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Participatory art for navigating political capabilities and aspirations among rural youth in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

While exploring the everyday experiences of Tonga youth, this paper draws on a participatory graffiti-on-board project in Binga, a rural community in Zimbabwe. Focus is placed on what shapes and drives youth aspirations in precarious contexts marked by unemployment and poverty. Using graffiti to create participatory and artistic engagements, the research aims to stretch the limited boundaries of social and political space available to the youth for discussing issues that concern their development pathways and livelihoods. The article presents everyday narratives that impact on Tonga youths' aspirations, endeavouring to create a space where they can visualise their prospective futures. Additionally, exhibition spaces are seen as sites for the construction of a collective voice and political capabilities for the youth. We argue that aspirations among disadvantaged youth evidence the broader geopolitical conflict that exists in marginalised communities in Southern Africa. Lack of spaces to construct political voice among the youth curtails their capabilities and agency to choose from existing development opportunities in an uncertain future. We discuss the potential role of participatory art in relation to this in providing spaces for political voice, unsettling established power dynamics, and developing a collective, unified voice that might influence governance processes in fragile contexts.

Keywords: *education, Global South, participatory arts, Zimbabwe, poverty, youth*

Introduction

Young people represent over a fifth of the world's population but are nonetheless often marginalised in decision-making and planning processes in economies and societies whose outcomes significantly affect them (Cuervo and Miranda, 2019). As such, young people are directly and disproportionately affected by challenges such as limited access to reasonable work, limited space for democratic engagement and the underrepresentation of their voices in government. Focusing on the Global South, this paper makes theoretical and empirical

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3 contributions to youth studies, a research gap having been demonstrated by the abundance of
4 studies skewed towards the Global North (Cooper, Swartz and Mahali, 2018). It builds on the
5 agenda and need for “a conceptual and empirical space of invention and experimentation in
6 youth studies that moves the research agenda beyond the universal conceptualisations from
7 the Global North” to integrate viewpoints and narratives both about and from young people in
8 the Global South (Cuervo and Miranda, 2019: 1). Focusing on Tonga youths from the Binga
9 District in Zimbabwe, the paper highlights the complexities of disadvantage that are a direct
10 result of exclusion.
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18 Zimbabwe faces social, political, and economic challenges that affect youth development as
19 well as the prospect of forming attainable and viable aspirations, with the impact felt most
20 strongly by the rural and ethnic minority youth. This research was conducted in Matabeleland
21 North Province, northwest of Zimbabwe, in the Binga District; the district is inhabited by the
22 Tonga, who form the third-largest ethnic group. Census reports show that about 70% of
23 Binga District’s population can be classified as poor or extremely poor (Zimbabwe National
24 Statistics Agency [ZIMSTAT], 2012). The Tonga may, therefore, be seen to experience some
25 form of social disadvantage and economic marginalisation (Gwindingwe, Alfandika and
26 Chateuka, 2019). They have furthermore been subjected to structural violence, as evidenced
27 by their invisibility in the political, social, and economic spheres. It is this invisibility that
28 perpetuates a lack of participation by the community, especially the youth, and exhibits itself
29 as a certain type of poverty (e.g., economic, social, and political). In any context, the
30 exclusion of a country’s youth in development agendas is not only a matter of concern for
31 their personal development but has implications for the future development of the district,
32 region, and the country as well. Although what constitutes participation may be debatable,
33 our position is that the active engagement of the youth in what they desire to ensure their
34 well-being requires a non-passive structural approach. As Marovah and Mkwanzani (2020)
35 argue, participatory spaces create an environment for young people to confidently and
36 meaningfully engage in and contribute to debates and processes that advance what they
37 reasonably aspire to be and do. It is therefore our view that non-passive engagement with the
38 youth transcends a holistic approach to addressing their needs. However, most Tonga youth
39 are not advantaged to such processes because of the seclusion of their rural community.
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3 explored ways in which participatory art-based methodology may foster the political voice of
4 these youths.
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8 We contend that the aspirations of the disadvantaged should be viewed as evidence of the
9 presence of opportunities to expand their personal and professional horizons amid
10 constrained engagement spaces. The expansion of these horizons advances the capacity to
11 aspire, which for the poor is often brittle and thin because of fewer opportunities to practice
12 and experiment (Appadurai, 2004). However, as asserted by Paat (2016), we acknowledge
13 that even in the presence of the opportunity to make a choice in these disadvantaged
14 communities, how young people's personal or professional paths unfold is shaped by the
15 complexity of individual life courses that are often shaped by multiple factors. Consequently,
16 aspirations may be and indeed often are multidimensional and vary from individual to
17 individual and from society to society (Appadurai, 2004). This complexity and
18 multidimensionality are often pronounced in marginalised societies – in the case of our
19 project, rural communities – as access to resources and opportunities remains limited because
20 of both geographic and systematic developmental neglect.
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31 Questions on the kind of aspirations that young people have, whether educational,
32 professional, political, or general, require context-specific, in-depth analysis rather than
33 metric-based assumptions. To understand the interaction of environments in which young
34 people's aspirations are formed, this paper aims to (1) contextualise the lived experiences and
35 political voice of a number of youths in Binga District, (2) highlight their aspirations, and (3)
36 explore how participation and deliberation can widen their aspiration maps through collective
37 stories. We use data from twelve artefacts and interviews with twelve youths, as well as two
38 interviews conducted with representatives from one youth-based NGO and the BaTonga
39 Community Museumⁱ between August and November 2019. Consent to participate was
40 sought from the youth and the two representativesⁱⁱ. We draw on Amartya Sen's capability
41 approach to analyse structures enabling and constraining the political participation of the
42 participants. We commence by providing an overall understanding of the youths' personal
43 and contextual aspirations and then align this with the capability approach and the concept of
44 political poverty, as signified by the youths' lack of opportunities for public engagement with
45 relevant structures. We then discuss the potential impact of participatory arts in creating
46 spaces for political voice for both individual and collective aspirations. Finally, we detail the
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3 construction of political subjectivities through the process of these youths sharing their
4 stories.
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10 **Youth Aspirations in the Global South**

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12 Many young people in Sub-Saharan Africa experience multiple forms of social, economic,
13 cultural, and political deprivation in combination, including exclusion from political
14 dialogue, poor to non-existent education, and limited access to housing, basic services, and
15 economic opportunities. In these harsh conditions, the formation and expression of
16 aspirations may seem quite impossible. Gender, ethnicity, and geographic location are factors
17 that may, sometimes, restrict youth from progressing toward their desired lives. Similarly, in
18 the context of this research, the formation, expression, and realisation of aspirations are
19 heavily influenced by these factors. The marginalisation of the Tonga community renders
20 them ‘invisible’ in most political, economic, and social development discourses. In conditions
21 where they wish to express their concerns, there are limited ways in which their voices can be
22 heard by wider audiences. As such, aspirations formed within such a community would seek
23 (and need) to challenge these exclusionary practices. Drawing on Appadurai’s idea that
24 aspirations are never merely individual but are always formed in interaction and in the “thick
25 of social life” (Appadurai, 2004: 67), we similarly view aspirations as relational, and formed
26 in consideration of the other and through multilayered relations within society. Accordingly,
27 although aspirations may have to do with individual wants, preferences, and choices, they are
28 often shaped through social cohesion (Appadurai, 2004). Because the capacity to aspire, like
29 any complex cultural capacity, requires practice, repetition, and exploration (Appadurai,
30 2004: 69), for those on the margins of society – such as the youth represented in this paper –
31 aspiration pathways are likely to be more rigid as they lack the necessary resources. The
32 absence or unavailability of these resources would mean a thinner and weaker sense of the
33 available or desirable pathways (Walker and Mkwanzani, 2015), leaving those with access to
34 resources (in the cities) to enjoy wider aspirational horizons (Appadurai, 2004).
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53 While for the rich and well-resourced aspiration maps may be wider and offer room for
54 spontaneity, including moving beyond the thresholds necessary for basic human survival, for
55 disadvantaged groups, their aspirations are often influenced by a desire to merely achieve a
56 threshold for basic, socially just survival (e.g., political recognition, employment
57 opportunities, and access to schools). Therefore, within the diverse social ecologies of
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3 aspirations, there are demarcated levels of aspiration formation, both vertical and horizontal,
4 taking into account the diverse factors that define the members of a society, for example age,
5 gender, political position, belief system and the like. These factors cause individual
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7 aspirations to vary from person to person. Then, there are ‘collective’ aspirations, which are
8 held by a collective, such as a unified desire to be politically recognised as a group (e.g.,
9 based on gender or ethnicity).

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14 Although aspirations are formed within collective environments (see Mkwanzani and Cin,
15 2020), they have often been individualised for the purposes of understanding individual well-
16 being. Yet, there remains a strong collation of relationality in certain aspirations. For
17 example, the youths in our project held valued individual aspirations, but also exhibited a
18 collective desire for political and social recognition as an ethnic group, which is what our
19 paper focuses on. Therefore, although there is a growing body of literature on the youth’s
20 aspirations in the Global South (see Mkwanzani, 2019; DeJaeghere, 2016; Leavy and Smith,
21 2010), there is minimal focus on the collective aspirations, or at least a minimal focus on the
22 collective desire for political voice, in our context. In Zimbabwe, several youth studies have
23 recently dwelt on issues such as human rights (Gwirayi and Shumba, 2011), youth health
24 (Musizvingoza and Wekwete, 2018), and child marriages (Dzimiri, Chikunda and Ingwani,
25 2017). Amid this increased youth-focused research, a gap nonetheless remains on aspirations
26 literature. However, upon analysis of the literature, we conclude that the reported factors are
27 anti-youth development and often have a negative impact on youth aspirations. For example,
28 Masarurwa (2018: 17) reported low youth participation across economic, electoral and
29 governance processes in Zimbabwe and the youths’ lack of skills to engage government.
30 Closer analysis concludes that such low levels of participation in spheres of influence might
31 provoke an interest in young peoples’ aspirations, which our project picks up on. With our
32 arts-based methods, we also contribute to the conversation on the necessary knowledge and
33 skills required to engage government and other stakeholders in addressing structural
34 challenges. In the next section, we conceptualise aspirations in relation to the capability
35 approach by showing how aspirations are formed through or may be transformed into
36 capabilities.

37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 **Capabilities, Aspirations, and Political Poverty** 56 57 58 59 60

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3 There has been an increasing amount of research in the Global South on the capability
4 approach and aspirations (Mkwananzi, 2019; Mkwananzi and Cin, 2020), gender equality
5 (Cin, 2017), and arts-based participatory methods (see the edited collection by Walker and
6 Boni, 2021). In this paper, we use Sen's (1999) capability approach, with the concepts of
7 aspirations (Appadurai, 2004) and political poverty (Bohman, 1996) to offer an intersecting
8 framework that explores the aspirations of the youth.
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14 From a normative standpoint, the capability approach is interested in the freedoms and
15 opportunities that individuals (in our context, the youth) have to live the lives they value
16 (Sen, 1999). When evaluating one's well-being, it is essential to consider the real
17 opportunities and freedoms (capabilities) that the individual has access to, to live a valued life
18 (desired wellbeing). The quality of life that a person enjoys is not only about what he or she
19 achieves but is also about the options that he or she has to decide on life opportunities (Sen,
20 1992). The capability approach advocates the freedom of individuals as its first principle,
21 thus promoting individual choices and freedoms; however, these freedoms vary from context
22 to context. In an ideal society, the capacity to aspire may be seen as a freedom that allows one
23 to expand one's aspirational horizons. Ideally, supportive conversion factors (structures and
24 environment) would be in place for the capability to aspire to flourish, allowing for a positive
25 force that drives agency. Therefore, a constrained environment may **limit the** formation and
26 expression of aspirations and, as a result, may lead to perpetual disadvantage and
27 marginalisation. We have, through the use of the capability approach, identified the
28 opportunities that influence the aspiration process (formation, expression, and achievement)
29 among the youth in our study. This process is largely influenced by the context of Binga, as
30 the social setting impacting on the relevant capabilities and aspirations (Sen, 2009). The
31 social ecology of Binga not only impacts on the youths' freedoms and opportunities (which,
32 according to Sen [1999], are important for development to occur), but also shapes the action
33 they could take towards what they think is achievable. In acknowledging the close
34 relationship between the individual and the community, most of the youths' aspirations are to
35 encourage a better culture for all by addressing community challenges such as poverty and its
36 associated problems (for example early marriage) as a way to escape from it. This
37 relationship makes forming and achieving aspirations a multidimensional and complex
38 journey. However, **Buckler, et al. (2021) note that the disadvantaged states leading to such**
39 **complexity should be viewed as non-static as individual experiences and contexts evolve**
40 **overtime.**
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3 Secondly, our project aimed to contribute to the disruption of barriers that stand in the way of
4 young people's freedoms and aspirations by co-creating a platform for 'political voice' as a
5 vehicle to express their everyday realities and challenges in making decisions about their
6 lives. Our understanding of political voice is informed by the capability approach and intends
7 to reveal the numerous ways by which young people display resilience and agency in
8 addressing challenges and inequalities in their own contexts. We conceptualise political voice
9 in relation to the youths' struggles as citizens and subverting demeaning stereotypes which
10 have long since silenced them (Phillips, 2003). This political voice is instrumental in
11 improving their well-being as it helps them express and exercise their views to influence
12 governance processes. Therefore, public deliberation and the space created for interaction
13 through the participatory arts and exhibitions were vital for discussing issues of
14 marginalisation within and among the wider society (in this case, the public who attended the
15 exhibitions). The spaces also created a participatory and representative process, allowing
16 young people to speak out against perceived injustices and identify the fundamental freedoms
17 integral to their well-being (Sen, 1992). We are also cautious as regards the implications that
18 political voice may bring, such as seeing young people as passive or as lacking political
19 agency and, therefore, we do not argue that young people do not have a voice but rather flesh
20 out the importance of this particular voice as building allegiance and forming a collective
21 response and strategies against the injustices that act as barriers to their aspirations and
22 capabilities. Towards this, we believe a collective political voice has the potential to create
23 advocacy when the youth speak (out) as members of one community. We additionally
24 underline political poverty that dominates in precarious contexts to signify a particular
25 group's lack of opportunities to be part of the public dialogue, thus subjecting them to public
26 exclusion (Bohman, 1996). This political poverty can be either related to power asymmetries
27 or communicative inequalities that refer to cultural conditions of unequal power, as
28 experienced by the Tonga youth. Sen (1992) views poverty in multiple domains as a
29 capability failure to meet the basic needs of commodities required for a set of functionings.
30 Likewise, political poverty indicates the lack of opportunities, assets, means, or cultural and
31 social power to have the political voice and equality of standing to make one's concerns
32 count in the public sphere (Bohman, 1996). Such deprivation creates an invidious cycle to
33 break as the social and economic disadvantages youth face result from culturally imposed
34 political poverty and their cultural resources occupy a position of unequal power in society.
35 Cin and Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm (2020: 172) argue the importance of this unviable political
36 structures as "conditions which do not allow for a deep discussion of knowledge [and] are
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3 often shaped by deliberative and structural inequalities that restrict access to the public
4 sphere” and add that addressing political poverty “requires political equality of access, skills,
5 resources, and space to advance capacities for public functioning and knowledge production.”
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7 However, in the absence of a local public platform to express themselves and often being
8 victims of pejorative designations, youth aspirations are shaped differently, and political
9 poverty may affect their capacity to aspire and thus impede their desired wellbeing. Hence, in
10 this research, the use of creative arts as an alternative form of expression moves beyond its
11 methodological and contextual relevance to act as an instrument that communicates the
12 existence of political poverty and exclusion within Binga. The process of seeking alternative
13 spaces for public engagement embeds individual and collective reflections that are expressed
14 as the youths’ aspirations to craft a political voice and strong public claim and implicates the
15 collective desire of a long-excluded community to build political subjectivities.
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25 **Participatory Arts for Political Voice and Aspirations**

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28 This research innovatively employs participatory arts as underpinned by the ideas of co-
29 production, collaboration, community practice, and public engagement, and encourages the
30 dialogic interactions of artists, youths, and communities working towards social change. We
31 used participatory arts to contribute to the transformation of individuals and society through
32 raising critical consciousness, thereby not only introducing political and social issues to the
33 public sphere (Borisenko, 2016; Sandoval, 2016), but also bringing communities in dialogue
34 to document challenges in creating a bottom-up approach. In our research, participatory arts
35 included youths mapping out, deciding on and executing plans for future actions, thus
36 involving them in a collaborative approach to the pressing issues they face (Tzifakis, 2011),
37 but most importantly, it also accounted for the diversity of their experiences. Mapping out
38 was a process which included a number of workshops where youths, artists, museum
39 representatives and us as researchers came together to discuss themes the youths wanted to
40 focus on, spaces they wanted to use for exhibitions and the audience they wanted to invite to
41 the exhibitions. Through personal and collective creative expressions, the youths used graffiti
42 on boards to challenge long-standing biases and stereotypes impacting on their own lives and
43 the lives of others (Cooke and Soria-Donlan, 2019; Wheeler, 2018). Although graffiti was a
44 method conceived by the researchers beforehand, we are persuaded that the creative nature of
45 the approach provided a democratic space for collective engagement which was the project’s
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3 aspiration. It also inspired discussions on the importance of indigenous creative methods in
4 specific contexts, which was a welcome learning experience for us.
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8 Engaging in social issues and expressions of the desired change involve a lot of self-
9 exploration and addressing the multidimensional nature of these issues requires inclusive
10 spaces for engagement (Chamberlain, Buckler and Mkwanzani, in press). **Emerging**
11 **platforms for political representation of youth** – such as youth parliaments or councils
12 (Shephard and Patrikios, 2013), local forums (Zihnioğlu, 2019) or online campaigning (Henn
13 and Foard, 2014), are often criticised for the apparent imitation of an adult and androcentric
14 conception of political space occupied by adults (Wood, 2012). **These platforms are viewed**
15 **as fostering a male-dominated political culture that does not open space or allow room for**
16 **less-trained voices like the Tonga youth (Young, 2000).** **The use of participatory arts may,**
17 **therefore, be viewed as an alternative platform for the youth who are not disinterested in**
18 **politics but actually cannot find ‘safe’ spaces to engage in significant and purposeful**
19 **deliberation.** Such spaces would more likely influence public decision-making which, in turn,
20 could translate to policy outcomes (Shephard and Patrikios, 2013).
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32 The process included a five-day participatory art graffiti workshop with 12 youths aged
33 between 18 and 25 years, one representative from Basilwizi NGO Trustⁱⁱⁱ, and two
34 representatives from **BaTonga Museum**, who were the local partnering organisations. Table 1
35 presents the demographics of the participating youths. We sought to work with youths
36 irrespective of them already having left school and this is the age range provided by the
37 NGO. The partnering organisations had direct experience of working with the community
38 and had built up trust over the years, and therefore their involvement as a partner eased the
39 process of recruiting participants through an open call. They first organised a pre-engagement
40 event with the community’s youth to talk through the aims of the project and to discuss the
41 ways in which it could be co-designed with them to contribute to the well-being of the
42 community. We had a diverse team consisting of three university researchers from
43 respectively South Africa, Zimbabwe, and the UK, and two artists with differing levels of
44 research experience but all with some experience of participatory research and arts.
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Table 1 about here

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5 The first one-and-a-half days of the workshop were used to discuss the challenges and
6 opportunities experienced by the Tonga youth as a minority tribe in Zimbabwe. Icebreaker
7 games and activities such as *The River of Life* were used during the workshop. We discussed
8 and identified various themes, such as child abuse, early (or child) marriage, poverty, and
9 gender inequality which later informed the graffiti created by the youths. The activities and
10 the workshop were designed to encourage the participants to identify and discuss their
11 achievements, aspirations and what they needed to see those aspirations realised.
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13 Furthermore, the creative activities sought to help the youths identify the themes they wanted
14 to highlight on the graffities. We also aimed to build solidarity among the participants and the
15 community they live in and set up a WhatsApp group to further foster relationships among us
16 and to stay in touch to design the dissemination activities after the workshops had been
17 concluded. On the second day, two professional artists commenced with the graffiti training,
18 and this was followed by a creation of the graffiti on large boards rather than walls so that it
19 could be mobilised for dissemination. Also, graffiti artwork on walls would have required
20 commissioned permission from the Zimbabwean authorities. This art training is of great
21 importance to the youth seeing as street art, just like other forms of visual art, has the
22 potential to recognise and value epistemological diversity in making knowledge while
23 exploring daily inequalities – making the individual an epistemic subject rather than the
24 empirical subject (Santos, 2016). On the final day of the workshop, there was an in-house
25 discussion and photoshoot of the graffiti. As the youth completed their graffiti, an interview
26 was conducted with each of them to determine what had been learnt during the workshop.
27 One-on-one interviews were also conducted with the representatives of the museum and the
28 youth NGO, and interview data with the youths has been transcribed verbatim. We also
29 discussed future plans of how and where to display the graffiti-on-board artworks and the
30 audience we should be inviting to those exhibitions.
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50 Consequently, we view the participating youths as collaborators in the project as they
51 participated in the process both as trainees and as researchers who analysed the data (their
52 stories) and disseminated the knowledge through exhibitions at a public university and art
53 galleries in three cities (Bulawayo, Gweru, and Harare) after the workshop was concluded.
54 We also drew from their expertise and contextual knowledge of local experiences; this
55 complemented the knowledge and skills we possessed as researchers. This way, our
56 knowledge and expertise complemented each other. The process itself was creative and
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3 dialogical and interactive in the sense that the youths also focused on their own resilience,
4 what they have achieved thus far, and how they could use the collectivity and agency they
5 own to expand their aspirations. In this manner, the research was able to construct a ‘research
6 pedagogy consistent with participatory aspirations and values so that participants experience
7 a process of fairness both for themselves and towards others’ (Walker et al., 2020: 6).
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13 We used graffiti as a participatory art method for several reasons. Firstly, creating graffiti that
14 is accompanied by individual and collective stories and narratives is a political act based on
15 everyday experience and affords one the opportunity to articulate experiences of
16 marginalisation (Wheeler, 2018). Vogel et al. (2020) show how graffiti conveys the struggles
17 and the fabric of everyday spaces and experiences or everyday practices of conflict and peace
18 at the local level. Although arts literature makes a fine-grained distinction between graffiti
19 and street art – assigning the latter a more consensual, rebellious, and activist form of art
20 (Ross, 2016; Bacharach, 2015) – both methods aim to convey a social or political message
21 the participants want to share and thereby raising awareness about socio-political issues.
22 Drawing on the argument put forward by Vogel et al. (2020) on the graffiti versus street art
23 debates, we engage with a particular community and their experiences and everyday
24 manifestations, and therefore use the term ‘graffiti’ as a particular form of inquiry in this
25 research.
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38 Methodologically, we draw on the work of Bacharach (2018), who used street art to address
39 epistemic injustice and the negative identity prejudices that silence certain groups of people.
40 Our aim was to use graffiti as a peaceful tool to convey a political message while at the same
41 time considering the sensitive political climate in Zimbabwe. It was essential that we attune
42 the use and method of graffiti to this particular context as our aim was to communicate the
43 concerns of Tonga youth to the public. Graffiti was used as a language through which the
44 youths in our study were able to develop a political voice and agency to construct an image of
45 Tonga youth that the public would be unfamiliar with. We were also interested in presenting
46 a boundary work between art and social advocacy of redressing political poverty experienced
47 by the youth. Towards this, graffiti was both participatory and engaging as it dislocates power
48 structures in the production process but also challenges the power dynamics in the public
49 domain during the dissemination activities and exhibition by introducing the experiences,
50 agency, and voice of the silenced to the public imagination. Given this political role of
51 graffiti, we present below how education and cultural heritage emerged as encapsulated
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3 values and aspirations in the artefacts the youths produced. We then highlight the political
4 communicative strategy aspect of the graffiti (Gyasi-Obeng, 2000) in forming political
5 subjectivities and capabilities of the youth who may not otherwise have been heard. We also
6 discuss education and cultural heritage as aspirations valued by the participating youths, and
7 then move onto exhibition spaces to argue how they emerged as sites for political voice and
8 subjectivity.
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15 **Education and Cultural Heritage as Valued Aspirations**

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17 Educational provision in Zimbabwe, starting from primary school, is not free and requires
18 families to pay a fee which is not always affordable to those residing in rural and
19 disadvantaged communities like Binga. As a result, many female youths in this project had
20 their school expenses funded by CAMFED (Campaign for Female Education), an
21 international NGO that provides support to girls to prevent them from leaving school due to
22 any one of many diverse disadvantages. Such interventions by organisations create both a
23 capability (opportunity) and conversion factor (positive environment) for girls to expand their
24 aspirational maps and pursue them to build better futures. Nonetheless, we do recognise that
25 even with available capabilities, individuals may not necessarily make use of such
26 opportunities in a similar way. For some girls, their personal and family backgrounds may
27 pose as conversion factors with negative effects. For example, some of the girls have family
28 responsibilities requiring them to stay at home (e.g., taking care of or helping grandparents)
29 while for others it is generally a lack of support, knowledge and motivation as family
30 members may not have a higher education background. This reinforces the assertion by
31 Johnson et al. (2009) that even in contexts where families support high aspirations in general,
32 they may be unable to support the decision-making process due to a lack of knowledge or any
33 helpful first-hand experience. For girls, such a marginalised context and restrictive
34 environment complicate the formation of the capacity to aspire. For boys, their studies are
35 often funded by the committed families who value education, expecting that further education
36 may improve the social and economic mobility of the family and their overall well-being.
37 However, university costs are often unaffordable for most young people and thus making
38 financial resources the main conversion factor limiting their progression to higher education.
39 The lack of or inability to access funds is exacerbated by the constrained environment for
40 student loans and the absence of a stable student funding scheme. Thus, although students
41 may have the capacity (such as ambition, personal motivation) – as is the case with most of
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3 the youths in our project – a lack of structural opportunities leads to personal aspirations
4 remaining unexplored.
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7 Despite the limited instrumental benefits of education in Zimbabwe in terms of the potential
8 opportunity to secure decent employment,^{iv}the youth still value and desire the acquisition of a
9 formal education. As represented in Table 1, three of the youths are supplementing
10 mathematics courses so that they can have a recognised O level certification. One holds a
11 university degree, and the other is studying Supply Chain Management, while Vimbai is still
12 seeking opportunities to attend university. While the literature has shown that education is
13 seen by young people as a transition to a better life (Charaf, 2019), it was mostly the female
14 participants who indicated their desire to attend university hoping that an opportunity for
15 entry is enough motivation to seek funding. However, because of poverty, some girls saw
16 marriage as an opportunity to escape financial hardship. For example, Luba noted: *'I asked*
17 *my parents that they can marry me off if they want so that they would have one less plate on*
18 *the table.'* The marriage failed and her husband left her two years later and migrated to
19 Botswana to seek employment and she has never heard from him since. She then went back
20 to school in the hopes of one day becoming a teacher. While she thought marriage was the
21 only option to survive, with support from CAMFED, she now believes that studying may be
22 the only route to a dignified life. On the other hand, for those who do not get similar
23 opportunities offered by CAMFED, they potentially live to experience injustices such as
24 domestic violence and being deprived of their agency to take important decisions concerning
25 their life.
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41 Although students may aspire to becoming lawyers or teachers, the poorly resourced public
42 schools, poverty, and a lack of guidance regarding career paths remain the main barriers to
43 progressing to higher education. In the absence of access to information or technology in
44 rural areas and role models who might assist them, the youth depend on but a few peers for
45 advice in their communities who have made it to university. Most of the youths, notably the
46 males, indicated their desire to further develop the technical skills that they were already
47 using. According to Nhapi and Mathende (2019: 153), while the education system in
48 Zimbabwe churns out over 300,000 young people into the labour market annually, the formal
49 economy is unable to accommodate them because of the current instability in the country.
50 Also, graduates may possess theoretical knowledge instead of the technical skills required to
51 self-sufficiently venture into the informal sector where they could start their own enterprises.
52 Thus, the aspirations of the youth related to gaining vocational skills and knowledge are in
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3 line with the current reality of the state of the economy in the country. Most of the vocational
4 aspirations were attuned to the tradition and culture within the Binga region. The youth are
5 also aware of the opportunities available in their communities such as the fishing market on
6 the Zambezi River; however, they are disappointed to see that commercialisation of the sector
7 often involve large companies. Commercial ownership of local resources by large
8 corporations neglects the local youth and confiscates the only resource available to the Tonga
9 community through monopolising natural resources in the community. A small number of
10 community members do day-to-day fishing to sell at the local market. However, such self-
11 driven initiatives ultimately create little income compared to the big businesses operating in
12 the district. Therefore, some of these youths aspired to establish their own small-scale fishing
13 businesses in the region. Farai, for instance, highlights the importance of fishing for the
14 community:

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I have an interest to be in the fishing industry, even to breed fish in fishponds so we can harvest more fish and sell. Tonga people are privileged because it's where the Zambezi is passing through, I think it's one of the largest in terms of water capacity in Zimbabwe so because of that we Tonga people we are more exposed to the fishing industry than any other district in Zimbabwe. [People] must know that the fishing industry is just like any other form of industry such as mining , and it's one of the major backbone industries of the economy in Zimbabwe and people must also depict that it's only Tonga people who are able to do fishing and that they can do it efficiently at full capacity. (Farai)

The desire to fish is also reflected in the graffiti by one of the youths (Fig. 1), who expressed his desire to build a fishing business and how the old boat they have was beneficial to his family in terms of meeting their needs and paying off his school fees.

Figure 1 about here

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3 Some of the youths expressed a desire to preserve the cultural heritage of the Tonga language
4 and crafts that are unique to the Tonga community, an example of the influence of social
5 ecology on the youths' capabilities and aspirations formation (Sen, 2009). The BaTonga
6 Museum in the region was established in 2002 to tend to and display this heritage. There is
7 also a craft centre next to the museum which is funded by the Ministry of Women's Affairs to
8 encourage women to weave baskets and sculpt wooden animals to sell to locals and tourists
9 alike. Some youths expressed a desire to learn craftwork to earn money to fund their
10 education but also ensure the continuation of this heritage from one generation to the next.
11 Reasoning that there is no future in learning crafts, one of the youths noted how his parents
12 were reluctant to teach him, instead encouraging him to study:

21 *I would like to learn how to do crafts so that I can save some money for my*
22 *university degree. But I will also have something to pass on to my children –*
23 *something of my own culture. I am worried about the future of Tonga*
24 *language and heritage, but the elder generation discourage us saying that we*
25 *should rather study as craft business is not a long-term job and cannot give us*
26 *a future. It is not only about earning money but holding onto one's own*
27 *identity.*

34 The youth's aspirations to learn cultural crafts are mostly driven by economic concerns as
35 well as their desire to pass on their cultural practices, values, and heritage to future
36 generations. This provides a basis to the argument forwarded by Luebker (2008) that the
37 education system in Zimbabwe has often prepared students for white-collar jobs in the formal
38 sector but fails to equip them with technical or entrepreneurial skills, or a tangible or
39 intangible heritage. However, many youths value indigenous knowledge and are seeking
40 opportunities to learn indigenous heritage and local cultural practices, viewing them as
41 resources on which they can draw to build their lives. Although the cultural identities of the
42 Tonga are often stereotyped, most of them viewed this co-production of graffiti as a bonding
43 exercise and opportunity to showcase their cultural identities. The workshop was held at the
44 BaTonga museum where the Tonga cultural heritage is displayed. During both the interviews
45 and workshops, the youths spoke proudly of the museum, cultural artefacts such as *ncelwa*
46 (women's smoking pie) or *buntibe* (drum and performance) and expressed their desire to
47 make the museum an important site in Zimbabwe, which could stand for recognition of the
48 Tonga and their cultural and historical rights and practices. Mashingaidze (2013) sees the
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3 building of the BaTonga museum as a protest to subjugation, but the exclusion of the Tonga
4 youth in the operation of the museum or in the continuation of cultural artefacts is not
5 sustainable and can only make the museum a heritage hub rather than a living memory (Saidi,
6 2019). The cultural performances, introduction of cultural fairs or developing education
7 programmes that attend to the heritage of the Tonga are what the youth value – their heritage
8 advocacy is shaped by the consciousness of making the most of their available resources.
9 They see the elder generations as repositories of cultural knowledge and want to use their
10 knowledge culturally in an efficient manner to create economic opportunities for the
11 community and the youth of Binga, who are forced to leave the region to study or work.
12 During the workshops, the participating youths also engaged with Tonga poetry and shared
13 their favourite poems with one another, and to highlight the importance of their language,
14 some graffiti and the manifestos (captions and stories) attached to them were written in
15 Tonga. The graffiti artefact by Rudo (Figure 2) shows two girls holding a book entitled *Iwiyo*
16 *ninguzu* (“Education is power”), highlighting the importance of education for girls in
17 disadvantaged contexts as an important capability. Such a basic capability would, for the
18 girls, challenge stereotypical and gendered roles by advancing opportunities such as the
19 prospect of decent employment, leading to a better standard of living, and which Wolff and
20 De-Shalit (2013) aptly term a fertile functioning.
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Figure 2 about here

43 The ability to speak, write and produce artwork in their native language was important to the
44 youths and addresses the importance of indigenous knowledges in Southern Africa. The
45 endeavour of the youth, particularly regarding the recognition of their culture and language,
46 was to challenge dominant cultures in Zimbabwe which did not open or allow for epistemic
47 spaces for the Tonga to freely express their cultural identity. Therefore, discussing the
48 fundamental issues that matter to them, co-creating, providing peer feedback to each other,
49 and most importantly the collective creation among them through the dialogical processes,
50 were highly valued by the epistemically marginalised and unrecognised Tonga youth. The
51 exhibitions were held at the Bulawayo Art Gallery and at the National Museum of Zimbabwe
52 in Harare. Engaging with individuals who visited their exhibitions gave the youths a sense of
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3 being agents who were transporting their concerns, as well as a part of their culture, to public
4 social spaces. For the youths, acting as ethical interlocutors and subjects on behalf of their
5 communities was one important aspiration they have achieved: by displaying certain aspects
6 of their heritage to outsiders, and presenting their history and culture, along with their desire
7 for an education that values their identity and would allow them to actualise their language,
8 they gained some agency as political subjects.
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14 **Exhibitions and Stories as Spaces of Construction of Political Subjectivities and Voices**

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17 The stories expressed through the graffiti, and the subsequent exhibition spaces used to
18 communicate them, is a relational process of political subjectivity as well as collective action
19 (Wheeler, 2018). The idea of exhibiting the work in three cities, at a public university and at
20 the gallery, and finally at the museum was a unique opportunity for the youths to express
21 their aspirations and share their cultural practices. These places were strategically chosen in
22 collaboration with the participating youths.
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29 The process of expressing political voice and the formation of political subjectivity emerged
30 through the youths speaking collectively of their aspirations in public. This operates at two
31 levels, the personal and collective, both of which intertwined with each other as discussed
32 earlier in the paper. Although the stories behind each graffiti were unique and personal,
33 altogether they reflected an engaged and co-constructed collectivity of the youths' aspirations
34 for opportunities to gain an education and the normative value of schooling, despite the
35 growing research (Tikly and Barrett, 2013) on the Global South which shows that quality
36 education matters as much as ensuring that schooling enhances freedoms and challenges
37 status quos in communities. However, when there is outright poverty, the concerns regarding
38 the quality of education become less of a concern and it becomes difficult to move beyond
39 the normative good of any kind of education as it is seen as the toll to remove oneself from
40 poverty (Cin, 2017). Likewise, the collective aspiration for higher and technical education
41 was an important message articulated through the graffiti and led to a number of political
42 engagements between the youths and the academics at Midlands State University in Gweru
43 during their exhibition at the university. Being on the premises of a university and engaging
44 with academics and students created a feeling of recognition. Talking through what they
45 would like to study at the university, the ways in which they can secure access to university,
46 and the opportunities available for marginalised communities like themselves were important
47 to make informed choices. On the other hand, having the engagement space with university
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3 staff and students also constituted their political subjectivities as an achievement with regard
4 to challenging the hermeneutic conditions that ignore the Tonga youth and see them as unfit
5 agents for any kind of higher education. Such engagements were expressed as the
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8 ‘unavailable and missed’ opportunities (conversion factors) in young people’s lives and were
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10 essential to enable political capability.

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13 The youths in our study also implied the value of participatory arts for creating solidarity at a
14 grassroots level and developing a collective capability to express their views, but they were
15 also aware that political voice developed through arts may not be enough in itself to bring
16 about change unless there is a consistent collectivity and a grassroots formation. This is
17 because the mediation between local and state actors requires the formation of a collectivity
18 or organisation that could transform these voices into viable action. For instance, one of the
19 participants noted that “*These kinds of workshops or exhibitions can bring us together, unite*
20 *us Tonga youth and can catch the attention of the people to listen to us because it is peaceful*
21 *and not a deeply political act.*’ Here, what the youth meant by political act was to highlight
22 that the project and collectivity did not mean creating dissent in the highly politically
23 sensitive and restrictive environment of Zimbabwe, but to create an ‘invited space’ for
24 political voice. Even under authoritarian environments, such ‘invited space’ advanced the
25 political functioning to tell one’s own story and repositioned the youth who have always been
26 objects of research into communicators (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017). However, local actors are
27 frequently not in favour of the formation of such communities with strong political voices,
28 even if they support the kind of political structures that would provide a particular social or
29 political identity that is not based on domination or oppression (Staeheli et al., 2013). We, as
30 researchers, felt this to some extent as we were trying to secure spaces to hold exhibitions and
31 were exposed to some doubtful questions from the bureaucratic structures regarding the
32 purpose of the Tonga community and the nature of the project and intended exhibition.

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35 The act of participating in the making of graffiti and taking these to public spaces equipped
36 the youths with a sense of agency and encouragement and united them as one group, who
37 were then able to negotiate their positions as part of art-sceneries in the museum and art
38 gallery exhibitions. This helped to subvert, to some extent, some of the prejudices against the
39 Tonga community. These spaces were also local points of action for claiming a political
40 space to unsettle such biases by representing their heritage as in the form of a protest art. As
41 one of the artists who trained the youths and participated in the exhibitions noted, the
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3 representation, through a less-known form of art in Zimbabwe, had an instrumental and
4 important impact on sharing the heritage of the Tonga youth, which would probably not have
5 caught the attention of the public if they were displayed as more traditional forms of art. In
6 making this claim, we were cognisant of the criticism of participatory development through
7 arts, and how it underestimates the existing political capabilities of the communities or
8 authenticates the communal epistemologies (William, 2004). Yet, our focus in these
9 exhibition spaces can be described in two ways: as building alliances among the youth and
10 moving this to the grassroots level to form a cross-institutional network of universities, and
11 art-based institutions in order to strengthen their network and ensure that their political voices
12 are heard and supported. Secondly, it enhanced the political capital and capabilities of the
13 youth, reshaped political networks and power, and changed patterns of recognition through
14 the art of representation, as these reshaped political networks have the potential to build
15 themselves into a discourse of rights and active citizenship in the long term (Brody, 2021).
16 The youths also noted the importance of the change that can be created by the opportunity of
17 being introduced to different political and social networks. The change they wanted to see
18 was to challenge the exclusionary discourses that include the negative perceptions that
19 dehumanise their livelihoods. Therefore, for some of the youths, this exhibition space
20 simultaneously worked as a space of attention, hope, interest, and narrative imagination
21 whereby the audience could reflect and embrace different emotions and interest in their
22 culture. This again manifests the importance of arts in fostering creative personal and
23 collective expressions to challenge long-standing stereotypes, as one of the youths, Luba,
24 expressed:

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42 *The youth from Gweru learnt something from us as the youths from Binga. They did*
43 *not know that we can also do something which is productive. They were really*
44 *amazed.*
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48 As we have highlighted, the emergence of alternative spaces through participatory arts in this
49 research was very much related to the availability of only a limited space for the
50 marginalised, but more broadly to the youth who are not disinterested in politics but who
51 cannot find 'safe' spaces to express their agency. While capabilities lead to recognition, the
52 capacity to speak and act are very much dependent on processes and spaces for engagement,
53 which may not always be available. Participatory arts, collectivity, and spaces for interaction
54 become much more essential in challenging such structural, political, and historical
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3 conversion factors. Such an environment is intrinsically important to the youths in our study,
4 who noted their engagement as “innovative, peaceful and artistic”. Therefore, participatory
5 art, which has also been emerging as alternative and epistemic spaces for public and political
6 voice, offers an alternative and creative form of engagement that could afford the youth a
7 unique opportunity to express themselves in alignment with their cultural, social, and cultural
8 backgrounds, and at the same time nourishing their political subjectivities (Cooke and Soria-
9 Dolan, 2019).

16 **Conclusion**

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19 Drawing on evidence hewn from an art-based participatory project with Tonga youths from
20 Zimbabwe, we have shown in this paper that graffiti, as a participatory art method, can reveal
21 alternative narratives of under-represented communities. Political graffiti may also be an
22 important source of knowledge production for marginalised communities and can create safe
23 public spaces for engagement as well as create collective voices. Therefore, bringing arts to
24 everyday spaces has the potential to remove barriers and challenge dominant structures
25 constraining marginalised people’s ability for social and political networking with non-
26 oppressed groups. On the other hand, we acknowledge the potential of political dissent that
27 can be created through graffiti as regards official narratives, especially in a politically
28 sensitive context like that found in Zimbabwe; this poses certain limitations as to the extent to
29 which the voices of the youth can be accommodated, heard, and raised. There is a very
30 nuanced and thin line between graffiti as political resistance to dominant discourses and
31 being a distinctive and unique form of communication strategy in a fragile context. We also
32 argue that participatory arts can highlight the values and aspirations at the local level and
33 bring the everyday experiences of the youth, such as their aspiration for education and
34 cultural recognition, to public spaces. Our research shows that along with the economic
35 conversion factors enabling opportunities for access to education, equally important are the
36 political capabilities of the youth and the availability of structures and spaces nourishing
37 these capabilities. We argue that as much as capabilities and functionings serving to the basic
38 needs of people, within the current geopolitical conflict of Southern Africa, the political need
39 to be represented, to be heard and to be able to join public deliberations should also be a
40 priority in the agenda of sustainable development programmes and policies. Creating such
41 civic engagements through everyday creative practices may very well improve the political
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3 capabilities of Zimbabwe's youth and thus render them more legitimate actors in the
4 country's public sphere.
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11 **Endnotes**

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15 ⁱ A museum in Binga anchored on community empowerment, participation, engagement, and community
16 development.

17 ⁱⁱ The research obtained informed consent from individual participants, and this was supported by both the
18 Batonga Community Museum and the Basilwizi Trust. Both organisations work with all the youth who
19 participated in the study. The consent included awareness that data gathered (including the graffiti) would be
20 used to report finding in academic and non-academic platforms.

21 ⁱⁱⁱ A community development organisation founded by the local people of Binga District.
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Tables

Table 1: Participating youths

Pseudonym	Age	Level of education	Current occupation	Gender
Mpilo	18	Form 6	Studying at a Technical College	F
Luba	18	Form 6	At home – hoping to attend university	F
Makha	21	Form 6	At home – hoping to attend university	F
Nyasha	20	Incomplete secondary education	Supplementing Form 4	F

Vimbai	24	Form 4	Temporary primary school teacher	F
Rudo	23	Form 4	Supplementing Form 4 mathematics	F
Dumi	21	Form 4	unemployed	M
Taku	20	Incomplete secondary education	unemployed	M
Sipho	26	Incomplete secondary education	unemployed	M
Tino	20	Form 6	unemployed	M
Tapiwa	25	University education	unemployed	M
Farai	20	Incomplete secondary education	unemployed	M

Figures

Figure 1: Graffiti by Farai

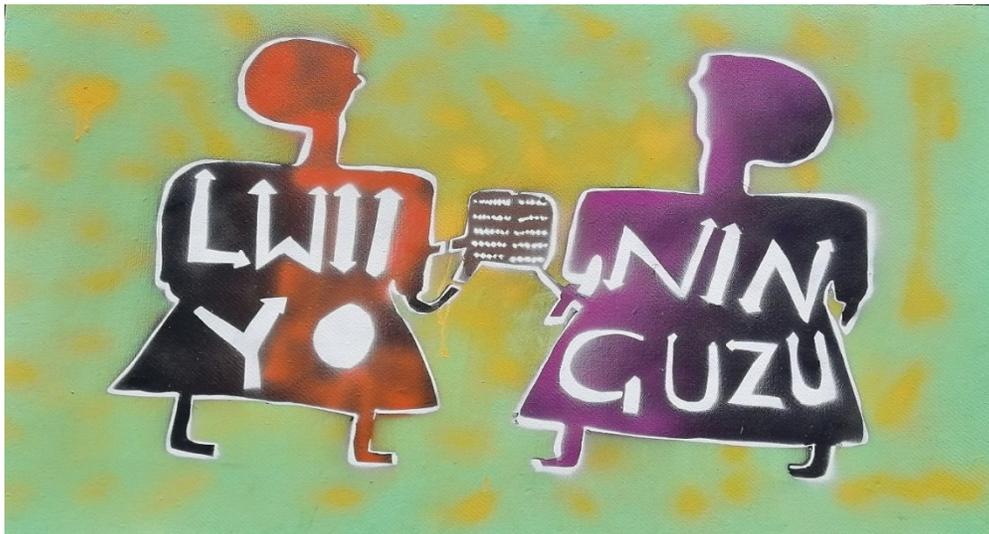
Figure 2: Graffiti by Makha

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