Being women scholar-activists:
Tensions between the neoliberal university and grassroots housing movements

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Abstract

Research rarely unpicks the variety of experiences that exist *between* activists at different intersections. Our paper attends to this shortfall in literature, firstly through the lens of gendered experiences of labour in housing movements, and secondly through the lens of casualised gendered labour as scholar-activists in the neoliberal university. How we, and others, negotiate these everyday politics will be analysed to offer a more complete understanding of the nuances and tensions at play even in the most progressive movements in Britain. By combining our own experiences with those gleaned from interviews with fellow activists, we develop a framework for understanding what we term 'activist housework' - often carried out by those of us who are not cis men - and how this shapes our capacity as organisers and researchers. This framework identifies mundane, everyday and behind-the-scenes labour of activism, which too often goes unseen in favour of focus on more emergent, organic and direct forms of resistance (Pain, 2019). Doing so, we consider, allows reflection on where and how resistance can and must change to maintain the welcome growth in housing activism in Britain.

Keywords
Housing movements, gendered inequality, precarity, organising, invisible labour

Introduction

"When we only name the problem, when we state complaint without a constructive focus on resolution, we take away hope. In this way critique can become merely an expression of profound cynicism, which then works to sustain dominator culture" (hooks, 2003: xiv)

Drawing on our experiences as women scholar-activists working within and studying UK-based housing movements, we make visible the urgent need to attend to the gendered politics of organising. Movements for housing justice are traditionally organised by women, with the home itself being a key site of social reproduction (Currie, 2018). It is widely understood that working-class organisers who are not straight, white, cis men bear the brunt of austerity and the housing crisis, being some of the most at risk of precarious and unsafe housing situations (Emejulu & Bassel, 2017; Fields, 2015). Despite this, our lived experience of organising in these spaces is underwritten by marginalisation. We consider that the subtle nature of these issues has resulted in them being under-explored in existing literature on housing activism.

Alongside our position as women scholar-activists, as PhD students we are also casualised researchers and therefore precarious workers. Our scholarship is informed by our political imaginations, concerning both the politics of housing *and* the politics of research within British universities. Our research is deeply entwined with the groups we organise in. We are known to those in our organisations primarily as active members who happen to be researchers, although this relationship looks different for both of us because of the nature of our work. For Meg, the tenants' union in which she has been intimately involved for the past five years forms the case study for her doctoral research, falling under the umbrella of Participatory Action Research. For Abi, her PhD research informs and is informed by the workings, knowledge, and tactics of her local community union branch. Since starting our graduate studies, we have raised concerns almost daily about whether academia is the correct path for someone who cares deeply about social justice. However, these questions often remain surface-level and do not necessarily consider how other parts of our identity and positions may influence our experiences.

Balancing both sides of the scholar-activist hyphen, as argued by Chatterjee et al. (2019), is easier said than done. Like Maxey (1999), we find the label of scholar-activist uncomfortable at times due to the diverse understandings and assumptions of the terms. Zielke et al.'s (2022) recent discussion of "the (im)possibilities of being a *good enough* researcher at a neoliberal university" resonates with our experiences. Whilst many depict researchers as having all the power in participatory scholarship (Pain, 2003; Beazley & Ennew, 2006), we argue that navigating the power relations present within higher education and activist spaces is complicated further by other axioms of difference we embody. This manifests through a variety of means, ranging from being shouted down in meetings to feeling overly cautious about being extractive when organising, even outside the remit of our PhDs. This, in turn, shapes how we think, act, and feel in both roles. In particular, we want

to express the importance of guilt in marking our experiences, which can quickly become overwhelming and lead to burnout or alienation for non-men organisers (Roth et al., 2021). In this paper, whilst remaining steadfast in our commitments to working with social movements, we argue that we need to think more critically about the power relations that muddy the relationships between us as precious women researchers, our institutions, and the communities we work in and with.

The politics of everyday life (Sharp et al., 2000) when viewed through the lens of activism are messy (Jupp, 2022). Rodriguez et al., (2021, p. 11) write that "activism is all at once something big and collective, private and intimate, a sharing of the personal in public to change the way things are, defined (and not defined) by its aims and/or its effects and/or intentions". Yet we have found that engagement, which critically questions the visibility and value afforded to the different configurations of labour, is often obscured in activist and academic spaces. For instance, framing resistance as predominantly *emergent*, *organic,* and *direct* (Pain, 2019) makes invisible the significant amount of labour involved in forming, maintaining, and growing activist organisations, without which, the more radical forms of direct action could not prevail. Our aim in this paper is to uncover some of the more concealed, less discernible, yet hugely influential and tangible aspects of activism, which determine the experiences of women organisers and casualised women scholar-activists. This is especially the case when these activities are considered less 'impactful' or 'publishable' compared to the more public expressions of organising, which leaves us in a difficult position in thinking about our future careers. In doing so, we are not overlooking the existing work of radical and political women scholar-activists, who have inspired how we navigate our positions. Our contribution is to offer our unique perspectives as women activists *and* precarious scholars, who experience the field in conflicting ways that offer insight into distinct yet deeply intertwined issues.

To explore the interconnected and overlapping dynamics we experience as women organisers and precarious scholars, we first provide some context to the cities where we live and organise and our analysis of housing as a site of feminist struggle. By combining our experiences with those of fellow organisers who are not men, we outline three types of gendered work in housing and community unions; the administrative, the bureaucratic, and that under the remit of conflict mediation. In particular, we draw attention to the contradiction at play where those of us who are not men are expected to take up this work, but then chastised for taking up too much space within our respective organisations. Working in Edinburgh and Liverpool, two cities that have seen the financialisation of housing decimate communities, our empirical research and first-hand experiences show how housing organisations are currently reproducing the very inequalities they seek to resist. Next, we connect our experiences as activists to the gentrification of scholar-activism within the academy and how this impacts us as women and early-career academics. Highlighting and resolving these issues is crucial to the future of the housing movement and the organisation of our communities moving forward.

It is important to acknowledge a shortfall of this paper. We are both writing from privileged positions within English and Scottish universities and housing justice

organisations. Our experiences as white cis scholars working within the Global North of course cannot be used to make assertions about what is happening elsewhere or to capture the experiences of non-white activists within our communities - nor would we wish to do this. When writing this paper, we have found it challenging to articulate these concerns. Whilst conversations are ongoing within our respective organisations, they remain overwhelmingly white and any changes are happening slowly. In addition, whilst our unions seek to build networks of solidarity with anti-racist and trans rights groups, it can be hard to compensate for a lack of diversity *after the fact* - often falling into the trap of being both tokenistic and ineffective in various ways. ACORN International's Wade Rathke (2018) alongside others (McAlevey, 2020; Roth et al. 2020) have written that we need to start building organisations from the beginning as we envision them in the future. Thinking critically about the communities we are part of, not shying away from being an 'activist' in these spaces, is by no means easy (Chatterjee et al., 2019). Nonetheless, we recognise the necessity of sitting comfortably with being uncomfortable. In our organisations, we have come a long way, but the work continues.

From a housing crisis to a housing emergency in two cities

'I am not overstating this when I say that we are being eviscerated. How can we fight when we barely have the capacity to keep ourselves alive?' -Union member

It feels safe to say that housing crises have become the norm in most urban settings. Both property and land are integral for maintaining power and wealth, with private property deemed by Marx as essential for the accumulation of capital (2013 [1887]). As such, housing and community struggles have become integral to contemporary class and anti-capitalist struggle (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014; Harvey, 2014; Gray, 2018; Adkins et al., 2020). Edinburgh and Liverpool are no exceptions. In this section, we provide some context to the ways in which housing financialisation has shaped our cities which in turn influences the precarity faced by organisers in the communities we work with. Despite having largely different demographics, the structural violence of housing markets presents similar struggles in the places we both live and work in. For us as researchers embedded within our communities, we want to highlight the importance of the specificity of place and how this shapes the precarity faced by our sisters and siblings in organising.

Housing policy in Scotland has been devolved to the Scottish Government since 1999. Whilst the Scottish National Party (SNP) and therefore Scottish Parliament present themselves as leaning further to the left than Westminster (Kintrea, 2003), the impacts of the housing crisis remain similar. There are however some important distinctions: Scotland abolished both the 'Right to Buy' (RTB) and the Bedroom Tax in 2016, preventing both the selling of council housing to private hands and additional costs to those most vulnerable (Dorling, 2014; Saunders et al. , 2018) - something that England is yet to legislate. In the same year, the Scottish Government introduced a new Private Residential Tenancy which put an end to short-assured tenancies as well as no-fault evictions (Scottish Government,

2016). Despite these progressive reforms, which would not have been possible without the relentless campaigning of tenant and community unions, the recent report from the Edinburgh Poverty Commission (2020) found that almost one-third of Edinburgh's households in poverty are there solely because of high housing costs. Rents have risen by 40% in the last decade, whilst wages have either stagnated or declined in real terms (Bishop, 2021; Living Rent, 2020; Young, 2022). Homelessness applications are on the rise, with most experiencing homelessness doing so because they have been asked to leave their current accommodation (Scottish Government, 2020).

Purpose-built student accommodation and short-term holiday-lets are taking over Edinburgh's city-scape (Rae, 2018; Living Rent, 2020) creating 'folk devils' in international students and tourists who become scapegoats for the city's ills - splintering the urban poor instead of creating a cohesive movement. Liverpool's landscape offers little in the way of difference, with tensions between long-standing residents and incoming migrant, student and tourist communities. Nicholls (2009) highlighted how these tensions can foster movements which tend towards localism and nostalgia for a past which never existed. We see here what Wacquant (2008) discusses as the denigration of place and splintering of communities in societies of advanced marginality where the dispossessed are divided (Slater, 2012a; Wacquant, 2008). In particular, this platforms the very racialised dynamics of the housing crisis, which sees non-white and other migrant groups both subject to disproportionate exclusion, eviction, and dispossession, as well as vilification from within communities they are part of (Summers, 2019).

Furthermore, disposability of people within place is crystallised when taking into account the stranglehold that developer-landlords have over Liverpool. Liverpool's elected government justify prioritising the building of luxury apartments and Grade A office space, as opposed to making it liveable for residents via affordable and secure housing (O'Connor, 2022). The betrayal of the local *left-wing* Labour government here is demoralising for residents and activists alike, and ensures organising is made even harder, with fractures development within movements and between communities. Moreover, the scars of deindustrialisation remain visible (Thompson, 2020), both economically and symbolically, meaning Liverpool remains a tentative and complex place to organise in.

Compounding the issues outlined above, the uneven geographical articulations of austerity have ensured local governments, particularly urban localities (Peck, 2015; Gray & Barford, 2018) lack the capacity to build (or own) affordable council housing (Hodkinson, 2019). As such, activists and organisers in both Liverpool and Edinburgh have found themselves starting from 'below zero', as highlighted by our sister and comrade above. Firefighting and calling for the minimum standards of justice has to take precedence before we can fully organise for the society we wish to see both outside and within our movements.

Everyday politics of housing activism

It is particularly pressing to address the gendered and racialized experiences of housing activists when we consider the understanding of housing struggle as feminist struggle.

Indeed, our work echoes the calls of other scholars in outlining that the housing crisis is not only a crisis of housing, but is one manifestation of interconnected struggles of systemic marginalisation (Malson & Graziani, 2019; McDowell, 2016, Bishop, 2023). With a focus on the sphere of production platforms the white male collective worker, community organising and housing struggle have historically been coordinated by women and people of colour within their local neighbourhoods (James, 1972; Cowley, 1974). The conceptual separation of the home as the sphere of reproduction and labour as the sphere of production has sought to diminish the importance of housing struggle as anti-capitalist struggle, as well as the important work that those who are not men do in fighting for a socially just future (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Katz, 2001; Seagert, 2016). The similarities, if we are to use a binary, between debates surrounding 'productive' vs. 'unproductive' labour (Allon, 2014), and 'productive' vs 'reproductive' struggles (Cowley, 1974), situate our experiences as casualised women scholar-activists working in housing struggle in a particularly interesting setting. The narratives of 'second-class citizens' and 'second-class action' resonate with vitriol across traditional accounts of anti-capitalist in our home cities. We encounter dismissal and reduction when fighting not only for the legitimacy of why we are doing scholar-activism but also for how.

Like Katz (1995, 2001) and Seagert (2016), we recognise the collective efforts and struggles in the sphere of social reproduction as important forms of resistance against the neoliberal assault on life itself, but also as generating the potential for other spaces for resistance and liberation. From Glasgow's 1915 rent strikes to Focus E15, women's activism is often legitimised through acting in defence of the family, home, and their femininity, rather than either as a direct challenge to capitalism or to their own benefit (Moser, 1987; Currie, 2018). Moser (1987) considered how Ecuadorian women mobilising in Guayaquil often had to present themselves as altruistic, with 'pure' motives, participating in protest out of desperation for the safety of their children. We find similar narratives are persistent within our organisations. This, in turn, is magnified by the ethical and reflexive practices that make scholar-activists acutely aware of taking up too much space within social movements (Chatterjee et al., 2019; Herzfeld & Lees, 2021). This is not to dismiss the essential considerations that underlie our research and political motivations but to highlight the complexities we face when navigating the power relations of our work, both within and outside the academy.

With renewed interest in social movements owing to the rollout of financialisation, the shirking of state responsibility for social reproduction (specifically in the United Kingdom), and the COVID-19 crisis (Mendes, 2020; Standing, 2021), social solidarity and mutual aid have become commonplace in our communities. Marginalised people, including women, people of colour, and non-cis gendered people endure the most of both these financial, emotional, and social burdens (hooks, 2003; Olufemi, 2020), yet they also remain at the forefront of resistance to them (Jupp, 2017; Hall, 2019). However, the ways in which this resistance manifests in the everyday dynamics of organising is often homogenised as 'activist' experiences. Our engagement with scholarship and activism is undoubtedly informed by this knowledge. We consider that the everyday interactions and experiences of women are

overlooked and made invisible by the entrenched systems of patriarchy which run deeply throughout social organisations and resistance campaigns on the left.

Through reflecting on our own experiences, and engaging with comrades who are not cis men, we have identified examples of what can be considered mundane labour, which is consistently overlooked in activist spaces. It is worth noting here that our motivation for writing this paper came from conversations of frustration regarding our respective positions and that of those around us. It quickly became apparent that these gendered inequalities do not have organisational or spatial boundaries, with our experiences deriving from living in different cities and countries. That activist groups can have different aims, structures, and geographies yet remain consistent in their perpetuation of gender inequality speaks volumes to how normalised and embedded patriarchal oppression is. And how far the *progressive* movement still has to go.

Uncovering the mundane: activist housework and 'behind the scenes' labour

Our work is grounded within feminist, critical geography and sociology, which aims to platform the voices of those marginalised by systems of patriarchal, racialised, and class-based oppression whilst fighting for justice (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Roy, 2019). Here, we have favoured collaborative and qualitative research methods that explore the lived experiences of our fellow organisers mobilising around housing struggle. The qualitative material explored below includes interviews conducted with women and non-binary activists, coupled with our own lived experiences, which exposes the logics of and possible responses to the inequalities we currently face.

To those on the outside, activism and grassroots resistance is reactive and spontaneous: responding in the immediate to unforeseen events and emergency situations, such as doorstep eviction resistance or community immigration raids (Cowley, 1974; DeFillipis, 2001), or scholarship predominantly thinks of large-scale demonstrations as the collective manifestations of anomie, anxiety, anger, and alienation (Standing, 2021). Recent years have seen an exponential growth in these forms of direct action, and the groups which organise them such as *Extinction Rebellion, Living Rent, ACORN Community Union, Kill the Bill, Black Lives Matter, Palestine Action* and *Sisters Uncut,* to name a few. The existence and longevity of these pivotal forms of frontline resistance are fundamental to our fight against the increasingly authoritarian governance we live under (Mendes, 2020; Slater, 2022). Individuals involved in political organising and social movements, which oppose the existing social order, are intrinsically participating in resistance. That being said, to conceptualise resistance solely as direct action via protest isolates it from the vast array of other mechanisms utilised by activists. These include case work, 'know-your-rights' education sessions, community welfare services campaigns, communications blockades on landlords and letting agencies, lobbying politicians for long-term policy change, and door-knocking.

Yet we contend there also exists a significant amount of less visible, 'behind-the-scenes', labour which varies relative to the nature of each organisation, but we consider can be broadly categorised into three themes: *administrative, bureaucratic, and conflict mediation.*

Inevitably, these roles are overwhelmingly performed by non-men (Roth et al., 2020; Moser, 1987). Our experiences, from which this paper is built, echo the existing literature here. Yet, as argued by Hughes (2020), these often hidden actions within these categories are in their own right forms of resistance. And, we add, undermining the importance of them makes activists complicit in the perpetual undervaluation of women's work. Academic research predominantly discusses the political economy of women's labour in relation to paid and unpaid labour between work and the household (Giménez, 2018) and within communities (Naples, 1992; Banks, 2020). Our intervention shows how these systems of inequality carry through to even the most progressive spaces. The irony of campaign groups fighting for women's equality whilst failing to address it in their own organisation is not lost on us, but that it is lost in research and on the left is emblematic of how ingrained these issues are in everyday politics.

In offering our contribution here, we are not claiming to represent the experiences of all women in organising. The burnout that we describe is disproportionately experienced by women of colour, owing to their additional labour in our communities (Danquah et al., 2021). Our experiences are limited by our position as white women, which sees us suffer inherently less violent interactions than our non-white counterparts. That those we work with are overwhelmingly white is reflective of the organisations we are involved in. The normalisation of organising being a white space is a significant barrier to our progress, as many organisations fail to be truly representative of the communities they are defending and organising in. The whiteness of activism is prevalent more broadly in British organising, with the environmental/climate movement historically being "devoid of minority participation" (Taylor, 1993: 263), a criticism which prevails today (Williams, 2021; Lights, 2022). These movements currently exist in silos, often being unable to make significant connections between one another and attending predominantly to their namesake - for example extinction rebellion, copwatch, anti-raids groups, women's shelters, and mutual aid groups. By failing to make connections between anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggles, our resistance is fundamentally compromised. We are not suggesting that any organisation should take ownership over every fight, however networks of solidarity between these groups is paramount to their success.

This is problematic in many ways, not least as Britain's housing crisis disproportionately impacts communities of colour (Tims & Caddock, 2022). This is not something unique to Britain, and colleagues and comrades overseas have reported how racialized capitalism shapes housing markets through means such as discriminatory mortgage regulation and eviction proceedings (Desmond, 2017; Fields & Raymond, 2019). Whilst unpacking the depth of these issues is beyond the remit of this paper, it is vital to at least acknowledge the deeply embedded structural issues ever-present in organising and the negative ramifications this has on our capacity to elicit change (Emejulu & Bassel, 2017).

The tendency for the left to participate in performative politics is antithetical to our work. We, alongside those we work with, engage in activism for no reason other than the visceral belief that we can and must demand an equitable world, which ultimately sees the end of capitalism and the oppression it manufactures. That being said, the continual

invisibilization of our labour in everyday politics is detrimental to retaining women activists and encouraging others to participate in the struggle.

Administrative:

> *'I remember getting relentless slack messages from a man who was picking up the tiniest typos in the meeting minutes immediately after the meeting had finished. However, when I asked him if he'd be interested in minute-taking next time, he very quickly dismissed this as an option! Peak cis-man activism there' - Union Member.*

This category of *administrative housework* we construct predominantly revolves around meetings, namely the organisation and running of. 'Meetings for meetings sake' have become a common occurrence as we live through increasingly punitive and managerial phases of neoliberalism. The disdain for meetings does not escape activists. We naturally find ourselves itching to get out and do the work, not theorise and plan it. Yet, anyone well versed in organising will reiterate the centrality of meetings to the success of an action. Even the most radical movements need a paper trail. Each organisation carries with it a wealth of documents to support it, communicate ideas, and archive important moments (Freeman & Maybin, 2011). Our experiences are that women, by completing, circulating, and filing these administrative documents, carry out the labour involved in preparations. These tasks include, but are not exclusive to, room/space bookings, minute taking, printing, and emails. Without the preparatory organising work of booking spaces, printing, and disseminating information to members, any form of action or campaign would be impossible.

Whilst on the surface, these tasks seem menial and some are not hugely time consuming, they have significant ramifications for women's participation in the movement. Without individuals being accountable for finances and minute taking, the democratic structure of organisations is vulnerable. Making the same person take minutes in each meeting ensures they are unable to participate fully in the discussions. In our organisations, we have encountered almost identical scenarios when trying to combat the unequal gendered division of labour within organising spaces. For instance, men will say 'oh I'm not very good at minute-taking' or remain silent with their eyes on the ground (or away from their screen) when asked 'who is taking minutes?', knowing it usually gets passed to the same person. Here, men are continually reinforcing the gendered expectations within our roles.

Grassroots movements working against the status quo are almost always resource constrained, especially when struggling to gain wider support (Roshan Samara, 2019). Often, we learn and develop these skills as our nascent organisations grow, develop, and work to produce counter-hegemonic knowledge. However, the presumption that administrative tasks are automatically the responsibility of women hinders our visibility (Vesterlund et al., 2017; Roth et al. , 2020). It also shows that men feel comfortable in weaponising their (in)competence as a means of relinquishing responsibility. Whilst having more women and non-binary members in high-profile positions does not automatically mean 'more feminism', addressing the gender balance of labour is an important step to ensuring more equitable and democratic participation for our members.

The Bureaucratic:

> *'Sometimes I've not even been able to read candidates' statements for incoming committee positions because I'm too focused on organising the logistics of the meeting, voting and that sort of thing. It's mad that's this is the case, and I don't get a real say in the union's structure'* - Union member

The second category of labour in which we find women are overrepresented, a category which also serves as the foundation to organising, revolves around the logistical legwork required for organising actions as well as maintaining union structures and internal democracy. This category speaks to the *behind-the-scenes* labour which maintains the functioning of unions themselves. Specifically, we are speaking to organising which maintains internal democracy and accountability, although this is somewhat ironic considering undertaking this labour means our democratic participation is often sacrificed. Examples of bureaucratic labour include preparation for general meetings, organising the logistics of elections, and attending to union finances.

A fellow union member Sophie shared her feelings when trudging through health and safety forms, as she logged onto social media to see her male counterpart unironically sharing his all-expenses paid-for 'pool day' in which he was representing his organisation at an international conference. "Everyone should have holidays," Sophie explained, "even us women", a luxury many in the movement are not afforded as a result of the responsibilisation enforced upon them. The banality and quantity of these *behind-the-scenes* tasks often detract from the more enjoyable and satisfying aspects of activism for women and non-binary members.

Furthermore, in our experience, women make up a significant amount of those in leadership positions within activist organisations, yet this does not equate to having more power. We are treasurers, secretaries, membership officers, and chairs, not necessarily through choice but because no one else will do this work. These roles are often positions of responsibility, rather than authority, where men who have spent less time preparing for meetings dominate the discussion. Here men can provide compelling soundbites to influence the debate, but shy away from any responsibility which comes with their words, leaving the work to everyone else. Perversely, these structures are then critiqued for taking up too much space, or we are criticised for not doing them properly when we are asked to take up other tasks. Resultantly, we are expected to carry the burden of those roles, yet demonised for fulfilling them.

The result of this bureaucratic aspect of activist housework is that despite identifying as what Taylor (2014, p. 306) refers to as 'capital A' activists, those involved in our research explain that the roles they are consigned to delegitimise their perceived involvement in resistance. The removal of women's agency in defining their role is a key tool of gendered oppression. We agree that retaining existing narrow framings of what activism is, are not useful for building broad coalitions of power across groups (see e.g. Brown, 2007; Askins, 2009; Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010). Instead, focusing on the experiences of women who are 'capital A' activists but in their everyday life experience marginalisation which invalidates

their role at the hands of their male counterparts, offers insight into how splintered the movement is.

Conflict mediation:

Care binds us together as organisers (Chatterjee et al., 2019). However, explicitly or implicitly, those of us who are socialised as women carry the burden of emotional labour. Despite activism having been characterised as the "moral economy of militant care" (Gann, 2015 in Wilde, 2022, p. 37), as the above discussion shows, often this care is not extended to women in organising who are at the forefront of providing it.

Caring as adults is not serving someone or being in service to an organisation, it is about holding one another to account, an issue which our comrade highlighted:

> *'It feels like we are constantly serving others. Be it through mediating issues between comrades and other organisations or through educating others'* - Union member

When discussing mediation, issues often centre around interpersonal relationships between members with women in organising roles finding themselves the first port of call as they are considered the most approachable and those best able to offer sound advice. This work, including supporting members through personal issues, is often relegated to a lower level of importance as it is not necessarily directed towards attaining specific political goals, but instead focuses on supporting people and groups (Roth et al., 2020). Women have a 'right to evil' (Valcárcel, 2012, p.568), and should not be forced to comply with behavioural standards that our cis-gendered male peers are unable to apply to themselves. Imposition and subordination are not practices that we need to learn to catch up with men, instead we hope to build power through cooperation. As our fellow members have voiced continuously, our role in organisations is not to teach people how to *do* feminism:

> *'I sometimes sit back and think about why we have to both teach people about the issues we are fighting, and teach them how to converse with women. We are not here to mother them'* - Union member

This issue is not confined to those who are not men, but pertains to communication between all within organisations. However, creating and adhering to meeting rules, upholding sound communication standards and sharing the burden of labour is too often framed as a feminist practice. Yet, it should not be a feminist praxis to not be outwardly offensive. And, we should not feel guilty about building these boundaries into our everyday practice.

There is a complexity here, in that we want to both highlight the importance of this work and also question the appropriateness of it in all organising spaces. In our experience, women activists find it hard to know when our emotional boundaries are being transgressed. When we do speak up and/or refuse care work, we are assumed to be either 'bad feminists' or 'nagging wives' (James, 1972). The impact of COVID-19 and the chronic underfunding of mental health services has made those of us who most viscerally experience precarity without the support we need, instead seeking support in the private sphere. Whilst we want to communicate our care and support to fellow members, we are not trained therapists who

are readily available to answer phone calls at 3 am. These issues raise questions as to what purpose unions - and certain positions within them - serve. As research has discussed, whether it be a trade, community or tenants union, these are not service providers, you cannot simply take out and never put in (McAlevey, 2020; Rathke, 2018).

Personal boundaries are vital for sustained engagement in activist spaces (Roth et al., 2020). However, our experience and that of our fellow organisers demonstrates how these can be difficult to draw - not least when you are fighting around something as emotive as housing and home. Whilst it is important to celebrate, commiserate, and support one another during campaigns (Moser, 1987), the balance of care can become a burden when not reciprocated or taken the wrong way.

There are methodological concerns here too, where personal boundaries being transgressed can mean that conducting research with fellow activists can involve needing to engage with those whom your relationship has soured. As young women scholar-activists, we have both experienced the struggle in trying to keep interviews professional when many people of all genders see this one-on-one time as an opportunity to transcend these professional relationships (Haddow, 2021, Wilkinson, 2015). Here, feeling that you have misled comrades or co-workers contributes to the tense atmosphere, emotional exhaustion, and overriding sense of guilt that sadly marks many experiences. We believe that vocalising these tensions is an important step to work through them collectively within our organising and working spaces.

The 'Gentrification' of scholar-activism from a gendered and casualised perspective

The male domination in activism is mirrored in the academic fields we work in. In this section, we aim to make visible the connections between our experiences as women organisers and those as early-career researchers in the increasingly neoliberal landscape of UK higher education. We find that the kinds of organising work we do is not only diminished in activist spheres, it is actively neglected in academia. Whilst the 'impact' agenda continues to proliferate within the social sciences (Slater, 2012b), we find that this overlooks the less public forms of resistance women find themselves doing. Meaning, the vitality of the *behind-the-scenes* activist housework we outlined above is not consistent with what academia rewards within the current marketised system. Tensions then inevitably arise between the work we do and what continued participation in the academy requires of us.

Before his passing, Neil Smith (2015) stressed the need for a critical assessment of the shifting structures of knowledge production in scholarship, which he attributed to the neoliberal assault on the university. Funding conditions and trends away from the humanities and social sciences have increasingly minimised spaces for scholar-activism (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010). The prevailing political and economic elites have set up many mechanisms to prevent meaningful engagement with those at the bottom of power structures based on their class, gender, ethnicity, and other social conditions (Martinez Lopez, 2019). Smith was part of, in his time, a small minority of researchers who combined scholarship

with activist engagement. He recognised the 'state-down political corporatisation of academia that has taken place in much of Europe under the aegis of neoliberalism' (2015, p. 954). The Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010), among others, asked how we can make urban studies more public, activist-based, radical, participatory, and less dominated by the neoliberal Anglo-American hegemony. The response to this dilemma has been an increased engagement from scholars working alongside resistance movements. We have learned from researchers such as Malson & Graziani (2019), Nevárez Martínez (2019), and García-Lamarca (2020) that there are more methods of resistance than we often imagine.

Herzfeld & Lees (2021) rightly warn of and oppose the gentrification of scholar-activism itself, where young scholar-activists in particular need to market themselves as such to solidify their careers in increasingly precarious and competitive environments. Occupying this position echoes our discussion of 'conflict mediation', as we are required to both serve the cause and educate others owing to our academic positions. The complexities and representation of scholar-activists has significant consequences for our positions as researchers and grassroots campaigners. As community union organisers and critical scholars engaged in housing struggles, we work with and for organisations that resist the overwhelming commodification of life. The 'situated solidarity' we occupy puts us in a position that is simultaneously heralded by radical academics (Herzfeld & Lees, 2021), questioned by funders, and pushed out by activists. The neoliberalisation of the contemporary university has shut down many spaces for critical scholars to engage with activists, despite the contradictory promotion of 'impact' within the social sciences and by its funders (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010; Slater, 2012b). Furthermore, undertaking our research in the male-dominated fields of geography and urban sociology has - unfortunately - offered us insight into how by nature of their position male 'scholar-activists' are able to mobilise their work in ways that are beneficial for both their academic careers and their authority within social movements. Meanwhile, as young, casualised, women PhD students we are not automatically afforded the same advantages.

The domination of men in the most visible spaces of activism is unfortunately replicated within the kinds of scholar-activism that are celebrated and published within academic writing. Research on protest, of campaign victories, and of militant resistance gain the most coverage (Hughes, 2020). Yet, our experiences of doing the work 'behind the scenes' as young, casualised women - whilst still activism - makes for neither the most exciting read nor the most 'productive' student. Ferreri & Glucksberg (2016, p. 121) draw a 'cautious symbolic parallel' between residents threatened with the destruction of their homes and the threats of displacement that casualised researchers may face in the cities in which they live and work. As PhD students in English and Scottish universities (who are at the time of writing fighting in a drawn-out industrial dispute) we are facing increasingly precarious working conditions with our future careers and therefore financial stability defined by outputs and impact. Yet, these measures are not compatible with the gendered labour detailed above that accompanies housing activism. Taking minutes, or filling in health and safety forms, does not necessarily produce widely cited research papers, whereas devoting all your time to direct action (and less time to *activist housework*) might. However, the continuing existence of organisations relies

on the less desirable tasks we outlined above. Here then we see the vitality of what we conceptualise as the 'administrative' and 'bureaucratic' articulations of 'activist housework', that which ensures the ability to democratically participate in *all* aspects of organisations that are primarily reserved for men.

Meetings with both other scholars and with other activists can be tense and anxiety inducing as we try to balance the demands of both PhD studies and commitments to social change. We are acutely aware of these issues, having experienced first-hand the extractive nature of researchers in organisations. In response, albeit often subconsciously, we have prioritised activism (in all its forms) over academic knowledge production. This is articulated in various ways, for example over-compensation by committing to take on too much additional labour, magnified by the gendered experiences we have outlined above.

In addition, the simultaneous prioritisation of detached or 'neutral' scholarship and apparent novelty of work that engages with social movements has resulted in fraught relationships between researchers and those working in activist spheres (Portelli & Yildirim Tschoepe, 2020; Martinez Lopez, 2019). Scholar-activists utilise their research to participate in the neoliberal university which many in their communities are excluded from, institutions which reproduce many of the social, cultural, and economic inequalities social movements fight against (Chatterjee et al., 2019). The relationship between living in and conducting research with deprived communities, and the imperatives of the "manageralised research infrastructures" is antagonistic (Zielke et al., 2022, p. 1). For example, the universities which fund our research are some of the most prolific and profitable landlords (Chatterjee et al., 2019; Revington et al., 2021). Taking this into account, the all too familiar distrust or hesitancy activists have towards academics involved in campaigning for research purposes is legitimised (Calhoun, 2008; Al-Gharbi, 2019). This distrust is then, in reaction, sometimes seamlessly weaponised against 'scholar-activists' in positions of responsibility, particularly if they are not men. Compounding this issue is the knowledge that as academic careers progress through promotions, many lose sight of their radical politics and ties to these groups, meaning social movements become a profitable vehicle in the machinery of the neoliberal education system.

With the above in mind, it is useful to reiterate that the fight against injustice is a key tenet of an activists' being, not a peripheral element. As Laing et al. (2022, p. 1) write the quiet, implicit, and everyday forms of activism often "sit ambivalently within broader institutional drives for research-based 'impact'". This conceptualisation of activism positions it as an embodiment, something which is innately part of our daily life. Our experiences find relevance with this, as we often do not consider our actions part of activist work, yet those on the outside do. It is because of these subtle practices that distinctions can (and should) be made between those who are activists to become scholars, and those who happen to be scholars and activists, reminiscent of Croteau's (2005) distinction between the scholar-activist and the activist-scholar. Nuanced understanding of the politics of scholar-activism (racialised, classed, and gendered) is impossible to develop from the *front-line* or the academy alone. This is, we believe, why much of the existing literature fails to account for these complexities.

Elevating women to leadership positions does not equate to the embodiment of feminism, especially when doing so overwhelmingly sees people of colour and non-cis-gendered women overstepped (Olufemi, 2020). That being said, as active trade unionists within the Higher Education landscape in Britain, we believe that those in similar positions to us are right in their wants and demands for job security. We cannot fight for others sufficiently until we begin to confront the multitude of issues discussed in this paper as intimately connected: the struggle for workers' rights, the struggle for safe and secure housing, the struggle against marketisation of higher education, and the struggle against patriarchal domination and violence. Audre Lorde reminds us that 'our struggles are particular, but we are not alone' (in Malson and Graziani, 2019, p.38). This list is not exhaustive but, as is the case throughout this paper, it reflects the our lived experiences and that of our comrades, and we consider it a necessary starting point from which to build our movement.

What can be done?

We are in agreement with Pain et al.'s (2012, p. 120) identification that scholarship with critical participatory and activist roots is possible within academia. However, as this paper has shown, the extent to which radically and politically informed work can be conducted in the academy is overwhelmingly reserved for those in secure positions who have already reaped the rewards of such practice. Our work will always be radically and politically informed and collaboratively produced, but in the current context, we question whether our careers can be or whether this praxis allows for academic careers. Securing funding beyond the PhD is reliant upon our ability to disseminate research through *world-leading* publications, amongst other commitments such as teaching, to avoid being evicted from the university (Ferreri & Glucksberg, 2016). This speaks to the 'politics of distribution' and struggling with broader logics (and politics) of institutions (Cox, 2015). Alas, doing so can risk relinquishing values and beliefs, airing on the side of extraction, thereby moving our positions as 'good enough' activists into question. Overcoming this tension is contingent on something those experiencing precarity almost never have: time.

Not dissimilar to Maxey (1999) and Bengle & Schuh (2018), at various points in our studies we are not primarily seen as 'researchers' but friends, peers, or fellow union members. As students, rather than tenured staff, we are not always afforded the same credibility that others experience when conducting collaborative or participatory research. This also creates a complex emotional landscape for us personally, as we grapple with competing commitments and loyalties to our communities. Unsurprisingly, as both researchers and activists, we are regularly questioned about whether the two parts of ourselves are at odds with one another. A common question posed to us, by both academics and activists alike, is *"How do you manage your mental health? Aren't boundaries difficult to draw?"* The crude answer would be "Not very well, and yes they are." Being as committed to our activism as we are to our scholarship means lines are permanently blurred between work and downtime, complicated by those in our activist circles being some of our dearest friends. This is not solely a negative

aspect of the dual position we occupy, but it is one which requires careful and continuous consideration.

Resentment is an emotion principally reserved for those we are all fighting against, be it the landlords, private businesses, or governments. Despite this commonality activists share, our fellow organisers explained that they only expresses their resentment and frustration with male members to fellow activists who are not men. She justified this by explaining her fear of "not wanting to detract from the main perpetrators and objects of our rage", meaning landlords. This perpetual cycle of guilt and frustration adds a further layer of emotional exhaustion to our sisters and siblings' experiences and in the long-term fundamentally inhibits the housing movement.

When writing this piece, and reflecting on amassing positive change for our movements, it helped to remind ourselves of James' (1972) expression:

> *"guilt doesn't build a political movement, it inhibits and exhausts us" (p.75).*

Conclusion

The existence of what we conceptualise as *activist housework* determines how organising is experienced by those who are not men. As this paper has shown, gender role expectations and workload discrepancies remain, despite the discourse of hope and equality being deeply embedded in left organisations, This unequal distribution of labour results in marginalised voices being muted and their contributions undermined, relative to those who identify as cis men.

To move beyond the problematic juncture we find ourselves at, we must unravel the current practices outlined above which maintain inequality and work towards rebuilding a movement which acknowledges that demanding respect from one another is not uncomradely. Those on the left have for too long failed to protect one another, for fear of policing one another. This unintentional practice has meant that good faith is taken for granted in these spaces, and when communication descends into uncomradely practice, we find ourselves without tools to rectify the situation. As hooks (2003) taught us, criticism and/or conflict is not necessarily destructive. In fact, it is vital to building more sustainable, equitable, and fairer movements. That being said, words are not enough - organisations must move towards actively dismantling the structures we have critiqued.

Some work is beginning which can attend to these issues. In Scotland, for example, Meg's union has organised a series of workshops which seek to construct an equitable space for women and non-binary members. These include practices which might be as simple as rotating minute-takers each meeting or as robust as new bylaws and complaints procedures which are built on dignity and respect. Structure here does not equal hierarchy, but instead aims to level the playing field to make sure more marginalised members are given ample space at the table.

In addition, the concerns raised throughout this paper reflect what Cox (2015) discusses as the academisation of the movement. We consider, as universities become further solidified

as a private-profit generating machine, activist-scholars must question the extent to which research risks *making resistance corporate*. This is not to say scholar-activism has no place, it is vital, but that academics owe it to their organisations to have open and critical conversations about the extent to which their activism is truly progressive if it results in traditional research outputs (Slater, 2012b). Our approach encourages the normalisation of sitting uncomfortably and recognising the conflicts we experience as researchers and organisers. Doing so will allow for alliances to be built based on shared endeavours, not extractive and competing purposes.

As we hope has been made clear in this writing, our experiences show the vitality of being transparent about the current state of resistance spaces, if we are to create a mass movement built on genuine equality and the politics of hope. Failure to engage in introspective reflection regarding the power imbalances at play in left-wing organisations risks alienating those who historically have achieved its greatest successes. In turn, this diminishes the possibilities of winning secure, affordable, and safe housing and communities for all. At this current juncture, we are unable to fathom the concept of an affordable house, let alone being able to realise the actuality of a housing becoming a secure and long-term home. In this vein, the possibility of building communities built on collective struggle, class-consciousness, and social solidarity are - to so many - unattainable. Whilst this sounds defeatist, it is reflective of the collective burnout which is overwhelmingly felt by women and non-binary organisers.

We are not asking for a reward (although maybe a secure contract!), we are demanding that the imbalance of power within organisations fighting in our name be recognised. Doing so will benefit the entire movement.

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

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