

# Defamiliarising Passivity with the Disabled Subject: Activism, Academia and the Lived Experience of Impairment

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*This paper explores the social construction of activism and academia in the contemporary UK context. Unlike activism, academia is not always regarded in mainstream culture as being politically engaged. The paper interrogates this state of affairs using Sara Ahmed's de-naturalisation of the terms 'active' and 'passive' (Ahmed 2010, 208-210). It also draws on insights from disability studies to reflect on the social significance of passivity. With reference to various sources, including my own experience of growing up with a physical impairment, I argue that the day-to-day lived experience of impairment defamiliarises the notions of activity and passivity. For many disabled people, a great deal of activity goes into those tiny, everyday tasks that are framed as the 'passive' ones we need to complete in order to reach the active, productive ones. I propose the term 'actively passive' to denote the conscious performance of actions which are undertaken unconsciously and spontaneously by most people. Politically engaged academia might also, I suggest, be described as 'actively passive' in that it labours to de-naturalise those positions and ideas that are taken for granted in mainstream culture. I propose that academia in the humanities and social sciences might both learn from the embodied experiences of the disabled subject and that, in its processes and practices, it can also be understood as being aligned and allied with this subject.*

*Keywords: Activism, Academia, Passive, Active, Disability.*

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If the activist is someone who protests and campaigns for change in the world, and the politically engaged academic is someone who researches and writes in order to

promote change in the world, then these two figures might be regarded as rather similar. In some instances, particularly in a field such as my own – disability studies – the two

identities are often embodied in the same person. Nevertheless, whilst both the activist and the academic have important political contributions to make, these contributions are, I will be arguing, different – and need to be valued in and for their differences. In the current age of austerity measures, discourses questioning the ‘impact’ of research in the humanities and social sciences risk constructing a hierarchical binary opposition between activism and academia, throwing the social value of academia into question. Mainstream culture tends to perceive activism as being, by its very nature, politically engaged, whereas academia has to fight for this accolade: it has to fight to demonstrate its value. In 2014, research undertaken by UK academics will be assessed, for the first time, in terms of its impact beyond the academy, as part of the new Research Excellence Framework.<sup>1</sup> This policy is referred to colloquially within the academy as the ‘impact agenda’. Yet measuring the ‘impact’ of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences is not a straightforward process. Since the outputs of research in these fields cannot always be evidenced in social and economic terms (or at least not immediately), such research risks being framed as a site of doubt and suspicion.<sup>2</sup> But perhaps the debate needs to be reframed. Indeed, Belfiore and Upchurch argue that ‘the impact discourse is problematic not because it demands too much

of [the arts and humanities] but because it demands *too little*’ (Belfiore and Upchurch 2012, Slide 19). By viewing the labour of the academic from a different angle, this paper will explore why the current conception of impact ‘demands *too little*’.

In this paper, drawing on Sara Ahmed’s revaluation of the terms ‘active’ and ‘passive’ (2010, 208–210), I argue that political engagement has come to be aligned with that which is ‘active’. By exploring the political and ethical possibilities of passivity – that is, by exploring what it might mean to be both politically engaged and *passive* – I seek to trouble the association between political engagement and activism and, in this way, to reframe the terms of the debate about impact in academia. This is not to devalue the important contribution of activism to politics, but rather to defend the contribution of academia as one which is political, though not necessarily according to conventional definitions of ‘the political’.

Drawing inspiration from Ahmed’s critical exposition of the preference for the active mode over the passive (Ahmed 2010, 208–217), I want to ask: who and what gets left behind when what we value is that which is deemed to be ‘active’?<sup>3</sup> What if there is important work to be done which has no obvious corollary in activism? What if, as Martyn Hammersley puts it, ‘[t]here *is* a difference [between social science contributions and those from politicians and others],

but it is lost in translation, as social science findings are turned into public discourse[?]' (Hammersley 2012, Slide 26).

I view the question of the value of passivity through a particular lens: my paper examines how the embodied experience of being disabled – and thus of being deemed passive or unproductive by society – might speak to the call for political engagement in academia. Drawing on my own experience of growing up with a physical impairment, as well as on life writing and cultural theory, I will argue that the day-to-day lived experience of impairment dramatises, often in highly literal ways, the opposition between 'the passive' and 'the active'. Moreover, to view activity and passivity through the lens of disability studies is to defamiliarise these concepts. In the case studies I consider, the experience of impairment enables subjects to feel 'wonder and surprise' at the reproduction of 'forms' that are usually understood as 'familiar' and are, hence, unseen by most (Ahmed 2006, 82). Exploring this 'wonder and surprise', I will propose that academia in the humanities and social sciences might both *learn from* the 'passive' experiences of disabled subjects and might also *be aligned and allied with* these subjects.

### **Disability Studies**

Before beginning my discussion of passivity, some important questions about identity and the body

need to be posed. Firstly, is it possible to speak of 'the disabled subject'? When discussing impairment, it is impossible to universalise: each experience of disability is particular to the individual concerned. I know how it feels to have a mild physical impairment but to pass as nondisabled; I do not know how it feels to be blind, or to be a wheelchair user. The term 'the disabled subject' thus cannot account for that which is particular about an individual's experience of disability. It must be used with caution. That said, the use of the term can be defended as a form of 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak 1988 [1985]):<sup>4</sup> it mobilises disabled subjectivity as a distinct identity for the purposes of political solidarity. Although Spivak has 'given up on' the term (though not on the 'project' itself), feeling that (mis)users of the term do not pay enough attention to the notion of 'strategy' (Darius and Jonsson 1993, 35; see also Spivak 1993 [1989]), in the context of this essay, the concept provides a strategy for exploring what a politics of passivity might look like. The term cannot, however, dissolve the universal/particular tension: a tension will always remain between an ethical stance on the one hand, which celebrates that which is particular to the individual's experience of disability, and a political stance on the other, which risks universalising in its search for common ground. Indeed, this tension pulls me in two different directions. My essay gener-

alises for the purposes of making an argument (as all argument-making tends to do), whilst simultaneously seeking to remain attentive to the ‘particular’ – to that which is distinct, unique and irreducible about each individual’s experience. My desire to stay with, but not to attempt to resolve, this tension is in keeping with my sense that one of the important roles of politically engaged academia is, in Les Back’s terms, to tolerate ‘moral complexity’ and to refuse to be reduced to a “‘sound bite’” (2007, 15; 16). As I shall argue, drawing on the work of Back (2007) and Hammersley (2012), these are some of the qualities that differentiate academic scholarship from party politics and from a cultural orientation towards the active, which might be termed ‘active-ism’.<sup>5</sup> The political activity we call ‘activism’ is expected to perform itself using the active mode; this is necessary if its demands are to be recognised and heard by those with political power.<sup>6</sup> Academia, on the other hand, has the opportunity to speak in different terms, though this can of course mean that its voice gets ‘lost in translation’ (Hammersley 2012, Slide 26).

If I intend to refer, however cautiously, to an experience of disabled subjecthood, what do I mean by disability? And who defines embodiment as ‘disabled’? These questions have been much debated both inside and outside the academy. To answer them in full, it would be nec-

essary to map the history of disability activism and disability studies, which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I will refer briefly to some models of embodiment which have influenced my own thinking on disability. One of the founding concepts of disability activism in the UK context was the social model of disability, which separated ‘impairment’ as a term denoting embodiment and ‘disability’ as a function of social barriers to participation (UPIAS and The Disability Alliance 1976). The model is helpful in that it avoids casting disability as a problem of the individual, which medical models have tended to do (Oliver 1983). The social model has been subject to much critique within disability studies for oversimplifying the mechanics of oppression, as well as for both reifying the concept of impairment and for downplaying issues of embodiment (see for example: Reeve 2008, 28–31; Tremain 2006; and Thomas 1999). Broadly speaking, in this essay, I use the terms ‘disability’ and ‘impairment’ in the senses intended by the social model, but I also seek to move beyond this model.

One of the most interesting theories of embodiment to emerge in the field in recent years – and one which moves beyond the social model – has been Robert McRuer’s application of Adrienne Rich’s notion of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ to the experience of disabled embodiment (Rich 1981, 4; McRuer

2010 [2006]). Whereas heterosexual ideology would frame lesbian identity as an “‘alternative life-style’” (Rich 1981, 4), Rich argues that lesbianism is in fact pathologised in order to naturalise heterosexuality (Rich 1981, 24): marginal identities are thus employed to maintain the status of ‘dominant identities’ as ‘the natural order of things’, to use McRuer’s terms (2010 [2006], 383). McRuer introduces the parallel term ‘compulsory able-bodiedness’, observing that ‘[a] system of compulsory able-bodiedness repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, ‘Yes, but in the end, wouldn’t you rather be more like me?’ (2010 [2006], 386). For McRuer, the notion of ‘compulsory able-bodiedness’ is particularly cogent in a capitalist dominant order where ‘free to sell one’s labor but not free to do anything else’ could be translated as ‘free to have an able body but not particularly free to have anything else’ (McRuer 2010 [2006], 385). In the current context of cuts to disability benefits, this idea will resonate for many disabled people in the UK. Might ‘compulsory able-bodiedness’ thus contain within it the idea of ‘compulsory activity’ and ‘compulsory productivity’? These are ideas which this paper will examine.

McRuer develops the concept of compulsory able-bodiedness by drawing on Judith Butler’s notion that heterosexual gender identity is

performed (Butler 1990). He proposes that disabled embodiment can be understood as a non-normative (failed) performance of able-bodiedness, which enables and maintains the fantasy that able-bodiedness exists (2010 [2006], 386–7). As will be argued below in the ‘Active and Passive Technologies’ section, actions that are associated with able embodiment – such as taking a walk – might be read as part of a performance of able-bodiedness, which wilfully avoids seeing its own reliance on technologies such as shoes, preferring instead to see reliance on technology in the disabled subject – for example, in the wheelchair user (see the conversation between Judith Butler and Sunaura Taylor in Taylor 2009, discussed below). Disabled embodiment thus problematises those things about able-bodiedness that have been constructed as natural. In this paper, I seek to show how the challenge it poses to compulsory able-bodiedness might operate both as an example for academia to follow, and as an analogy for the kind of critique that academics in the humanities and social sciences already offer.

### **Active and Passive Grammatical Subjects**

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed proposes that we need to ‘challenge the very separation of active and passive’, arguing that this distinction ‘works to secure different classes of being’ (Ahmed 2010,

210). The English language betrays a preference for active, rather than passive subjects, Ahmed observes: we favour the sentence, ‘the chicken crossed the road’, over the construction ‘the road was crossed by the chicken’ because we want to ‘preserve the fantasy that the subject, even the animal-subject, is the one who acts’ (Ahmed 2010, 209).<sup>7</sup> The road is grammatically devalued: it is regarded as passive, as ‘doing nothing’ (Ahmed 2010, 209). However, the road can be reconceived as a ‘provider’; it ‘provides the point at which we can cross, at which we can go from one side to the other’ (Ahmed 2010, 209). Thus, ‘that which has been deemed as passive’ may in fact provide ‘the conditions of possibility for doing something’ (Ahmed 2010, 209).

Could the road operate as an analogy for academia? Ostensibly, academia in the humanities and social sciences ‘does nothing’, at least as far as certain politicians are concerned. Yet academia provides an environment in which we can think about how ‘passivity’ is ‘distributed’, rather than being natural (Ahmed 2010, 209). It is not just the chicken that uses the road: it is also used by the politician, to reach the government buildings where political discourse is made.

### **Active and Passive Technologies**

I suggest that the experience of impairment “‘orientates” bodies in specific ways’ and reconfigures

the notions of activity and passivity (Ahmed 2006, 21). As Judith Butler observes in her conversation with Sunaura Taylor in the film *Examined Life*, ‘nobody takes a walk without there being a technique of walking, [...] without there being something that supports that walk, [...] outside of ourselves’ (Butler in Taylor 2009). A wheelchair is perceived as a facilitative technology which allows the disabled person to ‘take a walk’ whereas the facilitative properties of ‘shoe[s]’ go unnoticed (Taylor 2009). Why is it that the technology used by a disabled person can be perceived as such – as actively enabling – yet the technology used by those who regard themselves as nondisabled ‘does nothing’, so that the act of walking emerges as natural rather than cultural? Through this naturalisation of the world, nondisabled subjects experience themselves as active; they do not notice the role played by those objects such as shoes and pavements and roads in providing the conditions of possibility for activity. Meanwhile, the cultural production of the wheelchair as a technology makes the wheelchair user constantly aware that her activity depends on something outside of herself; she is continually brought into contact with her own inability to ‘do’ in the terms of society. This is not the same as her passivity, although a culture of ‘compulsory able-bodiedness’ (McRuer 2010 [2006], 383) tends to view it as passivity.

What would it mean to conceive

of academia as the wheelchair user? To do so would posit academic discourse as one which identifies itself as disabled, as aware of the prostheses upon which it depends, as conscious of its contingency and its limitations. We might characterise other discourses, meanwhile, as nondisabled, jostling for position ahead of academic ones, bold and unaware of the props on which they rely, unconscious of the privilege of not being confronted by this awareness.

### **Being Actively Passive**

For me, the process of learning to walk itself was an exercise in learning how my body 'does not do' according to the terms of other bodies. My walking was made conscious to me, I experienced it as a cultural production, as a failed attempt at activity. If, like me, your learning to walk involved placing your feet into a trail of insoles positioned at equidistant intervals across the floor of a physiotherapist's studio, with the physiotherapist's voice at your back instructing you to put your heel down as you walk, you are only too aware that the insoles on the floor are the active ones; they are the ones with the power to determine the 'rightness' of your walking.

For most nondisabled people, walking simply 'happens', it is not something which needs to be thought. For me as a disabled subject, the experience of being taught to walk as others walk, to use my

body as others do, was an experience of becoming conscious of that which remains unconscious, spontaneous, we might even say passive, for most people. Learning to walk, for this disabled subject, was about forcing the body to become actively aware of itself in those most 'passive', most unscripted of moments. Ahmed speaks of 'paths', of 'scripts' and of 'straightening devices' which lead us to reproduce certain kinds of subjectivities; I understand these concepts not only at a literal level, but at a bodily level, since my own walking was scripted for me as a way of making my body straight (Ahmed 2006, 16; Ahmed 2010, 91).

There is a paradox here: I am speaking of nondisabled subjects experiencing themselves as active because they do not have an experience of their walking as something they produce actively – rather it is something they do 'naturally', passively. By contrast, I experienced myself as passive in relation to the 'path' of insoles I was expected to "tread": the 'path' seemed to be active in forming me as a passive, compliant disabled subject (Ahmed 2006, 16).<sup>8</sup> However, the process of internalising the path entailed a literal 'becoming active': a learned policing of my own body, such that the body would now *actively* reproduce those movements that other bodies performed passively, unconsciously, nonchalantly. I suggest that the nondisabled subject might be described as *passively active*, whereas I expe-

rience myself as *actively passive*, or perhaps as *actively active*.

The disabled subject sees activity differently because for her, a great deal of activity goes into those tiny, everyday tasks that are framed as the ‘passive’ ones we need to complete in order to reach the active, productive ones. In her memoir *Waist-High in the World: A Life Among the Nondisabled*, Nancy Mairs, who lives with multiple sclerosis (MS), recounts an experience of performing her morning routine alone, in the absence of her carers: ‘[t]he myriad small actions that most people would perform all but unconsciously tax my ingenuity: removing the plastic wrist splint I wear to bed, unfastening my watch, pulling my nightgown over my head’ (Mairs 1996, 66). Several pages of prose are dedicated to describing, and defamiliarising for the reader, acts such as showering and using the toilet: these habitual processes that society barely acknowledges as ‘acts’ are brought into consciousness as such. In her critique of phenomenology, Ahmed draws attention to the hidden domestic labour which permits Husserl to be seated at his writing-table, choosing it as the object of his investigations (Ahmed 2006, 31). It is significant that some objects and acts are deemed appropriate for analysis, while others remain out of sight.

Might we understand politically engaged academia as *actively passive*? Might the disabled subject,

conscious of her own ‘unproductive’ labour – the labour undertaken to reach the place that others simply inhabit – figure as a metaphor for politically engaged academia, which labours to de-naturalise those positions and ideas we take for granted? The humanities and the social sciences have sought to be conscious of the ‘directions’ they have ‘followed’, and not to take the ‘arrival’ in a particular location for granted as a form of ‘magic’, but rather to see it as an example of ‘social reproduction’ (Ahmed 2006, 16; 17; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990 [1977], 3). Politically engaged academia has also shown how some objects and acts are deemed worthy of intellectual attention, while others are relegated to the status of ‘the passive’.

### **The Passive, the Ethical, the Complex**

Mairs’ memoir is involved in a project of remapping the world from a perspective which is, literally, waist-high. As part of this process, ‘the passive’ and ‘the active’ are re-framed. Yet this task is not straightforward, for these terms have accrued specific moral and ethical associations, as Ahmed argues (Ahmed 2010, 208–9). Mairs highlights this difficulty in her account of the challenges of existing in a body which is, in her words, ‘[g]ood for nothing’ (Mairs 1996, 61). The use of the adjective ‘good’ here is not just an idiomatic coincidence, but is highly significant, in that the equa-



tion between morality and action is under scrutiny. Mairs draws attention to this issue as follows:

But is a woman for whom any action at all is nearly impossible capable of right action, or am I just being morally cocky here? After all, if I claim to be a good woman, I leave myself open to the question: Good for what? The most straightforward answer is the most tempting: Good for nothing. I mean really. (Mairs 1996, 60–1).

In a society which values work, activity and productivity – where we are ‘free to have an able body but not particularly free to have anything else’, in McRuer’s terms (2010 [2006], 385) – to be ‘good’ we feel we must be good *for something*. Since ‘the qualities of activity and passivity are distributed’ in particular ways and to particular bodies, that *something* is socially defined and cannot be just *anything* (Ahmed 2010, 209). For Mairs, that *something* involves ‘doing’ (Mairs 1996, 61): she speaks of her desire to ‘act out [her] love, in the way that a dancer inscribes abstract movements on the air with hands and feet and torso and head in order to give her private vision public force’ (Mairs 1996, 79). As this painfully beautiful metaphor of the dancer implies, the quality of activity, and the moral ‘beauty’ attached to it, gets located in the one who is seen to be ‘do[ing] love’ (Mairs 1996, 79).

In a chapter entitled, ‘Taking Care’, which draws attention to the multiple significances of this idiom, Mairs laments that it is not enough to take care *from* others, unless one is also ‘tak[ing] care *of* others’ (Mairs 1996, 83 (my emphasis)).

Although ‘[p]assivities tend to be located in the bodies of those on whom we have given up’ – disabled bodies, for example – Ahmed reconfigures passivity by pointing out that ‘[t]o give something up can be not to see the quality of an action’ (Ahmed 2010, 209). In Mairs’ writing, the defamiliarisation of conventionally passive tasks inflects those tasks with ‘the quality of an action’. By ‘improvis[ing] [...] alternatives to the traditional modes of tendering care’, which sometimes means, paradoxically, accepting care from others, Mairs is ‘taking all the care [she] can’ (Mairs 1996, 83; 84). Indeed, as Mairs notes, there is a particular ‘etiquette’ to the passive action of ‘taking care from others’ (Mairs 1996, 70). Here Mairs’ ‘passivity’ resembles an ‘ethical capacity’ in the sense described by Ahmed, who states that ‘you have to be willing to be affected by others, to receive their influence’ (Ahmed 2010, 221).

This kind of ethical passivity, I suggest, is a quality that politically engaged academia should seek to espouse. Les Back argues that one of the roles of academic sociology is to counter the ‘auction of authoritarianism that is pervasive not only in popular media but also in political

debates' (Back 2007, 14). Sociology must aspire to perform 'attentive listening' which values 'the importance of living with doubt in the service of understanding, of trying to grapple with moral complexity' (Back 2007, 19; 14–15). Rather than being expected to emulate activism, academia must be valued for the things it does differently.

Academia's commitment to nuance and 'moral complexity' allows for an exploration of the inequalities between bodies that do not translate easily into slogans for political protest (Back 2007, 14). The idea of the *actively passive* subject is not very catchy, but it describes an experience that we might need to understand if we are to include the body for whom it is true. For Tanya Titchkosky, the experience of disability is one of being '[b]etwixt and [b]etween', which, she argues, is a rich and productive space from which to offer insights into the experience of 'human alterity' (Titchkosky 2003, 209; 232).<sup>9</sup> The notion of '[b]etween-ness' (Titchkosky 2003, 217) resonates for me since my body occupies a liminal space between disability and able embodiment; whilst I have a physical impairment, others do not usually notice it when they first meet me. I do not fit either category. An account of the experience of not fitting, but of trying to fit, and of simultaneously trying not to fit does not translate well into conventional political discourse; it resists being a "sound bite" (Back 2007,

16). In Hammersley's terms, it is exactly the sort of contribution which gets 'lost in translation' when it enters public discourse (Hammersley 2012, Slide 26). Yet it is a fitting subject for academia.

### Resisting 'Active-ism'

In this essay I have drawn on accounts of the lived experience of impairment to trouble the distinctions drawn between 'the passive' and 'the active'. Following Ahmed, I have argued that the categorisation of a body or a practice as 'passive' may involve not seeing 'the quality of an action' (Ahmed 2010, 209). In the current political climate, academia in the humanities and the social sciences is sometimes characterised as passive and unengaged. The new Research Excellence Framework will measure 'impact', with the ostensible goal of ensuring that the research funded by the taxpayer has value. Of course, the politically engaged academic strives to have an impact. But what if, in demanding recognisable 'impact' we are in fact obscuring our ability to see the 'quality of an action' contained in something deemed to be passive? What if we are seeing only the chicken and not the road, the wheelchair and not the shoes, the action of writing and not the action of showering in the morning which made it possible to write now?

Jonathan Bate has observed that '[t]here is [...] a simple answer to the question "what is the value of

research in the humanities?” which is that ‘research in the humanities is the only activity that can establish the meaning of such a question’ (Bate 2011, 3). In its efforts to establish the meaning(s) of this question, and other similar ones, politically engaged academia undertakes *actively passive* labour, inhabiting a disabled subject position. We need this kind of actively passive academic labour in order to be able to see how it is that the active mode comes to be valued, and why in certain circles (not least among the politically powerful), activism, more than academia, has come to be associated with political engagement. The impact agenda might only seem to be ‘demand[ing] too much’ (Belfiore and Upchurch 2012, slide 19) of academia because its frames of reference are unable to measure the ‘much’ that takes place in the realm of the actively passive. There is ‘much’ that needs to be valued that cannot be understood according to the narrow terms of ‘compulsory able-bodiedness’ (McRuer 2010 [2006], 383) and compulsory activity.

In a rather strange irony, we might see the new focus on impact as inviting us to become the activists we have always wanted to be – after all, we can choose to have the kind of impact that resists dominant discourses, can’t we? However, I would suggest that the problem is precisely our ‘*interpellation*’ (Althusser 1971, 163) as ‘active-ists’ by the ‘impact

agenda’, and the valuing of ‘activism’ implicit in this ‘hailing’ (Althusser 1971, 163). Certain subjects (both literal bodies and bodies of thought) get left behind in this process of interpellation, and we leave them behind at our peril. The emphasis on impact can thus be characterised as a ‘straightening device’ in that it demands that as academics we follow certain ‘paths’ and not others, ones which are demonstrably active and productive in the terms of contemporary culture (Ahmed 2010, 145; Ahmed 2006, 16).

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Information about the assessment of impact in the Research Excellence Framework is available at: <http://www.ref.ac.uk/panels/assessmentcriteriaandleveldefinitions/>. [Accessed 27 March 2013].
- <sup>2</sup> Arguably, one might wish to draw a distinction here between impact in the social sciences and in the humanities. Arts and humanities subjects are particularly vulnerable to suspicion. As Belfiore and Bennett note, ‘impact studies, focusing as they do on economic and social indicators, do not actually engage with the real purpose of the arts’ (Belfiore and Bennett 2010, 7). Perhaps – one might argue – such indicators are more apt for engaging with social sciences research; however as disciplinary boundaries become less distinct, and research methods become more open to debate, this is not necessarily the case.
- <sup>3</sup> To my knowledge, Ahmed is the only theorist who has sought to defamiliarise activity and passivity in this way. However, in *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed engages with a long philosophical tradition in which happiness is framed in terms of activity and unhappiness in terms of passivity (Ahmed 2010, 210–211).

- <sup>4</sup> In coining the term, Spivak describes a 'strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest' (Spivak 1988 [1985], 205). This later comes to be described as 'strategic essentialism'.
- <sup>5</sup> I would like to thank Nick Hocking for the terms 'active-ism' and 'active-ist'.
- <sup>6</sup> 'Activism' is (like 'academia' and 'party politics') an umbrella term which is used to describe a huge range of political activities, some of which could be said to speak in the terms of party politics, and some of which use very different, and deeply subversive tactics. As stated, many academics regard themselves as activists, so these identities are in no way mutually exclusive. In this paper, I am interested in the way in which political engagement becomes aligned with the active mode, such that activism has to be 'active-ist' in order to make itself heard as political discourse.
- <sup>7</sup> Admittedly, this argument is specific to the English language; perhaps activity and passivity are constructed differently in other languages. This may be one of the points at which my argument demonstrates its own positionality and its attention to the particular rather than the universal. Nevertheless, it seems important to attend to the way in which qualities such as passivity are 'distributed', as Ahmed puts it (Ahmed 2010, 209), and since language is one of the mechanisms of distribution, thinking linguistically is a vital part of the project of defamiliarisation.
- <sup>8</sup> I employ Ahmed's terms here, but I am speaking of a highly literal experience of being formed by a 'path'.
- <sup>9</sup> Ahmed's re-evaluation of the role of the road prompts me to question the 'human' part of this noun-phrase: what about non-human animals, wheelchairs and roads? Moreover, the work of Mel Chen (2012) in this field leads to questions about the fitness for purpose of the term 'the humanities'.

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