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On Moving the Table: Reflections on an Author-Meets-Reader Session

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Abstract

Through a commentary on the enriching experience of receiving feedback through the *Brewing Legal Times* author-meets-reader session in February 2018, this piece reflects on the intellectual generosity and scholarly labour that makes such sessions an important form of academic social reproduction.

Keywords Law · Time · Feminism · Social reproduction

When academics stage author-meets-reader sessions, we often arrange our chairs differently from a normal panel. Maybe we think there is something radical in the removal of a table, the sudden exposure of jeans or leggings, that tentative shift into heady waters out of range of the Powerpoint controls. In this author-meets-reader session, the table was indeed gone and we speakers were left with our embarrassed knees and all those dilemmas about how to comport ourselves in plain sight when others are giving their remarks. The concentric rows of chairs in front of us conjured unruly waves of attention, which, I thought, might beach us in places we had not imagined, or carry us off on unexpected flights of fancy.

It was late on a February afternoon in the staff room at Queen Mary and we were sitting in front of a warm, chatty audience, our prepared talks in printed sheets on our laps. I remember lime green and mauve comfy chairs arranged in haphazard rows, an automatic coffee machine grumbling in the background, and the smell of paper. I remember, too, the compulsion to make a joke in order to defray nerves, because the tone had suddenly become over-serious. We had tripped into an uncomfortable type of attention, like animals caught by surprise in a place we should not be found.

As the session began, I asked myself how readers can talk about a book when the author is present. It must be like performing a book review, I thought, only possibly trickier. But if Rebecca, Kathryn and Sarah had been at a loss about what to say,

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they hid it well. The real inciting incident (as fiction writers would put it) had been their agreeing to come at all: those quiet ‘yesses’ written in emails to the organiser, Ruth Fletcher, many months previously, promises fulfilled later as they prepared their remarks amidst daily pressures of child-care, research, teaching, and activism. Being the reader in an author-meets-reader session is alive with generosity, emotional labour, and intellectual graft. It requires skilful bridging between the book as artefact, one’s one body of research, and wider debates. Yet it’s never predictably safe; in fact, it must sometimes feel like gathering up one wild thing and bringing it to play with some other wild things, without knowing what kind of animal any of them really are or how they are going to get along.

Depending on one’s favourite verb, we might see these readers responding to, critiquing, or amplifying the author’s work, along the way exercising the usual techniques associated with enlightened reason. All of this might be true, yet agreeing to publicly air one’s responses to a book with the author present is a delicate enterprise. There’s something a bit messier and less predictable going on, something as much to do with feelings, care, and relationships as it has to do with rigorous ideas and the clarifying heat of raucous academic debate. This kind of lively shepherding is more like academic social reproduction than anything else; it fosters reflection, development, and new ideas through forms of sociality that are simultaneously staged and responsive. With enough risk and enough safety, these sessions allow ideas to grow through dialogue.

In their own research, Rebecca, Kathryn and Sarah tackle difficult questions about time and temporalities with grace and clarity. From Rebecca’s rightly influential contributions to feminist sociologies of time, hope, and futures (Coleman and Ferreday 2011; Coleman and Tutton 2017) we might come to understand, amongst many other things, the enormous potential of reflecting on our own performativity as researchers and of using inventive research methods to study how temporalities are lived (Coleman 2014, 2016). From Kathryn’s insightful analysis of the limitations of human rights law and discourse, and her radical political vision, we might develop hope in the promise of a feminist-oriented “human rights to come” (McNeilly 2017). And from Sarah’s conceptually rich work on property and land law, race, and belonging (Keenan 2014), we can explore the far-reaching effects of colonial property norms and their consistent re-production through law’s administrative functions (Keenan 2017, 2018).

There we were in the common room, with our knees and our papers. Some of us delivered our talks looking up, others spoke to the back of the room, essentially in dialogue with that coffee machine. The shorter papers, more conversational tone, and of course the lack of anywhere to hide, fostered a convivial set of reflections on our aims and motivations. As the session continued, Rebecca, Kathryn and Sarah deepened our understanding of multiple knotted relationships between law and time, fostering conversations that I hope will grow as our research continues. As she delivered her comments, sitting slightly forward in her chair, Rebecca returned us to the concept of ‘enchantment’ as a mode of academic analysis. Her remarks on the specific, the ‘this-ness’, of the material worlds we encounter in empirical research prompted us to reflect on connections between feminist new materialism, temporalities, and legal theory. Kathryn proposed that we think

about the type of radical politics that could ensue if we paid greater attention to the temporal aliveness of our legal objects and technologies, and in doing so she transformed a question about the legal temporalities at play in CEDAW proceedings on Northern Irish abortion law from ‘how it is’ to ‘how it could be’. And Sarah focused our attention on the means by which our relationship with land comes to be refracted through property law, with its associated technicalities, fictions, and institutional histories. Along the way, her insights charted new ways of engaging with apparently mundane land title registration mechanisms.

I want to thank these readers, and the audience that day, for their lively shepherding of my own and others’ research on law and time. But in closing these reflections, I want to return to that theme of academic social reproduction and spend a little more time with the person who set this all in motion. Many events that are blessed with a sense of accidental ‘rightness’ are, in fact, carefully curated over many months. Ruth Fletcher, feminist legal theorist and medical lawyer, had at the time of this author-meets-reader session been Academic Editor of *Feminist Legal Studies* for some years, organising fascinating international workshops, new ways of thinking about, and doing, editorial labour, and managing all of this alongside her own inspiring work on Irish abortion law (Fletcher 2016). In staging the session on *Brewing Legal Times*, as in so many of her other engagements, Ruth achieved a strange juxtaposition, through which focusing on one piece of work refracted attention to a much wider, more vibrant set of feminist conversations about law, politics, and activism.

That afternoon, I had walked into the common room, finding Ruth at work on the ubiquitous academic labour of shifting furniture. She looked up, paused, and offered me a coffee. I glanced over at the machine with its confusing rows of buttons, and I hesitated.

“It’s not that good,” she said. “There’s better coffee round the corner. Never mind. What do you think of this room? Do you think it will do?”

“It looks great,” I said, dropping my rucksack on the floor beside a large pile of boxes and arranging my coat on top of it.

Ruth watched this and then returned to scrutinising the lay out of the room. “Give me a hand with this table,” she said. And as we caught up on our week, chatting about news and friends and work, we shifted this large desk away from its prominent place in the middle of the common room over to the right hand side, behind the boxes, and almost out of sight.

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