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DOI:

[10.1080/10286632.2019.1702032](https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2019.1702032)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Gross, J. (2021). Practices of hope: care, narrative and cultural democracy. *International journal of cultural policy*, 27(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2019.1702032>

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N.B. This is the Author's Accepted Manuscript version of the article: Gross, J. (2019) 'Practices of hope: care, narrative and cultural democracy'. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*. Accepted for publication on 04 December 2019. The 'Version of Record' of this manuscript has been published, and is available at: doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2019.1702032.

Author: Dr Jonathan Gross

Affiliation: Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries, King's College London

Email: jonathan.gross@kcl.ac.uk.

Postal Address: Room 2.01, Chesham Building, Strand Campus, King's College London,
London, WC2R 2LS

Biography: Dr Jonathan Gross is a Research Fellow and Teaching Fellow in the department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries, King's College London, where his research addresses questions of cultural policy, politics and participation.

Wordcount: 7, 999 (excluding References, front and back-matter)

Practices of Hope: Care, Narrative and Cultural Democracy

Abstract

This article contributes to debates regarding the fundamental aims of cultural policy. It argues that *hope* is central to political imagination, and that competing hopes need to be addressed within discussions of what cultural policy is ultimately seeking to achieve. In doing so, the paper suggests the distinctive role that cultural policy can play in responding to a ‘populist moment’. It begins with a case study of young people’s cultural opportunities in one London borough, demonstrating the significance of practices of *care*. Care enables people to narrate their lives, and to experience that their actions matter. Drawing on this case study and a survey of literature on hope, the second section shows that practices of care and *creative self-narration* support individual and collective hope. The third section argues that addressing the conditions that enable ‘democratic hope’ is an important step in theorizing and realizing *cultural democracy* as a normative framework for cultural policy. The paper concludes by suggesting that at a time of populist ‘anti-politics’, cultural policy can enable conditions of democratic hope at multiple scales: from supporting practices of care and self-narration within specific projects, to helping rearticulate the public narratives that structure political possibility.

Keywords

Capability approach; care; cultural democracy; hope; narrative; populism.

Introduction

Within our current political circumstances, cultural policy may appear a parochial concern. We are witnessing the breakdown of trust in democratic institutions: from politicians and parliaments, to the broadcasters and newspapers that historically have held decision-makers to account. The anti-politics (Glaser 2018) of right-wing populism is on the rise, whilst liberal and neo-liberal parties fail to answer the profound questions posed by the 2008 financial crisis and climate emergency. What can cultural policy, a relatively junior policy domain, possibly contribute to meeting these challenges?

Recent discussions of the politics of cultural value (O'Brien 2014; Miles and Gibson 2016; Crossick and Kaszynska 2016; Belfiore 2018) indicate a growing need to directly address the fundamental aims of cultural policy. When it comes to culture, what should the role of the state be? Critics of the 'deficit model' (Miles and Sullivan 2012; Stevenson, Balling and Kann-Rasmussen 2017) suggest the prevailing principle of arts policy, 'excellence and access', reinforces hierarchies of cultural value. Critics of the 'creative industries' script – which for twenty years has framed cultural policy (including and beyond the arts) – argue that not only has it played a key role in wider processes of neo-liberalisation (McRobbie 2016), but that it constitutes the abandonment of responsibility (to market forces) for what are rightly *political* choices regarding the distribution of cultural resources and legitimacy (Bell and Oakley 2015, 7; Belfiore 2018).

Per Mangset goes so far as to consider whether, because it is 'not adapted to major transformation processes in contemporary societies', we may have reached 'the end of cultural policy in Western democracies' (Mangset 2018, 1). He suggests:

1) it is not obvious that a sectorial cultural policy will persist in the future, 2) public cultural policy is facing legitimisation crises in some countries, and 3) there is a need for further discussions on the rationales for public cultural policy. (Mangset 2018, 11)

In what follows I reject the possibility that we have reached the end of cultural policy, whilst making a specific case for how its aims and potentials can - and should - be rearticulated. In particular, I show that cultural policy has a distinctive contribution to make in enabling conditions of *hope*: in which people are able to narrate their (individual and collective) place in the world, and in which they know that their actions matter.

The paper has three parts. It begins by presenting fieldwork conducted in the London Borough of Harrow. This research sought to understand how ‘cultural opportunity’ operates for children and young people, and in what ways such opportunity could be better supported. In discussing this research, I show that one of the conditions that enables cultural opportunity for young people are practices of care, and that a consequence of such practices is hope. The second section discusses how hope has been understood across a wide range of disciplines, and argues that practices of care and opportunities for creative self-narration are key conditions of hope. The third section considers what would be involved in placing a concern with hope at the heart of cultural policy, and how this could reposition cultural policy within the project of democracy.

1. Conditions for Cultural Democracy: A Case Study of Care¹

The starting point for this paper is the recent resurgence of interest in ‘cultural democracy’ (Wilson, Gross, and Bull 2017; Hadley and Belfiore 2018) - which has been driven, I suggest, precisely by the need to (re)articulate the normative foundations for cultural policy. The term

cultural democracy used widely during the 1970s and 1980s (Kelly 1984; Jeffers and Moriati 2017), naming a commitment to more equitably distributing cultural resources and legitimacy: shifting cultural policy towards supporting people’s cultural activity ‘on their own terms’ (Mulcahy 2006, 324). My colleague Nick Wilson and I have offered a distinctive re-conceptualisation of cultural democracy (Gross and Wilson 2018). Our argument has three steps. First, that notions of cultural democracy – as well as the prevailing discourses of cultural policy they challenge – operate notions of *cultural opportunity*, but these are implicit and undertheorized. Cultural opportunity needs to be better understood. Second, we show that cultural opportunity is *ecological*: it operates via the interconnections and interdependencies between cultural resources of many kinds. Third, we suggest that the capability approach to human development offers conceptual resources with which to expand understandings of cultural opportunity. Initiated by Amartya Sen, with major subsequent contributions from Martha Nussbaum, the capability approach began as a critique of orthodoxies within development economics. It has since become influential within a wide range of academic and policy domains, including education, health, women’s rights, and theories of justice. Challenging GDP as the indicator of prosperity, it offers a multidimensional account of human flourishing, giving central importance to what people can actually do and be (their ‘functionings’), and the freedoms they have to make choices about which functionings to exercise (their ‘capabilities’). (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2011; Robeyns 2017)

Building on these ideas, Wilson and I conducted research with A New Direction (AND). AND is a charity that supports creative opportunities for children and young people across London, including via Cultural Education Partnerships - building relationships between schools and arts organisations. AND wanted to undertake research to examine young people’s cultural lives ecologically: to understand how cultural opportunity operates not only

through schools and arts organisations, but also within everyday locations, and via the interconnections between these sites. We undertook this research in the London Borough of Harrow and employed a range of methods: questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, activity diaries, and Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) workshops (Wilson and Gross 2017). We deliberately worked with a wide range of organisations, including schools, arts organisations, Harrow Council, private businesses and third sector organisations. One of these was the Ignite Trust. Ignite works with young people on the periphery of the education system, many of whom are living difficult and dangerous lives, with some involved in gangs. The organisation offers a range of activities to the young people it works with. At the centre of its approach is creating safe spaces. Two evenings a week Ignite opens its doors for young people to come and have a free meal, and to spend time with each other and trained youth workers. During school holidays, there is a more extensive programme of activities. For some projects and events, such as the Christmas party, the young people are given control of the budget; and there is a regular discussion group, at which the young people can explore issues effecting their lives.

Ignite does not present itself as an ‘arts’ organisation, and there is a notable tension regarding the role of art within the organisation’s practice. Ignite was set up in 2001 when a young man who had grown up in Harrow returned to the area, having recently finished his studies. He was aware of difficulties between a group of young people spending time on the steps of a local church and the parishioners. He asked the vicar if he could use the church hall and invite the young people to join him for sessions using his DJ turntables. These sessions proved popular, and a new relationship developed between the church and the young people. With the support of other churches and charitable foundations in the area, this led to the creation of the Ignite Trust. What made these sessions successful, and how this established

the model for Ignite, was the creation of an environment in which a relationship could develop: a safe space, focused on an activity the young people were interested in, directed towards a goal (developing DJ skills), and drawing on the youth worker's abilities to listen.

The current Ignite director,² however, indicates that the role of art within the organisation is not straightforward. 'I don't think the [young] people out there [on the streets of Harrow] have head space, because their head is so full of what they're involved in. There's not really much space for creativity when you live in fear.' Those young people who have worked with Ignite for a long time are the most likely to take part in activities such as drama, dance and music, which have at times been offered successfully. But involvement in art projects cannot happen straight away. The director explains that:

As young people move towards the fringe of the education system they're likely to engage with a gang for their own confidence. [...] They live in fear. And when they come into our projects it's great to see them relax and have some fun. And we see that as progress. [...] they live in this incredibly violent environment outside. But what we've got is a safe environment to show that actually there's a lot more outcomes to life.

Ignite seeks to create conditions in which young people can make choices that lead away from severe risk, towards safer futures, with more paths open. The role of art within this is somewhat paradoxical. Over the years, young people have developed confidence, friendships and capacities of self-expression via drama, making music or dancing at Ignite. However, it requires a lot of trust for the young people to say 'yes' to opportunities such as these in the first place. Ignite is funded to work with the most at risk. These young people tend not to

choose to take part in art activities, in which they are invited to express themselves in front of other people. A foundational level of confidence is required.

Developing confidence is not a short-term process, and Ignite often works with participants over several years. The organisation has identified the effectiveness of a number of practices. Most importantly, offering one-to-one mentoring with skilled youth workers. Ignite's director explains:

That might be when they find out who they really are. I think they lose it in the gang fraternity. They get a street name, and that's who they are [...]. And then somehow, as [they work with us], they can start to let the person they've created [slip away]. I've heard one person describe when she first went into the secondary school, she said, "I've joined this huge school and, actually, suddenly I didn't know who I was. I had to create a person to survive in this environment." [...] Those who speak a second language, those who have gone through trauma arriving in this country [...], those who've got a parent at home who has an addiction problem [...] they somehow have to invent who they are. And as they're now obviously possible targets for gang members who want to recruit them, they then invent themselves in a way that's not helpful for them, and certainly not for their future.

Ignite seeks to treat everyone they work with as a whole person, by giving them spaces in which to be (and become) who they are outside of the pressures of their everyday lives. The staff are experienced in creating conditions conducive to this, and employ specific methods - such as the use of a 'life wheel' within a mentoring relationship - to help discuss a young person's needs and goals. Ignite is creating conditions in which young people can give form

to their experiences. Like other organisations we researched with in Harrow, Ignite actively creates environments in which young people not only feel safe, but in which they feel their voices are heard. Sustained conditions of listening are essential to creating environments in which young people can develop trust in the organisation, and confidence in themselves. As I show in the next section, trust, confidence and hope are closely intertwined.

2. Hope: A Fertile Functioning

We can understand how Ignite staff work with young people to establish trust and confidence as practices of *care*. Tronto identifies four aspects of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness (Tronto 2013). Theories and practices of care are a key concern within feminist scholarship and activism, but the range of academic disciplines that have engaged with care includes ‘social policy, sociology, psychology, health, politics, philosophy, epidemiology and economics’ (Phillips 2007, 2). Researchers are beginning to address the relationships between care and creative work (Flisback 2013; Dent 2017; Campbell 2018; Wilson 2018; Berridge 2019). However, there is not yet a developed account of the implications of the ethics and politics of care for rearticulating the normative commitments of cultural policy. What follows makes a contribution to such an account, by identifying one of the consequences of care: *hope* – conditions of trust in which people experience that their actions matter. Building on the Ignite case study, I examine how hope has been understood, and argue that it needs to be an explicit concern of policy making. This paper thereby contributes to re-thinking the conceptual and normative underpinnings of cultural policy, extending my account of cultural democracy.

Varieties of Hope

Hope has been widely discussed in philosophy (Zournazi 2003; Lear 2006; Smith 2010; Van Hooft 2011; Eagleton 2015), theology (Moltmann 1993; Smalley 2005; Pope Francis 2017), psychology (Gillham 2000; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Chang 2001), education (hooks 2003; Halpin 2003; Webb 2013; Freire 2014; Roberts 2016; Vlieghe 2019), politics (Sacks 2000; Skrimshire 2008; Solnit 2016) and anthropology (see Kleist and Jansen 2016).

Kleist and Jansen go so far as to suggest that ‘Since the turn of the millennium, there has been a veritable explosion of writings on hope in the social sciences and the humanities.’

They suggest two explanations: ‘a widespread sense of crisis and a heightened sense of a lack of political and ideological direction in this situation.’ (Kleist and Jansen 2016, 373-4)

However, there has been little discussion within cultural policy studies. The major exception is the important work of Oliver Bennett (Bennett 2011, 2015), discussed further below.

Kleist and Jansen observe that in the anthropological literature on hope, a wide range of social phenomena are articulated in relation to conditions of *uncertainty*, registering an increased ‘awareness of, and sensitivity to, living with risks’ (Kleist and Jansen 2016, 374).

In Rebecca Solnit’s account, uncertainty is integral to the meaning of hope, ‘the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand.’ (Solnit 2016, xii). Similarly, Kleist and Jansen suggest that:

For the articulation of any hopes for different futures to be possible, there must be a degree of uncertainty, an awareness of it and a willingness to act in it. At the most basic level, [...] hope as a phenomenon is characterized by simultaneous potentiality (in its broadest sense) and uncertainty of the future. (Kleist and Jansen 2016, 379)

That uncertainty is a precondition for hope can be clarified via the word's history. Eagleton explains that an archaic usage of *hope* was 'a feeling of trust', and he suggests that 'to trust that one will be not abandoned is the foundation of hope' (Eagleton 2015, 41). A range of empirical and conceptual studies helps us to further understand this close association between hope and trust.

Jonathan Lear studied the Crow tribe of native Americans, and how they responded to the destruction of their way of life as nomadic hunters of buffalo. Drawing on Aristotelian ethics, Lear's account of 'radical hope' is grounded in an analysis of *courage*, 'the capacity for living well with the risks that inevitably attend human existence.' (Lear 2006, 121) He seeks to understand the ethical situation of the Crow at the moment the very concepts with which they understand the *good life* have been destroyed. Radical hope, for Lear, is manifest in Plenty Coup, the Crow chief, committing to a future good way of being a Crow, trusting that there will be such a way, whilst not knowing what this will consist of. This is not a commitment to mere biological survival, nor any expectation of returning to former ways of being Crow. What courage means to the Crow has been transformed: no longer to take risks in battle, but to commit to the possibility of new ways of being distinctively themselves. Lear argues that both before and after the destruction of their nomadic way of life, the Crow people's courage consists of *living well with vulnerability*. Taking this community as his example, Lear seeks to give a broader account of ethics (how to live well) in the face of human vulnerability: not only the vulnerabilities of physical health and bodily integrity, but also 'ontological vulnerability' - the possibility that whole systems of meaning-making can come to an end. Richard Sennett refers to a person's expectation that 'there will be continuity in his or her life whatever its ups and downs, that experiences will be threaded together' as

‘ontological security’. (Sennett 2012, 187) Ontological insecurity, by contrast, is ‘a failure of trust in everyday experience.’ (Sennett 2012, 194)

Humans are inherently vulnerable. Yet vulnerability, and the ability to trust in the future, varies across time, place and social position. Jansen refers to anthropological research addressing these variations as ‘studies of the political economy of hope’ (Jansen 2016, 450). But on the basis of a range of anthropological studies, Kleist and Jansen argue that ‘it makes little sense to use “hope” as a blanket feel-good word in the way that it often seems to appear in the contemporary moment.’ Instead, they suggest that hope needs to be examined as ‘a central dimension of contemporary mechanisms of government, whereby visions of possible lives, and thus of possible futures, are produced and distributed differentially within social configurations.’ (Kleist and Jansen 2016, 388). They argue that, as an object of analysis, hope is ethically ‘neutral’. Webb concurs, offering a taxonomy of five kinds of hope, each of which can operate with different political inflections (Webb 2013). A key consideration, then - when exploring its potential significance for cultural policy - is to be alert to the *varieties of hope*.

The small number of articles addressing hope within creative labour studies highlight its pernicious potentials. The notion of ‘hope labour’ has been introduced to name forms of self-exploitation in pursuit of future creative employment (Kuehn and Corrigan 2013).

McRobbie’s Foucauldian work on the ‘creativity *dispositif*’ identifies the collectively damaging effects of the invitation to relinquish job security, labour rights, unionization and conditions of solidarity in the interests of pursuing a fulfilling creative career (McRobbie 2016). Studying the trajectory of a young Dutch/Chinese singer, Chow proposes the notion of ‘hope management’. The hopes of young diaspora Chinese performers are articulated in

opposition to normative aspirations within wider Chinese discourse, and Chow argues that it is inherent to hope that it is articulated *against* other hopes. To understand Chinese cultural politics, he suggests, more research is needed on hope management. This includes understanding ‘how different social agents are negotiating and giving shape to dominant hopes in contemporary China’, the ‘gendering of hope; the consumption of hope’ and the relationship between narratives of migration and modernity within this particular environment of (diasporic) hope management. (Chow 2011, 803-804)

The promotion of particular hopes can serve the interests of the already powerful, and operate against the interests of the hopeful. Berlant has discussed this possibility at length, referring to it as ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011). Similarly, recent work has critiqued the regressive hopes cultivated by discourses of wellbeing (Ceadestrom and Spicer 2015; Davies 2016; Segal 2017), and the promise of social mobility within ‘meritocracy’ (Littler 2017). In the context of cultural policy, Florida’s famously optimistic account of the rise of the creative class, heralding a new golden age of culture-led economic growth and urban renewal (Florida 2002), has been widely critiqued. Not only because the hopeful story it offers conceals and reinforces social inequalities, but because its central hypothesis has been shown to be false.

Committing to a particular narrative of hope, we may devote many of our tangible and intangible resources. The individual and collective consequences can therefore be considerable: ‘hoping can be very dangerous’. (Shade 2001, 3) In this light, Eagleton distinguishes between hope and optimism.³ Hope is anchored in an awareness not only of uncertainty, but also of the possibilities of failure, suffering and abjection. Unlike hope, optimism is a fully elective stance, with no grounding in the assessment of objective possibilities. For this reason, he argues, optimism often serves politically reactionary political

ends, complacent with regards to inequality and injustice. (See Lott 2019). In addition to this differentiation, Eagleton distinguishes between fundamental hope and particular hopes relating to specific undertakings. Many of the key figures in Eagleton's partial survey of the hope literature are primarily concerned with the fundamental variety, including Ernst Bloch, whose magnum opus, *The Principle of Hope*, posits hope as a pervasive principle at work within the progressive development of world history (Bloch 1986 [1959]). Eagleton shares with Bloch a concern to locate hope within analyses of the structure of history. Optimism, he suggests, makes no serious engagement with questions of historical progress or teleology. Hope is one of the three 'theological virtues', along with faith and charity, and a large amount of writing on hope has been theological discussion of the moral arc of the universe. But it is not only theists for whom questions of hope are inseparable from questions of historical trajectory, and in this context, Tsiolkas identifies the need to develop forms of secular faith. 'When I talk about faith I mean the actual experience of believing in the future.' (Tsiolkas 2003, 100)

Aspirations and The Capability Approach

Cutting across categories of religious/secular, Kleist and Jansen propose the notion of 'temporal reasoning and engagements with the future' as a less normatively inflected way to refer to topics studied by anthropologists as 'hope' (Kleist and Jansen 2016, 381). Appadurai comments that Sen's work, with its 'radical expansion of the idea of welfare', constitutes 'a major invitation to anthropology to widen its conceptions of how human beings engage their own futures.' (Appadurai 2004, 63) Amongst researchers making use of the capability approach, the language of hope has not yet been used. Instead, they discuss the role and significance of 'aspiration'. (Conradie 2013; Conradie and Robeyns 2013; Hart 2013, 2016; Ray 2016; Flechtner 2017.)

Aspirations are ‘future-oriented, driven by conscious and unconscious motivations and they are indicative of an individual or group’s commitments towards a particular trajectory or end point.’ (Hart 2016, 326) Conrادية and Robeyns propose a relational ontology of aspirations, which are ‘always deeply context dependent’. Moreover, aspirations are not simply waiting to be discovered within us, they are ‘constructed in the process of thinking about or formulating them.’ (Conrادية and Robeyns 2013, 562) Recognition of the significance of the social conditions within which aspirations come into being enables appreciation of specific forms of inequality, with some people ‘much less likely than others to risk imagining or voicing their aspirations.’ (Hart 2016, 332) Hart argues that how people develop their aspirations has so far been undertheorized, particularly in terms of the ‘power dynamics at play’ (Hart 2016, 334). But it is precisely its systematic attention to the multidimensionality of human (un)freedom that makes the capability approach a valuable set of tools with which to understand processes of aspiration-formation.

Hart observes how the language of aspiration has been taken up within UK policy discourse, including then Prime Minister David Cameron referring to the UK as an ‘aspiration nation’. She suggests that a ‘narrow economic instrumental positioning of aspirations’, such as Cameron’s, ‘can be viewed as corrosive as it erodes the possibility and value of wider aspirations.’ (Hart 2016, 325) Moreover, the idea of ‘poverty of aspiration’ has been frequently employed to disavow collective responsibility for disadvantage, implying that deprivation is the fault of the deprived (Bennett 2012). Nonetheless, capability scholars continue to make use of this language. Hart argues that the capability approach ‘enables us to articulate aspirations in a way that helps to counter narrow policy discourses on aspirations’,

and understanding the complexity of the processes by which aspirations are formed will have material implications for practitioners, including teachers and policymakers. (Hart 2016, 337)

For Hart, the freedom to aspire is in itself an aspect of human flourishing. But the constraint of this freedom also limits other capabilities. Appadurai argues, similarly, that the deliberate articulation of aspirations can increase capabilities. He refers to what he calls ‘the capacity to aspire’, the development of which is dependent upon the availability of resources. This capacity:

like any complex cultural capacity, thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation. Where the opportunities for such conjecture and refutation in regard to the future are limited (and this may well be one way to define poverty), it follows that the capacity itself remains relatively less developed.

(Appadurai 2004, 69)

Here Appadurai is making an intervention within the politics of recognition (Taylor 1992; Fraser and Honneth 2003). In this body of work justice is understood not only as a question of the distribution of material resources, but also the distribution of recognition. Appadurai’s argument is that interventions in systems of recognition, made possible by the strengthening of the ‘meta-capacity’ to aspire, have consequences both for expanding other capacities and for affecting change within systems of material distribution. If this hypothesis is correct, he suggests, supporting the capacity to aspire should be an integral part of development programmes, including ‘any project with other substantive goals (such as health, food security, or job provision) directed to the reduction of poverty.’ (Appadurai 2004, 82-83) He proposes concrete steps that could be taken to support this meta-capacity, including

developing practices and tools through which to identify the ‘cultural map of aspirations’ of the people involved in a development initiative.

Following action research with women in a township outside Cape Town, Conradie and Robeyns identify the ‘agency-unlocking’ potential of focusing directly on aspirations within small-scale development interventions. ‘Thinking about, talking about, and reflecting upon their aspirations, especially when this is part of a group process that creates a supportive and encouraging atmosphere, motivates people to use their latent agency to make changes in their lives, which will expand their capabilities.’ (Conradie and Robeyns 2013, 565). Flechtner also argues that there is a role for public policy in promoting aspirations, whilst emphasising that this must be combined with measures directly addressing material deprivations. She observes that there is a consensus within development literature that low aspirations can be detrimental to people’s welfare, as they ‘prevent people from performing activities they should have reason to value, and that would improve their well-being.’ (Flechtner 2017, 518)

Building on the capability approach’s account of the multidimensionality of poverty, Wolff and de-Shalit have shown that not all advantages and disadvantages are equal. Some capability deprivations lead to many others (‘corrosive disadvantages’), and some achieved functionings are particularly enabling of other valuable beings and doings (‘fertile functionings’). (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007) The Ignite case study, in combination with the work on aspiration by capability researchers, provides grounds to hypothesise that *hope is a fertile functioning*. The analysis of pragmatist philosopher Patrick Shade helps to articulate this further. He suggests that, ‘Generally speaking, hope has as its object an end [...] whose realization lies beyond our present agency’. But hope is ‘productive in drawing us beyond present practical limits, showing us new horizons and leading us to discover (or generate)

new means of exploring them.’ (Shade 2001, 3, 6-7) Hope is a liminal condition. In hope, people recognize the limits of their current situation, but are oriented beyond them.

Art, Creativity and Narrative

Part of the significance of identifying fertile functionings is that they locate where policy interventions may be most effective in addressing disadvantage. Taking seriously the hypothesis that hope may be a fertile functioning, how might policy intervene? Bennett identifies five institutions that promote hope: democratic politics, work, family, religion and psychotherapy (Bennett 2015). Notably, he does not include institutions of art making. One of the affordances of art is individual and collective self-narration. This makes them a significant resource of hope. Distinguishing hope from desire, Eagleton observes that:

Because hope involves a degree of expectation, it is generally speaking more narrationally inflected than desire, which may simply shuttle from one object to the next with no very obvious storyline. By contrast there is the ghost of a plot to hope, which links a present impulse to a future fulfilment. [...] To hope means to project oneself imaginatively into a future that is grasped as possible, and thus in some shadowy sense already present, rather than simply to languish in the grip of an appetite. (Eagleton 2015, 52)

To hope is to be able to narrate ourselves, and our place in the world. There are innumerable examples of literary creations, fiction and non-fiction, through which writers have explicitly worked upon their experiences to better understand the past and make possible new futures. (For example, Bechdel 2006; Levy 2014.) But it is not only writers who narrate. The craftsman Peter Korn emphasises the relationship between craft-making, selfhood and

narrative. Drawing on his own experience and those of his students, he suggests that creative practice ‘exercises one’s innate capacity to re-form the given world in ways that matter.’

(Korn 2015, 125) Makers are ‘thinking with things (such as material, sound, movement, and language) to discover, embody, and communicate a vision of what matters.’ (Korn 2015, 64)

He suggests that the construction of narratives is a central human activity, which explains ‘who we are and how the world works. These mental maps not only frame our experience of reality; they actually shape reality, because they guide us as we interact with the world.’

(Korn 2015, 126) For Korn, then, people undertake creative processes ‘to become more of whom we’d like to be and, just as important, to discover more of whom we might become.’

(Korn 2015, 104)

It is not only professional artists for whom creative activities afford opportunities for self-realisation. I have documented examples of this via my research with participants at a small arts festival in Leeds with a specific focus on mental health. Participants reported the paths through life they have developed via involvement in a range of art activities and organisations, including opportunities to narrate themselves in new ways (Gross 2018). Why is the ability to narrate one’s life valuable? DeVereaux and Griffin suggest that, ‘In contrast to setting out an array of unmediated information items’, a story offers ‘the promise of coherence’. (DeVereaux and Griffin 2016, 9) Phelps argues that giving coherence to our experiences through storytelling is the fundamental human activity: we are *homo narrans*, the narrating animal (Phelps 2006). But there is not equal opportunity, nor equal need, to self-narrate. In post-conflict situations, for example, the chance to tell one’s story is an essential component of justice. In this context Phelps refers to the ‘capability of narration’, without, however, developing a full account of the conditions that enable and constrain this capability.

Nussbaum argues that access to creative education is vital to the capabilities that underpin democratic citizenship, as ‘the narrative imagination’ is cultivated ‘above all, through literature and the arts’. She argues that ‘Through the imagination we may attain a kind of insight into the experience of another that it is very difficult to attain in daily life — particularly when our world has constructed sharp separations, and suspicions that make any encounter difficult.’ (Nussbaum 2006, 391). But there are two components here: ‘literature and the arts’, and the affordances of a structured space outside of everyday life. These both have great potential value, but they should not be conflated. Whilst offering specific affordances, the arts are just one amongst a variety of conditions through which narrative and imaginative capabilities can be cultivated. As we see in the example of Ignite, the creation of a safe space, constituted via practices of care, can be very consequential. This does not necessarily involve the arts. Rather, it is a space of relationship and trust: in which self-recognition takes place, aspirations are explored, and alternative futures imagined.

As against the arts, Gauntlett uses the notion of ‘everyday creativity’ to refer to ‘the activities of making which are rewarding to oneself and to others.’ (Gauntlett 2011, 13). He situates his ideas within a trajectory of thinking about creativity that includes John Ruskin and William Morris. He notes that hope was a keyword for Morris, meaning ‘all that gives worth and continuity to human endeavour’ (Thompson, quoted in Gauntlett 2011, 39). (See Wright 2018.) In the tradition of Ruskin and Morris, Gauntlett identifies everyday spaces of creativity as potential sites of unalienated labour. The value of this activity is partly its capacity to connect us to ourselves and to others, and partly the form it gives to our lives. He suggests that ‘People need something to strive towards’ (Gauntlett 2011, 125), and that, as Richard Layard puts it, ‘Prod any happy person and you will find a project’. (Layard, quoted in Gauntlett 2011, 125). Surveying a range of literature on wellbeing, Gauntlett suggests that

happiness ‘stems from having meaningful connections with others, and meaningful things to do. These projects are especially valuable if they are not contained at the individual level but involve some form of sharing, cooperation, or contribution to other people’s wellbeing.’

(Gauntlett 2011, 126)

Gauntlett argues that making – and connecting through making – are timeless human tendencies, but societal conditions not only enable but also constrain the freedom to create. He suggests that ‘the fostering of everyday creativity is one of the most crucial things any government should do’ (Gauntlett 2011, 226). It is of course not only governments involved in nurturing conditions for creativity. The Ignite case study illustrates that practices of care, on a micro scale, are integral to the conditions in which self-narration can take place. Tronto identifies care as the great unaddressed question of democracy, and that democratic theory is incomplete unless it provides an account of *the just distribution of care* (Tronto 2013). Given the intertwined relationship I have traced between care, narrative and hope, Tronto’s radical challenge raises a fundamental question for cultural policy. Exactly what story of ‘democracy’ should cultural policy be seeking to tell?

3. Cultural Democracy and Democratic Hope

New Political Narratives

Our self-narrations are not only individual but collective. Stories of who we are and where we are going constitute discursive boundaries upon political action. We have lived for forty years within the conditions of possibility framed by a neo-liberal narrative. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, George Monbiot proposes an alternative story: a ‘politics of belonging’.

(Monbiot 2017) Kristeva argues that hope is closely connected to belonging, but belonging constitutes an inherent challenge for democracy. With all the uncertainties that democratic

decision-making involves, ‘the question is how to preserve our sense of security while at the same time opening ourselves up to the democratic dangers which guarantee our freedom.’ (Kristeva 2003, 70) Political narratives that may support belonging vary greatly, from the inclusiveness of Monbiot’s promotion of difference within community, to the identarian exclusions of populist nationalism.

The promotion of hope is, of course, not the preserve of the left. How else should we understand Trump’s ‘Make America Great Again’ than as a narrative of belonging. Mary Zournazi suggests that within right-populism:

Hope masquerades as a vision, where the passion and insecurity felt by people become part of a call for national unity and identity, part of a community sentiment and future ideal of what we imagine ourselves to be. It is a kind of future nostalgia, a ‘fantastic hope’ for national unity charged by a static vision of life and the exclusion of difference. (Zournazi 2003, 15)

Dominant narratives of hope can exclude alternatives. Speaking of his adopted home, Australian-born anthropologist Michael Taussig suggests, ‘it is almost like after they have the phrase ‘the American dream’ there can be *no more dreaming*.’ (Taussig 2003, 53. [Italics in original.]) The competition between competing narratives of hope is the very stuff of political imagination and contestation. Monbiot suggests:

If the rupture [in our political life] is to be resolved for good rather than for ill, we need a new story. Our challenge is to produce one that is faithful to the facts, faithful to our values, and faithful to the narrative patterns to which we respond. [...] When we have

no stories that describe the present and guide the future, hope evaporates. Political failure is, in essence, a failure of imagination. (Monbiot 2017, 5-6)

What new political stories can be told that are neither the future nostalgia and rejection of difference of resurgent nationalism, nor a restatement of ‘progressive neoliberalism’ (Fraser 2019)? In developing alternatives to right-wing populism, it will be necessary to mobilize multiple ideas and resources (Muller 2017). Cultural policy has, historically, been positioned as a junior partner. But it may have a distinctive and consequential role to play.

Promoting Practices of Hope

If cultural policies are narratives (DeVereaux and Griffin 2016; Bilton and Soltero 2019), what narratives of hope might they offer? There is a general mood of anti-paternalism and anti-neoliberalism within cultural policy discussion in the UK. It is crucial to take the next steps and develop conceptual resources for new normative commitments and new policies. My account of cultural democracy, drawing on the capability approach, makes one contribution to developing those conceptual resources. This paper, in arguing for the need to address *hope* within accounts of what cultural policy can seek to achieve, further elaborates what such a project of cultural democracy could consist of. Crucially, in this section I argue that whilst cultural democracy requires conditions that enable hope (environments conducive to creative self-narration, including practices of care), to achieve this, it must be *part of a wider project of democratic renewal*. It is helpful, here, to distinguish between democracy as a set of institutions and democracy as a value (Dunn 2005), or between the *process* of democracy and the *promise* of democracy. The promise of democracy is that we can be both governed and free. The potential institutional arrangements of democracy are of infinite

variety. What might the institutional provisions look like by which we can better fulfil this promise with respect to *cultural* democracy?

We need to consider policy responses across micro, meso and macro scales. At the micro, policy can seek to support practices of care. Building on insights from capability researchers on aspiration, policy could directly support spaces in which hopes (and fears) can be shared and explored. Ignite is an example of this in practice, with youth workers creating conditions of relationship in which trust and confidence were made possible, and alternative futures imagined. Policy interventions could actively support such work in a variety of contexts.

But forms of policy that address the meso level require consideration, too. This would include investment in social infrastructure, ‘the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact’ (Kleinenberg 2018, 5), which play a vital role in enabling social trust. As Eric Kleinenberg explains, ‘People forge bonds in places that have healthy social infrastructures – not because they set out to build community, but because when people engage in sustained, recurrent interaction, particularly while doing things they enjoy, relationships inevitably grow.’ (Kleinenberg 2018, 5) Moreover, new cultural governance arrangements need to be developed: including democratic and ‘ecological’ approaches to cultural leadership at borough and city levels (Gross and Wilson 2019). To take just one current example of what such an approach could look like, Arts Council England’s Creative People and Places programme, at the time of writing, appears poised between an audience development programme (albeit with some elements of local decision-making) and a more ambitious strategy of support for democratically led cultural eco-systems. In principle, a publicly supported programme of this nature has the potential to commit itself to promoting conditions of hope. It can do so by enabling practices in which people know that their actions

matter, on an ongoing basis. This needs to take multiple forms, not only through micro-environments of creative self-narration, but also via sustained opportunities for involvement in cultural governance (Jancovich 2019). At both the micro and meso scale, it is crucial that such approaches build and sustain *trust*. This, as we have seen, is close to the very meaning of hope.

But what about at the macro-level? Drawing on Gramsci, Nancy Fraser suggests we are living at a time of *interregnum*, in which ‘the old is dying and the new cannot be born’ (Fraser 2019). For Kier Milburn,

We find ourselves living in one of those rare moments when history opens up. We face exhilarating possibilities but also terrifying threats. The rise of the Far Right and the consequences of climate change loom over our time like a nightmare. Yet the potential for a decisive move towards equality and freedom is greater than at any time in the past 40 years. (Milburn 2019, 2-3)

For some political theorists and political scientists, this situation is the outcome of several decades of ‘anti-politics’ (Schedler 1997; Clarke 2015; Fawcett et al. 2017; Flinders 2018; Glaser 2018). ‘Anti-politics’ names a collection of political sentiments - hostility to politics as such - and a set of political actions:

activities that seek to abolish the political domain by replacing collective problems with self-regulating orders (e.g. the market), plurality with uniformity (e.g. ‘the people’ of populism), or contingency with necessity (e.g. ‘there is no alternative’ or ‘TINA’); and activities that seek to replace the communicative rationality of the political domain with

another rationality e.g. science and technology or moral absolutism [...]. (Clarke 2015, 190)

Seeking to confront anti-politics, Glaser argues we need to ‘remember what politics is, to realise what we’ve lost’ (Glaser 2018, 8). The pervasive antipathy to politics, articulated and stoked by right-wing populists, ‘and the parlous state of politics in its organised form’, are ‘detrimental to us humans in our individual and collective lives.’ (Glaser 2018, 7). Muller argues that what characterises populism is political actors claiming to speak on behalf of the *whole* people, to the exclusion of difference and debate (Muller 2017). For Muller, populism is democracy’s ever-present and constitutive other: what democracy can transform into if its commitment to government of the people, by the people, for the people turns ‘the people’ into an undifferentiated block.

Chantal Mouffe, however, argues that populism is not inherently anti-democratic. Politics is fundamentally *partisan*, involving contestation over hegemonic ‘common sense’. Populism is the effort to constitute an alliance of different political identities and interests around a hegemonic project, and we are currently experiencing a ‘populist moment’ precisely because a situation has arisen in which the political order *has* to be refashioned. For Mouffe, therefore, the development of a ‘left populism’ is vital, as the ‘new hegemonic formation could be either more authoritarian or more democratic’ (Mouffe 2019, 79).

Instead of seeing the populist moment only as a threat to democracy, it is urgent to realize that it also offers the opportunity for its radicalization. [...] It is only by restoring the agonistic character of democracy that it will be possible to mobilize

affects and to create a collective will towards the deepening of the democratic ideals [...]. (Mouffe 2019, 85)

Praising Mouffe's work, Jeremy Gilbert emphasises the importance of combining a commitment to 'radical pluralism' with the need 'to think politics strategically' (Gilbert 2014, 191). A central challenge is how to connect the transformative potentials of multifarious creative democratic practices with strategic political action. For both Mouffe and Gilbert, strategic alliances are essential:

the multiple tasks required to make change possible are likely to be borne by quite different kinds of agent: from art movements to think tanks to university departments to civil society organisations to political parties. Such tasks include generating new modes of thought and perception which might contribute to cultural change; crystallising those affective changes into meaningful political demands; strategically co-ordinating a range of demands and constituencies into a viable political coalition; delivering a coherent programme for government which instantiates some of those changes; recruiting and mobilising a cadre of professional politicians who can implement this programme; sustaining the affective and semiotic potency of those demands to the point that such realisation becomes likely; and many others. (Gilbert 2014, 204)

The re-emergence of 'cultural democracy' as a term indicates a rising ambition to connect cultural policy to broader political projects. This paper suggests that by recognising practices of care and creative self-narration as integral to the conditions that enable people to give form to their experience, and to know that their actions matter, discussions of cultural democracy can go further in contributing to the constitution of an effective democratic alliance.

Progressive political projects are, of course, faced by many challenging ‘realities’. However, I am arguing that it is precisely the power to name what is politically realistic that a new project of cultural democracy (reframing the nature, scope and aims of cultural policy) can contribute to. It can do so in two ways: creating the conditions for many more stories to be told, and helping to build a political alliance that tells *a new collective story*. Previous articulations of cultural democracy have done vital work in making the case for the former. I am suggesting that there is the need to go further with the latter.

Conclusion

By identifying the significant interrelations between care, hope and narrative, this paper contributes to rethinking not only the scope of cultural policy (far beyond ministries of culture), but also its fundamental aims. Oliver Bennett identified five institutions that promote hope: democratic politics, work, family, religion and psychotherapy. This paper adds to the list: the practices of care that enable individual and collective self-narration. In doing so, the paper raises the possibility of cultural policy deliberately supporting practices of hope at micro, meso and macro scales.

The Ignite case study offers specific indications of approaches that might be replicated in other locations. These include the skilled provision of spaces of listening, environments that support the development of confidence, and processes through which people co-produce knowledge about their cultural eco-systems - including what opportunities they have, and what they need. Many further questions remain regarding how to realise the promise of cultural democracy: including what systems of governance and resource allocation are required, and how these may vary geographically. But the argument of this paper is that any

policy programme aiming to realise the normative commitments of cultural democracy needs to address the environments through which we experience an enduring sense that our actions matter.

The capability approach provides powerful conceptual tools here. It offers ideas with which to understand the role of multiple (tangible and intangible) resources in enabling human freedom and flourishing - including the freedom to aspire. Those developing the theory and practice of cultural democracy have much to draw upon from capabilities research and its multidimensional analyses of agency, wellbeing and justice. For starters, drawing on the work of Wolff and de-Shalit, this paper has suggested that hope is a *fertile functioning*, and therefore a consequential area for policy intervention. In addition to demonstrating the value of engagement with capabilities thinking, this article also shows the need for those looking to develop cultural democracy to further engage with *democratic theory* - including Tronto's provocation to address the democratic distribution of care - and to explore possibilities whereby such theory can be actively connected to policy making and political action.

Here I have connected possibilities for cultural democracy to theorizations of populism. In doing so, I have argued that the realization of cultural democracy – as a normative commitment, a system of cultural governance, and a policy programme – requires its integration within a wider project of democratic renewal and expansion. At a time of right-wing populism and climate emergency, the formation of new progressive alliances is urgent. By identifying the potential for cultural policy to deliberately seek to enable *practices of hope* at micro, meso and macro scales - supporting sustained environments of care and creative self-narration - this article proposes a distinctive role for cultural policy within a wider alliance of democratic strategic action.

Funding details

The research project from which the case study is drawn, *The Cultural Learning Ecology in Harrow*, was funded by A New Direction.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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¹ This article comes out of the UK cultural policy context. However, the intention is that the ideas and arguments will speak to a broad range of locations.

² Current at the time of the fieldwork.

³ Some writers, including Bennett (Bennett 2015), do not make this distinction, using the words more or less interchangeably.