FEMINIST DEBATES AND REFLECTIONS – *AUSTRALIAN FEMINIST STUDIES*

Title:

The Graveyard Slot *is* Political

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Abstract

The 'graveyard slot' at a conference is a session which, due to the timing of the session, has a high probability of low attendance. Being scheduled for the graveyard slot can be interpreted as a neutral programming decision, or we can point to the marginalisation of particular knowledge and/or knowledge producers which are arguably more likely to be scheduled for these slots. Unfortunately, the neutral-seeming nature of programming means that accusations of marginalisation are likely to be rejected as lacking proof. This thinkpiece encourages further politicisation of discussions of conference programming; the piece is based on the authors' experience of organising a session on sexuality at a teachers' professional conference, which was scheduled in the graveyard slot and ultimately cancelled. This incident is situated in wider discussions of the politics of the graveyard slot, which are particularly salient for gender and sexuality researchers presenting at mainstream conferences.

Keywords

Conferences; graveyard slot; marginalised knowledge; sexuality and education

In the graveyard slot

Our 80-word summary is in the conference programme, bearing our names and an open invitation to a discussion about sexual orientation and professionalism in the classroom. We have been timetabled in a parallel session comprising six concurrent sessions in the final hour of the conference. In the lobby of the hotel hosting the conference, we see an information board displaying details of 'what's on', to which handwritten notes relating to individual

sessions have been added, clearly by the session leaders themselves. We hastily add a brightly-coloured reminder of our session. We walk from the lobby to our allotted room. As we walk, we check the names of rooms, none of which match the one we are looking for. We find ours when we have passed every other possible room. It is the furthest room from the lobby and dining hall. We put the same colourful notice on the board outside the room.

The previous round of sessions is drawing to a close. From the constellation of rooms, delegates are emerging in clumps of two and three and five. We are still waiting outside our room; the session before ours, due to finish, is still rounding off. Most people drift with varying degrees of intent into the rooms preceding ours. Several people do make it through, to ask for directions or clarification on sessions taking place; none of these questions are about our session. Some delegates pass our room, glance briefly at the sign at our door, and rush, head-down, past us and around the corridor. We discover that the sharp corner at the end of the corridor, past our allotted room, is one way of reaching a set of toilets.

When our room becomes free, five minutes into our allocated time slot, it is clear that no one is coming. We open the door and enter: welcome to our empty room. The room is plain, comically large, and resoundingly empty. There are three round tables, each with seven or eight chairs. At each place sits a blank, hotel-branded notepad and pen. In the middle of each table are bottles of still and sparkling water, and glasses with paper coasters. A bowl of individually-wrapped sweets lies next to the water on each table. The tablecloths are, like everything else in the room, including the sweets, an indistinct shade of brown. Some of the glasses have been used by attendees of the previous session; some of the water bottles have been opened. Few of the sweets have been eaten. At the front of the room are the vestiges of a seminar presentation – a flipchart, a long table with projector and laptop padlocked to the floor. We find ourselves sitting in the front corner, as though we are eager session attendees. We have both avoided the chairs left facing the room for presenters to occupy. There is a surprising absence of silence; the hum of presentations in the room next to us and beyond fluctuates, at one point erupting in the sound of a video, and then applause. The hour is punctuated, every now and then, by a single person walking past the door we left deliberately open, craning to glance in, and walking on.

The politics of conference scheduling

In 2013, we cancelled a workshop on sexuality and teacher professionalism that we had proposed at a UK-based discipline-specific conference for secondary school teachers because no one turned up to the workshop. At the time, Holly was a sixth-form teacher (approx. ages 16-18 in the UK system) and was also conducting her Master's research on teacher sexuality (Henderson, 2019), and Emily was a PhD student with an interest in gender and sexuality in educational contexts. We planned an interactive workshop to provide teachers of any orientation with a space to discuss issues which they are not necessarily able to explore in their institutional settings, given the limited available discourses (DePalma and Atkinson, 2006; 2010; Ferfolja, 2014). We were perhaps naive in our ambition; we had not reckoned that the conference, being organised and attended by teachers, was still more or less an institutional space (Henderson, 2020; Lewis, 2013). Sexuality as an issue was marginalised in the conference schedule, in that we were the only presenters speaking on this issue, and we were scheduled for the last hour of the conference, in the last room. This scheduling reduced the pool of possible attendees, as many had already left the conference, but we did see that there were well-attended sessions at that time, on teaching about the Holocaust and skills-based sessions.

We wrote the above description of our empty room while sitting in the room, trying to take stock of what it meant to have to cancel this workshop. We were disappointed and frustrated, but also felt silly and embarrassed, as if we had been snubbed, as if we should never have expected to be able to have these discussions at an event like this. As we constructed the vignette, we also began to feel that the workshop cancellation was imbued with the very politics that had led us to propose the workshop in the first place - namely, a continued silencing of sexuality in educational spaces (Neary, 2013). This silence is both internationally recognisable and nationally specific; research on LGBT+ identities and schooling highlights unspoken but pervasive heteronormativity across different continents and countries (see, for example, Francis & Reygan (2016) on South African Schools, and Martino (2008) on Canadian schools). In the UK, in 1988 Section 28 was introduced, which forbade the perceived promotion of homosexuality in state-funded educational institutions. The legacy of this law, despite its repeal in 2003, is a discourse of caution and fear regarding non-normative gender and sexual identities and the place of these identities in education.

Sitting in the empty room, we also realised that, in some ways, the workshop *had* been an intervention – after all, the workshop was printed in the programme, and the proposal had

been read and accepted by the conference committee, and as such our time slot and designated room would always remain as one of the options that attendees had had to choose from – even if it would always remain in the graveyard slot of the conference.

Most commonly, the term 'graveyard slot' is used to refer to the late night/early morning slots on television and radio, when there are fewest viewers. Interestingly, there is a significant body of literature referring to graveyard slot programming and the politics of visibility in this field (see eg. Glynn and Tyson, 2007; Wheatley, 2011; Frederik, 2017), but this discussion has not transferred over to conference scheduling. Definitions of the graveyard slot at conferences vary, but the common feature is a slot where fewer people will attend and/or have lower attention (Jucker, 2013). In disparate literature that refers to this phenomenon, the graveyard slot is referred to as the slot before lunch (Morrison-Low, 2001), or directly after lunch, where delegates are sleepy and struggle to pay attention (Reeves, 2007; Ribes, Iannarelli & Duarte, 2009). The graveyard slot can also refer to the last day, the last session on the last day, or indeed the first slot on a Sunday morning (Davis, 1999) or the morning after the conference gala dinner (Thornton, 2008). These latter slots are all slots where there is a higher probability of low attendance.

Despite the almost complete lack of scholarly literature on the graveyard slot, we have found some published discussions of this slot, which point to a tendency to schedule marginalised fields of knowledge in the graveyard slot, and/or speakers who are lower in the academic hierarchy. This is of course not a universal tendency (yes, we *have* all been assigned the graveyard session), but we have succeeded in finding voices to join ours in making this point. We particularly focus on marginalised knowledge in this section, as it is most relevant to our own graveyard slot, although it should be noted that the marginalised knowledge fields we refer to here are at least in part identity-based, and as such the knowledge producers are relatively likely to reflect the marginalised positions that also form the topic of their research. As Emily has found in her ongoing research on conferences (Henderson, 2020), conferences often appear in the form of in-passing references in literature on other topics. In these references, conferences and conference scheduling are used to signify the state of a research field, or a shift in thinking within a field or the status of a sub-field. In Vines' (2012) account of the changing energy landscape in Africa, for example, conferences set the scene for a shift in the international importance of the African region in energy production: 'Five years ago...

[t]he region was...treated at international oil and gas conferences as *the graveyard slot*' (p. 10, emphasis added).

The graveyard slot appears in academic literature as a location where emergent research fields or new theoretical trends may be scheduled before they are fully recognised within the discipline or field of the conference. The editors of a volume on feminist poststructuralist policy analysis (Allan, Iverson and Ropers-Huilman, 2010) note that the AERA (American Educational Research Association) conference session that gave rise to the edited book was, like our workshop, 'scheduled for the last day of the conference, during the last time slot, and placed at the farthest end of an obscure hallway' (Ropers-Huilman, Iverson, Allan, 2010, p. 239). The policitisation of conference scheduling that is gestured to here is again echoed in the guest editorial (Whittle, 1998) for a special issue of the *Journal of Gender Studies* on transgender studies:

> For several years, I have been campaigning around the conference circuit, pleading for trans studies to be more than an oddball issue that is stuck in *the graveyard slot*. (ibid., p. 269, emphasis added).

Whittle goes on to discuss a conference that had included a full panel of trans studies scholars, with the move out of the graveyard slot heralded as a significant moment for the field. In a similar vein, an article on shifts in the field of disability studies (Davis, 1999) uses conferences to illustrate the 'friction in disability studies' (p. 509) between social sciences and humanities, where social sciences had previously dominated the field. The 'May 1997 meeting of SDS [Society for Disability Studies] in Minneapolis', where

> only one session out of many was slated for the humanities and it was buried in *the graveyard slot* of 8:30 a.m. on a Sunday morning (ibid., emphasis added),

is compared with the 1998 conference, which was 'chaired by a humanities-oriented scholar' (ibid.). At the 1997 conference, the scheduling was immediately interpreted as political: 'active lobbying by the humanists at the last minute shifted the session to a more accessible time' (ibid.).

While this evidence is from disparate fields and only provides in-passing commentary on the role of graveyard slot programming at conferences, we consider this nonetheless an important point of departure from which to further consider the political nature of conference scheduling and in particular the graveyard slot.

The graveyard slot *is* political

The political nature of conference scheduling has stayed in our minds since 2013, and in Emily's continuing research on conferences it has come up in several different ways (Henderson, 2020). There seem to be two camps in relation to this issue: those who fully recognise that conference scheduling is implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) political, and those who find the idea completely unfounded. It is difficult to point a finger at a conference schedule to say that scheduling a particular topic or speaker in the graveyard slot is a deliberate act of marginalisation. In this section of the paper we therefore bid to outline an argument for why scheduling a person and their paper for the graveyard slot is *always* a political gesture.

Research on marginalisation within academia has amply demonstrated that intersecting inequalities are often perpetuated through institutional processes which privilege some groups above others without appearing to be directly discriminatory (Asmar & Page, 2018; Bhopal, 2018; van den Brink & Benschop, 2013; Stockfelt, 2018; Morley, 1999). Recruitment and promotions processes are examples of these processes, where panel members' subjective criteria such as personal perceptions of 'excellence' – which adhere to certain privileged subjects – have been shown to override more concrete criteria in making a final decision (Herschberg, Benschop & van den Brink, 2018). It is difficult to accuse the individuals involved of discriminatory behaviour because they were simply following institutional processes; the processes themselves are often disadvantageous for particular groups. In Sara Ahmed's (2012) work on institutional racism, she uses the metaphor of a brick wall to describe these types of institutional process, where the institution appears to value implementing more inclusive policies and yet reinscribes inequalities through the implementation (or lack thereof) of these policies. The brick wall signifies the impossibility of breaking through the institutional façade to challenge the underlying systemic issues which reproduce inequalities in the academic profession. Because of the highly distributed nature of universities' institutional systems, where individuals enact micro-processes but do not have responsibility for the final outcome, challenging these systems is akin to hitting a wall.

Conferences interlink with institutional marginalisation in academia on two fronts. Firstly, conferences contribute to marginalisation within institutions because they contribute to success in academic careers for those who can access them, through direct promotions criteria (Sabharwal, Henderson & Joseph, in press), as well as through indirect benefits such as research and publication collaborations which result from conference networking (Campos et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2017). Needless to say, those who cannot access conferences, or who are marginalised within conference spaces, are less likely to reap the benefits of conferences (Henderson, Cao & Mansuy, 2018), and their work is accordingly less likely to be privileged within the conference curriculum. If a marginalised subject is also working in a marginalised field, conferences have the potential to validate or re-marginalise subject and field alike, as seen in the examples provided in the previous section.

Secondly, conferences are exclusionary institutional spaces in their own right (Lewis, 2013), which both reflect and further perpetuate inequalities in the academy regarding both knowledge and knowledge producers (see e.g. Pereira's 2017 work on the marginalisation of gender knowledge at conferences). Conferences have their own brick walls, where devolved systems and distributed responsibility result in exclusionary experiences for which no one is directly to blame. Large conferences rely on multiple stages of organisation which are completed by different teams (Mair, 2014). Decisions such as the choice of venue have widespread effects in relation to accessibility (Rodríguez-Zulaica & Ara, 2019), trans inclusion (Nicolazzo & Jourian, Forthcoming) and childcare and breastfeeding (Bos, Sweet-Cushman & Schneider, 2019) – yet how to point a finger at the brick (or glass, steel and concrete) walls of the venue? A packed conference programme which has been designed to maximise the number of papers accepted is experienced as exclusionary on the basis of care (Henderson, Cao & Mansuy, 2018) and disability (Hodge, 2014) – yet how to point a finger at the conference booklet or app? Conferences are also experienced as exclusionary due to more intangible features such as accepted codes of behaviour (see e.g. Jackson, 2019, on 'unwanted grabs' at conferences) and enacted hierarchies of dis/respect (see e.g. King et al., 2018, regarding gender and race at conferences; Stanley, 1995, regarding social class at conferences).

The graveyard slot is one instance where conferences may feel deeply exclusionary for those implicated, but where the conference presents a brick wall. Decisions about scheduling take

place behind closed doors and are also highly distributed across administrative personnel, academic organisers and automated systems. Informal discussions at the conference compare notes on who has been given the graveyard slot/s – early career scholars, or Global South scholars, or unfashionable research topics? (Henderson, 2020). Undoubtedly, presenters who are scheduled in the graveyard slot are constituted as *less* important or relevant within the conference curriculum. However mobilising around this issue takes courage and a critical mass (alluded to in the examples in the previous section) in order to legitimise the complaint and hold the conference organisers to account. Whether or not the scheduling of marginalised subjects and/or fields has been intentional or accidental, clear impacts from presenting in this slot can be deduced from research on ROI (return on investment) to conferences (Edelheim et al., 2018; Hahm et al., 2016; Kwok et al., 2018). For example, conferences have the potential to increase international exposure, but presenting in a slot with few attendees and/or which is located at the end of the conference with little networking time afterwards will evidently diminish the probability of actualising this potential. Thus, assigning the graveyard slot is *always* a political decision, as the act of scheduling a paper for this slot has implications for the presenter's career and for the field they are working in.

While we recognise that conference scheduling is highly challenging (Jucker, 2013) and that fulfilling an equitable programme would be well-nigh impossible, we assert that conference organisers could make more creative use of the graveyard slot. While we cannot do away with the graveyard slot – the next slot along would take its place – some possibilities exist for a more thoughtful engagement with scheduling presenters for this slot. For example a committee could try scheduling senior presenters with a guaranteed audience for these slots and explicitly placing early career or otherwise marginalised presenters or fields in other slots. Conference committees could also analyse their programmes before confirming the schedule according to different intersecting criteria of marginalisation such as country of origin, career stage, identity characteristics and topic of presentation, to demonstrate organisational accountability. Conferences are increasingly being called to account on equality, diversity and inclusion issues by their attendees (e.g. Bos, Sweet-Cushman & Schneider, 2019). This paper adds to this emerging discourse by staking a claim for more responsible, politically engaged conference programming.

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To return to our experiences of cancelling the workshop on sexuality and teacher professionalism, it is important to conclude this piece by stating that neither the passing of time nor the process of writing have diminished the frustration and disappointment we felt when no one showed up for our workshop. These enduring emotions were a reaction to the undeniable reality that quantifiable bodily presence, in spaces demarcated by four walls, remains a key concern for the promotion of the representation of marginalised identities and knowledge in organisational spaces. The process of conference scheduling, even if the result is a seemingly objective grid on a paper programme or app, even if no single individual is to blame, influences the perceptions of delegates as to the importance of a speaker and a topic, and affects the probability of attracting an audience. As Frederik (2017, p. 12) states in relation to film festival programming, marginalised topics are constituted by the schedule as 'precarious content best shown in the graveyard slot'. With this piece we have laid down a challenge: we argue that the graveyard slot *is* political.

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