Accidental Academic Activism – Intersectional and (Un)intentional Feminist Resistance

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Drawing on autoethnographic reflections, this work explores the concept of 'accidental academic activism'. It outlines how this notion aids understanding of power struggles and resistance in higher education. Shaped by feminist and queer theory, there is discussion of processes of (mis)identification as an academic activist. This article examines how the intersections of racism and sexism result in the presumed political presence of Black women in academia, in ways that may influence their academic activism. This account also considers how creative and self-reflexive approaches can enable resistance to neoliberal pressures to perform perfection as an academic. When considering the history and future of academia, questions concerning identity, ideology and inequality inevitably arise. These include the contested scope for individuals to pursue and produce work that is both academic and activist in nature. Pairing such debates with discussion of race, gender and feminism yields insight into fractious forms of academic resistance, solidarity, (un)settling silences, and identities. This article stems from my perspective as a Black (and mixed-race) woman, and who as an early career researcher is still determining the extent to which their work is resistant. By reflecting on tensions and overlaps between academia and activism, there is exploration of the parameters within which feminist research and resistance is (im)mobilised.

Keywords

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Introduction

> Although I engaged with many of the themes that I am looking at now at undergrad, it was never in nearly as much depth…at times I feel that I may have skirted around the edges of topics related to gender and race, for fear of veering into what may be perceived as 'controversial territory'…engaging [now] more 'head on' with such constructs as part of my research, has resulted in a very different awareness and perception of my identity…as well as my perception of how others may perceive it.
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> – *Research diary, 7th January 2016*

In the words of Black lesbian feminist writer and activist Audre Lorde (2002, p. 156), I believe that a writer does not write 'out of anything other than those various entities [they] [1]she or he defines as self'. My article is based on a self-reflexive perspective and includes brief autoethnographic vignettes about my experiences of academia (Boylorn, 2006; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014; Busia, 1993; Stanley, 1992; Weir & Clarke, 2018).

Self-reflection can be a resistant act that challenges dominant academic ideas, which have often 'assumed a predominantly masculine model of sociology and society' (Woodruffe, 1996, p. 13). By embracing first-person pronouns, such as 'I', 'me' and 'my', I aim to push against normative notions of academic work being objective. I refuse to perform a false distance between my work as a researcher and my personal experiences. Moreover, I refuse to regard subjectivity and self-reflection as a negative quality of research and writing. On the contrary, through self-disclosure and introspection, we can understand often ignored inequalities and challenges amidst academia, and beyond. This involves consideration of 'the politics of everyday life' (Emejulu & Bronstein, 2011), which relates to how powerful institutions and structural oppression affects people in different ways.

This article sprung from my experience of finding a seat at the academic table, while also finding my Black feminist self in the process. Although my identity as a Black (and mixed-race) woman means that I am part of an under-represented demographic as an early career researcher, in approaching this article, there is also acknowledgement of my social privileges, including my middle-class and cis-gender position.

Based on the premise 'that writing is a form of political activism in itself' (Nayak, 2017, p. 2), this article explores the concept of 'accidental academic activism'. There is an emphasis on its relation to feminist scholarship and the experiences of Black women. To realise the radical potential of academic output, there is a need to foster its impact beyond close-knit disciplinary communities. As Jameela (2015a) puts

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[1] My addition of 'they' is in recognition of the identities of non-binary individuals and people who do not identify as either 'she' or 'he'.

it, 'my feminism is useless if it is not accessible'. As well as reflecting on channels that research is communicated through, there needs to be consideration of how it is communicated. My inclusion of poems and self-reflections in this article, is a step towards trying to translate my work and experience in a more accessible way than academia often permits.

This account addresses how the notion of accidental academic activism, and contradictions it may suggest, captures forms of resistance in academia that involve inadvertent and indirect aspects. The article proceeds by addressing questions and issues related to power struggles and marginal representation in academia, feminist scholarship, as well as how activism is (un)defined.

Theoretical Framework

(Un)defining Activism

Before discussing issues regarding race, gender, resistance and higher education in more detail (Benjamin, 1997; Bhambra et al., 2018; Gabriel & Tate, 2017; Murray, 2018; Nkopo et al., 2018), there is a need for a much more in-depth consideration of the notion of activism. Dictionary definitions of activism include 'the use of direct and noticeable action to achieve a result, usually a political or social one' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2018, n.p.n.), as well as 'the process of campaigning in public or working for an organisation in order to bring about political or social change' (Collins Dictionary, 2018, n.p.n.). Though these are only two of many definitions of activism, they capture some of the common ways that activism is understood as being 'noticeable' and 'public' in its expression. Despite such definitions, the nuances of activism include elements of it that are subtle, only noticeable to a select few, and may be more indirect than direct.

Ideas regarding 'real activism', can involve expectations of activism being very public and physical in nature, such as a protest march, or a demonstration 'die-in'. Measuring the success of activism solely in relation to its visibility and the immediacy of its effects, can uphold neoliberal notions of productivity and speed over sustainability, that such activism may even be intended to resist. To put it briefly, as with most concepts, dictionary definitions alone do not encompass the varied qualities of activism, which are arguably more (un)definable than definable.

The devaluation of resistant labour that does not conform to a template of activism as being direct and physical in nature, undermines the resistance of individuals whose efforts may be more implicit than overt, yet which may be part of a 'politics of survival' (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017). In addition to taking place amidst public platforms, resistance can occur in the everyday moments we are situated in; behind closed doors, between intimate others, as part of leisure and recreational activities, and in private places (Ahmed, 2004; 2017; Breeze, 2015; Palmer, 2011; Sobande, 2017). There is also a risk that resistance may become more performative than

substantive, the more hyper-visible it is. Public declarations of resistance can be high stake for those who voice them. Hence, ruling out more private articulations of resistance denies the existence of activists whose identities and work is not always identifiable, including due to issues of safety (Springer, 2005).

Academic Activism

There is a 'widespread belief that academia and activism are separate worlds' (Eschle & Maiguascha, 2006, p. 119), yet such spaces and activities are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as has been highlighted as part of the development of work around activist academia or academic activism (Collins, 2012; Cooper, 2007; Eschle & Maiguascha, 2006; Kilomba, 2010; Nayak, 2017). A refusal to acknowledge the different ways that resistant labour can manifest, is suggestive of how the concept of activism and idealised perceptions of it can generate oppressive relations.

Tensions thrown into relief by pairing the words 'accidental' and 'activism', mirror friction regarding perceptions of educational institutions as being politically passive, versus beliefs they are a hotbed of power and politics, which informs who teaches what, to whom, and with what intention (Mirza, 2015; Nyachae, 2015). Activism in academia can, and does, take many different forms. It may be in the design of a curriculum foregrounding scholars and critical thinkers, often overlooked. It may also be in an individual's self-presentation in academic spaces, or their choice to participate in strike action.

Resistant higher education efforts are diverse in their makeup. These can entail lobbying for curriculum and structural changes, such as the dismantling of exclusionary Eurocentric and patriarchal canons of thought, paired with the inclusion of more scholarship by Black academics (Bhambra et al., 2018; Ogunbiyi, 2017; Project Myopia, 2018; Sobande, 2018; Nkopo et al., 2018; Walcott, 2018). Backlash to efforts to decolonise academia, particularly those experienced by young Black women while they are students (Oredein & Awoniyi, 2017), signals the risks involved in highly visible forms of resistance in higher education. It is therefore understandable that not all examples of resistance to academic power dynamics are obvious or fit with traditional impressions of activism taking the form of frontline and forthright protests (Twine, 2004).

Resistance in the classroom may be in the shape of a lecturer whose non-hierarchical teaching approach challenges ideas regarding the differences between students and academic staff (Murray & Kalayji, 2018). Resistance can also be found in the creation of online platforms such as Project Myopia. Since its inception in 2016, Project Myopia has been devoted to making academia more inclusive, through the crowdsourcing of material intended to diversify university curricula. For some, their activism predates their involvement in academia, and for others it emerges as part of experiences within it. Academic activist endeavours can result in individuals taking

on the role of participant-researcher or insider as part of their work (Boylorn, 2006; Breeze, 2013; 2017; Downes et al., 2013), including while engaging in community-based studies. As will be further outlined, academic activism can also involve collective and group organising.

There is a myriad of examples of collective organising in the spirit of intersectional feminist politics. One case in point is the formation of what scholars such as Cutts, Love and Davis (2012, p. 62) refer to as – 'Critical Friends Groups (CFGs)' or 'sister circles' (Marina et al., 2016; Patton & Harper, 2003) between Black women. Additionally, the Women's Paths Research Group (2018) (University of Leeds) is intended to bridge activist and academic gaps between issues faced by women who are the most societally oppressed.

Another example of how feminist scholars may resist the dominant market logics of higher education, is work done by the Res-Sisters (2016) – an early career academic feminist collective. The Res-Sisters have eluded neoliberal pressures underpinning decisions regarding the order of named authors of collaborative output, by publishing work under their collective identity, such as writing entitled 'I'm an Early Career Feminist Academic: Get Me Out of Here?' Encountering and Resisting the Neoliberal Academy'.

Spaces such as Critical Friends Groups, sister circles, Women's Paths, and the Res-Sisters, and events including the annual Black Feminism, Womanism and Politics of Women of Colour in Europe (WoC Europe) symposium, afford women the opportunity to address challenges that they face, collaboratively and collectively. This can include through discussion of issues concerning the intersections of racism and sexism (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 2017), such as their effects on how Black women and women of colour experience higher education in isolating and exhausting ways (Gabriel & Tate, 2017; Qureshi, 2018).

My involvement in the first annual WoC Europe (September 2016, University of Edinburgh) symposium, as an organising committee member and presenter, was a pinnacle point in my academic trajectory:

> As the event drew nearer I continually questioned and reflected on what I wanted to say as part of my presentation. Initially I intended to focus on my research to do with the depiction of Black women in the media and the experiences of Black women as media spectators but I started to feel as though I was losing sight of what I ultimately wanted to speak about; being a Black woman involved in academia.

> (Sobande, 2016, n.p.n.)

More pertinently, WoC Europe 2016 was a space that would lead to, and strengthen relationships with other Black women researchers, which became my informal equivalent of a Critical Friends Group or sister circle.

Motivations behind individuals' participation in such collective environments can include activist intentions, such as a thirst to dismantle racist, sexist and colonial

structures. Motivations may also relate to people's self-preservation strategies, in terms of nurturing their wellbeing and friendships (Cutts et al., 2012). While these motivations can be interdependent, not every Black woman who seeks out ways to enrich their sense of self and support system, may view such efforts in activist terms. This can lead to individuals being labelled as activists, despite their lack of self-identification with this word.

There is danger in making use of the word 'activism' so liberally, that it actually obscures the self-perceptions of individuals who may feel as though their everyday lives are being over analysed and politicised in ways that are not true to their experiences. Discussion of accidental academic activism can help to explain how the labels of 'activist' and 'political' are projected onto people, in ways which reveal more about how their existence is perceived in academia, than any activist intent of theirs.

I think (as a Black Woman in the Academy), therefore I am (an Academic Activist?)

The under-representation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) individuals at postgraduate and postdoctoral level in the UK, is increasingly being acknowledged (Arday, 2017). However, it remains difficult to identify information that specifically relates to the experiences of Black (African and/or Caribbean) individuals. This, in itself, indicates their marginalised existence in academia. Furthermore, there are only 86 Black professors in the UK, which makes up less than 0.5% of all professors there, with only 18 being Black women (Times Higher Education, 2016). Although these numbers may have shifted by the time that my work is published, it is unlikely that these figures will have altered significantly. My article does not focus on statistical data regarding Black women at postgraduate level onwards in UK higher education. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise their under-represented status (Gabriel & Tate, 2017), to provide context for the writing that follows.

My own experience of academia is not one spurred on by resistant intentions from the start. As a first-year undergraduate student, I found my feet in an MA degree in sociology and politics. I embarked on this mainly because of my love of learning about media and global issues, rather than being consciously motivated to challenge injustices and the status quo. Despite this, my undergraduate experience led to an increasing awareness of race and gender inequalities, that suddenly seemed hidden in plain sight, or which had never really been hidden at all but had not been on my radar this way.

I became acutely aware of my invisibility and hyper-visibility (Ahmed, 2007; Simmonds, 1992; 1997) as a young Black (and mixed-race) woman, often found researching issues related to race and gender in predominantly white and patriarchal institutions. I did not identify as an activist but I was certainly aware of my Blackness and associated Otherness (Lewis, 1997). The relative freedom that came with the final

year of my undergraduate degree, led to me writing essays on topics such as mixed-race celebrities, the representation of Black men in cinema, and decades of the marketing of Black hair and beauty products.

I only found myself being able to write about the intersections of race and gender at the final stage of my undergraduate degree, when faced with assignments that allowed me to construct essay questions. During the first half of my undergraduate experience, the language of Black feminism was still to become familiar to me. It was in the final year that my active interest in the work of Black critical thinkers and creatives developed, including while searching the library shelves for books that I had never even known I was missing.

Dipping my toe into race, gender and Black studies, was the highlight of my undergraduate time. That said, it was a footnote on a four-year experience, during which discussion of the intersections of racism *and* sexism (in the words of those worst affected by them), had been marginal at best. My undergraduate time left me feeling troubled about why it had taken so long for the curriculum to scratch the surface of Black scholarship, let alone that of Black feminism specifically. Nevertheless, it was not until I started my PhD that I would realise how quickly and combatively Black scholarship is dismissed: 'this is *not* about race and this is *not* about gender', 'your work is *not* about Blackness…it's a marketing PhD'. At times, it was as though the mere inclusion of the words 'Black women', were enough for people to imply that my doctoral research was unnecessarily political and radical.

All too often scholars are cautioned against doing work that is 'niche', overly 'personal' or 'political', including by avoiding inserting themselves into their research; as though their abstraction from it was ever possible in the first place (Hall, 1997). The caveat rarely added to this alleged advice, is that terms including 'niche', 'personal' and 'political' are frequently applied to academic work in very niche, personal and political ways. In short, such critiques are often attempts to tar the work of under-represented scholars, as being of little relevance or interest, to individuals other than themselves.

At this point in my academic journey, I have lost track of the numbers of times that Black scholars, myself included, have been cautioned against 'becoming the person who does "the race work"', or have found their research being described as 'provocative', 'ghettoised', 'solipsistic', or 'controversial'; simply because it centres Black people. That academic work continues to be dismissed on the grounds of allegedly being 'niche', reflects 'changes in the field of education (such as massification and marketisation)' (Taylor, 2014, p. 62), as well as historical racism.

Often, the word 'niche' is a thinly veiled proxy for 'not being about, or written by, structurally dominant groups in society'. Being encouraged to avoid producing 'niche', 'personal' and 'political' work, often takes the guise of 'employability advice'. By unpacking such 'advice', and who it tends to be 'offered' to, there can be further understanding of the raced and gendered nature of pressures on academics to produce 'marketable' work for the 'masses'. In the pursuit of unique and critical contributions,

scholars may walk a tight-rope between the overarching pressure to perform and produce what is citeable, versus their personal desires to pursue their research interests. The friction caused by such experiences, can be the very thing that sparks their resistant inclinations, or even – their accidental academic activism.

The Politics of being (Mis)identified as an Academic Activist

> So, 'why Black women?'
> Why not?
> I want to say.
> I want to scream.
> ...
> The question chases me.
>
> *– Research diary, 2nd June 2016*

My PhD research (2015–2018) addressed the representation of Black women in Britain in the media, including by looking at their experiences as both content producers and spectators. Over the course of my PhD I navigated various responses to my research. This included being encouraged to look beyond the perspectives of Black women on the representation of Black women in media: 'have you also considered interviewing white women as part of it?' For some, there was an obvious discomfort regarding Black women being the focus of my work: 'wasn't that done in the 70's or something?', 'will you find any [Black women] to speak to?', 'so how do "coloured" women feel then?', 'has anybody even heard of that show [Scandal]?' Questions and comments such as these arose on numerous occasions and in a myriad of spaces. Sometimes they were the words of relative strangers in social settings, other times they were the remarks of alleged academic 'giants', whose 'shoulders' early career researchers are so commonly encouraged to 'stand on'. In the absence of comments in response to my work, was sometimes awkward laughter and the symbolic violence of a pointed silence and bemusement. The words 'Black women' may have rolled off of my tongue by the end of my PhD, yet, they seemed an alien, and even offensive, concept to some.

Who and what is commonly associated with activism can reveal much about power relations, including the very dynamics which activists may seek to challenge, such as the subjugation of Black women. While activism can invoke ideas related to the intentionality of resistant gestures, as has been outlined, people need not identify as an activist, for others to politicise them. To study issues regarding race and Black identity, as a Black woman, prompts questions and critiques of the perceived personal and political quality of the work. As Ahmed (2017, p. 9), states 'you are assumed to be doing identity politics as if you speak about racism because you are a person of colour

or as if you speak about sexism because you are a woman'. The constructed nature of identity is influenced by social interaction (Abdi, 2015); through which people's identities may be ascribed *to* them, including in ways that contrast with how they themselves identify. Therefore, at times, 'efforts *not to be recognised* as...' (Skeggs, 1997, p. 74), or to assert a sense of self-definition, can seem futile.

Despite their ambivalence or opposition to self-identifying as an activist, individuals may find that a resistant disposition is projected onto them, including as part of micro-aggressions in higher education. Phipps (2016, p. 303) poses the powerful question of 'whose personal is more political?', when examining how social capital can be cultivated within feminist politics. Exploring this question also reveals how the under-represented identities of people in academia, can result in their (mis)identification as activists, simply because of their existence in such spaces. My doctoral research on the media experiences of Black women in Britain was not explicitly activist in its initial architecture. Yet, the number of people who sought to debate, denigrate, and deny its focus on Black women, made me ponder its resistant credentials. It soon became apparent that my research topic, and identity as a Black (and mixed-race) woman, meant that my work and I were deemed more political and disruptive than I had anticipated.

The concept of accidental academic activism helps to capture some of the schisms between how individuals (dis)identify and how they may be (mis)identified, including due to their race and gender. It is a useful and necessary concept which sheds light on exertions of agency, as well as structural forces which impact the development of the identities of individuals in higher education. This includes Black women, such as myself, who may find themselves confronted by expectations that their work is activist in nature. With such issues in mind, the following sections focus in more detail on the use of creative and self-reflexive methods as part of feminist academic approaches.

Resisting Pressures to Perform Perfection: Making Invisible Labour Visible

> Labouring
> You should know by now.
> You do.
> You do?
>
> Last year came and went.
> Unfinished ideas
> still stewing,
> simmering,
> Embryonic

but existing
in the face of fear
and flack.

The by-product of all the 'in-betweens'.
Laboured conversations
at train stations.
Fleeting introductions
and departures.

Knowing looks
and crumpled brows.
Narrowed eyes,
taught lips.
Choking back the 'hmmmms' and 'how comes'.

My ideas are the 'in-betweens'.
They're one foot in and out.
They're everything
and nothing to me.
They're born from passion
and part doubt.

Who are these ideas curated for?
Who will consume my claims?
Who am I to speak to them?
And who am I
to them?

All of these thoughts come rushing now...
To view me
as they do.
The discomfort is palpable
anxiety
        ensues.

Labouring to put at ease.
Labouring
to speak.
Labouring to carve a space
Labouring
to please.

Research diary, 4th June 2016

Just as Stanley (2015, p. 144) discloses, it is my view that 'it is cathartic, actually, to write my way through what I felt during the PhD process'. While the cathartic quality

of self-reflexive and autoethnographic work is often articulated as part of commentary concerning such a methodological approach, its potentially resistant aspects are rarely a source of equal interest. Such self-reflexive accounts can be a means of archiving structural obstacles in academia, in ways that may provide a source of solidarity for others who too have encountered them (Boylorn, 2006).

Dominant academic discourse includes the expectation that researchers personally distance themselves from their research subject(s), or at least appear to do so, through asserting their alleged objectivity. The pressure to achieve perfection in higher education, yields great risks for individuals who write of their subjectivity and disclose difficulties, as opposed to posturing and performing ease as an academic. The risks that such individuals face include professional isolation. In more extreme cases, this leads to public attacks and persecution (Grundy, 2017), which are reminders of informal ways that academics identified as being resistant may be socially disciplined.

In spite of this, feminist and queer theorists have continued to develop a robust body of methods and justifications, for writing and research rooted in their personal experiences and positionality (Ahmed, 2017; Boylorn, 2006; Breeze, 2017; Busia, 1993; hooks, 1987; 2000; Kilomba, 2010; Skeggs, 2002; Stanley, 1992; Woodruffe, 1996). My efforts to make some of my own emotional labour and personal experiences more visible, include the poem featured in this section which was written at a point in time when I questioned what the purpose of my PhD research was, and at what cost completing the process might come.

Although the evolution of British higher education points to its continued marketisation (Murray et al., 2016; Wäggren, 2017), the future of academia is one which will still be influenced by issues related to emotionality, precarity and subjectivity, regardless of pervasive marketplace and transactional logics. By continuing to take up the tools of self-reflexive approaches, the humanity of higher education may outweigh its commodification.

Trying to document stages of my PhD research process in self-reflexive and creative forms, reminded me of the constraints of conventional academic writing which can compartmentalise feelings involved in academic research, and which are worthy of documentation.

The 'business as usual' mantra at the root of the marketisation of higher education, sustains the disquieting idea that acknowledging strife is to expose weakness and unwillingness, which can hamper future employability. The related 'publish or perish' rhetoric that is force-fed to scholars since they were students, alludes to two mythic inescapable and disparate outcomes when pursuing academic careers: success or failure. These underlying 'survival of the fittest' sentiments, do not capture the uneven playing field that academia has always been (James et al., 2009). As Taylor (2014, p. 63) notes 'it is only those who play the game the 'right' way, making the 'right' choices with necessary capital to 'participate', who will prosper'. Furthermore, it is through accounting for the often invisible, emotional and social

labour that higher education can entail (Gabriel and Tate, 2017; James et al., 2009; Murray, 2016; Mirza, 2015, Taylor, 2012), that academic pressures can be analysed in-depth.

Black women often have experiences of higher education that make them feel as though they are (in)side of the academy – which 'encompasses how despite being formally accepted in academic settings, be it through successful student and job applications, Black women may feel as though they simultaneously exist within and to the side of academia' (Sobande, 2018: 92). One of the defining moments which led to me grappling with related issues, was writing my first piece of intentionally reflexive academic work. My undergraduate essay concerned an experience of cross-coding visual and interview data, as the only person of colour in a small group of student researchers exploring perceptions of who and what constitutes an 'activist', compared to a 'rioter'.

The group work exercise resulted in me realising how our different identities as researchers were shaping our interpretations in ways that were in need of close inspection. The overall experience of collaboratively conducting such research, led to me tentatively reflecting on how my point of view may have differed to those of my cross-coders, due to how our perspectives were informed in ways related to our racial identities. The supportive response that I received from my tutor, fuelled my interest in learning more about how the identities of researchers informs their work and vice versa. The intention behind documenting this experience at the time, was far from being an activist one. Instead, my choice of essay topic had been the by-product of my search for a specific element of the undergraduate project to write about. However, the internal dialogue and encouraging response from my tutor which it provoked, was a significant moment for me which influenced my developing understanding of the possibilities of academia and different forms of labour that it involves.

Self-Reflection and (Un)settling Silences

The PhD process remains an ambiguous experience despite the copious literature available to students in search of advice about undertaking one. Furthermore, 'while inputs, outputs, and milestones are visible, there is a sizeable gap in our understanding of candidates' lived experiences' (Stanley, 2015, p. 153). Creative and visual methods can enable people to communicate in ways which may come to them more easily, than when trying to find the 'right' words to use, or references to cite (Boylorn, 2006; Pink 2013; Rose, 2013). It was through writing and creating visual content (drawings, paintings and photographs) without the constraints of academic conventions, that I was able to pick apart how my identity and those of my interview participants (Black women), influenced certain perceptions of my doctoral research as being resistant.

When initially undertaking my PhD research, there was no plan to adopt a self-reflexive approach to my work. However, as the process developed, it became apparent

that there was a need to articulate certain emotions, feelings and introspective observations, which were informing my research and emergent academic identity. It was through engaging in dialogue with different people that I began to realise that there may be perceptions of me and my academic positioning, as being innately political due to the foregrounding of Black women in my work.

As was referenced, questions and comments appeared to allude to impressions of my perceived activist and political intent, such as when being referred to as 'sister', by individuals who were neither women nor Black, as well as being cautioned against making my work 'too personal', 'too political', or glorifying Black women, who may be portrayed in 'overly uncritical and heroic ways'. To say that my PhD has led me to reflect on my own identity would be an understatement. Without the use of self-reflexive writing and creative output, my research could have simply sustained neoliberal notions of rigorous scholarship being devoid of emotionality and subjectivity, which it is now my intention to challenge. That said, resistance can be both about silence and speaking up.

Related questions that have shaped my writing, include: when expectations of your resistance in higher education are projected onto you, does resistance take the form of subscribing to these, or can the refusal to resist in anticipated ways be more potent? There is no easy answer to such a question. While self-identifying as a Black feminist in academia can involve expressions of agency, the decision to choose not to disclose all of one's self can also be a source of self-empowerment, self-definition and activism.

When you are one of few, if not the only Black face found in various academic settings, it may not be long before you are called upon in tokenistic ways, given the marketability of diversity and 'capitalist multiculturalism' (Ahmed, 2017; Taylor, 2014), rather than anti-racist politics. When moving through academia as a part of an under-represented social group, the prospect of being categorised as being 'diverse', in ways which serve little purpose other than to appease faux multicultural agendas (Taylor, 2012), can be a source of discomfort. Such an awkwardness can be exacerbated by expectations to speak up and represent wider demographics that the individual is a part of, albeit in ways amenable to the marketisation of diversity.

Depending on the setting, resistance in academia may take the form of self-disclosure. Paradoxically, it can be found in the refusal of people to bend to pressures to speak about their personhood, which are placed upon under-represented individuals in academia. While my article primarily focuses on issues related to the former approach of embracing types of self-expression and self-disclosure, there is recognition of the resistant potential of silence and the resistant nature of choosing to unsettle it.

Conclusion: Accidental Academic Activist or Just (An)Other Academic?

As an early career researcher on the brink of leaving behind their status as a student (I write this two days before graduation), becoming comfortable with the label of 'academic' is an ongoing process for me. It is also one shaped by the intersections of my age, race, and gender, and associated oppressive ideologies that negatively affect me. These combine in ways that can cultivate feelings of inadequacy which require my (in)visible and continual labour, in order to actively challenge. This article is partly my attempt at making some of such labour that bit more visible. To deny the emotional and introspective work involved in existing as part of an under-represented and structurally oppressed group in academia, is to uphold the misguided idea that the ability to thrive in such a setting is a matter of meritocracy alone.

Claims of the political neutrality and objectivity of academia persist (Ahmed, 2017). Still, educational structures are inherently ideological, and shaped by resistance concerning issues to do with race, gender, and class, amongst others (Benjamin, 1997; Gabriel & Tate, 2017; Jameela, 2015b; Murray, forthcoming 2018; Reay, 2017). Activism exists on a spectrum of explicit and highly strategic efforts, to more elusive and circumstantial examples. The perceived resistant undertones of scholarly projects and people can result in individuals navigating internal tensions and external questions concerning whether or not they are either, neither or both an academic and/or an activist. Sometimes, answers to such questions become less about the self-perceptions of such people, and more about the perceptions of others.

The subject positions of under-represented groups in academia, can result in derisive and derogatory notions of the politicised nature of their identities (Phipps, 2016); which can manifest as presumptions of their activist agendas. To be Black and a woman in academia is often to be regarded as a political presence, before even having uttered a word. Acknowledging that resistance can sometimes resemble a whisper or mumble, more so than a shout, enables an understanding of activism which is sensitive to the different ways that people are (not) able to partake in resistant efforts. It also helps to articulate expressions of resistance that may be subtle, slow and iterative in their effects, as opposed to obvious and immediate.

Creative and self-reflexive methods can enable individuals seeking to self-define and self-document their experiences of academia, including issues related to resistance. This article is intended to act as kindling to ignite further discussions concerning the intersections of activism and academia, including the ways that issues related to race, gender and feminism, may be entangled with them. Although activism involves a sense of intentionality, it is important to reflect on what perceptions of *who* academic activists are, reveal about issues related to identity and ideology, as well as resistant higher education approaches.

If the resistant efforts of individuals in academia do not only take place on picket lines or in very visible settings, does this strip such activity of its potential to challenge structures and social hierarchies? This question remains open to a wide range of conflicting interpretations, but as is argued throughout this article, individual resistant acts within academia do not always occur in view of a watchful audience. In fact, efforts to subvert an omnipresent gaze may be part of one person's approach to challenging societal structures.

The concept of accidental academic activism expands our understanding of both academic and activist work, including their overlap. Further discussion of such matters can help to tease apart the power struggles involved in resistant efforts, including those related to how and why individuals identify as academic activists, as well as how their experiences of higher education may prompt them to do so.

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