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ARTICLE

Towards scholar-activism: transversal relations, dissent, and creative acts

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ABSTRACT

What does it mean to be a scholar-activist or to pursue scholar-activism in the neoliberal university? Acknowledging how this concept of a 'scholar-activist' is often approached either cynically or idealistically, we ask how we might engage this figure otherwise: as one characterised by in-betweenness. We pursue the question of what it means to be a scholar-activist theoretically drawing on the work of Engin Isin, and empirically situated in the midst of our everyday teaching lives. In doing so, we develop ideas about how enacting our academic lives through a politics of in-between involves developing transversal relations, practising pedagogical dissent, and engaging in non-heroic, creative acts of citizenship. Overall, we argue for a form of scholar-activism that is ambivalent about its capacity to bring about change, and restless in practising how things could be different. Through a discussion of two examples of dissident teaching practices from our respective Geography departments, we ask: what might it mean to pursue change in the spaces of the university, using the tools we have to hand, as we consider the future possibilities for scholar-activism?

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Introduction – the promises and limits of the scholar-activist

The idea of scholar-activism invokes a particular kind of figure. This figure might be driven by the pursuit of change, and keen to work beyond the spaces of the university to connect with community groups. They might consider their audience to include different publics, policy-makers and practitioners as they pursue emancipatory aims. Yet this figure is also increasingly mainstream, if not championed by neoliberal universities that need to demonstrate 'knowledge exchange' (McGettigan 2013). The figure of the scholar-activist can be seen posing at heartwarming community-events, tweeting appropriate university hashtags, and then finding those re-tweeted by the universities as brand. The risk of co-optation by the neoliberal university is just one reason why we might distrust the idea of 'scholar-activism'. After all, being a scholar that works and engages with communities beyond the university is almost an unavoidable necessity for a new generation of scholars that cannot rely on the university to be their sole employer, and

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where 'impact' has to be proven for job security and progression. Yet, despite these risks, in these times of multiple pressing emergencies – from a warming climate to heightened nationalisms – we find ourselves wanting to address the enduring possibilities, promises and limits of pursuing scholar-activism. We address it mindful of the multiple pressures facing early-career scholars (Hughes 2021; Zielke, Thompson, and Hepburn 2022), mounting redundancies in the UK academy (Simpson 2022), and the reminders by feminist and critical race scholars' that the university has not, only *recently* become an exclusionary or difficult space to work in (Ahmed 2017; Boyer 2022). In this article, we pursue an idea of scholar-activism that is both active and ambivalent in its pursuit of change.

Two factors have brought us to this topic. First, this invitation to contribute to a special issue marking 20 years since the publication of Engin Isin's *Being Political* (2002). Isin's work, as well as his teaching and mentoring, has played a large part in influencing our own relationship with and commitment to scholar-activism. Second, the experience of teaching and working with postgraduate students. A large number of the Masters and PhD students we work with increasingly are engaged in a combination of scholarship and activism. These students often find themselves *in-between* governmental agendas and community action groups, and distrustful of the approaches and solutions adopted by both. They arrive at the university seeking the possibilities for a position in-between these different agendas, in a way that remains critical towards both. They have prompted us to ask: how do we avoid approaching this figure of the scholar-activist either cynically or idealistically, to consider how we keep on pursuing change in-between the multiple, exhausting demands of the neoliberal university? We have used this question to turn to literatures of scholarly-activism and citizenship, and try to remain attuned to the risks of a politics that is self-certain in its account of the present and future. Encouraged by Debbie Lisle's field guide for scholars and students, we prioritise ambivalence for how it 'refuse[s] the seductions of resolution and certainty, keep[s] us focused on the horrific global conditions we currently face, and prevent[s] us from turning away' (Lisle 2016, 419). Drawing on scholar-activist (Derickson and Routledge 2015; Suzuki and Mayorga 2014) and pedagogical literatures, as well as Isin's work on citizenship (both single-authored and his work with others), we reflect on how feelings of curiosity and discomfort can equip and energise us to work on the boundaries between the scholarly and the activist, whilst refusing to opt completely for one position or the other.

We refer to the 'neoliberal university' as a shorthand for identifying a set of processes which––although highly contextual––are also global in reach. This is an 'articulation of free market governmental practices with varied and often quite illiberal forms of social and political rule' (Sparke, 2006: 153 quoted in Mountz et al. 2015). In this context, we witness the retreat of state funding and standardized metrics wielded to rank individuals and institutions that create competitive cultures (Cowden and Singh 2013). We write from the perspective of UK Higher Education, where the replacement of grants with loans in 2010 extended competition, making universities more 'customer-, business- and industry- focused' and reducing the sense of promoting public goods (McGettigan 2013, 7–8). However, these changes have not simply damaged a system that was previously open and egalitarian. Debates around 'decolonising the university' demonstrate that universities were never straightforwardly spaces of emancipation: intellectuals have historically, developed theories and discourses that 'bolstered support for colonial

endeavours' and contributed to the suppression of indigenous knowledges (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nisancioglu 2018, 5). Indeed, just the location of university institutions often reflects the 'infrastructure of empire', with key buildings often 'the spoils of colonial plunder, enslavement and dispossession' (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nisancioglu 2018, 5). And universities play a role in bordering practices, making decisions that have implications for people's capacity to move across borders (Cantat, Cook, and Rajaram 2022). Set against these depressing backdrops, the possibilities for scholar-activism seem slim.

Whilst there are many reasons to give up on the contemporary university as a site of learning or of a meaningful encounter, in this article we argue for exploiting the possibilities presented in universities for working collaboratively, cultivating forms of knowledge that are less about expertise than about generating dialogue and convivial encounters, grasping those moments when it becomes possible to act. First, our approach foregrounds transversality and ambivalence as central to scholar-activism. We consider how moving in-between different sites, spaces, audiences and contexts potentially enables us to refuse purity or expertise as starting points and instead prioritise improvisation and movement. Second, we examine the possibilities for minor acts of creativity and dissent, by discussing two examples from our teaching work. These took place against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic – a context that drastically altered our teaching methods, following national orders in the UK to stay at home and university decisions to move teaching online. Beyond the clear difficulties of this period, we focus on the spaces that emerged for experimentation. Third, we reflect on different ways of imagining the 'activity' of scholar-activism, inspired by feminist and postcolonial theories that ask us to remain attuned to the risks of seeking mastery. Taken together, we engage the different enduring possibilities for scholar-activism.

The politics of knowledge: ambivalence and improvisation

We turn to Engin Isin's work to consider some critical questions about the role of the 'intellectual' and what we consider to be our capacities to shape and change the world. Whilst the idea and promise of scholar-activism can often suggest we understand knowledge as something we can package and deliver to 'local' communities, or to 'others' in distant places, postcolonial scholarship has long shown us how this framing betrays colonising assumptions, where we remain certain that we know what is best for others. We may assume that academics must be in pursuit of the 'good', without reflecting on how solutions can cause their own violence (Lisle 2016, 419), how we misdiagnose the issues at stake, or remain blind to other intersecting struggles and injustices. In his work on 'postcolonial intellectuals', Isin argues that this figure traverses both dominant and dominated positions, situated in fields of 'knowledge-power' and aware of their location within 'imperial-colonial orders' (Isin 2018: xiii). This 'double consciousness' enables them to act transversally, 'always crossing borders and orders, constituting solidarities, networks and connections' (Isin 2018: xiii), and reflecting on their own position in the production of knowledge.

Isin presents intellectuals as subject positions that have long spoken from 'precarious but emergent positions' (Isin 2018: xi-xii). He reminds us that precarity is not necessarily new, and has to be considered in context. This complements Jenny Edkins's advocacy of the intellectual as not an 'expert'. In her work on the politics of certainty and change,

Edkins encourages us to guard against the closures that can come from affirming 'the status of "expert"', reminding us that intellectuals are often drawn from particular groups and classes that serve to protect what philosopher Michel Foucault calls a particular 'regime of truth'. In contrast, other types of intellectuals make it their work to question and 'disrupt rather than reinforce the prevailing hegemony' (Edkins 2019, 31). Edkins aligns herself with this definition of questioning, rather than reinforcing norms. This means teaching in ways that refuse to 'cover over the impossibility of answering' (Edkins 2019, 46). Edkins acknowledges that this is not easy and leaves an 'inevitably messy and incomplete attempt at dialogue' (Edkins 2019, 46). Indeed, it can be even more difficult for minority scholars, or scholars with less experience, to reject this role of the 'expert'. But as Isin and Edkins suggest, doing otherwise carries risks too, not least in reinforcing hierarchies, and suggesting that knowledge is owned rather than shared. Turning to the particular space of the classroom, scholar, writer and activist bell hooks tells us that for dialogue to be possible, it is vital to acknowledge unequal power-relations. Reflecting on her own early experiences as a student in a segregated school, hooks identifies the moments in which she was encouraged to challenge received orthodoxies, and articulate her own lived experiences of racial violence (hooks 1994, 2). Hooks insists that these moments were only possible when the classroom struggled with and against familiar hierarchies––those which alienated teacher from student––and instead became a space for mutual, embodied learning (1994). What inspiration might we take from such moments when we move between working as educators, scholars, researchers and activists?

We pursue an idea of scholar-activism that embraces Edkins' insistence on refusing the role of the expert and hooks' point about open dialogue, to adopt an ambivalent, dissenting but active perspective about the relationship between academic work and global change. This is for a number of reasons. Following postcolonial scholars, we remain sceptical of the belief that more knowledge secures peace and enlightenment (Seth 2021, 216). And we caution against the assumption that 'progressive politics and good knowledge' belong in harmony (Seth 2021, 210). This point is important because the presumption of a straightforward relationship can often underpin discussions of scholar-activism. A correspondence of progressive aims is assumed, when 'there may, in fact, be differences and difficulties' (Seth 2021, 212). Following Foucault, this relationship is better understood as just that––a relation––one that cannot be determined. It is full of tension; it is a 'tangle' (Foucault 2000, 238). The key point here is that we have no guarantee about the directions in which our scholarly or activist efforts might take us. This is an argument against presuming our righteousness, or embodying a pure position, but mindful of the ways we all fall into these traps. It complements recent discussions in Geography about the risks of drawing equivalence between affirmative scholarship and 'good feelings', arguing that it is important not to resolve the tension between 'affirmation and negativity' (Ruez and Cockayne 2021, 93; Bissell, Rose, and Harrison 2021). Drawing on debates in affect theory on what is it we want knowledge to do (Sedgwick 2003), we use this term 'scholar-activist' in an attempt to work with rather than resolve tension and ambivalence (Stacey 2014; Linz and Secor 2021). We recall how Isin situates the role of the 'postcolonial intellectual' as involving the work of traversing – building connections and bridges, establishing pathways, joining one struggle with another. It is

through these tensions and agonistic conventions that––Isin reminds us––political action is possible.

This is all straightforward if we proceed, following Jacques Rancière, with the presumption that learning is not a process of transmitting knowledge from an expert to a non-expert. In The Ignorant Schoolmaster, Ranciére challenges the very principle of explication, arguing that this is based on a relationship of inequality. That is, it relies on conjuring and dividing the world into 'knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid' (Rancière 1991, 6). The explicator relies on a relationship of distance between the educator and they who must be educated, with the 'master always a length ahead of the student' (Rancière 1991, 21). Rancière refuses this widespread basic assumption about how we learn, and instead champions all the ways in which we learn without any instruction or explication. By pursuing the possibility of equality in the classroom, Rancière pursues the potential of emancipation (rather than stultification), which he argues is a different method of learning. In beginning with the assumption of equality, and the aim of emancipation, Rancière challenges us to use and exploit our position as already capable of learning, teaching and researching the world around us. What would it mean to cultivate in our students and in ourselves a sense of all that we already know, and all that we are already capable of? What would it mean to take these reflections on learning into different forms of scholarly work, especially as we traverse between academia and different publics?

We are motivated by these literatures on pedagogy and the role of the intellectual to consider learning and scholarship in a way that sidesteps the championing of expertise and instead embraces improvisation. Improvisation is often dismissed as a method founded on ignorance, but in fact draws on the richness of what is enabled when expertise is removed as a guiding value, and learning (as well as researching, acting, teaching, supervising) is disassociated from the fear of failure of finding nothing (Oliver 2022). Improvisation demands that we work with our limitations: this may be anything from imperfect spaces and broken technology, to our location in peripheral cities, nations or islands to the different borders and prejudices that block scholarly and activist work. It leads us to creativity, as it often forces us to look across, when the paths ahead seem blocked. In our two examples, we reflect on moments from teaching where some degree of improvisation led us to experiment with creative methods in the classroom and in a field course. These included working with anti-deportation-movements in the North-East of England and with private and public citizenship initiatives in Swansea, Wales (both, UK). Before we get there, the next section develops what we mean by a politics of working in-between, and how this might set the stage for understanding the subtle but restless politics of the scholar-activist.

A politics of working in-between

Whilst existing literature tends to position the figure of the scholar-activist as one that gets *out* of the classroom (Capra 2007; Castleden et al. 2013), Edkins, hooks and Rancière remind us of the potential of the classroom (including the online class) as a space for change. However, we are also interested in thinking about how scholar-activism is mobilised by this movement in-between. Indeed, the scholar-activist is neither strictly

in *nor out* of the classroom and is perhaps better understood as inhabiting various in-betweens. For example, this figure is both a representative of the university (whether they choose this position or not), and a critic of its increasingly neoliberal logics. She is motivated by writing and contributing to an academic archive, and yet pulled by the desire for more 'public' engagement, and to make a difference beyond the academy. The scholar-activist is a figure traversing between various spaces, including the classroom, the campus, and the city; the library, social media, the gym and café; drop-in centres, support groups, home and the street. Infrastructure and architecture matter, as 'intellectual life can be dependent on the sort of buildings in which conversations take place' (Lisle 2016, 30). But we also want to think about what is generated in the movement between these different spaces. In this, we draw on Lisle's work on working 'in-between', and the ways she considers this in active terms. Lisle points to Samuel Beckett's figure of Godot, who is waiting, but not stuck, and who exploits ambivalence. With Lisle, we want to ask: what might it look like to understand scholarly inbetweenness as a 'dynamic and unbounded way of living'? (Lisle 2016, 418). What is the potential for mobilising the in-betweenness of academic life as a political tool: to forge new connections, to inhabit complex identities and to challenge exclusionary spaces?

Much of the extant work on scholar-activism proceeds from the assumption that university work and activist and organisational work represent distinct and self-contained sites (The Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010). This takes our attention away from what happens in the movement *in-between*. Isin focuses on the *actors*, *sites* and *scales* of citizenship, which allows us to consider how claims for rights can emerge in unexpected sites and at a range of scales, performed by various categories of subjects, 'including aliens, migrants, refugees, states, courts and so on' (Isin 2009, 370), and we might add, students, librarians, technicians, artists, cleaners. In Isin's vision, claims to rights are diverse, and can include 'civil, political, social, sexual, cultural, ecological' rights, and the forms of acting are varied too, encompassing 'voting, volunteering, blogging, protesting, resisting and organizing' (Isin 2009, 372). We can see how thinking according to this typology begins to expand what might count as 'scholar-activism'.

Working in-between also means that we never fully occupy a pure position as an 'active' citizen. Here, it is worth revisiting Isin's understanding of this archetype of the active citizen, and also how he has reframed it. Drawing on Étienne Balibar, Isin argues that the archetype active citizen is one who claims to 'advance objective social transformation . . . but in the final analysis it always limits itself to the statist axiom, "the law is the law", which presumes the omniscience of the administration and the illegitimacy of conflict'. This type of citizen, Isin argues, becomes a 'script for already existing citizens to follow already existing paths' (Isin 2009, 383). But the figure that Isin sketches is different from this script-following citizen. Isin points to another figure making claims to justice: the 'activist citizen'. This figure calls into question the script, its taken-for granted exclusions (that the citizen is propertied, male and acting within strictly defined territorial boundaries). Rather than accepting these apriori conditions as a given, and presuming the law as fact, the activist citizen questions these foundations, challenges how the institution of citizenship is itself premised upon exclusion. This figure is not simply interested in highlighting how exclusion functions but aims to 'truly force open the gates' by forging solidarities which are rarely determined in advance, but negotiated through unfurling struggle (Isin 2009, 384). This action seeks to interrupt and 'create a scene

rather than follow a script' (Ibid: 279). In response to the dominant conditions, Isin invites us to consider the strategies, tactics and acts that might constitute other ways of being political.

We find this vocabulary motivating and affirming in examining the figure of the scholar-activist. Yet, when situated against reports of exhaustion from working in the neoliberal university, reports of 'burnout' from the COVID-19 pandemic, and enduring structural racisms in UK higher education (Williams et al. 2019), it is further necessary to expand our imagination of this figure of the activist, by de-individualising it, and draw from feminist and postcolonial theory to detach longstanding images of activism from assumptions of detached, upright postures and mastery (Honig 2021; Singh 2018). Bonnie Honig develops Adriana Cavarero's work on the gestures of maternal or caring bodies, to develop an alternative image of the political actor. In contrast to a figure that embodies a 'privileged upright posture and ethics of moral rectitude', experiences of care suggest different postures of strength and power, such as an actor that uses an arm to help hold another body up. More can be done, then, to broaden how we imagine this figure of the activist-scholar, and to insist on how she is always working *with others*. We proceed with our examples from everyday teaching to emphasise forms of acting that do not follow an expected script, that we hope bypass ideas about heroism and individualism, and move in-between, using whatever tools we have to hand.

Pedagogies of Dissent

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic our ways of teaching and relating to students altered. The zoom-gloom of a dozen black screens with unrecognizable names stared back at us. Gestures and jokes got lost in the momentary lapse of internet connectivity. The widening gap in participation and the juggling of, sometimes, conflicting duties of care. These changes had profound impacts, unevenly felt. This context also sparked experimentation and elicited new sets of questions and feelings. Over this period, we witnessed the intensification of a particular affect, dissatisfaction.

At times, this dissatisfaction expressed as individual angst, 'this is not what I purchased', and a generalized fear that the necessary grades required to enter a challenging job market will not be secured (Times Higher 2020). Such dissatisfaction might be read as the iconic expression of what Isin has referred to as, the 'neurotic citizen' (2004). That is, a subject driven by the hope for certainty and safety who is compelled to govern oneself through the affects of unease, nervousness and distress. In the pursuit of a notion of absolute security, Isin argues this figure is left only with 'chronic discontent' and 'the right to angst' (Isin 2004, 218). A paralysed kind of subject. While this partly captures how dissatisfaction may be functioning as a mode of self-governance within university spaces today, we have also seen this affect channeled and enacted in ways we think resonate with Isin's more generative notions of political activism. We have heard the unease of increasingly unaffordable, inaccessible and exclusionary education linked to broader structural critiques of government. For some, the pandemic was a catalyst to begin more seriously questioning (and challenging) the university they bought into (for no small fee). In some cases, this dissatisfaction was not contained to an inward-looking critique. Instead, it spilled out as dissent into a wider critique of the university as a structure tied up in, complicit with and maintaining deeper inequities. Below, we

delve into ways dissent manifested in the classroom specifically in a third-year module 'Geographies of Displacement' that was held online because of the pandemic.

A student interrupts the online, live lecture: 'We're talking about detention in the UK, but we haven't discussed the planned detention centre here in the North-East of England'. It was true. At this moment, there are a number of directions where things might go: including asserting control of the classroom and feigning authority. But not knowing much of this topic, this was a good and necessary opportunity to encourage dissent – even in its gentlest form. As Edkins reminds us, the academic performance of sovereign authority is rarely generative. However, if we think about the classroom as a space for learning and performing different types of citizenship (Pykett 2010), this moment represented a pedagogical opportunity to cultivate a more 'dissenting, inventive, creative' forms of citizenship. That is, a citizenship committed to unsettling authority, asking and acting upon critical questions.

The student explains how the UK Home Office's plan to increase the immigration detention estate for women in the form of an Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) in Durham County. The Hassockfield Detention Centre is preparing to take around 80 women in the Autumn of 2021. It will be built on the site of the former Medomsley Detention Centre which used to house young men aged 17–21 for minor offenses and which was closed in 1998 after reports of abuse. She also tells the class, there is action currently being taken to challenge this construction, pointing to various local and national migrant justice organizations.

After her impromptu-lecture, the class begins asking more questions than usual in the chat function. Some even speak. Together they decide to perform a small act of solidarity with migrant justice organizations and communities with precarious status who are resisting the Hossockfield Detention Centre. Each student turns on their camera (a first all term) revealing their face. They hold up a sheet of A4 with the hand-written words: 'No to Hassockfield' or 'End Asylum Detention'. A number of students tweet the image with the handles @RefugeeAction and @UniofSanctuary. A few students explain that linking their public statement to the 'University of Sanctuary' (of which their own Newcastle University is a recognized member) is vital. This is a national UK movement inspired to promote hospitality for asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants. Students surmise that linking the IRC plans to their university's sanctuary status will highlight a discrepancy between their institution's claim to advance welcome in the north-east of England against its silence in condemning a centre in this same region, designed to incarcerate those seeking asylum. It might unsettle the university's sanctuary 'brand' one student notes. Untangling the university as a brand – selling a 'student experience' or in this case, 'welcome' - is something this cohort has grown adept at.

Following this minor act, the students help draft a letter and circulate it to staff at three of the universities in the region: Durham, Newcastle and Northumbria. This letter itself serves not only to inform but also galvanize political conversations and build solidarity across too-often siloed academic spaces. The students also liaise with Women for Refugee Women, No To Hassockfield, the Durham People's Assembly, Abolish Detention – Hassockfield to produce this letter (which eventually included signatures from MPs, local law centres and religious and art organizations). In addition to this coalition-building, students organize and attend various protests to oppose Hassockfield IRC. One Durham-based student at the event holds a placard addressing the intersecting

concerns of housing and detention. Her placard reads 'Dear Durham Uni: End Prisons, Start Affordable Housing'. The sign addresses the shortage of affordable housing in the area (with at the time, 10,500 people on the area's waiting list for social housing). This small act of solidarity – of linking university life to that within the wider region – is one of asserting and celebrating transversal relations. That is, illuminating and building connections between the class and the field to politicize both.

A small group of students also craft their final course assessment as a way of contributing to the anti-detention movement. One student creates a zine (a mini-magazine) (Figure 1) exploring how this centre should be understood within wider 'circuits' of incarceration (Gill et al. 2018) and how local residents and university staff and officials might get involved to challenge its construction. Another student creates a zine including poetry from ex and present inmates of similar carceral spaces. Zines in this context have been a powerful mode enabling students to cross a threshold of academic writing – that is to do that transversal work – moving beyond academic audience (usually of one: the teacher) to a more public-mode of communicating (Bagelman and Bagelman 2016). These students circulate their 10-page cut-and-paste documents throughout Newcastle: on public transport, in markets, in public toilets and online through social media platforms.

One zine features knowledge shared by Agnes Tanoh who was taken to Yarl's Wood detention centre in 2012, and who actively opposed the Hassockfield IRC. Drawing on Tanoh's expertise-by-experience, the zine calls upon students to imagine themselves differently: not as citizens of the university, nor simply of the UK but rather of this north-east

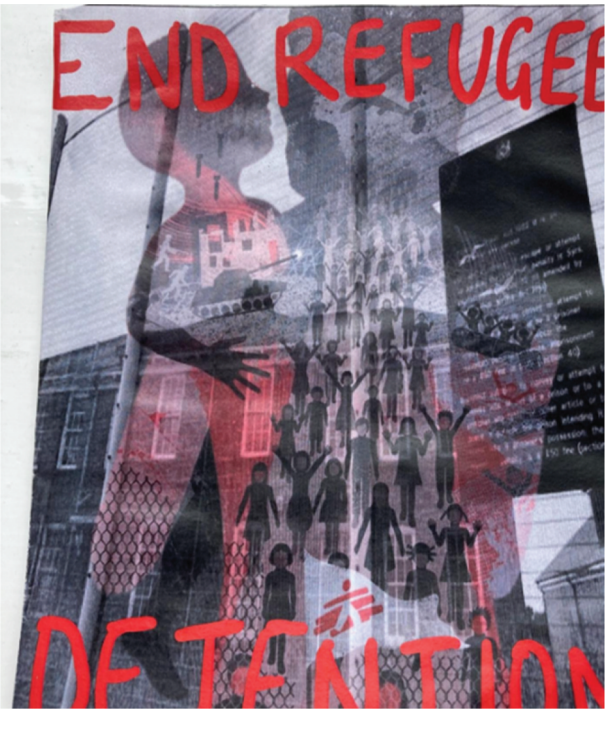

Figure 1. Front cover of zine created by Newcastle University students.

community where they study and the wider global communities of which they are entangled. The zine also calls on universities in the north-east to stand in opposition to this centre's construction. It refuses to straightforwardly celebrate Newcastle University as a place of sanctuary (despite its recent status as a University of Sanctuary). Instead, it points to its complicity in failing to ensure that all inhabitants of the region, regardless of status, are welcome and safe, and how the university can use its resources and power to insist on other futures. The student illuminates important steps her own university might take in lobbying against the proposed construction. In this context, zines as a process and final assessment became an important tool for students to embrace a different kind of student-activist positionality. The process of zine-making incited students to ask critical questions, become even a little irreverent towards authority and nourish what is often cut-out of the classroom: excitement.

This critical framing present in student zines was echoed by a student group called 'Global Health' which, during Refugee Week, refused to offer the familiar celebratory stories so often-associated with this event. Instead, these students used Refugee Week to educate other university staff and students about how their own institution and city council are entangled in maintaining the detention regime which imprisons thousands of asylum-seekers. Their posters and online material circulated the following figures: 24,000 people were detained in 2019; the UK has 9 Immigration Removal Centres across the country, some of which are run for profit by private companies. This small action performs a rupture in the more familiar Refugee Week discourse, which tends to locate the problem of refugees as geopolitically distant – that is, as happening elsewhere.

Of course, these efforts cannot be understood outside a system which ranks student energy and effort (Finn 2015). As the prospects of job security have eroded, students are pushed into conscientious attempts at securing better grades, and behaviours that risk aligning with 'the neurotic citizen'. This work might also be described as a form of 'active' student citizenship that presents an interest in social change, but ultimately refuses to challenge and come into conflict with institutional norms and orders. However, rather than conceptualise these minor acts through a language of escape, we propose that these actions are better understood as functioning *between* and *against* various demands and registers – both concerned with advancing personal careers through institutional recognition of 'good' work *whilst also* challenging these institutions. These students speak up about how universities maintain exclusion, or at least are complicit in various ways. They are not the active 'changemakers' who fit neatly on university open day advertisements. But they perform a break with the habitus of the university-endorsed messages of welcome and the celebratory statuses that signal equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). In these ways, we think the minor dissident student acts explored here is more akin to what Isin refers to as the activist citizen, or what we call the activist-scholar: one who refuses to follow the comfortable rules of performance and instead, 'disrupts already defined orders, practices and statuses'. Perhaps there is something to learn from the ways these students inhabit this in-between, interrupting the rules of the game and challenging the script of what constitutes a good, active scholarly subject.

Between the field and the class

In the UK context, fieldwork – to distant and alluring locations – has been a key method for attracting students to an increasingly commodified university education. The

COVID-19 pandemic brought many such trips to a halt, and in some ways threatened their future. However, the pause also enabled a valuable space to ask questions about what fieldwork should look like, evident in a review of Geography teaching in Higher Education, which highlights our dual responsibilities towards the environment and to decolonising the curriculum (QAA 2022). In this section, we turn to an example of a 'minor' field course––a visit to the city of Swansea, rather than a journey to a far away place––to examine how fieldwork involves traversing between the spaces of the university campus and city, thereby presenting new openings in the pursuit of knowledge. In this example, fieldwork emerges less about *accessing* a different place, archive or environment, and more about the *movement between* the class and the field. Transversality is in this way imagined to be central to the creation of knowledge (Mbembe 2016, 27). We propose that this is relevant not only for thinking about field courses but also for designing research projects and scholarly contributions that work in-between different publics and audiences.

In this, we follow other Geographers' attempts to question the very idea that we that stand outside of, then 'enter' a field (Staeheli and Lawson 1994; Katz 1994). In contrast, we are interested in how fieldwork presents various opportunities for orientating ourselves to difference, in ways that accept our position as one among a number of life forms in the city, and in ways that can 'awaken new modes of encounter' (Manning, 2016: 8). This short, half-day undergraduate field trip to Swansea city centre predated the COVID-19 pandemic, and up until 2020, it operated to the side of more glamorous trips to distant locations (New York, Vancouver, Berlin). During the pandemic, however, this 'local' fieldtrip became essential, and staff at Swansea University's Geography Department developed a range of exciting trips to nearby sites, which included the Hafod Morfa copper works, to learn about Swansea's history as a global centre for copper smelting in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, which placed the city in international networks of capitalism and the slave trade, to Cefn Coed hospital (a disused County Asylum built in the 1930s), and to the volcanic landscapes of north Pembrokeshire.[1] The examples drawn on here refer both to the experience of a trip to Swansea city centre that took place before the national UK lockdown, in February 2020, and to a short film of the city produced for students during the Winter of 2021, when all in-person teaching was suspended. This film of Swansea focused on the High Street, which has made headlines for regenerating itself through the arts (West 2016). Short interviews to camera with creative entrepreneurs were mixed with brief historical and genealogical accounts of different sites, juxtaposing different stories, and creating an experience, through film, of transformation and churn. We filmed the Grade II listed Palace Theatre, a flat-iron shaped building that predates its more famous cousin––the triangular flat-iron building in New York; the (then, empty) headquarters of Volcano Theatre company, who occupy an old Iceland supermarket shop on this street, several artist studios, international food shops and cafés (all closed during this time), but which mark the 'provincial cosmopolitanism' of this street (Rogaly 2020). In all, both in the in-person and film versions, presented students with different spaces of citizenship, and what Isin and Nielsen (2008) describe as the different acts through which people enact themselves as citizens.

The trip presented the city as what Engin Isin calls a 'difference machine' (2002). This means we approach the city as less a space composed of definitive groups, and consider instead how groups have 'defined their identities, staked their claims, waged their battles,

and articulated citizenship rights, obligations, and principles' (Isin 2002, 51) in several different ways, historically. Gleaned in this way, politics does not emerge as something settled –– be that for the dominant or the excluded, but as a constant *churn* (Noxolo 2018) in establishing the grounds upon which citizenship is constituted. We asked how beings are 'thrown into acts that enact us/them as citizens, strangers, outsiders or aliens' (Isin 2008, 3). With this approach, we visited different buildings ranging from the city market (which in 1897 formed the largest glass and iron structure in the UK) to the city archives (the West Glamoragn Archive Service), where staff invited us to compare maps of how the city had changed across the centuries. One of the themes that emerged was the discontinuous history of this city: Swansea has been demolished and rebuilt, destroyed and replanned, several times. We addressed this by showing how much Swansea High Street has changed from being a significant street at the turn of the Twentieth Century, featuring a tram – initially horse-drawn but later electric ––that would carry people to the busy shops with their pretty awnings and advertising boards, to the end of the Twentieth Century, when the poet of urban life, Nigel Jenkins, described it as composed of: 'Boarded up businesses, charity shops, abandoned theatres, empty upper storeys, pigeons nesting in attics' (2008: 93). It is now being transformed again through massive investment in brand-new, imposing buildings, designed as Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA).

The students told us how they didn't normally go to these parts of the city: the places were local and foreign to them: they combined 'the familiar and the unfamiliar' (Cosgrove and Daniels 1989, 171). Prior to lockdown, we visited the magnificent Civic Centre, a beautiful example of concrete architecture, first opened in 1982 and which inside, combines exposed concrete, green plants, chandeliers and exquisite views of the sea. We also visited the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, a Grade II listed building, first built in 1911, and recently refurbished with an extended, glazed structure, where we saw (in February 2020) an exhibition of various paintings, drawings and photographs from their archives, that represented Swansea in various different ways (Figure 2). The exhibition showed us 'the fluidity of meaning and representation' (Cosgrove and Daniels 1989, 171) in terms of how we see and understand this place. We also learned about how the gallery's namesake, Glynn Vivian (1835–1910), who built his original private art collection on wealth raised from his ownership of a copper smelting pot, and so how parts of the collection is steeped in colonial dreams of travel and acquisition. All this allowed us to ask how certain dominant groups come to constitute themselves as having an identity, and occupy spaces, at various points (Isin 2002, 2–5). It also enabled us to traverse different symbolic and material spaces that are central to the possibility of citizenship (Isin 2002, 42) - 'buildings ('Pantheon, pnyx, guildhall), configurations (forum, plaza), and arrangements (agora, gymnasia, assembly)' (Isin 2002, 42). Citizenship requires that citizens come to understand themselves, and perform themselves as such, in space (Butler 2015), and this course invited our students to occupy some of these spaces and feel their way around them.

Overall, the course presented the histories of the city as fragmented, changing and incomplete. This was made explicit in the film, as, because of lockdown, we were forced to improvise, and do whatever was possible within the limits of the law. We interviewed the directors of different arts venues on the High Street, as well as local resident and author of *Wales in 100 Objects*, Andrew Green. On film, he asked the students to consider

Figure 2. Swansea University students looking at different representations of the city, as part of an exhibition at Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea, February 2020.

what we might do now with the large shops (e.g. Debenhams) that were at this point closing down in quick succession. How, as citizens of the city, might we reclaim these spaces, and do other things with them? It would be disingenuous to suggest that lockdown *forced* improvisation, as the original field course had also rejected the role of the 'expert'. This figure, who stands in front of a building, landscape, street or memorial, and explains to the students all that is significant about it, is familiar in Geography field courses. But whilst it may be necessary to share key facts, histories and questions, the desire to play the role of the 'expert' can also run counter to many of the aims of the field course, which *relies* on undoing the distance between teacher and student, to cultivate the sense that we are able to think and learn for ourselves.

Currently, it is the accepted wisdom in higher education currently that fieldwork should enable opportunities for 'active learning' (France and Haigh 2018). Isin's work nevertheless allows us to consider what we mean when we refer to this 'active' student. This short visit was largely experimental: who we interviewed depended largely on who would agree to talk to us; and what we visited depended on what was still open; the weather; as well as what seemed lively and engaging in terms of its contribution to the overall atmosphere of the city. This meant that the field course was never reproduced in the exact same way, nor was there a specialism that had to be imparted. But the city's extant energies and its 'difference machine' guaranteed plenty of questions. Critically, the 'activeness' on the part of students (and staff) was not forged in opposition to slowness, sluggishness or uncertainty. This course asked students to get lost in a city that they already knew – something that calls 'for quite a different schooling' (Solnit 2006, 6). This is not possible if we consider being 'active' to mean knowing exactly what we expect to find and projecting ourselves forwards. It does however rely on acting in concert and going with what emerges. By presenting the students with different scenes of encounter, we wanted them to be open to different 'acts of citizenship' (Isin and Nielsen 2008),

which might not appear as an obvious, recognisable forms of 'political action'. That is, we were inviting students to engage scenes from across the city which were not reducible to citizen actions that are already calculated, understood and intended (Isin 2008, 34). We worked without given scripts. In the context of a public health emergency as well as mounting inequalities, the students were invited to ask: what kind of cities do we need?

Field courses exploit the potential for scholar-activism because they rely on traversing between the university and outside. Yet despite decades of critical work on the politics of knowledge, field course teaching is still surprisingly beholden to the presumption that learning must involve *deep immersion* in 'unfamiliar surroundings' (Herrick 2010, 110), and that the act of crossing a boundary *from inside* to *outside* will lead us to a more truthful encounter with the world's problems; *then* we will be able to and apply our 'expert' understandings of the world around us. These presumptions matter because they continue to shape how we think of 'scholar-activism'. Students and staff alike disclose a sense of thinking we need to arrive at 'the *right* kind of reflection' (Oliver 2022, 83). What we hope to do in this article is remind ourselves not to judge our scholarly-activist efforts according to these coordinates. In the context of teaching a field course during the pandemic, we had greater space for experimentation, as we were asked to invent using whatever materials we had to hand (see also Swanton 2020); there was less risk of 'failing'. Expertise was jettisoned in favour of *partial illuminations* about cities and citizenship. Our point, however, is that what became possible in the context of the pandemic is nevertheless significant for other scholarly efforts. We seek to do work that rejects a presumption of distance between 'knowing minds and ignorant ones' (Rancière 1991, 6), and that generates encounters that guard against depoliticisation, cynicism and self-righteousness, even as we recognise how easy it is for all of us to get stuck in such positions.

Conclusion

This article has asked what it might mean to be a scholar-activist or to pursue scholar-activism in the neoliberal university. We have been inspired to pursue this question in relation to the scholarship of Engin Isin, and in particular ideas around thinking through transversal relations, dissent, and creative acts. What we have developed is a notion of scholar-activism that embraces working through an in-between, ambivalent register, between activist agendas and scholarly ambitions, between the university and various elsewheres. Mostly, our aim has been to articulate and navigate an approach to scholar-activism that rejects cynicism and idealism, and refuses a temptation to respond to the horrors of the world and the crises in many higher education institutions by opting for 'passive capitulation or fixed inertia' (Lisle 2016, 417). Our contribution is also firmly rooted in the present moment, and reports of exhaustion in the neoliberal academy, and from this moment we have sought to expand Isin's ideas about activism with feminist and postcolonial theories to consider forms of acting that embraces happenstance moments for dissent, and that works to the side of the neoliberal academy.

We have sought to sketch out an in-between position by bringing into focus some minor acts that took place in the company of others, and that involved energising encounters. For instance, we have paid attention to how students mobilised the figure of the 'student as consumer' to demand political action from their institutions, whilst

challenging a depoliticising neoliberal subjectivity. We have explored local field course that replaced an escape to exotic destinations with the unsettled geographies of citizenship that combine the local and global. We have also considered how we can exploit the ways academics work between various languages, publics, disciplines and worlds. Whilst these various acts of liminality (neither here nor 'out there' and neither inside/outside the university) can be a source of struggle in that we can feel pulled in various directions, and sometimes stuck, we have also explored how this in-between positionality can be generative and mobilising, enabling movement and minor actions.

It is through this liminal position that we see our students and colleagues learning to transverse different public realms, and navigating contingencies whilst exposing the university as a set of practices rife for critique as well as a space for forging new solidarities. In keeping with in-betweenness, we by no means propose that this is a solution to the problems of our daily working lives at the increasingly neoliberal university. However, we are eager to seek opportunities for 'experimentation and spontaneity' (Oliver 2022, 83), and to pursue what we learn from being in-between (rather than fully immersed), improvising (rather than becoming expert), learning as we go and trusting in experience to make judgements (rather than drawing on deep reservoirs of authority). This is what offers unique vantage-points, which we suggest are critical for energising and mobilising scholar-activisms (Cook and Bagelman 2019). As Lisle reminds us: inhabiting betweenness means 'cultivating modesty' and maintaining 'skepticism toward confident claims of progress' (2016a: 428). Happy to be unspectacular, it is in this embracing of modesty and contingency which promises neither emancipation nor succumbs to domination that we see the scholar activist as a figure of political possibility.

Note

1. These courses were developed by David Clarke, Jo Maddern, Mary Gagen and Katie Preece, and form just some examples of the creative work that staff developed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions on global travel.

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