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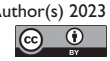

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Endurance, exhaustion and the lure of redemption

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the lure of redemption in contemporary academic and accounts of exhaustion, endurance, and biopolitical life. Drawing on, and contributing to recent work on negativity in cultural geography, the paper analyses how optimism and redemption find their way in to academic writing on the contemporary condition. It interrogates the optimism in these literatures, paying attention to the genealogical roots of the propensity to redeem accounts of slow and attritional violence and biopolitical subjectivity. In particular, the paper charts the implicit politics and ethics at play in the invocation of the Deleuzian 'otherwise' which haunts many accounts of the transformatory potential of exhaustion, and the remnants of dialectical historicism and Christian morality at the heart of redemption narratives in accounts of endurance. The paper ends by questioning the motives behind such hopeful readings, and asks what it might entail to refuse to redeem tales of violence with optimistic glimmers of an as-yet unspecified world.

Keywords

affirmation, endurance, exhaustion, negativity, redemption

Introduction

In the critical humanities and social sciences, scholars have begun to pay attention to the 'slow' rather than catastrophic violence of the world,[1] violence that 'occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction'[2] rather than immediate, explosive, spectacular and sensational. Such work is concerned with technologies of debilitation, abandonment and exhaustion that render certain lives less than liveable, and where freedoms, capacities and desires are diminished, captured and corralled. The move from 'catastrophic preoccupations'[3] to the ongoingness of the

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exhausting present has generated geographical research on toxic environments,[4] forced migration,[5] zones of abandonment,[6] austerity[7] and the exhaustion of precarious work,[8] providing cogent accounts of these experiential forms of late capitalist life. Among this concern with the slow impact of violent regimes, industrial change and ecological degradation emerge two key concepts for geographers and other social scientists: exhaustion and endurance.

Exhaustion is figured as a central motif of the contemporary condition: the exhaustion of bodies subject to the forces of biopower, the exhaustion of resources, and the exhaustion of the very category of the subject as object and target of biopower. The concept of endurance describes those holding on to life in exhausting, enervating contexts and curtailed futures: those living in suspension,[9] or postindustrial indeterminacy[10] or through biopolitical abandonment.[11]

These concepts are illustrative of 'broken world thinking',[12] of critiques of the present that acknowledge the deep ecological and social harm of late capitalism, the pervasiveness of biopower and the decline in purchase of progress narratives.[13] They are seemingly hopeless terms for hopeless times. Yet despite increasingly pervasive accounts of slow violence, everyday endurance, attention saturation and burnout, we detect a propensity, in geography and beyond, to read within them glimmers of a different world: another future, the potential of a people or world to come.[14] In such examples, scholars often *avoid* staying with the trouble,[15] or else imply that this trouble goes hand-in-hand with attempts to affirm such direness as a portent of an as-yet unspecified otherwise. Exhaustion, abandonment and alienation, in other words, are seen to provide the *conditions* for as-yet-undetermined – but presumably better – 'new ways of living'.

This paper interrogates the adoption of an optimistic and affirmative stance in the face of that which is 'chronic and cruddy'.[16] The sanguinity written through stories of endurance and exhaustion, we argue, serves a redemptive function: a means of attributing meaning and teleology to the everyday suffering of exhausted bodies in the present. The vocation of redemption is one of seeking succour, of escape, of being saved from a given problem, state or event. As such it offers a conservative, rather than revolutionary, approach to critique; a justification, perhaps, for writing while the world burns, in the hope that those whose situation is the most dire will save us all, if only we tell their stories. Our concern is that there is a tendency towards searching for, and being seduced by, redemption narratives. Yet the redemption remains forever in suspense: a world to come in abeyance.

It is through a concern with the political implications of redemption narratives that this paper draws attention to the prevalence of such narratives and storying in contemporary accounts of exhaustion and endurance in late capitalism. In the light of attritional and insidious forms of violence, we question the imperative to read into bleak spaces the potential for transformation, or to highlight the small acts of care, maintenance and intimacy that offer consolation in living on. We track how scholars weave redemption narratives through their accounts of how biopower generates exhaustion for those who are made to live, and those who are let to die. In addition, we begin to consider the roots of a difficulty with leaving the bleak to be bleak, arguing that the lure of the redemptive narrative has behind it a specific genealogy of Western thought that demands a hopeful ending, a 'silver lining'. Behind the redemptive structure and tone of such writing, we argue, lurk spectres: spectres of the Marxian/Hegelian dialectic, spectres of the optimism of progress modernity, spectres of Deleuzian process ontology, and spectres of Christian redemption narratives, all of which underpin the urge to redeem seemingly hopeless situations. This paper draws geographers' attention to the way in which academic writing on contemporary conditions – such as endurance and exhaustion – can follow patterns that, while acknowledging the abjection, suffering and difficulties of living through biopolitical forms of letting die, cannot help but do so within narrative forms, informed by Western philosophical and cosmological thinking, that foreground the idea of progress and the possibility of a better future to come. In other words, the optimism which lies at the very core of the project of the social sciences reveals itself even in accounts of seemingly hopeless situations.

Within geographical thought, a body of scholarship is emerging which has begun to question the uncritical adoption of affirmationism as a politico-ethical disposition[17] and to point to the limits of affirmation to deal with the violences and diminishments of contemporary forms of life.[18] In cultural theory, there is growing concern with reparative forms of cultural analysis and politics and their relationship to neoliberalism.[19] Likewise, geographers have begun to express a disquiet or unease with the idea of hope as a political category,[20] often drawing on Berlant's critique of optimism as a cruel form of attachment,[21] or exposing its relationship to modernist and imperialist temporalities of progress, and the violences that they support.[22] Cultural geography in particular, has most readily engaged with these concerns, and as such, we offer this contribution to the growing body of critical and conceptual work concerning the problems with affirmation and reparative modes of analysis and politics. This article sits alongside such work: we share the concerns that 'negative geographies' have with affirmation, and particularly the inherent conservatism that such accounts may give rise to. However, our reach in this paper is wider: our call is for all of us, including our colleagues working in more 'negative' tenors, to question how we write about contemporary problems, and to consider more closely the political implications of narrative form.

In other words, we question the propensity by scholars to seek out redemption: the need for accounts of biopolitical exhaustion, endurance and violence in the present to be 'laced with virtual traces for alternative futures',[23] or a possibility of living 'otherwise'. To this end, we offer a genealogical account of optimistic and redemptive storytelling in academic writing, arguing that they implicitly universalise a specific set of Western cultural and philosophical ideas. As such, this paper seeks not only to draw attention to the strands of optimism, redemption and hope that play out in academic accounts of biopolitical exhaustion and endurance, but also to contextualise and provincialise them in Western cultural narratives and modes of storytelling. If optimism is cruel, and is the condition of hope's possibility, then as well as critiquing it as an object, geographers and other scholars need to consider how it finds its way into our work through *form*. Storying experience charges us as researchers to make decisions about genre. While stories have been a longstanding preoccupation for geographers,[24] more might be made of the implications of the kinds of stories that we choose to tell, and the narrative structure of those stories.

In the following section, we demonstrate our claim and critique of the lure of redemption, through a discussion of two recent and key accounts of biopolitical exhaustion: Peter Pal Pelbart's *Cartography of Exhaustion* and Rosi Braidotti's *Posthuman Knowledge.*[25] We pay attention to how the 'otherwise' is figured, highlighting how, in both texts, exhaustion has been figured as a threshold of transformation through the lived experience of stress, enervation and fatigue. At a juncture when Deleuzian concepts and vocabulary have a wider readership than ever before, we want to interrupt the way in which becoming-otherwise is often implicitly assumed as a becoming-better.[26] In the subsequent section, we turn to recent scholarship across the social sciences that examines endurance as a mode of living on through exhausting times, drawing out how these accounts often highlight moments of care, connection and escape that reposition endurance as noble or redemptive. We suggest some epistemological and genealogical bases for the implicit deployment of redemption narratives, pointing to a series of spectres that lurk beneath the desire to fabulate redemption narratives and to redeem accounts of contemporary biopolitical life that seem 'hopeless'. Alongside a discussion of the cultural and conceptual underpinnings of this desire, we question the ethico-political stance that it generates, and particularly its relation to those bearing the burden of suffering the contemporary conditions of exhaustion and endurance. In so doing, we question if an implacable hopefulness has become the default (and implicit) disposition of much ethico-politically charged work. Mindful of Elizabeth Povinelli's recent work on stubbornness, we ask: 'is hope the only political affect of the otherwise',[27] and suggest alternative ways of thinking about endurance and exhaustion that ask what it would mean to refuse to redeem slow, debilitating and exhausting forms of violence.

Exhausted subjects

Neoliberal subjectivity is, for many, saturated with exhaustion. In his recent book, *Not Working: Why We Have to Stop*, Josh Cohen characterises working life as 'plagued by stress, enervation and fatigue'.[28] He outlines how we 'find ourselves suspended between a compulsion to do too much and a wish to do nothing'.[29] Perpetual busyness is fuelled by an existential climate that derides or trivialises the need to stop. In addition, *not* working becomes at least as tiring and incessant as working itself: the autonomous Marxist Bifo describes this saturation of mental life as 'a cognitive space overloaded with nervous incentives to act'.[30] In such a context, an entire battery of psychopathologies – including stress, anxiety, depression, and attention deficit disorders – have become increasingly common responses to the world around us.[31] Given that, for many, neoliberal subjectivity means that 'nothing is ever fundamentally "off" and there is never an actual state of rest',[32] it is perhaps unsurprising that exhaustion is so pervasive. We are subject to a constant compulsion to activity, leading to, in many cases, burnout, described as 'dull, nagging tiredness: an omnipresent feeling of deficiency which the sufferer tries to silence'.[33] In short, burnout gives expressions to the anxieties of our age; it is a 'signature affliction'.[34] These, and other scholars besides, are generating a critique of the forms of contemporary life that capture, compel, seduce and employ us as utterly exhausting.

Peter Pal Pelbart's *Cartography of Exhaustion*[35] takes us on a tour of continental philosophical thought to generate a Guattarian critique of the exhausted subject described above that will, perhaps, contribute to its undoing. With echoes of both Italian autonomist Marxism and Frankfurt School cultural critique, Pelbart constructs an indictment of biopolitical life as utterly saturating and anaesthetising, generating subjects incapable of suffering or feeling. Through contemporary corporeal aesthetics and media technologies, biopolitical life means that we are 'submitted to a tepid hypnosis, even when the sensorial anaesthesia is disgorged as hyper-excitation'.[36] Pelbart argues for exhaustion's potential to reveal the limits of subjectivity, and in doing so the possibility for a new ordering of life that does away with the subject of biopower. Exhaustion, for Pelbart, is an undoing, an exhaustion of the sayable and the possible that is, above all, *creative*. Bodies at the limits of human life, figures such as the Muselmann of the concentration camp, Kafka's hunger artist and Melville's Bartleby exist as exhausted, half-living, no longer capable of suffering and feeling, demonstrate the triumph of will that is exposed at the dissolution of the subject. He suggests that, like the Camp, the totalising regimes of contemporary biopolitics produces not subjects but survivors: a 'living corpse, inhabiting that intermediary zone between the human and the inhuman, the biological machine deprived of sensibility and nervous excitation'.[37] Biopolitics, as a generalising condition, exhausts, reducing us to 'meek cybernetic cattle or cyberzombies'.[38] And it is within this context of saturating, molecular, rhizomatic, decentred biopower, that life, as impersonal, pure will, 'fights back'.[39] Exhaustion, Pelbart argues, 'undoes that which "binds" us to the world, that "captures" us with its words and images, that "comforts" us with an allusion of entirety. . ..in which we have long ceased to believe, even as we have remained attached to them'.[40] Drawing heavily from Deleuze's essay 'The Exhausted',[41] and on the figures that lurk at the limits of subjectivity – the mad and the dying, for whom the constraints of subjectivation have been loosed – Pelbart positions the subject as exhausted. The subject, as a regime of power and discipline, has exhausted itself and the bodies to whom it is subject are exhausted too, and contribute to the exhaustion of subjectivation as a pattern for life. It is exhaustion of bodies at rock bottom who signal and contain the potential of desubjectivated life. For Pelbart, this is the 'otherwise', the unspecified project of unmaking and remaking, the liberation of the will that will bring about the community to come once the dissolution of the subject takes place. Exhaustion, as the generative force which, in its undoing and destruction of the subject, enables the immanent potential of

posthuman life to emerge by embracing active nihilism. Exhaustion is the undoing that looses our bounds to the world: a creative charge that can be amplified through exposure to those who lie outside the limits of subjectivity.

The affirmatory power of exhaustion takes a less Nietzschean, less nihilist stance in Braidotti's *The Posthuman Condition*,[42] yet similar Deleuzian themes run through it, not least Braidotti's concern with what she calls 'the importance of being exhausted'.[43] It is worth quoting her at some length here to give a sense of her argument:

> Let me dare to suggest that there is a creative potential here, which means that exhaustion is not a pathological state that needs to be cured, as an actual disorder, but a threshold of transformation of forces, that is to say a virtual state of creative becoming.[44]

Again, drawing heavily on Deleuze's essay,[45] exhaustion is a product of the 'posthuman convergence' of technological saturation and the subjectivatory power of advanced capitalism with its relentless focus on productivity and bodily improvement, and its related psychopathologies of burnout, anxiety and depression. Exhaustion, for Braidotti, is generative. She argues, like Pelbart, how exhaustion involves a 'sense of evacuation of selfhood, a low-energy opening out beyond the game of ego-indexed identity'.[46] It is a 'threshold of transformation of forces . . . a virtual state of creative becoming'[47] through which the posthuman, as unspecified otherwise, is generated.

Here we might do well to consider Braidotti's audacious suggestion that exhaustion is not something which needs to be cured, but is a state to be affirmed. Exhaustion, we are told, 'encourages us to see the intensity of the discomfort as a motor of change'.[48] It should not be misunderstood as inhumane, she notes, to suggest that exhaustion could 'assist in the elaboration of alternative forces and values that can be generated from the burnt-out core of the old schemes and mind-sets'.[49] According to Braidotti, rather than surrender to despair we ought to take this as an opportunity for reinvention. We have reached a crisis point, and this is the moment to seize and reinvent the subject anew. Such a claim is of course not simply a theoretical one – it is also keenly ethical. More than this, the demand for exhaustion to be affirmed is posed in moralistic terms. We simply need to 'embrace [exhaustion] as an opening out towards new virtual possibilities and not as a fall into the void'.[50] Exhaustion ends up being celebrated as 'an intransitive state that allows multiple opportunities to stay afloat in a state of latency, always in potential'.[51] Braidotti is not alone in attempting to gloss exhaustion as transformational.[52] In his study of burnout, Pascal Chabot goes as far as to suggest that there might be such a thing as a 'successful burnout', as long as this culminates in (an unspecified) metamorphosis of the self. Like Braidotti, the violence of exhaustion is muted in favour of amplifying the hope of a becoming-otherwise. Even Josh Cohen, having spent much of his book detailing the perpetual busyness of contemporary life, retains hope that we might 'glimpse a way out of repetitive circuits in which our overworked lives are today so easily caught'.[53] In short, exhaustion is not something to be dwelt upon in these accounts except as a threshold or vector for transformation.

Perhaps at this stage it is worth turning to Deleuze's essay, explicitly albeit briefly, given its importance to both Pelbart and Braidotti.[54] In it, Deleuze argues that exhaustion, as the exhaustion of possibility, is necessary for the creation of new subjects. The piece was first published in 1992, soon after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and only a few decades after the events of 1968. At this juncture, signalling the end of ideology and the unravelling of a politics that posits a knowable future, the celebration of an Otherwise, of indeterminacy, and unknowability would have been more tenable. Yet 30 years later into the neoliberal project, amidst a global pandemic and ongoing climate emergency, the naïve optimism that positions the otherwise as somehow better, or more free, seems misplaced. To do so is to confuse ontology with politics and ethics. There is nothing in

ontologies of process, indeterminacy, multiplicity and virtuality that points necessarily to a better world. This is the trap of progress thinking: the spectre of progress and the dialectic, within which the social sciences are so deeply mired that it is hard to fabulate critical narratives without these glimmers of the otherwise contained within, that point to a possible betterment of the now.

Endurance

We notice a similar hopefulness and transformatory bent in recent academic discussions of endurance. Endurance, like exhaustion, has emerged as a key explanatory frame for living in and through the chronic conditions of late capitalism. It conceptualises the experience of living in worlds where futures are foreclosed, and is associated with a condition of living on through biopolitical forms of state abandonment and letting die, and with an ethics of existing in and through structural cruelty.[55] Steering clear of the term 'resilience', that too readily invites accusations of neoliberal blindspots of individual sovereignty and American dream bootstrap politics, the concept has gained traction in Geography, Social Anthropology, the Environmental Humanities and Social Theory in recent years, as a way of accounting for how people live on in exhausting, hopeless or debilitating situations. In these literatures, exhaustion and endurance are intertwined; exhaustion is to be endured, and endurance exhausts. Simply to endure within regimes of biopower is itself exhausting.

Endurance involves persistence, perdurance and maintaining a semblance of liveability in the face of structures that work to make life unliveable, such as the baroque and punitive administrative processes of automated austerity,[56] or the carceral domains of indebted life[57] or the 'non-stop inertia'[58] of precarious work. It is associated with a temporality where futures are foreclosed; when dreams of 'progress' are shattered through slow, attritional forms of violence. In these literatures, however, there resides an implacable hopefulness, whether through the promise of future transformation or in the augmentation of consolation and solace. Against these bleak backdrops, we witness an emerging focus on the politics of endurance: the refiguring of endurance as a kind of optimistic agency, from Felix Ringel's 'practical reappropriation of the near future',[59] through Lisa Duggan and Jose Esteban Munoz's 'practice of hope that helps escape from a script in which human existence is reduced'.[60] These range from mundane acts of multispecies cohabitation[61] to the appearance of an explicit politics of endurance in humanitarian interventions: projects devised to help people 'live better with circumstances they cannot change' in refugee camps.[62] 'Born out of the failure of humanitarian projects to save lives, these projects instead focus on generating fleeting possibilities for togetherness and celebration',[63] or temporary escape. This focus on the micropolitical potential of endurance is also highlighted in discussions of care. In political ecology, for example, Manuel Tironi discusses his interlocutor Ana's practices of everyday maintenance and care (daily cleaning of chemical residues from tomato plants, tending to her husband's industrial wounds) in a toxic environment. Tironi suggests that 'she will not abandon the possibility of dignity, even amidst the ruins of industrial capitalism. Ana does not withdraw from the promise of a different life, even as she's tested every morning . . . The spaces of endurance in which Sara, Ana and their neighbours act are fertile soils for the emergence of alternative sociabilities'.[64]

While providing a compelling set of essays of forms of temporality in suspension, the psychosocial theorist Lisa Baraitser finds a similar hopeful politics within the space of endurance. She writes of the present as a 'time that pools without a rim',[65] that will not unfold, that does not hold true to fantasies of growth, accumulation and expansion or progress, but instead suspends such fantasies. Through paying attention to these modes of non-progressive time – the time of maintenance, of suspension, endurance and waiting – she articulates how such modes enact an ethics of care through the staying-in-relation, of living in the seams. Richard Billingham's notorious 1990s photobook 'Ray's a Laugh', which documents his family and particularly his recently redundant

and alcoholic father, is read by Baraitser as reflecting the making of a life in the detritus and holding on to the mundane space of the family, despite the slow violence of poverty and addiction that produces their world. Baraitser refigures endurance at the level of the everyday, through maintaining material and affective attachments as practices of care in a space of neglect.[66] The politics she discusses engage in what Lauren Berlant calls 'managing the meanwhile', an attempt to show how lives are made liveable in the face of ongoing structural violence; to make visible the resources that the exhausted go on going on.[67]

The filmmaker Ken Loach's indictment of welfare reform under the UK Coalition Government *I, Daniel Blake* is a recognisable cultural example of this trope. His characters, despite struggling with the cruel architectures of the austerity-era welfare state, display moral fortitude and, above all, dignity. A clear message here is that endurance involves maintaining dignity in the face of humiliation, and the cultures of mutual support and kindness that emerge in these spaces offer the promise of proletarianisation. The film's main characters maintain their moral compass: they are *good people*. An elegy to the post-war settlement in ruins, the protagonist Blake holds true to its fantasy, to the cruel optimism that the state has a welfare/social democratic/redistributive function, rather than a function to abject, and to shame. Towards the beginning of the film, Blake's neighbour, who refuses to hold on to the post-war welfare dream and finds other ways of making a livelihood, says, 'they'll grind you down'.[68] While the film ends with Blake's death, the mutual aid of the vulnerable provides redemption in the face of the cruel architectures that exhaust them. The characters turn to each other, clinging to a lost fantasy of collective life and a foundational human sociality prior to its debasement.

Such narrative tropes of endurance – putting up with, working through – construct characters that are ground down but also, and crucially, sympathetic and heroic. They are figured as contemporary parables of morality, where the bleaker the context, the starker the highlighting of the good, the kind, the purity of the human condition. They are, in short, 'getting by'[69] and their suffering is occluded by narratives that augment the kernel of interior humanity that is hiding behind the layers of biopolitical and economic exhaustion. Yet this is too easy: these figures are painted too simply; their innocence and quiet 'ploughing on' assuages the guilt of metropolitan privilege through their moral redemption. These narratives work for the scholar and critic through a double confessional: by making visible the violence through which their lives are shaped, and at the same time reassuring us (the reader, the liberal elite), that this violence, of which we are part (and upon which our good life rests), is not for nothing. As a basis for politics, we find the implicit morality of the concept of endurance in the academy problematic. This moral framework elevates dignity, and keeping it together in the face of the unliveable. Figures of endurance are wretched, dogged and unflinching in their living on. They do not cry out, nor do they complain; they find hope and solace in each other, in the small things, in the ashes of their ruined worlds. The politics inscribed here are ultimately conservative rather than revolutionary. As Berlant asks, in the context of the neoliberal United States, in such a situation, 'is the best one can hope for *realistically* a stubborn collective refusal to give out, wear out or admit defeat'?.[70] While we do not want to dismiss a politics of salvage and making do, we refuse to elevate this through the invocation of the otherwise; the ontological indeterminacy of becoming in ruined worlds should not be framed as redemption, or even consolation.

Spectres of progress

Underneath these redemption narratives lie a set of deeply rooted assumptions about the nature of Western critique and social science enquiry, rooted in the Marxist/Hegelian dialectic, the (related) narration of history as progress, and the narrative structure of Christian redemption. In both Marxist

historical materialism, and Christian doctrine, suffering provides the conditions for salvation, either through revolution, or through the resurrection of the Christ. Endurance is thus figured as suffering in Christ, as bearing the pain of existence, and holding strong when faith is tested, bearing the pain with quiet dignity.[71] In Marx, we see the necessity of working-class suffering under capitalism to bring about the new epoch. By invoking the Deleuzian otherwise, Braidotti reinserts hope at the very moment when exhaustion becomes unbearable: the dialectic of transformation at rock bottom, when capitalism exhausts itself.

The spectre of Marx haunts these attempts to salvage a residual purity of humanity which is figured as the lever for transformation and hope. The embryonic, perhaps dormant, proletarian drive that can be awoken if we, the scholars, join up all the dots. And, among all the talk of multispecies entanglements, of cohabitation, of care, of community and kinship which characterise the redemptive ember, it is this humanity which the scholastic seekers of salvation seek out. Yet, just as power corrupts, so poverty debases.

There are a number of problems with these moves. The first is an unreasonable positioning of responsibility for the redemptive future of humanity on those with the least power to do anything about anything. Redemptive accounts of endurance look to populations who are most vulnerable to those environmental and social degradations that characterise the violences of the Capitalocene, to show us a way forward. Within these narratives, we detect a millenarianism that, in its concern for an analytics of the present and faith in the indeterminacy of the world to come, actually places the wisdom needed for the world to come in the hands of those whose capacities to do anything other than just survive are frustrated at every turn. In other words, focusing on the deprivations of the present enables particular redemption stories to be told and particular figures to emerge, figures that are harbingers of something that exceeds the now, something uncertain but surely better, either through their anachronistic retention of a better past, or their creative *bricolage* that will provide a way out of this mess.

The second problem is the caricature of goodness and innocence implicit in these accounts which places the dispossessed on a pedestal. This creates a fable from the struggling world, rather than truly staying with it. As Haraway points out, 'staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures'.[72] These populations, exhausted, unhealthy, impoverished, are scrutinised as having the means and wherewithal to not only inherit the earth but to save it. Take, for instance, Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar's hope that they might find 'angry, politicised citizens ready to fight back',[73] only to be confronted by weariness.

The final problem with these sanguine accounts of endurance that celebrate collectivity and commonality, dignity and perseverance, is that they arguably buy into those forms of violence, and make them sustainable as lives that are just-about-liveable. In celebrating the spaces of endurance, consolation, care and community in exhausted worlds, an as-yet unspecified otherwise is invoked, there is a tendency to overlook the suffering which provides the conditions of its possibility, and an assumption that the otherwise will be better. Thus, framing unliveable worlds as spaces of endurance, or as providing the embryonic glimmers of an otherwise, places a conceptual sticking plaster over the wound, a sticking plaster that, although we might find it discomforting to admit, props up those very structures of abandonment and exhaustion. Martin Savransky,[74] in a discussion of social thought 'after progress' asks us to embrace the 'perhaps' and draws our attention to the felicitous; the chance encounter that may lead to the event. In embracing these felicitous moments, we might find the solution to the better world within the spaces of decline, ruination, predation and degradation. Perhaps Savransky does not go far enough in abandoning the notion of progress, though. Indeed, his faith in, and affirmation of, the unspecified otherwise may inadvertently rebrand progress for a post-progress world. Our concern is that the unspecified otherwise offers a salve to the

social sciences, a way of assuaging Western guilt while maintaining historical entrenchment in progress narratives and the promise of a better world.

Refusing to redeem

To present suffering as suffering, without recourse to an otherwise, is unsettling. It is difficult to write without redemption in the context of narrative structures that call out for some kind of way out, for redemptive promise at their conclusion. Whether in the implicit moralities of suffering that underpin Christian redemption, or a faith in the potential of the dispossessed to offer the glimmers of another way of being, there appears to be an imperative, in Western academic accounts of the exhaustive aspects of late capitalist life, to find redemption in a world where the politics of history and ideology are increasingly unavailable, and where the totalising narratives of capitalist realism and the recognition of forms of cruel optimism leave us adrift. And there is, as we have seen, a lack of acknowledgement of the histories of Western thought – via Christian doctrine, Hegel and Marx, as well as the Otherwise of Deleuzian affirmationism, and of the academic's discomfort with facing bleak and dispiriting situations head on, that lead to the specifically redemptive forms of storytelling, that have political and ethical implications.

While these articulations of endurance and exhaustion rarely make this explicit, we want to entertain the possibility of reading such accounts of structural violence and suffering without redemption. With these examples in mind, we turn away from redemption stories that celebrate the possibility of the otherwise within these ground-down worlds, from the pressure on those who slowly suffer and endure to somehow, despite everything, offer critical theorists inspiration to carve new worlds. A different politics of exhaustion needs to look beyond the moralising of endurance, and point towards figures of refusal and negation. Refusal offers an opportunity for scholars to reflect on the urge to seek redemption narratives, a propensity firmly situated within the progress-laden history of the social sciences that acts as an imperative to seek ways to make things better, to get *past* the current condition. What would it mean to refuse an open-ended and unspecified 'otherwise' as the optimistic excess that these attritional violences of late capitalism call forth? Or to refuse to open up and amplify spaces within the unliveable that offer heart-warming tales of collective becoming, as disquieting as this may be? This is not to deny the very real ways in which those trapped in circuits of suffering are making liveable lives, but instead to question the academic imperative to celebrate this, and elevate it to form the basis of a new politics and a new world.

Elisabeth Povinelli begins *Economies of Abandonment* with an allegory from Ursula Le Guin's short story *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.* In this story, the abused, deprived and neglected child in the broom closet is the sacrificial lamb upon which the good life of those from Omelas relies. Yet despite this beginning, Povinelli's charting of modes of endurance through biopolitical violence, abandonment and abjection offer the possibility of reading her work as a powerful redemption narrative. Exhausted, wretched, unhealthy, her interlocutors nevertheless display dogged determination and above all, hope. Povinelli, too, finds hope in perseverance itself, drawing on Spinoza's concept of the *conatus*: in the striving to endure conditions and open up the body to greater capacities. Yet it is in her discussion of Le Guin that she offers a way out: while her interlocutors are caught in circuits of cruel optimism, where hope keeps them captive, the reader is offered a chance to refuse – to *walk away.*

> To be stubborn is to refuse to register affectively the knowledge that the world is built to run you over so that others can build their houses on and out of what remains. Refuse to let them . . . refuse to be moved by those that see you as their currency of hope.[75]

While we find ourselves agreeing with Povinelli about refusing to convert all kinds of circumstances into the currency of hope, our call for refusal differs. This call for a refusal is as much an ethical gesture as it is a political one. In keeping with recent work appraising the rise of affirmationism (and its limits) gestured to at the beginning of this paper, we ask what it might entail *to refuse rather than to redeem*. This refusal seeks to stay with the trouble, to follow in the wake, to dwell with – and not look away from – that which is unsettling, violent and hard to witness. It is offered as an antidote to the short-cut: seeking a route out, a way past or a future not-yet. As we have suggested, redemption might be understood to operate in a conservative rather than revolutionary manner, binding us to a hope or belief in something better; instead, we ask: 'what kind of salvation or freedom is actually on offer from neoliberal redemption narratives'?[76] This is not a call for pessimism – indeed our call also differs from the passivity often foregrounded in negative geographies – but rather to avoid the temptation of a solution, or to temper the hope that even if things can be otherwise, this does not straightforwardly mean they will better. We are not suggesting that the future itself is refused – that would be foolhardy! – but rather we call for a refusal to invoke the future as an unspecified but implicitly better otherwise, and to remain resolutely in the present tense. Put simply, what would our accounts of contemporary life look like if we documented violence *qua* violence? Moreover, what would it mean to resist the imperative to affirm, and refuse to narrate celebratory accounts of exhaustion and endurance?

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Notes

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48. Bradotti, *Posthuman*, p. 17.
49. Bradotti, *Posthuman*, p. 18.
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52. She notes that sceptics will read her argument as "concomitant with neo-liberal self-management techniques"; Braidotti, *Posthuman*, p. 176.

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54. It is worth noting that there have been ongoing debates around the extent to which Deleuze is redemptive, or if it is merely the readings of his work which figure a 'redemptive Deleuze'. Such debates tend to rest on the suggestion that there is some correct way of reading Deleuze. Instead, we consider such readings to amplify what can already be found in Deleuze, rather than doing something entirely different, and – if anything – is in keeping with Deleuze's own re-readings of other philosophers. See P.Hallward, 'Gilles Deleuze and the Redemption from Interest', *Radical Philosophy*, 81, 1997, pp. 6–21; E.Bordeleau, 'A Redemptive Deleuze? Choked Passages or the Politics of Contraction', *Deleuze Studies*, 8, 2014, pp. 491–508; C.V.Boundas, 'Gilles Deleuze and his Readers: A Touch of Voluntarism and an Excess of Out-Worldliness', *Deleuze Studies*, 1, 2007, pp. 167–94. See also A.Culp, *Dark Deleuze* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
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