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Abstract

In an essay in Critical Social Work, Robert Fairbanks suggests that space perspectives need to be accounted for in social work practice if the profession is to procure a more nuanced understanding of the production of social relationships. Yet, Fairbanks s analysis fails to account for the problematic of a spatialised politics of belonging for racialised subjects, and for the connections between racialising practices and (neo)liberal governance on localized social-spatial relations. This paper addresses these shortcoming by accomplishing three objectives: (1) To introduce a renewed vector of space thesis by borrowing from post-colonial writings; (2) To enliven that frame by critically reading visual images produced within the context of social service agencies in Toronto. I examine how these images attempt to reorient codes of difference and belonging in relationship to the representational and material contexts in which they were produced; and (3) To provoke a Social Work response to its own animation of these theoretical precepts. I argue that client produced representations reposition a practice sight-line away from a positioning of client subjectivity as redeemable only in it s neo-liberal guise or as surplus in its democratic value, towards one that allows for an inter-subjective unfolding of identity, place and belonging.

Keywords: youth at risk, racism, neo-liberalism, spatialised politics

Introduction

> Space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power (Foucault, 1984).

In their daily practices, social workers navigate the material and symbolic manifestations of space in the lives of their clients. We may consider, for example, social work's efforts to engage in community development initiatives within inner-city neighbourhoods compromised by the politics of gentrification, or settlement work that mediates the social and economic implications of displacement and relocation of people across national boundaries. We may also reflect on the profession's social justice initiatives oriented towards challenging the ways in which racial profiling and stereotyping tie specific marginalised bodies to economically disenfranchised and segregated geographical spaces or make mobility across national borders impossible for some and not for others. And yet, despite the socio-spatial nature of the work of the social, the discipline has paid scant attention to mapping and comprehending the complexity of these politically and ideologically charged experiences (Dua *et al.*, 2005; Fairbanks, 2003).

It is this very gap in social work's thinking and practice that Robert Fairbanks's (2003) essay 'A theoretical primer on space' sought to bridge, by introducing a set of conceptual tools for analysing not only how economic forces of neo-liberal globalisation inform the social geographies in which clients/practitioners live, work and play, but, importantly, how locally manifested social relations and subjective meaning making are negotiated and articulated spatially and in conjunction with these transforming forces. While I embrace the critical insights that Fairbanks's 'space as vector' thesis offered, I would suggest that his analytical frame neglected to fully account for the presence of racialising representational systems and practices, and the effects that these have on differentially empowered subjects' attempts and abilities to claim belonging in globalised spaces.

In what follows, I first offer a brief synthesis of Fairbanks's thesis in light of targeted arguments articulated through a post-colonial and critical race lens. I then introduce a Canadian case study in which this renewed assemblage of concepts—race–space–class—is deployed for analysing a select group of visual images created about and by economically and racially disenfranchised youth. Two youth-made videos—*Samurai Loyalty* (by Jissa Brahin, Yang Shen, Joey Chen, Shane Tymes, Colin Singh and Emanuel Kedini) and *Honeycomb* (by Nathalie, Luke, Omar, Ali, Jordan and John)—produced under the auspices of two Toronto social service agencies—Regent Park Focus and Eva's Phoenix—will be analytically positioned next to a series of publicly displayed print advertisements created by the Salvation Army, a prominent social service agency in Toronto and throughout North America. Through this case study approach, I hope to accomplish three interrelated objectives: (i) to introduce a renewed 'space as vector' thesis; (ii) to illustrate or enliven that

analytical frame by critically reading contesting visual images that offer, I argue, a set of co-ordinates for comprehending current ways of representing and understanding 'difference', 'space' and belonging in relationship to the geo-economic contexts in which the images were produced; and (iii) to provoke a critical social work response to its own animation of theoretical and representational assertions about racialised youth subjectivity, place and power.

A proposed five-dimensional frame

Fairbanks underpins his primer on space with two analytical starting points: one draws from the sociological work of Henri Lefebvre, the other from the late philosopher Michele Foucault. According to Fairbanks, Lefebvre's analysis advanced the claim that space and spatial structures can be thought of as dynamic social products that are informed by and, in turn, inform social relations within a given mode of economic production (e.g. fordist capitalism or flexible capitalism). Essential to this formulation is an analysis of the ways in which power, and thus oppression, is mediated through spatial structures. In addition, Foucault's reading of space as heterogeneous is productive, Fairbanks argues, of a spatial analysis that is able to account for the ways in which discursive practices, knowledge and power are configured within and through different spatial configurations across a social plane—from the intimate life-worlds of subjects to the institutionally organised practices of courts, prisons, hospitals and schools. These two foundational analytics challenge social work to (i) understand power, oppression and resistance as manifestations of struggles to create, control and name space, (ii) grapple with space as an articulation of the flows of globalised capital in its current configurations; and (iii) comprehend social life as pre-eminently spatial and inter-subjective in its expressions. Cultural theorists, like Stephen Haymes and Aiawa Ong, are brought into the conversation to critique and problematise an exclusive structuralist reading of spatial relations. For these authors, space needs to be understood in its specificity, both as a manifestation of local forms of agency, meaning making and cultural expression, and as an agentic entity in its own right that shapes how people's interactions transpire and how people think of themselves.

Fairbanks's attempt to bridge what appears to be an impossible divide between localised meaning production and macro-level determinants suggests a more precise and expansive mapping of the tension that exists between the analytical categories of 'culture' and 'political economy' already familiar to social workers who employ person in environment, human ecology or more structural analytical approaches to understanding the lives of their clients. In other words, an analysis of the material, social and discursive productions of local space becomes an important mechanism

for understanding how clients mediate and construct their sense of selves and the politics and possibilities of their everyday lives (Fairbanks, 2003).

An important corrective to this model rests on a critique levied by social work writer Park (2005), who suggests that the deployment of 'culture' as a generic marker for difference makes innocent the perniciousness of racialised logic in informing the productivity of power. Indeed, as post-colonial writer Ash Amin (2010) observes, a 'conjectural tightness' exists between racist legacies and the impact of globalisation and (neo-)liberal governance on localised social–spatial relations and identity formation. Drawing from the work of a select group of critical race theorists and postcolonial writers, I argue for a need to complexify Fairbanks's vector to account for the ways in which a colonialist/race logic manifests and functions within the socio-economic spatial relationships of a globalised, modernised economy.

According to post-colonial writer Achilles Mbembe (2004), race manifests itself in the 'cognitive framing' of inhabited spaces, social relationships, people and things, where these 'objects' are to be understood in terms of their abstract qualities. These qualities—in terms of differences, equivalences—are then conceptually mapped and measured to derive functionality for the economic reproduction of the capitalist (colonialist/or settler) state and, I would add, for the construction of its nationalist, political identity. Indeed, as sociologist Sunera Thobani (2007) argues, Canadian subjectivity and a spatialised conception of nation have been created based on a prescribed set of protestant and liberal ethics, values and characteristics. Political and economic strategies of the newly forming colonialist Canadian state were employed to call forth certain subjects—those of Anglo-Celtic heritage—to embody these traits. By a discursive slight of hand, these traits and values were then deemed to be intrinsic to these subjects' moral and physical constitution and simultaneously declared to be an essential component of the spirit and identity of the emerging national body politic. As Thobani argues, to garner a sense of belonging in this ever-evolving Canadian nationalist project implies the ability not only to embody and perform correctly a specific set of dispositions, characteristics, and moral beliefs and values, but also to identify these characteristics in others. As subjects are called into their racialised, gendered (etc.) identities through their relationships with language, culture and institutional practices, their consequent human worthiness and entitlement to specific rights, places and resources are affirmed through their sense of belonging.

Here, it would be useful to recall social geographer Marco Antonsich's (2010) insight that a twofold mode of belonging is dynamically at work in the positioning of the exalted subject vis-à-vis its racialised other that Thobani names. 'Place belonging' is the term that Antonsich assigns to the affective, intimate and subjectively manifested feelings of 'being at home' that are negotiated in everyday practices and in the negotiation of inter-subjective relationships; and the 'politics of belonging'—concept that he employs to suggest that belonging is used as a 'discursive resource'

to contest, instantiate or justify 'socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion' (Antonsich, 2010, pp. 645–6). This analysis allows us to think of belonging as a spatialised layering of the discursive and materially manifested plays of power, the territorialising and deterritorialising practices that mobilise cultural and religious artefacts, values and sentiments, and the psychical processes implicated in everyday practices of inter and intra-subjective formation.

A second means of tracing the contours of a race–space–class nexus is to consider how specific configurations of seeing and visualising difference, as regulatory mechanisms of power, are mapped onto cognitive ways of knowing. Various critical theorists (Goldberg, 2009; Hall, 1996; Jay, 1988) corroborate this insight, positing the existence of a particularly insidious association between the productivity of racism (its representations, apparatuses of control and regulations) and what has been referred to as a modernist 'scopic regime', a system of visuality based on Cartesian perspectivism that dictates how social phenomena, including spaces and subjects, are seen and comprehended. This centrality of a privileged way of looking/comprehending to the functionings of racism operates in different registers: it dictates the place of power from which the truth value of otherness can be harnessed and known (through the apparatus of scientific, judicial and state surveillances); and it fetishises the body and skin as signifiers of that difference such that difference is mistaken as biological or essentialised evidence rather than a constructed form enforced through discourse (Goldberg, 2009; Hall, 1996; Mercer and Julien, 1994).

Finally, a third means by which race functions in a globalised, modernist economy is that of 'a mirror, a constellation of imaginary identifications, emotions, feelings and affects' (Mbembe, p. 382). Here, we may consider the ambivalences that lie at the heart of multiculturalist policies and aspirations. And, so, for example, despite Canada's claims to liberal pluralism and proclamations of universal freedoms and tolerance, Thobani (2007) and Banerjii (2000) have argued that these policies/practices, while welcoming the stranger and functioning to manage the tenure and tone of intercultural relationships, simultaneously position the racialised other and the spaces they inhabit as the symbolic point of origin of unbridgeable otherness. Tangentially, the deployment of the tropes of tolerance and 'cultural' difference (Brown, 2006; Park, 2005; Teelucksingh, 2006; Thobani, 2007) functions to legitimate a spatial and moral segregation of the virtuous and the pathological. As these authors contend, embedded within the discourses of multiculturalism is a logic that enables the nationalist subject to obsessively and consciously distance itself from specific cultural characteristics as understood to manifest in persons and places that are deemed to be 'disgusting, amoral, patriarchal, excessive, criminal or violent' (Thobani, 2007, p. 170).

To summarise, then, what I propose is a set of five analytical co-ordinates for understanding the complexity of socio-spatial relations operative within social work practice: power is configured through a set of spatialised

relationships that are negotiated in tension with the movements of globalised capital and reconfiguring racist legacies; a race–space–class nexus is mapped cognitively; racialised spatial environments together with the markings of these spaces as places of identity are comprehended visually; and race acts as a projective screen, as a placeholder in which to house a constellation of fears and identifications about differently marked spaces and bodies. Finally, this analysis reminds us that belonging manifests spatially, and that the right to claim and name space hinges, in part, on the ability to disrupt and reorient visually and textually mapped regulatory systems that police social spatial relationships. As a means of illustrating how this analytical frame can be deployed to critically reflect upon, to assist in the 'decolonization' (Briskman, 2008) of the conceptual framing that may be operative in social work's own representational and material practices around issues of youth subjectivity, place and belonging, I turn now to a reading of images that are being produced and circulated by different social service agencies catering to racialised and economically marginal youth and adults.

Situating the case study

Regent Park Focus (*www.catchdaflava.com*) uses mixed media as a vehicle for social action and community development. *Samurai Loyalty* was created as part of a RPF summer film-making camp, was screened at the 2003 Regent Park Film Festival and continued to receive airtime on RPF's web-based broadcasting project, RPTV, until October 2010. Eva's Phoenix (*www.evasinitiatives.com/e-phoenix.php*) provides supportive housing and employment readiness programming for street-involved youth. The film mentorship programme—the venue for the production of *Honeycomb*—relies on arts-based methods as a vehicle for self-representation and expression. The video was screened at Eva's Phoenix in 2007. I became aware of both projects because of professional ties that I had with the two agencies while director of a grassroots social agency (Bridges for Youth) doing arts-based, activist work with street-involved youth.

The south, central and eastern quadrants of inner-city Toronto inform the spatial geography for arts production at RPF and Eva's Phoenix, and for the public display of Salvation Army images connected to services provided by the agency in Toronto's downtown core. These areas are currently undergoing a flurry of demolition and redevelopment activity; condominiums, loft developments, upscale restaurants—structures that signal the conversion of space suitable for middle-class consumption—are appearing across a territory once reserved for cheap rental accommodation and publicly subsidised housing. Neighbourhood and business associations in the gentrifying areas of Cabbagetown and Church Street (Toronto's oldest Queer neighbourhood) and condominium dwellers of the Bay-College–

Wellesley Street corridor have linked with police and local bureaucracies to shut down local social service agencies, to support rezoning for commercial and large-scale residential enterprises and to dictate how public space should be defined and used (Ocap, 2010).

In this neo-liberal environment that has witnessed the 'evacuation of public good by privatization and marketization' (Gilroy, 2005, p. 1) and the erosion of social welfare programming supporting social housing and income security (Hick, 2004), poverty rates have increased, there is a widening gap between rich and poor, and the rate of homelessness in major urban centres in Canada has been increasing since 1990, with estimates of homelessness now ranging from 150,000 to 300,000 (2007 figures - Laird, 2007). Moreover, Canada, and Toronto specifically, has been the recipient of an unprecedented migration of human traffic, resulting in a city population that comprises 40 per cent new immigrants—89 per cent of whom are from non-European countries (Canada Census, 2006). Recent evidence suggests that, over the last two decades, ethno-racialised newcomers have experienced higher incidences of poverty, greater barriers to accessing adequate housing and employment reflective of their education and experience, and an overall deterioration in a sense of belonging and rootedness than earlier waves of newcomers (Henry, 2006; Murdie, 2008; Ornstein, 2006).

Representing a class–race–space nexus in visual image production

I begin this analysis of contested visual representations of racialised and spatialised poverty, belonging and youth subjectivity by focusing on a series of print advertisements and posters that have appeared on the sides of Toronto's bus shelters, in newspapers, on television and on billboards for the past four Christmas-holiday seasons (www.adpunch.org/entry/a-compelling-ad-campaign-by-the-salvation-army/). These images, created by the Salvation Army, were used as a catalyst for discussion with youth involved in Eva's Phoenix Film mentorship programme, and are representative, of a widely circulating set of visual images about the subjectivities of homelessness and public spaces that have the suggestive power to reinforce neo-liberal and racist rationalities about the proper place of both displaced and exalted subjects. What I am suggesting is that social services' images, especially those produced by significant actors like the Salvation Army, need to be critically examined as sites for the production of knowledge and power; they influence how funding flows, are illustrative of what programming gets funded and shape how social issues are understood, addressed and regulated.

The visual images in the adverting series are identical in their format and design, depicting in each a ghost-like portrait of a solitary figure,

translucent and substanceless with hollowed-out eyes and, in one, an image of a child adult pair, huddled together in an immaterial embrace. These spectral visions of economic destitution are projected into one of a series of marginal urban spaces—an isolated park bench, an abandoned alleyway, stairs leading to a tenement building on a desolate street. The words 'We see what most don't' are anchored either beneath or above the spectre in crisp, bold, white capitalised letters, starkly contrasting with the murky blue and brown washes of the depicted scenarios of homelessness and abandonment that passers-by and readers are invited to see.

I would argue that what is depicted in the Salvation Army's images, despite what the printed text states, is precisely what most certainly do see and this seeing takes place within the limits of what is acceptable to be shown within the public sphere. These advertisements about homelessness and destitution confer an ideological support for a host of representational and material practices that facilitate a delineation of the boundaries of respectful/productive citizenry and serve to reconstitute restrictive access to the public sphere. The spectral figures are positioned in forgotten spaces, away from the sightlines of commercial activity and productivity, ensuring a level of disassociation between the signifiers of destitution and how we, as the imagined viewers (the 'exalted citizen', to recall Thobani's phrase), are meant to experience public space. Moreover, the advertisements make use of a series of dominant narratives about homelessness that not only ontologise a set of attributes—destitution, choicelessness, hopelessness, addictions riddled, criminality—onto a person experiencing homelessness, but erase from view the systems of support and care that exist on the streets and the strengths/skills/knowledge acquired through those experiences (Sakamoto *et al.*, 2007). Further, and importantly for our considerations, what is reinforced in these depictions of the subjectivity of 'homeless' in its ghostly guise is a refusal to allow for the incidents of homelessness outside of normative whiteness, a representational form that effectively erases the experiences of people who are racialised, forecloses the scope of caring that the ads attempt to caste and effectively eclipses the role that racialisation plays in creating the conditions of poverty, street involvement and homelessness in the first instance. The operating cognitive and scopic technologies at work in these images render the mechanisms and manifestations of colonisation and racialisation invisible and thus representationally occluded from the ongoing psychic and material life of the city.

Finally, I would suggest that the very familiarity of the images inscribed on the poster, together with the portraying of the face and gaze of homelessness as being emptied of content, allows for an ease of scrutiny of the causes and effects of poverty such that viewers are buffered from having to make affective and analytical sense of a personal and systemic history that is, here, in its representation, shown only in its containment. In these advertisements, individual characteristics of 'homelessness' are pathologised

and stand in place of a much more complex set of circumstances that are both historical and current, individual and systemic, interpersonal and intra-psychical (Ruddick, 1996). Further, because the social service agency in question positions its own omni percipience and omniscience through its declaration 'we see', we, the viewers, are invited to substitute any discomfort we might be feeling for an assurance that closure on the problems of homelessness/endemic poverty is both possible and imminent, and that the pathology/threat to public space will be contained. In these commemorations of destitution and redemption, where the passer-by is invited to look without witnessing and to know without having to sense or feel that something is missing, seeing and comprehending become a vehicle for easily forgetting.

The twelve-minute video, *Honeycomb Produced by Youth at Eva's Phoenix*, does not simply present a 'corrective' to that which is represented within the Salvation Army advertisements. Rather, in *Honeycomb*, images of the spatiality and subjectivisation of difference challenge the viewer to think about the role of the scopic and the discursive in organising regulating representational systems. In the opening sequence of the video, after an initial shock of light, the screen splits into four quadrants, each with its own initial soundscape and colour field. This initial visual and auditory effect seemingly anticipates a difference that is yet to unfold—a difference, I would argue, that offers a pre-emptive challenge to representational truth claims about certain spaces and bodies made possible through the presentation of a stable and singular image (Alcoff, 2004). What then follows from this initial fragmenting of the visual field is the appearance of an urban landscape coloured in sepia tones—a cinematic devise conventionally used to visualise a nostalgic longing for an authentic and timeless past, but, here, as we will witness, ironically employed to highlight a set of disjunctures that occur between seeing and knowing, and between the expected and what one affectively experiences. This displacement of a temporal truth-value is further reinforced through the revealing of an urban streetscape at different times in the four quadrants. And yet, the unsettling feeling that the audience gets from witnessing fragmented time is paradoxically pacified by the nature of the landscape itself that unfolds before us. The scene is intended to be instantly recognised as familiar and safe for the presumed viewer—well-maintained shops with clusters of people shopping, talking, laughing and claiming a rightful presence, because of their dress and comportment, to participate in the expected commoditised exchange of public space.

This momentarily achieved sense of comfortable familiarity is interrupted by the sudden appearance of an apparition that materialises into a corner of one of the screens. The same haunting image then appears in the remaining three screens. As in the Salvation Army advertisements, this ghostly figure embodies a culturally available look of classed abjection and yet, unlike those images that project the figure into spaces of

abandonment (where it is impossible for it to tell or to be seen), the haunting of a solitary homeless figure in this video first takes place in a space bearing the presence of potential witnesses. Although the pedestrians on this street walk by without noticing, complicit in their occlusion of the presence of homelessness and poverty within the place of the civic, we, as spectators, are invited to witness truths about the passers-by, about ourselves and about our response to this spectral presence that is surplus to the commercial activity of the street. How do we, as spectators, position ourselves in relation to an event that no one else in the filmic movement of time seemingly wants to know or see? And how do we, as witnesses, comprehend our reaction to the passers-by—we who might share a similar sense of entitlement to claim rightful place on this same street?

I would argue that the video invites us to witness an incomprehensible event, incomprehensible because what we see in this scene cannot be easily digested as an individualised, privatised anguish or a highly personalised pathology. The haunting is about power and denied access—to space and to knowledge about the past and present. We, as spectators, are compelled to look beyond the spectre of the ubiquitous homeless figure, to confront the effects of a haunting that takes place within a site where subjectivity, history, systemic violence and commoditised social interactions collide. These moments of collision hold no narrative, but echo to past and present wounds inflicted through processes of exclusion and forgetting.

Recalling the Salvation Army's advertisements, the figure of homelessness and poverty is contained in body posture; the shoulders are folded inwards and the knees pulled upward in its subjective submission to a place of victimisation and pathology. Moreover, the spectre is enfolded into a compressed space on the expansive visual horizon, and its presence merely inserted rather than integrated into the landscape. Thus, in its gestural, postural and spatial containment, the figure, is made to embody and materialise for the viewer the superfluity of a neo-liberal rationality at work in the space of the social—the figure is simply, and baldly, static and thus excessive to the public's market logic, and surplus to its technologies of practice. An agentic ability to shift positioning outside of the restrictive and dehumanising discursive frames of neo-liberal rationality is representationally denied.

In contrast to this image, the figure of homelessness in *Honeycomb* possesses the ability to walk off the screen at will, away from the spectacular gaze of the camera or the wilful ignoring by passers-by. Moreover, the figure's movement from sitting, to standing, to walking betrays an understanding of subjective value without the attending assumption of participation in activities of purchase and exercise of consumer choice. Here, in its agentic mobility, the spectral figure of *Honeycomb* calls into question not only practices that render certain subjectivities excessive and thus deniable as legitimate presence in the arena of public space, but the very

ontological properties of public space itself as it has become redefined in Toronto and elsewhere.

In the following sequence, the focus of the camera shifts to a close-up of the homeless subject who is now positioned defiantly at a table in the more commercialised space of a food court. By re-centring explorations of homelessness to a space of commercialised normativity, *Honeycomb* refuses to acknowledge, the place of abandoned urban spaces as the authenticating or essentialising force in defining the subjectivity of people experiencing homelessness. Moreover, as the camera moves closer into the space of the figure's body, we witness colour beginning to bleed into the grey-toned transparency of its hands and face, revealing a uniqueness previously masked by the codes of abjection and despair. In each successive screen, as colour saturates the figure, sameness fades away to reveal four differently racialised, gendered selves of varying sizes, ages and abilities, each displaying a differentiated facial expression, hand posture and set of accompanying emotional registers to which the audience is invited to bear witness. As each set of hands opens and as each face looks upward to stare into the camera, the four individuating characters are poised to make claims over their own displaced bodies and their own abjected selfhoods. This reconciliation between subjectivity and corporeality happens representationally at the level of the material in a space that routinely exiles the body of 'homelessness' to a place of superfluity. Most importantly, for a moment at least, the spectators to whom this revealing is addressed are compelled to look from a place that defies our stultifying gaze and is attentive to a beauty unfolding to another becoming corporeal, for themselves and for us.

This transformation in subjective positioning continues to unfold in the following scene depicting the gathering of these characters as intimate friends invested in the political and social well-being of one another. Although each character is, in one sense, segmented from the others by the technical device of the split screen that singularly frames each of the four subjects, an inter-subjective intimacy is offered to each character by the audience's ability to see their bodily, gestural and facial expressions of engagement with their fellow interlocutors. Moreover, each character is framed in such a way that the audience is able to see the interruption or presence of their interlocutors' hands moving into and around the space of their own individuated screen and the space of their own bodies. This mode of framing subjectivity serves as a potent reminder that, at least for these individuals, there exists a rich network of friendship, touch and social intimacies that are discounted or simply rendered invisible by agencies and their supporters desiring to see homelessness in its isolation and dysfunction. *Honeycomb* dares to visualise what happens when the spaces people occupy and the people themselves are personalised, when the pathologising of space and bodies is eclipsed momentarily, to reveal instances of joy, intimacy, irony and relational support.

Samurai Loyalty (Regent Park Focus)

Like *Honeycomb*, the 1.5-minute super-8 film *Samurai Loyalty* recalls the ways in which cognitively and scopically arranged discourses project non-exalted subjects' movements, bodies and spaces in an essentialising caste of binaries of difference. And, as in *Honeycomb*, *Samurai Loyalty* reveals that sites of representation and associated signifiers of racialised/classed difference are complex and sliding, and thus potentially re-inscribable. What I wish to suggest, then, is that this film plays at the edge of normativising and, conversely, paranoiac accounts of alterity, refusing in its narrative structure a move back towards the re-inscription of essentialised spaces and identities that reinvest the desires, fears and logic of a visuality oriented around the power of whiteness. Put simply, the potency of *Samurai Loyalty* lies in its ability to disrupt expectations from within and simultaneously alongside the logics of neo-liberal, racialised rationalities. *Samurai Loyalty* begins with a placard that flashes a warning to the audience about violence that it is about to witness—'Two combatants must fight each other to the death upon a signal from their master'. The camera's gaze pans from a close-up profiling one of the combatants and then to the other, recalling for the viewer postures and camera angles used by television/print media to image the embodiment of terrorism and criminality (Grewal, 2005). Here, in this first visual instance, where the epistemology of perspective and consumerist media culture enmesh, the audience is challenged to confront their own emotional responses when presented with the dual images of the black male (combatant #2) and the brown (Muslim) male (combatant #1). Indeed, these subjects have occupied prominent and familiar places in not only a post-September 11 popular imaginary (Gray and Wyly, 2007; Grewal, 2005; San Juan, 2007), but also as manifestations of a xenophobic response to the realities of recessionary living following the crisis of globalised capital in 2009 (Zizek, 2010) where blackness has been re-coupled with a fear of ghettoised poverty and criminality, racialised immigrants as threats to livelihood and job security, and brownness with Islamiscist fanaticism and spaces of terror. These raced bodies, the spaces they occupy, are the markers of unpredictability and violence in 'our/ nationalist/city's' midst—where 'our', as Thobani argues, is always singular and racially exclusive. The technologies of surveillance, threat management and suspension of liberties that have been employed to animate and pacify these fears (Gilroy, 2005) have become part of the lived experiences and environments of those visually framed as suspected other.

But, in the very first frame of *Samurai Loyalty*, there is a disruption to the audience's ability to lay claim to, to fetishise the spaces and bodies of the two-racialised combatants. While the youth are wearing 'ghettoised fashion' made popular in gangsta rap and hip-hop videos—a commoditised style that simultaneously signals resistance and defiance in the face of a

racialising gaze and one that re-signifies the properties of criminality and ghetoisation—their body postures and characters assume the role of Samurai, warriors trained in the highly disciplined practice of martial arts. These near-mythical figures demand a societally recognised level of honour, power and respect that has been disavowed in the everyday lives of the youth embracing these roles. Moreover, this referencing and merging of styles emanating from an Asian film tradition together with an Afro-diasporic music tradition allows for the characters to invent themselves within the globalised yet locally incurred interstices of circuits of visual representations encoded with racist and Orientalist expectation and anticipation.

In the next frame, however, the camera's gaze reintroduces and conjoins the tropes of 'terror and criminality' onto the postures and gestures of the youth. The two combatants are positioned in their solitariness, in their concentrated focus preparing to battle to the death for a cause that remains mysterious, imperceptible. Here, in this frame, the politics of insecurity and threat are playfully mobilised once more; volatility, fanatism, unpredictability can only be understood as the operating logic of the violence that is about to ensue (Puar and Rai, 2002). *Samurai Loyalty* playfully engages with the optics of this spatial and temporal 'irrationality'. The aesthetics of the combatants' dress and stylised movements are restless and polymorphous (at once of a diasporic Africa, of a globalised 'ghetto', of Asia, of the Toronto present); the characters' gestures and postures ironically repeat codes and signs that are supposed to remain invisible; the space of combat bears the mark of urban park and rural field (reminiscent of training zones for terrorism that have been imaged for consumption in print media); and there is movement from the appearance of realism to the play of mimicry. Each move between spaces, between times is swift and unprecedented, leaving the audience in a state of tension as to how to prepare for what is to follow.

As the battle ensues, the audience gets a further sense that all is not as it appears: in slow motion, the combatants run across a field to approach each other in mortal combat, yet they appear not as threats to each other's survival, but as friends reuniting after a prolonged separation. And the swords, while menacing to look at, bend and fold when tested in the realness of combat. Finally, the fighting is stylised rather than raw and animal-like in its representation. To complete the sketch's play on expectations, the sequence of events culminates in a sudden and comically startling command to lay down arms—the Master is 'only joking'.

Samurai Loyalty calls into question a nationalist desire to symbolically fix racialised (black and brown/Muslim) identities in homogenised space and time—in places of violence, as threats to civil order. We are reminded of two vital points about visual discourses: first, both art and 'the joke' can be used as effective strategies for disrupting exclusionary scripts and introducing a space in which alternative narratives of self and space can be

imagined. And, second, what we witness is that the film's employment of mimicry succeeds because the combatants cannot be simply reabsorbed into the discursivity of a (neo-)liberal/colonialist subjectivity; they also remain elsewhere, a space or place in which invention, emergence, becoming are possible.

Conclusion and implications

This paper has attempted to expand the scope of a critical social work response to its own animation of theoretical and representational assertions about racialised youth subjectivity and power in two important ways: first, I reiterate Fairbanks's claim that a more analytically precise conceptualisation of the tensions that exist between localised meaning production and macro-level determinants must account for the ways in which space in its materially, ideologically and socially inscribed forms shapes, and, in turn, is shaped by clients' political and social realities and aspirations. And, yet, I argue that this very proposed matrix of culture, political economy and space is problematic in that it fails to account for the perniciousness of colonialist and racist mechanisms in rearticulating neo-liberal modes of social regulation of space and subjects. The first act of unlearning/recontextualising (Gray *et al.*, 2008) social work thinking, then, involved proposing a five-sided analytical frame in which racialisation, as an apparatus of power, would figure prominently in any analysis that seeks to comprehend the complexity of socio-spatial relations operative within social work practice.

The second part of the paper employed this renewed analytics to frame questions posed by two youth-created videos in their critical address of currently circulating, neo-liberal representational and material practices that signify the terrain of homeless and racialised youth subjectivity and its relationship to the imperative of how public space is utilised and embodied. In other words, my comparative reading of visual images suggests the need for social work to critically examine foundational concepts relating to youth subjectivity, belonging and youth engagement with public space, specifically as these concepts are mobilised in different text or image-based discursive practices. Specifically, I would argue that, in *Honeycomb* and *Samurai Loyalty*, we witness a profound unwillingness on behalf of its subjects of focus to be cast as mere spectres of otherness inhabiting abjected spaces. And both videos engage in a performativity of space and subjectivity such that the narrative that unfolds and its attendant representations disavow a claim by circulating projections and expectations about proper place of subjects deemed surplus within racialising, neo-liberal rationalities. What we are challenged to comprehend is an insistence on a fundamental equality between subjects at play in the videos' representational fields. Moreover, I would argue that the videos are illustrative of the mechanics of belonging, at least as these politics/sentiments manifest in the narrative terrain of the

videos; belonging here derives from the right to be heard and the right to representation. And belonging articulates the necessity of building new structures for subjectivity and relationality out of artefacts, hopes and intimacies located here and elsewhere across geographical/national boundaries.

This is the potential function of a democratic impulse within social work practice, I would argue: to initiate exchange that respects the unexpected. Through their visual representations about space and place, *Samurai Loyalty* and *Honeycomb* stage this type of democratic process. These videos challenge a social work audience to (re)consider the parameters set not only for suturing the brokenness created by past and present acts of racialised and classed erasure and segregation, but for creating new modes of consideration for what constitutes a liveable life, the spatial configurations of public/civic space that can make that happen and what the respecting of difference might entail. As such, *Honeycomb* and *Samurai Loyalty* create a potential template for how social work practice might be conceived of and materialised—and I am thinking spatially, representationally and relationally here—in which all of the participants matter in a way that repositions a practice sightline away from a normativising, commodifying and racialising positioning of subjects as surplus in their democratic value (or a subjectivity redeemable only in its neo-liberal guise), towards one that allows for an inter-subjective unfolding of identity, place and belonging in new and surprising ways.

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