

# Presentation fever and podium affects

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*Feminist Theory*

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## Abstract

In this article, I flesh out and crip the bodily experience and institutional terrain of academic feminist presentation, so as to socialise the increasing privatising of experience in the neoliberal academy. As a means of staging feminism, presenting is a vital part of the academic habitus, yet it is an experience and practice that is problematic for intersectional feminisms. Without critical examination, the reproduction of power and claims to power in feminist events are mystified. My aim is to contribute to a collective conversation and reimagining of the ethics and politics of how we make feminism present and public; outside of an incessant tendency towards mastery.

## Keywords

Affect, bodies, disability, events, habitus, presentation, publics, speaking

As humanities and social science scholars we are tasked to work with a fluid cognitive tool set: taxonomies, namings, retrievals. Ultimately, the academic institutions we inhabit are at this moment adept at producing what I would call disciplined cognators. What happens to us in that process? I do not mean that some people simply become canonical or affixed to disciplinary frameworks. I mean that our disciplining goes much further than disciplinarity (Chen, 2014: 178).

In ‘Brain Fog’, Mel Chen (2014) sketches a scene of pre-conference disarray that arrives as a slowly gathering disturbance to conventions of giving a keynote. Two days before a conference, Chen’s ‘miserable six weeks of ongoing migraines

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and nausea, accompanied by wiggly visual and auditory distortions' (2014: 172), lifts with a joint of cannabis; a remnant from a friend's prescription. In mobilising brain fog to trouble and disorder the expectation of clear thinking and 'comprehension', Chen interrogates larger schemes of variable bodymind distributions in how we assemble knowledge and in our 'access to a particular kind of cognitive elaboration tied to class and race privilege' (2014: 176). Whether in the classroom or at conferences, Chen reads the performance of clear thinking and efficient information processing as a normative weight, fabricating intellectual authority.

### 'What happens to us in the process?'

Chen's unsettling question comes with me in the following exploration of feminist presenting in academic conferences, workshops and other public gatherings where feminist publics are convened through an address (Warner, 2002). I have always found academic presenting a strange, disconcerting business, with feminist events – despite recent initiatives to unconference – offering little variation in the assumptions of subjectivity surfaced by Chen. I am not a disinterested writer on this topic. I felt the disciplining constraints of academic presentation most vividly during a two-year spell of labyrinthitis, following glandular fever in 2014; and more recently reanimated in March 2020 by (possible) coronavirus infection, augmented with shortness of breath and hoarseness.

Labyrinthitis is a malady of the vestibular system, which processes sensory information through the tubes and sacs of the inner ear and the brain. The vestibular system is a locating mechanism. It tells us where we are in the world (Dickinson, 2014). An early description of the sensation of tilting walls and floors evokes the condition with an eerie beauty: 'gravitational anarchy' (Roueché, 1958: 71).

My labyrinthitis came on as lurches of vertigo and nausea, with low-level chronic headaches and pins and needles in the back of my head. I was hypersensitive to movement, especially in my peripheral vision. Someone jiggling a leg or tapping hands on a thigh made me queasy. The light from the computer screen hurt. My spelling and writing became erratic. In the early days, I would come into my office before teaching and lay my head on my desk for some respite and stability. Standing in the classroom, I kept my hand or fingers on a surface as a mooring. I was living on a swaying suspension bridge, exposed to unpredictable sensory downpours.

Labyrinthitis exaggerated, or buoyed to the surface, the lonely vertigo of the podium; the rocking of time and space; the temporary vaulting into estrangement from the taken-for-grantedness of the body; breath and voice self-consciously unruly others, every sense frayed. All of these sensual and affective currents (and more) are what I believe is corralled and disavowed as some of us become 'disciplined cognators'. And yet, the need for stability, focus and order when crippled is much more than a biopolitical disciplining and can become an aid in moving through ableist worlds.

Sociologist Robert Rourke (2019), who has Asperger syndrome, has shown how for some people on the autistic spectrum, difficulty in understanding, filtering and negotiating social, emotional and sensory experience is managed through kinaesthetic, proprioceptive and haptic rituals and habits, such as rocking, echolalia, holding or stroking a soft material. Given that rocking can be stabilising, I resist the temptation to pit stability against gravitational anarchy, preferring instead to read them contextually. I would like to remain open to how chaos and systematising might supplement each other, as well as carrying the potential to disinvigorate various crosscutting normativities.

To get technical for a moment: by presentation I mean multimodal forms of ‘speaking’ and exchange in public – most commonly, giving a paper, being a discussant, participating in a panel – as well as the performativity of speech acts.<sup>1</sup> Presentation is significant as a crucial interactional node in how knowledge circulates, to whom, and how it is legitimated (Gross and Fleming, 2011; Hamann, 2019). What is noteworthy about the delimited types of academic presenting I examine is the varied entwining of practice and performativity in how knowledge is re/produced. On this, I draw from the theories of Pierre Bourdieu (1990), for whom practice is an unthinking bodily know-how, enabling a subject to perform efficiently and in synchrony with the demands of a given sphere or ‘field’ of social life.

Crucially, as Lovell (2000) recognises, the force of performativity for Bourdieu – via the work of J. L. Austin (1962) – derives from how the authorising and disciplining power of social institutions is naturalised in regulated improvisation and taken-for-granted understandings (doxa) of how a field operates. Naturalisation for Bourdieu manifests in sedimented and durable bodily dispositions or a ‘habitus’ (discussed later). By denaturalising some of our quotidian, unthought habits, ‘which are themselves *corporealized* preconditions of our more self-conscious practices’ (Adkins, 2003: 25; emphasis in original), I hope to show how presentation constitutes and puts into question our disciplining. How many of us present is not ‘natural’. Rather, we have been socialised – and continue to be socialised – into certain conventions of presenting that are problematic for intersectional feminisms in that they have an incessant leaning towards mastery.

Bourdieu’s scholarship, as Lisa Adkins (2004: 3) recognises, has been a resource for feminist analyses of ‘the politics of cultural authorization; the theorization of technological forms of embodiment (that is the theorization of embodiment post bounded conceptions of the body); the relations of affect to the political...’. Bourdieu’s ideas are also relevant to this discussion because of his investigations into the field of education and the shoring up of scholastic authority. Through these engagements I also colour and cripple, moving away from Bourdieu’s theorising. Why? Because a premise in Bourdieu’s understanding of cultural authorisation is that our disciplining comes about through forgotten inculcations of a habitus; that is, forgotten learning and doxa. For me, this assumption of forgotten learning is limited insofar as it obscures more neuro-, biochemical and bodily queer living. For instance, neurodiversity can mean having to explicate and recover dominant

conventions, which can then be reproduced in effortful fabrications of prevailing habits and bodily comportments. Surviving like this in neurotypical worlds can appear as both odd *and* as normativity, producing simultaneous, disjunctive strata of habituation. What can appear as normativity might not be.

So, in investigating the play between practice and performativity in feminist presenting, I am suggesting that the varied means and circumstances through which presentations are put together, conveyed and experienced are *as* important as their content. In this, I am most interested in the experiences of those rejected and marginalised in/by academic presentation conventions and in the scope for what Anna Hickey-Moody (2016) – in the context of inclusive disability dance performance – calls ‘being different in public’.

I begin by elaborating the institutional forces that circumscribe feminist events, moving on to describe Bourdieu’s theorisation of habitus as a means to excavate some of the hidden structures and inherited learning that shape how we present. I then go on to draw from my own experiences, triangulating temporalities of imagination, speaking and critical exchange through the interconnected scenes of preparation (‘presentation fever’), *in situ* podium affects and post-speaking after-affects. How I have come to think about these experiences has been enriched by Black, of colour and indigenous feminist work on listening, knowing, speaking, reading and writing otherwise (Smith et al., 2016; Nash, 2019). Like Julietta Singh, I find hope in the ‘beyond’ of mastery, ‘not in the sense of exceeding it but in the sense of *surviving* it in order to envision being otherwise in the world’ (2018: 23; emphasis in original).

## Feminist eventing

Early discussions of the format and purpose of Euro-North American feminist academic conferences and gatherings approached them as occasions of discourse-based praxis, connecting feminist pedagogical commitments to knowledge exchange and production. ‘A key goal for feminist pedagogy’, Bell has written, ‘is to transform the classroom or conference session from isolated individuals into a cohesive group working together to extend understanding’ (1993: 111). The aspiration of classrooms and conferences to offer reflexive spaces of fellowship in which to commune and ‘do’ feminism, presupposes the convening of a feminist public through particular cultural forms of speaking, listening and dialogue. As Warner tells us, such a public is necessarily limited by material constraints, such as the means of producing and distributing textual resources and also because the addressee of an interpellation ‘is always yet to be realized’ (2002: 55). In other words, the gathering of a public-in-process is in tension with ‘the need to presuppose forms of intelligibility already in place as well as the social closure entailed by any selection of genre, idiolect, style, address, and so forth’ (Warner, 2002: 54–55).

Exclusions through the closures of a public punctuate the fraught history of Euro-North American academic feminism, with fissures between addressed publics and the material, sensual and discursive structuring of an address. Recall Audre

Lorde who time and again raged against the exclusions of feminist conferences, challenging the lack of ‘significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians’ ([1980] 1996: 158). Or, Sara Ahmed’s tracing of the interruption of the unmarked phenomenology of institutional whiteness at feminist events, so that ‘non-white bodies feel uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different, when they take up this space’ (2007: 157). More recent empirical studies from think tanks and scholars in the natural sciences have focused on (binary) gender disparities between speakers (see: Else, 2019), including the time spent presenting (Jones et al., 2014). Related campaigns launched in the early 2010s – a composite of technocratic gender mainstreaming and activist demands – have called for an end to ‘manels’ (all male panels)<sup>2</sup> and ‘manferences’ (male-dominated conferences).

Under a neighbouring set of concerns about who speaks and takes up space and time in the constituting of a feminist public are events as sites for practising and nurturing critique and engaging political organisation, with some conferences being storied as foundational to new scholarly fields (see: Allen, 2012). As scenes of feminist storytelling, feminist events provide public forums to re/stage and contest the plotlines of feminist histories and to re/imagine feminist futures through discursive ‘boundary work’, marking identifications and closures (do Mar Pereira, 2017). The reverberations of Clare Hemmings’s (2011) compelling analysis of Western feminist journal citation tactics as circumscribing shared politics and affects are unmistakable. In the way I am approaching them, feminist events also secure theoretical inheritances and investments through the convening and performance of feminist narratives and citation politics.

Speakers’ lifeworlds are lured into this citationality. We can become fastened to an event’s speech acts, in what Judith Butler (1993) describes as the professionalisation of identity. Knowing how this performativity works, Butler parodies her acceptance of an invitation to speak at a Yale conference on homosexuality with ‘I was off to Yale to be a lesbian’ (1993: 310). How to inhabit, deploy, refuse or hold off these citational conscriptions and hailing is an on-going dilemma for some of us. ‘I have become attuned to the requirements of accepting invitations in which your body is somehow implicated in where you end up’, Sara Ahmed (2013) has observed: ‘You can become for an event what you speak of in the event. And sometimes we speak of, by “speaking as”’.

While presentation offers opportunities to observe the lexicon through which feminist narratives are reiterated, a political economy is also at work. The costs of participation, from event fees, transport, immigration visas and care costs, to the time and anxiety involved in securing access and mobility, weigh more heavily on disabled, Southern and early-career scholars and those without institutional resources. Access and mobility as privileges structure intellectual agenda, field and canon formation, too often favouring and elevating the lone presenter rather than intellectual collectivities.

Drawing out the gravitational forces of podium affects/effects into planetary and climate politics, indigenous scholar Zoe Todd (2020) implicates our gathering together within larger extractive histories and environmental degradation.

Reflecting on flying to a conference over the San Jose forest fires in November 2018, Todd (2020) writes:

Nothing I do as a scholar is important enough to ask me to violate my ongoing reciprocal obligations to lands, waters, atmospheres in order to perform my credentials or knowledge in american (or canadian or british or or or) academic imperialist organizations. Or disciplines . . . I did not fly to San Jose out of love. I flew out of ego, the desire to prove my worth and my intelligence to a fellow group of scholars.

As Todd (2020) makes clear, presentation is a channel through which egos and intellectual capital are built and sustained. Always artefacts, presentations in the neoliberal university are fast becoming a commodity (see also: Nicolson, 2017). The number of talks and their status rack up value, inflating professional profiles. ‘In addition to publications and grant success’, Jones and colleagues (2014) write, ‘visibility may be achieved through conference attendance, presentations, plenary talks, and engagement with the media’. Like other academic credentials, such as external examining or participation in advisory groups and think tanks, presentations can be counted, ranked and ultimately traded on the academic market as tokens of esteem and impact. Likewise, the increasing branding and marketing of events by universities and sponsors mobilises certain feminisms – through economies of affect, fantasy and desire – as motifs of progressiveness to promote institutions and attract investments, not least potential students. Feminist events risk segueing into an experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 2011), shoring up institutional and personal cultural capital within globally competitive markets.

The choice of ‘celebrity’ keynote speakers as scholarly trendsetters and/or troublemakers is inseparable from the circulation of cultural and symbolic capital, even while feminists work to resist capitalist values. A keynote is a citational practice in bold upper case. Its elevated status is necessarily ambivalent, but too rarely problematised. At times, keynotes act as framing devices, drawing attention that, with the help of scheduling, can illuminate less renowned contributors. Keynotes also signal the cultural networks of an institution and/or event organisers, at times eclipsing the day-to-day maintenance and service work of feminism – the domestic and reproductive labour – undertaken by local scholars and activists, caterers, cleaners and security staff as well as administrators and technicians. As feminist infrastructures and interfaces, these segmented labour relations shape and facilitate our movements through an event.

Photography, filming, live-streaming, real-time transcription, translation and sign language services are more readily recognised as professional labour and paid accordingly. Registration, stewarding, clearing up and social media management are more ambiguous, intermediary and hyphenated roles. The latter are routinely allocated to graduate students who are often gender scholars and possibly our colleagues as teaching assistants. They can be paid at institutional rates or at national/local minimum or living wage standards. The roles bestow opportunities to attend an event and can promise introductions to more out-of-reach feminist networks. The tasks themselves create and demand varying levels of in/visibility and emotion

management, as well as trade-offs in distance and proximity to cultural resources (see Sherman's [2007] ethnography of hotel workers). All of which can shift in formation with institutional and feminist politics. The domestic work of feminist gatherings is thus not entirely exploitative. Neither is it free from hierarchy.<sup>3</sup>

What we draw close to in excavating these differential labour relations are the submerged paradoxes of staging feminism. The socio-material architecture of feminist events, designed to facilitate egalitarian proximities, critical dialogue and the management of what do Mar Pereira, in the context of feminist classrooms, terms 'didactic discomfort' (2012: 129), offers varied opportunities for an event's domestic workers to participate in academic feminist cultures. These constellations of feminist labour can be less legible as social asymmetries and disciplining practices because the political allure of contributing to meaningful feminist work can overshadow the assimilation of workers into an ever-expanding academic precariat. Power is labyrinthine in these circumstances *because* it is contoured by affective investments in feminism. The dovetailing (or not) of the ideational, affective, political and material is one mechanism through which the moral and political grammars of feminism are enfolded into formats.

Together these various practices produce the disciplining tides of academic feminist events: the multiple spaces of a gathering, its rhythms, codes, closures and legacies. With these facets in mind, I want to move on to examine the material and affective layers of presentation for feminist scholars in the Euro-North American humanities and social sciences. I also want to flesh out the political and institutional terrain of presentation, so as to socialise the increasing privatising of experience in the neoliberal academy (see: Gill, 2010: 229), whereby the value of open, imperfect intellectual exchange feels as if it is narrowing to a focus on stylised performance (Nicolson, 2017).

To be more direct: we rarely discuss openly what presenting *is like*. Yet, as a means of exchanging feminist knowledge and experience, it is a vital part of an academic habitus. Without critical examination, the reproduction of power, claims to power and the creative subversions that are a part of feminist events are mystified. While my focus is on the humanities and social sciences, I recognise that how we present is contoured by different disciplinary and cultural traditions, genre, methodologies and technologies with varying codifications (see also Nash [2016] on commemorative genre and originalism with regard to intersectionality; and Callaci [2019] on book acknowledgements).

## **Habitus: the weight of convention**

The notion of habitus that I have been drawing from so far has been elaborated by Bourdieu (1977) in his studies of the reproduction of social class. Habitus for Bourdieu is an embodied and socialised subjectivity, circumscribed by culturally encoded 'rules of the game'. 'The *habitus*—embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history—', Bourdieu explains, 'is the active presence of the whole past of which it is a product' (1990: 56; emphasis in original).

With a snug fit between one's habitus – as tacit knowledge and bodily knowhow – and the field of social life we inhabit, what emerges is 'ontological complicity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 20). Equipped with the right habitus (to which we must commit), we can move freely through social settings or 'fields', with effortless agility and seeming competence:

... social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127).

The competence that comes with ontological complicity is contrived. Fluency in disciplinary vocabularies, at-easeness, oratory, clarity, thinking on one's feet, humour, irony, focus, retrospective reasoning and critical reflection, and all those other qualities we might read as competence, are inculcated, learnt dispositions (Bourdieu, 1993). They are more rarely seen as entailing some level of subjectification and self-stylisation, grounded in 'illusio', or some degree of investment in/disposition towards the stakes of different social fields (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2002: 98). Our investments offer us meaning as well as 'social gravity' (Bourdieu, 1993), demanding complicity with the weight of social, institutional and disciplinary values and practices. Along the way, we get sucked into the illusion that these modes of academic being have purpose. Without the illusion, we risk another version of gravitational anarchy. As Bourdieu understood, via Freud (1920: 247), recognition of the sway of the habitus was a narcissistic wounding, in so much as 'it collides head-on with the illusion of (intellectual) mastery of oneself that is so deeply ingrained in intellectuals' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2002: 132).

The illusion of mastery for the intellectual is more uneven than Bourdieu has described (see: Singh, 2018). It can be a casual cultural osmosis, in harmony with belief in the value of a certain disembodied practice of presenting, for instance, which then accumulates worth/weight. Alternatively, the valuing of mastery might be struggled over as a part of disordering the status quo of feminist politics. The performance of being in control of a stylised presenting self can also be an effortful labour for those with diverse bodyminds. Let me be less abstract. Take apparent eloquence and effortlessness in formulating a spontaneous, coherent response in a Q&A. Through a Bourdieuan lens, eloquence is far from a natural ability. We can better understand it as emerging from habituation to disciplinary vocabularies and 'hypocorrection' as a process of continual refinement and tinkering with the contextual use of language and evolving political discourse (Bourdieu, 1991: 63). Being academically articulate, we can infer, comes from the progressive revelations of time immersed in academic feminist conversations as well as bodily and cultural capacities, such as the ability to speak a dominant language.

Using a sort of hermeneutic and sensual echolocation honed from ethnographic observation, mimicking and practice, some of us can learn to read the topology of a question: the volatility between form and content, where a certain position can lead, drift or suddenly pivot. We pick up how to impute meaning, emotion and intention from semantic clusters and abstractions; how the rise and misfiring of a narrative into nothing that comes close to a question can be a wilful attack or ambushing, or a more benign nervousness or cognitive difference. We might come to recognise the type of question that is above all else a bid to be noticed. Along the way, we can learn how to disguise anger, irritation, confusion, pain, sensory overload or brain fog, framing our responses to lure and guide more familiar and conducive intellectual exchanges. And if we do not have the wherewithal to offer an adequate answer, we can know that there are many different ways to respond to not knowing. Nevertheless, a burdensome ableist expectation in most Q&As is that both parties are able to formulate clear, coherent, on-the-spot responses. It is difficult to ignore the resonances here with the rationality of university audit culture, which, as Strathern argues, devalues slow and oscillating thought and learning, marked by ‘doubt, ignorance, hesitation, confusion’ (2000: 318).

More prosaically, the performance of thoughtful eloquence can disguise rote learning and retrieval. If you have given the same paper several times, have been asked similar questions or have already written something that is relevant to the discussions at hand, it can be relatively easy for the ‘disciplined cognator’ (Chen, 2014: 178) as well as the neuroqueer to recall and recite whole streams of narrative, sometimes with verbatim quotes and citations, that have a dazzling aura of freshness to them. However, the topology of this honing of practice can have other sensual and affective layers for disabled presenters. Recognition of sensory and/or cognitive difference recasts the unthinking sedimentation of Bourdieu’s habitus (see: Williams, 1994).

If we pause and make strange the socio-material set-up of events for those who are not healthy, are depleted, in pain or disabled, what is valued and expected – confidence, quickness, clear thinking, succinctness, tolerance of amplified light and sound, packed programmes that run on time, the podium itself – are unimaginative and inhospitable (see: Garland-Thomson, 2007: 120; Scully, 2008: 91). ‘*You want to know how you’ll know if you’re doing disability justice?*’, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018; emphasis in original) has asked. ‘*You’ll know you’re doing it because people will show up late, someone will vomit, someone will have a panic attack and nothing will happen on time because the ramp is broken on the supposedly “accessible” building. You won’t meet your “benchmarks,” on time or ever.*’

And those who are marginal to institutional structures are also subject to, and feel, what Nirmal Puwar (2004) describes as ‘super-surveillance’. For Puwar, working with a Bourdieusian analytic, ‘bodies that are out of place have to work harder to convince people that they are capable’ (2004: 61). Bodily signifiers, such as size, dress, tone of voice, accent, posture and gestures, Puwar demonstrates, shape how legitimacy to occupy a dominant cultural space is established. While certain

signifiers can be cultivated to better fit the situational demands of a habitus, some bodies are by their very existence over-determined. Although all bodies are sites 'upon which distinctions can be drawn' (Skeggs, 1997: 84), some bodies are 'carriers of biopolitical surplus' (Black, 2016). As Stryker et al. (2014) have shown, surveillance by medicine and the state is constitutive of the very category of trans-gender, harbouring the expectation of bodily assimilation into a bodily gender normativity. Other regulatory norms frame the reception of disabled presenters as 'voyeuristic objects' (Crawford, 2014: 234) of obvious and covert surveillance. Disabled and trans presenters are regularly subjected to staring, an intensified looking that homes in on bodily and gestural signifiers, marking out what is aberrant.

Being continually read and sized up against what Puwar terms the 'somatic norm', rakes bodily and cognitive alterity through judgements of personal and professional competence. 'The tiniest error in a performance can be picked up and amplified as proof of the person not being quite up to the job', Puwar (2004: 62) writes. And yet, amplification does not necessarily manifest as disapproval. It can surface in a patronising and fake appreciation. Jarness and Friedman (2017) believe that dissimulations that minimise or cover up intolerance and downplay social differences have become a part of a contemporary upper- and middle-class habitus.

With these discussions in mind, I turn once more to my experiences, interweaving personal accounts of presenting with theory. My purpose is to slow down and bring to the fore presentation temporalities and technologies, exploring what they reveal about the extents of our disciplining. The ethical questions raised are ultimately a provocation for how we might take up public space differently. What might a practice of vulnerable presenting beyond mastery look, sound and feel like?

### **Before: presentation fever**

In *Dust* (2002), historian Carolyn Steedman offers a visceral rendering of Jacques Derrida's (1995) 'archive fever', as it plays out for the researcher. Derrida's fever was caught in disinterring the institutionalisation and authorisation of the archive of psychoanalysis in the search for beginnings, trails and the recursive. This is the archive as a place and a temporality of dwelling and of passing; of tracing, finding and loss. Feminist events are more than archives in the making. They are zones of intimate contact between different archival materials; all those ghostly, polyphonus scenes and residues that make their presence felt through unexpected breaks of breath, tone, gestures and confidence. As presenters we are full of archive fever. Perhaps more so when we refuse the work of foreclosing uncertainty and not-knowing that is foundational to the archive. As Marline Hawkes tells us, the word 'fever' in Derrida's text as a translation of the French word 'mal' connotes ache, loss, trauma, malice, pain, nausea and sickness. For Hawkes, 'the

overwhelming desire driving the archive seems to be to conclude, to finally understand the event and to have all questions answered' (2018: 60).

Steedman's archive fever is also very much of the body. It comes on in the twilight hours. In a budget hotel, harassed by insomnia, we find the historian in bed. Steedman is trying to avoid the grubby blankets and the debris of the countless other bodies that have previously occupied the bed. Obsessing about the bed, she recognises, is a screen anxiety:

What keeps you awake, the sizing and starch in the thin sheets dissolving as you turn again and again within their confines, is actually the archive, and its myriads of the dead, who all day long, have pressed their concerns upon you ... You think: I could get to hate these people; and then: I can never do these people justice; and finally: I shall never get it done (Steedman, 2002: 17–18).

My screen anxieties during fieldwork are uncannily similar, bubbling up in insomnia and, when I do manage to fall asleep, teeth grinding. I can worry myself silly about the work I need to do and failing those I have met, whether in the flesh or the archive or those I am about to encounter. I worry about oversleeping, transport, punctuality and forgetting vital equipment; that is, of missing something and letting others down.<sup>4</sup> At night, when the duration of a second, a minute, an hour is wildly distorted, feelings billow up from a low-grade anxiety into something more frenzied and metallic.

Anxieties and symptoms like these extend from fieldwork into the public discussion of my work. Although I now speak fairly regularly at conferences and other public forums, presentation remains a source of anxiety. Or, in Derrida's terms, it is a 'trouble de l'archive', 'the trouble of troubled and troubling affairs' (1995: 90). With me, the seeping of fever from fieldwork into presenting is a palpable point at which my responsibilities to my research participants feel the weight of the academic habitus; of disciplinary orthodoxies and rituals of public performance. It is a tension captured by Spivak's understanding of ethical responsibility as being 'caught between an ungraspable call and a setting-to-work' (1994: 23).

Presentation fever is an ethical symptom. It is embedded within relationships, materials, non-conscious feeling and non-discursive thought. The creativity and insights birthed pre presentation can be unpredictable, inefficient and unstable. Many of us have probably presented talks that swerve wildly from the abstracts we have submitted (Bruce, 2010). We have also probably edited and revised a presentation at the last minute (see: Smith, 2009: 108). It is not unusual for me to gut a presentation and rewrite it the night before an event because of a nagging sense that I have missed something important, or because what I have does not feel good enough. What may have felt right a few weeks or days ago just does not work *now* as the event draws closer, as I am fleshing out ideas into writing and when I am more able to imagine myself into the presentation's public. A glaring misjudgement or omission swims to the surface. Pre presentation, the room in which I work is a chaos of materials, strewn and layered over desk and floor; a physical

manifestation of the ruminations of felt thought, spilling over into my working environment. ‘Writing’s mechanics of expansion and contraction change the concept’s environment’, Berlant and Stewart observe: ‘Thought becomes a little surprised to latch on to something, to arrive somewhere, and still looks around, testing what flashes up a surround’ (2019: 46).

This type of presentation fever is bothersome. It can easily be seen as affective and sensory waste; an unfortunate by-product or developmental stage (something to grow out of), to pass through on the journey towards more controlled and efficient academic habituation. But because we cannot know in advance the extent to which habit can constitute ethical conduct (Pedwell, 2017), or indeed how for some neuro-normative denizens habits are crip simulacra of the dominant habitus, how we interpret habituation must remain unsettled and unsettling. But who after all would willingly submit to the upheaval of presentation fever? Rather than trying to school or ‘cure’ the fever, I am drawn to its ethical potential as lying in a collective knowledge making that embraces the publicity and demands of negative capability. Might the recognition and valuing (or even love?) of the insecurity that is churned up in presentation fever break open more hospitable feminist spaces?

### **Podium affects and ‘tenuous moorings’**

The generative infusions between thought, feeling and critical reflection in the presentation fever I have described have some resonance with Hannah Arendt’s (1978) meditations on creativity. What Arendt theorised was a suspended temporality entailing the withdrawal or forfeiting of thought from the enduring present world of appearance, in order for imagination to do its quiet work of turning ‘sense-objects’ into ‘thought-objects’ (1978: 78). A crucial point that Arendt makes is that the time of imagination and creativity exceeds dealing with what is absented from the senses. It strays into the immanent and lawless realm of becoming. The various backgrounding of conscious thought that can take place in the space between writing and presenting that I have discussed is one facet of the temporality of Arendt’s retraction. Another is the wildness that can erupt in the act of speaking.

In a YouTube symposium talk, Aimee Bahng (2020) comments on the practice of humanities scholars who read out their papers. For Bahng (2020) – herself exploring a move away from verbatim reading – ‘the text and the paper and the word and the sentence is our data’ and we need further exploration of how we hold our relationships to words and text. As a part of writing this article, I too have been exploring and experimenting with how I give presentations, gradually moving away from reading papers. What I have noticed is that even when I have locked down the space for faltering, freewheeling thought by giving largely verbatim papers, speaking out loud does more than spark and reveal new thinking. It *is* thinking. It is also feeling.

As Mariam Motamedi Fraser's (2015) erudite examination of the sensuous materiality of words make clear, words are much more than haulage vehicles for language. No wonder we stumble over our words. As poet Sarah Howe reminds me: 'A hand, a brush, its inclinations —/involved in an anchoring of sign to thing/so artful that we, like the Jesuits, might forget/words' tenuous moorings' (2015: 39). The feel, pitch, prosody and shape of words in a mouth, signed or spoken through an app, are part of the 'tenuous moorings' of words to sign systems. Motamedi Fraser believes that these intricate relationalities have long been neglected as 'participants in assemblages that are complexly nondiscursive' (2015: x). To be witnessed in the coming together of written, non-discursive and spoken thought and for this exposure to be recognised and valued is an intellectual nakedness that is becoming all too rare and risky in the neoliberal university. By risk I mean an inaugural escape from convention and the known. To better think through and feel what is at stake in the capacity of some speakers to risk themselves, I will delve a little further into the ethics of speaking in public as an address.

### *Unjust speech*

If you are a socially lost or marginalised scholar in the social sciences or humanities and talking about the non-normative, you can find your work infringed by the recursive entanglements of what Miranda Fricker (2007) calls testimonial and hermeneutical injustices. Fricker theorises testimonial injustice as an epistemic dysfunctioning, arising from the devaluing of the credibility of the speaker and the wrongful undermining of her 'capacity as a knower' (2007: 17). There are two primary modes of dysfunction at work in testimonial injustice: 'credibility excess', where a speaker's account is given inflated credibility; and its constitutive other, 'credibility deficit'. Hermeneutical injustice is at play, Fricker argues, when the unintelligibility of a speaker's account to their interlocutor 'is a function of a collective hermeneutical impoverishment' (2007: 7).

We can all probably recall examples of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, such as in the failure to believe/recognise accounts of sexual harassment, transphobia and/or racism. There is also the more bevelled outmanoeuvring of accountability to in/justice through recourse to abstract, incipient appeals to hermeneutical deficits: *I do not disbelieve you, but I do not have the capacity to understand and respond to your claims.*

Another less-discussed facet of hermeneutical injustice is how socially structured defences, often necessary for day-to-day survival in emotionally intense settings (see: Menzies-Lyth, 1988), can muscle in on the risking of openness. A danger of an awareness of the politics of hermeneutical injustice, as it plays out for speakers, is how it can nourish self-delusion and defensiveness. It can extinguish the capacity to be swept away by the disruptions of creativity and to recognise relational vulnerabilities. I have in mind those times when the spiralling of anxieties and second-guessing about how our talks will be/have been received becomes a cover story for the gravitational pull of more banal constraints. If I have not put enough

time or care into preparation, perhaps because of workload or displacement activities, the chances are that my ideas will be poorly articulated.

A perverse politics comes into play in these circumstances. The badly formulated presentation can press into, as well as be passed off as, the traumatic scene of a deficit in hermeneutical resources. At the same time, under conditions of paternalism, sloppy, superficial presentations by minoritised scholars can seem as if they have gone down well. If we are already feeling insecure, needy, defensively deluded or sanctimonious, projecting inadequacy onto interlocutors and epistemes can forestall the recognising of more idiosyncratic deficits and opportunities to learn.

Sara Ahmed's (2014) thoughts on the fragility of the figure of the feminist killjoy describe some of the mixed-up energies and histories that I have begun to think of as 'podium affects'. There are projections, selective hearing, pre-emptive judgements, defensiveness, envy, competitiveness and rage, as well as the huge emotional labour that institutionally side-lined scholars can put into *not* being the killjoy that disrupts a seemingly congenial atmosphere with *too much* critique. These are political feelings for Ahmed. At the same time, she cautions, we should be alert to the consequences of what we do in order to survive. Drawing from Audre Lorde, Ahmed cautions against emotional hardening: 'by becoming stone, by making ourselves into harder matter, matter that will less easily shatter, we might harden ourselves from each other; we might in becoming less soft, be less able to receive each other's impression' (2014).

To create opportunities for open dialogue, rather than to profess without engagement, requires vulnerability: being open to others and to being undone. The speakerly textures of this susceptibility bring to mind the call of queer theorists of affect (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995) to move from a paranoid stance and a hermeneutics of suspicion, where the critic is sovereign, —'knowing, when others do not, the hidden contingencies of what things really mean' (Wiegman, 2014: 7) —to reparative encounters. A reparative positionality is open to surprises and to holding ambivalence rather than recourse to a Kleinian splitting between good–bad, subject–object, self–other.

## After-affects

Let us imagine that you have finished your presentation and have responded in the Q&A to the thoughtful gifts, barbed firecrackers and the long monologues from those I think of as optometrists ('I' specialists). You have mingled afterwards and received further reflections through email and social media. Although I feel I absolutely *know* when a presentation has gone badly, I am much less certain of how a talk has gone — 'gone' in the sense of journeyed. Feelings of bewilderment and loss accompany any presentation because of the peculiar mix of intimacy and distance involved. Inevitably, as Goffman believed, the 'speaker and the audience rightfully return to the flickering, cross-purposed, messy irresolution of their own unknowable circumstances' (1981: 195). The return of distance is an after-affect that can feel like the melancholia of a small bereavement or a break-up.

How we might understand the after-affects of presentations has been reassembled by technologies and new conferencing habits. In the past, it was possible to have a random and ambiguous mix of located conversations and memories of an event to draw on in digesting and evaluating a presentation. With the increasing recording of talks (in 2020 necessitated by the coronavirus pandemic) and social media-generated post-event commentary, the relationship between speaker and audience has been remediated. Live streaming, filming, tweeting, screen grabs and photography have ushered in novel real-time and archival capture. In their speed and audio-visual documentation, the layers of re/mediation and negotiated reception between speaker and located and distanced audiences are more opaque. The recording of talks and presentations alters the durational field, affective flow and experience of a talk. We know surprisingly little – apart from viewing figures and dis/likes – of post-presentation digital afterlives, not least in how viewing is tracked and used to sell data and inform targeted marketing.

And despite the seeming mechanical objectivity of the recording of presentations, technologies always carry inter- and intra-subjective relationships, creating new kinds of attention, cognition, exchange and reflexivity that shift with time. The experience of giving a presentation is becoming more uncertain. The delay and distance between an event and critical reflection is also susceptible to neoliberal governmentality in the compulsion to self-monitor and to show how productive we are through the (selective) performative sharing of event images, recordings and social media. When, we might ask, is a presentation over and done with?

### **Becoming undone: a tentative ending**

Underlying the disciplining formats of presenting that I have described are traditions of modern European thought steeped in rationality, distance and an ordering of knowledge that offers little space for fallibility. The subjectivity of the presenting self as coherent, intentional, self-evaluating, grounded and transparent is a legacy of Greek and Roman antiquity, challenged by psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, postcolonial, Black Studies and crip theorists (for the latter, see McRuer, 2006 on ‘composition’). As Judith Butler’s (2005) expansive cross-reading of Western ethical philosophy on accounting for one’s self makes clear, as subjects we are always divided, inconsistent, unstable, porous. At the same time, there are historical schemes and conditions ‘that govern who will be a speaking being’ (Butler, 2005: 133), along with ethical responsibilities that are constitutive of the act of speaking and its becoming.

In conversation with the work of Adorno, Cavarero, Foucault, Levinas and Nietzsche, Butler offers a reading of subject formation where the very conditions of opacity and limited self-knowledge are the grounds for relational ethics and responsibility, rooted in our inescapable, unchosen interdependence. Recognising this co-implicatedness undoes illusions of autonomy and self-containment, exposing our vulnerability. For Butler, the undoing of the facade of the autonomous self is founded on the ethical claim of the other upon us. And what an undoing it is,

when it entails feeling, thinking and speaking in front of others, inciting thinking on the place of failing and falling in the most public of arenas (see also: Cixous, 1976).

And it is important to remember that the publicity of this imperilled, giddy self-in-process is always a part of speech acts, even in what might seem to be the most soulless, scripted and distanced of presentations. And, of course, we may not feel undone, at risk or dispossessed in presenting. Presenting can be pleasurable for some, I am sure. And there are those contingent exhilarations of the ‘beyond’, ‘when you give away the unexpected beautiful phrase – unexpected, no one has asked, beautiful, it will never come back’ (Harney and Moten, 2013: 27). But what continues to concern me is that there is a certain academic comportment that would deny vulnerability altogether, masking or burying feelings of being anxious, out-of-sorts, inarticulate, incoherent or unworthy of taking up any space at all.<sup>5</sup> My commitment here is to traditions of feminist care that recognise multiple registers of labour and make possible risky intimacies (Nash, 2019).

Within the ethos of an article that has come together through brain fog and insecurities of footing, I should confess that I am not entirely certain that presentation is the best way to interrogate feminist formats and knowledge making. But I would like to open up conversations about how we might reimagine and recraft presenting, untethered from the gravitational pull of mastery as well as chronic overproduction. More personally, I have lived with the somatisations of presentation fever as inconvenient, irritating and sometimes exhausting personal weaknesses. It feels important to listen to our selves more carefully. And to take seriously – and collectively – what our vertigo, insomnia, worn-down teeth, racing hearts and nervous hands are trying to tell us.

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### Notes

1. The participation of audio-visual technologies in events has intensified and increased, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, reterritorialising social spaces (see: Clough, 2000: 3). However, we should not forget that vision, sound and movement have a much

- longer history in how presentations are assembled and circulate through stories, prayer, rituals, ceremony and prophesies (see: Smith et al., 2016). Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith and colleagues argue persuasively for recognition and questioning of how multi-sensory Indigenous Knowledge or mātauranga Māori, including formal oration (whaikōrero) and kapa haka, are formed as intergenerational knowledge sharing and storying, ‘weaving and re-texturizing . . . relationships . . . and as dialogue with ancestors and the spiritual dimensions of the world’ (2016: 136).
2. The portmanteau term ‘manels’ gathered pace as a Twitter hashtag in 2018, publicising cross-disciplinary stories of the male domination of events. ‘The Pledge’, a North American initiative to end manels, asks participants to commit to not taking part in ‘a panel of two people or more unless there is at least one woman on the panel, not including the Chair’ (see: Drezner, 2018). Two Open Society studies of gender and speaking roles at high-level European policy conferences found male-dominated echo chambers (Morehouse et al., 2018). One of the studies (Morehouse et al., 2018) was based on twenty-three conferences held between 2012 and mid-2017, amounting to 12,600 speaking roles: 74 percent of the speakers were men. ‘Asking for greater gender diversity is only the beginning’, the Open Society report states: ‘we need to go on to look at age, religion, politics, regional, and ethnic diversity’ (Morehouse et al., 2018: 3). There are also increasing accounts of the sexual harassment that women face at mainstream conferences (Jackson, 2019).
  3. I do not have the space to do more than recognise the coterie of personal assistants, usually graduate students, that some feminist academics accrue. Fielding event communication, preparing audio-visuials for a talk and managing social media presence are some of the tasks devolved, that in the process are also a socialisation into academic performance and production.
  4. The labour that goes into the practicalities of pre-talk preparation (checking technology, medication, travel times, the weather, choosing what to wear, what to pack into a bag) is also a temporality that orbits the podium. It materialises the bleeding of past experiences and an anticipated future into the present. As a form of Heideggerian (1962) equipping, preparedness and forecasting about what can get in the way of a good presentation are rooted in ensuring the ready-at-hand. It is also an accumulated ability that develops through different composites of dis/ability and ontological complicity as a *sense* of what is expected of us and how we can situate others and ourselves in the field of academic presentation. An underlying fear of mine is that a lack of preparedness will show itself in a talk, undermining me personally and professionally. At the same time, I am painfully aware that uncertainty can be both a vital critical resource and infused by capillaries of power.
  5. Seeming to not care about what audiences think is part of these same types of immaterial labour because they entail a certain manipulation of affect in others, what Hardt and Negri (2004) term ‘affective labour’, and the production and management of our own emotions that Hochschild (1983) deems to be ‘emotional labour’.

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