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– ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND DISSENT FOR POSTCOLONIAL URBAN SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS

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Abstract

Environmental justice principles are widespread at national and global levels of transition discourse, but this is sometimes irrelevant to marginalized communities. To address this issue, we apply environmental justice theory to a participatory postcolonial urban case study where poverty, unemployment and inequality continue to incentivize unregulated exploitation of vulnerable environments and people. It is unclear how national legislation can provide for indiscriminate access to environments that promote wellbeing in complex postcolonial communities, where xenophobic and economic discrimination reproduces colonial-style inequalities. To resist this injustice, the combination of academic and ordinary expressions of critique that confront regressive praxis and orthodoxies becomes a valuable and constructive political innovation for transitions. Empirical results suggest that enfranchising the most vulnerable proponents of transformation could advance their political capital to advocate for themselves, formulate and enculturate decolonized visions of urban sustainability, demand governmental and commercial accountability and foster urban reform that is relevant to them.

Introduction

The impact of environmental degradation often falls disproportionately on the shoulders of poor people (Bell, 2020). This is the premise of environmental justice (EJ), a concept that connects environmental problems with social justice (Wagner, 2020). Over time, the theoretical value and strength of EJ has developed from its discursive potential to challenge systemic shortcomings of neoliberal principles, such as broad tolerance of inequality and indiscriminate pursuits of private gain in spite of the social and environmental cost (Kronenberg *et al*., 2020). It is globally relevant for attempts to understand how heterogeneous and populous communities can be incentivized to prevent environmental degradation in an equitable way (He *et al*., 2021). This is highly salient today. As the COP27 Climate Change Conference illustrated, the interdependence of environmental care and socioeconomic inequalities has never been more pressing (Chancel, 2020). This is especially applicable to the global South, in Africa and Asia, where 90% of the forecast additional urban population is expected to be concentrated by 2050 (UNDESA, 2019). EJ is a multifaceted and complex concept delineating fair practices, processes and outcomes, but it is also a movement that aims for social transformation. EJ movements are shifting their focus to the injustices that both political and economic dynamics can cause or worsen (Minkler *et al*., 2008). Besides mostly affecting impoverished communities, such injustices also tend to disproportionately affect ethnic minorities. An important aspect of EJ as a concept is that it is deliberately sensitive to lived experiences of multidimensional

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injustice in everyday life (Schlosberg, 2013). However, despite EJ being mainstreamed in postcolonial contexts to such an extent that it has, for example, been enshrined in South African law, does EJ manifest in marginalized communities where the social and material improvements associated with postcolonialism are most needed?

South Africa has been widely understood as a global paragon of postcolonialism since local social movements effectively toppled the extremely discriminatory apartheid regime in 1994. However, hard-won human rights embodied in the benefits urban sustainability transitions can and should confer are not equally distributed in this postcolonial setting (Venter *et al*., 2020). There is evidence that postcolonial urban sustainability transitions can replicate apartheid-style inequalities between and within heterogeneous cities still divided by race and income (*ibid*.). The permanence of these inequalities is on show in the City of Cape Town, where economic and labour-market forces are replacing apartheid controls (Turok *et al*., 2021). Cape Town thus exemplifies a pressing and worryingly universal challenge: neoliberal urban sustainability-transition approaches (for example, climate urbanism) restrict discursive space for solutions tailored to context-specific imperatives of social justice (Robin and Castán Broto, 2020). A characteristic feature of the problematic neoliberal approach is the application of quantitative indicators that tend to bypass unique socioeconomic realities in complex postcolonial settings. In Cape Town, neoliberal urban densification is an instructive example of urban sustainability-transition approaches that may amplify, rather than mitigate, inequalities (Scheba *et al*., 2021).

Hence, in this article, we explore empirical accounts of the *impacts* of shocks and the *direction* of paradigm shifts within a sociopolitical regime to advance theory on EJ and the so-called 'just transition' (Swilling *et al*., 2015) with reference to the case of Imizamo Yethu (IY). IY is situated on the western coastline of the Cape Peninsula in a semi-rural suburb called Hout Bay, approximately 15 kilometres south of the CBD and part of the Cape Town Metropolitan Municipality (see Figure 1). Our study has two objectives. The first is to investigate perceived causes of disproportionate levels of environmental injustice in IY and to identify key factors that inhibit a 'just [urban sustainability] transition' here. The second is to provide practical recommendations. Three research questions guide our analysis: (1) How do impoverished people experience and perceive environmental injustice? (2) What do they see as the causes of persistent environmental injustice? (3) What may help them to address these? Patel (2009) argues that the political nature of decision making pursuant to EJ means that attention should be paid to the experiences and values of communities who must benefit from socio-environmental change. Most black South Africans continue to live in degraded and overpopulated neighbourhoods that lack basic services, and experience the accelerating negative impacts of climate change. Simultaneously, environmental degradation in and around South African cities is visibly intense. However, the plight of other Africans seeking greener pastures in South Africa—from nations where quality employment, education, natural environments and public services are even more difficult to access—is lacking in these observations.

Not surprisingly, scholars such as Swilling *et al*. (2015) are pessimistic about a 'just transition'—construed as a balance between developmental welfarism (Khan, 2013) and a sustainability transition—in South Africa (and, by implication, other developmental states where government capacity to drive such transitions is low). Swilling *et al*. (2015) argue that sociopolitical shocks and paradigm shifts could spark social movements that bring about transformational outcomes, but influential incumbents can maintain unjust status quos by limiting the effect such shocks and shifts have on deeper distributions of power. Does the same apply at smaller scales of society in postcolonial contexts where social struggles against domination outweigh technical issues?

To build on the crucial contribution of Novalia *et al*. (2021), who extend debates about the incumbency of sociotechnical regimes to the global South, exploring empirical

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FIGURE 1 Hout Bay in the City of Cape Town, Western Cape Province, South Africa (left) (© Google Earth, 2023; image © Airbus; Maxar Technologies; data SIO; NOAA; U.S. Navy; NGA; GEBOO) and Imizamo Yethu in Hout Bay (right) (© Google Earth, 2023; image © Terrametrics; Airbus; Maxar Technologies; data SIO; NOAA; U.S. Navy; NGA; GEBOO)

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accounts of the *impacts* of shocks and the *direction* of paradigm shifts within the sociopolitical regime in this case helps advance theory on EJ and what are termed 'just transitions' in postcolonial contexts, where a dichotomization of socioeconomic and environmental wellbeing continues (Patel, 2009). This case, from a postcolonial African context in which transitions to EJ are still undermined by a range of discriminatory praxis and narratives, also represents an empirical contribution to fill the demographic gap in transitions scholarship.

In the next part of this article, we critically review literature covering dissent and EJ, respectively and apply the analysis to sustainability transitions in cities. These theoretical themes are then framed contextually by introducing the area in which primary data was collected by means of a questionnaire and informal interviews. We then present particularly relevant features of the research area, prior to an explanation of data collection and analysis. The questionnaire results are then presented quantitatively and thematically (public conditions and services, livelihoods, and environmental concern), followed by a presentation of qualitative data obtained from informal interviews about local notions of dissent and justice. Results are then discussed holistically before we conclude with key practical recommendations.

Critical review

– Dissent

A wide variety of literature reports on how representations of marginalized socio-environmental interests are leveraged to justify the expansion of existing centres of power (Ferguson, 1994; Kaika, 2017; Ryser, 2019; Stirling, 2019; Kalina, 2020). Incumbents are not oblivious to paradigm shifts that incrementally assign increasing value to environmental concerns. However, dissent, disorder, disruption and controversy are valuable political praxes that can counteract greenwash-style expansion of existing centres of power (Stirling, 2016; Kaika, 2017). Greyling *et al.* (2016) apply this notion to the postcolonial context of this study to argue that such counteraction has resulted from shifts in the balance of power based on how problems are framed and therefore how solutions are designed, with due consideration for local political and experiential realities that shape policy outcomes. To aid such consideration, there is a need to acknowledge and constructively engage with 'dissensus practices that act as living indicators of what urgently needs to be addressed' (Kaika, 2017: 89). This stands in stark contrast with attempts to make body politics culpable in the reproduction and rebranding of unsustainable outcomes by perverted democratic means (Blühdorn, 2019). Acknowledging and constructively engaging with dissenting communities that are often co-opted by incumbents should therefore be mutually exclusive to 'seeing like power' (Stirling, 2016: 282). In other words, especially as researchers but also as living human beings in general, how we think about and action radical progressive change and sustainability transitions should not be shaped by those who benefit from inequalities and thus necessitate change in the first place (Stirling, 2016). Therefore, critical analysis of how public perceptions diverge from, and sometimes completely contradict, normative politics at whatever scale must be motivated and encouraged.

While racial and ethnic discrimination have recently come to the fore in pioneering environmental justice literature (Pulido, 2017), intraracial xenophobic discrimination has not. For Serequeberhan (2009), critical thinking from African perspectives is fundamental to effectively resisting the reproduction of exploitative behaviour, inequality and other toxic legacies of colonialism. Contrary to much-celebrated research emanating from older and more affluent democratic societies, such as that by Ostrom (2009) and Stiglitz (1998)—which advocates for societal transitions to sustainability that emphasize trust, transparency and consensus in diversity—discrimination, exploitation, competition and violent expansions of established

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power are perhaps more relevant factors that must be accounted for in transitions to sustainability in neocolonial societies. In this dissonance, there is a convenient avoidance of increasingly widespread arguments that sustainable development, which originated in grassroots collective action, is being encroached by the objective of 'social control' (Stirling, 2016: 265). Hence, rather than peace, acceptance and tolerance of inequalities, recognition of dissent and disruption as drivers of radical transformation may be valuable for transitions (Kaika, 2017). Through the participatory approach adopted in this article we investigated a tacit social movement 'motivated by a practical goal of securing local service provision as well as a political purpose of expanding citizen control over state resources' (Novalia *et al.*, 2020: 3). We aim to take things a step further by critiquing the discursive and practical exclusion of non-citizens.

We also make use of nascent philosophical work reaffirming the need for legitimate, sometimes uncivil, disobedience when laws or praxes are unjust (Delmas, 2018). South African history is a quintessential example of how such disobedience can radically transform society. We use this crucial understanding to critically engage with the observation that incumbents placate tensions by using piecemeal compromises to survive multiple legitimacy challenges, thereby nipping overall transformative potential in the bud (Novalia *et al.*, 2021). This approach thus explores sociopolitical innovation that is counter-hegemonic and environmentally just. Innovative confluences of state and non-state dissent might counteract bureaucratic practices of 'forgetting and unseeing' that appear to serve the beneficiaries of remnant colonial logics until palpable disasters expose systemic environmental injustices (Novalia *et al.*, 2020; Anand *et al.*, 2022: 4). Such lessons should be learned from *post*colonial practices and experiences.

– Environmental justice

Environmental justice (EJ) is a multifaceted and complex concept delineating fair practices, processes and outcomes; it is also a movement that aims for social transformation. The notion of EJ has contributed to a deeper appreciation of the role that public policies and market forces play in the genesis and exacerbation of environmental inequities that affect the poor (Minkler *et al.*, 2008) and ethnic minorities in particular (Pulido, 2017). Politically, EJ commands analyses of power relations linked to class, gender and race (Stein, 2010), as well as of the relationship between human wellbeing and that of the physical environment (Walker, 2012). EJ was originally about the spatial distribution of environmental goods and ills. Then EJ became 'social transformation directed towards meeting basic human needs and enhancing quality of life—economic quality, health care, housing, human rights, environmental protection, and democracy' (Hofrichter, 1993: 4–5). Schlosberg (2007) took this further, arguing that EJ includes moral considerations about both the natural world and social groups. This is particularly relevant in South Africa, where a history of racial and environmental inequity, including colonial economic and political oppression and exclusion, apparently still moulds the pivotal dispositions and experiences of impoverished and marginalized people in destructive ways. But academic representation of this relevance is vulnerable to bias in studies that centre technical/Northern/Western perspectives.

When developmental narratives are dominated by established incumbents, these have been exploited to reinforce and consolidate the power and relevance of dysfunctional authorities in developing contexts, rather than foster disruptive social and material innovation and equality (Ferguson, 1994). This worsens social inequalities within and between postcolonial societies in Africa and other heterogeneous milieus that are undergoing transition. Hence, critical and controversial, or dissenting and disruptive perceptions and experiences of impoverished and marginalized communities should be at the forefront of research agendas that appraise the drivers and barriers of human-centred environmental care and restoration (Seghezzo, 2009; Stewart, 2019).

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Counter-intuitively, degradation of the natural resources all life depends on has given impetus to 'socio-metabolic reconfigurations' that embolden historical centres of power (Schindler and Demaria, 2019: 53). Hence, when we ask how exactly 'social relations in the "economy" are themselves transformed' (Tilzey, 2017: 11), we must also ask who is responsible and accountable for such change. The role of the state comes up frequently in response to such questions (Johnstone and Newell, 2018), as do capitalist interests (Pulido, 2017). Ecological modernization, or the idea that technical innovation is the solution to environmental issues, has dominated environmental discourses in mainstream ENGOs and in global environmental politics. It originated as a North-European social theory in the early 1990s (White *et al*., 2015).

Despite heavy criticism from various quarters, ecological modernization still dominates global environmental discourse and has been incorporated into the United Nations' sustainable development goals (SDGs) and its New Urban Agenda (Barca, 2019). Barca (2019) reads Kaika (2017: 91) to be saying that this is happening because the custodians of our unsustainable capitalist society quietly resolve to ignore, reject, or undermine 'the voices of those urban communities and movements that are expressing dissenting, alternative visions of sustainability'. But, on the margins of global and national political discourses, there are blocs in support of EJ comprising coalitions of environmental and social justice organizations (Barca, 2019). Environmental degradation and its impacts highlight known and unresolved social injustices in postcolonial cities that cannot be undermined. The consolidation of incumbents, as in state and capitalist entities, undermines fora for dissenting, chaotic and informal disruptors; it erodes the capacity of diverse communities to 'let go' of unsustainable pathways, 'broaden out' the way we think about sustainable alternatives, and 'open up' radically transformative politics (Stirling, 2016: 269). Hence, we need more radical schools of thought to influence and challenge the way businesses and governments relate to, and react to, EJ movements (Pulido, 2017; Barca, 2019).

But there are serious shortcomings in current EJ discourse that are perhaps more deeply flawed than ecological modernization or the consolidation of incumbents. Environmental racism is an understated element of environmental injustice, but also of racial capitalism: 'A focus on racial capitalism requires greater attention to the essential processes that shaped the modern world, such as colonization, primitive accumulation, slavery, and imperialism' (Pulido, 2017: 526–27). Hence, we critically analyse the reproduction of such processes in a postcolonial context, where intense population growth, environmental factors, acute poverty and inequality—all underpinned by distinct demographic heterogeneity—perpetuate historical environmental injustices. Our research is situated in the broader context of a society emerging from apartheid (a system of state-sanctioned racial hegemony following colonial rule in southern Africa) in transition to a highly progressive and environmentally just democracy. We scale the scope of inquiry down to the grassroots level, where individual experiences and perceptions, especially of something as difficult to measure as EJ, matter. The assumption underpinning this approach is that international societal transitions comprise progressive environmental and social movements that foster transformations at a local level.

In the following section we present the case selection and context of our study—including visual representations of the research site and data collection and analysis procedures.

Method

– Case selection and context

Hout Bay is a semi-rural suburb of the City of Cape Town, situated on the western coastline of the Cape Peninsula (see Figure 1). Historically, it was designated as a whites-only area. Formerly called Mizamoyethu and Mandela Park, IY was established as a low-income site-and-service settlement for black and 'coloured'

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residents,[1] most of whom formerly squatted illegally on land elsewhere in Hout Bay (Oelofse and Dodson, 1997). According to the latest official statistics (2011), 15,538 people live here in 6,010 households. Of these, 25% are serviced with piped water inside the dwelling, 80% have electricity for lighting and 61.7% have a flush toilet connected to a sewerage system. Around 24.4% of adults of working age have no income, and another 25.4% earn less than R19,600 (US $1,450) per annum, or just below US $4 per day (Statistics South Africa, 2011). In total, 91.6% of the population in IY identify as black African and 59.5% identify isiXhosa as their home language, while 17.3% (*ibid*.) identify 'other', or non-South African, home languages. Around 2.6% had received formal higher education and 54.9% were men (*ibid*.). The Democratic Alliance (DA) governs the City of Cape Town and the wider Western Cape Province, making it the only exception to uninterrupted African National Congress (ANC) rule of post-apartheid South Africa.

In many ways, the suburb of Hout Bay, in which IY is located, is a microcosm of South Africa, epitomizing many of the contradictions and tensions that characterize the country as a whole. South Africa's ghettoized city structures are well demonstrated here. The suburb is set in a scenic valley, with mountains encapsulating it on every side except at the southern end, where the land meets the Atlantic Ocean. Hout Bay's population typifies Cape Town's demographic profile. The suburb comprises (1) large estates, small farms, large houses and hotels owned by a small number of rich and mainly white, English-speaking people; (2) the populous, mixed-income township or semi-formal settlement of Hangberg (visible at the south-western extreme of Figure 1, right), principally hosting a 'coloured' and Afrikaans-speaking community; and (3) the populous, impoverished township or informal settlement of IY, which is situated on the eastern side of the Hout Bay valley and principally hosts black African people.

IY was established in 1991, shortly before national apartheid rule was formally abolished in 1994. The translation of 'Imizamo Yethu' is 'our collective struggle'. After waves of covert and eventually overt land invasions in rebellion against apartheid segregation laws, IY was planned as a settlement for domestic workers and newcomers to the fishing industry and expected to house 455 informal households on 34 hectares of land. Around 18 hectares were initially zoned as residential, and 16 hectares were reserved as a 'greenbelt' or for developing community facilities (Harte *et al*., 2009). Population growth has been visibly intense and residential structures have repeatedly flouted formal urban planning (see Figures 2 and 3). According to the 2011 national census, population density here was around 27,227 persons per kilometre squared (Statistics South Africa, 2011).

While such population density is alarming in any informal settlement, the situation in IY is exacerbated by the topographic situation of the site and the limited employment opportunities in the area. Heavy winter rainfall on the steep sandy slopes causes runoff loaded with sediment, and the resulting erosion makes the development of sustainable infrastructure both technically challenging and costly. Climate change is exacerbating the already degraded environmental conditions as summer droughts (as well as fires) and extreme weather events become more frequent and intense. Poor socioeconomic conditions imply vulnerability, hence the livelihoods of residents in IY are at risk. Impromptu protests against poor service delivery are regular events in Hout Bay, and frequently feature violent clashes between police and the residents of IY and Hangberg. Politicized violence is especially common in and around IY, ranging from xenophobic attacks or allegations of such acts (PMG, 2015) to taxi war shootouts

1 This distinct but complex South African demographic category denotes a person of 'mixed' European, African or Asian ancestry, as officially defined by the South African government from 1950 to 1991. It has distinct historical, geographic, and cultural dimensions. There is, however, a tension between the apartheid state's arbitrary imposition of this category and the current proud adoption thereof by many people who identify as such (although this adoption is neither uniform nor universal).

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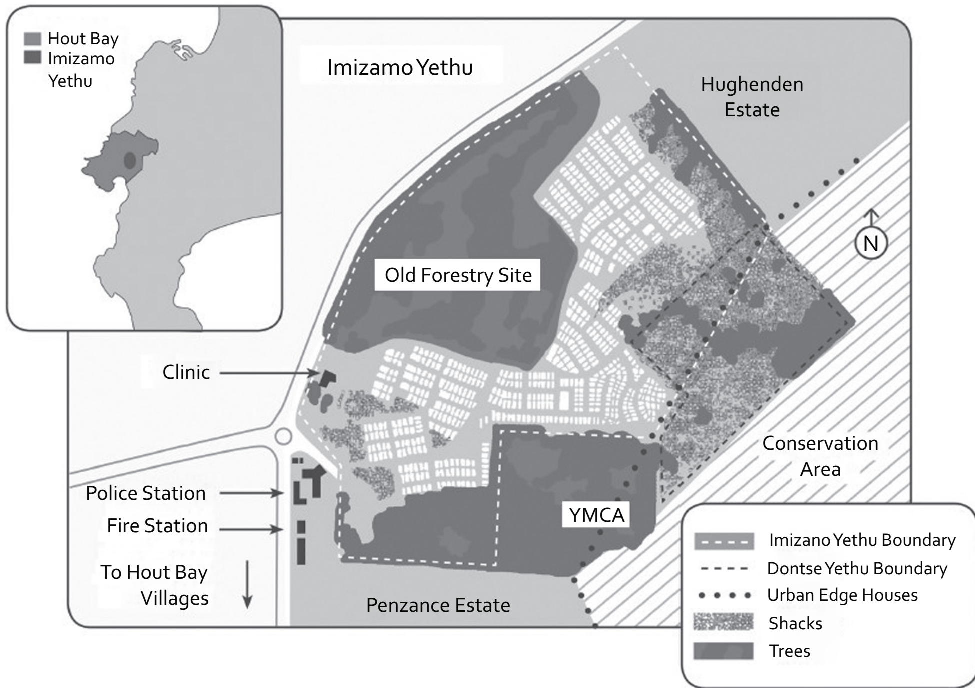

FIGURE 2 Map of Imizamo Yethu's 1991 development plan (*sources:* Anciano and Piper, 2018; Harte *et al*., 2006)

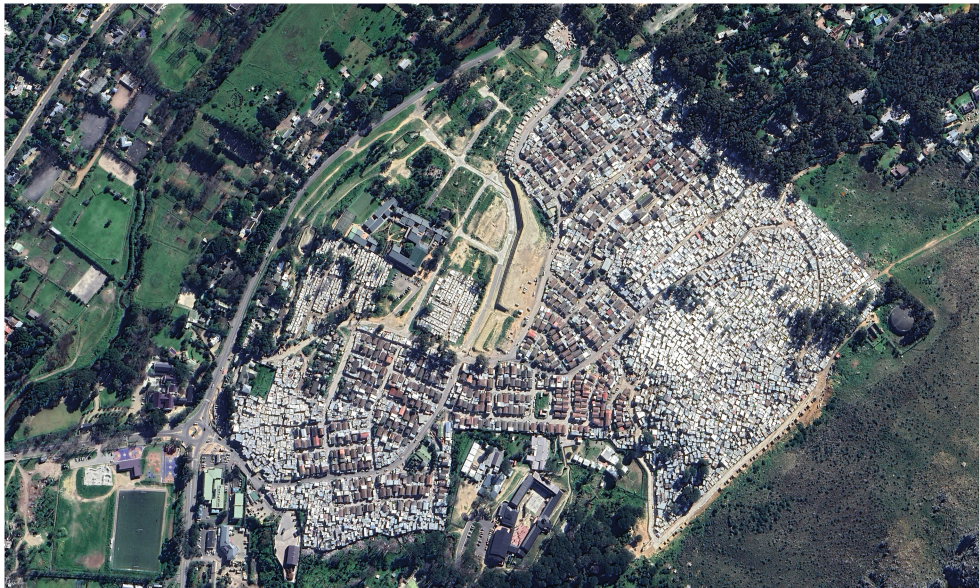

FIGURE 3 Imizamo Yethu in detail; as seen from above in 2023. Notice the ongoing development(s) on land designated as a 'Greenbelt', or for community development, in 1991 (© Google Earth, 2023; image © Airbus)

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carried out in front of the adjacent police station—located at the main entrance to IY (Petersen, 2019).

– Data collection and analysis

We obtained the data for our research by means of a questionnaire and informal interviews. A randomly selected sample of participants were approached in person between August and December 2017. Data collection covered three broad themes: public services, livelihoods and environmental concern. In total, 79 individuals completed the questionnaire and 22 interviews were conducted with a diverse sample of ordinary residents. Participants did so voluntarily after receiving an informed consent letter explaining the study in English and isiXhosa, and/or hearing a verbal version thereof. Ethics approval was given by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Humanities (reference no. GW20170731HS).

In the first section of the questionnaire each participant's age, gender, employment status/income, education and duration of residence in IY was recorded. In the second section participants appraised levels of public services, livelihoods and environmental concern. The intention was also to learn with participants from their experiences of environmental injustice and what they saw as its causes. The questionnaire was designed to simplify answers to 'yes' or 'no' responses. If not for limited resources and time available for the research, more open-ended questions would have been put to a larger sample. The questionnaire was disseminated and completed on weekdays in daytime, which meant that employed residents were relatively unavailable for participation. Questionnaire items are listed in Table 1. These were not arranged in any particular sequence, but all attempted to elicit direct accounts of relevant local experiences and perceptions. The provocative nature of questioning sparked some informal, open-ended interviews in which participants had the opportunity to share their experiences and perceptions of environmental injustice.

Data were processed using simplified or binary statistical analysis in the case of demographic results and 'yes' or 'no' answers to specific items in Table 1. Interviews were recorded with field notes only, in view of safety concerns associated with carrying any kind of clearly visible technological device in the research area. Hence, complete verbatim transcriptions were not possible, but core statements and repeated sentiments were captured precisely and accurately. While not all participants were comfortable to disclose their nationality to unfamiliar outsiders, some were eager to express the

TABLE 1 Questions posed to participants in the questionnaire

Questions
Are you able to satisfy all your basic needs on a daily basis?
Is your surrounding environment a source of stress to you?
Do you know of and/or support any environmentally friendly businesses or agencies in IY?
Would ownership of land make a difference to your attitude toward the environment in Imizamo Yethu?
Do you think that there should be a limit to the number of people allowed to live in IY?
Do you have access to clean drinking water, clean air to breathe and healthy food to eat on a regular basis?
Have you experienced sufficient public service delivery (rubbish removal, sanitation, etc.) in recent years?
Can businesses and community members take better care of the IY environment than the government?
Do you think people should pay for good environmental conditions?
Do you believe that national and local government respects your right to a healthy environment?
Would you be willing to smuggle abalone, if it were necessary, to provide for your family?
Have you or your family members experienced any violent crime or burglary in or near you home in IY?
Are social and economic problems more important than environmental problems?

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difficulties of daily life related to being 'a foreigner'. Respondents' countries of origin included Somalia, Nigeria, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Eritrea and Mozambique, but the majority of the 22 interviews were conducted with Xhosa-speaking African people who had migrated from the more rural Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. A few participants were Afrikaans-speaking 'coloured' people who identify as the true natives of the Western Cape Province. The conversations were open-ended but tended to follow the broad themes indicated in Table 1. These centred on environmental stress, awareness of—and attitudes towards—commercial and state capacity to drive the transition to sustainability, respectively, and the balance (or imbalance) between welfare and care for the environment necessary to achieve just transitions in practice. Finally, perceptions of what kind of sociopolitical regime change is desirable were critically discussed.

Results

Research outputs presented in this section include broad demographic descriptors of the sample and thematic qualitative data covering public conditions and public services, livelihoods, environmental concern, and justice and dissent.

– Demographics

Altogether 45% of participants had dropped out of high school; only 34% had completed their secondary education to successfully obtain a matric (school-leaver's) certificate. Around 14% had only finished primary school (see Figure 4).

Most participants in our sample were persons between the ages of 35 and 50. Altogether, persons aged 21 to 50 comprised approximately 69% of the entire sample (see Figure 5).

Around 65% of participants had resided in IY for more than ten years at the time we disseminated our questionnaire. This also applied to the considerable proportion of participants who were foreign nationals. Roughly the same number of male and female residents opted to participate in the questionnaire. Foreign nationals as a demographic descriptor was not sought in the questionnaire, but often featured in interviews. Despite their length of stay, most had not gained South African citizenship or mastered any local languages, which made informal interviews difficult.

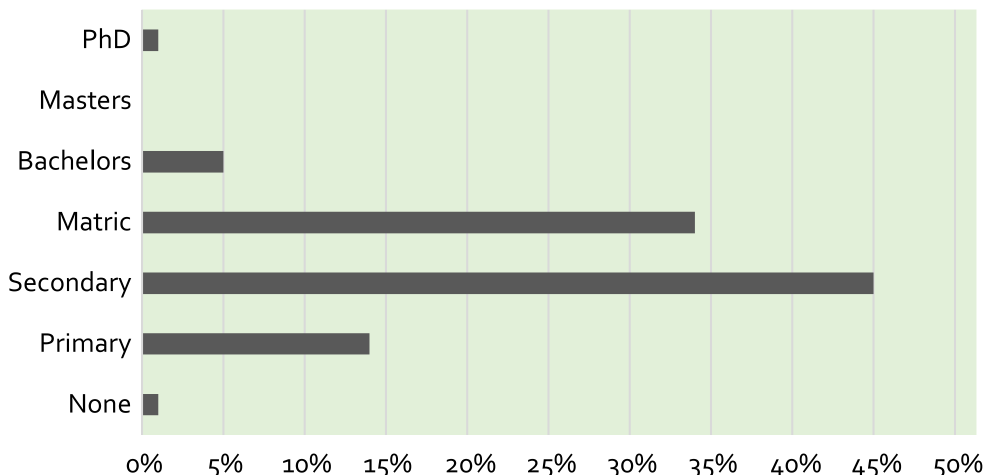

FIGURE 4 Percentage of participants per educational level completed

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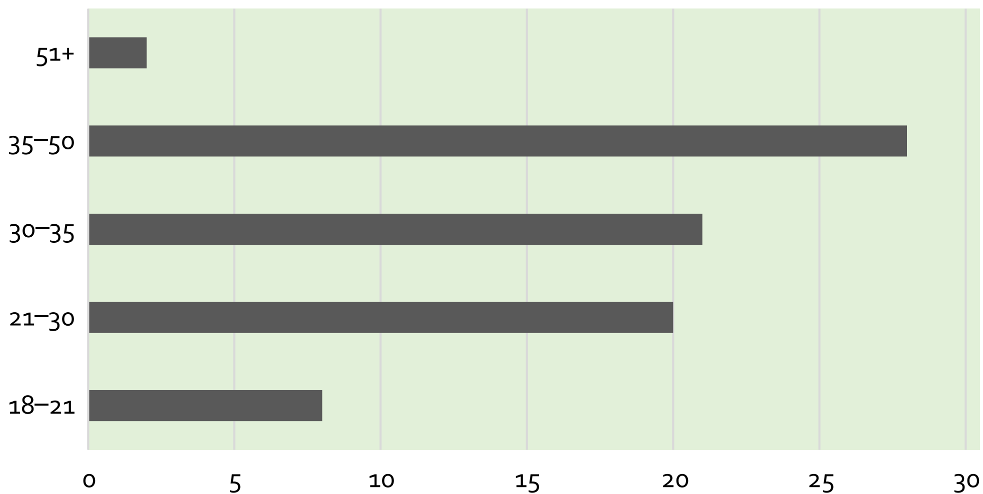

FIGURE 5 Number of participants per age category

– Public conditions and services

Biophysical living conditions in IY are extremely hazardous. Fire is an ever-present threat. Few residents could afford safe electrical appliances, and thousands of electrical cables could be seen draped between houses and connection points. The north-westerly slope on which IY is situated is covered in Cape fynbos—a vegetation type that is prone to wildfire. Long, dry summers and invasive species combine to increase the likelihood and intensity of these fires, and the community's vulnerability is compounded by the density of the settlement. Shacks are often built on top of one another within and beyond the boundaries of the designated residential area.

Other pressing environmental hazards are related to grey-water pollution, dirty drains, blocked or leaking sewerage systems, insufficient toilet facilities and piles of rubbish. The lack of basic services, such as provision of private sanitation facilities, threatens both environmental wellbeing and human health. According to official statistics compiled via the national census in 2011, more than 3,000 households in the area had no access to a flush toilet connected to sewerage. The few communal toilets and basins that are available are visibly unsanitary, dysfunctional and/or unused. Urination and defecation take place randomly amid the dwellings, as does washing of clothes. It is common for residents to dispose of solid waste, grey water and/or sewage on the outskirts of the buffer zone—or in the narrow spaces between dwellings.

Around 75% of participants indicated that they experienced inadequate refuse removal and sanitation facilities and 65% said they do not have regular access to clean drinking water, healthy food and/or clean air. Polluted runoff from IY contaminates the nearby Hout Bay River, which flows into the Atlantic Ocean through the local estuary, creating a health hazard for all Hout Bay residents and affecting the entire estuarine and marine ecosystem. Indeed, 85% of participants indicated that they experienced their immediate environment as a source of stress. Furthermore, only 34% of participants answered affirmatively when asked whether they were able to satisfy their basic needs on a daily basis. As a crude indicator of community trust, or recognition of willingness, in whatever sphere of government to provide public services sustainably in IY, 34% of participants said government was a more appropriate custodian than businesses or community organizations. However, when asked whether they thought government respected their environmental rights, 80% of participants answered negatively.

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– Livelihoods

Experiences of despondency were strongly conveyed by the community's more outspoken members, especially regarding the empty promises and untrustworthiness of national, provincial and local governments. Some interviewees said they felt ignored and neglected, arguing vehemently that 'people cannot live this way forever'. Simply put, participants were explicitly disillusioned with their chances of securing a healthy environment and achieving any kind of multidimensional equality. In informal interviews, some said that they felt cheated and sold out by the ruling ANC (national) and DA (provincial and local) governments. Altogether 39% of participants indicated that they earned an annual salary of R60,000 (around US $4,200) or less. The maximum figure in the category of US $4,200 equates to US $11.50 per day, but the category is broad and may comprise an average income on the basis of the South African minimum wage (US $9.50 per day). In total, 49% of participants identified as unemployed (see Figure 6).

Participants expressed dissatisfaction with overcrowding, frequently asserting its economic causes and effects. Controversially, 85% of participants indicated that the number of people allowed to live in IY should be limited. Contrarily, informal interviews indicated that those who owned land in IY exacerbated the alarming population density by renting out small spaces that barely offered enough space to accommodate informal dwellings (shacks) in their backyards or in the 'greenbelt'.

As a result, the problem of overcrowding is often attributed to the influx of economic migrants from other African countries. One elderly participant expressed dissatisfaction with the 'many foreigners overpopulating' IY. The influx of so-called 'illegal' immigrants highlights many tensions about access to land and sustainable living space more generally. The property market in IY is chaotic and effectively lawless. A substantial number of long-term residents live in masonry houses, and have formal homeownership, but the proportion of informal backyard dwellers is increasing. This assertion in informal interviews can be corroborated by direct observation.

The scarcity and insecurity of place and services has led people to resort either to opportunistic individualism, which involves seeking one's own advantage at the expense of others, or engaging in hostile collective actions to confront the threat newcomers pose to existing livelihoods. For example, collusion on rent pricing exploits the desperation and vulnerability of impoverished and disempowered foreigners. Thus, exploitative land-use practices among homeowners intensifies the already unjust spatial distribution of

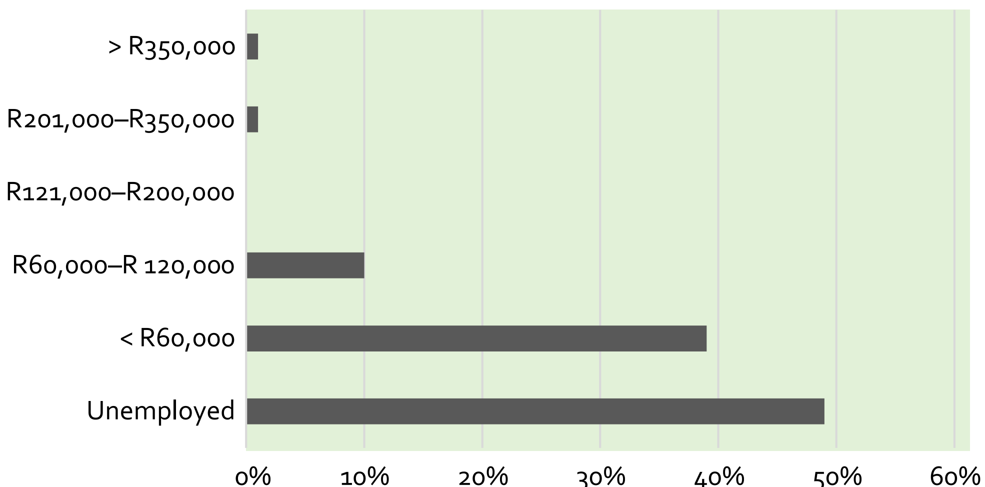

FIGURE 6 Percentage of participants per income category

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environmental goods and ills in IY. In one interview, a long-term resident expressed deep frustration with individuals causing overall community vulnerability. The interviewee highlighted overpopulation due to rent-seeking locals, and a resultant uncontrolled influx of 'illegal' immigrants. According to one 'illegal' immigrant, this hostility was making it impossible for foreign nationals to set up businesses. Another non-South African interviewee was at pains to express despair about a failed attempt to establish a competitive, sustainable restaurant in IY. The enterprise had failed because (local) residents chose to boycott the venture, and because of the community's general lack of buying power. When we asked some foreign nationals why they would voluntarily enter a precarious situation in which competition for money/employment and environmental resources was fierce, a common explanation was that rich white people in the area informally employed them at sub-minimum wage pay scales—but that such wages offered more attractive opportunities than those available in their home countries.

– Environmental concern

In their answers to our question about awareness of environmentally friendly businesses or agencies in the area, 53% of participants said they knew about such organizations. This proportion was lower than expected, since a quite visible recycling centre is located near the main road's entrance into IY.

Despite livelihood concerns, residents wanted improved environmental conditions. Still, 39% of participants said they would be willing to harvest endangered species (that is, smuggle abalone) if necessary, to provide for their families, suggesting that livelihoods tend to have supreme priority. This might suggest that biophysical needs trump environmental care. Indeed, 81% of participants said land ownership would change their attitude towards the environment in IY.

As in many areas in South Africa, environmental problems seem to be overshadowed by social crises. Even though our sample was biased due to the timing of data collection, unemployment in IY is severe, and basic needs are not met. An overwhelming 89% of participants indicated that they or their families had recently experienced violent crime in or near their homes. Most participants found questions about the relative importance of socioeconomic problems versus environmental issues simple to answer, with 72% saying the former was supreme. Despite their experiences of violence, a noteworthy 39% of participants believed that people should pay for good environmental conditions—notwithstanding established public policies that provided for indigent households to receive free basic electricity, water and other basic public services.

– Justice and dissent

Informal interviews took place mainly in response to the questionnaire and were anchored in narratives about how environmental concern is superseded by aspirations for governmental accountability and economic equity—and in behaviours seen as proper means to these ends. These ends were not commonly understood in explicit relation to each other, but as separate issues.

> We've been struggling here for many years. 'Imizamo Yethu' means 'our collective struggle' in isiXhosa. That's what it is—that's why it isn't 'Mandela Park' anymore—because the ANC isn't struggling for us anymore. They get fat and we get nothing. So, we will fight for ourselves! (Interviewee I, 2017).[2]

Interviewee I identified as black African and isiXhosa-speaking, but did not disclose any formal station or position. He was the only participant who associated proudly with IY

2 All extracts in this article are from interviews ('What does environmental justice mean to you?') conducted by Matt Johnston in IY between August and December 2017.

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as a unitary collective or polity with common interests. Notably, this was also one of the only politically assertive statements made by any of the participants. Most interviews were almost uniformly economic in their substance. Some participants expressed contempt for their fellow residents:

> Mense kom van die Oos-Kaap en oral in Afrika, en maak asof die plek hulle s'n is! Onse mense is nog altyd hier, maar hoe kan ons iets doen as Zimbabwiërs en Malawiërs sal werk vir kleingeld? Hier het ons meer nodig, maar die rykes sal mos liewerste kleingeld betaal vir dieselfde werk. So, ons soek nie die buitelandse mense hier nie. Ons gaan nie prysgee vir hulle families duisende kilometers weg nie [People come from the Eastern Cape and all over Africa and act like the place is theirs! Our people have always been here, but what can we do if Zimbabweans and Malawians are willing to work for small change? We need more, but the rich prefer to pay small change for the same work. So, we don't want foreigners here. We are not going to sacrifice for their families thousands of kilometres away] (Interviewee II, 2017).

Interviewee II, a 'coloured' Afrikaans-speaking participant, here criticizes inward migration of people from South Africa's Eastern Cape Province, and of those from 'all over Africa'. A fragmented notion of IY's community was conveyed by Interviewee II in line with Turok *et al*. (2021), where labour-market forces have replaced apartheid controls: wealthy people preferred the cheap labour that Malawian and Zimbabwean immigrants are willing to provide. Interviewee II was unwilling to sacrifice her financial wellbeing for that of foreigners' distant family members in Malawi or Zimbabwe who were reaping benefits at her expense. However, cheap domestic labour is only one trade in which African foreigners partake. One individual was eager to express the following in broken English:

> I am from Somalia. I come here trying to make a living and support my family. It worked for a while, I was selling hot meals and people were buying. They like it. But then some locals say: no. They tell everyone not to buy at my place, and those who still want to don't have money. Now I am stuck with nothing. So, I drink [laughing] (Interviewee III, 2017).

Interviewee III was not unique in turning to substance misuse, nor was he unique in being challenged by linguistic barriers. Some residents were unable to participate in our research for linguistic reasons and were therefore also unable to secure gainful work. An elderly participant pointed out that local, careless teenagers tended towards this kind of problematic behaviour in IY too:

> They [the youth] are up to no good. There is no work for them. What must they do? They are making trouble: taking drugs and looking for quick money every day. They do anything to get what they want. It helps them forget life here (Interviewee IV, 2017).

The narrative of injustice therefore developed along economic lines. All participants were made aware of the nature of this research—and its focus on environmental injustice. They intuitively grasped that the aim was to understand local causes of the acute environmental degradation in IY, and IY's sharp contrast with the wealthy neighbourhoods in surrounding Hout Bay. Governmental accountability, or lack thereof, frequently came into focus as one such perceived cause:

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> Some of these nice houses were paid for by the Irish government long ago, but our own government don't do it. Why not? They spend big money on themselves and rich people have nice clean streets and good roads here, next to us! They talk [about] social grants all the time, but it's not enough (Interviewee V, 2017).

Frustration with the government's apparent inability or unwillingness to provide adequate formal housing was common, as Interviewee V's words show. But basic amenities were also found wanting:

> Nobody listens when we ask nice for stuff we need. Everyone knows we need! If toilets and taps are not broken, lots of shacks must share one. Women and girls get raped there at night. So, people just do their thing next to the shack. It is safer. Then we live like this. But if we toi-toi [protest], we burn the street, then they must watch, and things happen. Government and people with money only help us when they see things are ugly here (Interviewee VI, 2017).

Interviewee VI's statement was made in the aftermath of a fire that had affected 6,100 residents in IY. This event sparked noteworthy charitable activities coordinated by international and local NGOs such as Gift of the Givers and Thula Thula, but also stimulated the City of Cape Town to start upgrading essential infrastructure (Mofolo, 2020). During our data collection fieldwork, passers-by expressed frustration with opportunistic fellow residents who queued for food, blankets and other donations even though their homes had allegedly not been affected by fire. But this angry distrust was relatively mild compared with the sentiment towards IY's super-wealthy neighbours:

> Look down here in this valley and around there in Llandudno—people live the high life. How is that fair? What chance do we have to get there—fokol [none]. That's why people go do illegal stuff like perlemoen [abalone], then they get rich and move to Llandudno. I know a guy like that. That's how to get rich and have a good life. Now more foreigners come in and take the work that just keeps us struggling to survive. That's life in IY (Interviewee VII, 2017).

From this interview, a narrative of rebellious self-determination began to emerge. Tangible examples such as those quoted by Interviewee VII indicate how residents perceive the economic injustices that might only be mitigated if they take matters into their own hands. Abiding by the law and relying on government help did not yield decent work, services or environmental health:

> How can we trust government to take care of people and the environment here? They don't care until now, so what's changed? I also don't trust people in IY, but at least we know the problems. Simple things, you can see! But where's [the] money? (Interviewee VIII, 2017).

The metanarrative developed into one that foregrounded sustainability, and local custodianship of sustainability, on condition that such collective and individual actions would be gainful:

> I studied anthropology, but I do township tours in IY. My sister owned one of these houses paid for by the Irish government long ago, but she died from HIV, and my brother-in-law forced me out of the inheritance. So, now he rents a small part of it to me. Everyone is doing that: renting out a small patch to desperate people—and then we get this overpopulation and shit in the streets. I want a

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> better life for my daughter, so the township tours I do for rich, white European and American tourists bring enough for me to send her to private school here in Hout Bay. I am proud of that. That is my justice, but for the environment here … people need to see how caring about it gives them the power to live a decent life (Interviewee IX, 2017).

Interviewee IX explained how rent-seeking behaviour had reached absurd proportions. The owners, sometimes legitimate and sometimes not, rented out a few square metres of informal housing (shacks), or bare land where such informal housing may be built, with no services whatsoever to vulnerable non-locals. Often, such rent seeking is non-contractual and based on misrepresentations of true property ownership—leaving tenants with no legal rights or recourse to authorities at all. Interviewees strongly communicated the point that everything taking place there is effectively unregulated, which means wealthy locals can and do easily and eagerly exploit poor immigrants—thereby reproducing apartheid-style hierarchies of unequal opportunity and power.

Discussion

Cape Town, while often lauded as a world-class city, remains starkly divided. A disempowered majority find themselves caught in a vicious cycle of environmentally destructive behaviour and attitudes, often entrenched by the more powerful middle class. In terms of policy, the National Environmental Management Act No. 107 of 1998 and associated Waste Act No. 59 of 2008 contain some environmental justice principles such as prioritizing the prevention of pollution, placing the onus of implementation on the state (both national and regional) and businesses, and enacting a binding universal duty of care, which applies to both consumers and producers. However, implementation of these provisions is rare and consequences for non-compliance have been all but absent.

This case study is perhaps a typical example of many postcolonial cities and regions where legal or judiciary instruments provide little to no relief from discrimination and inequalities that run deeper than racial binaries (Nixon, 2011). Persistent poverty incentivizes the exploitation of the already degraded natural environment and vulnerable people, rather than encouraging ethnically and socioeconomically heterogeneous communities to organize concerted dissent for shared benefit. Our results suggest that money (or the pursuit thereof) is a major impediment to EJ. It also suggests that there is a lack of both community and government accountability regarding human dignity and environmental health. Other case studies in postcolonial settings have identified 'crisis events, governance messiness, and social conflict' as important and interrelated contradictions that underpin the broader polity (Novalia *et al.*, 2021: 683). Studies emanating from postcolonial contexts are showing how the conglomeration of diverse actors combining collaborative and confrontational movements can destabilize authoritative and capitalistic regimes while galvanizing new ones (Gore, 2018; Novalia *et al.*, 2020). In this case, the low impact of chaotic and reactive solutions suggests a need for inclusive leadership in the community that can catalyze concerted and non-discriminatory dissenting activities that demand environmental justice for everyone, rather than blaming 'immigrants' for its absence.

Many participants proposed an indiscriminate limitation of inward migration. This sentiment reflects the extraordinary growth of the informal settlement, where the official residential development boundary imposed by local government has been repeatedly transgressed, which simultaneously led to visible densification well beyond the 27,227 persons per square kilometre noted in 2011. Experiences and perceptions of environmental injustice centred on poor service delivery and an alarmingly widespread struggle for subsistence. Enunciations of these experiences and perceptions were generally coupled with xenophobic statements and expressions of powerlessness. The

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popular perception that government does not care about environmental rights in IY was compounded by a cautious view that community members and businesses were better equipped to take care of the natural environment—despite the scant resources accessible to the community and the obvious lack of commercial activity to promote EJ. This perception reflects a common belief that government cannot or does not care, despite its very own legislative duty of care imposed by the National Environmental Management Act of 1998. Xenophobic tensions are not endemic to the informal settlement in this case (Uwimpuhwe and Ruiters, 2018) and the scale of true inward migration is unknown. However, the national population has simultaneously grown from 40 to 60 million (UN, 2019) and economic outlooks and inequality have generally worsened since 1994 (Mohamed, 2020).

Such systemic pressures, combined with the contextual lived experiences of poverty, poor service delivery, insecure livelihoods and frequent disasters such as fire (Kahanji *et al*., 2019), have culminated in a subjective deprioritization of environmental concern and social cohesion. Trust in fellow residents and government to solve these problems is low. Despite these topics being raised in quick succession in both the questionnaire and during interviews, xenophobic tensions were not anecdotally related to the widely perceived lack of political will in government to intervene. This suggests that the reproduction of social inequalities along the lines of race, class, gender and nationality are not aberrations or the result of market failures, but integral, normal elements of modern market economies that necessarily produce social and environmental inequalities (Pellow, 2007). Africans from across the continent in IY suffer political disenfranchisement by a popularly elected government, cultural disenfranchisement by their informal settlement communities that are themselves reproducing apartheid-style inequalities, and economic disenfranchisement by an elite white minority and growing black middle class that knowingly offer slave wages and squalid places to live in that cannot be refused. If inaction equates to tacit acceptance, this can be understood as state-sanctioned reproduction of the processes that subjugated black African people and their environments for the deliberate benefit of imperial European society. And, since legal impunity is the order of the day, and since capital does not have to actually address environmental justice issues because it knows there will be minor, if any, sanctions (Pulido, 2017), those few documented South African owners of land in IY are effectively free from any duty of care regarding the environmental and societal consequences of exploiting impoverished fellow Africans for monetary benefits alone.

The commodification of IY as a touristic spectacle was an unexpected observation. Individual residents who tapped into the wealth of international (principally European and North American) tourists managed to secure a relatively comfortable livelihood that enabled them to send their children to the international private school in Hout Bay. Again, this is perhaps not so much a market failure but an ordinary, normal manifestation of an international service economy at the postcolonial grassroots level. Just as in *A Small Place* by Kincaid (1988)—in which the bizarre positionality of the residents and island of postcolonial Antigua is described—IY's story is also one of place as displacement told in the first person, where knowledge must begin and which is inextricably local and transnational (Nixon, 2011). Further, as Anand *et al*. (2022) argue in their comparison of Mumbai and Philadelphia, we must consider both contextual differences and similarities at the same time to restore the emancipatory potential of critical research in this era of neocolonial developmental narratives in cahoots with the forward march of racialized capitalism. The key point to take from our case is that the displacement and fragmentation of African families for what we consider to be slave labour is neither historical nor forced, but contemporary and voluntary. Moreover, where historical injustices fundamentally entail the intercontinental and inter-racial exploitation and expropriation of people and environments such as those in this case study of IY, contemporary injustices

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include intra-continental and intra-racial human and environmental exploitation and expropriation. Distinctly, contemporary injustices as in the case of IY occur at international, regional and individual levels, and entail the normalization of colonial-style exploitation between black Africans with diverse demographic identities, wealthy whites, and a sensitive environment: neocolonial capitalism made manifest.

Conclusions

This contribution can be categorized as a hybrid of values, contestation and disagreement, and normative directionality regarding urban sustainability with an emphasis on, first, the ethical aspects of transitions—distribution, justice, poverty—and, secondly, power and politics in transitions (Avelino, 2017; Köhler *et al.*, 2019). So, what does this mean for sustainability transitions in *post*colonial urban contexts? We argue that this research, which brings urban transitions theory 'down to earth', is an exercise in 'facing reality, recognizing and accepting such diverse phenomena like greed, opportunism, status seeking, and rebound, which are unlikely to be countered adequately by altruism' (Van den Bergh, 2010: 542). We find the persistence of dissenting and empirical accounts of environmental injustice in such extreme postcolonial urban contexts incompatible with progressive environmental policies that rely on a duty of care. The rapid pace at which marginalized communities in postcolonial Africa are evolving outstrips the theoretical catch-up that is under way in North American and European academic thought—where EJ literature lacks the critical edge afforded by anti-colonial experiences and views. The reframing of climate change and environmental degradation through postcolonial lenses with reference to mainstream environmental justice literature in the northern hemisphere is happening (Dhillon, 2018), but colonial praxis is still being reproduced in postcolonial or 'emancipated' contexts despite the political power of white society having been effectively eroded. Worryingly, therefore, the political mechanisms that delivered apartheid are being replaced by economic norms. Even more alarmingly, political and bureaucratic elites in Africa may be implicated in such insidious reproduction of Northern/Western hegemony (Serequeberhan, 2009). Results suggest that concurrent local and global visions of urban transitions to sustainability should be informed by postcolonial demonstrations of simultaneously destructive and creative dissent.

The principles of EJ, augmented by a heuristic utilization of the notion of a 'just transition' (Swilling *et al.*, 2015), should be advanced by means of non-violent, well-organized dissent. Such resistance would simultaneously communicate priority issues and places (Kaika, 2017), while instilling a sense of power in solidarity for heterogeneous and anarchic communities characterized by acute environmental stress and material deprivation. For postcolonial policy and governance, this could mean reform or abandonment of ineffective measures that shift responsibility for urban sustainability transitions to powerless individuals. Finally, we argue that the aforementioned challenge of resistance should not only be directed at government authorities, but also at wealthy businesses and persons who should proactively take greater responsibility in postcolonial contexts, where their duty of care necessarily extends to the constrained and complex livelihoods, public services and environmental concerns of impoverished urban communities who are subject to discrimination. Deeper duties become neglected when the bare minimum is done simply to conform to formal legal prescripts or policy (Emanuel, 2017). Proactive and direct engagement with dissenting urban communities can advance a shared just transition. Impactful critical research is needed on the exclusionary representation of social and environmental issues in postcolonial urban communities, where complex injustices may be obscured by violent forms of public dissent that perpetuate the unsustainable 'slow violence' of dominant sociopolitical regimes (Nixon, 2011; Chancel, 2020; Anand *et al.*, 2022). We recommend open and regular meetings of powerful interscalar organizations (including the third sector, academia, government at all levels, financial organizations and businesses)

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and free agents to provide platforms where critical voices in postcolonial cities effect policy change on the basis of a shared 'duty to resist' environmental injustice (Delmas, 2018; Chancel, 2020). Neocolonial and racialized urban capitalism can be countered by new regulatory institutions that learn from, and are accountable to, postcolonial perspectives and experiences such as those in IY.

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