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## **Feminist conference time: aiming (not) to have been there**

Emily F. Henderson, Centre for Education Studies, University of Warwick

### **Abstract**

'I was thinking, "I've travelled all this way, and I was looking forward to this, and my mind is somewhere else."' This is an excerpt from an interview with a feminist academic, taken from my ethnographic study of three national Women's Studies conferences (India, UK, US). It is one example of the multiple temporalities that are experienced by feminist scholars when they make a break with the everyday and move their bodies to a conference (Henderson, 2015); anticipation layered with bodily presence in the here and now, layered with ongoing and future-oriented 'somewhere else'-ness. This chapter explores academic feminist conferences as confluence points where multiple, competing, affective temporalities collide; I present a theorisation of 'conference time' that encompasses two competing temporal modes. Firstly, a feminist conference involves an embodied experience of being there, of being present in space and time, of taking time to think and take stock. However, 'being there' may also be experienced as an irritation that is impeding a more future-oriented modes of being: 'having been there', and/or 'not having been there'. Both of the aspects of this mode involve 'catching up' with the future. 'Having been there' relates to the conference experience that is lived for the gains it will have brought, a line on the CV, for example. 'Not having been there' refers to the expectation that the conference attendee will be able to return home seemingly without having interrupted normal work patterns, having kept up with emails, for example. These modes, which may be experienced simultaneously, represent some of the tensions involved in occupying the subject-position of 'feminist academic' (Pereira, 2015): how to maintain a commitment to the field, to collegiality, to thinking, when academic success seems to demand an individualistic, performative, future-oriented approach?

### **Turning towards feminist conferences<sup>i</sup>**

*If you think back to the last conference you attended, did you have something on standby to do in case you attended a session and realised that you were not interested in the papers? How did you decide when to do it or what to do? If you did take up an alternative activity, did you feel a sense of relief at unexpectedly getting something done, of having gained time? How far did the temptation reach – how far did it outweigh your potential interest in the paper – how long did you wait before*

*picking it up? Did you, on the other hand, have something that you had to do during that paper, such as finish your own paper, which you would give in the next session, or deal with a work matter that had a deadline in the next hour? Did you hope that your activity would go unnoticed, and that, should there be anything of interest, you would pick up on it anyway? You may of course have intended to sit through the session and listen, to take the time to be there and forget all of the things to do; you deserved a break from the whirlwind, you needed some thinking input for your work, to take your ideas elsewhere. But who is to say that you were able to remain in the room? You may have been as elsewhere as the other people there who were unexpectedly getting things done or who had to get things done, your thoughts borne back towards your desk or inbox...*

These reflections will provide you with some of your own material to work with as you read through this theorisation of feminist conference time. My conferences study took place at three national women's studies association conferences – in the UK (FWSA – Feminist and Women's Studies Association biennial conference, 2013), the US (NWSA – National Women's Studies Association annual conference, 2013) and India (IAWS – Indian Association for Women's Studies triennial conference, 2014). The most common question addressed to me in relation to this research project is, 'Why conferences?'. For conferences are often referred to in social networking and the press, and indeed in some academic literature, by sheepish and scathing academics and non-academics alike, as worthy of mockery – they are a waste of money and time, they are excuses for protected, sofa-cushion-residing dons to take a free holiday in a luxury resort, for students to indulge in binge-drinking and romantic flings, possibly with their professors. Academics and proto-academics know they have to go to them, but often they wonder why, and in conversation cynical accounts prevail about 'gaining the CV line', being bored silly by unprepared or unrelated presentations, and taking time out to see the local attractions. However I argue that conferences are, despite all the dismissive bad press, (which is nonetheless at times accurate), respectable sites for empirical research (Henderson, 2015). On the one hand, they represent trends of higher education research, such as globalisation, technologisation, professionalisation, marketisation. On the other hand, as sites where people come together for a form of dissemination that cannot fully hide behind the printed word, where bodies meet names, where professional relationships and hierarchies become tangled up with toilets, meals, and discos, conferences provide an excellent opportunity to study the informalities of the academic profession which tend to hide, as Gill (2010) has noted, in the corridors of higher education institutions.

The study as a whole was a theorisation of gender knowledge production using conferences as the site (Henderson, 2016), but in this chapter I want to concentrate on discourses of time that emerged in my interviews with participants from the three conferences. At each conference, in addition to ethnographic and autoethnographic observation and document analysis, I recruited approximately ten delegates to participate in analysis and discussion at and after the conferences. I was also able to conduct a preliminary interview with the majority of my participants before the conferences. The conditions of my presence at the IAWS conference did not allow for this, so these participants participated in one interview on Skype after the conference. While time was not the focus of my analysis of these interviews, I noticed that most interviews included some discussion of time, but these discussions happened in the subtext of comments about other matters (as was also the case in Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett, 2013; see also Lahad, 2012). In one example, an IAWS participant mis-understood my question ‘do you need a break’ (intended to check that she did not want to return to the interview later) as a question about her tiredness levels in general; she proceeded to analyse the multiple temporalities she had experienced over the two back-to-back conferences she had just attended. I also noticed that, while my questions and comments in the interviews were generally cautious and carefully considered, I unselfconsciously participated in asides about time, and seemed to be validating certain discursive practices about academics’ time. In one instance, an IAWS participant described the work that awaited her on her return from the conference, stating that she would be ‘back to work with a vengeance’. Returning to the transcript some time after conducting the interview, I found that I had replied, ‘At least you’ve had a good break’. I am slightly disturbed to discern an implicit suggestion in my words. I seem to be saying, ‘You’re lucky to have a flexible job that allows you to travel and take a holiday afterwards. You shouldn’t complain about the administrative burden that is awaiting you on your return’. With this seemingly harmless remark, I was participating in the guilt economy that surrounds academia. This economy is in part responsible for the time-related behaviours at conferences that I theorise in this chapter: there is widespread informal recognition that conferences are a luxury, a holiday, and that they disrupt ‘real’ work.

Having sensitised myself to the normalised yet value-laden temporal discourses surrounding conferences, I mapped out the different temporalities that govern conference experiences, to ask what conference attendees’ involvement in these congruent temporalities means for the production and dissemination of knowledge, for the potential, or lack of potential, of academic conferences to constitute places of learning and inspiration, connection and collaboration (Burford and Henderson, 2015; Burford, Henderson and Pausé, forthcoming). This chapter explores academic feminist conferences as confluence points where multiple, competing, affective temporalities collide. An

FWSA participant stated in her interview, ‘I was thinking, “I’ve travelled all this way, and I was looking forward to this, and my mind is somewhere else”’. This is just one example of the multiple temporalities that are experienced by feminist scholars when they make a break with the everyday and move their bodies to a conference; anticipation layered with bodily presence in the here and now, layered with ongoing and often future-oriented ‘somewhere else’-ness. Drawing on analyses of changing academic temporalities in the neoliberal university, this chapter portrays feminist conferences as both feminist spaces for resistance and spaces which are not spared by neoliberal politics and processes. The chapter uses time as a concept which can help to explore the ways in which feminist academics’ experiences of academia are shaped through different modes of presence, of *being there*, which are often lived simultaneously and which produce multiple, contradictory subjectivities. My theorisation of temporality at conferences feeds into wider debates around the academic profession about time pressure, performance culture, and accelerated productivity demands (see eg. Archer, 2008; Burton, this volume; Clegg, 2010; Gibbs et al., 2015; Gonick, this volume; Harris, 2005; Meadhbh Murray, this volume; Morrissey, 2013).

### **Feminist academic conferences – an escape from or to neoliberal academia?**

In a book entitled *Feeling Academic in the Neoliberal University*, what place can a discussion of feminist conferences take up? Ostensibly, conferences take place outside of the university – at times in a spatial sense when they are located in conference centres and hotels, and at other times when they are hosted by universities but occur outside of the normal work patterns of academic life. In many discussions of neoliberalism in academia, the academic is depicted *in* their university, dealing with increasing surveillance and pressure with regards to teaching, research and administration (Archer, 2008; Harris, 2005; Morrissey, 2013). These portrayals of static academics are at odds with another set of discussions about neoliberal academia – namely the literature on academic mobility. A number of research studies have focused on the heightened mobility practices of academics in contemporary academia, particularly within the Global North but also increasingly across North-South and South-South borders (Fahey and Kenway, 2010a; Fahey and Kenway, 2010b; Kim, 2009; Kim, 2014; Maadad and Tight, 2014). In these studies, the physical location of the home university appears as just one among numerous sites where academic work is taking place. In Parker and Weik’s (2014) paper on frenetic academic mobility, airports take on the familiarity of an academic’s office. In this chapter, then, I use academic conferences as a means of analysing the ways in which academics who are temporarily distanced from their university experience this mobility as both a break from and a continued experience of the neoliberal university.

It can be argued that feminist conferences are particularly important spaces for feminist academics. While conferences often have the function of developing a research field, and a researcher's position within that field (Becker, 2014; Chen *et al*, 2012; Gross and Fleming, 2011; Hoyt and Whyte, 2011), feminist conferences are layered with an additional role of bringing together scholars whose work is marginalised within the mainstream (Krishna, 2007). They are thus spaces where feminist alliances are formed, where feminist politics is contested and enacted, and where different forms of feminism are constituted or dismissed as 'proper knowledge' (Pereira, 2012; see also McWilliams, 2000). In this sense, feminist conferences can be experienced as an *escape from* neoliberal academia, where politicised feminist research and teaching is often frowned upon (unless it can be repackaged within the 'impact' agenda; cf Pereira, 2015). Accounts of the history of feminism sometimes use conferences as 'bookends' in the field (Stryker, 2006, p. 2), such as the 1982 conference in Toulouse which is seen as an important marker for the institutionalisation of feminist studies in France (Chevalier and Planté, 2014; Kandel, 2014), or the 2014 conference at Université Paris 7 which was seen as an important moment for incorporating intersectionality theory into French feminism (Falquet and Kian, 2015). Furthermore several participants from my study referred to feminist conferences where feminist conference pedagogy (Saul, 1992) was employed to create a collegial and inspirational space, where activism and academia intermingled and reinvigorated feminist ideas and practices, and where lifelong friendships and writing partnerships were formed.

In spite of these positive representations of feminist academic conferences, where we might lay emphasis on *feminist*, these conferences are nonetheless still *academic* conferences. It is clear from the previous paragraph that feminist conferences can to a certain extent resist the structures and strictures of neoliberal academia, constituting a welcome escape for feminist academics and a valuable space for feminist thinking. However, conferences are also portrayed in the literature and indeed by my research participants as reproducing many of the characteristics of higher education institutions. There are obvious leakages between conference spaces and universities, when job interviews are held at conferences (this happens at NWSA conferences), or when, at a more implicit level, conference delegates investigate forthcoming job opportunities. Academic conferences also reproduce the power-play and hierarchical practices of universities; Lewis (2013, p. 881) analyses conferences as 'organizational space[s]' and 'temporary institutions' which replicate the competitive and hierarchical inclusions and exclusions of universities (see also Ahmed, 2012). Some of this challenge emerges from the age-old debates around the institutionalisation of Women's Studies in academia (Bowles, 1983; Brown, 2008) – in order for feminists to succeed in carving out a space for feminist knowledge in academia, are we required to replicate the techniques of the mainstream? And

is this always one compromise too many? Bell (1987, p. 74) refers to the ‘tyranny of traditional formats’ at conferences, where ‘knowledge is reified through the hierarchical structure of podium and auditorium’ – feminist conferences which replicate traditional conference structures are sites where the institutionalisation drive and the feminist re-working of knowledge production collide in an intense, localised, embodied manner (Caughie and Pearce, 2009; Stanley, 1995). A frustrated colleague referred to what she referred to as the ‘dick swinging’ that occurs at academic conferences (anonymised Facebook post, April 2016); the traditional conventions of conferences may place feminist academics into the role of ‘dick swingers’ even if we resist exclusive and hierarchical practices in our research and teaching. As such, feminist academic conferences may be experienced less as an *escape from* and more of an ambivalent *escape to* the neoliberal university.

Arguably it is not just at the level of conference systems and conventions that feminist academic conferences are experienced as microcosms or reproductions of universities. It can also be suggested that the academic subjectivity of the academics who attend feminist conferences is resistant to – or incapable of – leaving the university behind. This line of argument suggests that academics bring the university with them to the conference, even if they deliberately try to do otherwise. In this argument, it is not just that there is a neoliberal university within which the academic is located; instead the academic’s subjectivity is itself structured by the neoliberal university. Here we are broaching the idea that the subject may be fundamentally altered by the environment and practices of the neoliberal university (Gill, 2010; Morley, 2016), and furthermore that the subject may be unable to operate outside of those practices. As such, even ‘feeling academic’ outside of the university, for example through the affective experience of a feminist academic conference, may be mediated through a subjectivity that is crafted within the neoliberal university (Leathwood and Hey, 2009). The chapter now moves on to address this argument in more detail through the concept of time.

### **Time and academic subjectivity**

The concept of time is frequently employed – though sometimes implicitly (Clegg, 2010) – in analyses of neoliberal academic subjectivity to demonstrate changes to the nature of work and attitudes to work that are displayed by academics in the contemporary university. For example, time underpins the notions of performance and work-plans in Morrissey’s (2013) account of the normalised academic self that is constituted by neoliberal managerialist practices (see also Gonzales, Martinez and Ordu, 2013). Harris (2005) uses sped-up time to frame her analysis of shifts in academic identities caused by neoliberal policies: ‘individuals...must make decisions quickly in a world which is fast moving and constantly changing’ (p. 421). In her analysis, research projects and

the results from these projects are being sped up by accountability requirements; institutions are forced to respond hastily to quickfire policy decisions, and these responses are imposed onto academics within institutions. This use of time is also employed in Mountz et al.'s manifesto 'For slow scholarship' (2015), which begins 'The neoliberal university requires high productivity in *compressed time frames*' (p. 1236, emphasis added). Participants who were on fixed-term contracts in Archer's (2008) and Nikunen's (2014) studies of early career researchers discussed the pressures placed on them in terms of time: the uncertainty of the future caused by the fixed duration of the contract was layered with the certainty of the everyday workload, which demanded a stretching of the working day into the weekends and evenings. Common to these accounts of the neoliberal university is a sense of time objectively speeding up, and subjects having to speed up in order to 'keep up' (Pereira, 2015).

While it is commonly recognised across these accounts that changes in the way that time is manifested in the neoliberal university are impacting on academic subjectivities, the relationship between time and subjectivity is conceptualised differently in different accounts. Different understandings of this relationship position time as more or less objective and external to subjects (see also Adam, 2010; Leccardi, 1999, 2005; Odih, 1999). A spectrum of these understandings would position at one end objective, external time where subjects live by time but time is not affected by subjects; at the other end we would find a mutually constitutive intermingling of time and subjectivity (Lapping, 2016). Analyses of academia that consider that time is objectively changing lie more at the former end, while a view that academic subjectivity is simultaneously constituted by and constitutive of time lie at the latter end of the spectrum. The aim of this section is to engage with multiple understandings of the relationship between time and subjectivity, in order to then move onto the next stage of the argument about the neoliberal university in relation to feminist conference time.

The *first understanding* of time that I address in this sequence is the 'realist' notion that time exists objectively, where 'the continuous duration of time [is perceived] as a given' (Lapping, 2016, p. 3). This form of time is also known as 'clock time' (Adam, 2006; Adkins, 2009; Lingard and Thompson, 2017), and the implication is that time presses on regardless of the subjects that are living by it. As such, the relationship between temporality and subjectivity in this understanding of time is passive in nature, where time moves on in an inevitable, regimented manner, and the subject responds to time accordingly. Clock time in academia acts as an imposed reference point by which academics can be measured; it takes the form of 'timetables, targets, production rates and deadlines' (ibid., §3.1). A



clear example of the use of clock time in academia is the ‘Time allocation system’ to which Nikunen (2014, p. 120) refers, where academics’ time is slotted into an external, objectively quantified ‘surveillance system’.

The clock time dimension of conferences is clearly evident in the structuring of conferences across a number of days, and within those days a number of hours. In this sense, conferences are organised according to an externally-imposed timescale with ‘invariable hours’ (Adam, 2006, p. 123) that exists independently of the people who are occupying the conference space. There are of course moments where this timescale breaks down – where, for example, a conference is cancelled (Carpay, 2001), or a speaker does not arrive (Ringrose, 2010). However in general there is a sense of the inevitable pressing forward of an objectively constituted time. This was particularly evident at the IAWS conference, where the plenary stage was situated at a distance from the rooms where the parallel sessions were held, but the timetable did not allow for the 10-15 minute walk – as one participant remarked, this inflexibility of the timetable meant that she ‘did miss a few [papers] and [she] arrived late’. This also occurred at the huge NWSA venue – a participant noted, ‘I don’t think I went to any panel that I wasn’t late to’. In this understanding of time, conference time is objectively separate from the university; conference clock time is an *escape from* the university in the sense that it is an intense, temporary, discrete timescale. When I delivered a conference paper on being a ‘proper delegate’ (Henderson, 2014), a member of the audience commented that when she attends conferences she enjoys yielding to conference clock time because she experiences the rigid timetable as a break from managing her own work and family time.

In the *second understanding* of conference time that I introduce here, the subject takes a more active, agentic role. In the first understanding, time was perceived as a ‘given’ that was external to the subject. In the second understanding, time is still seen in this way, but the focus moves to the way in which subjects adapt their behaviour to try to manage clock time. Here, then, time is ‘a given that is subjectively mediated through a consciousness that structures the subject’s experience of temporality’ (Lapping, 2016, p. 3). This understanding of time in relation to academia is particularly relevant to analyses of ‘fast time’ (Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett, 2013, p. 1120), or the speeding up of work: ‘academics experience the pressures of clock time that materialize in academic workloads, with tasks compressed into time-frames’ (ibid., p. 1122). In this understanding of time, we find representations of academics as not having enough time, or experiencing a ‘lack of time’ (ibid., p. 1125), and as developing strategies to manage this change in the objective time that structures their work. These strategies are referred to as ‘self-governing technologies’ (Nikunen, 2014, p. 120) which involve

attempts to effect the ‘subjugation of time to human will’ (Clegg, 2010, p. 347). In this understanding of time, it is noteworthy that, despite the basic conceptual understanding of time as externally imposed, academics are represented as taking agency over clock time. They are ‘steal[ing] time’ from one activity to spend time on another (Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett, 2013, p. 1127), engaging in ‘time-markets’ where they are ‘trading periods of time’ (ibid., p. 1131) and ‘outsmarting time’ (Gonzales, Martinez and Ordu, 2013, p. 1107). In calling for ‘slow scholarship’, Mountz et al. (2015) employ the same understanding of time in their call for academics to take agency against these efficiency strategies in order to ‘make...time’ (ibid., p. 1247). They suggest that, ‘We must dare to relax our grip on time...throwing clocks, watches and iPhones over the rooftops’ (ibid., p. 1246). In conference terms, this understanding of time plays out as a resistance to and strategic management of conference clock time, where delegates manage their conference experience between ‘following [their] own pace, allowing time to sort through the information [they]’ve taken in, and rushing from one session to the next so [they] won’t miss anything’ (Bell, 1987, p. 74). In the next section of this chapter, I go on to show how many academics employ these strategies of time management in their conference attendance, and how this shapes their experiences of conferences.

The *third understanding* of time that I present in this section involves a relationship where temporality and subjectivity are inextricably produced in and through each other. This version of temporality appears in Adkins’ (2009) ‘event time’, where ‘time does not operate externally to events but unfolds with events’ (§4.4). Adkins posits that more individualised processes of labour and new types of commodities ‘confound notions of clock time’ (ibid., §4.1) and ‘evade measure in clock time’ (ibid., §4.3); in her analysis, ‘time and phenomena are entirely entangled’ (ibid.). Lapping (2016) enacts a similar theoretical manoeuvre but more explicitly centres on the subject, asking if temporality is in fact inherent to the possibility of the subject (and subjectivity to the possibility of temporality). Contrary to the ‘realist’ perspective outlined above, ‘approaches [to time] that question the unity of the subject’ (ibid., p. 3) implicate the ongoing process of subject-formation as inimical to processes of time, and vice versa. As such, the continuity of clock time is perceived as ‘a construction that supports the fantasy of unified identity’ (ibid.). While the second understanding of time positions the subject as having agency over clock time, the third understanding perceives that this agency is inimically produced by and productive of clock time, and clock time likewise as produced by and productive of agency.

Lapping (2016) employs an interview excerpt from her study of academics’ research practices to clarify the difference between a ‘realist’ analysis and an analysis that questions the role of the subject.

The participant, who gives an account of working on a funded research project, contrasts the previous temporality of her working pattern (“‘things sort of unfold’”) with the temporality of the funded project, which necessitates “‘a publication plan’” (ibid., p. 4). The ‘realist’ understanding of time understands this scenario as a veritable change in objective time, where the researcher is now obliged to strategically manage a newly rigid relationship with the demands of the research funder, measured in clock time. The analysis that Lapping goes on to develop of this extract re-configures this reading of the excerpt into an interrogation of the signification of the participant’s account in terms of the relationship between subjectivity and temporality. As such, instead of reading the shift from ‘things sort of unfold’ to ‘a publication plan’ as a change in objective time, this shift is read as the *appearance* of a shift which is rooted in the interaction between structural and material forces that produce the subject (in a Deleuzian reading) and in the relationship between unconscious desires and conditions of temporality (in a Lacanian reading). In terms of conference time, we might re-frame the quotation from Bell (1987, p. 74) about delegates ‘following [their] own pace’ and then ‘rushing from one session to the next so [they] won’t miss anything’. Rather than understanding this quotation as evidence of conference participants taking agency over the clock time of the conference schedule, we can reframe the schedule and the participant as interlocked and located *within* the psyche of the subject. The schedule provides the participant with a concomitant sense of reassuring but restrictive structure, and an opportunity to experience agency by resisting the schedule, both of which enact and contribute to the participant’s subjectivity. The schedule in turn only takes on significance once it is being adhered to or rebelled against by the subject.

### **Feminist conference time**

Building on the three understandings of time that were introduced in the previous section, I now develop the theorisation of conference time by bringing together the discussion of feminist academic conferences as *escaping from* and *escaping to* the neoliberal university with notions of temporality and subjectivity. Once I had noticed the aforementioned in-passing references to time at conferences in my interview transcripts, I compiled these references in order to read across them. These included references to the timetable of the conference, to slotting the conference into the university timescales, to managing competing activities at the conference owing to competing timescales, to how conference delegates spent their time at the conferences. From these references, I identified two modes of being at the conferences, both of which involve a different temporality and both of which situate the conference in relation to *escaping from* and/or *to* the neoliberal university: (i) *being there*, and (ii) *(not) having been there*. These two modes will now be expanded upon and evidenced, using the different theorisations of time that were set out in the previous section. For each mode, I set out

how that mode can be understood using the three different understandings of time. As such, I set out *three understandings of time for two modes of being* at a conference. The intention in doing so is to provide plural interpretations of conference time, and to resist a single reading. I also wish to highlight the danger of only using the first two understandings of time in analyses of time in the neoliberal university – these understandings of time position the subject as external to and either passive to or as having agency over clock time. Strategies of resistance to time in academia that utilise these two understandings of time in fact employ the same tools as the forces they are resisting – particularly in feminist calls for academics to take agency by ‘making time’ for leisure and thinking. I argue that the third understanding of time – where time and subjectivity are intermingled at the level of subject formation is essential in rethinking feminist resistance to time in the neoliberal university. These modes – and the collision between them – therefore represent some of the tensions involved in occupying the subject-position of ‘feminist academic’ (Pereira, 2015; Thwaites and Pressland, 2017).

### ***Being there***

The first temporal mode of conference attendance that I address here is the notion of *being there*, of being present in space and time, of taking time to think and take stock, which is akin to the notion of ‘time off’ (Stein, 2012). This mode, though pertinent for all conferences, is particularly relevant to feminist conferences, because of the importance of feminist conferences to feminist scholars whose work is marginalised within their universities. *Being there* involves deliberately not thinking about what awaits you when you return from the conference, so that you can fully participate in the conference. In Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett’s (2013) typology of academic temporalities, this mode constitutes ‘committed time’, i.e. ‘an activity that offers a much greater level of satisfaction’, and ‘an investment of self’ (p. 1132). Two examples of *being there* are as follows:

In [the conference location] I was never checking my mails, I decided that I’m on sabbat[ical] from internet (IAWS participant).

The good thing about coming to conferences that are less centrally about what you work on is that it’s just nice sometimes to sit and listen to people, and find out what they’re doing, without having to worry about thinking, ‘Oh, I need to quote this’ [...] so I think I’m coming more in [...] a more kind of like, ‘Let’s see what happens’ [way] (FWSA participant).

The *being there* references tended to focus on the decisions participants took about how they spent their time at conferences; practices of *being there* involved not checking emails and attending papers

to ‘sit and listen’. Other practices involved resisting the temptation to take useful notes, and deliberately choosing sessions that were not related to participants’ current work, in order to discover new areas of feminist research and to think creatively. *Being there*, then, is associated with taking time to think, to engage with ideas, to leave space for ‘something to happen’. This type of undisturbed time is commonly referred to in accounts of the neoliberal university as the precious time that is now too scarce: ‘speeded up time has made time for reflection on...the part of staff...much less likely’ (Clegg, 2010, p. 358).

*Being there* can be framed in terms of clock time (the *first understanding*) as an *escape from* the neoliberal university. In clock time, *being there* can be viewed as a passive response to the objective time frame of a certain number of days which are separated off from time spent at the university. In a linear conception of time, the conference participant is obeying the logic that states that the participant’s body is away from the university for a set number of days, and is now within the conference space, so should yield to the new timeframe: ‘[conference space] brackets out the rest of everything else that’s happening in your life’ (FWSA participant). The clock time understanding of *being there* relates to the comment made to one of my conference papers that I mentioned above – that the everyday cares and conflicting responsibilities can be put aside, arrangements having been made for the duration, and the conference participant can slot into the timetable that is provided for them.

In the *second understanding* of time, where academics try to manipulate time in order to make more time or work more efficiently, *being there* appears less as a passive, yielding mode, and more as a concerted effort to *be there* which may or may not work. We can take this understanding of *being there* as an example of ‘making time’ in order to resist the time demands of the neoliberal university. However it was clear that ‘making time’ was a challenge. Several participants mentioned the difficulty of getting away for the full duration of the conference (because of work commitments and caring responsibilities), and it was clear that participants organised punishing schedules for themselves in order to attend as much of the conference as possible:

because I’m teaching right now I finish teaching my class on Thursday morning and then I’m flying Thursday night so I’ll miss Friday so um I’ll just have Saturday and Sunday (FWSA participant who travelled from the US for the conference).

The effect of trying to protect time – in the clock time sense – for *being there* at the conference impacted upon participants' ability to *be there*: this participant commented that she 'was in a jetlagged stupour' during some of the papers she attended; I have already mentioned another participant who stated that she was unable to concentrate on the conference because she had been working so hard before leaving for the conference that her 'mind [was] somewhere else' (FWSA participant); one of my participants attended the IAWS conference and another conference with a few days of each other, and as a consequence was unable to fully *be there* because there was 'too much to take in, and too much to participate in'. In this understanding of time, then, some conference participants win against time and manage to craft an affectively embodied conference experience of *being there*, while others lose out on clock time and/or on the quality of *being there* that is attained.

In the *third understanding* of time, where subjectivity and temporality are intertwined, *being there* is perceived less as a period of objectively discrete time, less as a subject's personal struggle with that discrete period of time, and more as a feature of ongoing processes of subject formation in relation to temporality. In this understanding of conference time, *being there* is still viewed as a means of resisting the demands of the neoliberal university, but instead of an *escape from* the university, *being there* is shaped by an underlying but inescapable sense of the participant's *absence from* the university. *Being there* is characterised by protective practices that the participant engages in so as to 'outsmart time', but the time for *being there* that is produced from this outsmarting involves constantly warding off the intrusions of the university. *Being there* is never achievable as an absolute, objective state, because academic time is not experienced as linear in a way that a few days can be marked out as 'here, not there'. Instead, parallel, 'complex, divergent and not infrequently conflictual' timeframes are occurring (Clegg, 2010, p. 358), where the university continues regardless of conference participants' absence; one participant received a call from a colleague while she was at the FWSA conference where the colleague told her, 'Your desk is *loaded*'. Enacting a *being there* mode of conference attendance therefore requires the enforced forgetting, repression or compartmentalisation of the parallel temporalities of the university. I argue that, far from being a passive mode of conference attendance (as it at first seemed with the clock time analysis), *being there* is an active mode not just of conference attendance but also of academic subjectivity formation. The clock time of the conference is experienced by the academic subject as a force to both obey and resist, and that clock time takes on its significance in this interplay within the subject. The struggle within the subject in relation to a form of time that is seen as inevitable and yet manipulable are therefore arguably an extension of (rather than a break from) the wider processes of subjectification in the neoliberal university.

***(Not) having been there***

*Having been there* in conference clock time refers to a set, discrete period of time where the participant's body needs to be in a particular location, and this is seen as the principal requirement. This mode of attendance results from a lack of engagement in the conference and/or commitments elsewhere (usually in the university) that outweigh the importance of the conference. A prime example of the *having been there* mode is in evidence in one of the comic strips from Cham's 'Piled Higher and Deeper', where the PhD student and his supervisor discuss holidays:

- PhD student: Any plans for the summer, Prof Smith?  
 Prof Smith: Yes, I'm going on vacation with my family. However, I'll still be checking email every day, having regular conference calls and working on grant proposals while I'm there.  
 PhD student: Do you really want to go?  
 Prof Smith: I'd rather send one of my postdocs but my spouse won't let me.  
 (Cham, 2014)

In this interaction, Prof Smith intends to go on holiday in a *having been there* mode, where, as long as a body is seen to take up the place of holiday-goer (even if it is in fact a postdoc rather than Prof Smith), the holiday *will have been* taken and the 'spouse' *will have been* appeased. That Prof Smith has no intention of *being there* on holiday does not seem of concern. This comic strip, which seems to also include a nod to conferences and the tendency for busy professors to send their juniors to give their papers in their place, is an illustration of the *having been there mode* where conference time is taken to be a discrete period of time in which the body (and only the body) needs to be outside of the university, but *being there* at the conference is either not desirable or not possible. In this section, I deal with both explanations for *having been there*. Where *being there* is not possible, I refer to a type of *having been there* that is modulated as *not having been there*.

Where *being there* is undesirable, *having been there* refers to the conference experience that is lived for the gains it *will have brought*. In this mode, participants' conference behaviour is shaped primarily by the desire to *already* have gained what they need to gain from the conference, without having to fully *be there* at the conference. This mode is characterised by, for example, the desire to present at a conference almost solely to *have gained* the CV line, where attending the rest of the conference is perceived as unnecessary or uninteresting. *Having been there* is explicitly a future-oriented mode of conference attendance, where the future is 'ready and waiting to be filled with the competitive endeavours of individuals' (Clegg, 2010, p. 349). This mode of conference temporality

is perhaps less inimical to feminist conferences, because of the political and affective connections that bring feminist scholars out of our universities and into feminist conference spaces. However, while it may be rarer for this mode to characterise a participant's feminist conference experience as a whole, there is no doubt that moments of the conference may be experienced in this way.

Where *being there* is rendered impossible by commitments elsewhere (probably in the university) that outweigh the importance of the conference, the *not having been there* mode refers to the expectation that the conference participant will be able to return home seemingly without having interrupted normal work patterns, having kept up with emails, for example. Participants who attend conferences (or parts of conferences) in this mode use every possible opportunity to 'get work done' during the conference. This mode of conference attendance reflects Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett's (2013, p. 1130) inclusion of conferences in a set of 'invisible' academic activities which are not directly available to surveillance by the university, and as such are 'sources of suspicion'. Because conferences are not necessarily counted as bona fide activities by neoliberal universities, academics are often expected to continue with institutional commitments as if they were still in their offices. Furthermore, other commitments with different timeframes (such as research funding deadlines) roll on irrespective of conferences, just as conferences roll on irrespective of other activities; as a result, academics exist 'on the edge of time, as decisions about the use of time-moments have to be made' (ibid., p. 1123). I set out some of these decision-making processes about 'time-moments' at the start of this chapter, in my invitation to readers to think about distractions and temptations they experienced at the last conference they attended.

The passivity to time that is embedded in the *first understanding* of time is not in evidence in the *(not) having been there* mode. There is some sense of an externally imposed clock time in the sense of the body relocating for the duration of the conference, but in the *(not) having been there* mode even this prerequisite is eroded by practices such as participants only attending for the day – or half day – of their presentations, or sending a junior scholar in their place. *(Not) having been there*, then, is overwhelmingly characterised by the *second understanding* of time, where the agentic subject perceives the conference schedule as fully manipulable.

The *having been there* mode therefore moves from the clock time understanding of conference time to the subject 'outsmarting time' (the *second understanding*) when we begin to ask what conference participants do with the few days that their bodies are outside of the university. The clearest example of *having been there* being linked with the undesirability of *being there* at the conference was given



by a participant who referred to some of her friends who attended NWSA but whose primary disciplinary affiliation was not women's studies:

They all felt like it was not their conference so when they got there they sort of rolled in late, they weren't there for the whole time [...] they were there to present their papers to get the CV line – like I talked about how I felt like [...] I was kind of half present, [...] they were probably like a quarter present (NWSA participant).

The participant here refers to a minimal conference attendance of 'a quarter present', which was owing to the fact that these conference participants did not view *being there* at the conference as necessary or desirable – she went on to recount the long lunches, dinners and late nights that constituted 'a vacation for them'. In this account, the conference participants appear to strategically perform a minimal presence at the conference ('a quarter present') while 'outsmarting' the time that their bodies have to *be there* by using it as a holiday. The issue of conferences as holidays appeared in other places in my interviews. For example, an IAWS participant remarked that

especially the conferences happening in India, I think um [laughs] the primary agenda of at least half the people is to um you know do the sight-seeing, the traditional sight-seeing of the place.

This was particularly in evidence at the IAWS conference that I researched, as it was held in Guwahati, Assam, in the North-East region of India. While the conference was deliberately held in that region to improve feminist academics' knowledge of the region, which is overlooked by feminists from other regions of India (Deka, 2014; Sen, 2014), this also meant that many conference participants also wanted to use the time that they were in Guwahati to explore the area. I was surprised to find that a local tourism company had set up a stand at the conference for trips of up to two days that were being run for conference delegates (and that delegates were indeed enrolling for) during this four-day conference. There seemed to be a contradiction within the conference, where as previously mentioned the timetable was packed full, but where the conference seemed to condone or even encourage participants to use the conference period to see the region.

The activities listed by Prof Smith as holiday activities ('checking email every day, having regular conference calls and working on grant proposals') are clear examples of *not having been there*, where *being there* is impossible (even if desirable) because of other work commitments that outweigh the importance of the conference (or part of the conference). During the ethnographic parts of my fieldwork, I encountered participants who missed parts of the conference in order to: work on

research grants; continue with ongoing fieldwork activities (for a participant who lived near the conference location); use the presence of multiple research partners at the conference to hold a meeting; work on their presentation at the conference in order to not have taken time out of institutional commitments before the conference; take a number of slots on the schedule per day to answer emails and deal with other administrative tasks remotely. One of the NWSA participants, a PhD student, stated in her post-conference interview, ‘So I didn’t really do so much networking but I probably would have had I not had like mid-terms [coursework] and stuff due’ – she had not managed to finish the work she needed to before leaving, so spent much of the conference working according to the coursework timescale of her university, rather than the timescale of the conference. While the *having been there* mode includes the potential to use conference clock time to *escape from* the neoliberal university by taking a break or short vacation, *not having been there* is the clearest manifestation of an *escape to* the neoliberal university: perhaps the body has escaped the university buildings, but the time spent at the conference is devoted to limiting the damage of this escape vis-à-vis the university.

The second understanding of time, where the subject takes agency over clock time, is undeniably pertinent to practices of *(not) having been there*, but I now reframe that pertinence as more complex than the second understanding would have us believe. In the *third understanding* of time, as with the third understanding of time applied to the *being there* mode, all practices of *having been there* (whether because *being there* is undesirable or impossible) are linked with *escaping to* rather than *from* the university. Here the relationship between the subject and temporality has a different quality to the *being there* mode. Although the period of the conference is experienced as a discrete set of days where the body needs to be at the conference, the ways in which a participant enacts *(not) having been there* – whether for the whole or moments of the conference – are inimically bound up with processes of academic subject formation. Part of what we see here (for *having been there*) is a breaking down of boundaries between work and leisure, where a vacation is taken under the guise of (and embedded psychologically and physically in) work; for *(not) having been there* we see a breaking down of the temporal and spatial boundaries that designate particular chunks of clock time for particular activities.

It is also possible to interpret ways in which academics make valuations of their time, and what it is worth them spending their time on, at a deeper level. These value-judgements are particularly evident at conferences where many sessions have a tiny audience because speakers only attend their own sessions. I have informally heard this behaviour dismissed as unprofessional and uncollegial

(see also Thompson *et al*, 2012), but I argue that it is a practice that does not result solely from the academic subject's agentic decision-making process about the value of their time. Echoing Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett (2013, p. 1122), I argue that this type of criticism comes from the fact that an 'agentic sense of time' is being privileged in understandings of time in the neoliberal university. Instead, I locate these apparently agentic decisions in a psychosocial interplay of time and subjectivity, where the subject constructs clock time as external to it, and then engages in practices of resistance and/or 'outsmarting' in relation to that construction of clock time. Analyses of the neoliberal university often use the *second understanding* of time, by portraying time itself as speeding up and altering, and academic subjects as trying to take agency over and manage changes in time. I argue however that, instead of asking questions about time and how to resist it, we need to ask more questions about subjectivity and its construction of and by time (the *third understanding*). If we step back from viewing time as an objective force that subjects respond to, we can re-think this relationship by imagining not just subjects responding to time, but time responding to (and being constructed by) subjects. In this argument, there is no objective, external time – there is only the time that makes us and that we construct.

This argument has implications for the way we view resistance to time in the neoliberal university, which is a key feminist project (Mountz *et al*, 2015; Pereira, 2015). While I do not doubt that formulating practices for taking more leisure and making time to think and feel is a necessary and worthy strategy for survival in a high-pressure work environment, I also argue that formulating these practices using the second understanding of time misses an important element. For if academic subjectivity is bound up in constructing time as a given and constructing subjectivity as agentic over time, then the same processes of (potentially exhausting) subjectification are involved in making time for thinking (*being there*) and leisure (*having been there*) as are involved in making extra time for work (*not having been there*). In this sense, there is no veritable *escape from* the neoliberal university. I argue that a feminist project of resistance to the neoliberal university needs a theorisation of time as constituting of and constituted by subjectivity to underpin our resistance, in order to avoid replicating neoliberal subjectification strategies.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided an introduction to feminist conference time. However it is important to note that, owing to the scope of the chapter, various complexities of conferences have not been covered here. For example, some of my participants were involved in organising the conferences, because of roles within the associations in question. This added an extra layer of time-management

to the conference, where participants described their experience as ‘manic’ (FWSA participant), and as lacking in time (‘I guess I will sleep’, NWSA participant; ‘I had almost no time’, IAWS participant). A second, vital aspect of conferences to consider in more depth is the break in the home as well as the work routine, and the applicability of *being there* and (*not*) *having been there* to the home routine. Some participants minimised the amount of time spent away in order to reduce the need for childcare and pet-care arrangements; others brought their partners and/or children with them. Others returned home to find a ‘shit show’ (NWSA participant) because the routine had been disrupted.

In this introduction to conference time, then, I have highlighted the importance of thinking about feminist conferences as spaces where feminist scholars need to *be there* – for the sake of their work, friendships and the field – and yet I have also shown that conferences are spaces where participants may be unwilling and/or unable to *be there* for all or part of the conference, even while their bodies are in situ. I have situated this argument within a broader framing of the ways that the affective and embodied experiences of conferences are mediated through conference time. I have theorised conference time as involving three understandings of time (*firstly* clock time and the passive subject; *secondly* the subject outsmarting clock time; *thirdly* the subject as produced by and producing clock time) and two modes of being at a conference (*being there* and (*not*) *having been there*), which were then articulated through the three understandings of time. The intention of this theorisation was to provide multiple readings of conference time, which could also be re-applied to other timescales and activities within academic practice. The second intention was to put forward an argument that speaks to wider analyses of time within the neoliberal university – in particular to highlight the pertinence of the third understanding of time to the feminist project of resisting time pressure in the neoliberal university. While conferences provided the vehicle for this argument, as a clear instance of embodied displacement from (and yet continued locatedness within) the university, it is hoped that this argument could be extended to less clearly defined ‘compartments’ of academic work.

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