

Problematising the 'scholar-activist' label: uneasy identifications

As we indicate in the Introduction, although we will delineate some broad principles and orientations of anti-racist scholar-activism, this book is not intended to be a 'how-to' guide. The accounts presented throughout the book show that such an endeavour would not only be incredibly difficult but would belie the nuance, complexity, and multiplicity of what is invoked through the terms 'scholar-activist' and 'scholar-activism'. It is not our intention to present anti-racist scholar-activism as an essentialist entity that can be easily captured and theorised, or to uncritically perpetuate discourses of idealised activism. Nor is it our intention to homogenise our participants, or to ignore the terminologically and conceptually contested nature of 'scholar-activist'. Indeed, in a variety of ways and to different extents, participants were quick to problematise and question the scholar-activist label.

In this chapter, we consider the uneasiness that the label 'scholar-activist' evokes amongst our participants. Their reluctance or hesitance in adopting the scholar-activist identity makes for an interesting starting point given that all of our participants are engaged in the kind of work we might broadly conceive of as anti-racist scholar-activism. In this chapter, we want to show that, ironically, a criticality and wariness of scholar-activist as a label is one of the few consistencies amongst those who might identify

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and/or be identified by others as an anti-racist scholar-activist. We begin by exploring the perspectives of participants who see utility in adopting a scholar-activist identity, before we problematise the label by examining participants' concerns over its constitutive elements: 'scholar' and 'activist'. Next, we explore another set of concerns around the scholar-activist identity, this time related to the currency the term carries. This currency, we show, makes the term susceptible to institutional co-optation and to being overclaimed by academics. With these problematics in mind, and notwithstanding some value in the identification, we suggest that scholar-activism is more usefully thought of as something that one *does*, rather than something that one *is*.

Claiming a scholar-activist identity

In the introductory chapter, we noted that scholar-activism has utility as a shorthand term to refer to approaches that combine scholarship and activism in pursuit of social justice: it demarcates a distinction from more traditional or hegemonic approaches to academia. It follows, therefore, that 'scholar-activist' refers to somebody who combines scholarship and activism in pursuit of social justice, and invokes a similar set of distinctions. The importance of claiming a scholar-activist identity was something that several of our participants emphasised. This was illustrated by Galiev, an early-career academic of colour:

In terms of the scholar-activist identification, I think it has pragmatic use now because we have to identify between us and scholars who don't engage in the struggle. There is a resentment against scholars who don't engage within the wider community or that are able to say these hoity toity things from the ivory tower, but they don't engage in it or they don't acknowledge their class privilege which means that the very things that they're criticising, they're largely immune from. I think at this particular moment, it's important that we distinguish ourselves from that.

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For Galiev, his identification as a scholar-activist represents not only a connection to others he sees as being like him but is also based upon a disidentification with, or a disavowal of, what he understands the academy to represent. In this respect, the distinction Galiev draws serves to critique the ivory-towerism that positions the academy as detached from wider society.¹ This critique of the current state of universities – which we discussed in the Introduction – is one that motivates the praxes of many of our participants, whether or not they identify as scholar-activists. For Galiev, it is the wider failures of the university (and other academics) that motivates not only his praxis but his claim to a scholar-activist identity too. In contrast to most ‘traditional’ scholars in higher education (HE), Galiev positions himself and other scholar-activists as being both engaged within wider communities (see Chapter 2), and reflexive about their own (class) privilege. In this sense, the scholar-activist label denotes a particular (counter-hegemonic) orientation – it sets apart the *detached* academic from the *engaged* scholar-activist.

Like Galiev, Zami – an established academic of colour – was particularly forthright in advocating for the claiming and usage of the scholar-activist identity. We should ‘make it explicit, name it’, she insisted:

That way it doesn’t just name, it forms what it names and [that’s] great. Let’s have the word activist everywhere but let’s [say ...] I’m an anti-racist feminist activist-scholar, you know, not just an activist. What are you activist in?

Zami suggests that the scholar-activist identity should be regarded as desirable and something that we are proud to claim. As she indicates, naming scholar-activism is a process of bringing the practice into being: it is, in this sense, performative.² Key here is the idea that we can *do* things with words, particularly through repetition. This is what Judith Butler conveys when she argues that ‘discourse produces the effects that it names.’³ Thought of in this way, claiming the scholar-activist identity can be a political act in and of itself – which is not to say that it is sufficient

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alone – and one that functions to relocate scholar-activism from its marginal position in HE. As Zami implores, 'let's have the word activist *everywhere*': let's establish scholar-activist praxis as a norm within the university. As in Galiev's account, there is a conviction that increasing the visibility of scholar-activism, through naming and repetition, can increase its power.

Zami also makes a case for naming the particular political orientation of our work as a way of further distinguishing the scholar-activist identity. In doing so, she perhaps addresses concerns, which we come to later in this chapter, around the breadth of, or lack of specificity in, what could be considered scholar-activist. As she centres the importance of anti-racist and feminist approaches, situated within a theoretical and practical history of resistance – a tradition we began to chart in the Introduction – she marks out the specificity of her orientation and praxis. She insists that her scholar-activism must be anti-racist feminist scholar-activism.

Writing in the Canadian context, though with an eye on the global picture, Tilley and Taylor offer observations prescient to our consideration here. Reflecting on the questions 'why choose such a label? What is in the name?', they posit:

A number of people collect together under the umbrella of scholar-activist. There is strength in numbers. When we identify in such a collective way we can find and connect with our allies. We can stand together and work to make visible the limitations of our institutions for promoting social justice and equity goals. We can also support each other as we advance our research and teaching in ways that question the status quo whether in our local contexts or abroad. We can support each other in the face of those who may question the usefulness of our work, particularly when at times it seems more 'activist' than 'scholarly'.⁴

Tilley and Taylor therefore share a similar sentiment to that of Zami and Galiev – that is, the notion that by adopting the scholar-activist identity, we can build a collective or, in Sivanandan's terms, grow our *communities of resistance*.⁵ Indeed, developing a collective identity functions to situate

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people with similar praxes together under the same ‘umbrella’, which, in turn, enables their collective identity to be consolidated through participation in collective action.⁶ On this latter point, Tilley and Taylor point to the more concrete ways in which scholar-activism can be brought into being, including via support networks (the importance of which we discuss in Chapter 4). Key here, then, is the idea that by claiming the scholar-activist identity, we can facilitate scholar-activism as a practice, and that this is a collective process.

Problematising the scholar-activist label

Although Zami and Galiev were not alone in highlighting the utility of identifying as a scholar-activist, the term was problematised by participants in a number of ways. In this next part of the chapter, we explore participants’ unease with the constituent parts of the scholar-activist label.

Problematising ‘scholar’

When considering the scholar-activist label, several participants spoke of a sense of discomfort that centred on the ‘scholar’ component specifically. Thomas, a Black early-career academic, exemplified this sense of unease. Having been asked whether he thought of himself as a scholar-activist, he responded:

Yeah, I’m a lot of things. I guess a scholar-activist [is] one of those things. I don’t really like the word scholar. I feel like it’s a bit archaic, isn’t it?! If you told someone on the street, ‘oh yeah, I’m a scholar’, people would be like ‘what the fuck are you talking about?’

Thomas first makes the point that scholar-activist is not his totality. He occupies a number of identities, perhaps situationally and contextually, and scholar-activist is only one. Whilst he affirms that the term is applicable

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to him, he shows that, at the same time, it is replete with issues. It is therefore perhaps only useful as a shorthand descriptor, in the absence of more fitting terminology or a more elaborate explanation. Most explicitly, Thomas goes on to trouble the word 'scholar' and questions its utility in everyday interactions. As he suggests that the term is less intelligible outside of the academy, he reveals his own orientation to be shaped by a concern with being intelligible to wider society (or 'on the street'). Whilst Thomas is speaking specifically about scholar-activist as a label, his remarks are microcosmic of a wider set of concerns – evident across all of our participants, including explicitly in the earlier account of Galiev – around the usefulness and accessibility of academic work to those outside of the ivory tower.⁷ We return to discuss these concerns more fully in Chapter 2, as well as elsewhere in the book.

When we asked Thomas about how else he might articulate his particular position, he elucidated:

I'll just say activist. I use the word academic more than I use the word scholar because academic feels a bit less like living in the medieval times, but yeah activist-scholar. I wouldn't tell anyone outside of academia that I was a scholar. They'll probably think I'm being pretentious.

Here, it becomes clearer still that, for Thomas, the term scholar-activist is only useful within the context of academia, where it is more readily understood. Outside of academia, the term is indicative of pretensions which, as we unpack throughout this book, are antithetical to the ambitions that those engaged in anti-racist scholar-activism have for their praxes. Thomas attributes this largely to the outdatedness of the term 'scholar'. Interestingly, Thomas also reframes 'scholar-activist' as 'activist-scholar'. Much like in the work of Reynolds, Block, and Bradley,⁸ who draw a distinction between scholar-activists and activist-scholars, this reframing emphasises the prioritisation of activism (or activist communities) ahead of scholarly activities (or the university). As we noted in the Introduction,

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we use the term scholar-activist in this book in a broad sense to encompass the different stances of our participants, the varying emphasis they place on the constituent parts of scholar-activism, and ultimately to capture the heterogeneous nature of anti-racist scholar-activist praxes.

Whilst earlier Galiev spoke about the utility of the scholar-activist identity, particularly for setting apart engaged scholar-activists from detached ‘traditional’ academics, he also reflected on how the scholar-activist label can feel ill-fitting:

I’m sometimes reluctant to call myself a scholar ... I’m reluctant to call myself a scholar-activist, but I think that’s to do with my own imposter syndrome, which I think actually speaks to a larger structural issue of how particular people feel about their position in academia, particularly as someone who maybe doesn’t see people like myself in academia as much.

Although generally positive about scholar-activism as a concept and praxis, Galiev’s reluctance to use the label scholar-activist to describe himself rests on the notion that ‘scholar’ is not a neutral term, but rather is loaded with racialised and classed meanings. As a person of colour from a working-class background – and therefore a ‘minoritised’ person in academia – Galiev feels that his own positionality jars with what is hegemonically invoked through the term ‘scholar’. The imposter syndrome to which he refers has been noted elsewhere to impact academics of colour particularly acutely.⁹ Through various mechanisms, and drawing our attention back to the discussion in the Introduction of the university as institutionally racist, academics of colour are often made to feel a sense of non-belonging or outsidership within HE.¹⁰ Imposter syndrome was also mentioned by Khadija (Bangladeshi, early-career), who remarked: ‘I’m still very fresh in academia [and ...] my imposter syndrome is pretty severe.’ Imposter syndrome is cross-cut and exacerbated by a range of factors in the matrix of domination.¹¹ Galiev and Khadija’s reflections about the ill-fitting nature of the scholar-activist label, therefore, point

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to structural problems within HE that are no doubt shaped by the colonial project of coupling whiteness and intellect.

In a similar vein to Galiev, Jasmin – a Pakistani PhD researcher – also reflected on how the racialised nature of HE can make the scholar-activist label seem ill-suited:

as a non-white person in the system, I feel like certain labels are just not really [fitting]. I mean it's kind of invalidated, like I feel that at no point in my time at university doing my PhD have I even been made to feel that I could be considered a scholar.

Because of her racialised identity, Jasmin feels that her identification as a scholar is always already undermined. We see again this sense that 'scholar' is coded as white, and in this respect Jasmin's account points to the active reproduction of white supremacy in HE. It is this that means Jasmin, and many other academics of colour, have never been made to feel like a scholar. Taken together, the accounts of Thomas, Galiev, and Jasmin show that whilst we must avoid uncritically adopting a scholar-activist identity, some of the problems associated with it lie with the deeply racialised, classed, and elitist nature of scholarship in HE, rather than with the scholar-activist label per se.

Haytham – a Pakistani PhD researcher and long-standing activist – also raised concerns around the 'scholar' element of scholar-activist. For Haytham, however, his problematisation related to the significance assigned to the label 'scholar' within Islam:

It is that word scholar, I guess that it throws you a little bit because, you know, as a Muslim you know there is a certain reverence that is attached to that word ... An activist researcher why not? A scholar I am not so sure about yet, even when I am 60 or something it is something I might not say.

Haytham conveys a sense that there is a certain weight attached to the word 'scholar'. Jasmin and Galiev centred race in their problematising of the term, but Haytham shows how religion can also be salient. For Muslims,

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he argues, there is a ‘certain reverence’ – due to its usage in reference to Islamic law – that can make one more hesitant in identifying as a scholar-activist. It is for this reason that, whilst supportive of scholar-activism in spirit – that is, as a praxis – Haytham suggests he is more comfortable with ‘activist researcher’ as a label.

Problematizing ‘activist’

Participants were generally more comfortable with the ‘activist’ constituent of scholar-activist than they were with the ‘scholar’ element. Nonetheless, there were issues raised with the ‘activist’ component too. Although an abiding theme throughout many participants’ accounts was a belief that being a scholar-activist often requires individual and collective risk and sacrifice – an idea this book goes on to unpack later, particularly in Chapter 4 – this appears to pertain primarily to the ‘activist’ component, at least as far as the ‘scholar’ and ‘activist’ of ‘scholar-activist’ can be disentangled. Put another way, the risk and sacrifice involved in scholar-activist work is not unique to scholar-activism, but rather was felt to be a feature of activism more broadly. In fact, as Barry – an early-career academic of colour – indicated, academics involved in activism can be insulated from many of the risks and sacrifices non-academic activists face. This made Barry reluctant to identify with the scholar-activist label:

I wouldn’t embrace the label scholar-activist myself because I feel like when I meet activists, I’m always impressed by the fact that they’re doing shit for free, which takes loads and loads of work and which I don’t do.

Barry raises an interesting critique here that points to potential tensions embedded within the scholar-activist label. If activism is conceived as being done, virtuously, ‘for free’ (i.e. without tangible individual gain),¹² then there is an understandable uneasiness when that activist may also benefit materially as a ‘scholar’. Whilst we discuss these tensions in more

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detail throughout the book, it suffices to say for now that a perceived lack of sacrifice left some participants feeling unworthy of the 'activist' label. Notwithstanding the precarity of many academics¹³ – a situation exacerbated by (or exploited by institutions under the guise of) the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁴ and, for some, the UK government's hostile environment (anti-immigration) agenda¹⁵ – these feelings of unworthiness are perhaps tied to the relative economic privilege of HE in comparison to other sectors.

Like many of the participants in this study, Barry is widely regarded by others as a scholar-activist. He is known to be involved in community organising, to support community events, and to be committed to the public dissemination of his work. In fact, whenever we spoke about writing this book, his name was regularly mentioned to us by participants as somebody we *must* speak to. For this reason, it is all the more interesting that Barry is so reluctant to self-identify as a (scholar-)activist.

As well as raising concerns particular to being employed as an academic, Barry's feelings also reflect a wider set of issues regarding idealised activist identities. As Craddock argues, the typical construction of an activist as an 'extraordinary individual ... often functions as an unreachable standard that results in individuals feeling unworthy of the title.'¹⁶ With this in mind, it is worth noting that the idealised spectre of the activist is shaped by discourses of race and gender that elevate masculinity and whiteness,¹⁷ and devalue more slow-burning, probing, reflexive, and emotional modes of organising.¹⁸ Barry's contemplation of the term 'activist' is perhaps, therefore, indicative of the ways in which his own approach sits in contrast to the idealised activist, who reasons in 'black and white' and engages in 'direct action' quickly and urgently, often without necessary reflection. In this regard, as we began to suggest when discussing the 'scholar' constituent earlier, reluctance to identify as a scholar-activist cannot be viewed outside of the ways in which logics of whiteness and masculinity – as well as ableism and other factors in the matrix of domination – shape meanings.

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Another way in which participants troubled the ‘activist’ constituent of the scholar-activist label relates primarily to power. This was particularly apparent in the account of Dez – a Black professor – who, like Barry, had been mentioned to us time and time again as an anti-racist scholar-activist with whom we needed to speak. It was again surprising, therefore, that when we asked Dez whether he considered himself to be a scholar-activist, he answered:

No! I mean I would probably call myself an intellectual worker, to be honest, something like that, I think. Partly because I’m not entirely convinced that academics should have leading roles in activism because there is a certain imbalance of power which is difficult to compensate for, if you push yourself as an activist working in academia.

Dez’s critique clearly centres on the ‘imbalances of power’ that can manifest in activism, especially when academics take up ‘leading roles’. Being positioned as an academic means that one’s knowledge often comes with a perceived degree of institutional legitimacy that can create unequal hierarchies of knowledge and expertise. It can become the case, therefore, that the privilege and status that scholar-activists have can result in them speaking *for*, rather than *with*, their fellow activists.¹⁹ That said, a number of participants sought to circumvent these power hierarchies by adopting reflexive approaches that were sensitive to (partially) countering the status imbued upon them as academics. Practically, for many, this involved occupying supporting roles in activism, often articulated as doing the ‘donkey work’. Nonetheless, as Leon Sealey-Huggins’s work on climate change activism attests, hidden hierarchies and power imbalances pervade activist movements.²⁰ As such, it is important we bear in mind that participation in anti-racist movements is never egalitarian and we must remain attentive to, and committed to addressing, inequities.

Dez’s concerns seem to echo those of anti-colonial thinkers such as Amílcar Cabral with regard to the petit bourgeois intellectual,²¹ as well as well-documented critiques of W.E.B. Du Bois’s writings on the ‘talented

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tenth'. Du Bois argued that the 'negro race' would be 'saved by its exceptional men', who would and should receive 'higher education' in order to lead them.²² For Andrews, this 'bourgeois sentiment' is the antithesis of Black Radical politics.²³ Whilst more generous interpretations suggest that Du Bois's writings have been distorted, his thesis contains 'the trappings of elitism' at least.²⁴ Dez's important warning suggests that the unequal power dynamics attached to academics in activist movements are so deeply entrenched that they 'are difficult to compensate for'. Indeed, regardless of the extent to which they adopt a scholar-activist identity, power imbalances were a significant concern amongst participants (an issue we discuss more throughout the book).

Much like those in the previous section about the 'scholar' element of scholar-activist, the concerns raised here around the 'activist' identity could also be understood as pointing to problems with the academy. For Barry and Dez, academics occupy a position of privilege, both in terms of their relative lack of sacrifice and in terms of their relative power. Of course, these positions of privilege are always mediated by the interlocking structures of power that constitute the matrix of domination, such that some academics are subject to less risk and occupy more power than others.²⁵ It is important, therefore, that those taking up the scholar-activist identity are attentive to Barry and Dez's concerns, as well as how processes of privilege and disadvantage shape our scholarship and activism, regardless of the labels we do or do not adopt.

The currency in scholar-activist identities

Critiques around the scholar-activist label not only pertain to its constitutive elements. Rather, some of the most resounding concerns raised by participants were tied to a recognition that, in some circles, the scholar-activist identity carries a certain amount of currency: 'it does feel very much like a new buzzword ... it has market value in the capitalist system', noted

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Amara, a mid-career academic of South Asian heritage. As the renowned activist and educator Aziz Choudry similarly writes:

There is a currency in this terminology – with many universities promoting themselves as community engaged, with academics who perform and construct an ‘edgy’ or ‘radical’ identity and image, without necessarily engaging in radical politics or taking political risks.²⁶

As Choudry shows, currency manifests in an interlinked set of concerns. Firstly, we have the institutional co-optation of scholar-activism and secondly, academics’ overclaiming of the identity and therefore its dilution. Here, we look at each in turn.

Institutional co-optation

Barry was one of several participants who raised concerns around the institutional co-optation and marketisation of scholar-activism. As he put it:

these terms get picked up and co-opted by the institution to show that it’s right on in some way ... If they were to say that they are a place where there are a lot of scholar-activists – if the university is still run like a business, if the student body is still really middle class, and if the fees are still extortionate and there’s not that much engagement with people in the local area – then I don’t want to see it marketed basically. So, the scholar-activist thing, I don’t think it’s one of them but it could be. It could become a thing that I guess is co-opted basically.

We see through Barry’s account that there is some currency in the scholar-activist identity in that it allows the university to portray a favourable external image. Much like Choudry,²⁷ the problem for Barry lies in how the university’s deployment of a scholar-activist identity is superficial. It is not indicative of structural change. As Barry indicates, whilst the university might brand itself as being an advocate for and vehicle of social justice, it is simultaneously perpetuating inequalities through its fees, class demographics, and poor engagement with local communities. But

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as Barry also argues, the institutional co-optation of the scholar-activist identity would also be market-driven. In this regard, anti-racist scholar-activism could be repurposed by the university to yield profit and extend inequality, aims that are antithetical to anti-racist scholar-activism. Although Barry suggests that this co-optation moment has not yet arrived, he implies that it could be on the horizon.

The neoliberal market-driven paradigm that has overtaken academia means that Barry is right to urge vigilance, particularly given that universities often prefer to create the illusion that they are doing anti-racist work, rather than actually *doing* the disruptive work of anti-racism.²⁸ There are clear (albeit, not absolute)²⁹ parallels here with the co-optation of 'decolonisation'. As Dar, Dy, and Rodriguez write, '[d]ecolonising has entered consumers' imaginations'.³⁰ In their powerful analysis, they ask important questions that, as Barry's account attests, we might well apply to a consideration of scholar-activism:

is decolonising becoming familiar to power structures in ways that its consumption, circulation and reproduction in the academy is diluting its radical politics? We question whether the rapid uptake of decolonising as the new buzzword of critique has become a new form of academic production that adds value to one's reputation as a critical scholar while also opening a pathway to profit through making the histories, bodies, and experiences of Black people and people of colour consumable and marketable, transforming them into a viable subject for the entrepreneurial academic agenda. We identify a new form of appropriation, where it seems that decolonising is becoming factionalised along a political spectrum so that only parts of it are easily absorbed by Universities (and the people who govern them). This in turn supports the legitimisation of HEIs as inclusive spaces without demanding that they engage in the painful process of self-accountability.³¹

In this critique, Dar, Dy, and Rodriguez show how the (market-driven) overuse and misuse of the term 'decolonisation' threatens to undermine its transformative potential. This is particularly apparent given that the more radical elements are hollowed out to enable easier entry into the

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politics and processes of (what we established in the Introduction to be) the neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist university.

The argument set out by Dar, Dy, and Rodriguez aligns closely with Barry's pre-emptive concerns around scholar-activism. Ultimately, they do not call for radical scholars to eschew the term 'decolonisation', but rather for greater attentiveness to the radical framework that the term invokes. Such attentiveness must be resistant to – even oppositional to – the co-optive forces of the neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist university, and the same might be said about scholar-activism. In their warning, Dar, Dy, and Rodriguez are not only concerned about institutional co-optation but also the sudden, widespread, and superficial uptake of 'decolonisation' by academics (who use the term but do not adhere to any radical framework).³² We now go on to explore similar concerns with the overclaiming of the scholar-activist identity.

Overclaiming

There was a palpable sense amongst our participants that the scholar-activist identity was overclaimed by academics who, quite often, were not doing the 'real' work. As Amara argued:

You have people talking and writing about scholar-activists and it just makes you wonder why is it so valuable, why is this being so widely circulated ... People are writing about it because they are gaining market value from it. If I was wrong, then we would be having a revolution in the country, wouldn't we?

For Amara and others, then, the currency in the label means that the number of people identifying as anti-racist scholar-activists far exceeds the number of people doing anti-racist scholar-activism. As such, the identification can become what Sara Ahmed refers to as 'a substitute for action.'³³ The 'entrepreneurial spirit is overriding the structural critique that we need', as Amara put it. In so doing, she draws attention to how

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the radical framework of anti-racist scholar-activism can be cast aside by academics as, spurred on by research performance metrics such as the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF), they jostle to market themselves in an increasingly competitive academia.

Much like Amara, Dillon – a British Asian early-career academic who is involved with several anti-racist community groups – also reflected on whether scholar-activist is a desirable identity (for some):³⁴

It's fine to use the term, anyone can call themselves a scholar-activist, but are you doing the work of the scholar-activist? It's fine to write on your Twitter handle scholar-activist, interested in de de de, but are you actually engaging with the groups on the ground?

Underpinning Dillon's provocations is the idea that scholar-activism can come to be superficial, merely 'acting out the motions of activism to gain social capital rather than engaging in real action.'³⁵ In this superficial sense, it is a form of branding ('on your Twitter handle') that can lack substance. Dillon is clear that the performance is 'fine' but it must be supported by action to avoid what Ahmed calls the non-performativity of anti-racism.³⁶ For Dillon, this action should involve 'engaging with groups on the ground', a notion that is reminiscent of Walter Rodney's conceptualisation of 'groundings' – that is, the praxis of embeddedness that we identified in the Introduction as a tenet of anti-racist scholar-activism.³⁷ The importance of engaging with community groups was a key and recurrent theme in participants' accounts and we return to it in the next chapter.

This sense that people were more likely to adopt the label than do the work was also apparent in the account of Neville (white, mid-career). As he explained:

You can definitely carve out a little career niche for yourself, as the activist-academic I think, if that's what you want to do. I don't really label myself like that in public, I think partly because I feel a bit uneasy about it, and I feel like there's probably a lot of quacks around who are claiming that identity, and so I feel a bit nervous about being one of those people.

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Whilst noting that it is 'niche', Neville is clear that there is some currency to be extracted from the 'activist-academic' identity and that this leads 'quacks' to overclaim it. In this regard, much like Dar, Dy, and Rodriguez's observations in relation to 'decolonising',³⁸ the scholar-activist identity can add 'value to one's reputation as a critical scholar', at least in certain academic circles. Showing how perceived currency enters such considerations, it is clear that both Neville and Dillon share concerns about – and are keen to distance themselves from – the 'quack' who takes the capital without doing the work. It is the spectre of the quack that, by hollowing out the term, leads Neville to disassociate (publicly at least) with the term; although, importantly, not with its essence.

Seeming to share much of the sentiment expressed above, Sajid – a mid-career British Pakistani man – calls for a closer consideration of the scholar-activist label:

I would describe myself as that but then I guess that you're always a little hesitant in prescribing labels to yourself, you know, that I'm a scholar-activist ... people might equate you to other scholar-activists who, you know, who aren't that scholar-activist *really* if you look at their profiles. And I think we need to really drill down into what this term means and who benefits from it. Because, if I'm a scholar-activist, it's not because I want to benefit from that label, it's because I'm seeking to shift debates and policies and discourse in progressive directions with my very limited capacity. I think the reasons why people do it are complicated. Of course, some of them, many of them perhaps, are genuine, but I think also there's many people who may be misleading not only others but themselves.

Although Sajid begins by saying that he identifies as a scholar-activist, as he ponders, he reflects the nuances and complexities manifest in the term, complexities that make him somewhat 'hesitant' to adopt the label. As Sajid indicates, there is a slipperiness to the term scholar-activist, perhaps resulting from overinflation, that leads to a need to 'drill down' to consider its meaning more closely. Amara similarly suggested that 'it is important

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to think about what [scholar-activism] is and what it isn't. What politics does it fall under and what methodologies does it refuse?' These are prescient questions that we, and our participants, consider throughout the book.

In Sajid's account we see, again, a suggestion that there are more people who claim the anti-racist scholar-activist identity than do the work, and it is from those who are 'misleading' – the 'quacks', as Neville put it – that Sajid seeks to distinguish himself. Whilst these 'quacks' are there only to benefit from the label by offering a particular presentation of Self, Sajid is clear that his motives are more productive and less individualistic. He is seeking to use his capacity to contribute towards progressive social change. By 'drilling down', therefore, Sajid is seeking to excavate the *practice* behind the label, and in doing so he reveals a distinction between himself and the 'quack'. Put another way, the 'quack' is concerned only with the scholar-activist identity; the genuine scholar-activist is concerned (primarily) with praxis.

In a similar vein, Galiev touched explicitly on the need to refine the scholar-activist concept and be specific with regard to what we are invoking through its use:

I think if you don't engage in the struggle, man, in concrete, practical, grassroots, on the frontline action, I think it's bollocks ... there has to be some kind of intersubjective definition of what we consider a scholar-activist [to be,] over which there is consensus. Part of that has to be that you engage in the struggle. You can't be someone who talks a big game but doesn't walk the walk.

Like Neville and Sajid, undergirding Galiev's suggestion that we must develop a shared understanding of what constitutes a scholar-activist is the spectre of the 'quack'. With this in mind, for Galiev, consensus over the term ought to centre around what one *does*. As he puts it, there is a need to tangibly and concretely 'engage in the struggle'. This seems to reiterate Dillon's claim earlier that one must be 'engaging with groups on

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the ground'. Galiev's emphasis on 'frontline' action might threaten to erase those less typically masculine and less confrontational forms of (scholar-) activist work,³⁹ but his call for a need to 'walk the walk' is reflective of several of our participants' accounts. It is also reflective of Ruth Wilson Gilmore's emphasis on 'talk-plus-walk',⁴⁰ which we noted in the Introduction to be a defining feature of scholar-activism, and of Kevin Hylton's discussion of walking the walk as an important component of the 'lived activism' of Critical Race Theory.⁴¹ By raising concerns around the overclaiming of scholar-activist identities, Galiev, Sajid, and Dillon do something important: they centre in on the *doing* (Galiev), *practising* (Sajid), and *engaging* (Dillon) elements of scholar-activist praxes. This sentiment was reiterated by Oliver, a Black senior academic involved in community groups, who insisted:

If you're going to be a fellow scholar-activist, alongside me, you need to bring it to the table. If you don't have proper community roots, and if you're not really embedded in your communities, then you're just *chatting*. You're not going to be part of anything I'm *doing*.

Whilst we pick up on this theme of embeddedness more in the next chapter, for now Oliver's emphasis on *doing*, rather than *chatting*, is our key concern.

In the next section, we think a little more about this idea of doing – of walking the walk – but before we do, it is important to note that we tread a fine line here between definitions of scholar-activism that are too narrow and those that are too broad. Those that are too broad threaten to overinflate the concept of scholar-activism to such an extent that it becomes claimable by all. At this point, the term comes to be devoid of specificity: it becomes vacuous, an empty or floating signifier. As Bobel writes, '[w]hen anything is activism, and, by extension, anyone is an activist, then the definitional power of the word is compromised'.⁴² This is why Galiev calls for some 'consensus', Sajid urges us to 'drill down', and Amara seeks clarity on 'what it is and what it isn't'. Definitions that are too narrow, however, might fall

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into the trap of drawing upon an idealised version of (scholar-)activism. As we have argued, this idealised image is shaped by (white) ableist masculinity and operates to privilege certain forms of (frontline) activism, forms that can often be problematic, knee-jerk, and short-lived.⁴³ As Taylor argues, 'there is more to do to embed inclusive notions of activism within scholar-activism [...] if it is to avoid the problems of exclusion and disempowerment associated with "capital A" notions of activism'.⁴⁴ In part, it is this balancing act that makes scholar-activism such a slippery concept. This slipperiness is evident when we recognise that, on the one hand, there are people who claim the scholar-activist identity who are not doing (what could generally be agreed upon as) scholar-activist work, but on the other, there are people who are doing (what could generally be agreed upon as) scholar-activist work who (actively or inactively) do not claim the identity.

Walking the walk: doing scholar-activism

Building on the arguments above, here we want to further problematise the scholar-activist identity. Indeed, a significant number of our participants noted (either explicitly or implicitly) that they are more comfortable with the idea of scholar-activism as something that one *does*, rather than scholar-activist as something that one *is*. Similar notions are evident in wider literature on activism and social movements,⁴⁵ and this is encapsulated by Khadija, who said: 'I participate in activism, I do what I can within academia and outside, but no, I wouldn't use the term to describe myself'. Expanding on this sentiment, Rosa, a mid-career white woman who migrated to Britain, explained:

I'm generally uncomfortable with labels and identities, and I'm aware that there has been an increasing interest in – for the most part, of radical academic research – into this topic. So, my fear is always that if we start defining ourselves in this way then we almost reproduce a new form of

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identity which could be comfortable or too comfortable, and then it becomes more about who we are, rather than what we do.

Like participants in the preceding section, Rosa is concerned about the currency embedded in the scholar-activist label, which has manifested in an increasing interest in the topic. To identify as a scholar-activist risks the reproduction of an identity that, at the point when we become 'too comfortable', lacks substance. It is, as Rosa puts it, more about 'who we are, rather than what we do'. Rosa's emphasis on 'what we do' is important here. She went on to explicate this point a little further: 'there is something [problematic] about naming itself, defining oneself as an activist. I believe in political practice; I believe in *practice*' (emphasis her own). As she calls for practice over naming, Rosa paves a way for responding to concerns raised earlier around the currency that is associated with the (superficial) performance of scholar-activist identities. In doing so, she bolsters Galiev's assertion that scholar-activism is not about talking the talk but about walking the walk.

Oliver seemed to concur with Rosa, suggesting that 'the terms aren't hugely important. It's about the work you're doing.' There seems to be an impetus in these accounts, therefore, for a shift from *noun* to *verb*: from *being* to *doing*. We find this to be a useful framing, not least because the shift from being a scholar-*activist* to doing scholar-*activism* situates scholar-activism as a process. It is something towards which we must continually strive, rather than a fixed and reachable entity. This idea of continual reflexive praxis is perhaps encapsulated by the becoming 'too comfortable' that Rosa warned against.

The idea of scholar-activism as something one does, rather than something one is, is made clearer still by Barry. Earlier in this chapter, he expressed his reluctance to identify as a (scholar-)activist because of the positions of privilege we occupy as academics relative to most non-academics engaged in activism. For Barry:

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Part of me feels a bit like when I have met activists doing the [frontline] stuff. They're the ones who don't have a wage. They're the ones who are more likely to end up with criminal records and more likely to be surveilled, and I get invited to give talks and I'm applying for jobs with like thirty-five grand starting salary. So, that's why I wouldn't be too keen on saying I'm a scholar-activist, but I would be keen to say that scholars should be doing some kind of activist work.

As Barry makes clear, his salary, activities (invited talks), and relative lack of surveillance and criminalisation⁴⁶ all mean that he does not embody the risk and sacrifice that he sees as constitutive of being an activist. Though Barry's recognition of power and privilege is demonstrative of an important degree of reflexivity, it is also possible that his initial reflections here are caught up in discourses of *capital A activism*⁴⁷ – discourses that restrict understandings of activism to its more masculine, rapid, and/or idealised forms. In research with menstrual activists, Bobel found that her respondents – many of whom felt unable to claim an activist identity – often defined activism through 'romanticized, abstract allusions to tireless commitment, selfless sacrifice, [and] unparalleled devotion.'⁴⁸ This is, however, as one of Bobel's focus-group attendees put it, 'a paralyzing way to look at it.'⁴⁹ As Barry continues, he appears to find a way out of this paralysis by shifting his focus from being an activist to 'doing some kind of activist work'. For Barry, *doing* (some kind of) activist work is an imperative as an academic, and his use of 'some kind' creates space for more expansive understandings of what constitutes that work. In this sense, Barry echoes Ali – an Arab early-career man – who warned against 'essentialising scholar-activism as one monolithic entity'. As such, Barry's framing enables him to acknowledge his particular orientation (and commitment to acting for social change), whilst also recognising the relative privileges he holds.

Barry's view that scholars should be engaged in activism was commonly held amongst participants, with some seeing activism as part of their

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duty as an academic. As Ali put it, 'I have a responsibility towards myself. I have a responsibility towards my family and towards my community.' Throughout our interviews there was an abiding sense that doing (what some might call) scholar-activist work is merely what ought to be considered good academic practice. Daiyu Suzuki speaks fittingly to this point:

In an ideal academia, this would not even be an issue because scholarship and activism would be one and the same, together composing a cyclical process of learning and social interventions for the betterment of the world. In an ideal world, we would not even have the word 'activist,' because living attentively to social injustices and seeking ways to address them would be considered a natural part of living as human beings.⁵⁰

As Suzuki suggests, when redressing social injustices becomes the norm both within and beyond the university, there will be less need for terminological and conceptual discussions over the utility of scholar-activist as an identity or scholar-activism as praxes. With this in mind, moving anti-racist scholar-activism from the margins to the centre within HE should be a goal; although, in the process, there will be a need to be attentive to the danger that scholar-activist praxes lose their radical edge or transformative, anti-racist, anti-capitalist potential.

In this section, we have called for the need to give primacy to the praxes of scholar-activism – to recognise that it is something that we *do* – ahead of the identity or label. Notwithstanding this point, we still maintain, as participants suggested in earlier sections, that there may also be some value in identifying as scholar-activists. Our point here then is that although the *doing* should be our focus, identifying as a scholar-activist does not necessarily foreclose the possibility of seeing the work as always ongoing – that is, the verb and the noun need not be seen as at odds. Indeed, our identities and our very existence are always in process.⁵¹ Recognising this, we can see our scholar-activist identities as always in a process of becoming. When we understand identity and existence in such a way, we can adopt the identity, whilst recognising the need to

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continue to do the work. The anti-racist scholar-activist identity, then, is forged through praxes.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have unpacked the contested nature of the scholar-activist label. We have shown that even amongst those that are regarded by others as such, there is a tentativeness in identifying as an anti-racist scholar-activist. Terminological criticality is perhaps one of few consistencies in how our heterogeneous group of participants self-identify. Although there are some that claim scholar-activist identities as a way to demarcate themselves from the academy writ large, there was a general consensus that we must be attentive to the problematics of the scholar-activist label. Some participants raised concerns about the 'scholar' constituent, including the datedness and pretensions of the term, and its racialised codings. Others drew attention to the problems associated with the 'activist' component, specifically in relation to the privilege of academic-activists relative to non-academic activists, and the power dynamics arising from academic involvement in activist movements. These concerns were raised in discussions around the scholar-activist label; however, they point to a broader set of structural problems within the academy. Indeed, concerns around the ill-fitting nature of the 'scholar' element point to the deeply racialised, classed, and elitist nature of scholarship in HE, whilst, in a similar vein, concerns over academic privilege and power within activism point to how the academy is invested in reproducing inequality and hierarchies of knowledge.

Concerns also centred around the misuses of the scholar-activist label and the dilution of its meaning. Participants warned about the dangers of the (neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist) academy's co-optation of the term, and how this may not only blunt the radical potential of scholar-activism but may result in it being marketised to drive profit and

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ultimately to extend inequity. Concerns were also raised around the currency the term carries for academics (in certain circles) and how the 'quack' takes up an anti-racist scholar-activist identity without engaging in the 'real' work. To resist the dilution of scholar-activism, participants urged us to 'drill down' and develop an 'intersubjective' understanding of what is invoked through the term. In this regard, we argue that a balance needs to be struck between narrow definitions that promote *capital A activism* and definitions that are so broad that they become bereft of their discursive power. Importantly, and as per the tenets we set out in the introductory chapter, our intersubjective understanding should focus on anti-racist scholar-activism as *praxes*. Indeed, whilst we have explored the problematics of scholar-activist *identities*, our participants are much more comfortable with the notion of scholar-activism as something we *do*. Although we do not intend to discount the identity or label entirely, this praxis-oriented framing – one we adopt in the rest of the book – allows us to situate scholar-activism as a constant process, as something we must continually strive towards rather than a fixed and reachable entity.