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Gender and the Symbolic Power of Academic Conferences in Fictional Texts

Pauline J. Reynolds¹ and Emily F. Henderson²

Department of Leadership and Higher Education, University of Redlands, USA.¹

Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick, UK.²

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Abstract

Across the contemporary global higher education sector, there is an increased focus on gender and the academic profession, particularly inequalities. Previous studies construct a clear picture of the academy as an unfriendly profession for women, particularly highlighting the challenge to ‘belong’. A growing body of literature demonstrates how conferences contribute to the development of academic careers but are also shown to be exclusionary spaces for many different groups, including women academics. This study focuses on how gender manifests in *cultural representations* of conferences – and the academics involved. Based on a qualitative gender analysis of symbolic references to academic conferences from a sample of written fictional texts, the article reveals how fictional representations of conferences portray gender and especially how they contribute to depictions that reproduce gender inequalities. Focusing on who is attending fictional conferences and what these characters are doing at or in relation to conferences, our analysis highlights how women’s viability as academics is challenged across a range of texts. We argue that cultural representations of academics cannot be ignored in gender analyses of academia, due to the role they play in constructing a dominant imaginary of academics.

Keywords: gender, conferences, academic careers, cultural studies, inequalities

Gender and the Symbolic Power of Academic Conferences in Fictional Texts

Across the contemporary global higher education sector, there is an increased focus on gendered inequalities in the academic profession. Research has produced substantial evidence of the exclusionary nature of academia, particularly the upper echelons, across different country contexts (van den Brink & Benschop, 2013; Chanana, 2003; O'Connor, 2014). Studies have investigated the micro-processes which result in gender inequality, including sexism and misogynist behaviour from colleagues (Morley, 1999; Savigny, 2014). Particularly helpful in showing the processes by which inequalities are re/produced are studies which explore routine, everyday practices in higher education institutions, such as networking (Pifer, 2018) and professional development (Hyers et al., 2012), as well as conferences (Henderson & Moreau, 2020; King et al. 2018). These studies construct a clear picture of the academy as an unfriendly profession for women – and highlight the challenges of ‘belonging’ as a woman within academia (Stockfelt, 2018). Although conferences are an under-researched phenomenon in general (Mair, 2014) and specifically in the higher education field (Henderson, 2015; Nicolson, 2017), there is a growing body of literature demonstrating how conferences contribute to the development of academic careers (e.g., Campos, Leon & McQuillin, 2018; Wang et al., 2017). By the same token, conferences have been shown to be exclusionary spaces for many different groups, not least women academics (Sabharwal, Henderson & Joseph, 2020; Walters, 2018). In this context, our paper focuses on how gender manifests at conferences but from a new and original angle: we explore the role of *text-based cultural representations* of conferences – and the academics involved.

There is an existing sub-field of research on cultural representations of higher education, which brings together cultural studies and empirical sites of higher education, to which this article contributes. Several scholars assert the value of analysing fictional texts to learn more about higher education (Anderson & Thelin, 2009; Reynolds, 2014; Tierney, 2004). One reason for this is that they are a major site for the reproduction of shared meanings, which play an important role in the dissemination, maintenance, and legitimation of hegemonic ideas (Hall, 1997). As the analysis of novels has been more readily accepted as valid research endeavour within higher education studies, the study of cultural representations of higher education commonly begins with fictional texts such as novels (Thelin & Townsend, 1988) – our research follows this practice. Prior scholarship focuses more on representations of students and student life, but an increasing body of work examines the academic profession, including novels (Major, 1998; Tierney, 2004) and other media such as TV (Tobolowsky, 2017) and movies (Reynolds, 2017a). Scholars also use fictional texts to examine aspects of academic life, such as academic freedom and tenure (Tierney, 2004) or professorial power (Major, 1998), but academic conferences have not received the same attention to date, hence our choice to focus on fictional texts in this project akin to other initial work in the sub-field.

In academic life, attendance and participation at conferences feature as a hallmark of faculty experience and endeavour; consequently, cultural representations featuring higher education characters use conferences to help position characters as academics. Conferences are referenced across different media, including television shows (*Big Bang Theory*) and cartoon strips (*Piled Higher and Deeper*) – as well as in fictional texts such as novels, short stories and graphic novels – yet are neglected as a focus for higher education cultural representations research.

This paper draws on an ongoing critical cultural qualitative study of academic conferences in fictional texts using a sample of texts diverse in publication date, form, and genre. At the time of writing, we have assembled a corpus of 36 texts generated by a multi-pronged approach: recommendations through social media calls, individual approaches to scholars who have analysed higher education fiction, and our own reading. This paper focuses on a sub-corpus of texts (18 texts) which specifically include brief allusions to conferences (as opposed to whole works set at conferences). For this paper, we collectively label these short instances as *symbolic references*; through their brevity these references embody shared meanings that can be casually referenced and easily understood for readers. Our analysis of these symbolic references (not the fictional texts as a whole) showed that they act as a narrative shorthand to establish the scholarly identities of characters by hooking into a host of shared meanings related to the practice of attending conferences. The two research questions for the analysis of the sub-corpus for this paper were: (i) Who is attending conferences? (ii) What are they doing at or in relation to the conference? Akin to Terras' (2018) study of representations of professors in children's literature, these open questions revealed highly gendered representations of academics.

Gender and belonging in the academic profession

A substantial body of research on gender in academia focuses on the under-representation of women in the professoriate (van den Brink & Benschop, 2013; O'Connor, 2014) and in leadership (Blackmore, 2014; Gallant, 2014; Kandiko Howson, Coate & de St Croix, 2018). An important strand of this research engages theoretically with the gendered nature of organisations. Acker's (1990, 2006) theory of gendered organisations is a notable example of this type of work which analyses not just the gendered bodies and identities of those occupying different roles and spaces in academia but includes a focus on the ways in which organisational structures and

processes position subjects in gendered ways. This added nuance means that it is possible to analyse both a role and its occupant as gendered, at times in contrasting ways, as shown in Morley's (2012) analysis of how women and men occupying traditionally masculine leadership roles are positioned. This work recognises the discomfort of occupying a role that has a legacy of men occupants and is imbued with a legacy of masculine qualities (Acker, 1990). At a practical level, this legacy can be recognised through institutions' uneven change regarding parental leave and other associated policies – career norms are still built on a breadwinner model, where occupying the role of academic *and* carer is logistically impractical (Grant, Kennelly & Ward, 2000; Henderson & Moreau, 2020).

Underpinning the practical challenges is another issue, that of recognition as an academic subject. Because of the gendered legacy of masculinity that imbues the academic profession, women have struggled to gain recognition as academics (Leathwood & Read, 2009). Studies have shown that students more readily recognise men as academics than women. For example, Mendez and Mendez (2018) demonstrate that students prefer to select men when faced with a choice between men and women instructors. In academic departments, Pifer (2018) found that women are more likely to be consulted by their colleagues about teaching matters, while colleagues seek out men's advice on more valorised matters such as research and institutional processes. Although the profession is gradually shifting to include more women, there are ongoing concerns that the change in gender balance is not accompanied by full recognition of women as 'authentic' academics. Achieving recognition is a complex and multi-faceted process which is comprised of multiple micro-political moments (Morley, 1999) which occur in different academic scenarios. This can include decisions to avoid asking for mentoring from senior academics (Hyers et al., 2012), being positioned as a junior member of staff (Ahmed, 2012) or

having one's expertise doubted over a sociable academic dinner (Edwards, 2017). As parallel organisations reliant upon the actors and reward structure of higher education for their existence, conferences operationalise gender similarly to institutions of higher education, mirroring and indeed perpetuating challenges for women academics to be recognised as 'belonging' in academia.

Academic Conferences

Although academic conferences are under-researched in the field of higher education research (Henderson, 2015), there is a growing body of work examining gender and conferences (Henderson & Burford, 2020). The majority of empirical studies on gender and conferences consist of statistical analyses of one or more aspects of conferences, where the gender balance is examined for predicted inequalities (thus reinforcing a gender binary). Studies have shown that women are more likely to opt for shorter presentation slots (Jones et al., 2014), less likely to ask questions (Hinsley, Sutherland & Johnston, 2017; King et al., 2018) and less likely to hold prestigious roles such as keynote speaker (Eden, 2016) or academic committee member (Walters, 2018). These studies are extremely important in that they set out a statistical picture of women's marginalisation at conferences. However, studies of this nature only gesture towards capturing how conferences operate as gendered organisations where some academics are legitimised, and others' status is challenged. To complement this research there is another set of literature which does not report on an empirical study, but rather sets out vignettes, personal narratives or anecdotes regarding gendered conference experiences. One such example is Jackson's analysis of sexual harassment at conferences, which reads anecdotes from her own and colleagues' experiences through theoretical lenses (Jackson, 2019); another is Lipton's research poem on bringing her baby to a conference (Lipton, 2019).

Together these studies show how conferences are experienced as unwelcoming and even hostile sites for women academics. This is concerning as conferences are also vital sites for: career development (Kuzhabekova & Temerbayeva, 2018), creating international networks (Kyvik & Larsen, 1994), developing publication collaborations (Campos, Leon & McQuillin, 2018), field-specific learning (de Vries & Pieters, 2007), and accessing the latest developments in the field (Pryor, Garvey & Johnson, 2017). While these aspects of conferences are important practical functions of attending conferences, there is also a more intangible function which is related to the notions of recognition and belonging outlined above. Conferences are spaces of embodied knowledge production where bodies and identities are involved in the performance of a set of academic rituals (Henderson, 2020). Attendees' performances of belonging and 'fitting in' are interpreted and responded to by other attendees, such that practices of recognition shape and reinforce hierarchies of legitimacy within the profession (ibid.). If an academic is told she does not look old enough to be researching her topic (Garvis, 2014), or everybody looks round when women academics of colour enter the room (Ahmed, 2012), or an academic is told she is in the wrong bathroom (Rasmussen, 2009), these moments contribute to a sense of misrecognition or unintelligibility for women.

Cultural representations of the academic profession

Looking across research examining cultural representations of academics, scholars focus on campus specific activities which reveal, most pertinently for our study, gendered portrayals of roles and identities (Reynolds, 2014; Tobolowsky & Reynolds, 2017). Indeed, children's literature, novels, comics, TV shows, and movies normalize white men's embodiment of the academic profession, teaching readers and viewers to imagine a gendered, racialised construct of the professor figure (Reynolds, 2014; Reynolds, 2017; Terras, 2018; Tobolowsky, 2017). In

doing so, cultural representations compound ‘real-life’ gender inequality, highlighted by the underrepresentation of women academics in senior roles, by further exaggerating these inequalities in their portrayals of academics. Focusing on TV, Tobolowsky (2012) notes that this exaggeration results in the overrepresentation of white men as academics. In comparison with men’s general overrepresentation, Tobolowsky (2012) also highlights the way TV shows additionally overrepresent women academics in less prestigious institutions such as community colleges. However, most of this research focuses on campuses and involvement with students, therefore providing a discussion of the portrayals of academics in institutionally based narratives (as opposed to external spaces such as conferences).

Other narratives across media question the validity of women as academics by challenging whether or not they belong. In their interaction with students and colleagues on campus women academics are represented as controlling and repressive in early college women’s novels (Marchalonis, 1995), are shown to act unreasonably and dangerously in comic books (Reynolds, 2017b), serve as help-mates rather than academic equals to their colleagues who are men (Flicker, 2003), face challenges to their expertise (Ryan & Townsend, 2010); their femininity is questioned (Dagaz & Harger, 2011), and narratives sexualize them (Bauer, 1998; Steinke, 2005).

Research suggests that cultural representations present gendered portrayals of academic work, where women academics are more likely to be depicted as teachers on campus, and men as researchers and writers (Reynolds, 2014). Overall sexualized, feminized or masculinized (Dagaz & Harger, 2011) in their portrayals, academic women are deemed to be an exception (Steinke, 2005), and in need of transformation to align with feminine ideals (Flicker, 2003; Reynolds,

2009); cultural representations across genre are shown to challenge women's recognition as belonging in academia by questioning their abilities, and commitment.

Most of the existing research examining cultural depictions of academics focuses on academics on campus. Our research extends the parameters of this work to determine how fictional narratives represent academic gender at, or related to, conferences. Given that research about conferences demonstrates their salience in reproducing gender inequalities in the academy, distinguishing how fictional portrayals represent gender through the specific roles, identities, and peculiar dynamics of conferences is a new contribution for both the study of representations of higher education and of conferences.

About the study

As part of a wider project, we developed a corpus of written fictional sources that feature conferences. The development of a corpus is a common approach in this area of research. Terras' (2018) examination of academics in children's picture books provides one example of such work, where scholars build an as complete as possible list of relevant works in a given area (Reynolds, 2017a; Reynolds, 2017b; Terras, 2018).

For our study, we determined broad selection criteria for texts to be considered for inclusion in the corpus: they could be different forms of narrative fiction (novels, short stories, graphic novels); written in English or translations (to widen the nation of origin); from any genre, as long as they include at least a sentence that refers to an academic conference; and any time period. The corpus includes texts from a wide range of publication dates but have been included for analysis on the basis that they are still available and consumed in the contemporary era, meaning that they still inform dominant public perceptions of academia.

In addition to an open approach to text type, date of publication, nation of origin, and genre, we also embraced inclusivity related to the role conferences played in the narrative itself, determining to what extent conferences featured. Representations of conferences could be *dominantly* represented (all of the text or a substantial proportion set at or revolving around a conference e.g., Ellen L.R.’s short story “Conference Sex”), *peripherally* represented (a smaller part of the text features a conference e.g., Rivière’s *Notes on a Thesis*), or *referentially* present (short references to conferences in the text, perhaps with no narrative time spent at a conference e.g., Amis’ *Lucky Jim*).

Akin to purposeful sampling, for this article, we selected all the texts from our corpus where conferences feature referentially or peripherally, as defined above. We then identified and labelled the sentences about conferences in those texts as ‘symbolic references’ to conferences, as they act as a textual shorthand to construct perceptions of academia. All the portions of writing that focused on conferences in the selected texts constituted the material for our analysis. We analysed 122 references to conferences from 18 fictional narrative texts of different types (e.g., novels, short stories, graphic novels) (see Table 1). For the rest of this paper, we refer to these data as either ‘symbolic references’ or ‘references’.

Table 1: Sample of fictional texts with symbolic references to conferences

Title of text	Author	Date	Type
The Groves of Academe	McCarthy	1952	Novel
Moo	Smiley	1995	Novel
I Love Dick	Kraus	1997	Novel
Publish and Perish: Three Tales of Tenure and Horror	Hynes	1997	Novellas
A Darker Shade of Crimson	Thomas Graham	1998	Novel
A Whistling Woman	Byatt	2002	Novel
At the Villa of Reduced Circumstances	McCall Smith	2003	Novel
Portuguese Irregular Verbs	McCall Smith	2003	Novel
The Finer Points of Sausage Dogs	McCall Smith	2003	Novel
On Beauty	Smith	2005	Novel
Logicomix	Doxiadis & Papadimitriou	2009	Graphic Novel
A Discovery of Witches	Harkness	2011	Novel

Unusual Uses of Olive Oil	McCall Smith	2011	Novel
Mudwoman	Oates	2012	Novel
Dear Committee Members	Schumacher	2014	Novel
Notes on a Thesis	Rivière	2015	Translated Graphic Novel
Tenure to Die For	Perkins	2015	Novel
The Devil and Webster	Hanff Korelitz	2017	Novel

The references vary in length, ranging from a sentence to a paragraph. There may be more references to conferences in the sample of texts selected from the corpus, but none have been deliberately excluded and the texts naturally provided a range of genre, type, and nationality of author.

For this study, both researchers individually read the symbolic references collected from the selected texts. We qualitatively memoed about the references to discern meaning related to our research questions until saturation (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). In this study, saturation meant that, although the data presented new narrative moments, there were no new underlying ideas emerging in our memos related to our open research questions. Through discussion of our memos, we reached consensus about the main ideas occurring in the data, specifically the stark presence of gender differences. After this preliminary analysis, we focused our continuing analysis to determine how gender specifically manifested in the data. Our next step involved different types of qualitative coding, including descriptive and open codes used to label explicit and implicit meanings related to gender and conferences, guided by our research questions (Saldana, 2015). Coding included explicit descriptive codes such as “speaker”, “panel member”, “delegate”, “question-time,” “presentation,” “social gathering” related to roles and events as well as open coding that identified a variety of meaningful expressions in the data such as relationships between characters (e.g., “helpmate” or “minion”), feelings of characters (e.g., “fear”, “doubts”, “confidence”, “pride” “relief”), what happens to or behaviours of

characters (e.g., “harassed,” “challenged,”) as well as more interpretive codes. (e.g., “role ownership,” “using privilege,” “conference hierarchy”). We worked together to reach consensus about patterns and relationships with the codes, working towards building themes that helped illuminate a response to our research questions.

Who attends fictional conferences, and what are they doing there?

Our analysis reveals that, in symbolic references to conferences in fictional texts, conferences serve as a site that delineates who belongs in the profession, from a gendered perspective. This occurs across genres and applies to both pastiche and more realist representations of academia, with data from pastiche texts also serving to reinforce cultural sexism. The short allusions to conferences from our sample of texts establish stark differentiations between women and men academics that establish worth and value, power and privilege, and speak to experience, expectations, and abilities. It is important to note as a finding in relation to the first research question, ‘who attends fictional conferences?’, that there were no trans or nonbinary characters in these novels, and very few representations of characters who were not clearly heterosexual. As such, even texts with powerful women professor characters (*A Discovery of Witches*) still reinforce the notion of (white, cis-gendered, heterosexual) men professors as the norm for academics. The analysis presented below responds to the questions that frame this paper: Who attends conferences? What are they doing at or in relation to conferences?

Who attends fictional conferences?

Our data overwhelmingly portrays conferences as organizations dominated by men. The monopoly of men is exemplified in *Logicomix*, one of the graphic novels in our sample, which

provides a glimpse at a historical conference in several comic panels showing a room full of white men listening to and questioning a speaker. Characters who are men are shown to boast about how many conferences they attend, are invited to, and their speaking roles (e.g., *Portuguese Irregular Verbs*). Men academics are often more senior in rank and gather in groups. They are shown to use conference attendance, particularly invitations, as a way to signal their importance in their fields, such as in *The Finer Point of Sausage Dogs*, where Professor von Igelfeld muses that at conferences “colleagues had tripped over one another in the race to compliment him on his papers” (p. 35). In our data, men are ubiquitously present at conferences in a variety of roles, particularly the most prestigious parts of conferences such as keynote speaker.

Women are also present at conferences, and symbolic references are also used as a shorthand to establish women characters as academics. However, there are fewer women included in our data, and they often appear alone (as opposed to in groups). Women are occasionally depicted in powerful roles such as keynote speaker (*Mudwoman*), but how these roles are referenced routinely counters their authority and belonging (see following sections). Additionally, references also depict women as graduate students or early career researchers, so women feature as less experienced and powerful, despite being set up as opposing senior men characters’ actions at times. “99”, a novella in the *Publish and Perish* collection, depicts a woman graduate student who courageously stands up to a senior faculty member’s racist conference poster (he is also her lover).

The references portray a different relationship between women and conferences. Women feature less prominently than men in the references, and when they are present, some appear more as interlopers, especially when the narrative point of view is that of white men academics.

As we show in the following sections, the symbolic references depict a less secure sense of belonging for women characters across a variety of sampled texts.

Conferences as a terrain for establishing normative masculine academic subjects

Resoundingly across our data, conferences provide the stage for men academics to powerfully enact their ownership of the professorial role – their importance to the success of a conference is stated repeatedly in both their own minds and at times in others' reactions to when they speak and are listened to, whether behind the podium (*Logicomix*) or in the conference hotel bar (*Dear Committee Members*). Some men professors are depicted as using conferences as a site for acting out competition and rivalries, such as the professor in *Unusual Uses of Olive Oil* who uses his notoriety to make demeaning snide comments about other academics, or the professor in *Notes on a Thesis* who plans to use future conferences as a way to monopolize a certain strand of research and thus demonstrate his superiority over a rival colleague. Others use masculine academic privilege to demand exorbitant treatment and bolster their importance, like the professor in *Moo* who receives first class plane tickets for himself and his family, family passes for theme parks, and other luxuries. In stark contrast, the woman professor invited to the same conference is offered less than her colleague, and, after the conference sponsor reneges on the agreement, she is held accountable for all her charges, while he is not.

In several of our symbolic references, men professors or administrators act as gatekeepers to conferences either by organizing conferences themselves or by being a member who can provide a recommendation for others to gain access. As conference organizers, who invites who is shown to ensure men's monopoly of fields, ideas, and their prominence as speakers (*A Whistling Woman*). As well as men characters making and using unwritten conference rules to their advantage, our symbolic references also depict men disregarding the rules of the conference

game, with men professors wielding power by casually ignoring and overriding procedures and conventions. This includes the character who flagrantly disregards the instructions for the conference application needed for a letter of recommendation to pave the way for student inclusion (*Dear Committee Members*), and men professors who repeatedly present the same paper or keynote instead of speaking about new work (*Portuguese Irregular Verbs*).

Our symbolic references portray academic men as confident owners of the academic role. They demonstrate their authority and belonging through representations where they gatekeep less experienced women academics, demonstrate rule ambivalence, and benefit from normative male role privilege.

Conferences as a terrain for contested feminine academic identities

Across the symbolic references analysed for this paper, and irrespective of genre, women's academic presence was repeatedly contested. This took a number of forms that predominantly challenged women's 'belonging' at conferences. One challenge relates to personal and professional roles where attending conferences is portrayed as more difficult for women. For example, a woman university president who has been invited to speak at a conference in a university close to her family's hometown ruminates on how she deliberately has not told her family that she is coming to town to avoid work-family conflict (*Mudwoman*).

Even when women characters do have conference roles, the importance of these roles is often downplayed, or women's occupancy of these roles is somehow marked out as unusual and therefore raises questions about their belonging in academia. For instance, a professor in *Dear Committee Members* ridicules a woman academic for trying to network and hand out CVs at a conference. Even when women are portrayed as keynote speakers, readers are given access to women characters' doubts and insecurities. For instance, the woman university president in

Mudwoman ruminates about whether her keynote is “too emotional...She would call her lover in Cambridge, Massachusetts – to ask of him *Should I? Dare I? Or is this a mistake?*” (p. 21). This is in stark contrast to the representations of men characters’ confidence and self-importance in these roles.

Some of the symbolic references undermine women academics by aligning conferences with fear and anxiety for women. In the graphic novel *Notes on A Thesis*, an established woman scholar refers to her previous conference anxiety; the reader also experiences the main woman protagonist’s (a doctoral student) conference fear through compelling full-page panels that represent her conference experience with a breathless, anxious swimming metaphor, complete with disjointed, bulging-eyed gasps for breath. Even a renowned historian in *A Discovery of Witches* notes her anxiety ahead of a conference where she has been invited to give the keynote. In contrast with this anxiety, men academics boast about their attendance and performance at conferences with bravado, such as Dr Timothy Monahan’s description of his “triumphal progress” through summer conferences (*Moo*).

Another gendered contrast occurs through the academic ritual of question-time. While men delegates describe it as a heroic “joust” (*Portuguese Irregular Verbs*), women academics are shown to react to the hostility of this tradition, such as when a woman speaker dons armour in the graphic panels of *Notes on a Thesis* as she prepares to face down the aggressive man-dominated professorial hordes, or the woman university President’s anticipation of “hostile questioning” (*Mudwoman*) after her keynote. *A Discovery of Witches* highlights this hostility from the other side, when a character remembers question-time from a conference panel:

He gave a paper – I can’t remember the particulars – and a woman asked him a question. It was a smart question, but he was dismissive. She was persistent. He got irritated and

then mad (pp. 48-9).

Such a reaction buttresses our interpretation of the portrayal of gendered roles at conferences: when a woman character exercises academic authority, she is greeted with hostility and rage. The juxtaposition of men's conference confidence with women's conference anxiety in the symbolic references bolsters the representational consistency – across genre – of men's belonging in academic spaces, and conferences specifically, while diminishing women's authority and belonging as academics.

Women academics' sense of belonging at conferences in our data is also depicted as contingent on women serving men. The references place certain conditions on access to and inclusion during conferences, which further men's professorial needs and explicitly rest in men's convenience or service. Women's inclusion due to being in men's service ratifies a gendered conference hierarchy, where men provide access and inclusion to women for their own ends and punish women if they do not conform to the conditions of their inclusion. In some of the references, women scholars are portrayed as helpmates for more senior men academics. As helpmates, women are given certain responsibilities for conference work that may either be demeaning or exploitative. Before the conference, this work includes "doing the slides" for the presentation (*A Whistling Woman*), or solely writing a "co-authored" paper (*A Darker Shade of Crimson*). In *A Darker Shade of Crimson*, several references to conferences in this text depict the substantial amount of time that the main protagonist, an Assistant Professor, spends on a paper that she is supposed to be co-writing with her former dissertation advisor and now colleague. This positions her in a subordinate role and suggests that her inclusion is contingent upon the condition of her subordination.

In the symbolic references, in addition to undertaking conference labour for men colleagues, women's contingent belonging at the service of men also appears to be on the condition of enduring harassment by or the seduction tactics of men academics. Some references establish conferences as sites where men have affairs or (hetero)sexual encounters, often involving junior women characters (*On Beauty*, *Moo*). In general, women are not shown to be initiating these affairs. Dr Monahan in *Moo* congratulates himself on his conference discretion and outlines his rules to successfully conduct dalliances with women at conferences, "flirting enough, but not too much, getting discretely laid but sticking to one person, and [with] one who was nearly his own age and nearly his own rank" (p.15). Although he flatters himself for his discretion and partner choices, he preys on younger, less established women to service his transient sexual needs. So, one condition of women's access to and engagement with fictional conferences is based in objectification and sexualization, which frames and furthers the heterosexual men's embodiment of the professoriate within the confines of the conference and beyond.

Conclusion

Empirical research about women, conferences, and higher education demonstrates persistent gender divisions in academia. However, scholarship about conferences has yet to examine cultural representations of conferences and the academics that attend them. In this paper, we have specifically explored the ways in which symbolic references to conferences in fictional narrative texts act as a shorthand to establish academic roles and identities for associated characters, and the ways in which these are mediated by gender. We found that symbolic references to conferences portray gender inequalities in very specific ways, reproducing or even exaggerating actual inequalities highlighted in burgeoning work about

gender and conferences (e.g. Eden 2016, King et al. 2018). As a symbolic shorthand that shares information about conferences and academics, the brief portions of text that comprised our data accentuate gendered differences across different genres of fiction; they quickly establish conferences as spaces where power and privilege play out – and demarcate conference spaces as venues where women do not belong. In our analysis, academic conferences are used in fictional texts to establish gendered academic identities and inequalities by reinforcing men’s monopoly of such spaces, presenting men’s confidence in these spaces as opposed to women’s anxiety and insecurities, and by sabotaging the competency of women in these roles. These symbolic references position women as academics who are beset by anxieties and doubts, whose belonging in these roles and at conferences specifically is contingent on being silent, acting as helpmates, and/or as lovers to senior academic men. The gendered presence, placement, and positioning of fictional academics in relation to conferences normalizes men’s embodiment of the academic profession.

Bringing together the growing empirical work about conferences with that on cultural representations of higher education, our research illuminates some important conclusions. Firstly, this study reveals how brief references to conferences in fiction provide a very particular site, or symbolic focus, to perpetuate shared meanings about academics that demonstrate clear gendered inequalities. Secondly, despite women’s increased involvement in academia, conference depictions in fiction in our data portrayed these stark gendered differences for conferencing academics, regardless of time of publication and genre of fictional text. Thirdly, as cultural representations of higher education reproduce, reinforce, and legitimize shared understandings of higher education (Reynolds, 2014), the continued stark association between men, their academic roles, and conferences that we find in our analysis may contribute to broad

gendered understandings of who belongs in academia and who is recognisable in professorial roles. Future work should explore these issues beyond symbolic references in fiction to texts where conferences play a significant role in narratives, as these texts may represent conferences and their delegates in more complex and multi-faceted ways. We recommend that further research also extend beyond our focus on fictional texts and examine these topics across other media. It is concerning that one way to establish scholarly identities in fiction is through gendered inequalities; to conclude, this paper has revealed that, although (and indeed because) the symbolic references analysed in this study are brief, they contain powerful and stark delineations concerning the reproduction of gendered inequalities in cultural representations of academia, crystallised through the use of conferences.

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