Reparative theft: stealing from the university

In the previous chapter, we set out an orientation for anti-racist scholar-activism that is governed by the notion of working in service to communities of resistance, and to the broader project of anti-racism. For the purposes of this chapter, we want to set the praxes of servicing against the backdrop of two coordinates. On the one hand, we have the relative lack of wealth and resources in communities of resistance, whilst on the other, we have the significant wealth and resources of the contemporary university, of which we, as academics, are affiliates. Given the importance of such resources in determining the successes or failures of social movements, opportunities for anti-racist scholar-activism lie in this stark contrast. Our access to resources within our institutions and the wider academy, and our orientation towards communities of resistance and anti-racism, make it incumbent upon us to redirect resources out of the university and into communities. As we argue, it is our duty to ‘steal’ from the university.

In the first part of this chapter, we explore Harney and Moten’s work on the subversive praxis of ‘stealing’ from the university. We bring these ideas into conversation with a discourse of reparative justice, in order to introduce the concept of reparative theft – a concept that then underpins the rest of the chapter. Building on these foundations, we introduce the accounts of participants to make the case that reparative theft is morally
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and ethically justifiable. Thereafter, we look at reparative theft in practice and do so in two sections. The first focuses particularly on the reparative theft of more material resources – for example: money, time, labour, and space. The second considers how social and symbolic capital constitutes a resource that can, and should, be stolen from our institutions. Ultimately, we argue that reparative theft is a key form of praxis – a fundamental component – of anti-racist scholar-activism, one that enables scholar-activists to exploit the contradictions of the university in service to communities of resistance and anti-racism more broadly.

Towards a theory of reparative theft

The notion of stealing from the university emerges out of Black Studies, and specifically the seminal work of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. In The Undercommons, Harney and Moten declare that the ‘only possible relationship to the university today is a criminal one’\(^5\) As they explain, given the university’s underpinnings:

one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can … abuse its hospitality … spite its mission … join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment … be in but not of – this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university (our emphasis).\(^6\)

We touched briefly on the idea of being ‘in but not of’ in the Introduction and in the preceding chapter: it strikes at the heart of what it means to work in service to anti-racism. As we suggested, the notion of being ‘in but not of’ the university, as we take it from Harney and Moten, reflects a radical orientation that is fundamentally committed to anti-racism, and is also fiercely and necessarily critical of – and often operating in opposition to – the neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist university. To be ‘in but not of’, as we see it, is to be employed by the university but to work at its margins. It is to work ‘inside’ a university, whilst holding allegiances that are grounded ‘outside’ of it.\(^7\) Scholar-activists – or subversive
intellectuals, in Harney and Moten’s terms – are in the university to service the undercommons of resistance: they ‘came under false pretences, with bad documents, out of love’. As Lennox and Yıldız rightly suggest, the question becomes, therefore, ‘how can we mobilize the resources and privileges of our position within academia to service radical movements?’ How can we exploit the pockets of possibility the university presents to us?

Reminding us of the counter-hegemonic orientation of scholar-activists, Harney and Moten describe how, after taking what can be taken from the university, the subversive intellectual:

> disappears into the underground, the downlow lowdown maroon community of the university, into the undercommons of enlightenment, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong.

As we argued in the previous chapter, once again we see in this conception that communities of resistance are prioritised by scholar-activists over and above the university. Underpinning Harney and Moten’s notion of stealing is an understanding that the university is an unjust and extractive space: it ‘cannot be accepted’ as a ‘place of enlightenment’. Its current form is ‘built upon the theft, the conquest, the negligence of the outcast mass intellectuality of the Undercommons’, they argue. With this in mind, recognising the (racial) inequities of the university – as we seek to capture through our use of ‘neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist’ – is vital to our understanding and gives a particular inflection to the theft committed by subversive intellectuals. Not only do many universities have direct and indirect material and financial ties to African enslavement, colonialism, and contemporary racial capitalism, but – through knowledge production – universities played (and continue to play) a key role in the development and perpetuation of the white supremacist ideologies that underpinned slavery, colonialism, and contemporary coloniality. Moreover, historically and contemporarily, universities reproduce and
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reinforce structures of race, class, and other systems of oppression that make up the ‘overarching structure of domination’: the matrix of domination.¹⁴

It is in taking account of this long extractive history, a history with an afterlife, as Sharpe puts it,¹⁵ that Harney and Moten remark that ‘to be a critical academic in the university is to be against the university.’¹⁶ A critical understanding of the university not only renders ‘stealing’ ethically and morally justifiable but – for anti-racist scholar-activists at least – positions it as a duty. In this sense, to steal from the university in service to social justice might be thought of as an act of reparative justice. Struggles for reparative justice have a ‘long and varied history’, beginning in ‘chattel enslavement’, ‘interwoven into the histories of African-led resistance to enslavement’, and contemporarily hinging upon ‘the legal concept of a crime against humanity’.¹⁷ Although this complex history makes succinct definition difficult, at its essence reparative justice, or reparations, invokes a framework of repair.¹⁸ To speak of repair is to recognise that harms have been caused and that it is only right and proper that actions are taken to redress those harms. As such, the concept of reparative justice enables us to think about the university’s complicity in (re)producing harm (see Chapter 6) and to seek reparations accordingly. Notwithstanding initiatives at institutions like the University of Glasgow – which in fact ‘does more to bolster the university’s liberal image than serve restorative justice’¹⁹ – the relative unwillingness of higher education (HE) institutions to (meaningfully) reckon with their pasts and free up their resources for the dispossessed makes it incumbent upon anti-racist scholar-activists to serve, duplicitously, as a conduit of redistribution. In using this concept, our intention is not to be so naive as to imply that the work of individual scholar-activists can do the monumental work needed to realise reparative justice. Rather, we seek to locate ‘stealing’ from the university in a historical and sociopolitical context, and to recognise the small role that academics can play in lieu of (or as we agitate for) a deeper institutional commitment.
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Despite Harney and Moten’s searing critique of the university, they leave space in their analysis to acknowledge that, in spite of its extractive and oppressive tendencies, the university presents opportunities for subversive intellectuals. This is a key point for us. As la paperson implores us to see, despite all of its ills, the university is a site of contradictory forces and competing visions – that is to say, it is better viewed as an assemblage than a monolith. The heterogeneity and complexity of the academy creates pockets of possibility through which anti-racist scholar-activists can exploit the contradictions of, and tensions present within, their institutions. Importantly, universities present opportunities for us to ‘steal’. With this in mind, it is necessary to resist the temptation to overdetermine the university as a homogenous site of oppression and extraction in order to recognise these possibilities, as few and fleeting as they may be.

The reparations movement has gone to great pains to move beyond ‘reductive interpretations of reparations as demands for individual payments, or simply as a “pay cheque”’. We agree with Kehinde Andrews, however, that it is important for anti-racist movements to not shy away entirely from a focus on economic justice. In the rest of this chapter, therefore, we conceive of ‘stealing’ as a form of reparations that both includes, and reaches beyond, the immediately economic. We want to turn now to our participants, as we develop the concept of reparative theft a little further and, in particular, think about reparative theft as a praxis that is entirely justifiable.

There is justice in reparative theft

Much like Harney and Moten and others, participants acknowledged that the university has vast resources and that these resources should be redirected towards, or ‘stolen’ for, communities of resistance. This was encapsulated by Aaliyah, a Black early-career academic:
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I like the idea of just exploiting the university and its resources, everything, because it's exploiting my students and my colleagues. So, I don't owe it anything. That's really how I feel.

Bearing witness to the ways her institution exploits its constituents, Aaliyah makes clear that she does not feel indebted to the university. Instead, she affirms, it is the university that has a debt and, as a consequence, it ought to be (justifiably) exploited for its resources. In emphasising that it should be exploited for ‘everything’, we might read Aaliyah’s comment as pointing to resources beyond the economic. Galiev (person of colour, early-career) picked up this thread:

It's a form of redistribution. I think that what we've got to remember is that the university has a massive accumulation of not just economic capital but social capital. That social and economic capital is not entirely self-generated. That comes off being able to exploit the social and economic capital of people that work within, but also outside of the university and people within the university that may not necessarily be academics … They don't get their prestige, they don't get their wealth, purely because it's self-generated. It's because of the community that they kind of come into. I think, because of that, the people outside of the university are fully entitled to use the resources that the university often excludes them from. It's a form of, I guess, redistributive justice in that we've got to recognise that we wouldn't have the kind of prestige and resources that we have, were it not for being in the particular space that we were in and the exploitation that the university engages in.

As Galiev makes clear, the university exploits both its constituents and wider society. The position of the university – its social and economic capital, prestige, and wealth – is inextricably tied to the subordination of others, particularly the communities surrounding our institutions: communities which are often excluded physically and symbolically from the university. What Galiev argues, therefore, is that dispossessed communities are entitled to forms of ‘redistributive justice’. Like the concept of reparative justice, Galiev’s notion of redistributive justice engenders a framing that
is cognisant of an injustice that must be equalised or repaired. It is a framing which recognises that the university is built on ill-gotten gains and that anti-racist scholar-activists should redistribute those gains.

Sharing the sentiments of Galiev and Aaliyah, Maria was directly influenced by Harney and Moten’s work: ‘I think there’s a justice in stealing from the university’, she explained. We asked Maria – a white, established academic – about the framing of theft and whether a reparations discourse might be more appropriate:

I think it should be reparations. It’s an unjust institution that owes something to communities. So, for me there’s a justice in the stealing, it would be like, enslaved people, theft does not mean the same thing. The morality of theft is subjective when the structure of opportunities and equalities are skewed towards some over others. So, yes, for me it’s not theft, but the word ‘theft’ is nice, because it situates me as being subversive against what it’s doing. It makes me clear about my position, which is that I’m a part of it but I’m on the edge of it. I’m critical of it the whole time, and I think some of that is not even just for the benefit of saying to other people I’m not a part of this; it’s for myself, so that I don’t trick myself into thinking that what they’re offering here is what I want or what they’ve got for me here is worth it. That’s not what I’m about here. I’m about taking the resources, stealing the resources, and trying to keep focused on the reasons I came in here to do this work.

Maria’s starting point, like Galiev’s and Aaliyah’s, is that the university is an ‘unjust institution’. The university is exploitative and extractive, and, contrary to the myth of meritocracy, is not a levelling space. As Maria puts it, ‘equalities are skewed’. It is from this critical base that we must understand notions of ‘theft’ and the praxes of ‘stealing’ – that is to say, given the inequitable distribution of power, it is morally justifiable – morally imperative, in fact – to steal from the university. As Harney and Moten urge, we must steal. It is part of the ‘criminal relationship’ we should have with the university.

Rather than dispensing of theft to simply talk about reparative justice, however, Maria contends that there is virtue in the notion of theft because it
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reflects her subversive ‘in but not of’ relationship to the university. Reflecting her positionality and orientation, it serves as a reminder that Maria’s priorities lie not with the university (whose allure under capitalism can, of course, be seductive)\textsuperscript{26} but with communities of resistance or, in Harney and Moten’s terms, with the Undercommons. Maria’s emphasis on the need to ‘keep focused’ also reminds us, as we argued in Chapter 1, that scholar-activism is best thought of as something that one does: a form of ongoing praxis that is shaped by action and reflection,\textsuperscript{27} rather than a fixed or static identity that can simply be attained. As well as serving as a reminder with regard to her own orientation, Maria’s retention of the notion of theft also urges us to recognise that, despite presenting pockets of possibility that we can exploit, HE institutions are generally resistant to radical anti-racist scholar-activism. As Gargi Bhattacharyya observes, ‘state-funded institutions are unwilling to support and fund the work of revolutionary movements or to promote ideas that promote their own demise’.\textsuperscript{28} This unwillingness to fund anti-racist scholar-activist work – which should not be mistaken for impossibility – therefore necessitates theft. Resources (material or otherwise) will not be given to anti-racist scholar-activists readily; we must take them.

When Maria continues to elaborate on her point, she shows us the importance of the notion of reparative theft:

the goal is not to make the institution love you, that’s not the goal. In fact, my struggle shouldn’t centrally be around just the university. If I’m in here to steal the resources of the university to empower communities and to be involved in more radical organising, then my esteem in this institution should not be the central focus. My time in this university and the support they give me is not the central focus even though I’m concerned about those things. So, I think maybe I picked the university for those reasons … It gives me a space that has a lot of resources that I can leverage for other people, that I wouldn’t have had otherwise if I was working in a different type of job.

Maria’s perspective brings our attention back to the notion of working in service, an orientation we discussed in the preceding chapter. As she notes,
her goals and her sense of esteem come from ‘more radical organising’ within wider communities of resistance, rather than from her relationship with the university. Like many of our participants, Maria entered the university because of the opportunities it presents to plunder its resources for the benefit of anti-racist movements. Thus, as Maria reminds us, our fervent critique of the neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist university should not preclude us from recognising the pockets of possibility the university presents for anti-racist scholar-activism. Whilst these pockets of possibility or spaces within the university might be, as Darren Webb puts it, ‘fleeting, transitory [and] small-scale’, they can nonetheless be leveraged in service to our communities of resistance, and anti-racism more broadly.

Reparative theft in practice

Having shown that notions of reparative theft inform anti-racist scholar-activist epistemologies and orientations, we want to turn now to consider what forms this reparative theft takes and what it might look like in practice. Writing on what they refer to as a politics of resourcefulness, Derickson and Routledge describe how:

scholar-activists can commit to channeling the resources and privileges afforded academics (e.g., time; access to research, technology, and space; grant writing experience; expertise legible to new organizations) to advancing the work of non-academic collaborators (community groups, activist networks, local insurgencies, etc).

Many social movements and community groups lack resources, power, and privilege. This is important to acknowledge given that the successes or failures of social movements are inextricably (although not solely) tied to their ability to access those things. In contrast, universities have a wealth of resources. It is because of this contrast that Derickson and Routledge’s remarks about the practice of redistribution become all the
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more salient. In the remainder of this chapter, we first explore how those engaged in anti-racist scholar-activism undertake the reparative theft of material resources, before we consider social and symbolic capital as a resource that can be stolen from the university.

Stealing material resources

There is a broad array of resources available within the university that can be repurposed for communities of resistance, and anti-racism more broadly. As Rosa – a white, mid-career academic who migrated to Britain – explained:

It can be financial resources; it can be money, it can be human time, labour. It can be knowledge sharing, critical information sharing. So, maybe also help communities that are hit by austerity [gain] access to some resources through those resources that are available for research, as such. I’m certainly not the only one trying to do this. Then also, if you think about PhD studies … you can actually use your own self as a PhD student to help out groups that have limited access to resources. So, in a way, you are also allowing a transfer of resources through your own activism.

As Rosa’s account indicates, when asked about the transfer of resources from universities to communities the most common response from participants was economic redistribution – that is, the filtering of university money, or money accessed via a university affiliation, into community groups. Although often requiring some careful (re)framing – what we refer to later in this chapter as strategic duplicity – academics can secure funds for communities of resistance in a variety of ways, including: through the inclusion of payments on (internal and external) research funding applications; by framing activism as/through Research Excellence Framework (REF) Impact activities; and through university community engagement or social responsibility funding streams. The possibility to
actualise (relatively small-scale) economic redistribution reminds us again that the university is not a homogenous entity, but rather a site of contradictory forces and competing visions that create pockets of possibility for anti-racist scholar-activism.

Securing university funding for activist groups is important and something that we seek to do in our own scholar-activist work. In our experience, and as our participants attest, amounts of funding that are considered to be small in the university’s own terms can be incredibly impactful in grassroots community settings (such is the unequal distribution of resources). This is not, of course, to underestimate the ways in which funding can get wrapped up in university bureaucracy and is tied up with State surveillance. By way of example, Laura has encountered some of these problems when requesting the university pay sex worker activists for their labour on one of her research projects. The rigid managerial systems of the university offer no space to be responsive to sensitivities around sex workers not wanting to disclose real names and addresses to the university for fear of being ‘outed’. Many times, when anxiously (and embarrassedly) waiting for our respective universities to pay our community partners, or when our partners have been made to jump through the hoops of hostile environment policy, we have wondered whether it would simply be easier to find funding outside of the university machine.

Notwithstanding the importance of funding, there are also, as Rosa explains, university resources beyond the immediately financial. Time can be stolen and so too can labour. Indeed, without people and time (amongst other factors), funding is not enough to sustain an effective activist movement. Many of our participants spoke of how, academic workloads permitting, they use some of their salaried time to engage in activist work – that is to say, with scholar-activists acting as a conduit, the university comes to unwittingly resource activist time. This is the reparative theft of time that not only bolsters communities of resistance in the more immediate sense but which also rubs against – or seeks to undermine
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and redress – a neoliberal capitalist system that steals all of our time. Rosa uses an example of PhD study, but this can perhaps be extended to research studies and our work more generally. If studies are designed in such a way as to overlap with or be fundamentally informed by the interests and needs of activist groups, as they should (see previous chapter), then it is possible for one’s research to be contributing to wider activism. Put another way, if one can (perhaps duplicitously) frame their activism in such a way as to see it recognised as part of their academic work, then time can be redirected from the academy to communities of resistance.36

On this point, Dez (Black, senior academic) spoke about the possibilities for finding space to do subversive work in the context of the contemporary university:

On the one hand, if a new variable of university success is public engagement and Impact, then so long as you can narrate your work as public engagement or as Impact, then in actual fact its content is emptied out. It doesn’t mean anything. All that it means is that you can make a claim to say that you’ll do public engagement or Impact. In other words, part of it, at least over the last few years, is that no one cares what you’re doing, but you’re valorised if you can say that you’re doing it. Again, there are problems with that, but at the same time, if it allows me to be able to do that stuff, then I don’t really have that much of a problem with it.

As we have discussed, there are myriad issues with neoliberal mechanisms like the REF and its concern with Impact. Amongst a litany of other problems – some of which we touched upon in the book’s Introduction – we are particularly concerned here about its promotion of short-termist and superficial engagement with communities.37 As Dez explains, the hollowness of the REF Impact agenda means that it can be much easier to perform the work of community engagement than it can be to actually do the work, and indeed it is only the performance that is needed: ‘its content is emptied out’. Put another way, it is the performance that is ‘valorised’, whilst (as we explore in the next chapter) the work of anti-racist
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scholar-activists – who invest significant amounts of time and energy in building genuine relationships within communities and community groups – is often undervalued within the academy. Having said that, Dez also points to how the hollowness of institutionalised notions of Impact and public engagement means that anti-racist scholar-activists can find space to do more counter-hegemonic work in service to anti-racism, as long as it can be articulated through the discourses of the REF. Our point here is not a defence of the REF because, as we noted in the Introduction and the previous chapter, its negative impacts are profound. Following Dez, we simply seek to point out how contradictions in the system can be manipulated for the benefit of communities of resistance, or how we might find breathing space within academia. We must bear in mind, however, that these benefits might be short-term in nature and may come at the cost of legitimising university processes that bring about damaging longer-term consequences.

Several of our participants noted that academic jobs can often provide the time and space to produce particular forms of knowledge that support wider resistance struggles. Such sentiment is evident in Chomsky’s writing on the Responsibility of Intellectuals:

> Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the Western world, at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us.

In Chomsky’s analysis, there is clear recognition of the relative privileges experienced by academics. From this privilege, he argues, comes a sense of responsibility or duty. This was keenly felt by many of our participants. Ali (Arab, early-career), for example, spoke of feeling ‘very, very blessed,
very grateful’ for the ‘space to be able to read and write and think’. With this, he noted, comes a ‘responsibility that weighs down very heavily’.

The sense of responsibility that both Chomsky and Ali capture was echoed by Thomas, a Black early-career academic, who perhaps pushed towards a more overtly activist framing:

Sivanandan described it as providing the intellectual fuel for the motors of resistance, which I quite like. So, it’s the fact that all of these communities are engaging in troubles against the police or against the education system or against our borders, but academics have the resources, space, and time to do the, kind of, the knowledge producing that aids those struggles. To better understand the border system. To make connections between different forms of policing in parts of the country or part of the world or different parts of a specific empire. I think being able to have the space to make those kinds of connections, both historical or geographical or theoretical is what makes us scholar-activists.

For Thomas – who draws directly on Sivanandan and expresses sentiment not unlike Chomsky’s – scholar-activists can work in service to (or provide ‘the intellectual fuel for’) wider resistance movements (see Chapter 2).

We can do so through the production of knowledge that ‘aids those struggles’, for example, by drawing connections between sources and systems of oppression, connections between struggles, and developing understandings of the bigger picture. There are two points we want to make here. Firstly, Thomas is not suggesting that academics have a unique intellectual capacity to do this work, but rather it is the ‘resources, space, and time’ offered by a position in the academy that makes such work possible. This is an important point if we are to challenge dominant (colonial) constructions of legitimate knowledge – that is, those that position the university as the site of knowledge production. Secondly, as Thomas insists, the knowledge production we engage in must be to service anti-racism (‘aid those struggles’). It is worth adding here that the form that this takes will likely differ across academic disciplines and – for a
range of reasons – may be less direct in some instances than others (this relates to the point we made in the previous chapter about how we may be accountable *directly* to the communities of resistance we work within and/or more *indirectly* to broader anti-racist movements).

It is this second point, we argue, that returns us back to the notion of theft. If the university does allow time and space for anti-racist scholar-activism, why is it useful to think of our practice as *theft*? Whilst the university may offer some space for scholar-activism (which in fact was a key reason why many of our participants work in the academy), there are limits to the work that can be done *legitimately* within the academy.\(^{41}\) Moreover, as suggested in the introductory chapter, the neoliberalisation of HE means that time is increasingly being squeezed and compromised. The task of scholar-activists, therefore, is to exploit the contradictions of the university,\(^ {42}\) and to push (back) these limits: ‘abuse its hospitality … spite its mission’ and ‘subvert the work’, in Harney and Moten’s terms.\(^ {43}\) We must ‘*steal*’ more than is on offer or, as Elroy puts it, constantly ‘operate in the margins’, from our ‘in but not of’ position. Choudry is right then that ‘despite changing times, and notwithstanding all of the pressures on new academics to publish and perform in a certain way, there remain possibilities to use resources and locations in universities in the service of struggles and movements.’\(^ {44}\) This work often requires a degree of *strategic duplicity* with regard to what is being presented to the university, compared to the work that is actually being done.

In practice, some of the contributions that academics can make to social movements appear relatively insignificant (in that they place almost no burden on the academic) but can actually be incredibly impactful in terms of the benefit that they produce for communities of resistance. Thomas provided an example of this low-effort/high-reward work:

> it’s very, very difficult to get a central London location where people from the north and south, east, west can access quickly for free and all that kind of stuff. So, I was like, bang. It’s fine. I’ll just book you a room at the university.
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It’s a very small act but it meant that that convening could go ahead, and a lot of academics don’t think about that I don’t think, because I’m constantly booking rooms all the time.

As Thomas acknowledges, booking university space for community groups and/or activists is ‘a very small act’ that many academics simply ‘don’t think about’, but it is one that many of our participants recognised as being important and undervalued. It is one that is enabled by our affiliation with the university. When we consider the ways in which universities lock out so many, and the growing real estate and gentrification practices of HE institutions, to reopen those spaces to wider communities can be an important political act: it can be a reparative act. It is an act that many of us, scholar-activist or not, can and should engage in. This is all the more apparent when we consider the ways that so many community groups struggle for access to space, for example, as a consequence of prohibitive city centre rents.

The value in university space has been apparent to us on several occasions in recent years. In 2019, for example, we were working on a project with Resistance Lab that required physical space for us to get together. We needed the space to have a strong internet connection, accessibility, space for a sizable group, relative privacy (not to mention heating and relative comfort), to be geographically central to us all, and of no (or low) expense. University buildings transpired to be one of the only appropriate spaces that allowed us to do our work.

On another occasion, as part of the Northern Police Monitoring Project, we hosted the former Black Panther Kathleen Cleaver at a public event in 2018. Given the number of people wanting to attend, and the project’s lack of resources, finding a suitable venue was a challenge. Despite it meeting our criteria in terms of size, location, and equipment, we ruled out university space early on. We did so because of the detachment of Manchester’s universities from the communities we organise with, and because university spaces can be exclusionary and alienating. We eventually
found a community venue and the event was largely regarded as a success, but as we followed up with fellow organisers and attendees after the event, one point of feedback really stuck with us. It was possible that, because we held the event in one specific geographical area of Manchester, potential attendees from other areas of Manchester might have felt unable, or too uncomfortable, to attend. We had, potentially, prioritised one community over others. Although there was likely no perfect solution and the aforementioned problems related to university space still hold true, the university’s central location and ‘neutrality’ might have offered us a way to circumvent the issue that was raised. Indeed, reflecting on a community project of his own, Ornette Clennon notes the underconsidered and underutilised value in university meeting rooms as ‘neutral space’ to bring together various constituents of groups. Using the university may also have allowed us to open it up to communities of resistance, to reclaim that space and to, temporarily at least, chip away at the exclusionary politics of the university in order to alter campus dynamics.

There are two other small acts that are worth mentioning here, and both might be considered forms of reparative theft that are somewhat unglamorous. The first is printing. Whilst community campaigns and groups can spend considerable amounts of money on printing, academics are usually able to print at work, at no cost to themselves (although their usage is sometimes monitored by their institutions). Particularly where anti-racist resistance is antithetical to the dominant logic of the university, repurposing university printers to produce materials for community groups can be a subversive act. As Elroy (Black, established academic) explains, it is about using the resources that we have and asking ‘What do you need? A hundred flyers? Yes, I can get those printed off.’ The second act relates to accessing academic resources, particularly paywall-protected journal articles but also academic books. The institutional protection of these resources acts to lock knowledge into the academy, even when that knowledge can be useful to wider communities. By opening up these
resources (for example, by sharing journal articles), scholar-activists can engage in small acts of subversion that, on the one hand, undermine the exclusive logics of HE, academic publishing and the commodification of knowledge, and, on the other, bolster and resource communities of resistance. Particularly with these smaller acts, we are not suggesting that only scholar-activists do this work, or that printing for a community group (on its own) makes a scholar-activist. We are merely suggesting that these are some very easy examples of ways in which academics can better support communities outside of the university. Given the in service orientation of scholar-activists, such acts can form a (very small) part of a broader arsenal of scholar-activist praxes.

Stealing social and symbolic capital

Our participants were keenly aware of the relative status accrued from their position within the academy. For some, the prospect of using this status in service to communities of resistance was the main reason behind their entry into the academy. Elroy encapsulated such motivation:

I remember reading an article by Chuck D in the ’80s. He was talking about notions of power, and where power is concentrated. I remember him saying, ‘Where are all the black researchers?’ Because we know knowledge is power; we know that data is power. And yet, we don’t have black researchers doing this work for us. I just thought, ‘Fuck, that’s what I want to do. Right, Chuck, I’m going to do it.’ It was one of those moments, just as a kid growing up, 18–19, thinking, ‘That’s what I’m about.’

Central in Elroy’s reflections is his desire to increase the power of Black communities. In his framing, the university is positioned as a site of power and it was, therefore, the prospect of harnessing this power that motivated Elroy to become an academic. He is motivated to engage in acts of reparative theft, as he seeks to repurpose the university’s power – perhaps read here as social and symbolic capital – to the benefit of
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Black communities. In this sense, as well as the more tangible material resources outlined in the previous section, Elroy’s account nods to wider notions of resource. We want to think here, then, about how anti-racist scholar-activists can utilise the symbolic and social capital of the university, through forms of reparative theft, in service to anti-racism.

One of the most common ways that participants felt that they were able to support wider struggles was through the use of their status and, specifically, their symbolic capital.51 This is evident in the following account from Dez. Having asserted in the previous chapter that academics often lack the specific skills that movements need, here he claims that what he does offer relates to status and symbolic capital:

it’s the fact that I bring a title and an institutional affiliation which valorises the work, just because of that. I’m not afraid of it, I don’t care … use that, I don’t mind. I don’t mind that at all.

Dez recognises that there is capital embodied within academic titles and associated with institutional affiliations. Notwithstanding the dangers of situating the academy as the site of knowledge production and of reproducing hierarchies of knowledge, the symbolic capital of academics can strengthen movements and campaigns.52 As Dez puts it, it ‘valorises the work’. He is therefore happy for movements to ‘use’ his capital. A similar point was conveyed by Elroy:

To be a doctor affords you a privilege and perspective which opens those doors … It’s exploiting or working in the margins of, I would say, the privilege that is afforded from being in a university.

As discussed in the last section, we are reminded here of the relative privilege afforded to academics and the responsibility that comes with it.53 For Elroy, who echoes both the language and sentiment of anti-colonial thinkers within the Black Radical tradition,54 this privilege can be exploited in the interests of communities of resistance. To facilitate this exploitation, one must work in the margins or be ‘in but not of’ the university.55 In
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this sense, although he is referring to the privileges that derive from symbolic and social capital, Elroy’s framing is similar to those who discussed more material resources above.

Elroy elaborated on the notion of exploitation. He explained: ‘that sense of being in service almost means sometimes opening yourself up to be exploited, for want of a better term, and that exploitation is important’. The idea of exploitation is a valuable one here. It is present in Elroy’s accounts, is an underlying theme in Dez’s, and can be seen too, both implicitly and explicitly, in other accounts across this and the previous chapter. Our participants often work with, and write about, communities that are subject to the exploitations that manifest as a result of the matrix of domination. In siding with communities of resistance, and resisting those forms of structural exploitation, scholar-activists can engage in subversive work. By looking to exploit the university (an institution that is usually exploiting rather than exploited), the counter-hegemony of scholar-activism becomes all the more apparent. In this respect, anti-racist scholar-activists can serve as conduits for reparative theft, in that they can enable communities of resistance to move from a position in which they are the subjects of exploitation to one in which they are effectuators of ‘exploitation’ – the latter position being one that, as we established earlier in this chapter, is morally and ethically justifiable.

This idea of exploitation also came up in our interview with Alison (white, mid-career), in which she spoke about her work with a local community campaign:

I think they see the university and the university connection as a resource, like as a legitimating resource … I had a text from [someone] this morning saying ‘Oh, I’ve got an opportunity to go on the radio to discuss [my] case and … will you come with me? You can do your university bit’ … there’s all sorts of stuff there. [There is being] an individual, on an interpersonal level, supporting that person through that experience, but there’s also something about my being there, my relationship to the university can
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legitimate things that she’s saying … I think there’s quite a bit of that. Good, let’s use [it] … Because that’s power, isn’t it? That relationship to power can maybe be positively exploited.

Alison reiterates the earlier point that a ‘university connection’ constitutes a form of symbolic capital and that this capital can be harnessed for anti-racist movements. This argument was made time and time again by participants. Whilst many were reflexive and critical about the processes that construct the university as a legitimating institution, there was nevertheless a degree of pragmatism that led Alison and others to explore how the university’s power could be ‘positively exploited’ or, put another way, ‘stolen’ in service to communities of resistance. In offering this example, however, Alison also points to how her role within the community group is about more than the symbolic capital she brings. As we discussed in the last chapter, it is also about the interpersonal: the ‘being there’ and the ‘bearing witness’. It is about the work that is often unseen and uncelebrated. It can be about ‘trying to feed into a conversation or be supportive or respond to the emails of people, direct people to lawyers’ (Barry), or something as simple as ‘getting on the phone’ (Elroy). Engaging in this feminist-inflected relational work of giving and caring sees us countering the neoliberal, masculinist, extractive, white politics of the university and it, again, involves us stealing back time.

Thus far, the accounts in this section have largely focused on how anti-racist scholar-activists can harness their social capital to support wider movements. Alex (mixed-race, mid-career) continues in this vein:

There are people who I really respect, who are activist-scholars, who successfully are in both worlds, and part of what they do, I think, is to amplify the insights and voices of activists, groups or individuals within activist circles, who otherwise wouldn’t be heard beyond their immediate political circle.

For Alex, key to being a scholar-activist (or activist-scholar in her terms) is a commitment to raising the collective voices of, or individual voices
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within, communities of resistance. This should be contextualised against a backdrop in which universities often operate as gatekeepers in terms of whose voices are elevated. Alex’s use of ‘amplify’ is significant and instructive here, and it is this point that we want to linger on. To amplify is to raise the volume in order to allow a message to be heard. Importantly, amplification leaves that original message intact. In this sense, to amplify is characteristically distinct from the speaking for communities that so often characterises academic practice. Unlike amplification, the act of speaking for risks distorting and silencing rather than elevating. As the American philosopher and activist Cornel West explains, ‘the vocation of the intellectual is to let suffering speak, let victims be visible, and let social misery be put on the agenda of those in power’.59 It is not to speak for that suffering. The praxis of amplifying therefore requires a degree of reflexivity. Firstly, it is necessary to recognise one’s own social capital and relative power. Secondly, one needs to harness that power in service to communities of resistance. And thirdly, and vitally, in doing so, one must guard against the reinscribing of unequal power dynamics. Underpinned by the orientation and sense of accountability we discussed in the previous chapter, reflexivity becomes most important in navigating the inherent tension between step two and step three: to utilise power, whilst resisting the perpetuation of unequal power relations. We want to turn now to consider this apparent tension a bit further.

For our participants, it seems that the aforementioned tension was largely understood and reconciled in terms of a need to be strategic when working in service to communities of resistance. This was articulated clearly by Abiola, an African man and long-standing activist in the final stages of his PhD:

As a scholar-activist, I’m not about performance. Not unless I’m doing performance stuff. That’s not my game. It’s to communicate the idea in the most effective way possible. The most practical way possible. And that means that if I have to talk in a certain register – if I had to wear a suit
and tie … You’ve never seen me in a suit and tie. But if I had to wear a suit and tie, then that’s what I’d do as an activist, I’d make those compromises, those decisions. But it also works the other way around. If I can be communicating my ideas without that performance, without falling into those tropes, then I’d equally do so. Because it breaks down and chips away at that veneer, these respectability politics that state this is how an academic must sound, must look. This is how an activist behaves.

Here, Abiola discusses the strategic ways in which he draws upon and manipulates his status for the benefit of the communities he works within, as well as wider anti-racist movements. He is concerned with practicality. Therefore, when he draws upon his status, he does so based upon a strategic assessment that the manipulation of such status can be of some benefit. It is in these instances that he will engage in performance: he will ‘wear a suit and tie’, he will ‘talk in a certain register’, if that is what it takes to be most effective. Drawing upon the work of Keith, Bhattacharyya notes that:

the role of the scholar is, at best, changeable, ranging from playing the expert to trimming knowledge to fit the demands and attention span of the audience, to speaking in whatever dubious tongue will achieve the desired end … the value added by scholars is the ability to move between different presentations of knowledge with some understanding of which register will yield influence and with whom.60

Whilst Abiola and others clearly embody some of this spirit, what is important for Abiola is that he remains cognisant and critical of the processes that make it advantageous for him to engage in impression management and different presentations of knowledge. If he can avoid the superficial performances then he does so because he knows that such performances perpetuate hierarchies of knowledge and harmful stereotypes about who possesses that knowledge. In this sense, anti-racist scholar-activism is dually concerned with utilising symbolic capital for communities of resistance, but also deconstructing knowledge hierarchies.
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To pursue the dual concerns of utilising and deconstructing status requires reflexivity. This point was reiterated by Alison, who draws us explicitly to a notion that, aside from a couple of brief mentions, has lie just beneath the surface of this chapter – that is, the notion of strategic duplicity:

I think it’s important to, in this space at least, recognise the duplicity, you know, in that space I won’t have these [campaign wrist bands] on. I’ll have a suit and I’ll wear my hair differently. I might even tap into a different accent. There is a level of performativity in those spaces whereby the scholar-activist dynamic to your work is turned down in order that you know, so you’re managing yourself in those different spaces, for your message to be received.

Alison’s primary concern here is with the message being received. To this end, she, like Abiola, is happy to engage in performance management if the situation demands it. What is important in these accounts is the acknowledgement of the superficiality of these performances. Both Abiola and Alison are critical enough to know that these performances lack substance but reflexive and strategic enough to know that they can bring benefits to the struggles that they are engaged in. We might understand this praxis as duplicity, therefore, since it involves a doubleness of thought, speech, or action. Drawing our minds back to the work of Harney and Moten, to be duplicitous is to engage in deceit and deception, or subterfuge in their words, in the interests of communities of resistance. It is therefore always a strategic duplicity.

For several participants, this strategic duplicity manifests in a manipulation of the myths of objectivity and rationality that surround academia. Neville (white, mid-career) made this point:

It’s quite useful if you want to get access to elites, if you don’t necessarily always wear your politics on your sleeve. So again, kind of assuming the role of the disinterested, impartial observer, can be quite useful if you want
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to get access to people and places, where waving a red flag might be a bit more difficult.

Much like other participants, and recalling the tenets we set out in the Introduction, Neville is influenced by traditions that show objectivity and rationality to be a fallacy that protects power and the status quo. Nevertheless, there is recognition that those mythologies can be harnessed in the interests of communities of resistance. In these cases, academics may be able play the role of ‘the disinterested impartial observer’ in order to give an air of legitimacy to the interests and demands of the groups and communities that they work within. As Alison explained: ‘At certain times, you want to look more like the sort of neutral evidence producer, yeah? Rather than the kind of person politically motivated by social change.’ Some anti-racist scholar-activists, like Alison, can therefore harness the notions of impartiality that are attached to the academy to the benefit of anti-racist movements. There are two additional points to make here though. Firstly, this praxis of strategic duplicity should perhaps (and often does) sit alongside longer-term work that looks to dismantle the hegemonic privileging of ‘objectivity’ in research – that is, the very logics that make such duplicity possible. Secondly, it is necessary to acknowledge that not all academics or scholar-activists are able to play the role of the impartial academic. We are thinking here, for instance, of those who have a documented and known histories in social movements, or those who are racialised in ways that see them viewed as always already biased. We return to this theme of racialised experiences of scholar-activism in the next chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have drawn upon Harney and Moten’s work on stealing from the university, and the discourse of reparative justice, in order
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to introduce the concept of *reparative theft*. Reparative theft invokes a form of theft that – in the context of coloniality, white supremacy, and the matrix of domination – is both morally and ethically justifiable. In fact, for many of our participants, such theft is understood as a duty. This rendering is premised on a recognition of the university as an extractive and exploitative institution that is built on ill-gotten gains. It is through this lens, therefore, that we come to think of this theft as a form of reparation, small-scale and incomplete though it may be. We cling onto the notion of theft in this chapter, however, to acknowledge the subterfuge that scholar-activists must engage in, in order to exploit the contradictions of the university and take its resources for the groups and communities we work within. The idea of theft acts as a reminder of whose side anti-racist scholar-activists are on or, put another way, that we are ‘in but not’ of the university. Our orientation is in service to communities of resistance, and wider anti-racist movements.

We have shown that the university holds a range of resources that scholar-activists can and do leverage for communities of resistance. As well as directly economic resources, there are also other invaluable resources such as labour, time, and space. In terms of space, we might think of this both as physical space – which can be booked for community events – and as space to think and produce knowledge for social movements. There are also those resources that might be less glamorous but are still significant, for example, access to printing. Albeit very small acts, all of these practices of resource redistribution are acts of reparative theft, with anti-racist scholar-activists – and hopefully academics more widely (particularly given the relative ease of these acts) – serving as a conduit.

We also focused on those forms of resource that are less material, in the immediate sense. Specifically, we situated the social and symbolic capital of the university, which can come to be embodied in university-based academics, as something that can be stolen. Here, we explored
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how scholar-activists navigate an apparent tension between using this knowledge for communities of resistance and perpetuating harmful hierarchies of knowledge and power. Mediated by accountability and embeddedness (see previous chapter), we argue that reflexivity is key in this regard and to anti-racist scholar-activist praxes more broadly. Ultimately, this chapter has built on Chapter 2’s notion of working in service, in order to show that reparative theft is a key component of anti-racist scholar-activism.