



Mobile, hierarchical, normative, decadent and conflict prone: understanding academia through fictional conferences

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Abstract

Representations of higher education in fiction-based sources contribute to forming public perceptions of academia, and so are a form of public pedagogy. Within popular culture representations, understandings of academics are constructed using particular tropes which build shared meanings of the profession. Conferences are one of these tropes and can thus be used as a focus to explore the construction of the academic profession in popular culture representations of higher education. This paper draws on a research project which explored representations of conferences in narrative fiction texts (novels, graphic novels, short stories). In this paper, we analyse references to conferences for what they teach us about the academic profession. The paper is based on analysis of 98 symbolic references to conferences from a sample of 23 fictional texts. Symbolic references are short references which serve as a shorthand to signal aspects of the academic profession, and in this paper, they have been analysed in terms of what they portray and where they position the reader. The paper argues that popular culture representations of academia are pedagogical, in that they show the profession to be desirable to others but encourage a disidentification with academics, reinforcing the exclusionary nature of the profession.

Keywords Conferences · Academic work · Academic profession · Cultural representations of higher education · Campus fiction · Academic novels

Introduction

The academic profession in public discourse is often characterized as an elitist ivory tower (Benjamin, 1993; Porter, 2019; Reynolds, 2014). The portrayal is shared across media, social media and commentators on the academy. Representations of academia are important to consider as they are a form of public pedagogy (Sandlin et al., 2009), and contribute to shaping policy priorities relating to higher education (HE),

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especially where the un/popularity of state funding for HE closely links to voter preferences (Boyadjieva & Slantcheva, 2007; Kim et al., 2007; Mwamila & Diyamett, 2009). Moreover, public perceptions of the academic profession pedagogically shape the aspirations of those who may wish to join the profession, who may see it as a logical progression from their studies, those who see it as irrelevant and fusty and those who see it as a place they do not belong (Chimba & Kitzinger, 2010; Kelly, 2016; Porter, 2019). Alongside various media representations of academia (Attenborough, 2013; Mitchell & McKinnon, 2019), representations of HE in fiction-based sources contribute to forming and confirming public perceptions of academia (Wilkinson et al., 2021). Representations of the academic profession pedagogically convey information to lay readers about who academics are, what academic work is and what it means to succeed in academia.

Within popular culture representations of academia, understandings of academics and their work are constructed cumulatively, using tropes which recur and build shared meanings of the academic profession, even if these meanings are outdated or contextually specific (Showalter, 2005; Tierney, 2004). Conferences are one of these tropes. Conferences come under fire in public discourse for a number of reasons which epitomize critiques of the academic profession—they are often portrayed as excessive and elitist and, concomitantly, useless and boring (Henderson, 2020). Within fiction-based representations of academia, conferences commonly make brief appearances, but are rarely featured centre-stage (Reynolds & Henderson, 2022). As we go on to show, conferences signal particular attributes of the academic profession in various ways. The subliminal presence of conferences in popular culture means that, while the majority of the population has never attended an academic conference, many people have accumulated reference points for (but not necessarily a detailed understanding of) what attending a conference signifies. Moreover, reoccurrences of conferences in popular culture representations of academia may also indicate that conferences are a key part of academic work in the public imagination. We argue that conferences can thus be used as a focus to explore the construction of the academic profession in popular culture representations of HE, viewed as a form of public pedagogy.

This paper draws on a wider research project which has explored representations of conferences in narrative fiction texts (novels, graphic novels and short stories). A core aim of the project has been to explore conferences as a cultural phenomenon, recognizing that there are competing public discourses about conferences that shape academics' and proto-academics' perceptions of conferences, but that these have as yet not been fully analysed (Henderson, 2020). The project has already yielded findings showing that fiction-based representations of conferences reflect—and reproduce—perceptions about academia as being dominated by white, men academics (Reynolds & Henderson, 2022). In this paper, we analyse references to conferences in narrative fiction for what they signal about academia and the academic profession, including academic work and career success. The paper is based on analysis of 98 symbolic references to conferences from a sample of 23 texts selected from a corpus of 66 fiction-based texts that contain representations of academic conferences. The paper argues that popular culture representations of the academic profession are a form of public pedagogy, in that they show the profession to be desirable to others but simultaneously encourage a disidentification with the profession by readers. This is an important argument to consider within equity drives in HE, given the multi-faceted process by which HE aspirations are formed (Reynolds, 2014).

Cultural representations of academia and conferences

There is a relatively significant but rather disparate body of literature which focuses on fiction-based representations of the academic profession. The work in this area is predominantly situated in HE studies and literature studies, with some additional work in other fields such as history (Somsen, 2021) and the sciences (Flicker, 2003). In this section, we review this research firstly to see how other researchers have gathered together the representations of academic work and the academic profession, and secondly to position our study from an educational research perspective. We then explore the literature for the inclusion of conferences within the analysis of fictional representations and identify the contribution of our study to the existing literature.

Cultural representations of academia: contradictions and ambivalence

Cultural depictions of HE in general, and the academic profession more specifically, respond to, inform and reproduce public perceptions of academia (Kelly, 2016; Reynolds, 2014; Terras, 2018), and thus are a form of public pedagogy (Sandlin et al., 2009; Wright, 2009). Scholars research cultural depictions of HE from a variety of different angles, including in relation to students, academics and professional services, as well as thematic foci such as neoliberalism (Wilkinson et al., 2021) and diversity (Donahoo & Yakaboski, 2017). The vast majority of analyses of cultural representations of academia focus on texts written by authors based in the USA or the UK, with just a few exceptions (e.g. Fuchs & Klepuszewski 2019; Kelly, 2016). A wide variety of different cultural media have been explored, including novels, films, music, comic books, video games and TV series. In relation to novels, there are numerous studies of the genre that is known as ‘campus fiction’ or ‘academic fiction’ (Showalter, 2005; Fuchs & Klepuszewski, 2019), often written by academics themselves who assume a relatively high knowledge of academia from the reader. While literature on representations of academics in novels tends to be based on the campus fiction genre, other explorations of cultural representations range across representations of HE in mainstream sources. In this section, we therefore include analyses of different types of representation, in order to better understand portrayals of academics and what cultural representations teach us about the academic profession.

Until the mid-twentieth century, academics were not regularly represented, with a focus on students in representations of HE (Conklin, 2014; Reynolds, 2014). In the twentieth century, the range of media broadened and academics were portrayed with greater frequency (Reynolds, *ibid.*). Initially, men academics were portrayed as paternalistic and chaste (*ibid.*), but the representations shifted over time to a more ambivalent, complex construction of the profession (Reynolds, *ibid.*; Showalter, 2005). In our study, we were interested in cultural texts that are still consumed today (predominantly 1950s onwards), meaning that the dominant construction of the academic profession that our study is based on is this increasingly ambivalent construction. This ambivalence takes multiple forms, which overall lead to a compiled effect of a profession which is complex and contradictory and often portrayed as undesirable.

Existing research finds that academic work is shown to be contradictory, with opposing forces leading to dissatisfaction among students and staff alike. Showalter’s (2005) chronological exploration of academic novels identifies how novels chart the rise of competitiveness in the academic profession. This takes the form of a move from

portrayals of academic work as situated firmly in a department and/or an institution to wider concerns of reputation and competition within the discipline at large. Academics' relationship with power is one of the reasons for this shift, as self rather than service dominates faculty motivations, and competitiveness rather than collaboration is shown to govern faculty endeavour (Major, 1998; Reynolds, 2014; Showalter, 2005). In cultural representations of the academic profession, teaching is placed as central to this tension between internal and external work, as portrayals predominantly critique academics' abilities as teachers, with good teachers an exception (Conklin, 2014; Major 1998; Tobolowsky, 2006, 2017). Academics are those who erect barriers to students' success through low grades or difficult final exams (Tobolowsky, 2006).

In addition to the contradictory priorities of academic work that are identified across cultural representations of academia, literature identifies consistent themes of the elite, exclusive/exclusionary and hierarchical nature of the profession, which is shown in abundance in cultural representations. Institutional type is shown to be an important marker of hierarchy, where full-time faculty who work in community colleges (alternative HE providers) are portrayed as undistinguished and marginal (LaPaglia, 1994). In contrast, named elite institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge in the UK and Harvard and Yale in the USA are overrepresented in fictional texts across media, to such an extent that 'exclusive higher education is portrayed as the only real higher education' (Reynolds, 2014, 34). In addition to a hierarchy of institution, contract type and associated status have been identified as a major theme in portrayals of the profession (LaPaglia, 1994; Tierney, 2004). Representations of HE teach consumers that where academics work, in what role and who they work with indicate worth and success (Reynolds, 2014).

Academics are depicted as unsavoury characters or as engaging in work which is worthless or harmful. An analysis of films from the 1940s demonstrates how narratives positioned academics as 'the other', with distrust attributed to intellectual work, research and the commitment to pursue an academic life (Reynolds, 2017). The anti-intellectual slant to representations of the profession has been thoroughly analysed in the edited collection by Tobolowsky and Reynolds (2017a). For instance, primetime US-produced TV shows aired between 1996 and 2014 present an anti-intellectual discourse that attacks the value of tenure and suggests deep distrust towards academics and academic life (Tobolowsky, 2017) while video games position in-game academic characters as emotionless, immoral and elitist (Lozano, 2017). Furthermore, academics have been identified by numerous commentators as displaying immoral and decadent attributes, engaging in sexual relationships with students and being unfaithful to partners (Tierney, 2004).

In the contemporary era of representations of the academic profession, defined as the latter part of the twentieth century and the twenty-first century, existing research demonstrates that the profession is shown to be riven with contradictions and ambivalence. Contradictions occur in the nature and priorities of the work, in terms of commitment to the institution versus commitment to developing a reputation in the field. The profession is shown to be competitive and elitist, strongly marking distinctions between different institutions and contract types. Importantly, the portrayals of academics are characterized by ambivalence because the profession is shown to be desirable *for others*; a disidentification is set up where the viewer or reader is taught to not identify with or aspire to be the academics they are seeing or reading about. This ambivalence carries further into the personal characteristics of academics, where the disidentification is cemented with immoral and decadent behaviour—behaviour which is again not portrayed in a desirable light.

The place of conferences in analyses of cultural representations of academia

To what extent, then, is this dominant construction of the academic profession, across decades and across media, reflected and/or extended in symbolic references to conferences in narrative fiction? Literature analysing cultural representations of academia has not tended to focus on conferences, with a particular lacuna in this regard in the HE research on cultural representations. However, some literature which examines portrayals of academics or focuses on texts that feature conferences does include discussion of the representation of fictional conferences. We have assembled these scant discussions for the purposes of this article and have identified key ways in which conferences are used to illustrate some of the broader concerns identified in the previous sub-section.

In relation to the contradictory nature of academic work, with internal priorities such as teaching competing with external priorities pertaining to reputation and discipline-related contribution, researchers identify conferences as one of the forms of academic work that signal the prioritization of external activities. For instance, Terras (2018) includes references to attendance at conferences in her study of academics in children's picture books: academic characters are rarely depicted on campus, with conferences identified as a practice that takes academics away from their workplace. *Professor Puffendorf's Secret Potion* provides an example when a professor's travel to a conference provides opportunities for shenanigans to occur in her lab during her absence (Terras, 2018). Researchers identify the use of figurative references to pilgrimage and circuits related to conference travel to demonstrate academics' purposeful awayness and mobility (Anderson & Chaddock, 2017; Showalter, 2005). Therefore, conferences seem to be used to signal the mobile nature of academic work, and the resultant absence of academics from campus and campus-based activities.

The ambivalence that characterizes representations of the academic profession is reflected in researchers' brief commentary on representations of conferences. Researchers have identified representations of gatekeeping occurring during conferences in terms of access to the profession through conference-based interviews or who is invited to participate (Showalter, 2005) or whether students gain access to conferences (Kelly, 2009). Conferences in fiction have been recognized as positioning academics in ways that highlight alliances, ranks and the status of conference attendees (Klepuszewki, 2019; Showalter 2005). Hawlitschka (2005) notes that conferences display a hierarchy of intellectual engagement where the event becomes, or is perceived as, a platform for embarrassment and humiliation as academics belittle where funding comes from and the choices made about what people study: serious academics need to avoid being associated with others' inferior interests. Assembling these insights reveals the use of conferences to illustrate academic hierarchies. This reinforces the portrayals of the academic profession in the previous sub-section, in that conferences—and prestige within conferences—are shown to be desirable *to others*, but the reader is not encouraged to aspire to attend conferences themselves.

The disidentification with the profession at large and with conferences as a form of academic work is also extended to the academics attending conferences. Narratives displaying academics enjoying luxurious food and lodgings, social engagement and consuming alcoholic drinks suggest academics engage in heady, exciting activities through their conference attendance, accentuating the sense of conferences being vehicles for professional success and recognition (Hawlitschka, 2003; Klepuszewki, 2019; Showalter 2005; Talburt & Salvio, 2005). Researchers have identified that conferences are

represented as an excuse to get drunk and have sex (Fuchs, 2019), with sexual liaisons serving as a popular pastime for conferencing academics (Anderson & Chaddock, 2017; Kelly, 2016; Klepuszewki, 2019; Showalter 2005). Conferences are also identified as sites where academic ‘bad behaviour’ occurs in the form of conflict and in-fighting; conference depictions emphasize competing academic ‘sects’, making them sites of disagreement and conflict (Hawlitshka, 2003), where frictions and duels occur (Klepuszewki, 2019). Although the ‘bad behaviour’ in the form of drunken decadence, sexual exploits and in-fighting may seem to show conferences as exciting and desirable, discussions of conference decadence in the literature illustrate this as part of the negative portrayal of academia.

In sum, assembling the references to conferences in literature on cultural representations of academia reveals that conferences are used—in an implicit form of public pedagogy—as a vehicle to demonstrate: the competing priorities of academic work, with a focus on mobility and absence from campus; the hierarchical and exclusive nature of the profession, with academia shown as desirable for some but not for the reader; the unsavoury nature of academics, with academic bad behaviour contributing to the reader’s disidentification with the profession.

The study

The foundation of this study is built on the ongoing development of a corpus of narrative, text-based fiction texts (novels, graphic novels and short stories) that include reference to conferences, an approach which reflects strategies used in other studies of HE in cultural texts such as movies, comics and picture books (Tobolowsky & Reynolds, 2017a; Terras, 2018). The texts could be written and published at any time or in any country, in English originally or in translation. At the time of writing, our corpus includes 66 texts of varying type and genre including mysteries, romance and fantasy along with academic novels; the corpus is not limited to the genre of campus fiction, but rather involves any texts where academic conferences are mentioned. The corpus was developed through referring to the references list in publications analysing campus fiction, internet searching and consulting with the relevant research community on social media. Conferences feature in fictional representations of HE to different extents. In some cases, an entire novel or short story is based around a conference, but more commonly conferences are referred to in passing. Though brief, these short references embody a whole host of shared meanings about conferences, academics and academia itself (Reynolds & Henderson, 2022). This paper focuses on this latter type of references to conferences, which we term ‘symbolic references’ (ibid.). We define ‘symbolic references’ as references to conferences in texts where there is little or no narrative time spent at a conference. In practice, this means that conferences are referred to in passing, or a brief scene takes place at a conference, ranging from one sentence or a paragraph up to three pages of text. These symbolic references to conferences act as a narrative shorthand that draws on (and simultaneously reproduces) common assumptions about conferences and the academic profession more widely, making them a salient focus for analysis.

For the purposes of this paper, we analysed 98 references to conferences from 23 fictional texts from our corpus (see Table 1). The 24 texts were selected as these were the texts that we had located at the time of beginning the analysis for this paper that contained symbolic references to conferences. As a preliminary stage of analysis, both researchers read the references and memoed about them until saturation. We used the memos to

Table 1 Sample for the study: fictional texts with symbolic references to conferences

Title of text	Author	Date	Type	Number of symbolic references to conferences
The Groves of Academe	McCarthy, Mary	1952	Novel	7
Changing Places	Lodge, David	1975	Novel	3
The Women's Room	French, Marilyn	1977	Novel	2
Moo	Smiley, Jane	1995	Novel	6
I Love Dick	Kraus, Chris	1997	Novel	3
Publish and Perish: Three Tales of Tenure and Horror	Hynes, James	1997	Novellas	12
A Darker Shade of Crimson	Thomas-Graham, Pamela	1998	Novel	3
A Whistling Woman	Byatt, A. S.	2002	Novel	6
At the Villa of Reduced Circumstances	McCall Smith, Alexander	2003	Novel	4
Portuguese Irregular Verbs	McCall Smith, Alexander	2003	Novel	7
The Finer Points of Sausage Dogs	McCall Smith, Alexander	2003	Novel	4
On Beauty	Smith, Zadie	2005	Novel	5
Torpor	Kraus, Chris	2006	Novel	6
The Headstrong Historian	Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi	2009	Short story	1
A Discovery of Witches	Harkness, Deborah	2011	Novel	4
The Marriage Plot	Eugenides, Jeffrey	2011	Novel	3
Unusual Uses for Olive Oil	McCall Smith, Alexander	2011	Novel	5
Mudwoman	Oates, Joyce Carol	2012	Novel	4
Dear Committee Members	Schumacher, Julie	2014	Novel	2
Notes on a Thesis	Rivière, Tiphaine	2015	Translated graphic novel	8
Tenure to Die For	Perkins, Ronald	2015	Novel	1
The Devil and Webster	Korelitz, Jean Hanff	2017	Novel	1
Transcendent Kingdom	Gyasi, Yaa	2020	Novel	1
TOTAL: 98 references from 23 texts				

identify key ideas about conferences to determine the focus of a more in-depth analysis (Birks et al., 2008). The second level of analysis focused on one of the main ideas emerging from the preliminary analysis, i.e. the use of symbolic references to conferences to represent the academic profession, using inductive and deductive thematic coding. The deductive coding used the themes identified in our literature review (contradictions in academic work priorities; hierarchical and exclusionary profession; unsavoury characters) as an a priori means of analysis, while the inductive coding identified aspects of the references which exceeded these themes (Saldana, 2015).

The analysis presented in the next section presents the themes we detected but also reaches beyond a thematic presentation by considering the interpolation of the reader into a particular position in relation to the profession. Drawing on the disidentification bent described in the previous section, it is important to consider not just the content of the references but also the presence of the reader or narratee (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983). In line

with Terras' (2018) study of the representations of academics in children's literature, we argue that fictional representations of academia use and contribute to public perceptions of the academic profession, to the extent that representations form the foundation for a public imaginary of the profession, regardless of verisimilitude (Kelly, 2016). Fiction-based representations can be analysed from different temporal angles, including the date of publication or release (Wilkinson et al., 2021; Tierney, 2004), the era depicted in the representation (Showalter, 2005) and the time of consumption. In this article, we approach the texts through the latter angle. We argue that readers or viewers do not necessarily employ a socio-historical lens when consuming fictional representations of academia, and that they may not ask themselves if the academic profession they are seeing on the screen or the page is historically accurate to the period portrayed, or if the profession has changed since this portrayal. Rather, fictional representations of academia accumulate in the public imaginary, added to other representations and experiences to form an individual's perception of the profession. In order to answer the question posed in the introduction, *what symbolic references to conferences teach us about academia and the academic profession, including academic work and career success*, it is important to consider not just what we are taught in terms of content, but the extent to which we are taught to dis/identify with and aspire to become academics.

Understanding academia through fictional conferences

From the literature, we identified that conferences are used to signify the prioritization of external academic work, the hierarchical and exclusionary nature of the profession and the unsavoury nature of academics themselves. Our analysis of the symbolic references to conferences in the narrative fiction texts in our sample resulted in an expansion of this initial triad to a five-part analysis: (i) a mobile, absent profession, (ii) a hierarchical, exclusionary profession, (iii) a normative, conventional profession, (iv) a decadent profession, (v) a conflict-prone, combative profession. It should be noted however that these facets are not mutually exclusive, as there are many overlaps between them which are signalled in the below analysis. In addition to understanding how each part of the analysis compiles a picture of the academic profession, in the final discussion section, we consider the position of the reader in relation to the pedagogical effect of dis/identification.

A mobile, absent profession

Academic novels use conferences to establish professorial roles and endeavours featuring as part of what Showalter (2005, 7) calls 'academic time'—the ways that an academic's time is 'organized and compartmentalized according to various grids and calendars, vacations and rituals' dictated by the competing priorities of institutional and disciplinary work. References to conferences indicate that part of academic work is travelling and being away from the campus, with absence serving as a marker of external success. Conference representations therefore denote a privileged mobility as being part of an externally successful academic's work (Anderson & Chaddock, 2017; Showalter, 2005; Talburt & Salvio, 2005; Terras, 2018). Indeed, it is significant that in novels that we have encountered about academia where there are no mentions of conferences, such as *Disgrace* (Coetzee, 1999) and *A Single Man* (Isherwood, 2010 [1964]), the academics featured in these works are stuck, struggling with their research careers and weighed down with teaching responsibilities.

In our study, conferences were used to signify the frequent absence of academics in their workplaces. For instance, in *Changing Places* (51), Zapp enquires after another academic in the department he is visiting. The member of staff replies that the academic is ‘in Hungary. Won’t be back until the beginning of term’, and Zapp automatically asks ‘At a conference?’, indicating the synonymous nature of conferences with absence. Zapp, an academic from the USA, is described very early in the text as ‘A seasoned veteran of the domestic airways, having flown over most of the states in the Union in his time, bound for conferences, lecture dates and assignments’ (7–8). Many of the references to conferences in our sample did not refer to a specific conference, as with this reference from *Changing Places*, but rather to conferences *in general*, conveying a sense of the conference circuit, a string of travel commitments that blur into each other. A second example, from *I Love Dick* (219), includes the narrator’s remembered conversation with Sylvère, a highly mobile academic and critic: ‘I don’t remember which conference in which European country you’d just got back from. You said you were exhausted and depressed’. This reference layers the privileged status of frenetic short-term academic mobility with a sense of ennui, the discontent of the *over-mobile*. To this extent, the expectations of mobility are portrayed as a norm of academia and even an inconvenience, such as when Iso’s brief affair with Kyla in *The Women’s Room* ends in part because Kyla has ‘committed to go to some physics conference’ (538) and will therefore be away over the summer.

A hierarchical, exclusionary profession

As discussed in the literature section, conferences are used in fictional narrative texts to signal the hierarchical nature of the profession. This intersects with the mobile and decadent aspects of the profession, as there is a clear sense of academia as an elite and indeed an *elitist* profession. The elite character of academia implies its selectivity, with conferences being a recognized gateway to enhanced academic success (Kyvik & Larsen, 1994; Smeby, 2005). Conferences are used in fictional representations to both signal the hierarchy between academics and non-academic staff, and the hierarchy within academic ranks.

In the graphic novel *Notes on a Thesis* (89), a conference is used to signal academics’ disdain for administrative staff. The protagonist, a doctoral student, has taken a job as a university administrator to support herself during her studies, where she is responsible for organizing conferences. There is bathos between the academic asking that all the programmes are printed to make her name larger, and the administrator saying ‘I came to your conference on Raskolnikov. I’m doing a PhD with Alexandre Kapov’. The academic says ‘Oh, so Alexandre is supervising secretaries now, is he?’ with a startled expression. Then in the next frame, she returns her to her place as administrator, reminding her of the programme change. In addition to showing the hierarchy between academic and non-academic staff, a conference is used in *I Love Dick* (99) to show how academics draw up hierarchies with others who are in the vicinity of academia. Chris, whose partner attends many conferences, is not an academic but does move in academic and film-making circles. She recalls ‘a breakfast she and Sylvère [husband, academic] had once with Andrew Ross and Constance Penley at a conference in Montreal. Constance brilliantly corrected Chris’ bumbling appreciation of Henry James, touching every intellectual base’. Academics are shown to take any opportunity to engage in professional gatekeeping and hierarchy maintenance.

Conferences are also represented as both challenging and reproducing institutional hierarchies (Henderson, 2020). Showalter (2005) highlights a series of ‘conference rules’ gleaned from her examination of Lodge’s (2011 [1984]) novel *Small World*. These rules

determine insider/outsider status and establish who belongs and who does not, as well as the parameters of professional, personal and event success. This is shown in *A Whistling Woman*, where the Vice-Chancellor and the Dean of Students are discussing the selection of invited speakers for the upcoming Body-Mind Conference:

Wijnnobel [VC] said he had given further thought to the ‘star’ speakers... and had two names to put before Hodgkiss [Dean of Students]. ‘In your capacity as Dean of Students, as well as in your Conference capacity’. (31)

The jousting between the two senior academics over which academics to invite is itself a form of hierarchy enactment that mirrors the discussion of the academic prestige of the invited speakers.

A normative, conventional profession

Our analysis of the fictional representations of conferences revealed a facet that is linked to but separate from the hierarchical nature of the profession. Conference representations showed academia to be a normative, conventional profession, in terms of the norms of the profession and how academics engage in their work.

Academics must engage with conferences as a marker of professional authenticity, even when individuals experience them, and the work for them, as a futile endeavour (Porter, 2019). Many of the symbolic references to conferences represent the view that presenting at conferences leads towards tenure and seniority, such as in *Tenure to Die for* (164):

I published several articles in prestigious chemical journals, gave presentations at national meetings, served on several university committees and believed I was well on my way toward a tenured appointment.

and in *Transcendent Kingdom* (222) where a doctoral student lists her aspirations: ‘I wanted my own lab at an elite university. I wanted a profile in *The New Yorker*, invitations to speak at conferences, and money’. Career success is signalled when these achievements have been attained, and even an ennui conveyed in relation to conference involvement (similar to the over-mobility mentioned in the mobility analysis), such as with Grace, a Nigerian academic and descendent of a family indelibly marked by colonization, in the short story ‘Headstrong Historian’:

It was Grace who, as she received faculty prizes, as she spoke to solemn-faced people at conferences about the Ijaw and Ibibio and Igbo and Efik peoples of Southern Nigeria, as she wrote reports for international organizations about commonsense things...would imagine her grandmother looking on and chuckling. (217–218)

Conferences are constructed as a powerful norm of academic work and success, even though in fact they are rewarded to a much lower degree than publications, grants and teaching in ‘real life’ academic recruitment and promotion criteria.

Conferences are also used to show the conventional nature—the banality and futility—of academic work, another facet of anti-intellectual representations (Tobolowsky & Reynolds, 2017b). In *Mudwoman* (21–22), M. R. Neukirchen is waiting to attend the National Conference of the American Association of Learned Societies where she will deliver a keynote to 1,500 people. The conference keynote she is planning is held up by the academic as risky and potentially controversial, yet the conference itself and her topic appear to be niche and uncontroversial from a contemporary reader’s perspective.

The conventional nature of the profession is also highlighted in representations of conferences that appear to be trying to be radical. In *Torpor* (165), Jerome, a philosopher and cultural critic, recalls a conference where he met another academic character, Peichel: ‘He [Jerome] and Peichel met in Austria five years ago at a conference Peichel organized... The conference, Jerome recalls, was something about *Literature and Contagion...* the same old semiotic shit tricked out to reference AIDS and therefore seem more *edgy*’ (emphasis in original). Here, academic work is shown to be repetitive at its core, but always trying to reinvent its terms of expression to sound more enticing. Even where conferences are used to signal the challenging of norms, these representations show that the challenges occur within a narrow, conventional frame.

A decadent profession

As discussed in previous sections, academia is constructed as an undesirable profession, in part through the portrayals of academics as unsavoury characters and their worthless work, with conferences acting as the stage upon which a range of academic ‘bad behaviour’ plays out. In an analysis of a short story about a conference, Klepuszewki (2019) highlights how a conference set within a castle reads like a medieval court with jousts and feasts. Klepuszewki (*ibid.*) analyses the notion of a ‘conference topography’ consisting of the ‘ceremonious, atmospheric, and consummatory aspects’ (68) of ‘the place, the people, and the atmosphere’ (74) that ‘render not only the conference fabric, but even more so its flavour’. These sensory aspects of conferences are used to both glamorize and satirize professorial lifestyles, with fictional conferences identified as representing a site for sex for the ‘sex starved’ (Anderson & Chaddock, 2017, 26), and providing opportunities to cheat on partners (Showalter, 2005). As identified in our literature review, symbolic references to conferences in fictional texts may be used to highlight the decadence that is inherent to the academic profession. This function of symbolic conference references overlaps with the mobility aspect, where the highly privileged mobility that academics engage in is accompanied by luxury and bad behaviour.

In the symbolic references, conference decadence includes luxury travel, food and drink, particularly the consumption of alcohol. For instance, in the epistolary novel *Dear Committee Member* (72–73), the protagonist, Jay, a grumpy professor of creative writing, writes to a colleague and recalls their drunken conversation in the hotel bar of a conference 10 years before: ‘I remember sitting with you at the hotel bar, each of us (all right, yes, full disclosure, it was mainly me) unpacking the sordid facts of our professional and then our personal lives’ (72). The combination of mobility and decadence sets the scene for sexual encounters to occur at conferences, against a backdrop of alcohol and luxury. As noted in the mobility section, conferences are used to signal academics’ absence both from work and their home lives, with sexual encounters forming an undercurrent of this absence. In *On Beauty*, there are two references to a conference where academic Howard seemed to have had an affair with Claire, and these references are used to signal Howard’s absence and detachment from his home life. In the first (13), Howard’s wife Kiki points out that a phone number they are unable to locate is “‘in the diary, the diary that was left in Michigan, during the famous conference when you had more important things on your mind than your wife and family’”. A further twist on this conference affair occurs when it is revealed later (119) that Howard had in fact falsely informed his wife that the affair had happened at the conference, as this story seemed less serious than the 3-week affair he had actually had

at another time. Here, the accepted status of conferences as sites of relatively low-stakes sexual encounters is held up for the reader.

In *A Whistling Woman* (168), the senior academic Lyon Bowman enters the lab and stands too close to Jacqueline, a graduate student. Here, another parallel plays out between conferences as work and/or personal trips, as he offers that she can accompany him to a conference. There is a contrast between the professional tone of the invitation: ““You need time off. You need a change. I’m off to a conference on the visual cortex in Turin. Do you want to come along? the Department can support you. Meet a few new scientists. Get a little more sun, even in winter”” and the accompanying gesture ‘He slips an arm round her’. Using a conference as a means of seduction is identified as a common occurrence as Jacqueline has ‘heard about Lyon Bowman’s conference invitations to women graduates’. It is noteworthy that the excesses of academic conferences are depicted in a highly gendered manner, with men academics primarily indulging in decadent conference behaviour of all kinds and women (academics and/or partners) portrayed as tolerating the bad behaviour or portrayed as objects of men academics’ desire (see also Reynolds & Henderson, 2022).

A combative, conflict-prone profession

In the literature section, conflict was included within ‘bad behaviour’ at conferences that also includes decadence. However, our analysis of the sample showed conflict at conferences as a major feature of fictional conference references, so we present a separate analysis of combative conference behaviour. Conference portrayals provide the site for conflict, fights and even murder—the extreme of this occurs with a conference killing spree in *Murder at the MLA* (Jones, 1993).

The image of the academic profession compiled from the above sections is a profession of autonomous, privileged individuals who behave as they wish and engage in professional gatekeeping and hierarchy maintenance through unspoken norms and rules. Conferences are used to signal the conflict-prone nature of the profession, with conflicts in turn used to signal negative aspects of the profession such as pettiness, self-importance and irrelevance. In *Groves of Academe* (232), the academic Mulcahy is told: ““We’ve been told... that the conference is going to be rigged. A certain elderly poet is going to be asked here, to be attacked by his juniors and by certain members of our faculty””. In *Notes on a Thesis* (30), the doctoral student protagonist goes to see her supervisor to get advice on her PhD. While she is talking, he thinks about how many PhDs on the topic a rival is supervising. He reflects ‘From now on, I’m speaking at every Kundera symposium and I’ll supervise everyone in the field’. Here, the symbolic accolades of career success that are the foundation of this academic rivalry—signalled by his presence at conferences and in his numbers of doctoral students—obliterate the pedagogical act of supervision. He also selects conferences as his chosen battlefield to obliterate his rival.

Alexander McCall Smith’s Professor von Igelfeld books feature an academic rivalry between von Igelfeld and his colleague Unterholzer. In *The Finer Points of Sausage Dogs* (25), there is a scene where Prof von Igelfeld is thinking about his colleague Unterholzer, who is junior to him but who has just received an award that von Igelfeld thinks he should have received himself. Igelfeld remembers an international conference invitation that Unterholzer received, but reassures himself with his inside knowledge that being invited to a conference is not necessarily the career success marker it seems, as there is a hierarchy behind the invitations of who has the privilege of being asked first and declining: ‘His [Unterholzer’s] Buenos Aires invitation had come merely because they could get nobody

else to attend the conference'. This notion of declining conferences as a form of academic rivalry aligns with the ennui of over-mobility and over-presenting discussed above, as it is a marker of privilege to decline an international speaking engagement. Deliberate absence from conferences as a career success marker also appears in *A Discovery of Witches* (48) where one scientist discusses absence from conferences as suspicious, stating "'Well he's behaving like a scientist does when he's discovered something big'". The protagonist, historian Diana Bishop, queries this observation and her friend responds "'We get jumpy and weird. We hide in our labs and don't go to conferences for fear we might say something and help someone else have a breakthrough'". Conferences are both used to show rivalries playing out at conferences and also to signal rivalries and hierarchies that extend beyond conferences lead to absences from conferences.

Discussion: the role of conferences in forming reader dis/identification

From our analysis, conferences signify privileged, mobile work, where absence from campus is equated with a successful research career and a deprioritization of campus-based work. Recent research aligns this with gender, noting this privilege to be more significant with men academics, and women academics labouring to meet the needs of the institution (Guarino & Borden, 2017). Although the privileged 'high mobility' (Viry & Kaufmann, 2015) of academics could be seen to be glamorous, the portrayals do not encourage the reader to aspire to this mobility. To the contrary, there is an ennui and a frustration with conference (over-)mobility to the extent that attending conferences is conveyed as a source of irritation and fatigue (Henderson, 2020), not an enviable facet of the profession.

Our analysis shows that conferences are used to signal the boundary that academics draw up between academics and non-academics, as well as the hierarchies and exclusionary behaviours within the academic profession. A common feature of these references is the desirability of attending, organizing and being invited to speak at conferences for academics and the importance of conferences for gaining prestige and guarding intellectual territory. However, in contrast to some previous work on cultural representations of HE, the reader is *not* aligned with academics in the desirability of conferences, but rather is positioned to view academics as unpleasant and snobbish, and conferences as an empty performance of seniority or toadying, showcasing meaningless work. This positioning aligns with the anti-elitist aspects of anti-intellectual messaging associated with academics and academic work (Tobolowsky, 2017).

Conferences are shown to represent the normative nature of the profession, with conferences used in enumerations of academic achievements to signal academic success. In these enumerative representations, conferences are not accorded any specificity or narrative time, meaning that they are collapsed into a generic accumulation of events, giving the reader no entry to conference experiences. This inclusion of conferences in enumerations of career success markers has the effect of teaching the reader that conferences are necessary for academic success, akin to other pedagogic messages derived from fiction (Reynolds, 2014), although the status of conferences is more complex in 'real life' academic success metrics. In another manifestation of anti-elitist ideas (cf. Tobolowsky, 2017), the profession is also shown to be conventional, with purportedly radical conferences dismissed as rebelling within a normative framing. The positioning of the reader in these representations is again on the outside, taking a skeptical view of academics' pretentious assertions to radical behaviour.

Conferences are used to signal the decadent nature of the academic profession, with a focus on food, alcohol and particularly sexual encounters. This decadence is shown from the perspective of men academics, with women tolerating men's bad behaviour or depicted as objects of men's desire. Portrayals focusing on women academics do not tend to focus on the decadent aspects. Conferences are shown to be recognized sites for low-stakes sexual encounters and predatory behaviour, an aspect of conferences that is increasingly coming under scrutiny in relation to sexual harassment (Flores, 2020; Jackson, 2019). Portraying academics as lacking moral integrity is an aspect of anti-rational manifestations of anti-intellectual thought where individuals, academics in this case, behave poorly (Tobolowsky, 2017). The reader is positioned as looking in on academic 'bad behaviour' with a strange fascination, in the role of an anthropological observer. Academics are not in general portrayed as sexually attractive, and yet they (men academics in particular) are shown to be constantly aroused and assuming they are sexually attractive. The luxury accommodation, food and alcohol consumption are also not portrayed in an enviable way. Again, the reader is located outside of academia and is not taught to aspire to this strange world they are shown through these representations.

Conferences are used to signal multiple forms of academic 'bad behaviour', with a focus in the symbolic references in our study on conferences as sites where rivalries play out—in terms of both the presence and absence of academics. While the conflict playing out at conferences often appears to be action-packed and intense, again the position of the reader is one of an anthropological observer, who is outside of the action. Even where the action is gripping, there is a parallel thread that encourages the reader to take a disdainful view of the conflict, which is often predicated on the niche, jargonistic concerns of unsavoury, unpleasant individuals whose work is irrelevant.

The—implicit pedagogical—dis/identification of readers towards academics and academic work through conference references specifically manifests through different dimensions of anti-intellectual thought. Across the symbolic references analyzed as part of this study, mentions of conferences casually establish and respond to a public imaginary of academics and academic work. Akin to Hawlitscha's (2003) observations about academic mystery fiction, the conference manifests as a specific fictional tool embedded with the essential elements to starkly juxtapose high and low attributes across texts and genres related to academics and academic work. High or elite representations serve to position conference attendance as privileged, selective and influential, while low or base representations collapse these notions of privilege through ridicule, excess, violence or conflict. Representations of conferences in the symbolic references analysed in this study therefore serve to simultaneously elevate and diminish academics and their work. Combined, the mobile, hierarchical, normative, decadent and conflict-prone profession established in fictional references diminishes the desirability of the elite aspects of these representations with expressions of drudgery or ennui.

Conclusions

Popular culture representations of academia are a powerful but unruly source of public pedagogy. While widening participation and equity drives tend to be funneled through formal educational institutions and structures, we also know that the public imaginary is formed outside of these formal processes. Depictions of academia abound in media sources, from the news to films and TV to video games to novels, meaning that a

majority of people form impressions about the profession even without having personal experience of knowing academics or even accessing HE (Reynolds, 2014). As Terras (2018) has shown, impressions of academics are formed already in childhood through children's picture books, and from previous work for our study (Reynolds & Henderson, 2022), we also know that messages about the (lack of) diversity in the profession continue through narrative fiction written for adults. In this exploration of the impressions of the academic profession and career success formed through representations of conferences in narrative fiction, we have extended this understanding to show that the academic profession is presented as undesirable to readers.

Conferences as a trope are used as a shorthand to refer to the academic profession as mobile and therefore absent; hierarchical and exclusive; normative and conventional; decadent; combative; and conflict prone. Our findings align with previous observations about depictions of academics and academic work in fiction but highlight the particular role that references to conferences play in constructing ambivalent, contradictory, anti-intellectual representations of academia. The contribution of conference-focused symbolic references to the public imaginary about academia includes a critical view of academia which encompasses strands of anti-intellectual thought as manifested in anti-elitist and anti-rationalism representations (Tobolowsky & Reynolds, 2017b). In our analysis process, we were surprised at the overwhelming negativity that was infused in the references to conferences. This is a different message to the message outlined above regarding the cultural representations of academia as lacking diversity. While that argument emphasizes that a full range of readers is discouraged from seeing themselves as academics through the construction of academics as privileged white men, this paper argues that readers are not taught to aspire to become academics at all through reading these texts. This argument is complementary to the previous argument as this means that a certain degree of privilege and inside knowledge of academia is necessary to override the disidentification and to aspire to become an academic *in spite of* this disidentification.

With this paper, we have extended the existing research on cultural representations of HE by focusing on the hitherto neglected area of the representation of conferences. Studying symbolic references to conferences has provided a lens through which to explore the use of tropes to signal particular characteristics of academia to readers. Our research on symbolic references to conferences in narrative fiction has shown that conferences play a multi-faceted but undesirable role in shaping the public imaginary about academia. This research would be usefully developed through exploring symbolic references to conferences across other media, and also by exploring whether texts which include more substantial narrative time at conferences construct different messages about the academic profession, especially given the fact that some of these texts include more multi-faceted portrayals of academics at conferences, as opposed to the simplified tropes in symbolic representations. Finally, we argue that research on the exclusionary nature of the academic profession needs to take into account the powerful, unruly messaging about the profession that people receive outside of the formal interventions and equity drives, and that this holistic understanding of aspiration is necessary to create strategies for change.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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