5

Struggle where you are: resistance within and against the university

In the previous chapter, we considered how the neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist university constrains and lashes back against those engaged in anti-racist scholar-activism. Exploring how anti-racist scholar-activists find ways to survive and navigate the abrasive terrain of higher education (HE), we also insisted that the university is not a monolith but rather an assemblage of contradictory and competing forces which give rise to pockets of possibility that we might exploit. Whether it be the British University and College Union (UCU) strikes, student rent strikes, Rhodes Must Fall, or Why is My Curriculum White, a litany of campus-based campaigns have shown that the university can be a site of resistance. Alongside these more high-profile examples are less visible forms of resistance that manifest through counter-hegemonic approaches to teaching and curricula development, speaking up in meetings, and challenging harmful institutional decisions. In this regard, we take seriously Stuart Hall’s advice to struggle where you are and suggest it can be an important guiding principle for the praxes of anti-racist scholar-activism.

In the first section of this chapter, we explicate the instruction to ‘struggle where you are’. Thereafter, the chapter is split into two overarching sections. The first focuses on the classroom and critical pedagogy. We discuss resistance to the myths of objectivity and neutrality in relation to pedagogy;
the cultivation of critical thought; the potential for social transformation via, what we call, a classroom-to-activism pipeline; and the transformation of the classroom. The second section looks beyond the classroom to focus on wider acts of resistance in the university. Here, we focus on speaking up and pushing back in university meetings, and on labour union activism. In each section, we consider how those committed to anti-racist scholar-activism engage with the impetus behind struggle where you are, and the tensions it engenders.

Struggle where you are

We draw the idea of ‘struggle where you are’ primarily from the late public intellectual and cultural theorist Stuart Hall, who offered this brief comment as advice to a Black community group grappling with considerations of how best to engage in anti-racism. A similar sentiment was expressed by the anti-colonial thinker and activist Walter Rodney, who argued that ‘the first level of struggle for the intellectual is in his [sic] own sphere of operation’. He continued:

The ‘guerrilla intellectual’ is one who is participating in this whole struggle for transformation within his [sic] own orbit. His or her [sic] task is to operate within the aegis of the institution and the structure and to take from it and transform it over time.

Directing us to think about the foundations of the praxes of anti-racist scholar-activism, we argue that these teachings offer an important intervention in at least four interrelated ways. Firstly, the instruction to struggle where you are reflects a degree of pragmatism with regard to what is achievable. As Hall explained, ‘you can’t do everything, you fight the battles that you can fight.’ This is about how we, as individuals, can feed into a struggle that is necessarily vast and complex, against a system of racism that is vaster and more complex still. For those involved in activist movements, such wisdom will seem familiar. It is a necessary (though
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perhaps difficult) realisation in every activist’s journey that one cannot do it all. This is important for managing expectations, for avoiding ‘burnout’, and for remembering that, as Angela Y. Davis reminds us in her book of the same title, ‘freedom is a constant struggle’.

Secondly, but relatedly, we also read struggle where you are to point to a movement that is bigger than the individual. The implication being that if we each struggle where we are, others will struggle where they are too and a collective struggle will grow. In Mouffe’s terms, we can work towards a ‘construction of the people’ – a strong resistance movement to redress diverse forms of domination. Under the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, Davis warns, ‘it has become especially important to identify the dangers of individualism’, particularly within ‘progressive struggles’. To this end, she pronounces that ‘it is essential to resist the depiction of history as the work of heroic individuals in order for people today to recognize their potential agency as a part of an ever-expanding community of struggle’. In this community of struggle, university-based academics are just one group of actors amongst many others. This point is particularly apt given the concerns raised in earlier chapters around the dangers of academics being elevated or privileged within activist movements, and around the construction of the university as the site of ‘legitimate’ knowledge production.

Thirdly, and despite the second point, we also understand struggle where you are to have a particular inflection for those of us working in powerful institutions, like the university. In previous chapters, we discussed the insistence of Cabral, Fanon, and others that petit bourgeois intellectuals have a particular role to play in betraying their class interests, or using their affiliation with power, in service to communities of resistance. Through this lens, struggle where you are is an instruction with particular pertinence to those of us working in HE – one that, recalling our discussion in Chapter 3, implores us to repurpose the powerful machinery of the university to fuel the motors of resistance.
Fourthly, calls to struggle where you are also demand a degree of introspection, a notion of particular significance given our focus on university-based anti-racist scholar-activism. The hegemonic delusions that construct academia as a liberal space, detached from the racism and inequalities that characterise society,\textsuperscript{15} mean that such introspection is generally as lacking as it is urgent. As Sara Ahmed shows us, ‘the self-perception of being good blocks the recognition of racism’.\textsuperscript{16} Thus for many academics, it is unthinkable that they, and the university more broadly, could be wrapped up in processes that maintain and perpetuate racism, and this is particularly so given that ‘the face of racism’ is often narrowly conceived as ‘that of the moral degenerate, the hateful bigot’.\textsuperscript{17} To struggle where you are in academia, therefore, is to break with the hegemony that sees the university as beyond reproach. As we began to argue in the book’s Introduction, it involves recognising HE to be a site of historic and contemporary colonial injustice.\textsuperscript{18} Nodding back to Chapter 3 on reparative theft then, and as Esther Stanford-Xosei warns,\textsuperscript{19} the reparative work of universities and academics must resist the temptation to focus only on the external. Instead, it should contend with the internal need for institutional and educational repair. Once we recognise the university to be a key social institution in the production of contemporary inequality, it follows that it has to represent a key site of resistance.

Despite the potential for struggle in the university, it is also necessary – as the preceding chapter indicated and as we develop further in Chapter 6 – for us to take note of the limits of that potential. Darren Webb’s work is particularly instructive in this regard. He argues that ‘the university can be the site for fleeting, transitory, small-scale experiences of utopian possibility’ but, given the predominance of ‘corporate-imperial’ interests, it ‘cannot be the site for transformative utopian politics’.\textsuperscript{20} Whilst we agree with Webb’s conclusion that we must look to communities and movements outside of the academy if we seek to affect transformative social change, we argue in this chapter that if we take a pay packet and relative job
security from our university employment, we have an obligation to also struggle where we are.

**The classroom and critical pedagogy**

The classroom (and/or lecture theatre) is central to what Rodney calls the ‘sphere of operation’ of university-based scholar-activists; this view was reflected by several participants, including Khadija (Bangladeshi, early-career) who noted: ‘I’ve always seen the classroom as the core space.’ Pedagogy is, therefore, an important component of scholar-activist praxes. As William D’Antonio wrote in an early piece on scholar-activism, ‘activism begins in the classroom.’ Perhaps unsurprisingly then, participants articulated a range of points about pedagogy. These points help to map out a picture of what pedagogy might look like for those of us committed to anti-racist scholar-activism. As several participants noted, the picture that develops is one fundamentally influenced by traditions of critical pedagogy. Afterall, as Amara (South Asian heritage, mid-career) declared, ‘if you are not talking about pedagogy and not thinking about pedagogy, then it’s going to be just armchair intellectualism, like armchair activism.’

The tradition of critical pedagogy is generally traced to the seminal work of Paulo Freire in Brazil, as well as to the Marx-influenced Frankfurt School and their development of critical theory. Whilst there is no single approach to critical pedagogy, there are some key elements to the tradition. With echoes of the fundamental tenets set out in the Introduction, critical pedagogy fundamentally problematises the myth of neutrality in education and is explicit about its aim of enacting positive social change. Through both content and method, it seeks to encourage critical thinking, empower students, promote democratisation, and challenge the status quo both within the classroom and the wider social world. It attempts to break with top-down ‘rote’ learning and a ‘just-the-facts’ pedagogy, to instead position students as active and equal participants in the learning process.
Throughout this book, we have maintained that a critical (structural) understanding of racism and a commitment to anti-racism are fundamental to praxes of anti-racist scholar-activism. This continues into approaches to pedagogy too. Despite its usefulness, as Ereene (British Muslim, early-career) explained, ‘critical pedagogy is often critiqued as [being] neglectful of race’. Indeed, Cann and DeMeulenaere have cautioned that critical pedagogy’s ‘historically class-based framework’ has, at times, led to the elision of considerations of race and racism.28 There is a need, therefore, to ‘complicate critical pedagogy by centring race’ and many scholars have done so.29 Indeed, Ereene explained how she ‘incorporates Critical Race Theory’ into her pedagogy in order to realise the potential of critical pedagogy. Following Ereene and the numerous critical pedagogues who centre race – and in the spirit of anti-racist scholar-activism – we contend that there can be no critical pedagogy without a centring of race. For this reason, when we talk of critical pedagogy, the race (i.e. critical race pedagogy) is always already implied.

As should be clear from the book so far, and particularly from the tenets we set out in the introductory chapter, there are huge convergences between the critical pedagogy tradition and the ambitions and values underpinning scholar-activism. In what follows, we look in more detail at some of these elements, as raised by our participants. We begin by looking at the myth of neutrality and its relationship to conscientisation,30 before we consider how anti-racist scholar-activists might cultivate critical thought, and build a classroom-to-activism pipeline. We then explore how we might work towards the transformation of classrooms.

**Eschewing neutrality and engendering conscientisation**

Critical pedagogues recognise that whilst dominant ‘traditional’ approaches to teaching masquerade as neutral, they work in actuality to ‘sustain the interests of the dominant groups’.31 This is not to say that (hegemonic)
education merely reflects the status quo but rather that it actively constitutes it. Whether it maintains or disrupts the status quo, therefore, teaching is always a political act: it is never value-free. Echoing broader points we have made about praxis throughout this book, such an understanding is central to critical pedagogy and informs the pedagogical praxes of many of our participants.

The importance of naming teaching as always partisan was conveyed by Dillon, a British Asian early-career academic:

I’m very blunt in the sense that I tell students that I’m not neutral: there’s no such thing as an objective sociologist. I tell them that I’m coming at this from a particular position. If you don’t agree with it, well that’s fine, you’re more than welcome to question it and challenge it. One of my favourite writers is a guy called Howard Zinn and he says you can’t be neutral on a moving train. To be neutral is to be complicit because social relations are structured in a particular way, and are moving in an unjust direction, and to be neutral is just to be a bystander and get swept along. So, you have to be actively resisting and actively pushing back, and I do that with my teaching and I’m very explicit about that.

Dillon’s approach to pedagogy is based on an understanding that the university is unjust, much as the social world it constitutes, and it is constituted by, is unjust. As he explains, in such a context, teaching cannot be objective and non-partisan. Rather than maintaining the status quo, Dillon’s approach is to actively resist and push back through pedagogy. By making this explicit to his students he undermines the fallacy of neutrality in teaching, and in so doing begins to reveal the mechanics of education: an act that is integral to critical pedagogy. This work can alter the expectations of students, and create a precedent that encourages pedagogues to make clear the positions and assumptions that shape their teaching. In this way, Dillon contributes his small part to the wider project that Walter Rodney speaks of when he calls for a transformation of the institution.
Eschewing neutrality creates the conditions for *conscientisation*, a concept Freire uses to describe the process through which we learn ‘to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality’. There are, therefore, two key elements to conscientisation that Freire encourages us to hold in tandem, elements that we try to convey through our use of the term ‘praxis’ in this book. The first refers to critical thought and the second to related action in pursuit of social change. These elements are evident in Jay’s (Asian British, mid-career) reflections on the importance of teaching: ‘I see teaching not just as imparting knowledge to students but also, encouraging an ethical stance in them. Not forcing one upon them but making them understand their role in broader society.’ The significant point here is that understanding the social world should lead to taking a stance in relation to it: ‘reflection leads to action’, as Ereene put it. The ‘action’ element is often forgotten as ‘critical thought’ is prioritised and, with this in mind, we want to now look at both elements in turn.

* Cultivating critical thought

The cultivation of critical thought involves exposing students to critical understandings of the matrix of domination, understandings that we have argued are fundamental to anti-racist scholar-activism. As Cann and DeMeulenaere contend, it is about pulling ‘back the curtains on some of the greatest shows on earth – patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity – and expos[ing] the make-up and the special effects that create the charade.’ The value in this work is not to be underestimated. As Khadija asserted: ‘the classroom, for me, has been the most transformational space.’ It was in a similar vein that Neville (white, mid-career) explained:

If I think about what’s the biggest impact that my own work has, it’s probably not my research, it’s probably talking to young people in the classroom, and getting them to think about stuff in a way that they haven’t thought
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about it before, and so I think as an academic you can still do stuff that's positive despite, rather than because of, the institution.

Given the centrality of the classroom to one’s ‘sphere of operation’, cultivating critical thought – through critical pedagogy – as Neville describes, is an opportunity to (begin to) put scholar-activism into practice. Neville’s account illustrates an orientation that is oppositional to the systematic devaluing of teaching in the academy that arises, in part, from the hyper-competitive research culture and burgeoning workloads that are driven by neoliberalism. It reflects a value system that is governed by a desire to influence social change (and a degree of pragmatism about where one is best able to do this), rather than by neoliberal metrics or individual careerism. Neville’s insistence that critical pedagogy occurs ‘despite, rather than because of, the institution’ also reminds us that in the classroom, as elsewhere, scholar-activism involves working within and against the university. Despite the neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist nature of HE, and the specific ways in which neoliberal metrics strangle the potential of critical pedagogy, there remain pockets and spaces that constitute opportunities for resistance. The classroom is one such space.

The opportunities presented in the classroom for cultivating critical thought were acknowledged by many of those we spoke to, including Maria (white, mid-career) who reflected:

Teaching allows me a place where, even though I don’t see immediate results with students, I do feel like the students are taking in tangible things from what’s happening and they’re being transformed by the experience and they’re feeling empowered to do stuff that ends up being tied to activism.

In a similar vein, Elroy (Black, established academic) explained that the classroom is ‘a space within which I can drop the fucking seed’. He continued:

I tell my students, ‘You will be tomorrow’s policymakers, and you will be tomorrow’s academics, and you will be tomorrow’s police officers, and I
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don’t want you fucking up like these lot are doing at the moment.’ So that’s a space within which we can begin to have that conversation. So, the activism also takes place within the university. I don’t see the space as divorced from activism. I don’t see my students as insulated from the type of work I do outside.

These accounts both convey a sense that classrooms hold opportunities for cultivating more critical world views among students, and that the development of such critical thought can have a wider societal impact. Relatedly, like Neville’s, these accounts reflect an orientation that is resistant to the systematic devaluing of teaching in the academy. This is perhaps reflective of a scholar-activist praxis that is governed by the notion of working in service to anti-racism (where teaching is seen to offer opportunities to bolster anti-racism), rather than in service to performance metrics (tools of neoliberalism), as we explored in Chapter 2.

Despite conveying an appreciation of opportunities for the cultivation of critical thought in the classroom, Maria and Elroy’s accounts also caution against the assumption that the cultivation of critical thought is enough alone. Maria suggests that teaching can lead students to engage in activities that are ‘tied to activism’, which is perhaps different from saying that teaching (always) leads students to become activists. Elsewhere, she also noted that though teaching can be important, it is not something she thinks of as activism, in and of itself. Similarly, Elroy talks of teaching as a space in which we can ‘begin to have the conversation’. As such, although the engendering of a critical world view might be the first step – as the duality of critical thought and action in Freire’s concept of conscientisation makes clear – there is more work to be done. The task, therefore, is for us to embolden students to use the critical thought generated in the classroom in order to effect change. Whilst Elroy talks of making sure students, as future academics and police officers, are not ‘fucking up’, there are questions over whether such teaching encourages students to transform the current system or merely helps them to operate within that system.
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(albeit, from a more critical position): to be a better police officer, rather than to fight for the abolition of policing. This is a significant distinction. How do we create the conditions for students to act as agents of social transformation in the radical, rather than piecemeal, sense? How do we encourage students to become part of our communities of resistance?

Building a classroom-to-activism pipeline

If we are to encourage students to act on their critical thought in pursuit of radical social change, we need to facilitate possibilities for this to happen. As the critical pedagogue Henry Giroux explains, critical pedagogy has to involve the creation of ‘opportunities to mobilize instances of moral outrage, social responsibility and collective action’. Echoing this sentiment, Ereene explained: ‘I want them [students] to be inspired and passionate and get involved in community organisations … and fight the battle as well.’ Although the vision that Ereene articulates is an urgent one, the neoliberal contexts of our universities and the specific impact that student-centred performance metrics have on teaching means that it is a vision that is also deeply constrained. With this in mind, and as Webb cautions, despite the allure of our classrooms, ‘we should not overestimate their transformative potential.’ We might, therefore, be better thinking about how we make the most of these spaces in service to anti-racism, without mistaking critical approaches to teaching for the totality of the kinds of scholar-activist work we need to engage in.

We have written elsewhere about our own efforts to engage in teaching for social change. In 2017, we taught sessions on the Grenfell Tower fire – a significant and devastating event in Britain, symbolic of deep-seated class and race inequalities – in an attempt to cultivate critical thought and stimulate activism amongst our students. The sessions were emotionally moving, and we were left in little doubt that we had encouraged more critical world views and ignited a desire for social justice amongst our
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students. Upon reflection and an analysis of the surveyed views of our students, however, we realised that we had in fact failed to move beyond what we refer to as bounded social change – that is to say, despite developing politically charged sessions, students struggled to see how they could use their critical understanding beyond the immediate context of the neoliberal university.\(^48\) We had not done enough to build a *classroom-to-activism pipeline*. We introduce the pipeline metaphor here to think about how our classroom praxes can create routes that enable students to move from the classroom into activism. In many cases, this pipeline is often blocked or poorly constructed. In the example of our own teaching, the pipeline failed to exit the university because, although our students wanted to ‘do something’ about the injustices of Grenfell, their imaginations – blunted as they were by neoliberal HE – could not see beyond writing a powerful essay. Of course, the current structure of the academy and its assessment processes mean that those essays have little, if any, real world utility.\(^49\) In this regard, we were sharply reminded that conscientisation is not only about developing a critical understanding and a desire to act,\(^50\) but about making that action imaginable and realisable. It is about enabling *freedom dreaming*,\(^51\) which, in turn, helps students move ‘from cynicism and despair to hope and possibility’.\(^52\)

Some of our participants were deliberate in attempting to create pathways for action and social change, or in constructing a *classroom-to-activism pipeline*. For instance, Jay described to us a law course that trains students to investigate the cases of people who claim to have been wrongly convicted. This, he argued, allows activism to be tied into his academic role and to his classroom. Another example came from Aaliyah (Black, early-career):

I suppose getting students to engage with local community projects and building relationships between the university and the community projects. I think that’s really important because I think universities take a lot from community groups, don’t they? So, it’s about what we can give back. So, I
Suppose the module that I’m teaching on, that I’m working on, is a way of building relationships.

By forming links with community projects, Aaliyah creates opportunities for students to imagine more socially just societies. In turn, students can move beyond bounded social change towards forms of unbounded social change that extend beyond the neoliberal university context. In the words of Aronowitz and Giroux, she moves from the position of critical intellectual to transformative intellectual – that is, ‘beyond [an] isolated posture to the terrain of collective struggle’.

A scholar-activist orientation is manifest in Aaliyah’s approach as there is a clear effort to place her teaching in service to ‘community projects’ as a form of redistribution: as a way for her to ‘give back’. She points to how we might resource community groups via the labour of students or via economic resources that we can leverage from these sorts of courses. As Castle and McDonald make clear, ‘there must be some level of community engagement, or one has not moved beyond ivory tower activism.’ We might add that such engagement must be meaningful and beneficial to the engaged community, rather than the extractive, short-lived and/or superficial community engagement that, in the UK context, can be encouraged through frameworks such as the REF Impact agenda.

*Transforming our classrooms*

As we have suggested, central to the idea of struggle where you are is a recognition that it is insufficient to talk about power inequalities ‘out there’ (in wider society), without paying attention to our ‘own sphere of operation’. Taking this notion and the lessons of critical pedagogy seriously, it is necessary for us to recognise the power dynamics that operate within our own classrooms. In this regard, Ereene emphasised the need to create ‘a space where everyone is a teacher, and everyone is a learner, and where we together come up with actions for social change’. Echoing much of
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this, Okoye – a Black, Muslim early-career woman – was also particularly thoughtful in this regard:

Once I’m in that lecture, once I’m in that seminar, I’m on my own with the students and I feel like it’s a space where we make the decisions of what takes place in that one hour, two hours that we have together. So, we set the tone together.

By positioning her students as co-decision makers within the classroom, Okoye attempts to push back against, or transgress, traditional power dynamics that situate lecturers as service providers/knowledge givers and students as consumers/empty vessels. As Patricia Hill Collins acknowledges, when we ‘set up our classes … social hierarchy is quite crucial to how students feel about learning, regardless of content’. This subversion of classroom dynamics represents an attempt to build the Undercommons in the classroom to offer a ‘place of refuge’ or ‘breathing space’ from the wider university. In turn, it creates an environment more conducive to critical consciousness raising and to anti-racist resistance.

There is more to this subversion though: it also undermines or pushes back against the hegemony of traditional pedagogy. Relatedly, it has the potential to push against the limiting imperatives of neoliberal education, operationalised in the UK primarily (though not exclusively) through ‘student-centred’ performance metrics such as the Teaching Excellence Framework and the National Student Survey. These tools have been noted to depoliticise the classroom, deter innovative teaching, prioritise metrics over real learning, and position students as consumers rather than active participants. In this respect, the neoliberalisation of teaching makes critical pedagogy more challenging, but also more disruptive. As Okoye explained:

if we were really having a dialogue there would be a sense right from the onset of students being partners in the classroom and that is a risk for any institution because the minute you make students partners and make them invested in their own learning you remove some of the power from yourself
and you legitimise knowledge that you don't always have control over, and that can dismantle the whole institution.

By undermining dominant logics of power in the classroom, Okoye attempts to weaken the university and the pervasive ideas it reproduces about ‘legitimate’ knowledge production. Anti-racist scholar-activists should, therefore, as Webb urges, adopt a ‘dialogical pedagogy that prefigures in the very process of collaborative learning the kind of social relations that might characterize an alternative way of being’. In this regard, we might also begin to transform student perceptions about what the university is or can be: we might encourage freedom dreaming.

Whilst Okoye’s account may appear to hold some similarities with the institutional shift in recent years towards ‘flipped classrooms’, it is in the underpinning anti-racist politics and commitment to social change that anti-racist scholar-activist approaches are defined and distinguished. As Okoye continued to explain, there are other factors that shape her approach to teaching:

We have very uncomfortable conversations and we find ways to manage the cognitive requirements of it in terms of being able to critically think about some of the theories and unpack them. But also, the affective requirements. There’s always an emotional, visceral response if somebody knows what they’re talking about, how are we as a group going to manage that and work together to do that?

In this, Okoye shows a further break with hegemonic approaches as she places discomfort, affect, and emotion in the classroom. Taking us back to our earlier discussion of neutrality, mainstream educational discourse privileges the illusion of objectivity and rationality, and constructs emotion as lying ‘beneath the faculties of thought and reason’ and therefore as having no place in the classroom. For Okoye and others, however, emotions do have a role to play in education and particularly in education for social change. Emotions are relational and, when directed in the pursuit of anti-racist social justice, an engagement with emotionality
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– through pedagogies of discomfort\textsuperscript{65} – can be productive. Making emotions present and visible in our classrooms can push back against academic convention and allow us to break with the norms of what is expected of an educator. To centre emotion in pedagogy, therefore, is to struggle where you are not only in the sense that it is a disruptive pedagogy, but also in its ability to create a classroom environment more conducive to the development of communities of resistance.

Whilst we have thus far emphasised the potential of the classroom and the importance of critical pedagogy, such teaching poses challenges that should be acknowledged too. Two related issues were highlighted by participants in particular: opposition from students; and how the matrix of domination, and specific tools of domination such as counter-terror as operationalised in the UK through Prevent,\textsuperscript{66} shape classroom dynamics. Despite our optimistic tone regarding critical pedagogy, the strength of neoliberal logics of instrumentalisation and logics of white supremacy mean that not all students welcome counter-hegemonic and anti-racist approaches to teaching.\textsuperscript{67} One way of working through this tension productively is to draw on the ‘spectrum of allies’ concept which, emerging out of the US civil rights context, has gained significant traction in recent years in social movement building and activism.\textsuperscript{68} Employing this concept, we can see our aim as not being to win over all students but about engaging those who are within our spectrum of allies – that is, those who are open to being brought into our anti-racist movements.

There is, however, more at stake here than feeding the classroom-to-activism pipeline. The well-being of scholar-activists is also a vital consideration, particularly when we recognise that student hostility is especially pronounced when critical education is facilitated by teachers of colour.\textsuperscript{69} Both Khadija (Bangladeshi, early-career) and Sara (British Muslim, early-career) illustrate this point:

A classroom site is transformational, but also sometimes I get the impression some of the students don’t necessarily want to be challenged or made too
uncomfortable either … We’re both two women of colour teaching this course and it’s been some of our white students who have been giving us a bit of a hard time because of how they’ve understood race (Khadija).

For me, racism [in the classroom], I cannot deal with it. I cannot just sit there and say that’s fine, you know, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, or whatever it is … that is something which I am very aware of, as a Muslim brown woman. I will not tolerate that … As a person of colour who was teaching, that is my body on the line that you are discussing … I have to be very strategic in who I am speaking to, about certain things that resonate with my own lived experience – its self-care (Sara).

As Khadija and Sara make clear, despite the promises of critical pedagogy, it is necessary to consider the threat of backlash (which returns us to the previous chapter) and the toll that critical teaching can take on academics, particularly those from minoritised communities.

Relatedly, whilst we hold that there is real value in making emotions visible in the classroom, there is also a need to be attentive to who is undertaking that emotional labour amidst the risk of reinscribing existing power imbalances. As Khadija and Sara make clear, classrooms are not immune from the matrix of domination. This is particularly manifest in the urgent need to think about how the Prevent duty, and counter-terror policy and Islamophobia more widely, curtail the potential of radical emotion-centred pedagogy. As Haytham (Pakistani, PhD researcher) explains:

Students are less willing to talk about their feelings and their positions within the classroom because they see it as a Police space now. They see it as a space that is potentially harmful to them in terms of their long-term aims and ambitions, right? So, it doesn't mean that they are not willing to be in that space, it just means that they have to alter themselves, they have to self-regulate based on this gaze that they are under.

Underpinning Haytham’s account is a well-founded conviction that these issues of surveillance are specifically affecting students of colour, and
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particularly Muslim students. What we see across the accounts of Khadija, Sara, and Haytham then is that structural issues pertaining to power and inequality have to be negotiated in the classroom, and threaten to limit the potential of critical pedagogy.

Another consideration regarding the limits of critical pedagogy has been highlighted by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and particularly the shift within HE institutions to online teaching (and related reliance upon digital technologies). These conditions have given rise to questions about how pedagogues can adapt, questions that are particularly pertinent given the likelihood that online teaching will become increasingly commonplace as a mode of delivery post-pandemic. Although our interviews took place well before the pandemic, such questions take on a particular inflection when we think specifically about scholar-activists and critical pedagogues. How do we build the community links that we describe in the previous section when we operate online? How do we engage students in online space in ways that inspire them to pursue anti-racist social justice? What does the classroom-to-activism pipeline look like when both the classroom and activist spaces are operating largely online? How do we manage emotion and difficult conversations in virtual classrooms? How do we break down hierarchies in the classroom when the classroom is digital? How do we manage racism in the online classroom? How do we take into account the particular forms of (digital) surveillance (and/or dataveillance) that might encroach into online teaching? How do we respond to differential levels of access to digital technologies that are often reflective of (and will reproduce) racial and class inequalities? We are not suggesting, here, that the shift to online teaching makes anti-racist critical pedagogy insurmountable, but there are significant considerations with which we must grapple. Indeed, it would be naive to assume that methods of in-person teaching can be applied, without adaptation, to digital classrooms. There is a need, therefore, for those of us engaged in
anti-racist scholar-activism to think about how we best adapt our methods to online spaces.

There are two more fundamental considerations here too. The first requires us to think more broadly about the implications of the pandemic. The question of how we consider all of the above, whilst also being attentive to the realities that our students are living through multiple crises and contending with a range of issues, becomes particularly pressing. The second consideration concerns the broader implications of the increasing reliance on digital technologies as tools for education. As Mirrlees and Alvi show, although digital technology is often uncritically celebrated for its capacity to revolutionise education, what they refer to as ‘EdTech’ acts to reproduce and exacerbate capitalist relations that are deeply unequal and imperial in nature.71 There is a need to pay attention, therefore, to ‘the real economic and political structures, institutions and interests that are shaping and attempting to benefit from EdTech’s development, diffusion, application and impact in society’.72 The point here is not to suggest that in-person teaching does not also reproduce inequalities (or to suggest that the use of digital technology in teaching is not without its benefits). Rather, there is a need to pay attention to the particular inequalities that can arise through the increasing reliance on digital technology in teaching and the wider web of vested interests that may drive and profit from such developments. For scholar-activists, this critical reading of digital technologies in education raises questions about the contradictions and complicities that can arise in our practice (an issue we return to in the next chapter), and highlights the need for forms of reflexivity that consider the wider implications and contexts of our work.

Notwithstanding the significant issues that threaten to constrain critical pedagogies, we have shown in this section that teaching presents opportunities for anti-racist scholar-activism. Nevertheless, we have also suggested that the transformative potential of teaching is curtailed by the institutional
context, and specifically by the neoliberalisation of HE generally and the classroom particularly. Without wanting to diminish its value, our participants, like us, are clear that university-based critical pedagogy is not enough alone. As Webb aptly puts it, the university classroom is, at best, a ‘bolt-hole’ or a ‘breathing space’ in an otherwise ‘suffocating environment’. Whilst we have argued that we should create and exploit these pockets of possibility as much as possible, we should also look to build a pipeline out of the university and into communities of resistance. It is outside of the university where we can work most effectively in service to anti-racism. Knowing that our work is about more than teaching, and notwithstanding the dangers of focusing too much on struggle within the university setting, we now want to think about resistance that occurs elsewhere in the university.

**Beyond the classroom: wider acts of resistance in the university**

There is a need to look beyond the classroom in thinking about how we can struggle where we are. As Patricia Hill Collins states, critical pedagogy is not enough; rather ‘teaching for a change involves struggling for institutional transformation so that we leave the social institutions that educated us better than we found them’. Striking a similar chord, Giroux contends:

> it is crucial for progressive educators to wage battles over access for poor and minority students, shift power away from bureaucracies to faculties, and address the exploitative conditions under which many graduate students work – often constituting a de facto army of service workers who are underpaid, overworked, and shorn of any real power or benefits. Simply put, the what, how, and why of teaching cannot be separated from the basic conditions under which educators and students labour. This means rethinking how teaching functions as a form of academic labour within iniquitous relations of power.
For Giroux and Collins alike, there is a need to ensure that one’s praxis is not confined to critical pedagogy within the classroom, but that instead we consider other sites within the university where anti-racist resistance can be enacted. One such site might be the curriculum. Indeed, given that university curricula are so enduringly US-Eurocentric, and with student-led ‘decolonise’ movements demanding change, transforming the curriculum can be a way for critical scholars and anti-racist scholar-activists to struggle where we are. This work is key for challenging the coloniality of knowledge production, canonisation and discipline formation, and for feeding into critical consciousness raising. Whilst some of this work can occur in the classroom (as the previous section shows), it also needs to take place elsewhere in the university, particularly if change is to become institutionalised and embedded. We can use university meetings and committees to effect change in relation to the curriculum, as well as for speaking up and pushing back against a range of other inequities and injustices.

**Speaking up and pushing back in university meetings**

The importance of meetings as sites of resistance was encapsulated by Sajid (British Pakistani, mid-career):

If you’re looking for a site of activism, staff meetings and team meetings, departmental meetings, are another way in which to bring your activism to bear because that’s when we’re talking about inequalities in the workplace. That’s when workloads and deployment [is discussed] and [discussions are had] about student experience and about why Black and Asian students are much more likely to drop out. That is political, right, so I think it’s about bringing the political into the meeting. That’s activism.

Underpinning Sajid’s account is a recognition of the harms caused by, and inequalities within, the university. Whilst staff meetings are perhaps not generally thought of as insurgent sites of activism, and without wanting
to overstate their utility, Sajid emphasises their importance as a site for disrupting – or ameliorating – the harm caused by the university. This everyday disruptive work can sometimes be important. It holds potential for us to operate simultaneously in and against the university, providing an opportunity for us to seek to (partially) mitigate our own complicity in the inequalities reproduced in HE (see Chapter 6). As Amara reminded us, ‘speaking up in meetings’ can be one way of ‘practising what you preach’, or of engaging in the ‘talk-plus-walk’ that we have suggested is integral to scholar-activism. We are not suggesting here that speaking up in meetings is unique to the praxis of scholar-activism (we are in no doubt that other academics engage in this work too), or that the act of speaking up constitutes scholar-activism, per se. Rather, we are suggesting that it may be one small part of an assemblage of practices that make up scholar-activist praxes.

Returning us to ideas developed in the previous chapter, capacity for speaking up is always mediated by a range of factors. The precarity of many academics, particularly those working at the margins, makes this kind of labour riskier for some than for others – that is to say, we do not always have the resources, power, or job security required to disrupt. Ironically, it is in fact often those with the most grievances that are situated in the weakest position from which to disrupt. Relatedly, Rosalind Hampton writes that ‘university committees and the policies they produce and uphold are, by definition, intended to work for the university and protect its determined interests’. There is a need, therefore, for scholar-activists to be ‘critically selective’ about this kind of disruptive work, to recognise the limits of the university, and to be cognisant of the profound challenges we might encounter when we try to talk back. Vitally, we must also avoid being lulled into mistakenly seeing such meetings and committees as the only or even primary avenue for change, particularly in a context where the increasing neoliberal managerialism of HE means that such meetings are often merely a space through which participants ‘go through
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the motions’. There is a danger here in becoming institutionalised – in developing a myopia that makes it difficult to see beyond institutional mechanisms and piecemeal reforms – and losing sight of our critical and radical visions.

Making a similar argument to Sajid, though pushing us to think more broadly about aspects of the university that too often go unchallenged, Galiev (person of colour, early-career) highlighted the need to:

Always, always pull them up on everything that they’re doing which is perpetuating inequality. If they’re investing in the arms trade, if they’re investing in Israeli military companies, if they’re investing in fossil fuels, all that kind of stuff. Our job is to mitigate or ameliorate the fundamental, the systemic, the inequalities that the university engages in and to always hold them to account.

As Galiev points to the far-reaching ways in which the university reproduces (global) inequalities, he offers an important challenge to the irony that sees many academics writing about structures of inequality ‘out there’ without looking at the realities ‘in here’. Of course, recognising the backlash that might come from speaking truth to power, we should remember that this dissenting work is likely to be most effective in bringing about meaningful change ‘when these goals are taken up as organizing and/or activist endeavours, with collective planning towards meeting clearly defined goals’. As we suggested in the last chapter, protection can come (at least in part) from collectivisation.

These collectives can, and should, be formed with students too. Indeed, several participants spoke about the importance of building solidarity with students and offering (often behind the scenes) support for students who may campaign on the types of issues that we (should look to) speak up about in meetings. Amara, for example, insisted on the importance of being led by students in such regards: ‘I would not be a scholar-activist if I am not working with my students … I have become a radical because of my engagement with radical students.’ Student campaigns are often
able to have far more impact than would be possible were an academic to speak up in a meeting. In the spirit of struggle where you are, such work is also about having different actors and modes of influence in different spaces – that is both staff and students, as key constituents in the university, applying pressure to address particular issues.

Even with the relative protection and mutual support offered by collectives, holding the university to account is not without consequences. As discussed in the previous chapter, institutions exert backlash against anti-racist scholar-activists not only because anti-racism is considered subversive but because its subversion is enhanced by our activist orientations (and for some of us, our marginalised positionalities). In the context of his comments above, Galiev reflected on this issue:

If you look at the people who are radical in what they say, who have reached the top, I’m not going to speak ill of these people because their scholarship has been really important to my work, but you may question whether or not they were scholar-activists. They’re just maybe a radical public intellectual. As a radical public intellectual maybe it’s easier to start from the bottom and get to the top. As a scholar-activist, I think the jury’s out on that one as to whether or not they can make it to the top of their profession. I would be sceptical about that. If you’ve got someone who’s been on the picket lines, who’d been at a senate meeting saying, ‘we need to divest from x, y and z’. Who’s been calling out the racism and sexism of their heads of department, I think they’re going to find it very difficult to get to the top.

Here, Galiev articulates his sense that the praxes of scholar-activism have negative implications for career progression. As Sara Ahmed contends, ‘when you expose a problem you pose a problem.’ For Galiev, this posing of problems is part of what defines anti-racist scholar-activist praxes and this creates a range of barriers over and above those faced by other kinds of academics, including public intellectuals.

Distinguishing this time between critical academics and scholar-activists, Alex (mixed-race, mid-career) made a similar point:
I think it’s definitely possible for a critical academic to have a quick career path to the top and to have a really high profile as an academic, writing Left-wing stuff, anti-racist stuff. I think there’s a market for that, to be frank. I don’t know, because I haven’t worked in every institution and institutions are all different, but I think being a scholar-activist is different and yes, you will necessarily have a longer wait for promotion perhaps because you’ll be involved in union organising that will make you unpopular with management and you won’t be volunteering for managerial positions that you feel like you can’t justify politically.

In both Galiev and Alex’s accounts, the difficulties faced by scholar-activists can be understood as a consequence of, or as a part of, the backlash (see Chapter 4) against scholar-activists’ attempts to struggle where they are. This is a struggle that, for Galiev, manifests in the speaking up and against the university’s exploitative and extractive practices, and for Alex, in being part of union organising. In keeping with the accounts of Galiev and Alex, Patricia Hill Collins notes that confronting those that wield power within the university can result in scholar-activists being ‘routinely passed over for cushy jobs’ and ‘fat salaries’.86

Galiev went on to explain that he is content to ‘top out at a particular (academic job) level’, if that enables him to maintain his commitment to working in service to communities of resistance. A similar perspective underscored Alex’s account too, and both appear to share Cornel West’s conviction that it makes little sense ‘for somebody to have a radical sociological analysis with a neoliberal soulcraft’.87 Whilst participants explained that the pursuit of ‘cushy jobs’ and ‘fat salaries’88 were not their motivators, there are at least two broader points worth making here. First, the difficulties one might encounter in gaining promotion as someone who speaks up and pushes back are manifestations of an institutional discouraging of – or backlash against – challenges to those in power (and perhaps discouraging of scholar-activist praxis more widely). Second, these difficulties are wrapped up with, and underpinned by, the same
forces that create increased precarity and vulnerability to un(der)employment. At the sharp end then, this is about far more than promotions and ‘fat salaries’ and, with this in mind, we must take heed of the imprisoned former Black Panther Mumia Abu-Jamal’s reminder that ‘even radical intellectuals must eat’.89

In the context of such challenges, many participants took self-preservation seriously. This takes us back to our framing of struggle where you are in the early parts of the chapter – notably, the importance of recognising that one cannot do it all. Okoye was one participant who exemplified this sentiment. Reflecting on her efforts to bring the ‘decolonising style’ of her community work into the university setting, she spoke of the challenges presented by the institution and her response to them:

It is a lot more difficult to do it within the institution [than a community setting] because there are so many things that are confining you to a system of Eurocentric understandings around what objectivity is, the idea of universality, the idea of meritocracy, and you spend so much time fighting and fighting back that when you are the minority in terms of an academic, it is sometimes exhausting. So, I sometimes reconcile myself to the fact that, okay let me just get through today and I will be able to go back into the community and do some more meaningful work, which is not the ideal situation. But sometimes in terms of self-care you have to manage activism in that way, and just say let me just make a difference where I can, because it is too exhausting to try and fight a battle here. Sometimes it feels like it is a challenge worth taking and a fight worth fighting, but some weeks it is just like ‘listen, the institution is too big for me to do on my own.’ I just do what I need to do and then go.

Anti-racist work within the university is made more difficult by the institutional constraints that Okoye names, all of which are compounded for her because of her positionality as a Black hijabi woman – that is to say, as discussed in the preceding chapter, one’s ‘minority’ status already creates conditions for exhaustion and this is exacerbated by backlash against anti-racist praxis, particularly when it comes from a
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scholar-activist orientation. For Okoye, this threat of exhaustion leads to a level of pragmatism: sometimes it is just necessary to ‘get through the day’ or, as Heidi Mirza puts it, to survive ‘the sheer weight of whiteness’.90 Not all battles can be fought, and as Okoye reminds us, self-care and self-preservation are vital. In some instances, therefore, Okoye chooses not to invest too heavily in (struggling against) the institution, in order to preserve herself for anti-racist resistance outside of the university, where the ‘real work’ gets done.91 This serves as an important reminder of the diversity of approaches and perspectives of our participants, who, like us, vary in the extent to which they place their energies inside the academy. Whilst some expend significant energy struggling within their institutions, others place such struggle as secondary to their wider activist work outside of the university. Of course, the relative emphasis placed on sites of struggle can change over time too. It is impossible to do it all, and the decisions scholar-activists make, like activists more generally,92 are often based upon strategic considerations of what will be most effective at that moment in time.

Okoye was not alone in placing limits on her engagement in struggle within the university setting. Abiola (African, PhD researcher) was even more forthright in waging his resistance outside of the academy:

I’m quiet in the academy. I just like to get on with stuff, head down into my work and let my activism take place outside the academy, or through my academic writing, but not in my physical reality, that’s my persona. But whenever something happens on campus that’s an injustice, and I realise it’s an injustice, there is this internal monologue that’s going, ‘Oh God, you’re going to have to get up. You’re going to have to expose yourself. You’re going to have to take the mask off. You’re going to have to deal with it.’ And, as much as I don’t have a problem doing that, I don’t always welcome it because when I’m working and thinking like an academic, I sometimes like that space the academy provides just to think, to be able to creatively imagine and consider theory without always being on defence from the State. Not always be having to confront. But it’s part and parcel of the job.
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I don’t think you can be a scholar-activist without being prepared for that eventuality.

Abiola is a well-known community activist who has had longstanding involvement in a range of anti-racist social justice campaigns and community education. For him, the university is not the site for his activism. Rather, it is a space in which he prefers to keep his ‘head down’, to take a step back, to think, and to rest. It provides respite from the need to be defensive and reactive, and this respite serves an important function in allowing him to ‘creatively imagine’ – a key but undervalued component in activist praxis. As he acknowledges, though, there are situations in which he feels it necessary to speak up – that is, there are certain injustices that simply cannot be ignored. Placing Abiola’s approach in contrast to those who are involved in union activism (which we discuss below), or those who otherwise resist on campus, underscores the need to remember that scholar-activism is heterogeneous (there is no ‘right way’).

The union as a site of struggle

As many participants explained, another way we can seek (partial, not absolute) preservation comes via participation in the union. The interviews for this book took place in the midst of ‘unprecedented levels of strike action’ from the main academic union in the UK, the UCU, with major strikes held in 2018, 2019, and 2020. The strikes initially and primarily centred on pensions, but also focused on cuts to pay, racial and gender discrimination in pay, working conditions, and the casualisation of labour. These disputes therefore shaped the backdrop of many of the discussions we had with participants related to the union and working conditions in HE.

The long and damning history of racism within trade unions has been widely recognised. This history led Ambalavaner Sivanandan to trouble, and Paul Gilroy to write off, the potential for effective interracial class
solidarity within trade unionism. Satnam Virdee has suggested, however, that this writing off was somewhat premature, pointing to a flurry of efforts within trade unionism to build interracial class solidarity in the 1970s, perhaps best encapsulated by the Grunwick strike. Notwithstanding some of the criticisms raised by Sivanandan, Gilroy, and others, the importance of trade unionism has been well documented within anti-racist movements. From C.L.R. James and Martin Luther King Jr, to John La Rose and Angela Y. Davis, trade unions have been understood, despite their problems, to be spaces from which we can build collective resistance and class-based solidarity. The value attributed to unions is not only reflective of the importance of organising blocs, but also of the inextricable ties between capitalism and racism, or the reality that anti-racist resistance must be anti-capitalist. In this regard, and in the context of sometimes hostile unions, Black Worker Committees have often constituted communities of resistance within unions. As such, they have been of vital importance in fighting for anti-racism within unionism.

Whilst racism endures in trade unions today, and the UCU Black Members and others continue to have to highlight that many union issues are impacted by race and migration, a number of our participants emphasised the importance of the union and of union activism (though many noted the union’s limitations too). Rosa (white, mid-career), for example, exemplified this:

without my union activism I would be, perhaps, more involved in the productivism of the careerist. Whereas, because of my activism in the union and then recently also the strike – which was super-engaging, and physically and mentally involving – I mean, it’s a matter of fact, you just take time out from writing articles, networking, advertising yourself, because now it’s all about how you market yourself. So, in practice, if you decide to become active in your workplace, to fight the terms and conditions of your own employment, and to help colleagues with casework and support others, your time becomes limited. So, you make a choice, and automatically you stop being that perfect, productivist, neoliberal university worker.
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For Rosa – an academic who migrated to Britain – being an active part of the union is not only an important way to effect change in our workplaces, but it also acts to underscore one’s orientation. It renders one ‘in but not of’ the university: it locates one in the margins.\(^{100}\) This positioning ensures that we are located not on the side of the employer – or the neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist university – but on the side of workers’ struggle. To be engaged in the union offers an anchoring, or grounding, that runs counter to the hegemonic logics of the academy. It involves taking time out from being the ‘perfect, productivist, neoliberal university worker’ and redirects your time to struggling where you are. As Tanzil Chowdhury notes, and as we discussed briefly in Chapter 3, ‘[t]he fight over the working day is a fight over the marketization of higher education.’\(^{101}\) Thus, the struggle over time within the neoliberal university is a key battleground, and to disrupt the logic of ‘accelerated capitalist time’ can be a political act.

The importance of supporting union strike action was highlighted by other participants too, but the significance of the strikes was particularly great for Sajid:

for me, being on strike is one of the few ways in which a person is almost stripped naked and all you can see are their politics, right? … For me that is a moment where somebody’s politics are laid bare … It’s much more disappointing when somebody [crosses a picket who] claims to have progressive values and claims to have progressive credentials. I gave you one example earlier and actually there were a couple of examples … [of people] who would identify as Critical Race scholars who have crossed the picket line. That doesn’t compute for me. It doesn’t correspond, you can’t do that, it’s a contradiction and it comes back to what scholar-activist means and this distinction between actually practising activism and just simply writing critically. I think that there’s a distinction there and I think strikes are a perfect way to gauge how somebody is willing to respond.

Sajid sees engagement with strikes as a way in which critical scholars must move beyond talking the talk to walking the walk of their criticality.
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It is an opportunity to put one’s critical credentials into action. As Sajid sees it, for critical scholars not to support the strike or wider workplace/sectoral struggle creates a contradiction between their writing/teaching and their wider practice; or perhaps it merely highlights – as we suggested in the Introduction – the distinction between critical scholarship and scholar-activism. Scholar-activism, Sajid avows, requires a degree of consistency between one’s scholarship and one’s actions (though perhaps such consistency should be, and for many is, an inherent feature of critical scholarship too). As we show in Chapter 6, whilst we are all inescapably wrapped up in contradictions that make us complicit in reproducing inequities in the academy, there are some contradictions that simply cannot hold.

For many of those we interviewed, crossing a picket line was one such contradiction. Galiev echoed this sentiment:

you’ve got loads of armchair radicals who are happy to profess all of these ideas of structural inequalities and all these problems which are systemic, but because often these people are in positions of power, these strikes might strike at the heart of the privilege from which they benefit. Yes, I don’t think it’s unusual to have people who are scholar-activists … Again, I won’t call them scholar-activists, but people who are self-proclaimed radicals that would then engage in the very structural abuses and inequalities that are producing these pension changes, the increasing precarity within Higher Education.

Like Sajid, Galiev positions the strikes as an opportunity to practise the talk-plus-walk\textsuperscript{102} of scholar-activism. He suggests that too many academics are concerned with the protection of their own privileges. This exposes the hollowness of some claims of being radical and to being engaged in scholar-activism. In the first chapter, we discussed how there is often an overclaiming of the anti-racist scholar-activist label. Here, Galiev’s account implies that this overclaiming is embodied by the ‘armchair radicals’ who write about structural inequality, whilst crossing the picket lines of strikes.
against those very conditions. Giroux holds that ‘a radical pedagogy as a form of resistance should, in part, be premised on the assumption that educators vigorously resist any attempt on the part of liberals and conservatives to reduce them to the role of either technicians or multinational operatives.’\(^{103}\) For Sajid and Galiev, the vigorous resistance that Giroux refers to is realised on the picket line.

Earlier in this chapter, and in the preceding chapter too, we noted the potential costs of speaking up. Despite the relative power of trade unions, participants made clear that similar costs can also be suffered through union activism. In the following account, Sajid recalls an experience on the picket line that had serious ramifications:

I can almost guarantee you that in one of my previous jobs my contract wasn’t renewed because I confronted the Head of Department who was crossing the picket line … And I was on a fractional contract, right? Like a temporary contract. And I’m out with not many colleagues. There are many full-time permanent staff members that aren’t even on strike. Either they’re sat at home or they’re crossing the picket lines. And so, the Head of Department comes up, right, to cross the picket line, and I confronted him … I asked him ‘Are you a member of UCU?’ He said ‘yeah,’ and I said ‘well UCU have passed a democratic vote to support this strike.’ And he said ‘well, if you want to grass me up to UCU, that’s fine, you can do that …’ So anyways, he crossed the picket line, but I pissed him off. I could see that I’d pissed him off, and lo and behold a few months down the line my contract isn’t renewed and I’m basically out of a job.

There is a cost to speaking up. In this case and others,\(^{104}\) that cost is one’s employment. Just how high the stakes are was highlighted in late 2020 when news broke that Gargi Bhattacharyya, a leading anti-racist scholar and activist, was facing redundancy from her position at the University of East London in what appeared to be a targeting of union activists. As the former president of the National Union of Students Malia Bouattia contends, ‘it is clearly because of what Bhattacharyya represents and the threat she poses, that the university is attempting to get rid of her.’\(^{105}\) Like
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Sajid’s account, events like these reflect a wider picture in which university-based scholar-activists operate at the juncture of complex tensions – that is to say, they may be ‘critiquing the power structure on one hand, while on the other depending on it for their livelihood’.¹⁰⁶ Notwithstanding this point about livelihoods, as Bhattacharyya defiantly put it, ‘if you’re a union rep and your employer hates you, you should always think that means you’re doing something right. Tattoo it on your heart and be proud.’¹⁰⁷

Although the union was generally regarded as a vehicle through which we, as anti-racist scholar-activists, can struggle where we are, there are two points of critique worth reiterating here. Firstly, the UCU – like all unions – is imperfect, particularly when it comes to issues of ‘race’, racism, and migration.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the UCU has often failed to prioritise anti-racism and the experiences of academics of colour, non-British academics, and others working in the margins. Second, there is an urgent need to better establish the links between campus-based activism and wider struggles beyond the ivory tower. Galiev recalled his attempts, via a letter to his colleagues, to urge them to collectively address the two issues:

I said, ‘It’s really important that we support the strike, and this is brilliant’, but then I was saying, ‘We’ve got to link this to precarity. We’ve got to link this to wider struggles, man, because as bad as it is that they’re trying to reform our pension, this is a bourgeois struggle, man.’ Do you know what I mean? We’ve got to talk about the people on the frontline who are the most vulnerable which are people like TAs, people on precarious contracts, with it disproportionately obviously, affecting women, scholars of colour et cetera, et cetera. That was rebuffed.

As Galiev explains, whilst strikes and the work of the union are important in their own right, there is vital work to be done in thinking about whose needs get centred in those strikes, and how we situate the strikes in a broader context of resistance. With this in mind, although it is important to struggle where you are, this should not be myopic and should not be the end point. It should be understood, instead, alongside notions of
working in service (see Chapter 2) and reparative theft (see Chapter 3), which maintain the scholar-activist orientation as prioritising anti-racist resistance outside of the academy.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have taken up the instruction given by Stuart Hall to struggle where you are, in order to illustrate that it is an important component in the praxes of many anti-racist scholar-activists. As well as prioritising a movement over individualism, to struggle where you are implores us (collectively) to look inwards at the university. In this sense, it offers a break with the all too common understanding of the university as sitting outside of, rather than constitutive of, inequality and injustice. As we have shown, there are many opportunities for resistance within the academy. Indeed, notwithstanding the challenges engendered by the logics of neoliberalism and institutional racism, the classroom can offer opportunities to ‘drop the seed’ and raise anti-racist critical consciousness amongst students. We might go a step further, as some of our participants did, in fostering a classroom-to-activism pipeline; a vital step if we are to address how marketisation and instrumentalisation blunts the imaginations of students and prevents us all from freedom dreaming. We might also seek to transform the dynamics of the classroom, subverting teacher/student hierarchies as a political act that pushes against established norms within HE. Ultimately, we have shown that pedagogy is one way in which university-based scholar-activists can embrace calls to struggle where you are.

Recognising the need to operate not only within but also beyond the classroom, participants spoke about the importance of speaking up and pushing back in staff meetings and/or in wider institutional interactions, to hold the university to account. Notwithstanding the importance of this work, not all battles can be fought, such is the inequitable distribution
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of power and precarity in the academy. For some scholar-activists this means waging resistance within the university; however, for others, there is a need to be selective and strategic in what they take on: in this respect, self-care becomes a key consideration. A further site of activism might lie in engagement with the trade union. Such engagement, we argue, ensures that we are struggling where we are over workplace conditions. It is an opportunity for us to walk-the-talk of our critical writing: it is, in Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s terms, talk-plus-walk.\textsuperscript{110} Engagement with union activities provides an anchoring that pushes back against the neoliberal logics of the university and, by prioritising union work, we often come to de-prioritise academic productivity. We reclaim our time.

Despite the virtues in struggling where you are, at several junctures in this chapter we also noted the dangers of our activism being constrained by the institution, and becoming myopic or reformist. We must remain attentive to avoiding praxis – and freedom dreaming – that is restricted to tweaking the system, whilst also (perhaps inadvertently) maintaining that very system. That said, we maintain that as long as we are accepting a pay check from a university, we have some obligation to exploit the pockets of possibility for dissent and transformation that arise from our positions, no matter how ‘fleeting, transitory [and] small-scale’ they may be.\textsuperscript{111} In the next chapter, we build upon these discussions as we look at the complicities that arise from operating within the university, alongside practices of dissent.