



# An attempt to become an-Other critical scholar: Bridging as ‘activist performativity’

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## Abstract

This essay invites my colleagues in business schools to do their research differently by working with and for community/grassroots organisations. Based on my fieldwork experience at a free food store problematising food surplus and food waste in Aotearoa New Zealand, I offer ‘activist performativity’ as a scholarship modality that builds on critical praxis aligning activism, research and teaching for a socially just and sustainable society. I present my attempt to become an-Other critical scholar *bridging* multiple domains as a case of activist performativity with the hope of collectively transforming the alienating research practices at business schools as critical scholars.

## Keywords

Academic activism, activist performativity, an-Other critical scholar, bridging, community organisations, critical praxis

## Introduction

In this essay, by drawing on my fieldwork experience at a community organisation problematising food surplus and food waste in Aotearoa New Zealand, I call for more activist research in the neo-liberal academy through activist performativity. I build my argument on the scholarly conversations about postcapitalism (Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2006), alternative organising (Just, De Cock, and Schaefer, 2021; Parker and Parker, 2017; Zanoni et al., 2017), critical performativity (Fleming and Banerjee, 2016; Reedy and King, 2019) and activist turn in critical management studies (Alakavuklar, 2020; Contu, 2018, 2020; Grosser, 2021; Prichard and Alakavuklar, 2019; Prichard and Benschop, 2018; Weatherall, 2021). As a case of activist performativity, I present the practice of ‘bridging’ to inspire and invite my colleagues to engage more with alternative/non-capitalist practice(s).

While this essay is a personal ‘tale of the field’, I believe that the challenges and opportunities related to my experience will resonate with many colleagues who feel disengaged and alienated

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due to the dominant ideological and epistemological assumptions at the business schools, including, but not limited to, corporation as the organisational and neoliberal capitalism as the economic preferred models; implications for ‘business managers’ with a top-down technocratic view; competitive and individualistic research practices reinforcing ‘playing the game’ of publishing; focusing on tiny theoretical gap-spotting as research disconnected from societal challenges; and instrumental critique without engaging with the relevant societal actors practising social change. In such a context,

business school academics are not expected to engage in radical work (i.e., to ask awkward questions about the current system, to forge progressive alliances and to build theories and practices that have a deep and intimate critical concern with social, economic and epistemic justice). (Contu, 2020: 744)

Alternatively, I argue that engaging with community organisations creates opportunities to perform our scholarship differently, closer to injustices and practices of social change as a scholar.

My fieldwork took place at a free food store that was officially registered as a charity store, an intriguing case of micro-scale ‘alternative economy’ compared with dominant organisational models driven by capitalist logic and an entry point for doing socially relevant research as a critical scholar (Dunne et al., 2008). With a social agenda tackling challenges of food poverty, food waste and sustainability, the store was built on non-capitalist and solidarity practices prioritising community well-being, such as giving food free to meet needs, non-monetary exchange relations and collective volunteer labour, all in all presenting an opportunity to (re)consider how the economy can be organised differently.

Zanoni et al. (2017) argue that engaging with such community attempts ‘offers [an] alternative paradigm for ‘other’ critical research, from which we can start becoming ‘other’ critical scholars’ (p. 582). Before my fieldwork experience, my research and political action problematising dominant capitalist relations were confined within the university’s boundaries and used to take only the form of reading and writing (cf. Shukaitis and Graeber, 2007), mainly in idealised theoretical echo chambers built by academics. My scholarly ideas were formulaic and mostly abstract, considering the role of alternative organisations in driving social change. Therefore, as I explain throughout the essay, my engagement with the community initiative opened a new path through which I encountered new organisational practices, postcapitalist theories and alternative critical scholarship modalities aligning research, pedagogy and activism. It was a ‘fundamental shift’ in my praxis as an academic (Zanoni et al., 2017: 583), paving the way to become an-Other critical scholar bringing together practice-based and theory-informed knowledge(s) about day-to-day social transformation.

With this essay, I call for reconfiguring the ‘norms of academic scholarship’ (Brewis and Bell, 2020: 534) with an activist agenda that prioritises social change over a particular understanding of scholarship disillusioned with the publish-or-perish neoliberal logic reinforcing theoretical rigour over relevance more and more. Hence, this piece is part of ongoing conversations about transforming our scholarship (Contu, 2020), changing the role critique can play (Prichard and Alakavuklar, 2019) and identifying our research locale for social justice (Weatherall, 2021). As an outcome, I demonstrate how ‘bridging’ can be a case of ‘activist performativity’ that transforms research practices/researcher identity, contributes to critical pedagogy and supports community work.

With this essay, I also hope to inspire my colleagues to engage more with community/grassroots organisations, their practices and social causes against the background of business schools that are haunted by capitalist ideology (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2021) and mimic the private enterprise (Fleming, 2020), thereby eventually alienating us (Alakavuklar et al., 2017). Hence, through activist performativity and doing socially meaningful and relevant research (Tourish, 2020), we can

take our intellectual freedom back from the neoliberal business schools imposing a particular scholarship (Jones et al., 2020).

In the following, first, I present the societal challenge of ‘poverty amidst abundance’ in which the free food store emerges as a community solution in the Aotearoa New Zealand context. After sharing my lessons learned, I elaborate on ‘activist performativity’ and the case of ‘bridging’ to discuss how my attempt to become an-Other critical scholar has been an ongoing journey. To conclude, I invite my colleagues to reimagine and rethink how our scholarship can be performed differently with all the struggles, risks and failures involved (Callahan and Elliott, 2019; Weatherall, 2021).

## **The societal challenge of ‘poverty amidst abundance’**

In popular media (Stuart, 2009; Woolf, 2020) and academic research (Campbell et al., 2017; Huang et al., 2020), there is a rising social, ethical, environmental and economic concern regarding the amount of food surplus becoming waste. While governmental initiatives enact food donation laws forbidding wasting surplus food and forcing retailers to donate it to charities,<sup>1</sup> there is a growing organisational mobilisation at different scales to deal with surplus food and food waste (Vlaholias et al., 2015). What is more striking is the gap between surplus food and food poverty. While ‘around 931 million tonnes of food waste was generated’, an equivalent of 17 percent of total global food production, through households, food service and retail (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2021: 8), it is estimated that more than 800 million people are affected by chronic food deprivation globally (FAO et al., 2018). The simultaneous existence of large-scale waste and food poverty is an alarming indication of global inequality, not to mention the impact of waste on climate change.

Regarding organisational mobilisation of food surplus, our taken-for-granted economic relations and structural barriers are significant challenges (Böhm et al., 2020). For instance, food banks and charities are mostly considered band-aid solutions that normalise and depoliticise food poverty (Caplan, 2017). Despite their best intentions, they cannot confront the structural and global aspects of food poverty and related big societal questions such as ‘fair redistribution of food’ (Poppendieck, 1998; Szende, 2015). There are small-scale solutions all around the world out of goodwill. However, the problem of food surplus, food waste, and food poverty persists and creates a challenge for not only such organisations but also social movements, governments and universities considering the social consequences of (economic) inequality (Holt-Giménez, 2019).

When it comes to the local context, Aotearoa New Zealand used to be one of the leading food exporters for the United Kingdom before joining the European Union (New Zealand School of Export, 2011). As a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it is considered a developed country known as a world leader in food (Invest New Zealand, 2023). However, while food is abundant in this country, similar to other countries, and as argued above, there are significant issues regarding food poverty and accessing healthy food. For instance, in 2017, families asking for food parcels from the Salvation Army food banks increased by 12 percent (Johnson, 2018), and the number of one-off food grants and their cost to the government rose more than 50 percent compared with 2 years earlier (Bracewell-Worrall, 2018). While food waste at the retail level is estimated at 13 kg per capita per year (Goodman-Smith et al., 2020), 24.372 tonnes of food is thrown away by cafes and restaurants in Aotearoa New Zealand (Mainvil et al., 2018).

Overall, it is a morally and politically unacceptable (and striking) difference between the amount of food waste and those who may not have access to food at the local and global levels. This discrepancy is also an indication of a structural problem of income inequality and (re)distribution of

wealth leading to, for instance, the Māori and Pacific communities living disproportionately below the poverty line and higher risks of child poverty in the case of Aotearoa New Zealand (Rashbrooke, 2013: 4-5).

## Engaging with the free food store

Against this backdrop of (food) poverty amidst abundance, the store operates at the heart of the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. It was founded in 2011 by a former church member who used to redistribute surplus food through her own initiatives without a store. She believed that the surplus food becoming waste was morally and environmentally unacceptable and collaborated with community members, including academics, businesses, and the local council, to redistribute more food through a store. The organisation's mission is not to let anyone go hungry and reduce food waste. They collect fresh, perishable and non-perishable donated food and let the customers have them without any monetary exchange in a store setting. The surplus food comes from around 30 suppliers, including big retailers, local cafes and individuals. The director/founder and manager work part-time with the support of volunteers.

My research at the free food store was designed as an organisational ethnography to study how such an alternative organising becomes possible. I worked in different volunteer roles for around 8 months along with others, equalling approximately 190 hours in the field, accompanied by field notes and semi-structured interviews with the organisational members and food suppliers/retailers. Sometimes I visited cafés around the free food store to collect surplus food (e.g. unsold hot pies, sandwiches); sometimes, I drove the store van to the community gardens to gather fresh vegetables. I also had the opportunity to welcome customers into the store in the evenings. There were many other opportunities to engage with the reality of food surplus and witness how a community is self-organised around the idea of 'not letting anyone go hungry'. Therefore, my tasks included but were not limited to arranging aisles for the donated food, cleaning the store, saving edible potatoes, attending social events that create awareness about food waste and meeting with other volunteers and customers (see also Alakavuklar, 2020).

Due to my ethical and political responsibility as a researcher, I wanted to keep the director/founder informed about my findings and facilitate the participation of other organisational members in my study as much as possible. Still, there was neither an official agreement nor explicit expectation of how my research would be of value to the organisation, except for sharing my 'labour'. Throughout my research, I was like other volunteers with more accessibility to organisational members for informal chats.

## Making sense of the free food store

As one customer asked the director/founder, should we consider this kind of community solution as radical as 'a socialist act in a capitalist system' given that the store gives food free? For scholarly interests, the question for me was, can communities and their organisational practices be the new 'locale' and radical enough for social change? DeFilippis et al. (2006) posit that, within their own constraints, community organisations can host attempts for social change. Some other commentators claim that such grassroots initiatives constitute the living laboratories of social innovation (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). It is also argued that they play essential caring and solidarity roles for the communities (Gómez Garrido et al., 2019). Therefore, while the free food store might be a market-compatible community solution and even rely on the surplus produced by the capitalist dynamics, there are perhaps not socialist but alternative practices (i.e. non-monetary exchange relations, volunteer labour, free giving of food, solidarity) that can shed light on the ways of

organising economy and society differently. Furthermore, through various other activities such as documentary screening and attending social gatherings, the free food store acts as an intermediary of community development, raising awareness and mobilisation concerning food waste and sustainability (Broad, 2016; Levkoe and Wakefield, 2011).

While I could see that the free food store decommodified the economic relationship between labour and food and offered us an alternative way of self-organising at the margins to sustain the community, I was puzzled by the limits of this initiative. I asked the director/founder of the free food store a similar question – what would be her intervention to the systemic and structural problem of food waste and food poverty? I hoped to hear a detailed and radical analysis from the first-hand witness. However, the argument was simple and straight: ‘it may be a fatalistic view, but instead of looking at what we can’t do, we’ve been looking at what we can do’.

These fatalistic – however, morally and environmentally concerned – views essentially shed light on the ethics and politics of the free food store. Hosting quite a diverse group of volunteers (i.e. Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent), Māori, international residents, disabled, students, academics, retired, unemployed and community workers) and being open to anyone (i.e. no means/income testing), the free food store was a charity organisation that helped community meet their basic needs without politically addressing the big questions such as structural inequalities and social injustices. At the same time, the differences based on professions and class were explicit within the diversity of volunteers (e.g. architects, pensioners, social workers, academics, officers, and students) and customers. Some volunteers were struggling to find a regular job or on benefit schemes; they also visited the store as customers. The visibility of the customers queuing in front of the store was another discussion point. Despite the goodwill to offer a dignified experience for the customers through unconditional (food) giving, the queue was an issue concerning the perceptions of shame and stigma. Nevertheless, the differences and challenges were neutralised through the notion of community built around the store. From this perspective, it is not surprising to categorise free food store as a band-aid solution in the era of neoliberal responsabilisation of the communities while the welfare states drew back (Poppendieck, 1998; van Dyk, 2018).

On the contrary, the free food store was essentially more than a simple food aid organisation that reproduced power asymmetries. Three aspects are striking to note: (1) moral, environmental and economic justification of saving an immense amount of food (e.g. 45 kg of food, an equivalent of US\$350k retail value monthly); (2) helping many people at a local level (approx. 600/day) unconditionally; and (3) creating awareness about recycling food and sustainability as a member of a national network problematising food waste. Instead of a political agenda bringing committed people together, solidarity links were built on a moral basis to support and empower vulnerable community members in difficult economic times through ‘transcending material needs, and creating a collective sense of inclusion as an alternative model to market relationships’ (Gómez Garrido et al., 2019: 770). This aspect was visible concerning most of the regular customers: single-income large families, single parents, people on benefit schemes, homeless people, daily workers and anyone who hardly made the end of the month.

While trying to understand what to do with this alternative organisational complexity and its transformative potential, I got a comment from another volunteer one day. Presumably reflecting on her previous perception of the academics (arguably dominant in the Aotearoa New Zealand context – see Bridgman, 2007), she told me that I was not like the other academics who stay on the other side of the bridge (referring to the physical location of the university in the region) and do their jobs as academics. For her, I am the one who ‘crosses the bridge’ to work with the community organisation, which, she argues, makes me different.

This comment was the turning point for my fieldwork and my scholarship. It made me realise how the community perceives academics and, more importantly, reminded me of the urgent and

pressing need to be more relevant for the actors who already do things within their own capacities to tackle challenges and change society through their day-to-day practices. I was urged to reconsider the limits of my participant observation (and my role as an academic) if I wanted to go beyond my comfort zone of ‘reading and writing’ and do more – literally and metaphorically ‘crossing the bridge’, getting out of echo chambers, and ideally leaving behind the anxieties of being an academic that feed the neoliberal academy imposing rankings, assessments, careerism and individualism (Pullen and Rhodes, 2018; Ruth et al., 2018).

## **Learning to become an-Other critical scholar and activist performativity**

During my engagement with the free food store, I was pushed to be more reflexive about my positionality, limits and expectations as a critical scholar. As a result, my perception of social change, the role of (critical) scholarship, and other research and teaching choices have been crystallised. The purpose of my research has completely turned towards engaging with and supporting community initiatives/grassroots organisations that practise bottom-up daily post/non-capitalist organisational solutions to expand their impact, opening more spaces in the scholarly conversations for the value of these postcapitalist practices and facilitating any collaboration with them to build a collective political agenda within and beyond the academy. My teaching practice focused more on alternative organisations’ economic and politically transformative potential, emphasising local community and grassroots organisations and their sustainability practices. I will give more details about this transformation in the last section.

As a part of this learning experience, Gibson-Graham’s community economies framework (Gibson-Graham, 1996) and Wright’s (2019) discussion on eroding capitalism have been inspirational. While simultaneous change attempts from above (through the state, national/local governing bodies and policies) and from below (through grassroots, unions and community activism) would gradually erode capitalist economic relations with democratic market socialism for Wright, Gibson-Graham addressed communities as a source of bottom-up socio-economic transformation. My ‘crossing the bridge’ introduced me to the potential of community initiatives, the performative impact of research and the possibilities of mutual learning (Weatherall, 2021).

Many community initiatives are located at the heart of social issues and can be natural allies for critical scholars to practice and learn from (and imagine) alternatives (Esper et al., 2017; Parker and Parker, 2017), however complicated, complex and contradictory their positions are (Wright, 2013). While some commentators find the impact of these initiatives limited for transforming broader power relations (Böhm, 2014; DeFilippis et al., 2006), they fulfil the needs of the communities, (re)organise economic value relations (Eskelinen, 2020) and lead to the construction of alternative economic, ethical and solidarity practices as sources of social change (Broad, 2016; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Gómez Garrido et al., 2019). Therefore, as in the case of the free food store, however, they may seem fatalistic; these postcapitalist initiatives host ‘socially useful production and doing’ (Chatterton and Pusey, 2020: 41–42) by diverging ‘(intentionally or not) from private accumulation of monetary value, market competition, and the commodification of essentials and life itself’ (Schmid, 2021: 2125). As postcapitalist experiments, the diversity of economic activities at the community level leads to the formation of multiple economic subjects (e.g. waged worker, unpaid family carer, volunteer) that not only deconstruct capitalocentric assumptions, practices and subjectivities but also potentially empower individuals and communities to (re)configure social and political relations through self-organising (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Healy et al.,

2020). Hence, community initiatives are inspirational sources of alternative economic practices from which academics can draw theories and concepts.

Academics can also play a critical role by collaborating and contributing to these community initiatives. The community economies framework (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020) has particularly been emphasised by management and organisation scholars to do more relevant and performative critical work at the business schools (e.g. Aslan, 2020; King, 2015; Wharerata Writing Group, 2018). Engaging with these community practices as cases of alternative organisations helps us construct new academic subjectivities (i.e. an-Other critical scholar) that transform how we do critical research to contribute to social change efforts for a socially just and sustainable society (Just et al., 2021). Through these collaborations, performative effects emerge not only on the communities but also on researchers (Gibson-Graham, 2008) – as this essay itself demonstrates such an impact.

As a derivative of such an impact, I propose ‘activist performativity’ to reconfigure our scholarship with a social change agenda and politicise our critical research further for a more holistic and nuanced understanding. In doing this, I argue that the performativity debate builds on decades-long scholarly conversations about academic activism (Reedy and King, 2019), and it needs to go beyond its own internal ‘web of discussions’ taking place at the ‘ivory tower’ (Just et al., 2021: 92). By following Fleming and Banerjee’s (2016) problematisation of business managers as interlocutors for social change, I build my proposal on their call to engage with activists and social movements, acknowledge teaching as a political act and use critical/radical theories as our toolkit.

With my proposal, my intention is not to do another theoretical exercise that would stay in the academic papers; on the contrary, it is a call to bring ‘activism’ back into the critical research practice that indeed has a performative effect in multiple domains with a holistic social change agenda. It can create opportunity and impetus to go beyond the limits of ‘discursive interventions’ (Fleming and Banerjee, 2016) and ‘instrumental careerism’ (Butler and Spoelstra, 2020) that boosts ‘unhealthy obsession’ with theory development based on tiny gap-spotting (Tourish, 2020: 100). Then, how can activist performativity reconfigure our scholarship for social change?

1. It is built on a holistic understanding of ‘critical praxis’ focusing on acting/doing and aligns all the scholarly academic functions (Contu, 2020) with an attempt to break down the perceived separation between research, teaching and activism as the locations of struggle (Chatterton et al., 2010). Hence, as an essential component, ‘critical praxis’ means practising research, teaching and other academic roles with a critical/radical purpose to make a difference both in society and the academy (Fuller and Kitchin, 2004) as part of resistance and challenge to established research practices and neoliberal discourses of impact (Rhodes et al., 2018).
2. It purposefully addresses activist communities/grassroots organisations as close allies to create a performative effect on different domains. Such allyship constructs a fruitful ground to work with and for community initiatives leading to *material and embodied engagement* with the practices of social change efforts, potentially followed by scholarly contributions in the academic sphere.
3. It calls for engagement with day-to-day practices as a source of individual and collective transformation. Therefore, acting and doing with the purpose of social justice have a performative effect on communities’ cause and researcher(s) practices in the university (i.e. social impact).

Overall ‘activist performativity’ becomes an *academic practice* to work towards changing the university (and society) from within and outside, blurring the lines between activist practice,

research and teaching relationship and sensitising research to the broader societal and structural challenges. As a result, the activist engagement built on practice-based knowledge feeds into the scholarly reflection/contribution based on theory-informed knowledge, bringing together holistically the sites of struggle for social justice.

## **Bridging as activist performativity and implications**

As mentioned by my colleague at the free food store, traditionally, the university was positioned distantly from the practice in my research context. This physical distance and perceived tension were evident in transdisciplinary gatherings where academics and practitioners shared experiences. As an anecdotal note, in a conference related to regional food production, each academic speaker began their talk with apologies since they did not have the knowledge of ‘practitioners’. The questions to the academic speakers were also nearly hostile, straightforwardly asking the ‘so what?’ question after their talks.

The perceived distance between research and practice is not recent, given the discussions about rigour versus relevance (Butler et al., 2015) and the performativity debate in management and organisation studies (Cabantous et al., 2016). From a critical point of view, this tension is already explicit in Marx’s thesis 11 concerning the philosopher’s (read academic’s) role, whether it should be understanding and/or changing the world. Hence, bridging can be one of the taken-for-granted roles of the academic activist with the assumptions of gaps (Reiter and Oslender, 2015; Sutherland, 2012: 33). Yet, through encounters across domains, imaginary bridges can collapse, leading to different performative outcomes with a more holistic approach (Weatherall, 2021). Therefore, in principle, this separation should be problematised as if the social justice struggles can be categorised and as if there are hierarchical differences between the knowledge(s) produced by scholars and activists (Chatterton et al., 2010; Choudry, 2020).

In my research context, however, there was indeed a bridge between the university and the city that must be crossed many times in reality and imaginaries. Hence, my fieldwork allowed me to move out of the usual boundaries of research and create spaces to share practices, meanings and assumptions from different domains. My engagement with the free food store organically turned into a bridging practice not only between the university and the community but also activism (practice), academy (theory) and teaching (pedagogy). In other words, bridging rendered a holistic critical praxis possible.

As a part of bridging, known to many organisational ethnographers, daily talks, mundane interactions, interviews, volunteering for different tasks and guest lectures of community members facilitate learning from shared practices and each other. These were the little but precious moments where we could create the opportunity with the community members and students to reflect on the value of giving free food, question who gets what in the current food regimes, discuss possibilities of organising differently and query the role of the academics (and the university) in society. My fieldwork facilitated three forms of bridging:

*Bridging activism and research:* Through the design of my research, since its beginning, I planned to contribute to the organisation’s cause (i.e. saving surplus food, sustainability) with my labour. This specific research time was dedicated to participant observation and secured by my university (which was also a privilege) so that I could work for the organisation wholeheartedly, immerse myself in its day-to-day practices and study it simultaneously. It was also an opportunity to do something as an active citizen at the local level to engage with/(co)politicise grand societal challenges (i.e. food waste), and figure out in which ways academics can ‘collaborate with’ bottom-up initiatives to contribute efforts of social change (Prichard, 2015). Leaving my office and



isolated (neoliberal) loneliness to change my research *locale* led to mutual interaction, engagement, and learning between the domains of activism and research that fed into each other.

However, there were also ‘a-ha’ moments as a part of my engagement, which can be considered as (un)common encounters (Chatterton, 2006) between community members and me. For instance, I regretfully recall when the founder was seemingly (and perhaps understandably) indifferent to my initial findings, full of jargon and ambitious theoretical analysis referring to the alternative material, symbolic and political layers of the organisation. She said my talk ‘went completely above her head like that’ animating with her hands as if my words and sentences were passing by her face. I had to become aware that my language and the way I ‘critically’ explain things were taken for granted by me and the academic world I am embedded in. In another instance, I was questioned by the store manager about how I could become a management scholar without ‘managing’ people (given my affiliation with the ‘School of Management’). This query was another opportunity to reflect on not only the perception of the academics ‘out there’ in the university studying things they do not ‘practice’ but also the meanings and power attributed to the management function in a non-market environment.

I was required to learn to walk with the community to create a common ground, but more importantly, (re)create a new (jargon-less) language, style and method of engagement (Chatterton, 2006). My initial response was to go with the flow of the organisation and its daily dynamics instead of thinking about my research agenda and researcher role. This approach freed my mind and opened more space to get closer to the day-to-day practices of tackling the challenges of food surplus. Moreover, I witnessed their own complexities/difficulties, became a part of their ongoing daily struggles, supported ‘what they can do’ with my labour, and, if possible, carried their voices into my research and teaching (Reedy and King, 2019). I was pushed to (re)think, (re)act, (re)search and live differently alongside the community members – academic crossing the bridge, noting the structural problem of surplus food, going back to literature/university, coming back to the field to know more about ‘fatalistic non-capitalist practices’, leaving academic echo chambers and research questions aside, noticing the limits of imaginary academic selves, different languages, priorities and constraints. The free food store and community organised around it held a mirror to my profession (Weatherall, 2021). I am unsure if my presence could create a similar impact on them.

*Bridging postcapitalism with the critical theoretical toolkit and scholarly writing:* In the case of the free food store, community initiative became the entry point to theorise about possibilities of bottom-up social change and check the reality of practice with the relevance of theories. Therefore, bridging took place between postcapitalist literature, my theoretical tool kit as an organisational scholar and my scholarly writing. By practising volunteer work with community members, I learned more about the relationship between day-to-day practices, change and imaginaries emerging from the diversity of the economy (Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2006). I had the opportunity to see first-hand the impact of societal challenges (i.e. food surplus, food waste, food poverty), the community solutions (i.e. redistributing free food, meeting the needs of people, caring for the community) and the potentials and limits of alternative organisations ‘within, despite and post’ capitalism (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010). The free food store was part of the dominant market structure, benefiting from its dysfunction of over-production and creating waste. At the same time, contrary to the usual exchange practices such as money vis-à-vis food as a part of our daily consumption, it offered an alternative arrangement of giving food free. Finally, diverging from capital accumulation and offering socially useful production for the community’s well-being were indicators of a postcapitalist setting.

As a theoretical experiment, the free food store demonstrated the non-monolithic structure of the economy, the presence of diverse non-capitalist practices (non-wage work, non-monetary

exchange) alongside dominant capitalist practices, and the decommodified social relations interwoven around food surplus for the sustainability of the community. Furthermore, I was able to draw attention to the issues around the dominant economic practices and ways of organising (e.g. top-down organising, growth motive, consumerism and lack of fair distribution). The free food store and community activism attest to the validity of critical theories of postcapitalism with its peculiar context and provide a complex case regarding the emergence of non-capitalist value relations within the limits and boundary conditions of a community organisation.

*Bridging activism, research and pedagogy:* Bridging multiple domains and communities contributed to my attempts to teach differently with a social and economic transformation perspective as part of my critical praxis. Against the dominant corporate model, I taught about alternative organisations and their potential to question neoliberal capitalism, individualism and competition to open up new conversations about the way we organise economy and society (Reedy and Learmonth, 2009). I took my lessons learned about postcapitalist practices, grassroots organisations and community perspectives to management courses to teach non-capitalist organising. I also invited the store manager as a guest lecturer to share their perspective on societal challenges and how the free food store is organised around community well-being. He emphasised the voluminous amount of surplus food that would become waste if not rescued, the impact of food waste on the environment and explained how the free food store is an organisation for the community by the community to support those who are in need of food. From the manager, the students had the opportunity to learn first-hand the issue of ‘poverty amidst abundance’ and the critical caring role community organisations can play against the background of the capitalist economy creating the problem in the first place. I also encouraged them to ‘cross the bridge’ to visit the store as a customer to enjoy a free sandwich and see an alternative organisational setting with their own eyes. Overall, by drawing cases and arguments from day-to-day practices of the free food store, I attempted to problematise and politicise the ‘business-as-usual’ management education.

It should also be noted that the domains of activism, research and pedagogy do not have clear-cut lines. Bridging is a continuous ethical and political struggle to navigate these perceived boundaries and make sense of our role as critical scholars in blurring the lines further while learning and testing the limits of the very same boundaries. It is a question of whom we see as allies, whom we work with and whether we re-produce the power relations in the process of bridging (Bristow and Robinson, 2018). Therefore, my bridging attempt cannot be thought independent of the ethics and politics of the free food store and ‘in relation to others’ (Cunliffe, 2008: 128). As argued above, essentially, learning to go with the flow as one of the organisational members, being open and building trust with my ‘colleagues’ helped me navigate my positionality. While gaining official ethical approval was mainly a bureaucratic exercise of the university, I was attuned to the power differences and the potential impact of my research at the food store. Hence, from the beginning of my fieldwork, I did my best to be transparent to all as to who I was as a researcher (middle-class, non-native, international academic being out of his comfort zone), why I did volunteer work (how does the free food store operate?) and how I did my research (working with them, taking notes, keeping anonymity, principally do no harm). Completing tasks together, having sincere chats, mostly listening to others and being discreet helped me build rapport and establish a sense of familiarity and security with the diverse group of volunteers. While this process took time,<sup>2</sup> as far as I am concerned, my perception by my colleagues at the store gradually shifted from ‘the curious academic from the other side’ to an engaged insider involved in the organisational activities like other volunteers under the guidance of the director/founder and manager (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013). This shift (i.e. becoming one of the volunteers) was not easy, however, it facilitated an in-depth understanding of the inequalities, tensions, and contradictions emerging from such a context.

## So what?

Drawing on my transformative and challenging fieldwork experience, I want to contribute to scholarly conversations on how our critical scholarship in business schools matters to us and others. As I have found myself on a new journey to become an-Other critical scholar, there are lessons learned which can incite and encourage my colleagues to reconfigure and perform our scholarship differently. Before concluding, I should note that I was fortunate and privileged; my engagement took place thanks to the availability of dedicated research time provided by the university, community members' support and colleagues' collegiality. Nevertheless, it is impossible to fully know the implications of my engagement, despite my best intentions (Maxey, 1999). In the bottom line, my working at the free food store along with other members was based on offering my labour at a material level and may have had a limited/modest impact.

Concerning my experience, there are two outcomes which can be a source of inspiration and provocation. 'Bridging domains' is a critical learning that can be considered a form of 'activist performativity' and an academic activist modality. It creates an opportunity for critical praxis to harness the transformative potential of multiple domains with a holistic perspective. Bridging also leads to a cross-fertilisation of practices and assumptions for making an impact in different spheres – activism, research, teaching, communities and the university. It pushes us/researchers to engage with the 'other' practices to understand and comprehend the other socio-economic relations, emerging subjectivities and alternative imaginaries that can contribute to individual, collective and organisational transformation attempts. While bridging may imply a perceived separation of domains to be problematised (Weatherall, 2021), metaphorically, it invites us to reflect on where we stand as critical scholars, what kind of bridges we build, how many times we cross different bridges and why as a part of our scholarship.

In addition, I propose activist performativity as a research practice that targets and prioritises community initiatives/grassroots organisations as allies to do socially relevant and meaningful research, potentially contributing to social change efforts. Within the boundary conditions of doing critical work in business schools (Parker, 2020; Ratle et al., 2020), I believe that activist performativity becomes an-Other opportunity to do research differently. Nevertheless, against the background of continuous attacks on academic freedom and critical theory in higher education institutions today, 'activist performativity' should be taken not only as an individual attempt to be relevant to communities out there but also as an epistemological and political proposal to build other 'bridges' between collective struggles and alliances within and beyond the university to construct a critical mass. Hence, given its social change agenda, activist performativity cannot be separated from the broader collective critical work and resistance at the neoliberal academy and should be considered part and parcel of other academic activist engagements (Contu, 2018; Dar et al., 2021; Grosser, 2021; Rhodes et al., 2018). Activist performativity, in that sense, means working towards becoming the change we want to make with the emergence of new (academic) subjectivities and promotion of alternative research practices that challenge and push the orthodoxy at the business schools and society, of course, within the opportunities and limitations we have.

Now, working in a different institutional/country setting, my journey of becoming an-Other critical scholar continues with new challenges. I try to follow principles of activist performativity and bridging domains as in the case of constructing a transdisciplinary postcapitalist network, including activists and academics, for longer-term collective action and more sustained impact (Anders Utrecht<sup>3</sup>), podcasting with network members as a case of co-production of knowledge and linking this network with a recently launched master's programme centred on activism – of which I have the coordinator role (Organising Social Impact<sup>4</sup>). The network (located on an online city map and publicly available) currently hosts 15 local grassroots organisations tackling societal

challenges such as social inclusion, sustainable food networks, the commodification of art and culture, and environmental protection. It facilitates dialogue between academics from different disciplines (i.e. organisation studies, sustainability science, media and communication), encourages collaboration between scholars and activists concerning sustainability transformation in the city through workshops and research, and promotes inter-organisational partnerships. Seven podcast episodes, each hosting two different organisational representatives and an academic discussing the role of grassroots organisations in sustainability transformation, are publicly available to inform interested parties and create awareness about bottom-up sustainability practices.<sup>5</sup> Students of the new master's programme are doing their engaged fieldwork in some of these organisations. To bring theory and praxis together, the students actively engage with and contribute to organisations' activities (as an alternative to detached short-term extractivist data collection exercise), reflect on organisational social impact practices, and use these experiences as input for the programme's courses and theses.

As scholarly and practical knowledges converse with each other in this network, the academics work as critically engaged partners to activate and contribute to ongoing processes of social change. Hence, different from metrics and rankings, an alternative and holistic impact paradigm is offered to become an-Other critical scholar who bridges the academy with grassroots activism to work together towards urban sustainability. The university plays a critical role as an anchor institution to keep the relations vibrant and mutual learning possible for the longer term. In this work that constructs a new *locale*, the scope of working 'with' communities has expanded and moved towards a more collective transdisciplinary initiative to create a broader and sustained impact on research, teaching, community initiatives and society. Without my engagement with the free food store and the limitations I had encountered, my current academic work would not be possible, nor would I be the same person.

To conclude, by echoing Contu (2020), I wonder whether, as critical scholars in business schools, we can indeed change 'the terms of academia and that of ourselves as academics' (p. 754). Shall we stay on the other side of the bridge with the risks of more isolation, individualisation, competition and alienation (Fleming, 2020)? Or, instead, to contribute to the multitude of efforts for social change taking place every day through daily practices here and there, can we 'build new bridges' to take up the challenges of working with/for the communities and do socially relevant and meaningful research with our critical praxis? I leave the metaphor of 'bridging' and the question of 'activist performativity' here to imagine more possibilities of becoming an-Other critical scholars together and to spark more conversation for a collective political agenda within and beyond the academy.

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## Notes

1. Please see the global food donation policy atlas [atlas.foodbanking.org](https://atlas.foodbanking.org)
2. I could do my first interview after 5 months of engagement.
3. <https://andersutrecht.nl/en/>
4. <https://www.uu.nl/en/masters/organising-social-impact>
5. <https://andersutrecht.nl/en/andersutrecht-voice/>

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