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Title	"Novel" Delegates: Representations of Academic Identities in Fictional Conferences
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"Novel" Delegates: Representations of Academic Identities in Fictional Conferences

Abstract

While there is now a growing body of research on the cultural significance of representations of higher education in media, literature, and popular culture (Edgerton, Holm, Daspit, & Farber, 2005; Reynolds, 2014; Tobolowsky & Reynolds, 2017), this work has not yet addressed the role of conferences within these cultural artefacts. This critical, qualitative study, uses a corpus of fictional texts centred on academic conferences (including novels, short stories, and graphic novels) to explore representations of the role of delegate in fictional conferences. We explore the ways in which pre-existing academic identities shape and even determine the conference experience of individual delegates. Our findings from the open, preliminary coding of our selected corpus revolve around two competing representations: the role of the delegate, and the external roles and identities that delegates bring with them to the conference.

Paper

While there is now a growing body of research on the cultural significance of representations of higher education in media, literature, and popular culture (Edgerton, Holm, Daspit, & Farber, 2005; Reynolds, 2014; Tobolowsky & Reynolds, 2017), this work has not yet addressed the role of conferences within these cultural artefacts. This lacuna reflects the wider absence of analytical accounts of conferences within the domain of higher education research (Henderson, 2015; Nicolson, 2017; Rowe and Ilic, 2015). The noticeable absence of a coherent body of formal research on academic conferences (within higher education studies and beyond) is astonishing, given the resources that are poured into attending conferences each year. The study that this paper is based on makes a contribution to the wider scholarship on conferences, as well as the sub-field of research on cultural representations of higher education. Because of the lack of research in this area concentrating on conferences, the research study takes an exploratory approach which aims to identify how academic conferences are represented in fiction (for this study novels, short stories, graphic novels). While there are conference representations in films (e.g., *The Visitor*), television shows (e.g., *Big Bang Theory*) and cartoon strips (e.g., *Piled Higher and Deeper*), this area of cultural research commonly begins with the more traditional novel form (Thelin & Townsend, 1988), laying the groundwork for exploration in other media (Tobolowsky & Reynolds, 2017). This paper

addresses one of the sub-questions of this study, which asks how academic identities are represented in fictional conferences.

Cultural artefacts, such as written fiction, reflect, inform, and counter shared meanings that influence the ideas, values, beliefs, and behaviours of audiences and consumers (e.g., Hall, 1997; Storey, 2012; Turner, 2006; Weaver, 2009). From the 1980s, prominent US scholars argued for a wider examination of academic fictions, which would reveal shared understandings about higher education (Thelin & Townsend, 1988; Tierney, 2004; Anderson & Thelin, 2009). As academics epitomize the endeavour of post-secondary education, they are often the focus of cultural work examining academic identities (Haynes, 2003, 2006; Kramer, 1979; Leuschner, 2006; Major, 2008; Reynolds, 2014; Reynolds & Durazo-DeMoss, 2016; Reynolds, 2017). Research examining students in cultural texts highlights the social experience of undergraduates, resulting in an “academic-lite” portrayal of their engagement in higher education (Reynolds, 2014, p.119-121). An extensive literature review has not however revealed any studies examining the representation of academic conferences in fiction, nor the academic identities of those attending them. Conferences are important but under-researched spaces where academic identities are constructed and performed; roles and hierarchies are upheld and subverted, and knowledge production is interwoven with embodiment processes (Bruce, 2010; Hodge 2014; Jones et al., 2014). In this paper, we explore representations of the role of delegate in fictional conferences, including the ways in which pre-existing academic identities shape and even determine the conference experience of individual delegates.

The research strategy employed for the study is the ongoing development of a corpus of written fictional sources including novels, graphic novels, and short stories that feature or reference conferences, which is a common approach in this area of research (e.g., Terras, forthcoming; Reynolds, 2017a; Reynolds, 2017b). We determined broad selection criteria for the texts: they could be different forms (novels, short stories, or graphic novels); written in English or translations (to widen the nation of origin); and, representations of conferences could be dominantly, peripherally, or referentially present in the texts. To search for texts we contacted scholars who have written about higher education in written fiction and asked these “campus fiction insiders” for recommendations; we used two social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) to solicit; we used our own experience of academic novels as readers; we used existing research to identify texts where conferences played a dominant role, such as Kramer’s annotated bibliographies of campus fiction (Kramer, 2000, 2004). In our approach a small number of texts were selected for comprehensive preliminary analysis in order to establish more specific questions with which to analyse the wider corpus. This paper is based on the preliminary sample of 25 texts (see Table 1), which were purposively selected to include all three forms of fiction (novels, short stories and graphic novels), and depictions of different academic identities (including students and professors). Both researchers individually read the selected texts, qualitatively memoed and coded the texts using emergent coding, and then discussed their coding to reach consensus in building categories and themes (Saldana, 2015).

Our findings from the open, preliminary coding of our selected corpus revolve around two competing representations: the role of the delegate, and the external roles and identities that delegates bring with them to the conference.

In some senses, conferences are shown to be equalisers, in that they bring attendees of different rank and status under the same umbrella of 'delegate'. The role of delegate appears as an academic identity in its own right, with identification markers (lanyard or badge, conference pack and programme (as in the short story 'Conference Sex' and *Murder at the MLA*) and practices (scheduled location-specific activities and expected behaviours, as in *Small World* and *2666*). The conditions of conferences in some ways unify delegates by, for example, providing similar accommodation, food and space to all (e.g., *The Devil at Webster*). When attending conferences, delegates do not however leave their institutional academic identities behind; conference attendees take up – and are intelligible to others in – the role of delegate in different ways. As such we see gatekeeping processes that mean that students struggle to access conferences (e.g., *Dear Committee Member*) and are denied a sense of belonging while at the conference (e.g., *Notes on a Thesis*), while professors are invited and funded – and lauded (e.g., *Portuguese Irregular Verbs*, *Meetings of the Mind*, *The Literary Conference*). We also see academic status intersecting with age, gender, and research area to result in differential access to and within conferences (e.g., *A Discovery of Witches*, *A Darker Shade of Crimson*, *Moo*). Our preliminary findings therefore show that, reflecting existing research on cultural representations of higher education, hierarchies of academic status and identity are reproduced within and reinforced by conferences, but that in fictional conferences these hierarchies are specifically inflected through the role of conference delegate.

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Table 1: Preliminary Sample of Fictional Conference Representations

Year published	Author	Form	Title
1949	Gibbons, Stella	novel	<i>Conference at Cold Comfort Farm</i>
1952	McCarthy, Mary	novel	<i>The Groves of Academe</i>
1954	Amis, Kingsley	novel	<i>Lucky Jim</i>
1977	French, Marilyn	novel	<i>The Women's Room</i>
1984	Lodge, David	novel	<i>Small World</i>
1993	Jones, D. J. H.	novel	<i>Murder at the MLA</i>
1995	Smiley, Jane	novel	<i>Moo</i>
1995	Chabon, Michael	novel	<i>Wonderboys</i>

1997	Hymes, James	collection of short stories	<i>Publish and Perish</i>
1997	Kraus, Chris	novel	<i>I Love Dick</i>
1998	Thomas-Graham, Pamela	novel	<i>A Darker Shade of Crimson</i>
2000	Damrosch, David	novel/essay	<i>Meetings of the Mind</i>
2002	Byatt, A.S.	novel	<i>A Whistling Woman</i>
2003	Brown, Dan	novel	<i>The Da Vinci Code</i>
2003	McCall Smith, Alexander	novel	<i>Portuguese Irregular Verbs</i>
2004	Bolaño, Roberto	novel	<i>2666</i>
2005	Smith, Zadie	novel	<i>On Beauty</i>
2006	Aira, César	novel	<i>The Literary Conference</i>
2009	Doxiadis, A.; Papadimitriou, C.H.; art by Papdatos, A.; Di Donna, A.	graphic novel	<i>Logicomix</i>
2011	Harkness, Deborah	novel	<i>A Discovery of Witches</i>
2012	L.R., Ellen	short story	'Conference sex'
2012	Oates, Joyce Carol	novel	<i>Mudwoman</i>
2014	Schumacher, Julie	novel	<i>Dear Committee Member</i>
2015	Rivière, Tiphaine	graphic novel	<i>Notes on a Thesis</i>
2017	Korelitz, Jean Hanff	novel	<i>The Devil and Webster</i>