



## The 2019 *Antipode* RGS-IBG Lecture

# Hope's Work

Les Back

*Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London, London, SE14 6NF, UK;  
L.Back@gold.ac.uk*

**Abstract:** This article, given as the *Antipode* RGS-IBG Lecture on 28 August 2019, argues that hope can be found through training an attentiveness to the social world in troubled times. Hope then is an empirical question and a matter of documenting hopeful possibilities that often otherwise remain unremarked upon. In this sense “worldly hope” draws possibilities that are manifested in the social world and stands in contrast to cruel forms of optimism or an unrealistic faith in future progress. An argument for such an approach to hope and trouble is developed through two examples drawn from contemporary London life, namely, the silent walks at Grenfell Tower in West London and a community arts project in Bellingham, South East London.

**Keywords:** hopeful geography, metropolitan paradoxes, everyday life, urban inequalities, gentrification, city life

This paper was given as the 2019 *Antipode* Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) Lecture at the RGS-IBG Annual International Conference in London (see <https://antipodeonline.org/category/lecture-series/>). As well as engaging with the conference themes of “geographies of trouble” and “geographies of hope”, the lecture celebrated 50 years of *Antipode* publishing innovative papers that push at the boundaries of radical geographical thinking.

### Introduction

It is perhaps easier to offer a list of worldly troubles than it is to speak of hope in our times. From the national self-mutilations of Brexit to our heating Earth and the polluted landscapes that thicken our oceans and the tragedy of the Covid-19 pandemic, worldly troubles loom large. The political forces of our times feel so much against hope, at least that is how it seems when I turn on the screen world and watch the bad news unfolding in our online culture with its hateful certainties and entrenched forms of thinking. Socially engineered ignorance and the speed of circulation enfeeble what passes for understanding or thought.

Over 10 years ago I wrote that we live in a time that suffers not from doubt but from certainty (Back 2007:166). It seems to me that this quality has hardened in the last decade along with a fascistic disregard for knowledge and the steadfast cultivation and circulation of untruth. These false certainties and barefaced lies provide—as they always do—hollow compensation for the tumult of worldly troubles.

The Chair of the 2019 RGS-IBG Annual International Conference, Hester Parr, commented in an email that the decision behind the conference theme of “geographies of trouble / geographies of hope” was “a response to how things felt last year [in 2018]”. The conference theme questioned the role and value of geography as a specific form of “earth writing” in our times. Within radical geography the spatial aspects of the idea of hope have been re-thought as a way to approach politics and knowledge (Anderson 2014; Anderson and Fenton 2008; Harvey 2000; Zournazi 2004).

I am not qualified really to speak for the discipline, but you know everyone wants to be a geographer these days. I do have a degree in Geography, well, half a degree to be precise—but more seriously Hester’s notion of “earth writing” is very appealing to me for it suggests a planetary ecology and scale of thought. It transcends nationalistic hopes that draw on the reservoir of melancholic nostalgia or myths of past “greatness” that drives so much of the discussion about Britain’s place in the world. The idea of earth writing also pushes against the parochialism of academic disciplines and the terms of what passes for public debate. I would like to pose a different question and ask what is the role and value of the kinds of work we do in these dark times of certainty?

What might a hopeful orientation to knowledge be in our current moment? Where might we look and listen for hope? My answer, in short, is that fostering a different kind of attentiveness to the world is a resource in the service of hope. Our work may be of value precisely because it documents remarkable things that are not remarked upon and in so doing creates an archive of emergent alternatives, directions or possibilities. I think in a way this has been a latent or tacit commitment in all the work I have done without really comprehending it. As scholars the attentiveness we pay to the world is part of *hope’s work*.

Developing a hopeful understanding must never look away from the trouble; Chris Philo and Hester Parr (2019) argue it must be concerned with not only what is, but also with what might be (see also Williams 1989). I want to develop this argument by drawing on some examples taken from London life, which has been my research topic for more than 30 years. London is a world city of metropolitan paradoxes in which trouble, damage, hate and division co-exist—sometimes on the very same streets—with freedom, conviviality, escape and dare I say it ... hope. In the tangle of these paradoxical forces we can find and document what Paul Gilroy called in his 2015 *Antipode* RGS-IBG Lecture, “histories of cosmopolitan hope” (2018:19). An argument for this approach will be based on two quite different examples of contemporary life in London, one very close to where this lecture took place at the Royal Geographical Society in affluent South Kensington in West London and another from the City’s southern hinterlands, south of the river Thames.

Before taking you to these uncelebrated corners of the city I want to first explore the relationship between what I call “worldly hope” and critical thinking.

## **Worldly Hope and Blind Pessimism**

20<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals had very contrasting views of hope and its political connotations. To live in hope, for Albert Camus, is to surrender to inertia, fatalism and

defeat. He pointed out that, for the Greeks, hope is the last, and most dreadful, of the ills left inside Pandora's box. Camus concluded: "I know no more stirring symbol; for, contrary to the general belief, hope equals resignation. And to live is not to resign oneself" (Camus 2005:14). By contrast, black feminist bell hooks argues that hope can be found precisely in the un-resigned struggle for freedom. She writes: "Hopefulness empowers us to continue our work for justice even as the forces of injustice may gain power for a time. To live by hope is to believe that it is worth taking the next step" (hooks 2003:xiv–xv). That next step can involve angry and outraged protest. For example, Audrey Lorde (1981) argues powerfully for the value of anger in redefining the terms upon which black women live and work.

For others hope is a powerful illusion. "Hope is a rope...", writes Henri Desroche in his study *The Sociology of Hope*, translated from French in 1979. Hope is a powerful illusion that people hold onto. For him it is like the shaman or fakir who throws a rope into the air, and it is able through magic to take his weight. I want to come back to this approach to hope because it always makes it a kind of phenomenology or a firm belief—whether religious or secular—that holds and takes the strain. I want to argue that hope is better conceived as a worldly attentiveness to what is emerging in the conditions of the present as they are carried into the future (Freire 1994; hooks 2003).

Hope then involves not only daydreaming in the possible and the not-yet-decided conclusion but also taking in the world as it is. This attention to what is becoming is at the heart of Ernst Bloch's epic three-volume study, *The Principle of Hope*, which was written in the shadows of Nazism. Bloch's principle of hope is cast in contrast to fascism and its fear principle. He wrote:

It is a question of learning hope. Its work does not renounce, it is in love with success rather than failure ... The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them ... The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong. (Bloch 1995:3)

This jars against the general atmosphere of despondency and defeat in the social sciences and humanities.

Within the academic world a commitment to critique means that the tone of our writing is often in a despairing or hopeless key. Or, to put it another way, simply listing troubles is not enough. Anthropologist Michael Taussig commented that for social critics—perhaps including geographers—there is a peculiar kind of consolation in adopting a hopeless position. Here the "temptation [is] to bind lack of hope with being profound" (Taussig 2002:45). A curious comfort can reside in the critical certainty of pessimism. In a way, this blind or blanket pessimism is the reverse of the repeated adage about naïve sightless optimism. Pessimists are never surprised because they can be confident that things will inevitably turn out badly and the world doesn't disappoint them.

I wonder sometimes though if pessimism of this type is a luxury that is not afforded to everyone. This was Martin Luther King's view which he outlined in a little-known essay published posthumously called "A Testament of Hope". In it he sets out what might be referred to as the proof of hope. "People are often surprised to learn that I am an optimist", he writes. "They know how often I have

been jailed, how frequently these days and nights have been filled with frustration and sorrow, how bitter and dangerous are my adversaries. They expect these experiences to harden me into a grim and desperate man" (King 1986a:314). For him, his faith in God is the ultimate warrant for hope. This is the equivalent of the fakir's rope but it is not the only one because the proof of hope for King is to be found in the worldly and profane struggle against racism and white supremacy. He continued: "Millions of people have fought thousands of battles to enlarge my freedom; restricted as it still is, progress has been made. This is why I remain an optimist, though I am a realist, about the barriers before us" (ibid.).

For Martin Luther King, Jr. the sound of dissenting voices is a warrant to hope. In an interview with *Playboy* in January 1965, King recounts a conversation with his brother who had telephoned him with terrible news from Birmingham, Alabama. There had been a series of bomb attacks on his brother's home and at the motel where Martin Luther King, Jr. had just stayed. Amongst civil rights activists Birmingham had been re-named "Bombingham" because of the frequency of white racist violence. Listening on the telephone from his home in Atlanta, King recounted what he heard:

My brother described the terror in the streets as Negroes, furious at the bombings, fought whites. Then, behind his voice, I heard a rising chorus of beautiful singing: "We shall overcome." Tears came into my eyes that at such a tragic moment, my race could sing its hope and faith. (King 1986b:347–348)

He described these songs as the "soul of the movement" but they are also a testament of its hopes.

Hope can also be the enemy of other kinds of certainty because it is seen to be too provisional and leaves too much to chance. In Studs Terkel's book *Hope Dies Last* he interviews some military people, including the pilot who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. Another interviewee, Admiral Gene LaRoque, a US Navy rear admiral who worked in the Pentagon and taught in the war colleges, is hostile to hope precisely because it undermines military logic:

Never once do military people think about hope. Hope in my view is a wasted emotion. People hope to win the lottery when they buy a ticket. They hope to win it because there is no chance. If we want a better world, we as human beings ought to do what we can to bring about the change. Hoping is a futile mental exercise. (in Terkel 2003:42)

For the military mind the unfinished and undecided is the enemy of conviction. Regardless of Admiral LaRoque's dismissive certainty maybe there is something valuable to be salvaged from the fact that no one ever fired a torpedo or dropped a bomb in a state of doubt.

What if the expectation that hope licenses is empty? This is precisely what Lauren Berlant (2007) calls a cruel optimism which manifests as a cluster of promises, which are "attached to compromised conditions of possibility". The result is an attachment to a problematic object that is unable to deliver on its promise and that is why it is cruel. Rebecca Coleman and Debra Ferraday (2010:317) point

out that while feminism might be characterised as a “politics of hope” the “temporality of feminism cannot be conceived as straightforwardly linear”. The hollow mainstream accommodations to feminist demands or political appropriation of feminist issues undermine a sense of progress and generate a sense of hopelessness in the matter of sexual politics. Coleman argues that in austere times pessimism and hopelessness can be both “flattening and enlivening”. The productive aspect of what she calls “hopeful pessimism” is the way it both acknowledges “being worn out by debt and austerity and a resistance to this wearing out” (Coleman 2016:100).

So, following this line of argument a distinction needs to be drawn between worldly hope and cruel or unconditional optimism. Terry Eagleton makes a strong and eloquent case for a conception of hope *without* optimism. Two aspects of Eagleton’s argument are particularly relevant here. The first, is what he calls a “nonprogressivist form of hope” (Eagleton 2015:31). Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s (1973) conception of history as an unfolding catastrophe, Eagleton argues that the force of history is not a hopeful progressive improvement. Rather, “progress” is a destructive storm that hurls the world forward without control or clear direction. The second, is an insistence that hope be “anchored in the present” and attentive to what is unfolding at any given moment (Eagleton 2015:38). Hopeful possibility and action can be sustained without necessarily being hostage to the belief that everything is going to improve or turn out well.

Famously, Antonio Gramsci described his view on the subject in a letter dated 19 December 1929 (see Gramsci 1975:159). He described a political sensibility that “never despairs and never falls into those vulgar, banal moods, pessimism and optimism ... my mind is pessimistic, but my will is optimistic”. The phrase so often attributed to Gramsci is a borrowed one. Gramsci was in fact quoting French poet, novelist and dramatist Romain Rolland who Gramsci credited with the expression “pessimism of the intelligence and optimism of the will”. This seemingly paradoxical entanglement is a way of holding to the world that combines *critical reflection* and *attentiveness*.

Here worldly radical hope (Lear 2006) is cultivated and shaped in the here-and-now by the practice of attentive witnessing, taking in what is happening, interpreting its meaning and the possible gifts to the future that might emerge. In this sense worldly hope is not a blind faith in the strength of the fakir’s rope or belief in an overseeing divine provenance. Rather, it is an attention to the present and the anticipation that something unexpected will happen and emerge from its ruins. Hope, then, is not a belief but an empirical question.

## **Silence is Never Empty**

There is something allusive and impossible about cities without sound. It is not just in dissenting voices where the proof of hope resides. The attempt to roll out a blanket of silence can sometimes reveal deep social divisions. The “silent walk” protest at Grenfell Tower in West London is one such powerful example. The multicultural community of Grenfell, where poor low-income families lived just a short

walk away from some of the most expensive mansions of the global super rich is a symbol of the deep divides carved in London's cityscape.

Since the fire on 14 June 2017 at Grenfell Tower that killed 72 people, local residents in North Kensington have organised a silent walk each month to protest the on-going injustice and insensitivity they experience from the authorities in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (where the 2019 Royal Geographical Society annual international conference took place). The fire was an avoidable, socially-produced tragedy, a compound of neglect, unsafe housing and mismanagement. The silent steps of the march communicate dissent wordlessly against the indifference of the local state, the thoughtlessness of politicians and the well heeled Londoners whose attention has moved on. Silent indifference is countered with an active but soundless provocation. The organisation and staging of this righteous quiet assembly is the work of hope in the face of despair.

On 14 August 2019 the 26<sup>th</sup> silent walk took place. Hundreds of people gathered but there were no speeches; at the end of the walk 72 seconds of further silence was observed. This is a ritual performance that happens each month, without fail. At the end the marchers gather to hear the names of the victims read aloud. At the end of each page the protesters said together "forever in our hearts". The names of the lost carry with them a kind of inventory of the London's cosmopolitan reality. The names also bear witness to the human cost, the damage, the disregard and the "nature of the offense", as Primo Levi (1987:188) put it. I want to take you there now and describe what it is like to witness and be a part of the walks as a kind of event, where, as Ben Anderson and Jill Fenton comment (2008:78), "hope unsettles the spacing of the present".

Gathered outside the Notting Hill Methodist Church on a cold Sunday in January 2018 the procession is called to formation by the whispered choruses of people saying "shuusssh". The first of these protests started with just 50 local people but on this winter's night there must be a thousand or more people here.

The demonstration is led and hosted by local people but the thing that is so striking is how open and welcoming they are to those of us from other parts of London who come to show solidarity. At the front there are large hearts in green with a single word beneath each of them—truth, justice, grace, love and hope (see Figure 1). These words carry something powerful about the politics of these occasions and what they summon. They are moments of undefeated hope in the city. People carry placards and candles including some green electric ones. The famous red and blue London tube sign is appropriated but in a heart shape with the word "Grenfell" written across the centre. Makeshift memorials are held to particular victims too. A unifying stillness is maintained with gentle vigilance as mothers push their children in buggies, families walk together, teenagers stroll solemnly and dog walkers offer whispered apologies for tripping up fellow marchers behind them. The multicultural crowd—of all ages—is unobtrusively inspiring. A public choreography of what Martin Luther King, Jr. called "fellow feeling" or a solemn realisation of Paul Gilroy's (2004) portrait of heteroglot urban conviviality.

As the march progresses these busy West London streets fall quiet. Some residents come out and watch respectfully as the procession passes, buses pull over and make way and there is something eerie about the way London's noise



**Figure 1:** Notting Hill Methodist Church, 14 January 2018 (photograph by the author) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

recedes into the distance. On Ladbroke Grove four local fire fighters line the street and people go up in turn to express muted thanks and appreciation. Further up the street I notice a famous American anthropologist observing the scene from the pavement and I can see he is not observing the silent vigil but instead offering an impromptu commentary to the person standing next to him.

The walk ends under the Westway and on the concrete pillars of the overpass messages are written and beneath them are improvised shrines of photographs, flowers and soft toys. Zeyad Cred, one of the organisers, addresses the crowd. He asks us to face the Tower. Framed by the flyover, Grenfell looks like a dark, charred hole in the night sky. A minute more of silence and then Zeyad asks us to chant one word over and over again. He calls out repeatedly—JUSTICE! The crowd replies in kind each time louder than the time before. Zeyad tells the crowd that next time the demonstration will be taken out of the area to the town hall and their rich neighbours.

A month later on 14 February 2018—Valentine's Day—the marchers assemble outside the town hall in affluent South Kensington. It is a brutally cold and wet winter night. At 5.30pm it looks like just a hundred or so demonstrators would brave the cruel cold. The start is delayed by half an hour and the paper green hearts and banners start appearing from parked cars and cabs as survivors and residents emerge from vehicles of all descriptions. High Street Kensington is a very different urban landscape from Grenfell and the low income council estates close to the Westway. As the march forms and the hush falls as the protestors move

through London's richest commercial high street. Even the shoppers and tourists are muted by the heavy silence of the marchers as they approach.

A tourist speaks into his mobile phone about his return flights to Hong Kong and the dinner arrangements for this evening. His voice seems louder somehow against the hushed assembly. Then another sound is amplified against the emptiness—the wheels of a pull-along suitcase sound like a sharp growl. As the owner hurries to pass the marchers it's like an urban equivalent of radio static. These are the sounds of the international rich who are just passing through the global metropolis.

The contrast between London's rich and poor seems starker as the walk turns north passing the mansions of Holland Park. Slow rain pours down on the marchers making a low thudding sound on the umbrellas that they are trying to shelter beneath. Getting closer to Latimer Road, the urban landscape changes to the low income housing of North Kensington. There are more Grenfell signs here and the letterboxes have green ribbons tied to them. Under the railway arch at Latimer Road an honour guard of fire fighters line the path, their helmets on the pavement at their feet. The walkers go up and embrace them in gestures of wordless appreciation. On this miserable Valentine's night in London all hearts are green (see Figure 2).

In contrast to the wounding compassion that passes as news, this powerful movement at Grenfell gifts those who attend something else: a sense of connection that bridges differences temporarily in the muted city. On these nights at least, a different London is assembled, one that is less shamefully divided by wealth and social dispossession.



**Figure 2:** All hearts are green on Valentine's Day, 2018 (photograph by the author) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



In May 1968 John Berger wrote a short piece on “The Nature of Mass Demonstrations”. He argued that demonstrations are not tactical, strategic or functional. Demonstrations are rehearsals for a different kind of future. For, as Berger writes, “a demonstration, however much spontaneity it may contain, is a created event which arbitrarily separates itself from ordinary life. Its value is the result of its artificiality, for therein lie its prophetic, rehearsing possibilities” (Berger 1968). A different kind of world is being rehearsed and embodied as silence floods these West London streets on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of each month when people assemble together to remember. Monique Charles (2019:181) has commented that what is “poignant in the symbolism of the walk is that those directly involved in acquiring justice for Grenfell understand it is a *local* and *national* issue”. The silent walks establish what Taussig (2002:60–61) calls “islands of hope” in motion and at walking pace.

The Fire Brigades Union are always present at the protests. The truth of what happened on that terrible night has begun to emerge with the publication of the Phase 1 Report of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, which found that the London Fire Brigade “fell below the standards set by its own policies or national guidance” and that an earlier evacuation of the building would have saved lives (Moore-Bick 2019:22). Their presence at the silent walks is a reflection of the impossible challenges that they face in their work routinely but also their own culpability in institutional failures. In August 2019 a large group of 20 fire fighters from the North West of England attended all wearing green t-shirts with the words “Grenfell Never Again” written on the front of them. Each region of the national union is taking turns to be present at the monthly protests. At the end of the August march a fireman from Cumbria explained: “I wanted to be here because I am so ashamed of what our society has become and that the government isn’t doing anything to make another Grenfell less likely to happen. We see it everyday.” The trouble is ever present in the hopeful vigil, like an angry thunder in the silence.

## On Gramsci Way

I want to take you to a very different London scene as part of this inventory of worldly hope. There is a street in South East London close to where I live in Lewisham called Gramsci Way. I am pretty sure it is the only street in the UK to honour the name of the great Italian Marxist and exponent of wilful optimism mentioned earlier. The story of how this uncelebrated street got its name and the social geography of this place is another example of what might be learned through attentiveness to everyday life and unexpected moments of radical hope. Although, as Ben Anderson (2017:593–594) has argued, the “micropolitical is not synonymous with the resistant or subversive or oppositional”, the greatest violations of power can operate at and through the micro-level and the local provides no protection or refuge from them. My own style of scholarship has always been concerned with linking the unfolding small-scale experience of life with the larger historic social and political forces. The story of the renaming of this street is one such example.

Gramsci Way is in Bellingham, South Lewisham (see Figure 3). London County Council’s Bellingham Estate was built after World War I as part of what David

Lloyd George called “homes fit for heroes” and to ease inner city overcrowding by building new garden city developments with facilities for social activities and gatherings on the edges of the city. It was a place of hope and social improvement for working class communities. However, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the estate had fallen into disrepair and there was a widespread sense amongst residents that it had been neglected by the London Borough of Lewisham.

As a young priest, Father Paul Butler was the Vicar of St Dunstan’s Church in Bellingham from 1996 to 2006. Father Paul lived on the estate with his wife and was incredibly active in developing estate-based forms of community development supported by government programmes like Sure Start, which was set up in 1998 by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, to help parents living in the most disadvantaged areas. As part of the regeneration a new road needed to be built next to the church, on which the existing vicarage would remain. Father Paul explained: “People kind of said, ‘well, you must name the new street’ and ‘your house is the house most affected’.” Father Paul explained that his politics and ministry are influenced by two Italian thinkers: the first being St Francis of Assisi; and the other the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Consequently, he decided to honour Gramsci’s secular politics of hope in naming the street. He explained:

Many towns in Italy have a Piazza Gramsci or a Via Gramsci. And so I suggested it, this is in the days of New Labour at its height. “Well, why don’t we call it Gramsci Way?” Well, I had to write a strap-line as to who he was. And I said he was an important thinker about community and civil society—I didn’t say he was a communist or anything like that. And anyway, this got through all the council committees, everyone said yes to it. And then it got stamped and then it got agreed and then it was done.



**Figure 3:** Gramsci Way, London, SE6 (photograph by the author) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

The years leading up to the road being re-named in 2004 were tough times on the estate. There was plenty of call for “pessimism of the intellect” but also evidence of Gramsci’s “optimism of the will”. Father Paul commented that part of the reason he chose Gramsci was both for his commitment to anti-fascism but also to practical politics and cultural activism rather than high political theory. In the midst of difficult times, pockets of resentment and racism had been established on the estate combined with violent racist activism, far-right support and fascist groups. On the night of 25 September 2000 Father Paul witnessed a violent racist attack against a local resident by two white men who targeted him after leaving the Fellowship Inn pub on the estate. On the basis of Father Paul’s evidence the two men were convicted of the racist attack and both served prison sentences. In the aftermath of the attack Father Paul was subject to personal death threats and a threat to burn down St Dunstan’s Church.

The politics of racism in this community is paradoxical, uneven and complex. There was a local anti-racist campaign where many spoke out against what had happened. When Lewisham Council tried to evict the family of one of the young men who’d been convicted of the racist attack in line with their policy of not offering council housing to people with convictions of racism, there was a campaign locally—which included support from Father Paul—to allow the family to stay in their home. Father Paul commented: “If you’re against racism, what you want to see is racists stop being racist. You want them to be changed. Not ... not to destroy people anymore and make them more bitter and ruin their [and] everybody else’s lives.” The campaign was successful.

The story of what happened next to the Fellowship pub from which the racist attackers emerged is linked to this Gramscian fable. London County Council had been reluctant to allow pubs to be built on its estates due to pressure from the Temperance Movement who saw alcohol as a threat to the moral life of the poor. The Fellowship pub was the first to be built on a council estate and it was completed in 1924 (see Figure 4). It was a multi-purpose community space and included a dining hall and meeting rooms. It was where, in 1963, Henry Cooper trained for his fight with Muhammad Ali (who was then using his former name Cassius Clay). His family moved to Bellingham in 1940 from the inner London district of Elephant and Castle. Latterly, in the 1960s and 1970s it also became a local cinema and a thriving music venue where Fleetwood Mac played in the era of the blues boom. By the 1990s the pub was in decline and disrepair. It was thought to be an unwelcoming place for black residents particularly because it was thought of as a racist place. However, the history of the Fellowship is complicated and it is largely forgotten that at one time it was a public place commonly used by Irish migrant workers.

South London is losing its pubs. It is losing them to fire, property speculation and re-development. Some say these institutions of Old London are being run down on purpose because there are more profitable ways to use the land. With every closure a part of the social ecology of the urban environment changes. This has been felt keenly in South Lewisham where many iconic pubs like The Tiger’s Head, The Saxon and The Farmer’s Gate have disappeared. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century “public houses” were often key hubs of social life; they provided alternative public



**Figure 4:** The Fellowship and Star public house, Bellingham, London (photograph courtesy of Phoenix Community Housing) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

places predominantly for men in working-class communities. Their names are often iconic reference points that represent a sense of place and local pride. Pubs are often exclusively masculine, heteronormative places but they also have complex histories as alternative community spaces. For example, several historic South London pubs were established as queer public spaces, too, like the Father Red Cap and The Royal Vauxhall Tavern.

In a way, the changing fortunes of pubs is an indicator of London's changing social and cultural fabric. In 2017 the Greater London Authority published an audit showing that since 2001 the number of pubs had fallen by a quarter (GLA 2018). The story of the rebirth of the Fellowship Inn led by Phoenix Community Housing, a resident-led community gateway that manages 6000 homes in South Lewisham, is a hopeful twist of fate and ingenuity. It emerged out of the forms of estate-based generation mentioned by Father Paul and led by local people like Pat Fordham, who was Chair of Phoenix for nine years. Pat Fordham is an extraordinary woman whose resolve to fight unfairness was shaped by her experience of growing up in postwar Kings Cross and the working-class communities that were dismantled as a result of the re-housing policy. I am going to let her explain the circumstances of the re-development:

Well, the area had been badly neglected ... and the pub used to be well used at one time. But gradually, when they changed, different people took it over. And it got to the stage where it was a no go area, basically, because there was lots of nasty stuff

going on in there. Not a family pub anymore. It was dilapidated. And people didn't feel comfortable going in there. It just was not welcoming.

As Jim Ripley, Chief Executive of Phoenix, commented, it was not economically viable to simply restore the Fellowship to a local pub:

I had been to all sorts of pub operators beforehand to see if anyone was interested ... So, I remember having a meeting with Fuller's and Wetherspoons and they both said exactly the same, "No way ... not in that postcode."

Tara Lynch, Project Manager of the Fellowship Inn Project within PCH, also pointed out the underlying economic issue:

The reality is that it's a [Grade II] listed building. It's a pub, which means that it doesn't have a huge value, that building, because in the area it's protected. It can only ever really be a pub. Listed buildings are difficult to do much with. So actually no one is going to invest in that building because ... The refurbishment works are like £3m. Even after we've finished, that building is probably going to be valued at about £1m. So who is going to do that? Nobody.

The development was commercially unviable and hopeless in economic terms. However, Phoenix Community Housing did something audacious; it built a case for the re-development based on its social value as a community resource that acts as a social bridge (see Phoenix Community Housing 2019).

While lower income workers in urban terraces form the core of this community making up almost 35% of the households, this part of South East London is becoming increasingly diverse with more affluent people moving into the area: 16.1% of households in the wider area are made up of professional families buying into better quality older terraced council houses (Back and Stoneman 2019). These changes bring with them the risk of gentrification (Glass 1964) and exacerbating social divisions between established residents and richer newcomers.

A successful application to the Heritage Lottery Enterprise Fund for £4.2 million secured by Phoenix provided the opportunity to restore the Fellowship. This ambitious plan aimed to transform the historic pub into a community space that combines enterprise, music education, heritage and community history projects.

The challenge of this initiative is that it is based on a model of community enterprise. Phoenix Community Housing played an enabling role so that other operators could deliver the different elements of the development: the pub, live music venue, café and cinema. The new pub operator is Electric Star, which is an independent pub group with experience in dance music promotion, music festivals and pop-up street food markets often in derelict or abandoned spaces including the Red Gallery and Last Days of Shoreditch.

The community arts and heritage projects have been effective in bridging the building's past and future in a way that is recognisable to local residents by using and recording the stocks of shared knowledge and unspoken memories. Lakeisha Lynch-Stevens, who is facilitating the oral history project, commented:

I thought it would be a struggle for people to kind of be able to articulate exactly what their thoughts [were] ... but I was surprised by how much people had a sense of

what Bellingham is and where they live and ... and what it means to be from Bellingham. And we kind of found out more from each other as well.

Lakeisha is 28 and has lived all her life in Bellingham. Her mother moved to London from Grenada in the 1960s when she was 15 and her family have lived in Bellingham for nearly 40 years. The project brought local residents of all ages together in community workshops that included senior citizens groups as well as a project with local school children from Elfrida Primary School.

The oral history sessions enabled the tacit aspects of community life to be shared and documented, from the legend of a local stray dog called "Bella" that was taken in by residents, to how the local phonebox or footbridge acted as community meeting places. Lakeisha explained: "The way we all interact with each other ... there was a strong sense of like us all being Bellinghamites in some way." The oral history sessions enabled a shared sense of local pride and style to be articulated.

In this short extract recorded on Bellingham Green in the heart of the estate Lakeisha describes the connections and relationships that developed out of the project and the special relationship she developed with Tina, a local resident who died during the course of the project:

Lakeisha: We had a lady called Tina, who was a volunteer with us, and I'd bump into her quite often ... sadly, she passed away, and that knocked all of us back quite a bit. And it was weird because when I look at it, we probably did about two different workshops with Tina and then probably saw her three other times. But spending all that time together ... you really become close to people. And yeah, the fact that we were ... being allowed to go to the funeral as well and feeling like part of a community representing her like part of a family.

Les: And what was her heritage? Was she from a very different background to you? Or similar?

Lakeisha: So, she's white, female, different background to me; I'm black, female, 20s and she was white female, late 60s or early 70s.

While longstanding established residents of the estate, the racial division within the local community set them apart. However, the oral history project offered a way to connect them and in turn realised a more inclusive sense of local pride.

Lesley Johnson, Director of Property and New Business within Phoenix Community Housing, commented: "There is something important for me about celebrating working-class culture in a good way." What the initiative has done very effectively is access the community histories, and particularly working-class dimensions of this, but at the same time remain open to the cultural diversity of resident experiences and the multiple heritages that are also part of the local community. For Ruth Glass (1964), who coined the phrase "gentrification", rapid urban change of this type corresponded with a displacement of working-class residents. Lesley Johnson continued that the development of the Fellowship and the arts projects linked to it is not an attempt "to soften up Bellingham for gentrification. It's so not that". The project offers an alternative to the socially divisive forms of gentrification that have taken hold in other parts of the London.

What all the arts-based heritage projects shared is a desire to embed the re-development within the local heritage. This has been a way to ensure the new development will be located within that community story and not dislocated from it. Through art, drama and oral history the community's past is being memorialised inside the new building. At the same time, this process is creating new bonds and connections and versions of local pride built out of its older ones.

The transformation of the Fellowship from a ruin and bolthole for racists to a public community space is extraordinary and deserving of inclusion in London's inventory of hope. Father Paul reflected:

Yeah, you know, the people can do it themselves ... We all need partners, we all need help, but ... but people know best about their own lives, and so, yeah, to see that happening and, you know, and to think of black people in Bellingham talking about the Fellowship and not as a place where you might avoid ... something that might bring some social goods to the place and might be a place where people can have a sense of pride again in that place, right by the train station, right in the centre of things. How wonderful is that?

I want to give Pat Fordham the last word:

I believe we could get back to what it was, a family group of people, a community working here ... But what I'm saying is I know from what's gone in it and the planning and the thinking, it's got to be a success ... it's going to be a welcoming place ... that's our ethos that nobody should be turned away ... and the way they've looked after it and built it and redone it all ... so much love has gone into it, because love has gone into it, that's why we saved it.

In July 2019 the new Bellingham Film Palace opened its doors inside the Fellowship. It began its programme with the new Spider-Man movie for the princely sum of £5 entry. A high-end cinema experience was enjoyed by groups of local teenagers from Bellingham munching popcorn alongside trendy film enthusiasts from more affluent neighbouring streets and the odd middle-aged sociologist. It may just be that this new community venue will offer a bridge and a meeting place for South London's increasingly divided social landscape.

## Conclusion

To end, I want to address two of the questions posed by Hester Parr as the Chair of the 2019 RGS-IBG Annual International Conference—questions concerning the role of the work we do collectively as scholars and the prospect of a hopeful geography. I have argued for the value of training an attentiveness to the world within what Marx called "sober senses". That careful quality that animates so much of the imagination in evidence at the conference is valuable and urgent because we live in times that are politically drunk with certainty. As a result, hope remains an open empirical question and a method of creating knowledge (Miyazaki 2004).

Hester asked: *Should we always be hopeful, individually and collectively?* Well, if we are to avoid what Gramsci called "vulgar, banal moods" of thought then the

short answer to this question is “no”. We need to take in and live with the trouble, the damage and the wreckage. This task is necessarily contextual, geographical and worldly in scale. It insists on holding in mind both socially produced trouble and hopeful openings and turns of events. Part of the role of a hopeful scholarship is to portray and document an inventory of those moments of repair that suture damage, where hate gives way to love, convivial coexistence bridges divisions and exclusions, and where “islands of hope” emerge from within the midst of despair.

Anthropologist Hirokazu Miyazaki argues in his book *The Method of Hope* that there is a “temporal incongruity in the shape of knowledge itself” (2004:138). The worlds that we document and write about always lapse into the past at the moment of writing. The accounts we offer are like epitaphs to the living, or, as Avery Gordon (1997) might put it, they are ghostly matters and spectres of hope. As we write we are trying to move those moments of vital witness through time. Walter Benjamin famously commented that this requires a “gift for fanning the spark of hope in the past” (1973:257). I have been trying to do just that by taking you across town and across time. These are fixed moments that have now already become moments in history, lapsed into the past, but by taking the time to record them and magnify them through writing they become glimmers of worldly hope.

Leila Dawney, Claire Blencowe and Patrick Bresnihan call this *re-enchanting hope* and fostering “practices that do not train our attentions on impossible futures but instead serve to amplify joy in the present” (Dawney et al. 2017:6). This is the nature of the challenge posed to a hopeful form of scholarship that is neither hostage to a naïve sense of progress nor willfully oblivious to the scale and shape of the trouble in our troubled world. In José Esteban Muñoz’s extraordinary book *Cruising Utopia* this form of critical methodology is described as a “backwards glance that enacts a future vision” (2009:4). Hope, then, is not a destination or an achievement but an improvisation across time that links the past, present and not yet realised future.

*What can geography trouble by its ideas, research and interventions in hopeful, positive and productive ways?* One answer is to foster a deep but open attentiveness to the nature of social damage but also the emergent forces that oppose it. Rebecca Solnit writes: “hope is not about what we expect. It is an embrace of the essential unknowability of the world, of the breaks with the present, the surprises” (2004:163). It is a question of living with doubt in the service of understanding. The practice of knowledge making I am arguing for builds on this approach to what we do as “earth writers” and the attempts to understand the nature of the trouble through embodying hopeful uncertainty with humility and a capacity to be astonished. As philosopher Gillian Rose put it defiantly: “You may be weaker than the whole world but you are always stronger than yourself” (1995:740).

I think we need to be bolder and stronger in our commitment to be interpreters rather than legislators of society, but also be equally humble in what we can promise politically. Careful thought, reflection and evidenced argument seem more precious qualities perhaps than ever before. David Harvey (2000:17) argues that progressive politics needs an “optimism of the intellect” to open up new



ways of understanding worldly trouble. The kind of scholarship that is in tune with Harvey's hopeful thinking is, I would argue, collective, dialogic, inventive, artful and trans-disciplinary. Here thinking, ideas and evidence can offer a navigation device or a compass for thinking and a way of attending to what is before us. They can help us to determine a direction of travel through the contemporary world as it moves towards its troubled future.

## Acknowledgments

I would really like to thank the editors for the invitation to give the 2019 annual *Antipode* RGS-IBG Lecture. I would like to offer special thanks to Freya Hellier, Tariq Jazeel, David Featherstone and Andrew Kent and the anonymous reviewers who made helpful suggestions on this published version.

## References

- Anderson B (2014) *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions*. Farnham: Ashgate
- Anderson B (2017) Hope and micropolitics. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35(4):593–595
- Anderson B and Fenton G (2008) Spaces of hope. *Space and Culture* 11(2):76–80
- Back L (2007) *The Art of Listening*. Oxford: Berg
- Back L and Stoneman P (2019) "The Fellowship Inn Project Evaluation." Centre for Urban and Community Research, Goldsmiths, University of London
- Benjamin W (1973) *Illuminations* (trans H Zohn). London: Fontana
- Berger J (1968) The nature of mass demonstrations. *New Society* 23 May
- Berlant L (2007) Cruel optimism: On Marx, loss, and the senses. *New Formations* 63:33–51
- Bloch E (1995) *The Principle of Hope, Volume 1* (trans N Plaiçe, S Plaiçe and P Knight). Cambridge: MIT Press
- Camus A (2005 [1936]) *Summer in Algiers*. London: Penguin
- Charles M (2019) ComeUnity and community in the face of impunity. In D Bulley, J Edkins and N El-Enany (eds) *After Grenfell: Violence, Resistance, and Response* (pp 167–192). London: Pluto Press
- Coleman R (2016) Austerity futures: Debt, temporality, and (hopeful) pessimism as an austerity mood. *New Formations* 87:83–101
- Coleman R and Ferraday D (2010) Hope and feminist theory. *Journal of Cultural Research* 14(4):313–320
- Dawney L, Blencowe C and Bresnihan P (eds) (2017) *Problems of Hope*. Lewes: Authority Research Network Press
- Desroche H (1979) *The Sociology of Hope* (trans C Martin-Sperry). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Eagleton T (2015) *Hope Without Optimism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press
- Freire P (1994) *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Continuum
- Gilroy P (2004) *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* Abingdon: Routledge
- Gilroy P (2018) "Where every breeze speaks of courage and liberty": Offshore humanism and marine xenology, or, racism and the problem of critique at sea level. *Antipode* 50 (1):3–22
- GLA (2018) "London's Pubs Audit 2018." Greater London Authority [https://data.london.gov.uk/apps\\_and\\_analysis/londons-pubs-audit-2018/](https://data.london.gov.uk/apps_and_analysis/londons-pubs-audit-2018/) (last accessed 11 May 2019)
- Glass R (1964) *London: Aspects of Change*. London: Verso
- Gordon A (1997) *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Gramsci A (1975) *Letters from Prison* (trans L Lawner). London: Jonathan Cape
- Harvey D (2000) *Spaces of Hope*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- hooks b (2003) *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. New York: Routledge

- King M L (1986a [1968]) A testament of hope. In J M Washington (ed) *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (pp 313–330). New York: Harper Collins
- King M L (1986b [1965]) *Playboy* interview: Martin Luther King, Jr. In J M Washington (ed) *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (pp 340–377). New York: Harper Collins
- Lear J (2006) *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Levi P (1987) *If This is a Man / The Truce*. London: Abacus
- Loorde A (1981) The uses of anger. *Women's Studies Quarterly* 9(3):7–10
- Miyazaki H (2004) *The Method of Hope: Anthropology, Philosophy, and Fijian Knowledge*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press
- Moore-Bick M (2019) "Grenfell Tower Inquiry: Phase 1 Report Overview—Report of the Public Inquiry into the Fire at Grenfell Tower on 14 June 2017." Grenfell Tower Inquiry <https://www.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk/phase-1-report> (last accessed 15 May 2020)
- Muñoz J E (2009) *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press
- Philo C and Parr H (2019) Staying with the trouble of institutions. *Area* 51(2):241–248
- Phoenix Community Housing (2019) "The Fellowship Inn." <https://www.phoenixch.org.uk/community/fellowship-inn> (last accessed 5 December 2019)
- Rose G (1995) *Love's Work*. New York: New York Review Books
- Solnit R (2004) *Hope in the Dark*. New York: Nation Books
- Taussig M (2002) Carnival of the senses: A conversation with Michael Taussig. In M Zournazi *Hope: New Philosophies for Change* (pp 42–63). London: Routledge
- Terkel S (2003) *Hope Dies Last: Making a Difference in an Indifferent World*. London: Granta
- Williams R (1989) The practice of possibility. In R Gable (ed) *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (pp 314–322). London: Verso
- Zournazi M (2004) *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*. London: Routledge