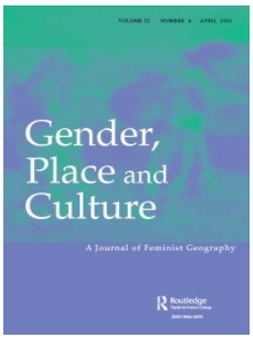

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Mobilising spaces of fugitive complaint within the neoliberal university

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ABSTRACT

We reflect on a year-long series of experiments held in collaboration with doctoral researchers from minoritised backgrounds. These experiments included creative methods, zine-making and collective conversations, all of which constitute our co-theorisations of spaces of fugitive complaint. In this paper, we critically reflect on the use and value of these composite spaces, by thinking about how complaints are vocalised and are heard, and their fugitive possibilities. We centre not just listening but also grieving the university and reassembling ourselves in the wake of institutional violence. We argue that in conjunction, these three modes – listening, grieving, and recovering – are necessary to unsettle hierarchies of power within the university and speak to fugitive acts of imagining other liberatory worlds.

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Complaint; fugitivity; neoliberal university; spaces of refuge and respite; Co-production

The start: navigating the university as 'other'

This paper brings together our reflections on a research project, nearly two years after its completion. The focus of our reflections is on spaces of affirmation for minoritised experiences within the sphere of higher education, and the challenges of making and sustaining such spaces. It is thus a reflective piece that hopes to share our nascent theorising about such spaces and practices with fellow navigators, or to borrow Ahmed's (2010) term, 'killjoys', in academia. In doing this, we draw on the works of feminist, black, indigenous, and other decolonial thinkers who also desire more just, more equitable and alternative forms of the university. (We wish to note at the outset that following extensive debates on why the word 'black' should or should not be capitalised, we have used the lowercase 'b' in this paper, except where cited publications have used the capital 'B'. While no one usage can be

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correct for all occasions, we are persuaded by the argument that a capital 'B' may more readily signal an essentialist and homogenised reading of the contributions of black scholars and black thought, and thus we use the lower-case 'b' "to rupture corporeal knowledge-making and excessive description that stagnate and steal livingness" (Rashid et al. 2023, 507; see also McKittrick 2021). We also acknowledge that the capitalised 'Black' has its uses for strategic and thoughtfully planned purposes. For consistency, we have extended the lower-case usage for other identities as well).

The project was an experiment by a research collective of staff and PhD scholars of colour based at one university in the UK. It was initiated to understand what 'belonging' can mean, or fail to mean, when inhabiting the spaces of UK Higher Education, and was devised as a set of three workshops that would build on each other, in the hope that the iterative process would also deepen our ties with one another over the course of the year. The workshops themselves drew upon a portfolio of creative methods (such as body-mapping, collaging, zine-making) which we experimented with, in small groups. Our ultimate goals, however, were shaped collectively, particularly in how we thought of ourselves in relation to each other, what modes and tactics of knowledge disruption we wanted to pursue, and how we saw ourselves evolving to meet our collective needs. While we struggled to sustain our gatherings after the project's completion, deep friendships and collaborative writing have emerged across different arrangements of the collective, which we will also reflect on, in this piece.

Much of our year-long research 'project' has been an experiment: namely, testing the conditions through which a group of us within the academy, from diverse backgrounds, can support each other, and for moments in time, experience freedom from institutional constraints and norms. Our writing and thinking are informed by our own experiences as minoritised scholars situated – at the time of the project from 2021 to 2022 – at various levels within the university, including as a doctoral researcher (Ghaffar), an early-career academic (Ramakrishnan), and a more established academic (Priyadharshini), while also recognising that our individual histories could only ever partially capture the heterogeneous intersections of race, class, caste, disability, gender, and sexuality. We also have different sets of privilege along these same axes, that puts us in complicated, even 'impossible' positions that we do not seek to reconcile; rather, we seek to 'acknowledge that they include specific machinic privileges that may be put to work in the service of decolonizations' (la paperson 2017, xxiii).

We did not always intend for the types of conversations, gatherings and affective outpourings that transpired; indeed, our initial aim was to convene a space where doctoral researchers from historically underrepresented backgrounds within HE could feel supported in exploring their sense of un/belonging. At the project's inception, the three of us had shared concerns

about the exclusions, and uneven academic and social trajectories that doctoral researchers, particularly from racialised backgrounds, experience during their time in the university. Our reflections here are cognisant of this and are also attuned to how racialised and minoritised subjects are positioned in the context of UK higher education, in the hopes that we can contribute to transnational conversations about who belongs to, and what claims are forged within the (colonial) university (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018; Rashid et al. 2023).

To stake claims on the university, or to complain about how it functions and who it excludes (Ahmed 2021), is to bring extra scrutiny and extra demands on already overworked and marginalised staff and students. At its core, colonialism, racism, sexism, ableism, and transphobia pervade universities and disciplines such as geography, marginalising 'othered' peoples and their knowledges. Important reflections have pointed to the failures of geography to address the toxicities of the discipline and its departments (Domosh 2015 and Oswin 2020), particularly sidelining women of colour (Kobayashi 2006; Mahtani 2014), queer/trans perspectives (Brice 2023; Rosenberg 2023) and also point to those who produce knowledge within the (western) academy as being largely white (Johnson 2020; Kinkaid and Fritzsche 2022). These challenges are also deeply embedded in UK HE, cutting across disciplines and types of institutions, to the extent that the flight of minoritised academics to institutions outside the UK is a matter of concern (Bhopal, Brown, and Jackson 2016).

The pursuit of higher education in the UK also exists in a context where government funding is increasingly scarce and students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, have taken on debt to finance their degrees, including doctoral studies (Mattocks and Briscoe-Palmer 2016). The hostile environment has placed undue burdens on international students (Lomer 2018), and academic precarity continues where few are able to find permanent positions (Loveday 2018; Rao, Hosein and Raaper 2021). Against these conditions, there are also growing concerns over the worsening of mental health and wellbeing of research students, associated with neoliberal practices prevalent within higher education (Dakka and Wade 2023; Peake and Mullings 2016). To make sense of our efforts in making an affirming space in this context, we have turned to the scholarship of decolonial, feminist, and anti-racist thinkers and activists as they work within and outside academia. These works were instrumental in our attempts to convene such spaces in the first instance, and we hope that taken together with our efforts and those of others that came before us, these reflections offer ways of inhabiting the university differently.

Increasingly, scholarship with an anti-racist, and anti-oppressive praxis has responded to calls for new formations of solidarity that directly confront exclusion and marginalization (De Lissovoy and Brown 2013; Gaztambide-Fernández,

Brant, and Desai 2022; Kincaid, Parikh, and Ranjbar 2022; Oswin 2020). Forms of gathering and respite have organised against and despite the neoliberal university – particularly graduate student focused – from 'covens' (Smyth, Linz, and Hudson 2020) to collectives (Al-Saleh and Noterman 2021; Athena Co-Learning Collective 2018; Faria et al. 2019; FLOCK 2020; Puāwai Collective 2019), and we draw inspiration from them. These formations tend to resist, however unevenly, the pressures to turn excluded identities and positionalities into the service of the neoliberal university in superficial or institutionally performative ways. The neoliberal university (Ball and Olmedo 2023) has been observed demanding emotional labour from minoritised subjects, particularly in taking the lead on 'diversity' initiatives which become tools to enhance the reputation of universities as 'diverse', while paradoxically eliding the tackling of inequity or discrimination (Ahmed 2012).

In terms of diversity initiatives, there is not only the problematic institutional image management that occurs through 'diversity' practices (Ahmed 2007, 2012), but also a dreaded, forced conviviality that is extracted. Of particular interest to us is recent work by Rashid et al. (2023) who aptly describe how 'conviviality appears in many coded formations such as diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives (DEI), the creation of centralised DEI, visibility of multicultural programming …' (497) and so forth, and instead replicates practices that are colonising. These are panels, committees, and working groups that we have ourselves have been a part of, only to leave, exhausted by the performative demands of 'diversity work' (Ahmed 2012). Similarly, diversity initiatives can also be appropriated by a neoliberal university as part of a 'decolonisation' mission that is in danger of becoming the new orthodoxy. For example, audit cultures and their measures (in the UK these include the 'Teaching Excellence Framework', the 'Research Excellence Framework', impact factors, research power, and so on) that instrumentally attempt to account for equality, diversity and inclusion can paradoxically cause racism to flourish because the whiteness of the institution is unexamined (Ali 2022) and where decolonisation becomes merely performative (Two Convivial Thinkers 2023). (For a discussion on the particular types of 'research cultures' and 'research environments' reified through these audit frameworks, amidst processes of rampant casualisation and devaluation of labour in UK universities, see Callard (2024).) Despite these pitfalls, we are encouraged by Rashid et al. (2023) who manage to find space to recuperate and repurpose 'conviviality' for decolonial endeavours, and Jazeel (2017) who presses us to shift the focus from extant disciplinary and institutional spaces instead towards 'the people, places and communities on and with which we work' (334).

It would be remiss for us to lay waste to the entire top-down 'decolonial' directive within (colonial) universities, and while we are not alone in our concern for what such efforts elide, obscure, or reproduce (Esson et al. 2017), we are still trying to find a mix that works for our ethics and our dreams of

queer, black, and indigenous futures as core to the university. For la paperson (2017), this mix is inherent to being located within the 'machine' that is the contemporary university:

> The bits of machinery that make up a decolonizing university are driven by decolonial desires, with decolonial dreamers who are subversively part of the machinery, and part machine themselves. These subversive beings wreck, scavenge, retool, and reassemble the colonizing university into decolonizing contraptions (xiii).

If we were to contribute to the 'reassembling' of the university, to borrow from la paperson, what might these 'reassembling' efforts look like as we turn our attention to the needs of under-represented communities?

Influenced by these promising ideas from la paperson (2017), Jazeel (2017) and Rashid et al. (2023) we began to understand our project as one of creating an affirming space where there is refuge and respite from the more hostile context of higher education, for our community of minoritised doctoral students. We briefly set out the contours and glaring inequities of this context within which the project arose: while race and ethnicity are often categorised under the term 'BAME' (Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic or just 'BME') in the UK – and we have used it as well to render ourselves legible to funding bodies and institutions – it brings its own baggage, not least in homogenizing identities, and papering over substantial differences in university awarding gaps, pursuit of further education, and staff and PhD student retention (DaCosta, Dixon-Smith, and Singh 2021). That difference within the institution is painted with broad brushstrokes is problematic, given the particular struggles that black students face within the university. According to a report authored by the organisation Leading Routes (2019), only 3% of the intake of PhD students in 2017/2018 were black. The number of doctoral scholarships awarded by UK research funding bodies to black students were equally dismal – demonstrating how it is not surprising that a 'broken pipeline', from undergraduate to PhD study, is pervasive (see Desai 2017). Okoye (2021) writes on the environment in which black students pursue postgraduate study in the UK, whereby everyday microaggressions create strains on student mental well-being requiring additional pastoral support from supervisors. Elsewhere Arday (2018) documents the specific mental health struggles that undergraduate minoritized students face, and how the whiteness of universities can engender further experiences of alienation and distrust in formal mental health services. These struggles become compounded too, by the university writ large that prioritises particular 'masculinist performances of the self' (Parizeau et al. 2016, 196) that suppresses and marginalises other experiences of 'failure' and loneliness.

The sense of being alone, isolated, and adrift is captured well by Tolia-Kelly (2017) who uses the term 'felt violences' to articulate feeling out-of-place. Drawing on multiple accounts of minoritised academic

researchers, amalgamated in one voice to protect identity, Tolia-Kelly (ibid) ends the piece with this vignette: '… [My] body feels heavy. No energy to write or think creatively … Have to find an intellectual home; a safe workplace with dignity and respect. And to feel in-place (327).' Exclusionary spaces, disciplines, and universities serve to alienate and sever a sense of community and self (Faria et al. 2019; Joshi, McCutcheon, and Sweet 2015). This body of literature demonstrates the debilitating effects on both students and staff who might not fit into codes of behaviour, productivity, and collegiality that the university demands. Then where and how might students who are racialised-as-other belong? Our project was an experiment working on securing this sense of togetherness and of feeling 'in-place' rather than out-of-place particularly for doctoral students of colour.

Mobilising spaces of fugitive complaint

In this section, we highlight core concepts and ideas that influenced our thinking about mobilising new kinds of spaces in the university; of what ideas the 'undercommons' - of communal spaces of fugitivity, complaint, refuge, and respite - can offer us in this endeavour. One mode of being together and 'reassembling' the university machine, relies on the idea we term 'spaces of fugitive complaint', that is spaces that allow us to defy the enclosures and boxes that the university often forces upon those who seek to study and be together otherwise. We draw on black radical tradition and thought to explore what such spaces could look like and offer, beyond safety. In particular, we spend time with Harney and Moten (2013) and their conceptualisation of the 'undercommons', where 'study' happens. Study is 'what you do with other people' (ibid, 110), a relational, common, intellectual practice. This is not the established, business-as-usual study within the university that defines relationality in problematic ways, such as the 'forced conviviality' of diversity work, or the misappropriation of 'decolonisation' to reinforce a new orthodoxy, as discussed earlier. This mode of study consciously tries to evade/avoid the compromises that may prioritise safety over the creative joy of radical thinking and work. It is not surprising that such study happens on the margins and amongst those who for various reasons have been forced to inhabit the margins. As Harney and Moten (2013) set out, study in the 'undercommons' is about reclaiming a mode of life that the institution may not recognise:

> To enter this space is to inhabit the ruptural and enraptured disclosure of the commons that fugitive enlightenment enacts, the criminal, matricidal, queer, in the cistern, on the stroll of the stolen life, the life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back, where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives the commons (28).

Before we gathered as a group, we (the three authors/initiators of the project) spent time imagining a non-hierarchical space where our identities

as students, teachers, and mentors are put aside for creative conversations and endeavours – though we were nervous about how this might transpire. 'Safe' spaces felt limiting and limited in what we were trying to achieve. While critical discussions of safe spaces in geography have noted they offer relationality, multiplicity, possibility, and meaning-making (The Roestone Collective 2014; Mountz 2017), we see that 'safe' spaces efface our efforts of constantly troubling outwards. Instead, the indeterminacy of the undercommons that Harney and Moten (2013) point to is inherently 'unsafe', whereby "the undercommons, its maroons, are always at war, always in hiding" (30) from a university that disciplines unruly bodies and demands the following of established norms.

This is not to say that the ability to decompress and repair are unavailable in the 'undercommons' or spaces that collectively build new and different worlds. For instance, Allen (2020) describes how such spaces also offer 'respite'. While studying a marching band at an historically black college/university (HCBU) – in this case Marching 100 at Florida A&M University (FAMU) – Allen (ibid) finds that the marching band, and wider university offered respondents a 'place of respite' or an ability to find 'affirmative resonance' – centring in this case 'Black people's visions, concerns and lives' (1571). This isn't to ignore the wider violent structures that necessitate such spaces, according to Allen (2020), but to point to what types of reparative practices and relations can emerge if given support. We hoped our gatherings would build and strengthen our connections to each other in this space, with respite from institutional pressures and contractual relations.

As Rashid et al. (2023) point out, these sorts of spaces have the capacity to offer refuge from an alienating world. Theorising a 'fugitive convivial praxis', they also evoke Harney and Moten's (2013) idea of the 'undercommons', which imbued their graduate student collective: curiosity, kinship, and radical pedagogies were allowed to flourish in their gatherings. The description of a radically different space/time by Rashid et al. (2023) resonates with our own experience: 'the university undercommons remain a place of refuge where scholars, as subversive intellectuals can gather in free discourse, be it unsafe, out of love and desire for other worlds' (498). Returning to the importance of Harney and Moten's (2013) conceptualisation of "study", Trafí-Prats (2024) finds that engaging in sensory-spatial explorations of black urban histories in Manchester with students, brings together people to "think with one another in mutual affection" (13) and ultimately, to undo binaries such as hope/dread and belonging/alienation. We specifically unsettle the binary of un/belonging in our work to understand what alternative imaginaries can be held in relation to the university, particularly those that evade the university's capture.

Similar to Rashid et al.'s (2023) discovery of the 'undercommons' in their university basement gatherings, we found that the 'undercommons', as an

anticipatory mode converged amidst us in unexpected and liberating ways. For some of us in the employ of the institution, this space allowed us to remake ourselves as other than lecturer/professor, other than supervisor, other than administrator/organiser, forging new kinds of affectionate kinship with fellow students, becoming co-students ourselves. For doctoral scholars, the space allowed them to be other than a registered student with obligations and milestones to reach. It allowed them to speak of being a son, grandchild, sister or just homesick. The space of the 'undercommons' thus awoke in us a sense of fugitivity, an escape or exit from the relations and structures shaped by the neoliberal university.

Through our collective reading and thinking, we came to better understand the idea that fugitivity is about a persistent struggle towards freedom as a practice of place-making (Gilmore 2017; Winston 2021). Fugitivity remains processual, non-linear, and generative – and thus, thinking about these multiple modes of place-making in conjunction can further destabilise and delegitimise hegemonic structures and relations offered by the neoliberal university. These are not simple moves/movements/configurations to refuse the colonial presents within the university, but rather constitute place-making 'otherwise' (Gross-Wyrtzen and Moulton 2023), made possible partly because 'fugitivity offers us language for world-building beyond racial subjugation, enclosure, and bondage' (Rashid et al. 2023, 504) and is built on cooperation and solidarity (Winston 2021).

The perpetual struggle that fugitivity speaks to, according to Gross-Wyrtzen and Moulton (2023), can be also read as a 'method'. A fugitive praxis is conceptualised as exceeding notions of physical or political space and which involves the symbolic, aesthetic, and material (2023, 1266). They identify three operations of 'knowledge-making, kin-making and place-making' (1259). The emphasis on making is something that we took seriously in our workshop gatherings where we worked towards an archive of inhabiting the university otherwise: body maps, collages, photo maps of campus, and zines. The ways in which these makings also made us as a collective is the subject of another paper (Concrete Collective 2024). Here we note the alternative forms of knowing and being at the university that making enabled: from identifying spaces on campus that brought us joy or solace or dread, to practices of care and mentorship that could exploit cracks in the university's neoliberal and colonising grounds. These acts of making could also simultaneously rupture the disciplinary and knowledge enclosures pervasive within the university; and reflecting, making, and writing together as a collective offered us a transdisciplinary, creative experience.

As the project was set up to explore 'belonging' among doctoral students, we were aware that this space would only function if we could simultaneously dream and complain. We thus turn to 'complaint' (Ahmed 2021), and the need to recuperate complaint from the many doors that the institution

can close and keep closed. From Ahmed (2021), we are made aware of institutional blockages and cultures of silencing when formal and informal complaints (largely of bullying and sexual abuse) can get lost in a bureaucratic maze of processes that sap energies. For us, complaint animated different concerns but assembled multiple, common emotions, such as rage, grief, and loss as well as desires for another university. Activating the 'feminist ear' (Ahmed 2021, 3) is thus an integral part of the process of reckoning with our grief, challenging harm and enacting fugitivity.

We also recognise the accountability that comes with listening – in that we too did not want to just become a 'filing cabinet' (2021, 15) for the microaggressions or unjust and hierarchical relations that those amongst us have experienced in the academy. Thus, '[a]lthough complaint can be shattering … to make a complaint is often to fight for something. To refuse what has come to be is to fight to be' (2021, 26). And these 'fights' are also openings that promise another kind of university. Thus, our final workshop was designed to use the complaints, grief, and any sense of being forced into the interstices of the university to find common ground, solidarity, and most of all, to forge space to imagine new kinds of relations and futures for the academy.

We have thus far described some key features that helped conceptualise spaces of fugitive complaint, and its importance for us on the project – a space offering respite, refuge, fugitivity, and embodying the spirit of the undercommons – and one in which it was safe to complain and re-imagine. We anticipated and hoped for a few of these features to manifest in our project. Others became salient either during the project or emerged as we reflected on our experiences after the project officially ended. The next section focuses more specifically on how these features manifested as a fugitive space in a way that was meaningful for us as individuals, but more importantly, for us as a collective.

In the clearing: openings and reassembling

> Refusal is the shorthand for what can't be named within the conceptual field of enclosure. It expresses our unwillingness to be conscripted to man's project or world. It is easier to index than to describe. All of the gestures bent on eluding the imposed terms of order and value – the me and mine, the propertied earth. The vision of us in the clearing best conveys it. (Saidiya Hartman, cited in Sharpe 2023, 245).

Here, we draw on our experiences of the project to illustrate the ways in which this space of fugitive complaint unfolded. There were significant differences in our experiences that reflected our heterogeneous positionalities, but simultaneously, we could identify shared points of departure and related struggles against erasure within the university. If we appear to gloss over the substantive conversations and concerns shared within our gatherings, this is

intentional. Many of the conversations we had were incredibly personal and brought up difficult topics, for instance, on family pressures that inhibited graduate study, the burden of being a first-generation student, and the effects of repeatedly encountering white institutional spaces. We believe it is right to refuse access to these intimate details for a variety of reasons. The idea of refusal is conceptualised in indigenous (Simpson 2007; Tuck and Yang 2014) and black feminist scholarship (McKittrick 2021) and has synergies with the 'feminist ear' described earlier, whereby questions must be asked about what we focus on in our conversations, what we share, and what we decide to write. This means that not everything must be made available for consumption by the academy, and following Tuck and Yang (2014), we refuse 'to portray/betray them [our interlocutors] to the spectacle of the settler colonial gaze' (223). Or as McKittrick asserts: 'And somethings we keep to ourselves. They cannot have everything. Stop her autopsy. They cannot have everything' (2021, 7).

We take seriously the idea that pain, hurt, grief and rage are intimate, personal and should be treated with care. Instead, we share threads of conversations that were written up as collective notes – drafted by the authors with the opportunity to edit by other members of our collective – as an invitation to others to read the contours of what transpired, rather than being privy to every detail. Additionally, we share the general themes that emerged when we held collaging and zine-making workshops.

Listening, grieving, and recovering

The collective that emerged was not pre-determined, and we embraced organic developments and desires in the creative re-making of our fugitive spaces and what we believed was a small but meaningful intervention in reassembling the colonial university. Building on what this fugitive space praxis might look like, we focused on the atmospheres/affects that emerge from being present within these spaces and how they can transform our relationships and desires to take refuge from and remake the university. Even the seemingly mundane was important for how we engaged with each other in this space, becoming a starting point for our ethics of how we treated others across the university and practiced 'radical vulnerability' (Nagar 2019). For instance, we chose to gather in the only grand and historic (but renovated/modernised) building at the outer reaches of our concrete-brutalist campus, in a room that felt open, with glass panels for a whole wall; with gardens and fields beyond, that created a different ambience from the 'typical' university spaces we were used to. We also experimented with how we might introduce ourselves. Rather than offer our names followed by departmental affiliation, and our area of research interest/expertise, we attempted to foreground other parts of our lives that were less determined by the institution.

We spent time reflecting on objects or images that carried meaning for us, a pair of gloves, a wristband, an object from one's hometown, a tattoo, and so on. This did not signify a mere introductory exercise, but rather it allowed us to side-step the institution and offer an entry point into how we might hear, see, and know each other and our own selves differently. Indeed, our departmental and disciplinary affiliations – across geography, sociology, education and social work – fell away as we conspired together on how our 'undisciplining' could enact mutuality and relationality differently.

We have co-authored as a collective elsewhere, where we talk about the role that creative arts-based methods played: from collaging to body-mapping to zine-making, and the experimentations we held (Ghaffar et al. 2024). Here, we reflect on how acts of listening, grieving and recovering became mobilised for a fugitive praxis through 'making'. For instance, through the method of 'body-mapping' (see Luckett and Bagelman 2023 as an example), we traced our bodily outlines on paper, connecting our bodily sense of dis/comfort to the institution

– its buildings, green spaces, libraries, and cafes – and locating exclusions and microaggressions within our bodies is how we made sense of our belonging. To see it mapped out so visibly and viscerally generated important conversations of where we see ourselves within the discipline and university, and if either could ever be a space where we belong. Embodiment is central in one of our collective notes from a safe space gathering where we reflected on what conversations body-mapping elicited:

> For the body mapping, we debated how to balance the literal interpretation of the body vs. thinking more abstractly about embodied feelings. Some of the ideas that emerged included balancing the pressures of achieving vs. taking time to relax – and that even the latter can be pressure-laden and how this pressure is carried on the shoulders. We also talked about stresses that manifested bodily: such as eating more and how certain types of fieldwork may mean a (gendered) control of bodily functions. Other thoughts included thinking about home as a place to rest (put one's feet up) and whether that existed, and where; the brain as a messy place and things that potentially silence us. (November 2021).

These are all complaints – of the expectations, the pressures, the mixed feelings of home, and frustration for the institutional workings of the university. For Ahmed (2021), complaint works as a 'feminist pedagogy … and frustration can be a feminist record' (7). Re-reading our notes, it became evident that some of us had been/were disoriented by the university and had internalised this – the bodily scale and viscerality of what we were experiencing was important to acknowledge (see Joshi, McCutcheon, and Sweet 2015). The spaces provided by the workshops, however, allowed us to collectively acknowledge these frustrations and share in our grief. As Ahmed notes, "complaint can be an expression of grief, pain or dissatisfaction, something that is a cause of protest or outcry, a bodily ailment as well as formal

allegation" (2021, 101–2). Grief exists because we see collective scholarship and producing knowledge differently as modes of emancipatory transformation for/within the university; grief manifests when educational spaces become foreclosed to such possibilities and people and structures within the university expose themselves as key agents who reproduce exclusion.

For instance, most of our collective were classed as "international students" who spent an extraordinary amount of time navigating the UK's creation of a 'hostile environment' through visa regulations. UK universities have chosen to support the bureaucracies of the UK Home Office (Dear 2018), including but not limited to monitoring university attendance and travel abroad, adding further paperwork to already burdensome visa processes, and not recognising the extra costs that applying for visas and moving countries demands. Thus, in our collective, minoritised identities needed to be talked about in conjunction with how the university centres white, domestic bodies as core to the workings of the university (Kinkaid, Parikh, and Ranjbar 2022; Lomer and Mittelmeier 2023; Mittelmeier and Cockayne 2023). We listened to each other's experiences of difficult conversations, including the start-up costs of moving countries and losing inordinate amounts of time chasing bureaucratic administrators. One of our collective members worked as a cleaner at a hotel to pay off a loan from their family and to tide them over until their scholarship was disbursed (a scholarship itself that was caught up in multiple quagmires) while managing a full-time graduate course load – something they grieved about in isolation as they couldn't share this experience with others in their cohort. We listened as another member shared how their home was in an occupied territory, and how this meant they needed letters of support from the institution to render their travel abroad legitimate to the occupying force – vital documents that could render safety for them and their family back home, but which the university delayed producing. This delay was experienced as a betrayal given the scholar's emotional investment in the university and was closely intertwined with grief over their sense of isolation from the institution which required them to report regularly to immigration police instead.

These are conversations that the predominantly white institution often does not know about, or finds hard to understand, or are minimised. They bubble below the veneer of the 'welcoming' institution. Members of the collective reported on how when they requested supporting letters, or temporary financial help, or simply anticipated a friendly hearing in sharing their troubles, were sent in circles as the institution's staff checked rules and endlessly consulted each other. Many innocuous and legitimate requests for support went through several rounds of administrative checks and queries before being refused or reluctantly permitted. Members shared how they felt infantalised by the institution's power. Our own engagement with complaint was multi-fold as we (the authors) too shared experiences of routinely feeling dismissed or silenced in institutional spaces. These conversations and collective

sharing of complaint and grief, of how we have inhabited multiple positionalities, were important for drawing out commonalities, but also for offering an affective balm against these rigid bureaucratic procedures that characterised so much of everyday life within the institution for us. The fugitive spaces we collectively forged allowed us to offer the opportunity to complain, be listened to, and to heal/recover in the conviviality/solidarity of the group.

Some of our grief stemmed from a reckoning of what we believed the university to represent, particularly for those within the group who were first-generation, working-class graduates, were not UK citizens, or came from contexts where they did not always 'fit' with family and community expectations. The university was where we had imagined that we might belong more readily but instead many of us were faced with having to 'explain' matters of caste, class, religion, language, race/ethnicity, gender and sexuality in ways that left us underwhelmed and exhausted. Oswin's (2020) reflections resonate with some of our initial journeys through the academy: 'I was primed and ready and naïve/privileged/desperate enough to believe assurances that the academy could save me and others' (12). Instead, to be in the university was to be constantly reminded of its colonial, imperial, elitist and exclusionary pasts and present, and also how we ourselves can come to be imbricated within these structures.

However, complaint can be resuscitated for other ends too, including recovery. Our final collaging and zine-making workshop involved independent as well as collective 'making'. A key goal for us on the project was to use our imagination and creativity to re-imagine and reassemble a new kind of university, one in which we did not feel we had to strive to belong (see Bagelman and Bagelman 2016). To capture this reimagining, the design of our zine ended up in a flip format: one half embodied the critical spirit of complaint (unbelonging) and the other half, the recovering spirit of imagination towards belonging on our terms, to liberatory and radical formations. The middle page was a spread of visuals that highlighted both unbelonging and the potential for a desired university. Our production of the zine involved conversations about a format that called for a reader who would have to do the hard work of deciphering our multiple meanings we held and the relations we had built to the university and each other. Some of the visuals were deliberately cryptic – we were reluctant to hand over hard-won knowledge, emotion, and experience too easily, and in the spirit of fugitivity, we accepted that: 'We are not obsequious. We are not abject. We know more. We know. We know ourselves.' (McKittrick 2021, 46). The physical and online (https://www.eggboxpublishing.com/product-page/degrees-of-belonging-zine)copy of the zine required readers to flip it over, half-way through, an act that we hoped would instigate an imaginative flipping from awful reality to future promise. The zine served as an archive to ourselves and readers, not just of

how and why we were complaining, but how dreams, written collectively could map an alternative university.

This creative and non-traditional 'output' was also a way of carving a space that did not neatly fit into recognisable ways of producing and disseminating knowledge. Dakka and Wade (2023, 744) talk of the ways in which doctoral students are charged with generating knowledge and of how 'they do so irrespective of the spatial dissonance or temporal arrythmia experienced on a daily basis, within calendars and deadlines, spaces and places that are not aligned for the reflection, meditation and self-awareness that is required for intellectual endeavour'. Taking time and space to craft and assemble the zine was an expression of knowledge for recovery from the production machine. Simultaneously ephemeral and durable, the zine traversed multiple temporalities but also demonstrated how racialized, classed, gendered, and sexualized graduate students and staff could write their multiple positionalities into collective knowledge of rupturing and dreaming another university and worlds.

The final/ish overture: Where to next?

Our collective experimentations with fugitive spaces speak to how we might co-create, inhabit and (re)imagine the university otherwise. Focusing on space – physical, metaphorical, imagined, desired and feared – has led us to valuable anti-racist, decolonial, and feminist scholarship that has grounded and reaffirmed our experiences, while inspiring us to think radically about what emancipatory spaces – the 'undercommons' - within UK higher education might look like. Our many complaints and grievances about institutional machinery and its constraining spaces were part of our efforts to refuse the university's disciplining and silencing of racialised students and staff. Our felt experiences and shared understandings also fuelled our desires to escape spaces that are dominated and defined by relations of indifference, insecurity and precarity. Reassembling ourselves alongside the university, then, required careful attention to what enclosures are consistently reproduced through and by the university. Our subsequent refusals included limiting the appropriation of our work on this project as part of its 'diversity' or decolonising initiatives.

Our endeavours and experimentations also illuminate the importance of carving out and mobilising spaces of collective 'fugitive complaint' and collective healing within - and against - the everyday hostilities of life in institutions of higher education. By starting with ways of relating to each other beyond what the institution dictates, we conjured up spaces that did not exist for us previously – spaces of respite and refuge. Fugitive spaces. By using creative, making-focused methods in the workshops, we found ways of complaining, listening, grieving, and recovering. Our complaints and grievances became a springboard to imagine our fantasy spaces of higher education that articulated new forms of belonging, without exploitation, explanation, or justification.

While the fugitive spaces were ephemeral – part a product of our project and our collective need – we found that they are not the only forms where fugitive complaint can transpire. Indeed, we are inspired by other anti-racist, feminist gatherings that take place across and beyond Anglo-American universities (see, for example, Geobrujas-Communidad de Geógrafas and Mason-Deese 2021). Instead, these multiple arrangements and improvisations of fugitive complaint including our own humble offering, when taken together, can be read for the dimensions of the university that offer care and tenderness as an antidote to its bureaucratic norms. The slogan 'another university is possible' that has been a rallying cry on university picket lines is to us, not just lip-service, for it symbolises opportunities to keep studying and being in unruly ways. Beyond discipline, these ways now become more apparent to us than ever. In this sense, we have been collectively schooled in the spirit of fugitivity, of seeing and thinking otherwise, where another university becomes more present – and indeed, we are excited and energised by these possibilities and where they might lead us next.

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