Transforming hope labour: Badiou, the COVID-19 Event, and contingent academic work.

ABSTRACT

Studies of hope labour emphasise individual's commitment and attachment to unpaid or undercompensated labour, a phenomenon normalised by neoliberal ideology. However, they provide limited insights into how change and transformation can occur in neoliberalism. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which interrupted the established order and transformed the political economy, we address this lacuna by drawing on Badiou's theoretical ideas of the event. We theorise and demonstrate how the Covid-19 event has transformed the patterns of contingent academic work that sustain and reproduce hope labour. Through an analysis of forty interviews with contingent academics in the United Kingdom in the wake of the Covid-19 event, we illuminate the emergence of a new present manifested in patterns of 'transforming academic passion' and 'transforming academic professionalism'. This novel contribution enriches our understanding of hope labour and precarity within the neoliberal university by highlighting the subjective break experienced by contingent academics, disrupting the continuity of hope labour and giving rise to new discourses and practices. Our analysis sheds light on the nuanced dynamics at play in the research of academic work, emphasizing the transformative potential inherent in the event.

Keywords: academic work, Badiou, change, hope labour, neoliberalism, precarity

Introduction

The historic Covid-19 global outbreak – just like the financial crisis before it – a political-transformative event (Zizek, 2020) has devastated lives and exposed many of the fallacies of neoliberalism, such as the inability of the state in the face of global markets, the unequal social system, and the proliferation of flexible and precarious work (Mai et al., 2023; Meliou et al., 2024; Orr, 2023). Nevertheless, the pandemic has also changed the public vision of social possibility by demonstrating principles for organizing in a way that works for people (Riad, 2023; Burke et al., 2022), making it hard to discern all that is at play and offering potential glimmers of hope and transformation in a moment of crisis (Bloch, 2020). In a world that is often experienced as hopeless, this article mobilizes Alain Badiou's (2006; 2009; 2009) work on the Event to explore the possibility of change and transformation in contingent academic work in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite worsening conditions in the neoliberal university with the use of performance metrics in publishing and teaching, labour intensification, and insecurity in career progression (Bottrell & Manathunga, 2019; Tourish et al., 2017), many academics remain committed to, and personally invested in their work often beyond paid hours (Fleming, 2022; Gill, 2010). For those in precarious, contingent contracts, involving zero-hours contracts, short-term research positions, and hourly-paid teaching, uncounted work becomes a defining feature of an academic career (Ivancheva & Garvey, 2022; Fleming, 2021; O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019; Childress, 2019; Kezar et al., 2019).

Scholars in work and organizations often use the term hope labour, defined as 'unpaid or undercompensated labour usually undertaken for exposure or experience, with the hope that future work opportunities may follow' (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013:10) to explain how precarity is normalised in neoliberalism. Research associates hope labour with creative and cultural industries (McRobbie, 2016; Oksala, 2016; Scharff, 2016) but it is also visible in higher

education, adding academics to the growing list of occupational groups that might be considered 'creatives' (Gill, 2014). Studies of hope labour have theorised how neoliberal discourses of individual commitment and attachment at work shape subjectivities, emphasizing the meaning of work as a pathway to self-realisation, freedom, and fulfilment. These discourses offer a sense of normality and common sense, with power implications in a Foucauldian notion, through which hope labour is made generative in precarious and flexible conditions (e.g., Carr & Kelan, 2023; Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2020; Moisander et al., 2018; Valas & Cummins, 2015; Fleming, 2015). The very labour of coping with recurrent calamities becomes, as a result, all-encompassing, leaving little time for anything else, including change seen as a fantasy (Kenny, 2012).

Yet, events like Covid-19 which created a rupture in the established order of things and transformed the political economy (Howard, 2021; Western, 2020), may bring something new into the world (de Vaujany et al., 2021). To theorise change and transformation in neoliberalism, the paper engages with Badiou's (2006; 2009) work of the Event, defined as something unpredictable in its local specificities that erupts the status quo, and radically opens its possible transformative effects. It is from events, the novelty of which escapes traditional classification, that we can catch a glimpse of other versions of ourselves and our political worlds (Bassett, 2016). Therefore, we ask: How has the Covid-19 event erupted hope labour for contingent academics such that something new may come about? Through interviews with forty contingent academics in the United Kingdom in the wake of the Covid-19 event, we explore whether change and transformation may appear in the ruins of lockdowns to enable the *subjective break* of contingent academics from the dominant neoliberal norm of hope labour. Theoretically, we build on and advance existing research on hope labour not to examine the commitment of the subject to hurtful discourses, norms, or fantasies that already coordinate its possibilities, as in previous research (e.g. Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2020), but to explain the

commitment of the subject to change in the situation that constitutes it, to the 'truth of the event' (Badiou, 2006), which may become part of a transformative process. Our analysis shows how the Covid-19 event reveals the truth of precarious work showing the limitations and illegitimacy of hope labour. Underpinned by an emphasis on egalitarian justice, the truth announces itself in discourses and practices of a new present. Our findings demonstrate that the new present manifests itself in patterns of 'transforming academic passion' and 'transforming academic professionalism'. However, the new present is not embraced by everyone. Our findings further show how some contingent academics continue to rigidly conform to the past, perpetuating hope labour, which is indicative of an obscure transformation.

In what follows, we first discuss the literature on hope labour. We then present Badious' work on the event and explain how it offers the possibility to theorise openness to change and transformation in neoliberalism. After discussing our empirical research, the findings show the truth process or the eruption in the thought and practice of contingent academics brought about by the Covid-19 event and the change manifested. We conclude with a discussion about the implications of the truth event for contingent academic work in the neoliberal university.

Hope labour and contingent academic work

The foundations of hope labour have been laid out by social scientists in creative and cultural industries who studied how attachment and commitment to work are portrayed as emancipatory and empowering (Terranova, 2000; Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013; Duffy, 2016, Fast et al., 2016; Gregg, 2015). Hope encapsulates the human condition of moving from a state of 'not-yet-being' into a state of being-more or being-fulfilled (Schumacher, 2003). Such desirable future-orientated projections are historically specific in that individuals draw on some condition of the past or present, some experience or idea one would like to see realised (Bloch, 1986).

Empirically, organization studies scholars have explored how hope labourers in neoliberalism draw from attractive conditions when projecting their desires into the future, including secure and stable employment arrangements (e.g., Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2020; Hora et al., 2020; Carr & Kelan, 2023; Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). Hope labour is precarious and yet is negotiated and naturalised in neoliberal terms as liberating and meaningful, valorising an individualised and competitive entrepreneurial subject that works in the name of a brighter, better, and richer future (McNay, 2009). Research in this area adeptly documents how workers are predisposed to engage in unpaid labour or accept non-monetary rewards 'on the promise of deferred bounties' and 'future career rewards' (Ross, 2003:142). It spotlights the ambivalent mixture of competitive and contradictory subjectivities or 'one's sense of self, emotions and desires' (Foucault, 1982) that individuals form by being encouraged to act as entrepreneurs of the self, that is to say autonomous, self-directing individuals responsible for increasing their self-value and developing their career (Berlant, 2011). Propagated as norms and common-sense, hope labour thus makes it difficult for those individuals to articulate the precarious conditions that are associated with such work, as very little security is offered in return (Alacovska, 2019; Ashman et al., 2018; Gill, 2010).

This echoes the exploitative conditions of, for example, college and university internships (Hora et al., 2020; Forkert and Lopes, 2015), graduate employability (Handley, 2018), or academic careers (Bristow et., 2017; Gill & Donaghue, 2016) because the highly cognitive characteristics of academic work make it susceptible to the seductions of hope labour (Knights & Clarke, 2015; Mingers & Willmott, 2013). In academic work, hope labour manifests in ill-defined ideas of vague notions surrounding contractual freedom and its corresponding contractual obligations (Fleming, 2022). The neoliberal university's use of contingent academics, for instance, is a case in point. Contingent academics are "theoretically" given the possibility to determine their own workload (Kezar et al., 2019; Courtois & O'Keefe,

2015). Yet, they struggle with contractual obligations that involve increased work demands, inadequate compensation and uncertainty regarding pension benefits (Gill & Donague, 2016). Hope labour is further evident in empty promises of the autonomy of the academic profession. The technical innovation through the proliferation of digital platforms, especially following the Covid-19 pandemic means that work can be undertaken everywhere, anytime (Ivancheva & Garvey, 2022; Mirlees & Alvi, 2020). Gill refers to academia without walls to signify that 'alongside the intensification of work in academia, we are also experiencing its marked extensification across time and space' (Gill, 2010: 237). The continuous attentiveness to voluntary effort academics dedicate to organizational citizenship as a means to secure visibility and future rewards (Clarke et al., 2012; Edwards, 2020) is seldom recognized by employers (Gregg, 2009). As such, while these norms are not deterministic, an emphasis on professional ideals, the ethical importance of academic work, and intrinsic values can produce hope labour.

For those academics in contingent contracts who seek contract security, autonomy and vocational aspiration, hope labour becomes a defining experience to compete to manage their portfolio and enhance their 'personal brand' (Fleming, 2022: 1997). Although academics have not typically been understood as submissive populations (Kenny, 2021; O'Keefee & Courtois, 2015), the voluntarily take up of unpaid or under-compensated labour to find satisfaction and passion through work is no longer an act of dissent. The economic framework of their work and material circumstances are considered 'as a part of an implicit economic strategy reconciling the promises of the norms with the lack of their immediate fulfilment' (Musilek et al., 2023:3). It is precisely this future-oriented logic of hope that renders change seemingly illusory and sustains hope labour as a widely accepted and normalized practice in the neoliberal university.

However, in historical moments like the Covid-19 event, which has disrupted local and global processes, such as education and work, and has ushered in new social, economic and

political practices and policies, including remote working and accelerated digitalization, hope may also involve devising a new way of living (Webb, 2007). Such political event shapes individuals' practices creating opportunities for change, despite the influence of power within society (Badiou, 2005; 2006). In this article, we draw on Badiou's work on the event to explore how Covid-19 erupted contingent academics' hope labour such that something new may come about.

Badiou's theoretical framework: Event and the truth process

The work of Alain Badiou has been mentioned, mostly in passing, in critical studies of change and transformation in organization studies (e.g., Parker & Fotaki, 2014; Essers et al, 2009) to examine the emphasis and the limits of managerial change in neoliberalism. Scholars explain how contemporary ways of thinking about change are translated into managerial recipes of, for instance, leadership and engagements of employee empowerment and commitment (e.g., Kenny, 2009; Roberts, 2005, De Cock & Boehm, 2007) that ultimately ensure that everything will effectively remain the same. In this context, Badiou's work is helpful because its focus on the event as a rare occurrence or rupture makes certain situations so elusive to categorise that the multiplicity of their consequences becomes impossible to predict and contain. As commentators of Badiou's event explain, while Covid-19 may not resemble the radical upheaval of a revolution (e.g. Russian Revolution), we are still far from grasping the ways in which Covid-19 will likely interrupt the social fabric and transform human institutions (Howard, 2021; Harman, 2020; Western, 2020).

According to Badiou (2005) every world or situation, which refers to what surrounds us and the ensemble of possibilities that can and cannot emerge, is structured/organized in a particular way, reflecting the sociohistorical conditions in place at a given time, the neoliberal status quo in our case. When the state of the situation is called into question, as in the case of Covid-19 where 'even laissez-faire capitalism appears to have put itself into a temporary stall'

(Howard, 2021:85), the event designates the sudden, unexpected, and incomprehensible appearance of something that has no place in it, revealing the radical contingency of organizing the situation. Events interrupt the order of continuity; they "unpresent" (Badiou 2012: 204) insofar as they suggest the limits of what can be represented, named, and categorised by the resources of civil society. In Badiou's theoretical framework, the event reveals 'the edge of the void', that is that aspect of the situation that has no interest in preserving the status quo as such. This aspect of the situation is at once 'presented' but not 'represented' in the status quo, located at the limits of currently available formal resources. In other words, the members of the group belong to the situation but are excluded from the status quo, such as for instance, the proletariat in Marx's bourgeois societies, the immigrants in the neoliberal society, or the contingent academics in the neoliberal university. Contingent academics are perceived as non-citizens in the neoliberal university, a position that is evident in formal recognition, such as staff status, entitlements, pay and valuing of work, as well as in informal dimensions, including social and decision-making power (Ivancheva & Garvey, 2022; O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019). The border status of this group and its exposure to uncounted, inconsistent way of being in the situation, is what opens it up to aleatory (Hallward, 2003).

The consequences of the event are 'indiscernible and unclassifiable for knowledge' (Badiou 2012: 338). Drawing on Lacan (2006), Badiou argues that the event 'punches a hole' in knowledge structures or status quo that disturbs existing coordinates of an individual's existence, and the possibility of change is all but invisible. Discerning the new patterns depends on the subject's orientation towards the event. To use Badiou's vocabulary, new patterns demand a sensitivity and openness to the 'truth of the event' (Badiou 2005:46). In this way, the subject engages in the construction of a generic truth or a counter-ideological understanding of power relations in society. For Badiou, truth is what contests power and is thus in the interests of all those subjugated by those in power. As such, truth is 'egalitarian' (Badiou

2012:409), defined in terms of universals that would hold true for all people, regardless of differences, for instance, in social class, ethnicity, or gender (Earley, 2014). In his analysis of Covid-19 as a Badiouian event, Howard (2021:99) explains how Covid-19 has exposed 'inequality after inequality in everything from health care to childcare to policing to voting to prisons to wages […] each one a truth called out by collective action', that changed the socio-political order demonstrating how other collective concerns can trump financial ones, and manifesting new ways of engaging and participating in our collective existence.

However, no matter the possibilities truth entails to interrupt the status quo, what matters is our subjective orientation towards the event or how we read the situation. The 'forcing' activity of the subject establishes how the change that is taking place, the undecidable, can be decided upon, and that is legitimate to carry on with it. This subjective encounter with the event is what Badiou describes as a fidelity procedure, an operation that renders insufficient the taken-for-granted coordinates of our lives, and a decision will be necessary to proceed (Badiou, 2005:335). This, in turn, results in the establishment of new patterns, a new present that is irreconcilable with dominant knowledge and requires new discourse and practices in personal ethics and behaviour. For Badiou, an event can evoke a range of subjective responses, as the subject can be faithful to the event and produce a new present, a confused present, or the subject may deny the truth of the event, embracing rigid conformity to the past rather than unfolding the consequences of the event.

In this paper, we explore how the subjective orientation of contingent academics to the Covid-19 event exposes and reconstitutes the truth i.e., the precarity of hope labour, and how their sensitivity and openness to the truth may lead to new patterns that transform the dominant norm of hope labour.

Methodology

Research context and data collection

The study aims to generate insights into the patterns of contingent academics towards hope labour in the wake of the Covid-19 event. The data presented here are part of a broader study on the work and career experiences of contingent academics in universities in the United Kingdom (UK) during the Covid-19 event. We conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with contingent academics from September 2020 to March 2021, a period which partly coincided with the second Covid-19 lockdown in the United Kingdom. Within the context of marketization (Muller-Camen & Salzgeber., 2005) and corporatization (Huzzard et al., 2017) of higher education the Covid-19 event was further operationalised as the reason for redundancies and hiring freezes (Ahmed et al. 2020; Batty, 2020). In the United Kingdom, one of the largest academic job markets worldwide (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2020), one third of all academic staff working in universities are employed on fixed-term contracts, and many institutions employ staff on zero-hour contracts and hourly paid contracts (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2019/2020). At the time of the interviews, academic work had moved from campuses to home, inducing further uncertainty.

Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowballing sampling methods (Silverman, 2010), utilizing a mix of social, academic and trade union networks. We obtained a sample covering a range of UK university types (e.g., research or teaching focused, including elite Russell Group universities). We also strove to ensure demographic diversity to capture the anticipated heterogeneity of participant experience and richness of the sample population rather than to create statistically representative groupings (Bowen, 2008). Our sample reflects contingent academics' diversity in terms of contractual duties (teaching, research, or both), age group, country of origin, career stage, and personal situation. Participants' ages varied from the early 20s to the late 50s. Three participants were still finishing their PhDs at the time of the interview while working in teaching and/or research at, at least, one university. The career stage also varied from early career academics with less

than a year experience to more established academics, who had been in the sector for 17 years. Although our call was open to all academics in contingent contracts most of our participants are women. The overrepresentation of women in our sample might be explained by the fact that women are overrepresented in precarious academic work (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019). In turn, the overrepresentation of women might, for example, be the result of their greater presence on networks related to academic careers (Villeseche et al., 2022) or they may be more inclined to participate in scientific research (Whitaker et al., 2017). Table 1 details the background of the participants. In the findings, participants are identified only by their participant number (Participant 1–40) to ensure privacy.

Insert Table 1 about here

Interviews of one to two hours were conducted via videoconference (Zoom and Microsoft Teams). All the interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. As we aimed to gather vivid accounts of the participants' experiences, we took care to ensure that the questions were open-ended and focused on situations and activities in their worlds (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). Participants were asked about their career histories, current employment, and the impact of the Covid-19 event on their work and life, including institutional support received, future career plans and job search process, and psychological well-being. During the interview, participants were seen as interactive partners in the research study (Cassell et al., 2019; Cotterill, 1992), which often contributed to a dialogue where accounts of experiences were shared between the interviewer and the participant in a two-way manner. Although we do not claim to have privileged access to the experiences of the participants, nor to share an identical position with them, there was a sense of partial common

ground (Pullen, 2006). Participants were keen to share their experiences, with a view to contributing to raising awareness and understanding of contingent academic careers.

Data analysis

The focus of the paper on understanding the 'subjective break' of the norm of hope labour in the accounts of contingent academics was driven by our data. During the interviews, we observed much concern and contestation of academic hope labour, so we decided to dig deeper into it in our analysis. As such, drawing on Badiou's theoretical framework, our analytical aim was to place participants in the situation to understand their subjective orientation to the Covid-19 event and how their sensitivity and openness to the truth or the precarity of hope labour may lead to new patterns that transform the dominant norm of hope labour.

First, data were imported into NVivo12, after which every interview was coded to identify relevant themes related to the experiences and meanings of hope labour instigated by the Covid-19 event. These first-order codes or the 'traces' of the event were local, in the sense that they were grounded in the participants' accounts. Participants distanced themselves and contested the meanings and practices of hope labour, such as norms related to passion for research and teaching. Themes, where respondents identified with hope labour during the Covid-19 event, were also evident in participants' accounts. We bracketed passages relevant to these emergent first-order codes, drawing on the literature and extended the coding framework to include any new themes. We adopted 'progressive focusing', moving from defining fairly loosely empirical codes to more specific ones as the analysis progressed (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1997). In the second stage of analysis, we aimed to identify how these 'uncategorized' (Badiou, 2005) words and practices that did not belong to the situation, or they did not reproduce the neoliberal norm of hope labour, constitute the truth that the becoming subject produces. In other words, we identified what aspects of hope labour are

contested, the consequences that unfolded and the decisions taken. Finally, after multiple rounds of team discussion, and re-grouping of codes and themes, in the third stage, we aggregated into forms of the becoming subject that denote how our participants - the inhabitants of the situation - treated the event.

Our findings present the new patterns that a becoming subject produces in fidelity to the event. Our focus is not to compare or generalize participants' experiences, but to provide evidence about the subjective break from hope labour in neoliberalism. In this sense, articulating the concepts of the event and truth process in dialogue with the data provides us with ideas for theoretical advancement of the phenomenon of hope labour. We provide below quotations substantiating our findings and offering sufficient contextual detail to enable readers to understand the reality as constructed by the participants.

Findings: Transforming academic hope labour

Through an analysis of the accounts of contingent academics, we explore how the truth of the Covid-19 event, i.e. the precarity of hope labour is gradually exposed and reconstituted. Drawing on examples from participants' accounts, we present below the new patterns that emerge in the discourse and material practices of contingent academics and outline the actions and choices our participants make. Manifested through patterns that question the normative understanding of academic hope labour, the new 'encyclopaedia' (Badiou, 2005; 2006) of the situation that develops involves a constant and active redefining and readjusting of one's career aspirations. This is reflected in patterns of 'transforming academic passion' and 'transforming academic professionalism'. We juxtapose those who are truthful to the event with those who negate the Covid-19 event, signifying an obscure transformation. Within this web of personal narratives, we elaborate on the precarity and inequality that underpin contingent academic

work, highlighting the 'subjective break' from the neoliberal norm of hope labour in the wake of the Covid-19 event.

Transforming academic passion

Our analysis illuminates the dynamic ways in which contingent academics construct narratives that challenge the concept of hope labour in the wake of the Covid-19 event, by resisting and transforming the normative understanding of academic passion. Passion is characterized as a profound inclination toward activities that individuals genuinely enjoy or love, considering them significant (Vallerand et al., 2007). It involves a high degree of personal value, consistent investment of time and energy, and integration into one's identity with emotional contingencies (e.g. self-esteem, feelings of social acceptance) attached to it (Magneau et al., 2011). In the neoliberal university, passion normalises the intense and precarious individualized work of hope labour (Lund & Tienari, 2018). Being passionate suggests a highly enthusiastic and subject who does not complain about uncounted, free labour. However, examples from participants' accounts in the wake of the Covid-19 event show how contingent academics resist this normative understanding of academic passion by 'becoming cynical' and 'becoming detached'.

Becoming cynical

Becoming cynical is a form of resistance that enables disruption by questioning accepted norms from those at the margins (Kennedy, 1999; Fleming & Spicer, 2003). Cynical discourse is impolite and disruptive, providing a space for our participants to criticize and speak out about the truth of passion-related teaching, research or academic prospects and vision that sustains the ideology of hope labour. The account of P28, a contingent academic for 11 years, is telling of the new vocabulary that emerged in the wake of the Covid- 19 event. P28 juxtaposes the past with the new present as she becomes cynical of her passion for research:

> I was going along with that. I was like I'm going to be a professor and I'm going to have a big research project of millions of euros or pounds. I was talking like this. And

now I just feel like what the hell? What is the point? What do I want to have a big research project on? Just like the point of all this garbage was missed. And I'm willing to work but I'm not willing to pretend I think the work is some fucking amazing thing that needs me to be (P28).

Similarly, P13, 3 years in contingent contracts, who took maternity leave during the first Covid-19 lockdown describes the anticipation of her role within a research-intensive university as '*belong[ing] to a pre-COVID sort of imagination*'. In her interview, P13 contemplates the unrecognized efforts she dedicated to students, elucidating how the shifting priorities amid the Covid-19 event made her conscious of how 'superfluous' her position was:

> I did so much extra and so much was this extracurricular work with students, but now it's just trying to get these students through the course. And I think that possibly has quite a sort of knock-on effect to, like when everyone's at the coalface, like suddenly my role seems very, like a little bit superfluous (P13).

This discourse of contesting the conventional ideals associated with the passion for an academic vision and status is echoed by P20 who has a decade of experience in contingent contracts, as she articulates that '*I'm very conscious I'm filling all the gaps. So, that's the way I see myself, my position there*' (P20). Likewise, the account of P5, a contingent academic for 6 years in a teaching-intensive university, signals suspicion, interruption and a faithful transformation attuned to the current situation. In her interview, she is cynical of her effort and explains how she started to redefine her future career prospects:

> I felt a little bit cynical and thought well does it make sense for me to be giving all these contacts and all this effort to this programme when there's no real sense of opportunity here for me or no real sense of becoming a part of staff, in reality.

The cynicism and irony related to voluntary effort and extra, uncompensated work is echoed by P10, a contingent academic for 6 years who works at two universities at the time of the interview. As she explains:

> I caught myself doing this actually this morning and kicked myself, doing the extra, doing lots of, look how conscientious I am and how I do all of this devoted work to show what a good person I am. Please give me a job. It's like really, it doesn't make any difference at all. (P10)

These examples illustrate how becoming cynical disrupts the established discourses that

sustain hope labour in the neoliberal university, providing an alternative, counter-ideological perspective on power relations within society. For our participants, becoming cynical is an effective means to an ethical and political end, as they actively call attention to the precarity of hope labour and the inequality experienced.

Becoming emotionally detached

Becoming detached reveals the logic of emotion which erupts the neoliberal status quo of hope labour. In her seminal work on emotional labour, Arlie Hochschild (1983) argues that emotions are controlled and governed by social rules. Emotions have a social component and as such they are intertwined with meaning-making. While hope labour requires that precarious academics discount inequalities, reproducing themselves as 'exploitable', becoming detached is an active response to 'passionate attachment' (Gill, 2009:41), bringing to light the affective engagements of our participants with their surroundings. Becoming detached illustrates the emotional dynamics that disrupt the neoliberal norm of hope labour making visible the interplay between affiliation and detachment, proximity and distance, and inclusion and exclusion (Ahmed, 2014; Whetherell et al., 2015). P27 explains how, in response to the announcement of the Covid-19 lockdown and the shift to online learning in universities, she established boundaries and distanced herself from the neoliberal norm of hope labour to avoid emotional engagement:

> I felt that because I was just a small grid in the system, I wasn't that important. I felt that I'm just hired to do these modules so I'm not going to get too involved in this emotionally. I kept a distance and just observed because the pay is not that much (P27)

In a similar vein, P17, who has navigated through contingent contracts for 17 years, explains how the Covid-19 event accentuated emotional detachment by spotlighting feelings of being undervalued, challenging the prevailing discourse of hope labour that promotes and values an enthusiastic academic:

> Sometimes I want to say devalued or unvalued, but that would be the case if there was a value to start with, which I don't feel there is. The pandemic has really increased that

because the hard work has increased, the expectations have increased, the pressures increased, the anxiety has increased that you may lose your job, and equally how you're valued hasn't changed. (P17)

Relatedly, much tension and incompatibility for many of our participants arose from the idea of 'belonging'. This was often discussed via the idea of 'fit' or congruence, as P19, who has been a contingent academic for a year explains:

> I definitely felt frustrated that I didn't know where I fit in a department that I was supposed to know very well. I spent four and a half years of my life there. It wasn't that I moved to a new institution, and I didn't know where I fit. I should be able to know where I fit and I was surrounded by people that knew me. I wasn't, you know, a new colleague (P19).

Becoming detached foregrounds the political through emotional confrontation and interruption, and the deliberate embrace of dissensus.

Transforming academic professionalism

Hope labour extends to the social production of the professional self (Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021). Much like other professions, an academic's professional connection to work represents a mode of being, contributing not only to personal satisfaction but also to the public good (Barcan, 2018). Academic discretion and autonomy drawing on collective knowhow is needed to perform the work (Fleming, 2022). Studies of professionalism have shown that, this autonomy as well as goodwill are important in knowledge-intensive occupations (Muzio et al., 2019). This idea of extension of one's goodwill inherent in the norm of hope labour, often associated with an individual's ethico-political commitments (Gill, 2010) is often used as a trade-off mechanism against monetary rewards. Our analysis shows how the Covid-19 event renders insufficient such taken-for-granted norms (Badiou, 2005; 2006). Erupting practices and values that legitimize the academic professional legitimacy were dominant in our data. New patterns for the becoming subject begin to emerge: 'becoming secure/ independant', and 'becoming refrained'.

Becoming secure

The Covid-19 event affected the job market, to the extent that even precarious jobs became unavailable. In this *"dead academic job market"* (P3), becoming secure challenges narratives of the material sacrifice of academic hope labour. This need for security and a long-term permanent position is exemplified in the account of P13, who has been a contingent academic for six years:

> But I wonder if now that I've realised that I've been doing fixed term contracts for eight and a half, nearly nine years, and I've got a young baby and the background of COVID makes precarity feel even more precarious, I've started wondering if it might have been wiser to have pursued a permanent teaching post rather than continue on this kind of this sort of early career route. (P13)

Becoming secure entails taking action to expand career possibilities beyond academia, either by looking for opportunities to use skills differently or even leaving academia. The account of P12 who had contingent contracts for three years is illustrative of this transformation:

> COVID made me realise plans are nothing. You can plan and something like this virus can come and break everything down. I recently attended a work event and during the networking session, there was someone from [X company] who was interested in what I do. I have a chat next Friday to ask some questions about industry to get a feel of how industry is, to make a decision (P12).

However, such a decision does not come easy for everyone. While our participants acknowledge that a decision is required to proceed, this can still be confusing. According to Badiou (2005; 2006), a subject is not exclusively in the service of the truth. Reactive transformation denotes a confused present. There is still novelty, participants do not deny the new present, but the reactive transformation harbours actions where some of our participants deny the urgency of the situation. This is evidenced in the account of P10:

> There's been this sort of forced stop for reflection. I keep applying for things, lots of things as they come up, and have also actually started to apply for non-academic jobs. That's both for my own sense of self and also financially. I'm sure it's connected to the pandemic too, that idea that should you be doing something more for social good (P10).

Research suggests that a sense of career commitment may lead to 'lower withdrawal intentions' (Duffy & Dik 2013: 430). However, in the wake of Covid-19, P33 explains: '*I see friends who are dropping out of academia, but the pandemic has just been a complete accelerator, the*

amount of people who are dropping out has just trebled from the days that I know. In an area that's a problem anyway, the pandemic has just finished people off (P33). Some of our participants decided to leave academia to take up permanent contracts. The narrative of P37 is illustrative of this transformation:

> I'm actually leaving X University at the end of this month to take up a permanent contract with a private sector organisation. My contract with X University was for 24 months, a fixed term contract. So along the way an offer came for a permanent role, and therefore I decided to take up the private sector organisation offer. (P37)

Such examples demonstrate the rupture that the Covid-19 event brought to the career considerations of contingent academics.

Becoming refrained

While academic discretion and freedom is required to perform the job, the autonomy academics experience is inherent in the neoliberal norm of hope labour. Unpaid, voluntary work is considered necessary for autonomy (Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021). In this context, autonomy is not equated with choice, but rather with the freedom to act according to one's future aspirations and calculations. Underpinning this promise is that an academic career enables individuals to pursue their ambition and self-realization while carving out their personal and felicitous equilibrium between career and personal life. Notwithstanding these promises, scholars explain how the neoliberal university drives a culture of presenteeism (Ruhle & Süß, 2019; Hadjisolomou et al., 2022). Bone's (2019) concept of the 'continuous present', argues that young, precarious academic workers are required to make commitments and sacrifices driven by feelings of job insecurity and aspirations for career advancement. Covid-19 obviously amplified the university's expectation that work can be undertaken everywhere, anytime (Ivancheva & Garvey, 2022). Our data show how the Covid-19 event erupted this culture of presenteeism, giving the possibility to many of our participants to determine the conditions of their work. Kim et al (2020) show that non-permanent workers who often

perceive their jobs as insecure were more likely to report presenteeism compared to permanent workers. Yet, the Covid-19 event enabled many of our participants to 'refrain themselves' from being present, providing the possibility to decide the circumstances of their work. This is expressed in practices of balancing work and life, as well as stepping back from the community life. The account of P5, who 'retreated' is indicative:

> I wonder if actually, the opportunities that they're giving me are hindering my personal life. It's affecting my life, my work/life balance and my sense of value as well. Well in some ways COVID has improved my work/life balance. I retreated a little bit and COVID helped me in that sense because I was involved in this cycle of organising things and webinars and events, and teaching and all that.

The focus on personal self is also reflected in the account of P12, a contingent academic for three years, who used to be in the workplace most days. In her interview, she explicates how she found time at home to 'understand more myself'.

> I was coming most days in the lab, I didn't have that time to do stuff, like, write your ideas down. So I did all this stuff that I wasn't able to do before. I also started exercising and going for walks. I spent a lot of my time at home on personal development, trying to find my values, and understanding more myself. (P12).

For others not travelling/commuting to workplace allowed them to offset the ill effects arising from high feelings of obligation that drive presenteeism. As P24 describes:

> It felt more positive, to be honest, because now everything is online, so it seems more accessible, you don't have to travel somewhere to meet people. I think that kind of felt like a positive side of COVID (P24).

Becoming refrained is also discussed by our participants in relation to the notion of academic community. Community is important in academic job where contingencies arise. It involves collegiality, shared purpose and collective responsibilities in which status differences are de-emphasized and individuals interact as equals" (Massy et al., 1994:18). Yet much uncounted work falls under the rubric of community, upholding hope labour (Fleming & Harley, 2023). Although it was acknowledged that meeting people and the intellectual community to *bounce ideas off one another*" (P10) was important, recurrent in our data were accounts illustrating how for many of our participants the Covid-19 event erupted the dominant idea of community

in the neoliberal university. This is particularly evident in the narrative of P5 who becomes refrained from community when the anticipation of shared aspirations and rewards collapses amid the challenges brought about by Covid-19. For P5 becoming refrained signifies a positive transformation, as she explains in the excerpt below:

> I think potentially my issue is that I was half promised things or people were saying of course we'll find something for you because you're so good and you do so many things. But of course, nobody has said anything remotely similar to that now in months, which is COVID. In some ways it has been positive in the sense that I was very attached to the community at my university. And now I have also had the chance to detach a little bit from that link and build myself and my profile a little bit more independently. (P5).

This becomes more pronounced in the narrative of P26. During the interview, P26 articulates the sense of exclusion she encountered during lockdowns, shedding light on the nuanced interplay between holding on to collective responsibilities and the subjective experience of community:

> I thought, especially being from the States and all of the socio-political turmoil I found, that no one even reached out to me, to be like you know, are you okay? (P26).

Likewise, the narrative of P10 sheds light to the exploitation and inequality underpinning the idea of community engagement:

> You can get really tired of people saying, oh I'm so sorry, if it was up to me, I would. It's like well just sort it out then. They're sort of super aware that they've got permanent staff and that I'm still on an hourly contract and they're sort of if I could get you some more hourly paid work, would you like that? (P10)

Such examples demonstrate the new patterns that emerge in the wake of the Covid-19 event. Becoming refrained erupts prevailing norms of presenteeism and community, underpinning professional legitimacy that contribute to the reproduction of hope labour.

Obscure transformation*: An Occulted present

Despite the changing discourses and practices observed in the narratives of many of our participants, some repressed the new present and hope for change. According to Badiou (2009), an obscure transformation entails the negation of the traces of the event that is in process. Our

findings show how some of our participants continued to rigidly conform to the past, sustaining hope labour. The following examples from our participants succinctly capture an obscure transformation. P11, who has had contingent contracts for 11 years and is employed in a research-intensive university, explains how she continued to work for 'zero pay', having lost her job:

> By the time I lost my job in April 2021, until I started my new job in January 2022, I was working full-time hours, at least a nine to five, if not longer hours, for zero pay. I was organising their research seminar series so I was the convener for that. Because it's the right thing to do. I've always been driven by what's the right thing to do rather than by what my contract dictates and that's probably a bit naïve, but as I see it, I'll always be very loyal to [Z University] because they've created opportunities for me, obviously, I've made the most of them, but I now want to do that for the students. So it's more than a job, it's almost like pay back. Almost like volunteering.

Her narrative exemplifies the sense of vocation that characterizes the academic profession. Vocation represents a mode of being enacted through practice, contributing not only to personal satisfaction but also to the public good (Barcan, 2018). This sense of vocation, often perceived as an extension of one's ethico-political commitments (Gill, 2010) is inherent in the norm of hope labour. P11 extends the generosity of the university to students with her free labour during Covid-19 when she was mostly needed. Her narrative demonstrates how this sentiment of hope labour is intrinsically rewarding; yet it involves an investment of time and energy and is used as a trade-off mechanism against monetary rewards.

Similarly, the sense of vocation is evidenced in the narrative of Participant 32, a contingent academic for three years. Her account is illustrative of an obscure transformation as she sustains hope labour amidst the Covid-19 event. As Badiou (2009) argues, this obscure form presupposes the existence of a new present and would not be what it is without it. P32 acknowledges the consequences of the pandemic; yet she perpetuates hope labour by working harder.

> I can't imagine they're going to be hiring people much, the staff seem to be the first thing to go. I don't know what it would be like if we hadn't had a pandemic on, but I'm

a little bit concerned that this will be one of the final nails in the coffin for me getting a permanent job anywhere any time soon. It's also made me work a lot harder. The pandemic has just made everything so stressful and scary and the actual workload in itself has just exploded, a lot of it very pastoral stuff as well, there's just so much more pastoral care. I'm really grateful that I get to do it and I really want to make sure that my students are okay. I'm so scared for all of them (P32).

The obscure transformation highlights the dominant norm of hope labour in the accounts of contingent academics.

Discussion

Our study explored how the Covid-19 event erupted hope labour for contingent academics and the changing patterns that emerged. Here, we discuss our contributions to the scholarship on hope labour in organisation studies before moving to the conclusion.

Specifically, existing research on hope labour has documented the commitment and attachment to the neoliberal ideology of hope labour that shapes people's desires and conducts and animates them as 'entrepreneurs of the self' (Foucault, 2008). At this juncture, Badiou's philosophy on the event offers a powerful account that allows us to consider how to think of change and transformation in neoliberalism. It let us demonstrate the interruption of the neoliberal ideology of hope labour brought about by the Covid-19 event in contingent academic work and what was previously judged to be 'impossible', reconstituting the truth of the precarity of hope labour. Our study shows how the Covid-19 event, while manifested 'locally' in the lives and careers of our participants, allowed for the articulation of a new present, reflecting the existing historical and social context. In the wake of the Covid-19 event, a mountain of stories in the press and social media about the 'great resignation', emerged. The great resignation, a phrase coined by the academic Antony Kotz, captures a significant shift in the labour market marked by an overwhelming wave of resignations exceeding 4 million, as recorded by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics Survey (Schmiedehaus et al., 2023). This surge in resignations extends across industries, including the field of education. The great resignation

has also led to similar movements such as 'quiet quitting' reflecting employees withdrawing their extra role behaviours. This marks a pivotal moment in the workforce where employees were granted a newfound sense of autonomy (Needelman, 2022). When employees become cynical, resignations become contagious, as employees influence each other to collectively quit (Brown et al., 2022; Klotz, 2022). Resignation rates still continue to linger at high levels compared to historical norms, with employees reporting increasing work/life balance conflict coupled with significant mental health challenges. These challenges, whose impact is difficult to predict have also notable implications for employers (Ng & Stanton, 2023).

This novel, political, global, and almost nonsensical movement that emerged in the wake of the Covid-19 event challenges existing norms at work and life and renders insufficient taken-for granted coordinates. Indeed, our analysis demonstrates the changing patterns that our participants adopt, actively redefining, and readjusting their career aspirations. In the new present brought about by the Covid-19 event, the becoming subject in fidelity to the event transforms the normative understanding of academic passion and academic professionalism that sustain hope labour. In particular, our participants become cynical and emotionally detached, speaking out and challenging normative expectations of passion-related teaching, research or academic vision that assume an uncomplaining, enthusiastic subject engaging in voluntary, uncompensated labour. While to an external witness this cynicism and emotional detachment on may seem arbitrary, lacking a referent inside the situation such as it is, it evidences the emergence of a counter-ideological understanding that questions the legitimacy of hope labour by the inhabitants of the situation (Pluth, 2010).

Similarly, transforming academic professionalism reveals the changing patterns that underpin the social production of a professional self, sustaining hope labour. Our participants take action to become secure by expanding career possibilities beyond academia, either by looking for opportunities to use skills differently or exiting the profession. Reflecting the norms

of 'quiet quitting', our participants challenge the culture of presenteeism hidden in the logic of academic vocation, taking action to determine the conditions of their work by balancing work/life, taking time for the self, and stepping back from the demanding community life that upholds hope labour. Faithful transformation is orientated to the unfolding of an expansive, more egalitarian, new present; change is always incomplete. In this context, hope becomes a liberating utopia 'for what might become real' (Rorty, 1998: 18–19) and a sense of possibility to herald a better alternative, grounded in a confidence in the powers of human agency (Gutiérrez, 2001).

Yet, our analysis also demonstrates how the new present is negated by some participants who continue to rigidly conform to the past, sustaining hope labour. According to our Badiouian theorising, the patient construction of a new present does not destroy the situation; instead, it supplements the situation by bringing into existence new subjects that were inexistent before the event (Bassett, 2016). Our analysis shows how some of our participants engage in uncounted, free labour and work harder, even as unemployed. They sustain and perpetuate the neoliberal ideology of hope labour rather than unfold the consequences of the Covid-19 event.

In this sense, our analysis makes a novel contribution to understanding the connection between the allure of hope labour and transformation in neoliberalism by illuminating the political emphasis brought about by the Covid-19 event and the subjective ideological transformation that our participants encounter.

Cconclusion and research avenues

Drawing on Badiou (2005;2006; 2009), we study how the Covid-19 event interrupted the neoliberal norm of hope labour in contingent academic work. Our research uncovers novel patterns that manifest in both the discourses and material practices of contingent academics, providing valuable insights to the evolving study of hope labour. While our study contributes

significantly to the research on hope labour, it has limitations that open further research avenues. Importantly, we acknowledge that our sample consists primarily – but not solely – of women academics in the field of business and social sciences. Future research should explore the transformations the Covid-19 event brought about in the lives and careers of academics in other disciplines facing different challenges, as well as to uncounted professionals in different industries. The novel patterns observed in our study are indicative of the possibilities that a Badiouian analysis may generate. Given that the event is manifested locally, future research should explore this question in different geographies and contexts. In particular, future research on the transformation of hope labour could explore the ethical and political implications for more egalitarian and inclusive work practices.

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Appendix
TABLE 1

P	Country of origin	Gender	Age range	Caring responsibilities	University type *	Years in contingent roles
P1	British	F	31-40	None	1	7
P2	British	F	41-50	None	1	5.5
P3	Indian	F	31-40	None	2	3
P4	British	M	31-40	1 child	1	5
P5	Spanish	F	31-40	relatives	2	6
P6	Australian	F	41-50	2 child.	1	12
P7	Indian	F	31-40	None	1	4
P8	British	F	23-30	1 child	1	4.5
P9	British	F	41-50	1 child	1	7
P10	British	F	51-60	None	1,2	6
P11	British	F	31-40	None	1	7
P12	Greek	F	23-30	None	1	3
P13	British	F	31-40	1 child	1	3
P14	British/American	F	31-40	1 child	1	9
P15	British	F	31-40	1 child	1	10
P16	British	F	51-60	None	2	7
P17	French	F	41-50	2 child.	1,2	17
P18	British	F	31-40	None	1	2
P19	Greek	F	21-30	None	1	1
P20	Brazilian	F	51-60	None	2	10
P21	British	F	31-40	None	1	1
P22	British	F	21-30	None	1	3
P23	Thai	F	41-50	1 child	1	14
P24	Italian	F	21-30	None	1	0.5
P25	Peruvian	F	41-50	None	1	2
P26	North American	F	31-40	None	2	2
P27	Finnish	F	41-50	None	2	0.5
P28	British	F	41-50	1 child	1	11
P29	British	F	31-40	None	1	11
P30	British	F		Partner	1	8
P31	Austrian	F	21-30	None	2,1	10
P32	British	F	41-50	None	1	3

P33	British	F	31-40	None	1	10
P34	British	F	21-30	2 child.; relative	1	2
P35	British	F		1 child	1	6
P36	Spanish	F	31-40	None	2	4
P37	Malaysian	M	21-30	None	1	9
P38	Nigerian	M	21-30	None	1	2
P39	Scottish	M	31-40	None	1	3
P40	British	M	41-50	None	1	12

* 1- research intensive university; 2 – teaching intensive university