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Voicing ambiguities in the *Ilizwi Lenyaniso Lomhlaba* co-creator collective

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ABSTRACT

This article considers youth co-production in the context of Global Challenges Research funded project, Changing the Story. The participatory project conceives of 'voice' as research data, turn of phrase, and character by engaging with the work produced by South African co-creator collective *Ilizwi Lenyaniso Lomhlaba*, who contribute to voicing issues related to land, stewardship and futures. Developing Linda Tuhiwai Smith's five dimensions of decolonial theorisation, the article considers 'voice' as a complex and dynamic formulation including regimes of power: funding, legacies of dispossession and ongoing marginalisation and highlighting the achievements of young people's formulation of the stories of their world.

Fade up: Children carry scrap metal into a dusty open area. A montage of interviews with local women introduces a complex layering of voices: Mina George talks about the chickens she keeps in her backyard, Noleen Fourie extols the values of the Karoo's people, while Alexandra Jaftha hopes for a new shopping mall. They talk about how they want to live; what constitutes a dignified life, and how they feel about place. On the dusty square, the women describe the cramped spaces they inhabit, the scarcity and poor quality of the water, the lack of housing provided by the municipality. Cut to Elizabeth Maarman, who makes her living by collecting rubbish for recycling: 'Hier woon ons in die verdrukking' *(Here we live in oppression) she says.* (Co-creator Collective 2019)

Ilizwi Lenyaniso Lomhlaba ('the true voice of the land' in isiXhosa) is the name given to a project initiated by the established South African land rights NGO the Support Centre for Land Change (SCLC), the fledgling youth-driven activist organisation Youth-in-Power, and the authors, in the major regional town of Graaff-Reinet, in the eastern part of the vast, arid central plains of the South African Karoo. This name was chosen by the 'co-creator collective' (or CCC) recruited by SCLC and Youth-in-Power, who came together as young people (18–25) to achieve an ambitious programme linked to the overarching work of 'Changing the Story', funded by the United Kingdom's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). This global project investigates how arts, heritage, and human

rights education can support youth-centred approaches to civil society building, with a range of activities located in diverse 'post-conflict' contexts. Changing the Story activities in Graaff-Reinet were pitched as attempts to 'amplify' the 'voices' of young people in the Karoo region of South Africa in the context of struggles for land and environmental justice.

Because 'voice' was centred, care was taken in the design to ensure that recruited co-creators took the lead in determining the project's identity and aims, and that the envisioned film-making, theatre-making, and social research toolkit would be managed by the young people of the CCC themselves. Our intention was to implement participatory methods in order to produce, harness and stage the 'voices' of people not usually centred in knowledge production, while at the same time seeking to challenge 'extractivist methods' (Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith 2008; Smith 1999, 2006).

In this article, we engage critically with these ideas, seeking to hold on to the ambiguities and dilemmas our work entailed, without submitting to the urge to resolve them. *Ilizwi Lenyaniso Lomhlaba* uses films as advocacy in the ongoing struggle for land and environmental justice against the backdrop of colonial land theft, on-going race-based dispossession, and extractive capitalism in what is a resource-rich country. The Karoo is home to wind and solar farms, but also conceals millions of cubic feet of natural gas, making the region a crucial battlefield in the politics of 'sustainable' energy. Control of the land is contested. Twenty-five years after the end of apartheid, white people still own most of it, and benefit directly from decisions over whether ecotourism, mining, farming, or other industries are planned. Landless Black people are often constructed as lacking agency in development debates, and as easily led into supporting whichever unscrupulous lobbyist promises the greatest immediate gains. Instead of the rational public sphere envisioned under liberalism, public debates over resource extraction stack the odds heavily towards existing racialised land distributions that reproduce whiteness as hegemonic (Burnett 2019).

The social locations of project participants are inextricable historical processes of racialised dispossession. Members of the CCC hailed from the suburbs of uMasizakhe and Kroonvale which, in a country with the ongoing spatial and socio-economic legacy of apartheid, largely corresponded to isiXhosa-speaking 'Black African' and Afrikaans-speaking 'Coloured' youth (to use the old Population Act categorisations). While the CCC came from relatively poor and peripheralised communities, as researchers, we participated in the project as white, English-speaking South Africans who have been privileged by centuries of colonial and racist oppression, and now both live in the global North, employed by European universities. As we explore below, the project was from its very inception inflected by dynamics of class, language, gender, race, and able-bodiedness. To work on 'amplifying voice' in the context of these dynamics necessarily involves engaging with the complexity and ambiguity connected with claims of efficacy and political visibility. Without undermining the significance of research centring voices of young people, indigenous communities, and people outside of metropolitan areas, we wish to attend to the implications of a focus on 'voice' and highlight some of the tensions, ambiguities and potential concerns of processes of building an activist co-creator collective.

In doing so, we aim to address what is particular about 'voice' in participatory co-creation, and how this more critical reflection might generate conscious research practices that enable reflexivity as well as an analysis of power in its colonial and intersectional

complexity. While we aspire as scholars to engage in the 'risky business' of challenging racism, colonialism, and oppression we acknowledge that struggle is a 'blunt instrument' that can work to reproduce power imbalances (Smith 2006, 152–153). In the context of the decolonial moment in South Africa and beyond, the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a leading voice on methodological decoloniality, provided a framework for our critical analysis of voice as a constituent element of activism, and theory as struggle (2006). She proposes five conditions, or dimensions. The first is critical consciousness, which entails 'an awakening from the slumber of hegemony and the realisation that action has to occur' (2006, 155). The second condition relates to the imagination, to posit an 'alternative vision' for the world grounded in decolonial epistemologies. Her third condition relates to the intersection of diverse and distinct social categories and discourses, which creates opportunities for new tactics of struggle. Her fourth condition relates to the instability and disturbance associated with movement, as counter-hegemonic struggles develop in unpredictable and disruptive ways. Finally, there are the limitations imposed by structure: the 'underlying code' of imperialism that works to legitimate the inequalities and marginalities grounded in material reality. We will use critical consciousness, reimagining the world, intersection as opportunity, disturbance, and structure, to bring into focus the question of how the emerging practice with young people involved in *Ilizwi Lenyaniso Lomhlaba* reflects on the politics of voicing contestation, and how this might produce the conditions for generating work in their filmed and performed outcomes.

In the next section, we sketch out the theoretical assumptions that structured our project design and our assessment of it. In the third section, we analyse key texts produced at specific moments in the project, including during workshops and social events, as well as in the filmed and performed outputs themselves, before offering some concluding thoughts in the final section.

The 'true voice' of the land? Problematising 'voice' as a research and social change methodology

The preoccupation with 'voice' in development studies could work to reproduce the idea that without the beneficence of the 'developer' there would be silence (Cooke et al. 2019; Harman 2019). The suggestion that the everyday existence of marginalised people (including young people in the Karoo) is not already mediated, shared, and expressed, and that it is only through research or development funding that it can be voiced, is clearly insupportable. On closer appraisal, a concern with voice has less to do with the margins and more to do with what the centre will and will not listen to, and on what terms those with power will consent to unplugging their ears. 'Voice' can even normalise a shifting of responsibility to the powerless to do better at competing in the imaginary market of the 'attention economy' – especially where media production is concerned. In South Africa 'voice' often emerges from the powerful cultural production of metropoles such as Johannesburg or Cape Town. Shifting a listener's attention to a small Karoo town, while an important corrective measure, clearly also has the potential to replicate the patronising, colonial dynamics inherent in research and development. Research projects that aim to be 'participatory' or 'decolonial' cannot be solely 'for' a distant, privileged scholarly 'listener'. And whose voice is it, ultimately, that gets listened to (Holland and Blackburn 1998)? Can research voice/s be plural, create space for dissonance, and not privilege harmony? If

we see intersection as opportunity, how can we understand the processes of engaging with voice as revealing, exercising, and recognising difficult modes of relation?

In approaching project design for Changing the Story in Graaff-Reinet, the notion of voice played subtly different roles in relation to research methodology, co-created artistic outputs, and the construction of 'social change'. At its simplest level, 'voice' in research methodology is data. The voices of participants are inputs in our field notes and in the many hours of caught on tape of workshops, scenery, outings, interviews with community members, rehearsals, and performances. These voices are analysed by us as researchers in terms of broader knowledge production aims imbricated in political projects. Voice is also opinion, point of view, turn of phrase, or character in the creative outputs produced by the CCC. Their production, direction, editing, dramatising, and performance of their own and others' voices means that there were also processes of beneficiation, analysis, and processing, of selection and combination, that inevitably also involved silencing some voices to privilege others. Finally, we must consider voice as being involved in struggle for social change, as involved in processes of developing a 'critical consciousness' that becomes involved in articulating 'alternative realities' (Smith 2006). Pathways for social change include impact on policy, social and political organising, and the mediatisation and dissemination of ideological programmes.

Participatory film-making is a powerful tactic to deploy at the juncture of these three domains. 'Voice' is clearly not monolithic, and socially engaged research should seek to implement methods that do not 'universalise or homogenise experience' (Harman 2019, 10). In her important work situating the value of film-making and visual methods in international relations, Sophie Harman highlights questions of who sees, how we see and what the visual field pulls into focus in relation to contexts that are social, political and informed by histories of place (2019, 104–105). Taking this approach, research focused on the politics and pragmatics of voice in participatory co-creation needs to attend to issues of recognition. That is, how meaning becomes intelligible across – and perhaps because of – differences in languages and cultures. This suggests a specific concentration on points of conflict, difficulty and tension in the process. The production of 'voice' is neither merely about replicating stories people expect to hear (Cooke et al. 2019), nor reproducing easily consumable narratives of suffering, dispossession and oppression (Ngunjiri 1998). This point has particular resonance in the context of research, when outcomes can 'stick', and participation

> may, in itself, be oppressive to participants when the parameters are controlled by academic others and the 'knowledge' produced may reinforce stereotypical views of their lives and their 'problems'. (Sandlin, Szkupinski, and Hammerand 2018, 58)

The epistemological imperatives of the development paradigm that funds the research may well reproduce these 'deficit' models and produce 'hierarchies of control that are created and re-created' (Sandlin, Szkupinski, and Hammerand 2018, 65).

Smith calls for the production of knowledge from the perspective of local, indigenous perspectives (the 'margins') which are crucial for a politics of recognition (Smith 1999, 2006). For colonised people, engagement in struggle and in research is 'a *re*writing and *re*righting [of] our position in history' (Smith 1999, 28, emphasis in the original). Colonial power structures the kinds of knowledge that are valued and produced. Specifically, white South African knowledge production has taken place at the intersection of economic and

racial power, and has worked to reproduce a specific way of thinking and speaking about the land of South Africa that forecloses indigenous claims for land justice through inventing an autochthonous whiteness that secures settler ownership and control into the future (Burnett 2019).

In our project design we posited that stories from young people at the fringes of the social and economic order are vital resources to speak back to the racialised power structures contesting the future of the Karoo. We hoped young people would curate the voices of their peers and elders alongside their own, anticipating that the processes of editing films and creating theatre would serve an interpretive and analytical purpose that spoke to wider themes. At the same time, it would have been naïve of us to think our project aims would not in themselves construct the 'voice' we were presumed to 'discover'. Kenyan theatre for development practitioner Steve Oga Abah offers participatory arts methodologies as 'negotiation', where despite common agendas what is said and how it is heard may be in conflict:

> To make communication for purposes of change it is therefore imperative to arrive at a common understanding. This demands negotiation. (2004, 47)

Within Abah's call for negotiation is a sense that commonality, consensus or a purposeful direction is necessary and desirable, and that what we are seeking to 'change' in a participatory approach (behaviours, attitudes, skills) has a predetermined future ideal. This can certainly have its place where access to public health information and best practice can improve communities' living conditions. However, it can also veil some of the hidden hierarchies in place when we produce standards that are to be broadly applied. It can also obscure the tensions, difficulties of adherence or local practices that make compliance, or consensus a realistic (or even desirable) outcome.

In our project, what we consider to be valuable is the process of dwelling in ambiguity, in negotiation itself, and not necessarily in a clear or consistent outcome or singular 'story'. In that sense, as Zakes Mda explains, participatory approaches can make space for those 'faced with complexities and ambiguities that we need to interpret' (2002, 282). We felt we would undermine the whole enterprise through trying to resolve the tensions introduced through the various layers of power that pulled 'voice' in different directions (Walsh and Burnett, forthcoming). These layers of ambiguous power include the funding structures and their replication of colonial systems of power-knowledge; and navigating the project structures as a form of gatekeeping related to universities and grassroots organisations filtering opportunities to young people. Importantly, dynamics of power between participants themselves – along lines of gender, class, language, and other dimensions of identity – actively structured the conversation, ensuring that some voices were heard while others remained silent.

A focus on the 'local' can deflect attention from systemic injustice and inequality, as can top-down agenda-setting (Mohan and Stokke 2000). Research for social change ought to leave room for the imagination. But, as Smith points out, hopeful, imaginative practices are not political projects in themselves. With a warning that they are 'inherently uncontrollable' (2006, 159), she insists that embracing creativity and ambiguity is an important epistemological resistance in decolonial movements. We therefore aligned ourselves with the recognition that 'voice' is not a singular phenomenon that can be 'given' by one group to another, even across lines of privilege and inequality that structure

knowledge and media production. To accommodate a plethora of voices, we took inspiration from Jacques Rancière's notion of 'dissensus' (1998), an attempt to 'loosen the bonds that enclose spectacles within a form of visibility […] within the machine that makes the "state of things" seem evident, unquestionable' (in Carnevale and Kelsey 2007, 259). It is this dissensus – with its ups and downs, and ins and outs – that we will explore in the next section.

Dissensus: voice and power

We analyse key moments of voice – but also of silence – that were recorded in the *Ilizwi Lomhlaba Lenyaniso* project between June and December 2019. In observing closely the fading into and out of intelligibility, and in holding dissensus and ambiguity, while listening for what was unsaid, we propose five key perspectives raised by the CCC that complicate and deepen approaches to voice as a research and social change methodology. First, we discuss the ambiguous potential of film to represent 'reality'. Second, we examine the voice of 'organic intellectuals'. Thirdly, we discuss the implications of heterogeneity for an attempt at 'dissensus'. Fourth, we examine the structural dimensions underpinning the voice/s of the project. And finally, we address the salience of voices of 'youth'. The filmed interviews evinced the entanglement of power with language: many interviewees spoke English, some spoke isiXhosa, some Afrikaans, and some a mixture of Afrikaans and English. The translations were made by the CCC in subtitles for the films, and we reproduce them here. We also include the original language to align with the critical approach to the politics of translation.

Film as testimony to the 'real'

In a country where the spaces that people inhabit are still largely defined by income and apartheid 'population groups', part of the power of film as a medium is its ability to take audiences across social and political boundaries. The first set of shoots include lingering shots of children playing games on dusty streets, abandoned lots where rubbish had been allowed to pile up, and poorly lit household interiors where project participants and their friends rap to downloaded backing tracks. The first impulse of filmmakers, in this case, appears to have been to show, rather than to tell. As one of the co-creators puts it:

> I feel very strongly that it is necessary to expose these realities, to tell our stories abroad, beyond borders, so everyone has access to it. It is very important for society to have access to it, beyond writing, to document these things in visual and audio. (Interview, Zamuxolo Matha, English)

The idea that images were being recorded for the purposes of travelling 'beyond borders' was combined with an assertion of the power of moving images to reflect 'reality'. The project's framing around the notion of a 'story' was in some cases unpicked by co-creators, who distinguished romanticised stories from harsher realities.

> I feel like I want people to see reality. People are living a fantasy just now, living through other people … [I want] to show them actual reality. People make emotional decisions. I want us to focus on reality actually. If I can make an example. Like there is no retirement package for a

farmworker. That's the *reality*. That is the reality for people. We should be putting reality in people's faces so they can see it. People are just *living vicariously* through other people. (Interview, Ntando Sodladla, English, emphasis in spoken original)

At a number of points, this theme was taken up by co-creators: that stories of economic success and increases in social status were romanticised stories that did not reflect the realities of people in Graaff-Reinet, and were in fact unwelcome abstractions from lived realities. This privileging of harsh realities over 'fairytales' was mirrored in the privileging of concrete action over the nice words of politicians, of praxis over theory. This was framed in one of the early films of the project, 'Women in Arms':

> *Women standing on a dusty open space in a poor neighbourhood conduct a spontaneous lecture to the filmmakers about how spatial inequalities are perpetuated in Graaff-Reinet, as those in the municipality* 'know nothing about how we live'; *complaining about how the everyday realities of joblessness, the struggle to survive, overcrowding and crime affect people's dignity. From this communal complaint, they shout at some nearby children to* 'fetch the poles … we are going to erect our own plots. Today is D-day! … We don't need creches! We need houses! *Dis daarvoor daar is soveel rowers en verkragters in Graaff-Reinet, die hele plek is omsingel van fokken kerke!* [That's why there are only robbers and rapists in Graaff-Reinet, the place is surrounded by fucking churches!]'[1] *shouts one of the women.* (Co-Creator Collective, 'Women in Arms', part English, part Afrikaans 2019)

This loud and ebullient chorus gathers energy as community members add their voices in collective support of the main speaker. The most vocal woman seems bolstered by being heard. The power that seemingly builds in the sequence filmed by the group comes from the strength of their complaints. The co-creators frame the complaint in the context of space, access, and feeling unheard by political decision-makers. The speaker's insistence on houses before churches or crèches speaks to the general theme of what the CCC found in their process: that it is the cramped conditions of urban areas that loom largest in people's minds when the subject of land justice is raised. The power of the camera to represent people's abject poverty was highly valued by the film-makers:

> *Jy moenie net insit wat jy wil insit nie […] nou sit mense in wat mooi is, in plaas van die waarheid! … die waarheid is basies om op die punt to kom …* [You can't just put into the story what you want to … People just put pleasant things into stories, instead of the truth! You have to get to the point!]. (Interviews, Junaid Oliephant, Afrikaans, 2019)

Who is this truth being shown to, and in whose interests is it being represented? Eliud Ngunjiri outlines the ambiguities of participation where NGOs use methodologies to highlight existing marginalisation. He draws out the complexities of funding dependencies and campaigns for representation as 'marginalised' that seem to be predicated on replicating conditions of marginalisation, calling this a process that adds 'insult to injury' (1998, 468). This can lead to a cycle of consciousness raising, complaint, group frustration but little action resulting from awareness of marginalisation.

Zamuxolo Matha's hope that films would move 'beyond borders', and the oft-stated aim of co-creators to represent the 'truth' in order to impact on social conditions, could amount to 'insult to injury'. To adopt the critique of the women on the dusty square, the project itself could be like building more 'fucking churches' instead of houses. The abysmal social conditions of South African townships are fairly well known in the

academic literature as well as in the media, and yet material change is not forthcoming. There is a sense in which just representing the realities of these spaces could be therapeutic, but a dead-end for activism.

This sense is however mitigated through a theme that emerged strongly from co-creators that spoke to a renewed sense of urgency around the conscientisation of local people through representation. When Ntando Sodladla refers to 'people living vicariously' in a world of 'fantasy' he is speaking of local allies he seeks to conscientise. There was a sense in which co-creators themselves saw their reality – and those of their neighbours – afresh through the process of mediatising them:

> Because now you know the stories. *Jy loop verby iemand …* [You walk past somebody] but it's just OK, bye. When you ask them about their lives, about how they live, you don't even know that your neighbour has been through all of that. […] *ons almal word nie raakgesien nie, ons almal het nie 'n voice nie, ons …* [Not all of us are seen; not all of us have a voice; we judge people but we don't know these people]. (interviews, Thandi Persensie, English and Afrikaans)

> *Toe ons begin het […] jy dink jy het probleme, en dan vra jy vir die plakkers en hulle sê hulle gebruik dieselfde toilet, as die water afgesny is in Graaff-Reinet het hulle geen water. Die mense se lewe staan stil. Die mense in die community reik nie uit na hulle nie, want hulle in die plakkerskamp lewe …* [When we began […] you think you have problems, but then you ask the squatters about their lives and they say they all use the same toilet, and that when the water is cut off they have no other way of getting water. Their lives stand still. Other community members don't help them, because they stay in the squatter camp]. (Interviews, Sadé Jaftha, Afrikaans)

> *Ons mense dink ons kry swaar, maar daar is altyd iemand wat dit swaarder kry. Elke mens het 'n storie, en ons stories is nie dieselfde nie.* [And we think we have it bad, but there is always someone is having harder time. Everybody has a story, and our stories are not the same]. (Interviews, Waltozine Jacobs, Afrikaans)

Rather than voice being understood as something that moves from the local to the national or global scales (though this does happen, to a limited extent), we might start to ask questions about how filmed storytelling plays a local role in mediatising reality for people who already have some access to that reality, but are driven by hegemonic social forces to acquiesce. Film clearly also has a role to play as a local agitator, as a focused counter-hegemonic discursive intervention.

The organic intellectuals

Secondly, among co-creators themselves there were vastly different agendas when it came to storytelling and the curation of voice, largely because of their backgrounds in diverse social movements and their participation being grounded in different motivations and political commitments. Early on in the project, the Sodladla twins Thando and Ntando, as well as the co-founder of Youth-in-Power, Zamuxolo Matha, and Junaid Oliephant, made explicitly political and philosophical contributions to co-creator discussions. Their interventions aimed to articulate a structural account of the limits to counter-hegemonic agency, and to conscientise the group about the need for activities that addressed both the material base of inequality and the discursive production of the minds of the oppressed. For others, the major motivation for participation was self-

development, and to learn new skills that might help in career advancement, for example:

> Dis die experience wat ek soek. Vir jongmense … Ek dink jongmense moet meer opportunities vat soos hierdie, om jou skills en jou persoonlikheid voortestel, veral mense wat geen selfvertroue het nie. [It's the experience I am looking for. I think young people should take more opportunities like this one, to develop your skills and introduce your personality, especially if you lack self-confidence]. (Interviews, Waltozine Jacobs, Afrikaans)

This insistence on using the project as a platform for personal learning, and humility about existing knowledge, were often connected to a nascent political consciousness:

> Our land was once important to us. Our land was, like, our riches. And now we are […] disadvantaged. If we could have our land back […] we probably would be able to create our own jobs without having to worry about, oh, I have to wake up tomorrow and look for a job. Because we have learned to make our own gardens. (Interviews, Khunjuzwa Mangaliso, English)

What does this mean for a theorisation of 'voice'? Arguably, the process of collaboration itself was instrumental in the construction of voice, as various social and personal commitments were negotiated between team members to result in the co-creation process itself. Identifying interview subjects, shooting locations, question sheets, and then making camera, editorial, and dissemination decisions were all processes that linked into the specific commitments and evolving shared understanding of members of *Ilizwi Lenyaniso Lomhlaba* about exactly what it was that they were achieving with their project.

Dissensus and heterogeneity

Our process was consciously grounded in paying attention to the principle that each person matters. Building a team of equals is challenging and requires skills development in respectful communication. This was particularly evident in the seemingly inevitable return to patriarchal models of communication, including how meetings were run, who was expected to make tea, what order people spoke in and which roles were undertaken by which participants. Who could speak, and whose voice was heard most loudly in discussions, decisions and even in ultimatums, proved decisive to the creative outputs of the project.

The question of who was responsible for dealing with these power relations on the team was not always clear. In the opening session of the first workshop the second author generated ambiguity about whose responsibility it was to ensure that co-creators were not being silenced by loud voices:

> I am also a very opinionated person, I've got a loud voice and I do tend to take up space, so I will also share what Thando and Ntando have said that sometimes you also need to tell me to keep quiet and listen … We've got big personalities in the room and we've got people who say they want to listen and that they are soft, so we must be careful as 'hard' people. (Interviews, Scott Burnett, English)

This rhetorical division of co-creators into 'hard' and 'soft' was mirrored in a number of intra-group engagements that played out as the project progressed. While we reminded ourselves to resist closed stories, and remain aware of the significance of context in storytelling (Miller, Little, and High 2017), it was clear that this advice was also salient to the management of the group itself. Personalities evolved in the group, and differences of

language, social background, educational level, gender, as well as of course South African racial politics, played out in the production of voice.

Mda reminds us that creative methods with developmental aims are strongest when they 'arouse the people's capacity to participate and decide things for themselves' (1990, 354). What people actually decide may interrupt a neat narrative of 'transformation'. Behaviours in CCC meetings often replicated the gendered and class oppressions prevalent in South African daily life. In filmed footage of the first author's first exercise on narrative and storytelling, the invitation to the groups to create scenes with only two minutes for rehearsal immediately resulted in dominant characters (assertive men fluent in English) taking charge of the process. Indeed, the element of pressure introduced by the authors as workshop facilitators was fundamental to forcing power hierarchies into play. Somebody had to take charge and, without intervention from facilitators, these people tended to be those who already benefited from social power hierarchies.

After two months of working together since the first workshop, the authors arrived back in Graaff-Reinet for a debrief of progress made, and a second round of training workshops. It became clear that intense schisms had developed in the group. Some of the men adopted explicitly anti-feminist stances. While people confident in speaking English shared their points of view in the debrief, many Afrikaans speakers remained quiet.

Gender's insidious structuring of power, access and communication can be seen in the confident mode of the young men who took up organising and leadership roles, and who maintained strong communication with the second author, and the silences, gaps or missing voices from the young women involved in the project and in communication with the first author. This speaks to how power and voice are engaged in constant negotiation with wider discursive notions of how certain people have rights and responsibilities while others must labour to carry out the tasks or instructions determined by the decision-makers. It is difficult to understand exactly how this operates from a distance, but it is easily recognised in footage of the CCC in rehearsal: eloquent, confident young men hold forth in monologues, while others watch, listen and respond approvingly.

Language and class are highly imbricated in South Africa, with access to 'Model C' English (i.e. white South African English) strongly correlated with Black people who have joined the middle classes (Soudien 2004). Those in the group who had been educated at the local (majority white) English high school often took up a disproportionate amount of airtime in conversations, especially with the authors, who quite literally 'speak their language'. Although we attempted to make room for isiXhosa and Afrikaans, this was limited by our own linguistic shortcomings. Though Afrikaans is a language we both speak at a basic level and can understand fairly well, we were seldom able to facilitate, articulate project aims, or 'back-channel' in Afrikaans, leading to a dynamic where participants sometimes clearly felt pressured to make themselves intelligible in English, even when this was clearly uncomfortable for them. Specific language ideologies also arose in the way that we were able to debrief the filmmaking process, where activities such as subtitling were discussed:

> Zamuxolo: We tried to overcome language barriers, like with the subtitling, like with someone who is speaking Afrikaans you would be reaching only those. It breaks language barriers with subtitling.

> Emile: *Want Engels is 'n international language.* [Because English is an international language].

> Patricia: *Ek was die translator, en ek wil dat mense sal verstaan wat aangaan.* [I was the translator, and I wanted people to understand what was going on]. (interviews, CCC, English and Afrikaans)

Necessarily, the power of and fidelity to original Afrikaans and isiXhosa 'voice' is lost in translation to this 'international' language. We are thus wary of eloquence, prominence, or confidence as reliable measures of the effective amplification of voice. The privileges afforded by gender and the classed dimensions of language confound such easy conclusions. Thinking alongside the work of Allison Goebel (1998), while the pursuit of 'the true voice' of the land through participatory co-creation offered valuable insights into young people, group and identity formation and collective creativity, we must acknowledge that local knowledge is 'dynamic, contested, and often contradictory' (Goebel 1998, 277). To that end, we observe that multiple voices did emerge – in 'competing stories' of dissonance and dissensus (1998, 277).

Building the capacity of young people who are activist-aligned requires fostering a sense of gratitude for one another. This can be a long, ongoing journey, but it enables the chance to build communities not of sameness, but of difference. The development of the group and their stories is non-linear, relying on recognition of interdependence. This may seem utopian; in practice it is complicated, and a great deal of effort was expended by SCLC partners in managing this. At various points in the process it became necessary to pause the action of the project and focus on group development, communication styles, and interpersonal dynamics. As researchers we engaged in this with an awareness of the superordinance of questions of social justice: that whatever our design, and whatever the planned research 'impact', these had to be subordinated to the kind of equality that can be forged from paying attention to emergent, organic, and shifting patterns of power and control within the CCC.

Structure: underlying imperial codes

While social hierarchies developed in the course of the project, at the apex of these hierarchies, unavoidably, sat the authors, in our role as facilitators, designers, and project managers: determining frameworks, timing, and lunch breaks; setting deadlines, following up, and communicating aims and objectives. We represented the funders and the institutional power of university learning in the workshop setting. And so it was not a surprising result that, when the team presented their chosen vision and values for the project on the first day of the workshop back to the camera, there was an excellent fit between what had been decided, and the 'Theory of Change' that had been submitted to the Changing the Story project team 8 months earlier:

> Our vision through storytelling is to create a space that practices land justice, tells stories, and empowers youth, to ensure dignity in the Karoo. Our mission is to educate people, conduct interviews, film the stories, and put them in public spaces to get people to participate. (interviews, Thandi Persensie, English)

> These are our values. Number 1: Integrity. Number 2: To reclaim the space. Number 3: To inspire people. Number 4: Ubuntu. And Number 5: the uniqueness of the Karoo! (interviews, Waltozine Jacobs, English)

> [*Scene at sunset on the first day of the first workshop*] Our organisation, *Ilizwi Lenyaniso Lomhlaba*, basically what we want to do is film the stories of the local people in our local Karoo – and guys this is what we're talking about [*gesturing to the camera to film the mountain*] leave the houses out, the mountains actually. Are you getting that? Yeah that's what we're after guys, we're after that mountain over there …. (interviews, Ntando Sodladla, English)

The power of the authors as facilitators to frame the project notwithstanding, its design clearly resonated and was embraced enthusiastically by the CCC. Participation was incentivised through the promise of skills training, social engagement with peers, and financial honoraria for creative outputs delivered. As project leaders, we are not only representative of hegemonic white socioeconomic power in South Africa, but the associated global power structures of the United Kingdom and Sweden, where we live and work, respectively. Though participants had other sources of financial support (including part-time jobs and supportive family members) these material and symbolic incentives clearly contributed to co-creator participation and enthusiasm.

This danger was highlighted by one interviewee who had apparently given an excellent interview on camera, but had later withdrawn his consent. Though the footage of his interview was removed from the project archive, the content of what he said served as an important discussion point at our follow-up workshops. He was 'voiced' in the performance piece, using the catch-phrase: '*jou mind is ge-capture*!' [your mind is captured!], a clever play on the discourse of 'state capture' that hinges on the corruption charges against former president Jacob Zuma. In a still very racist country, the 'corrupting' influence of whiteness as structuring the horizon of possibility for Black people, to whom the nation belongs, is analogised to Zuma's crony clientelism; while he 'captures' the State for personal gain, white land owners 'capture' the minds of landless Black people. This was posed as a challenge to us as facilitators by co-creators at dinner. What guarantee would we be able to provide that, as privileged white South Africans, our project design and facilitation was not continuous with the on-going discursive gestures of future ownership that secure the continuity of white socioeconomic power in South Africa? When we were back in the U.K. or Sweden, what would we really have achieved? The first author responded to this challenge by quoting Audre Lorde's 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' – but to what extent had we succeeded in designing new tools (Lorde 2018)? To what extent were we not merely performing a new tessellation of the 'development' fractal radiating out from the GCRF?

These critical questions had surfaced before; in one specific moment of resistance, the authors challenged the co-creators' decision to use the old Struggle song, *Thina Sizwe*, in both their theatre performance and in their film, as for us this song is a maudlin hymn associated with an older generation of freedom fighters; it has become part of the clichéd symbolic 'furniture' of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), whose capitulation to neo-liberalism in the 1990s, which pulled the rug out from under any thoroughgoing post-apartheid redistribution of wealth has long been the focus of activist ire (Hart 2002). The refusal, with a knowing chuckle, of the co-creators in their rehearsal on 23 August to choose a different song is perhaps explained by closer attention to the song's lyrics (Zama 2018):

> *Thina sizwe esimnyama* (We, the black nation)
> *Sikhalela izwe lethu* (We are weeping for our land)

> *Elathathwa ngabamhlophe* (Which was taken away from us by white people)
> *Mabawuyeke* (They should leave it)
> *Mabawuyek'umhlaba wethu* (They should leave our land alone)

Thina Sizwe clearly still has a revolutionary potential we did not at first understand. The version of the song used in the edited version of 'Women in Arms' is taken from an album by the radical Black opposition party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), dissolving its link to the ANC's neoliberalism. The resistance to our white and privileged perspective on *Thina Sizwe* can thus be read as an attempt to not allow the creative outputs of the project to be 'captured' by whiteness.

In these outputs, the imperial codes of white social and economic dominance were also clearly visible in what would and would not be said on camera. In our filmed debriefs with co-creators, nearly all of them reported that interviewees had not been completely comfortable to talk openly about land justice on camera. People with strong opinions off-camera were suddenly less animated and talkative on-camera. White economic power and Black and Coloured political power in the municipality or in civic organisations was constructed by a number of interviewees as potentially visiting retribution on them for things they would say on a public forum:

> Khunjuzwa Mangaliso: They're scared that […] white people are gonna see this and then they get worked up […] some people are scared to speak about the land question because they want to go to war, they want the land back, then they try to hide those emotions, because they are angry about it …
>
> Zamuxolo Matha: People […] want tangible results. The reason people don't want to be interviewed they are scared to be exposed […] because they are members of political or church organisations …
>
> Khunjuzwa Mangaliso: Scared of the feedback, the backlash … scared of the ears that will hear and the reaction … . (interviews, CCC, English)

Add to this the pressures of delivering project outputs on time. Our participants' attempts to elicit 'the true voice of the land' required plenty of time: stories did not emerge in the timeframes set by institutional decision-makers. This reflection needs to be inflected through layers of privilege; ease of reference that go along with education; accessibility of activities (including the technical dimensions that presuppose a certain level of digital literacy). For co-creators to participate in a shoot, they needed access to transport to get them to the location. One co-creator uses a wheelchair, and requires help to get in and out of vehicles. At our chosen venue for the final lunch of the first workshop the bathrooms were not wheelchair accessible, and we thus subjected her to the indignity of a profoundly ableist space. Co-creators' capacity to navigate expectations and deadlines were predetermined in many ways by their differential access to resources and capabilities. 'Voice' was thus in all cases produced against structural limitations, the imperial codes underlying life in Graaff-Reinet, South Africa, and the world at large. It would be naïve to imagine that these codes did not structure the project outputs.

Youth voices

The most effusive audience for the work of the co-creators was at the conference organised by SCLC and land activist organisation *Tshintsha Amakhaya* (22–24 August 2019). The

resounding theme of the feedback from these women activists was their sense of relief, but also inspiration, that young people were taking on the struggle for land justice. The filmed and performed work they did gave voice to small scale farmers, local workers, unemployed people, and community leaders to explore the specificity of space as inflected from various positions. Their questions probed people's memories and experiences of land, space, and how they experience intersections of access to resources, changes in governance and local power struggles over housing, living conditions including sanitation and the implications of fracking for the natural resources of the Karoo. For older activists it was not so much the content of the films as a recognition of the future standard bearers of the struggle that fuelled their positive response.

This is a strong theme throughout our discussions with co-creators and in many of their films. A preoccupation with the role of youth in land struggles shapes South African politics at present, and was articulated as the main reason for involvement in the project, and other projects, by co-creators:

> For me […] influence is the word [… youth] should own that debate, that's ours basically. Because I feel like all these old people talking about land and who it belongs to, they're not gonna be around here for much longer. And they're gonna leave us with this mess that we're in currently. […] So I think the land issue is our issue. It's not about us influencing the discussion, it's our discussion basically. (interviews, Thando Sodladla, English)

The sense that youth had new energy and new solutions to structural change in South Africa was in certain cases contrasted to a rejection of the older generation's way of thinking about land politics, and in others with a commitment to taking up the fight that was started by their elders. In some cases, young people expressed a longing for the close connections to the land of their elders, and a need for conscientisation:

> I won't understand the depth because I am the new generation. But for someone else who's actually lived that situation, they understand it. Me. I am in the new generation. I am more in a different state of mind, you know. (interviews, Khunjuzwa Mangaliso, English)

These intergenerational co-creations of 'voice' are fascinating instances of building critical consciousness, and the sense of 'alternative realities' Smith (2006) identifies as intrinsic to decolonial struggle. Consciousness emerges in dialogue, in sharing, but also in challenging narratives and listening critically to each other. An expectation of radicalism, of change, of progress, underlay much of the engagement between older and younger people in *Ilizwi Lenyaniso Lomhlaba*.

Conclusion

In our critical reflection on voice, we have mobilised Linda Tuhiwai Smith's five dimensions of decolonial struggle (2006). Clearly, the sense of critical consciousness for activists was negotiated, subsisted in dissensus, and was inflected by power inequalities. A process of reimagining the world assembled semiotic resources from a variety of people and contexts to be articulated in narratives that imagined ways 'out' of our conjuncture, while this imagination and consciousness were both limited by intersecting social locations and projects. These happened across transverse sites of struggle, and also across generations. But we could not supersede the impact of imperialism, hegemonic whiteness, ownership, nationhood, or hegemonic gender relationships as the underlying imperial code of

most of our interactions. Rather than anticipate a linear progression between these five dimensions, we see them working in and against one another in a productive tension in which collecting stories anticipates imagining and voicing new worlds.

Note

1. Translations from the Afrikaans by the co-creators and the authors.

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