RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER-REVIEWED)

Youth Activist Paradoxes in the Urban Periphery of Lephalale: The Struggle for Employment and Climate Justice in a Coal-Rich Region of South Africa

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Abstract

Southern Africa is understood to be a climate change hotspot, with youth and children most likely to be affected. The region has already suffered climate variability, with increased occurrence of floods and droughts, which are expected to escalate in the future. Despite the fact that young people in the region are central to ecological and social justice debates, they are often depicted as uninterested and excluded from policy and decision-making spaces – especially those living in global and urban peripheries. In this article, I speak to the nexus of youth, social and environmental justice, and climate politics. I do so by unpacking the everyday concerns and negotiations of youth activists in the urban periphery of Lephalale in Limpopo, South Africa – not typically seen as an urban centre or a site of youth politics. Lephalale is viewed as a future hub of power generation in South Africa, the rapid growth of the town being based on the expansion of coal extractivism. The complexities and paradoxes around how youth are navigating their futures in this site of mega coal projects are explored through two case studies: the Lephalale Unemployment Forum and the Waterberg Environmental Justice Forum. With climate and environmental catastrophe producing both shrinking futures and horizons of possibility, I argue that youth contestation and negotiation of their futures hold out possibilities, even with their contradictions, for collective reimagining of urban space and development.

Through the methodology I employed to explore these negotiations and contestations, I aimed to be cognisant of how research is embedded in context-specific power-laden social relations. While it was not explicitly collaborative research, what emerged from the process was the importance of slow, informal relationship-building before, during and after the research, which would be the basis for a collaborative research project years later. This way of conducting slow research is particularly necessary for engagement across racial, cultural and class divisions, as well as for research that traverses the boundary between academia and social movements in this time of crisis.

Keywords

Youth Politics; Coal Extractivism; Climate Justice; Global South; South Africa

Introduction

Southern Africa is understood to be a climate change hotspot, with youth and children most likely to be affected (Awojobi & Tetteh 2017; Betts et al. 2018; Beukes 2021; Engelbrecht et al. 2015; IPCC 2018; Vogel et al. 2022). The region has already suffered climate variability, with increased occurrence of floods and droughts, which are expected to escalate in the future. The drying of the Limpopo basin has been noted as a concern (Maúre et al. 2018; Vogel et al. 2022). In this context, notwithstanding a lack of financial clarity, COP26 made an unprecedented announcement regarding a Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) with South Africa to accelerate its transition from coal (Burton 2022). Despite the fact that young people are central to ecological and social justice debates, they are often depicted as uninterested and excluded from the policy and decision-making spaces – especially those in global and urban peripheries (Beukes 2021; Han & Ahn 2020). Nkrumah (2021) argues that young people are often given a tokenistic role in policy debates regarding climate change matters that most affect them. Furthermore, while scholars have explored the nexus between youth and social and economic justice, less attention has been paid to youth activism and participation in climate justice and climate politics in the Global South, including South Africa (Nkrumah 2021). Correspondingly, O'Brien, Selboe & Hayward (2018) call for greater recognition of the multiple forms, spaces and expressions of youth dissent in the face of climate change.

In this article, I speak to the nexus of youth, social and environmental justice, and climate politics, in response to the above lacuna in scholarship. I do so by unpacking the everyday concerns, negotiations and paradoxes of youth activists in the urban periphery of Lephalale in Limpopo, South Africa – typically not seen as an urban centre or a site of youth politics. The complexities of how youth are navigating their futures in the context of coal development and unemployment are explored through two case studies. In exploring the complexities of everyday politics, I heed Sitas's (2020) call to avoid simplistic binaries that set up youth as either passive or as sites of pure revolutionary politics; African cities as either sites of catastrophe or of optimism; or a simplistic binary between employment and development or environmental justice. In this framing, the city is understood as a complex entanglement of catastrophe and aspiration and local and global processes, as the social-spatial dialectics of the city both shape and are shaped by the politics and practices of its youth.

This article is structured into four sections: first, I introduce research-as-activism, the methodology I employed to engage with members of Lephalale community organisations; second, I sketch an overview of the place and its politics; third I discuss two case studies – the Lephalale Unemployment Forum followed by the Waterberg Environmental Justice Forum; and fourth, I reflect on some of the complexities and paradoxes surfaced through the two case studies and the research process that I engaged in.

Research-as-Activism

The research project on which this article is based used critical ethnographic methods, informed by feminist research principles, including attentiveness to lived experiences, subjectivities, alternative and situated ways of knowing, and cognisance of multiple and intersecting relations of power. I conducted fieldwork between 2015 and 2017, with site visits varying from four months to several weeks, and with follow-up interviews in 2019. This data was supplemented with ongoing media analyses into 2022. In my fieldwork, I traversed different sites in the town of Lephalale and its surrounding areas, including its informal settlements, the small town of Steenbokpan and surrounding farms, and the villages under the Ga-Seleka Royal Council. I conducted participant observation at sites such as power stations, farms, and community and trade union meetings. I also conducted interviews with 80 residents (names of interlocutors have been protected using pseudonyms), including workers, the unemployed, and activists from environmental and women's organisations. For the purposes of this article, I focus on the everyday negotiations and political practices undertaken by community and environmental organisations and activists in Marapong, the township designated for black people during apartheid.

Reflecting on the research process I adopted for this project and future research to be conducted in environments of similar complexity, it is important to understand how research is embedded in complicated, power-laden social relations, with contestation over political stakes (von Holdt 2022). Oldfield (2008, p. 270) explains that these power-laden social relations are not only between universities and communities, but also structure complex ways in which 'non-governmental organizations link to community organizations and community organizations to "communities", a mix of residents with specific local identities and interests'. The analysis of the relational topography is context-specific and impacts research processes, products and afterlives (Oldfield 2008). Through the methodology employed, I aimed to be cognisant of some of this complexity and, while it was not explicitly collaborative research, what emerged from the process was the importance of slow, informal relationship-building before, during and after the research process. This is particularly necessary for engagement across racial, cultural and class divisions, as well as research traversing the boundary between academia and social movements.

This approach aligns with Hailey's (2001) reflections on the importance of moving beyond formulaic participatory research to intersubjective and informal processes of building mutual trust and respect. Furthermore, as an intersubjective process, cognisance of one's positionality is required. Hall (1990, p. 18) states, '[t]here's no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all.' Positionality is not only about one's embeddedness in power relations – and as a white researcher, complicity in settler colonialism – but also about how one actively positions oneself in the research process and daily life.

That I came to this research following involvement as an activist in labour and student movements, having already shared some political life with activists in Lephalale, facilitated relationship building. Before and during the research process, I spent time with organisations – attending meetings and assisting with workshops and media statements. This all contributed to a slow process of relationship building in a context permeated by suspicion and mistrust. Caretta and Faria (2020, p. 2) reflect on the importance of 'time and care, for building those relationships of trust, respect, and conviviality so essential for rigorous research and for understanding complex social and spatial processes'. Writing from a service-learning perspective, Winkler (2013) highlights the importance of building and maintaining transparent and trustworthy longer-term relationships between university and community partners so that power imbalances and unrealistic expectations can be continuously addressed. Thus, without these relations in place, it may be necessary to ask

who benefits from university-community partnerships. According to Baum (2000, p. 244), creating relations of trust and accountability, requires 'sophisticated knowledge and skills, [and] years of time'. These relational processes are significant 'products' of research even if not typically viewed as a research outcome (Oldfield 2008). The intangibles of mutual sharing, learning, engaging and acting together are significant in shaping and enabling future processes, as well as shaping how we imagine relations and spaces that could allow for human flourishing across traditional boundaries (Oldfield 2008).

The relationship-building processes between myself and organisations in Lephalale will extend into the future, such that, after many years, a more explicitly collaborative research project is now possible. The next phase of research involves working with the Waterberg Women's Advocacy Organisation on a participatory arts project to investigate the gendered impacts of coal, with the aims of feeding into broader campaign work against coal development and supporting local and collective power to change corporate and government practices. This highlights the importance of recognising and affirming different ways of knowing, local knowledge and experience in research processes that can feed into policy work (Oldfield 2008; Sandercock 2003; Winkler 2013). My ongoing research is embedded in this vision of working collaboratively with activists in the area and imagining other worlds in an attempt to 'find ways to exist in a world that is diminishing' (Ahmed 2014, n.p.).

The Place and Politics of Lephalale

The town of Lephalale lies in the northern Limpopo province of South Africa. Previously an agricultural space, Lephalale developed around a coal mine and coal-fired power station in the 1980s. With the development of the coal-fired Medupi power station, and possible future coal developments, it has become a place of interest. The site is a contradictory and contested symbol of 'modernist progress' and 'fossil fuel catastrophe'. It is marked by modernist imaginaries of a future built on mega coal projects, neoliberal aspirations and foreclosure of habitable futures owing to social and environmental destruction. This locality is of particular significance as it holds South Africa's largest remaining coal reserves. The economy relies almost entirely on fossil-based energy and is one of the most carbon-intensive economies in the world (Ashley et al. 2020). This trajectory continues in the face of an existential catastrophe: that of anthropogenic, or human-induced, climate change. The plans for increasing fossil fuel development in Lephalale and its surrounds will radically alter the town and, in turn, its social relations and relations with nature, as well as further the trajectory of existential catastrophe. For these reasons, it is meaningful to explore youth politics and practices to uncover alternative futures for this site.

Following the boom in the 1970s and 1980s, a second boom in coal extractivism occurred with the development of Medupi. Lephalale is described as a post-apartheid urban centre and a coal mining and petrochemical city of the future (Mgojo 2016). The town, comprised of three urban nodes, Ellisras, Onverwacht and Marapong, is located approximately 40 kilometres from the border of Botswana (Lephalale Local Municipality 2016b). In terms of its spatial organisation, Lephalale Municipality extends beyond the town to include 38 sparsely scattered villages, a few informal settlements, and farm areas (Lephalale Local Municipality 2016a; Monaledi 2016). Despite the increased urbanisation, approximately 65 per cent of the population still live in rural villages and on farms located outside the town (Lephalale Local Municipality 2016b).

According to the 2011 census, youth, as defined between the ages of 15 and 34, represented the largest proportion of the population within the municipal area at 43 per cent – more than the national average of 37 per cent (South African Government 2020). Women comprise 54 per cent of the population of Limpopo, but Lephalale Municipality has a dominance of men, constituting more than 54 per cent of the population (Statistics South Africa 2012). The 2016 Community Survey projected a 21.8 per cent increase in the male population compared with a 13.5 per cent increase in the female population (Lephalale Local

Municipality 2019). This gender differentiation can be explained by the high prevalence of contract workers and professionals coming into the area to seek job opportunities in male-dominated sectors, such as mining and construction (Lephalale Local Municipality 2016a). Despite the rapid population increase and urbanisation, which may have led to greater spatial integration, the spatial geography of Lephalale remains divided and fragmented along race and class lines, perpetuating apartheid spatial planning and continued uneven and fragmented development (Phadi & Pearson 2018).

The model of development as one based on extractivist mega-projects continues to be propagated even though 65 percent of the population still reside in rural areas. Du Toit (2017) argues that South Africa's post-apartheid model of development and modernity was very much orientated towards the idea of the metropolitan, and out of touch with the lived realities of marginalised rural populations. Subsistence agriculture has been largely ignored, with little state agricultural support or access to informal markets, water and land (Du Toit 2017; Okunlola et al. 2016; Sukume, Mavedzenge & Murimbarima 2015). The villages surrounding Lephalale engaging in subsistence farming activities are no exception in this regard, continuing to be neglected and receiving little developmental support or socio-economic opportunities, despite their central anchoring as a place of home in people's lives.

Through the construction of Medupi, the African National Congress (ANC) government attempted to discursively regenerate an image of great feats of engineering and modernity, around which a city would be built, but constant technical failures, soaring debt and corruption scandals overshadowed the project, with Medupi now representing more a failed project of modernity. The neo-liberalisation of the project through contracts with scores of private companies and with little accountability and oversight by the parastatal organisation generated high levels of labour dispensability. Workers were cast aside after short-term contracts expired and compelled to find ways of surviving in dusty Marapong, waiting, perhaps for years, to 'secure' their next contract job. A form of dispensability was also generated through the health and environmental costs of extractivism that are unevenly distributed. Davies and Mah (2020) argue that environmental injustice unfolds wherever social inequality and pollution collide. In Lephalale, residents of Marapong, situated in the shadow of a coal mine and a power station, are particularly affected by the intersecting and reinforcing brutalities of slow violence and structural violence, which renders some lives disposable (Davies 2022; Murphy 2004; Nixon 2011). Some aspects of slow violence are literally driven into 'the tissues of subaltern bodies' (Armiero & Fava 2016, p. 79). Thus, the infrastructures of Lephalale's mega-projects not only produced an affective landscape of possibility and aspiration, resulting in an influx of people from neglected rural areas, but also produced landscapes of loss, death and rupture.

In this crisis-ridden terrain, the ANC dominated processes of 'development'. Local political networks were crucial in controlling flows of resources and job opportunities. In conjunction, Medupi functioned as a pivotal feature around and through which capital flowed and political networks were established. In the context of masculinist constructions of work and artilleries of power, women were often sexually exploited. For example, a Lephalale Unemployment Forum activist explained the process of obtaining employment on the coal mega-projects:

> If you want the job [and] you are a woman ... you have to use sex ... your own body, using it like toilet paper ... it's the councillor, HR [Human Resources Manager] ... who uses women ... ANC councillors because ANC is the leading party … and they say 'when you come with this [sex], I will give you the job' (Interview, Lesego, 16 February 2017).

These networks of power also played out through political violence. In 2021, two people were shot and 16 injured during an ANC branch meeting for the selection of local councillors, resulting in ANC meetings being called off. The violence was attributed to the Mayor's supporters, who used it to intimidate members and secure power (Madia 2021a, 2021b). Von Holdt (2019) emphasises that violence has become an important resource in factional struggles over access to opportunities and capital, and in supressing

contestation. 'Patronage-dependent accumulation' patterns are constitutive of class formation where gatekeeper politics and patronage struggles, in a context of extreme inequalities, are part of the production of the everyday political economy (Beresford 2015, p. 229; Von Holdt 2019). A politics of inclusion and exclusion (re)produces configurations of power that influence social and spatial dynamics, such as flows of capital, who has access to what (workplace and home) spaces, and under what conditions. As noted above, these configurations of power are deeply patriarchal and are constituted not only at the macro-level – for example, through the allocation of tenders in the construction of Medupi – but significantly through everyday practices at the local level.

In this context of multiple crises – environmental, social, political, economic – there are political practices that potentially push towards alternative horizons. In Marapong, activists and community organisers have built unemployment, environmental and feminist organisations, such as the Evergreen Arts Centre, Lephalale Unemployment Forum (LUF), the Waterberg Environmental Justice Forum (WEJF) and the Waterberg Women's Advocacy Organisation (WWAO). Below, I focus specifically on two case studies: the Lephalale Unemployment Forum and the Waterberg Environmental Justice Forum, which were both led by youth activists, as self-identified by research participants. Through my analysis of these case studies, I aim to highlight the everyday and paradoxical politics that young people undertake in Lephalale in the complex navigation of their futures.

The Lephalale Unemployment Forum and the Struggle for Waged Labour

In Lephalale, the hope (often frustrated hope) of a job, thought to make possible the building of a life, is constantly referred to. For instance, this hope was expressed by unemployed residents staying in the informal Thular Park shack settlement in Marapong: 'We have a belief maybe we'll get a job. But it's just a belief … Maybe one day we can get a better life' (Interview, 13 April 2016). This was a recurrent theme expressed by unemployed residents of Lephalale.

One such resident was Lesego, who was in her twenties and a member of the LUF leadership. She grew up in Kroemhoek in rural Limpopo and was the only child raised by her mother and father. Her parents were born in the area and her father worked on a potato farm until he died when she was still at school. She moved to Lephalale in 2013 in search of work; however, she did not manage to find work. At the time of the interview, she was staying in a shack in Marapong with her boyfriend, who had initially found employment at Medupi but was now unemployed. Even though Lesego was politically active in the LUF, attending meetings and organising in her community, she experienced much of her time as 'waiting' and 'wishing' for a job for herself or her boyfriend. Reflecting on her daily thinking, she pointed out: 'Sometimes I say "Why don't I get a job, so I'll have my own house with my own family? That is why I don't want to think to have kids right now because I'm suffering myself, what about if I have kids? No, let me wait for a kid"' (Interview, 16 February 2017). Thus, 'waiting' for a job is also 'waiting' for and deferring a future, while simultaneously finding ways to navigate the present and the everyday. Lesego's future of 'adulthood' with a family and a house has been put on hold, but remains ever-present in her imagination.

The project of building a life can only be planned for and actualised when the 'waiting' for (a job) comes to an end. Lesego's actions on their own were insufficient to realise a job, leading to a waiting state of 'planning what cannot be planned' (Dobler 2020, p. 9). Thus, young people organised collective action to intervene in their regimes of waiting. The Lephalale Unemployment Forum was formed in response to the precarious waiting in time and space experienced by many in Lephalale. Waiting can come at 'social and personal costs', but can also be generative of action (Mujere 2020; Schwartz 1975; Stasik, Hänsch & Mains 2020). The Forum, comprised of disgruntled ANC, Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and Democratic Alliance (DA) members, was not aligned to any political party. It was an organisational space of collective

and active waiting – turning waiting into a shared experience around which social action and solidarity could be built ([Dobler 2020](#)).

Lesego explained that her vision for the organisation was to stop people in Lephalale being 'used like toilet paper' and under the control of the councillors, and to stop the suffering from the coal mine and coal power stations. She elaborated:

> I want them [the community] to enjoy the way they want to live at Marapong. If they say, we don't want this here at Marapong, they don't want it … I don't want community to worry all the time … the water is there, the electricity is there, there is no shack, you have a toilet. I want that (Interview, 16 February 2017).

POLITICAL REPERTOIRES TO INTERVENE IN 'WAITINGS'

The LUF took action to intervene in the 'state of waiting' and to shift the collective experience of 'stuckness' in relation to imagined futures, meeting up to three times a week on an open patch of land in front of the Marapong Library and the Marapong Job Information Centre. The meetings had a regular rhythm, with up to 100 attendees. The committee reported back on meetings held with ESKOM, Exxaro and the municipality, and provided information about upcoming meetings and hiring processes (Field notes). The LUF initiated a range of protest actions and submitted memoranda of meetings with Medupi and the local municipality.

On several occasions, the LUF saw it as their role to ensure fair recruitment processes by stopping political interference (Field notes). In a meeting between Medupi officials and LUF representatives, the LUF highlighted the role of the Community Liaison Officer (CLO), arguing that the CLO was not performing their function in terms of sharing recruitment information. LUF representatives proposed that the community should be involved in the appointment of the CLO and that the officer should be accountable to the community and not only to Eskom. The LUF further advocated that it should be part of recruitment monitoring for fraud and corruption, thereby attempting to involve the organisation in processes around 'waiting lists' (Field notes, 15 February 2017). On another occasion, the LUF leadership reported at a community meeting that Matimba had agreed to inform the LUF of job openings, thereby creating dual processes of job information sharing and setting up the possibility that the LUF might appropriate the bureaucratic recruitment practices (Field notes, 21 February 2017).

In these invited spaces, the LUF also advocated for skills development and education as a means for people to achieve longer term decent employment. A committee member asked in a meeting with Medupi, 'there are locals who have been general workers for years and didn't go on skills programmes and now have been demobbed [retrenched]. Are you just going to demob people who don't have skills?' (Field notes, 15 February 2017). He elaborated, 'We want progress in this society. The most important progress is skills.' The committee advocated for a free training centre in Lephalale that companies should invest in. A better job and a better future for one's children were often articulated through the importance of education. For example, for Lesego, education was seen as the means of securing a better life. 'I want them [future children] to enjoy life, not live like the way I'm living … Education is the key' (Interview, 16 February 2017). As such, the imagined 'good life' does not significantly challenge the order of things, but the LUF pressed for greater inclusion in this imagined horizon.

However, the LUF did not only engage with companies in invited spaces, but also pushed to invent spaces through more disruptive actions. Here, I draw on [Miraftab (2004)](#) to think through the intertwining practices of 'invited' and 'invented' spaces. While the above examples focused on activities to which the LUF was invited and legitimised by government and parastatal companies, the organisation also created 'invented' spaces in which they directly confronted authorities. These two repertoires do not work in opposition, but

rather are flexible strategies employed by grassroots organisations to confront daily suffering and hardship (Miraftab 2004). The oppositional and defiant strategies also opened doors to invited spaces by positioning the LUF as a significant force in Lephalale.

On one such occasion of defiance, in October 2016 the LUF organised a protest to Lephalale Local Municipality to highlight issues regarding lack of employment opportunities, corruption and the environmental impacts of Medupi. Despite repeated notifications to the Municipality regarding the protest, the Municipality failed to respond. The Forum decided to proceed with the march, which was violently stopped by police at 6 am (Right2Protest Project, n.d.). Lesego explained:

> The police came. They said, 'You are not going anywhere'. They came with rubber bullets and started shooting, while we are sitting down. People ran away… That day, it was painful, but the community did nothing… What have we done? (Interview, 16 February 2017).

Some of the LUF leaders were arrested, including Lesego. She described her night under arrest: 'I was crying the whole night [in a cell] because we didn't do anything. What kind of public violence are they talking about? What have we done? Nothing' (Interview, 16 February 2017). The following day, Forum members went to the police station to find out what had happened to their comrades, and a further five were arrested at the police station. They were all charged with public violence (Right2Protest Project, n.d.). Lesego explained that the arrests and police violence created fear amongst community members, especially women: 'After the march, the women got scared and disappeared. They left me [in the organisation]' (Interview, 16 February 2017).

Repression is employed in order to preserve the power of local ANC political authorities and that of private and state corporations. This is an attempt to limit people's imaginaries of decent work and fair processes. Despite this repression, the LUF continued to intervene in shared waiting spaces and to invent and disrupt space in order to shift the political and social terrain of Lephalale. Lesego explained, 'our organisation is powerful. [It] fights against corruption, maladministration … every radio station talks about that' (Interview, 16 February 2017). Thus, through a combination of invited meetings and consultations, and more disruptive actions, the LUF was able to build leverage to affect waiting regimes and future imaginaries around a central concern of employment in the lives of youth in Lephalale.

The Waterberg Environmental Justice Forum and the Struggle for a Future

The Waterberg Environmental Justice Forum (WEJF) was established in 2012 for Lephalale and the broader Waterberg area, working in six municipalities. Boitumelo and Molefi established the environmental organisation and, paradoxically, both were part of the leadership of the LUF. Boitumelo explained that they were moved to do so, with other youth in Lephalale, because they 'saw bad conditions in other mining areas and thought this is what is going to happen here', given the projected coal developments. The WEJF criticised the form of development happening in the area, contending that, 'if you [companies] are busy killing us, you better not come' (Focus Group Interview, 12 April 2016). Current coal developments and the likely future loss and destruction of natural spaces threatened their concept and experience of home as well as the futurity of home for their children. This is illustrated by Boitumelo's projection: 'Our children will never know a lot of things that happened back then, but I wish everything was still the same and they can experience what we experienced' (Interview, 8 April 2017).

Youth activists in Lephalale incorporated multiple temporalities into their politics owing to a concern for 'intergenerational equity for the yet unborn' (Nkrumah 2021, p. 331). Despite being an urban centre, Lephalale is surrounded by villages and vast farmlands and is thus still constituted through relations to

land as a source of livelihood and integral way of living. For many of the WEJF activists, an appreciation of nature and its beauty was developed through their childhood experiences of growing up in the surrounding farms and villages. Boitumelo was born in Botshabelo village in Ga-Seleka. His mother sewed clothing using a small machine, while his father worked at ISCOR's mine in the 1980s and then at Matimba in the 1990s as a 'kitchen boy'. He dropped out of school when he was 16 to look for employment in Lephalale because his family was struggling. At the time of this research, he was unemployed, living in Marapong and trying to provide for two children. Boitumelo explained that as a child, 'I was loving my home and loving the nature, going to the bushes and enjoying the nature. There was a lot of things we could live on … Those villages are no longer the same as before. The wetlands are always empty' (Interview, 8 April 2017).

Similarly, Itumeleng, a committee member of WEJF and a queer activist, explained that his childhood was a 'beautiful experience'. He grew up on a farm in Steenbokpan in the 1980s with his grandfather while his father worked in the mine. His grandfather was a farm worker who had a small patch of land allowing for subsistence farming. They planted 'every vegetable or food you can think of'. He continued, 'we never went to bed hungry … We used to go in the morning … to the bush to hunt for rabbits' (Interview, 15 May 2017).

The WEJF's vision for communities in the Waterberg region is for sustainable development, including small-scale agricultural development, renewable energy and, importantly, to build youth activism in order to participate in the development taking place. A committee member explained, 'we want to see young people coming out and not be[ing] afraid. Young people keep quiet here, but we need young people to come out. We want to motivate young people. As young people, we must know that we have the power to challenge government' (Focus Group Interview, 12 April 2016). This power is understood as the potential to challenge both government and corporations in order to safeguard their futures.

The vision to develop youth activism and their voice emerged from life trajectories. It was through these journeys that these activists were motivated to organise the youth to say, 'no is no' when confronted with harmful development. For Itumeleng, for instance, it was important for him not to be ashamed of his sexual identity and to share this with other youth in the area. As the founder of the Evergreen Arts Centre, he used art and theatre as a way of expressing and emboldening voice (Interview, 15 May 2017). This was also connected to his environmentalism – expressed as a lifelong love of the environment and doing community work. For Boitumelo, he went on strike at Medupi in 2012 when he was a construction worker. As a consequence, he was arrested and charged with public violence. It took more than two years for the charges to be dropped and he was subsequently black-listed from working on the mega-projects. He explained that this experience confirmed his resolve to 'struggle and raise my voice … that's when I started to be an activist' (Interview, 8 April 2017).

The WEJF's vision for sustainable development was grounded in their experiences of rural life. Boitumelo elaborated:

> You go to the agricultural project in the villages, there are no young people there, it's only old people because they [young people] are saying, 'We are going to the project of Medupi, there is a lot of money there.' Yes, there is a lot of money, but you need to think … The power stations don't give us life, the thing that gave us life is this thing that they [the coal power stations] are destroying (Focus Group Interview, 12 April 2016).

The foundations of life are understood to be the land and the environment, which need to be sustained. Thus, even though paradoxically the same activists were involved in campaigning for waged labour through the LUF, they also understood that this was not to be at the expense of the foundations of life and that rural livelihoods needed to be supported.

For Boitumelo, when he was employed on the mega-projects, life was experienced as unhealthy and damaging. He explained:

> I think it's better where I am [unemployed activist] because in a job I made a lot of debt. ... I was [a] money maker and chasing girls but that was not life. And even if I can go ask those guys, that's all they do in Lephalale, sitting and drinking all weekend. There are no activities here, there is no life here (Interview, 8 April 2017).

Rejecting the life that formal employment enabled and adopting one of activism entailed personal costs and sacrifices for Boitumelo. He survived by selling products that he bought in Johannesburg when he went there to attend civil society workshops, as well as through the stipends that he received from NGOs. These resources were used to support his children, but his familial relations were destabilised and disrupted through his loss of employment. Thus, the complex and concrete life trajectories that led to environmental activism and the building of the organisation did not come without ramifications.

POLITICAL REPERTOIRES OF THE WATERBERG ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FORUM

The WEJF developed different organisational focal points, including waste management; community health with an emphasis on HIV and AIDS and Tuberculosis (TB); air, water and noise pollution; and safeguarding general biodiversity. These four foci developed in response to conditions on the ground. For instance, the area is the leading sub-district in Limpopo province for TB, with 9.8 per cent of deaths caused by it in 2012 (Ramaliba et al. 2017). Residents in the area suffer from sore eyes and sinuses and respiratory infections from the dust and air pollution.

In order to address the above, the WEJF undertook different political strategies. Unlike the LUF, the WEJF placed greater emphasis on research, community education and awareness raising. Employment, and the lack thereof, was an immediate concern for youth and residents of Marapong, whereas environmental concerns, despite their importance, were seen as somewhat distant from the immediacy of bread-and-butter issues. Thus, the necessity for education and awareness activities. The WEJF also engaged in practices of engagement with local government, companies and other key stakeholders; deployed constitutional rights; protested; and produced spaces of solidarity and alternative visions. Here again, there was a movement between invited and invented spaces in these grassroots strategies.

Like the LUF, WEJF intervened with local government and companies in invited spaces, specifically in processes of consultation. These included participation in forums, such as the Local Economic Development Forum's Environmental Group, and attendance at public consultation meetings for mining applications. WEJF mobilised around human rights to push for more inclusive and democratic processes, arguing that these are 'not apartheid days' (Field notes, 23 February 2017). The South African Constitution, especially Chapter 2, Section 24 on environmental rights, was seen to be useful in monitoring non-compliance with environmental policies and rights. Section 24 states that everyone has the right to 'an environment that is not harmful to their health' and to 'have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations' (South African Government 1996, pp. 1251–52). WEJF utilised this as a basis for protecting the environment, youth and future generations of Lephalale.

The WEJF committee inserted themselves into processes of development, asserting that 'We make sure that companies recognise us and also the municipality' (Focus Group Interview, 12 April 2016), signalling the importance of youth constituencies. Both government and private companies were criticised for their inadequate processes of consultation and lack of independent processes and accountability. The government was also criticised for conflating its processes of consultation with internal ANC processes rather than working with non-partisan community forums. Companies, such as Exxaro, were seen as having 'their own people' rather than non-partisan processes for environmental reviews.

Part of this work involved campaigning for transparency and accountability. For example, the 'publish what you pay' campaign was an attempt to hold mining companies accountable and pressure them to publish their profits as well as what they pay to social investment programmes (Mabula 2018). Another instance of mobilising democratic rights occurred with the development of Sekoko coal mine in Steenbokpan. In 2020, working with alliance partners, such as WWAO, WEJF involved the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) to assist families with access to protected ancestral graves that were inside the mine yard. SAHRA ruled that the graves must not be destroyed, damaged, altered, exhumed or removed from their original position given that the graves were heritage sites. And further, that the graves should be protected with fencing, and families must be given access to visit their ancestral graves (Waterberg Environmental Justice Forum, 2020).

WEJF also engaged in their own ongoing research and monitoring of developments in the area in order to participate in invited spaces effectively and engage in more disruptive actions when necessary. As Boitumelo explained, 'We must know things so we can challenge authorities … you must know your area better – you must know what is happening around' (Field notes, 23 February 2017). The organisation encouraged a culture of research in the community. At meetings, they advocated for information and evidence gathering: 'You must go to any meeting where people are gathering just to listen and ask around what's going on' and further that, 'sometimes when you take things emotionally, you are going to have a serious problem and so do some research first and make sure you have a solid ground' (Interview, 8 April 2017). Residents and activists were encouraged to attend community meetings, local government sittings and environmental impact assessment meetings. WEJF emphasised the importance of research in understanding the full and long-term implications of the mega-project developments rather than simply adopting discourses on development, as promulgated by local government and corporations: 'They say Lephalale is going to be a city and you jump up and down. No! … it's not a city because you don't have lights here. The lights are only for the power stations and mines' (Interview, 8 April 2017).

The organisation placed an emphasis on education, awareness and campaigning in order to scythe through ideological dissimulations to comprehend the unfolding of toxic geographies and uneven development. This was undertaken through activities, such as community radio talk shows, programs at schools, door-to-door campaigning and community meetings. Campaign work was often appreciated, for example, by older generations, including the Seleka Royal Council which learnt about their environmental rights from the youth activists in the WEJF (Field notes, 11 April 2017). As such, the WEJF's practices of inventing space were focused on the slow building of alternative visions within different constituencies in Marapong and surrounding rural areas. With employment being seen as the urgent and necessary horizon for a liveable life, the organisation did not have the mass base that the LUF had in order to intervene in the status quo. Rather, WEJF had to navigate the immediate needs and the needs of future generations by finding ways to advocate for development that would not destroy the foundations of life instead of focusing on employment through mega-projects, which would result in the ongoing marginalisation of rural livelihoods and denigration of the natural environment.

Reflections on Paradoxical Youth Activism in Lephalale

These two case studies highlight the paradoxical nature of youth politics in the unfolding of concrete and particular social–spatial relations. In a place such as Lephalale, which has been spatially produced through the intersection of fossil fuel industries and rurality, there is no discrete separation of the rural from the urban, or linear development from rural to urban, but rather intersecting, uneven and adverse forms of development (Du Toit 2017; Luckett 2021).

In this model of development, it is unclear if the time of 'the job' will ever arrive for the youth of Lephalale in urban informal settlements and rural villages. This waiting, which entails suffering under

capitalist conditions, is described by Wrangel (2017) as a constant deferral of the future. In this sense, hope for a job can constitute a 'stuckness' in relation to time and space (Potamianou 1997), as social life becomes a set of repetitive practices for economic and emotional survival, to ward off defeat in the neoliberal order (Berlant 2011). However, in contrast to Auyero (2011, 2012) who emphasises the state's domination over subjects through imposed bureaucratic forms of waiting, theorists such as Mujere (2020) and Stasik, Hansch and Mains (2020) investigate shifting contestations and emphasise the productive or generative aspects of temporalities of waiting in Africa.

The precarious nature of work in and around Medupi led to investment in 'the job' and 'waiting for a job' as sites of future possibilities (see Kenny 2018 for an in-depth analysis of work as a site of possibility and horizon of becoming). I have shown through the LUF case study how the surplus or generative aspects of waiting for employment in Lephalale include social action and forms of solidarity developed through a collective experience of waiting. The shared experiences and political repertoires described above point to the complexities of working both within and against the *status quo* in the struggle for liveable futures. These futures are not only about having employment in order to obtain 'adulthood', but also about having a safe and healthy environment in the present and for future generations.

This struggle for future generations, however, often comes at personal and social cost. Boitumelo's experience of remaining a committed activist for WEJF, despite his loss of employment, speaks to White's (2013) analysis of the interpenetration of money and social relations, arguing that our relations are framed by the circulation of capital. Economic activities become 'conditioning stuff' of relationships and social relations become 'subject to' capital, or the lack thereof (White 2013, p. 141). Familial and intimate social relations, which appear to have very little to do with political economy, are in fact mediated by the circulation of capital for realisation of intimacy and care. In this context, adopting alternative life strategies and a political vision is entangled with personal and relational loss; hence the significance of Boitumelo's statement: 'I am passionate to teach our fellow Lephalale community members to say it's not about getting a job and making a living, as long as you understand what is [happening] around' (Interview, 8 April 2017).

The two case studies highlight the importance of understanding the concrete dynamics of local and global processes and the role of youth politics in shifting terrains of struggle. In Lephalale, youth intervened in invited spaces regarding both employment practices and environmental justice. Given the neglect of rural villages and livelihoods, youth activists adopted seemingly paradoxical positions in demanding waged labour on extractivist projects and campaigning for environmental justice. They expanded spaces of inclusion through more disruptive actions and through the slow work of community education and awareness raising in order to shift political horizons and the modernist conception of development. The concrete life trajectories and paradoxical political practices of youth activists in Lephalale reveal some of the complexities entailed in moving towards greater social and environmental justice.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued for the importance of exploring the nexus between youth activism and environmental justice politics in the Global South, particularly in urban peripheries. I have shown, counter to discourses of passivity, that multiple forms and expressions of youth dissent emerge in the face of social and environmental injustices and precarious and uncertain futures. Despite the complexities, hardships and repression that youth in Lephalale encounter, many still struggle to use their voice to strengthen others and build spaces of collectivism and solidarity. Youth activists embedded in local politics showed the necessity of bringing together immediate needs and future horizons in a context of gender, economic, social and environmental injustices. This was at times done in contradictory and paradoxical ways, especially in the situation of an extractivist model of development, alongside rural neglect and lack of genuine participation

in decision-making processes, thereby highlighting the complexities of struggling for liveable presents and futures.

Reflecting on my role as activist-researcher, it is important to highlight that it would not have been possible to explore these two case studies without the trust and conviviality of the activists in the LUF and WEJF. This trust and conviviality in turn places an ethical demand on scholar-activists, not only in relation to accountability and transparency in research practices, but in the politics of everyday life. The slow processes of building and maintaining relationships of solidarity and trust require time, energy and emotional labour, which is not well understood or supported by the university-as-business that drives research 'productivity' as a highly individualised, competitive enterprise. Flexible and slow processes are not often accommodated within the time frames and requirements of grant-driven research projects and university pressures. While knowledge production generated through engaged scholarship is receiving more attention in higher education (Winkler 2013), little has been implemented in terms of resources, time and platforms to support ways of doing research otherwise. This is of particular importance in a context such as South Africa, with a history of colonialism and ongoing forms of violence and extractivism, thus requiring a refusal to repeat relations of (knowledge) extractivism and rather contributing towards the transformation of social relations both within and outside the academy.

Finally, returning to the words of Boitumelo, who warned that children will not experience flowing water – as Limpopo increasingly becomes a desert – this moment of deep crisis signals the urgency of safeguarding the futures of unborn generations and natural worlds. In this context, there are no guaranteed outcomes and, moreover, no guaranteed progressive outcomes, but as Solnit (2016) writes, 'it is in the uncertainty that hopeful possibilities exist'.

Acknowledgements

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