Activism in/and the Academy: Reflections on "Social Engagement"

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I have spent all day here, in this slightly grubby room in a flat-roofed building on the outskirts of Brighton, having my first adventures in microfiche. The light is poor, and there is a knot between my shoulders. It is August, 2002. Outside it is hot and bright and I want to go and sit on the sun-warmed stones of the beach and drink vodka, lime, and soda, and stare endlessly at the sea. Instead, I scroll through the plasticky film searching for news articles about the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, a process I will eventually learn to call 'data collection'. I want to understand more about how the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, deploy discourses of motherhood in their self-representation. I identify these women as activists, their organisation as social movement. I am determined to understand them within the framework of IR, this strange discipline that I have begun to call home, but I perceive such a separation between their world and mine – not just a temporal divide but a gap of substance, where theirs is a praxis, a politics of the real, and my amateurish analytical writing is ephemera. They are not me. I am not them. I am not even close to that world. This shames me for reasons I don't quite understand.

And then… I am six or seven years old. Mum parks our 2CV on the sloping tarmac of Sainsbury's car park and I slide out of the back. It is cold; I breathe into the scarf that mum has lent me, and it releases the ghosts of her perfume, a scent memory the echoes of which to this day comfort me. We walk past women shaking yellow plastic buckets, raising money to support the miners in the north of England who were striking in protest against mine closures. I knew only a little of this, and had only a tenuous grasp on what was at stake in the strike, but I knew that Thatcher was bad, and unions were good, and solidarity was a virtue, so I asked mum for some coins to put in the bucket on the way out. The metal warmed in my hand as we approached, releasing that ferrous smell peculiar to hot coins. I dropped the coins in the bucket, and they gave me a badge – red, with white writing, I think – and I was pleased with myself for this performance of politics. The strike ended in 1985, the Conservative government proceeded with its program of economic liberalisation, thousands of jobs were lost and whole communities impoverished as a result of pit closures. I didn't often think about the miners' strike again.

And then… I am walking down the middle of a country lane near Lakenheath, in the east of England. The lane is in shadow, almost fully, from the tree branches that meet overhead. The

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air smells green. It is 1986, and my dad and my stepmother have brought me on this march, a demonstration against the US bombing of Libya ordered by President Reagan on the basis of Libyan involvement in several terrorist attacks on Americans. There is a US airbase at Lakenheath. It is surrounded by a chain-link fence; on our side of the fence there is a gentle hill. Me and a few other kids spend the day rolling down the hill and crashing gently into the metal. We sing 'Don't bomb... bomb Libya' to the tune of the Frog Chorus, and I have only the vaguest notion of where Libya was and no clue at all about why it might be bombed. I am pleased because my best friend Joe is there. Later we go back to his house and his mum makes chapattis and we play in his garden, among the veggie patches and the apple trees and I mostly forget about Lakenheath, and Libya, and little kids playing at political protest in the shadow of the so-called Cold War.

And then… It is 2017. I get an email from a colleague in London, with whom I'd planned to meet at the International Studies Association annual convention in Baltimore, asking: Are you still going? Are you boycotting? Which side are you on? I was program chair for the Feminist Theory and Gender Section, and it hadn't occurred to me that a boycott was possible. Other women and I were simultaneously trying to work out how to support the women who would be travelling to New York for the Commission on the Status of Women in March, because the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom traditionally sponsors a delegation of women peace activists from the MENA region who wouldn't have been allowed in to the country had the Muslim ban stood. But I hadn't connected the ISA convention to CSW. I don't boycott, in the end, but I do participate in the protest against the Muslim ban – against Trump's presidency, if we're being honest – standing outside the convention hotel, holding a sign and taking up space. It probably achieves nothing, but I feel almost part of something, a corporeal and substantial politics. It feels real, though I still feel like an imposter.

These stories give an account of politics as the occupation of public space: the picket line, the protest march, the gathering of like-minded people to express dissatisfaction and dissent. This was the concept of activism I held when I entered the academy: 'activism' as a demand on one's time and one's body, an embodied performance of politics requiring sustained commitment and organisation and coherence. This is the vision of activism in which I still struggle to see myself. This is the background against which I offer some thoughts about activism, and the academy, and the process of 'social engagement'.

A series of connections has informed my thinking about these concepts, the first of which is a relationship between activism on the one hand and scientism on the other. In this paper, I explore the constitution of activism in the contemporary academy, examining its relationship to science – the work of even the *social* scientist – and the web of connections that link activism, scientism, authority, knowledge, and expertise. All of these are imbricated in contemporary discourse about social engagement, and I conclude with a discussion about the shift I believe we are witnessing in the constitution of academic subjectivity in the neoliberal academy. The subject now emerging from discourses about performance, relevance, and impact, is an activist-scientist subject, and more besides. She is expert, authority, knowledge, yet the conditions of her possibility are restlessness, inadequacy, loneliness, and fear.

These two concepts, activism and scientism, exist in uneasy parallel, skittering in my mind like objects of opposite polarity: as a child, I would play with small magnets, convinced that I could force the dull dark grey rectangles to overcome the resistance that refused to allow

them to meet with a satisfying click. Scientism and activism in International Relations have similarly seemed mutually repellent at times, getting close but never actually connecting.

This apparent inability of scientism and activism to merge in a meaningful and productive way is, I think, grounded in the history of the discipline of IR and its fetishisation of (a particular configuration of) science. As Patrick Jackson notes, science is 'a notion to conjure with in the field of IR'.[1] Scientism lauds such conjuring: ours is conventionally a discipline of abstraction, hypothesis-testing, and quantification of the social world, in the name of 'rigour' and 'objectivity'. It is particularly this claim to objectivity that sticks with me as I attempt to think through and around the scientism/activism relationship. To be objective is to be scientific: to be scientific is to be objective.[2] But stowing away inside objectivity is a whole nested arrangement of values and judgements that affect – and effect – how science is evaluated and scientists (re)produced, primary among which are notions of authority and expertise.

Both authority and expertise are, of course, gendered. Gendered ideas and ideals, assumptions that we hold about bodies and behaviour, inform (and are in turn informed by) dominant conceptualisations of both expertise and authority. These concepts are tricky and unstable things. Both expertise and authority are constituted through race, class, coloniality, gender, sexuality, age, and multiple other identity markers, and this has implications for how expertise and authority are embodied, how experts and authorities *live* in the world and how their expertise and authority is received. We are conditioned to view dominant social groups as experts, because those are the people to whom media outlets turn when seeking an opinion on this event or that tragedy: their view is privileged, and their subjectivity erased as they, through their positioning, speak for *all* people, not just particular (White, male) people.

With expertise, therefore, comes authority, and the ability to speak objectively, rather than subjectively, on a given topic. To provide an objective evaluation of a given situation – to perform *expert* and *authority*, in line with expectations – is to produce a distance between the speaker and the subject, such that the subject of exposition is not infected with the speaker's ideas, ideals and values. 'In standard practice', as John Law comments, objectivity 'is usually detachment. Disentanglement from location'.[3] Feminist critiques of objectivity in research are particularly relevant here, because part of feminist research practice relies precisely on attachment, entanglement, the imbrication of the self in the research encounter. Feminist engagements with research values, and the values of positivist social science more broadly, question its fundaments in piercing and productive ways.[4]

These values, and the value ascribed to these practices, cohere in positivist IR research which insists on a sharp distinction between facts and values. Science, which produces facts, is

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[1] Patrick T. Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2010), 9.
[2] I have discussed this mutual constitution elsewhere. See: Laura J. Shepherd, 'Research as Gendered Intervention: Feminist Research Ethics and the Self in the Research Encounter', *Critica Contemporanea: Revista de Teoria Politica*, 2016, 6, 1-15.
[3] John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Sciences Research* (London: Routledge, 2004), 68.
[4] Joan Acker, Kate Barry, and Joke Esseveld, 'Objectivity and truth: Problems in doing feminist research', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 1983, 6(4), 423-435; Kim V. L. England, 'Getting Personal: Reflexivity, Positionality, and Feminist Research', *The Professional Geographer*, 1994, 46(1), 80-89; Sharlene, Hesse-Biber, 'Feminist Research: Exploring, Interrogating, and Transforming the Interconnections of Epistemology, Methodology, and Method', Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, ed., *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis* (London: SAGE, 2012), 2-26.

value-free, or at least value-neutral, which is why IR as a knowledge domain for many years eschewed the idea of normative theory.[5] Learning about the philosophy of science in my PhD program, I struggled endlessly to make sense of the claim that theory could be value-free, 'non-normative': how could one possibly sustain the idea that any account of the world could somehow be viewed solely in terms of what *is* and not recognised as a claim regarding what *should be*?

I never found peace with this struggle. As I began to form my own self-image as a researcher, I carved out a research space from which to disavow the scientistic dislocation demanded of me and espoused instead a research ethic that not only accepted my lack of objectivity but did not, in the first instance, perceive it *as* a lack. Instead, a feminist research ethic is open about the situatedness of knowledge[6] and conscious of the ethical implications of such situatedness. Situated ethics are subjective by definition, and can be 'characterized by the agent paying explicit attention to the particular situation and to the consequences for the relations between those involved, and by an absence of interest in making universal claims'.[7] Per Law's comments quoted above, this wilful entanglement of my self with my research put me at odds with the distance desired by the standards of my discipline, at odds with scientism writ large. As a scientist, I fail.

Thankfully, in this, at least, I have failed in good company. I completed my PhD research at an institution home to many academics who performed both scientism and activism, refusing the false dichotomy imposed by slavish devotion to the myth of objectivity, even seeking to 'remake the mainstream … so that activist IR scholarship is the norm rather than the exception'.[8] This was the culture within which I was formed as a junior researcher, an environment known for its critical mass of critical scholars and their shared commitment to decrying the nakedness of the Emperor of Science. Politics, which is what we studied when we studied together, was a politics of flux, of questioning the taken-for-granted and challenging the *status quo*. A politics of action, a politics of change.

Activism *requires* entanglement, ideals, total imbrication in a given social context and the avowed situatedness of the self within a broader project of political change. This sense of politics-as-attachment permeated my developing academic consciousness, which was in turn already shaped by the exposure to political action I'd had as a child: mine was a childhood of Thatcher's dissolution of the Greater London Council, the *Socialist Worker*, 'Free Mandela' t-shirts, and no South African oranges. Mine was a political consciousness of action, of doing, not of thinking. The space in the Venn diagram between activism and the academy seemed hard to access for me.

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[5] Mervyn Frost, *Towards a Normative Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Chris Brown, *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1992); Mervyn Frost, 'The Role of Normative Theory in IR', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 23(1): 109-118.

[6] Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 1988, 14(3), 575-599.

[7] Bella Vivat, 'Situated Ethics and Feminist Ethnography in a West of Scotland Hospice', 236-252 in Liz Bondi, Hannah Avis, Ruth Bankey, Amanda Bingley, Joyce Davidson, Rosaleen Duffy, Victoria Ingrid Einagel, Anja-Maaike Green, Lynda Johnston, Susan Lilley, Carina Listerborn, Shonagh McEwan, Mona Marshy, Niamh O'Connoer, Gillian Rose, Bella Vivat and Nichola Wood, *Subjectivities, Knowledges, and Feminist Geographies: The Subjects and Ethics of Social Research* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 240.

[8] Eric Herring, 'Remaking the Mainstream: The Case for Activist IR Scholarship, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 2006, 35(1), 105-119, 119.

The etymology of activism derives from 'activist', one who is committed to direct action in order to effect change. 'Act' is thus central to the process of making sense of activism; derived from the Latin *actus*, 'a doing; a driving, impulse, a setting in motion', an act is 'a thing done'.[9] There is a do-er implied in this configuration, an agent to act, and the materiality, or at least substance, of the 'thing done'. The activist is a do-er of things, a setter in motion of change according to the imperatives of their ethical framework, their politics. 'In common parlance, activists are rabble-rousers, those who are *actually out there in the world* seeking to agitate, educate and direct political change'.[10] The *world out there* is, implicitly, a different world than the world *in here*, the locus of academic life and scholarly endeavour.

Just as scientism inspires images of associative chains attaching science to, *inter alia*, objectivity, expertise, and authority, therefore, so too does activism invoke a series of conceptual connections, though of a different order. This is a constellation rather than a chain, a universe of related considerations that exceeds the possibility of containment. Revolving lazily alongside the scientist/activist dichotomy spin a number of other binaries: active/passive; theory/practice; word/deed. These are binaries with which I have struggled throughout my academic career, and it is in the shadow of activism – in the space of theory, word, *passivity* – that I felt (feel?) most at home.

As I was completing the manuscript that would become the book presenting my doctoral research to the work, I wrote, in a somewhat snooty footnote which hopefully no one but the book's editor has ever read, that I perceive the 'rigid separation' of theory and practice as 'problematic'.[11] I insisted on running the two words together throughout the book: mine was an account of 'theory/practice'. My obsession with practice was evident even in the title I settled upon for the book, which identifies 'discourse as practice'. I was, no doubt, protesting too much.

This derives in part from the philosophical position I developed in the book itself and which to the present day guides my encounters with the world: since reading Stuart Hall as an undergraduate student I have been obsessed with the politics of representation.[12] We apprehend the world through representational practice; as I understand it, there is no unmediated or extra-discursive 'reality' that we can access – our words are our worlds, but also images, sculptures, textiles, and architecture are implicated in meaning-making. The meanings we make, and those representational practices through which we communicate, are fundamentally political, in that they are inextricably interlinked with power. Every claim to know is a practice of power, and every practice of power carries with it a claim to know. Power/knowledge, as Foucault has it,[13] is manifest in representation, and representation – including theory – is practice. This neat philosophical two-step allows me to collapse the

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[9] Online Etymology Dictionary, 'act (n)', online at https://www.etymonline.com/word/act (accessed 12 February 2018).

[10] Karena Shaw and R. B. J. Walker, 'Situating Academic Practice: Pedagogy, Critique and Responsibility', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 2006, 35(1), 155-165, 157, emphasis added.

[11] Laura J. Shepherd, *Gender, Violence and Security: Discourse as Practice* (London, Zed, 2008), 176, Note 9.

[12] Stuart Hall, 'The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power', in Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben, eds, *Formations of Modernity* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), 275-332; Stuart Hall, 'The Work of Representation', in Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE, 1997), 13-74.

[13] Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The birth of a prison* (New York, NY: Random House, [1977] 1995), 2nd edn, trans. Alan Sheridan, 27-28; Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (London: Penguin, 1988), trans. Robert Hurley, 92-102.

space between word and deed – in theory, at least. But the residual uncertainty about the validity of this intellectual manoeuvre, the strange guilt I feel about identifying as a thinker, not a doer of things, persists, and colours bright the perception I have of activism from the vantage point of my own grey, wordy, existence.[14]

Moreover, within the concept of activism there stows away a new configuration of expertise, different to the expert/authority of science but nonetheless influential and important to consider when exploring the relationship between activism and the academy. Activists can claim a kind of 'experiential authority', derived not from book-learning, but from years of involvement with political struggle. In some fields, such authority underpins the identity category of 'expert by experience';[15] per its straightforward formulation, this identity describes someone whose authority and credibility vis-à-vis a given issue comes from their lived experience rather than their years 'prostrate to the higher mind', as the Indigo Girls would have it. The ascription of 'expert by experience' in the context of activism presumes something about the authenticity and generalisability of experience, however, which is complicated. 'What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political'.[16]

I have suggested that activism and scientism are frequently juxtaposed, but there is the possibility here of a shared foundation, stemming from the concept of expertise and the identity – the embodied presentation – of the expert. These are pressing concerns not only in the abstract but in the immediate political environment; ours at present is a world in which experts, and the evidence on which these experts draw to make their knowledge claims, exist within a mediascape populated by people who have 'had enough of experts', per then-UK Justice Minister Michael Gove.[17] The relationship between experts and evidence is important, as is the relationship between experts and truth. Both scientists and activists use evidence, and make truth claims: the differences here are a matter of degree, of tone and shade. Neither the scientist, nor the activist, tend to question the existence of truth, or the concept of evidence.

I, however, question both. Such questions belong properly to the philosopher, to the thinker of thoughts and not the doer of deeds, and in particular to those who – like me – are, by

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[14] This is of course not unrelated to the relentless drive for productivity imposed upon the subject in late modern capitalism. The production imperative is organised by the same logics that value 'doing' over 'being', measuring work ethic by output. These logics shape work practices in particular ways, with 'the conspicuous display of busyness' becoming visible as a way to signal both virtue and status; Silvia Bellezza, Neeru Paharia, and Anat Keinan. 'Conspicuous Consumption of Time: When Busyness and Lack of Leisure Time Become a Status Symbol', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 2017, 44(1), 118-138, 121 and *passim*. I am grateful to Elizabeth Dauphinee for prompting me to reflect further on this connection.

[15] 'The social worker working with the expert by experience is suggestive of a relationship of equals whereby one expert's expertise has been accrued through their training and practice and the other through their experience'; see Hugh McLaughlin, 'What's in a Name: "Client", "Patient", "Customer", "Consumer", "Expert by Experience", "Service User" – What's Next?', *The British Journal of Social Work*, 2009, 39(6), 1101-1117, 1111. See also Tehseen Noorani, 'Service user involvement, authority and the "expert-by-experience" in mental health', *Journal of Political Power*, 2013, 6(1), 49-68; Jijian Voronka, 'The Politics of "People with Lived Experience": Experiential Authority and the Risks of Strategic Essentialism', *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, 2016, 23(3/4), 189-201.

[16] Joan W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry*, 1991, 17(4), 773-797, 797.

[17] Quoted in Julia Shaw, 'The real reason that we don't trust experts anymore', *The Independent*, Friday 8 July 2016. Online, at http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/the-real-reason-that-we-don-t-trust-experts-a7126536.html (accessed 13 February 2018).

training, concerned about the organisation of knowledge into seemingly immutable structures of Truth. We philosophers and thinkers, held as the enemy of the doers of deeds by many in the current 'Knowledge Wars', are painted as wanton nihilists, indefensible relativists, intent on the destruction of all that is held to be good (and *true*). I question the things of which evidence is deemed to be evidence, and I question the things that are taken for granted in interpreting political life – among which I include the value of science and the benefit of activism. In the academy, at least, and in popular discourse to a significant extent, science has been elevated as a system of belief to the point where scientific truths have the status of unquestionable Truth and *it is no longer visible as a system of belief*. The desire, therefore, to point to this assumed value, the attribution of such a status to one mode of enquiry (scientific reasoning) to the exclusion of all others (affective, embodied, fictive, etc.[18]), is not the same thing as saying that all truths produced within this mode of enquiry are false or themselves questionable, but instead to make the rather different point that science itself functions as a particular *regime of truth* and that the politics, partiality, and potential problems with this ought to be borne in mind when wholeheartedly endorsing its knowledge as truth.

This position is alert to the ways in which evidence is marshalled in service of particular sets of argument and the way that 'common sense' ideas are invoked in order to foster and perpetuate particular formations of knowledge such that they become regimes of truth. But this means that I would use evidence to determine the credibility of a series of knowledge claims just like everyone else, while maintaining fidelity to the assumption that the credibility is contingent and conditional on the particular historical, social, and political context, as is the meta-level idea that 'evidence' is the determinant of credibility (i.e., proceeding with the belief that actually-existing-facts are conditioned and produced by the fact-as-idea proposition in contemporary politics).[19] So in the realm of truth, as in the realm of science, I fail.

Do I fail as an activist? I think so, and not just because of my ambivalent relationship with Truth and my inability to commit acts of Truth to shore up my sense of expertise. Activism, in addition to requiring *action*, always seemed to me to require a degree of certainty I was unable to muster. So here, perhaps, is where scientism and activism meet after all: in the overlap in which resides a purity, a certainty, a burning righteousness that casts kaleidoscopic colour on those within the radius of its radiance. Not I. Once, as a graduate student, I felt utterly and wholly deficient when I learned of a peer who worked for a prominent NGO as well as completing a PhD full-time. I remember asking my advisor whether it was true that research that didn't inform direct political action wasn't really research at all. My advisor assured me that my work was 'real' work, that it was no less valuable a contribution for its attempt to speak to an academic rather than activist community, for its focus on words rather than deeds, for its theoretical purity and its lack of practical application. I remained (I remain) somewhat unconvinced. There is a residual insecurity at work here also, a suspicion that my advisor – my brilliant, sensitive, generous advisor – was lying me an alibi when she reassured me that mine was 'proper' research.

'Imposter syndrome' is the condition that makes people doubt their expertise, despite their credentials; it makes people sit and second-guess themselves while others, though slower to reach the solution or find a contribution, put their hand up first. And while it affects everyone, it does not affect everyone equally: race, socio-economic background, and gender

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[18] Law, *After Method*, 2-3.
[19] i.e., This thing is true because science.

are significant. Women, for example, are far more likely to experience 'imposter syndrome' than men; similarly, racial or ethnic minorities are also more likely to feel like imposters than their White peers in majority-White environments.[20] Both activism and scientism arouse the imposter in me. In neither domain do I feel 'expert'; I would not claim either identity, and yet in the contemporary academy the pressures brought to bear on academics to simultaneously perform both are significant indeed.

When I had the conversation with my advisor, recounted above, I had no comprehension of 'engagement', or 'impact', or 'knowledge transfer'; now these are ideas that have become commonplace in the neoliberal academy. I saw 'activism' as one more pressure, one more underdeveloped dimension of my professional self, one more way to fail to meet the expectations others held. (I feel this no less keenly now, if I'm honest, but I perhaps have better defences against that relentless, creeping feeling of inadequacy that seems to inhere in the academy.) A significant difference, however, between the academy as it was when I was but a neophyte and the academy as it is now, at least in the contexts with which I am familiar, is the expectation that activism – or at the very least 'social engagement' – will be integrated into our work product, as part of our quotidian 'responsibilities'.

I consider my context to be both UK and Australian higher education. I am of, and embedded in, both of these cultures, which are divergent in so many ways; this causes some dissonance at times. But in the matter of 'engagement', 'impact' and 'knowledge transfer', the logics are (perhaps unsurprisingly) similar. In contrast to the dynamics of the academy in the early 2000s, in which brilliant scholars had to fight to get their activism recognised as work, it is now the case that scholars who *don't* practice their politics have, in some sense, to account for themselves.

In the UK, research performance is measured every five years or so using the Research Evaluation Framework (REF; formerly the Research Assessment Exercise, or RAE). In 2014, the REF introduced research impact as a criterion of assessment, defining it as 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia'.[21] This was the first time in the UK's highly bureaucratised and systematised research surveillance system that the 'end-users' of research beyond the academy had been taken into account when determining the research performance of a given higher education institution.

Unsurprisingly, when the assessment criterion of 'research impact' was made public, research administrators within universities across the UK began frantically to interrogate researchers about the 'end-users' of, and 'stakeholders' in, their research. Just as Alice passed through the looking glass into a world freed from conventional logics and behaviour, so too did UK higher education transform into a wonderland environment in which activism was not

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[20] Julie King and Eileen L. Cooley, 'Achievement Orientation and the Impostor Phenomenon among College Students', *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 1995, 20(3), 304-312; Shannon McClain, Samuel T. Beasley, Bianca Jones, Olufunke Awosogba, Stacey Jackson, and Kevin Cokley, 'An Examination of the Impact of Racial and Ethnic Identity, Impostor Feelings, and Minority Status Stress on the Mental Health of Black College Students', *Journal of Multicultural Counselling and Development*, 2016, 44(2), 101-117; Anna Parkman, 'The Imposter Phenomenon in Higher Education: Incidence and Impact', *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, 2016, 16(1): 51-60.

[21] Higher Education Funding Council for England, 'REF Impact', no date. Online, at http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/REFimpact/ (accessed 14 February 2018).

dismissed but instead valorised, even lauded. Written up into 'impact case studies', the work that committed scholar-activists had been doing for years was suddenly of value to the academy and could be recognised *as* work, instead of fitted in to 'personal' time. (That the space allowed for time designated as such is ever-shrinking is probably the subject of another essay entirely…)

This fundamentally changed the landscape of higher education in the UK. In Australia, where an impact assessment had been trialled two years earlier, the same dynamics are evident. To the scholarly workload of teaching and publishing was added a new category: engagement. Engagement is, apparently, the process through which research has impact. Engagement is, in part at least, activism re-thought, activism in the garb and trappings of the neoliberal university. The process through which activism is commodified within the neoliberal university, though which value is ascribed to the political and politicised activity that previously would have been anathema to the value-neutral scientists of the ivory tower, transfers knowledge, through engagement, from the academy to society, such that research findings might have an impact on 'the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life'.

'Social engagement', as one Australian university strategy has it, 'improves lives through advancing knowledge and understanding and with them, equality, diversity, open debate and economic progress'.[22] This aligns with my own vision of the university as a public good. I am not drawing attention to this statement in order to criticise it, nor to suggest that it represents a flawed or otherwise lacking appreciation of how the university and its staff should interact with the society it serves. When preparing for my last promotion, in fact, I addressed the practice of social engagement directly; I discussed working with community organisations as partners building knowledge networks, translating knowledge effectively for use by academic and non-academic stakeholders, producing research that makes a difference in the world. I espoused a personal and professional commitment to ensuring that my research and teaching practice is informed by and in turn supports these values.

During the interview, I took a shallow breath and gave the example of my work in advocacy around the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Australia. I reported that I am a founding member of the Australian Civil Society Coalition on WPS and was, at the time, a member of the Coalition's Steering Group. I informed the committee that the Coalition was formed with aim of keeping government accountable and tracking progress on implementation of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, that we had developed from a very loosely defined group of interested people into a structured Coalition meeting regularly with government. I said proudly that the engagement between the Australian government and the Coalition was held up as best practice in UN Women's 2015 Global Study on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325. I bit my tongue, and commented that my work with the Coalition was representative of my enduring commitment to translating academic research for non-academic stakeholders, and that I was proud to be supporting ongoing efforts to ensure that women across Australia have a voice in peace and security governance. I wore the costume of activism that day, an activism derived from and mutually reinforcing the expertise I claimed as a scientist, a 'leading' researcher in this field, and it served me well.

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[22] UNSW (the University of New South Wales), *UNSW 2025 Strategy: Our Strategic Priorities and Themes*, 2015. Online, at https://www.2025.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/uploads/unsw_2025strategy_201015.pdf (accessed 14 February 2018).

I have explored elsewhere 'the seductive interpellative power of the subject of "expert" and the insecurities inherent in occupying that position',[23] attempting to make sense for myself of the tension I feel in my role in the academy, which demands a performance of expertise from me even as I feel entirely unsuited to that subject-position. The root of my ambivalence towards the concepts of scientism and activism, as I have discussed, resides in an uneasy relationship with expertise. Discourses of expertise, engagement, impact, create subject-positions that are afforded value within the contemporary academy and they are subject-positions that feel ill-fitting to me.

I reflect on the fact that the research area where I focus most of my endeavours lends itself so well to the performances of expertise validated and rewarded by the university now; a knowledge economy of expertise has flourished in the field of Women, Peace and Security research and there are so many consultancies, contracts, and opportunities for 'engagement', for the work that we do to have 'impact', it seems unbearable, like an admission of failure or defeat, to shy away from claiming that coveted position of 'expert'. We are an enterprise. I wonder wryly whether this is the approved collective noun for 'experts' and whether I can bear to count myself among the number within the collective. I know that it would sting were I not to be counted by others as part of that community. I seem to occupy a liminal space, a space between those who are able to confidently claim recognition as experts and those who have no knowledge to transfer, no society to engage.

What might this say about the demands we place upon ourselves, the demands placed upon us as academics, within the academy today? I suggested that the pressure to 'be active' was a pressure I felt keenly as I completed my doctoral research. The pressure I feel to 'be scientific' in my enquiries is a pressure I feel confident and able to resist, but the pressure I feel to 'be expert' is no less a weight upon me now, as I continue to conduct research that lends itself to 'translation' for policy-makers, bureaucrats, advocates and (actual) activists in the sphere of Women, Peace and Security practice. I think this is reason for my coming at the questions around activism and social engagement somewhat widdershins: in my current academic environment, the Australian/UK higher education context I consider to be my academic home, the pressure comes from within and not without.

It is not society demanding engagement, it is the academy. It is not society demanding that we account for ourselves, share our expertise, perform relevance, *be active*, it is the academy. It is not solely our concern for international affairs that requires we produce hot takes and op eds and 'conversation pieces' relevant to the contemporary political environment. Social engagement has been added, through measurement and reward and other forms of governmentality, to the plates we are required to keep spinning, the balls we are required to juggle. It is not enough to be expert, however discomfiting 'expert' might feel; we must be *relevant*.

I am reminded of Hans Christian Andersen's tale of the red shoes, some versions of which see the vain young protagonist dance herself to death in enchanted scarlet slippers. For the red shoes of relevance, we trade further, higher, expectations, alongside a diminished selection of acceptable objects of study. Just as a measurement of research performance that uses grant income as a proxy for quality quickly creates a massive influx of funding applications for any given scheme, and leads to a concomitant plummeting of success rates

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[23] Shepherd, 'Research as Gendered Intervention', 11.

for that scheme, if the higher education sector and its research evaluation techniques are measuring research performance through social engagement and impact then researchers will self-select into areas that can most easily be fed into the engagement-impact Ouroboros.

I remember being told by a Wiradyuri woman that in her language there is no word for 'expert', because everybody is a custodian of some knowledge or another and the idea that one quantum of knowledge would be valued over another, the idea that knowledge should be arranged in a fixed and immutable hierarchy, is faintly ridiculous. The academy has a lot to learn from the Wiradyuri people. I try the thought of an academy without hierarchies, and am returned to the start of this essay, where I consider the relationship of science – surely the unifying logic of the academy if one is to be found – to expertise. How will we know if we are worth anything at all, if we cannot shield ourselves from the charge of irrelevance with our qualifications and our experience and our expert opinions?

I find it a perennial struggle, to express my occupation in a way that is descriptive but also that feels authentic. 'I'm an academic'? Yes, that works, but a lot of people don't actually know what that means. 'I'm a researcher'? True, for now, as I currently have no teaching responsibilities, but too vague. 'I'm a professor'? I can say that now, and I feel a certain thrill at claiming that promotion, but also too vague. 'I work at the university' is vaguer still, and I am (for shame) disinclined to give up the prestige of my doctorate, wary of being categorised by my interlocutor as professional, rather than academic, staff (how petty such distinctions feel, really). 'I study politics'… This is closer. I try it on for size: 'Mostly UN stuff, about gender and violence in conflict and post-conflict settings'. That's ok. It works. It's not really what I do most of the time, but it sounds good. It sounds *relevant*. It sounds like a subject-position I can occupy without it slipping and chafing like ill-fitting (red) shoes.

This might not be enough, however, given the demand across the sector that academics claim expertise and pursue engagement. I do not like the effect that the uncritical celebration of expertise, engagement and impact has on my community. In tandem with the hyper-individualisation that the cult of expertise produces, demands for engagement contribute to the normalisation of hyper-employment especially for academics without job security. Those paid for teaching by the hour or by the course, those most precarious of colleagues whose routine exploitation is the oil that makes the motor of the academy run, 'engage' and perform their expertise for free, research in their own time and receive no remuneration for their devotion to furthering knowledge, transferring knowledge from the academy to society; the assumption is that such devotion is its own reward or that it will ultimately reward the devotee with a permanent, continuing, position within the same academy that has been actively complicit in their exploitation for a year, or two, or ten.

The fact that academia is eating its young grieves me. I came through the job market in a different era but that was a case of luck not judgement, so mine is a different story. But the grinding of brilliance to so much dust, the transfiguration of creativity and spark and wonder into performance metrics organised alphabetically in an Excel spreadsheet is the story of my community, and it is a tragedy. When reflecting on activism, engagement, and impact, I feel ill-prepared, and inadequate, not expert enough to answer these questions; I also feel like these are not the right questions – the most relevant questions – to be asking at all. When I presented a version of this paper at a conference, the discussant commented that I seem to be writing against my own sense of worthlessness, that this is an essay – owing much to the French etymology of the word here –against ephemerality. Negation is indeed a recurrent

motif, a patterning or a logic that gives shape to these paragraphs; I am not sure what it is that I am trying to erase other than my own doubts, fears, wild imaginings.[24]

Perhaps there could be a more substantial foundation from which to reach for the constellations of recognition as 'expert' than this iterative negation. Perhaps the fetishisation of Science and Truth can be unbound, perhaps the pressures and tensions experienced by those subjected to the demands of the new academy can abate or at least be borne collectively, in a way that nurtures and values each of us but especially our most precarious, our most vulnerable. But in the face of that which I obviously cannot know, all I have by way of defence against the abiding, grating anxiousness that grows from that space between activism and the academy is my narration, these meagre words that I can conjure. Today, perhaps that is enough.