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Young women's aspirations and transitions into, through and away from contemporary creative work

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Abstract

This chapter considers the lived experiences of realising aspirations for creative working lives, drawing on a longitudinal study of the transitions of young female creative aspirants in England. Participants were first interviewed in 2007–2008 when they were in education and training for the performing arts. Coming of age under New Labour, these young women were addressed by what Angela McRobbie (2016) calls a 'creativity *dispositif*', which encouraged young people to seek careers in the creative economy. Follow-up interviews conducted several years later explored whether and how participants' aspirations had been realised, reshaped or relinquished. In this chapter, I consider how these young women subjectively accounted for their transitions into, through or away from the creative economy. I discuss how participants encountered and interpreted the complex challenges associated with creative work – including precarity, low pay, informal networking and typecasting – and consider the resources and strategies drawn upon to navigate these. The analysis highlights the role of gender, class and race in shaping opportunities for making a living within the creative economy. In doing so, it offers a critical counterpoint to optimistic framings of creative work as offering unfettered opportunities for young people – especially those from marginalised groups.

Key words: creative work; youth transitions; aspirations; gender; class; race.

Introduction

The UK, like many nations globally, has witnessed a long-standing celebration of the economic and cultural significance of the creative and cultural industries (CCIs). This 'creative fetish' (Banks, 2007) was especially prominent under the New Labour governments (1997–2010). Aligned with its 'Third Way' agenda, New Labour both asserted the economic importance of these industries and pushed an egalitarian discourse of 'culture for all'. Included in this was a commitment to enabling young people from all backgrounds to develop their creative talent. Angela McRobbie (2016) has argued that under New Labour a 'creativity *dispositif*' emerged; a particular configuration of discourses, institutions, practices and forces that exhorted young people – and young women in particular – to 'be creative'. This *dispositif* was not only embedded in government policy, but bolstered by a wider celebrification of the sector, as stories of success through entrepreneurial creative work proliferated across popular culture. These aspirational narratives were also reproduced in institutions delivering education and training for the CCIs (Allen, 2013; Ashton and Noonen, 2013).

Substantial scholarship on cultural labour has challenged this 'romance of being creative' (McRobbie, 2016, p. 33). Documenting the precarious, informal, and exploitative nature of cultural work, this scholarship has highlighted the effects of such conditions on individual workers, including anxiety, chronic stress and poor physical health (Banks, 2007; Gill, 2002; Gill and Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2016). Moreover, the conditions and logics of cultural labour are understood to intersect with and (re)produce gendered, classed and raced patterns of disadvantage within the workforce (Allen et al., 2013; Brook et al., 2018; Conor et al., 2015; Saha, 2018). Thus, despite its image as meritocratic, inequalities in cultural labour appear to be

endemic, with certain groups facing disadvantage not only in accessing the sector, but also in progressing and staying within it. This is manifest in the under-representation of women, black and minority ethnic (BME) and working-class workers. Thus, invitations to young people from under-represented groups to aspire to and train for creative careers do not appear to have delivered a more representative labour force.

Set against this backdrop, this chapter considers the lived experiences of realising aspirations for creative working lives. It presents data from a small-scale longitudinal qualitative study into the transitions of young British women aspiring to careers in the CCIs – specifically, the performing arts. Participants were first interviewed in 2006–2008 (aged 16–18), and again in 2014–2015 (then in their early to mid-twenties). Here, I consider how participants interpreted *and* responded to the complex and often harsh conditions of contemporary cultural work. I identify some of the strategies and resources that enabled a number to navigate these and sustain 'passionate attachments' (McRobbie, 2016) to creative work, as well as the instances where such attachments became frayed and ultimately untenable.

The research

The original study explored the aspirations of 20 young women (aged 16–18) studying for vocational qualifications in the performing arts at two state-funded educational institutions in the South of England. Unlike other specialist performing arts institutions that charged upwards of £3000 a term, both institutions were free to attend and, subsequently, attracted a diverse intake. Indeed, in seeking to widen access to culture and the cultural industries, these sites were in many ways exemplary of the creativity *dispositif* activated across educational institutions under New Labour.

Participants in this study came from socioeconomically and ethnically diverse backgrounds. However, the majority were the first in their families to contemplate higher education, and intergenerational desires for social mobility infused their accounts. As I have discussed elsewhere (Allen, 2013) their aspirations for and perceptions of creative work were informed not only by New Labour's optimistic framing of the creative economy, but by a wider post-feminist logic that positioned young women as subjects of possibility, choice and aspiration (McRobbie, 2009). Participants aspired to careers across the CCIs. Whilst not fully formed, these aspirations included both performing roles and 'back stage' roles (e.g. directing, production, writing) in theatre, TV/film, music and dance. Contemplating but not yet encountering the labour market, participants were aware of some of the challenges associated with creative careers and expressed anxiety about their futures. However, the challenges were discussed in abstract terms and the dominant tenor of the conversations was one of optimism, with participants invested in meritocratic discourses of creative work (Allen, 2013).

The follow-up interviews[1] took place between 2013 and 2014 when participants were in their early to mid-20s and explored whether and how participants' original aspirations and perceptions of creative work had shifted over time. Of the 20 original participants, I was able to locate 12, and of these, seven agreed to be interviewed again. Interviews were conducted in person or via Skype, and lasted between 90 and 180 minutes. They were loosely structured, enabling participants to narrate their biographies in ways that were meaningful to them.

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[1] The research was funded by the British Academy (grant number SG121856).

Thematic and discourse analysis of the transcribed interviews was conducted to identify key themes in participants' experiences and the discursive patterns in their talk (Taylor and Littleton, 2013). Attention was paid to the discursive repertoires and common-sense assumptions participants drew upon in order to interpret and explain their experiences of the creative economy. In the discussion of the interviews, pseudonyms are used throughout.

Encountering creative work: recalibrating aspirations

Consistent with other research that reveals a cooling off of aspirations as individuals encounter the cultural labour market (Morgan and Nelligan, 2015), participants' aspirations had undergone a process of recalibration since the original research. Some had abandoned their creative aspirations completely (discussed later in this chapter); others had scaled down and diversified their original aspirations. Participants distanced themselves from the optimism or naivety of their younger selves, associated with vague or singular aspirations to 'be on stage'. Upon encountering the labour market, such aspirations were deemed unrealistic and subsequently adjusted to encompass a more flexible worker identity that stretched to a range of 'creative' roles.

Participants were engaged in a dizzying array of activities within (and outside of) the CCIs, including acting roles in television and theatre, writing and producing theatre, and events and marketing positions for arts organisations. Whilst seemingly resembling the kinds of entrepreneurial 'portfolio careers' associated with creative careers, they were rarely experienced as wholly positive or desirable. It was not uncommon for participants to recount a patchwork quilt of employment, moving from one short-term contract or project to the next. Experiences of low-paid or unpaid work were extremely common, and largely deemed par for the course. Consequently,

creative work was typically interspersed with (or, more commonly, undertaken alongside) periods of secondary paid employment outside of the sector. Although some managed to find work tangentially connected to the arts (such as youth arts facilitation or events management), for most participants this meant casual and part-time work in the retail and hospitality sectors – jobs that were easy to pick up and discard when opportunities for creative work arose. Additionally, pursuing creative aspirations necessitated moving back to the family home.

The constant juggling of stints of low-paid or unpaid creative work and routine drudgework (McRobbie, 2016) engendered both practical and psychological difficulties. Metaphors of insanity were common across participants' accounts, as they spoke of the stressful, intense and 'manic' nature of creative working lives. Several spoke of the physical and mental toll this work took – including periods of ill health, depression and generalised 'burn out'. Moreover, they expressed a degree of ontological anxiety about the future. The lack of job security and income from cultural employment, and dependency on their parents, led them to speak of being in a 'forever-childlike' state, unable to meet the normative milestones associated with transitions to adulthood. In the following excerpt from her interview, Emily (white and lower-middle class[2]) discusses the difficulties of both returning to the family home and working in the local shop that employed her as a teenager in order to pursue her career in theatre. We see here how humour operates to manage the spectre of failure or regression implied in these scenarios:

2 Social class was assigned based on parental occupation and family experiences of higher education as well as self-identified class position where this was given.

> You feel like you're still at home and you're going back to your old job you had at college … but you've done all of this stuff and have a degree. It's not good. I've always said 'If I go back to the party shop, shoot me! If I'm still living at home when I'm this age shoot me!' And I am! Me and my sister, she's a dancer, we had a conversation the other day. I said 'I'm going to earn £275 next month' and she went 'I earned £75 last month' and we were like 'Hey, we're doing really well, high fives!' Oh God … [laughs].

Like Emily, Abigail (white, working class) juggled different theatre projects, some unpaid, alongside various jobs outside of the CCIs. She describes how this gave rise to feelings of self-doubt and a highly speculative orientation to the future:

> I've worked in a pub and a cake shop and a special needs school …Working in the pub full time after you've just done an amazing project and these people treat you like shit. You judge yourself on that … the fact that I'm not doing what I know that I'm capable of doing and what I've studied for. I'm polishing cutlery, looking at my reflection in a spoon like 'Oh my God is this who I've become?' You can easily forget everything you've achieved … You have moments when you're unbelievably high and doing the best project in the world and then suddenly it stops and you're working in the pub, living at home with your mum, and you're like 'What the fuck am I going to do next? Who am I? What am I actually good at?' … You feel a sense of failure … I'm fucking

> shitting it for the future, I'm really afraid about where I'm going to live and the concept of having a family seems so distant.

Here we see the dilemmas in sustaining a coherent identity as a creative worker when a significant amount of one's time is spent undertaking work entirely unconnected to the CCIs. In Abigail's closing comments, we also glimpse the specifically gendered tensions and dilemmas that this kind of livelihood produces. As others have argued, these volatile and 'bulimic' working patterns (Gill and Pratt, 2008) typical of creative occupations, and associated demands for mobility and flexibility, pose difficulties for those with children (Conor et al., 2015; McRobbie, 2016). It is not a surprise then that for most of my participants, motherhood appeared only as a distant aspiration and abstract concept.

Participants deployed very similar discursive strategies to rationalise the difficulties they encountered. In particular, their accounts echoed a familiar compensatory logic whereby creative work is positioned as a form of labour that 'offer[s] the possibility of personal fulfilment or self-actualisation, albeit in return for considerable hard work and an absence of financial security' (Conor et al., 2015, p. 5). Indeed, participants emphasised how the pleasures of creative work ultimately outweighed the negatives.

> As a creative we don't have stability … you can't *own* your career, because someone else is always in control … it's the hardest thing. You have no money, no house, but you're still going to keep doing it. Some people just want stability so I don't believe it's for everyone, but I know I don't want a

> normal job. That's the honest truth. (Jade, black, working class)

> Anyone in the arts will always work in the service sector too, it's the norm … I work really hard, non-stop. It's a way of life. It's not a clock in, clock out job … and that's just what I've chosen and it's worth it … I absolutely would rather this be my way of life than having a nine to five job, because that's not me. I'm not a routine person … I mean, of course I still want money to live, but I value life so much more from experiences than money itself. (Abigail)

In these quotes we see how the 'nine to five' or 'normal' job play important constitutive functions, symbolising dullness and predictability in opposition to the allure of creative work. Yet there is ambivalence underscoring these assertions of pleasure in, and commitment to, creative work. Participants oscillate between justifying precarity and expressing frustration. Emily entertains the possibility of leaving the sector only fleetingly:

> Sometimes I'm like, 'I've had enough of the love, I want it to be my career not my hobby' … But I just literally don't think I can do anything else, because that's just where I feel most comfortable, directing. I just love it … The fact that you're still happy to do it for 100 quid, expenses or nothing sometimes ... I've had moments of thinking 'fuck it! Shall I give up? Get a normal job?' But I just can't leave … If you're still in the arts now, you don't do it because it pays, you do it

> because you want to be there … I mean, we all knew what we were getting into.

It is important to highlight the role of class-linked advantage and disadvantage in mediating these experiences of financial hardship and insecurity. For many participants, parental support provided an important buffer that facilitated the pursuit of creative aspirations. For Emily, Abigail and Jade, this came in the form of the family home: all three had a parent who lived in social housing in Greater London, allowing them to be proximate to job opportunities. This was discussed as a less-than-ideal but essential compromise, necessitating the negotiation of often-fraught family relations. For two participants, it entailed becoming a carer to an ill or disabled parent.

For Kirsten (mixed-race, middle class), this support was more substantial. Her parents had careers in the cultural sector, and she described her grandparents as 'rich'. Leaving university, Kirsten took up part-time jobs in the hospitality sector whilst running numerous social enterprises within the cultural sector, frequently referring to herself as an 'entrepreneur'. At the time of the interview, she was living in the house of a family friend in Italy, having decided to 'leave the rat race' of London:

> I had enough money to just chill … I've been painting, writing … And I've still been staying in contact with people in the industry … so it's fine … I was going to come back to London, and then my mum who was a very successful artist, she encouraged me to stay a bit longer [and] I'm going to do an art exhibition here at the end of the summer.

Kirsten faced similar challenges to the other participants in attempting to establish herself as a creative worker, however her relative class privilege helped her navigate the hurdles she encountered. Buffered by valuable familial resources –

financial aid and industry contacts – taking 'time out' becomes an opportunity to engage in pursuits that will enhance her career rather than damage it.

Getting in and getting on: negotiating competition and self-promotion

In the previous section, I argued that participants' aspirations had undergone a process of recalibration upon leaving education and encountering the labour market. A common trope in their accounts was a shattering of a sense of optimism and 'specialness' they had felt whilst studying, as the scale of competition became apparent. The following extract from my interview with Emily illustrates this.

> [In school] you don't realise that there's so many more out there trying to make it … You're the best in the class and then you leave and there's 50, no, 500 of you … I'm part of this director's network and there's like 900 of us, it's ridiculous. At times I've felt pangs of jealousy over other director friends … I have to remind myself constantly that we've all got our own kind of journey. I just kind of say 'right, just stop thinking about everyone else and just get on with your own thing'.

We see here how encountering competition entailed negotiating uneasy feelings of self-doubt and jealousy over the relative success of peers. Participants' responses to these, however, were to 'get on with it'; a pragmatic learning of strategies of networking and entrepreneurialism in order to find (or create) opportunities for creative employment. Informal hiring practices and word-of-mouth recruitment are notoriously endemic in the sector, and this was not lost on participants, who spoke of the importance of finding work through personal

recommendations, rather than job adverts. As Abigail stated, ‘nothing good is advertised, or if it is then everyone goes for it. All the good stuff in performing is word of mouth, so creating contacts, networking with theatre companies, that's what’s been key’.

Kirsten’s account encapsulated this more than any other. Her interview was littered with references to networking, and the importance of maximising every encounter as an opportunity to accrue contacts.

> Kirsten: It’s very easy to get to know the right people as long as you put yourself out there.
>
> Kim: So how do you get into those networks?
>
> Kirsten: By just going to events and making sure that you’re speaking to people, representing yourself well and any chance that you get to get into conversation with someone. And you know there are so many online opportunities. And by not burning any bridges or keeping in contact with people that you might need in the future.

In Kirsten’s account we also see how the sector’s practices of compulsory networking and sociality have expanded to include online spaces. Indeed, engaging with social media has increasingly become a key aspect of cultural workers’ labouring practices (Duffy, 2016), and participants discussed how building and nurturing one’s online presence through digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram was essential to ‘standing out’ in highly competitive industry. This labour not only requires time but also demands a particular type of subject aligned with the values of competitive individualism and self-promotion. Whilst Kirsten took to this with

apparent ease, others expressed difficulty in navigating these pressures of entrepreneurial self-commodification, as the following quote from Jade illustrates.

> Social media is everything, you have to put yourself out there … but I don't really like telling everyone what I'm doing. But I guess I have to … My agent is all over it, she's like 'you have to, you don't know who's looking at your Twitter or Instagram'. I went to an audition and the guy asked me how many followers I have. I thought 'Do I lie?' Because that's how they market the show, it's income. So I told him something silly, like 300. Mmm [laughs]. So yeah, I need to work on that I guess.

This intensive and affective labour of building one's brand is not simply about finding work. What is often masked in incitements for workers to self-promote online is how the industry itself extracts value from this labour. As Jade observes above, her social media becomes a marketing tool for the production company to build interest in their show and generate revenue.

In her work on classical music, Christina Scharff (2015) has considered how the demands to self-promote within the CCIs conflict with gendered expectations of appropriate femininity that value modesty. Whilst gender may have factored in Jade's experiences and feelings of discomfort, social class is clearly significant:

> I go to these networking events and it's a constant battle … It's like, 'okay cool', I try to push myself to get out there and try to mingle. But, when it comes to [my] class, do I know how to conduct myself all the time? No. I'm like 'I'm ready to go now' … I don't know what to say no more. I don't know

> how to mingle. I'm not used to that bit, but it's that whole thing- like my class, like the working class, we don't mingle. Not like that anyway. We get what we want and then we get up and go.

Jade feels both unable and unwilling to engage in these compulsory practices of networking and self-promotion both on- and offline. Her classed dispositions and values are in tension with a field in which 'getting in and getting on' involves strategically accruing resources through performing the self in a particular way. Such practices demand certain forms of embodied cultural capital – ways of dressing, speaking and codes of behaviour. The classed conflicts in Jade's account speak to what Nicola Ingram (2011), drawing on Bourdieu, calls a 'habitus tug', whereby 'tastes, practices and dispositions are competing for supremacy, resulting in the individual being pulled in multiple directions by different fields' (p. 292). For Jade, getting on in the cultural industries is a 'constant battle'.

Experiences of disjuncture were frequent themes in Jade's account. At drama school she felt out of place, different to her predominantly white and middle-class peer group who displayed cultural knowledge unavailable to her. As she explained:

> It was embarrassing to not know certain things … These posh girls were just talking jargon and I'm like, 'Can you explain again so I don't look stupid' … Even now when I go to auditions and they're like 'Do you know this person?' 'Did you see this play' and I'm like, 'no!'.

Jade's encounters echo other research that demonstrates the relationship between cultural consumption and access to cultural labour markets, where cultural tastes and orientations are subject to judgement by institutions, employers and other

gatekeepers (Oakley and O'Brien, 2016). Jade feels like an outsider in these spaces, where whiteness and middle-classness are privileged. In response, Jade attempted to change herself – modifying her accent in order to pass as middle class in a field where ways of talking operate as important forms of capital. Yet, we see how these attempts fail:

> When I left drama school I was so well spoken. I thought I had to change and talk like this [says in 'posh' accent] and I went to auditions and they were like 'Be more black, don't talk posh, talk like you're a little bit dumbed down, like you haven't got a degree'. And that is what you have to do. I go to auditions and I look at the black girls that have just finished training, and I'm like 'You need to lose your drama school accent'.

The director's instruction that Jade should talk 'more black … like you haven't got a degree' demonstrates an alarming conflation of the category of blackness with working-classness. As Anamik Saha (2018) deftly outlines, processes of racialisation are built into the very structures and processes of cultural production, including commissioning and casting decisions. Jade's black body is read as incongruous with middle-classness – itself coded as 'white'. As Saha warns, such practices cannot be attributed simplistically to a lack of diversity in the workforce, but rather, are informed by wider commercial logics governing cultural production. However, the preponderance of white, middle class men in the senior ranks of commissioning, directing and production is significant here. As Sam Friedman and Dave O'Brien (2017) argue, this structural inequality in the sector's workforce contributes not only to the oversupply of leading roles for white, middle class male

actors, but to the typecasting of marginalised or 'othered' actors. Indeed, Jade explained:

> I just started to notice as a black female, I'd be going up to play [Shakespeare's] Juliet. And it's like 'nah, that's not going to work!' ... Truthfully there are no roles right now for black women … we don't get roles and when we do we're single mothers doing something stupid … or Rude Girls.

Considered 'too black' to play Shakespeare's Juliet (a role already imbued by racialised notions of 'Englishness'), Jade finds herself limited to highly caricatured representations of black womanhood that bear little resemblance to her own lived experience. The 'single mum' and 'Rude Girl' are social types that fit a 'received stock of already-interpreted images of black bodies' (Gooding Williams, 1993, in Puwar 2004, p. 40), abject figures who, in the popular imaginary, symbolise welfare dependency, criminality and family breakdown. And yet, despite her frustrations, Jade feels unable to reject these reductive types. She explained: 'it's sad they're not writing [for us]. They keep you stereotyped. But I'd rather be typecast than play nothing'. Thus for Jade, movement in and through the CCIs is characterised by constant compromise and constraint. This was not simply about sustaining passionate attachments to creative work through precarity, but navigating racialised, classed and gendered norms and practices that hamper the possibilities for being creative.

Abandoning creative aspirations (or When love is not enough)

In the remainder of this chapter, I turn to two participants who abandoned their creative aspirations. When I first met Reece (black, working class), aged 17, she aspired to become a film and television actor. After college she pursued theatre

temporarily, but soon abandoned it to embark upon a degree in marketing and communication. The first in her family to attend university, she was highly invested in credentialism as a route to social mobility. Explaining her decision, Reece challenged the neoliberal logics of passionate labour that underpin work within the creative economy:

> I know a lot of people 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!' The likelihood is you won't be successful … There's no clear return on investment … if I don't work and get paid I can't do the things I like … I think more than my desire to be on stage, I want to be comfortable.

At 16, Carly (white, lower-middle class) was an aspiring TV presenter. Following college, she tried to get hands-on experience in the sector as an unpaid runner for a large TV network, while auditioning for extra parts in TV. Exhausted and broke from working 12-hour days without pay, she eventually gave this up and sought a job that would provide a steady income. Subsequently, she worked in hospitality before becoming a flight attendant. At the time of the interview she combined this job with raising her two-year old child. Like Reece, Carly described a sense of disillusionment and frustration with the cultural sector:

> I was a runner and I was thinking this is all very well if I think well there's going to be a job at the end of it, but there wasn't … I found it flaky. It just wasn't enough for me, maybe I should've been more positive … I just thought, this is quite a sad life, hundreds of people who are just waiting for this break

> … I got fed up of being treated like rubbish … So many of my friends are still working for free, doing running jobs, living with their parents, no money. I think 'good for you' but the industry just wasn't steady enough for me. There was no concrete 'this is going to pay off' … It's really competitive. Everyone is out for themselves. To get to the top you have to be very sneaky and probably a real bitch, which, I just couldn't – it just wasn't for me.

For both Reece and Carly, the compulsory precarity, low pay and uncertainty of creative work were not simply untenable, but undesirable. Moreover, the sector's demand for competitive individualism became a source of tension and conflict for Carly. Reece made similar comments:

> Everyone's very fake, so that's hard, and it's very dog eat dog you know … You'd be talking about work, but you wouldn't want to share ideas, or talk about an opportunity you're pursuing. You're made to be very guarded and competitive and that's not a very good atmosphere for friendship. It's more like frenemies. Nobody wants anybody else to do well.

Deemed flaky, exploitative and risky, creative careers were incompatible with their desires for authenticity, friendship and financial security – desires no doubt informed by their class. For Carly, pursuing work in the sector was also irreconcilable with her desires to be a mother. However, alternative and seemingly more 'secure' pathways did not transpire to be as fruitful as these participants envisaged.

Reece discussed how she took her degree seriously, working hard to make the most of the opportunity to invest in her future, and graduating in 2010 with a first-

class honours degree. However, upon graduating she encountered a hostile labour market. She recounted long periods of job-hunting and signing on, unable to get graduate jobs associated with her degree because of her lack of experience, but also unable to get waitressing jobs because she was overqualified. Eventually securing a job in sales, she took a series of demotions and pay cuts, and was anxious about whether her contract would be renewed. Thus, despite choosing a more 'secure' pathway, success – even stability – remained elusive.

> I really was 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 – …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, that didn't happen.

These challenging encounters with the job market had repercussions on other aspects of her life, as other markers of adulthood came to feel unobtainable. Reece expressed bafflement and frustration at the broken promises made to her generation by successive governments, explaining:

> I feel a lot of pressure in terms of everything that I thought I should obtain by now by life milestones, I now don't think that's going to happen … I'm more likely to join the circus than buy a house … I've done everything I was supposed to do, and it's not worked.

Carly's experiences of the labour market were somewhat less tumultuous. She had enjoyed working as a flight attendant and the perks of her job – travel, flexibility and sociality. Yet, whilst the job was seemingly more compatible with having children, she still found herself facing a motherhood penalty.

> Being a young mum, it's a struggle. I've given up my career because, even in my industry, if you want to progress you have to really get out there … But with [my child] at home, I don't have the time, so I've had to take a step backwards. If you want to be at the top of your game, you have to put in all the time, and I can't compete.

For both Reece and Carly, abandoning their original aspirations for creative careers was a pragmatic decision, informed by a desire for stability and security. Yet, their accounts also remind us that in the current economic environment, refusing the exhortation to 'be creative' and pursuing alternative pathways does not necessarily guarantee a more liveable life.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how a group of young female creative aspirants subjectively accounted for their transitions into, through or away from the creative economy. I highlighted both how participants' attempts to realise creative aspirations involved reckoning with complex and frequently hostile conditions, and the different resources and strategies drawn upon to navigate these, though not always successfully. A key theme in these young women's accounts was the requirement to 'sell themselves' through networking and social media. I demonstrated how these demands for entrepreneurial self-promotion produced tensions and conflicts for many

of my participants, informed by their social position. Morgan and Nelligan (2015) foreground the class conflicts around self-promotion, contending that working-class men are less well positioned than their female peers to meet the sector's demands for entrepreneurialism, flexibility, and individualism. My research shows that not all young women can 'thrive in the unstable environment of the creative industries' (Morgan and Nelligan, 2015, p. 80), and some of my participants did not – or could not – engage enthusiastically in these practices. I therefore assert the value of an intersectional lens that considers how gender, class *and* race shape young people's experiences of and opportunities in the creative economy.

This chapter provides a critical counterpoint to optimistic framings of creative work as offering unfettered opportunities for young people, especially those from marginalised groups. Tracing the exclusions and self-exclusions that characterise these young women's experiences, the analysis fractures the popular mythologising of the creative economy as egalitarian and meritocratic. Their accounts are a sobering reminder that New Labour's creativity *dispositif* (McRobbie, 2016) was an ideological instrument that incited young people to 'be creative' and 'follow your dreams', but did not deliver on its promises.

I have also called for caution in approaching transitions into creative work as exceptional. My research highlights how the challenges associated with forging creative careers are familiar to young people across *many* areas of the labour market. In the current conjuncture of late capitalism, even traditionally secure sectors are becoming marked by conditions of precarity (Taylor and Luckman, 2018), thereby hampering many young people's ability to plan ahead. The UK has not only seen dramatic changes to the labour market, but also a Conservative-led project of austerity

that has decimated previous forms of social protection. These changes have disproportionately affected the young; and precarious work, underemployment, and low pay have become the norm for many (Antonnuci et al., 2014). However, for working-class and BME youth, the current 'crisis' is not fundamentally new, but rather an extension of routinised crisis and long-term inequality (Mendick et al., 2018). It is important, therefore, that we do not posit the creative economy as unique in having unsustainable or toxic working conditions, nor romanticise departures from it as necessarily emancipatory. The accounts of my participants, including those who abandoned their creative aspirations, poke holes in the celebratory discourses of aspiration, meritocracy and social mobility that not only lie at the heart of the creativity *dispositif*, but address all young people under neoliberalism.

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