How poetry and song can grapple with the dialectics of crisis and agency, and become tools for transformative research

Nick Hopwood
University of Technology Sydney (Australia)
Stellenbosch University (South Africa)

Abstract

Activist scholarship inspired by a cultural-historical tradition often seeks to foster agency with people facing crisis. The aim is to develop new understandings and bases for action that can help people break away from the status quo and change what is possible. Cultural-historical theory understands crisis and agency dialectically, linking both to individual and social transformation. Dialectic understandings of crisis foreground breakdown and renewal. Dialectic understandings of agency foreground personal contributions with social consequence and contingency. I argue that these understandings are crucial as a point of departure in research where we stand alongside others on grappling with matters of equity and justice. However, establishing these as a shared basis for resisting, reimaging and rebelliously acting is not straightforward and requires countering dominant neoliberal framings. Arts-based forms have significant potential to enable precisely such disruptive thinking. The line 'Dance on the shark's wing', opens a poem by Nikos Kavadias, blurring the lines between the real and the imagined, the fearful and the possible. 'No One Is Alone', a song from Sondheim's 'Into the Woods', tells a story of how individual interest is overcome through collective wisdom and consequential action. These examples are discussed as potential transformative tools that could provoke and support collective radical imagination based on coherent understandings of individual agentic contributions to collective struggles. An argument is presented to embrace arts genres as means to destabilise engrained ways of thinking about crisis and agency, thus strengthening collaborative efforts in activist research.

Keywords: *transformative research; agency; crisis; cultural-historical theory; arts.*

Introduction

> We can contribute visions and ideas that will give people a shock of recognition, recognition of themselves and each other, that will bring their lives together… But we can't do it, we can't generate ideas that will bind people's lives together, if we lose contact with what those lives are like. Unless we know how to recognize people, as they look and feel and experience the world, we'll never be able to help them recognize themselves or change the world. Reading *Capital* won't help us if we don't also know how to read the signs in the street. (Berman, 1984, p. 123)

Activist scholarship inspired by a cultural-historical tradition often seeks to foster agency with people facing crisis. Rather than suggesting pre-determined solutions, the aim is to develop new understandings and bases for action that help people break away from the status quo and change what is possible. Doing so requires means to generate the shocking ideas and visions that Berman (1984) refers to in the quote above. Activist researchers seeking new means to combat injustice and inequity must create conditions in which co-participants can seriously and sincerely imagine alternative futures, entertain the possibility of the seemingly impossible. This is especially challenging because of pervasive, disempowering neoliberal views that expect us to adapt to the status quo, while simultaneously fostering individual self-interest over collective action (see for example Dafermos, 2022; Stetsenko, 2017).

In this paper I argue that dialectical understandings of crisis and agency are crucial in resisting this neoliberal stranglehold over how we understand the nature of crisis and agency, and our position in relation to matters that matter. This is not to say that Marx, Vygotsky or any other dialectical theorist had the practical answers to the concrete struggles that we join, such that we would not need insights and rebellious visions from those on the ground. But they gave us means to recognise the deleterious effects of neoliberal ways of thinking, and the potential for dialectic thinking to resist this. Dialectic understandings of crisis and agency are not the answer, rather, they are important pathways to new, disruptive, transformative answers.

Berman (1984) suggests that we must connect theory to the 'street' and be in contact with what lives are like; Stetsenko (2022) argues similarly that theory and research need to come out of life and return to life, connecting to struggles on the ground. How can we connect complex dialectical ideas to life, preserving their theoretical integrity, while provoking discussion, imagination and commitment that breaks away from the givens of neoliberal norms?

Artistic genres have special capacities to disrupt our thinking, challenge assumptions, pose impossible possibilities, hold contradictory ideas together – all ways of stepping out of the habitual and resigned, stepping into the radical and ambitious. After explaining dialectical views of crisis and agency, I consider two examples. The line 'Dance on the shark's wing' opens a poem by Nikos Kavadias, blurring lines between the real and imagined, fearful and possible. 'No One Is Alone', a song from Sondheim's *Into the Woods,* tells a story of how individual interest is overcome through collective wisdom and consequential action. I speculate how these might provoke and support radical imagination based on coherent understandings of individual contributions to collective struggles amid crisis as a process of creative renewal, while also connecting to the lives of those we do research with. The

paper thus presents an invitation to identify and explore other examples that can help overturn neoliberal colonisation of minds in relation to crisis and agency. These arts do not provide the answers any more than theory does. They might help participants recognise themselves as not alone, develop more radical visions of what might be possible, and grapple with individual-and-collective dynamics of the agentic actions required to overturn the status quo and realise alternative futures.

Cultural-historical, activist scholarship

Cultural-historical researchers take a stand that we need to do more than respond to pressing problems: we must co-create alternative futures (& Sannino, 2023). This is not simply a matter of collaborative research that solves technical problems. What is at stake, I suggest, is a broader matter of how neoliberalism as a globally hegemonic theory and practice of subjectivity and political economy has invaded collective thinking so that (a) crises are given, inevitable features of the world that we must accommodate and adapt to; (b) agency only appears as a matter of self(ish)-interest of people acting alone. We are expected to be resilient in ways that degrade the subject, where autonomy and agency are threats not solutions, and where the right choices uphold the status quo (Chandler & Reid, 2016). Discourses of individual choice pervade, for instance, what good parents decide for their children's schooling (Lee & Stacey, 2023), or how good patients get their healthcare needs met (Mol, 2006). However, such choices have deepened inequality because not everyone is in an equal position to choose or have their choices realised. Hyper-individualist notions undermine social cohesion and limit the potential of collective action, resulting in profound and increasing inequality (Fieldman, 2011). Neoliberal imperatives around individualism and adaptation have come to pervade social, cultural, and economic logics.

This pervasiveness might arguably reflect something of a seductive nature of neoliberal tenets, especially for those who benefit from them. Its elite key supporters (Crouch, 2014) are those in positions to make choices that advantage them, those buffered from the effects of social and economic crises. There is agency is the actions that uphold the neoliberal status quo. Stetsenko (2019) draws on Bierria (2014) to distinguish such hegemonic agency from insurgent forms that exploit fissures in present systems, and radical transformative agency that is "overcoming accommodation of, or adaptation and acquiescence to, the existing status quo of a neoliberal political framework with its power imbalances, exploitation, oppression, and violence" (Stetsenko, 2019, p. 8). It is this latter form that occupies cultural-historical activist scholars most keenly, and which I have in mind in this paper.

Crouch (2014) reminds us that the dominance of neoliberalism is not a reflection of its irresistible democratic force, but the way it "has captured the minds (and feeds the wallets) of political, economic and many other elites" (p. 114). He argues for peaceful confrontation of these interests (despondent in matters of race, but more hopeful in those relating to gender). There are numerous crises where the neoliberal stranglehold urgently needs to be challenged. Cultural-historical scholars argue from within different strands of this tradition that we need radically refashioned notions of ourselves, so we can develop viable alternatives to unsustainable, oppressive patterns of capitalist economy and governance that perpetuate inequality and injustice. I agree with Stetsenko that in such a climate "we do not have a luxury to separate activism from scholarship" (Stetsenko, 2018,

p. 15). Transformative, activist research rejects the inevitability of these crises, turns away from neutral, objective or disinterested research, and seeks to disrupt the status quo, realising alternative futures (Stetsenko, 2017).

Research can reject futures that falsely appear as 'given'. The status quo is not as unalterable and immutable as it appears – and as neoliberalism would have us believe. Stetsenko (2017) echoes Leonard's (2014) argument that utopian impulses flourish in troubled times because the impossible seems more reasonable that what is presently real. Engeström and Sannino (2021) frame developments in what they term fourth generation cultural-historical activity theory as tackling critical societal problems and forging practical alternatives to capitalism. This fourth generation is exemplified in Sannino's (2020) work on enacted utopias in relation to eliminating homelessness. Liberali (2019) urges scholars to reignite Freire's (2005) quest to realise the viable unheard of (*inédito viável*, also translated as untested feasibility). This is about how we explore and create concrete ways to strengthen moves towards alternative futures, living projects that go beyond the limiting situations posed by current reality (Liberali et al., 2020).

Cultural-historical researchers typically commit to understanding and creating conditions for positive change. This reflects the work of Vygotsky who, following in Marx's footsteps, advocated world-changing scholarship, committed to social goals of emancipation (of workers, minorities, women, people with disability) and equality (especially regarding access to education):

> There is a direct coupling of Vygotsky project's major concepts and ideas with its unique grounding in and an unwavering, unapologetic orientation toward social justice and equality. (Stetsenko 2020c, p. 20)

This can be seen in Vygotsky's approach to analysis through prisms of contradictions and crisis, guided by an ethical-political commitment to a society transformed towards what ought to be, as per individual and collective visions (Stetsenko, 2022). Stetsenko (2020b) argues that the most useful strategy of scholarship at this time of crisis is to explicitly connect and insert our work into sociopolitical struggles on the ground. Research in this spirit has spawned diverse forms of formative intervention advocated as novel methodologies to actively participate in changing the world (Arievitch & Stetsenko, 2014; Clot & Kostulski, 2011; Cole & The Distributed Literacy Consortium, 2006; Sannino & Engeström, 2018).

Crisis and agency

If research is to enable people to reject the message to merely adapt to the many, deepening injustices of the world, then alternatives to neoliberal concepts of crisis and agency are crucial. We cannot leave these ideas under the purview of mainstream approaches grounded in neoliberal logics of adaptation, individual self-interest and choice (Stetsenko, 2022b). Cultural-historical approaches offer a dialectic, ethico-politically grounded alternative.

Crisis

Creative imagination and dialectic transformation are central to a cultural-historical understanding of crisis. Vygotksy (2004) regarded imagination as a higher psychological function that can create distance from the constraints of an immediate situation. This distance is crucial for new horizons of possibility to emerge (Dafermos, 2022). The thinking this involves is contradictory in a Marxist sense, involving ideas in development (Goulart & González Rey, 2021), not unfettered wishful thinking. We cannot simply imagine our way out of crisis. However, there are "disimagination machines" (Giroux, 2013, drawing on Georges Didi-Huberman) that invade our personal and social thinking. This refers to cultural apparatuses (including schools, media, screen culture, public pedagogies) that undermine our capacity to "bear witness to a different and critical sense of remembering, agency, ethics, and collective resistance… to think critically, imagine the unimaginable" (Giroux, 2013, p. 263). Without resistance to these disimagination machines, we cannot hope for concrete transformation. Hence, imagination is not to be dismissed, but rather taken up as key in the struggle over the future.

Crisis refers to historic transformations that go beyond the limits of existing ways of life (Plakitsi & Kolokouri, 2019). In dialectic thinking, crisis is a critical moment in a dynamic, contradictory, developmental process (Dafermos, 2022). This reclaims crisis as a catalyst for emancipation (Jovanović, 2021), imbuing it with future orientation and trajectory (Freeden, 2017). In this process there comes a revolutionary moment when the old is recognised as hopelessly compromised and unfit for use, but novel replacements have not yet been created (Dafermos, 2022). Thus, crisis has a double nature: breakdown of what was before, and a forced transition to something new. Rather than adaptation, Dafermos (2022) prefers the notion of sublation, meaning to cancel, preserve and bring to a higher level: the contradictory death of the old and painful birth of the new. This is not a new idea, nor restricted to cultural-historical theory. American historian and social critic Berman (1984) argued that when people are faced with the closing of familiar horizons, they open new ones; when they are disappointed in their hopes, they create new visions that inspire new hopes.

In crisis, people are forced into a *choice*, between adapting to the status quo or contributing to transformation, struggling over alternatives (Dafermos, 2022; Stetsenko, 2022). Choosing the former is common, due to the way our imaginaries have been colonised, and because of discomfort in facing threats and the risk of stepping into the unknown. Crisis can be a constituent part of changing reality. But such change is not guaranteed: it depends on individuals' and social groups' positioning (Goulart, 2022).

Agency

Cultural-historical theory captures the individual and institutional consequences of human action, innovative opportunities that people create, with – rather than against – each other and the world (Cole et al., 2019). This is a direct counter to neoliberal logics in which individuals adapt to the world, choose from given options, in their own interests.

A key challenge in theorising agency in activist research concerns relationships between the individual and social (Hopwood, 2022). Cultural-historical and other researchers have

rightly been cautious about the concept of agency, due to its historical association with problematic individualism arising from binary structure/agency logics (Arievitch & Stetsenko, 2014). Furthermore, Stetsenko argues that in debunking the myth of isolated individuals, researchers have thrown out the proverbial baby (person, agency, human subjectivity) with the bath water of individualism and solipsism (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004; Stetsenko, 2017, 2020c). There has been a reduction upwards, where self and agency have been dissolved in the collective dynamics of social processes (Stetsenko, 2020b).

However, ideas of human subjectivity, mind, individual standpoints, positioning, personal responsibility and contribution to collective struggles do not have to be disposed of to escape Cartesian dichotomies (mind/body, self/other, individual/social) (Stetsenko, 2017). We *can* conceptualise agency without falling into traps of individualism (Stetsenko, 2022c). Agency is not something people have, a sense or quality of individuals, but emerges through social and material activity (Sannino, 2020).

Stetsenko's (2017, 2018, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c) Transformative Activist Stance (TAS) elaborates a dialectic view of agency. It recognises the efficacy of human beings as actors and co-authors of their history while acknowledging collaborative practices as critical to human development and social transformation. Each person is understood as co-emergent with social practices, not separate or isolated. Stetsenko (2013) suggests the term 'collectividual' to convey a dialectic amalgamation of individual and social. Individuals act towards common goals, always from unique positions (standpoints) and with unique commitments (endpoints). People contribute through their own actions, yet doing so is socially contingent (for example, on cultural tools of agency) and socially consequential (mattering in the world, whether in upholding the status quo or resisting, challenging, overturning it). Stetsenko is not alone in reclaiming individual contributions within a notion of agency that is also fundamentally social:

> In our understanding, collaborative agency is a phenomenon in which participants get involved in different activities, raising questions and acting critically to overcome a crisis in order to transform a given context. Through such a phenomenon, participants also consider ways of solving future problems rather than seeing them as inexorable and predetermined facts. (Lemos & Cunha Jr, 2017, p.56)

Such approaches to agency offer ways to reclaim individuals as social actors, co-creators of and contributors to social practices who matter in them (Stetsenko, 2013). This is bound up with notions of transformation and as such is crucial in relation to the understanding of crisis outlined above.

Cultural-historical, dialectic understandings of crisis and agency subvert dominant neoliberal logics of adaptation and individualism. They do not contain the answers to what agentic actions might look like as part of resistance and creative renewal amid crises in particular contexts. Yet, they offer a powerful platform for activist research that seeks to work with others to counter injustice, inequity, detriments to personal and collective wellbeing and so on. Such concepts may seem alien and contradictory to participants in research. We then come to the question of how we might invite participants into dialectic thinking that fosters radicalisation of imagination to overturn the status quo, opening new

avenues of resistance (Dafermos, 2022). The remainder of this paper explores the potential of the arts to do precisely this.

Activist research and the arts

The very notion of working with participants to foster radical alternatives to the status quo is counter to many established notions of research, where the purpose is to objectively explain and predict features of the world. It is even a stretch for qualitative, subjective modes of research that favour rich description. This paper explores the potential of arts in activist research – including (critical) participatory action research and formative interventions where the researcher is decentred, working with others to foster agency and support concrete action to overturn a problematic status quo. This is research with an emancipatory and political rather than technical agenda (Bradbury et al., 2019). There are longstanding traditions of this kind of research. These include participatory action research associated with Freire (2005; see Campos & Anderson, 2021; Orlowski, 2019) and Fals Borda's (1979), the latter rooted in Colombian social movements that challenge the neoliberal creed (see Pereira & Rappaport, 2021; Gutiérrez, 2016). Critical participatory action research challenges conventional research conduct, elevating the voices and perspectives of marginalised groups, combatting social injustice, and leveraging social science research for action (Fine & Torre, 2021; Kemmis et al., 2019). Participatory action research is regarded as a companion to community development in empowering communities and bringing about systemic change (Stoecker & Falcon, 2022).

Within cultural-historical theory, diverse approaches have developed that share this spirit of collaboration to transform situations and break away from the status quo. Dafermos (2022) highlights the importance of carrying out collaborative projects with a future-oriented, transformative agenda, especially for marginalised groups. Examples of such work abound in cultural-historical scholarship, including many instances of Change Laboratories (Sannino et al., 2016), and work focused on homelessness in Finland (Sannino, 2020, 2022), racism and discipline in schools in the United States (Bal et al. 2019, 2021), Brazilian women's rights in childbirth (Niy & Diniz, 2023), ecological movements (Francisco Junior et al., 2023), and on reparative justice in southern Africa (Lotz Sisitka et al., 2017, 2023).

Diverse aspects of the arts have been embraced in activist research traditions. These include theatre and performative methods (Makepeace, 2021; Abah, 2021), as well as those based on images and storytelling (Limaye et al., 2018) and painting (Spaniol, 2004). Ferholt et al. (2021) work with puppetry in creating playworlds that foster creative imagination, enabling adults and young people to enter into common fantasies that support their development, wherein the arts provide a pathway to engage with fun, infinite possibility and "human magic" (p. 95). Poems based on participants' own words have been used as data, as means of data reduction (compressing thick narratives into tight packets of meaning), and as a process of inquiry (e.g. in autoethnographic work as a vehicle to explore emotions in relationships) (Furman et al., 2007; Janesick, 2016; Szto et al., 2005). In such cases, the intent is often to produce forms that are (more) authentic or congruent with participants' experiences and feelings. Macaulay (2022) took this further, co-producing poems with child refugees from Sudan in ways that reflected their ways of

knowing and transformed how the children positioned themselves in relationships with others.

Studies within a cultural-historical framing have also embraced the arts, including children's drawings as artefacts relating to processes of questioning, taking stances, and envisioning futures (Engeström et al., 2023; Wei, 2023). Here, the issue is less one of congruence with experience, and more one of how such artistic forms might play a role in transformative efforts. This resembles the uptake of poetry in community development research: not as a matter of data, but as a tool in building something new (Sjollema & Hanley, 2014). Foster (2012) describes how poetry was used to challenge dominant ideologies of parents raising children in disadvantaged areas, suggesting value of poems in providing insight into the lives of others and engaging in 'what if?' discussions. I take up a similar issue relating to challenging hegemonic ideologies, exploring how the arts might aid disrupting received neoliberal ways of understanding crisis and agency. This is about the arts as a catalyst for thinking differently and freely, in ways that are coherent with the theoretical stance outline above, and in ways that create contact with the lives (Berman, 1984) of those we are researching with.

This might be criticised as an elitist approach seeking to fold others into existing cultural-historical ideas. The intent is indeed to find ways to foster understandings and imaginings that tap into the radical potential of dialectic thinking. However, the endpoint is not that participants become experts in cultural-historical theory. It is rather that they become able to shake off the grip of neoliberal framings to explore a radically different set of possibilities that resonate with their own positionings and commitments. Cultural-historical principles and concepts can underpin this work. What I suggest is precisely counter-elitist in the sense that it explores how the arts might be used to connect ideas to the 'street' (Berman, 1984), to enable research processes to come out of life and return to life (Stetsenko, 2022).

Activist research seeking transformation with others must address dual challenges of dealing in a sophisticated way with the dialectical nature of crisis, and creating conditions to think seriously about what seems impossible. These difficulties are amplified by grip that everyday notions of crisis can have on people (Dafermos, 2022), and the tendency to be resigned to the status quo, limited to neoliberal logics of adaptation rather than transformation (Stetsenko, 2017). The value in the examples I explore is not simply that they coherently capture dialectic notions of crisis and agency. It is that they might become tools to support and provoke radical re-imaginings that might otherwise have been difficult to achieve.

Denzin and Lincoln (2018) argue that diverse arts genres can support unconstrained discussion and imagination in research. Folklore, poetry, and narrative can bring non-canonical forms of logic that can transform how we understand the world and what it might be, entertaining rupture from reality as it appears (Luitel, 2017, 2019). Unconstrained and non-canonical imagination is precisely what is needed to escape the confines of neoliberal thinking. Herein lies the potential to explore what is nonreal, felt, mythical, imaginary and atypical (Luitel & Taylor, 2013, 2019).

This is of profound significance for researchers concerned to secure futures that ought to be rather than those that appear (falsely) to be given. This goes back to Vygotsky's early work *The Psychology of Art* (1971), in which he made a case for art as a major means for

developing human consciousness(Barrs, 2016). Barrs' work highlights how, from a cultural-historical perspective, the arts can be worked with as tools for society. In this effort it is important to note Vygotsky's interest in the dynamic, fluid and personal nature of meanings that can arise through poetry (Barrs, 2016). Stetsenko (2017) refers to breakthroughs in art, literature, poetry, and cinema that embody revolutionary energy and rebellious agency. She notes how poets and novelists can grasp notions with unusual and not-well established connotations. Poetic utterances do not let us through to things too easily, without work and effort; instead, they confront us. In the words of Holquist and Kilger (2005), they disrupt automatic associations, addressing the danger described by Shklovsky in his 1917 essay '*Art as device*' (Shklovsky, 1991) not that we are too alienated from the world, but that we are not alienated enough. Stetsenko (2017) picks up these authors' view that this lack of alienation leads us to wrongly believe things must be as they are.

Smagorinsky (2011) highlights Vygotsky's argument from *The Psychology of Art* that "a work of art by itself cannot be responsible for the thoughts and ideas it inspires" (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 40, cited in Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 325). In other words, the meaning potential of a work of art is open, not fixed. Its meaning potential arises through its form (the fact that a poem is a poem matters) and the cultural context in which it is read, viewed, heard. Vygotsky believed in the developmental value of poetry in relation to the creative reworking of reality, noting the way that poems and other art forms can force us into reacting, presenting contradiction and solution (Smagorinsky, 2011). Poems, short stories and other forms create and maintain a tension between opposites that can become a basis for transformation. In artistic works, beauty can arise from horrors, we can fly beyond the horizon, and liberation emerges from tragedy (Valsiner, 2015).

I have outlined why poetic and other arts-based genres might be taken up and taken seriously in activist research engaging with crisis and agency, and established links to cultural-historical theorising. Now I will turn to two examples: a line from a poem, and a song from a musical. The latter is examined more in its lyrical aspects than its melodic ones – a poetic rather than musical reading. Both embody dialectical thinking about crisis, self and other, illustrating how the arts can present us with seeming contradictions in ways that not only make sense, but which can grab our attention and spur is into alternative perhaps radical ways of thinking.

Dafermos (2022) mentions the opening line 'dance on the shark's wing' as an invitation to overcome the fear of failure and make the impossible possible, resisting social fragmentation and zombie economics. This warrants further reflection and exploration of the poem and its context, and is hence taken as the first example. Dafermos used the line to drive home a conclusion around the nature of crisis and to make a call for research that transforms the dance of death into a dance of life. Building on this, I illustrate more deeply how this line captures complex notions of crisis, and how it might provoke us to imagine crises and the choices they force us to make differently. It is from the poem *Woman* by Greek poet Nikos Kavadias (1910-1975) [1], who explored themes of connections with others through motifs of death and loneliness, and who also used metaphors of sea-voyaging to stretch the boundaries of reality. While the single line is understood in

---

[1] Kavadias is sometimes spelled Kavvadias – the latter is closer to the Greek Καββαδίας and used by Dafermos (2022) but the former is used in the volume of his collected poems referred to as the source material, and so is used in this text.

relation to the full poem and Kavadias' wider work, the focus on just the opening words echoes a habit of Vygotsky's: singling out lines that captured the essence of a poem, recognising the significance of an abbreviated linguistic form (see Wertsch, 1985).

Stephen Sondheim (1930-2021) was a composer and lyricist from the United States. *Into the Woods*, written in 1987 was a much less intimate work than Kavadias' poem. It addressed rampant individualism of the time (Reagan in the United States, Thatcher in the UK) and was a call for the audience to think and act differently. I focus on the song 'No One is Alone' because it addresses self and other in a very different way. Both examples explore love, loss and connection with others. While Kavadias merged autobiography and fantasy, Sondheim delves into issues of individual and collective wishing, responsibility and agency by re-writing familiar fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm. In contrast to the single line of the first example, the full song examined in the second enables exploration of how complex ideas can be built up in more extended artistic forms. Following with a discussion of each in turn, I speculate on how they might work as tools to promote radical envisioning and agency with participants in research.

Dance on the shark's wing

Dafermos (2022) connects the opening line 'Dance on the shark's wing' to his analysis of crisis as a crucial tipping point between life and death. He refers to forced choices between on the one hand, acceptance and adaptation to what is untoward, and a commitment to transformation on the other. I expand on this briefly made connection to explore in more detail how this particular line offers a basis to challenge neoliberal notions of crisis.

The line opens the poem *Woman* (see evfokas, 2011, for a full version in Greek and English). The poem refers to a sailor's relationship with a woman, at times depicted as a prostitute. It presents vivid fantastical memories, ruptures between then and now, and contradictions in the relationship. The woman is both distant and near, the connection between them both lost and enduring, the sailor is alone and not. Ambivalent themes resist stable notions of life, death, togetherness, and loneliness (Menelaou, 2020).

Kavadias' wider work uses his sea-voyaging and travels as metaphors to escape ordinary life, transgress the boundaries of reality. Exotic images, madness and memory are devices to create a neither wholly true nor wholly fictitious world. His poems of myth and reality create a marriage between fantasy and reality (Sakkatos, 2009), their truth deriving from their lies (Lykiardopoulos, 1990). Both biography and poetic imagination play and important role (Menelaou, 2020). In using the sea as a metaphor for life, Kavadias encourages imaginative ways to escape, avoiding both irresponsible romanticism and irremediable despondency (Bien, 1992). The line is danced between naïve utopia on the one hand, and false hopelessness on the other.

How might we expand the developmental, transformative meanings of 'dance on the shark's wing'? Dafermos (2022) notes that the line is an invitation to overcome the fear of failure and make the impossible possible. The shark symbolises fear, dancing on its wing[2]

---

[2] It is worth noting the difficulties of translating Kavadias into English (Bien, 1992); 'wing' is also translated by some as 'fin' or 'dorsal fin'.

is the impossibility. This embodies precisely the artistic potential of beauty arising from horror, of liberation emerging from tragedy (Valsiner, 2015). Five words capture a great deal of complexity, holding dialectic dynamics while at the same time invoking a playful, radical invocation towards what is deemed impossible. The blurring and blending of fact and fiction, myth and reality give the line what Dafermos (2022) detects as a powerful resonance with dialectic understandings of crisis as developmental.

Crisis is when what seems impossible becomes possible. In the face of crises, we must learn to think, imagine, learn and develop outside the box (Dafermos, 2022). I argue we can use the idea of dancing on the shark's wing to confront ourselves and people we do research with. We can treat it as an encouragement to think and imagine in an unconstrained way, not only transgressing what we fear, but also the boundary we draw between the real and the possible. To dance on the shark's wing is to radicalise our imagination, precisely the opposite of what neoliberalism would have us do amid crisis (adapt, conform). Neoliberalism's grip on our imagination in crisis depends on acceptance of reality and the future as given. Kavadias invites us to think differently. The fearful feature that we are supposed to accommodate in pliant acquiescence instead becomes the platform for an altogether different response – a dance of new life unfolding precisely on what would otherwise be a harbinger of death. The power of this line derives deeply from its poetic genre, and its belonging to a wider work that embodies contradiction, transgression and blurring between real and fantastical.

No One Is Alone, from *Into the Woods*

Sondheim's (1987) *Into the Woods* also engages fantasy, in this case through fairy tales. Characters from Little Red Riding Hood, Jack and the Beanstalk, Cinderella, and Rapunzel make wishes and pursue them, variously foolishly, selfishly, courageously. Themes of life, love and loss connect with a central idea of unexpected consequences of getting what you want. Eamon Flack directed a 2023 production in Sydney, and in the program notes, argues that these consequences are "bigger than any one or maybe even any number of us – climate change, mad wounded financial systems, raging billionaires, pandemics of disease and misery" (Flack, 2023).

Into the Woods is fundamentally about creating *new* stories. This is embodied in Sondheim's use of existing fairy tales to tell a completely new story. It is what Sondheim's characters do for themselves. They do this not as isolated individuals, but through their relationships with others. And it is what Sondheim is urging us to do. As Flack (2023) notes, the musical's debut came at a time when the pervasive story in the United States and United Kingdom was that of the potential of unleashed self-interest. Sondheim was critiquing what, decades later, Dafermos (2022) describes as the colonisation of social imaginaries by neoliberalism and exaggerated individualism.

According to Flack (2023), the musical addresses stories written for us, those that entrap us, those that we live by, and those that we (co-)create. If the central *idea* is one of unintended consequences, the central *message* is that change and renewal are always possible – we can and must write ourselves into new stories, new ways of living. I suggest this is how *Into the Woods* raises questions of agency, and that it does so in sophisticated

ways that confound dualisms between structure and agency, self and other, individual and collective. Flack writes:

> These [new stories] do, yes, require individuals — individual thought, individual willingness — but change and renewal only really count when they become communal, and when the dead are included. When they become a story that can be told and shared and maybe even take over the world. (Flack, 2023)

Thus, I argue that *Into the Woods* recognises individual responsibility and contribution, but also collective contingency and consequence (and, through the dead, history). I suggest this is consistent with the fundamentals of how agency is conceptualised in Stetsenko's (2017) TAS. More detailed consideration is warranted as to how this artistic form offers a meaningful counter to neoliberalism's individual framings, in a way that is coherent with the dialectic bases of cultural-historical theory. Before focusing on 'No One Is Alone', I place the song in the context of the overall story.

In the musical, Jack climbs the beanstalk, steals from a giant, and kills him. The giant's wife descends, seeking revenge and threatening the characters. Jack's mother defends her son, angering the giantess, and is killed by another character, leaving Jack an orphan. The giantess kills Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother. Unsure what to do, Jack is consoled by the baker, and Little Red Riding Hood by Cinderella. In the song 'No One Is Alone', the baker and Cinderella explain to Jack and Little Red Riding Hood that choices have consequences, and that everyone is connected. The four of them slay the giantess and later return to the village to tell their story. I will now present the song lyrics in sections, discussing the connections to agency as understood through TAS (Stetsenko, 2017).

Mother cannot guide you
Now you're on your own
Only me beside you
Still, you're not alone
No one is alone, truly
No one is alone

This first part establishes a core seemingly conflicting idea: being alone, never being alone (echoes of Kavadias' *Woman* can be heard here). Recently orphaned Jack is reminded of this fact, but also that there is someone beside him. The audience in the climate of rampant individualism of the 1980s are being told, conversely, that they – no one – is alone. The song presents us with contradiction – how might we read it for its developmental and transformative meaning potential, in the way that Smagorinsky (2011) encourages?

Sometimes people leave you
Halfway through the wood
Others may deceive you
You decide what's good
You decide alone
But no one is alone

Now the song addresses decisions and points to responsibility, affirming again that despite being left or abandoned, we are never alone. This echoes the enduring presence of the woman with the sailor in Kavadias' poem, despite their separation.

I wish...
I know.
Mother isn't here now
Wrong things, right things
Who knows what she'd say?
Who can say what's true?
Nothing's quite so clear now
Do things, fight things
Feel you've lost your way?
But—
You decide, but
You are not alone
Believe me,
No one is alone
No one is alone
Believe me
Truly

Jack wishes (returning to the theme from the start of the musical) and his companion acknowledges and empathises. The suggestion to do things, fight things, is a direct counter to the neoliberal demand to adapt and acquiesce. Still, personal responsibility remains (You decide). Not only is 'no one is alone' repeated, but is emphatically restated (Believe me, Truly). This resonates with a point Stetsenko (2017) treads carefully about the future that ought to be: this is not something universal or given, neither is it a matter for the self-interested individual. It pertains to the visions and imaginations that reflect people's unique stand and endpoints, and their collective strivings toward shared alternatives.

You move just a finger
Say the slightest word
Something's bound to linger
Be heard
No one acts alone
Careful
No one is alone
People make mistakes
Fathers
Mothers
People make mistakes
Holding to their own
Thinking they're alone
Honor their mistakes
Fight for their mistakes
Everybody makes

One another's terrible mistakes
Witches can be right
Giants can be good
You decide what's right
You decide what's good

Now the song shifts to the theme of consequences. Small movements, tiny utterances linger, are heard. One's action always connects to others (so be warned!). The mistake is not in acting, but in thinking one acts alone (and without consequences for others). Stetsenko (2023) presents similar ideas as highly relevant to agency, not only the issue of acting with consequence, but highlighting how agentic actions might live perhaps unnoticed in taking initiative, making decisions, developing stances, exerting influence, resisting oppressive power. We all directly contribute to the world-in-the-making, through our unique authorial deeds that are both individual and social. Furthermore, in TAS, agency is not reserved only for some actions, but for *all* actions (yes, right from birth), where our being, knowing and doing bring forth the world. You move just a finger, say the slightest word.

Clean lines between right and wrong are again blurred in this section of the song, now focusing on who is acting: parents erring, fairy-tale villains being right and good. Jack and Little Red Riding Hood are being told that his actions and mistakes are theirs to make, but always with consequence for others, and that what is right and good is for them to decide and take responsibility for.

Just remember
Just remember
Someone is on your side
Our side [Jack and Little Red Riding Hood]
Our side [Baker and Cinderella]
Someone else is not
While we're seeing our side
Our side [Jack and Little Red Riding Hood]
Our side [Baker and Cinderella]
Maybe we forgot
They are not alone
No one is alone
Hard to see the light now
Just don't let it go
Things will come out right now
We can make it so
Someone is on your side
No one is alone

The repeated urge to remember perhaps tells Jack, Little Red Riding Hood, and the audience how easy it is to forget that we are not alone, that someone is on our side. This speaks again to the climate of individualism which needs to be continually resisted, recognising that pervasive ways of thinking can become so entrenched that people forget

there are alternatives (to individualism, to capitalism, to environmental crisis). This is what radical scholarships of resistance are about.

The pivotal moment comes when one person telling another ('your side') becomes two lots of two people stating in unison ('our side'). The individual has become a collective. Yet, this is immediately countered by recognition of opposing sides, others – also not alone – who may resist. Dialectic thinking abounds here in the balance between the two, the holding of two seemingly opposing truths simultaneously. While the shift from you to us is the key pivot in the song, the climax comes in the third line from the end: 'We can make it so'. If the musical were to be summarised in five words, it might be these. The 'we' firmly states it is through the power of acting together – not alone – that different stories can be lived out, the world can be made right. The notion of 'make it so' connotes a world that is open, up for grabs. Jack and Little Red Riding Hood no longer framed as on their own, but people with others on their side, who together will *decide* what is right (remembering this is not universal: the giants would not have agreed) and make things right. Might this togetherness be the beauty arising from the horror of the tragedy that has befallen Jack and Little Red? The lyrics also speak to the audience – the bigger 'we', telling each member there is someone on their side, someone who can make the decisions and world with them: no one is alone. And we must make decisions about what is right, take initiatives, develop stances, exert influence, and resist what orients in other directions (Hopwood, 2023; Stetsenko, 2023). Thus the meaning potential of the song unfolds, creating contradictions that become a basis for transformation.

The central characters in *Into the Woods* begin by pursuing selfish interests, their imaginaries colonised and limited by excessive individualism. They fall foul of these interests. They learn to think and act together, and by the end take collective decision and actions that rid their world of giants, changing their condition of life together in new domestic arrangements. Their personal contributions are clear. And while the plot traces each character's trajectory from unique standpoints toward unique endpoints, they finish by orienting towards a common good according to what they have decided is right. I suggest this is a powerful illustration of agency and the collective as conceptualised by Stetsenko (2013, 2017).

Over its two Acts, *Into the Woods* shifts from an invitation to wish to one of wisdom and connection – or perhaps wisdom *through* connection (Flack, 2023). This is what Jack, Little Red Riding Hood, and the audience learn through 'No One Is Alone': to be wise by recognising and connecting with those on our side. In *Into the Woods* the giants are slain; the giant at the time of its debut was a metaphor for unconstrained individualism. We might today link the giant with this same meaning, and the zombie ideas Dafermos (2022) seeks to resist: climate crisis, entrenched and deepening inequality, capitalism, exclusion, racism, sexism, ableism and so on. Flack (2023) notes, "A giant is just a story. The way to kill a giant is to come up with a better story". Stories other than those of neoliberalism are needed, and this song might help us tell them.

Conclusion: How arts genres might invite collective questioning and envisioning of alternative futures

The arts in general, and poetry and songs in particular, are established features of activist research with participatory, critical and emancipatory intent. In this final section I consider how these and similar examples might be taken up in such research to address the specific problem of unleashing collective imaginaries in relation to crisis and agency. This constitutes an important but overlooked function of arts genres. It depends on their ability to depart from, counter, and undermine neoliberal framings that might otherwise constrain and contaminate collective struggles to overturn the status quo. I am not proposing an alternative to (critical) participatory action research, formative intervention, or other activist approaches. Rather I propose exploring how radical counter-neoliberal imagination and action might be cultivated through these longstanding modes of counter-hegemonic research.

These examples from the arts do not contain any answers as to what researchers or participants should do in specific struggles against injustice, inequality, exclusion, and marginalisation. The works are not responsible for the thoughts and ideas they inspire – these are open (Smagorinsky, 2011; Vygotsky, 1971). I argue we can discern meanings in 'Dance on the shark's wing' that point to what is needed – to overturn what seems fearful and impossible, dance the dance of life instead of death, moving beyond crisis as destructive, and into a process of creative renewal. Similarly, we can understand 'No One Is Alone' in ways that remind us of our contributions and responsibilities as individuals-with-others.

These examples crucially cohere with cultural-historical, dialectic thinking in taking a counter-hegemonic stance. However, the key point is not that they simply stand in for specific ways of conceptualising crisis and agency, replacing the scholarly tome with something more accessible. I imagine that these examples might become useful in research by linking their radical and unsettling ideas with specific aspects of struggles we join as activist researchers. They are less about the answers than the questions they might help us pose. This might embrace (without resolving) the contradictory nature of experiencing a crisis and the co-existence of various ways to break through it (Dafermos, 2022). With Berman's (1984) challenge not to lose contact with the street in mind, they might also help create contact with what participants' lives are like and how they experience the world. This is a step towards helping researchers and participants recognise each other, the positions we/they take not as people in the world, but as people who might – together – change it. The questions I present below explore the open meaning potential of works of art, their potential to force us into reacting not by adapting, but by creatively reworking reality, where beauty might arise from horror (Valsiner, 2015).

We might briefly introduce the meaning of 'Dance on the shark's wing' as pertaining to overcoming the fear of failure and making the impossible possible. With a non-elitist intent to reclaim crisis as an emancipatory process (Jovanović, 2021) – using the tools of theory and the arts together – we could deliberately provoke discussion and radical imagination with participants in ways that remain in close contact with their lives.

- First, we might challenge collective understandings of the status quo, and question what appears falsely as given about the present. What does the shark denote for us, here and now? What are we afraid of? Who is telling us we should be afraid?

- Then we might consider what it might mean to resist the adverse, dominant and seemingly unquestionable. What would it mean to usurp the predatory nature of the shark? How would it look and feel to stand up rather than flee or submit?
- We might then move to the even more unthinkable: What would it mean to dance on the shark's wing? What would it mean to take the threat and treat it as our platform for a new dance of life? What would this do to the world?
- We could then go beyond the metaphor and consider how actions of resistance, rebellion, creation and generation might be involved. All the while, we might make efforts to remind ourselves of the repeated fact in human history that what seemed impossible proved not to be the case.

The juxtaposition of dancing and the object of fear, real-world objects and the fantastical imagery might work to help participants in research think and imagine in unconstrained, radical ways. To work meaningfully in research with crisis we have to *face* threats (Dafermos, 2022), confront the world (Stetsenko, 2017), hence the metaphorical relevance and power of the shark. By urging us to think the unthinkable, Kavadias' five words can be taken up in dialectic ways, so that when conducting research with people amid crisis we are able to escape the submission to doom, confines of adaptation (Stetsenko, 2022), or resignation to apocalyptic narratives (Dafermos, 2022).

Of course, there are many other selections from poetry that could work in similar fashion. Poetic forms can offer something that meets the demands of theoretical integrity, while tapping into the power of both dialectical thinking and the arts as ways to undermine neoliberal framings of crisis, and thus intervene disruptively, rebelliously, and creatively in work we do alongside others in committed struggles over the future that ought to be.

What of the song, 'No One Is Alone'? It is less compact than the single line of poetry. However, its length allows for an unravelling of ideas, a story to be told, and a progressive series of challenges and invitations (perhaps imperatives). Just as Cinderella's words (cautions, assurances, urges) to Jack were simultaneously Sondheim's words (cautions, assurances, urges) to the audience, the lyrics of the song might also caution, assure, and urge participants in transformative research.

The messages of 'No One Is Alone' could potentially help researchers and participants jointly grapple with the complexities of individual and collective dynamics, especially as they pertain to agency, in ways that are in contact with lived experiences and struggles. Again, it would do so not by providing answers, but by provoking questions. With some background to the story, we might listen to the song together and then take it up as a tool for reimagining.

- First, we might ask, what is the giant we are trying to kill? Whose stories created the giant? Who are the villagers who could join the fight alongside use? Who, like Jack's mother, comes to our defence?
- Then we might explore agency in ways that challenge individual self-interest: What key decisions do we need to take responsibility for? How can we become wiser in making those decisions by connecting with others? How can we make our decisions and actions communal? A key purpose here could be to provoke people into realising they are not, after all, alone.

- We might be prompted to reflect critically: What mistakes have we made? What have the consequences of our past actions been (intended and otherwise)?
- We might move from there to consider how we are not alone: Who, like Cinderella, is on our side and ready to offer us wisdom? Who, like the Baker, will take us in when we are rejected?
- Then we might seriously envision alternative futures: What are we trying to make so? What stories are we taking for granted as written for us in how our lives unfold? What stories are we trapped by? What stories do we need to create for ourselves?
- What new stories do we need to make, tell, and enact? How might those stories become shared and told (i.e., lived) by others?
- In this envisioning work, we might replicate a move that follows the blurring of real and imaginary in the song as well as the poem, giving our collective stories (or histories) different endings, charting different paths for ourselves as characters, giving them magical beans.

It is important to place such concrete proposals in an understanding of the social dynamics of research. Regardless of intent to foster genuine participation, to decentre the researcher, and to use research to join and advance the struggles of others, it would be wrong to overlook the issue of positioning – which may undermine or strengthen change (Goulart, 2022). There are asymmetries in privilege and power associated with initiating research and in determining the terms and tools of the process. However, these asymmetries can be navigated in a way that leaves the process open to directions and endpoints that are not predetermined. Consider how representations of activity systems have been used so often in Change Laboratories – a tool from a specific theoretical tradition brought by researchers, but not as a holder of answers, but to transform understanding, envisioning and action (Sannino et al., 2016). The same intent might frame the use of arts-based examples to create conditions for thinking differently about crisis and agency in ways that are empowering. However, this is not automatic, and just as social dynamics can trouble the use of theoretical tools (see Kandjengo & Shikalepo, 2021), so they might trouble the effectiveness of these or any other arts forms. Epistemic distance (Jakhelln & Postholm, 2022) between researchers and participants might still be created, and might undermine the intent to produce a sense of togetherness and unity. The line from the poem might seem aloof and inaccessible; the song might seem alien in its assumption of shared cultural reference to particular fairy tales. While not resolved in the prospective outline above, these problems are not insurmountable, and do not undermine the more general point about the potential of the arts to productively destabilise how we understand crises we face and our own-and-collective responsibilities and capacities to change things.

Despite their different forms and substantive meanings, the poetic line and the song have important things in common as potential tools of re-imagining and agency in research. They both exploit the potential of their respective genres to confront us with unusual and not-yet established connotations (Stetsenko, 2017). They offer distinctive ways to think about danger, solitude, solidarity, responsibility, wisdom, and possibility. They can be tools not just to capture how the world is, but to construct it – differently – through imagination (Luitel & Taylor, 2013). It is precisely their embeddedness in arts genres that legitimises radical imaginaries, and the capacity to hold ambiguity with precision,

contradiction with coherence, breaking down with building anew. As such they hold potential to foster the visions and joint commitment that fuel transformative and rebellious agency (Stetsenko, 2017). I therefore suggest that transformative, activist researchers working in cultural-historical traditions might usefully explore how diverse arts genres and examples might loosen the neoliberal grip on collective imaginaries, and thereby create conditions to formulate alternative imaginaries together.

References

Abah, O. S. (2021). Theatre for development as a participatory research tool. In D. Burns, J. Howard, & S. M. Ospina (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of participatory research and inquiry* (pp. 783-796). SAGE.

Arievitch, I., & Stetsenko, A. (2014). The 'magic of signs': Developmental trajectory of cultural mediation. In A. Yasnitsky, R. van der Veer, & M. Ferrari (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of cultural-historical psychology* (pp. 217-244). Cambridge University Press.

Bal, A., Afacan, K., & Cakir, H. I. (2019). Transforming schools from the ground-up with local stakeholders: Implementing learning lab for inclusion and systemic transformation at a middle school. *Interchange*, *50*, 359-387. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-019-09353-5

Bal, A., Bird Bear, A., Ko, D., & Orie, L. (2021). Indigenous Learning Lab: Inclusive knowledge-production and systemic design toward Indigenous prolepsis. In W. Cavendish & J. F. Samson (Eds.), *Intersectionality in education: Toward more equitable policy, research and practice* (pp. 122-150). Teachers College Press.

Barrs, M. (2016). Vygotsky's 'Thought and Word'. *Changing English*, *23*(3), 241-256. https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684x.2016.1203610

Bien, P. (1992). The collected poems of Nikos Kavadias (review). *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, *10*(1), 150-153. https://doi.org/10.1353/mgs.2010.0374

Berman, S. (1984). The signs in the street: A response to Perry Anderson. *New Left Review*, *144*(1), 114-123.

Bradbury, H., Lewis, R., & Embury, D. C. (2019). Education action research: with and for the next generation. In C. A. Mertler (Ed.), *The Wiley Handbook of Action Research in Education* (pp. 7-28). John Wiley & Sons.

Campos, F. C., & Anderson, G. L. (2021). Paulo Freire's influence on participatory action research. In D. Burns, J. Howard, & S. M. Ospina (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of participatory research and inquiry* (pp. 41-54). SAGE.

Chandler, D., & Reid, J. (2016). *The neoliberal subject: Resilience, adaptation and vulnerability*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Clot, Y., & Kostulski, K. (2011). Intervening for transforming: The horizon of action in the Clinic of Activity. *Theory & Psychology*, *21*(5), 681-696. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354311419253

Cole, M., Ferholt, B., Jornet, A., Nardi, B., Rajala, A., Vadeboncoeur, J., & Williams, J. (2019). Acknowledging changes and the challenges ahead. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, *26*(4), 283-285. https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2019.1701682

Cole, M., & The Distributed Literacy Consortium. (2006). *The fifth dimension: An after-school program built on diversity*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Crouch, C. (2014). Putting neoliberalism in its place. *The Political Quarterly*, *85*(2), 114-121. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923x.12077

Dafermos, M. (2022). Discussing the concept of crisis in cultural-historical activity research: A dialectical perspective. *Human Arenas*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-022-00289-4

Engeström, Y. (2020). Ascending from the abstract to the concrete as a principle of expansive learning. *Psychological Science and Education, 25*(5), 31–43. doi:10.17759/pse.2020250503

Engeström, Y., Rantavuori, P., Ruutu, P., & Tapola-Haapala, M. (2023). From future orientation to future-making: Toward adolescents' transformative agency In N. Hopwood & A. Sannino (Eds.), *Agency and transformation: motives, mediation and motion*. Cambridge University Press.

Engeström, Y., & Sannino, A. (2021). From mediated actions to heterogenous coalitions: four generations of activity-theoretical studies of work and learning. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, *28*(1), 4-23. https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2020.1806328

evfokas. (2011). *Γυναίκα - English translation*. https://lyricstranslate.com/en/ginaika-woman.html-0

Fals Borda, O. (1979). Investigating reality in order to transform it: The Colombian experience. *Dialectical Anthropology*, *4*, 33-55. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00417683

Fieldman, G. (2011). Neoliberalism, the production of vulnerability and the hobbled state: Systemic barriers to climate adaptation. *Climate and Development*, *3*(2), 159-174. https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2011.582278

Fine, M., & Torre, M. E. (2021). *Essentials of critical participatory action research*. American Psychological Association.

Flack, E. (2023). *Into the Woods digital program*. Belvoir St Theatre. https://belvoir.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Into-The-Woods-Program-7.pdf

Foster, V. (2012). What if? The use of poetry to promote social justice. *Social Work Education*, *31*(6), 742-755. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2012.695936

Franciso Junior, O. A., Lesama, M. F., & Querol, M. A. P. (2023). Transformative agency by double stimulation in an ecological agroforestry association from Brazil: Reflections from a Change Laboratory intervention. In N. Hopwood & A. Sannino (Eds.), *Agency and transformation: motives, mediation and motion* (pp. 288-310). Cambridge University Press.

Freeden, M. (2017). Crisis? How is that a crisis!? Reflections on an overburdened word. *Contributions to the History of Concepts, 12*(2), 12–28. https://doi.org/10.3167/choc.2017.120202

Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed (30th anniversary edition)*. Continuum.

Furman, R., Langer, C. L., Davis, C. S., Gallardo, H. P., & Kulkarni, S. (2016). Expressive, research and reflective poetry as qualitative inquiry: A study of adolescent identity. *Qualitative Research*, *7*(3), 301-315. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794107078511

Giroux, H. A. (2013). The disimagination machine and the pathologies of power. *Symplokē, 21*(1-2), 257–269. https://doi.org/10.5250/symploke.21.1-2.0257

González Rey, F. (2018). Subjectivity and discourse: Complementary topics for a critical psychology. *Culture & Psychology, 25*(2), 178–194. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X18754338

Goulart, D. M. (2022). Crisis, dialectics, and subjectivity within cultural-historical approach: Constructing a dialogue between Dafermos and González Rey. *Human Arenas*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-022-00290-x

Goulart, D. M. & González Rey, F. (2021). Cultural-historical psychology in Latin America: An interview with Fernando González Rey. In: Pablo Fossa. (Ed.). *Latin American Advances in Subjectivity and Development: Through the Vygotsky Route* (pp. 249–266). Springer.

Gutiérrez, J. (2016). Participatory action research (PAR) and the Colombian peasant reserve zones: The legacy of Orlando Fals Borda. *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*, *22*, 59-76.

Holquist, M., and Kliger, I. (2005). Minding the gap: Toward a historical poetics of estrangement. *Poetics Today, 26*(4), 613–636. https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-26-4-613

Hopwood, N. (2022). Agency in cultural-historical activity theory: strengthening commitment to social transformation. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*. https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2022.2092151

Hopwood, N. (2023). Agency as the direction and reach of actions: a theoretical outline. In N. Hopwood & A. Sannino (Eds.), *Agency and transformation: motives, mediation and motion* (pp. 355-382). Cambridge University Press.

Hopwood, N., & Sannino, A. (2023). Motives, mediation and motion: Towards an inherently learning- and development-orientated perspective on agency. In N. Hopwood & A. Sannino (Eds.), *Agency and transformation: motives, mediation and motion* (pp. 1-34). Cambridge University Press.

Jakhelln, R., & Postholm, M. B. (2022). University–school collaboration as an arena for community-building in teacher education. *Educational Research*, *64*(4), 457-472. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2022.2071750

Janesick, V. J. (2016). Poetic inquiry: Transforming qualitative data into poetry. In N. Denzin & M. D. Giardina (Eds.), *Qualitative inquiry through a critical lens* (pp. 59-72). Routledge.

Jovanović, G. (2021). Subverted crisis and critique. *Human Arenas*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-020-00168-w

Kandjengo, S. N. (2021). Change Laboratory workshops as tools for improving learner leadership in schools: A researcher-interventionist approach. *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*, *04*(12). https://doi.org/10.47191/ijsshr/v4-i12-18

Kavadias, N. (2006). *The collected poems of Nikos Kavadias (English and Greek edition)* (G. Holst-Warhaft, Trans.). Attica.

Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., & Nixon, R. (2019). Critical participatory action research. In O. Zuber-Skerritt & L. Woods (Eds.), *Action learning and action research: genres and approaches* (pp. 179-192). Emerald.

Lee, J.-S., & Stacey, M. (2023). Fairness perceptions of educational inequality: The effects of self-interest and neoliberal orientations. *The Australian Educational Researcher*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-023-00636-6

Lemos, M. F., & Cunha Jr, F. R. D. (2017). Facebook in Brazilian schools: Mobilizing to fight back. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, *25*(1), 53-67. https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2017.1379823

Leonard, S. (2014). Back to utopia. *Dissent*, *61*(1), 30-32. https://doi.org/10.1353/dss.2014.0006

Liberali, F. (2019). Transforming urban education in São Paulo: Insights into a critical-collaborative school project. *DELTA: Documentação de Estudos em Lingüística Teórica e Aplicada*, *35*(3), 1-26. https://doi.org/10.1590/1678-460X2019350302

Liberali, F., Magalhães, M. C. C., Meaney, M. C., De Sousa, S. S., Pardim, R. P., & Diegues, U. C. C. (2020). Critically collaborating to create the "viable unheard of" – connecting Vygotsky and Freire to deal with a devastating reality. In MSUPE (Ed.), *Cultural-historical psychology: Interdisciplinary research perspectives and social practices. International ISCAR Summer Seminar for PhD Students - Collection of Abstracts* (pp. 30-34). Moscow State University of Psychology & Education.

Limaye, N. P., Rivas-Nieto, A. C., Carcamo, C. P., & Blas, M. M. (2018). Nuestras Historias - Designing a novel digital story intervention through participatory methods to improve maternal and child health in the Peruvian Amazon. *PLoS One*, *13*(11), e0205673. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0205673

Lotz-Sisitka, H., Mukute, M., Chikunda, C., Baloi, A., & Pesanayi, T. (2017). Transgressing the norm: Transformative agency in community-based learning for sustainability in southern African contexts. *International Review of Education*, *63*(6), 897-914. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-017-9689-3

Lotz-Sisitka, H., Thifulufhelwi, R., Chikunda, C., & Mponwana, M. (2023). The emancipatory nature of transformative agency: Mediating agency from below in a post-apartheid land restitution case. In N. Hopwood & A. Sannino (Eds.), *Agency and transformation: motives, mediation and motion* (pp. 230-264). Cambridge University Press.

Luitel, B. C. (2017). A mindful inquiry into reductionism in mathematics education. In M. Powietrzyńska & K. Tobin (Eds.), *Weaving complementary knowledge systems and mindfulness to educate a literate citizenry for sustainable and healthy lives* (pp. 185-211). Springer.

Luitel, B. C. (2019). Journeying towards a multi-paradigmatic transformative research program: An East-West symbiosis. In P. C. Taylor & B. C. Luitel (Eds.), *Research as transformative learning for sustainable futures: Glocal voices and visions* (pp. 19-37). Brill-Sense.

Luitel, B. C., & Taylor, P. C. (2013). Factals of 'old' and 'new' logics: A post/modern proposal for transformative mathematics pedagogy. *Philosophy of Mathematics Education Journal*, *27*, 1-31.

Luitel, B. C., & Taylor, P. C. (2019). Introduction: Research as Transformative Learning for Sustainable Futures. In *Research as Transformative Learning for Sustainable Futures* (pp. 1-16). https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004393349_001

Lykiardopoulos Y (1990) *Myth and the Poetics of Travelling*. Erasmos.

Macaulay, L. (2022). "She Just Saw Me - She Didn't Teach Me": the perspectives of Australian Sudanese and South Sudanese youth on the student/teacher relationship in Australian schools. *The Australian Educational Researcher*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00554-z

Makepeace, E. (2021). Theatre is knowledge: Augusto Boal's theatre of the oppressed and participatory research. In D. Burns, J. Howard, & S. M. Ospina (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of participatory research and inquiry* (pp. 68-78). SAGE.

Menelaou, I. (2020). The explorations and poetic avenues of Nikos Kavvadias. *Caesura*, *7*(1), 17-35.

Mol, A. (2006). *The logic of care*. Routledge.

Niy, D. Y., & Diniz, C. S. G. (2023). Choice in childbirth, agency and collective action: Cesarean sections and birth plans in Brazil. In N. Hopwood & A. Sannino (Eds.), *Agency and transformation: motives, mediation and motion* (pp. 265-288). Cambridge University Press.

Orlowski, P. (2019). Freirean conceptions of participatory action research and teaching for social justice - same struggle, different fronts. *Canadian Journal of Action Research*, *20*(1), 30-51.

Pereira, A., & Rappaport, J. (2021). Tropical empathy: Orlando Fals Borda and participatory action research. In D. Burns, J. Howard, & S. M. Ospina (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of participatory research and inquiry* (pp. 55-67). SAGE.

Plakitsi, K., & Kolokouri. (2019). Foreword. In K. Plakitsi, E. Kolokouri, & A.-C. Kornelaki (Eds.), *ISCAR 2019: Crisis in contexts, e-proceedings* (pp. 5-6). University of Ioannina.

Sakkatos V (2009) *The Poet Nikos Kavvadias*. Dromon.

Sannino, A. (2020). Enacting the utopia of eradicating homelessness: Toward a new generation of activity-theoretical studies of learning. *Studies in Continuing Education*, *42*(2), 163-179. https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037x.2020.1725459

Sannino, A. (2022). Transformative agency as warping: How collectives accomplish change amid uncertainty. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, *30*(1), 9-33. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2020.1805493

Sannino, A. (2023). Toward a power-sensitive conceptualization of transformative agency. In N. Hopwood & A. Sannino (Eds.), *Agency and transformation: motives, mediation and motion* (pp. 35-55). Cambridge University Press.

Sannino, A., & Engeström, Y. (2018). Cultural-historical activity theory: Founding insights and new challenges. *Cultural-Historical Psychology*, *14*(3), 43-56. https://doi.org/10.17759/chp.2018140304

Sannino, A., Engeström, Y., & Lemos, M. (2016). Formative interventions for expansive learning and transformative agency. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, *25*(4), 599-633. https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2016.1204547

Shklovsky, V. (1991). *Theory of Prose* (B. Sher, Trans.). Dalkey Archive.

Sjollema, S. D., & Hanley, J. (2014). When words arrive: A qualitative study of poetry as a community development tool. *Community Development Journal*, *49*(1), 54-68. https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bst001

Smagorinsky, P. (2011). Vygotsky's stage theory: The Psychology of Art and the actor under the direction of perezhivanie. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, *18*(4), 319-341. https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2010.518300

Sondheim, S. (1987). *Into the Woods* [Musical].

Spaniol, S. (2004). An arts-based approach to participatory action research. *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice*, *3*(1), Article 6.

Stetsenko, A. (2013). The challenge of individuality in cultural-historical activity theory: "Collectividual" dialectics from a transformative activist stance. *Outlines - Critical Practice Studies*, *14*(2), 7-28.

Stetsenko, A. (2018). Confronting biological reductionism from a social justice agenda: Transformative agency and activist stance. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, *67*(1), 44-63. https://doi.org/10.1177/2381336918787531

Stetsenko, A. (2019). Radical-transformative agency: continuities and contrasts with relational agency and implications for education. *Frontiers in Education*, *4*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2019.00148

Stetsenko, A. (2020a). Critical challenges in cultural-historical activity theory: The urgency of agency. *Cultural-Historical Psychology*, *16*(2), 5-18. https://doi.org/10.17759/chp.2020160202

Stetsenko, A. (2020b). Radical-transformative agency: Developing a transformative activist stance on a Marxist-Vygotskian foundation. In A. Tanzi Neto, F. Liberali, & M. Dafermos (Eds.), *Revisiting Vygotsky for social change: Bringing together theory and practice* (pp. 31-62). Peter Lang.

Stetsenko, A. (2020c). Transformative-activist and social justice approaches to the history of psychology. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia, Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190236557.013.466

Stetsenko, A. (2022). Radicalizing theory and vygotsky: Addressing crisis through activist-transformative methodology. *Human Arenas*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-022-00299-2

Stetsenko, A. (2023). The tasks of reality and reality as the task: Connecting Cultural-Historical Activity Theory with the radical scholarship of resistance. In N. Hopwood & A. Sannino (Eds.), *Agency and transformation: motives, mediation and motion* (pp. 56-83). Cambridge University Press.

Stetsenko, A., & Arievitch, I. (2004). The self in cultural-historical activity theory: Reclaiming the unity of social and individual dimensions of human development. *Theory & Psychology*, *14*(4), 475-503. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354304044921

Szto, P., Furman, R., & Langer, C. (2016). Poetry and photography: An exploration into expressive/creative qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work*, *4*(2), 135-156. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325005052390

Valsiner, J. (2015). The place for synthesis: Vygotsky's analysis of affective generalization. *History of the Human Sciences*, *28*(2), 93-102. https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695114559530

Vygotksy, L. S. (1971). *The psychology of art*. MIT Press.
Vygotsky, L. (2004). Imagination and creativity in childhood. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology, 42*(1), 7–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/10610405.2004.11059210

Wei, G. (2023). Children's agency during the COVID-19 pandemic in China. In N. Hopwood & A. Sannino (Eds.), *Agency and transformation: motives, mediation and motion* (pp. 336-354). Cambridge University Press.

Wertsch, J. (1985). *Vygotksy and the social formation of mind*. Harvard University Press.

Acknowledgements

About the authors

Professor Nick Hopwood is based at the School of Education and International Studies at the University of Technology Sydney. His research explores connections between learning and agency in diverse settings, including schools and healthcare. He works with cultural-historical theory, inspired by its orientation towards what is not yet, but should be. This is reflected in his recent book, edited with Annalisa Sannino 'Agency and transformation: motives, mediation and motion' (Cambridge University Press).