues, this type of study presents us with a mass of possible narratives and these narratives present a ‘vast multiplicity of different readings’. Exploring sensations of haunting and perceptions of online selves as ghosts inhabiting university machines offered new possibilities on ‘the presentation of self’ (Goffman, 1990) at work in differing and digital ways.

New worlds and sense of ending.

In this first data section, we analyse respondents contexts around the lockdown order and how individuals predicated this sudden threat to working life. Whilst all respondents conveyed emotional responses to events in early paragraphs, one group who launched straight into their ‘turmoil’ (R2) of feelings around isolation, digital acceleration and challenge appeared more conflicted and confused than those who began their accounts with factual personal statements of workplace roles and responsibilities or those who constructed a story around the initial stay-at-home message. We interpreted the latter two groups as utilising the writing process itself as a step in ordering and making sense of discordant experiences, with those who ‘crystallised’ their interpretations through a story-tellers frame (Gabriel, 2000:31) perhaps closer to rationalising hardships (or wishing to) from the Covid experience.

For those framing their reflections by setting a scene, respondents 1, 5 and 9 aimed to time-stamp their lockdown experiences by setting that initial context of the lockdown orders in terms of disruption to space and place, using expected chronological time as an anchor. R1 described his past presence *then* as away at a work meeting whilst the first order to stay at home was issued (see Brown et al, 2021). Reporting on his ‘regular day’, he analyses

mundane activities of meetings and an after-work drink in an attentive way (Kelly, 2020:722) deliberately noting a sudden disquiet under his chosen heading of 'Beginnings'. 'By that evening walking the streets of Edinburgh it was apparent something was in the air'. This statement was affirmed by 'something significant' happening, 'but one was not quite sure what', although 'something' (unspecified in the text) was 'inevitable'. His accompanying photograph of Edinburgh castle at sunset further communicated a sense of ending and separation from the previous environment (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003:270) as the respondent departed an 'emptying' city for home, and a *now* where he would then 'inevitably' isolate 'for the foreseeable future'. Similarly, R5 reports leaving for class that morning 'wondering why it was actually going ahead' then returning 'home to...self-imposed isolation' and haunted 'uncertainty of whether I was now a carrier of the virus'.

These respondents established temporal frames as signposts for how their accounts might be interpreted, separating the *then* of past events and expectations from their *now* of the liminal, pandemic experience and in turn, from an uncertain *future* time of work and society reopening (reincorporation) and return to professional security. (As researchers, we also maintained awareness of a new, fourth phase of time, where we are reviewing respondents testimonies with the benefits of hindsight (Frank, 1995:139)).

In terms of initial emotionality, tensions were expressed as familiar teaching spaces were abruptly rendered problematic. All shared initial feelings of uncertainty, or sadness, or wondering in an exploratory way, which appeared to fill a vacuum from suspended regular activities, and perhaps a cathartic way of acknowledging fear and ambiguity, 'I have been surprised to feel a bit lost' (R4). Reflections included disquieted separations generated by students leaving workshops part way through the day and not returning (R5) and confused explanations around personal and mass 'evacuation' (R1) experienced on the journey from work to home environment highlighting a moment of crisis. Feelings of disjoint at the

disappearance of immediate expected futures (Fisher, 2012) of teaching and academic routines as respondents wrestled with the ‘prospect of threat’ and their own ‘imperilled capacity’ (Orr, 2023:2016) were supplemented with insecurities of what might happen next.

All respondents expressed judgement on the initial period of forced stasis and isolation where expected teaching work paused, and the University announced contingent arrangements.

Managers had sent explicit instructions about online teaching but, ‘not to communicate with students prior to their receipt of the university mail’ (R5). This period of ‘absolute inactivity’ (R1) and cut-off from students and university was referred to as ‘short and unpleasant’ (R5), although emotional responses to forced inertia differed. Some recorded estrangement from expected interactions with students as ‘categorised by worry’ (R6), ‘bewildering’, ‘with the website going to close down, would they [students] still be able to speak to me?’ (R4). Here, concern for students appeared in some cases as distraction from their own troubles, where ‘lockdown, the stark statistics and enormity of it all started to hit home. Stories in the news, on social media... and the domination of coronavirus deaths...[were] inescapable’ (R10).

Participants also reported surprise, discomfort and unease at unexpected student reactions to loss of expected university time, with R2 commenting on examination cancellations, ‘instead of swathes of relief...this caused much angst, panic, frustration, and consternation...’. It was not just students who responded in this way. For R9, a ‘sense of loss that traditional structure of the academic year has dissolved’ represented strong affinity to long-standing seasons (Back, 2016:1), comfort from the teaching calendar and deteriorated capacity ‘to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live’, (Fisher, 2012:16).

As ‘usual practice and order’ of regular university time was suspended (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003:267), respondents entered transition to a liminal, *other* state. This provoked anxieties and feelings of disjoint and wrongness and a sense of loss from all, e.g. ‘the

foreseeable future is gone – gone into the abyss until 2021 we are told’ (R2). ‘I’m ‘overwhelmed’ (R4) and ‘not good enough’ (R7) were two early responses to teaching in lockdown from those struggling to cope. Feelings of fear and mortality are defamiliarizing; ‘you also had this appalling feeling at the early days of lockdown as to whether you are marking your last [assignment], or the student might not be alive to read the feedback’ (R1). Respondent 10 lays out her feelings in April of being ‘at breaking point’ with over eighty assessments due alongside a growing burden ‘of daily emotional upheaval from students’, some of them ‘even blaming me’ for cancellation of tutorials. She goes on to write, ‘what I hadn’t banked on was how distracted I had become...I began to read my comments, re-read and re-read them to check and double check...I’m lacking my usual confidence in marking’. Others responded by imposing a formal rationality on their anxieties. R11 writes starkly, ‘No choice. Swim or sink’, in relation to pivoting classes online, although this may have been a discursive device to help manage ambiguity and disembodiment in digital teaching.

Ghostly selves

As their lockdowns wore on, we noted different ways past and potential future selves disorientated then current working experiences of respondents. Some appeared to react to the wider social period of liminality by consciously superimposing a chronological order of their own - for the three respondents who constructed a story of personal response to lockdown work, their time and teaching practices remained clearly signposted between *then* and *now*. Others’ recollections appeared discontinuous, as anxieties from the multiplicity of intrusions from global crisis into their intimate daily spheres jostled alongside more workaday worries around improving online skills. In and amongst discussions on workload, student angst, and communication difficulties resulting from the rapid pivot online, we traced a range from disassociation to troubled emotions in response to curtailed teaching activities and loss of expected professional interfaces. To describe affect from separation from both expected past

and possible future, the concept of haunting, described by Rahimi (2021:6) as the condition of a 'nullified possible future' where what was expected was foreclosed – the ghost represents that promise that was 'unrightfully cancelled'.

Accounts reflected three emergent/overlapping modes of managing difficult feelings during lockdown teaching. These are explored firstly below as the 'life fully booked' state of denial related by Helin (2023:382); and secondly as an attempt at counteraction by either repressing emotions and/or, as 'cathartic discharge' (Gabriel, 2012:23) by sharing re-experienced past traumas during the lockdown state. A final mode appeared to be accepting/embracing alternatives to institutional logic, mediating how things might be 'otherwise' (Gordon, 2008:57) and pursuing a 'more independent path' (Bristow, 2023:369).

The first mode saw some respondents ambiguously appearing as 'ghosts' themselves, attempting to overcome isolation via recapturing echoes of previous teaching and familial existences. For these individuals, separation between work/life activities appeared impossible to achieve, and we saw their responses criss-cross their jobs with issues such as caring and homeschooling responsibilities. Some left 'sticky' (Collins et al, 2022:209) markers of their presence in newly disembodied and digital lives, 'due to the lack of structure in my day/week I felt I had to fill in each day with.... meetings...show myself, my family, my boss, and the world that yes. I still had a purpose in life' (R2). For these respondents, their accounts were a bricolage of noted digital bonding encounters that faintly approximated previous social conventions, helping manage temporal ambiguities and socially cement the self through a shadow of business-as-usual. These felt like 'everyday work of repressing crisis', as a way of smoothing emotions as reported by Orr (2023:2025). Reported activities included time away from work to attend a digital funeral (R12) and online cooking club (R7) with previously unremarkable activities such as the weekly food shop seen as a 'highlight' (R2). Associations of online togetherness were also highlighted; 'myself, my family, my students' (R2).

‘Tutorials are also much friendlier – I go online an hour before they start and tell students to pop along for a chat...’ (R10). ‘Longing for contact’ and felt absence of the *Other* (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2023:45) show how easily ‘permanent’ behaviours can be suspended.

However, others did not convey attempts to be anchored via shadowy approximations of past material selves and activities. These lecturers rather recorded conscious efforts to damp down responses and contain the ghostly, e.g., ‘change the direction of my thoughts’ (R7) alongside awareness that they ‘were locking their emotions away’ (R4) from a regular life temporarily denied. Fleming (2021:17) notes such difficulties as a ‘double alienation’ and ‘sullen reflexivity’ where academics are not only haunted by spectres of lost futures, but are self-aware ghosts in their own right, haunting the university.

Other respondents appeared haunted by path dependencies and ‘troubled’ by the agency of the past’ (Brøgger, 2014:522) as lockdown provoked personal memories which came ‘flooding back’ (R4) of other difficult events in their lives when they had felt ‘scared’ and ‘alone’. R4 recalls that this time ‘the world around me’ was affected in a sudden and ‘extreme’ way, although noting on this occasion that this was a collective rather than individual trauma, ‘this time it wasn’t just me’. New fears pressed upon them, ‘I was now scared to go to shops or to meet people’ (R10). Another (R8) described a makeshift hot-desk set up in the living room, explicitly guiding the researchers’ eyes to a prominent family photograph within her photograph as punctum (Barthes, 1980:26). In the accompanying text, she uses her account to ask researchers to ‘remember my mum and raise a tribute to the NHS’, explaining her mother’s vocation as a nursing sister alongside her recent death. For those affected, previous difficulties from past adversities appeared to compress and obfuscate the senses in challenging ways, with previous events intruding as memories, ‘stretching’ and ‘speeding’ time (Gusich, 2012:513). Rahimi (2021:15) refers to these memories as a

‘temporal dislocation of an experience’, noting the unexpected ways that the past, having sometimes lurked unconsciously, can become present. He writes of these past traumas as dormant non-events until they are channelled into meaning and consequence.

A final group of responses appeared, despite the challenges of lockdown working, to find solace in receding formal systems of power and control in the university. These voices were strong, reflecting a conscious desire to be active agents in the face of pandemic uncertainty. R6 provided an account of accepting change and reclamation of power in the liminal space, and the role of work in establishing coping mechanisms. Whilst ‘early March was categorised by worry.... what alternatives and possibilities were being put in place’, they went on to assert that ‘later...working has helped manage worry...helps you feel in control of a situation that robs you of control’. This echoes a potentially painful liminal state but also beginnings of attractions and possibilities, as freedoms from institutional controls began to assert.

We reflected in this second phase of analysis, that these voices became privileged in our initial findings where we noted opportunities ‘generated for individual academics taking student learning into their own hands’ (Glover et al, 2024), rejecting mechanisms of control. A previously oppressive aspect of contemporary neoliberal higher education appeared lightened here (Kociatkiewicz, 2022:313) in developing resistance, reworking a past (Good, 2019:418) of lecturer expertise, of being ‘needed’ (R4) by the university or as knowledgeable, independent ‘expert’, ‘dreaming about new ways of working’ (R12). For example, R1 posted a cartoon of cut telephone cords to display lack of connection between himself and the organisation. This was significant in contrast to his later reflections on ‘reinvigorated’ and ‘supportive’ close bonds with students, where the pandemic-distant institution represented by formal routines and assessments appeared to fade in importance, and enthusiastic daily micro-interactions and new forms of animation on teaching platforms took centre stage.

However, others struggled with competing demands between student need and management imposition (such as abrupt changes to assessment sent out over a weekend) and felt themselves and their needs overrun as they ‘disappeared – lost down an online rabbit hole’ (R3). This connects with findings from Brøgger (2014:529) whose study of educational reform programmes noted a variety of competing and haunting realities as unforeseen consequences of change. Capturing ways these ‘ghostly selves’ addressed us as researchers, they communicated both their agencies and fragilities during the lockdown period, whether attempting to present themselves as rational actors overcoming a time of unmanageable digital work, or, as fellow travellers navigating ambiguities of both trauma and learning.

Accepting liminality and preparing for reincorporation

In this final thematic section, we analyse excerpts from participants’ written accounts and artefacts they chose to interpret their feelings during the latter stages of lockdown teaching, socially labelled as ‘the new normal’ (Stanistreet, 2023). Many conveyed a dreamy, ethereal quality to their teaching practice at this time alongside varying degrees of engagement with expected pre-pandemic life and work, as respondents mindfully navigated the lockdown state. Expected linearities of past, present, and future did not apply. That ‘sharp distinction between the real and the unreal’ (Derrida, 2006:12) had faded, as ‘time blurred’ (R2).

A haunted lockdown state created spaces where ‘time has no meaning’ (R2) and an unanchored, ‘floating, languid state...of time being slow and slightly suspended’ (R9). A screenshot of communications sent to a student message board at 02.21am was highlighted to researchers as evidence of expected disruption to normal temporal activities (R9) and a relaxed response to it. For R3, work had become ‘a helpful marathon not the usual sprint’. In her writing, Respondent 2 reflected on her own journey to acceptance by consciously ‘striking a balance’, commenting how in the ‘early days of the pandemic’ she had become

overwhelmed with tiredness by a ‘phone that constantly pings and a feeling I need to respond’ and ‘feeling ever so guilty’ when she needed to rest, but had now achieved a ‘sense of perspective’ by ‘physically closing the door of the study...for a spot of gardening or indulging in some mindless TV’. Similarly, R10 related how she had noted disturbance to her sleep; and ‘scared’ feelings where the spectre of the pandemic was ‘inescapable’ before re-establishing ‘control’ by owning an independent work schedule, ‘my...time from 3am to 9am...when no-one else was up’. Individuals were isolated from physical teaching rhythms, but also organisational convention and obligation.

Some respondents used existing everyday artefacts as the focus of their photographs and assigned them lockdown-specific meanings. These were sometimes researcher-expected teaching tools resonant with past ‘historical, social, and cultural contexts’ (Reitan, 2022:4) such as an image of a box of highlighters that might ‘never be needed again’ (R4), or a cup of tea in front of an essay (R3), headed with a warning to ‘step away.’ Other objects were personally infused as microhistories of lockdown life. Noting a ‘world limited to looking out of my little office window’, R4 accompanied this reflection with a chosen image of a pair of worn indoor shoes and accompanying comment of ‘no excuse to get out of the slippers’ alongside an empty purse signifying fears over future income.

A number of participants turned to famous artworks to convey how they navigated anxieties produced in the liminal state. *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) by Dali was used by three participants to mark ‘stretched’ (R11) lockdown time, using ‘surreal’ to anchor that part of their narratives. R10 explicitly used the painting to contrast the ‘softness’ and ‘hardness’ of time during lockdown, where expectations became softer, but daily life and news reporting were seen as harder and harder to endure. She writes of Dali’s depiction of the collapse of expected order ‘just like coronavirus’. R1 and R9 highlighted contrasts in the painting, with

R1 focusing on the ‘featureless’ face, and R9 turned to the sandy background, using ‘arid’ as one metaphor for lockdown life.

We noted such artworks as tools providing a ‘conduit’, (Orr 2014:1054) between the past, a suspended present, and multiplicity of possible personal and social futures and post-pandemic trajectories. Paintings reflexively served as an extended metaphor to uncover unspoken emotions around ‘the march of time’ for R9, who threaded Mondrian’s (1943) *Broadway Boogie Woogie* to convey ‘the structured life before pandemic’, together with that ‘current limbo’ emotion provoked by Dali. She closed her reflections with Kandinsky’s (1924) *Composition 8* to suggest a ‘new tempo and unpredictability of a future world’, and ‘waiting’ for the ‘myriad potential directions the future could go’.

Conceptualisations of past trauma were also used to generate interconnectivity, a shared social medium for exploring relevance of previous tumultuous events shaping respondents’ current understanding and hopes for the future. R1 chose Paul Nash (1918) artwork *We Are Making a New World* to convey his sentiments of a ‘new normal’ in the days before limited social reopening in June, noting both the broken and shelled wartime landscape, and his love for this painting that captures the gap between crisis and intent to rebuild a better world and university, ‘but somehow I doubt it.’

Prior to lockdown, respondents had been part of the established organisational time of the university calendar and thus subject to externally-imposed control mechanisms. In standard times, academic staff tend to firstly privilege working time to the needs of the institution, and then the students. Here, where lockdown time became ‘endless’ (R4) we noted institutional priorities became ‘not entirely attended to’ (Kociatkiewicz et al, 2022:313) and sometimes unmissed, alongside (re)kindling teaching as vocation, e.g. (R7) ‘I feel more connected to my students than ever before’. R1 expanded this idea, reporting toward the end of his narrative

that as ‘traditional lines of managerial responsibility...were not working’ it was becoming ‘no longer necessary to participate...in management agendas’, and he was now free to focus on students. ‘My job has always been to help them pass, and hopefully learn something in the process.... students have been great’. To him, ‘muddled thinking’ and a ‘can’t-do culture’ could now be safely ‘viewed from afar’. In this approach, the university itself became the ghost, both present and expected, but simultaneously absent.

As lockdown drew to a close, many participants turned to future-focused reflections to conclude their accounts. Some considered anticipated challenges of reincorporation around ‘sudden accelerations’ of progression in ‘this virtual world’ (R9) alongside pragmatic musings on future institutional offers for hybrid and digital learning (R2) and its potential implications. A number of respondents appeared to reflexively engage through ‘recourse to metaphor and analogy’ (Turner, 1977:127) in plans to reclaim their lost futures. Several (R1, R3, R4, R6) used natural images such as a butterfly, the sea, countryside view, or an opening flower to convey wishes for a planned re-rooting in the physical world. One writes (R3) how she has ‘gained appreciation for what is around me’, another (R6) uses the flower as reminder ‘that the world is still turning’. R8 continues that metaphor, describing how although ‘it can be difficult to remain optimistic’, ‘planting seeds from which new life and opportunity will grow’ brings hope for the future. As noted by Kociatkiewicz et al (2022: 312), this is not nostalgia, as a ‘longing for the past, but a desire for something unfulfilled’, an agency of the nonmaterial to focus thought and surface emotion. As summed up by R3, who provided a foggy day photograph of a bridge in the mist: ‘I do not know if the work will be there in future, but I feel confident there is somewhere to go’.

Discussion: digital working, emotional residues, and perpetual liminality

Empirical themes above draw connections threading phases of an unforeseen and disquieting rite of passage, where the liminal present of respondents haunted by a lost past of familiar teaching and learning routines became subsequently criss-crossed with affective anxieties around future reincorporation. Intense emotions were generated against a backdrop of social crisis that hummed with fear and ambiguity, interplaying with newly-enhanced digital skills and ways of working. As during lockdown managerial agendas temporarily receded, troubled agency of individual lecturers came to the fore to support students in unexpected and differing ways than shaped by past management decisions.

We now analyse the implications and emotional residues from that ‘something unexpected’ (Knox et al, 2015:1010) haunting lockdown working. We organise our discussion firstly around investiture and/or perpetual liminal futures for university workers, offering a witness perspective on unsettled outcomes, before considering implications for university managers. Finally, we engage briefly with wider literature considering the pandemic as potential turning point for (digital) ways of working and prospective longer-term impacts upon teaching staff.

Individual implications from ‘A ‘shift of register?’

So far, explorations of lockdown teaching and its liminal state have concurred with the ‘shift in register’ and ‘wonderings...set in motion’ observed by Pors, (2016:1655). Staff wrestled with tensions around withdrawal of usual teaching routines and the operational safety-net of academic calendar, but also, a renewed rendering of the burden of teaching and pastoral support that is ‘there all the time, only we pretend not to notice it until events force us to do so’, (Orr 2014:1057). A void from social interactions became filled with inconsistencies, shadow activities, and trauma but also a welcome openness to different ways of working.

We noted in findings that haunting might provide an outlet for our respondent emotions, allowing them to mourn their expected lost future alongside adjusting to this temporary new

climate. Once participants normalised the crisis state, and organisational control had receded, new ways of teaching set in. Clegg, Kornberger, and Rhodes (2005:157) note how such a state of organisational slack-tide might create ‘preconditions of learning’, as spaces *between* previous organisational order and post-event change and adaptation yield insights.

However, the pandemic crisis event had implications for individuals beyond Turner’s (1977:97) function of a rite of passage which released them from ‘the mediacy of structure’ for the possibilities of the realm of *communitas* and a return to renewal or acceptance. This was not a bounded transformation at the solely personal level. Respondents were returning to personal questions about what digital teaching futures might mean for them alongside a wider state of organisational and societal flux generated by collective crisis where liminality and ambiguity may be less easily resolved (Beech, 2011), and liminal thresholds needed accounting in a number of practical and emotional ways.

We noted a variety of emotional engagements with the wider trope of possibilities afforded by digital technologies as the ‘saviour’ (Clark, 2024:414) of higher education teaching during the pandemic, alongside institutional discussions on ways forward. For some respondents this appeared as an opportunity, a fresher form of teaching organisation through potential digital transformation, permitting positive reaggregation, ‘I am well placed’ (R9). Others were pragmatic in their responses, seeking ‘closure’ (R11) by accepting and meeting demands of hybrid working and change. In this situation, our lecturers were perhaps tentatively aware of a more permanent liminality of the future, a ‘both-this-and-that’ (Bamber et al, 2017) of reduced bodily presence in all aspects of lecturing life weighed alongside an opportunity of digital alternatives. Here an exhortation to engage with organisational plans manifested, ‘we must find consensus...on avenues for hybrid and digital working’, (R2). Finally, for R1, who confided plans to reject a perceived state of future limbo as shadowy online worker resulting

from 'organisational chaos and muddle'. Reflecting on 'the ultimate stress-test', he decided to slough away his workplace identity, reincorporating to a new retired phase of life.

Purposes of testimony and management response

Use of the metaphor of haunting here provides new insights on anxieties suffered during the pandemic, and a signal to workers and managers to do something in regard to residual and unprocessed emotions. Accounts presented therefore might serve two main purposes. Firstly, as testimonies (Frank, 1995:139), individual pages from the greater whole of pandemic trauma beyond individual ken, they evidence the need for ongoing organisational support and care as we recover from collective social disturbance. For individuals, testimony records that the haunting process will not simply be a memory for those experiencing liminal work environments during the pandemic, but a trace of learned human response to crises, and 'complex interactions between psychological experience and social processes' (Good, 2021: 420). Highlighted by Smith and Ulus (2020:852) in '*noticing and acknowledging suffering*' from trauma, a management learning opportunity remains to be taken up in cultivating future 'safe, fair environments'. As a proposal for change, a first step would be questioning differing post-crisis impacts on individuals; rather than ignoring or minimising insights on offer, such as by outsourcing coaching programmes or employee assistance, which has left management opportunities to learn from pandemic teaching practices reduced. For, by hearing and accepting emotional difficulties and discordances, rather than prematurely closing down such dialogues or avoiding uncomfortable knowledge, we create conditions to quell our ghosts, supporting conditions for agentic change alongside returning 'sense of order and safety' (Orr, 2023; 2022).

Secondly, retelling real-time narratives of pandemic teaching raises important points in regard to the lived experiences of lecturers and their future embrace of digital and hybrid

working. Our lockdown experiences, whilst historically situated and now designated as part of the ‘sanctioned, acknowledged past’ (Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, 2013:9) have, like previous ghosts, the potential to affect the memories, emotions and decision-making processes of current workers, managers, and even institutional leadership. They should be acknowledged. As Marx [1852] (2002:19) tells us, ‘the spirits of the past’ are weighty, and there to be summoned, ‘men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please.... rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited.’

‘Sudden accelerations in this virtual world’

While we saw responses to reincorporation vary from those who embraced a digital future, we also noted those who were troubled by the direction of travel in online teaching, or rejected it. This provides us with a context to briefly re-engage with wider literature of pandemic discussions in academia, as related to workers’ perspectives, and a place to site this study as one of many threads to be accounted for in future educational choices.

Some three years on we may see digital teaching futures as a contested area, and its inhabitants still in a state of feeling haunted. Academics working through the workaday implications of *what* we do and *how* we do it’ (Carrigan et al, 2023:16) of digital pedagogies continue to ask careful questions, and are subjected in turn to conversations around digital and hybrid university futures. However, there are other reasons for lecturers to continue as uneasy, ‘outside’ expected working imaginaries and held in more permanent liminality.

Uncomfortable lockdown recollections are now becoming enmeshed with longer-standing disquiet around academic roles and ‘troublesome’ dialogues around where digital education is heading (Bayne, 2024). We may now see three directions of the haunted stemming from a higher education inheritance of flux and uncertainty generated in marketized conditions, a jumbled present of pandemic-legacy hybrid working and recognition of sector frailties, and

future fears of ‘fateful choices of continuity or transformation’ (Orr, 2014:1044) around digital and hybrid futures facing higher education teaching staff.

Much further research will be needed here as post-pandemic concerns interplay with prior feelings of instability for sector workers. Long-standing conditions of intensive marketisation and intertwining of ‘managerialism and neoliberalism’ (McCann et al, 2020: 434) are applying additional pressures, as audit cultures return in the company of another spectre, that of a post-pandemic funding crisis, (Foster, 2024). Research by Clark (2024) highlights how technology’s success in maintaining universities during the pandemic has further legitimised and naturalised online teaching and learning solutions. According to Bayne and Gallagher (2021) this leaves the sector vulnerable to data-driven opportunism from corporate ed-tech and requiring academics to own their digital futures. Time spent reconciling staff communities will be necessary to achieve this.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to develop the potential of hauntology and integrate it with liminality to chart an alternative story of fear and ambiguities experienced by university lecturers during the challenging and lonely experiences of working online during lockdown. Derrida’s (2006) notion of the ghostly has been extended towards understanding perspectives on emotions generated in crisis situations, and how we need to account for these in response and for reconciliation. Using a differing approach to reanimate narratives and images, we have sought to elicit otherwise unnoticed reflections and anxieties from our participants accounts that would otherwise miss the opportunity to carry important learning for working in a university today, and support the development of our own digital futures. During crisis mode, ghosts were ‘ubiquitous, mediating’ presences (Orr, 2014:1058) in their accounts of lockdown working practices and as such demand acknowledgement in post-pandemic

organisational recovery and change. Hence we have sought to provide a ‘message in a bottle’ (Kurasawa, 2009) in bearing witness through platforming their voices of fear, discontent, hope and change. The paper acknowledges emotional responses to achieve a small measure of recourse and closure, an interpretation against incomprehension of that spectral form, and a remembrance against forgetting both trauma and freshness from new modes of working and teaching possibilities that provide hope in future online environments.

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