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Critical hope (and hopelessness) in youth participatory arts praxis: #ImaginingOtherwise

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ABSTRACT

This article considers moments from youth participatory arts praxis in Cape Town, South Africa. Hopelessness can ensure that dreams and desires are quashed and keep one 'in place' (Muñoz, 2009). We thus consider the role of 'concrete struggle' [Giroux, Henry. 2004. "When Hope is Subversive." *Tikkun* 19 (6): 38–39], how it relates to youth 'agency' [Häkli, Jouni, & Kallio, Kirsi P. 2018. On Becoming Political: The Political in Subjectivity. *Subjectivity*, 11, 57–73] and what is particular about exploring these through arts approaches. We explore the significance of what Henry Giroux calls 'critical hope' while attending to the mobilising energies of 'critical hopelessness'. The article considers youth meaning-making through their collective creative actions as core dimensions of critical hope and hopelessness.

On the walk to the bus stop with mrs, we talk about a lot of things, which is mostly one sided because at the moment i am in no mood … seems the day's mood of being depressed carried through, not even the presence of my favourite educator can change it. That's just the way it is.

When i get home i undress and i want to nap, I'm really tired.

i always seem to be, whenever i get 'home.

As i lie in bed i think about the future, i usually do. It always seems to be gloomy though. Mrs Clark always says that 'if i work hard i can be whoever i want'.

I'm not too sure about that, she might be my favourite teacher, but i do not agree with what she said. I think she doesn't understand that what she is saying sounds so stereotypical. I hate it, i feel like even though i'm told that, every time i start slackin' in my schoolwork … i still don't believe it' (Thalia, #IO project documentation 2021).[1]

Thalia's words are from a script developed by a participant as part of a two-year participatory arts project in Cape Town from 2020–2022 titled #ImaginingOtherwise. In the monologue, the character lurches between the desire to impress her teacher and a

sense of doom about the future. Its protagonist is mired in an individualised embodiment of South Africa as a country of hope and despair: a dream born in 1994 through the peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy. A nightmare lived daily by millions of ordinary South Africans for whom little has changed in terms of their hope for a dignified life.

At the macro level, youth in South Africa face ever-increasing unemployment and barriers to post-school education opportunities (SAnews 2019). As in the rest of Africa, South African youth represent approximately 63% of the population, and 'for the first quarter of 2022, the unemployment rate was 63,9% for those aged 15–24 and 42,1% for those aged 25–34 years' (Statistics 2022). According to the Oxfam Inequality report, 'the structure of South African wealth and income inequality looks more like a caste system, where one's social status is determined at birth and is based on race, class and gender than a system of free association among people of equal value' (Oxfam 2020, 12). It is no wonder that, for many young people in South Africa – as Thalia's character expresses – the future seems bleak. This is racialised (in terms of social mobility) and correlates with differentially foreclosed possibilities for schooling; with differing potential for secure employment, housing or little capacity to generate something other than constrained options for work, leisure, and social life. For instance, a young woman or queer person, living in a country with the highest rape and femicide rates in the world means living in a state of constant vigilance – which Pumla Gqola (2022) refers to as the 'female fear factory' that perpetuates the ongoing policing of the feminine. South Africa's femicide rates contribute to the country being amongst the only in the world where there is an exponential increase in the homicide rate, and according to the Institution of Security Studies, has the second highest murder rate per capita in the world (Faull and Bruce 2023).

This toxic mix of violence and massive inequalities is rooted in South Africa's colonial history, apartheid's legislated 'separate development' and continues in the neo-colonial present. In this context, young people from poor and working-class communities try to navigate school and post-school life while being told disciplining narratives about 'success' as individualistic and a result of hard work. The violent context that the young people in this project inhabit reinforces the sense that as working-class Black youth, their life scripts are predetermined and hopeless, which Selina Busby points out is part of the formulation of 'bare life' (cf. Agamben 1998). She reflects that '[m]any of the 'bare citizens' that participate in [..] community theatre projects […] are also conditioned by their circumstances to think that alternatives are not possible, that their futures are set and unchangeable' (Busby 2022, 48–49). This can diminish what is seen as potential alternative futures, resulting in young people feeling 'disposable' (Evans and Giroux 2015) and it is for this reason that finding ways to foster critical hope/lessness is vital.

In this article we start off with the proposition that specific participatory arts processes can promote 'critical hope'. That is, a mode of hope which centres social critique of present problems in order to strive for a world without oppression or suffering. This mode of hope (one of five discussed by Darren Webb) is active and embodied: 'hope experienced in the critical mode compels us to do something other than merely persevere and stand firm' (2007, 72). Critical hope connects arts and activism in the #ImaginingOtherwise project. Participatory arts processes become part of a critical pedagogical approach that invite participants to identify modes of structural oppression, and create alternative stories and relationships that can encourage young people to conceive of themselves as political actors in the world. In Rebecca Solnit's words, 'in the spaciousness

of uncertainty is room to act' (2016, xiv). Our focus is thus on *critical* hope – not merely imagining, but attaching the activities to the real-world activist endeavours needed to make change. As Adam Cooper, Swartz, and Mahali (2019) point out, there are few theoretical approaches that seek to make sense of majority world (specifically African) youth on their own terms. In the context of a Southern critical pedagogy, we sought a means of engaging youth perspectives on their lifeworlds.

Our article puts forward approaches to arts praxis that chime with critical pedagogue Henry Giroux's sense of 'critical hope' (2001; 2004); expanding on his concept by exploring young people's rich responses to the project stimuli through the lens of critical hope and hopelessness. Our argument throughout is that the 'critical' or 'educated' dimension of hope is productive for arts-based projects in relation to agency; informing how young people engaged with the materials, responses and different perspectives across the project. Our intention here is to reflect on and articulate critical hope/lessness as it emerged out of the process, pedagogy and artforms. As practitioner-researchers, we are looking back and developing theory from the praxis. In that sense, the article generates a grounded theory of arts participation, rather than seeking to exemplify predetermined characteristics of hope/lessness.

To consider the usefulness of critical hope and hopelessness, we analyse different art forms and processes in the project. Firstly, engaging with South Africa's geographies of inequality, we set out the imperative for arts engagement to promote critical hope/lessness. Then, we work through the framing of critical hope/lessness in the project design and praxis. In the third part, we explore the shift to critical hope modalities with a close analysis of some examples from the project workshops based on a framework from Giroux. Our starting point is thus, to recall Webb (2007) and Giroux (2004), that critical hope/lessness is a mode of social critique by which we can learn about the world we would like to see. This relates to agency, in terms of political subjectivity, which, as Jouni Häkli and Kirsi Kallio put forward:

> […] is animated when people become attentive to social power relations embedded in particular subject positions that they end up accepting, averting, or transforming. The baseline that follows is that subjectivity is both the premise of and constraint to human political agency, thus forming its critical condition of possibility. (2018, 65)

Such agency in our project was the particular, subjective understanding of how race and space come together in how young people come to conceive of structural inequalities (Gilmore 2002). Our engagement with arts processes made space for the exploration of these issues, noting that they are complex and interrelated.

Project overview

#ImaginingOtherwise was a two-year collaborative project (2020-2022) which worked with young people aged 15–25 through the arts to explore spatial and racial injustice that are legacies from colonisation, apartheid, and racial capitalism. These have resulted in infrastructure that is not only a spatial logic, but that plays out in everyday life, particularly on the Cape Flats where the project was located. We worked with 25 participants who were connected to a post-school education Non Profit Organisation (NPO) BottomUp and who applied to join the project through a brief motivation and commitment to the time required (monthly workshops, continual WhatsApp engagement, and two weekend camps). The funding for the project was from Global Challenges Research Funded (GCRF) project 'Changing the Story,' supporting participatory arts-based project with young

people in post-conflict settings (see Changing the Story 2021). These participants were limited in number to enable working long term with a fairly stable cohort, and were recruited via the partner organisations from a range of schools across the Flats.

The project brought together partner organisations that represent the intersection of arts, education, and politics. In the UK, the project was led by Aylwyn Walsh with co-investigator geographer Paul Routledge (2017) both from the University of Leeds. The Cape Town team was led by Alex Sutherland and the Tshisimani Centre for Activist Education, established in 2016 to assist social justice movements and activists to challenge inequalities and support struggles for freedom and dignity (Tshisimani 2023). They do this by developing political education programmes rooted in popular education methods. The arts are a core method of education and activism for the organisation, and their arts and media team facilitated visual and performing arts processes as part of the project. Project partner BottomUp (see BottomUp 2023) is a small NPO working with under-resourced high schools in the Southern Peninsula (part of Cape Town's Cape Flats). BottomUp uses participatory action research and critical pedagogy as tools to promote active citizenship and participatory democracy with children and youth through a series of after-school programmes aimed at fostering critical thinking. Their role was integral in navigating how the schooling system impacts poor youth, recruiting engaged participants, and providing a vital bridge between the lived realities of high school youth within the contexts of scarcity, and the arts programme. We collaborated with a range of artists on the project. The two NPOs partnering with the University of Leeds always centre critical pedagogy in an approach to education and activism, rooted in Paolo Freire's approach to hope for critical consciousness. We drew on a lineage of thinking through creative emancipatory education such as Freire (1996; 2014), Boal (1979), Greene (1995), hooks (2003), Ichikawa (2020) and Giroux (2001; 2004; 2015) to develop a bottom-up, politically meaningful educational interaction that centres the role of arts and culture.

We wanted to consider how this group of young Africans based in the Cape Flats responded to critical pedagogy, and so the examples and practices explore how young people mobilise arts processes to increasingly reflect on class, violence, race and inequality as structural. Our intention was to relate participatory arts to political agency (Häkli and Kallio 2018), in particular in relation to a sense of 'disposability' (Evans and Giroux 2015).

The #ImaginingOtherwise project team therefore embraced a view that providing spaces for young people to critically analyse their context and to then imagine and (eventually) resist or fight for change can be achieved through creative processes. In that sense, and building on scholar activism from our collaborator Paul Routledge, the arts activities informed a critical pedagogy about place, imagination and activist potential (Derickson and Routledge 2015; Routledge 2017). This aligns with the notion of developing a critical hope: a hope for a future that is not unattainable but that can be shaped, fought for, and experimented with in the present.

Context: Concrete struggles, geographies of inequality

The Cape Flats covers a large area and its name derives from the flat, sandy, exposed and not always habitable piece of land that joins the Cape peninsula to the African continent. It is an area housing thousands of Black and 'Coloured'[2] people, established when families were forcibly removed during the violent dispossession of black neighbourhoods in the 1960s due to Apartheid's Group Areas Act (1950). They are sandwiched between the

previously white (middle-class) neighbourhoods nearest the Table Mountain range, and the sprawling Black township of Khayelitsha where the majority Black population live 30 kilometres from the city centre. The Flats, as it is commonly known, encompasses a range of suburbs (including some lower middle-class areas), yet it is overwhelmingly associated with poverty, substance abuse, and extreme gang violence. The young people in the project came from 'Coloured' and Black South African families, alongside children of African immigrants. For most, this project was one of their first opportunities for meaningful interaction with a racially and ethnically diverse group.

In the Cape Flats, populations are deprived of basic services, with a concomitant lack of opportunities (specifically jobs, and post-school education). For example, the schools servicing neighbourhoods across this part of the city have over-crowded classrooms and a lack of infrastructure such as laboratories or libraries or sporting facilities. Access to healthcare is constrained by long queues and delays at state facilities; and safety is an ongoing issue due to the high levels of violence and a police force that is either indifferent, incompetent, or corrupt (Lamb 2021). Young people in schools in poor and working-class communities are serviced by failing schools that are subject to violence, either just outside the school premises, or within the school grounds (see Cruywagen 2023; Hlati 2022). Such violence on the Cape Flats is often perpetuated by rival gangs that thrive on the drug trade and crime (see Pinnock 2016 for an excellent insight into the relationship between spatial apartheid, neoliberal policies and gang-dominated neighbourhoods and how these impact on adolescent lives).

Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon (2020) refers to the state's ideological refusal to see and acknowledge the urban poor as a form of neglect. For young people, this can give rise to everyday lives characterised by despair in which narratives and lifeworlds seem foreclosed, or hopeless. Such hopelessness keeps the population inert and not resisting, according to Tshepo Madlingozi (2020). These indicators relate to Giroux's notion of state 'forgetting', whereby a sociological perspective on space, access to resources, and infrastructures can clearly illuminate the state's failure to plan for thriving futures for the whole population (Giroux 2015). But these are not only state failures with technocratic solutions: they inform everyday life of poor and working-class youth. Giroux argues for an 'educated hope' as a critical form of resistance to such structural denial or forgetting. It is a form of hope that combines the pedagogical and the political as a means of harnessing political agency capable of imagining alternatives (2001; 2004). By arguing for the importance of *both* imagination *and* action, these standpoints shore up the imperative of hope, and even utopian practice (Busby 2015; 2022), for those aspects of everyday life that must be changed.

To pursue the richness of critical hope and not ignore hopelessness, we recognise the core of #ImaginingOtherwise arts praxis explores issues of injustice without neatly insisting on resolutions. We view the understanding of the political subject and what Häkli and Kallio (2018) term 'mundane political agency' as foundational to how young people engage with, and make sense of their experiences.

> Political agency […] is the subject's action when in a 'state of becoming' prompted by the future-oriented demands and contingencies of social life, and characterized by the exigencies of changing situations with considerable uncertainty and ambiguity. (Häkli and Kallio 2018, 69)

Their comments signal that claims for change are a crucial issue, as research on participatory arts ought to retain a focus on the aims and recognise the potential for praxis-research to collapse into its intentions. It may otherwise be tempting to narrate the 'possible'

impacts or effects of projects (for instance, emancipated futures, transformed outlooks or fair outcomes). On the contrary, we propose that critical hope invites collective, collaborative being in the world, generating deeper understanding and accountability rather than itself dismantling the structuring and structural inequalities that serve to keep people 'in place'. This is discussed next in terms of how the arts praxis evolved.

Developing a responsive #ImaginaryOtherwise praxis

Initially conceived as a participatory research project using primarily performance methods, we needed to rethink after our first in-person workshop with 30 young people in early March 2020 was followed by the South African government's early responsiveness to the COVID-19 pandemic. In South Africa, the hard lockdown (level 5 and a State of Emergency) was one of the strictest in the world resulting in South Africans confined to home spaces for over a month. Within the context of a digital divide, we needed to carve a digital community in the lockdown by working together on WhatsApp and Zoom (Walsh and Sutherland 2021). This required the purchase of cheap smartphones, remote loading of data bundles for access, aiming to connect remotely despite inadequate signal, electricity provision that is unstable, and with no assumptions about privacy. These material conditions mean that a middle-class pandemic education was a quite distinct set of circumstances than that faced by young people in over-crowded conditions. The complexities and nuances of how 'pivoting' to online education can further marginalise poor and working-class communities were discussed at length (see Walsh et al. 2020). The project activities therefore needed to invite a sense of collaboration and participation while recognising that trust and proximity of face-to-face workshops was impossible for the initial stages. In that sense, critical hope can be observed in the team's insistence of collective possibility despite the pandemic-legislated isolation.

Once COVID restrictions started to ease, participants were given a choice of artistic media through which they could continue to learn and create (such as film and performance, script writing, and visual arts). A major effort was expended on participants' self-representation, based on beliefs that access to excellent arts education (including access to high quality resources) allows for a process of exploratory self-expression to emerge. Such emergence is not fixed or finite, though the project scope is.

In addition to the workshops, prompts and questions to generate metaphors that we would later go on to animate in studio-based workshops, we commissioned artist mentors to engage people in smaller groups for 3 months online with our artist team and participatory performance and radical geography workshops with the wider research team. Working with professional, excellent artists resulted in rich, complex, and challenging collaborative works. In these cross-arts workshops, young people produced speculative imaginaries about justice, fair futures, survival, and creative fulfilment. One young person modelled a town gate protected by a dragon to stave off violence, while another made a comic about being a 'depressed teen' who saw art as a modality of coping (their own words). Several wrote monologues about reclaiming dignity from broken families, violent communities and schooling that produce them as 'troublemakers' and 'no-hopers,' or simply 'stuck' in a sense of having no clear future. We will go on to explore how this evolving praxis links the development of political agency (Häkli and Kallio 2018) through participatory arts processes, to the emergence of critical hope as

foundational to social change. We note that it is in process to avoid overstating the completeness of change.

Pedagogies of hope (& hopelessness)

Writing specifically about applied or participatory theatre work, Selina Busby (2015; 2022), Kathleen Gallagher (2022), and Gallagher and Rodricks (2017) discuss the specific role of participatory and applied arts processes in formulating the conditions for rehearsing hope and hopelessness, articulating the need for pedagogies of hope. In their large-scale youth-led international project Gallagher and colleagues asked:

> what practices of hope acknowledge, but are not reduced by, the precarity and insecurity of community life inside and outside schools and youth organizations? How does this hope live uncomfortably alongside disappointment and disengagement? (Gallagher, Rodricks, and Jacobson 2020, 4)

In this pair of questions, they draw attention to the significance of attending to hope-practice and the paradox of also attending to where hopelessness may remain entrenched. This is a valuable tenet of critical pedagogy, which, for Giroux, demands such contradictions to allow for the conversations, negotiations, and imaginaries of what else is possible. He says:

> hope becomes a discourse of critique and social transformation. Hope makes the leap for us between critical education, which tells us what must be changed; political agency, which gives us the means to make change; and the concrete struggles through which change happens. (2004, 38)

Using a slightly different term, Giroux goes on to say that 'educated hope' 'is a subversive force when it pluralises politics by opening a space for dissent, making authority accountable, and becoming an activating presence in promoting social transformation' (2004, 39). Similarly focused on social change, Busby outlines a pedagogy of utopia, arguing that collaborative applied arts enable an 'environment that invites the kind of reflection in which change is both desirable and conceivable' (2015, 415). The common ground here is the value of the artforms as a mode of reflexive imagining of something different. This is especially valuable in the geographies of inequality such as the Cape Flats.

When might hopelessness be a viable counterpoint to hope? When understood as 'public feeling' as Duggan & Muñoz point out (2009), it is not entirely destructive and self-referential. They go on to say:

> If happiness and optimism appear too often as individual, psychological, overbearing and annoying to those excluded from their complacent joys, doesn't hope sometimes arrive in collective, political and insurgent form? (Duggan and Muñoz 2009, 276)

Lisa Duggan's questions reflect suspicions that hope is for 'other people,' attaching it to problems of meritocracy and privilege. In that case, the potential of hope for otherwise 'disposable youth' (Evans and Giroux 2015) lies in its audacity. The dialogue between Duggan & Muñoz refutes hope and hopelessness as a binary. In this stark continuum, hoping runs the risk of 'prescribing of what our futures ought to be' which is described by Muñoz as 'keep[ing] one in place' (2009, 278). By considering hope praxis as a form of mobility that allows for creative, exploratory moves (away and towards) shifts the

attention to the praxis rather than the seeming impossibility of social change. This is picked up by Giroux who argues that:

> [w]ithout hope, even in the most dire of times, there is no possibility for resistance, dissent, and struggle. Hope expands the space of the possible, and becomes a way of recognizing and naming the incomplete nature of the present while providing the foundation for informed action. (Giroux 2015, 80)

At the core of the practice is the development of arts skills and meaning-making reflexivity that help people to witness and talk about 'the way things are' (akin to Gramsci's understanding of hegemony (1994)). Beyond that, there is the need to activate against a sense of helpless submission (or hopelessness). Linking Thalia's words in the prologue to the approach of Häkli and Kallio (2018), we note it is possible to recognise young people's agency as also including the ambiguous, or hopeless.

> This agency may take different forms because activity and passivity are equally possible responses – not taking progressive action may also be an act – and humans may seek to either restore the status quo or produce change in those aspects of their lives that have become problematized. (Häkli and Kallio 2018, 69)

In that sense, we did not ignore hopelessness, but wanted to work with it, specifically through arts pedagogies. For example, we used strategies such as collaborative titles or having young people co-curate and produce captions that explored the social and economic frames of hopelessness. In so doing, naming and curating practices were not individualised, but part of a wider atmosphere of collective and collaborative knowledge construction about the politics of race and space. As we introduce and analyse how critical hope emerged, we also aim to illuminate where its counterpart hopelessness allows participants and researchers on the team to explore, create from, and reflect on what they desire to change in a South Africa that has yet to address systemic inequalities and the ravages of dispossession.

Image 1. Protesting uniform policies.

Creative maps of hope/lessness

To illustrate the ways in which critical hope/lessness was co-produced in the #ImaginingOtherwise project, we draw on moments within the two-year process. Part of the larger inquiry concerned spatial injustice: the intersections of race, class, gender, and space. Some of our online and in person workshops built on ideas from Routledge (2017) on the circulations and nodes of sites of contestation and resistance. Routledge's scholarship on geographies of activism outlines how theories about social movements and spatial politics have understood the links between cultural representation and collective action: specifically how 'symbolic production and identity construction have acted as key frames by which collective action is interpreted and motivated' (Routledge 2017, 4). The mapping activities discussed here incorporated physical, visual and oral expressions of place that work to collectively articulate increasingly complex understandings about the politics of place.

Image 2. Mapping Cape Town and our connections.

One collective mapping activity was the culmination of a three-day camp which was also the first time the group physically met each other after COVID's hard lockdown (Image 2). These spatial mapping processes exemplify the movement from the individual to the collective levels, creating connections between lived experiences that shift participants towards an increasingly nuanced understanding of the structural roots of inequality, and were grounded in activities led by Routledge (2017) in online workshops.

In the beginning phases of the project, we used playful mapping exercises to invite participants to creatively explore their environment despite being confined to their homes, aiming to map affects and not only material conditions (see Walsh and Sutherland 2021). In the first few months participants were asked to reflect on space, for example, to write a line each day on the WhatsApp group contributing to a group poem that placed them at different locales: initially in the room they were in; then the street; then the

neighbourhood; then the city. Collectively, we started to build a group dynamic and sense of place. For some participants, home is a small, cramped house, or a shack with a room shared with siblings and guardians. This notion of thinking about our immediate domestic spaces and then widening out is also a way of expressing a world beyond the immediate closeness of a home during lockdown. It facilitates an increasing analysis of the context of the spaces we inhabit or are excluded (or somewhere in between) inviting participants to start to critically reflect on their environments. Such mapping through online processes were then consolidated and shared in a zoom workshop. This workshop moved from exploring through storytelling, a specific imagined journey on foot around their neighbourhood, and later asked participants to identify places of hope, uncertainty, significance, safety, or danger. These detailed investigations of place contextualised where potential activities and relationships of hope and hopelessness occur. In so doing, participants moved towards Giroux's notion of an 'educated hope' (2001) or Webb's 'critical hope' (2007) in which a more holistic social critique of context can enable the kind of political agency capable of imagining alternatives.

These reflexive processes mapping worlds formed the building blocks for a workshop on the last day of a residential camp where we could all meet each other. Our artist facilitators LoDef Film Factory took participants through an intensive process that involved visualising and then actively mapping spaces. The facilitator instructions outlined in the youth arts toolkit state:

> 'The exercise is about different scales – starting small and 'zooming out' to a huge scale: 'imagine yourself in bedrooms, in bed' through an ever-expanding scale to zoom out until drifting above the planet. The instructions start from a small personal immediate scale to room, neighbourhood, community, city, country, continent and then the planet'. (Amy-Louise Wilson, in Walsh and Sutherland 2021, 30–31)

Image 3. Outside connecting exercise.

The exercise developed to cover multiple pieces of coloured paper mapping picture and text responses to these different spaces from 'self' to 'world' scales (Image 2 and 3). We moved from individual reflexive responses to a collective map of our self-world pictures on the floor. The physical setting of each participant standing around what appeared to look like collective chaos of space and place, and then narrating one aspect of a place that they wished to share, facilitated a collective performance of identity, belonging and place: an embodied containment of the visual confusion in which each participant placed themselves in relation to a wider social context. The following extracts from participants' choice of which part of their map they wished to share, indicate how participants identify places of fear, places of hope, and their own place. Cassie chose to speak about the reality of her immediate surroundings, expressing the contradictions within her world.

> The window is significant. If I lay on my bed, I can see everything around me. Like I can see gangsters, people that do drugs and people that abuse their children and things like that. I can see everything from my window because my bed is at the window. I have another map about my community. I have my church that I go to and where I go volunteer sometimes opposite my flat. (Cassie, project documentation, 2021)

Cassie's 'other map' is one in which there is a church and a place where she contributes to her community. The world directly outside her bedroom is a violent one that she names, yet there is also a world within that, one where she is useful and has a place. The mapping processes asked participants to locate the apertures of hope within their often-violent contexts. This hope is not naïve, it exists alongside the messiness of socio-political violence. Hope, in this example, echoes Gallagher, Rodricks, and Jacobson (2020) who argue that this notion of hope does not erase or diminish the often harsh realities but can be used as a spur for generating hopes and desires out of the specific context (not despite it). Hope is not a naive retreat, but the capacity to see the worst of our circumstances and to reach for more.

Tahir also narrates hope, fear, and the positive role he is playing within this context:

> In my community I have a lot of people that are smoking and drinking and doing stuff that they are not supposed to be doing at a young age and for me it is not right. As an under 12 soccer coach, I want the children that I coach, I want them to be part of the solution and be better than what their brothers or sisters are. I want to inspire them to do other things instead of being a *straat maat or* a *jong wat wil net dagga rook* (a street guy or a youth who just wants to smoke weed). (Tahir, project documentation, 2021)

Through these navigations of place, participants start to articulate a critical or 'educated hope' that Giroux (2001, 235) argues is necessary as it enables a recognition of people's potential as political agents capable of imagining alternatives. For Cassie and Tahir's story-mapping they name not only the realities of their social space, but the potential that their involvement in community structures (such as sport or church) offer despite the violent context. Their naming of these spaces where they contribute to improve social conditions can be seen as identifying their own agency to create positive change. They recognise the power of action: of doing something rather than receiving the prescribed scripts attributed to young people on the flats. In this they embody a critical hope that moves towards action, resisting stasis. Critical hope is thus in the everyday as much as it is in the artforms.

The South African participants who were born in and live on the Cape Flats reflected that the only places they had been to were certain neighbourhoods within Cape Town. During this physical mapping activity, Taryn shared the contradiction of feeling both

included and excluded within the city due to her race and class position. 'I am proud to call Cape Town mine, but it cannot be because I do not completely know it, but if I try to get to know it or understand it, it feels like everything is against me' (Taryn, project documentation, 2021). This contradiction and 'uncertainty' (Solnit 2016) opened spaces for critical reflection. For those who are the children of migrants, their sense of place is linked to the African continent and the meaning of borders, even if they were born in South Africa or arrived when they were young. In her narration, Litha also reflects an ambiguity about the city and the borders that exist within it, and beyond.

> So, on my map I spoke about Zimbabwe and the border where I came from, and I pinpoint things in Cape Town. I don't really know Cape Town that much but from what I see, I feel like there is still division about Gugulethu and the Cape flats. I still feel like apartheid is still happening here … I spoke about Zimbabwe about how it had a huge impact on our lives; the things that happened and how it all affected us to find ourselves in this place. (Litha, project documentation, 2021)

Litha's sense of place is located within a far wider context of political violence in her home country, and the impact this has on where her family lives now. The dispossession she feels is different yet connected to the dispossession of the 'Coloured' participants who identify a sense of longing, yet not belonging, in the 'beautiful' city of Cape Town. It is a city they should feel ownership of, yet from which they are excluded due to ongoing spatial inequalities. These narrations link race, space and the neo-colonial present bringing the texture of Ruth Wilson Gilmore's thinking on racialisation into relief (2002), not in the theoretical terms she uses, but through the art forms linking violence, bordering regimes, state negligence and 'disposability' in terms of their own experiences of belonging or not belonging. Both Taryn and Litha mobilise the mapping process to critique the politics of inclusion and exclusion based on race and class.

Critical hope in performance-making and playing with language

A final example comes from a short extension of the project that expanded our original focus on space, inclusion, and exclusion to concentrate specifically on issues of language and power. We were granted a three-month funding extension to explore something that emerged for the young people. This short investigation entitled *Power of Word* (PoW) invited the young people to think about language, power, and identity; and to play with languages used in urban working-class contexts as a means of validating knowledge creation from below. The role of language in specific spaces and how it can reinforce race and class hierarchies was explored in relation to resistant language performances that value Black working-class language use. The performance examples discussed occurred at a weekend camp and were based on improvised activities.

Afrikaaps is a dialect of Afrikaans used by working-class communities on the Cape Flats that strategically reclaims Afrikaans as a language rooted in Cape Town's history of slavery. For several participants from Black African families, having to learn Afrikaans as a second language at school was conceived as an imposition of yet another colonial language. However, part of the workshop explored the historic roots of Afrikaans as a creolised language arising out of colonial conquest: a mixture of Dutch, Khoi and San languages, Malay and Indonesian. The group were fascinated to discover that the first written Afrikaans texts date back to the early and mid-nineteenth century written by Muslim descendants of

slaves translating Arabic holy texts to Arabic-Afrikaans (Willemse 2017). Afrikaner national-ism had essentialised the language and associated it with white supremacy, yet today Afri-kaans is the second most common language spoken by Black people in South Africa – and far more Black people speak the language than white people. For the participants, the reclaiming of this language as being rooted in oppressed people and its reimagining in the Afrikaaps *(*Kaaps) dialect spoken in Cape Town was embraced through performance poetry and vignettes. The group learnt that Kaaps was being recognised through a diction-ary project aimed at validating Kaaps as a language as well as those who speak it (Haupt 2021). Haupt shows how Kaaps usage has been associated with stigma and identity:

> When people think about Kaaps, they often think about it as 'mixed' or 'impure' ('*onsuiwer*'). This relates to the ways in which they think about 'racial' identity. They often think about [C]oloured identity as 'mixed,' which implies that [B]lack and white identities are 'pure' and bounded. (2021: online)

The stigmatised ways young people use Kaaps in working-class contexts (as opposed to 'proper' Afrikaans required in school) relates to a sense of hopelessness about one's iden-tity and self-expression. With that starting point, the young people coming from Afri-kaans-speaking 'Coloured' families played with Kaaps through performance, and its use in this group is in informal settings amongst friends, and is otherwise culturally policed outside of these settings. Yet, Kaaps as a language is highly performative – it is poetic, energetic, and used extensively in the local hip hop scene. It is also used as a source of parody in mainstream media – stereotyping speakers as lower class and stupid (a common supremacist trait that associates class with education and social mobility).

We found that the acceptance of Kaaps as a valid tool of expression facilitates critical hope as it connects with political identity and agency. Rather than reverting to English as the shared language in the group, participants started to embrace it in their performance pieces, through poetry and satirical skits about the development of 'kitchen Dutch' (which is what Afrikaans was referred to by the Dutch settlers, referencing its working-class roots). This led to a notable shift in confidence and how young people represented themselves, and how they were valued by their non-Afrikaans-speaking peers. For example, Jordan and Alice (two strongly activist-inclined young people) created short performances using Kaaps. Jordan performed a short monologue that defiantly addressed the audience about expectations from others to speak either 'good' English or 'good' Afrikaans, ending with '*Ek praat Afrikaans* MY way' (I speak Afrikaans my way) (project documentation, 2022). Alice performed as part of a group spoken word poem about being misunder-stood – a common teenage lament. Alice spoke in Kaaps. Throughout the weekend, she had passionately defended Afrikaans (Kaaps) as part of her identity and sense of belonging. The other performers used English to express feeling voiceless, not heard, and also discovering a voice that matters. This comes through in a fragment of a collective poem by the group, generated as a devising activity based on border crossing Mexican-American La Pocha Nostra's pedagogy (Gomez-Peña and Sifuentes 2011):

> We, who speak Afrikaaps;

> We, who use art to express ourselves;

> We, who are stripped from our mother tongue;

Thina sithetha ulwimi lomhlaba (We, who speak the language of the earth);

Ons, wie die taal van die onderdrukkers praat (We, who speak the language of the oppressors)

We, who are a *mengelmoes* (mix);

We, who are silenced by fear. (collective poem by ImaginingOtherwise group, 2022)

As part of the evaluation of the project, one of the participants who is a migrant from the Democratic Republic of the Congo living in South Africa since childhood reflected on what he had learnt through a short video interview. He reflects that he hated learning Afrikaans at school because he felt like it was forced on him. However, through the project he observed how passionate Alice is about Afrikaans, noting 'whenever she speaks in our sessions, she tries first in English but she always goes back to Afrikaans because that is who she is' (Tshisimani 2022). This is a sense of critical hope/lessness – not entirely shifting his feelings of alienation but alerting him to the value of Afrikaaps for some others. By valuing the diverse languages used by the participants and their families – and adaptations from below, this process became about fragmenting the hegemony of the perpetually colonising use of languages. These insights, and youth contributions were shared with fellow researchers working on the Afrikaaps diction-ary (Alim et al. 2021; Haupt 2021), taking the impact of youth participation into language policy.

Performance modes, including theatre games, improvisation and theatre-making enabled the permission to experiment with diverse language possibilities within the aesthetic frame of creative expression. As such, participants began to embrace the validation of the wide range of Black modes of speech as legitimate and valuable. In this way, critical hope is mobi-lised when participants, through participatory arts processes, demonstrate mundane agency and acts of resistance to the concept of disposability discussed by Evans and Giroux (2015) making choices about how contested, stigmatised language can be reframed.

Conclusion

Where young people are seen as experts or 'theorists of their own lives' (Gallagher 2022, 142), it acknowledges their 'mundane political agency' (Häkli and Kallio 2018). With these orienting praxes, critical hope, for Giroux,

> becomes a discourse of critique and social transformation. Hope makes the leap for us between critical education, which tells us what must be changed; political agency, which gives us the means to make change; and the concrete struggles through which change happens. (2004, 38)

Close attention to the examples from across the project allow us to focus on how to explore concrete struggles, and work through these in the arts-based approaches. These accounts of project moments are not intended to be evaluative, but to signal how critical hope (and hopelessness) can be modalities in arts-based projects. Our core ethos was the need for young people to articulate their own sense-making (Cooper, Swartz, and Mahali 2019). The participants' work as well as their reflexive comments touch on some of the tensions and struggles rather than articulating neat solutions. It is this openness to 'dissent' that is valued by Giroux as an 'activating presence' (2004, 39).

As we have explored via Giroux's conception of 'disposable youth' (2015), it is all too easy to feel defensive and dismissive, even cynical, about the future in a socio-economic context that has an extremely limited understanding of human value. From that

contextual basis, it is our contention that an arts-based praxis taps into the creativity, collaboration and imagination that will be needed for deepening transformative approaches to their worlds. As Gallagher's recent work (2022) and Busby's (2015; 2022) have shown, participation in arts processes do not by themselves change the circumstances of those taking part. Nonetheless, there is capacity to explore the place and role of critical hope and hopelessness through getting involved in making, collaborating, rehearsing and presenting arts. The negotiation, discussion and decision-making about how to represent issues, whether through creative mapping or through performance-making about language (PoW) is both ethical and relational and youth can, according to Gallagher 'see themselves as character witnesses […] to emerging selves' (2022, 4).

Our project sees the arts as a bridge between articulating the complexities of life on the Cape Flats and the capacity of a sustained project that links 'critique' with activation of what is possible. This application of Giroux's concept of 'critical hope' and the engagement with the generative potential of 'critical hopelessness' may well speak beyond the specific locatedness of the Cape Flats and these young people to those elsewhere seeking critical imaginaries of how our worlds may be otherwise.

Notes

1. We are using pseudonyms to protect the young people's anonymity, and are preserving their typographic choices, slang and shifting between languages.
2. Apartheid categorisations of white, Black (African) and 'Coloured' (a contested category referring to people who are descendants of slaves, with Khoi or San heritage, and mixed-race peoples), continue to be used.

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Ethical statement

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