

Ways of hoping: Variegated hope among theatre freelancers during COVID-19

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Laura Harris** 

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Abstract

Hope has long been articulated as an intrinsic component of creative work, used to alleviate or justify the challenging precarity and narrow pathways to success in this sector. Two key articulations of hope have emerged: a deferred economy model in which present hardship is endured as a down-payment on specific future benefits, however ultimately unlikely; and a more dispersed understanding in which the hoped-for future is unspecified but affectively felt and mobilising in the present. In this article, we draw on qualitative data from an online survey and a policy event timeline developed as part of an 18-month research project with UK theatre freelancers during 2020 and 2021. Our qualitative analysis explores different ways of hoping among this group of creative workers at a time when futures and hopes were severely inhibited. Our findings propose that multiple forms of hope co-existed and intersected with practices of care, time and the self as mechanisms for navigating interrupted lives. The 'variegated' model of hope that we propose moves away from totalising theories of hope and helps in the understanding of hope as a force of resilience within cultural work, adding to existing calls to realise its political potential across cultural studies.

Keywords

Care, COVID19, crisis, freelance, hope, labour, theatre

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Introduction

The study of hope as a crucial component of creative work has grown significantly in recent years (Alacovska, 2018, 2019; Chen, 2021; Cook and Cuervo, 2019). In this article, we set out to explore what is revealed about hope and hopelessness in the work and lives of creative freelance workers (in this case, theatre freelancers) when all present states and futures were interrupted; specifically, their ways of hoping during the disruption of COVID-19 and the intermittent lockdowns (Banks, 2020; Comunian and England, 2020; de Peuter et al., 2022). This was a period when the usual temporal orderings, certainties and uncertainties were disrupted and hope was a rare but important social and personal resource. In this article, we consider existing understandings of hope in creative, particularly freelance, work and consider their effectiveness for explaining the diverse manifestations of hope that we saw in the qualitative data we collected as part of a research project looking at the social, cultural and economic impact of the pandemic on theatre freelancers. While the larger project spanned 2020 to 2022, our focus here is on data covering the time period of our survey collection: from November 2020 to March 2021.

We situate this work in the United Kingdom and in professional theatre. Our participant group and focus, theatre freelancers, offers particular insights in that we must understand 'creative workers' as a heterogeneous group in which the nature of the artform and forms of contracted work vary. Theatre relies more on freelancers in its workforce than other fields of work (and indeed other creative work) (Maples et al., 2022). In addition, theatre is an artform and business reliant on live collaborative in-person experiences for both production and distribution. Arguably, there is then perhaps a stronger reliance on collective behaviours for both work, and identity formation and additionally the effect of the pandemic on professional theatre and its freelancers was earlier, longer and larger than other fields of work including other creative work, expressed in campaigns such as the 'first to close, last to re-open' campaign (FitzGibbon, 2022; Maples et al., 2022). We believe what we identify as 'variegated hope', the co-presence of multiple 'ways of hoping', has wider resonance and force due to the globalised nature of the pandemic and the troubling evidence of increasingly precarious creative work across countries and continents (Voldere et al., 2021; Gu, 2022). Equally, although our data were generated in a pandemic context, our general push towards a multifaceted understanding of hope stands beyond this period, not least because 'crises' in the creative industries are neither new nor resolved.

Central to our arguments here is that creative worker subjectivities are not fixed and that adapting one's affective orientation to the future is a form of agency. The ability to maintain multiple different orientations to the future, manifested in hope, is a hallmark of how creative workers navigated the 'compound precarity' of COVID-19-related lockdowns and uncertainties (Langevang et al., 2022); how they expressed varied forms of hope through the multiple 'emergencies' of the pandemic (Anderson, 2017); and how these were affected by external demonstrations of care/carelessness in government and industry actions. We suggest that hope is a significant force in both future and everyday creative work and correspondingly merits greater attention in policies surrounding

creative labour. As Gross (2021) notes, hope requires a more complex engagement across cultural studies to realise its political potential.

Literature review

Early studies of hope in Western philosophy aligned hope with desire, combined with probability; that is, the act of hoping brought about desire fulfilment of something probable (Meirav, 2009). An alternate theory – ‘hope against hope’ – suggested only the *possibility* (not *probability*) of desire fulfilment was sufficient, providing a rationale for strong hope and the act of hoping (Martin, 2013; Milona, 2020). Scholars differ, however, on the degree to which hope is deployed with ‘knowingness’ or as an act of unbound optimism in the face of a grim reality (Berlant, 2011). Equally, there is disagreement about the relation of hope to hopelessness or despair, and whether these states are opposites, or can be simultaneously and separately held (Meirav, 2009).

Creative work has been widely conceptualised as ‘hope labour’, that is the labour of rationalisation and emotional behaviour management to self-actualise creative futures and identities in the face of degraded work and working conditions in the present (Alacovska, 2018; Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013). Hope labour is intrinsic to a fragile identity formation and retrospective and prospective justification of decisions by precarious workers (McRobbie, 1998; Taylor and Littleton, 2016). Its study points to the contradictory power systems of cultural production that promote neoliberal discourses of entrepreneurialism, resilience and independence and simultaneously rely on fictions of relative autonomy, the blurring of personal and professional boundaries and acts of self-precariation (Banks, 2010; Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2020). Hope, therefore, is fundamentally tied to the precarious nature of creative and cultural work; both the artificial freedoms afforded by the perceived choice to work for free, and the precarity imposed by the move towards gig-working, short-term and unstable contracts, and growing disparities between work required and payment received (Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2020). We propose that these differing existing theorisations can be broadly clustered across two conceptualisations of hope.

Deferred economy or representational hope

The dominant conceptualisation of hope in creative work relies on the possibility of success as a justification of present disadvantageous conditions (Martin, 2013). The ‘deferred economy’ approach proposes that creative workers rationalise their poor conditions in the present as a down-payment on future success (Bourdieu, 1998: 82). This ‘deferred economy’ model is therefore one of individualised strategising; hope here is ‘representational’ in that it is angled towards a specific referent and future reward (Cook and Cuervo, 2019). This relies on a number of assumptions: that creative workers are pursuing an autonomous, linear path over time and that, however improbably, there is a defined end state that could be considered success. Hope is a ‘cruel optimism’ – we become attached to dreams as a means of continuing, even while our very desire is an obstacle to its realisation (Berlant, 2011).

This conceptualisation of hope in creative work can be expressed as a positive and future-oriented coping strategy to explain present precarity. Creative labour studies argue that systems of cultural production are doubly cruel in that they exploit such optimism among precarious creative workers to ensure their own continuity and viability (Banks, 2010; McRobbie, 1998). In the context of professional theatre (our focus), such systems ensure artists and other creative freelancers will continue to self-exploit: pursuing ‘opportunities’ such as internships for low/no pay; pitching, auditioning and networking with little hope of success; contributing ideas and work for remuneration below their value or for free (FitzGibbon, 2022).

While this process of hoping against hope may be recognisable, it has also been criticised as a limited understanding of hope for presenting the creative worker as lacking agency, a naïve ‘dupe’ to a false vision of success (Alacovska, 2019). Too much attention has been given to entry points of creative work; a more complex understanding of hope labour is needed as careers become increasingly precarious across lifetimes (Alacovska, 2019; Taylor and Littleton, 2016). In addition, creative workers (and artists in particular) do not carry the same status in the non-West as in Western Europe, nor are cultural production practices and norms globally common, suggesting that we need a more varied understanding of hope (Chen, 2021).

Non-representational hope or everyday praxis

An alternative, ‘non-representational’, model of hope has recently been conceptualised (Cook and Cuervo, 2019). In positing this alternative, Alacovska (2019) proposes,

When precarity is no longer relegated to a state of exception but becomes longstanding or constantly recurring, then the meaning of desires, fantasies and aspirations needs to be rethought. (p. 1122)

Rather than strategising about routes to success, hope here is understood as a ‘psycho-social resource’ and ‘everyday praxis’ that we deploy in the present to make the future desirable (Alacovska, 2018: 1120; 1122). Unlike the ‘deferred economy’ model, it doesn’t have a specific referent or individualised goals. It is a model of hope concerned with the everyday, relational practices that allow people to persevere through an uncertain present; with the affect of hope and ‘feelings and sensations of hopefulness’ (Cook and Cuervo, 2019: 1106; Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2020). This is hope as a ‘process of becoming’ (Cook and Cuervo, 2019: 1106), with the power to ‘open up agentic spaces for building alternative possible worlds and forging solidarities’ (Alacovska, 2019: 1133). In contrast to other iterations of hope labour and creative labour studies, here the subject is aware of their own actions and decisions, even if their intention is non-representational.

The ‘deferred economy’ and ‘non-representational’ models of hope offer different ways of understanding what hope is and how it acts on the lives and careers of creative freelancers. In the literature, they appear as differentiated from one another. However, despite their theoretical dissimilarities, we posit that they could both be mobilised in hopeful subjectivities and adapted to face uncertainty and changeable careers. In pursuit

of our inquiry, we collected data about theatre freelancers as they navigated profound change and called on the diminishing supplies of hope that characterised the COVID-19 closedown of theatres and livelihoods.

Methods

The data for this article were generated as part of an 18 month rapid response research project on the social, cultural and economic effect of COVID-19 on UK theatre freelancers titled 'Freelancers in the Dark' (Maples et al., 2022). In this article, we draw on two data sources from the wider project:

- Qualitative data generated through an online survey of UK theatre freelancers that ran from 23rd November 2020 until 19th March 2021 (n=397) (Harris et al., 2024)
- A policy event timeline compiled for the period 1st January 2020 to 31st March 2022 (the end of the project) (FitzGibbon and Harris, 2024; FitzGibbon et al., 2022).

The wider project defined its participants of interest as:

any individual [working in theatre] whose working life exists outside of formal payrolled employment (and the restrictions and protections such contracts may offer). (Maples et al., 2022: 18)

The decision to stipulate theatre as the field but only which employment characteristics our participants did *not* have (i.e. a primary income from a payrolled theatre sector job) was an attempt to reflect a field of creative work that is highly elastic, characterised by contract diversity and mixed employment both within and across fields. This is an imperfect approach, as self-selection based on broad criteria can result in a participant pool with little internal cohesion, making it difficult to address the research questions. However, it is generally understood that the social actors within art worlds are sprawling and dispersed while their employment arrangements are highly fragmented and individualised (Becker, 1982; Gill and Pratt, 2008). In the pandemic context, we sought to capture the experiences of those operating without the relative (economic and social) security of significant payrolled employment, without being overly prescriptive in defining who constitutes a freelance theatre worker and what contract 'independence' looks like. The data collected allowed us to critically reflect on how self-definitions were mobilised during the pandemic, and gave us sufficient information on the nature of participants' work and employment. While ultimately not required, we planned to exclude from our analysis anyone *only* employed as payrolled theatre staff, or indeed anyone whose work was too far removed from theatre to usefully shed light on our research questions. Generating data during a pandemic presents unique ethical challenges (Kara and Khoo, 2020; Surmiak et al., 2022). In addition to the usual ethical concerns of online research methods generally, such as privacy, ensuring informed consent and digital inequity (Linabary and Corple, 2019), pandemic-specific ethical considerations included the heightened

nature of existing vulnerabilities or risks and a highly changeable social context (Institute for Government, 2021; Roberts et al., 2021). During the survey timeframe, each of the United Kingdom's four nations entered and lifted lockdown restrictions with significant variation. The ethical imperative to keep track of the social contexts of our participants prompted the creation of the policy event timeline (FitzGibbon et al., 2022).

Survey

Surveys were a common feature of the theatre sector in the first 18 months of the pandemic. Their popularity, and our decision to adopt the method, was based on their (relatively) easy set-up, the fact that they did not rely on face-to-face interaction, their ability to circulate through highly active social media networks, and their atemporality, allowing participants to engage with them at a time that suited them. Grassroots, representative and public bodies ran quickfire advocacy and research surveys to articulate the struggles of, and advocate for, the sector and its workers (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2020). Although different in intention, our data generation strategy overlapped with these initiatives, producing a risk of 'survey fatigue' (Field, 2020). To avoid overburdening our participants with repetitive requests, we differentiated our survey by orienting it towards freelancers' expectations and perceived futures, and exploring their relationship to policy/state, wider society and the rest of the sector.

The survey had 34 questions. It used closed-response scales to capture changing attitudes and beliefs (e.g. 'Compared to before March 2020, do you feel more or less like your work in theatre and other arts satisfies your sense of civic or social responsibility?') (Johnson and Morgan, 2016), and yes/no questions to capture specific data points (e.g. 'Have you been in work of any kind since March 2020?'). We clustered 'functional' (region(s) and setting(s) of work) and identity questions (age, gender identity, race, occupation(s), etc) at the end of the survey, enabling responses to be sifted to find common and divergent accounts. These data fed into the project's final report (Maples et al., 2022).

This article, however, focuses on qualitative data generated through open-text responses to questions concerning support networks, relationships with employers/previous employers and, crucially, reflections on feelings of optimism and pessimism and visions of the future. Participants were able to skip any free-text question, and as such the minimum time commitment was 8 minutes. Despite this, our participants often gave full and detailed responses and the average response time was 30 minutes.

We note in Table 1 the most represented occupational roles, although 31 were captured ranging from choreographer to consultant. Of our survey participants, over a third were 'multi-jobbing', consistent with the career hybridity of theatre (FitzGibbon, 2022).

Policy events

The second principal source for this article was the dataset used to build a policy event timeline spanning 1st January 2020 to 31st March 2022 (FitzGibbon et al., 2022). We identified a 'policy event' as an 'agenda-setting' instance within the time period (Birkland,

Table 1. Survey Participants’ principal or only occupation – top 10 (self-described).

Stage manager	74
Lighting	64
Actor	54
Director	48
Technician	43
Writer	43
Sound	40
Performer (non-actor e.g. dancer, puppeteer)	26
Producer	23
Costume	22

2007). An agenda is defined by Birkland (2007) as ‘a collection of problems, understandings of causes, symbols, solutions, and other elements of public problems that come to the attention of members of the public and their governmental officials’ (p. 63). For this study, these were identified as policy statements and actions that had social and economic impacts on our participants; and responses, calls or manifestoes that sought to prompt or change these policy agenda. While the study of policy responses to ‘focusing events’ mainly explores larger, sudden crises (earthquakes, etc) and large-scale policy domains (Birkland and Warnement, 2016), our study identified the pandemic as such a crisis, and the freelancers we were studying as operating within both a policy crisis and a personal/professional individualised crisis. Our study thus captured these events as agenda-setting by discrete and mainstream political and policy actions and by freelancers’ own collectivised mobilisations (through informal pressure groups and formal bodies or trade unions).

The dataset captured 1,343 time-stamped ‘policy events’. A digital visualisation of the data is publicly available (see FitzGibbon et al., 2022). It was initially prompted by the researchers’ attempt to keep track ‘in the moment’ of government announcements and freelancers’ responses (through collectivised movements and formal bodies). The digital visualisation was published in 2020 and invited crowd-sourced contributions from which additional events were added. Following this, the researchers evolved it as a formal dataset for the study, returning to public announcements, blogs and media reports spanning the time period. Sources spanned the four UK nations (UK parliament and three devolved assemblies) with corresponding public health and cultural agencies. These included national and devolved lockdown announcements, the opening and closing of support funds and regulatory policy adjustments (particularly around worker support and public gathering). We tracked global landmark dates in the pandemic’s progression, vaccine release dates through global and national health agency announcements. Against this, we tracked key reports published by academic and grassroots commentators, campaigns by trade unions and bodies (Equity, the Writers Guild and others), statements, blogs and social media outbursts of informal spontaneous grassroots solidarity movements and their leading voices.

Methods of analysis

We initially analysed the qualitative survey data thematically using NVivo. A code-book of 83 keywords was produced. These were then cross-referenced to create ‘families’ of keywords. Of these families, ‘hope’ featured strongly in the following: ‘Campaigning’, ‘Care’, ‘Charity/volunteering’, ‘Future’, ‘Networks’ and ‘Transformations to practice’. Conversely, ‘hopelessness’ featured strongly in: ‘Age and stage’, ‘Emotion’, ‘State support’, ‘Industry’ and ‘Inequality’. Separate but concurrently to this, we analysed the policy timeline data to explore the context of our survey data for our participants and wider expressions of survey themes as they arose in analysis. As the survey was open for over 3 months, we could identify relationships between our policy timeline and our qualitative survey data. This process was iterative and we revisited the interplay between data sets multiple times, yielding in particular our interpreted findings around the Fatima campaign and expanding our understanding of care/lessness.

Findings

Taken together, our qualitative data reflects a time of great anxiety and stress for our participants. The affective character of the dataset is one of fear and the heightened emotionality of crisis(es). Within this, participants’ overarching project was one of sense-making – how was the world likely to have changed once the dust settled, if it ever would? – causing frustration and anger towards powerful players in their lives, whether government or employers, whose actions made it more difficult to imagine a future. In all of this internal and social turmoil, theatre freelancers were just one grouping within a society at large grappling with the early ravages of COVID19. However, within this turbulent period, we also observed the dominant theme of hope, intersecting with other social experiences: care, time and the self.

Hope and care

During the research period, theatre freelancers engaged in a vast amount of everyday, solidaristic activity. For our participants, this ranged from phones calls to ‘check in’ with one another, sending gifts, offering free online courses and mentoring, sharing resources, supporting each other with funding applications, and creating formal and informal support networks. In the United Kingdom, semi-formalised and spontaneous grassroots networks, including Freelancers Make Theatre Work (2020), #WeMakeEvents and the Freelance Task Force (2020), provided focal points for this upswell in solidarity and channelled it into campaigning for sectoral change. Albeit incomplete, this gives an overview of mutual aid in the community of theatre freelancers as comprising two main categories: skills-sharing and emotional support. Almost all these expressions of care were worker-initiated and served as contrast to, and protest against, a perceived absence of care by employers, sector or governmental bodies.

2020 in to 2021, as has been much commented on (Springer, 2020), saw the rise in prominence of mutual aid and the framing of acts of community care as such. Whether organised through social media or other forums, people pooled their material and

immaterial resources to answer the (real or imagined) needs of their peers. This served to redraw social groupings: streets of neighbours became communities of care, political opponents became united in their goals. People chose modes of caring that were possible for them, but also that connected them to social worlds in which they felt belonging, or desired to belong (the street, the city, the nation). Through this, social groupings were reinscribed, reconfigured, or imagined into being, and furnished with symbols and narratives.

Aesthetic, moral, and political commitments to the project of theatre-making in general provided the broader context for these acts and networks of care among our participants. However, our dataset makes clear that in a theatre or creative context, the status of ‘freelancer’ acted as a powerful identity marker when it came to mutual aid. Participants saw themselves as uniquely able to offer care, and conversely uniquely buoyed up by receiving care, from people whom they considered to be ‘in the same boat’ as them. Within a context of shared precarity, the status of being a freelancer overrode other distinctions, such as genre of theatre-making, in bringing together communities of care. The delivery of this care – through skills-sharing and emotional support – reinscribed this grouping as particularly salient. For example, participants described sharing not only theatre craft insight but insights to the freelance career process. Emotional support was not generalised, but specifically responsive to freelancer struggles. Channelling care through the subject-position of freelancer solidified their employment status as an identity category, with the solidaristic potential that building collective identities brings. This quote from a costume professional captures this:

‘I have been impressed by how supportive the community of freelancers has been – from what was a very loosely connected collection of workers, only really linked by common work, the sense of a united body is great. It does give me hope that we will be able to act more collaboratively and stand together in whatever the future world is’.

From this we see the creation of a ‘united body’ not only provided solace in the everyday, it also offered up routes to an imagined better future, organised around collective principles.

These widespread acts of care or mutual aid can be understood as non-representational hope as described by Alacovska. Although this activity was often related to creative practices, its intention was not (solely) to advance individual careers but rather to build ‘alternative possible worlds’ and forge solidarities, making it typical of Alacovska’s (2019) ‘hopeful creative labour’ (p.1133). Related to this, we can see the identity or group-formation function of these examples of hope as ‘everyday praxis’ (Alacovska, 2019: 1122). The upswell of grassroots care initiatives fomented identity groupings around the unique theatre freelancer experience. This provided the narrative base on which hopes for better, if undefined, working futures were mounted.

Care was not only present in such group-oriented activity, but also in articulations of the role of theatre in wider society. This perhaps highlights the particularity of the theatre field to this study of hope labour. Another costume professional wrote that ‘theatre is a way for people to empathise, learn, communicate and explore new ideas with each other’ and that this was a value too often elided in government policy. Another participant, a multi-jobbing technician/manager, spoke of the ‘impact of some of the amazing performers I’ve worked with on audiences’. An access professional spoke of the ‘role of

arts in keeping up people's spirits, enlivening isolation, and making connections'. Many participants spoke of the mental health benefits that theatre work offers to society. These statements evidence an ethical orientation to art-making as an act of general social nurture (Alacovska and Bissonnette, 2021). Although these motivations towards working in the creative industries are well-evidenced outside the pandemic context, the conditions arising from lockdowns served as a case-in-point. Theatre freelancers recognised the pandemic as a moment in which culture's value was pronounced and more socially recognised, creating the possibility for a societal re-evaluation of the role of art (Tsioulakis and FitzGibbon, 2020). From this, two hopes flowed: first, that the general population would find uplift and inspiration through theatre freelancers' work; and second, that policymakers would value this and reorient future cultural policy towards it.

However, the hopefulness to be found in collectivised care and the social role of art had its limits. Most often these limits were defined by the very reasons why solidarity found fuller expression once theatres closed: the inherently competitive nature of the industry. Participants evaluated future career opportunities and strategised about how best to proceed; balancing these plans against their ethical and caring motivations and their hopes for future life and work. A writer/director/producer/facilitator reported that their commitment was 'to local and global political change through theatre', stating they would reorient their work along 'another creative path' to achieve this if necessary. This balancing act often took the shape of non-representational hope, tempered by representational modes of hope and pessimistic/pragmatic expectations of future careers. We can see this balancing act in the following two quotes from different sound professionals:

I do worry about whether I'll work in my career again, but I can at least use my experiences to empower and promote better working practice.

As the pandemic and associated social measures have unfolded since March 2020, I have fluctuated wildly from optimistic about returning to a better industry that looks after its workforce better to being sick with worry that employers will use the pandemic as an excuse to cut fees and salaries and tip the balance of terms and conditions in their own favour. This fluctuation happens on a daily basis [. . .]

For the former, the complete potential loss of a career, in this case a career of between 11 and 20 years, was balanced with a commitment to empowering others. For the latter, an appeal to care (being 'looked after') in an imagined but unspecified 'better industry' signifies a prioritising of the collective, while pessimism is expressed over future material conditions. From these, we learn that manifestations of hope qua care were in a dynamic tension with pessimistic (or pragmatic) reflections on entrenched sectoral norms.

Hope and time

In October 2020, just prior to the launch of our survey, the UK Government released a promotional poster as part of an ongoing campaign called 'Cyberfirst', aimed at building workforce skills in cyber, tech and digital skills (Bakare, 2020). Featuring an image of a female ballet dancer tying her shoe ribbons, the caption read:

Fatima's next job could be in cyber.

(she just doesn't know it yet).

The 'Fatima' poster quickly circulated online, sparking incredulity and exasperation in those who identified with the dancer and the devaluing of her work. Countless memes ridiculed the poster, altering the text to read, for example: 'Fatima could keep the job she loves. (If the government decided to give a fuck)'. Shortly before the poster launch, the UK government had also issued an online 'retraining quiz', intended to offer auto-generated career advice based on 50 questions, marketed at people looking to transfer their skills to an allegedly more secure job. It suggested creative workers retrained in career paths such as a 'lock keeper' or 'lollipop person'. A teacher/ production manager in our dataset was advised to retrain as a boxer; an actor/musician was told to consider a career as a road traffic accident investigator; a technician was recommended to retrain as a technician. The absurd advice generated by the quiz circulated on social media, soon dovetailing with the Fatima poster, and particularly resonating with creative industry professionals who found dark humour in the advice offered. The 'Fatima' poster and quiz created a spiralling controversy, both on arts-adjacent social media and the broader media scape which noted widespread fury directed at the government. Although the government quickly withdrew the poster, the damage was done, and our participant group had a shared reference point for their feelings of being disregarded by government. 'Fatima' quickly became a byword for the state's failure and condescension of the arts and its workforce.

Our policy timeline shows the 'Fatima' and retraining quiz controversy did not occur in a vacuum, but in a fast-moving context of government announcements and prompt sector rebuttals. Advocacy and trade representative organisations, such as the Writer's Union, issued many statements around the time condemning the inadequacy of state supports for their members (WGGB: The Writers Union, 2020). Only days after 'Fatima' surfaced online, BECTU (the lead technicians' union) published a report showing over 7000 redundancies in theatre and live events. At the same time, restrictions on movement diverged across the four UK nations, inhibiting viable forward planning or reopening of the live arts sector. Representative organisations responded in real time to their members' experiences of falling through the cracks of government support, and campaigned for changes to rectify these short-comings and uncertainties.

The 'Fatima' campaign and retraining quiz acted as a symbolic and, crucially, temporal line in the sand for theatre freelancers. Its virality reflected the way that it captured the crushing sense of neglect felt by many creative workers, and apportioned blame to a callous government. Survey participants reported that it left them feeling 'ignored', 'unvalued', 'insulted' and, crucially given our focus on hope/lessness, 'demoralised'. An actor and musician put it succinctly: 'The "Fatima" poster was a sad *moment*' (emphasis added). We can understand the Fatima poster and retraining quiz as a temporally located synecdoche of the various crises that beset theatre freelancers in the early pandemic, after which government action was perceived to be not only ineffective but also 'flippant' (as one participant described). As a symbol, it persistently resurfaced when freelancers were attempting to imagine their futures, acting as a significant block

to representational modes of hope. In the post-Fatima landscape, trust and respect between freelancers and the government was severely damaged. Not only did hope diminish as a result, but it became significantly more difficult for theatre freelancers to generate hope from future government interventions.

While ‘Fatima’ acted as a shared marker in time and a widespread inhibitor of government-oriented hope, more personal experiences of hope/lessness had a far less synco-pated rhythm. To draw on the words of one sound professional, the balance of hope/lessness ‘fluctuated’ (Warran et al., 2022). Similarly, a multi-jobbing actor/director/choreographer/sound professional spoke of their feelings ‘shifting ... from extreme pessimism to cautious optimism’, while a stage manager reported that they ‘swing from pessimistic to positive more than once a day’. Pithily, a sound professional wrote simply: ‘It’s been a rollercoaster’. The self-negotiation of hope/lessness was ongoing, processual and relational. Beyond common reference points like ‘Fatima’, self-negotiation hinged on experiences that participants had in their personal lives. It was widely reported that while companies and venues reached out, or were responsive to, freelancers in the early stage of the pandemic, these communications waned as time passed. Micro-level experiences such as these returned freelancers to individualised subjects, making it ‘hard to be hopeful’. These trends of employer behaviours were experienced at the individual level, without the sense of collective grievance that the virality of ‘Fatima’ provided. Nonetheless, these individualised employer-oriented experiences followed a similar temporal trajectory across our dataset – from better to worse. In this case, however, freelancers were less able to experience this temporal trajectory as a shared one, and therefore less able to reach for the optimism that, as shown above, can flow from collectivity.

Participants also showed that the future into which their hope projected operated at different temporal scales. A sound professional commented that:

In general, I do feel more optimistic about the future than I did in March, however I feel very pessimistic about the near future.

In this case, the ability to maintain optimism about the longer-term acts as a counterpoint to present-oriented pessimism. A front of house worker also captured this, saying:

In whole, I feel okay because I know that theatre *will* return eventually. The only exhausting and demoralising thing is the question of “when.” (emphasis from participant)

The future was a space of multiple possibilities operating at multiple temporal and social scales: from the near to distant future, from the isolated and individual to the shared (Shaughnessy et al., 2022). As we suggested in the above section, the ability to feel oneself ‘in the same boat’ as an identity group you place value in – e.g. theatre freelancers – proved important for the generation of hope of different kinds. Sharing experiences in time is an important part of such group belonging, and events like ‘Fatima’ provided (at least) a collective symbolic and temporal marker, albeit one that severely damaged representational hope. Outside of such shared temporary markers, the experience of time appeared fractured and individualised, even where our analysis found shared patterns

and trajectories. On such individualised timelines, the future was a radically unstructured place of multiple and contradictory possibilities.

Hope and relational self

It is by now commonplace to describe cultural/creative workers and the industries they sustain as ‘ecologies’ (de Bernard et al., 2022); that is, characterised by interdependencies that make a lively, complex network of workers and places, and result in the creation of collaborative and individual acts of art-making. Our data showed that the negotiation of hope at the individual level of the self was caught up in, or relational to, this ecology of practice and narratives that included sectoral and state actors, while also operating at a deeply personal level.

Fellow freelancers, cultural sector players (such as companies, venues, ‘employers’), and public and governmental bodies all fed into individualised experiences of hope. We have already explored collectivised mutual aid behaviours as a form of care and a seat of non-representational hope. We have examined how hope/lessness fluctuated in response to ‘events’ in time. We also derived from our data that hope in relation to the individual was dispersed, socially mediated and interpersonal, influenced by the interactions and interdependencies with these other players. Those who reported more positive engagements with employers/former employers and those who had engaged with the various freelancer mutual-aid networks also demonstrated greater optimism about civic, collectivised and individual futures.

Unsurprisingly, those who had accessed different government and agency support schemes reported higher levels of hopefulness about their own future and wider expectations of change than those who had been excluded from the main schemes (consistent with Williams et al., 2022). Within this, however, there was nuance: being supported by an Arts Council/Creative Scotland COVID grant had deeper positive affect on personal feelings of self-worth than non-arts grant schemes, while the incremental acts of ‘carelessness’ through 2020 into 2021 in terms of delayed and ill-fitting government aids and poorly informed political statements produced personal responses of hopelessness. From the timeline, we built a picture of freelancers as a group and as individuals, alternating between expressing visions for shared futures and celebrating this shared identity marker of freelancer, and despair at continued carelessness that enhanced personal uncertainties. Often, the individualised self was mobilised (through testimonies or images) in freelancer-driven campaigns to articulate how each freelancer’s personhood (as a skilled professional with a unique history and life story) was indivisible from the now (more) robustly collectivised freelancers, the sector, the perceived beneficiaries of theatre work and the communities they lived in.

Hope, or its opposite, is experienced as an embodied sensation. We can see this in the actor/teacher who, in anticipation, ‘holds their breath’, and the sound professional who is ‘sick with worry’. We can also see this in accounts of self-worth that attach to hope. A stage manager/technician, for example, who felt ‘hopeless’ following their exclusion from various government and public sector support schemes, reported feeling ‘like a fool’. A consultant reports feeling ‘hopeless and useless’ while many participants reported a decline in their mental health. While hope may manifest in social relations, it is also felt closely and intimately, sustaining or collapsing narratives of the self, felt in the body.

Thus, non-representational hope may find its expression in the collective but representational hope tended to hinge on individualised circumstances. Specific contracts or employment opportunities often provided a specific enough reference on which to mount hopefulness on the personal level. Research has argued against reducing creative workers to ‘calculative and individualized subjects’ (Alacovska and Bissonnette, 2021) and pushed back on the idea that the art world is the field of competitive position takings (Bourdieu, 1984). This has usefully opened up scholarship to other motivations that sustain creative careers and that have fed the forms of hopefulness in our dataset. Nonetheless, it is clear that the freelancers in our study may well adopt an ‘individualised’ subjectivity in order to mount a specific form of hope. This is not to say that the theatre freelancer is individualised, or conversely is part of an ecology. Rather, we argue that these subject positions are overlapping and are mental tools available for theatre freelancers for operating positively in the present and seeking a brighter, often altruistic or civic-oriented, future. This, we suggest, is an overlooked but forceful form of worker agency.

Discussion and conclusion: variegated hope

Through these findings, we have shown that hope and creative workers’ individual and collectivised experiences of hope are varied in style and in referential (temporal and social) scale. We see this as ‘variegated hope’ in that both representational and non-representational hope were deployed in a non-binary fashion and as response to changing conditions, emotions and external influences. Variegation is a term used to describe a plant’s evolved response to variable and changing conditions of light and shade in the natural world, recognisable by dappled leaves or leaves of different colours. Although we are mindful that using natural world terms to describe creative workers feeds an existing pattern of infantilisation (as noted by FitzGibbon, 2022), we find it a useful way to articulate the blended way in which hope was deployed by these creative workers as a mode of being, futuring, survival (in the face of persistent *and* unprecedented precarity) and sustaining growth in a challenging environment.

Variegated hope proposes that hope, deployments of hope (as futurity and everyday praxis) and hopelessness vary according to care (enacted, shared and mutual), time and event, and in relation to self. While earlier hopeful sociologies propose distinctions of representational and non-representational hope, in our study we found both forms enacted by individuals and within collectivised actions as modes of being and futuring with agentic force. Our work agrees with Alacovska’s (2019) view that this hopefulness is not naïve or blind to the bleak circumstances in which the creative workers in our study (theatre freelancers) found themselves; rather these were conscious deployments of hope in relation to event and self, and responses to wider crises, empathies and apathies (perceived care within mutual aid and carelessness of employers, public bodies and governments). However, our work shows that individuals (and collectivised groups of freelancers) were deploying these different modes to different degrees often at the same time, adjusting their perspectives across and within time and forming personal and shared dimensions of hopefulness to shape both present and future. We suggest variegated hope then, at its core, is both an expression of, and intrinsically linked to, worker agency and discourses of care in creative work.

In our study, hope/lessness and care/lessness were observed as mutually connected discourses: care-less policy and government/sector rhetoric diminished all forms of hope, and individual and shared acts of care were manifest forms of hoping. Participants operated in hope of better futures and aligned their hopeful efforts in the present to sector and societal improvements. They tempered their hopelessness with aspirations that a greater value might be realised in their work and that their theatre-making could prompt social change. Their acts of solidarity were manifest expressions of mutual care and shared hope. In this sense, care-giving was hopeful and hope was a form of care. As our work here has drawn heavily from Alacovska and their co-authors' work on both a hopeful sociology and ethics of care in creative work, we suggest there may be great value in bringing these two discourses together as interrelated.

We explored in this article how individual creative workers mobilised hope as an agentic force in response to setbacks and challenging times. These acts were both collectivised and solo, fuelling the collectivised identity marker as 'freelancer' and supporting the self through destabilising experiences. We posit, then, not unlike Gross (2021), that hope operates with significantly greater political potential than currently understood. Given the disproportionate impact of hope/carelessness, both employers and policymakers should consider the impact of their decision-making and communication in relation to hope and care as outlined above. Furthermore, hope as worker agency offers new collectivising power to trade unions and collective moments in its multi-modal forms of personal and shared strength. Finally, we posit that policymakers concerned with creative workforces reconsider hope and care not as emotional and 'soft' delusion in the face of precarity. Rather, they are potentially more successful forms of strengthening creative work and wider civic/social capacity. We suggest they should replace the currently dominant resilience thinking aligned to neoliberalised self-entrepreneurialism (so effectively critiqued by McRobbie, 2020; Newsinger and Serafini, 2021).

Events were magnified in significance across the period we studied as the prolonged nature of the pandemic was revealed in the moment of the research. Nevertheless, we cannot say such knowledge does not have future value because it occurred in circumstances many described as 'unprecedented'. We feel the opposite is the case: that this experience revealed dimensions of creative work, hope and its relationship to time, care and the self, such that it can condition how we see these behaviours in the future. It might be argued that the heterogenous nature of theatre freelancers as creative workers diminishes the transferability of this study's insights. Yet, the widespread growth of freelance and precarious work, both within and beyond the creative fields, suggests the opposite: the live and collaborative nature of the form amplified more widespread practices and highlights perhaps a greater need for sensitivity to artform in future studies of hope labour and its potential value. Furthermore, as we experience societies and industries destabilised with increasing rapidity and persistence (both in the Global North and South), our work here offers some understanding of how we understand creative workers' deployment of variegated hope in response to disruptions of everyday present and future life and work, as much as acts of care and resilience as hope.

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Data availability

The data for this paper are available via ReShare, from the UK Data Service. The survey data serial number is 857056. The policy event dataset serial number is 856883.

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