

# PROBLEMS OF HOPE

Edited by  
Leila Dawney, Claire Blencowe and  
Patrick Bresnihan



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and Patrick Bresnihan

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## **Introduction: Problems of hope**

However hopeless we often feel, we are creatures of hope. Because we live in worlds that are composed through imagination, transformation and feeling, hope is a part of our fabric. Because we live in capitalized, neo-colonised worlds, with their constant thirst for 'growth' and creative-destruction, hope is the most precious stuff of power: inciting, inviting, inspiring; making bodies move.

Our capacities to endure and to make others endure are leveraged through the seductions and invocations of hope. We might be seduced by miraculous visions and grand promises, or by humbler, more intimate moments of attachment that relieve – for a moment – the nausea and vertigo of despair. We might be moved by hope for justice or any other ever-after story. We might work ourselves to the bone, in hope of a better job tomorrow. We might vote against our true beliefs because some politician or other offers 'the only hope'.



And every dashed hope leaves a small catastrophe – a spirit just that little bit more broken. These dynamics of hope proliferate senses of inspiration and expectation, depression and inadequacy. Such feelings can in turn galvanize new forms of hopeful politics – such as the resurgent far-right nationalist movements that align ‘hope for the future’ with closed borders and the persecution of minorities.

And yet, we can no more give up on hope than we can give up on time itself, or love, or our persistence in the world.

This book explores ‘problems of hope’. We refer to ‘problems’ because we do not assume hope to be inherently good, or emancipatory. By paying attention to different instances and practices of hope, we reflect on how these can both support and obstruct us in our efforts to make lives more liveable, or futures more just. The essays show how hope can be re-engaged in the indeterminate margins, reenchanting writing and politics for a post-hopeful age. It is a book for those who want to remain hopeful but find it hard to see how.

What follows is a brief sketch of some of the ‘problems’ and questions that inspired us to write this book together.

### **Hope that hurts**

Hope can have effects that are very different to those that are intended. Hope for vitality and growth can generate exhaustion. Hope for a good society can generate

disappointment, grief and blame. Hope for love can generate wounds and resentment. Optimism can be most cruel. And attachment to wounded positions, and those that wound, is as likely a result of hope as is 'progress'.

Precarious lives are built on uncertainty, hope and fear. We hope for small things to change, and hope for a liveable future. Hope, as well as fear, is thus built into spaces of uncertainty and abandonment. Hope can keep power relations and structures as they are, extending the present into the future. It can trap us into thinking only about the future so that we miss possibilities for change in the present. It can make us obsess about some higher power or other that promises to fulfil our hopes – the new government, the right economic cycle, the potential employer – and close our minds to more creative forms of change that we can mobilize ourselves. Thus hope can lead to passivity or moments of toxic escapism that return us to the place we began, just worse off. Hope can also blind us to violence and injustices that others are enduring, or make such cruelties appear the necessary cost of the better future to come. One set of hopes is another horror story.

- ❖ *What is the role of hope in creating the very wounded world that the hopeful want to escape?*
- ❖ *What perils are immanent to the cultivation of hopefulness, especially in a world resplendent with folk that know all too well how to capitalise on the hopes of others?*

- ❖ *What if our hopes for the future are built on an optimism that has no foundation, keeping us (or others) attached to the expectation of release without really presenting a way out of the entrapping situation?*
- ❖ *How can we remain hopeful amidst 'austerity' politics for which the deadening of hope may in fact be a specific goal?*

## **Hope without a future**

Sometimes we can feel that the problems we face are too vast, too all encompassing, too complex for us to see a way forward. Problems like climate change, or global debt, or factory conditions in faraway places, just seem too impossible and overwhelming for us to make sense of. Even those of us who strive for post-capitalist futures find it hard to be hopeful, to actually believe that such futures are really possible.

In the face of such seemingly intractable problems and apocalyptic scenarios, it is perhaps not surprising that notions of endurance and survival have come to the fore. From World Bank reports to 'cutting edge' critical theory, the need to attend to capacities for collaboration and resilience in the context of post-industrial ruins is presented as a necessary antidote to the hubristic, toxic projects of the twentieth century. Whilst these concepts are taken up from very varied political perspectives, there is

much agreement that 'progress' has been a dangerous and destructive concept in modern history. While broadly in agreement with this analysis, such critiques are often ambivalent about the place of hope and the possibilities of aspiring for a better, let alone utopian, future.

- ❖ *Is it time to give up on hope: to accept that to remain hopeful is always to mobilise a western humanist historical tradition and singular vision of the 'good life'? Is it time to reject hope as being a child of these often repressive traditions?*
- ❖ *Should we instead embrace survival: the daily survival of those at the brutal margins of society, for whom momentary interruptions to the cycles of attrition can be more important than the distant possibility of a better life; or the very survival of our species amidst the ruins of industrialisation and neo-liberal capitalism?*
- ❖ *How can we remain hopeful amidst forces of planetary and societal degradation that remain, seemingly, beyond our powers of action and comprehension?*
- ❖ *Is it possible to have writing, activism, or politics without the experience of hope?*
- ❖ *Can we describe the possibilities of collaborative survival without somehow being complicit in accepting the uneven histories of abandonment, dispossession and abjection that have shaped the world we live in?*

## Re-enchanting hope

Despite all the problems that hope entails, we can still imagine hopeful practices that do not train our attentions on impossible futures but instead serve to amplify joy in the present. Such practices can move us beyond mere survival and endurance and reconfigure the most intimate spaces of experience that fall prey to world-destroying forces.

Practices of hope work against the present by augmenting our collective capacities. Such practices can make the present more liveable. They can also produce ways of thinking, acting and being together that generate previously unimaginable futures. By augmenting moments when we feel interdependent, rather than codependent, hope can transform ‘glimpses of other worlds’ into real places for inhabitation. An important element of this is celebration. Change for the better comes from celebration and celebratory modes of being and thinking, from music and dance and improvisation, such as that seen in the tradition of second-line parading in New Orleans. The literary scholar Fred Moten describes this celebration as the “mass” – *the collective ritual that creates the body politic that can hope*.

- ❖ *What sorts of hopeful practices and politics can emerge from overarching narratives (and experiences) of decay, abandonment, dispossession and abjection?*

- ❖ *How can we enact a politics of 'hope itself' – to make hopeful feeling an object, rather than simply a resource, for politics, contestation and design?*
- ❖ *What is the role for magic, spirituality, and enchantment in elevating the power of collectivity and common life beyond mere survival?*
- ❖ *Is it possible to reclaim narratives of progress, to reimagine them outside of the systems of domination and exploitation through which they were conceived?*

The essays in this book take up these problems and questions. The intention is to provoke thought and unsettle fixed narratives and assumptions about hope and its im/possibility. We draw on social research, philosophers, literature, music and film. At the end of the book, the epilogue explores some of the ideas and the processes through which this book took shape and includes suggestions for further reading.









# On finding hope beyond progress

*Leila Dawney*

*Visaginas today is a shrinking town. That cannot be taken away. And the changes come slow and hard. But we manage to squeeze the best of what we are and where we are. We love the forests, and try to keep them clean. We invite guests to walk among pines around the lakes, stay for a night in a tent under clear sky, or fishing in a morning on a foggy, mystical lake. We create galleries in old flats and unused spaces, we maintain outdated libraries, create festivals, celebrations, and we constantly work to find the idea to raise the city, stop it from dying, revive it, if you wish.*

*And it is hard. As I told before, not everybody has processed the Soviets in their mind, not all of the people have left independent Lithuania aside. Some people cannot accept the changes that have to be made in order to resurrect the city for our future generations.*

*It's a long, difficult path of constant thinking, of research, of gathering, both the ideas and the concepts. And only a certain amount of strong willed people walk this hard way. And even they struggle day to day, to prove the worthiness of their ideas, to have the power of persuasion to break through walls*

*of both insularity and despair. The town is holding. We stand, some more proud than others, some less aware, some less interested. We stand in a middle of a forest, enjoy our simple food and casual restaurants, we do sports and bring medals to the city, we try to raise children to be creative, proud and open minded, to be able to withstand these uncomfortable conditions they were born in. We live our lives, as anyone else on a planet - as well as we can.*

Alexei Urazov, resident of Visaginas, 2016.

The Lithuanian town of Visaginas was a planned socialist town, to be built in the shape of a butterfly with main arterial roads cutting between the “wings” and through the “body”. Its campus design means that traffic is kept to a minimum in the rest of the town, and apartments, playspaces and community spaces are connected via sandy paths through the forest. It was designed in the Soviet era to house the workers of the nearby Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant, which for a short while was the largest in the world. Originally called Sniečkus, after Antanas Sniečkus, first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party, Visaginas was built on forested land from the late 1970s onwards. The rapid halting of the build at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union has meant that currently only half of the butterfly is built.



Such towns served two purposes: to house workers for large scale industrial operations; and to spatially showcase Soviet planning and the good life that it was possible to achieve through socialist economics. Sniečkus was overseen by the Ministry of Atomic Energy in Moscow, meaning that, unlike its impoverished siblings in the outer reaches of the Soviet Union that were governed by local administration, the town benefited from a direct supply line to Moscow. With the ready availability of supplies, well-planned living spaces, amenities and services, short



housing waiting lists and clean forest air, the residents of Sniečkus lived a good life. During its burgeoning, workers were posted to Sniečkus from other parts of the Soviet Union. In the case of nuclear engineers and physicists, this often meant that they came from the closed cities in the north and east of Russia. Sniečkus had the advantage of being semi-open, meaning that people could come and go as they wished. The workers at the plant were highly skilled, benefited from excellent training and were proud of the work they did. Like pioneers, they camped by the lake, took part in the construction of the town, waiting for an apartment. They moved with their families, and as couples often met during their training or education, schools in particular had very highly qualified personnel working

there. Sniečkus enjoyed its status as a place populated by educated, intelligent people and had a lively cultural scene.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, work immediately ceased on the building of the town and the planned third and fourth reactors. With Lithuanian independence, Sniečkus was renamed Visaginas. When Lithuania applied for accession into the European Union in 2004, a condition of its membership was the decommissioning of the Ignalina plant, which used RBMK 1500 reactors similar to those at the Chernobyl plant. Decommissioning in Ignalina began in 2009 and will continue for a further 30 years. A sacrificial lamb to European citizenship, Visaginas' mainly Russian residents were stripped of their livelihoods, identities and the motherlode of their community, in exchange for the economic advantages of the free movement of labour throughout the European Union. The town reeled from the shock. Many left straight away for the opportunities of London, Berlin and Amsterdam. Some returned to start families, and others remained to try and make sense of their redefined status in a Russian town in Lithuania with a decommissioning plant. For years, they faced uncertainty about the possibility of new reactors being built there. This seems less and less likely now.

I had high hopes, on planning my first visit to Visaginas, that this would be a place with some great stories to tell.



Those narratives of urban and industrial landscapes laid to waste, of industrial ruins calling up “smokestack nostalgia” or “cool Soviet architecture”, tales of the unstoppable force of neoliberal transformation ravaging communities and leaving abandonment and hopelessness. We hear these tales a great deal when we read critical work on post-industrial economies. We see the processes of ruination that leave populations crawling towards a slow death, experiencing a non-life, a futureless existence without telos. We hear stories of abjection, abandonment and structural cruelty.

The anthropologist Anna Tsing is particularly interested in what can emerge in from “ruins of capitalism”.<sup>1</sup> Tsing’s ethnography follows the emergence of the *matsutake*

mushroom in spent timber plantations in the Pacific Northwest – a valuable mushroom favoured by the Japanese and East Asian market – and the new informal economies that surround its emergence. Plantation models of economic production are those that exploit one resource until it is gone, then move on somewhere else. The plantation produces ruins, or spaces of abandonment. Tsing discusses how the overarching stories that are being told about such places are stories of progress and decay: stories of abandonment, of resource depletion, of deforestation and of industrial decline, stories of that which progress leaves behind in its wake, of communities left to waste. But, she argues, “if we end the story with decay, we abandon all hope – or turn our attention to other sites of promise and ruin, promise and ruin”.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Tsing’s work encourages us to look beyond these narratives, and consider what sites of hope can emerge, like mushrooms, in such spaces.

If we take Tsing’s invitation to look at what other stories emerge from the ruins of the plantation model, we might be able to read Visaginas’ story differently too. Plantation models are not of course solely the preserve of capitalist infrastructure: Soviet infrastructures relied on monoagriculture and monoindustry, just as both capitalist and Soviet modernity embraced progress narratives. There is certainly an aesthetic fixation with Soviet-era ruins in the West, a fascination with the traces of past glories, grand narratives and atomic dreams. The nostalgia of industrial *ruinlust*, the playful spaces of urbex, our aesthetic



fascination with the rapidly abandoned homes of Pripyat: all of these to a certain extent obscure the extent to which ruins are not only spaces of human abandonment, but also spaces where new forms of life emerge. The story of Visaginas, told through such progress narratives, might be seen in terms of a sorry tale of abandonment and decay, of ruination and destruction of lives and hopes and dreams.

Certainly, if we look for these stories we can see them: the decommissioning of the reactors effectively laid the city to waste. We can see them in the way that the national and local government's attempts to whitewash over Visaginas' Soviet and nuclear past has denied its people their own history and identity.<sup>3</sup> We can see them too in the empty booze bottles in the forest, in the mass emigration of generations to other parts of the European Union, in the graffiti and half-finished buildings, in the peeling paint, in the cracks forming in the poured concrete staircases.

But if you look for decay, you'll see it anywhere. You can find this stuff in any town, if you are looking for it.

What is more productive and interesting, however, is what happens when you stay for a while, when you let the big story go, when you begin to notice, to engage, to register other stories. Then, you begin to see what else is going on in these landscapes of decline.



You begin to wonder whether these cracks, these margins, these postindustrial ruins, may offer the conditions of possibility for something more than slow death, something where life could thrive and new relations between beings, land and labour could be configured? <sup>4</sup>

By looking for different stories, and adopting new forms of noticing, we can see beyond those narratives of progress and decay, paying attention to practices of worldmaking, of rhythm, of collaborative survival that move hope from a passive belief in an external future towards a practice of the present.



On our visit to Visaginas, we meet Maria, who has created an archive of Soviet and Baltic material and visual culture. Maria and her friends paint together in silent conviviality most days, producing a warm, collective space of creativity. We also meet Alex, who devises role-playing games with young people, and organises collective runs through the city, and litter picks in the forest.

We meet Nikolai, who has invented a new form of people-powered transport that uses the propulsion of arms and legs to move you along. We visit Jelena in her apartment, who has set up a space for training older people in IT to enable them to communicate with relatives abroad. In a former nightclub, I get talking to Sergei and Igor, who were given the space, with six friends, for design studios.



Drinking beer and playing table tennis to the sounds of a portable sound system, we discuss how special Visaginas is. They invite us back to spend the summer there, barbecuing and swimming in the lake. Sitting alongside these new friends, walking in the forest and resting by the lake, we see a very different Visaginas from the tales we'd imagined. We begin to notice the forms of collective life that emerge in the absence of structure or direction from above.

### **Soviet subjectivities and being equipped for hope.**

Visaginas has been described as the “last Soviet bastion in Lithuania”.<sup>5</sup> Soviet citizenship and subjectivities has led to strongly felt commitments to duty, service and to the motherland.



We see a move from a secure but authoritarian existence, an existence where the paralysis of choice is to some extent eradicated, an existence dependent on powerful collective ideology, to a series of macro-level changes that have had deep effects on citizenship, identity, economic and social life.

Visaginas is a town built on the promise of nuclear power. Workers in the plant knew that should anything go wrong, they would sacrifice themselves to save those around them. They also knew that the strategic importance of the plant to the Soviet project and the risky nature of their work gave them privileges within the regime. There is collective solidarity in doing risky work.



The threat, while small, of an accident haunted the lives of those living and working in Visaginas. Many had gone to university and worked with those who died in Chernobyl. Most has lost friends during that accident. While the plant was still active, and for a few years after, people gathered informally to remember those who died as a result of the disaster. As Father Josef, the priest of the Orthodox Church, points out, “everyone here was touched by Chernobyl”. These acts of collective memorialisation produce solidarity and enact the fraternity of the nuclear industry through recognition of mutual expertise and risk.

The traces of the Soviet dream, shattered fragments of a totalising, paternalistic master narrative live through the people and landscapes of Visaginas. The relatively closed

community in Visaginas, and its status as Russian enclave, enables the continuation of Russian-Soviet forms of interaction and mutual support, for example through clubs, unions and groups, as well as through the Russian Orthodox church. When I talk to those who remain living there, they invoke again and again the idea of the motherland. Yet in the absence of Moscow, of a united Soviet republic centred in Russia, the motherland mutates into something else. The town, with its poured concrete apartment blocks, its forests, summerhouses, children, aspen and larch trees, embodies something around which and for which people coalesce and dedicate time, love and energy towards: the motherland has wrenched apart from itself, fragmented and reformed into a solid foundation from which a people can emerge. Only this time, there is no master plan, only small acts of world-making: gift-giving, teaching, making, being together. In other words, the forms of Soviet subjectivity as duty, service and collective identity have provided those in Visaginas with the tools to make a particular form of world, a world that enables many to withstand the changes imposed upon them.

Unemployment is high in Visaginas. What work there is may be part-time and poorly paid. Yet there is also minimal consumerism. The spatial equalities of regulated apartments, the lack of need for cars in a campus city, the lack of shops and restaurants and embodied history of Soviet subjectivity, as well as the disproportionately high number of engineers with practical skills have enabled people to carve out fulfilling lives.



The commitment to service extends to welfare recipients, too, who are obliged to undertake “socially useful work” for up to 40 hours per month. Visaginas’ streets are immaculate. Leaves are swept, snow is cleared and litter picked regularly by this army of public servants. While Lithuania’s welfare system is hardly generous, the informal and formal structures in place in the town mean that it is certainly possible to live a decent life on a minimal income.

And this is where Tsing’s metaphor of the mushroom is so powerful. The mushroom thrives in the abandoned plantation. And accompanying those mushrooms are a different sort of worker, who camps below the radar in the forest, who avoids the gaze of state forestry workers, who



finds a sort of freedom in this life that reconfigures work and living in a way that feels more whole.

In Tsing's ethnography, the mostly East Asian mushroom pickers lived outside of state regimes. Through self-employed mushroom picking, outdoor living, and avoidance of incorporation into regimes of governance, control and exploitation by low wage employers, the pickers participate in a reconfiguration of living and working that is experienced as a kind of freedom. In Visaginas, too, a reconfiguration of work and life is taking place, but is made possible by the state, through public employment, a basic minimum wage through the welfare system, through pensions associated with the plant closure and through a remittance economy made possible by the open borders of the European Union. In other words, unlike Tsing's mushroom pickers, those carving out a life in Visaginas' nuclear ruins do so *as a result of* state intervention, and as such provide food for thought for ideas such as the universal basic income. Moreover, their lives are defined by histories of relationships with the state, whereas the mushroom pickers' lives are defined by its circumvention.

Dreams of modernisation and progress obscure other rhythms, such as seasons and lifetimes. History tells us progress narratives, yet there are other stories to be told... stories that interrupt these tales, and stories that may tell of a form of thriving, or a form of joyful cohabitation, if only we throw away those progress myths. As Tsing points out:



“as progress tales lose traction....it becomes possible to look differently”.<sup>6</sup>

When you start to look with different eyes, when you start to hear the stories of what grows up in the ruins, in between, you are confronted by these new configurations. Those who live in Visaginas are making lives for themselves and each other in different ways. Residents of the town grow fruit and veg in their summer houses, a half-acre plot and cabin that accompanies each apartment, and where they decamp for the summer. These summer houses provide land for small-scale agriculture and for exchange of produce, decreasing reliance on capitalist economics and consumption. Residents are selling their handicrafts on the online platform etsy.com, volunteering to train others in

computing, cleaning up the woods and bringing up children. They are thinking about work differently.

We hear no stories of hope for a new nuclear future for Visaginas – its residents have long since given up on the masters of infrastructure to which they were beholden to save them – and there seems to be no replacement for that Soviet energetic dream. But looking beyond those tales of ruination and decline enables us to make space for, and bring to visibility, forms of life and of making a life that turn up in the cracked concrete of Visaginas' grand boulevards, in the derelict nightclubs, in the fade-to-white of nuclear decommissioning industries.

*This essay is based on a collaborative project by Leila Dawney and the photographers Laurie Griffiths and Jonty Tacon. All photographs are by Laurie Griffiths and Jonty Tacon.*

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The Mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Tsing, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Balockaite (2012). 'Coping with the unwanted past in planned socialist towns: Visaginas, Tychy, and Nowa huta', *Slovo* 24(1): 41-60.

<sup>4</sup> Berlant (2011). *Cruel optimism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Balockaite, 'Coping with the unwanted past'

<sup>6</sup> Tsing, *The Mushroom at the end of the world*, p. 22.



# Xanadu

## *Miles Link*

What is the promise of the ‘feel-good’ movie? Its name suggests a simple transaction of warm feelings for the price of a movie ticket. And yet the most important aspect of a ‘feel-good’ movie is the chance it offers us to glimpse happiness in another setting, beyond the normal constraints of our lives. Indeed, many times when you ask people why they watch ‘feel-good’ movies, they will claim such films are only a diversion, an escape from reality. I suspect this vastly undersells their importance.

I’m not talking about the handful of films that you privately cherish for their sentimental value, the films you watched when you were home sick when you were twelve. ‘Feel-good’ movies make larger claims, beyond appeals to individual taste or sentiment, about a tension between art and reality, between an unfulfilled promise and that which seeks a claim of legitimacy merely for existing. Cartoons, for example, often act on this tension between inner desire and ‘respectable’ behaviour—although the kind of hope discussed here needn’t reside solely in works that, like cartoons, upend society’s rules and regulations.

Countless movies are entertainment, though few are vessels of hope, since most movies follow a completely predictable pattern, while hope is larger than the mere meeting of expectations. Hope is even banished in favour of praise for the well-adjusted nobody. For almost two decades now, a steady stream of comedies have appeared, all about women and men afraid of growing up, terrified of adult behaviour and tasks—relationships, marriage, work—and how they learn to accept their mediocrity. What is striking is how disinterested in real life such films are, despite all their claims about what normal people supposedly do.

No one could seriously accept ‘adjustment’ as ‘feeling good’. The ‘feel-good’ movie is not anything that merely gratifies the senses, or plays with the narrative that society sets for us. Those are still qualities of art at the level of mere decorativeness. Meanwhile, even the most improbable works of art can contain the suggestion, the outline, of a world different and better than our own. These works elicit good feelings through this suggestion of hope, even if it is never more than a suggestion. They offer up hope as an ‘ever broken promise of happiness’, as Theodor Adorno put it.<sup>1</sup> In what follows I explore one example of a feel-good movie, to demonstrate what this ‘suggestion of hope’ means.

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*Xanadu* was a movie released in 1980, directed by Roger Greenwald. It stars Olivia Newton-John and Michael Beck.

*Xanadu* is about roller skating. Or rather, it is a movie that tried to capitalise on the brief fad of roller disco. The basic conceit is that Olivia Newton-John is an actual honest-to-goodness Muse from ancient Greece. She falls in love with a down-on-his-luck artist while trying to inspire him to open a roller disco with Gene Kelly. It is a musical, one with so many numbers that the underlying story struggles for breath. Olivia Newton-John and Michael Beck and Gene Kelly roller skate a lot. *Xanadu* is the kind of film that could have been a midnight movie, like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the kind that people put on costumes for and turn into a performance created by its own audience. But *Xanadu* is too good-natured and not sexy enough.

It might be seen as unpropitious to pick out an example like *Xanadu* to illustrate the philosophy of hope. We can neither pretend that a film like this is a world-historical masterwork, nor that it participates in culture as it is lived today. It is mostly a triumph of style over substance. Even so, half-seriously, I think *Xanadu* is the kind of movie that the philosopher Walter Benjamin was hoping for in his remarks about film. In a nutshell, Benjamin welcomed film as the arrival of art by and for the masses. Art had need no longer to be shut up in museums and churches. And true enough, even though *Xanadu* does access Western art's historical tradition—it features a Greek deity romancing with a mortal—it is certainly not elitist or self-consciously 'cultural'. Everyone can understand this movie. Benjamin would say it takes an old expression of ritual (the Greek gods, sacred dances) and turns it into a reproducible, social,



polysemic event. It dances in the twilight of the cultic image of art.

The film further extends its cultural capital with a reference to the first few lines of Samuel Coleridge's poem 'Kubla Khan', from which the name 'Xanadu' comes in the first place. In the darkened, abandoned theatre that he will renovate into a roller disco, Gene Kelly and the Greek muse, for no particular reason, recite to each other:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure dome decree:  
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea.

And immediately the disco is named 'Xanadu'—although the 'stately pleasure dome' they erect is shorn of Coleridge's 'caves of ice' and 'holy dread'. The good-natured *Xanadu* is psychedelic like Coleridge's opium dream only in that it does not feel the need to burden itself with some semblance of reality. This is the redeeming value of this 'feel-good' film: it does not feel constrained either to reproduce or enforce what we are already familiar with.

*Xanadu* expresses this freedom by presenting a series of moments of inspiration—inspiration as a kindling flash. Indeed, the feel-good movie, as a general type, always gestures forwards, but if it follows its own invitation, it goes astray. Inspiration famously has this fleeting effect: a visitor interrupted Coleridge while he was committing his 'Kubla

Khan' dream to verse, and he forgot the rest. In turn, 'Down to a sunless sea' is just about where someone reciting 'Kubla Khan' usually has their memory fail them. Although the film *Xanadu* doesn't seem to be about anything, it is extravagant in its noncommitment. It moves on after each inspiration: it includes a mural painting coming to life, a jokey outfit-selection-in-a-shopping-mall montage, a battle of the bands, an animated sequence, a visit to heaven. You want *Xanadu* to stop and explain its cornucopia of images a bit more, its mélange of Greek sandals and Chippendale furniture and Art Deco spaceship sets, but all you get is Olivia Newton-John, leisurely roller skating away.

This parade of images is not so much the result of sloppiness as it is a demonstration of the transient power of inspiration itself. It is enticing, not exasperating. With each various glimpse of some inspired thing, the film keeps its buoyancy. In its exhibition of pure play (E.L.O.'s Jeff Lynne sings, 'Lost in another world (far away), never another word ('till today) / [...] How can it be real? / I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive'), the lengthy and various dance scenes, the awful video effects, the roller skating, the sheer unseriousness of it all, even the unseriousness of its seriousness (any character who is sad quickly shrugs and recovers themselves), *Xanadu* achieves something rather improbable: it is so uninterested in its own story that it seems to take us outside of time itself. The big finale of *Xanadu* is set not in our own world, but inside this Olympian discotheque. The nine Muses sing and perform, for a very long time. People everywhere roller skate and

dance continuously (Roger Ebert complained that the film is shot poorly—he couldn't see the dancers).<sup>2</sup> There doesn't seem to be any universe outside the windowless walls. This is not heaven as some endless party, which sounds horrible, but as an explosion of creative energy.

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*Xanadu* is not particularly well constructed, it is true. And yet, watching 'feel-good' films like *Xanadu* is never quite time wasted. The virtue of feel-good films, however much they are locked in the world of cheap entertainment, is that they preserve the aspirations of film by recognising the limits of the medium itself. I mean that film, because it combines so many kinds of art—image, sound, music, theatre—is always on the verge of overwhelming us. It threatens to tip over into a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a 'total work of art', which is suffocating to watch. Countless high-concept, 'artsy' films are guilty of this, so much so that it is a cliché: the closer that films try to depict life in its natural state, the more artificial they become. If a film ever really did become a 'total' work of art—if any film ever succeeded in dictating experience to us—it would overwhelm and smother the promise of a different life that it contains. It would be vulnerable to the classic objection to utopia: that utopia is hostile to life as we (imperfectly) live it.

Feel-good films don't shrink away from this threat of art subduing reality; they demonstrate its impossibility. In this way, they interrogate the limits of their own medium. A film with no aspiration to some imaginary apotheosis of art is

freed to pursue inspiration, image, and sheer spectacle, while it reflects its explorations back to us as possibility. That is, if feel-good movies are really suggesting that films cannot ever match pure, lived experience, then to 'feel good' at the movies is, paradoxically, to evoke a disappointed hope.

This paradox makes better sense if you consider hope as the representative of something as yet unrealised—and so, as a kind of challenge to what is real. That is, our sensation of hopefulness informs even our most disappointed moments, because hope never merely confirms what already exists. It is more like a suspicion that comes with every declaration that 'there is no alternative'; it is a hostility to all 'realistic thinking' which cannot lose the whiff of a betrayal. Part of that hostility is real resistance to all the ways in which the world disappoints an ideal, but part of it is also a kind of daydreaming, and an impatience with explanation. If we consider hope as the pursuit of something that doesn't yet exist, we not only recognise the process of striving for something better but also, crucially, the ways in which that striving has fallen short. After all, to claim that hope resides in the world, however hidden, is ultimately to celebrate that world, even despite yourself.

*Xanadu* was a commercial failure. Unlike more infamous cinematic flops, it is almost completely forgotten now. It even failed at failing, so to speak. It was recently made into a tongue-in-cheek stage show, although the original is so ingenuous that it is impossible to mock without coming off as mean-spirited. But *Xanadu's* failure, however typical of

feel-good movies, is also eloquent of hope, if that isn't too large a claim to make. Today's art, today's criticism (that is, today's statements of what we collectively hope for) is desperately afraid of failure. (This, despite a general lowering of expectations: however much the postwar dreams of Moon colonies and flying cars invites laughter now, even our sunniest visions of the future suffer from a shamefully curtailed notion of liberation.) But hope is also no guarantee of success. *Xanadu* demonstrates that a film that recognises its limits as art can still deliver the hope, and indeed expectation, of fulfilment. Art seeks after hope, but must leave it unrealised.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno, T. (2001) *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. London: Continuum. p.138

<sup>2</sup> Ebert, R. (2016) "Xanadu." *rogerebert.com*. 1 September 1980. Accessed 30 August.  
<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/xanadu-1980>.

# Hope without a future in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*

*Patrick Bresnihan*

## I

In the first few pages of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*<sup>1</sup>, Lauren Olamina, the narrator and central protagonist, recounts a conversation she had with her stepmother when she was seven years old. They were out after dark taking down washing from the clothesline. Above them is the splash of the Milky Way. Her stepmother tells her that when she was small she couldn't see the stars because of the city lights. "Lights, progress, growth, all those things we're too hot and too poor to bother about anymore", she explains. "When I was your age", she goes on, "my mother told me that the stars – the few stars we could see – were windows into heaven. Windows for God to look through to keep an eye on us. I believed her for almost a year." Lauren's stepmother clearly doesn't care much for stars – she tells her stepdaughter she can have them (they're free after all). Better that the city lights come back, the sooner the better.

The book is set in the near future (2024) and twentieth century infrastructures are failing; climate change brings regular droughts and floods; food, water, and energy are vastly more expensive; and surplus populations proliferate. Lauren's stepmother is, like many of her generation, nostalgic for a past she knows is unlikely to return and yet unable to believe anything else is possible. This is not the way Lauren sees things. She has very little faith in the past or the people who hold out the promise of a return to imagined heydays. For her, the stars represent the possibility of something beautiful and unknown, and in that she finds hope. This feeling is nothing more than a vague orientation, a fancy, but in the course of the novel we learn how this unearthly point of hope takes form through a messy and uncertain process of world-making in the present. The goal of this process is never clear nor is it even that important. This essay draws on Butler's decision to *not* choose between optimism and pessimism to show that hope can exist without a clear object of the future.

## II

The stars are not just symbolic; in 2024 the US government still funds space exploration programs. But everyone in Lauren's gated community thinks the space program is a waste of money: how can you justify another space trip when people on earth can't even afford water?

This is a familiar, and reasonable, argument but from Lauren's perspective it only feeds the culture of meanness that has enveloped her society - we later learn that a man

called Donner has been elected President because he has promised to scrap the “wasteful, pointless, unnecessary” space program and put people back to work by changing “overly restrictive” labour and environmental laws.

The first half of *The Parable of the Sower* gives a window onto the material and psychic violence of this regime of austerity. Of course, wealth still exists in this dystopian world, but it is far removed from the subsistent, insecure lives of the characters we encounter. This is what is most resonant about Butler’s work: she shows how this regime of austerity permeates the bodies, minds, and souls of people, how it generates a miserable, fearful complex in which individual self-interest and material necessity strangles all but the most cynical forms of imagination. Survival in this context is a brute, bare thing, a permanent state of strategizing, scrimping, and competing, which leaves very little room for joy or intimacy. Though we encounter material poverty, the lasting impression is one of affective poverty. As Felix Guattari argues, ecological degradation operates at different levels of experience: “[w]e live in a time when it is not only animal species that are disappearing; so too are the words, expressions, and gestures of human solidarity.”<sup>2</sup>

Hope in this context is confined to the fading possibility of ‘return’ (to ‘social order’, waged employment, city lights) or, increasingly, the maintenance of things as they are, staving off the dread thought of how much worse things can get. In this austere world, gestures of generosity are met with mistrust or dismissed as foolishness. The gated



community is squeezed from within and without. Basic goods become more expensive, money is harder to come by, those without become more numerous and desperate, basic government functions are abandoned, people jump ship, the ship is sinking.

### III

Lauren struggles against this austere world even as she has to live in it. Against her stepmother's cynicism she learns the names of some of the stars and constellations. She believes in space exploration and the Mars expedition – one of the only things left over from the last century that might help more than it hurts. She also knows her community won't survive – she sees that clearly and prepares for the event by reading up on plants, collecting maps, packing a survival bag with water, money, clothes and seeds. When she confides this to a friend, her friend replies that the new President might “get us back to normal”. Out of fear, the friend informs Lauren's dad that his daughter is planning to go North. It is another lesson for Lauren that even close friends cannot be trusted.

Lauren doesn't believe in her father's God anymore – the Church she was baptised into. Nor is she convinced by what other people say and believe. She reads the Bible and likes the story of Job even though she doesn't like the kind of God it represents – one that leaves very little room for humans. She has begun to write down short verses and poems that begin to trace the outlines of a God she could believe in.

All that you touch  
You Change.

All that you Change  
Changes you.

The only lasting truth  
Is Change.

God  
Is Change.

This is the starting point for Lauren's new religion, a religion she calls Earthseed. Recalling the stars and the possibilities of space exploration she writes: 'The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the Stars'; even as she packs her survival bag out of practical necessity, she harbours ideas that stretch far beyond the limited world she finds herself in. But these ideas are only thoughts in her head or verses on a page. They have no world, no bodies to inhabit.

#### IV

The walls of Lauren's gated community are eventually breached by 'pyros' – drug-addled mobs who set fire to anything they can. The community is decimated. Harry and Zahra, two other survivors that Lauren meets afterwards,

recall graphic scenes of rape and murder. All have lost their families and loved ones. These three people who hardly knew each other are now hurled together. All they have to share at this point is their pain: Lauren writes that the pain of Harry's bruised and beaten body and Zahra's crying for her dead daughter somehow eases her own misery at losing her family and home.

Lauren has hyperempathy syndrome, which means she shares the pain (and pleasure) of others; as a child Lauren would even share bleeding with others. Hyperempathy means Lauren is vulnerable. For this reason, Lauren's father always sought to make sure that no one would find out about her condition. In a world where only the fittest survive, any sign of weakness has to be disguised.

One night the group are attacked. Lauren awakes, hits a man and then shoots him in the head – is it to relieve her pain? Is it for the safety of the group? Is it because the man would die anyway, so far from medical attention? Harry and Zahra are shocked. Lauren tells them she is a 'sharer', something she did not want to reveal. She expects them to leave her behind; she is a liability now, her hyperempathy could endanger them. Harry is more concerned with how quick she was to kill someone who was injured. Would she kill him if he was badly injured or would she share his pain? These are not abstract questions; they have been brought up to mistrust one another as a matter of survival. But it is not what any of them want. Like hunted animals, Lauren, Harry, and Zahra begin to experiment with what it means

to share when sharing involves making yourself vulnerable to others.

## V

As they travel north along Highway 101, Lauren, Harry and Zahra encounter other people who are equally mistrustful of strangers and the risks involved in sharing: when they invite a mixed couple and their baby to travel with them the family begin trailing behind like wary dogs before joining them around the fire. But as the group grows the sharing is amplified: sharing invites reciprocity, not merely in terms of the thing being shared (food, money, stories) but in terms of the trust that is required. Both giving and taking involve the investment of trust in another person, an investment that is based on faith not calculation. These many, small acts of faith start to work as a kind of solvent, softening the interpersonal boundaries of fear that are otherwise assumed to be essential defences in such a violent world.

In Octavia Butler's vision, sharing is always more than economic exchange. It ties people together in ambivalent relationships, making them vulnerable while also amplifying their capacities. This is shown most clearly when Bankole, an older, black man, and Lauren become lovers. For Lauren this intimate, bodily pleasure is multiplied by her hyperempathic condition; her capacity to share is no longer a vulnerability but a source of joy. It is in this tentative context, one that is irreducibly material and social, that sharing begins to function as a kind of healing, a

healing that is not centred on the individual but works through the collective, transforming and holding these damaged people together in ways that were previously unthinkable. And out of this, new directions and imaginative possibilities begin to unclench.

When the band of travellers arrive at the homestead of Bankole's sister and family there is nothing but a "broad, black smear on the hillside". The farm buildings have been burnt out – only bones and ashes remain. No one is sure what to do. Bankole's family has been killed, the place is haunted. Even if they manage to avoid being attacked there are doubts about whether they can live there: the water could run out, or the seeds Lauren has carefully transported could be barren. No one wants to listen to Lauren's talk of "making an Earthseed community". Harry doesn't want to stay because he still wants "something that is mine" – he is still tied to the idea of a wage-paying job that will allow him buy his own house and land (these hopes are quickly shot down by a woman who has worked in a factory further North where indentured slavery and toxic conditions have become the norm). But there is also work needed on the land; there is still a well, a half-ruined garden with carrots and potatoes, citrus trees, as well as wild fruit and nut trees and pines. With no one entirely convinced, they decide to plant and cultivate, to build houses and to make the place secure.

## VI

What kind of hope does the *Parable of the Sower* offer us? It is not a hope that relies on any clear blueprint or shared project. It is not even a hope that is that hopeful. On the final page, Bankole confides to Lauren: “we don’t have a hope in hell of succeeding.” But at the same time, we are not left feeling hopeless: the book ends with a group of relative strangers choosing to pursue an uncertain future together, to make something out of the ruined, traumatised world they find themselves in. The possibility to choose a different life does not come from individual will power or a book. Lauren could not choose to live differently when we first met her, though she may have wanted to. The possibility of this new life was unthinkable without the transformative power of shared moments of bodily intimacy, vulnerability, and kindness. Two moments towards the end of the book stand out.

First: Natividad, one of the itinerants picked up on the road, gives a shawl she has knitted to Bankole. She wants him to use the shawl to wrap up the bones of his deceased family. It is the most beautiful object she owns. Bankole initially refuses, saying it should be kept for the living. Natividad responds that it is for the living because it is for him, a sign of her affection for him. Bankole breaks down in tears.

Second: Lauren proposes that they all take part in a ceremony to remember the people they have lost along the way. They are unsure how to do this but agree on each planting an acorn and saying a few words that mean

something to them, or to the dead – scraps of verse, personal memories, readings from the Bible.

The only thing common to these strangers is their experience of loss and pain. They inhabit a world full of such suffering, something they have dealt with in the past by closing themselves off, fearing others, protecting what limited resources they possess. But on the road they have begun to share pain, and sometimes pleasure, and through these exchanges realise the strange and magic healing power that comes with it. Through gestures of generosity and intimacy they have opened up new affective channels that ripple through their deprived bodies – individually and collectively. They themselves, without clear intention, have mobilised, slowly at first, a new way of the world, one that might not have to rely on fear and hoarding, subjugated factory work, or the degradation of the environment. With these new ways of relating a different future opens up. Where this goes is the subject of the next book and, indeed, the unwritten sequels that Octavia Butler would never complete, uncertain herself of what the future should hold.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Butler, O. E. (2012). *Parable of the Sower*. Open Road Media.

<sup>2</sup> Guattari, F. (2005). *The three ecologies*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

<sup>3</sup> See Canavan, G. (2014). “There’s Nothing New/Under The Sun, /But There Are New Suns”: Recovering Octavia E. Butler’s Lost Parables. *Los Angeles Review of Books*.







# Seeking

*Claire Blencowe*

*Walk with me, I've something to show you. This way, that's right, along the water's edge, along these clanking pebbles.*

*Washed out, I've washed up here again. On the only scrap of earth that ever felt like home. The scrap that scrapes the Atlantic.*

*We can rest just here, suspended in a billion smashed up shells.*

*See how jagged edges – red, black, green – give way to light. See the watery sun; how we dissolve in a luminescent mass pink-silver-white-blue?*

*You know, if we wanted to, we could fall through the sand here, and land in that sky.*

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*Is this a waste of time?*

*Am I wasted, Time?*

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In seventy-nine, the year before the year I was born, a score was laid out. Ours would be an orchestrated world without composers. Led by generators without a sense of beauty and form, breakage and humour; decomposing bodies recomposed as code and opponent parts. Entrance to every art practice would be guarded by games of virtuosity and chance. Professional competence and public trust would be displaced by pseudo market mechanics.

We would become objective, competitive, worthy-to-live.

Aspirational. Manic dreamers.

Our capacity to love and accept would be tarnished and harnessed to an ideology that declares the only quality to be betterment.

Entering an ever-accelerating world, our hope would be manifest time. Where time is money, but also, much more. The movement of life itself. The more than of life.

My father, trained in electrical mechanics and the manipulation of matter, would devote the long evenings of his working life to writing bids – tenders – so that the local council might win the right to build its own roads... until defeated he went to write tenders for the opposition.

My mother, trained to teach and cultivate the power of young bodies, would be serially harassed and driven to the

edge of despair by the statistically inescapable 'failure' of a normal school in the Ofsted regime.

And my own profession – university research and teaching – would crunch deeper and deeper into a farce in which the energies of the most educated bodies on the planet are absorbed in cults of self-flagellation and 'let's pretend' plays for wholly inadequate excellence assessment machines.

'Let's get wasted!'

However moral and hard-nosed they might have sounded, the ideologues of the new liberal regime were in truth embracing a teenage mantra.

And we surely have been wasted. For every successful individual, a slew of bodies made to feel themselves failures. For every project approved, ten or a hundred more that have been costed and planned to the letter, populated with players, invested and intensified with passionate life. So much promise and spirit smashed to smithereens.

The blows bruise and bludgeon. We adopt the bleariness of an aging boxer, or the anxiety of a high-wire walker. Or the sullen self-hatred of an abused partner.

Like so many abused partners and children we are bound up by the games of the bully, attached to the sharp tongue or brutal objectification that, in beating us down, shrouds itself in the robes of salvation. Wounded by those vicious

judgments we are attached to their source; the only mouth that could eat the words is the one that spoke them.

Our optimism and hope for our future becomes a form of cruelty. And as we reach to escape our situation it is impossible to tell if we are going somewhere or simply going through the motions of an addict after another fix; another impossible dream that might offer respite but could never cure.

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*Did you bring matches? We could conjure an assembly.*

*Gather the parts. Driftwood. Stones for a circle. A ball of dried seaweed. A handful of twigs.*

*We'd have to start out slowly. Playing. With sparks and shelter and breath. Paying. Close attention. Until feeble flames find their rhythm. And roar.*

*With an inferno to warm us up after, we could submerge our bodies in the sea. Or roll them three times in the sand.*

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The philosophers told us that we inhabit a secular slate; a slate wiped clean even of the self-belief of Man. In this post-modern desert we would struggle to find direction or salvation. But the reward would be a radical freedom from manipulative illusion and totalitarian plays of power. Without a compass we would have to give up our powers of judgement and participate in impersonal life forces:

competition, evolution, health, growth, vitality. Leave quality, beauty and ethics to the naïve imaginings of our oppressive ancestors.

But we actors refused to perform the philosophers' script.

The vitality of bodies refused to rest in matter, history refused to give up its ghosts. And the suffusion of psychic states with technology and reason seemed to only intensify manipulation-power.

People don't stop moving.

Bodies continued to dance in hope – for community or energy, salvation and healing, Truth, or some justice in this world.

Dancing at times into beautiful visions, and at others into psychotic states. Like the states induced by those most powerful of all cults: capital-expansion, time-intensification, and growth. Or those that conflate spiritual purity with identity. Or violence with life.

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*But instead,*

*Let's rest here a while longer – suspended in smithereens.*

*Let's scoop up a handful and let it fall through our fingers, hour-glass style. It's so soft as it falls that it's almost not there. Except that it draws lines in the air, and pulls a cone from the ground. And is moving like breath across our skin.*

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Must hope be so grand? Must it be a means to an end?

If hope is the movement of my body, it might not take us anywhere at all.

If movement is the make-up of matter, hope might be already everywhere at once.

Mystics call 'love', or 'divinity' this capacity to transform, and trust, and enjoy.

For them, hope is not a vector of time so much as what exists outside of time – when we pull back from future direction (distraction) and fully enter the present; or when we let go of the Truths we've been taught and fall back on the wisdom that was already there.

Hope as the fruit of unlearning, and unyearning; as what is left when we make space to breathe.

We might pick up a little insight from their search.

We might take a torchlight to those moments of unlearning and letting go that every othered and failing body has to pass through as a matter of mere survival.

Those moments when we realise or remember that the measure of success is a sham.

The revelatory refusals of common sense code or representation.

The flashes of justice.

We might dwell (not in being and death and transgression, but) in the joy of such moments. And hold that joy. And seek within it. Until we've tried to know and to have exhausted everything it is able to do.

Or we might build ourselves bodies that are better able to unlearn.

To let go (not of responsibility, optimism or hope, but) of all those parodies of wisdom that claim to *know* what we are, all those future-visions that cast the course as already set, and the searing heat of all those insults that we have been bred to bear – that bare their teeth at the glimmer of courage or strength or truth.

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*Come now.*

*Let's move on, before we get cold.*

*The night is calling.*





# Hope in a minor key

*Naomi Millner*

Hope gets written into national politics in many ways, but one pattern is overwhelmingly common: the security of an 'in-group' is made to depend on the exclusion of a historically marginal 'out-group.' For example, 'British jobs' are often framed as being in need of protection from the interests of 'non-British people,' or 'economic migrants' - although emphasis falls on the risk posed by poor, non-white people to citizens, not Australian or US immigrants. This observation illuminates how the fabric of common feeling we call 'nationalism' arises from the calibration of the hopes and fears of a bounded group of people, based in a shared sense of place-based entitlement. Nationalism can mobilise collective action unlike almost any other form of political belonging; it can inspire war and great personal sacrifice.

Such textures of feeling are knit, however, from highly selective narratives of the past. Whilst memories of glory are essential, the shaping of nation-states like the UK through successive conquests and invasions tends to be forgotten. Likewise, the more recent histories of British

colonialism and empire-building, reflected in contemporary immigration demographics, are often pushed from view.

This intervention begins from the paradoxical observation that hope builds powerful possibilities for collective feeling and action, often by drawing on intensities of racist feeling and action. Is it possible to reclaim hope in such a way as to break down divisions between communities of belonging? Hope feels necessary to the creation of solidarities that traverse national borders. However, the sense of 'promise' hope mobilises can quickly be diverted into the sense of a deserved entitlement for an existing group of people. It is this restriction of entitlement that makes the deliberate exclusion of minority groups, including 'migrants' in general, seem logical. In fact, hopeful feeling often ramps up most quickly when it leans on inherited assumptions about the world, including stereotypes about who 'we' are in relation to 'others.' Political campaigns, activism, advertising, and even hate speech gain momentum by speaking to hopeful feeling as it is already circulating. As hope builds, these assumptions, together with the privileges they confer, become less open to question. Nor is this a phenomenon that belongs to nationalist invocations of hope alone. Even when resisting entrenched forms of discrimination we tend to appeal to stock characters and stereotypes that encourage sympathy. Without realising it, we can make existing forms of identification - and existing forms of social exclusion - even stronger.

This is a hefty issue for someone like me, a white British woman engaged in refugee activism and academic writing. In this short intervention I seek to use anti-racist thinking to 'problematise' hope: to show that it's an uneasy, even if necessary, ally. I end by suggesting five tactics for what I call hope in a 'minor' key. Throughout the piece, when I say to be careful with hope, I mean two things: first, let us not assume that what we have been educated to hope for is what others hope for. Second, let's be wary of the way that hope is sometimes the glue that attaches us to visions of the future that aren't good for us, or aren't good for others.

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The phenomenon of selective inclusion in play here can be traced to the Ancient Greek city-state, from which we get contemporary notions of 'citizenship.' Governmental power was based there on the right of the sovereign to exclude an offender from political membership permanently. Thus the foundation of sovereign law and its authority was the threat of exile imposed on all citizens. This exclusionary basis for citizenship underpins the formation of modern nation-states, but takes on a new form in contemporary politics. There is no real 'outside' to governance today: there is nowhere you can be sent beyond the law. Power relations also have less to do the potential acts of a sovereign ruler than how economic and material flows are managed across borders. Airport security is an excellent example of the remaking of national borders in these transnational forms of governance: whilst the global business elite buy into frequent-traveller schemes that speed up their movements,

pre-emptive tracking systems work to detect potential terrorists and slow the traffic of potential immigrants down. This is telling: the 'outsider' against which citizenship in 'western' nation-states is defined is an amalgamated figure of the terrorist - standing in for the moral threat of fundamentalist Islam to western democratic 'freedom' - and the asylum-seeker, representing the economic threat of migration to the national economy.

What we are talking about here, let's be clear, is a racist bias in the ways we hope and fear. This bias is reflected by the tenuous grip on statistics that accompanies the scapegoating of asylum-seekers in the popular media. In the UK, asylum applicants made up just 7% of net migration in 2014<sup>1</sup>, with the UK receiving around 3% of claims made in EU countries. In the tabloid papers, however, asylum-seeking is made synonymous with all forms of economic migration, with the UK framed as an 'El Dorado' or 'top destination' for asylum-seekers. Meanwhile, such stock types, reproduced over and over in the media, rely on stereotypes of physical appearance and racial difference to produce their effects. The production of race as a category based on physical characteristics is rooted in colonial histories: race emerged as a system of legitimising the rights of one group of people over another, based on claims to 'inherent' superiority and morality. Since physical features allowed people to tell who belongs where, they were used to attribute characteristics of intelligence, worthiness, and criminality, and, with a circular logic, to explain the reasons for these characteristics.

My concern here is not to analyse scapegoating in the contemporary media. Rather I want to explore how it is possible to *avoid* reproducing racial stereotypes, because they are far more pervasive than we may think.

For example, it makes sense that these historical patternings result in unexpected waves of antipathy in the public media, because they focus fear on one group of people.

However, we also witness sudden surges of *sympathy*. The huge number of Syrian refugees crossing Europe in 2015 were more often portrayed as ‘victims’ in the public media, with the language of a ‘refugee crisis’ replacing the language of viral threat. At this time, large-scale support grew for pro-refugee campaigns, and solidarity missions were mobilised to Calais and Lesvos, locations where many asylum-seekers were stranded. Why were so many people suddenly interested in Calais, when the numbers of people in camps there was roughly the same in 2009? Perhaps this sudden sympathy was linked with perceptions of Syrian people as being ‘more white’, or because the way in which Syrian families and work ethics were represented was closer to ‘western’ ideals. However, the movement of iconic images during the high point of the media coverage of the conflict show us that hope’s circulation was also central to this large-scale rise in sympathy.

One image in particular stands out: the photograph of a dead Syrian child, three year-old Aylan Kurdi, lying face-

down in the surf at the Turkish resort of Bodrun, was posted many hundreds of thousands of times on social media, and galvanised many new refugee hosting schemes among European families. The photo revealed the most extreme kind of victimhood: a dead child, someone's son, the antithesis of an economic migrant. It is important that such images were instrumental in raising awareness of the survival struggles implicit to asylum-seeking. On the other hand, in the midst of angry and hopeful mobilisation, the figure of the sub-Saharan male asylum-seeker did not lose its sense of threat or blame. Sympathy increased with those who fit the 'victim' stereotype that Aylan Kurdi stood for. However, as someone who has helped run a hosting scheme for asylum-seekers since 2009, it was striking that of the hundreds of new contacts who wrote to us, barely a handful were interested in hosting *anyone other* than a Syrian child or family. The hopeful movement *increased sympathy because it appealed to sympathy*. However, others - Eritrean men in Calais, for example - were pushed further outside these contours of identification and belonging.

What happens when anti-oppression campaigning makes use of existing stereotypes that galvanise action and hopeful momentum? Are these direct lines into compassionate action that we can hopefully appropriate, or should we be challenging and changing them?

It is extremely difficult to raise public awareness of an issue without appealing to stock characters or stereotypes. On the other hand, when we do this, we risk 'mainstreaming' hope - building a sense of possibility that reinforces the way

that communities already feel sympathy and view difference. Moreover, the figure of the white 'rescuer' - embodied in the history of missionary imperialism, as well as European humanitarianism - haunts the scene with reminders of the harm caused by naïve do-gooders. Despair and guilt feel more appropriate here than hope.

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I don't want to give up on hope, but to place it in another, minor key. This means doing away with grand visions that supposedly speak for all, without giving up on the possibility of building on collective feeling. For, although I have suggested that hope is not an easy ally, hope is, after all, essential. Hope is a motor, an engine of momentum and collective action, even if the energy it configures across bodies is not necessarily tied to the commitments of equality and justice. Hope is what keeps people going, what binds people together into groups, and what causes people to place their votes or their bodies or their lives on the line. Whatever we do, hope is already out there, gathering people and motivating action. The challenge at stake is to *engage hope*, and so to find ways of (re)partitioning it across the usual divides.

To do this we need to recognise how hope circulates. Hope works by building a sense of promise, and returning to the promise, regardless of whether or not anything is delivered but more of the same. Hopeful attachment keeps us wanting, keeps us trusting. Thus, anti-migrant campaigning works by appealing to hope: *I will solve the migrant*



*problem*, each political candidate asserts. Advertising billboards also harness hope to sell their products: they persuade us that a 'beach-ready' body or a different brand of beer or a television series can be bought as a way out of mind-numbing unhappiness, or simple boredom. To challenge *what* hope promises and *for whom* requires a different kind of awareness - I'm going to call it a postcolonial awareness, drawing allegiance with scholarship, literature and art practices that seek to address ongoing colonial power relations in the present. This means acknowledging that, although the historical empires that enabled slavery and accumulation through dispossession have been dismantled, the forms of elitism and privilege they created endure today. Thinking hope as an anti-oppression practice involves *decolonizing* hope: engaging with hope as it circulates, untethering it from racial stereotyping and challenging how some voices are heard as political speech while others are dismissed as noise.

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I want to end by focusing on five concrete tactics that have historically been used to disrupt the ways that hope tends to settle into grooves that protect colonial privilege as part of the status quo. The Subaltern Studies Group (SSG), a group of South Asian historians in the 1960s and 1970s, sought to decolonise hope by decolonising history. Meanwhile, Creole Theory repaints resistance by drawing on artistic imaginaries of emerging sites of colonial violence and appropriation. The first concrete tactic offered by these movements is fundamental to any social movement seeking

to challenge divisions of 'them' from 'us':

**1. Unsettle the historical names that tell us who we are and what we can do.**

The SSG used the term 'subaltern' to denote the colonised people of the Indian subcontinent to open up a new perspective on history told from the perspective of the colonized. They sought to shift attention from the small number of elites usually named in history-making to a powerful voice 'from below.' This was especially important in a moment where several countries were still seeking their independence, or post-colonial identities. After Algeria's independence in 1962, for example, post-colonial feminist authors such as Assia Djebar were debating whether to resume the veil, which signified submission to men in one register, and cultural liberation in another. Djebar and her contemporaries used the impasse to reclaim revolutionary hope, using the colonial French language as itself a kind of 'veil.' French allowed them to communicate to a new audience, but they allowed their native languages, such as Arabic and Berber, to erupt into their texts, punctuating the colonizers' version of history with contradictions. The published accounts of French soldiers and officials are unsettled by the words of women freedom-fighters appearing next to them, raising questions about who is speaking and whose voices are not heard. Resisting linear narratives, these novels gather networks of hard-to-express emotions such as grief, re-situating hope from the sidelines. Hope here means moving beyond oppressive silence, but it also involves directly addressing the

continued colonial depictions of revolutionary movements published in accounts by French soldiers and officials.

This leads us to our second concrete tactic:

**2. Voice anger, but rather than use the 'master's' terms, derive new language from common experience.**

Such counter-history projects raised a fresh problem for hope: how do you address oppression without making stronger the categories that divide people apart? In a famous essay 'Can the subaltern speak?' post-colonial scholar Gayatri Spivak says that the way the SSG take up the name 'subaltern' and affirm their place outside established systems of privilege risked making those systems more solid. Spivak pushes scholars to engage instead with the idea of 'hybridity': the impossibility of separating from oppressive systems, and the challenge to adopt positions of speech and writing that disrupt them from within. This doesn't just mean celebrating all kinds of intercultural mixing as if they reflect something universal - indeed, it involves drawing attention to the conditions of violence under which numerous transnational cultural exchanges became possible. Creole scholar Sylvia Wynter makes a similar point when she shows how European 'man' has come to stand in for the epitome of humanity, or the 'figure of Man,' in the same way that racially stereotyped outsiders have been made to represent all that is not fully human. This is crucial, because when we talk about universal human experience, and even universal human rights, we are often talking about something that is highly

culturally specific and that does *not* extend to the experience of all people. As well as legitimising the scapegoating of migrants or minorities, this move has historically marginalised other ways of knowing the world, experiencing its art, and speaking and writing for oneself.

In this vein, our third hope tactic is to:

**3. Seek out common experiences of colonisation as a basis for sharing, but when someone says their experience is different, pay attention.**

The ambiguity of the term 'Creole' helps illuminate what is at stake here. Today the term is used to refer to sites of encounter configured by transnational trade, or to identify the food, languages and cultures of places shaped by these histories, such as Jamaica, Mauritius, and Louisiana. It was once used for children born to European settlers in the New World, however, and later referred to blacks, whites, and mulattoes born in the Caribbean region. What's critical is that it is a connective term: it doesn't describe one region or identity but the phenomenon of interchange that occurred at sites where the violent underpinnings of 'global relations' were being experimented. For example, in linguistic terms, Creoles are the languages that formed spontaneously when colonial masters forbade incoming slave populations to use native languages, even with their children. The grammatical commonality between Creoles around the world emerges because of what gave rise to them: the shared experience of not having access to a native language. Yet, this shared premise does not mean that all

'Creole' experiences can be treated as an essential category of experience. The art, music and literature produced through the exchange of colonial experience expresses anger at the mainstreaming of culture, repeatedly emphasising 'this situation is different!'; 'we are not all the same!' Engaging hope is a listening practice before it is a speaking practice.

The notion of Creole experience is a rich vein for helping us think through hope in the example of racialized migration politics in the UK. 'Creole Theory,' emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, and reviving today, connects the artistic worlds and repertoires of people in the Caribbean and surrounding island geographies, show how these can help us shake free of colonial ways of knowing and seeing. Repeatedly, these works draw attention to the creative acts of those who struggle to survive, including the political claims they make and the artistic sensibilities they evoke. In relation to my own campaigning, emphasis falls on politicising the figures being used to dramatise migration politics, on the one hand, and attending to the acts and names of individuals on the other. We can resist the notion that all refugees have the same experience and all routes are the same. Finally we can turn to migrant- and refugee-led movements in history and the present through which new stories of the past, including colonial history, are being rewritten. The fourth tactic thus derives from a specific understanding of what 'Creolization' has meant in cultural terms, and what it may mean for those of us who seek to find ways of enacting solidarity with those excluded within our own societies:

**4. Work collaboratively and creatively to expose the histories of violence that have configured ‘trans-national’ communities, re-politicising figures like the ‘migrant.’**

This tactic also promises to move hope beyond its tendency to collapse into feelings of guilt, or melancholy, when faced with its own inadequacies. Hope in a minor key is not about appealing to a sense of the future that we all feel - or about the failure of such a sense to count for all. It’s about the constant, attentive reworking of collective feeling through a turning of attention to hope, anger, and claims to presence as they are already being staged in ways we don’t yet know how to perceive. Yet we need to allow our senses of optimism to be interrupted. The fact that they can be interrupted is the basis for hope that can be both critical *and* effective in terms of collective action - thus:

**5. Hope can be a political praxis. To make hope a political praxis we must take our current coordinates of shared feeling as a starting point from which to listen, un-learn, and re-learn hope’s feelings.**

We are, to some extent, all caught within related systems of oppression and privilege beyond our own authorship, that constrain how we can be in the world and what we can say. However, we are all differentially positioned within this matrix; we all experience violence in different ways and in relation to different aspects of our lives. When some of us speak we are heard as political speakers. When others of us

speaking we may not be heard: we may be arrested, we may be mistrusted, we may be shot.

When hope is thought of as a political praxis, in a 'minor' key, desperate melancholy and exuberant hopefulness collide. Recognition of our simultaneous inheritance of racist and non-racist ways of seeing demands a new way of thinking feeling and feeling hoping that is more akin to listening. Feeling for difference, shall we say, feeling for common terrain with a sense of possibility sited beyond established stereotypes of heroes and victims, feeling with the patient desire to understand that takes place when we realise that what another says does – yet does not yet – make sense.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See:

<http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migration-to-the-uk-asylum/> Last accessed 7th September 2016.

2014 is the last year for which these statistics are available. In fact 64% of these applicants were initially refused, but around a third of this number later gained refugee status via appeal.

<sup>2</sup> Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271-313). Macmillan Education.

# Hopefully indebted

*Samuel Kirwan*

*A recent memory:*

*2013: house prices are rocketing and mortgage lenders are competing to capture our dreams. I remember this billboard against a blue sky. There is a photograph: in clear focus, two hands clasp above waves of green fabric – silk or satin. As the image blurs to the left the fabric falls upon grass; out of focus it looks like a faraway forest. The upper hand wears a large diamond ring like a snowflake. Across the image flows a message that stays with me throughout that day, a message both grotesque and powerful: “it still feels like a fairytale to walk through my own front door”.*

Several forms of hope swirl around the everyday of debt: I hope the collectors don't call me today; if they do I hope someone could lend me the money to fend them off a while. I hope they'll have hours for me at work, bring me one day closer to debt-free; I hope they *won't* have hours for me, and for a few hours I might be able to disappear from the anxiety of being available. Then, distantly: one day I might



be free of debt; one day I might take on a respectable debt – a mortgage or student debt.

In the United Kingdom the everyday of debt – the letters, worries, repayment schedules – are largely absent from politics: there is no argument over what debts are, what order they should be repaid or what the repercussions are for non-payment (though all of these areas have been subject to significant change over the last decade). There is, only, a scrapping over who can best ‘connect’ with the indebted voter through invocations of the ‘squeezed middle’ or ‘hardworking family’: debt as a site for political strategy as opposed to political conflict. I would argue that a disruptive engagement with debt, one that is attentive to the role played by different debts in shaping ‘everyday’ fears and pleasures, can be central to the re-enchantment of politics we discuss in this collection. Indeed, it is the very entwining of debt with time, space and our everyday relationships that renders it a key site for a politics of hope.

In this essay I begin by setting out what I mean by the ‘everyday’, establishing the shifting grounds of what ‘debt’ actually means across changing terrains of social and financial vulnerability. I look then at different forms of authority, particularly the authority of the law and of credit rating institutions and techniques, and how they shape the indebted everyday. I address finally the potential for political action in this field, looking at political movements and actions that have focused upon the experience of debt, and what they can tell us about a *politics of hopeful indebtedness*.

## **Everyday indebtedness**

I opened this piece with the Lloyds Bank billboard to show how the twisting of time that debt brings – paying for today with tomorrow’s labour – operates through certain channellings of hope. Evoking the beauty of a mortgage debt, the billboard promises a directing of dreams for oneself and society into appliances, fabrics, gardens and house prices, all of which are felt in the clasp of a lover’s hand. Over the last three years I have been carrying out research with advice services, working most extensively with Citizens Advice with whom I have volunteered across this period. The kinds of debt with which the majority of their work is bound – payday loans, doorstep credit, magistrates fines, tax arrears and benefit overpayments – exist at very different points in the spectrum of pleasure, work and hope. In particular, they represent a dual channelling of hope into a desire to be released from these debt burdens, that is, to attain a sufficiently stable existence that the debts might be paid down, and into momentary release – securing fragmentary pleasures through further credit.

With these different debts in mind I want to set out two distinct experiences of debt: two constellations of work, benefits, credit and intimate relationships that have dominated my work in this area. The first is the experience of those with varying levels of financial resources but typically renting in the private or social sectors and with

low-to-medium income levels or higher-level benefit payments; individuals who are not rich but are not poor enough to have fallen behind on the rent. Instead their debts are a mixture of consumer debts, payday loans, doorstep lenders, utility arrears and Council Tax arrears. This area is shaped by three decades of wage stagnation: wages have not risen in line with expenditure and credit is increasingly used to make up recurring shortfalls.

Credit, in this context, also represents hope; it is credit that allows for holidays, for nights and meals out. Amidst the exorbitant interest rates and exploitative collection practices, credit replenishes as well as destroys loving relationships. There is hope also in the pride of being able to pay down one's debts. We should not forget how strong and enduring this moral duty to 'pay one's debts' remains.

These individuals typically present to an advice agency when a change in circumstance has led to an inability to continue paying down their debts, or when a growing spiral of debts has finally become uncontrollable. The 'change in circumstance' can be a loss of job, a family breakdown or, in rural areas particularly, when the car breaks down. The signal that an individual has lost control of their debts is, in many cases, a notice of enforcement action from the local authority regarding Council Tax arrears – the red stamp of authority promising significant trouble to come.

Yet these are the good cases: *there is a solution*, though often it might mean difficult conversations around family spending or the possibility of a 'debt relief order' (a mini-

bankruptcy). The second indebted subject is more desperate, and their problems more intractable. These are the debts of those on extremely small incomes caused, predominantly, by cuts to benefits. Here the 'change in circumstances' is not in the person – there is neither a job to lose nor car to break down – but in the composition of the subject's relationship to the state. These cases represent a whole new sector of people who are being brought into the emotional demands of debt – into the realm of gathering anxiety and a future that contracts around the imminent threat of eviction.

Debt for these people means something very different. It is not spending that has led them here – there is no money to spend. There is no budget sheet that will lead them out of the situation because the situation is impossible.

### **Layers of authority**

There are two competing forms of authority at play in this composition of the indebted everyday. On the one hand there is a legal system and further institutional protections that keep in check the practices used by creditors, debt collection companies and bailiffs. It is this layer of authority that both protects the individual from their creditors, but also gives creditors and debt collectors, in setting the parameters within which they can act, their legitimacy.

On the other there is the credit rating system, and the new forms of credit rating algorithms based on 'leaked data' such as browsing history, screen resolution and Facebook

activity.<sup>1</sup> To the chagrin of debt advisers, it is the credit rating, defining the terms on which future credit can be sought (and the possibility of the mortgage 'fairytale'), that defines for many clients their value in the world.

In very different ways both forms of authority affirm the importance of debt: both bind to the moral imperative that *debts must be paid*. To fail to do so, or fail to recognise this, is to have failed in one's duties to society. Debt advice engages with the first layer of authority: what can be done within the existing law and procedural agreements between advice services and creditors. The answer, in most cases, is a great deal. Debts are prioritised, written off, parked. Budget sheets and arrangements are made; slowly the client is able to imagine a future.

Yet it is the second that carries increasing weight, in particular as the domain of credit ratings – increasingly used by letting agencies, phone providers and others – expands to determine a range of administrative decisions that will shape one's place in society. While the legal system allows for debts to be wiped away through forms of bankruptcy, options that often make sense to the debt adviser, it is the impact upon one's credit rating and the associated moral failure, rather than the possibility of being free of debt, that may guide the client: better to have debts that are being paid, even if it would take five lifetimes to pay them. Understanding the role of this authority is key to how debt frames the everyday for so many. The dream of a good life is anchored to a good credit rating and the possibilities

– evenings with friends, holidays with family, gadgets for my children – it is seen to afford.

This bind between desiring a better life shared with family and friends, if only for a moment, and the devastating conditions of paying down debts and fearing for one's long-term financial security and moral worth, provides a bleak example of Lauren Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism'.<sup>2</sup> What the indebted everyday produces as hope is either momentary release or the attainment of a regular existence. The latter hope, fed and maintained by the former, is to be part of a proletariat that is stably, regularly exploited (paid the bare minimum to survive and make minimum payments on debts); it is distinctly cruel, eating our energy and compassion and forever keeping us distanced from the pleasures we hoped for.

A recurring image in my work with debt advisers and clients is the growing pile of letters at the foot of the door and the anxiety they arouse. The cruelty of debt is that a financial and administrative process invades the home and weighs upon the body. By the time an individual makes it to an advice service, they have overcome a significant battle: to open this burden to another, to share what has been experienced as a personal failing.

This is why debt should be so important in seeking social change. It is the emotional end-point of two defining aspects of politics: low and insecure wages and ongoing cuts to what Barbagallo and Beuret call 'the social wage' – the combination of benefit entitlements, childcare

provision and other structures that provide a social safety net.<sup>3</sup> It is a defining, shared experience of these dynamics: the anxiety, fear for possessions, fear for the future, and the willingness to bow down and be broken by exploitative conditions.

Yet debt is also the site of hope across these problems: it is credit that can allow for moments of pleasure; it is paying down that can provide a framework of achievement. By looking at the politics of debt, I seek to address this bind and to consider what form a hopeful politics of debt would take.

### **Politics of debt**

Research in the field of critical political economy illustrates that rising household debt burdens can be explained neither by the poor decisions of poor households nor by the ready availability of credit. Rather, this defining experience of the contemporary age is primarily the product of an aggressive restructuring of work (diminishing job security and stagnating wages) and social security (towards 'conditionality' of payments and diminishing payment levels): a situation in which it is impossible to make ends meet without a credit bump towards the end of the month.

With this critique in mind there are a variety of proposals for how this can be tackled, including: taxes on financial transactions, land footprints or rising property prices; cash payments to households mirroring the 'bailout' of financial institutions, or a 'modern jubilee' through which private

debt is reduced; and a full rethinking of the dominant 'neoclassical' model of economics.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, these are interventions that directly challenge the authority of markets: the iron rule that economic policy responds first and foremost to the enigmatic voice of The City.

These arguments have a political voice in the form of Positive Money, a charity and nascent political movement seeking to educate on how money is produced (through the extension of credit by banks) and proposing the following monetary reforms: 'take the power to create money away from the banks, and return it to a democratic, transparent and accountable process; create money free of debt; put new money into the real economy rather than financial markets and property bubbles'.<sup>5</sup>

If this politics directly challenges the death-grip of finance capitalism, it remains largely detached (and as such unquestioning) of the everyday of debt and the forms of authority that shape our relationship to it. For indications of how to challenge this we need to turn to the two countries where toxic mortgage debt has defined the experience of the ongoing economic crisis: the United States and Spain.

In the United States the 'Strike Debt!' movement has gained considerable visibility: its tagline, 'Debt Resistance for the 99%', makes clear its role as a continuation of the Occupy movement. The group has carried out a series of spectacular actions, such as the purchase (on the debt resale market) of large amounts of medical debt – debts



which they were able to write off. These actions displayed two things: first the ways in which debts, otherwise experienced as highly personal, are traded between creditors and collectors at a fraction of the cost of the original debt; and second, the initial injustice of debts mis-sold or feeding upon unforeseen family hardship.

This politics offers some form of hope: the hope that debts unfairly accrued are written off by a guardian angel. Yet this hope does not necessarily bind to the actual experience of debt described above. The assumption is that hope attaches itself to being *out* of debt, not to dynamics internal to, or regularised within, relationships of debt. Debt is crippling and brutal, life, soul and relationship destroying. Yet debt is also a site of certainty, regularity and hope amidst a political situation that is also all of these things.

For this reason I have been drawn in recent years to politics that engage with the experience, rather than (or in addition to) the validity, of debt. In this vein the *plataforma de afectados por la hipoteca* (PAH) have sought, through a variety of actions, to combine advice and advocacy work with individuals facing repossession and eviction with more general disruptions of the anxieties around debt. Their work forms part of a broader proliferation of social movement activity in Spain around the debt-housing nexus, adding to rich discussions around how debt shaped understandings of self-worth during the mortgage boom and how repossession and evictions take place at a devastating distance from the lived realities of indebted households. Yet as the 'Provisional University', a Dublin-

based research collective for social movements, have argued, in their favouring of the practical and everyday politics over the spectacular and abstract, PAH offer an indication of how critical and disruptive politics can build hope through 'little big victories'.<sup>6</sup>

Returning to the UK, an 81-year old priest named Paul Nicolson has spent 2016 fighting a court battle over his refusal to pay Council Tax (a tax on property) arrears. These were deliberately accrued in protest against cuts made to the support low-income households receive in paying this tax, and against the aggressive tactics used by local government to recoup the combination of arrears and enforcement costs. Nicolson is fighting not the legitimacy of the debt (schools and other services rely upon local authorities collecting Council Tax), but the legitimacy of the benefit cuts that led to so many households accruing these debts and the emotional tactics used to expedite repayment. This was an extraordinary act, not least because the stakes of this form of civil disobedience are considerably high: as of the time of writing he is facing the twin possibilities of prison and bankruptcy.

I want to emphasise these latter two forms of debt politics because they foreground, and challenge, how debt *feels* – how it bears upon the body and shapes relationships. They render visible the channelling of our everyday fears – for the safety of our households and the possibility of continuing to love each other – as both sites for the production of debt and means for its repayment. Unlike the

sole focus upon political economy, these are politics that exist at the level of our own loves, hopes and dreams.

A hopeful politics of debt has to speak to two forms of hope: the hope of relational pleasures that credit allows for; and the hope of stability and security in the future. These are hopes that different forms of credit both allow for and destroy. If these forms of hope seem contradictory, they express a common desire to *continue loving one another* in both the present and future.<sup>7</sup> Debt has emerged where this is impossible amidst conditions of wage and welfare restructuring. Yet it is because debt is the shared experience of this twin restructuring that it can be the shared site for its disruption.

This disruption begins with the recognition that the feeling that one has a duty to pay ones debts has been aggressively co-opted. It now reaches far beyond the moral duty developed in our relationships with others - that the feeling of this moral duty endures in our relationships and our attachment to debts should not mislead us into thinking that we cannot question, challenge and overturn the ways that debts are imposed and collected. These feelings have been hijacked to cover over failing projects of neoliberalism: enforced job insecurity and the dismantling of the 'social wage'. The cost of these restructurings is a building anxiety amongst households, and latterly amongst the most vulnerable in society. These projects require an ever-tightening grip on the soul, reaching further into our loves and fears.

The politics of debt briefly sketched above are brave and important starting points. A politics of hopeful indebtedness brings these different levels of challenge and disruption – the spectacular with the academic, the communal with the personal – together through a message that the hopes and desires that are intertwined with debt *are the living fabric of the social*. It is a politics that directs anger towards a system that assumes these loves and dreams to be available material – ready to be directed and leveraged – in the re-structuring of work, social security and society as a whole. It is also a politics that directs hope to the endurance of this fabric across the ongoing attempts to dismantle it.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Deville, J (2013) “Leaky Data: How Wonga Makes Lending Decisions.” Charisma Network. Retrieved from: <http://www.charisma-network.net/finance/leaky-data-how-wonga-makes-lending-decisions>

<sup>2</sup> Berlant, L. G. (2011). *Cruel optimism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Barbagallo, C. and Beuret, N. (2012) “Starting from the Social Wage” *The Commoner* Vol. 5, pp. 159-1284

<sup>4</sup> Keen, S. (2012) “The Debtwatch Manifesto.” *Debt Deflation*. <http://www.debtdeflation.com/blogs/2012/01/03/the-debtwatch-manifesto/>

<sup>5</sup> Positive Money (2016) “Our Proposals” *Positive Money*. Retrieved from <http://positivemoney.org/our-proposals/>

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<sup>6</sup> Provisional University (2013) “Six Lessons from Spain’s Anti-Eviction Movement”.

<sup>7</sup> Graeber, D. (2011) *Debt: The First 5000 Years*. New York: Melville House.





# Rhythms of hope

*Julian Brigstocke*

Like many people, when I am looking for hope in difficult times, I often turn to music. If life is unmoored, music offers a way of maintaining a fragile connection with the world's possibilities. Music's immediacy, its materiality, its liveliness, helps put me back in touch with reality. To me, hopelessness feels like a disconnection from the world, from a future, and so from myself.

It can certainly seem as though there is little to be hopeful for, in our catastrophic present of violence, alienation, and accelerating environmental destruction. Amidst the endless repetition of these horrors, the future seems to recede ever further away. Few people appear to be able to offer any plausible imaginations of a better global future. Instead, dissatisfaction with the present surges in ever wilder and less predictable trajectories.

Recently, I have been immersing myself in the work of Richard Skelton, an experimental composer, poet and artist whose work explores the relationship between music, landscape, memory, and ritual. Skelton's ambient music,



typically involving complex textures of densely layered bowed strings, field recordings, guitars and piano, derives from a slow and immersive engagement with humans' encounters with place and landscape, in particular Lancashire, the west coast of Ireland, and Cumbria. Whether drawing on sound recordings or performances in the field, using instruments that have been interred and dug up from peat bogs, or drawing on memories of an experience of place, Skelton's later work has gone further and further into collaborating with non-human forms of agency. Skelton layers ethereal strings, not entirely dissonant, but lacking any conventional musical progression. Refrains loop backwards and forwards, decaying and mutating, disappearing and reappearing. The music is linked to place, but does not directly 'represent' places or the forms of life encountered there.

Skelton's work is part of a broader reinvigoration of practices that take creative inspiration from new ways of engaging with landscape, nature, and non-human life. As the baleful impacts of humankind's practices on the environment become ever more apparent, many people have become interested in challenging human exceptionalism and listening to the voices of non-human others. 'Our rationalist mindset won't permit us to engage meaningfully with the non-human or the "inanimate"', observes Skelton. 'But there are examples of other ways ... With music, art and writing, I'm trying to express something of that extended sense of self, to establish a connection with the "others" in my life. Paradoxically, I'm

also trying to acknowledge their distinctiveness from me: to express the tenets of non-anthropocentric ecology – their inherent right to exist beyond any purpose or usefulness they might have for me.’ If there is a strong Romanticist resonance here, it is not one that looks to nature as a source of moral authority, an intrinsically ‘good’ force of vital abundance. Skelton’s landscapes are unsettling, haunted, and mournful. They call to the listener through difference, in registers that are mysterious and hard to pin down. The landscapes he evokes are always partly absent and alien.

If there is hope here, it is not hope of finding redemption in nature. The nature evoked by Skelton does not feel inherently healing or beneficial. Rather, it simply exists, generating a beauty that is gained through evoking rhythms of growth and decay, fragility and violence. Often there is no easily distinguishable ‘beat’ in the music, no predictable turn and return. It is not a music that evokes an orderly passage through time, but a music that lingers in the present moment, in all its plurality.

Music functions through the creation and resolution of tensions. The history of western classical music can be read as a history of the ways in which the resolution of conflict through time has been represented and idealised. A typical piece of music in the pre-modernist canon starts with a theme, generates conflict that sends the theme into distant keys and variations, and eventually resolves the conflict to a harmonious, stable centre. Such music performs a hopefulness that times of violence and conflict will soon

resolve themselves in a stable, harmonious, complete centre. It is hard now to share this hope; for me, listening to such works, no matter how much pleasure they give, also evokes a nostalgia for more hopeful, optimistic times. Skelton's work does not participate in this false hopefulness of resolution and stability, but nor does it embrace the modernist language of fragmentation and dissonance. Instead, the temporality is one of incompleteness, of process, and of the unexpected possibilities that exist within moments of dissonance or pain.

There is a mystical element in such work that may be disturbing to some. Is the attempt to engage more collaboratively with non-human others, and decentre the authority of the human, a retreat into an irrational mythology? Skelton's exploration of ancient rituals and sacrificial violence perhaps flirts with such irrationalism. (Music, as many writers have observed, has an important connection to sacrifice.) Does this mythologizing distract us from the urgent world of transforming the practices and materials that enable contemporary forms of power to function? Certainly there is something comforting in the release of subjectivity into the wild temporalities of nonhuman forms of agency. Perhaps, then, there is an abdication of responsibility for the crimes enacted in the name of humanity: as soon as the effects of humans on the ecological texture of the world become apparent, we start to claim that we are no longer human in any case. Or perhaps collaborating with non-human agency simply

offers false hope, as if participating in the diverse flows of natural life held some promise of showing us a new, more authentic, path. The contemporary turn towards exploring non-human agency, then, would become a mere flight from politics.

Skelton's work is certainly not political. It is intensely private. Much of his early work explores the experience of bereavement. It makes palpable a multitude of rhythms of decay and transformation (of sounds, bodies, instruments, feelings). At times it is characterized by a breathtaking fragility, reminding the listener of the delicacy of life and its living and non-living substructures. It is, in some respects, a work of mourning: not only for Skelton's first wife, but also for the forms of life destroyed through the millennia by humankind. His later work evokes the systematic violence of humans against certain landscapes and animal species, as well as ritualistic violence of humans upon other humans. As a work of mourning, it is informed by a distinctive individual ethics, a practice of the self that is oriented towards the recovery of ritualistic and spiritual dimensions of human existence. The ritualised burial of objects and instruments clearly evokes funerary practices. Such practices, Skelton says, are informed by their gestural connotations as much as their sonic possibilities. 'Repetition makes ritual. As time moved on, my actions became more imbued with private significance. I would bury strings beneath stones or soil, or in the river's shallows. I'd leave small instruments (a zither, singing bowl, chime bars) out in the landscape for weeks, before

reclaiming them and using them in the studio. I'd collect various natural ephemera (stones, bark, pine cones, feathers & bone) and use them as plectra to sound my instruments. These "thing-poems" acted as a symbolic connection to the landscape itself. "A flint for the memory." And by simply being placed within sight they acted as components within the ritual of creation' (Interview, *The Quietus*).

Practices like these do not strive to dissolve human subjectivity into a world of pure flux. Nor do they attempt to give an authentic voice to inaudible non-human agencies, somehow offering them a voice as a magnanimous human gift. Rather, they ask questions of the landscape and invite the landscape to ask questions of both the composer and the listener. In this respect, rather than appropriating the active agency of the landscape, they allow it to exert a curious kind of authority, refracting non-human forces in ways that make demands upon the human listener. It returns, as it always must, to human desires, demands, and anxieties.

In his work with Autumn Richardson, including art, poetry, and two albums called *Wolf Notes* and *Succession*, Skelton directly addresses the rhythms of environmental degradation in upland Cumbria, observing the absence of deer, fell fox and wolves, present only in the area's place names, and using pollen samples as archives to uncover the ghost forests of the area. Evoking these haunted landscapes and the deep time that they inhabit, Richardson and Skelton offer glimmers of hope for a future return. In the final

album, *Diagrams for the Summoning of Wolves*, they move from witnessing to ritualist intervention. The album, they write, 'is a series of instructions for the *return itself*. It is the musical encoding of a ritual: "hand gestures, scents, markings" translated into melody, tone, rhythm. To play this music is to participate in its *summoning* - to become a node in a lattice of light'.

Perhaps ritualistic impulses may simply offer a false mythology, an escapist hope that is divorced from concrete action. But the grief and loss that they evoke is grounded in concrete experience. And it may be that in a damaged world, hope can only be summoned through an acknowledgement and reckoning of what has been lost. If ritual and mythology are new ways of coming to terms with the histories of ourselves and the non-human others whom we live with, then they can play a vital role in generating hope to mobilise new kinds of historical time. In doing so, Skelton's musical landscapes offer – to me, at least – hope for reconnection with an alien and trauma-stricken world, even if such a reconnection can only be achieved through a fuller recognition of our present disconnection. Perhaps hope is more about finding new energies in our memories of the past than it is about imagining the future.



# Networked hope

*Aécio Amaral*

Since early this decade social movements around the world that benefit from digital networks have been reverberating their demands and practices amongst each other, putting into practice an articulation between political protest and networked organization. The fact that insurgencies in Tunisia and Iceland between 2009 and 2011 reverberated into mass demonstrations in Tahrir Square, Cairo, *Indignados* in Spain, and Occupy Wall Street in New York reveals a trend which persists nowadays, with the reverberation of the anti-neoliberal occupation of schools by students in Chile and the occupation of schools by students in São Paulo and from there to other South American countries. In spite of the different contexts and demands that characterize the emergence of these forms of protest, there is a common thread tying them together: people's empowerment by networked political organization.<sup>1</sup>

Situations of humiliation and despair, not seldom in contemporary societies under the rule of economic austerity or anti-democratic governments, end up



imposing a protective barrier against resistance at the local level. As Foucault puts it, under some circumstances resistance amounts to madness.<sup>2</sup> To demonstrate is to expose the inviolability of one's own body to violent, physical and mental repression, ultimately, to put one's own life in a threshold. Such (sometimes limit) acts of dissent would not prove effective, or at least they would not threaten forms of oppressive authority, if they did not manage to at once reveal and produce the 'technicality' proper to current processes of authorization in the public sphere.

What characterizes networked movements is a mode of political organization that reconciles local demands with the replication of hope and discontent through networked technologies of communication and data collection. Such a mode of organization pushes for horizontality in power relations by experimenting with a collective decision-making that is made possible by the complementarity between local places and internet networks. The non-place of internet networks has proved to work as a topos for the articulation of local demands and collective mistrust against authoritarian governments and the environmentally damaging, socially disaggregating effects of neoliberalism.

By channeling general, collective malaise toward the rebuilding of trust, networked movements present us with some key features of the political significance of hope for contemporary politics. What is named here *networked hope* is a kind of collective struggle oriented toward the

radicalization of democracy, whose modus operandi either benefits from or is essentially based in networked organization. A digital network is operative in terms of the scope of a social movement's recruitment and the geographic reverberation of its collective demands. The network displays mutual belonging and facilitates political affiliation without being located in a particular space-time, thus calling for a speculation on the way in which the work of hope nowadays requires a specific understanding of temporality and assumes a certain level of automation of authority as a condition for the development of emancipatory large-scale political action.

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The cybernetic turn in governmentality (and the digital culture that stems from it) is crucial for the understanding of the working of networked hope. On the one hand, the application of cybernetic principles to governmentality increases the disempowerment of collective and self-identities since it promises governments and markets the prospect of full governance by enabling - through the scientific understanding of emergence and probability - the prediction, pre-emption, and anticipation of individual conduct. It thus prevents the emergence of the agency of counter-conducts. On the other hand, since the internet, cyberspace has become an emergent non-place by means of which socially emancipatory, economically egalitarian, and politically differential demands manage to spread their word. Endowed with informational and digital systems of prediction and anticipation, the internet makes room for

different temporalities to co-exist worldwide in a non-hierarchical architecture.

Through tracking and identification tools (the increasingly invasive cookies), governments and corporations manage to collect data about individuals in order to develop profiles in a probabilistic fashion for the purposes of surveillance and market profiling. Cookies provide the automated, open-flow feeding of web platforms with information about individuals' self-identities and subjectivities. This ensures that the transmission of data in real time operations is now adaptive. Accordingly, cybernetics-based digital culture replaces the modernist opposition between mechanical-chronological time (seen in Modernity as homogeneous, empty) and subjective time (seen as meaningful) by systems of algorithmic modulation that push for the intertwining of information and subjectivity.

Based on the same techniques, the modulation of time produced by networked movements is contingency-oriented. There is a technological mediation that makes possible the triangulation between the different scales of local demands, the automated market and governmental authorities, and a regulative ideal of global communication. With contingency thrown in, the clash between local demands and automated authorities differentially reverberates into the making of networked hope at a global level.

By drawing on the politics of time heralded by the internet, networked social movements operate at the difficult

intersections produced by local demands working in quite different political and cultural contexts across the globe. The ability to forge a chain of equivalence between non-necessarily related demands is an outcome of a temporality that is endowed with local-based hope and, once it communicates to other demands worldwide, does not leap upon itself. Rather than requiring a theory of communication in order to understand and appreciate the impact of networked movements on society and individuals, as in Castells' account, networked movements invite speculation on the technicality of authority and hope.

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It is precisely from the contingent status of the clash between social movements and economic or political power, the unstable outcome of the unequal play of forces, that the strength of hope stems - the very possibility, uncertain and unlikely as it is, of hope overcoming its weakness. And yet, when it happens that demands from social movements reach minds and hearts within the public sphere to the point of provoking change, they are faced with a complex situation in which their demands will be accepted and implemented by the very forces with which they are struggling.

Three scenarios are worth noting. The first is *reaction to hope*. It says of the fact that sometimes the sorry situation arises in which the impact of a given social movement on society ends up making room for the worsening of the state of affairs against which the movement itself was fighting.

The recent example of Egypt is striking. The massive, viral protests for the radicalization of democracy that initially dethroned Hosni Mubarak were followed by outright repression and demobilization of networked organization. What came after was the increasing deepening of the mockery of democracy in the form of a military *coup d'état*. The case of Brazil is also illustrative: in 2013, massive, networked demonstrations attempted to stop the exclusionary, inequitable, and securitarian logic of World Cup 2014 and the neo-development ideology that underpinned it. The fight against corruption, one of the topics in the agenda of the protesters, was selectively highlighted by traditional media and rightwing parties in a manoeuvre to destabilize Dilma Rousseff's government. The country now passes through a parliamentary coup d'état and a reversal of the redistributive politics from Lula's era. In both cases hope is trapped by its instrumentalizing appropriation by conservative political forces either endogenous or exogenous to the society at stake.

The second scenario is *absorption of hope*. Hope is absorbed when a demand from a social movement concretizes itself in law, under the condition that it passes through the scrutiny and filter of power. It speaks to the fact that hope is politically negotiated, a negotiation in which both parts of the contest need to accept, to different degrees, the vindication of the other. One might think here of any policy whose implementation derives from the recognition of demands from social movements. This second scenario

makes clearer something which is already an index of the first - identity is about contamination throughout, for good and for evil.

The third situation is *transformation of hope*. It accounts for the institutionalization of a given social movement, its transformation into something else. This is often a consequence of the augmentation of the resonance of the social movement's impact on society, to the point that its agency extrapolates its initial demands and now it encompasses hope for more universal change. The example of Podemos and Plataforma Común in Spain is exemplary, given their trajectory from social movements to experimental networked political parties.

In all three situations above, social movements will either dissipate or become institutionalized (in the second and third scenarios the movement's agency will in-form the structure). In either case the social movement is fated to die. Now, the awareness of the finite fate of the social movement is the condition of endurance of hope, as its failure to leap upon itself, together with power's ability to co-opt it, produces the deferral of justice. The deferral of justice at once prevents hope from creating a fully meaningful temporality and inscribes hope for justice in homogeneous temporality. The failure of hope fractures time. As entertained by the philosopher Jacques Derrida,<sup>3</sup> deferred justice turns hope into a specter.

Given that networked movements rely on technologies for the exteriorization of collective memory and knowledge,

these technologies appear as the proper locus for the replication of the spectral condition of hope. By repeating the finite fate of locally-based hope worldwide, networked movements manage to reverberate through each other in spite of the different geographic locations in which they emerge. *Networked hope is spectral*. In this perspective finitude and failure do not render hope hopeless. Far from it. Finitude and failure present the legitimate ground for the automation of networked hope, by keeping alive memories of oppression and unfulfilled justice.

Within this framework, networked hope constitutes itself as a political spirituality. The way in which networked movements defy the regimes of truth that ground cybernetic governance blends meaningful time and homogeneous time; this is essentially collective, technologically-mediated spirituality, and elaborates the contours of a third temporality, the spectrality of justice and hope in the midst of governmentalized 'adaptive real time'. That is how networked hope survives the necessary finitude of specific, punctual social movements.

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The political spirituality proper to hope is skeptical. Given its being toward failure and death, its skepticism defies the positivity of oppressive authority, as it highlights the contingent feature of any arrangement. The courage of truth typical of hope consists not only in challenging the authority of instituted regimes of truth, but also in engaging

resistance without any guarantee of success – in a word, engaging the opacity of the future.

Networked hope adds something else to hope's skepticism, namely, the technological opening of the present, of the given, in an attempt to decolonize the future from the overdetermination of life through the closure of austerity or authoritarian governments. If on the one hand systems of collection, processing and structuration of data for purposes of datamining and profiling display the conditions for the predictive, pre-emptive and anticipatory take on individuals and collectivities, there is also an increasing sense that these systems may also be directed toward individuals' orientation to, and coping with, the uncertainties of contemporary technological culture.

There is no doubt that sophisticated ICT interfaces based on algorithmically produced and refined profiles allow the indiscriminate personalization and pre-emption of individual conduct.<sup>4</sup> Big data certainly increase power's ability to engender events, not restricting power to govern only through law. Yet, algorithmically-based ICT interfaces are not only about "data behaviourism", a combinatory anticipation of events and human behaviour that would free individuals from the need to develop classificatory and categorial faculties to deal with the increasing complexity of reality.

Networked movements develop a certain "ontology of anonymous"<sup>5</sup> out of algorithmic schemas in order to fight the overdetermination of life and identity brought about by



big data. By displaying combinatory classification, algorithmic schemas provide networked social movements with the ability to design chains of equivalence between events held in different parts of the world. The courage of the truth of networked social movements consists in installing contingency and chance in the present, thus opening the future for hope by confronting technological planning and adaptive behaviour with the opacity of the real.

Platforms of collection, processing and structuration of data in massive scale are at the core of networked social movements. These include Anonymous and Occupy Wall Street and their fight against financial capitalism; laboratories of cybernetics and culture that provided combinatorial data profiling for anti-neo-development protesters in Brazil in 2013; the design of social digital currency by D-Cent in the UK as an alternative to the debt crisis; *Hipótesis Podemos* and *Laboratorios de Procomun* in Spain as anti-neoliberal austerity struggles. All of them extensively draw on network technologies that not only collect and process data, but also store collective memory and knowledge.

Through these platforms, the failure and death of social movements reverberate worldwide as skeptical, suspicious hope, in a technological spectrality that confronts the determinism of power. The temporality heralded by the programmers of networked social movements at once mourns the deferral of justice and impregnates 'adaptive real time' with the hopeful promise of justice.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive account of the global range of networked social movements and their modus operandi, as well as the way in which networked organization spreads both hope and discontent, see Castells, M. (2015), *Networks of outrage and hope: social movements in the Internet age*. Cambridge/UK; Malden/USA. (2nd Edition)

<sup>2</sup> On the relationship between resistance and madness, as well as on the relationship between hope and political spirituality, see Dillon, M. (2013), "Afterlife: Living Death to Political Spirituality". *Millenium - Journal of International Studies*, v. 42, n. 1, pp. 114-34.

<sup>3</sup> Derrida, J. (2002), *Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"*, in *Acts of Religion* (edited by Gil Anidjar), New York and Routledge: London.

<sup>4</sup> Rouvroy, A. (2013), *The end(s) of critique: data-behaviourism vs. due-process*. in M. Hildebrandt and K. de Vries (Eds.), *Privacy, Due Process and the Computational Turn. Philosophers of Law Meet Philosophers of Technology*. London: Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> Holpin, H, (2012), *The philosophy of Anonymous: Ontological politics without identity*. *Radical Philosophy* 176.



# **The Psychonaut's journey: Race, closure, and hope**

*Tehseen Noorani*

## **Introduction**

There has been a resurgence of interest in Western societies in non-ordinary states of consciousness. Self-styled 'psychonauts' – explorers of the mind – are growing in numbers, sharing experiments and practices ranging from the use of psychedelic drugs to music and drumming to dancing. Mainstream events focused on psychedelic experiences are becoming common for the first time since the 1970s. And yet, just like in the 1960s and 1970s, a largely White, male demographic are revealed to use psychedelics according to US population survey data. Questions of cultural appropriation abound. But also questions of potential; the resurgence has prompted conversations about the role of such experiences in radical politics. As 'expanded states of consciousness', these experiences promise fresh energies for tired times. As 'mystical experiences', they promise access to something pure and unquestionably positive in a moment when we

are becoming suspicious of how our very desires are complicit with systems that entrap us.

The Alchemist's Kitchen, a trendy new venue in New York City, held the event, 'Psychedelics and Race: Why is the Psychedelic Movement Whiter than the Tea Party?' on a warm August evening. The venue is a *hipster-chic* storefront with expensive tonics and elixirs with a downstairs space for events. The moderator of the panel was Dimitri Mugianis, a New York-based Bwiti N'ganga,<sup>1</sup> drug policy activist, poet and musician, who held the space for a spirited conversation. While the survey data do not necessarily correspond to those who would count themselves as belonging to the 'psychedelic movement', the proliferation of events such as this one at The Alchemist's Kitchen are consistent with the mostly White male demographic, pointing also to a distinctly gentrifier population. As the evening unfolded, I wondered what could come of an event where experiences of transcendent consciousness and universal love would be made to speak to the history of a racialized privilege that has long-enjoyed patting itself on the back. I also wondered what would be required for these conversations to endure beyond the night.

For me, one moment took flight. Mugianis asked what hope psychonauts can offer for radical political action. He suggested – at once playfully and seriously – that psychonauts can keep the party going because they do it at festivals like Nevada's annual Burning Man. They know that sustained collective activity requires organizing toilets,

showers, and food. We could add to this: managing collective and individual mood, and embracing extreme experiences by channelling them, drawing on them, transmuting them.

### **Closing and protecting**

Mugianis' example was meant as an invitation to find the bridges between Western practices of psychonautics and the increasingly urgent need to invent and bolster anti-capitalist, anti-fascist politics. I would add something to this. Psychonautics is steeped in practices of closing and protecting spaces. Consider the most secular of psychedelic-using spaces: the current swathe of university-based clinical trials testing psychedelic drugs, shut down at the end of the 1960s and only recently reinitiated. Here, participants must turn their phones off and take their shoes off. They cannot have visitors and should keep their eye-masks on so that they can focus on 'journeying inwards'. They do not even have to worry about time; a trusted nominee will come to pick them up at the prearranged time, while their guides' protocols and drug effects produce temporalities anew. In the underground use of psychedelics, various objects, charged through ritual, act as gargoyles protecting the space. Such objects, imbued with special significance, both delimit the boundaries and mark the centre of the space – as with an altar or a flame. Ensuring time off the next day, uninterrupted by the traffic of daily life, helps with the crucial integration of the experience. And in countless indigenous settings again, there is protection and closure – the holding of space

through the warding off of interruptions. Participants give themselves entirely for the night into the hands of a curandero, who builds containers through the singing of songs, the recitation of prayers and the sharing of food.

### **Problems of inclusion**

What might this protection and closing of containers have to add to the conversations about radical politics at The Alchemist's Kitchen? One theme not touched upon enough at the event was that of inclusion. The question was raised as to how to make these meet-up conversations more racially inclusive, with a widespread acknowledgement that this event was unusual in attracting an audience that was not wholly or predominantly White. But other factors went without comment. For example, the cost of the event is inevitably relevant. Conversations about racial difference cannot be intelligently had without intersecting conversations about class, and ultimately about Capitalism's great lodestone: scarcity. This event cost \$25 at the door, \$20 in advance. There was no sliding scale option, no prioritizing of inclusion over the bottom line. Other events advertised during the night's conversations also cost similar amounts.

But whose problem is it, exactly, that these events are so White? We rally behind calls for inclusion as a necessary value, but why is it so? Do we think that only by coming to these events can non-White people also benefit from conversations about psychedelics, race and political struggle? Do we know that there are no non-White-only

groups where such conversations happen, even flourish under the catalyst afforded by double consciousnesses – the additional capacity to see oneself through the eyes of a dominant group?<sup>2</sup> And when we look to other examples where non-White people are brought into the fray of largely-White events, what inevitably happens – who gets co-opted; who gets misrepresented; who gets forced to represent? Finally, why should the White event be the ‘original model’ that then adapts for sake of inclusion? We might wonder what White traces are left in the construction of the container.

To begin to respect the complex depths of racial histories we have to problematize the knee-jerk impulse to move forwards through inclusion. And we know this from psychonautic practices – to charge a space, we have to close the circle. To have certain conversations and build certain resonances, again we have to close the circle. To be vulnerable and powerful at the same time, close the circle. Meanwhile, back in the nineteenth century Karl Marx cautioned against the intrinsic goodness of connection. In describing the proletarianization of the masses, he showed how an interconnected population is an exploitable population; the emergence of a uniform population of laborers ready to sell their labour power as commodities in markets is not a universal condition, but one peculiar to the early history of capitalism.

The drive to interconnectedness today takes another turn. Now, it’s ‘good to talk’, we are all encouraged to ‘get connected’, and so much of our spare time and attention is



captured by the impulse to connect through social media. We might ask, in an age when our social and political interconnectedness is not a given but a labour that itself makes demands upon our time and money, what hope is left for revolution through connection?<sup>3</sup> Connection and inclusion have become hallmarks of neoliberalism, and money is the greatest connector. Events drawing people together at spaces such as The Alchemist's Kitchen are said to only be possible when their organizers can weather the currents of capital. This is not to say that inclusion and connection are not important values. But whom we connect with matters, as does how we do the labour of connection, and whether we can respect – or even hear – calls for reshaping the containers that connect us.

### **Building bridges**

What do these questions around inclusion mean for continuing the hopeful conversations started that evening? We might resist the temptation in seeking radical political engagement to swiftly move from recognizing how spaces are too White to calls for inclusion, with all the traps and disappointments the latter continues to entail. So let us pause for a moment instead. Once we have recognized that the bodies in a space are so very stratified, what *other* options become available to us? What inspiration is there in Black and feminist theories of separatist politics, and how do these intersect with our own knowledges of the importance of closure, exclusion and protection in psychonautic sorcery?

There are not one but several ways for academics such as myself to build these bridges. An incomplete list of where we might find inspiration includes theorists exploring the possibilities of an alliance between separatist politics and psychedelics through decolonial, postcolonial and feminist theory; historians excavating relevant antecedents, such as November 1970 in Algiers, asking what exactly went wrong when countercultural icons Timothy and Rosemary Leary met with Eldridge Cleaver and the Black Panthers;<sup>4</sup> and anthropologists focusing on the constitutive inclusions and exclusions demanded in the ‘sciencing’ of indigenous traditions today, when researchers pack the clinical trial model off to Amazon or the Atlantic coast of Equatorial Africa.

And what about the role for psychonauts? When stubborn drives for inclusion and connection in the present betray a racially divided past, psychonauts may be able to attend to histories of exclusion, separation and disconnection in order to deepen our understanding and engagement in the present. In other words, we might see an awareness of the lack of inclusiveness at the intersections of psychedelic experiences and radical politics as something to be entered, explored. Not quickly ‘resolved’.

And the felt absence of non-White bodies can be unpacked. Often in the name of individualized therapy or liberation, psychonauts journey through psychedelic states where they can engage ancestors, celestial figures and spirit guides, in order to bring back to the present various insights that seed and feed hope. However, practices of

psychedelics use go further than this, acting in ways that radically remap the relations of the past, present and future. In casting all as contemporaneous, it becomes possible to attempt to deliver justice to figures of the past. At the same time, changing the past itself has knock-on effects on the present, in particular in the life of the psychonaut doing the work. It is therefore incorrect to say that amongst psychonauts, “hope [for an objective in the past] expresses a relation of care and concern rather than its being a stimulus to action”.<sup>5</sup> One reconfiguration of temporality here is as an ever-repeating present whose horizon is marked by a radical openness to a future no longer conditioned by intergenerational tendencies that predated – and fully expect to outlive – us. Seasoned psychonauts are well aware that habits need not live longer than people.

So, what if these techniques for entering the past can be put in the service of a deepened understanding of the role of intergenerational trauma and histories of racialized division, offering insights, tactics and hope for the felt Whiteness of psychonautic spaces? Perhaps this promises to open up the circle into a spiral that comes round again but with a difference, this time including the constitutively excluded in another attempt at understanding the legacies of exclusion that haunted the closing of the circle in the first place.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> A spiritual healer in the Bwiti tradition, a monotheistic universal religion practiced by the peoples of Fang and other parts of Occidental Equatorial Africa, using the psychedelic *Tabernanthe iboga* plant. See Samorini, G. (1995) 'The Bwiti religion and the psychoactive plant *Tabernanthe iboga* (Equatorial Africa)', *Integration*, 5: 105-114.

<sup>2</sup> DuBois, W.E.B. (1903) *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co.

<sup>3</sup> Dean, J. (2012) *The Communist Horizon*, New York: Verso.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.timothylearyarchives.org/acid-bodhisattva-2>

<sup>5</sup> Waterworth, J. (2003) *A Philosophical Analysis of Hope*, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 34.



## **Epilogue: Practices of hope**

This book comes out of a two-year collaborative process. Most of its contributors are members of the Authority Research Network, a collective of theorists and researchers from universities in the UK, Brazil, Ireland and the United States who are interested in questions of power, authority, activism and the production of 'the common'. Central to this work is a critique of late capitalist forms of life, but also a desire to move beyond the impasse of critique to develop processes and practices for reconfiguring those forms.

The Authority Research Network has worked together for nine years, and operates through intensive theory retreats – week-long residential workshops based around specific problems and sets of literatures. These retreats incorporate discussion, collaborative writing and collective living. Practices of ritual, celebration, walking and being in nature also contribute to the processes of 'forcing thought' that we have developed over the years. These retreats effectively cast a circle, enabling us to carve out a space for sustained collaboration, friendship and critical intervention outside the demands of the academy. The two years leading up to the development of ideas set out in this publication were

supported by a research networking grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and involved collaborative workshops in North East Brazil, the UK, and the Republic of Ireland.

Our work also involves collaborations with artists. For this publication the illustrator Luke Carter has produced a set of linocuts in response to the essays. Photographers Laurie Griffiths and Jonty Tacon's work was produced in collaboration with Leila Dawney, and is the product of discussions that connect the visual with the theoretical/conceptual, providing another means of rethinking what theory could mean and what it might look like.

What follows is a summary of some of the literature and discussions that we engaged with over the last two years. We have included a bibliography at the back for those of you who might wish to explore this further.

### **Structural violence and dispossession**

One theme in this literature is the enormity and seeming insurmountability of forms of structural violence that late capitalism produces. Elisabeth Povinelli's *Economies of Abandonment* charts the ways in which the structural conditions through which marginalised groups are being made to live their lives leads to endless frustration, debt, incarceration and misery.<sup>1</sup> These groups are, she argues, being abandoned, being resigned to the past, slowly left to rot and self-destruct. Rob Nixon, too, discusses the 'slow

violence' that is wrought by climate change, war, and industrial capitalism that results in increasing vulnerability and desperation.<sup>2</sup> What these writers point to, are deep, insidious forms of attrition that gradually reduce lives and exacerbate poverty and dispossession. This work is echoed by Fred Moten, who argues that spectacular forms of violence (for example mass shootings) serve to mask the quotidian, subtle and everyday violence that is imposed upon Black people in the USA.<sup>3</sup>

This is important work. To be equipped to work towards a better world, the ways in which things are getting worse for people needs to be made visible, and moreover, the slow, attritional ways in which this takes place, and the ways in which this might escape public attention through diversion, blaming and spectacular popular discourse must be brought to the fore.

We need to know what we are dealing with, and how we might be part of the problem.

Yet sometimes, we can feel that the problems we face are too vast, too all encompassing, too complex for us to see a way forward. Problems like climate change, or global debt, or factory conditions in faraway places, just seem too impossible and overwhelming for us to make sense of. Indeed, for some time now the dominant response to these problems has been a turn away from collective possibilities for a better future. Instead we are encouraged on all sides to retreat to the local or the personal, to develop ways of adapting and persevering.



When things happen that seem out of our control, it is easy to descend into paralysis, experiencing loss of belonging, and hopelessness. It is easy to feel that we no longer know or identify with the world in which we live, or how we can even begin to make life work for us and for our fellow beings. This paralysis ultimately wrests hope from our hands. We feel adrift in a world that is changing in ways that we neither want nor understand.

### **Cruel optimism**

In recent social science and political philosophy there has been much focus on thinking in terms of ‘endurance’ and ‘survival’ in a world increasingly colonised by late capitalist relations of economic precarity and dispossession. These relations are understood as a totalising force that captures our bodies, souls, emotions and freedom: pointing to the levels at which economic forces shape our very being.<sup>4</sup> Various thinkers have argued that our desires, hopes and dreams have been captured and made available for the production of profit and for the expansion of a system that is based on increasing social inequality and structural cruelty – such that the very pursuit of a better life has become the very engine perpetuating an increasingly intolerable present. Many of us know and feel the extraordinary demands placed on our time and energy in order to house and feed and clothe ourselves. This is juggled with the pressure of maintaining relationships, caring for our bodies and mental health, doing our best to lead ethical lives, keeping up with the torrents of information that bombard our ‘smart’ devices, and so on.

Where in all this are we to imagine a gap, a place or a relationship that avoids capture; that doesn't add to the overload?

Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, in particular, discusses how our pursuit of what we understand to be 'the good life', the promise of a stable job, of family life and material property leads us to struggle towards something that can never now be fulfilled, that leaves us trapped in situations that damage us, or pushes us to pursue courses of action that might appear to offer relief but that may ultimately destroy us. In this way, she argues that certain populations are moving towards a "slow death", for example by obesity, lack of healthcare and welfare reform. Far from a source of redemption or vitality, optimism appears in Berlant's account of the present as a tool of power – attaching people to condemned lives through unrealisable dreams and wounds that bind.

Similarly, a body of literature on 'biopolitics' has highlighted the extent to which the modern political project of 'caring for life' - generating growth, health, longevity and creativity - has been dependent not only upon the ever intensifying exploitation of human and natural resources, but also the outright persecution of those billions of human lives that have been classified as 'dangerous' or 'backward'.<sup>5</sup> Some have gone so far as to argue that a radical politics for the present would have to abandon the pursuit of care for life altogether, and take up a somehow redemptive embrace of withdrawal and catastrophe or the 'queer death drive'.<sup>6</sup>

While these forms of knowledge about power are vital for a radical politics, it is not enough just to be aware of how bad things can get. Indeed, this can lead to a rather fatalist set of scholarly resources, which while remaining important in revealing the intimate ways in which we are produced as subjects and objects of late capitalism, can serve to close down hope, firstly by presenting the destructiveness of capitalism as totalising, and secondly by positioning hope itself as a resource which is itself captured and which, ultimately, can be most cruel.

### **Life that has flourished beyond the realm of Man**

Amongst the voices in political philosophy and cultural studies that seek to resist the apolitical pessimism that is implicit in some of the above, is that of anti-colonialism. Whilst contemporary mainstream European and north American philosophers despair in the face of abjection and the totalisation of oppression that is experienced as new, others look to the philosophical and spiritual traditions of peoples that have been utterly abjected by imperial capitalism since its 16<sup>th</sup> century inception. Paul Gilroy, Drucilla Cornell, Alexander Weheliye and others are drawing inspiration from Sylvia Wynter. She suggests that the alternative to the broken dreams and cruelty of the modern Euro-American political project is not pessimistic resignation but rather the forms of life that have always already “flourished beyond the realm of Man” – that is to say, the cultural practices of healing, resisting, loving and living of peoples that have been represented and treated as

'Other' and even 'less than fully human' ever since Europeans set out to conquer and exploit the globe.

As Gilroy argues, an optimistic humanism has always been central to the cultural and political traditions of the transatlantic black diaspora. Ideas about the supposed separation of humanity into different sub-species that are more or less human have been used against enslaved and colonised peoples to justify the most grotesque oppressions and exploitations of modern history. The victims of this oppression have always had powerful cause to assert the universal commonality of humanity. In 1961, in perhaps *the* canonical text of anti-colonialism, Franz Fanon argued that the true future of enlightenment and humanism – of freedom, beauty, justice and truth – lies not in “this Europe which never stops talking of man and yet massacres him at every one of its street corners” but in the experience of colonised peoples who have had to learn not only of the accomplishments of the European tradition but also of its crimes “the most heinous of which have been committed at the very heart of man” in the violent dismembering of humanity into supposedly different classes and races.<sup>7</sup> People who had suffered the dehumanisation and racism of the European project were better placed to fulfil its supposed promise of universalism, creativity and truth. For the sake not only of ‘ourselves’, he argued, but also of Europe and humanity itself, the people of the ‘Third World’ that were at the time overthrowing colonialism would have to “make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavour to create a new man”.<sup>8</sup>

Anti-colonial politics would not mean giving up on the ideals of humanism and dreams of human creativity, but rather the rejection of narrow conceptions of who or what counts.

Wynter is rooted in the tradition of Fanon and shares much of his sentiment. Unlike him, however, she is more celebratory of the spiritual and cultural traditions of enslaved and colonised people that have been created within and survived alongside the experience of imperialism. “We need to create a new culture”, she maintains, but (contra Fanon) we *do* have existing cultural and spiritual resources on which to draw. Wynter shares this emphasis on affirming existing oppressed cultural and spiritual practices with many anti-colonial feminist writers. For example, the Chicana/feminist/queer cultural theorist, poet, activist and shaman Gloria Anzaldúa makes a powerful case for the importance of affirming the cultures and ways of living that have been denigrated by imperialism and patriarchy. Crucial here is an affirmation of the validity of shamanic and indigenous forms of knowledge, and –with this – of spiritual concerns and practice as essential to political radicalism and activism. In line with this, Drucilla Cornell and Stephen Seely have argued that a revolutionary politics that is adequate to the present – in which capitalism and colonialism do indeed shape our very being – has to be a political spirituality. Rigid secularism and the dismissal of spiritual practice as ‘backward’ is seen here as a tool not of true enlightenment but of racist and patriarchal denigration of othered modes

of life. Secularism has been used to justify dismissing world views and cosmologies that don't fit with capitalist processes of exploitation and production. A big part of this has been the adoption of a kind of hubris with relation to non-human life and ecological systems – a refusal of the practices through which it is possible to 'pay attention' to voices beyond our own heads. Spiritual practices are crucial to the search for healing and transformation of consciousness that might offer hope not only of survival but of life.

### **Finding life in the ruins**

Sympathetic to the post-colonial move against political pessimism and lament are diverse strands of feminist critique, in the fields of political economy, anthropology, science studies and history. Shared across these fields of inquiry is the use of situated methodologies attentive to difference and possibility. The focus of this work, and the often affective, relational ways in which it is carried out, draws attention away from an exclusive concern with capital and power. In the words of J.K. Gibson-Graham, the examination of sites “not fully yoked into a system of meaning, not entirely subsumed to and defined within a (global) order”.<sup>9</sup> What emerges through these more granular practices of attention are stories of the many ways people have collaborated to sustain lives and worlds at a distance from exploitative labour markets and the control of the State.

One of the more recent and resonant concepts used to describe these diverse sites and practices is the 'commons'. Employed in many, often politically incompatible ways, the 'commons' are undoubtedly open to capture and co-optation (particularly when couched in terms of productivity and efficiency). Inflected through the lens of feminist and autonomous Marxist interpretations of the history of capital, however, the 'commons' becomes a way of tying together the multiple and inventive struggles of the proletariat, the 'many-headed hydra', in their quest to escape the exploitation of the slave plantations, merchant ships, and factories.<sup>10</sup> As Dimitri Papadopoulos describes it: "[s]o many of the scattered, disorganised, ephemeral, insurgent movements of people exiting feudal labour in so many different locales and geographies, continents and seas were *not* to enter into the capitalist humanist regime of the labour market but to escape into a journey that allowed them to create common worlds".<sup>11</sup> In this vein, the 'commons' is released from its historical inertia as pre-modern pastoral and transformed into a mobile, experimental and at times militant site of world-making transformation.

This takes on particular significance today as poorly paid, precarious work becomes more and more the norm in the ruins of former industrial economies, and the withering of the public state decimates the basic services (healthcare, housing, water, pensions) that large sections of the population have relied on in the past. In such conditions people are inventing new ways of getting by and supporting

one another. Across the Global South this situation is not new, but in the US and parts of Europe, solidarity networks, informal economies, and the sharing of labours, resources, and spaces have been growing, particularly since the financial crisis.<sup>12</sup> In a different context, the anthropologist Anna Tsing has examined the emergence of, what she calls, 'latent commons' in the ruins of the industrial forest plantations.<sup>13</sup> Here, for example, migrant workers from South East Asia find themselves collaborating with Matsutake mushrooms, pine trees and disturbed landscapes to make a more-than-human living on the marginal fringes of the state and the formal capitalist economy.

Often pragmatic and 'down-to-earth', the emergence of such commoning practices are politically ambivalent, rarely articulating demands or strategies, and not seeking representation in the usual sites of institutionalized political power. Yet despite being open to criticism that these are just "feel-good" stories – that they do not offer much other than survival and less than ideal substitutes for a social democratic welfare state - this work can draw our attention to radically different forms of life that offer different imaginaries beyond the impasse of the present. These experiences, and the texts that narrate them, offer a different take on narratives of decline, but they can also make visible and augment projects that open up radically different trajectories into the future. Marisol de la Cadena, for example, makes this point through her work on Andean cosmologies and the ways they enter into public



discourse.<sup>14</sup> In certain Andean cosmologies, the ‘non-human’ world is not considered as a series of resources but as an extension of kin, protected and cared for through rituals and practices of kinship.<sup>15</sup> The existence of these different material and spiritual relationships have brought “earth-beings” and “earth-practices” into the political sphere, insisting that they be recognised as such rather than being parcelled off as ‘cultural’ legacies within Western discursive frameworks. What is at stake in these new indigenous movements is not just access to resources or the value generated through their extraction but a radical challenge to the epistemological dichotomy of Nature and Humanity and thus a disagreement over the kinds of worlds that exist and “count”.<sup>16</sup>

### **Practices of hope**

During our workshops we began to think about the sorts of practices, rituals, relationships and politics that can emerge from overarching narratives of decay, abandonment, dispossession and abjection that can create hope in the present. We did so in order to learn to seek out different stories, developing ways of living through and with such stories in order to create space for hope and joy to flourish and thrive. The workshops also involved the sharing of our own experiences of being overwhelmed, of cruel attachments, of ecological damage and devastation. We shared stories of how we are attempting to act to reconnect with the places from which we feel alienated. We discussed how hope can re-emerge through communal practices of world-making.

While hope can be captured by capital and rendered impotent or worse, we can nonetheless create spaces and practices of hope that bring us sustained joy in the present, rather than displacing joy towards impossible futures. These spaces and practices can move us beyond mere survival and endurance, and in doing so, reconfigure those most intimate spaces of experience that fall prey to capture by world-destroying forces. This involves thinking about hope as something that we do and practice together, and about thinking about active rather than passive hope. As Elizabeth Povinelli points out – the stultifying conditions of abandonment can and do produce different kinds of endurance: hard, calloused and indifferent, or those that strengthen attachment to life.<sup>17</sup>

Joanna Macy, ecologist and systems thinker, argues that we need to embrace “active hope”.<sup>18</sup> This means that hope is refigured as a verb, a doing and a making, as constituted through practices of connection with others and with the world. In particular, she suggests taking time to experience gratitude, to feel part of the world in an ever increasing spiral of connectedness, and – crucially – feeling the pain of the world rather than pushing it away because it all seems too much. Through these practices, she argues, we can change ourselves and others.

To consider hope as something that we can enact as a practice, as something that is distributed between us, that emerges through active participation rather than something that is subjectively felt and passive, might offer a way through this conceptual impasse.

Indeed, Berlant's work, too, argues for a rearticulation of our affective relations with others, a reconfiguration of our hopes, dreams and attachments as a means of combating cruel forms of attachment. Another writer who has seized on the possibility of rearticulating our relationships with the world is philosopher Isabelle Stengers, who, in her collaboration with Phillippe Pignarre in *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*, draws on the writings of neo-Pagan activist Starhawk, arguing that the ritual practices of witchcraft can "activate" thought, and might cultivate "appropriate means of protection against" the "frightening power" of capitalist sorcery.<sup>19</sup>

By naming as 'sorcery' the work that capitalism does in "making people do freely what they are meant to do", Stengers prescribes a means of fighting back – of practising a sort of counter-sorcery that might break these spells that bind us, a radically pragmatic technique that invokes the consciousness raising tools of feminism and recovery movements, as well as shamanic and wiccan practices of magic – or the art of changing consciousness at will. The cultivation of safe and sacred spaces, relations of trust, letting go into altered states of consciousness, and creative work upon intentions can transform who we are as experiencing beings, including as beings who experience the violences and seductions of neoliberal modes of life. Such political spiritual practice might, as Cornell and Seely suggest, be world transforming.

Fred Moten, another writer of the black diaspora, argues that radical critical thought needs to look beyond just

exposing all that is wrong and to instead embrace celebration. He writes, “It is, rather, because the cause for celebration turns out to be the condition of possibility of black thought, which animates the black operations that will produce the absolute overturning, the absolute turning of this motherfucker out”.<sup>20</sup> In other words, change for the better – the object of hope – comes from celebration and celebratory modes of being and thinking, from music and dance and improvisation, such as that seen in the tradition of second-line parading in New Orleans. In this way, celebration is the “mass” – it’s about the collective and the ritual. It creates the body politic that can hope. For Moten, such forms of expression are also kinds of radical thought, and the kinds of thought that are not normally given credence within the academy. Moten’s task is to expand the horizons of critical thought to recognise their power and possibility.

Practices of hope can also involve *augmentation* of these moments of radical communing and celebration. This involves noticing and paying attention to those moments when we feel free, we feel nourished, we feel interdependent, rather than co-dependent – moments where pain is suspended – and tearing at these cracks, pulling them apart and wrenching them wide enough that they become visible to others, dwelling in them in ways that are joyous. Augmenting those moments gives space for them to become places for inhabitation rather than glimpses of something else, and gives us the perspective to identify what regimes of cruelty, or attachments to lost or

non-existent worlds, we have to move away from in order that we may see and feel them more keenly.

## Notes

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<sup>6</sup> Agamben, (2000). *Means without end: Notes on politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Edelman, (2004). *No*

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<sup>7</sup> Fanon, (1963). *The wretched of the earth*, London: Penguin. pp. 236-7.

<sup>8</sup> Fanon, p. 239.

<sup>9</sup> Gibson-Graham, J. K. (1996). *The End of capitalism (as we knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. xxiii.

<sup>10</sup> Linebaugh, P., & Rediker, M. (2013). *The Many-headed hydra: sailors, slaves, commoners, and the hidden history of the revolutionary Atlantic*. Beacon Press.

<sup>11</sup> Papadopoulos, D., Stephenson, N., & Tsianos, V. (2008). *Escape routes: control and subversion in the twenty-first century*, Pluto Pres, p. 138.

<sup>12</sup> Provisional University (2014). The abduction of Europe III: Commonfare.

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<sup>13</sup> Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>14</sup> De la Cadena, M. (2010). 'Indigenous cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual reflections beyond "politics"', *Cultural Anthropology*, 25(2), 334-370.

<sup>15</sup> Haraway (2015). 'Anthropocene, capitalocene, plantationocene, chthulucene: Making kin' *Environmental Humanities* 6.1 (2015): 159-165.

<sup>16</sup> Rancière (1998). *Disagreement: Politics and philosophy*. University of Minnesota Press.

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<sup>17</sup> Povinelli, E. A. (2011). *Economies of abandonment: Social belonging and endurance in late liberalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 116.

<sup>18</sup> Macy, J. and C. Johnstone (2012). *Active hope: How to face the mess we're in without going crazy*, Novato: New World Library.

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However hopeless we often feel, we are creatures of hope. This collection of short, accessible essays explores the ways in which hope is bound up with power in worlds that are composed through imagination, transformation and feeling. Hope is the most precious ingredient of power. However, the essays do not assume hope to be inherently good or emancipatory. Rather, they reflect on how hope can both support and obstruct us in our efforts to make lives more liveable, or futures more just. The essays draw on social research, philosophy, literature, music and film to show how hope might re-enchant writing and politics for a post-hopeful age. This is a book for those who want to remain hopeful but find it hard to see how.

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