

Narratives of hospitality at the existential fringe of Early Career Research: the struggle for collective temporal insurgence in the individualistic contexts of academic conferencing

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Paper

Text

This audio-visual, arts-informed presentation narrates my own trajectory as PhD researcher and Early Career Researcher trying to disrupt the standards of contemporary, neoliberal conferencing for emerging researchers. I will discuss the challenge of making sense of the ambiguities that come to the surface when combining activism with academia in the UK. In an existential lifeworld-approach to Higher Education, my poetic narrative also seeks to envision alternatives to the many solitary struggles for researcher visibility in precarious research.

Whose stories receive attention in academic events and in what formats are narratives embedded during academic conferences? A tweet about Early Career Researchers sums up this question relating to the unequally distributed narrative capital within academia: “ECRs paying £400 to present a 15-min.paper to less than 20 people in a small room because they think it will help them get their work out there & improve their career prospects” (Thatcher, 2019). My own journey in academia also begins with paying around £250 (on average) per conference, simply for the right to attend, to feel that you professionally belong. I paid for the right to enrich the event with my contributions. However, instead of adapting to the invisibilities of miniscule time slots at massive gatherings with sometimes 12 sessions running in parallel, I proposed a different format as a conference fringe location. In order for different stories to be told through temporal and spatial disruption, I was allowed to install a tiny house at several events. Instead of opening this hut for short, scheduled times, my micro-venue proposed open-ended, drop-in life storytelling days. Conference delegates came to sit around the wood fire stove during lunch, on the way to a panel, towards the end of a cognitively loaded panel afternoon. Gestures of hospitality will then be conceptualised as forms of activism.

Instead of just capitalising on the individual narrative as initiator of my solitarily managed project, the tour of conferences with the Welcome Hut mainly seeks to explore future directions for new forms of collective temporal activism among academics under pressure. To what extent could a small ‘dream tank’ for collaborative utopia and improvised life story arts shift the focus of academic conferencing? How could activist conferences become actual sites of welcome for all career stages and beyond the exclusivities of academic literacy?

Question: Are academics just avoiding taking an activist stance?

Keywords: temporal activism, fringe, neoliberal academy, conferencing, visibility

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