

Between activism and the academy: The urban as political terrain

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Abstract

A growing consensus suggests that urban scholarship can benefit from engaging with knowledge in multiple sites in and beyond the academy, for instance with activism central to politics in cities worldwide. This paper explores narratives of urban politics produced with activists to reflect on how we account for knowledge and practice in theorising the urban as political terrain. Research conducted with activists in a community-based ‘Civic’ organisation in Cape Town, South Africa highlights the everyday toil that shapes resistance and its politics, the frictions and engagements behind protest headlines. In opening up theorisations of activism and revolution to the knowledge practices of movements, the paper argues we may more cogently take account of the strategic and intimate politics that characterise contemporary activism, and reshape notions of ‘revolution’, urban politics and research practice in contemporary cities, a project broadly relevant in the Global South and North.

Keywords

academy, Cape Town, community activism, Global South, politics of knowledge, research collaboration, social movements, South Africa, urban politics

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Introduction

Activism and social movement mobilisation shape the urban as a political terrain in contemporary cities: from North Africa’s Arab Spring, to Occupy-movements in the heart of global financial capitals, from daily protests to claim basic services to struggles for political legitimacy and voice in cities across the South. Demands for justice and change populate the pages of newspapers, the screens of Al-Jazeera and BBC World, and accessible byways of the web. In streets and public spaces, acts of protest and resistance demonstrate ordinary people questioning power,

and naming and shaming injustice. This groundswell of mobilisation and political practice inspires analysis, shaping our theorising of the urban and its political terrain. Yet, how does the tension of being accountable to multiple worlds (Hale, 2006, 2008; Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2009) resonate in our theorising of the urban as a terrain of politics, shaping the ways in which we learn and know

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the city? In this paper I attend to this question, considering travel between 'the academy' and 'activism' and reflecting on the ways in which activist knowledge shapes our understanding of urban politics.

A growing consensus suggests that urban scholarship can benefit extensively from engaging with knowledge that is produced and travels in and between 'activism' and the 'academy' (Kendon et al., 2007; Mitchell, 2008; Mrs Kinpaiby, 2008). McFarlane (2011: 2), for instance, argues 'that if we are interested in justice, then we cannot simply ask what specialist and expertise knowledge is and what it does, nor simply how learning takes place – we need alongside this to ask constantly who we learn from and with; that is, we need to attend to where critical urban knowledge comes from and how it is learnt'. Moving the discussion from a question of with whom to the location of expertise, Rasool suggests that we 'understand the possibilities of de-centering and relocating expertise outside the academy' (2010: 79), a project Nyamnjoh (2012) frames for African scholars as a critical opportunity to reinvigorate post-colonial research through the inspiration and realities of popular epistemologies. Engaging with diverse practices and knowledges of activists and movements (Casas-Cortes et al., 2008) brings into view a wider set of urban political practice in multiple locations and knowledge registers, contexts in which activism and ethnography can be understood 'as parallel, related and potentially supportive endeavours' (Chari and Donner, 2010: 76). Drawing on this complicated, relational terrain, and the contested knowledge cultures embodied within it, I suggest, like Nagar (2002: 184), that we can 'produce research agendas and knowledges that do not merely address what is theoretically exciting or trendy *here*, but also what is considered politically imperative by the communities we work with or are committed to over *there*'.

Although not a challenge exclusive to the South or to contexts such as South Africa, these questions and challenges are urgent in this conjuncture where protest is rampant, democracy nascent and contested, and durable and painful histories of inequality shape everyday life in often violent as well as creative ways. I reflect on this context here through research conducted in partnership with activists in a community-based civic organisation (the 'Civic') in an impoverished township in Cape Town, South Africa. Organised originally to oppose evictions in the apartheid era, the Civic has mobilised against contemporary rounds of eviction, against water cut-offs and occupied land to address homelessness in the neighbourhood; in turn, resisting and engaging the city. Yet its political practices move beyond this terrain, building and performing community to counter the durable stigmas of gangs, violence and poverty. Narratives of Civic activism thus highlight the small-scale, everyday toil of activists that incrementally and boldly shape resistance and its politics, the frictions and engagements behind the headlines of spectacular, 'revolutionary' protest. Built through a long-term research partnership, these narratives position the urban as a complex political terrain, entangled in research practice, historical and contemporary struggles with the post- and Apartheid State, as well as the vagaries and violence of everyday life.

It is these complexities of organising and struggle that highlight the messy and multiple processes that shape how we know and understand the urban as political terrain. Moreover, research produced in relationship with everyday struggles makes visible engagements and entanglements across multiple sites central to understand this terrain. In making this argument, I draw on categories of 'activist' and 'academic', and reference spaces in and beyond the university. In doing so, my intent is not to reify these

categories, but to render what lies in and between them as messy, multiple, complex sites of knowledge, that are entangled and intermeshed. As Chari and Donner suggest (2010: 76), these categories are framed 'as a problem not a social fact'. This positioning opens up exploration of two related issues: first, how research and the knowledge of urban politics produced from it are constituted relationally in practice with activists; and, second, conceptually, how to account for activist knowledge and practice in theorising of the urban as political terrain. This argument brings to the fore a politics of knowledge that opens up more complicated and engaged stories about urban politics and the notions of change they inspire, a project broadly relevant in the Global South and North.

'Beyond Scholar Activism'

In 'Beyond Scholar Activism', the Autonomous Geographers Collective challenge 'false distinctions': the notion of the academy as separate from or beyond society, or intellectuals as distinct from social movements. Instead, they ask scholars to think of themselves, not as experts, but as 'citizens jointly challenging broader social systems' (Autonomous Geographers Collective, 2010: 250–251). This argument takes further Fuller and Askins' (2010) call to understand activist scholarship as a fluid continuum, shaped by serendipity, as well as academic and activist interests and passions. Certainly a body of work in geography has paid attention to re-conceptualising the places and roles of activists-scholars in various publics, debating questions of 'relevance', 'scholar activism' and 'public geographies' (Fuller, 2008; Kindon et al., 2007; Mitchell, 2008; Mrs Kinpaibsy, 2008). In exploring the ways in which knowledge is co-produced when researchers act in the world together with research participants, this body of work has

made important empirical, methodological and theoretical insights.

Engagement with the politics of knowledge has enlivened debate in many areas of social science (see Connell, 2007; Kenway and Fahey 2009; Sangtin Writers and Nagar, 2006, among others). In contrast, in the context of social movement research, ironically Croteau et al. (2005) argue, that in establishing itself as a legitimate academic field in the past three decades, social movement scholarship has cut itself off theoretically and in practice from activism and movements.¹ While arguing that activism and scholarship are both diminished in this context, they assess this deficit for theory specifically, arguing (Croteau et al., 2005: xiii):

Theory uninformed by and isolated from social movement struggles is more likely to be sterile and less likely to capture the vibrant heart and subtle nuances of movement efforts. Theorists without significant connections to social movements can end up constructing elegant abstractions with very little real insight or utility.

To challenge this type of narrowness, Appadurai (2000) has encouraged notions of 'grassroots knowledge of globalization' to broaden too-narrow forms of knowledge characteristic of the academy. Focusing on critical questions of power in this reconfiguring, Escobar too has suggested that we: 'pay attention to the epistemic potential of local histories embedded in or arising from the colonial difference, locating there some of the most meaningful sources of political action and alternative world constructions'. He stresses that 'these local histories have remained largely invisible in Eurocentric theory precisely because they have been actively produced as nonexistent – as noncredible alternatives to what exists' (Escobar, 2008: 23).

In sum, when we imagine the academy as an isolated site of expertise, or an 'ivory

tower', opportunities that exist to engage creatively and productively with the hard intellectual experience and thought of activists in many locations are lost. This type of initiative is particularly urgent in a South African context where the nature of the university and the project of research and knowledge after apartheid are under critical debate. South African universities and the practice of research have been implicated in complex ways in the apartheid state's logic and draconian practices of segregation (Lalu, 2012). And, an ongoing discussion places in question the social and political role of universities and research, in relationship to the state and society, and African region and continent.² While contentious and challenging, this context is also invigorating, forcing the academy and researchers within it to reflect critically on the central question of knowledge, its politics and positioning.

Part of this debate has drawn attention to the ways in which universities 'engage' through thinking about the world 'beyond' or 'below' the Ivory Tower. What is a socially engaged university (Favish and McMillan, 2009) or relevant research in the contemporary context (Lalu, 2012; Parnell, 2007)? Beyond a too often easy tendency to claim a process of 'salvaging' knowledge for 'communities' (see Rasool, 2010, in the context of urban archeology and social history), in what ways do scientific practices claim the authority and expertise to 'know for', or claim through research to 'service' communities, those dis-enfranchised and impoverished in the past and the present (Oldfield, 2008). This body of work highlights, as Oldfield et al. (2004: 295) describe, 'theorizing ... [that] takes place in multiple sites and through multiple processes that are grounded in critically engaged work'. Creative and productive, the critiques that emerge from these locations give us insights that might be different than what we get

from only being immersed in the academy. In this context, Sitas (2004: 23) argues:

We should have learnt that our best work as social scientists ... was in dialogue with ordinary people and their organizations ... because the cultural formations, resistances and filters people created had profound theoretical relevance.

Bearing the brunt of inequality and injustice, he suggests, 'ordinary people's' own organising and everyday life has profound theoretical relevance, debates developed further in a literature focused on practices of collaboration.

Activist-academic collaborations and conversations

Collaboration is a complex and powerful tool that can be developed – through constant and multiple self-critiques by intellectuals and activists in and beyond academia and NGOs – to forge alliances and re(de)fine methodologies that seek to reconstitute the norms, structures and content of feminist knowledges and political agendas in anti-hierarchical ways. (Benson and Nagar, 2006: 583)

Building on the agenda posed above, in *Transnational Feminist Practice* Swarr and Nagar (2010) suggest that social research as a practice is by definition collaborative, built on a sharing of knowledge and an engagement with everyday realities. They challenge researchers to rethink the relationships between processes and products of collaboration; to be more conscious of the interweaving of theories with collaborative methodologies; to produce knowledge that can travel across the borders of academia, NGOs, or people's movements; and to re-imagine reciprocity in collaboration.

The Sangtin Writers and Nagar (2006: 149) prompt us further, asking what kind of

struggles research makes possible, and how they shape the ways in which we make commitments to research partners beyond the university, and remain accountable to them. In building alliances between the academia and activists and in engaging together:

[A]ctivists ... challenge the feminist intellectual in the northern (wherever the North might be geographically situated) academy to immerse herself in the complex and contradictory realities of the activists' milieu. To confront such a challenge, she must try to understand the autobiographers' analysis from their location; she must ask why theoretical frameworks that she might consider 'cutting edge' do not adequately speak to or resonate with the activists' understandings and conceptualisations; she must be prepared to acknowledge the limits of discourses that she might be inserted into and to orchestrate shifts in them in ways that can become meaningful for her ... critics and collaborators.

Hale (2006) suggests a similar tension in anthropology, arguing that dual political commitments (to critical scholarly production and to principles and practices of people who struggle outside academia) transform our research methods directly. While alignment with political struggles makes research more complex, this relationship also 'generate(s) insight that otherwise would be impossible to achieve' (Hale, 2006: 98).³ At the same time, we should be equally wary of celebrating activist knowledge as somehow better or purer knowledge. Instead, we can share insights about the messiness of both forms of knowledge and how crossing borders can enrich and make both more accountable (Nagar, 2012).

In the precise context of this paper, in documenting and theorising the radical political change suggested or made by movements for social justice in South Africa (Ballard et al., 2006), how do the relationships built through research negotiate accountability to the activism in its focus?

And, how does the infusion of our theoretical work with activist knowledge enrich and shift thinking about the urban as political terrain? These are central questions framing the politics of activism and how we know it after apartheid.⁴

The politics of urban activism after apartheid

Central to overthrowing apartheid and to re-imagining society and the state after, activism and activists hold an important place in South African urban politics and history. Yet, after apartheid the role of activism and its politics have blurred (see Oldfield and Stokke, 2007, for instance), many anti-apartheid activists and organisations, as well as political parties, have become part of government or are allied closely with it; moreover, community-based activists and non-governmental organisations have had to negotiate the ambiguities of protest and critique in relation to the state, and the African National Congress, the political party in government, and its claims to a monopoly on progressive politics (Calland, 2006; Marais, 2011). Nonetheless, a series of new movements critiquing the post-apartheid order and state (see Ballard et al., 2006; Beinart and Dawson, 2010; Gibson, 2006; Pithouse 2008; Zuern, 2011) emerged in the new millennium. And, a relatively recent rapid escalation of protests (Alexander, 2010) – from tyre burning in roads, to protests to access water and basic services – characterise the daily political scene in cities across South Africa. A set of dynamics evident in the current rapid increases in mobilisation across the country, from 'service delivery protests' (Alexander, 2010) to mining and farmworker strikes.

Zuern's 'politics of necessity' (2011) characterises the difficult circumstances in which economically impoverished citizens mobilise

for socio-economic and political rights (Ballard et al., 2006). The everyday toil of activist struggles makes ends meet in the context of the commodification of services (Naidoo, 2007; von Schnitzler, 2008) and gives visibility and voice (Pithouse, 2006, 2008). Desai (2003: 25) stresses that:

[T]he poor are not just involved in recognition, or the discovery of the right policies, or the creation of the right administrative framework, or even the goodwill of power holders. They are challenging the very distribution of power in society and are doing so in ways that do not stick to the gradualist, corporatist, and nation-building script.

Urban activism reflects more than stories of national liberation, sites of neoliberal state repression, or any supposedly inevitable outcome of globalization; powerful tropes in global and national social movement discourse (Ballard, 2005). Nieftagodien (2010) highlights instead the rich histories, geographies and diverse meanings of neighbourhood organising across the South African urban landscape, ripe for more complex and contingent assessment. Not solely resistance or radical critique, activism produces a mix of counter-hegemonic narratives, a complex relational terrain that shapes the city and how we know it.

Embedded in collaborative research with activists, the approach drawn on here provides opportunities to engage with activists as theorists as well as agents of change. This partnership provides a context in which to explore, in the remainder of the paper, how we imagine the urban as a complex terrain of politics situated within and between the multiple worlds of research and activism.

From resistance and engagement to building and performing community

Built over 30 years, the Civic is a community-based organisation active in a township

designed and built through the political and social engineering of apartheid segregation, for families classified racially as 'coloured' (mixed race)⁵ by the apartheid state, forcibly moved from the centre of Cape Town and from shanty towns and squats on the edges of the then city. Today the neighbourhood includes overcrowded 1980s-era rental flats, with shacks in back- and front-yards, and two informal settlements, land occupations initiated in the 2000s. The discussion below introduces our research partnership, its evolution and approach and traces the organisation's varied strategies and struggles to access resources and to build community. In this short space, the excerpts are illustrative, framed in ways that help reflect on the practice of activism and politics, at multiple scales and registers across city terrain.

The research partnership: Its logic and method

In early 2002 I began a research project on social movement organising to access public services in Cape Town, focusing on community groups involved in a then new social movement, the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, formed in 2001 (see Oldfield and Stokke, 2007; Stokke and Oldfield, 2004). The Campaign initiated discussion on the ways my project related to the everyday work that activists undertook in communities to engage in struggles at city scale. Out of these discussions, we formed the Community Research Group (2003–2004), which worked on two premises: first, that research is critical to substantiate and shape activism in order to challenge policy; and, second, that activists research in their existing activities but often lack resources to make this work strategic, a set of resources some of which we were equipped to share. Civic activists were one of eight community-based organisations that participated. Preparing and running a survey on backyard

shacks to supplement their fight with the city over housing needs in their neighbourhood, they found the survey time-consuming and overwhelmingly large in scale with 1700 households in the neighbourhood. Our collaboration in conducting the research proved a productive way forward to complete the survey, as well as a means to develop our dialogue and partnership in more complex ways.

What began as a conventional research process has developed into a multifaceted engagement, through which we have researched together overcrowded housing and backyard shacks, land occupations, the practice of Minstrels, as well neighbourhood informal economies. The partnership has been sustained in the relationships we have built and the multiple forms of knowledge we have crafted together; the papers, the presentations, the life stories, the tables and maps, and the booklets, posters and public events through which we have analysed and shared the research (see Oldfield, 2008).⁶ In its long-term nature, multifaceted elements, and in its slow and careful process, this conversation has opened up rich knowledge on residents' struggles and the politics of community activism the Civic undertakes. The research documented, and the conversations and encounters made possible through the partnership, offer a context to reflect on activism, not as a social fact but as praxis that shapes and makes visible the urban as a complex and contingent political terrain. In the remainder of the paper I trace out varied politics of this activism, beginning with housing struggles, the genesis of the Civic itself.

Resistance and engagement: Struggles for housing

Personal experience, shared solidarity, has shaped activists' dedication to struggle for housing, for better state support, to help families claim 'their rights', to build a better

neighbourhood. As the leader of the Civic, stresses: 'I was evicted not once, not twice, but thrice'. In the 1980s, under the apartheid regime, she returned home from her job as a textile machinist to find her furniture and her three children sitting next to it on the street. Each time she moved herself back in. The third time she went to the 'rent lady', to the neighbourhood housing office to say: 'I am a single mother, I earn this much, look at my income slip, these are my costs, I cannot pay the rent, you cannot evict me, treat me with some respect'. Her personal experience of the hardship and stress of eviction is the kernel on which her activism is built.

Struggles over housing have shaped relationships with the City more generally, with the occupation of land the most dramatic. To address homelessness and overcrowding, Civic activists and homeless residents built an informal settlement, and to protect it, fought the police and army from destroying it. An activist angrily remembers:

The City shot at us, rubber bullets, they threw our shacks down with bulldozers. That day we started building shacks, there was nobody in the police station, they were all here – the police, law enforcement, even the South African army. They treated us like criminals. People were shot and ended up in hospital. But when they left, we continued building anyway. (August 2003)

Interdicted by the City for the land 'invasion', the Civic coordinated the settlement's engagement with legal representation, fighting the City in the High Court over a 4-year period, facing the archaic protocol of court, facilitating the judge's visit with families in the settlement. They won the case and an appeal by the city.

The Judgement ruled that the City failed to meet its Constitutional obligation to provide housing in emergency contexts by responding only with an instruction to 'wait your turn, abide by the housing waiting list'.

In consequence, the families in the settlement were granted legal status on the land and prioritised as recipients in a court-ordered housing project, with the immediate provision of basic services (water and electricity, group toilets). But the struggle didn't end in court. To pressure the City to put in water and sanitation for the settlement, and to challenge their response that there's no budget for it, the Civic planned a second set of strategies: to use City buildings in the neighbourhood to access all the settlements' water needs – toilets, drinking, cooking and washing water in particular. All 100 settlement families brought their washing, used the City's toilets all day, collected water for cooking and, on fences around the City's offices in the area, hung their washing to dry – their largest and oldest underpants especially. City work stopped, the crèche closed, harried to their limits, the officials called their bosses in the Civic Centre in the centre of the city. The following day, literally, what was previously unbudgeted for was possible: work on the installation of water standpipes began.

Combining strategic resistance and savvy engagement with City officials, Civic activists are explicit about their need to work within and outside of the system. In turn they draw on creative strategies that range from the physical defence of a land occupation, the dramas of the court room, to critique that challenges the logic of the City's regime and its injustices, highlighted, for instance by the public hanging of large, old underwear. But, engaging and protesting to claim rights is not a simple terrain without costs. Activism challenges and is challenged by neighbourhood logics, the 'commonsense' that shapes resistance and alternative visions of what is possible, a set of contestations evident in the Civic debate on how to respond to water cut-offs, the focus of the following discussion.

Negotiating the public and the private: Activism and access to water

The law enforcement vehicle, in tandem with the subcontracted company paid to disconnect the water, pulls up on the curb outside a house. They pull out their equipment, open up the water meter on the street, and publicly insert a stopper to limit the household's water access to a drip.⁷ Neighbours and residents observe; the family feels humiliation. They cannot afford to pay their water debt, or to pay the reconnection fee. Should they reconnect illegally? They feel fear, conscious of the possibility of legal recourse and criminalisation. Can they survive on the water dripping into the bucket, slowly, all day long? The immediate effect is a water shortage: the inability to do laundry, the need to cook less, to cut out cleaning. This forced change in habits is felt hard within their home and is visible to neighbours. On the longer term, their pride and joy, their garden, wilts. Planted and nurtured by the family's now deceased grandmother, the original occupant of the house, the family feels torn, hurt by the desecration of their grandmother's memory, and publicly humiliated as the garden dies, on view day-after-day.

There's a debate about what such families should do. Nearly everybody has water debts and hardly anybody can formally and legally reconnect by paying off a significant portion of the debt and the reconnection fee. Some families choose to live on the drip, but supplement their water access. You lower your head by going to the informal settlement next door, a part of the neighbourhood where there are standpipes and water is free because it is not metered. Some families suggest you should live within the free basic water allocation, conserving your water usage, individually embodying the city logic of 'careful' use, of living 'responsibly', within your means, as a 'good citizen'

should. For some activists in the Civic, it's obvious: 'reconnect, it's so easy. Know your rights'. You just need a 'baboon spanner' and a 'struggle plumber' to reconnect you. The leader of the Civic reflects on 'the long stories that people tell', proclaiming, 'you shouldn't be ashamed'. Yet, she herself is ambiguously positioned. As a formal representative on the City's ward forum and sub-council, she cannot break the city's laws. She is caught in a game in which she cannot reconnect publicly, so sends residents to others for help. In the sub-council, she can report maintenance problems and water leaks, but structurally cannot challenge the city's water policies directly or the broader social discourse that you are a criminal if you do not pay, or an irresponsible citizen, if you are not 'water-wise'.

Debates about reconnecting to water reveal not only economic marginalities bound up in households – the inability to afford this crucial resource, but also the layered and contested community discourse on the social consequences of reconnecting illegally, and of the public debate about living without access, private struggles made public. These tensions are made yet more complex as they are inflected in the city's discourse and its investment in an imagination of orderly citizens and their representatives, and its parallel practices of limiting water access, a lens on the complex ways in which these competing and contested notions are reflected and enacted. Mobilising for water rights requires collective strength and activism, a shift in identity, and a debate about hidden, yet challengingly public, individual struggles reflecting competing notions of what is legitimate and just.

Yet, the work of the Civic extends beyond organising for better services and access to basic resources such as water. Activism also challenges powerful stigmas, particularly: the neighbourhood as a dysfunctional site of poverty and violence.

Building and performing community: Minstrels as activism

Beyond the bounds of conventional accounts of community-level activism and its politics, the Chairwoman explains the motivation for the establishment of a Minstrel Troupe in 2005.

When people hear of [us] they associated our area with the 28 Gang and drugs. We needed to do something to show the world out there and the people out there – standing in Cape Town, across the Cape Flats, in the surrounding areas – to show them here we are. We come from here. This is what we are doing. And this is what we can do. (July 2010)

A practice that began after the Abolition of Slavery in 1834, Minstrel troupes march through the centre city on 2 January. Despite colonialism and apartheid segregation, Minstrels have continued as one of the largest, citywide public expressions of working-class black identity, both performing, controversially, and re-casting apartheid racial categorisations (see Martin, 1999; Mason, 2010). Planning and practising throughout the year, troupes compete in stadia in working-class areas of the city between January and March.

Traditionally 'Minstrels are not activists' and 'activists are not Minstrels', yet both reflect and build intimately on township histories and geographies, drawing on and speaking in different languages, registers and styles. As a resident compelling makes clear: '[Minstrels are] my history, my mother's, my grandparents' – its part of me, part of the Cape, part of slavery'. The ward councillor – the local elected politician, a DJ by career, and a long-term resident – explains that Minstrels are an annual opportunity for celebration, for freedom of a sort; 'the heart beat of this brave community' struggling to make ends meet in this peripheral and impoverished township. Civic leaders argue too

that the Minstrels sit at the heart of their activism, the organisation's ability to sustain itself and to rejuvenate time and time again. The glue that creates new relationships and sustains the old is embodied in weekly practices, the fundraising for costumes, their sewing and crafting, as well as the training of the band and adult and youth choirs. The most public moments of Klopse include marching through the city centre annually and competing in stadia from January to March, judged on singing, marching and style.⁸ The pleasure, passion and rigours of performing and competing in the centre of the city and across the Cape Flats, the predominantly black working-class areas of Cape Town, 'shows the "world"—surrounding areas, the "city"—that we are proud, we are disciplined, we are organized'.⁹ Minstrel practice and performance bridge neighbourhood politics, merging the collective politics of protest with a celebration and performance of community, and expanding Civic politics and shifting its reach across the city.

In occupying land, reconnecting water, and in uniting and performing as a neighbourhood, activist trajectories travel in and out of the formal and informal, the legal and the illegal, meshing together savvy and strategic engagement with outright protest, and often invisible or overlooked 'quiet encroachments of the ordinary' (Bayat, 2010). Moving between a radical social movement position that contests the state, to involvement and participation in its post-apartheid structures such as ward councils, requires negotiating the containments and codes of conduct both formally and informally demand. Performing community in Minstrels asserts a politics of representation and identity that both challenge and reproduce the stigmas of racialised township bodies and city spaces. As mothers, sisters and friends, as protestors, ward representatives and Minstrels, as activists and researchers, practices are reshaped, interweaving and

juxtaposing the spatialities of household, community, the university and city. This mix of activism and research directs us to the contested urban terrain and the knowledge registers and practices in which 'idioms of political participation are made' (Chari and Donner, 2010: 82).

Struggle and knowledge: The urban as political terrain

Nagar (2002) challenges us to ask what kind of struggles research makes possible. Blurring notions of formal and informal knowledge and process, so research and writing processes rest on the shoulders of many other moments, for instance: officially scheduled and informal or ad hoc meetings in the city's offices in the neighbourhood and city centre; seminars, classes, and workshops and research sessions at the university and in the neighbourhood library, homes and on the street; protests and minstrel practices and competitions; and the intimacies of important markers such as weddings and funerals.

While these varied encounters across the city shape our conversations and knowledge, the research takes place in the context of activists' and Civic hard, daily work, legitimacies, and identities and histories. Although it has not shifted the demands of activism itself, documenting neighbourhood realities and narratives in booklets, and reports, on posters and in meetings, materials confirms and deepens the knowledge of what needs to be done, surfacing the multiple ways that hardships affect individual and family lives, and shape Civic political struggles. At the same time, the process has enabled a range of intangible benefits: collecting information, and discussing and analysing problems systematically, and sharing these analyses beyond the area has become, in many instances, a platform for other sorts of community work and activism. A Civic

leader argues that the research process has brought people into the organisation more tightly; another activist explains, 'Working on the research gave me more courage to do something', in this case, an aspiration to be the local councillor and to serve formally as a politician. Over time, the research has become 'Civic work', like Minstrels, part of the rhythm of activism, powerful because it is deeply personal, linked to experience, struggle, and identities and intimately to neighbours, the Civic and the imperative to build community at various scales. These engagements reflect a commitment to community that is not generic, but personal, intimate and life-long – rarely does anybody move out of the area. An older woman resident explains: 'The community is what we leave behind, our legacies, to children and great grandchildren so they can pick up the reigns and keep going' (February, 2010). This vision is the commitment that the Civic Chairwoman and her crew of community workers invest in organising to build a better neighbourhood; to move 'forward' in the contingencies that the post-apartheid presents. These are the terms, practices and relations through which popular epistemologies are constructed and enacted.

Accounting for this learning, its multiple sites, registers and genres, as well as its interweaving, shapes and deepens notions of 'popular epistemologies', as Nyamnjoh (2012: 146) suggests, 'from which ordinary people draw on a daily basis, and the ways they situate themselves in relationship to others within these epistemologies'. Within neighbourhoods and across the city, it demonstrates the complex ways in which, as McFarlane (2011: 184) proposes, 'a significant part of the struggle over urban life is a struggle of how we come to know and perceive urbanism, whether through everyday experience, activism, or policy-making'. At the same time, however, reflection on the practice of research and activism suggests

that notions of 'popular epistemologies' and 'expert knowledges' are messily and intimately entangled, a theoretical register that brings together everyday lived experience, movement activism and its knowledge politics. This interweaving reworks simplistic distinctions of privilege and marginality, popular and expert, activism and policy, as well as roles of 'observer' and 'observed' (Kurzman, 2008; Swarr and Nagar, 2010).

In paying attention to this terrain, through accounting for activist knowledge in our theoretical work, we can, I suggest, develop an approach that responds to Casas-Cortes's et al. (2008: 27) invocation:

... rather than approaching culture, narratives, and ideas as interchangeable variables, or categories to be filled by the researcher of social movements, what would happen if we recognize these 'ideas' as knowledges? Moreover, what if we allowed that these knowledges have direct, political effects on the world?

Attention to *knowledge practices* builds a rubric to 'recognize, build on and engage with' knowledge that works in and between overly simplistic binary notions of the academy and activism, social movements and everyday experience, with out reifying or erasing these markers. This shift makes visible a broader array of politics that 'exist below the radar of what traditionally constitutes the political field' (Casas-Cortes et al., 2008: 27). By recognising movements as complex sets of practices with diverse actors operating across urban spaces and scales, important political insights help challenge and redefine debates, and 'produce critical subjectivities or new ways of being' (Casas-Cortes et al., 2008: 27).

Yet, collaborative research suggests more, as Nagar (2012: 4) compellingly argues:

Collaborative storytelling allows coauthors from varied locations to draw upon and

scrutinize their multiple – sometimes conflicting – experiences and truths while exploring, enhancing, and elaborating upon how these interconnect with ‘expert’ knowledges. Far from seeking perfect resolutions or ‘the final word,’ such an exercise requires us to confront the fact that ‘power is never really external to dialogue, participation and experience’. (Rege, 2010: 97)

Encouraging, as Nyamnjoh hopes, ‘a meaningful dialogue’ (2012: 146), this approach takes account for negotiations and conversations that navigate entangled epistemologies, embodied and lived in the divides that fracture and invigorate contemporary city spaces.

Conclusion

In counter-hegemonic narratives, and knowledge practices, activism is reflected in long-term registers, in the leadership and the boldness of individuals, as well as collective mobilisation and everyday community work, making visible the contestations of everyday toil and contentious relationships, these entanglements and messy practices produce a ‘politics of the possible’, subsumed in, performed through, and exceeding notions of participation and protest. Multifaced and scaled, these practices trouble universal or singular stories of urban revolution and its politics that too easily dominate the theoretical and analytical registers of social movement and urban political scholarship. Not utopian, nor easy, the possibilities for broader conversations depend on a slower process, one that builds situated solidarities that work to complicate categories of activist and academic, and the privileges presumed to accrue to each (Nagar, 2012). This suggests more than a notion that ‘the “worked-for” or “struggled-for” knowledge generated by members of oppressed Genders, Races and Classes is more likely to capture truths than the uncritical and comfortable

epistemologies that evolve out of privileged experience’ (Gregory et al., 2009: 206–207). In enlarging and enriching conversations across multiple sites, registers, and epistemologies, we avoid the tendency to ‘cut too quickly to the political [and theoretical] bottom line’ (Hale, 2006: 108) or to discount and sideline what does not fit into macropolitical and theoretical narratives as marginal ‘popular knowledge’. In opening up theorisations of activism and revolution to the knowledge practices of movements, we may more cogently take account of the strategic and intimate politics that characterise contemporary activism, and reshape notions of ‘revolution’, urban politics and research practice in contemporary cities.

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Notes

1. There are exceptions: see, for instance, Gillan and Pickerell (2012) special issue in *Social Movement Studies*.
2. From debates on the (in)justice of affirmative action and racially based quotas for student university entry and academic employment in the popular press, to the relationship of the South African academy to the study of Africa (Nhlapo and Garuba, 2012), or the place of

humanities and the role of the university in relation to the state (see Lalu, 2012; Higgins, 2012, for instance).

3. Although an acute theoretical consciousness about power and its perpetual negotiation shapes mainstream anthropology, Hale suggests 'cultural critique introduces very little change in the material relations of anthropological knowledge production' (2006: 101).
4. Activists produce many variations of formal published and public knowledge, of course; see in the Cape Town context, for instance, *No Land! No House! No Vote!* (Symphony Way Pavement Dwellers, 2011).
5. Apartheid-era racial classification categorised individuals legally as 'African', 'coloured' (of mixed-racial heritage), 'Asian' or 'White', legislation central to the design and implementation of segregation. Although no longer a legal category, the term 'coloured' persists in the present used both pejoratively and positively (see Adhikari, 2005).
6. Many of these materials are co-authored, sharing learning and negotiating multiple audiences central to our research and its various interlinked commitments (see Nagar, 2012, on dynamics and politics of collaborative writing).
7. For discussion of water policy and the evolution of cost recovery policies in South Africa, see, for instance, Smith and Hanson (2003), Naidoo (2007) and von Schnitzler (2008).
8. For a more detailed discussion of Minstrels performance and competition, music, its traditions, histories, and geographies, see Baxter (1996), Martin (1999), Mason (2010) and Bruinders (2010).

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