

# Brexit: Modes of Uncertainty and Futures in an Impasse

Accepted for publication in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. The information, practices and views in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).

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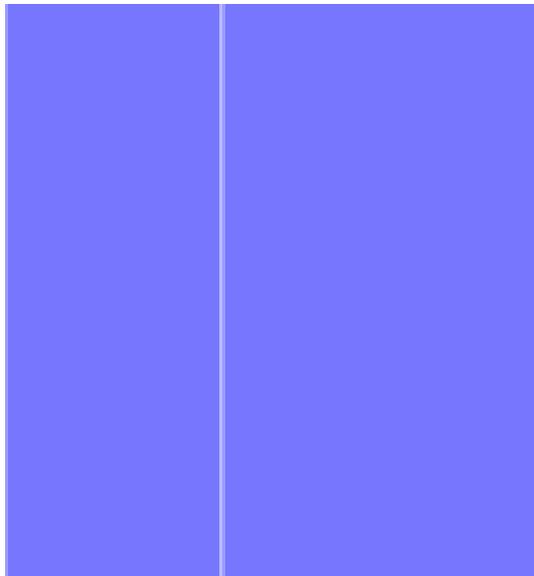
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This article has been accepted for publication and undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as [doi: 10.1111/TRAN.12348](https://doi.org/10.1111/TRAN.12348)



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**Article type:** Regular paper

**Abstract:** Alongside the emergence of various populisms, Brexit and other contemporary geopolitical events have been presented as symptomatic of a generalizing and intensifying sense of uncertainty in the midst of a crisis of (neo)liberalism. In this paper we describe what kind of event Brexit is becoming in the impasse between the UK's EU referendum in 2016 and its anticipated exit from the EU in 2019. Based on 108 interviews with people in the North-East of England, we trace how Brexit is variously enacted and felt as an end, advent, a harbinger of worse to come, non-event, disaster, and betrayed promise. By following how these incommensurate versions of Brexit take form and co-exist we supplement explanatory and predictive approaches to the geographies of Brexit and exemplify an approach that traces what such geopolitical events become. Specifically, we use the concept of 'modes of uncertainty' as a way of discerning patterns in how present uncertainties are lived. A 'mode of uncertainty' is a shared set of practices animated by a distinctive mood through which futures are made present and felt. Rather than treat uncertainty as a static, explanatory context, we thus follow how different versions of Brexit are constituted through specific 'modes of (un)certainty' – negative hope, national optimisms, apprehensive hopefulness and fantasies of action - that differentiate within a seemingly singular, shared sense of uncertainty.

**Funding information:** Leverhulme Trust

**Data availability statement:** Not provided

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Article type : Regular Paper

## PROLOGUE: IN AN IMPASSE

Jane was “dismayed” by the result. She'd gone downstairs to watch the news after texting her sister in Sweden, something that she wouldn't normally do unless it was serious and couldn't remember ever feeling that unhappy “without it being a personal... or family thing”. For Jane, a retired grandmother in her 70s, “it was *that* emotional... as if something bad had happened in the family”. Her observed rise in racism and the expression of far-right views had “shaken her faith in humanity”. She was worried for her children and grandchildren, and “what sort of a world it's going to be for them”. Jane's hope was that Brexit wouldn't “be as bad as it seems it could be” but she feels that her generation have let younger generations down.

Whilst Jane hadn't been shocked by the result Sally had been “surprised”, despite voting to leave. Her surprise had quickly given way to another feeling: that ‘this might be what we need...’, that we should “GO FOR IT”! She hadn't liked the way the country had been going for a while and had been relieved to get a Conservative government in the last election. Despite feeling that Brexit was “absolutely” the right thing to do for the country, she recognised that it was likely to be “a bumpy time” but was sure: “we can weather the storm... in the end it will be to the good”. Sensing that ‘the mood in the country might be changing’ she expected things to be better for her grandchildren. Now in her 60s Sally had voted for their future.

Contrary to the clear positions of Jane and Sally, Alan from County Durham still had “mixed feelings”. At the time of the result he'd been happy because he had hoped that Brexit would stop the country “wasting” so much money on Europe and “far, far too much immigration”. But he was also worried about the implications. He runs a small business and needs to “send things abroad occasionally [...] to France, all over...” He was unsure: “would that affect things? Will we have to send out a thousand forms to send a postcard?” These were the kinds of things that

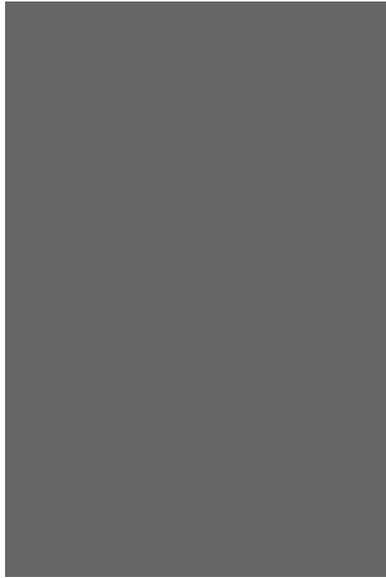
concerned him most, “holidays and everything...” So many things yet “no one, still no one knows”.

## 1 INTRODUCTION: BREXIT FUTURES

How did people encounter and relate to Brexit in the impasse between the referendum on 26<sup>th</sup> June 2016 and the anticipated exit from the EU in 2019? And what kind of event is Brexit becoming in the midst of other uncertainties that, in part, compose the contemporary condition? The opening accounts capture moments in an impasse. Whilst already dated, they are an important documentation of how people were feeling at the time; a set of feelings that are perhaps already estranged. Brexit sometimes becomes part of the background of everyday life but, as we write, Brexit also continues to have the ‘impression of a major event’<sup>1</sup> as the possibility of stark and divergent outcomes are named – ‘no deal’, ‘hard Brexit’, ‘soft Brexit’, ‘transitional arrangement’ – and radically different futures proliferate: new trade deals, fewer immigrants, regained sovereignty, separated families, lost jobs, increased racism, and so on. In this paper, we trace how Brexit happens as a set of incommensurate events and stay with Brexit as it becomes entangled with and (re)made through people’s affectively imbued relations to a range of futures. From Jane’s weak hope of it not being as bad as it could be, to Alan’s hope that the country would stop “wasting” so much money on Europe, Brexit becomes an event through a mix of hoped and feared, promised and threatened, futures.

In focusing on what kind of event(s) Brexit is becoming and how it is entangled with ways of living with/in uncertainty, we intervene in embryonic work on Brexit and other seemingly disruptive geopolitical events. We exemplify an approach to the geographies of events that stays with, and attempts to follow, what kind of event something becomes as it is variously encountered (Anderson and Wilson, 2018). In doing so, we supplement accounts that aim to explain the event of Brexit by reference to one or more cause whether new or old forms of racism and xenophobia that mark a European ‘crisis of liberalism’ and reactivate colonial legacies (Bhambra, 2017; Emejulu, 2016); a deferred response to the effects of austerity and post-Fordist changes in class composition (Mckenzie, 2017; MacLeod and Jones, 2018); a revolt by those ‘left behind’ from economic globalisation (Goodwin & Heath, 2016); or an effect of age and unequal distributions of opportunity (Dorling, 2016), to name just some. Whilst the work of explanation is important, it involves a particular mode of inquiry whereby the event becomes a secondary

<sup>1</sup>The phrase ‘impression of a major event’ is taken from a dialogue between Jacques Derrida and Giovanna Borradori (2003) on 9/11.



effect to be explained by reference to an already existing and known primary cause (or set of causes). More speculative work on the ‘implications’ of Brexit for various geographies (of citizenship, of the nation state, of regional economic development, of multiculturalism, and so on) retains but reverses this relation between cause and effect. Brexit becomes the cause of (potential) national and supra-national geographical transformations and consequences (Bachmann & Sidaway, 2016; Los et al, 2017). Importantly, whilst our approach aims to supplement these ways of relating to geopolitical events, it does not aim to replace them. By orientating our inquiry around ‘everyday Brexits’ or, rather, the scenes, figures, signs, and stories that *are* Brexit for different people, we trace how multiple versions of Brexit coexist in the impasse between decision and possible exit. Rather than one single geopolitical event, as the name ‘Brexit’ would suggest, multiple Brexits coexist. Whether Brexit becomes as the imminent return of waning sovereignty, the revival of ‘racialised structures of feeling’ (Virdee & McGeever, 2018: 1804), the loss of liberal tolerance (Wilson, 2016), or a slow onset economic disaster, each Brexit is a manner of relating to present uncertainty in a way that entangles Brexit with residual, dominant, and emerging affective conditions and formations of nation, identity, and belonging.

What, then, can an understanding of ‘everyday Brexits’ tell us about broader claims that the geo-historical present is characterised by uncertainty? And how is the present inhabited (and remade) in relation to such uncertainty? Numerous attempts have been made to diagnose how uncertainty has become something close to a shared, but differentially articulated and individuated structure of feeling that crosses, dissolves, and creates social differences (see Lorey, 2015; Berlant, 2011). In this context, Brexit has been interpreted as a symptom of uncertainty and as compensation *for* uncertainty. The act of voting to exit the European Union has not only been placed within a sequence of ‘unpredictable’ events in a turbulent geo-historical present, but also explained in relation to the uncertainties that accompany neoliberal ways of governing economy and life, which was evidenced by the Leave campaign’s desire to ‘take back control’. By following how people relate to Brexit in the current impasse, we complicate these general claims by honing in on the different ways people live with uncertainty. Rather than reduce uncertainty to a static, explanatory context, we expand on recent work on everyday practices of futures-making to argue that Brexit is constituted through specific ‘modes of uncertainty’ that differentiate within a seemingly singular and shared sense of normalized and intensifying uncertainty. We thus expand the concept of ‘modes of uncertainty’ beyond its original use in work concerned with the ways in which states and other formal actors govern futures (Samimian-Darash & Rabinow, 2015), by showing how every ‘mode of uncertainty’ is

characterised by a distinctive affective orientation (as expressed and enacted through the optimism, dismay, hope and other tones with which Jane, Sally, and Alan talked about Brexit).

The paper draws on interviews with 108 people in the North East region of England. In section two we place Brexit in the context of claims that a spreading and intensifying uncertainty has become something like a 'structure of feeling' that characterises what it feels like to dwell in the geo-historical present. We introduce the concept of 'modes of uncertainty' as a means of orientating inquiry to what kind of event(s) Brexit became as it was entangled with people's everyday lives and concerns. After a reflection on the challenges of researching in an impasse (section 3), the paper turns to empirical material, collected across six months, to map the 'modes of uncertainty' that sees Brexit become different kinds of event in the impasse between the UK's decision to leave the EU and its formal exit. Specifying *negative hope*, *national optimism*, *apprehensive hope* and *fantasies of action* as different modes of uncertainty that differentiate between, but also cut across, existing and emerging political (dis)identifications that surround Brexit, we show how each mode of uncertainty not only renders the future present, but also (re)makes the affective sense of the *geo-historical present*. In addition to summarising the consequences of our approach and arguments for embryonic work on Brexit and other geopolitical events, we conclude by reflecting on the implications of our emphasis on 'modes of uncertainty' for geographical work more widely.

## 2 STRUCTURES OF FEELING AND MODES OF UNCERTAINTY

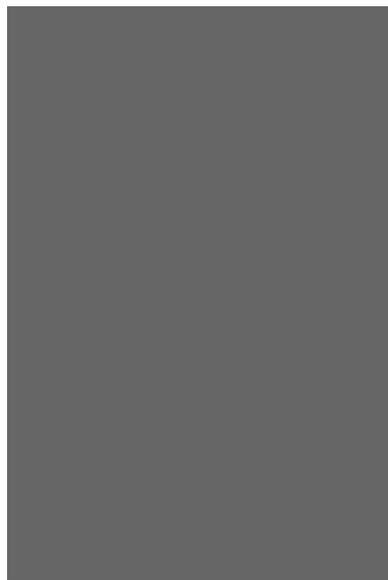
As part of multiple efforts to make sense of Brexit, politicians and commentators have placed it in a sequence of 'unpredictable' geopolitical events that have occurred in the wake of the 2007 financial crisis. Simultaneously connected to a 'crisis of (neo)liberalism', a 'crisis of globalisation', and other actual or anticipated crises, Brexit has become another expression of the turbulence that supposedly characterises the contemporary liberal democracies of Western Europe and North America. This is a turbulence that finds expression in unanticipated election results, including the election of Donald Trump; the rise of a range of left and right populisms; and the emergence of candidates independent of traditional parties, such as Emmanuel Macron in France. It is a turbulence that is also felt in the apparent waning of an already-fragile faith in the infrastructures of liberal democracy (including the media and ideals/ideas of truth and tolerance); attempts to name the alternatives that are slowly emerging (e.g. 'Post-Truth'); and speculations about the future of Western liberal democracies (including the becoming authoritarian or fascist of liberal democracies, and the appearance of new 'centrist' political parties and movements).

In such a geo-historical present, which is also constituted by climate change, terrorism, automation, and a myriad other unpredictable event-conditions that are enacted as threatening and/or disruptive, it is clear that Brexit uncertainties are happening in the midst of a collective, affective, *condition* of intensified and normalized uncertainty. Uncertainty has become the common thread that crosses and connects a host of terms used to discern the affective character of the contemporary (risk, turbulence, precarity, insecurity, instability, and other synonyms) in attempts to diagnose the waning and ending of the stability that was promised to some (middle-class, heterosexual, predominantly white) forms of life as part of the Fordist, post-WW2 settlement (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Such an affective condition marks a present in which a 'crisis ordinariness' (Berlant, 2011) has taken hold as social democratic pillars have fallen away (unions, pensions), 'flexibility' increasingly characterises regimes of work and non-work, and insecurity haunts multiple structural positions, from unemployed youth to the managerial class (c.f. Berlant, 2011; Lorey, 2015; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006). Staying with – rather than attempting to prematurely resolve – this ambiguity and terminological multiplicity tells us something about what kind of thing this affective condition is. Adapting the term from Williams

(1977), we might diagnose intensified and generalised uncertainty as one amongst multiple contemporary ‘structures of feeling’. Uncertainty would be the name for a structure of feeling that is characterised by the feeling of having multiple possibilities whilst simultaneously being unable to attach to and name *coherent* possibilities, as stable trajectories between past, present, and future fray and become fragile, are disrupted or interrupted, or fade and end<sup>2</sup>. For Williams, as an affective form of mediation tied to distinctive social-spatial formations, a ‘structure of feeling’ is a common affective quality felt across otherwise disparate events, practices, and processes. Structures of feeling “exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on action” (ibid 131-132) as affective resonances between diverse phenomena and intensifications that cluster around particular scenes, figures, and objects. We might say, then, that as a structure of feeling, uncertainty conditions how Brexit is related to and becomes present for people without determining how. Uncertainty occasionally intensifies, before dissipating as it becomes part of the background sense of ‘predictable-unpredictability’ (Southwood, 2011) that rumbles along as people learn to live with and through the precarious present.

If the concept of ‘structures of feeling’ gives us something like an affective context for ‘Brexit uncertainties’, it also presents us with a challenge: how to be attentive to the kinds of

<sup>2</sup>We use ‘possibilities’, rather than deploy a distinction between potentiality and possibility, to present the paradoxes of uncertainty as a structure of feeling. That is to say that multiple possibilities have been actualised but because of their multiplicity, attaching to a single, coherent, possibility becomes fraught.



differences in ways of relating to uncertainty that Jane, Sally, and Alan expressed in the prologue. How are we to attend to differences within a seemingly single structure of feeling without ascribing differences to variations in individual *interpretation*? This problem was unresolved by Williams (1977) as he tracked relations between structures of feeling at the level of the nation-state, and ascribed structures of feeling to either generations or classes. To differentiate within structures of feeling we deploy and expand the concept of ‘modes of uncertainty’. As we use it, a ‘mode of uncertainty’ is a felt way of registering and responding to uncertainty in a manner that enables it to be lived with and in (even if that promise is not realized, and uncertainty becomes overwhelming). By this, we mean that a mode of uncertainty involves a shared affective disposition – towards self, others, and world – that constitutes a form of living within/after/around uncertainty that is somehow characteristic. At the same time, it involves a

disclosure of uncertainty and an attunement to it in such a way as to have a felt impact. The term ‘modes of uncertainty’ is specifically introduced by Samimian-Darash and Rabinow (2015: 201) in the context of what they describe, after Foucault, as a “motion of problematisation” in which ‘uncertainty’ replaces governmental formations that are organised around “danger/certainty” and “risk/probability”. Although they say little about it, and theirs is not a conceptual use, for us the qualifier ‘mode’ serves to sensitise to differences and thus allows for a kind of engaged pluralism in analysis. Beginning from this emphasis on differences *within* commonality, we want to develop the concept into a way of orientating inquiry to shared ways of registering and responding to uncertainty.

To achieve such an orientation, we learn from and develop recent work on ‘future geographies’ which demonstrates how uncertainty surfaces as a particular kind of affectively and materially present problem that is variously mitigated, accepted, embraced, denied, or otherwise lived with (see Newhouse, 2017; Thieme, 2017). This gives us a starting point for differentiating between ‘modes of uncertainty’ as well as a question for work on Brexit as a particular kind of event: through what forms does uncertainty register as a specific problem that, in part, constitutes the sense of the present? First, every ‘mode of uncertainty’ will involve a specific way of affectively registering uncertainty, thus (re)making the *sense* of the geo-historical present as uncertainty surfaces. A mode of uncertainty may also involve the affective and/or ideational presence of pasts (including past possible or potential futures) and so is not only about the presence of the future and relations to it but involves a set of relations that entangle past-present-future into a particular configuration. As a consequence, and as terms like precarity (Lorey, 2015), stuckness (Berlant, 2011), and weariness (Wilkinson & Ortega-Alcázar, 2019) all gesture towards, it involves a particular way of feeling and being within the present (cf. Hitchen on austerity).

Second, every mode of uncertainty will involve anticipatory techniques, practices and/or dispositions that enable translations between certainties and uncertainties as they are hoped for and feared, mitigated, created, and entangled, in a dynamic set of affective investments and attachments that are tied into other social-spatial formations. Brexit is governed through logics of prediction and premediation that constitute the sense of an impasse or transitional present. Everyday relations also involve numerous forms of anticipatory action: preparing to leave or return to the UK, saving money, avoiding people, applications for dual citizenship, changing business suppliers, stockpiling, and so on. But everyday relations with Brexit also include waiting. As with other situations of, what we might call, frustrated, thwarted, impossible, or absent, agency (see Horton, 2016; Raynor, 2019), it might be that Brexit is now constituted by a series of anticipatory practices and dispositions that blur the line between action and inaction and thus question the emphasis on identifiable *anticipatory action*. This might include switching off, indifference, hoping, forgetting, not talking with friends, and so on (c.f. Allison, 2013; Jeffrey, 2010).

A ‘mode of uncertainty’ is a way of registering and responding to uncertainty that connects and renders indistinct events and the everyday. Modes of uncertainty – here what we are naming *negative hope*, *national optimism*, *apprehensive hope* and *fantasies of action* – vary between one another in two ways. First, in how uncertainty comes to have a felt impact and second, in the specific past-present-future relation that emerges alongside and through particular affective qualities. Modes of uncertainty are shared between people in that they are common patterns that simultaneously shape and condition how uncertainty can be lived with/in, and are the ongoing effect of innumerable practices of registering and responding to uncertainty. Whilst not the focus of this paper, people may move between modes, and their relation with events will also be affectively conditioned by the legacies, (non)belongings, and (non)attachments they bring to encounters with events that are always-already mediated (Ahmed, 2004). Despite this variation, orientating

inquiry towards ‘modes of uncertainty’ enables us to follow how Brexit becomes a particular type of event/events, rather than *only* an effect of other causes or a cause with a set of effects. What kind of thing Brexit becomes is entangled with, first, the particular presences of and relations between past and future and, second, the sense of the present. Before drawing out different modes of uncertainty, we reflect on researching in an impasse.

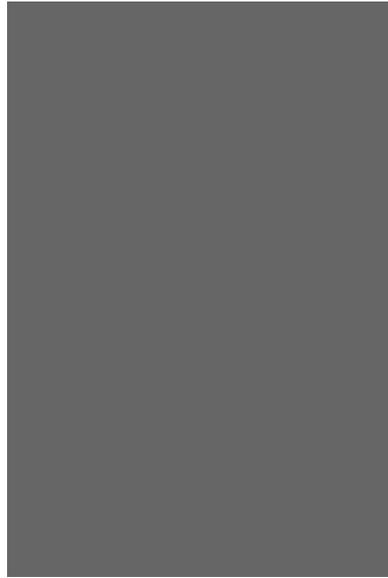
### 3 RESEARCHING IN AN IMPASSE

We interviewed 108 people between the ages of 18 and 90 in the North East of England. As a region, it contains some of the most deprived local authorities in the country and was named in a leaked government document as most likely to be hardest hit by the government’s Brexit strategy (Mason, 2018). Given the uneven impacts of austerity, uneven development, and the spatial politics of political disillusionment, geographically specific accounts are critical (Burrell and Hopkins, 2018; MacLeod & Jones, 2018).

The North East voted to leave with 58% of the vote, one of the highest regional margins<sup>3</sup>. Out of the twelve local areas within the North East, only Newcastle-Upon-Tyne voted to remain with 50.7% of the vote. Interviews were achieved using a snowball method and conducted across the region in both urban and rural locations and with people from a range of backgrounds, employment histories, political leanings, class positions, and different connections to the region. The sample was predominantly white British, with the exception of 10 EU nationals from Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, and Poland, and 2 participants from South and Southeast Asia, all of whom were resident in the North East at the time of the referendum. It contained both leave and remain voters, people who didn’t vote, and people who couldn’t vote (either because they failed to register or were ineligible), although these categories conceal concerns that are held in common and different intensities of attachment to remain and leave positions.

The research was conducted between November 2016 and May 2017, in the period between the referendum and the triggering of Article 50, but before the 2017 general election in an effort to understand how Brexit surfaced in an impasse filled with contradictory predictions. For Berlant (2011), an impasse is a type of “stretched-out present” (5), or a “stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic” (4). This emphasis on the intertwining of the intense and the enigmatic resonates with our experience of the shifting tones of our interviews and the very different issues and concerns that clustered around and attached to Brexit. Discussion of Brexit quickly moved into an inchoate tangle of concerns, frustrations, fears, joys, and hopes that ‘stretched’ the present into imagined futures of loss and return, as well as lingering pasts. Interviews would track between the identifiable and discrete scenes and figures that constituted the immediate present – the day of the referendum result, Theresa May, the triggering of Article 50, exchange rates – and a host of

<sup>3</sup>The region had a voter turnout of 69.3%.



concerns that were more or less distant; imperialism, a changing world order, multiculturalism, immigration, and so on<sup>4</sup>.

Partly, this ‘stretching’ is something common to interviewing as method. Rather than freezing or arresting life, multiple topics surface, shift, and become entangled as interviews happen (see Bissell 2014). But, this stretching is also telling of what Brexit was becoming in an impasse in which various transitions were or weren’t felt to be on the way, promised and threatened futures proliferated, and, in the midst of such feelings, people made sense in ways that moved between different positions and dispositions as they got on with ordinary life. The interviews attempted, then, to understand Brexit in a ‘present’ that was at once transitory – a particular moment in the process of Brexit – and spatially and temporally stretched as different pasts and futures were folded back into how people encountered and related to it.

If researching (and writing) in an impasse presents a set of challenges, then work on Brexit presents further still. Universities have been described by sections of the tabloid press as breeding grounds for anti-Brexit bias and ‘propaganda’, placing them in a category of elites that were accused of working against ‘the will of the people’ (see section 4.4). At the same time, it has been noted that the widespread shock and dismay that was expressed by some academics in response to the leave vote, reflected a relatively privileged, socially-liberal position (Isakjee and Lorne, 2018: 5). Whilst difficult to fully account for how this impacted the research, such a context cannot be ignored. Interviewees talked about a general reluctance to speak openly about their views, which was a concern that was especially pronounced amongst leave voters and so, aside from a small number of instances where family members were interviewed together, focus groups were not considered to be an option so soon after the referendum.

In what follows we draw out four divergent modes of uncertainty which coexist to form a ‘stretched-out’ present. Each mode coexisted with various ordinary practices of detachment from the event of Brexit in a way that dampened not only the intensity of the referendum result, but also the intensity of hopes, optimism, and other moods of uncertainty. People talked about no longer paying attention; only partly engaging with a political process that was felt to be too complicated; and how Brexit was no longer a topic of conversation. For some of our interviewees it had already “died a death”, a sentiment that is likely to have altered since. Memories of intense responses to the result and anger about the campaigns coexisted with

feelings of flatness. Reactivating the never quite residual types of disconnection that have long existed in relation to formal, parliamentary politics in the U.K. (see Clarke et al, 2017) people

<sup>4</sup>The interviews were anonymised and focused on: the moment of hearing the result and the immediate aftermath; people's relationships to the leave and remain campaigns; and their feelings after the result, including any changes.



engaged with Brexit through a complex and ever-changing mix of detachment, fragile hope, optimism, apprehension, anger, and alarm. We start, then, with a mode of uncertainty in which Brexit becomes an occasion of hope: the hope of an end.

#### **4 MODES OF UNCERTAINTY AND MULTIPLE BREXITS 4.1 Negative Hope and Brexit as End**

Our first mode of uncertainty is connected to the sense of a failed present; a sense of decline, disconnection, and stasis. In many cases, it was felt that everyday life was not only difficult – to greater and lesser degrees – but that people's lives were perpetually remade by forces that were external, opaque, and often working against them (including London, government cuts, a loss of British pride, a lack of community spirit, online shopping, immigration laws, and health and safety regulations). In this context, Brexit was felt as a welcome interruption to a present that wasn't working and became the ground for a hope that *something* will end.

49-year-old Andy, a gamekeeper from a small seaport town in Northumberland, told the story of a wasteful National Health Service (NHS) that was strangled by pointless protocols, disorganisation, and a lack of care. Having previously worked for the NHS he was particularly frustrated with their policy on crutches: "you cannot hand them back in". Whilst the connection to the EU was not explicit, Andy's detailed account of his visits to outpatients, and the amassing of disused crutches in homes across the North East of England, was offered as an illustration of something broken – 'unbelievable wastage' – and just one of many examples of something "that needs to be turned around". Similarly, musician and producer, Dave, discussed the decline of the region's livestock marts as evidence of a wider trend of deterioration. Dave was saddened that farmers in Northumberland no longer have the time and have to work "to death doing other things because [farming] just doesn't pay anymore". Dave's wife Mary – a former shepherd – noted that the marts used to be a 'big social occasion', and that the opportunity for sociability

had been reduced now that the sheep and cattle are taken straight off the farms. As a result, and even though he was disappointed, Dave hadn't been surprised by the outcome of the referendum, because he had recognised that "something had to give".

What that *something* looks like was less clear, but the accumulation of disused crutches and deadweight livestock is both presented as evidence of something wrong and a sense of slow decline and 'stuckness'. In the midst of talking about Brexit and the current impasse, these anecdotes became a way of narrating sadness, disappointments, and frustration with things and systems that no longer work. While the EU moved in and out of the frame of reference, the vote was generally discussed in the context of an unhappy present and, by extension, a general opportunity for some kind of change. In this first mode of uncertainty, the event of the referendum is thus felt as a cut or break from the present condition, and often began from a remembered but fading sense of relief on hearing the result.

When reflecting on hope, Lingis (2012) highlights how central discontinuity can be to the functioning of hope as a mode of relation. In contrast to Berlant (2011), who gives credence to continuity in the form of optimistic attachments, for Lingis (ibid. 23) "[h]ope arises in a break with the past". In this break "[t]here is a kind of cut and the past is let go of". To adapt Lingis' formulation, hope arose 'in' the break that was the referendum result. Yet, despite such hope, people rarely expected immediate or dramatic change. Instead, given the range of ordinary ills that were attached to the present, the event of leaving simply offered the attachable promise of an end, if not quite a solution. It offered what Taussig (2002) calls a 'glimmer' of hope: the moment in which the chance of something different opens up. Brexit, then, became the grounds for a form of negative hope – a better future that might or might not materialise but that would hopefully end something bad or rupture the otherwise smooth workings of external forces that, as Frank, a retiree from Gateshead, put it, have a "massive bearing on how we live". Brexit became this ground for change at a time when faith in a variety of institutions was lost and there were few other sources of hope left that people felt they could attach to and believe in. This was a recognizable narrative, and one that was also referenced by participants who didn't identify with this position themselves. As one mother and son suggested:

Louise: "I think [leavers] felt powerless and this was one little way that they [could...]" Joe: "...have] hope for a change, because this might change things, whereas a new government didn't seem to change anything for them".

In referring to a powerless 'they' Joe and Louise drew a distinction between themselves and other 'leavers', not only revealing their relative privilege but offering an explanatory context for the result that was based on imagining how others felt (Dorling, 2016; Bhambra, 2017). Louise, a university lecturer in the natural sciences, had voted to leave, whilst Joe, a recent graduate, had 'regrettably panicked' at the last minute and had voted to remain. Having had multiple conversations with people in the aftermath of the vote, Louise noted that the wealth in Westminster must be galling for those in regions "so poverty stricken" and "disenfranchised". As Joe put it "they [leavers] voted knowing that it is not going to get better quickly" but that it was "worth a try".

The need for some kind of change was a narrative common to leave voters, but there were also remainers who felt similarly. For example, Patrick, a joiner in his thirties, didn't vote and didn't like the outcome, but nevertheless felt that Brexit presented the opportunity for a much-needed disruption, despite feeling that both sides of the campaign had been peddling propaganda. However, notwithstanding this feeling, he didn't expect it to be enough and was perversely hoping that Brexit might be a catastrophe:

“I never felt looked after by the government, in the past I’ve had quite a few dramatic things happen... and I feel like they always failed us. And now I just feel like I’ll fucking eek out a path on my own [...] Maybe it’s a little bit, as well, to do with, like, not feeling like it’s got worse enough, do you know? Like something really radical has to change before things can get better? I don’t know. Is that bad to want that drama?”

The above examples evidence *a general feeling* that things aren’t working and move between a variety of sites, scenes, and forms of powerlessness. However, in other cases, the hope for an end, intensified around particular issues. For retired teacher, Amy, who had felt ‘utter relief’ on hearing the referendum result and had sensed a ‘general mood’ for leaving, it was about stopping a European federalism. As she said: “enough is enough”! According to Amy, nothing changed “dramatically”, but that’s what she found so frightening... we’ve slipped into it... it needed to be stopped”! For many others it was the imagined-felt presence of immigrants. Pete, also a retiree, had been unable to get to the polling station and was worried when he heard the results but was comforted by the thought that Brexit might halt immigration, having identified it as a particular ‘problem’ for the North East. He had heard about a small community in Gateshead where the council had “dropped 800 people”, putting “big pressure on the health service”. For him, the UK – and England in particular – was an especially “easy target [...] because [immigrants] get a house... they get medical treatment, they get money”. He “hoped that might stop... without being racist”.

Whilst Pete thought immigration was already a problem, Sally saw immigration as a problem that was on the horizon and one that was connected to her general dislike for “where the country was going”. Whilst painting a very different picture of the North East she nevertheless identified a trajectory of change that needed to be interrupted:

“There is so much expense on Brussels and other things. And I think that it’s mostly the health service... put terrific pressure on the UK services, on schools as well. I know that towns such as Middlesbrough are heaving with immigrants, erm... Peterborough is heaving with immigrants, Boston in Lincolnshire is heaving... I mean we in the North East see very few, but it’s going to come, it’s going to happen”

Sally and Pete’s views were echoed elsewhere, with the EU considered synonymous with ‘out of control’ immigration and a changing social landscape. Frank, for instance, who described himself as having a steady income from his pension and ‘not a Conservative voter by any means’, suggested that he was “not anti-immigration” but that immigration was one of the main reasons for voting leave. Against a backdrop of other concerns – “people on the dole making a career out of it”, nursing homes making a profit, and the political correctness that was, for him, “ruining the country” – he suggested: “I haven’t got a prejudiced bone in my body. I’m live and let live, but I think we have a saturation point... when you’re looking at your services and your services are stretched and it’s NHS or social services or whatever... that definitely is a problem for me”. Whilst he didn’t explain how the vote might change things, he was clear that he didn’t expect the result to affect him. His vote, he suggested, was for the younger generations: “a selfless act”.

Connected to the negative effects of other felt changes, Frank’s discussion of immigration like Sally’s and Pete’s, involved a declaration of not being racist, typical of contemporary forms of ‘raceless racism’ (Goldberg, 2008; Nowicka, 2018). Here, those things considered broken in earlier accounts – welfare support, security, community spirit, general services – become attached to the issue of immigration. These attachments were central to, and amplified by, the Vote Leave campaign (see Virdee & McGeever, 2018), whilst the media has also played a role in

generating fears and anxieties about interconnected ends (of national pre-eminence, of white privilege, of the promised futures associated with employment, of how a place used to be) and connecting them to the figure of the migrant. As Gilroy (2004) argued, when decline and the loss of imperial power ‘remains unmourned’, the ‘unacknowledged pain of loss gives rise to powerful displacement mechanisms that govern hostility towards immigrants’ (ibid. 110) and push out other explanatory contexts for decline.

## 4.2 National Optimisms and Brexit as Advent

The negative hope of Brexit as *end* blurs with a closely connected mode that might be called ‘national optimism’, which makes Brexit into an *advent* of a better future on the way. Brexit was associated with a progressive temporality of development and improvement, enveloped in a mood of confidence, which involved intensified attachment to various nationalist stories, but was only occasionally expressed through named hopes. Berlant (2011: original emphasis) describes optimism as a ‘force’ that “moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the *satisfying something* that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene”. The ‘*satisfying something*’, in this case, is the return of a feeling of preeminence, often clustering around a desire for (regained) control. Unlike the negative hope of the previous section, which focused on Brexit as a form of release or end, these reactions depicted new beginnings.

For example, Amy, who had talked of her concerns about a European federalism (section 4.1), described the impending separation from the ‘strange ship’ of the EU and the potential for regained glory and oscillated between notions of control and pre-eminence as she did. Having felt ‘utter relief’ on hearing the result, months on she felt “very optimistic” about the UK being able to make its own decisions. Amy hadn’t been “bothered” with the referendum campaigns because they were “so negative, always looking for the worst thing and never the good things”. Instead, Brexit was to do with “blue sky thinking” and having “something which is bigger than Europe” and not “just a narrow thing like immigration”. She thought the country should be going out into the world, like her son who was working abroad. As she put it: “Europe is a little thing, it’s a pigmy compared to the world stage... and we’re better out of it and forging on, on our own”. In noting the need to look beyond Europe, she also referenced Africa as “our biggest failure” and suggested that “we should not have abandoned them when we left”. Citing the prevalence of disease and starvation, she wanted the UK to “get back there, have a look at what’s happening and go in under our own flag”.

As Virdee and McGeever (2018: 1803) argue, such a deep nostalgia for empire and expression of moral superiority is made possible by occluding the racist ‘underside of the British imperial project’: the ‘corrosive legacies’ of racial-colonial domination (c.f. Lowe, 2015; Shilliam, 2018). In this case, various national figures, myths, and events are plotted within a story about a better future that (re)enacts nationalist feelings of exceptionality, alongside a sense of abdicated responsibility towards former colonies. A newly independent UK, rather than Brexit, becomes the attachable ground for renewed optimism and restored pride. Specific hopes-for are only vaguely offered but are nonetheless enveloped in a mood of confidence that a better future will emerge once the UK is no longer ‘shackled’.

In Amy’s case, Brexit was felt as an advent rather than end: something good is arriving (or will do once Brexit happens). This something good was often in the form of a return, or the continuation of something that was side-tracked by the European project. Whilst different hopes-for variously expressed and qualified the indeterminacy of this advent, uncertainty was generally denied through gestures of confidence. This could be seen in narratives such as Sally’s

which reiterated her belief that Brexit would be a success even if it wasn't necessarily going to be easy:

“We've got lots to offer; I'm sure we'll do it. I've got every confidence that once we get through it, I do believe it'll happen...I've got great faith in this country and where it stands in the world, you know? We had the Commonwealth, oh that's gone, that's fair enough, things move on, things change. And I think things might be a bit rocky for a little while, but we'll get there. We will. Because I really believe in the country, I believe in the country as a whole, I believe in our standing in the world”.

The form of the event is different, in part because a nationalist story of Britishness serves as the legitimising object of optimistic attachment. By making the present into a period of waiting for the restoration of past glory and standing, the uncertainty of the end result is denied, and past triumph and pre-eminence provides a guide to the post-Brexit future. Whilst this generalised sense of confidence is not quite equivalent to nameable attachments, it existed alongside the expressed desire for the return of past ways of life, and more importantly, the past glory associated with a now lost, but once prominent, global position, even while recognising the impossibility of its return. Here, Brexit doesn't just draw on 'deep reservoirs of imperial longing', as Verdee and McGeever (2018) put it, but deep reservoirs of imperial *belief*.

Brexit as advent happens, then, within the orbit of the ambivalent structure of feeling that Gilroy (2004) names as 'postimperial/postcolonial melancholia'. That is a melancholic and nostalgic attachment to past glories and mythologies of empire that enables a sense of moral superiority, and a selective, less potent version of colonial history that can remain unchallenged as a result. Thus, following Gilroy (p.99), Brexit might be said to offer a relief from the painful obligation to accept the loss of empire and to 'work through the grim details of imperial and colonial history' – a relief that is perhaps further enabled by focusing on Britain's fight against the 'tyranny' of an uncompromising European imperialism.

Despite forms of ambivalence, in this mode of relating to uncertainty the EU becomes less the cause of an inchoate sense of something wrong, as in Brexit as end, and more an external actor holding Britain back. This sense of compromised national agency mixed and blurred often with a sense of impeded *personal* agency, which was expressed in a desire for more control in different contexts. People told stories about the bureaucracy that touched their lives. Whether it was the unnecessary "health and safety things coming in" that led Sally to ask: "why can't we have control over that? Why can't we *get back control*?", or Pete's desire for "more control over our own destiny" in response to "Brussels bringing rules out that we all object to... that every 'i' has to be dotted and every 't' has to be crossed to perfection".

### **4.3 Apprehensive Hope and Brexit as Continuation... Perhaps**

Brexit as *end* and *advent*, whilst different, both enact a sense of renewed 'prospective

momentum' (Miyazaki 2004) that was grounded in the event of the UK's separation from the EU. Exiting the EU was felt to make either a less-bad life or some form of better life possible. Berlant (2011: 199) describes impasses as "decompositional": "in the unbound temporality of the stretch of time, it [an impasse] marks a delay that demands activity". The 'activity' of negative hope and national optimism, which at points blur and overlap, reduces the sense of an impasse by re-establishing a progressive form of temporality. In this respect, both modes of uncertainty resonate with Vote Leave's promise of positive change as expressed in their 'Take back control' slogan, albeit a forward momentum refracted through and activating imperial longing and anti-immigrant affect (Virdee & McGeever, 2018). However, both modes of uncertainty coexist with

other modes in which uncertainty becomes a pressing problem that can't be reduced, and Brexit is felt to be an impending problem or even disaster. In the next two sections, we briefly introduce two such modes: fantasies of action and, first, apprehensive hopefulness, which was common to the narratives of many remain voters.

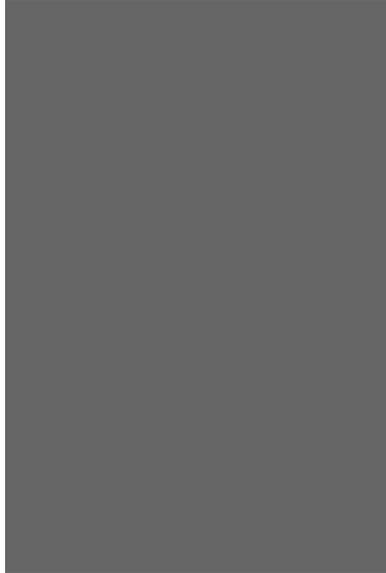
Whilst the first two modes of uncertainty largely connect the EU with a variety of ills, both explicitly and implicitly, forms of apprehensive hope emerge out of a very different relation. Rather than the EU accumulating a host of ills, it is exiting that functions as the blank figure around which a cluster of disparate apprehensions gather and attach. For instance, Margot, an ordained vicar who has lived in County Durham for a decade, was anticipating price hikes, worrying about a “dis-united UK”, and not being able to relate to the North East anymore. Tash, who was in Sunderland at the time of the vote, was also feeling “pretty negative” because of the divisions that Brexit had created but also because of what it might do to the economy. As a mental health worker in her twenties, she was worried about the stability of the NHS and the potential withdrawal of funding for NHS courses, which would force her to reconsider her career options. Asher, a Singaporean national and engineer with indefinite leave to remain, was similarly worried about the economic effects. He was “mildly concerned” for the value of his house and the depreciation of the pound, which would mean that his bills in Singapore would rise. Karen, however, who was on disability allowance, was concerned that Brexit had the potential to exacerbate inequalities and social problems in the region, particularly in “places like East Durham and Peterlee” where she worked as a volunteer<sup>5</sup>.

Despite such apprehension and gloomy forecasts, Brexit was only rarely anticipated as a catastrophe, although occasionally people did angrily describe Brexit as a disaster (see section 4.4). Rather, in this context the worries focused on the changes that might occur to something valued and perhaps previously taken for granted, in ordinary but not necessarily dramatic ways. Importantly, despite little certainty that anything would change, Brexit had unsettled them: the primary change was atmospheric. But whilst the hope that the future will be ‘fine’ or ‘ok’ was made fragile by worry, in many cases there was still an expectation that normality would continue. Rather than something positive, their hope was that *not much* would change. In these narratives there was no sense that Brexit would lead to a better future. Instead, energy was invested in a fragile hope that the post-Brexit future would be much like the present. For instance, despite concerns Tash was assuming “things will be okay” because she had no other choice; Asher had confidence in the UK’s “orderly civil service” and its ability to transition without too much damage; and Karen’s initial concerns about societal tensions were “beginning to fade” as things settled down. Whilst some people were comforted by this sense that “things would be okay in the end”, others put Brexit “into context”. Robert, a reverend with two children, had felt “shock” on hearing the result, but also felt ambivalent. He was worried about the economic effects of Brexit and the exacerbation of social divisions, having described some “sections of the public” as having had a “collective nervous breakdown”. Brexit was the biggest political decision in Robert’s lifetime, but whilst he was not confident that anyone knew what would happen he thought it unlikely to be as bad as predicted: “I was somewhat sanguine about the forecasts before the Brexit vote, but I’m markedly more sanguine now because so many of them have proved incorrect”. Besides, Syria is a “disaster”, as was the “Second Gulf war... the stakes were higher ...”.

Brexit oscillated, then, between being a harbinger of worse to come and just another non-event. The presence of various traces of a slightly worse future made this a hopeful relation unlike the optimism that enacts Brexit as advent. Following Bloch (1998: 341, emphasis added) by this we mean that a hopeful relation is one in which “the uncertainty of the outcome *remains*”. Uncertainty *remains* as it is not disavowed, transcended or deferred as it is in optimistic

attachments to the nation. Nevertheless, the basis for hopefulness is not unconnected to the forms of national optimism we described in Section 4.2. In demonstrating a cautious hope that it

<sup>5</sup> East Durham contains many former Pit villages and regularly features on multiple deprivation indices.



will all be fine in the end, we see an underlying confidence in the UK and its status: that it is not the kind of country to suffer catastrophe. This form of hope therefore demonstrated some of the confidences that were seen in the accounts of Brexit as advent, even whilst these confidences weren't explicitly acknowledged. Quite who would deliver or secure this future was unclear, especially as little or no explicit faith was placed in politicians who were described as either 'liars' or 'incompetent'. The affective register of this confidence amid uncertainty is best captured by Ngai (2005) who describes confidence as the "feeling that cannot be felt" and ascribes its power to its "resistance to being psychically registered" (ibid. 76). Confidences vary, but in the midst of a swirl of worries, a type of background confidence acts as the basis for a hope whose object is the maintenance of the present. As such, apprehensive hopefulness did not involve any explicit attachment to a heroic story of past glory – even though it was undoubtedly part of it. Instead, its basis was a confidence with diverse roots and routes including: a feeling that the predictions of disaster had not come to pass; a sense of interdependence with other European countries; a comparison with other countries that were supposedly worse off (including Trump-era America); the sense that the country has survived past crises; a residual faith in technocratic management; and an unshaken faith in the UK's status and power

#### **4.4. Fantasies of Action: Brexit as Disaster and Betrayed Promise**

In this last section we consider what happens when negative hope, optimistic nationalism, and apprehensive hopefulness were felt to be threatened. In such instances, Brexit was a matter of concern again, the practices of detachment and disconnection that for many had begun to drain Brexit of its dramatic atmosphere were disrupted. As a result, a desire for 'correct action' – action capable of rectifying the situation and (re)securing fragile forms of hope – emerged alongside a suspicion or paranoia that action or possibility was being thwarted. Such desires and suspicions were amplified through the UK print and social media, which reproduced and directed these periodic intensifications, albeit against the background of long-term dissatisfaction with formal politics (c.f. Clarke et al, 2017).

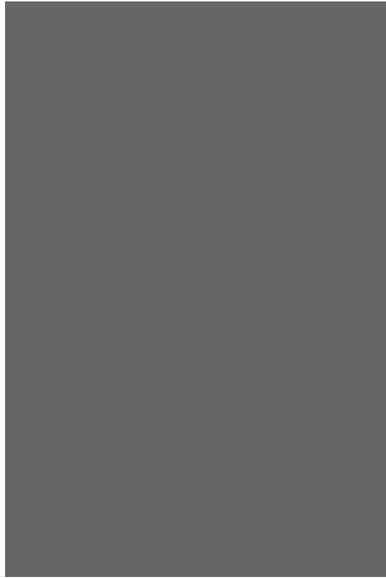
For many leave voters who were participating in the hope of the less-bad future or the optimism of the better nation, Brexit surfaced in everyday life as a negative event when angers and frustrations clustered around figures – both specific and vague – who were felt to be attempting to illegitimately thwart the UK's exit from the EU. This emerged as disillusionment and anger with processes and institutions that were deemed to be suspending or slowing down the process of leaving (including forms of deliberation and dissensus), as well as anger towards identifiable people. This included remain-supporting politicians and the judiciary who were variously felt to be thwarting the 'will of the people' and deliberately delaying Brexit. As recent graduate, Joe, relayed:

“What annoyed me was people were saying about how much money we would have [because] we spend so much money [on the EU] – and then you've got this high court battle costing millions. You've got people taking each other to court, you've got some woman trying to sue the government because it's not what she wanted, and there was some woman, some millionaire, who found some legal loop hole and tried to sue the government. And so again, not the common person with problems trying to do things! So, we're spending all of this time trying to faff about, not coming out, rather than actually saying “we have a majority vote” ...”

In narratives such as this one, hope and optimism are still present because the sense that there is something better endures, but it coexists with a feeling that someone or something, somewhere, is attempting to illegitimately thwart it. As such, as well as attaching anger to particular figures, these accounts became part of a wider mood of paranoia or suspicion that clustered around an amorphous 'they' who were acting to stop Brexit: the 'elite', the establishment, 'liberal luvvies', or 'some woman'. For instance, whilst Mark from Gateshead thought that Brexit will be better for his grandchildren and that 'Britain would prosper' in the end, he was worried that a lot of people were trying to stop it – “not just Europe, but forces in this country as well”. He was particularly 'sick of judges' and people like Gina Miller<sup>6</sup> “sticking [their] oar in”. Similarly, Sally was anticipating that there “would be a lot of in-fighting” and “a lot of obstacles put in the way”. As she stated: “they're going to make it as difficult as humanly possible for a transition”. As well as resonating with populist media and political rhetoric, the sense of an amorphous 'they' seemed to emerge as a solution to the problem of the unknown: not knowing what was happening with the Brexit negotiations, and fearing that their hoped-for future might not come to pass.

Animating an increasingly fragile and threatened hope for an end or an advent of a better future was an impatient desire for some kind of action – or as Joe put it, less 'faffing' – so that the better future could be sensed. For instance, Louise was concerned that “if you get parliament having a vote, you're going to get somewhere like Scotland trying to block it and it will drag on and on and on”. Like others that voted leave she wanted the government to “get on with it” because she feared that “uncertainty does more harm” and the longer it takes, the more likely that someone would stop it. In this mode, then, Brexit takes on the 'impression of a major event'

<sup>6</sup> Gina Miller was the lead claimant in a successful legal battle to prevent the government from triggering Article 50 without a vote from parliament. She was subjected to significant racist and sexist abuse as a result of her demonization by the media.



once again. It crosses a threshold to become, periodically, something dramatic and becomes an event with a particular form – an occasion tensed between a betrayed promise on the one hand and a promised end or advent on the other. What we are calling ‘fantasies of action’ involves investment in the presumption that someone or something (the government, a group of voters) is currently undertaking harmful (in)action together with the promise that some kind of presently-absent or faster action can halt or avert a disastrous future.

Whilst ‘fantasies of action’ is a shared mode of uncertainty, it was during these periodic intensifications that identifications as leave or remain voters were re-enacted and expressed often with a recognised sense of division or antagonism. Just as many leavers were unsettled by efforts to ‘thwart’ Brexit, many remain voters identified occasions when Brexit was felt as a looming disaster in ways that unsettled their general confidence that everything would be okay. The sense of an unfolding disaster or disaster to come was catalysed by various traces of damage or harms that were already happening or yet to come, with anger often directed towards leave supporting politicians for their incompetence, lies, or a combination of both. The sense of an unfolding disaster was particularly acute in relation to the future of car manufacturing. For library volunteer, Michael, the lack of any clear agreement for UK plants meant that Brexit was “hovering in the background all of the time, colouring everything.” He had “no faith in the Tory government...” because he didn’t think “they’ll do a deal that will benefit the ordinary population” and was convinced that it will be “big industry that benefits”:

“Something that’s going to be absolutely terrible... the government sat around the table and had talks with Nissan who incidentally are owned by Renault, France. And you can’t find any of the details of the insurances [sic] that Nissan has been given... nothing has come out at all. What is going to happen to the factories and the general production units...? I mean Liverpool has something like 400,000 people that work directly with Vauxhall and then there’s all the support services involved. If we have an argument with the EU and with the French in particular, they’re going to say: “right close down those plants, we’ve got another 24 around Europe, we don’t need those”.

That car manufacturing – and Nissan in particular – were a prominent concern is of no surprise in a region where the Sunderland Nissan plant employs approximately 6700 people, and claims to support a further 27, 000 in the UK automotive supply chain (three quarters of which are in the North East)<sup>7</sup>. The plant and its continuation has a further symbolic and affective value in a



Figures from: <https://careersatnissan.co.uk/life-nissan-sunderland-nmuk-plant/> (last accessed 19.6.2019)



region hit by past waves of deindustrialisation (Nayak, 2019), which was evident in how Michael linked his concerns about the “state of the country” back to “what the Tories did in the 80s”: the denationalisation of major industry, the loss of ship building, and the ‘destruction of [mining] communities’.

Michael was not the only one anxious about Nissan. Whilst his son in law had been given assurances about his job, as far as Tom was concerned “the government can say whatever they like” and “unless there was support from the government, they [Nissan] could withdraw their factory from the North East”. This was a sentiment that was shared by small business owner, Alan, who was generally confident about Britain’s ability to find trade elsewhere but was worried about “jobs in the UK, for Nissan, Hitachi. How will they fair if they can’t sell their cars to Germany without a tariff?” In these accounts the government’s failure to secure an agreement in relation to car manufacturing threatens a general sense that things would probably be okay.

Apprehension intensifies, clusters around a particular issue, and Brexit re-surfaces as an event – one that threatens to end or disrupt something that people attach to and value.

## 5 CONCLUDING COMMENTS: MULTIPLE BREXITS

Researching in an impasse intensifies the uncertainty that characterizes any work that attempts to describe present conditions. The present that we interviewed in and that we write from has already changed and was never single or coherent nor separate from past or future presents. In this paper, we have attempted to archive this changeable and multiple present by describing the different kinds of event Brexit was becoming as it shifted from having the impression of a ‘major event’ to becoming part of the background of everyday life in the UK. For our participants in the North East, different versions of Brexit emerged from specific modes of uncertainty that entangle Brexit and the present in the tendencies and latencies of other events and conditions, and residual and emergent structures of feeling including post-imperial/postcolonial melancholia, a racialised and xenophobic sense of something wrong, a sense of life as ‘okay’, as well as enduring traces of the harms of deindustrialisation and the damages of persistent inequality. We could understand negative hope and national optimism as producing a redistribution of a sense of ‘prospective momentum’, even if only temporary, – either by ending something bad or initiating something better. Both modes of uncertainty, in different ways, make Brexit into an occasion for a renewed feeling of possibility. Apprehensive hopefulness happens in the orbit of these other modes – an expression of worry about these changes and a hope for the continuation of the status quo. Fantasies of action emerge intermittently and intensely when promises were betrayed (or threatened), or Brexit inaugurated disaster. At the same time, modes of uncertainty create some resonances at the level of mood and attachment between ‘remain’ and ‘leave’ identifications and affections. For example, whilst they vary in intensity and diverge in how they reactivate felt elements of British history, forms of nationalist attachment cross between and connect ‘remain’ and ‘leave’ positions. Ultimately, the sense that the future will be ‘okay’ *and* the sense it will be ‘better’ after exit both re-enact feelings of confidence in Britain (albeit through different elements of the national story, one connected to a feeling of lost pre-eminence and position, the other more associated with a sense of carrying on or unshakable eminence).

Our focus on the co-existence of these different and specific modes of uncertainty has been an attempt to understand what it feels like to live in the midst of the contemporary condition(s) that Brexit, the election of Trump, and other events at once express and enact. It is through attention to how the present feels that we can explore how a set of seemingly dramatic transformations in, for instance, political identification or new forms of racism or nationalism, are enacted, reproduced, and made sense of, as people’s moods and attachments shift. Staying with the feel of the present – how forms of optimism and hopefulness coexist – is necessary in order to understand how seemingly momentous events make a felt difference in, to and through people’s lives. On this basis we see two wider implications.

First, and developing our emphasis on the feel of the present, we have placed Brexit in the context of a structure of feeling we have named as generalized and intensifying uncertainty. However, generalized and intensified uncertainty is not a single, coherent, structure of feeling. It is differentially expressed and enacted through ‘modes of uncertainty’ as it is articulated with particular forms of life and living. We understand ‘modes’ as translations of that sense through an ensemble of shared practices, resources, and dispositions that render uncertainty palpable and relate and respond to it in particular ways (through acquiescence, enjoyment, compensation, and so on). Rather than repeat claims that the geo-political present is characterised by uncertainty or synonyms such as turbulence or instability, we advocate, instead, tracing the specific modes of

uncertainty through which the feeling of the present is composed. Specifically, and moving beyond Brexit, this means orientating inquiry to the three dimensions around which modes vary, in addition to a critical diagnosis of the forces and events that generate uncertainty. This includes: the felt impact of uncertainty as it registers – affectively, materially, cognitively –

and is translated into a disposition towards self, world and others; the specific practices of registering and responding to uncertainty that generate and rework that felt sense; and the particular relations between past-present-future that emerge alongside those practices and felt sense.

Turning to the second implication, we have exemplified a mode of inquiry that stays with what an event becomes as it is differently encountered and related to. This approach to the dynamic life of events may serve as a way of researching geopolitical events more broadly. It moves us beyond a fascination with the moment of eventual rupture or disturbance (cf. Berlant 2011), and into the messy situation of the complicated and changing life of (non/quasi) events as they happen in ways that might be dull, vaguely interesting, disturbing, enraging, debilitating, and so on. Supplementing explanatory or predictive modes of inquiry does not mean abandoning critique as either a practice of disruption or an ethos of hope directed to change. Instead, critique is orientated to the conditions of formation for different versions of events, and what the consequences might be of how events are encountered and become part of people's everyday lives. This is necessary to avoid presuming beforehand what an event is, how it expresses and enacts contemporary changes, and what its effects may be. What is gained by this approach is an understanding of how events are (re)composed as they become entangled with other events and conditions. It focuses attention on what an event is, how it happens, and how it changes as it is experienced as a set of figures, predictions, scenes, and objects entangled with other dimensions of everyday life.

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