
The system of higher education is in the process of casualising academic labour through the increased use of fixed-term contracts, while simultaneously professionalising anti-racist work. The effect is one of heightened individual responsibility, wherein systemic racism may be boiled down to interpersonal dynamics of prejudice, the performance of anti-racist scholarship is superficially awarded, and academics are taking on untenable workloads with little job security and less ability to tend to the real work of anti-racism: community-based thought and activism.

The emergence of Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Laura Connelly’s *Anti-Racist Scholar-Activism* in the midst of widespread strikes across the UK university system¹ is a well-timed punctuation to one of the central aims of this book: to usurp the power of the neoliberal racist university in order to benefit activist communities. In this sense, the book is not so much review of the work of anti-racist scholarship as it is a synthesis of strategies for disrupting the system of higher education in the pursuit of liberation.

The argument of the book orients itself around a definition of three terms. First, anti-racism is defined as resistance to structural modes of domination rather than interpersonal dynamics of prejudice. Second, scholar-activism is put forth here as a term that synthesises decades of anti-racist scholarship. The authors summarise the concept as having six central tenets, in which scholar-activism is described as being: (1) explicit in its bias toward supporting the rights of oppressed communities; (2) centred around praxis; (3) embedded in counter-hegemonic struggle; (4) intersectional; (5) able to communicate knowledge accessible beyond the academy; and (6) always in but not of the academy. Finally, the “neoliberal-imperial-

¹ On which see https://antipodeonline.org/2022/03/21/fighting-the-marketisation-of-uk-he/
institutionally-racist university” is an institution that reproduces the structures of power, knowledge, and racism that have historically supported colonial endeavours.

These three contextual struts are dialectically intertwined, and have been inductively drawn from the 29 in-depth interviews with scholar-activists that form the basis of research for this book. After the introduction, however, anti-racism and scholar-activism seem to play the role of supporting characters for the most unique contribution of the book: what resisting hegemonic norms of scholarship means in practice. The authors’ argument in this regard focuses centrally on prioritising action that authentically benefits communities and divests from the university. This work requires consistent, strategic, and realistic re-evaluations of one’s relative privilege and ability to redirect the power and resources of the university. Chapter 1, therefore, begins by articulating that this kind of resistance research is an action, not an identity that can be performed or co-opted for university optics. Research participants, therefore, largely took issue with the term “scholar-activist”, and its constituent parts. Honing in on praxis, the authors take up scholar-activism in Chapter 2 as a means of working in service to communities of resistance. This entails redirecting one’s research such that it is accountable to anti-racist work with community groups, useful in empowering those groups in their activism, and made widely accessible to those outside of academia. Chapter 3 takes this break with accountability to the university a step further by introducing the idea of “reparative theft”. The authors, understanding the university as built on stolen land and labour in the service of racist, capitalist, and colonialist projects, situates the scholar-activist’s work within the project of funneling university resources (in the form of symbolic capital, funding, and access to spaces, services, and knowledge) toward communities of resistance. This becomes a form of reparative justice. Chapters 4 through 6 shift in tone slightly, from praxis toward critical, action-oriented reflexivity that focuses on: (1) the ramifications of doing this kind of work in terms of the backlash many scholars receive, often in the form of devaluing their scholarship; (2) how much scholar-activism an individual can realistically take on, based upon their own life circumstances and embodied positionality within
matrices of domination; and (3) the way that one is always complicit in this structure of power, and how this may be partially subverted. The book concludes in the style of many Marxist and Black radical texts with a manifesto that punctuates the authors’ work as an explicitly political intervention, and as a text that invites further consideration and revision.

In focusing on decentring the university as a site of knowledge production, Anti-Racist Scholar-Activism dares us to re-think epistemology as a collective craft. Where citations are important in the currency of the neoliberal university, citational praxis, as a carefully curated conversation, is an important part of doing the work the authors set forth of invalidating university metrics and the individual as purveyor of knowledge. The citational practice that Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly are engaged in intentionally weaves together the thought and care that has gone into decades of liberationist scholar-activism while simultaneously making these ideas accessible through clear, jargon-free writing. Situating their work as a conversation demonstrates the iterative, call-and-response nature of anti-racist scholarship; they sustain a deep engagement with scholars like Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Paolo Freire, Sara Ahmed, and bell hooks. Additionally, the authors pursue a practice of praxis-oriented idea sharing by adapting ideas initially put forth by Ambalavaner Sivanandan, Patricia Hill Collins, Stuart Hall, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, and Gayatri Spivak to form the conceptual frameworks that structure the manuscript. This has the effect of “producing intellectual narratives that envision renewed liberatory infrastructures that are stitched together not by specific names, but by the practice of sharing ideas about how we might and can resist multiscalar injustices” (McKittrick 2021: 28).

The most important of these scholars and frameworks for the authors, however, is that of “freedom dreaming”, borrowed from Robin D. G. Kelley’s (2002) work. In Kelley’s estimation of the Black radical imagination, freedom is not a fixed state of being; it is, rather, a verb, and a means of becoming. Similarly, scholar-activism must always be considered as an action rather than an identity that might be set or co-opted. Moreover, Kelley understands dreaming as a form of poetics, the imaginary needed to make new societies in the lacuna of scientific knowledge.
The invitation to consider scholar-activism as a form of freedom dreaming sets the tone of the work as refreshingly hopeful and creative.

As a project of poetics, the authors locate scholar-activism as productively messy, contradictory, and necessarily nuanced. For instance, scholar-activism is understood as a throughway for the reparation of the university’s fiscal and epistemological power without uniformly disavowing university affiliation. The authors state, “the university is not a monolith but rather an assemblage of contradictory and competing forces which give rise to pockets of possibility that we might exploit” (p.143). Similarly, communities are not homogenous entities for whom scholar-activists work uncritically. Scholar-activist work is thus always a project of strategically navigating spaces of disjuncture. To do so skilfully is a much higher-stakes game than simply writing a reflective statement at the beginning of one’s text or, as is increasingly common in the United States, acknowledging that we occupy unceded Indigenous lands. Rather than succumb to the passivity and performativity of guilt, the authors shift away from self-centred reflexivity toward the structural level of change-making efforts using Spivak’s (1999) notion of constructive complicity. In the same vein as mobilising decolonisation as an act of land repatriation rather than a metaphor taken up in the classroom (Tuck and Yang 2012), Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly suture critical self-reflexivity with a reckoning: as long as we are affiliated with an academic institution, we are contradictorily complicit with the neoliberal university. In order to do scholar-activism, then, the task at hand must be to subvert the harm of this association as much as possible by making material restitution a possibility.

It is here that the authors’ focused attention on deprogramming scholars’ habituated practices in the university, and their continual reference to acts of “freedom dreaming”, produces some dissonance. What we gain by focusing on resisting the university, we lose in a lack of direct attention toward the stated mission of scholar-activism: connection, “embeddedness”, and commitment to the people of anti-racist movements. Relying on scholar-activists’ accounts of their own approach to their work advances the authors’ aim to study anti-racist scholar-activism
as a phenomenon, and to deepen the dialogue happening about scholar-activism among academics. However, without grounding the reader in a demonstrated understanding of the ways that anti-racist activism is actually happening, the hopefulness evoked by “freedom dreaming” lacks the scaffolding of what kind of society and intellectual practice we are collectively imagining. And while the authors make a staunch argument in favour of using “anti-racism” as a collectivising phrase, I wonder what kind of freedom, as a practice and poetics that isn’t defined by the negation of violence, might be at work here. In other words, the book holds up as an exemplary outline of what anti-racist scholar-activism is and how it can ethically be carried out. But, the people and vision that this work and sacrifice is for are conspicuously absent, making the refrain of “freedom dreaming” ring somewhat hollow.

In the spirit of furthering the dialogue the authors have generously opened up, and engaging in a freedom dreaming praxis, I think that the book’s central line of enquiry would benefit from being extended by demonstrating whether or not the conceptual praxes illustrated here are indeed “walking the walk” and effectively serving communities of resistance. What, for instance, is the perceived gain by community activists of having an academic working with them? What forms of intellectual labour are most useful? Which of these reparative approaches has been helpful, ineffective, or even harmful? Community responses to these kinds of questions would provide a substantive opportunity for pursuing dialogue beyond the university while inviting scholar-activists to check their assumptions about how they are actually “serving” these communities. Community dialogue, too, extends the framework that Ellen Kohl and Priscilla McCutcheon (2015) identify in their article on “Kitchen table reflexivity” as “everyday talk”, in which researchers critically reflect on their positionalities with one another. If scholar-activists are accountable to communities, and request honest feedback that respects community time and input, they make another radical step away from the productivity metrics of academia and toward effectual on-the-ground engagement.
Anti-Racist Scholar-Activism must be read as part of a much larger community of radical Black feminist scholarship. When read alongside the invocations of contemporary scholar-activists, like Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor or Savannah Shange, the freedom dream and its praxis become apparent. Turning this struggle toward the university, and making demands not only for its academic workers, but also for the communities it has exploited for knowledge and labour for generations, is the necessary next step in anti-racist, liberationist work. This text is certainly a needed node in the movement toward justice that includes a form of anti-racist scholarship that is not only reflexive, but utilises its positionality to make a difference.

References


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