The right to be weary? Endurance and exhaustion in austere times

> I am interested in forms of suffering and dying, enduring and expiring, that are ordinary, chronic, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime… the *quasi-events*…
>
> (Povinelli, 2011, p.13)

The 2008 financial 'crisis' was followed by a period of intensified austerity measures across Europe and America. In the UK, the economic downturn resulted in a fall in real-time wages, a rise in short-term precarious employment, and an increasingly inaccessible housing market (Cooper & Whyte, 2017; Kitson et al., 2011). The Conservative-led coalition government used the budget deficit to justify deep public spending cuts, including significant reductions in local authority spending and drastic reforms of state welfare (Hamnett, 2014; Taylor-Gooby, 2012). This rolling back of the state has of course been one of the key strategies of neoliberal governance, and in this sense the financial 'crisis' was used as a smokescreen to justify further retrenchment (Hall et al., 2013; Hodkinson et al., 2013; Peck, 2012). Yet the British state portrayed these fiscal reforms as virtuous measures, as necessary steps made in the name of the national interest. Thus, in this so-called 'age of austerity' we are all being asked to 'tighten our belts' in the name of the national good. As John Clarke and Janet Newman (2012, p.303) note, in austere times, the state asks its citizens to share in a process of 'collective pain-sharing', deploying the collective-fantasy that we are 'all in this together'. This forms part of what Esther Hitchen has termed 'the collective moods of austerity', where 'the atmospheric qualities of moods become an 'infectious force' that radiates from one individual to another' (2016, p.105). Austerity can thus be thought of as a kind of national sentiment; a cultural repertoire. An integral part of the mood of austerity is a collective feeling of hardship and 'diminished expectations' (Bhattacharyya, 2015). Yet this mood is also one of 'hopeful pessimism', founded upon the idea that we all must suffer together in order for the economy to prosper once again (Coleman, 2016).

However, this collective national fantasy masks the uneven ways in which austerity is felt and experienced. Austerity measures have tended to have the most detrimental impact upon those whose lives were already a struggle, and have thus deepened class, raced and gendered inequalities (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017; Brah et al., 2015; Durbin et al., 2017; Gillespie et al., 2018; Greer-Murphy, 2017; Sandhu & Stephenson, 2015). In particular, existing inequalities have been exacerbated by severe cuts to state welfare. Welfare reform was an integral part of the UK government's deficit-reduction program, with the then prime minister David Cameron (2011) proudly announcing that his government were about to make 'the most ambitious, fundamental and radical changes to the welfare system since it began'. The welfare state was depicted as an unnecessary luxury at a time of economic hardship, with welfare claimants positioned as undeserving 'scroungers' (Jensen & Tyler, 2015). The wider structural failures of the financial crisis were blamed upon individual welfare recipients who were vilified for 'failing' to be financially self-sufficient, and not working their way out of poverty (Slater, 2014). Welfare claimants were thus accused of unfairly using state resources at a time when the rest of the nation were 'tightening their belts'. Conservative ministers claimed that state spending on welfare was excessively high and that the welfare bill had spiraled out of control. Accordingly, the June 2010 emergency budget proposed £11 billion of welfare cuts, and the subsequent 2010 Spending Review announced a further £7 billion (HM Treasury, 2010a 2010b). Thus, in an era of deepening inequalities, welfare cutbacks have eroded the very safety net that is so vital in times of increasing precarity and hardship. Cuts to state welfare have had a profoundly negative effect on some of the most vulnerable members of society. Importantly, the effects of the so-called 'economic-crisis' for vulnerable groups might be felt less as a catastrophe or shock, but as a continued deterioration into a life less liveable. Austerity becomes just another episode that one has to endure.

In this paper we draw upon interview data collected from research that examines how cuts to housing benefit have impacted the lives of young single people in housing need. We are particularly interested in the ways in which the violence of welfare reform is encountered and lived, reimagined and resisted. Our focus is not on the event, the catastrophe, the crisis (those moments when the cry of the dispossessed

cannot help but be heard). Instead, we turn to the more subdued, hidden and mundane ways in which the violence of welfare reform is lived and felt. We examine how cuts to welfare are often experienced not as a catastrophe, but as a slow and steady deterioration. This paper thus underlines the importance of considering the non-eventful geographies of slow violence and everyday endurance. Such hidden forms of suffering form part of what Elizabeth Povinelli (2011, p.13) terms 'quasi-events', those which 'never quite achieve the status of having occurred or taken place'. Povinelli highlights how certain forms of violence and suffering are made visible, recognised as requiring an urgent political response (here we can think of the temporal frame of the sudden catastrophic event or crisis). In comparison, we can consider the relative invisibility of durational everyday forms of slow suffering, those moments where violence is experienced as a continuation rather than an eruption (see Tyner, 2016; Laurie & Shaw, 2018 for further reflections on the temporalities of violence). Our proposition in this paper is that these everyday forms of violence demand a political and ethical response.

Our turn to everyday endurance and slow forms of suffering contributes to a wider body of feminist scholarship which seeks to challenge the ways in which 'phenomena and events that are commonly viewed as public, political, global and spectacular continue to have wider appeal as subjects of study than the private and apparently mundane' (Pain, 2014, p.532). Feminist geographers have long noted the interconnections between different scales of violence, from the intimate to the institutional (Pain & Staeheli, 2014). Central to this paper then, is a consideration of the varied scales and temporalities through which the violence of austerity function, from state-based systemic violence of welfare cuts, to intimate everyday forms of suffering through financial hardhsip. Our work marks an important intervention into an emerging body of research that has begun to highlight the ways in which austerity is far more than just a fiscal economic programme: austerity is something that is felt and contested in everyday life (Clayton et al., 2015; Hall, 2016, 2017, 2018; Hitchen, 2016; Horton, 2016; Raynor, 2017; Stenning, 2017 forthcoming; van Lanen, 2016).

Central to this paper is an examination of the ways in which the slow violence of housing welfare reform plays out at the most intimate of scales. We argue that

focusing on everyday ways of coping with austerity are necessary for understanding how the violence of welfare reform is not just lived, but also resisted. Specifically, the paper foregrounds moments of suffering where resistance is expressed as nothing more than a quiet murmur. Thus what we propose is that slow violence is often met with slow resistance: a form of politics that is not spectacular, or public, but instead often hidden, gradual and difficult to detect. Our research thus enriches existing depictions of 'implicit activisms': rather than foregrounding iconic forms of large-scale protest, it is crucial to understand the everyday acts that enable people to 'get by' (Horton and Kraftl 2009, p.19). These 'quiet activisms' often take place out of view and consist of small mundane moments (Askins, 2014; Jupp, 2017). In this paper we focus on the stories of those who are not taking direct action against the injustice of welfare reform. Rather, their stories represent a quieter form of politics, the hidden and solitary struggle of those who are attempting to 'get by'.

All-too-human-geographies

At a time when so many are being asked to endure increasing levels of hardship and precarity, it seems crucial that we begin to turn our attention to the affective states that are seen to subtract from life: those that diminish our capacities. Of interest then, is the role that affect and emotion might play in activating or hindering progressive political change (see Ahmed, 2004; Anderson & Wilson, 2017; Pedwell, 2016). In this paper, we make a sustained case for the political importance of paying attention to those affective moments that are not felt as eruptions or breaking points, but instead are experienced as flatness and impasse. The central premise of our paper is that the day-to-day existence of coping with welfare reform can often lead to a state of exhaustion, a gradual slow wearing out that comes with having to endure everyday hardship. Weariness is an integral part of understanding austerity's everyday affects. Existing research has outlined how hardship and poverty can lead to a state of fatigue (Bambra et al., 2015; Moffatt et al., 2016; Hitchen, 2016). Yet despite the seeming centrality of weariness to understandings of precarity, hardship and austerity, there has not yet been a sustained discussion into weariness itself. How does weariness

surface? How is it negotiated, denied, or overcome? How might we better understand the politics of weariness?

Weariness and fatigue are often positioned as the antithesis of political action, where individuals are slowly worn down until they no longer have the strength to resist. Weariness has been seen as something that reduces our capacity to act. In this paper, however, we argue that weariness also works in other more subtle and complex ways. We propose a more reparative reading of weariness, one that does not narrowly conceptualise it as simply a closing down. Our understanding of weariness is inspired by Kathleen Stewart's (2007, p.2) work on what she terms 'ordinary affects': those which can be understood as 'a scene of both liveness and exhaustion'. As we indicate below, weariness is not just about closure, it is also a *scene of possibility*.

Our research makes an important intervention into how we conceptualize the affective dimensions of political life, by re-evaluating weariness not as apolitical or anti-political, but as an affective state that contains political potential. Prior to conducting our interviews we had been working with a rather normative conception of weariness, presuming that it is a feeling that produces a specific set of affective sensibilities: negativity, resentment, disenchantment. Typically, weariness is seen as holding us back, delimiting or foreclosing action. Weariness is thus juxtaposed with other more hopeful affective states – pessimism, enthusiasm, joy – those that are seen to be brimming with political optimism and potential. Advancing existing geographical work on the politics of affect, this paper makes a significant contribution to an emergent critique of the vitalism of 'more-than-human-geography'. Paul Harrison, for example, has examined how we might begin to resist 'the seductive coercion in the invitation to affirm life' (2017, p.288). Harrison asks us to think about what is forgotten, or what is lost, when a joyful affirmation of life provides the basis of our thought, our ethics and our politics. What space is there in such accounts for a consideration of finitude, sadness, mediocrity, uselessness? In a similar light, Chris Philo (2017) has proposed that geographers may want to consider focusing on 'less-than-human geographies'. Here, Philo proposes an approach that would be:

> …alert to what diminishes the human, cribs and confines it, curtails or destroys its capacities, silencing its affective grip, banishing its involvements: not what renders it lively, but what cuts away at that life, to the point of, including and maybe beyond death. It is to ask instead about what *subtracts* from the human in the picture, what disenchants, repels, repulses – what takes away, chips away, physically and psychologically, to leave the rags-and-bones (and quite likely broken hearts, minds, souls, spirits) of 'bare life' (2017, p.258)

Such a move goes beyond the exploration of affective moments of exuberance, vibrancy, and affirmation to instead examine moments of destruction, diminishment and closure.

Perhaps then, we could include weariness as part of this shift, as something that reduces someone's capacity to flourish? A number of scholars have already begun to outline how welfare reform cuts away at life, resulting in debilitation and exhaustion (Goodley et al., 2014; Shildrick, 2015). However, although weariness does not tend to encapsulate vitality and affirmation, neither can it be neatly surmised as *less-than-human*. Thus we do not wish to place weariness solely within the frame of less-than-human geographies, as to do so would be to ignore some of the complexities of weariness, and the way it functions as a form of both curtailment and possibility. Rather, we propose that weariness should be thought of as part of what we term an *all-too-human* geography, a messy paradoxical state, a scene of exhaustion and endurance, diminishment and fortitude, decay and aliveness. Weariness brings us to the limits of our capacities, of what Roland Barthes (2005 [1978], p.12) describes as 'the paradoxical infinity of weariness: the endless process of ending'. Here, for Barthes, fatigue is 'in one sense, the opposite of death, since death—the unthinkable definitive ≠ fatigue, the infinitude but livable in the body'. Weariness is about loss, emptiness, deflation; but also about capacity, capaciousness, and endurance. Weariness thus transgresses any clear divide between bad affect (diminishing-closing-down) and good affect (flourishing-opening-up). Accordingly, we seek to complicate any neat binary categorizations that place certain moods, states, feelings as either detrimental or essential to human flourishing. Instead, our paper examines how

negative feelings may be fundamental to social change (Ahmed, 2010; Ngai, 2006). For as Ann Cvetkovich (2012, p.3) notes, 'feeling bad might, in fact, be the ground for transformation'. Our aim is not to redefine weariness as a form of action, but instead to think about the political potentials of inaction.[i] Crucially, research into people's everyday experiences of austerity enables us to challenge neat theoretical conceptualizations the political life of emotions and affect, and allows us to better understand the messiness and unruliness of 'ordinary affects'.

Researching welfare reform

The focus of our research is on changes to housing welfare in the private rental sector in England and Wales, and how this has had an impact on younger single people in housing need. Those under 35 have been particularly affected by housing benefit reform, as single people are now only permitted to claim housing benefit at the rate of a single room in a shared property, whereas prior to 2012 they could claim at a rate based on one-bedroom apartment (Cole et al., 2016). Single people without dependents are one of the most vulnerable groups in terms of housing rights— as they are frequently positioned as less 'in need' than other groups: placed at the end of the line for access to social housing, and not classed as a priority group for the limited range of temporary accommodation. Some of the young people impacted by these changes have managed to stay in self-contained properties, by borrowing money or using savings, but the vast majority are left with no choice but to either move into sub-standard shared properties with strangers, return to living with their parents, or 'sofa-surf' with friends or family. There is thus a tendency for these young people to quite literally fall off the map; they become the hidden homeless, with no real place to call home, yet with no financial capacity to access a home of their own. In 2017, those aged between 18-21 also had their automatic entitlement to housing benefit removed (though this policy has since been abolished). The logic behind both these reforms is that young people who claim housing benefit are too expensive and costly. It is argued that the state should not have to take responsibility for young adults in housing need, and that ideally they should remain within (or return to) the parental home until they reach economic independence. Young people have thus been targeted as a group

who are seen to not deserve full access to state welfare, accused of 'taking something for nothing' and living beyond their means (authors, 2017). Austerity measures and welfare reform have thus had a significantly adverse impact on the livelihoods of young people (McDowell, 2017).

Between 2015-2018 we conducted a series of biographical interviews with 40 young people (aged between 18-35) from across England and Wales. Our focus was on those who are defined as a 'protected group' under equalities law (e.g. those with disabilities, LGBT people, Black and Minority Ethnic groups). Our research involved two stages; the first was a questionnaire about changes to housing welfare for under-35s. We then selected a quota sample of these to interview for the second stage of the research, ensuring that we spoke to people from different (and multiple) protected groups. Interviews tended to take place within participant's homes, though due to the precarious housing situations of many of our interviewees some participants requested that the interview take place in a public space instead. During each interview we asked participants a number of open-ended questions about the past homes they have lived in, their current housing situation, and finally their aspirations for the future homes in which they hope to live. Wherever possible we avoided interrupting people's narratives, in order to let people narrate their own life story (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000). This was then followed up by a number of more targeted semi-structured questions. Biographical interviews meant that interviewees were free to construct their own narratives, and provided the opportunity for us to explore how the past shapes people's understandings of the now. In this paper we draw upon just two of these interviews to illustrate some of the ways in which weariness came through in people's narratives. We took the decision to focus on a small sample of interviews as we wanted to try and maintain some of the richness and integrity of the data, opening up space to explore some of the elisions and contradictions in people's stories (see Andrucki & Dickinson, 2015; Valentine & Sadgrove, 2014; Waitt & Gorman-Murray, 2011 for similar approaches). This depth also gave us chance to reflect upon some of the affective dimensions of the interviews, the points when the interview broke down, the non-verbal expressions, the overall atmosphere that shrouded the interview. Sometimes we would walk away from an interview full of optimism and hope, at others we were left with a feeling of flatness and futility, thus we were also interested

in trying to think more about our own affective investments in the interview process. The interviews we turn to in our analysis provide two revealing stories about how people had begun to feel 'worn out' by the everyday impacts of austerity. The claim is not that these stories are typical or representative of the wider sample; in fact our logic is somewhat the opposite. In many ways these interviews were quite unique, and while most of our interviews contained an element of weariness, these were some of the weariest. In qualitative research we are so often trained to see the connections, the over-arching themes; but to focus solely on these is to run the risk of overlooking the stories of those who do not neatly fit, who tell a somewhat different tale. We are thus interested not just in the dominant ways in which people coped with austerity, but also the exceptions, those who told us something different, the interviews that took us slightly by surprise. Perhaps most significantly these were two of the interviews that we could not neatly fit within our existing ideas around the politics of resistance, to us they did not feel particularly political or hopeful, and instead they felt listless and somewhat exhausting. But our own feelings of lassitude made us reconsider the role that weariness might have to play in anti-austerity politics.

Ploughing on

In this section we draw upon an interview with Beth[1], a bisexual white woman in her early 30s. Beth narrates a story of both weariness and determination, and while many of our interviews contained both these elements, Beth was particularly noteworthy in the way she managed to frame weariness as a form of determination. Beth tells us how she received a letter informing her that her housing benefit was going to be cut in half. This revelation caused her profound worry; as such a reduction would mean she would struggle financially to keep her rented studio apartment in South-West London, a place where she had lived for a significant number of years. It was around the time Beth received the letter about her housing benefit that her mother died. Subsequently, Beth's mental health deteriorated and she was hospitalised for a brief period of time. When in hospital, a health worker tells her to not worry about the impending cuts to her housing benefit, saying 'they won't cut your benefit really', 'you'll be exempted'.

[1] Pseudonymous are used throughout.

Beth tells us how she felt 'really positive' when she heard this news, until she realised, six months later, that this was not actually the case, she was not going to be made exempt, and the cuts to her housing benefit would be going ahead. Since then she has managed to remain living alone in her compact flat, using savings from her inheritance and receiving a small amount of money from her sister. Beth expressed great pride in the apartment in which she currently resides, which is within the area in which she grew up, and where she wants to remain.

Beth's narrative circled around a fear for the future, an anxious anticipation of what might happen next (see Horton, 2016 for a reflection into the various ways in which 'everyday anticipation' functions in a time of austerity). Beth tells us that while she currently 'manages', she still lives in 'constant worry' in case her benefits might be cut again. Recent welfare reforms have incorporated increasingly stringent forms of continual assessment, meaning people are left with the apprehension that the welfare they receive may be reduced or stopped entirely. The government claim that such assessments are needed in order to prevent fraudulent claims and to discourage 'welfare dependency'. The continual reassessment of welfare claimants ensures that people remain in a perpetual state of anxiety, ensuring that a life on welfare is never as comfortable and secure as a life without. Beth also disclosed how she was worried that her landlady might put up her rent and thus force her to have to move, as the rent she pays now is at the very upper limit of what she can afford. Living in the private rental sector can therefore create additional insecurities as rent frequently fluctuates. The idea that Beth might no longer be able to remain in her flat, and have to move to shared property with strangers, was something that filled her with apprehension, as she believed that living alone was integral to her mental health. The uncertainty of what might happen next was taking a psychological toll on Beth's wellbeing and she speaks about her anxiety for the future. A similar thread was found in Alison Stenning's (2017) research on the everyday impacts of austerity, where she notes that people's narratives contained 'a strong sense of threat and alarm', a pressing fear of what will happen next.

Beth goes on to explain how she suffers from anxiety and that her mental health issues means she struggles to find any form of long-term employment. However,

despite years of living in trepidation about the future, Beth is keen to stress that she has managed to keep going:

> …when I first tried to get a job I was suicidal and really bad, and I still got a job and I still ploughed on, and then they sacked me and it's like, oh I have to start again. So I just ploughed on anyway…

Despite the uncertainty she faces, she perseveres. This narrative of 'getting by' was a common trope in a number of our interviews, and as Hitchen (2016, p.114) notes, 'getting on with life' can be 'a way of retreating back to the day-to-day… a strategy of coping with the affective force of the uncertain, threatening future'. Phrases such as 'ploughed on', and 'plod on' occur repeatedly throughout the interview, and draw attention to the ways in which coping with insecurity can be a laborious task. Even though Beth is not currently in work, she is still 'ploughing on', a weary existence of day-to-day endurance. We could read this narrative as Beth simply retreating to the everyday, or internalizing the individualizing logic of austerity: 'make do', 'carry on', 'get by' be resilient (Bramall, 2013). Yet both of these readings are perhaps too narrow, as they overlook the way in which Beth's stoicism also functions as a source of respectability and pride, she gets by despite everything she has had to face (see Skeggs, 1997). 'Getting by' is an arduous task, but Beth endures. The narrative Beth tells about herself is largely one of strength.

Yet this narrative of endurance was occasionally punctuated with stories where Beth revealed the moments when she has felt worn out, when she has reached her limits. For example, Beth recounts a story of how a support worker encourages her to contact the council in order to try and appeal the cuts to her housing benefit. However, her experiences with the council have been both exhausting and demoralizing:

> If you go to the council you want to kill yourself, it's that bad… they treat you so like you are not worthy, like you are cheating them... I'm not in the mood or the state to just go and argue with people that treat me like dirt… it just puts you in a worse place in your mind.

Beth only contacts the council on a couple of occasions, before quickly realising that this will be a futile exercise, a waste of her time and limited energy. Here, any attempt at resisting or mitigating the impact of these cuts is not just ineffectual; it actually feels like a step backwards, it puts 'you in a worse place in your mind'. The encounter with the council leaves Beth with a profound sense of her own insignificance: that they 'don't care if you're out on the street'. Beth is left feeling abandoned by the state, with the impression that her life is expendable. She explained that she no longer has the energy to engage with the council, that she has given up trying. However, this withdrawal is not a story of weariness as apathy, it is a story of weariness as self-preservation.

Later in the interview, Beth recounts another scene where she turned to the authorities for help. Beth was encouraged by a support worker to go and visit her doctor to see if she could get a diagnosis for her mental health; which could potentially allow her to claim a higher rate of housing benefit. Despite her telling the support worker that this will not work, he persuades her to try. Beth is repeatedly told to be hopeful, to not resign herself to having to live a life of financial precarity. However, in the end she tells us how she was right, her doctor refused to give her the diagnosis. As Beth recalls:

> …it was very unpleasant and I went out crying because the way that she responded was like I was taking liberties… and when that happened it was just like why did I take his advice, why didn't I listen to myself?'

Beth keeps receiving well-intentioned advice from those who have presumably never experienced such hardship: they urge her not to give up hope, they say that what is happening to her is unjust, and that she needs to try and contest the cuts to her housing benefit. However, Beth keeps telling people that such endeavours are futile, but they will not listen, or cannot hear. The support workers mistake Beth's weariness as a form of passive despondency (and therefore that the solution is that she just needs to become more hopeful, have more belief). Yet, might it be better to understand her weariness as a form of pragmatism? Beth understands what she is being asked to risk, and at times this risk may be too great. The strength needed to turn to the authorities

is exasperating. The emotionally draining nature of such encounters is something that others do not seem to grasp, people are continually pushing her to try this and try that.

The support workers encourage, to borrow Lauren Berlant's term, a form of 'cruel optimism'. 'Cruel optimism' describes a form of longing or desire for the future, yet 'whose realisation is discovered…to be *im*possible, sheer fantasy' (Berlant, 2007a, p.33). The support workers however, can see no harm in such optimism. They encourage Beth to try each possibility, even if she risks setting herself up for failure. Yet here we want to stress how there is a very real harm to such optimism. Every setback leaves Beth even more depleted, with an even greater sense of her own abandonment. Whenever Beth has attempted to challenge the cuts to her housing benefit it has left her 'in a worse place'. Each refusal serves as stark reminder of the futility of her struggle. Each moment of closure has a detrimental impact on her wellbeing. Beth is forcefully reminded, time and time again, that no one cares about her struggle. Thus as Berlant (2007a, p.33) notes, the danger with cruel optimism 'is that the loss of the object/scene of promising itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything'. Glimmers of hope and possibility fleetingly appear but then vanish. Such interactions leave Beth in a momentary state of hopelessness; these failed moments of optimism leave her with little 'hope about anything'. These encounters are draining, they result in her having to take a step backwards and unsettle her from her everyday path of just trying to 'plough on'.

In the end Beth realises that the advice she has received is of little use, instead she tells us how she has learnt to trust her own instinct, to listen to herself, to focus on the task of her everyday endurance. Hopeful optimism has been replaced with a weary pessimism. Yet, what Beth's narrative demonstrates, is that such a shift should not necessarily be read negatively. If hopeful optimism diminishes our capacities, then maybe weary pessimism might be a lifesaver? Beth's story highlights the importance of what we term 'the right to be weary', a perhaps somewhat paradoxical claim of not having to live our lives in constant oppositional struggle, of not always having to resist and fight back. But rather than see weariness as simply a closing down, it could instead be thought of as a form of action, a redirection of energy. Thus, as Sara Ahmed notes, it is important to challenge the binary opposition between

active/passive, however '[t]he task is not to redescribe passivity as activity… but to think of passivities as involving different kinds of action' (2010, pp.209-210).

Wearing out

Our claim for the 'right to be weary' is not about apathy or acquiescence. Instead we want to think about a turn to weariness as a coping strategy, as a way to survive. Yet weariness is something we are constantly told we need to move beyond, weariness should only ever be a temporary sojourn, a momentary rest before a return. In this section, we outline how this normative push to get beyond weariness can, in itself, become a measure of failure. What happens then to those who are seemingly unable to 'get on with life', who feel overwhelmed by the hardship and uncertainty they face?

Here we turn to the story of Fiona, a white woman in her early 30s who identified as lesbian. Fiona had been living in shared accommodation in London, but was made unemployed and could no longer afford the apartment she rented, so had reluctantly moved back to live with her mother in a suburban bungalow just outside a small town in the north of England. At the time of interview Fiona had been living with her mother for just over a year, even though she had hoped that the move would only be short-term. The interview takes place in Fiona's bedroom, as this was her only private space. Fiona tells us how this used to be her childhood room, but that her mother had meticulously removed all traces of her as soon as she had left for University. Fiona speaks of how she is still not 'out' to her mother who would disown her if she found out about her sexuality, and so for Fiona, the move home was a return to the closet, as she recounts:

> I'm in my 30s and I'm back living with my mum. How depressing is that? I don't claim any benefits at the moment as I can't face the idea of having to go to the job centre. So I just live here for free.

Fiona tells us how she eventually became exhausted with dealing with the benefits system and that she no longer can cope with trying to claim welfare. Fiona describes the job centre as 'just too depressing… it just filled me with shame and dread'. Attending the job centre can be a dehumanising process, a space of stigma and shame (Patrick, 2016). Like Beth, Fiona no longer wants to have to deal with authority figures; the pressures and anxieties that such encounters place upon her are too much to bear. Thus once again, weary disengagement can be understood as a form of everyday survival. Sometimes closing-down can be the only way to get by.

However, throughout the interview Fiona chastised herself for not doing enough, that we must think of her as 'useless', that she 'ought to be doing more'. Fiona frequently castigated herself for not 'getting by', and blamed herself for wider structural failures (such as lack of employment opportunities and affordable housing). State failures become internalized as personal failures (Pemberton et al., 2016). Here we could argue that Fiona has, in some ways, adopted some of the dominant myths around poverty and welfare. During the interview she drew upon a neoliberal logic in which people are expected to work their own way out of hardship (typified in 'welfare-to-work' policies: Haylett, 2003; MacLeavy, 2011). Such a narrative positions individuals as responsible for their own destinies (see Pimlott-Wilson, 2015). There is hence a profound stigma around being seen as not self-sufficient, or what Valentine and Harris (2014, p.87) term 'the consequent fear of being unproductive and dependent'. This ideal, that individuals need to get beyond weariness and become 'productive', results in Fiona feeling an intense sense of failure: she is not the driven or determined person she ought to be. However, her imagined idea of what she *should* be doing (looking for work, finding somewhere to live) is an impossibility, and she explained to us that 'right now I just don't have the strength'.

Fiona expressed a sense of shame, not just about her lack of employment, but also shame about her feelings of fatigue. As the interview progresses she spoke of how her weariness is something she knows she should try and get beyond. This echoes Sianne Ngai's (2009, p.10) work on what she terms, 'ugly feelings', where 'the morally degraded and seemingly unjustifiable status of these feelings tends to produce an unpleasurable feeling *about* the feeling', so in this instance, 'I feel ashamed about

feeling weary'. There is hence a pressure to either not be weary, or to learn to hide our weariness. This is illustrated though a story Fiona recounts about her time spent living with friends in London. Prior to moving in with her mother Fiona had briefly lived rent-free in the spare room of her close friend and his partner. However, she only stayed for around three weeks before she 'had to leave'. We enquire if her friends had asked her to leave, to which she responds:

> No they didn't, they are really sweet, they'd never do that. But I guess they didn't have to ask really. I just knew it was time for me to go… in the end I just felt in the way of their life… they'd moved on to being grown up, and there is me sticking out like a sore thumb… They'd have their friends over and they were all very middle class, all went to proper Unis, all had proper jobs that sort of thing. I just felt like I couldn't fit in there, I was living on nothing, just the last of my savings. Couldn't spend money on things… and I was tired all the time, so never wanted to do anything… and who wants to be around someone who is moping around all day? So in the end I had to leave. I just felt totally out of place…like I was bringing them down.

Fiona describes a housing situation that many would see as a fortunate short-term solution; she had her own room, in a central area of London, with friends with whom she is close. The infrastructure of support and security was in place, yet despite this, Fiona felt out of place and that she 'had to leave'. The story Fiona narrates is one where she feels her very presence creates 'bad feeling'; she senses that she is a burden who 'brings others down'. She sees her weary state as wearisome, that her failure to get beyond her unhappiness creates unhappiness for others. Here we could again draw upon the work of Sara Ahmed, who has spoken about the obligation society places on us to be happy:

> The happiness duty is a positive duty to speak of what is good but can also be thought of as a negative duty not to speak of what is not good, not to speak from unhappiness… you have a duty to not be hurt by the violence directed toward you, not even to notice it, to let it pass by, as if it passes you by (2010, p.158).

Despite the hardship Fiona is currently facing, she feels she needs to learn to try and hide her fatigue. That she should do her best to appear cheerful and remain optimistic, as this way she will not bring others down. Yet Fiona is too fatigued to perform this 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1983), she can do nothing but 'mope' and feel 'tired all the time'. Fiona feels she is failing in her duty to remain positive; instead she is stuck in a melancholic state from which she cannot move on.

Throughout the interview Fiona expressed a disconcerted feeling of not being 'gathered' or control of her life, a feeling that she is trapped and cannot move forward. She frequently spoke of a normative aspirational ideal of the way in which a life should unfold, that by our thirties we should no longer be living in the parental home, that we should be independent and have a secure job and a steady relationship. This is exemplified in her talk of her friends' comfortable happy settled existence, which served as a constant painful reminder of her own relative failure. Fiona notes that the friends she was staying with in London had 'moved on to being grown up'; they were a stable couple in a secure home of their own, a life stage that Fiona has yet to reach. Thus, whilst a desire for the future can be a lifeline, an escape from 'the prison of the present' (Muñoz, 2007, p.1) it can also be the yardstick by which we measure our own present-day failure:

> I just feel like I've failed… I'm away from London, so away from any hope of a job… am away from my friends and my real life, and every day it just gets harder. I just feel worthless… living here and keeping this up, it's like it was before I moved away but worse, I can't see a way out…

During the interview Fiona speaks of this slow wearing out, of fatigue, of durative time. Weariness is felt as a kind of steady continuation, rather than a sudden eruption. Fiona presents a story of how she is struggling on her own to get by, which produces a condition of both endurance and exhaustion. A slow wearing down that comes from the struggle of day-to-day existence.

Weariness, then, can be thought of as part of what Stewart terms 'ordinary affects', those which 'can be experienced as a pleasure and a shock, as an empty pause or a

dragging undertow, as a sensibility that snaps into place or a profound disorientation' (Stewart, 2007, p.2). Weariness might be best understood then as a kind of 'empty pause', a temporal suspension, where one does not have the energy to move forward. How then might we begin to better understand of the affective dimensions of everyday life that might be experienced as a pause? That is, moments that are perhaps not passionate or intense, but instead are listless and still; the moments of inertia, flatness, impasse (see Anderson, 2004 on boredom; Bissell, 2007; Buser, 2017; Harrison, 2009 on stillness). Might these moments be so ordinary, so gradual, that we struggle to see them? How then, might we ever even begin to grasp the weariness that people feel?

Conclusion: An army of the weary?

When we began this project we had hoped, perhaps somewhat naively, that we might find angry, politicized citizens, ready to fight back against the injustice and mercilessness of the state. A cruel optimism indeed. We imagined that those hit hardest by welfare reform might be the ones most likely to rise up and resist, and in some interviews this was certainly the case. However, on the whole, most people were not engaging in anti-austerity politics, and were instead simply trying their best to get by. Yet, the most humbling part of qualitative research emerges when people's lives do not neatly fit with what one secretly hopes to find. In this paper, rather than focussing on hopeful stories of political resistance, we turned our attention to two weary tales. We selected these interviews as they were ones that left us feeling somewhat hopeless and disorientated. What then, might we learn from these moments of disorientation?

Of course, we could have simply dismissed these weary stories as apolitical, and chastised these individuals for failing to resist. We could surmise that weariness is a form of inaction and hence something that people need to try and move beyond. But such logic falls into the same individualized frame that neoliberalism so often relies upon— it gets better, you can find your way out, *just take action*. Yet another incessant demand. Such a theorization would continue to shame these individuals for

their weariness. Alternatively, we could envision weariness as a state of abeyance, a retreat before a rebound, a brief sojourn (see Gorfinkel, 2012). Using this conceptualization, weariness does not shutdown the possibility for action or resistance; it simply delays its eventual emergence. Here, weariness would be understood as having political potential, but only as long as it is a temporary state. We can spend some time in weariness as a way to repair and restore, before an eventual return to political action. However, such a summation still relies upon a normative judgment that positions weariness as something that people still need to try and eventually overcome. This kind of redemptive reading is something we want to avoid; instead we want to propose that one should have a right to be weary, *regardless of whether or not it leads to an eventual rebound*.

Thus, rather than seeing weariness as a blockage for political action, we propose a reconsideration of the political potentials of weariness. Weariness is often conceptualized as something without value: it falls outside of the logic of labour, *and* outside of normative conceptualisations of the political. Weary bodies are seen as hopeless, stultified, withdrawn. The 'temporal regimes of neoliberalism' leave us with little space for slowing down as there is the expectation that we should constantly be striving to better ourselves (Mountz et al., 2015, p.1238). Thus certain debilitated bodies are positioned as without value, as failing to be productive or self-sufficient (Shildrick, 2015; Puar, 2012). The narratives we have presented here are from those who are trying to get beyond their weariness, because weary is not what we are supposed to be. Yet this constant drive to get beyond our current impasse crates yet more exhaustion. Perhaps then, we could offer more reflection on what it might it mean to have a right to be weary? To not have to 'plough on', get by, make do, or feel grateful, but likewise, to not have to resist or rise up. How then, might people be able to carve out spaces in which they can be weary, rather than this seeming push to get by, and move beyond? For as Maurice Blanchot notes, 'I don't ask that weariness be done away with. I ask to be led back to a region where it might be possible to be weary'(1993 [1969], p.xx).

So what happens when we position weariness as something that we do not necessarily have to strive to overcome? Might it be possible to create an army of the weary—

rather than the resistant, or the resilient? Could people find common ground in their shared condition of weariness? The 'right to be weary' might thus be understood as a retreat from the relentless drive to move forwards, as a form of passive dissent. It could allow individuals to escape from being stuck in what Berlant (2007b, p.279) terms 'survival time', 'the time of struggling, drowning, holding on to the ledge, treading water *not stopping*'.[ii] What then, might it mean to no longer tread water, but to simply float in weariness? To stop, make no progress, *and to not feel bad*.[iii] Rather than pushing forward and striving, perhaps at times the only life-affirming thing to do might be to float. For some bodies, flourishing may only be achieved through withdrawal (see author, 2017).

In this paper we have outlined how austere cuts to state welfare serve as a form of slow violence. This violence takes place in private spaces, it is unspectacular, ordinary and often goes unnoticed. The stories we have shared are from those who are struggling alone to get by, these spaces of abandonment are often concealed and private. Weary moments often take place quietly off scene, and thus remain unseen. How then, can we learn to hear the exasperated cry of the weary? Blanchot (1993 [1969], p.262) asks how one might bear witness to the 'murmur' of those in need, what he terms a 'cry of need or of protest, cry without words and without silence, an ignoble cry'. The cry of the weary might be difficult to detect; a slow murmur, a quiet lull. This murmur often emerges in ordinary, everyday conversations; at times it might be so faint that it becomes inaudible: a sigh, a groan, a moan. Weariness then, could be understood as a kind of pre-emergence, perhaps unspeakable, an utterance that is not fully developed, but nonetheless, if only momentarily, its presence can be felt. Thus the political incentive here may not be that we need to mobilize the weary and encourage them to get beyond their fatigue, but that we need to learn to listen more carefully to the voice of the weary. That is, we must recognise the right to be weary, and to not instantly condemn weariness as inaction. The quiet murmur of the weary should be heard as a political demand in itself. Recognising the importance of weariness might enable us to make a place in which 'it might be possible to be weary', and to no longer shame those who find themselves 'stuck' in weariness. It might allow us to better recognise the violence of a (perhaps well-intentioned) intervention intended to help someone 'move on'.

This paper has provided a unique contribution towards understanding the everyday impacts of welfare reform. Our research raises important questions about how cuts to welfare are both experienced and resisted. The kind of suffering we have outlined in this paper might be best thought of as what Povinelli (2011, p.160) terms a 'slow catastrophe': it is ordinary, chronic, gradual. Weariness is felt as a kind of steady continuation, rather than a sudden eruption. We thus argue that in order to better understand the impacts of austerity, it is vital to examine these gradual and often hidden forms of suffering: the 'quasi-events' where 'little things pile up' (Povinelli, 2011, pp.132-133). Ultimately then, this paper is a call to turn our attention to these quiet, weary, and all-too-human geographies, in order to further our conceptualizations of both violence and resistance. The stories we have presented here are not about taking action or rising up against austerity: instead they represent a quieter form of politics, found in solitary moments of survival. Rather than positioning weariness as apolitical, we have offered a more reparative reading: one that recognises how a weary withdrawal may be a way in which to survive. Weariness should not just be understood as a closing down, but also as a site of possibility. Our research thus highlights the wider conceptual potential of thinking the politics of affect beyond neat dualities: of vitality or decay, capacity or curtailment. In turning to weariness we have highlighted some of the ambivalent, messy and multiple ways in which the everyday violence of welfare reform is both experienced and resisted. Ultimately then, our encounters with these research participants prompted us to reconsider the political significance of weariness: the passive dissent found in *the right to be weary*.

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[i] See Gilson, 2014; Butler et al., 2016 for a similar discussion around the politics of vulnerability.

[ii] For Berlant, 'survival time' is part of what she terms 'crisis ordinariness', it is not a momentary catastrophe, it is gradual, durative and everyday.

[iii] Here we want to note some individual may not be able to afford to dwell in weariness too long. For some, to stop treading water, even if only just momentarily, is to risk drowning, therefore, we also need to recognize the political significance of being resilient and 'ploughing on' (as it is also a complex state that is far more than just an internalization of neoliberal rhetoric around self-responsibility).