Hopes multiplied amidst decline: Understanding gendered precarity in times of austerity

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Abstract
Hope is not singular or fixed; instead hopes take multiple forms that constitute precarity. Drawing on interviews with white women ‘on benefits’ in the North East of England, in a period before Brexit, I explore different kinds of hope that surfaced in relation with neoliberal forces of, and beyond, austerity. (1) Multiplied hopes, hedging bets and holding several possibilities together; (2) Conflicted hopes, pulls towards paradoxical attachments; (3) Suspended hopes, framed by the limits of the now; (4) Negative hopes, invested in promises that despair could be pushed onto others; (5) Hopes for the absence of optimism, a mode of being present in the present, staying with mutual contingency and withdrawing from the cruelty of unknown futures, a strategy increasingly denied to women who were more than ‘left-behind’. By exploring the different forms that hopes take, we can better understand what hopes do. I argue that hopes in decline were not lost, nor orientated towards upward progress, but invested instead in maintaining a position. They were both sustaining and debilitating through situations of loss and uncertainty, and as such constituted a stretched-out present, tensed with decline.

Keywords
Cruel optimism, austerity, gender, precarity, mothering, Brexit

Hoping through pervasive uncertainty

You still get letters to go down to the Jobcentre [laughing] and it’s like “think about getting back to work,” and I think I’d love to get back to work, if anything it used to like take your mind off
it, it’s like something different but em… if anything at the minute it’s just all over the place…
(Sarah, 35)

I am too focused on creating the happy memories to actually do the happy memories, and that’s, that’s annoying. (Jessie, 39)

Milk leaks through my t-shirt as I chat to women in the group, then we laugh as someone describes ‘spraying an old granny in the eye once’. We are in a dusty blue room – in what was once a church, close to the river and half-made ships – now a third-sector family support service the North East of England. We talk while our children (or grandchildren) play in the crèche. This is a time following financial crisis, after the onset of austerity – but before a vote to exit the European Union (Gateshead voted ‘leave’ with 58,529 votes, 44,429 voted for ‘remain’) in a place high on the index of multiple deprivation facing some of the hardest effects of cuts to local authority budgets relative to the rest of the UK (Gray and Barford, 2018).

The chat and breast-feeding imply a comfortable scene, and there is comfort in this moment. But life is uncertain for women in the group; mothers, many single, all out of paid work. All receive income support or jobseekers’ allowance, and there are scant paid opportunities to fit with childcare provision. Sarah’s talk of parenting and other forms of unpaid care hint at the difficulty of being present when things are ‘all over the place’. Bella’s anticipation of a future self, reflecting on a happy memory, showed a present that is swerved by an idea of the future’s-past. These statements hint at the complex and splintered presents inhabited by women as time, space and resources for unpaid care – including the care of children, grandchildren, parents, friends and siblings – are withdrawn or closed down and demands to do more and be more intensify. While we are all looking the other way, the group, this space of support, loses its funding. It too ceases to exist.²

Austerity affects women disproportionately in England (Brah et al., 2015; Jupp, 2014; Pearson and Elson, 2015). Women use more public services and are the majority of welfare recipients (Elson, 2012). They are more likely to make up for lost services by increasing the amount of unpaid care they perform (Women’s budget group, 2017). The ongoing stigmatisation of women and especially mothers on benefits (Tyler, 2008) takes on new forms in austerity as cultural and political discourses foster public consent to anti-welfare policies (Allen et al., 2012; Jenson and Tyler, 2012, 2015). Not only are places and times to be cared for and give care disrupted, the legitimacy of that being and that caring is called, dominantly, into question.

Yet, as infrastructures integral to their everyday lives shattered and frayed, these women, for the most part, accepted the (gendered) story that ‘belts had to tighten’ (Bramall, 2013; Negra and Tasker, 2014). There was little hope for a collective break from the expected, and an express disinterest in ‘the system’. Following a lifetime of churn, women had a ‘right to be weary’ (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar, 2019) but this paper shows that hopes were not lost: they were (re)directed, multiplied and enclosed as both futures and presents became increasingly unstable. We will see that, generally, hopes manifested in attempts at maintaining a position, but they folded in on precarity constituting a stretched-out present tensed with decline.

What do I mean by a stretched-out present tensed with decline? It has been argued that forms of cultural, social and economic stuck-ness (Fisher, 2009) continue to accompany the slow and uneven death of lives, places, worlds, species (Berlant, 2011). Following a 2008 financial crisis, fresh genres of precarity marked the contemporary condition (Puar et al., 2012), and for an expanding population ‘the future could no longer be propped up on the
past’ (Rideout and Schneider, 2012: 5). The already violent, exclusive and ‘phantasmic’ post-war promise that things would always get better; of upward mobility, retirement, stable employment and home ownership; unravelled (again) at an alarming rate (Berlant, 2011: 4). Cracks emerged in the fake smile of upward progress as temporary or zero hours contracts ate away at permanent labour, as workers’ rights were corroded by regimes of ‘flexible exploitation’ (Adams et al., 2015). For some, there were hoped-for openings amidst the expansion and naming of this crisis, if the cruelty of promises that were already racist, already sexist, already out of reach for so many, were exposed. Perhaps, new forms of solidarity would be organised by greater exposure to our mutual dependency and vulnerability (Puar et al., 2012)?

Yet in England, incoherently, discourses of ‘austerity’ galvanised public feeling with promises that gave hope in narrative form to decline, mixing in myths of solidarity and a ‘short sharp pain for long-term gain’ (Hitchen and Raynor, 2020). And perhaps as the pain stretched-on, a referendum to exit the European Union wore another mask of progress. A sense of momentum towards ever-deferred resolution took form, and hopes congealed around futures built on (fantastical) pasts. In a pre-brexit context, I explore how hopes played out in everyday life and following Ahmed (2004), what they did for a small group of unemployed, single mothers struggling to get by. We see hopes invested not in an upward progression, but instead in maintaining a position, in the face of withdrawal.

If hopes are relations with disruption, which may begin in conditions of absence or desperation as momentary feelings of openness towards something different (Anderson, 2006), then surely hopes abound amidst the loss and insecurity associated with austerity? By listening carefully to the testimonies of women as they navigated the withdrawal of social, financial and emotional security, this paper notices an enclosure of futures in part enabled by the governance of hope. Disruptions create openings of possibility, organised (vanished, directed and enclosed) by structural and discursive forces related to the same social and cultural events and conditions. And further, hope is often referred to in the singular, for example, we see this in the phrase: ‘hope has a dark side, if it emerges from within the presence of various forms of ill-being’ (Seigworth, 2000: 257, in Anderson, 2006: 743). But here I think about hope’s multiplicity, and the darkness accompanying that multiplicity. Hopes point to contingency (Anderson, 2006) but in this paper, cruelly, we see them directed repeatedly towards a closure of contingency. Hopes are orientated towards certainty, in ways that (re)produce the conditions for uncertainty.

If through theorisations of an ‘endless present’ it has been argued that futures are lost for the precariat in late neoliberal life, we see that for these women, hopes are not. Instead, the conflicting and multiplied hopes of white women living in dominantly leave-voting, Labour heartlands of the North East of England prior to the referendum, fold in on an endless present fraught with uncertainty. And this analysis takes on a new significance in the contemporary. The research was undertaken, and this paper was originally written before Brexit: a vote to exit the European Union. Yet, as I re-write (late, following my own struggle with parenting and the precarious labour market), that event of hope and insecurity is hard to ignore.

There was an absence of women both in the Brexit campaign, and the following analysis (MacLeavy, 2018). Focus on what has been termed the ‘left behinds’ was dominated by the white male, both working and middle class (Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Hobolt, 2016; O’reilly, 2016). Bhambra (2017) notes the decline in relative privilege faced by such men, who feel edged nearer to positions already inhabited by more marginalised populations (MacLeavy, 2018). In this paper – by drawing focus on the experiences of women who
were already long out of paid work – I expand on what it means to be ‘left behind’, given in accounts of ‘Brexit’ (reviewed in Boyle et al., 2018).

This research exposes some pre-conditions for the Brexit vote. Further, it opens space beyond debates on the ‘left-behind’, which emphasise a relative lack of prosperity and opportunity, especially in de-industrial regions such as the North-East of England. I argue that these framings are reductive of the terms of decline. They re-enforce the logic of capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009), by giving less room to the possibility that some left-behinds are really lacking, not hope for progress or prosperity per se or opportunity for accumulating possession, but time and space to be present – in the present – to maintain bonds and relationships that are built on an understanding of mutual vulnerability (Butler, 2004): space for hope, without the cruelty of optimism (Berlant, 2011).

In order to make that case, I think through the governance of hope as a structure of precarisation, naming specific forms of hope that are not distinct, fixed or complete, but overlapped, emergent. Through Multiplied hopes we see women hedging their bets, holding several possibilities together, just to maintain a position. Conflicted hopes were associated with the paradoxical conformist promises of belonging, to which hopes are drawn. Suspended hopes involved planning vigilantly, in ways which were framed by the limits of the now. Negative hopes were invested in the despair of others; if resources had to diminish, the hope persisted that they would do so elsewhere. And these hopes were brought into relation with another kind of hope, hoping for the absence of optimism. This involved withdrawal from the cruelty of an unknown future, a way of being present, which became increasingly difficult for these women in times of austerity, and which was already denied to many. It becomes clear that the division and multiplicity of hopes at a local level are part of their cruelty, part of the conditions of precarity. Rather than upward progression, in the stretched-out present, hopes are orientated towards maintaining a position by avoiding decline. And all the while, loss is taking place, in the form of broken bonds, and the hopeful energy it takes, just to stay still.

The cruel promise of keeping going

There is a risk of producing false accounts here, of comfort and stability that existed prior to financial crisis, as in other work on contemporary precarity. That is not my intention. For a start, the paternal model of income re-distribution was by no means flawless (Adkins, 2015, 2018) and welfare was delivered with increasing conditionality long before ‘austerity’ was named (Dwyer, 2004; MacLeavy, 2011). This was a region built on industry, already holding close the trauma of loss (Pain, 2020). Turbulence and uncertainty were nothing new. What matters is what happened to hope (and what hopes did) for these women who felt a decline in security, as limited resources available to them were rendered scarcer and more contingent.

These single mothers received little or no financial or practical support from their children’s fathers. There was an insufficient supply of suitable paid work (Shildrick et al., 2012), and women were caught in a double bind ‘whereby being a parent makes one more vulnerable to economic austerity, whilst at the same time parents are being held more accountable than ever for the social (im)mobility of themselves and their children’ (Jensen and Tyler, 2012: no pagination). A desire to care persisted, and demand for care extended (Pearson and Elson, 2015). Meanwhile, micro-situational differences determined the effects of cuts and reforms on women (Raynor, 2017).

This made it difficult to generate solidarity in the face of decline, but further it opened up the possibility of women singularly avoiding decline: enabling conflict and compliance
through forces of hope. If we take ‘enclosure’ from Frederici (2004, 2011) on land enclosures, but also the enclosure of women’s bodies and reproductive practices, women whose acts of ‘commoning’, their bonds, capacities and expertise have been undermined again and again, then multiple forms of ‘enclosure’ of time, of space, of hope play out in ‘cruddy, chronic or ordinary ways’ for these women in Gateshead. These processes were not always related to as ‘crisis laden or sublime’ (Povinelli, 2011: 13) yet while everyday hopes created a sense of suspension or ‘keeping going’, we will see that a slow decline in conditions crept ever onwards.

I initially joined the family support group to facilitate theatre-making activities and develop a play. I stayed for another two years, joining activities and playing back drafts of the script for comments and discussion. We recorded 1–1 conversations towards the end of that process, which form the basis of this paper. The transcripts and my analysis of them, cannot be considered outside the context of the broader project. They are the product of relationships built over time, and our process of collective knowledge production. In part for that reason, I begin with a section of the script we created together. This is research material in its own right (Raynor, 2019) used here to introduce forms of hope as relations with disruptions and despair, and optimisms as pervasive feelings associated with organisational structures around austerity. This frames an approach to understanding the place of hope (and optimism) in contemporary, gendered precarity, which I go on to examine in further detail.

Lesley: Listen Sandra, there’s something I need to talk to you about…
Sandra: What, (beat) we’re not doing yoga again are we?
Lesley: No, no it’s not the yoga,
Sandra: Downward Dog and all that shite, I couldn’t walk for a week after the last session.
Lesley: No, don’t worry I’ve not booked any more yoga,
Sandra: Good cos all that breathing stresses me out.
Lesley: It’s nothing to do with that. Look, Sandra (pause) there’s something I need to tell you.
Sandra: Right. (pause) Well come on then Lesley. Spit it out.

(Excerpt from the play Diehard Gateshead, first performed 2015)

The story is built around women attending a family support centre. Group-lead Lesley attempts to tell group member Sandra that, as a result of cuts, the service is going to close. Feeling the weight of this loss, she hesitates, then, is diverted by Noel Edmonds. ‘Noel’ is a novelty jumper-wearing Saturday night UK TV star of the early 1990s, who’s failed career re-birthed in 2005 via popular quiz show Deal or no Deal. He attributes his success to the forces of ‘positive thinking’ underpinning somewhat mystical (and for him, lucrative) self-help practice, ‘Cosmic Ordering’ (Edmonds, 2007).
Noel in the play makes a serious political point. He advocates for a dominantly neoliberal genre of optimism (distinct from hope, Lasch, 1990) that positions positive mental attitude as a path to success (Ehrenreich, 2009). This is deeply individualised, gendered and woven into maternal expectations (Ahmed, 2010). It extends amidst ideological pushes to independence and self-empowerment at the heart of austerity (Jensen and Tyler, 2012). In the play, the absurd figure of ‘Noel’ acts to expose the flawed logics of neoliberalism including pushes towards positivity and self-empowerment amidst decline, though it doesn’t ridicule people who are moved by those forces. We see the tragedy that accompanies attempts to autonomously survive decline, and keep going, while structures of support fall apart.

Lesley’s investment in cosmic ordering, speaks to mediations of hope (Coleman and Ferreday, 2010) via cultures of optimism in the contemporary. This dynamic connects to processes of precaritisation, described by Lorey: ‘Practices of self-empowerment do not automatically have emancipatory effects’ (…) ‘They can signify modes of self-government that represent a conformist self-development, a conformist self-determination enabling extraordinary governability’ (2015: 13–14). Lesley’s optimism evokes the ‘servile’ side of self-government that accompanies intensified competition and conditionality creeping ever further into the nooks of everyday life. She refuses to position herself or the organisation as vulnerable or precarious. At the same time, the threatened endings – of the group, of Lesley’s job – stand in for all kinds of endings and anticipated-endings that women endured during the time of our research.

Precarity for Lesley lies in the threat of closure and her subsequent isolation from other women. Her hope is part of the emergent form of precarity (Anderson, 2014) yet does nothing to move her from a state of insecurity. Lesley, then, is caught in a relation of ‘cruel optimism’: ‘when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing’ (Berlant, 2011: 2). Her preoccupation with Noel feels sustaining, yet is simultaneously isolating and does nothing to prevent the closure. Amidst disruption, optimistic attachments, to Noel, and others, are orientated not towards progress, but towards avoiding decline, maintaining a position. Lesley holds a (painfully understandable) attachment to self-empowerment until the end of the story. A pragmatic relation with circumstances becomes subservient to the promise of positive affect. The positive attitude is both an object of desire and a mode of relating with an object of desire. It makes certain impossible futures seem possible.

Lesley’s optimism is channelled then into (a) the continuation of the group (b) the fantasy of cosmic ordering. The two orientations of hope became tensed together. As we will see these dynamics resonate with those experienced by women in austerity. And for those who have subsequently read the play, this acted as an eerie premonition for the deferred hopes of ‘Brexit’, which perhaps – like cosmic ordering – provided form to otherwise formless futures.

I should note, at this point, that while it may appear ‘hopes’ and ‘optimisms’ are used interchangeably in this section and the following sections, they are not. Optimism is a quality of being ‘full of hope that emphasizes the good parts of a situation, or a belief that something good will happen’ (Cambridge dictionary Online). Through cultures of self-empowerment, optimism is part of the organising structures central to neoliberalism, and yet optimism is cruel in the face of the obvious harms of late capitalism (Berlant, 2011). Hopes, however, are ‘event based’; they emerge from disruptions (Anderson, 2006). The story of Lesley, and later, the testimonies of research collaborators, show how relations between hope and optimism converge, through optimistic orientations towards events of disruption. As I will go on to explore, the multiplication of hopes, and forms of hopes – associated with logics of self-empowerment – themselves become cruel. And in this context, we see that optimism is not orientated towards the hope that something good will happen.
Instead it is orientated around the hope that something bad will not happen, or in other words, efforts at maintaining a position.

The language of ‘maintaining a position’ here, comes from Ahmed’s metaphor of precarity as a position, like a jug on the edge of a ledge. ‘When we say a population is precarious we would refer to how much work has to be done just to maintain a position, how easy it is, because of how hard life is, for some to fall right off . . .’ (Ahmed in Mehra, 2017: no pagination). In the testimonies below, maintaining a position means navigating the economic and emotional impacts of austerity. It also means holding on to a sense of the coherence of worlds, including those associated with relative forms of comfort and at times, privilege. Methods for doing this are organised by structures of withdrawal, in relation with the affirmative rewards of conformity and compliance (Duggan and Muñoz, 2009).

For Anderson becoming hopeful is marked, ‘not by a simple act of transcendence in favour of a good elsewhere or elsewhen but by an act of establishing new relations that disclose a point of contingency within a present space-time’ (2006: 744). The moment in the play when Lesley hesitated before turning to Noel spoke to that theorisation of hope. Amidst disruption, it represented a flash opening of possibility held tensed with contingency, in which a multitude of relations could be formed. Lesley might share her vulnerability with Sandra, building bonds in the process. Instead through cultures of (cruel) optimism and gendered norms of happiness (Ahmed, 2008) hope is quickly orientated towards positivity or ‘cosmic ordering’, the related promise of closing down uncertainty, and the bridge to a new world orientated towards maintaining an old one. Inevitably, the certainty and continuity that ‘positive thinking’ promises goes disappointed. Lesley does form new relations, but does not move on from the situation of loss and decline.

In the narratives below, hopes are similarly organised by structures of withdrawal, bridges to new relations orientated towards maintaining old ones, and already existing norms and conventions. Pulls to conventional genres for belonging become part of the work of worlding amidst insecurity and threats of loss (Stewart, 2011). They promise opportunities for closing down contingency, but in fact these hopes sustain unequal distributions of insecurity. How Duggan and Muñoz speak to conformist hopes that are built around genres for belonging is useful for understanding this: ‘hopes can operate as the affective reward for conformity, the privatized emotional bonus for the right kind of investments in the family, private property and the state’ (2009: 276). These women hold together multiple relations with marginality and conformity that at times, organise hopes in conflicting ways. They become associated with forms of ‘negative hope’, othering, another structure of precarisation (Lorey in Puar et al., 2012). Hopes then are cruelly orientated towards affective reward held in gendered conventions including those related to cultures of self-empowerment. And as for Lesley, a pragmatic relation with circumstance can become subservient to the promise of positive affect.

This paper sits with multiple formations of hope that constitute gendered precarity, and in doing so nuances a cultural and social diagnosis of ‘cruel optimism’ moving beyond applications already found in work on precarity and everyday life. I expand upon Berlant’s diagnosis by listening to nuanced formations of hope and relations with optimism that are fractured, contradictory, suspended and bridging. Hopes played out amidst decline for women who did not or could not attach to promises of upward mobility, but who were compelled, sometimes reluctantly, through necessity, or the promise of positive affect, into relations of cruel optimism orientated towards maintaining a position. What was disrupted, lost and corroded, were spaces of hope for living without optimism, hopes that were open to mutual contingency in the present. As for Lesley, loss, in this sense, was happening, even as attempts were made to avoid it.
Multiplied hopes

For a number of women in Gateshead, the widespread implementation of welfare and service withdrawals led not to a shrinkage but to a multiplication of possible futures. This multiplication was also a form of enclosure: energies were channelled into maintaining a position. Because cuts and changes happened and were anticipated simultaneously in numerous domains in women’s lives, several possibilities had to be held together at once, creating fractured future-presents. The multiplication of hope is part of the conditions of precarity. For example, let’s think about what happened to Sarah for whom things were ‘all over the place⋯’

⋯We’re going to try and appeal against that [the bedroom tax]. They say that they should be sharing but they can’t share because like with John having like a form of autism, he needs his own space all the time. And like I says with Barnardo’s being hit by all the cuts⋯with no support groups and also with John with like the taxis [provided to take John to a school that is able to support his additional needs] I think it used to be every 18 months it used to come up for review I think it’s every six months they’re doing it now so⋯Ah it’s just everything’s all over the place at the minute. (Sarah, mid-30’s)

Sarah repeated the phrase ‘things are all over the place’ many times during our conversation. That ‘the future does not depend on the past’ played out over and over again, in relation to her husband’s job loss, as well as welfare and service withdrawals. She cared informally for her mum and dad, her autistic son and another child, and was shaken by ‘the bedroom tax’\(^5\) which refers to a 25% cut in housing benefit, enforced because the family had three bedrooms for a family of four. As a result of rules on occupancy, the children should have been sharing. Because John was autistic and needed his own space, sharing was difficult, it fell to Sarah to make an appeal.

Around the same time, Sarah’s alcoholic and agoraphobic mum was declared fit for work triggering a sharp decline in mum’s mental health, another appeal, and more demands on Sarah’s time: ‘I mean me mam is come really like dependent on us as well at the minute.’ Withdrawal, and threats of withdrawal harmed Sarah’s family, and increasingly she took autonomous responsibility for mitigating these harms, hopes were multiplied: hope that the appeal(s) would be granted: hope that husband, Dave, could get a job, hope that the taxi would not be cut. Hope that Dave could learn to drive, quickly before they ran out of money. When they were understood in relation to one another it became clear: these hopes were less about moving forward and more about ‘maintaining a position’ (Ahmed in Mehra 2017) inducing a kind of ‘non-stop inertia’ (Southwood, 2011) involving ‘paddling frantically to stay still’ (Berlant, 2011). Meanwhile, time to rest in the present, to build bonds and to share experiences of care and support, for example at the Barnardo’s group, were withdrawn. Sarah faced all of this, with an endlessly optimistic disposition, amidst additional pressure:

   you still get letters to go down to the Jobcentre [laughing] and I’m like come on like, and it’s like ‘think about getting back to work ⋯⋯and I think I’d love to get back to work, if anything it used to like take your mind off it, it’s like something different but ⋯⋯if anything at the minute it’s just all over the place⋯’

She maintained a gendered commitment to happiness and to care: to hold responsibility for the fragile lives around her, with a smile. As resources declined, and support groups closed
down a desire, and sense of responsibility to ‘be there’ remained. Survival took form in the multiplication of hope and coexisted with all kinds of everyday convivial acts towards friends, other women in the group and family. A multiplication of hope amidst increased competition for limited resources played out in a number of other ways too. Another woman, Jane, had to move from income support to job seekers allowance when her son turned 5 (the age of child at which this move takes place reduced incrementally under New Labour and then dramatically in austerity). She faced additional pressure to return to paid work and was committed to doing so. Jane had applied for 500 jobs at the time of our interview, 500 imagined futures and hoped-for possibilities disappointed. She berated herself for ‘being on benefits’ ‘why should I stay at home when everybody else has to work?’ Each job held the potential for ‘something good elsewhere’ that failed to materialise. Lisa who was living in a small flat with little outside space, had tried but failed to ‘win’ the bid for a number of council houses, and council house swaps, for her growing family. And these multiplications of possibility resonate too with funding conditions at the family support centre itself, as core local authority funds were withdrawn there was a necessity to apply for multiple targeted ‘pots’. Women were pulled into cruel relations with multiple futures, and into competition, in the face of difficulty, disruption, despair. Hopes were orientated towards making the case convincingly that a singular need was exceptional, that one should get the job, get the house, or win the appeal. In the face of loss and threatened loss, the ‘renewed feeling’ that Anderson describes in relation to hope (2006) was held in those fractured promises. Hopes were governed in part through the affirmative reward that accompanied doing something in the face of decline. They were enclosed, limited by the terms of the competition, by the goal of maintaining a position. Decline was tolerated, since conditions were already diminished as a result of the time, worry, effort and energy required to keep going. The present was swerved as women were pulled into anxious cycles of anticipation and response. And yet this also made space for new relations in the form of conviviality, shared dramas, forms of hopeful anticipation, through which women asked about each other, cared for each other. Making bids for housing, job applications and appeals, were common conversation topics at the family support service, and through these processes new opportunities for intimacy, as well as division emerged. This re-asserts an affective reward for investing in the right kind of strategy, having the right kind of hopes, and being self-empowered.

Conflicted hopes

If hopes were multiplied, they were also brought into conflict with one another. This conflict was associated with the difficult ways in which women – single parents on benefits – negotiated affective draws to convention. But further, as we saw through the multiplication of hopes, conflict was also related to the logics of individual self-empowerment. Some women internalised a denial of social and structural barriers to self-empowerment, and simultaneously encountered social and structural barriers to self-empowerment. For example, we have already heard Jane ask ‘why should I stay at home when everybody else has to work?’ She took this on as a personal failing, yet also noted another reality – there were just not enough opportunities available. She did not dwell on that point, it felt, perhaps, too hopeless, too cruel. What would be available to her, to organise hopes in relation to that realisation?

There was little sense that things could change, at a structural level, with many expressing a disinterest in the ‘system’, for example Jessie:
I’m not really interested in ‘the system’ I’m just interested in bringing me bairns up to the best of me ability and bringing them up to be the best kids they can be (…) I’m not politically motivated I’m not.

Jessie had worked in a highly paid, but stressful job. After facing mental health issues, she took redundancy and became a stay-at-home mum, thus replacing the promise of material success, with other affective rewards held in her kids being ‘the best they can be’. Jessie had to face the stigma and increasing insecurity that accompanied being on benefits: ‘I’m a single parent so I’m sponging off the state it’s as simple as that…’ This was a sacrifice worth making:

I think if, if you look at more middle class or well to do families, where if father is in a good job then it is more acceptable and more expected that mum stays at home with the children, em… the mother is invariably, the child’s carer, for the best part of their life, and certainly the most important person in the first three to four years of their life, without a shadow of a doubt.

In order to uphold the gendered values that mattered to Jessie, it was necessary (in the early years) to have a relation with the ‘system’ that rendered her a ‘shirker’. But she found herself stuck between a rock – paid work that for her, was harmful and took her away from her children preventing her from instilling the kind of values that she wanted to instil – and a hard place – not working meant that her children may grow up to be ‘shirkers’ and therefore not hold the kind of values that were important to Jessie.

I want my kids to have good old-fashioned decent values, honesty, em, integrity, hardworking, whatever it is they choose to do, I don’t want them to be bums, I don’t want them to steal, I don’t want them to sponge.

A feeling of the value held in her maternal labour was associated with this conflict. Missing because her children may grow up to think that like Jessie they could ‘get something for nothing’, yet present because Jessie talked a lot about the intense physical and emotional effort that parenting demanded. Hopes were brought into conflict through orientations towards the conventional ways of belonging articulated by Duggan and Muñoz (2009). Jessie was not alone here. Hopes were orientated by gendered and classed expectations that women felt intensely. The shame associated with being out of work, was spoken often, in conflict with the affirmative reward of being a good mum, and being a good mum meant being present in the present – making the happy memories, without worrying about the happy memories.

Through an articulation of ‘choice’ we see the logic of ‘self-empowerment’ and an individualization of responsibility, creep through. ‘This is the life I chose for meself; do you know what I mean I chose the kids, I chose to put them before me.’ The insistence that she had chosen involved taking full responsibility for the life of herself and her children and this optimistic assertion of choice came into conflict with a note of bitterness at not having chosen the absence of the father. And amidst these conflicted hopes crept another secret wish: ‘I’d love to run away, I’d love to have one day or one night off, I’d love to have some time in me life where I could completely indulge meself (…)’. Time and space without demands is a privilege, which we speculate is already afforded to the absent father. But for Jessie, all that persists for now is a sense of conflict: the collision of optimism with anger.
and regret; belonging, with exclusion; self-empowerment with structural barriers to maintaining the values she hopes to maintain.

**Suspended hopes**

Hope for maintaining a position amidst decline, played out for some through vigilant planning, and again this was a cruel form of self-empowerment. Cruel because the conditions of uncertainty rendered such planning difficult. Jane, for example, resigned herself to a foreclosed and pessimistic future. For her what was lost or threatened amidst austerity was a feeling of stability, the opportunity to be outside worry. However, Jane’s pessimism was organised by conformist hopes. These took form through careful acts of planning – in addition to othering those who did not plan. Jane attempted to mitigate the effects of upheaval by pre-empting change. Since those changes were difficult to anticipate, this became a frustrating and exhausting process.

I worry about the future all the time, me, people laugh because I said once me son leaves home I’m putting me name down for sheltered accommodation, on me 50th birthday, I even mentioned it when I went down to age concern and they said ah like that’s a good idea, but you won’t get it in your fifties, and I said I know but by the time I turn 65 I’ll have been on the list for 15 years I’m ganna get somewhere aren’t I?

Jane’s expectations have had to shift:

No because of this bedroom tax and things like that em years ago you could have got a two bedroom quite easily in sheltered accommodation but now they they look more like bedsits like you’ve got a one room, you’ve got your bathroom and that’s it…

Jane hoped that her vigilance would provide a path to secure retirement in state supported sheltered housing, and this act of fore-thought brought with it an affirmative reward amidst decline, a sense of having taken control. The decline of the present is suspended forward, as she hopes for a bedsit – nothing better, and nothing worse. What became unbearable was the possibility that such housing provision could be eroded by further cuts and reforms: that she could be on a waiting list for nothing. What becomes impossible is the imaginary that provision could improve.

**Negative hopes**

Certain orientations to the future were pushed onto women during the time that I spent with them, through pressures into paid work. We have seen this manifest in the shame that accompanied being ‘on benefits’. Yet, on the whole, the narrative was accepted that decline was necessary. Opportunities to avoid the realities of withdrawal were available only at an individual level, amidst expressed disinterest in the ’system’. This follows a deeper logic in austerity (one faced by these women) not that we’re all in it together, but that somebody else, will take the pain. Cultures of self-empowerment have ordered hopes in a range of different ways, which I have already explored. This also became apparent in a form of precaritisation, through othering (Lorey, 2015). The hoped-for marginality of others was a cruel understanding that in order to hold a position, somebody else must ‘fall off’ the shelf.

For Jane, it was ‘other single parents’ the ones with ‘swollen belly syndrome’, who would get pregnant again as soon as their kids reached 5, in order to avoid returning to work.
It was also people who did not plan carefully enough. The hope was that they would carry the decline. A couple of women discussed ‘immigrants’ in our interviews, repeating fake stories about a ‘drain on resources’, which they had also described levelled at them. Several mentions were given, to ‘free mobile phones’ and ‘all the big houses they were getting’. Robyn was particularly attached to this narrative. She had been impacted by the ‘bedroom tax’, by increases in council tax, and by increased conditionality of Job Seekers Allowance. Robyn held together defiant resistance to the cuts and changes that impacted her as she refused to buy into the rhetoric of ‘workers’ and ‘shirkers’.

...obviously them that’s not affected, its straight over their heads so why should they worry about it? Why should they bother? (...) It could be you one day so why you’re having a go at people on benefits and claiming and waving the big flag saying yeah you should pay! Just remember that what we, what like everybody that’s fighting against it now it’ll be like for you as well (...) now it’s like look after yourself and if you’re all right jack I’m alright jack so sod the rest and I think that’s the attitude of a lot of it now.

Robyn was the oldest of the women, and came along to the group with her grandchild. She held onto a promise of organised resistance where the other women had expressed disinterest in ‘the system’. She was part of several organising committees, including one to prevent the deportation of a refugee who attended the women’s support service, and another to recreate ‘the Jarrow march’ (a 1930s protest NE against poverty and unemployment). This was a fight not just for herself but also for others who could be impacted by austerity and other forms of uncertainty. She celebrated a sense of convivial marginality when she claimed:

You'll find it’s the ones that’s the lowest of the low that'll help you out like the roughs and scruffs like meself, you know what I mean like, but at the end of the day that’ll knit together and say well if you need a hand let us know and its always the ones that have got nothing are the first ones to offer...

The affirmation of the roughs and the scuffs enabled Robyn to celebrate her marginality and generate a sense of belonging, while othering those who didn’t buy into such a reciprocal approach – the ‘I’m alright Jacks’. However, as well as berating the ‘I’m alright Jacks’ she went on to berate the ‘system’ which enables things like second homes, a deeply unequal distribution of wealth and more immigration to persist. In a return to ‘conflicted hopes’ the notion that ‘it could be you so you should understand how I feel’ was brought into conflict with those others deemed to threaten the continuation of her current lifestyle. This negative attachment to those othered figures provided a false bridging promise to a better future.

My opinion is I’m sorry but you’re letting far too many people in the country and I’m not prepared to give my home in for them and I’m not being racist or whatever the other word is, or nationalist, but its like no that you do something about the number of people you are allowing in the country that’s like pushing for these bigger homes and stuff it’s like em... like generally that as well, and I’m not prepared to leave me home for any of it, I would rather push and push for as long as I possibly could.

The belief had been internalised that her home was threatened not by changes and reductions to state funding but by increased competition for housing. To use the language ‘push’ hinted at the deferral of decline – to ‘push’ the threat of loss on to somebody else.
What became impossible was an imaginary that the bedroom tax might be reversed, and the logic of self-empowerment did not fully resonate. What ‘got inside’ was the possibility that sorting out the ‘problem’ of free movement could reverse Robyn’s misfortunes. If it was inevitable that things had to get worse, then things becoming worse for abstracted marginalised others instead became the object of her optimism.

The logic in austerity that things have to get worse, that heightened vulnerability is inevitable, became directed into the hoped-for vulnerability of others. We can see here how hope ‘organises the unequal distributions of security; with race, and class privilege, as well as gender and sexual conventions’ (Duggan and Muñoz, 2009: 276) and affirmative reward is related to finding another figure to hold the conditions of decline that are deemed to be inevitable.

Hopes were in conflict again, then, as Robyn both held onto and eroded the promise of collective action and reciprocity that she already lamented as lost. There is something of the moment in this conflict, and we can see how she sought to maintain a position of outsider and of relative privilege. She wanted to avoid being, or perhaps feeling, on the margins, as it was on the margins – she could recognise – that decline must be faced. One would then risk ‘falling off’.

It is possible to see through the varied formations of hope that I have narrated above, the mediation of cruel optimism – when something you desire is an object to your flourishing – as a structure of neoliberal logics of self-empowerment amidst decline. Energy was orientated not towards upward progress, but towards maintaining a position, and avoiding decline. Hopes channelled into closing down contingency at a micro level were part of what kept relations with insecurity going at a macro level. Yet another dynamic played out too, one that involved hoping for the absence of hope. Perhaps this was about recognising contingency, and occupying a position of openness towards the present.

**Hoping for an absence of optimism**

We could see this hope articulated by Jesse, at the start of this paper, when she described wanting to do the happy memories without worrying about them. The desire just to be there, came up a lot. Perhaps, most directly in my conversation with single mum of 5, Claire, who was not in paid work, but volunteered at the local toddler group. She hoped to embrace the present and ignore the future whenever possible. Problems were not anticipated but responded to as they arose. Claire expressed an action for living: ‘when something needs doing I do it’. Like some of the others, she too performed a disinterest in the system and an absence of concern for ‘making something of herself’ in a system of exploitation and exchange (Berlant, 2008). When I asked her about changes to the benefits and services that were, at the time of this research, integral to the continuation of her ordinary every day, she replied:

> I don’t know, I haven’t thought about it. I think there’s loads of things to worry about and I don’t like worrying about things until I have to. There’s just so many other things that you need to worry about, general life, and I hate worrying about things until that is upon you and I worry about it then. I never plan for the future and that has probably been my downfall, em never. I live for the here and now and I don’t really think of the future because you don’t know what the future is. I mean you can plan and plan and plan but having cancer in the family and stuff and me mam dying early (...) You get on with it. You do. You can moan and moan as much as you want but it doesn’t change anything - you’ve just got to deal with what you’ve got - life does suck for people, it’s life isn’t it.
So, Claire creates a future-less present as a kind of liberation, a different kind of empowerment that holds contingency close. Her general orientation to the world is pessimistic ‘life does suck’, yet the narrative feels hopeful, because of its openness to the ‘here and now’ in all its uncertainty. She expresses resignation to the cuts and reforms of austerity amidst the general uncertainty of life and later talks about the joy and pleasures that accompany focusing on those things that you can grasp and counting your blessings. Claire claims that it is a disavowal of unbearably uncertain futures that facilitates happiness in the ‘here and now’.

Claire also notes that her refusal to engage the future has left her susceptible to deeper insecurity. ‘That has probably been my downfall’. If as Ahmed (2010) and Berlant and Edelman (2013) suggest, negativity produces the energy that enables change, then perhaps unwillingness towards the negative expressed as ‘worry’ about an uncertain future dampens resistance to harm. It is a flop response to difficulty connected to the weariness that Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar (2019) describe. Or this is a reflection of Claire’s relative privilege, the absence of darkness from which hope might spring. Either way, this might not only be deemed a passive or apolitical act. Through Claire’s repeated use of the term, it is possible to recognise the pull of worry and the energy it takes to ignore: ‘I don’t like to worry:’ is this a rebellious resistance to the pressures and strains of optimism?

Ahmed (2004) describes tension between the maintenance of happiness (self-care) and passivity to violence. It is a double bind. Here, absenting from hope is possible for Claire because she already holds a certain position of security, and as a result of her race, and her nationality, she is not so close to the edge. Yet she recognises that when her child turns five, she will be forced into a different relation with the future, she will have to look for a job. And perhaps, a claim to ‘happiness in the moment’, is in itself a conforming act, if for Ahmed (2008) in the contemporary happiness becomes framed as some kind of end goal or measure of success in the UK. It is in this way that she grasps the promise of conventional normalcy held in a commitment to motherhood. However, the idea of this as a short-cut to belonging is potentially closed down or dominated too, through the sense that some people – particularly those not in the paid labour market – have happiness too easily where ‘expressions of horror about contemporary cultures of happiness involve a class horror that happiness is too easy, too accessible, and too fast’ (Ahmed, 2008: 11).

Opting out of the future, embracing the present, not caring about ‘the system’ are strategies for riding, without preventing the changes that are to come. But what if, as it seems at times for Claire, hopes without optimism were organised towards not away from contingency and particularly an understanding of mutual contingency, as Butler (2004) describes as she advocates for a politics of precarity? Across the accounts of women, and their multiple, conflicting, suspended and negative orientations of hopes, a desire to be present in the present becomes momentarily apparent. Yet through the individuation of responsibility and forms of self-empowerment, a chance to hope without cruel optimism becomes lost. Opportunity to be in the present, to hold contingency close, and to resist the pull of the future is eroded for women by threats of disruption, change and insecurity. In these conditions othering and competition thrive.

Conclusion: Towards another endless present

I started this paper with what might have been an awkward moment: milk leaked through my t-shirt. A pause, then somebody kindly met my vulnerability with a story of their-own, we laughed. There was no ‘breast or bottle’ conflict. It could have gone another way, and I was grateful that we could be present together in a space that held our mutual contingency.
close. Moments of shared intimacy, based on expressions of vulnerability, strengthened the
group over time and made us more open to each other despite our differences. But this paper
tells a story about how the governance of hopes mediates relationships between women,
closing down common spaces for building bonds, both physically and figuratively.

I have drawn together a story of gendered precarity and the varied forms of hope that
circulate in relation to it. Single mothers who are not in paid work endure a reduction in
economic and emotional security as state and third sector structures of support are with-
drawn. Eroded above all, is time and space to be present in the present, because ‘things are
all over the place’ and because women are drawn into a dynamic of harmful and (some-
times) undesired aspiration. Conflict exists at the level of the social, but also at the level of
the individual as different orientations of hope towards conventional forms of belonging,
and the affirmative rewards they bring, are drawn into tension with one another. And
structural barriers to maintaining a position are encountered in tension with neoliberal
logics that deny such barriers exist.

Calls to worry, calls to the future, ramp up. Particular futures are forced onto the present
and absenting from optimism leaves women feeling vulnerable to harm that is just around
the corner. A dynamic of cruel optimism becomes manifest in the various forms of hope that
I have explored in this paper. Indeed, it is exactly the multiplicity of hopes, and their conflict
that constitutes the cruelty. Here then hope, like the present, is not thought singularly –
instead various hopes create different experiences of and relations with the present. Multiple,
often dissonant or conflicting hopes (and relations between them) constitute precarity and
enable stuck-ness. And if a stretched-out present is tensed with decline at the level of the
social, this is because a sense of momentum from feelings and conditions of insecurity may
be maintained at the level of the individual.

The hopes of these women – who are not reducible to ‘left behind’ – are singular, complex
and multiple. Yet often they are organised by affirmative rewards associated with norms and
conventions, including long-told harmful stories about motherhood, austerity, immigration,
workers and shirkers. Despite moments of intimacy, care, connection based on mutual
contingency, resistance to the cruel promises of exploitative work, home ownership, and
upward mobility, strategies of precaritisation have taken root. And just as Lesley, in our
play, found a bridging promise, like a life raft to cling on to amidst loss and insecurity, so
we might speculate that Brexit became a holding place for these hopes. Perhaps Brexit promised
a coherent world around which multiplied and confused hopes could congeal, hopes orien-
tated less around moving forward and more around holding onto a position of relative
privilege. In this way, Brexit gave form to a formless future, and to the promise that that
something or somebody else would carry the decline and ‘fall off the edge’. And if that is the
case, then Brexit repeated the hopeful (and harmful) logic that we have seen play out at the
heart of austerity and through women’s narratives in this paper.

Women in the support group are trapped in an insecure present that is fraught with
decline. They are not able to move forward, and not able to rest in a present without the
cruelty of optimism either. Instead they are pulled into relations with futures that are vari-
ously affectively rewarding, impossible, undesired and harmful, just to maintain a position.
The stretched-out present at play here is organised by failed attempts at avoiding contin-
gency, on repeat. And the governance of hope that reproduces this situation depends on
forms of othering, built on relative privilege. This is the strategy of precaritisation. The
desire to maintain a position is cruel amidst precarity, but it is also, in itself an expression of
relative privilege. For so many, to hold a position would be unbearable: opportunities to rest
in a present without the cruelty of hope, would be long out of reach.
There are glimpses of hope for another kind of endless present in women’s testimonies. This would not be organised around multiplied and fractured orientations to the future, that fold in on othering and insecurity. Instead it would be built on an understanding of mutual contingency, and a desire to be present in the present, to connect, without optimism or hope for something elsewhere. Radical politics can be found in the expression of hope for the absence of optimism. Just imagine, for a second, if this very different form of endless present was available evenly to all.

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Notes
2. The quotes at the start of this paper are taken from 1–1 interview transcripts; the description of us in the room is an adaptation of field notes. Further detail about this research is provided in Section ‘The cruel promise of keeping going’, after the introduction.
3. The Fordist promise of stable progress always had significant exclusions and became an exception to the capitalist rule of precarity (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008; Seymore, 2012).
4. For example, Pettit, 2019 on precarity in Egypt, Bessant and Watts, 2014 on the EU Youth strategy, Beer, 2018 on Steel workers experiences of pension reform, and Zembbylas, 2018 on Human Rights Education.
5. For more information about this, see Department for Work and Pensions, 2013.
6. I recognise the role that my nationality, my whiteness and my sexuality likely played in this ease of connection. The social and cultural mediation of that dynamic and that intimacy is part of the point I am hoping to make.

References


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