Top Girls Navigating Austere Times: interrogating youth transitions since the 'crisis'

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Abstract: Since the 1990s, young women in the West have been addressed as 'Top Girls', symbols of social progress and emblems of a new meritocracy. The 2008 financial crash and subsequent implementation of austerity measures have further called into question the realisation of such promise and potential as evidence suggests that the young and women have suffered disproportionately within the post-crash landscape in the UK and beyond. This paper draws on longitudinal data to interrogate the promises and failures of neoliberal and postfeminist articulations of aspiration and meritocracy as these are lived and negotiated by young women making transitions in the midst of the 'crisis'. Attending to the biographical accounts of two participants occupying different class locations, I explore their transitions and perceptions of the uncertainties and risks characterising 'austere times'. I demonstrate how, despite similarities in their experiences of a stunted graduate labour market, social class shaped how they responded to and made sense of the pressures and predicaments they encountered.

Introduction: Youth transitions, austerity and the 'lost generation'

Following the global financial crisis of 2008, the UK - like many other countries - saw a period of economic downturn marked by low growth and high unemployment. In the UK, the government response to the great recession has been a programme of austerity measures which have seen a drastic retrenchment of the welfare state. Despite claims that 'we're all in it together', the young and women have disproportionately suffered within the post-recession landscape. In Britain, more young adults are in poverty than in pre-recession times (MacInnes et al. 2014) and falling wages have affected young

people more than any other group (IFS 2015). Young people in their twenties have seen a 12.5% reduction in median real-term pay since 2009 (Whittaker 2015) while rising numbers of young people are trapped in temporary and low paid work. Recent statistics released by the Office of National Statistics (2015) show that there were at least 1.8 million zero-hours contracts in use in the UK in August 2014 (up from 1.4 million in January 2014), with 34% of all zero-hours contract workers aged 16-24. This includes growing numbers of university graduates, with over half of employed graduates found in non-graduate roles, a marked upward trend since 2007-8 (ONS 2013). Rising house prices, a shortage of affordable homes and a growth in the private rented sector have left large swathes of young people squeezed out of the market, forming part of 'generation rent' (Dorling 2014). The number of years required for low-to-middle income youth to save for deposit has risen drastically from 3 years in 1983 to 22 years 2013 (Resolution Foundation 2013).

These trends are not unique to the UK. Rising youth unemployment, precarious work and slow and insecure education-to-work transitions present a global challenge, one considerably aggravated by the financial crisis (European Youth Forum 2014; ILO 2012; Lodovici and Semenza 2012). Such changes have prompted journalists, charities think tanks and some academics to declare this a 'lost generation' (Antonucci et al. 2014; Boffey 2014). In June 2014, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, described youth unemployment as 'the most common pathology of many countries implementing austerity measures' and warned that, facing significant hurdles in their transitions into work, young people are losing hope in the future (Muizneiks, 2014). Austerity, it has been argued, is producing a widening 'gulf' between the prospects of under 30s and over 60s, with commentators warning that 'the idea of each new generation being better off than the previous generation has been shattered' (Leach and Hanton, 2015: 5).

Youth scholars have historically warned against overstating degrees of social change in young lives (Pollock 2002), and it is important to note that these hostile conditions were not solely generated by the 2008 crash and subsequent austerity programmes. Signs of growing precarity and un/deremployment among youth preceded the current crisis, suggesting deeper-rooted global forces unleashed by neoliberal economic policies at work (Roberts 2009). However, these processes have clearly gained momentum since 2008 and, as such, they raise new questions for scholars

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For example, the proliferation of insecure work and unemployment and underemployment to include middle-class graduates points to social and economic conditions that are increasingly shared by working- and middle-class youth. Some have suggested that these changes may prompt a reconsideration of youth transitions clearly differentiated by factors such as class and gender (Furlong et al. 2011). As Robert MacDonald (2011, 2015) suggests, with some middle class graduates finding themselves stuck in cycles of low paid and insecure work, 'slow' transitions through extended education no longer necessarily signify the 'successful' youth biographies they previously did. Meanwhile, though going to university has become more commonplace among working-class youth, high levels of graduate un/der employment destabilise claims that extended routes through higher education among the working-class necessarily enable upward social mobility.

Relatedly, the disproportionate effects of the crisis on young people globally have fed into wider debates around the emergence of a new 'social generation' of young people. Resonating with the wider public discourse of an 'intergenerational divide', some scholars assert that contemporary conditions have given rise to a distinct 'generational consciousness' shared among young people whose lives are marked by insecurity, underemployment and downward social mobility, as compared to the upward mobility of post-war 'baby boomers' (Furlong et al. 2011; Roberts 2012; Woodman and Wyn 2014). Others draw attention to the continuities with and connections between generations, and/or assert that intra-generational differences between young people - related to social structural inequalities of class, gender and ethnicity - are more significant to understanding young people's experiences and opportunities than inter-generational differences (Goodwin and O'Connor 2009; France and Roberts 2015).

The impact of recent transformations on the youth and graduate labour market also have pertinence to other discussions within youth studies about how best to theorise young people's prolonged transitions to 'adulthood'. More precisely, they re-energise debates about the credibility of developmental psychologist Jeffery Arnett's (2000) theory of 'Emerging Adulthood' which he describes as a 'natural' phase of self-discovery, development and identity-exploration. Notwithstanding concerns about its

methodological and epistemological underpinnings, this optimistic formulation of prolonged transitions has been contested by James Côté as a 'dangerous myth' (2014). Côté argues that by framing prolonged transitions through an individualistic lens of free choice, Arnett's theory negates the socio-economic forces that produce extended transitions and as a result of which young people find themselves unable to realise the traditional markers of adulthood. As the austerity bites, larger segments of youth may find themselves in an involuntary and uncertain impasse. As such it is important to consider how young people's ability to cope with prolonged transitions and even 'maximise' the self-exploratory possibilities that these purportedly hold, may vary across dimensions such as class, gender, race and place.

The impact of the crisis and austerity has also begun to receive attention from feminist scholars concerned with the lived experiences of girls and young women. Since the 1990s a body of research has demonstrated how neoliberal ideologies crystalise in configurations of the 'Top girl' (McRobbie 2008). Here, against a backdrop of social change and the purported achievement of 'gender equity', young women have been encouraged to maximise new 'freedoms' in the fields of education, work and intimate relations. Addressed as agentic, individualised and entrepreneurial subjects, young women have become central figures in propagating the neo-liberal dream of upward social mobility (Walkerdine 2003). In the UK, this hopeful positioning of the 'Top Girl' coincided with the expansion of higher education under the New Labour government, with rising university participation among women and ethnic minority youth (HEFCE 2013). Feminist scholars have exposed the contradictions that arise from this celebratory positioning of young women as 'privileged subjects of the new meritocracy' (McRobbie 2008, 16) and the lived reality of encountering an education system and labour market marked by persistent gender (as well as class and race) inequalities (Baker 2008; Walkerdine et al 2001).

In this paper, I suggest that is important to consider how the disjuncture between the incitement to 'become somebody' and the lived realities of the education and labour market may have been further exaggerated by the crisis. There is now considerable evidence that the growth in precarious work, falling wages, cuts to the public sector and greater welfare conditionality have disproportionately affected women, raising concerns that thes transformations 'spell a tipping point for women's equality' (Fawcett, 2012: p3; The Women's Budget Group 2015). In a recent paper on youth in

an age of austerity, Linda McDowell (2012) suggests that rising unemployment and public sector cuts may reverse the earlier gains in young women's labour market participation.

To rehearse these debates in detail is beyond the scope of this paper. However, what unites these scholars engaged is a concern with the relationship between current conditions and the nature of inequalities in young lives and transitions. Indeed, even if 'limited opportunity structures unite the more and less disadvantaged in the experience of underemployment' (MacDonald 2011, 439), it remains important to ask: are the insecurities, risks and uncertainties accompanying these equally felt and managed across the contours of gender, class and race? Or, do 'old' inequalities manifest and permeate young people's experiences of contemporary conditions - even if they do so in new ways? To engage with these questions, the rest of this paper draws on data from a longitudinal study of young women who were making transitions in the midst of the 'crisis'. In what follows, I explore how young women perceive and theorise their biographies and orientate themselves towards the future in 'austere times'. In doing so, I seek to shed light on the promises and failures of political discourses of meritocracy and postfeminist articulations of aspiration as these are lived and negotiated by women occupying different class locations.

The Study

While valuable, empirical enquiries into young people's aspirations largely capture youth in a particular place and time, offering a snap shot of their sense-making practices and imagined futures. What they cannot tell us is whether their imagined futures materialise nor how orientations to the future shift over time. The importance of biographically-oriented longitudinal methods for interrogating how young people live through and negotiate conditions of social change and constraint is vividly demonstrated in a number of studies (Henderson et al. 2007; Webster et al. 2004). Given the concerns that frame this paper, there is a value in new longitudinal studies that explore how shared conditions of precarity and underemployment might be felt differently, or generate different responses, among young people in different social positions (McDowell 2012, 587). Revisiting her earlier work on 'Top Girls', McRobbie (2011, xi) has called for empirical and theoretical work which attends to how new

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social, political and economic contexts and 'horizons of power' shape the positioning of young women. In this paper, I am interested in how current conditions not only affect young people's transitions, but also whether youth un/deremployment, changes to the welfare state and the broader discourse of a 'lost generation' have disrupted the 'can do' philosophies that young women were encouraged to invest in.

To do this, I draw on data from follow-up interviews conducted in 2013-14 with young women who originally participated in my doctoral research in 2006-8 (then aged 16-18, now in their early-mid twenties). The original study explored the aspirations of a group of British young women who were contemplating their futures under New Labour. Participants were in state-funded education and training oriented to careers within the performing arts and creative industries. At the time of my research, the creative industries were subject to considerable policy attention by New Labour. As documented elsewhere (Allen 2013), my research illuminated the centrality of neoliberal and post-feminist discourses of individualism, choice and meritocracy to participants' imagined futures in the realms of education, work and intimate relations. Many were the first in their families to contemplate higher education and intergenerational desires for social mobility infused their accounts. I also demonstrated how social class and race shaped their opportunity structures and understandings of what futures were desirable and achievable. Their accounts were shot through with ambivalence and anxiety about their capacity to 'become somebody'.

The follow-up interviews provided a unique opportunity explore their transitions since the original study. Concerned with how young women narrate their transitions and account for change over time, the study was informed by the sorts of biographical youth research discussed above. Participants were contacted again using personal email addresses collected in the original study and via social media. Given the length of time since the original research, tracking down participants proved difficult. Of the 20 original participants, I was able to locate 12, and of these, seven took part in the follow-up interviews. The remaining five did not reply to my requests, were too busy, or agreed to meetings that did not ultimately materialise. I return to issues of recruitment shortly.

Interviews took place in person or over Skype, and lasted between 90 and 180 minutes. Interviews were un-structured, enabling participants to narrate their biographies in ways that were meaningful to them. However, to aid these I used a topic

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guide. I also asked participants to produce a 'lifeline' prior to the interview, adapting methods used by Thomson and colleagues in their longitudinal youth research (Thomson et al. 2002; Thomson and Holland 2002). While lifelines have been used to ask young people to 'think forward' – to imagine their futures – I used these to ask participants to reflect on the past, identifying 'critical moments' or 'turning points' in their trajectories since we last met. Wary not to reproduce normative models of 'proper' trajectories or a hierarchy of achievements, I encouraged them to include different aspects of their lives including work, education, relationships, housing, hobbies and travel, and allowed them to decide how they presented this.

Biographical longitudinal methods enable explorations of the nature of young people's transitions and the resources available to them as they encounter new opportunities and constraints. They afford opportunities to explore participants' attempts to materialise their imagined futures as they move through time and social space - including movement into new fields (Bourdieu 1984) such as higher education and employment - and as they encounter changing socio-economic conditions. As Thomson and colleagues argue: 'the use of critical moments forges a middle path between the way young people talk about their lives and what actually happens to and through them' (2002: 351). Through attending to 'critical moments' in participants' biographies, I consider the resources available to participants to shape their transitions and navigate the risks and uncertainties they encounter.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed, together with the lifelines, original interview transcripts and detailed fieldnotes. Attention was paid to the discursive repertoires, value judgments and common-sense assumptions drawn upon to give meaning to particular events or moments (e.g. around 'aspiration', 'success', 'opportunity'); to what pathways or choices were produced as desirable, successful, possible, blocked and so on; and the dispositional frames participants used to position themselves in relation to these (e.g. active, choosing, reactive, constrained).

Longitudinal youth research such as this is rife with methodological and ethical dilemmas. To begin, while I was careful in how I framed my invitations, asking young people to take part in follow-up interviews about their transitions can imply an expectation that they have 'successful' stories to tell. Being asked to account for one's past, particularly the living out (or not) of aspirations, may engender uncomfortable feelings. Secondly, biographical methods can encourage participants to take up

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positions of reflexive and agentic selfhood, part of a broader cultural 'autobiographical injunction' where to be rendered intelligible people must 'have a story' and produce themselves as agents of their lives. Young people in particular are surrounded by incitements to account for themselves according to notions of responsible, individualised and reflexive selfhood: from the demands of university and job applications to a broader political rhetoric of aspiration. In this sense, the tools of social science research, and in particular biographical methods, can bear the trace of the kinds of 'rendering of self' that are present in other spaces of surveillance, power and misrecognition (see Allen 2012, in progress).

Relatedly, the questions we ask young people carry a risk of proscribing participants' accounts according to normative frameworks of 'proper' transitions and authorised aspirations. Thus, despite attempts to encourage participants to reflect on various aspects of their lives, normative models crept in and structured how a life was told. The pull of these normative models was illuminated most clearly (and painfully for me as a researcher) when some participants, reflecting on their lifeline, expressed shame or guilt at their perceived 'lack' of achievement. I attend to these challenges in another paper (Allen in progress). Such issues may have contributed to the low recruitment rate where non-participation may have been rooted in a feeling among these participants that they did not have a 'story to tell' or perhaps did not want or care to account for themselves. They may have had better things to do or could not recall participating in the original study, reminding us that the significance we give to our research is not shared by participants.

It is important to recognise that the small number of participants reached affects the data generated and the claims made. However, my aim is not to claim representativeness about a cohort of young people. Rather, I deliberately and necessarily present a fine-grained analysis of the individual accounts of just two participants. These informative cases illuminate how young people's social positioning and the resources available to them shape their education-to-work transitions within 'austere times', and their perceptions of and responses to the uncertainties and risks accompanying these. Across the data set, all participants described encountering challenges in realising their aspirations. All participants reflected - to varying degrees - on the broader context of the crisis and austerity affecting their transitions and those of their peers. However, there were differences in the ways in which participants

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responded to and made sense of these when narrating their biographies. In attending to two participants' accounts in detail, I demonstrate how, despite similarities in their experiences, class continues to shape how these young women interpret and make sense of the pressures and predicaments they encounter along the way.

Reece: Broken Promises and Speculative Futures

Reece is Black British and grew up in London where she still lives. Her mother is a teaching assistant and her father runs a market stall. Neither went to university. I first met Reece when she was 17 and, like many of her peers at her school, had aspirations to become an actor. Reece also talked, alternatively, about her dreams of owning her own business and becoming an 'entrepreneur', citing celebrity actress, singer and businesswoman Jennifer Lopez as her role model. At this time, Reece was aware of the levels of competition and job insecurity associated with the creative industries. She spoke at length about her plans to get a university degree in media or business and the importance of gaining credentials as a 'back-up' to secure her a good job.

When I met Reece for the follow-up interview she was 24 and her concerns about the possibility of realising her aspirations remained a key thread in her account. However, these expanded beyond specific worries about the creative industries in ways that speak more broadly to young people's experiences of materialising futures within current conditions. Following school, Reece immediately decided not to pursue acting. Seeking a more 'solid' career, she applied for a marketing degree at a local university. Justifying her choice she explained:

> I realise there are people that believe you should just do what you're passionate in and nothing else matters, but I'm more 'yes you can do what you're passionate in, but you also need to eat… yes, you might be successful eventually but the likelihood is you wont be'. There's just no return on the investment you put in… it's too risky. I wanted something more solid… I just want to be comfortable.

Reece's investment in education and her desire for security can be read in relation to her race and class position. As Valerie Walkerdine (2003) argues, working-class girls in particular have been incited to produce themselves as upwardly mobile through

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investment in education. Likewise, Heidi Mirza (1992) states that against a backdrop of widening participation initiatives, vast swathes of black women embarked on a university degree, deeply committed to the transformative potential of education as a form of self-actualisation. Reece's account reveals a clear subjective investment in the meritocratic notion of credentialism as a means of 'getting on' and changing her life. As the first in her family to attend university, intergenerational desires for social mobility played out within her family. Reece's described being positioned as a trailblazer for her younger siblings, providing them with inspiration and valuable knowledge about higher education: 'If I didn't exist they wouldn't have had that idea [to go to university], because nobody else would've been doing it'. Throughout her degree, Reece stayed in her mother's home and worked part-time to support herself. Reflecting on her university experience, she explained how she felt different to the mainly middle-class students on her course:

> I was there quite seriously to get a degree and start my life afterwards… I didn't want to waste my time. I knew I needed to make the most of the opportunity and get the best out of it. … Whereas other people were there for the experience and the fun of living away from home… You'd be like 'oh we're supposed to meet to talk about the project' and they'd come back with loads of Selfridges[i] bags like 'oh sorry I was at the shops' and it was just … You know, different motivations… I don't have memories of university like other people do, the people that moved away, I don't know about student drinking games or… There's lots of things that I just didn't experience.

Jessie Abrahams and Nicola Ingram (2013) argue that the 'ideal' university student experience of moving away from home and immersing oneself into university 'life' is a middle-class model which is both 'privileged and privileging'. This model negates the diversity of young people's experiences of, and desires for, higher education. Reece perceived living at home not as a form of 'missing out' but as a positive choice. It allowed her to focus on her studies, live comfortably within her family home and stay close to her mother and siblings with whom she was close (referring to herself frequently as a 'home-body'). Reece talked often and at length about taking her degree seriously, working hard to make the most of the opportunity she felt she had earned to invest in her future. Reece graduated in 2010 with a First class honours degree.

While extended transitions through higher education have been framed as a key

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factor in boosting young people's job opportunities, contemporary conditions have thrown this sharply into question. Despite taking up the forms of self-investment endorsed as strategies to secure a 'good' future, Reece's experience of the graduate labour market was one of struggle and disappointment. She described a post-graduation experience characterised by long periods of job-hunting, applying and failing to get interviews for jobs aligned with her degree because of her lack of experience. Signing on at the Job Centre, she was declined for waitressing work because she was overqualified. Reece's transition from higher education has been marked by a 'churning cycle' of unemployment, unpaid work experience and low paid, insecure work in the service and retail sectors that has become common for many young people since the crisis (MacDonald 2015; Formby and Hudson 2015).

Importantly, this movement between different types of precarious work did not offer a 'stepping stone' to more permanent, fulfilling and 'appropriate work'. Eventually securing a job in sales, she was forced to accept a series of demotions and pay cuts in order to keep her job and was anxious about whether her contract would be renewed. 'Success', even stability, remained elusive for Reece.

Reflecting on this critical moment on her lifeline, Reece questioned the promises given to a generation of working class young people, particularly young women, that a degree and hard work would 'open doors':

> I just felt I really was very determined to do well at university. Then we started having the recession and all of a sudden all of my dreams of going to university and getting a good job were all being, you know, I was being told by the media and stuff that I was doomed, 'don't bother'… I couldn't get any job. Up until that time, I was really confident and that took it all away…. Because, your degree that you thought would open so many doors, you know, that didn't happen…. I don't think the ideas I had, I'd made up. They must have come from somewhere, the ideas that you graduate and then you go into this… and when I was looking for a job that wasn't what happened and so something must have changed…. The reality was very different.

The notion of a 'social generation' provides a key discursive mechanism through which Reece could make sense of and narrate her transitions. In the extract above, we see Reece refer to a media narrative of a 'doomed' generation, mirroring the commentary on the lost generation that has exploded since the crisis. In the extract

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below, Reece draws on a notion of generational difference. Reflecting on what she perceives as the increasingly distant prospects of owning a home and having children, she compares herself to her working-class parents who, despite their financial struggles, were able to become homeowners. While she does not use the term 'baby boomers', this is implicit in the comparisons she makes:

> I think for my generation, in terms of my parents, they had it really good. I think their parents didn't, and then they had it really good and then we're not going to again. Maybe my children might? Because by the time I get to 40 or 50 I'll have to probably look after my parents and any children, if I have them, at the same time. And I'll have to work until I'm well old and…by the time, in ten years time will there actually be any help from the government for people the way things are going? Yeah I think it's quite difficult for our generation because as we grew up our parents or the generation before us they were having quite a heyday. So it's like we saw things that we're not going to be able to have for ourselves or it will be a lot more difficult for us to have for ourselves …Whereas for them, looking at their parents, the only way was up. Everything was great. Whereas I think for us, it's kind of backwards, where we think we should have gotten this, but we haven't. So you feel like you haven't got what you deserve because you know, my mum now owns her house and she didn't even go to uni and…I've done this and that and I haven't [got that] so what have I done? I've done everything that I was supposed to do and it's not worked… I hope it does change but I don't see it changing.

Reece's experience of a stunted labour market not only ruptures a meritocratic ideal that hard work will be rewarded. It also destabilises dominant notions of futurity that equate this with social progress, as Reece articulates a sense of her future as not just blocked but 'backwards'. Reece's account echoes other participants in the study who described theirs as a generation 'without hope', a 'Peter Pan' generation whose movement into 'adulthood' is stalled and are learning to 'expect less' than their parents.

For Reece, this involuntary prolonged transition was not a welcome opportunity for the kinds of 'self exploration' advocated in Arnett's theory of Emerging Adulthood (2000). Rather it was characterised by uncertainty, disappointment and frustration. Unable to achieve that which is endowed with social status as symbols of success, maturity and respectability, Reece's sense of self and her future is shot through with self-doubt and anxiety. Throughout the interview, Reece spoke of feeling 'stressed' and

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of 'losing confidence' in her own abilities. Her experience generates a form of self-questioning, interpreting external constrains as individual failures as the countervailing neoliberal logics of meritocracy and individualism make it difficult to speak about one's experience through a language of structural inequality. As Biressi and Nunn state (2013) 'young people must now look to themselves as the source of their own failure or success, whether in education or employment. Success is increasingly characterised as only achievable through the deployment of one's personal, private resources of passion and drive'.

Furthermore, Reece's narrative reveals how cultural norms and expectations about what young people should achieve, and by when, regulate young people's ideas about their futures. The continued pull of such normative frameworks of 'proper' transitions pose subjective risks to young people when contemporary conditions halt their progress (Antonucci et al. 2014: 17-18) as we can see in the excerpt below:

> I feel a lot of pressure in terms of everything that I thought or think I should obtain by now by life milestones, I now don't think that's going to happen…. I don't think I'm going to buy anywhere to live, get married…. I thought I'd be in a position to buy whereas at the moment I'm more likely to join the circus than buy a house.

Here we see how uncertainty in the realm of work ripples outwards and into other aspects of young people's lives. Reece's experiences generated a speculative orientation to the future. When I asked her how she would like her lifeline to look in ten years' time, Reece laughed and explained:

> I can only say what I want because I'm learning that you just don't know what's going to happen…. I'd love to be a homeowner, maybe be in a relationship, maybe have a child… My dream scenario is having my own business by 35, buy my mum her own nursery…. That's what I want but not what I expect to have… I'm learning that effort doesn't always equal the result.. I'm trying to be less specific now because it's not helpful to be specific about things that are beyond your control, like buying a house by 29, that's just silly cos then I'll be sad.

In being 'less specific' about her future as a way of protecting herself, Reece suggests that life planning in austere times is costly, generating sadness and disappointment. Her

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account speaks to the 'hidden injuries' of forced prolonged transitions that Arnett's theory fails to recognise (Côté 2014).

I now turn to the biographical account of another participant, Kirsten, to demonstrate how class privilege operates to produce a different experience of the stunted labor market confronting contemporary youth. Specifically, suggest that class operates as a material and psychological safety net that not only provides resources that help produce meaningful lives, but also generates different orientations to precarity.

Kirsten: Assured Optimism and the Buffer of Privilege

When I first met Kirsten she was 16. Kirsten's family are from Italy, and moved to England when Kirsten was a teenager. Her parents are both professionals within the arts and creative industries, and she described her grandparents as 'rich'. When we first met, Kirsten talked about her desires to work in the performing arts in a job that would combine her passion for theatre with her interest in enterprise and charity. She explained how she wanted to 'make a difference' through her work. When we spoke again, Kirsten's imagined future had far from materialised and her transitions were far from straightforward, having experienced a similarly hostile labour market as Reece, as I explain.

Kirsten's trajectory through and out of further and higher education had been fractured, having enrolled but not completed various arts degrees and leaving these due to frustrations with the course and doubts about how useful these credentials would actually be. Kirsten placed a great emphasis on networking as central to career success:

> Networking is really important … It's very easy to get to know the right people as long as you put yourself out there…. going to events, making sure that you're speaking to people, representing yourself well and [using] any chance that you get to have a conversation with someone… not burning any bridges, keeping in contact with people that you might need in the future.

As Bourdieu illustrates, the practice of networking is a key mechanisms of social exclusion, favouring those with the relevant social and cultural capital (1984). In the creative and cultural industries, where much work is freelance and where recruitment

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is highly informal, accessing industry networks is often more valuable than qualifications, and research suggests that these practices contribute to class inequalities within the cultural workforce (Allen et al, 2013).

Departing higher education without completing her degree, Kirsten took up multiple part-time jobs in the hospitality sector alongside efforts to establish a number of her own enterprises within the arts and charity sectors. Kirsten repeatedly described herself as an 'entrepreneur'. Yet, struggling to pay her London rent on this patchwork quilt of short-term and low-paid work, she decided to 'leave the rat race' and 'take some time out to chill'. At the time of the interview she was living in Italy at the home of a family friend:

> I had to put the events company on hold and I got roped into doing a dead-end sales job which took up a lot of time and… I was finding it hard, a struggle, because I didn't have enough money to support myself in London… So I came over here a few months ago and just, I just wanted a break… I think it was the best decision I've ever made…I had a house out here, well, my mum's friends holiday home…I had enough money to just chill out…. I've been painting, writing and doing things like that…. And I've still been staying in contact with people in the industry through Facebook and things like that so it's fine… I was going to come back to London, and then I got speaking to my mum who was a very successful artist and she encouraged me to stay a bit longer. So I'm going to do an art exhibition here at the end of the summer.

As I discussed earlier, while un/deremployment and insecure work is now spreading from its working-class base, it is important that we attend to how young people in different class positions respond to, and mitigate against, the risks and uncertainties characterising the contemporary landscape. Objectively, it might appear that Kirsten and Reece have similar experiences of trying to make their way in the UK graduate labour market, both struggling to find secure and 'appropriate' employment. In the face of such difficulties, Kirsten was, however, able to mobilise her stocks of cultural, social, economic capital to help ease her through the setbacks and adversities.

Class privilege cannot operate as a complete shock absorber and Kirsten's life was far from easy: she worked part time to support herself and spoke of defending herself from longstanding concerns expressed by her extended family about her lack of a 'secure' job. However, the resources available to her provide a material and

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psychological safety net. As Sara Ahmed states:

> Privilege is a buffer zone, how much you have to fall back on when you lose something. Privilege does not mean we are invulnerable: things happen, shit happens. Privilege can however reduce the costs of vulnerability, so if things break down, if you break down, you are more likely to be looked after (Ahmed 2014).

While for Reece precarity within her transitions created anxiety and doubt, for middle-class youth like Kirsten, it can be transformed into a virtue. In Will Atkinson's (2012) study of the different classed responses to the economic crisis, he discusses how self-employed middle-class participants effected by the recession re-oriented themselves to changing circumstances by viewing these advantageously as providing a better work-life balance and greater autonomy. Like them, enabled by a 'distance from necessity' (Bourdieu 1984, 55), the crisis provided Kirsten an opportunity to work on the self.

Through Helene Snee's (2014) analysis of gap year travelers, we might understand Kirsten's decision to 'take time out' as an 'outcome of embodied dispositions shaped by social circumstance' (2014: 844). Gap year travel is constituted as 'time out' from normal life, yet as Snee shows, there is an implicit expectation that this time is spent on something 'worthwhile': activities that enable young people to develop the attributes and 'soft skills' sought out by employers or universities. In a similar way, Kirsten's 'time out' was not about giving up and opting out. Rather, under the veneer of 'chilling out' and 'having a break', Kirsten is producing herself as engaging in 'worthwhile' pursuits (self-improvement, producing and selling art) that will aid her future success.

An analysis attuned to social class differences in how young people respond to extended transitions in 'austere times' provides an important counter to Arnett's (2012) model of Emerging Adulthood. I argue that even if prolonged transitions are increasingly involuntary rather than chosen experiences for greater numbers of youth, class shapes how young people orient themselves to these. While not of her choosing, and far from trouble free, the hurdles marking Kirsten's transition can be converted into – and narrated as – a 'positive' experience due to the resources she had available to her. Extending Côté's (2014) critique, I argue that Emerging Adulthood theory privileges a distinctly middle-class model of selfhood in which subjects must display their moral worth through practices of choice, reflexivity and self-reinvention. Such performances

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of the self rely on having access to resources and the knowledge of how to display these in particular ways. In Bev Skeggs' discussion of risk (2005) she argues that '[for the middle-class] choosing danger, adventure and risk may enhance personal exchange-value.... [but] for the working-class it is likely to result in imprisonment' (2005, 971). Following this, I argue that youth scholars should consider orientations to the precarity and uncertainty of extended transitions under austerity as something that is approached differently by, and carries different costs for, working- and middle-class youth.

Unlike Reece's anxiety-ridden account of her future, Kirsten's account was infused by an assured optimism (Forbes and Lingard 2015) and a relaxed orientation to the future. Further, buffered by her relative privilege, Kirsten rejected future planning and money worries as passé, privileging instead personal fulfillment in the present:

> London makes you feel like you have to have money and have to be thinking about a career and you have to be thinking about your future and then when I came here I realised that I don't need to be thinking that far ahead. I can just think about what I enjoy doing for now, what I love doing and making money from it…. So for now, I'm working towards my art exhibition. We've got very good contacts so I am expecting to make quite a lump sum and then I'll come back to London, maybe go travelling…and I've always wanted to be a published author so I could finish my book while travelling and then try and get published…and then take it from there.

A discourse of a 'lost generation' did not feature prominently in Kirsten's account nor provide the same framing device for narrating her experience of the labour market as it did for Reece. Arguably, because of the resources available to her, the economic uncertainties Kirsten encountered were not as unsettling or traumatic in their effects as they were for Reece, who was jolted even closer to economic necessity. Likewise, while Reece's experience of the labour market ruptured the meritocratic principles she was encouraged to invest in, Kirsten provided a different explanatory framework for success: 'The thing is with my belief system is that it's just the power of your mind. It's just what you think. If you believe you can do something and if you work hard at getting it, you can get it. It doesn't matter who you are or where you're from'. Kirsten does not dismiss differences in young people's opportunity structures – she acknowledges that people start from different positions. She insists however that these challenges can be overcome by hard work, determination and positive thinking.

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Kirsten's overriding belief in meritocracy remind us perhaps how 'privilege describes a very specific kind of power, one that is often rendered invisible, at least to those who benefit from it' (Twine and Gardener 2013, 9).

Conclusion

These young women grew up surrounded by proclamations of opportunity and unbounded possibility. Returning to them seven years later, their lived experiences bring into question neoliberal and postfeminist promise of 'bright futures'. Yet despite the constraints these young women experienced my research reveals a continued investment in the promise of meritocracy. Only Kirsten and Reece have been discussed here, but their investment in the power of hard work, agency and self-responsibility was typical of the other participants who had similarly challenging experiences of the labour market. Despite Reece's astute critique and disillusionment with the current context discussed in this paper, she ultimately refuses to 'give up':

> You just have to keep going though… You have to be focused and determined. Otherwise you'd just kill yourself… do you know what I mean? …. You have to say 'these are the things I want, they might not happen but they might, there's always a chance'. So I suppose that keeps you going, because if you found out today that none of the things you want would happen…I don't know what I could go on to do, but I suppose because its unknown you just try…. it's just the way it is… life's not fair but no one knows how to make it fair.

The contradictions in Reece's account 'cannot be simply read off as being 'blind' to circumstances" (France and Haddon 2014). Rather, we can see Reece struggling to reconcile the discourse of meritocracy with her lived experience, and perhaps also trying to figure out a way to feel that she is still, in some small way, 'in control'.

These young women's accounts speak to some of the tensions that arise for young people incited to actualise their imagined futures within conditions that place (ever greater) limits on agentic practice. Even in an age of economic upheaval and deepening cuts that are pushing more people into poverty, calls to be aspirational, responsible and hard-working abound. To not 'believe in yourself' and be willing to compete is to be found wanting (Littler 2013). Thus, when Reece humorously remarks

that you have to keep trying or 'you'll top yourself' she speaks to the psychic and social costs that giving up on the future and 'sitting with hopelessness' carries.

This paper responds to recent calls by youth scholars to interrogate how young people experience and negotiate the changing contexts in which they make transitions (McDowell 2012; Shildrick et al 2015). There are some similarities in the experiences of Reece and Kirsten. The most obvious is that their labour market futures have much less of a sense of certainty than was available to either middle- or working-class youth in previous decades. Nevertheless, the different classed resources were available to Reece and Kirsten to navigate and make sense of their transitions disrupts the idea that young people in Britain are equally united in their experiences of the post-crash landscape. Thus while young people are encouraged to actively manage their biography and may talk about themselves as autonomous agents (Mendick et al. 2015), we are reminded that 'a 'can do' approach to life...is unlikely to be sufficient in the face of structural constraints (Thomson et al. 2002, 351).

In sketching some of the inequalities that continue to manifest in young people's experiences of the 'crisis' and austerity, this paper reveals the importance of attending to how different forms of privilege and inequality manifest and mediate young people's experience of the contemporary conjecture. Even if we have seen the arrival of a new social generation defined by a greater commonality of pressures and predicaments this does not mean that familiar social structural inequalities - by social class, gender or race - are now incapable of shaping the experience of, and responses to, those pressures and predicaments.

While based in the UK, the findings presented have implications for research into youth transitions elsewhere. As discussed at the start of this paper, the disproportionate effects of the recession and austerity programmes have a global reach. As such, youth scholars should interrogate both the similarities and differences in young people's experiences of the 'crisis' across different locales, attending the impact of national labour markets, welfare systems, social policy responses, as well as the public discourses of the 'lost generation' that mediate young people's sense-making practices. This paper is offered as a contribution to this vital area of youth studies.

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[i] Selfridges is an up-market shopping store associated with expensive and luxury goods.