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Creative Community Activism in Global Contexts

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ABSTRACT In this introduction to this special issue about creative community activism in global contexts, we draw together key conceptual and methodological principles of this collection. We begin from the standpoint that equality is a cultural artefact, a socio-cultural and political product specifically located in time and space and as such subject to creation and re-creation. Creative activism offers us a medium to both engage with and take action on issues of culture and gender in/equality. Through the creative activisms explored here, communities, researchers, and artists combine social action with creativity and arts to challenge inequalities, promote positive futures, and enable socio-cultural wellbeing in innovative ways that can be simultaneously engaging and participatory, and decolonising and democratising. They underscore how through creative activism hierarchies of power and knowledge production and lived experiences of in/equalities can be explored, understood, and contested.

INTRODUCTION

Creative activism offers us a medium to both engage with and take action on issues of culture and gender in/equality. The papers in this special issue all explore and discuss the ways in which creative activism is being used in a range of diverse contexts and by a variety of actors. What these papers also attest to is that while threads of connection between forms and impacts of creative engagement may be articulated, universal responses are not possible and any prescriptions must be contextual, depending on where (the geopolitics of knowledge) and by whom (the body-politics of knowledge) (Mignolo 2000; 2009) it is being articulated. Through the creative activisms explored here, communities, researchers, and artists combine social action with creativity and arts to challenge inequalities, promote positive futures, and enable socio-cultural wellbeing in innovative ways that can be simultaneously engaging and participatory, and decolonising and democratising. They underscore how through creative activism hierarchies of power and knowledge production and lived experiences of in/equalities can be explored, understood, and contested.

This special issue begins from the standpoint that equality is a cultural artefact, a socio-cultural and political product specifically located in time and space and as such subject to creation and re-creation. This leads the authors to pose a series of questions central to this special issue. We ask: what are the various ways in which equalities are made and contested in different parts of the world? If cultures are best understood as the practices through which we create the worlds in which we inhabit, how then can we employ diverse creative practices to challenge inequalities and engender new possibilities for more equitable ways of living together? What can creative practices offer both activism and academic research which are otherwise lacking? These three questions underpin this special issue in a focus on creative activism as a tool, a methodology, and an exciting articulation of global engagements with in/equality in the diverse worlds we inhabit.

Creative activism offers us innovative opportunities not only to engage with, better understand, and challenge dynamics of in/equality, but also a medium through which we can find new ways to dismantle geopolitical hierarchies and relations, all the while ensuring that we promote community partnerships. This articulation of combined creative praxis and community action becomes all the more significant when working with people and communities marginalised on the basis of their intersectional identities, for example through gender, ethnicity, class, dis-ability, religion or sexuality. Moreover, underpinning these moves towards the dismantling of geopolitical hierarchies and the critical interrogation of power and control of knowledge production – central concerns throughout this collection - is a recognition of the importance of decolonial standpoints and pluriversal forms of knowledge.

When we talk about decolonised, pluriversal and intersectional knowledges, power and identities, we are of course drawing on a significant body of feminist, postcolonial and decolonial

scholarship. Said's groundbreaking work, *Orientalism* (1978) was a critical turning point in critically interrogating the historical control and power of knowledge. Here, Said questioned the global production of knowledge and unsettled the terrain of historiography which, he argued, had removed the 'other' from the production of the history of modernity. For Said, ownership and control of the narratives of our global histories became a product of the West and in so doing, the West's material domination of the 'other' was not only justified but became naturalized. It is this fundamental interrogation of the geo-politics of power and knowledge production that became the foundations of postcolonial and decolonial theory developed in the decades since *Orientalism*, indeed, as Bhambra (2014: 115) articulates,

"Postcolonial and decolonial arguments have been most successful in their challenge to the insularity of historical narratives and historiographical traditions emanating from Europe. This has been particularly so in the context of demonstrating the parochial character of arguments about the endogenous European origins of modernity in favour of arguments that suggest the necessity of considering the emergence of the modern world in the broader histories of colonialism, empire, and enslavement."

Walter Mignolo has similarly contributed much to our decolonial positioning, which he outlines particularly succinctly when he states that, "Geo-politics of knowledge goes hand in hand with geo-politics of knowing. Who and when, why and where is knowledge generated […]? Asking these questions means to shift the attention from the enunciated to the enunciation. […] The question is: who, when, why is constructing knowledges?" (Mignolo 2009: 2). Through combining the political positioning these questions provoke with diverse forms of creative activism, as this special issue illustrates, we can find engaging ways to contribute to democratised and decolonised forms of knowledge production that are pluriversal (Mignolo 1999; 2009).

CREATIVITY AND CRITIQUE

Through the second half of the 20th Century the importance of critique grew within the social sciences and humanities, expressed particularly through the emphasis on the concept of (de) construction associated with post-structuralism and postmodernism and the proliferation of scholarly sub-disciplines which explicitly aligned themselves with a critical approach[1]. Whilst there are a huge variety of ways in which this criticality is understood or mobilised, a clear tendency is for it to be based on what Ghassan Hage (2012: 287) refers to as Critical Thinking, which he argues

"is most generally associated with the way it enables us to reflexively move outside of ourselves such that we can start seeing ourselves in ways we could not have possibly seen ourselves, our culture or our society before."

A fundamental element in this move 'outside ourselves' is what Bourdieu (1990: 15, emphasis in original) conceptualises as 'denaturalisation', a process through which one might "establish that things could have been otherwise, indeed, *are* otherwise in other places and other conditions". What this means in simpler terms is that through thinking critically we can reveal that the social, political, economic and gendered world(s) in which we live are not inevitable and natural, but instead constructed, hegemonic and in service of power. This move then enables us to imagine how we might, in the words of Decolonial scholar Arturo Escobar (2007: 179, emphasis in original), "craft another space for the production of knowledge - an other way of thinking, *un paradigma otro*, the very possibility of talking about 'worlds and knowledges otherwise'".

This then raises the question of what these worlds and knowledges might be 'otherwise', and a valuable starting point in defining this is Elizabeth Povinelli's (2011: 12) call for an 'anthropology of the otherwise' which "locates itself within forms of life that are at odds with dominant, and dominating, modes of being". If we wish to find ourselves in a location otherwise to domination we must identify the modes through which domination operates, and for the purposes of this special issue there is a clear orientation towards the understandings of domination afforded by Intersectionality (see, for example, Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2009). This is expressed very clearly by Mbasalaki and Matchett's (this volume) identification of domination as being rooted in what they term, in a slight modification of bell hooks (2013), "[heteronormative] imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy". This identification of the key modes of dominance they analyse as being rooted in homophobia,

Global North power, racism, economic privilege, and sexism is one which carries over to the other papers in this special issue. The weight conferred on each element differs according to context, whether it be that of sex workers in South Africa (Mbasalaki and Matchett), female construction workers in Bangladesh (Choudhury and Clisby), street children in Burundi (Cooper et al.), indigenous migrants in Chiapas (Valenzuela), graffiti artists from the favelas of Rio de Janeiro (Rocha) or research participants in the GlobalGRACE Project from Africa, Asia, and Latin America (McGuirk).

The differences in weighting and focus expressed through these papers is a deliberate and necessary consequence of the authors foregrounding the experiences and perspectives of those with whom they researched and created. The necessity of such a contextual approach is fundamental to a mode of creative activism which, as Cooper et al. (this volume) describe, demands that creative activism not extract knowledge *from* the local, but instead that knowledge must be constructed, defined and performed by the people, communities, and environments, collectively comprising the 'world' in question, and that the mode of learning and knowledge production "aims not so much to provide us with facts about the world as to enable us to be taught by it" (Ingold 2013: 2). This variety of contexts of course results in a pluriversal knowledge base, but what strikes us equally are the myriad cross-overs in modes of dominance across these disparate contexts which are separated by thousands of kilometres. This observation is a stark reminder that '[heteronormative] imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' remains a powerful global force of oppression, even whilst it operates differently across diverse places, peoples, histories and time.

Dehumanised Bodies, Affect, and Worlds Otherwise

In common with critical academic scholarship, creative activism therefore undoubtedly deploys criticism of the normative and hegemonic structures of power in order to identify and communicate that which the activists seek to overcome. To fail to do so would render impotent any activism because, as McGuirk (this volume) cautions us, creative practices do not offer to us complete license to create worlds, as these practices themselves and the worlds to which they refer are always tethered to histories of power and dehumanisation. It is therefore the activist goal of rehumanising the oppressed, based upon critical appraisals of processes and modes of dehumanisation, which marks the starting point for all of the examples of creative activism in this special issue. This is not creativity or art for their own sake, it is always equally and fundamentally political.

This centrality of activism does not, however, mean that artistic aesthetics are secondary in importance, indeed Mbasalaki and Matchett (this volume), for example, explain how the identification and analysis of the extant modes of oppression, domination, and dehumanisation serve to enable the development of an aesthetic grammar through which creative activism can operate. Such grammars are inherently contextual, and in different contexts can serve diametrically opposed goals—for example the grammars deployed by female construction workers in Bangladesh to increase their visibility (Choudhury and Clisby, this volume) are radically different than the visual grammar of *xarpi* writers in Rio de Janeiro, which deliberately evades understanding by the police and other state actors (Rocha, this volume). Nevertheless, the protagonists share a foundational understanding and critique of the contextual oppressions faced, the goals of their activism, and the role of creativity in achieving their aims.

Taking the critiques of power on which they are based, the creative and artistic practices discussed in this special issue are then able to facilitate a move beyond the critique of the extant and towards the creative imagining of 'worlds and knowledges otherwise'. Whilst the understanding of what is, and has been, is a necessary step for activism, it is not sufficient if we are to construct futures otherwise through activism, for this requires the making of something new and different, it requires *poiesis*. Day and Goddard (2010: 138) argue that "new beginnings combine praxis with poiesis in the sense of a bringing forth, which means that the future cannot be read simply from (or determined by) the past", and this drive to bring forth new and better worlds is a central animating theme across the creative praxes analysed here. Mbasalaki and Matchett (this volume), for example, cite the work of Silas Harrebye (2016:25) to explain that bringing poiesis and creativity to activism offers to us a

"a kind of meta activism that facilitates the engagement of active citizens in temporary, strategically manufactured, transformative interventions in order to change society for the better by communicating conflicts and/or solutions where no one else can or will in order to provoke reflection (and consequent behavioural changes) in an attempt to revitalize the political imagination."

The mobilisation of the imagination through art and creativity therefore affords to creative activism the possibility for provoking social change, and through the papers of this special issue it is through the body and affect that these imaginations emerge.

All of the activism discussed in these papers is embodied, the benefits of which are explained by Valenzuela's (this volume) discussion of the 'Migrant Museum' (MuMi) in Chiapas, Mexico. He describes how their creative activism always begins with the bodies of the participants in their workshops, mobilising their corporeality, emotions and experiences in order to create spaces in which they can reflect on their concrete realities and imagine ways of transforming them. One of the methods used by MuMi is participatory theatre, and it is in the theatrical activism discussed by Cooper et al (this volume) and Mbasalaki and Matchett (this volume) that the affordances of the corporeality of activism emerge particularly clearly. Cooper et al. for example, describe the use of Augusto Boal's (2008) Forum Theatre methodology to facilitate the performance of dramatic work developed through workshops by a group of street children, and explain that through using this methodology they were able to reduce the barriers between performers and audience. The street children performers and their audience were instead convened as an embodied collective which jointly engaged in constructing the critical analysis and understanding of the dehumanising oppression faced by the street children, and then in constructing the imagination of a world otherwise within which they might be re-humanised. Rather than as passive recipients of information, the audience was creatively engaged by the performers in finding solutions to domination. Mbasalaki and Matchett's (this volume) analysis of a sex workers' theatre group describes a similar methodology of participatory theatre, one which generates an "embodied activism through performance, where the aesthetic serves as an activator/agitator for activism". Within this grammar the embodiment of performers and audiences is mobilised through a critical embodied thinking which enables participants to better understand the context, and then mobilise this understanding to find ways to potentially transform the world through embodied engagement.

Closely linked to embodiment here is affect, and this is where the transformative potential of creative activism is perhaps most clearly displayed across this special issue. It is perhaps in the capacity to mobilise affect in order to engage imaginings of futures otherwise through its artistic practices that some advantages of creative activism over other activist modes most clearly become evident. Feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (2008: 33) explicitly makes this connection between art and affect when she argues that art has the "capacity to enlarge the universe by enabling its potential to be otherwise, to be framed through concepts and affects". The imagination of a world otherwise can therefore be generated through an artistic mode which promotes affective engagements in creators, performers, and audiences, a process for which the papers in this special issue all provide empirical support. Given the range of contexts and artistic and creative practices described the wide range of affective impacts described through the papers should come as no surprise.

In this special issue they range from the creation through art of 'affective communities' of graffiti writers formed in Rio de Janeiro over the last forty years (Rocha, this volume), to the fleeting affective connections one might form with a sex worker through engaging with her testimony and image in a gallery in Cape Town (Mbasalaki and Matchett, this volume), and the potential for future affective power in the sending and receiving of postcards (McGuirk, this volume). Joy and pleasure are recurring affective themes throughout the papers, ranging from the affective connections of shared humour during a performance by street children in Burundi (Cooper et al. this volume), to friendships of laughter, respect and mutual care between a middle-aged impoverished female construction worker and a middle-class young man in Bangladesh (Choudhury and Clisby, this volume). Affect can also emerge as the unintended result of creativity, as in the case of the smiles of thanks received by a graffiti writer from a favela resident whose neighbourhood has just

received a new mural (Rocha, this volume), or it can be a fundamental objective, as in the case of creative workshops with indigenous young men in Chiapas which focus on the damage caused by social pressures on men to repress their emotions (Valenzuela, this volume).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion we would like to return to the three questions that we posed at the beginning of this paper. The first of these concerned the various ways in which equalities are made and contested in different parts of the world, and, as we have reiterated throughout, the centrality of context and local knowledge is something that we, and the other authors in this special issue, consider to be fundamental. Through the participatory frame of the various forms of creative activism discussed here there is a determination that the object(ive) of the activism be that which oppresses the particular people in the particular place and time, and that the subjects of this knowledge and praxis be these same oppressed people who are situated in their worlds. Such a focus does not of course mean that local worlds exist in historical, political and temporal isolation from each other. Just as striking as the importance of context and the huge diversity that it reveals is the power and relevance of common systems of power against which the oppressed and marginalised organise themselves, that which Mbasalaki and Matchett (this volume) identify as "[heteronormative] imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." What the papers here reveal therefore is not the importance of the local over the global, or vice versa, but instead that any given context will, and must always, be constructed from a relational interplay between the micro and the macro. Where the local does take precedence is not necessarily in terms of the sources of power which guarantee inequality, but instead in terms of the analyses and knowledges of that power, and the political determination of how it should be confronted.

The second question we posed concerned culture(s), and the ways in which we might employ diverse creative practices to challenge inequalities and oppressions whilst in search of more equitable ways of living together. Here again diversity is key, and the creative practices described and analysed in this volume cover a wide range of artistic and creative languages and modes. In all cases these artistic languages, and the "aesthetic grammars" (Mbasalaki and Matchett, this volume) they afford us, were carefully selected by the artist/activists in question, from the graffiti writers who use the walls of the city to communicate with huge numbers of people (Rocha, this volume), to the street children who used the intimacy and immediacy of participatory theatre to collaboratively construct imaginings of more equitable lives 'otherwise' for themselves and their peers with their engaged audiences. Again, it is context, in its relational form between the macro and the micro, which determines the language and grammar of the creative form, with those most expert in the context whose knowledge and imagination is paramount.

Finally, we asked what it is that creative practices can offer to both activism and academic research. Here we have established the view that, based on the bedrock of a critical understanding of the power which marginalises and oppresses them, the artists-activists discussed here have been able to develop an activist praxis which reveals and represents that which must be overcome, and then through creativity constructs the otherwise towards which they strive. The critical and deconstructive tools of the academy and the activist are thereby joined with the creative poiesis of the artist, and together they reveal themselves to be not opposed or incommensurable but instead as coexisting necessarily within an uneasy dyad from which the creative activist attempts to wrest a future 'otherwise' within which she is recognised as fully human.

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NOTE

1 One might find strands in almost any discipline or sub-discipline of the social sciences and humanities which identifies itself as 'Critical', for example 'Critical Legal Studies' or 'Critical Race Studies'.]

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