

Pathways of difficult hope

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While scholarly interest in the notion of hope is not new (e.g. Bloch 1986; Friere 1994; Williams 1989) in recent years it has been the focus of considerable attention by scholars from a range of disciplines (e.g. Zournazi 2002). While earlier studies on hope tended to concentrate on religious and therapeutic associations (e.g. Desroche 1979), much of the recent work has explored other aspects. These aspects of hope have included its philosophical dimensions (e.g. Rorty 1999; Waterworth 2004), its involvement in architecture and spatial renewal (Harvey 2000; Halpin 2007), its key role in healing memory after trauma (e.g. Simon, Rosenberg & Eppert 2000; Kgalema 1999) and its place in pedagogical practices (e.g. Barcan 2002; Giroux 1997; Halpin 2003; Singh & Han 2007).

I want to contribute to this burgeoning field of inquiry by developing what could be termed the 'rhizomic' quality of hope (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). By this I mean that hope, along with hopefulness and hoping, has infinite starting points and possible pathways. I want to use this paper to begin to explore a range of modalities by which hope is experienced and represented, as well as to suggest the importance of beginning an ethnography of hope, a development of 'thick descriptions' of hope (Geertz 1973).

Such a project needs to map a richly complex, diverse and often contradictory phenomenology of hope. Such a phenomenology can usefully be divided into three aspects: representations; pathways; plus lived experiences. This approach raises questions such as:



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What does hope look like? How has it been imagined? How can the experiences of hope be represented? How does one work towards or struggle for hope?

There has been considerable recent interest in what has been termed 'robust hope', especially around young people and schooling. (e.g. Singh & Han 2007). McInerney writes:

In seeking to reclaim a utopian imagination for education it is therefore necessary to distinguish between naïve versions of hope which tend to embody 'wishful yearning' (Halpin 2003, p.2) and undue optimism rather than attainable goals, and the more robust forms which have the possibility of realization within present social conditions. (2007, pp. 257-8)

From such a perspective, hope is 'framed in a language of practical possibilities' (McInerney 2007, p. 258).

While I think such a formulation of hope is important, I would caution a rather simple oppositional formula that sets robustness, realism, and achievability against naivety, wistfulness and excessive optimism, indeed a formula that seems to reduce hope to just these excessively polarised options. Such a formulation is also rather goal-oriented. Not only is it reductive of the extraordinary and often nuanced complexity of hope but it sidelines the importance of an *experience* of hopefulness. In Ernst Bloch's seminal work on the utopian imagination, it is the imagination itself that has primacy and is the site of an emancipatory struggle against alienation in all its forms (Bloch 1986). While discussing Bloch's work, Judith Brown writes, 'Our desires, dreams, and longings, are given their form by the imagination; they are how hope is cast by the imagination' (2003, p. 2). In other words we need to be aware of how we imagine hope. Hope 'involves a struggle to attain a perspective on ourselves' (Brown 2003, p. 1). Hope inherently expresses a critique of present circumstances.



Hope is the critical and constitutive heart of Bloch's philosophy. It is both goal and always sought for. Hope and the blossoming of reason, a critical self-awareness, go hand in hand. (Brown 2003, p. 2)

In this paper I am particularly concerned with what I want to call 'difficult' hope and with expressions of tentative hopefulness even if occasionally these are infused with a robust desperation. A difficult hope is one that arises from marginalised circumstances, one where the goal may seem at a far remove, one in which there is the probability of a long struggle to achieve not just 'unrealistic' goals but even a sense of being hopeful. In some ways this parallels what Deborah Britzman has called 'difficult knowledge', the kind of knowledge that acknowledges oppression, guilt, shame, anxiety and fear (1998, p. 118). Such hope can be wounded, tentative and fragile. I am not casting this 'difficult hope' as oppositional to 'robust hope' but providing another inflection on what is an often contradictory terrain. A focus on a robust hope can emphasise goals to the exclusion of the experience of hopefulness and the critical education of the imagination. There is nothing inherently 'good' about hope or the utopian imagination. There are countless examples of them being harnessed to projects that range from ones that are highly oppressive to ones that are trivial. Despite an understandable desire to achieve substantive change for the better in peoples' lives, achievability of goals is scarcely an adequate evaluation of the value of hope and the utopian imagination.

Literature can provide one source of insight into experiences and representations of a wounded hope. For example, Gao Xingjian, in his ficto-autobiographical reflection about surviving the devastation of the Cultural Revolution in China, gives a haunting image of a desperate hope:

he was groping in the dark; seeking a way out was like searching for light, but he relied solely on that small point of dim light in his heart, and it was



this feeling that was indestructible. Pressing his palms together to protect that point of dim light in his heart, he slowly moved through thick darkness, quagmire, not knowing where the path lay, yet carefully protecting that point of dim light ... [T]hat point of awareness of existence, that point of beauty of life, that gentle light, that spot of pulsating in the heart gradually began to radiate outward (2004, pp. 530-531)

This passage by Gao Xingjian also highlights a sense of pathway, of a journey both in and towards hope not as a temporal or even physical movement, but as an intimately imaginative one. Hope can revitalise imagination. Gao Xingjian's description suggests that journeys along such pathways are ones of process and struggle, ones that have imaginative thickness, diversity and complexity. It also suggests that while hope is often purposively oriented towards an object or a goal, a hope *for* something, such goals can perhaps be considered as 'healing fictions' (Hillman 1983) and that the experience of hopefulness has value in its own right. To this extent there is a strong connection between hope and a utopian imagination. Like utopian visions, the goals of hope have an essential elusiveness, always just out of reach, always somewhere else.

The utopian imagination of young people on the margins of society¹

While hope and the utopian imagination have been central to my research on reconciliation (Bishop 2008), teaching (Bishop 2004) and on utopia-creation (Bishop 1989) this paper specifically emerges from a project which sought to understand the hope of marginalised 'at risk' young people aged thirteen to eighteen, who attended Alternative Education Schools in South Australia in 2006 and 2007. Students were interviewed, talked with in class, encouraged to draw and given a camera to take photographs of places, people and things that they associated with hopefulness and the future. Also, they were asked to imagine a hopeful scenario. It is important to emphasise that this was not research *about* these young



people. It was not a study *of* them. They were recruited as collaborators. The project sought to give weight to the imagination of young people who are usually not consulted in society's imaginings of a better future and thereby contribute to an understanding of social sustainability.

While the phrase 'Young people on the margins of society' can be used to describe a group of young people who have problems with crime, school attendance, drug use or social behaviour, the term itself is problematic. These young people would not, necessarily, describe themselves as being 'on the margins of society'. Instead, they may see themselves as central to their friends or their families. The spaces they inhabit, although appearing marginal, may be central to their happiness. While the phrase 'young people on the margins of society' has been used in the context of assisting these young people in education and care, such a negative description does not accurately describe a lived experience (Robb et al. 2008).

The perspective of treating at risk youth as research collaborators is not easy to sustain. There are strong pressures to objectify and to judge such youth, to pathologise them through various disciplines, or to reify them as oppositional, political activists, to view them as problems in need of correction.

While many circumstances can give rise to difficult hope, in this study I am suggesting it might be characteristic of a certain kind of hopefulness experienced from the margins of a society that promises or even creates an expectation of the 'good life'.

A phenomenology of difficult hoping

Among these youth having hope or even just searching for it was sometimes perceived as a weakness and vulnerability. This can set up resistance to or a disavowal of hope. There can



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be suspicion of hope and of expectation, a fear of false hope. A sense of being marginalised can also lead to an unwillingness to entertain hope, a feeling not of hopelessness, but of being outside of hope, or right on its margins at best. There can be a shyness of hope, a kind of avoidance of its apparent brightness. In such cases it seemed sufficient to just hang around the edges of hope.

A vital but fleeting and fragile intimation of hope can easily be dismissed by scholarly, critical interrogation and evaluation, or be crushed beneath the weight of social indictments, producing cynicism, anger and despair. The first task is to find images of hope and then to discover appropriate ways of handling and working with these. While carefully looking at the images and texts produced by the young people I began to think that not all of these really showed hope as such. While some could be interpreted in this way, others seemed to express more of a hopefulness for hope. They could be easily read as manifestations of a remembering that hope could be a possibility, perhaps even a desire to hope, an intention to seek hope. Perhaps they revealed some trace, a footprint of a hope yet to be tracked and glimpsed.

Robust hope and its associated pedagogies suggest a deliberate, structured perspective on hoping, or hope that has a clear, politically left-leaning agenda of social change. However, my concern in this paper is with serendipitous, individual expressions, ones that are not yet linked to broader social programs. People can find hope, build hope, steal hope. There are bringers of hope, spaces of hope, allies of hope. One person's hope can be another's platitude. In this sense, hope and hoping have a Bakhtinesque quality. The search for hope gives expression to a heteroglossia of jostling voices and languages, to open-ended imaginative bricolages (Shao-Pin Luo 2005, p. 290). Listening to these contending voices can result in a fuller articulation of the phenomenology of hope as a social imaginary.



Above all, the contributions of these young people revealed the diversity of hopefulness and the modes by which hope is imagined. Briefly summarised, hope was expressed in terms of:

- an inspiration or an aspiration
- a radical lateral shift in perspective. A breakthrough or at least a going beyond mundane limits.
- a special, perhaps secret place outside everyday life
- a family and friends who make you feel hopeful
- a concern for others
- an ability to do the normal things that you want to do
- a possibility for the ordinary to be made different
- a return to better times
- a result of provocation and risk.

The research showed clear, although not mutually exclusive, differences according to gender, especially where the photographs were concerned. The girls' photos generally displayed happy smiles, in-your-face attitudes, provocative bodies. The posturing was teasing, sexualised yet playful, with skin revealed, tattoos and piercings prominent.

Sometimes the young men attempted to demonstrate that they had credentials as 'men'. In most cases their stories emphasised power through the use or threat of violence, or the display of heterosexual practice with desirable or stereotypical ideas of femininity and sexuality.



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Hoping and popular culture

How do hope and a utopian imagining appear or even just become a possibility? Ernst Bloch insisted many years ago, that a glimpse of hope or utopian possibility arises from within the contradictions of everyday life. Such glimpses can be found in contemporary popular culture for it is here that important struggles take place in the imagination of everyday life (Bloch 1986; Brown 2003; Zipes 1979). People find hope and build hope from whatever material is at hand. The utopian imagination has always been messy and paradoxical, less about formulating large models of an ideal wholeness, than of providing glimpses, sparks, and hybrid fragments.

As part of the imaginative exercises, the young people were asked to imagine an image of hope that could be displayed in a museum exhibition. One young man came up with the following:

Yoda, he says, is in the museum. Yoda's wearing a jet pack. He's got a chop stick in one hand and tries to steal food from museum visitors. He has a light sabre in the other hand. In this exhibit Yoda exists in a time when there is no food. There is a sign next to Yoda that that says 'I'm hungry'.

The Yoda image clearly suggests the importance of figures from popular culture in creating images of hope. There were numerous such popular culture figures in the images produced by the young people. These are often archetypal/mythic characters and go beyond functioning as literal role models or as emissaries of rampant consumerism or as inspirations for corporate allegiance. Yoda is presented here as a trickster and as a warrior. His mission is to steal food, perhaps to feed the imagination of hope?



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Hope as a radical lateral or breakthrough shift in perspective

There are five green creatures that aren't human in the museum, he says. They are about human size, with weird faces. The creatures are talking to each in other in their own language. They're friendly.

Surreal or absurdist images, often humorous, seem to be significant in envisaging hope or just helping to provide or ignite a spark that can re-animate the imagination and the world. While camera-based research by young people can reveal challenging images with 'multiple meanings' (Cook & Hess 2007, p. 43) that are important in communicating ideas both to themselves and to adults, I think that camera-work is less likely to express this surreal or absurdist sensibility than are the imaginative exercises due to a realist or documentary habit within photography in our society. Certainly some of the photos had surreal or absurdist inflections, but as with the Yoda, or the green aliens examples, the imaginative exercises perhaps permitted more opportunity for absurdist and surreal imagining, as well as for re-mythologising around hope.

In the museum, he says, there's a fish tank with a fish inside it. Next to the fish is a garden gnome who is smoking a pipe. Next to the gnome is the sign 'gone fishing' and the fish is saying 'I'm not stupid'. The gnome gets up into the fish tank and catches the fish and eats it.

In a sense hope *is* absurd, as the 1968 Situationist slogan proclaimed: 'Be realistic. Demand the impossible'. Hope is even surreal, in the original sense espoused in the surrealist manifesto of a way of breaking through mental defences or dull habits of thought, encrustations of the imagination both individual and social. Friendly aliens, as in the five green creatures, also suggest that an intimation of hope can be something that originates from outside the normal ecology of everyday expectations. In this sense, hope can seem to come from somewhere else.



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Hope as an aspiration

I want to be a hairdresser

I want two to three kids in the future

I hope to have the friends I have and to get more.

Hopefulness is having a new car in the future

Feeling hopeful is about having lots of money and having that money in cash with you wherever you go. Hopefulness is imagining being powerful and rich.

While the goals of hope may be similar, if not identical, both for marginalised individuals and those located more in the mainstream, the experiences of that hope, its sense of distance, the difficulty of both imaginative and practical mobility towards realising it, can be quite different.

A place for hoping

There is a geography, a landscape, of hope. Sometimes it reveals safe and familiar places—teen girls' bedrooms, the backyard of the family home, a beautiful beach. At other times the places can be those of fantasy and reverie—magical, mysterious, hidden, secret, disturbing (Bachelard 1969; 1971).

In the museum, he says, there's a garden with large trees, grass, dappled light and flowers. The garden smells clean. The garden is reached by travelling a long hard walk where the walker moves away from civilization. It's a secret garden, it's a silent place, without people, a garden located in the future.



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There were also photos of abandoned places outside the everyday flow of time, events and expectations. Grady Clay has pointed to the way such places can function as sites of creativity and possibility (1989). Inhabited by a kind of underworld yet familiar presence, they allow a crucial kind of space for an essential pause and respite, for reverie and a re-imagining. Here are entrances to other pathways for hope, through an evocation of the uncanny, of the unhomely or *unheimlich*. As Kraftl suggests (2007, p. 136) ruins are suggestive of an unsettling, disorienting and disturbing quality so essential to the utopian imagination and the imagination of hope. Utopia and dystopia, hope and un-hope, are two sides of the same coin.

Reanimation of everyday things

Some of the photographs showed unusual perspectives on ordinary objects—feet, tins, buses, buildings. Hope can come from a search for ways to reanimate everyday things, to gain another more vibrant, or curiously different perspective on an otherwise mundane, entrapping, going-nowhere everydayness.

Herbert Guenther, drawing on the Buddhist pedagogy of Longchenpa, writes of the role of imagination in freeing ‘our vision from the drab blur of triteness and “familiarity”, and to enable us to see our “familiar” world anew, aglow, afresh, and alive’ (in Longchenpa, 1976, p. 167). From this perspective, hopefulness comes, not from elsewhere, or outside, but from a heightened sense of the familiar.

Hope as a return

Hopefulness can emerge when we enter another space and time. When dealing with hope we are dealing not just with the future, but also with the past, indeed any time other than this one we inhabit now. The important point is that there is another time to this one,



another place, another experience that is available. To live without this belief is to live without hope. Hopefulness can be about getting back something that you thought was gone, of finding a pathway back.

One of the young men took some photos of an abandoned primary school that he had attended. This was a place that was once important to him. Perhaps unexpectedly, he remarked that he had enjoyed primary school, so this was a site which gave him memories of pleasure and happiness.

This example suggest that hopefulness can be linked to the remembrance of a place—both real and imagined—in the past, where one’s life, one’s future, had good feelings and possibilities. Hope is also the ability return to such a place. This place/time is a marker, beyond which life took a ‘wrong’ pathway. It is also a resource for re-imagining a different, ‘better’ turn of events, for remembering a better feeling about oneself and one’s relationship to and with the world. Such a marker can help reactivate a movement into this better life. In this case the site is a public place yet also an intimate one. It is a site of respect and achievement. It is part of mainstream ordinary kids’ lives—school, a type of place that for this youth began well and subsequently turned bad, became a problematic place. In a sense this is a ‘therapeutic’ re-entry into a problematic situation.

Conclusion

Hope allows a horizon to appear, or at least gives an intimation of possible change. Hope is not necessarily future oriented in a literal sense of linear time but hope can provide access to a different order of experience and time, to a vertical dimension, a depth and source of imaginative life. Images of hope help to sustain a space in-between belief and rejection, acceptance and refusal. They mark entry-points into an imaginative complexity, ambivalence and contradiction.



While the imagination shows us things can be different, hopefulness suggests that change is still possible, and a utopian imagination can provide a glimpse of and faith in something better.

While encouraging vigilance towards moments of hope, it is important to know what it is we are looking for. How to identify hope? To label or categorise something as 'hope' merely gestures in a particular direction. But through its vague generality it can also block an appreciation of the imaginative diversity and lived complexity. I believe there needs to be close attention to the rich diversity, complexities, intricacies and depths of an imagination of hope. Awareness of the rich phenomenology of hope can enhance the ability to recognise these glimpses and help not only to craft utopias out of fragments of hope, but begin to develop a utopian imagination. I have emphasised difficult hoping—a process that suggests a struggle towards hope/hopefulness. Hopefulness is a complex, open-ended imaginative process, often serendipitous, difficult and winding. Engaging with or handling these pathways of hopefulness, with the often intimate affective relationships that people have with them, requires care rather than interrogation. The imagination needs to be investigated and understood in its own terms.

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Note

1 Much of this section is drawn from the catalogue essay that accompanied an exhibition at the Migration Museum, (Adelaide) of the research output (Robb, Mackinnon, Bishop, O'Leary, & Hart, 2008).

