

Academic- activist partnerships in struggles of the oppressed

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ABSTRACT

In this advocacy brief, we examine the transformative capacity of collaboration between academics and activists offering a pivotal anchor for local-national-global resistance. In the white paper on academic-activist partnerships, Dr. Sue Bradford and Professor Mohan Dutta draw from their journeys in academia and activist organizing to examine the intersections, synergies, challenges to, and lessons for academic activist partnerships. Questioning the meaning of collaboration and the nature of collaborative spaces in social change, the authors offer a conceptual framework for collaboration that joins in solidarity with the struggles of the oppressed.

The transformative capacity of collaboration between academics and activists offers a pivotal anchor for local-national-global resistance to neoliberal transformations of spaces (Dutta, 2011, 2013; Dutta & Basu, 2018). That the neoliberal ideology, promoting free market expansion, commoditization of the lifeworld, and individualization of public resources forms a fundamental threat to human health and wellbeing emerges as the basis for exploring the ways in which academic-activist partnerships can work toward interrogating the fundamental assumptions of neoliberal organizing, offering alternative meanings as anchors to global organizing, and for fostering alternative sites for re-imagining the lifeworld (Dutta, 2018a; Harvey, 2007). In this white paper on academic-activist partnerships, we draw from our journeys in academia, activism, and community organizing to examine the intersections, synergies, challenges to, and lessons for academic activist partnerships. Questioning the meaning of collaboration and the nature of collaborative spaces in social change (Obregón & Tufte, 2017), we offer a conceptual framework for collaboration that joins in

solidarity with the struggles of the oppressed (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010), seeking to transform the large scale neoliberal formations that underlie the contemporary global challenges of deepening poverty, widening inequalities, weakening worker rights, and catalytically transforming threats to the environment. The nature of oppression globally has been constituted by the neoliberal transformation of political economy, with individualization, privatization, and commoditization as the fundamental elements of change driving policies (Dutta, 2011). This is certainly the case in New Zealand, where inequalities have systematically increased and where Sue has done most of her work; in the various sites where the Center for Culture-centered Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE) has carried out its work, neoliberal transformations have systematically displaced communities from their livelihoods and placed them in precarious conditions that threaten their health and wellbeing (Dutta, 2018a). The overarching question guiding this collaboration is this: What lessons do we work with when building academic-activist bridges in addressing some of the most critical challenges that have resulted from the neoliberal transformation of the

globe (Massey, 2000) displacement of the poor from their livelihoods and expulsions into precarious jobs in extractive economies, challenges to climate that disproportionately impact the poor, and large scale inequalities within and between nation states (Harvey, 2007; Sassen, 2014).

In setting up the paper, we draw on the conceptual framework of the culture-centered approach (CCA) that suggests that communicative inequalities are deeply intertwined with material inequalities (Dutta, 2008, 2011). The erasures of the poor from sites of recognition and representation are intertwined with the experiences of material disenfranchisement among the global poor. The experience of oppression in this sense is material, and it is communicative. Not having access to spaces where they can voice their everyday challenges, experiences, and solutions, the oppressed remain cut off from pathways of mobility (Dutta, 2011). The challenge for activist-academic partnerships then is one of how to collaborate with the oppressed in building communicative infrastructures so the voices of the oppressed may be heard and make impact the ways in which policies are imagined and implemented. The paper therefore is set up around the question of how to create and sustain spaces, resources, and infrastructures so the voices of the oppressed may be heard in ways that impact and transform political economy.

We attend to academic-activist partnerships as transformative opportunities for building spaces where the oppressed articulate understandings of problems and solutions, and collaborate to building spaces of transformative social change (Ciszek, 2017). We begin by setting up a case for academic-activist partnerships, identify the challenges to such partnerships, and then work on strategies for transformation (Cox & Nilsen, 2007). We each work through our stories, set in dialogue and drawing on the tensions and possibilities we each experience in negotiating the bridges connecting academia and activism. The dialogue reflected in the text here draws on the multiple face-to-face interactions we had during the course of the week, including participating in collaborative writing online. We followed up our initial writing with subsequent conversations, and these conversations offered the foundations for further fine-tuning our writing and placing them in conversation with each other. Although we have inserted some references as

anchors to our ongoing conversations, we have limited the use of references to co-construct a writing style that bridges our activist- academic commitments, finding bridges and yet retaining our different voices. We did not write over the piece with the idea of achieving a singular voice; rather, in co-scripting what appears in the following pages, we worked through the different voices, tensions, struggles that have played out in our journeys.

Academic-activist partnerships?

Case study and reflection from an Aotearoa New Zealand perspective

Why do we even bother talking about this? The history of academic-activist collaboration in Aotearoa New Zealand has not always been a happy one, although there has been a real explosion of interest in recent years, seeded in part from the first Social Movements, Resistance and Social Change conference held at Massey University, Palmerston North in August 2014 (<http://masseyblogs.ac.nz/othersideofbusiness/2014/04/30/social-movements-resistance-and-social-change-in-new-zealand-a-call-for-papers/>)

Shiv Ganesh (Massey University) was a keynote speaker addressing Activism and the new dialogic while his fellow keynote contributor was Campbell Jones (University of Auckland) on What is possible. I made a presentation derived from my just-completed doctoral thesis *A major left wing think tank in Aotearoa: An impossible dream or a call for action?* which included fairly serious challenges to the role of academics, including the very language of the conference title itself. None of the groups I had been part of over a lifetime of activism had ever called ourselves 'social movements'. Why were we suddenly being defined in this way by the academic 'other'?

(<http://aut.researchgateway.ac.nz/handle/10292/7435>)

There were around 50 participants at that first conference. By September 2016 more than 400 activists and academics attended the third conference in the series, held at Victoria University. Some had to be turned away. A fourth conference was held at Massey University's Albany campus in September 2017, hosted through a collaboration between the university and the think tank which had emerged as a product of my doctoral project, Economic and Social Research Aotearoa (ESRA)-<https://esra.nz/>. In 2016 the first issue of a new academic journal Counterfutures: Left thought and practice Aotearoa was launched with the goal of nurturing thinking and debate among all parts of the

academic and activist left. It has been going ever since, publishing two issues a year, usually focusing around a particular theme

<http://counterfutures.nz/index.html>.

These years 2014-2017 saw a flourishing of interest across the traditional divides as many from both worlds sought new ways in which we might strengthen both theoretical work and praxis, within and across the worlds of activism and academy.

However, by late 2018 no fifth annual Social Movements, Resistance and Social Change conference had emerged. ESRA exists, but a number of us who had been involved during the project's genesis (2014 onwards) had left in mid-2017 to put our energies elsewhere. I will return to these more recent years shortly, but will first track back a little into the history of academic-activist relationships in Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly through the lens of my time with unemployed workers' and beneficiaries' (welfare claimants) organisations between 1983 and 1999.

Case study: reflections on academic-activist partnerships from an activist perspective

In 1983 unemployment was rising in New Zealand. From a public meeting of over 100 people the Auckland Unemployed Workers Rights Centre (AUWRC) was established, with the dual purpose of helping individuals at the difficult interface with government departments and of working politically and educationally for 'Jobs and a living wage for all.' We organised the first demonstration of unemployed workers in Auckland since the Great Depression of the 1930s, and linked individual casework with political advocacy through every mode at our disposal. As time went by we started to set up other organisations, including most significantly the three Auckland Peoples Centres, offering a mix of medical, dental, educational, hairdressing, advocacy, chaplaincy, small business support and other services for ten dollars a month per family (additional costs for dental). At their peak in the late 1990s the Centres were working with 14,000 adults and children and had created up to 50 full-time equivalent jobs. All who belonged to the Peoples Centres had the right to vote for the Board which governed the organisation.

From its earliest days AUWRC sought potential allies across the community, and of course the academy was one such place. Our first formal connection was with a social work school, which

had the courage to start placing students with us as part of their practical training. As well as supervising and mentoring such placements AUWRC took pride in carrying out its own research and writing, publishing a magazine *Mean Times*, running educational workshops and cultural work sessions, and contributing in depth research, writing and speaking on relevant areas such as our ideas about solutions to unemployment and poverty.

We remained wary of the academy. Reasons for this included:

- Fear that our research, policy development and writing efforts might easily be taken over by academics with access to far more time, resources, personnel - and societal status - than we had at our disposal.
- While we appreciated the ever increasing number social work and postgraduate students from a variety of disciplines being placed with us as the years went by, we received no financial or other resourcing support to compensate for the time and effort we put into mentoring and supporting them. Sometimes inappropriate students were sent our way, creating even more difficulties for our low-resourced groups.
- A sense that as community-based researchers and activists we were always seen as second-class. For those of us without a 'proper' education, this sense of inferiority was experienced even more deeply than by those (like me) who had been fortunate enough to achieve tertiary qualifications. Sometimes the distaste and contempt felt by academics for the working class thinkers amongst us was on open display.
- As our efforts become better known in the academic world, AUWRC and the Peoples Centres became increasingly the objects of research. There were times when we became quite angry about how our words, ideas and practice were mangled by somebody's research project, and resentful of how we were so often expected to happily offer ourselves up for examination without little, if any, sense of genuine reciprocity or accountability.

Of course there were far more fruitful relationships quietly developing as the years went by. Right from the start there were friends and allies from academic backgrounds who worked with us and supported us in every way they knew how. It was on the back of these associations that we gradually began to perceive potentially more productive ways of working.

Key steps in this journey included:

- An invitation to me from a Queensland University of Technology lecturer to speak on behalf of AUWRC at an Australian national conference on unemployment. This helped lift confidence in what we could offer a wider audience, confirming that our activities and ideas could find a place in the academic world, on our own terms, and not through someone else's writing. It also gave rise to a long term highly productive relationship with that particular lecturer, especially in our work on Universal Basic Income/Basic Income systems.
- AUWRC's involvement in the project 1994-1999 to set up what became Kotare Research and Education for Social Change in Aotearoa Trust. Academics from an adult education background worked with activists in our groups and networks to develop a base from which we could support collective action for a more just world through participatory education and research. Kotare, as it is colloquially known, is still going strong in 2018, running workshop programmes from its educational centre at Hoteo North near Wellsford, an hour's drive north of Auckland (New Zealand's largest city).- <http://kotare.org.nz/>
- In 1997 and 1998 AUWRC collaborated with Massey University lecturer Mike O'Brien to organise two major conferences Beyond Poverty and Social responsibility: *Whose agenda?* at Massey's Albany campus. Both events ran over two days and attracted over 200 participants to each. People from both the academic and activist worlds contributed presentations. Papers were collected in Proceedings from the two conferences. Each conference also had a focus on encouraging participants to join AUWRC in related street demonstrations immediately afterwards, calling on people to put all those fine words into action.
- In 1998-1999 AUWRC took part in a pilot social audit project lead by a specialist from the New Economics Foundation (UK) and implemented by a number of groups locally as an experiment in seeking values-based and congruent ways of evaluating the work of community-based organisations. As a result of the social audit process, AUWRC members undertook a six month discernment period, the consequence of which was a decision to close our doors for the last time. The Peoples Centres continued to operate for a few more years, but the loss of AUWRC and some of its skilled and political core helped contribute to the

Centres' gradual demise.

Lessons from the positive experiences of working at the activist - academic interface (from an activist perspective) included:

- The importance of building long term relationships of support and trust between us. This was only possible when individuals from the universities and technical institutes treated us as equals and not in a patronising way, as merely the objects of research or student placement opportunities.
- The usefulness of taking part in meaningful activities together on an equal basis, and increasing trust through praxis.
- There could be no generalisation about work with the academy. Whether the activity involved was with a postgrad or social work student on placement, or with a university lecturer or professor in some stream of research, policy development or activity, the quality of the relationship and what could be achieved depended entirely on what each side to the relationship brought to the equation.
- It was critical that within these collaborations people from AUWRC retained a clear view of our own kaupapa (core purpose and principles) at all times, and did not fall prey to the trap of sacrificing principle for funding or other forms of potential co-option.

This last point leads to another question in this retrospective analysis of our experience. What was it that enabled AUWRC to develop its research, education, publication and policy development capacity comparatively strongly, despite starting life as a fairly rugged group of unemployed workers and beneficiaries, albeit with an already conscientised if disparate number of activists at our core? What enabled us to successfully resist co-option by various academics and their departments or schools? Most other of our fellow organisations over the same period did not develop and amplify this think tank-like role to any degree at all.

The role of activist researchers, writers and thinkers in the struggle of the oppressed.

Over the 16 years of AUWRC's existence a large number of people passed through our organisation and contributed to our capacity to do media work, public speaking, policy development, write research papers, publish magazines, and carry out cultural work

programmes, run educational workshops and ultimately - to write papers and speak at academic conferences; play a key role in building a school for social change, from scratch; and to organise major national conferences in an equal partnership with a university. Many people played different roles in this, but at the centre were a small group who spent considerable periods of time working with AUWRC, either as paid staff or volunteers, and who helped the continual drive to lift our capacity in these areas. We were a mix of people with and without university degrees, and of different ages, faith, gender, sexuality, ethnic and class backgrounds. Looking back, some of the enabling factors included:

- We had among us thought-leaders from an earlier generation of street activists and union/unemployed union organisers. They were working class people with little formal education but of deep intellect and highly developed analytical skills. They often played a role in gently (although sometimes quite sternly) guiding us forward when we were uncertain, and remonstrating with us when they felt we'd gone astray or hadn't undertaken deep enough analysis of a situation before taking action. The reason we got so much out of this relationship was not simply that these older folk happened to be around, but that as a group we had consciously developed a culture of listening to what they had to say, taking on serious debates with them, and genuinely enjoying their company and presence amongst us.
- From early on in AUWRC's development and as a predominantly Pākehā organisation we were constantly challenged by and engaged with Māori with whom we worked, locally, regionally and nationally. Because unemployment and poverty affect tangata whenua (indigenous people of Aotearoa) disproportionately, there was no way we could not accept the challenges - and the many lessons - which came from the work of building groups, networks and campaigns with and alongside Māori, together and separately.
- AUWRC had a very clear kaupapa (core policy and principles) based on collective work done right from the earliest stages. There were some periods of deep weakness but through most of the group's history this kaupapa guided us and provided a lynchpin which allowed us to resist to the best of our ability political takeover, funder capture or academic co-option. We were determined to remain autonomous of church, state, corporates, the academy, political

parties or anyone else, while simultaneously seeking friends and allies wherever they might be in our work for 'Jobs and a living wage for all'.

- The mix of people from different backgrounds created a highly synergistic and creative dynamic in which 'action-reflection' and the use of collective forms of analysis were constantly undertaken. Theoretical bases from various socialist and anarchist traditions, liberation theology, structural analysis and Freirean pedagogy - as well as the influence of Māori world views and thinking - helped drive a constant search for 'what next' at the level of theory as well as practice.

The fact that a slender but growing group of core activists stayed together over most of a sixteen year period allowed the development of very high levels of personal trust as well as the ability to keep learning from each other, from our experiences and from the people with and for whom we worked. This allowed for constant development and experimentation with new forms of thinking and organising. This strong core with its commitment to kaupapa and to the importance of genuinely respectful relationships also meant the group was strong enough to continually welcome in new people, new ideas and develop new projects. We were not afraid of challenge and change despite the mistakes we inevitably made along the way, and the setbacks and difficulties of the sector in which we worked.

From activist to academic - and back again: Navigating the divide in recent years

In 1999 I was elected as one of the first group of seven Green MPs to enter New Zealand's national Parliament. For the next ten years I worked as an MP attempting to give voice to the voiceless and powerless through portfolios including employment, welfare, children, mental health, housing and community economic development. The Greens never became part of government during this period, but I did achieve some success with the passing of three private member's bills, all to do with the rights and welfare of children and young people. This was another big learning curve as I went from being a street fighter and community activist to working very much inside the system, operating within the political world through a reversed lens.

Not long after leaving Parliament I commenced doctoral research with feminist economist Marilyn Waring at Auckland University of Technology, looking into why no major left think tank had ever emerged in New Zealand, what it might take to set one (or more) up, and whether there was any support for such an entity (or entities). The very nature of the topic brought a major focus on issues around the activist-academic interface. I interviewed 51 people from across the left spectrum, and from both academe and community, as well as maintaining a field journal through the three years. The method used was 'political activist ethnography', an approach drawn from the activist world itself as well as from more academic traditions. At the heart of this method was a determination that the 'problematic' - the key research question - should be drawn from the affected people and groups themselves, and that the study, once completed and disseminated, should be of practical use in progressing constructive action on that problematic.

The day after I submitted my thesis in February 2014 I started work as a full time lecturer in the School of Social Practice at Unitec in Auckland. I spent most of a year there experiencing at first hand the joys and drawbacks of life as an employee in the neoliberal academy before leaving to take on the project of setting up a left think tank and to help develop further our new organisation Auckland Action Against Poverty which I had helped establish in 2010. - <https://www.aaap.org.nz/>.

For three years I was also an active member of Mana, launched in 2011 as a Māori lead, Māori focused parliamentary party and extra parliamentary movement. Lead by Hone Harawira and Annette Sykes, it was the first time people from the non- Māori movements had been invited to join such an organisation. There was much learning to be had from this experience, too.

From the time my thesis went public in mid-2014 I began working with others to build a think tank based on the findings of my PhD research. I also consciously brought with me the knowledge drawn from the variegated political and organising experiences of a lifetime. The key resource of the project to build what became known as ESRA was the determination of a small but growing group of academics and activists to turn my thesis conclusions into reality. Those of us who came from community and union backgrounds knew that while raising funding and other resources was paramount, just as important were the skills of organising honed in a lifetime in the long, hard grind of building and maintaining groups and campaigns.

We developed the basics of kaupapa and structure for the new think tank over an extended period of workshops and meetings. In September 2016 ESRA was formally launched at a major event attended by hundreds of people at the third Social Movements, Resistance and Social Change conference in Wellington. By the end of that year we had started a first research project commissioned by Unemig (Union Network of Migrants) and FIRST Union, a qualitative study looking at the conditions of migrant Filipino dairy farm workers in three geographical areas of New Zealand. Other activities included organising debates and workshops, strengthening links between ESRA and various university personnel and departments, continuing to build connections with activist individuals and groups outside the academy, as well as starting to disseminate papers written by ESRA's researchers.

Building a secure financial income was very difficult, but the steady growth of small regular contributions by a growing number of supporters enabled the group to grow, slowly but steadily. However, the first half of 2017 was marked by increasingly difficult internal issues which I do not wish to canvass here. By the middle of 2017 a number of people in the organisational core, including myself, left the project.

The reason I have given this brief summary of my work since the time AUWRC closed in 1999 is that I would like to add a few thoughts based on this second set of experiences at different facets of the activist-academic interface, in addition to the earlier points outlined above.

In research, evaluation and organisational projects where academics and activists work together, some key challenges today include:

Language and methodology

In many disciplines the language used in writing to postgraduate, postdoctoral and academic journal standards is incomprehensible to most ordinary people. Where research is being carried out with and subsequently disseminated among people and groups at the grassroots it is critical that writing and other forms of communication are conveyed intelligibly and well, without being patronising. At times this will mean using te reo Māori, and at others using the languages of migrants. I also believe that for those working within the academy there are many times when the style and nature of the language used, even within the constraints of academic demands and peer review, could be far clearer and freer of obfuscation.

As with the use of academic language and jargon, research methods and methodologies derive from a world which is foreign to many front line activists, and to most of those with whom we work. Like language, any discussion or imposition of methodology can leave people feeling estranged and bewildered. But even more dangerous than this is the wielding of particular academic methods by those well versed in their application in ways which risk undermining and damaging the kaupapa and work of community-based organisations and trade unions, in the guise of supporting them. Sensitivity; a willingness to listen and understand; to explain in ways that are genuinely comprehensible; to genuinely negotiate; and to always ask 'in whose interest is this method or practice actually operating?' are crucial.

Relationships

Within community and union organisations, as well as in activist relationships with academics, it is important that we understand that the quality and nature of the way we treat each other is paramount. When resources are scarce and a sense of common

purpose may be all that binds us, essential factors include:

- For tauīwi (non-Māori), always remembering and acknowledging the place we are, respecting and endeavouring to do our best in regards to tikanga (correct procedure, custom) and kawa (etiquette), as appropriate.
- Respecting all people and honouring their situation and contribution, without enacting or enabling oppressive practices.
- Taking the time for face to face contact rather than just or mainly working electronically or by phone.
- Starting from a position of mutual respect, with academics understanding that the production of knowledge from outside the academy is as worthy of examination and consideration as that produced within. What is learned from peoples' lived experience of hardship and oppression, and from the praxis of organisation and mobilisation, must be acknowledged in real ways, not through lip service or veiled contempt.
- Acknowledging that unless we have the will to take the time to genuinely listen and learn from each other, from both sides of the divide, trust will not grow, but will be destroyed, and with it the good work we aim to do together.

Accountability and power

There is an ongoing wariness among low income and marginalised people, including indigenous people - and their organisations - of being exploited and used by academic institutions. Some communities have been researched and investigated over and over again, without any material improvement in either wellbeing or the ability to more powerfully participate in economic and political life as a result. Project work emanating from the academy can look and feel like the latest wave of colonisation unless great care is taken. Students and researchers undertaking research 'on' people and organisations achieve the momentary glory of a thesis or article, and an addition to their PBRF (Performance Based Research Fund) evidence if they are on staff.

The organisation does not necessarily ever receive anything useful in return, and meanwhile is often obliged to put time and effort into supporting and mentoring the researcher's efforts. There are, of course, exceptions to this, and I will always honour and

acknowledge those students and staff who have gone on to put a lifetime's work into seriously supporting group- and movement-building outside the academy.

For those coming from the academic world, there will always be institutionally imposed accountabilities. Finding ways to explain these to those with whom they work is a first and integral step in most, if not all, ethics requirements. However there are considerations beyond this including:

- Academics should recognise and not just pay lip service to the power they hold as people with a mana, respectability, and a security of income (as individuals and researchers) often not granted to the individuals and groups they may be working with.
- Students need to have some sensibility that while they may not have the pay and security of an employed university staff member, they still have the backing of their institution and the standing and resourcing (including through the educational process itself) which comes from that.
- Academics who are serious about genuinely working alongside activists, their organisations and the people they serve are at their best when they have the sensitivity and a genuine determination not to allow their research and project work to compromise, take over or co-opt that work for their own purposes.
- Whether or not there are institutionally imposed ethics guidelines for a project, a shared values framework needs to be developed, in a genuinely collaborative way, with care being taken not to use language and methodology as a Trojan horse for co-option or takeover.

Context

As all researchers should understand, it is essential that practice and methods are contextualised. In Aotearoa New Zealand, two particularly relevant matters to which attention should be paid include the importance of:

Developing an understanding of the particular history of this country, and the impacts of both colonisation and capitalism on these islands.

Such an understanding will be helped if people work to understand the implications of this country's founding documents and subsequent work towards tino rangatiratanga and decolonisation, as well as becoming familiar with contemporary challenges and debates.

Gaining an appreciation of the particular constraints around funding and resourcing for community based organisations here. Over the last three decades the community sector has become increasingly colonised and controlled, through changes in charity law, the nature of funding and contracting, and other means. We are now at the point where it is very difficult to gain resources for any group which is seen as engaging in any kind of political advocacy, including even for the very kaupapa and people it serves. There is also a very thin philanthropic sector in Aotearoa New Zealand, without the range of grantmakers available in places like the US, or the transnational aid and development funding available in many other parts of the world.

Valuing activist labour

The long hard graft of community and union based work, including research, is real work. Even if unpaid, low paid or partly paid it is labour, and should be valued as such. For some of us there is a real caution around being exploited as cheap or free labour for academic purposes. The political and altruistic beliefs which drive us often mean we have spent a lifetime as volunteers or very low paid workers. Universities and university people can take this as a signal that it is fine to solicit and accept the gift of our cheap or free labour for joint projects, or that placing interns or student with our groups is sufficient compensation for the infrastructure we provide to support them.

Behind this can lie the dangerous assumption, reinforced daily by the neoliberal capitalist society in which live, that if one is highly paid (and even better, in a secure position) then one is somehow automatically worth more than the low paid and unpaid amongst us. Just as our research efforts outside the academy can be deemed as worth less than those of our academic peers, our labour constantly risks being viewed in a similar light.

In conclusion, I would like to take a moment to consider a few particular sources of hope going forward.

I have only just become aware of the existence of CARE and its transition from Singapore to its new home at Massey University in Palmerston North.

With its kaupapa of ‘transforming structures through communication, culture and community’, CARE’s years of experience and in working both practically and theoretically across the activist-academic divide across countries will bring new insights and methods which have the potential to enhance and increase the work already happening locally, in new and exciting ways.

The increasing number of migrants in our communities and universities bring with them skills and experiences of which local activist groups are often simply unaware. If we can find more ways of connecting with migrants who share our aspirations and beliefs, groups have the potential to add a diverse and exciting range of experience and knowledge to our work for transformative change, as well as playing a constructive role in helping newcomers become full participants in the political and democratic life of this place.

While for some of us there have been difficult experiences both historically and over the last few years at the academic-activist interface, there will come a time when our ability to analyse and learn from what has gone well - and not so well - will be of tremendous benefit to our work going forward, and potentially to the people who come after us as well. The tougher the path has been, the more important it is that we remember and use the tools of reflexivity and critical analysis which can help us hone future praxis.

It is up to all of us who have chosen to work for transformational change in the interests of those who have least - and of the planet which sustains us - to continually refine and hone the ways in which we work, and to constantly remember in whose interests we choose to apply whatever humble skills, experience and knowledge we may have to offer. I am aware that there are far more of us than any one of us realises, from both the academic and activist worlds, who share an interest in drawing out the best of our potential, and harnessing it to useful purpose across the divides that have traditionally kept us apart. It is up to all of us to keep on trying, to keep on rehearsing the ways in which we can work together for a world beyond the constraints of colonisation and neoliberal capitalism.

Struggles of the oppressed: Academia and activism

If we commit to the idea that the purpose of academic-activist collaboration is to contribute to improving the lived experiences of the oppressed, any academic-activist collaboration ought to be evaluated in terms of its relationship to the struggles of the oppressed. In this sense, the voices of the oppressed offer important anchors for the social change process. How to be accountable to these voices is a challenge for both academic and activists, especially when negotiating power, economic resources, and access to sites of recognition and representation. Whereas in ideal situations, the ownership of communicative spaces and decision-making structures are held by marginalized and/or historically oppressed communities, this is not always the case in both academic and activist collaborations with marginalized communities.

When the Center for Culture-Centered Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE) collaborates with communities at the margins, the idea of the ownership of communicative resources by the marginalized becomes the basis for the formations of advisory groups of the marginalized (see for instance, Dutta, Comer, Teo, Luk, Lee, Zapata, & Kaur, 2018). In the poverty project carried out by CARE in Singapore with households living in poverty, the work of building communicative infrastructures for the poor meant that the commitments of the research team were guided by an advisory board of community members experiencing poverty (Tan, Kaur-Gill, Dutta, & Venkataraman, 2017). The advisory board of the poor then collaborated with our research team to identify problems, develop potential solutions, drive research strategies, develop communication interventions, and create a framework for evaluation (see for instance Dutta, Tan, & Pandi, 2016). In culture-centered projects carried out by CARE in West Bengal, India, over the last two decades, the work of building communicative infrastructures among the poor have contributed to the co-creation of democratic spaces for participation and for shaping the pathways of development. Through their participation in democratic processes, the poor lay claim on development resources, how these resources are managed, and how they are evaluated (Dutta, 2004). The role of academia thus is re-defined in such culture-centered projects, with articulations of criteria for evaluating quality of the collaborative work and the objectives of the work emerging from the voices of the poor. The “No Singaporeans Left Behind” advocacy campaign emerged from this collaborative space, with the objectives, strategies, and tactics of the advocacy work

being built by our advisory group members. Our ongoing negotiations of our legitimacy within the academe were then tied to the question of what it meant to be accountable to the advisory group of community members experiencing poverty. This transformation in the primary site of accountability created a wide range of challenges for our research team, all the way from being interrogated about the nature of the work to being dictated to by power structures regarding the methodology, process involved, and outcomes of the work. This negotiation fundamentally brought out the tensions of the culture-centered approach (CCA) as a method located within the academe, challenging the very legitimacy of our research team and the legitimacy of CARE.

While working on the project on poverty in Singapore, our research team learned that a commitment to the voices of the disenfranchised serves as an excellent way to find the directions for collaboration, especially when negotiating a wide range of tensions that emerge in partnerships. The community of advisory board members shared their ownership of the communicative resources as integral to the creation of communication strategies of change. When the voice of the disenfranchised serves as the guiding post for the work of collaboration, it makes clear the sort of decision-making processes to be followed as the collaboration progresses.

The communicative space built through collaboration that is owned by an advisory group of the oppressed also means that at various points, the legitimacy of the methods, the nature of the collaboration, and the academic engagement with the work will be placed under scrutiny. Particularly salient here are the questions that emerge from various sites of institutional and state power about the involvement of academics in the work. Our research team learned the importance of being able to make arguments about the academic legitimacy of the work, continually demonstrating why such work belongs in the academe. Especially for untenured academics, it is critical to continue to engage in the struggle for legitimizing the labor that goes into building such partnerships and that is often not recognized.

The challenges to legitimate communicative spaces for the voices of the oppressed also arise from the nature of power plays in collaborations between academics and activists. Because both academic and

activist commitments might often be turned away from the oppressed, the communicative infrastructures might become channels for representation rather than emerging as resources for the oppressed, owned by the oppressed. When CARE collaborated with foreign domestic workers in Singapore experiencing various forms of abuse and exploitation at work, collaborating to create infrastructures that would be owned by the foreign domestic workers meant that the advocacy strategies developed by the foreign domestic workers at times did not harmonize with the institutional structures the academics and activists were working within. For instance, when an advisory group of Burmese foreign domestic workers came up with an advocacy campaign that highlighted the abuse they were experiencing, the board of the non-governmental organization (NGO) we were collaborating with directed the NGO to pull out because it felt the images were too confrontational. Being accountable to the advisory group of Burmese foreign domestic workers meant that the aesthetic sensibilities of the advisory group had to be privileged, creating a basis for interrogating the assumptions guiding the aesthetic sensibilities of academics and activists.

Oppression and power

To develop academic-activist collaborations with the disenfranchised, collaborations need to be grounded in an understanding of the nature of oppression and how it is intertwined with power. The power to have a voice in decision-making and access to structures where decisions are made shapes the textures and layers of oppression in society. The condition of being disenfranchised therefore is intertwined with the lack of access to power. In our culture-centered projects that are built on the principles of participatory communication anchored in the ownership of the participatory norms by the oppressed, we often hear the articulation from disenfranchised communities that community members feel a sense of voicelessness. The lack of access to power expresses itself in a sense of not having a voice. In our collaborations with Santalis in Eastern India, we have learned the ways in which the lack of access to power shapes the everyday sense of being robbed of dignity (Dutta, 2004). For many community members that have participated in our advisory groups, this struggle for dignity emerges as the work to be done through our collaboration. Recognizing that power is integral to the perpetuation of oppression means that academics and activists sitting with various levels and forms of access to power ought to continually work on creatively mobilizing power as a collective resource for the oppressed and simultaneously attempt

at undoing the ways in which power prevents meaningful collaboration.

This also means academics recognize the various forms of institutional power they have access to, and the ways in which these forms of power disenfranchise activist partners. The unequal terrains of power that academics and activists work from often result in the colonization of activist articulations within the academe to serve academic agendas. That academics are embedded within institutions that are driven by the neoliberal ideology often translates into the academic tendency to usurp the collaborative work to serve academic careers and to deploy activism toward branding the academic as anti-status-quo, which in itself can be a brand that draws resources. Being aware of these power inequalities in relationships becomes an anchor to transforming the relationships, inverting the dominant frameworks for knowledge production and saturating these frameworks with resistive ethos guided by the voices of the oppressed.

Neoliberalism and disenfranchisement

The global dominance of neoliberal policies based on the logics of privatization, commoditization, and financialization lies at the heart of the experiences of disenfranchisement across the globe. The displacement and expulsion of communities at the margins from their spaces of livelihood has been catalyzed through neoliberal programs. Although the nature of these neoliberal transformations differs across communities, the thread that flows across spaces is the transformation of public resources into private commodities and the individualization of the responses to disenfranchisement emerging from the dominant structures. For example, in Singapore, where CARE has been carrying out our work, the problems of inequality and in-access to resources are framed as problems of individual behavior. Similarly, in New Zealand, the problem of poverty is framed in the logic of kindness, seeking individual responses to the problem through philanthropy. In India, the solutions of poverty alleviation are solutions of individual ownership of market opportunities through integration into the global free market. Solutions such as extractive industries and special economic zones (SEZs) are offered under the rhetoric of poverty alleviation. These forms of deployment of communication to serve the neoliberal order are “communicative inversions,”

the turning on its head of material reality through the deployment of communication. One such form of communicative inversion is the promotion of individualized solutions to problems of structural disenfranchisement. For instance, with the large scale disenfranchisement of the poor, entirely new service industries have been created to meet the needs of the poor, working under framework of privatized profits. Delivering healthcare for instance has been privatized, with new stakeholders emerging to meet the emerging market of the underserved. Such forms of privatization have fundamentally displaced the poor from opportunities for collectivizing and organizing, with the nature of civil society being driven toward delivering services to generate material resources for supporting civil society.

The role of activism in struggles of the oppressed

One of the key challenges in contemporary globalization is the shrinking of democratic spaces where the voices of the oppressed may be heard. Increasingly across the globe, the sites for articulating alternatives are either being co-opted within the neoliberal structures or being violently erased through the deployment of the police and the military. Large scale grabbing of public resources are being organized under the rhetoric of development. Activism therefore has a key role to play in resisting the neoliberal transformation of local-global economies. Through a plethora of strategies that range from dialogic engagement with structures to antagonistic resistance, activists play key roles in collaborating with the oppressed in challenging neoliberal structures.

The role of the academe in struggles of the oppressed

The work of academia can be crucial to social change processes when grounded in the struggles of the oppressed. Because forms of knowledge production shape how policies are implemented and disseminated, intervening into policy circuits calls for interventions into the forms of knowledge production. Academics can play key roles in these interventions, working through the very tools of academic structures to destabilize them. To be grounded in the struggles of the oppressed is to acknowledge that the role of research becomes one of supporting struggles. Research, grounded in sound methodology and good theory, is integral to the change process. However, as we will note throughout this white paper, the very nature of what makes up good theory and how to go about studying a phenomenon need to be fundamentally disrupted in order to build and sustain transformative spaces.

Challenges to academic-activist linkages

The culture of mistrust in collaborations between academics and activists often emerges from the nature of power, the overarching economic logics that constitute spaces of collaboration, and the neoliberal transformations that have dominated universities across the globe. Whereas on one hand activists often feel that academics come in and out of activist settings in order to serve their academic agendas, on the other hand, academics articulate the importance of methodology and theory, which they suggest get lost in the emotional spaces of activism. The academic arrogance about the right method and right theory feels disempowering to many activists. The different forms of commitments to social change often arise from the very colonial formations that underlie the production of knowledge and that has shaped academic institutions historically. To the extent that academic-activist collaborations are driven by the impetus to contribute to the process of social change, they ought to be grounded in the question of how best to create networks and relationships of solidarity with the marginalized.

Negotiating power

The dominant ways of organizing power in the academe shape the nature of academic-activist partnerships. The role of knowledge production in sustaining the status quo and the rise in expertise-driven governmentality erase the opportunities for the voices of the oppressed to emerge, except when captured within the methodological tools of the academic elite. Power imbalances between academia and oppressed communities, as well as between academia and activists translate into top-down control that is often held by academics. In many instances, academics extract “data” from the oppressed, to be turned into another academic study that doesn’t contribute to the struggles of the oppressed. These power relationships often constitute the nature of academic engagement as tourism. The academic tourist goes in and out of communities, networking into activists and civil society service providers, creating the happy face of altruism.

The economics of sustainability

To sustain academic-activist collaborations, resources are critical. These resources support the collaborative work, often supporting the work of community organizers and activists. How the

resources are shared between academics and activists is a key question that shapes the nature of the relationship. The location of academics within universities often translates into greater opportunities for accessing resources. These inequalities in the distribution of resources between academics and activists play key roles in constituting the nature of the partnership and the ways in which collaboration plays out. Critical to sustaining partnerships between academics and activists is the role of honest dialogue about resources, how best to distribute them, and the ways in which they can be strategized toward purposes of social change. Most importantly, conversations about how best to serve the material needs of the oppressed ought to stay at the heart of conversations on social change collaborations.

The radical position as neoliberal performance

The radical position itself often becomes a branding tool for institutions and for academics within institutions. Devoid of collaborative anchors that are grounded in the struggles of the poor, these radical postures often end up co-opting activist struggles to serve the agendas of academics. In other instances, these radical postures enable specific cliques of academics to lay claim to institutionalized structures. Such radical performances often distract from the struggles of the oppressed, taking up spaces for voices of the oppressed. The radical posturing academic is often an “academic tourist,” travelling in and out of activist networks, artistic performances, and sites of oppression to make claims to institutionalized resources. Such forms of radical posturing often contribute to the mistrust among activists and oppressed communities toward academics. Moreover, by turning radicality into a performance for the market, the radical performance serves the neoliberal status quo.

Co-option and transformation

The co-option of the transformative impulse emerging from the voices of the oppressed is integral to the reproduction of neoliberalism. For instance, the image of the poor in need saturates the fundraising brochures of civil society organizations and academic think tanks/centers, pitching themselves to be the solutions to poverty. Without a commitment to listening to the voices of the poor, these efforts often individualize poverty, turn to individual behaviors and offer prescriptions that sustain the neoliberal status quo. Transformative agendas emerging from the voices of the oppressed often remain erased as neoliberal solutions are put forth.

Disrespect

Tied to the power imbalances highlighted earlier is the academic disrespect of the oppressed (Honneth, 2014). The erasure of the agentic capacity of the oppressed is anchored in this fundamental disrespect. The turning of the poor into sources of data or sources for service learning projects led by the academe is tied to the disrespect of the poor as meaningful participants in identifying problems and solving them. The culture of disrespect continues to disenfranchise the oppressed from decision-making structures and processes that are often held by experts. For instance, the conversations on poverty are held by academics and experts even as the poor are systematically erased from the spaces for conversations on poverty. The framing of the poor as lazy, undeserving, depending on dole, wasteful etc. is tied to the erasure of the poor from the spaces of articulation. In our ongoing work on poverty in Singapore, foregrounding the term poverty in an advocacy campaign created by an advisory board of the poor, disrupts the elite-expert-state driven narrative of low income.

Hopes for transformation

The challenges to transformative organizing brought about by the reach of the neoliberal ideology are disrupted through hopes that resonate in the voices of the oppressed, in the various movements of transformation led by the oppressed, and in the hopes that are seeded by struggles across the globe.

Power sharing

Given the ways in which power works historically and systematically to silence the voices of the disenfranchised, one of the ways in which academic-activist partnerships can transform power is through power sharing. The sharing of power often drawn from institutional settings and from access to institutional resources inverts the neoliberal logic driven by expertise and entrepreneurial innovation. Collaborations with communities at the margins offer opportunities for inverting the traditional forms of power that constitute academic knowledge production (Nilsen, 2013). In the work of CARE, we have sought to destabilize the sites of power that are intertwined

with the production of knowledge by seeking to collaborate with communities experiencing oppression. In doing so, culture-centered projects seek to create infrastructures of knowledge production. The work of CARE with women farmers organized in sanghams (cooperatives) in Telengana, South India, for instance, offers an alternative framework for organizing agriculture based on indigenous knowledge systems, understandings of climate change through lived experiences, and adaptations to climate change through indigenous methods of farming (Thaker & Dutta, 2016). Our collaboration here puts forth an anchor for knowledge claims that resist the neoliberal organizing of agriculture (Satheesh, 2000). Through the collaborative work, the indigenous knowledge of cultivating millet emerges as the anchor to transforming the neoliberal structures of agriculture that push Bt cotton on agrarian communities across India. The solidarities in inverting power fundamentally invert the nature of knowledge production, who produces knowledge and from where. Partnerships with activist communities can form the basis for such works of resistance, grounding such partnerships in the production of knowledge from the margins. Turning to the oppressed to build infrastructures for disseminating the knowledge that has long been held by communities experiencing oppression means that the ways of theorizing, methodologies, and formulations of what count as academic knowledge have to be challenged. The corruption in academic knowledge production that has systematically contributed to the oppression of communities through their exclusion from spaces needs to be interrogated, examining closely the underlying logics of free market promotion that have colonized academic life.

Critical reflexivity

To be critically reflexive is to continually question the position one occupies as an academic and as an activist (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010). Critical reflexivity often works as a method that enables the interrogation of power through close reflection on and critique of the position of power one occupies. The acknowledgment that knowledge production is situated within workings of power becomes the basis for closely examining the ways in which power gets tied up to one's position and to the overarching logics of academe. Through critical reflexivity, habits of activism enter academia, rendering impure the forms of knowledge production in the academe and interrogating the organizing logics that inhabit the academe. Critical reflexivity works as a method for transforming the very nature of knowledge, closely interrogating the power that is traditionally held

by academics and their relationships with state and market forces, and seeking to transform the methods through which knowledge is produced.

For me as an academic, this notion of continually interrogating the position I occupy has offered the framework for my activist work within the academe (Dutta & Basu, 2018). Recognizing that much of the work of activism is changing the rules through which knowledge is produced has meant that I learn to challenge on an everyday basis the habits of academia that we academics take-for-granted, the relationships of labour and production that constitute my privilege and access to spaces of articulation. This challenging of the everyday habits is important to creating transformative spaces for the creation of knowledge. For instance, when the voices of the disenfranchised interrogate the very organizing logics of academia or state structures that academia works within, academics collaborating with activists and disenfranchised voices are placed in situations of struggle, having to interrogate their own positions. The commitments of solidarity with the poor might often place academics in direct confrontation with university management and state funding structures. To authentically commit to participate in solidarity with activists might render as precarious the very position of the academic within academia. For instance, the activist-in-residence program that CARE runs and that Sue is a part of raises critical questions about the role of activism in academia, inviting scrutiny and surveillance from other academics as well as from powerful structures. Having Sue as an activist-in-residence draws the attention of academics brainwashed in the ideology of the free market, who ask: "What is CARE doing in a Business School?" Yet, these very questions and struggles are vital to the work of disrupting the norms of academic organizing, interrogating the taken-for-granted assumptions, and co-creating spaces for voices of the margins. These struggles for co-creating spaces for the voices of the margins within the academe and outside are salient globally, raising fundamental questions about the meaning of academic work and its relationship with activism, embedded within the structures of academia.

Humility

Humility as an ethic of partnership begins with a commitment to decolonizing the structures of knowledge production. To approach partnerships with humility then is to open up discursive spaces and sites to the many ways of knowing the world and being in it; at the same time the very desires for mainstream partnerships with state and industry actors within the overarching neoliberal framework is resisted. In the work that CARE has done with indigenous communities in Eastern India, the ethic of humility has nurtured openings for community organizing to identify and protect local cultural practices of healing (Dutta, 2004). Similarly, movements emerging from the struggles of indigenous communities against the large scale land grab carried out by the Indian state transform the neoliberal concept of development through the presence of indigenous voices in discursive spaces. An ethic of humility in partnerships turns toward the oppressed, saturating discursive spaces with stories emerging from communities that have been historically oppressed and erased (Dutta & Basu, 2018). In terms of method, humility as a guiding ethic suggests the constant questioning of the choices being made by academics when collaborating with activists and communities at the margins. Humility also disrupts the forms of academic tourism and radical posturing that inundate academia, questioning for instance the ways in which the concept of activism often tends to get taken up by academics to serve career opportunism. Consider for instance, the many instance when academic opportunists claim the activist mantle or label themselves as activists, quickly disappearing when activists and critical academics have placed their bodies on the line. Humility as an ethic challenges the very notion that abstract claims about activism can be made by academics who don't place their bodies on the line, co-opting activist articulations and struggles into academic papers and books that serve careers. Humility foregrounds the body as the site of articulation, placing the body into ongoing struggles against displacements, extractions, and erasures carried out by neoliberal policies (Bradford, 2016). Humility, for instance, in our collaborative work with migrant domestic workers and construction workers in Singapore (Dutta & Kaur-Gill, 2018), offers an anchor that disrupts the state-capitalist discourse of cosmopolitanism and creative city in Singapore (Yeoh & Lin, 2012). Humility also interrogates the privilege embedded in knowledge claims emerging from academic vanguards that seek to transform the poor by

educating them, without engaging in the actual work of building friendships of solidarity with the poor (Dutta, 2011).

Politics of transformation

Given the co-option of the radical position often within the structures of neoliberalism, it is critical for academic-activist collaborations to be explicitly anchored in efforts to transform the neoliberal political economy (Bradford, 2016). Consider for instance the rise in claims to activism within cultural studies networks in the university that see the work of activism as legitimizing and institutionalizing Cultural Studies within the university (Dutta, 2018b). Such claims to activism on one hand dilute the real work of activism in constituting a politics of transformation; and on the other hand, they co-opt the transformative politics of activism within the neoliberal structure of the academe. To the extent that activism can be co-opted into the university brand as an edgy marker of engagement with cutting edge challenges of poverty, inequality, and sustainability, it works toward furthering the agenda of the neoliberal academe, while at the same time erasing the spaces of resistance that actively seek to transform the neoliberal order.

In contrast, the explicit commitment to a politics of transformation is embodied in the risks that are borne by the bodies of academics and activists engaged in imagining alternative organizing structures. The neoliberal language of partnership, rather than being framed in the accommodationist language of "cultural research" in search of meanings and complexity that respond to the neoliberal diktats imposed by the state-capital nexus, albeit in the overarching framework of the market (see for instance Cassity & Ang, 2006; Ang, 2006), is actively countered through a project of transformative politics that foregrounds resistance. Partnerships, rather than being defined in the hegemonic logics of industry and state actors, are grounded in solidarities with the poor, and emerge from the voices of the poor (Dutta, 2018a, 2018b; Dutta & Kaur-Gill, 2018). The commitment to a politics of transformation translates into an explicitly antagonistic stance to market-based reforms of public spaces (including Universities), public sites, and public resources, driving social change communication partnerships that challenge the hegemonic logics of the market (Ciszek, 2017). That the ideologies of individualization, privatization, and financialization need to be challenged on an ongoing basis ought to form the basis of the explorations of the interplays between academia and activism.

The politics of transformation is as much about transforming the neoliberal ideology that has colonized the academe as it is about transforming the everyday spaces that have been co-opted by the neoliberal ideology. Moreover, this commitment to actively transforming hegemonic relations is embedded in an acknowledgment of the capacity of the poor and the marginalized to participate in decision-making processes as owners of knowledge, countering the top-down colonial undertones of vanguardist politics.

Conclusion

To create activist-academic spaces for collaboration calls for a dialogue-based ethic grounded in respect for the poor, an openness to resource sharing, and a commitment to transforming the neoliberal structures that have colonized life-worlds. Even as academics and activists occupy places within these structures or rely on resources drawn from these structures, the transformative capacity of academic-activist partnerships lies in an ongoing commitment to disrupt these structures through collaborations with the oppressed. The back-and-forth movement between critically interrogating the neoliberal discourses of partnerships and engagement and co-creating spaces for the voices of the margins offers anchors to new imaginations of economic and political possibilities that challenge the marginalizing effects of neoliberal governmentality.

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ⁱ The “No Singaporeans Left Behind” campaign was developed by an advisory group of poor community

members in Singapore, struggling to find solutions to their ongoing experienced of poverty. The poor, collectivized in advisory boards, created the objectives, strategy, design, and tactics of the campaign, with support from our research and design team. The campaign, originally called the “Singaporeans Left Behind” campaign had to be changed when the structure started questioning the purpose of the campaign and then offered the “No Singaporeans Left Behind” caption. The titling of the campaign and its slogan is one aspect of the various struggles that were brought out by the campaign, depicting the challenges to structures when the voices of the poor are heard.
