Introduction: Hope and Feminist Theory

Rebecca Coleman and Debra Ferreday

Hope is central to marginal politics which speaks of desires for equality or simply for a better life. Feminism, for example, might be characterised as a politics of hope, a movement underpinned by a utopian drive for full equality. This version of hope has been highly visible in the discourse of political liberalism, most notably in Barack Obama’s phrase “the audacity of hope”, a mobilisation of an affirmative politics which nevertheless implicitly reproduces the notion — emergent at the time of the election but growing ever more pervasive at the time of writing — that we are living in hopeless times. The widespread investment in Obama as a figure of hope — an investment which stretched far beyond the borders of the United States — indicates a need for hopefulness, which in itself suggests that the time of hope is already past. Such a notion of hopelessness suggests that hope exists always in memory: as an object of nostalgia, of mourning, of regret. This regret may mean a recasting of past hopes as false, as, for example, in the hopefulness that attended the election of the UK Labour government in 1997: in the light of the 2010 Chilcot inquiry into Iraq, the hope invested in Tony Blair can seem deluded, even decadent. If lost hope is imagined as having been justified but not satisfied, on the other hand, it becomes the object of nostalgia: a condition which already applies to the sheer relief that greeted Obama’s succession of George W. Bush in 2009 and which is already, a year later, impossible to write of except in a rather wistful past tense. Hope, the last fragile thing to exit Pandora’s box, is a frail creature that is always in danger of being lost.

Such a narrative of hope as having passed is a familiar one in relation to feminist theory, as well as feminist politics more generally. In recent years, feminism has seen the production of a prevailing mood of hopelessness around a generational model of progress, which is widely imagined to have “failed”. Feminism has been so successful in achieving particular equalities that young women see it as irrelevant and (worse?) as boring (McRobbie 2004, 2008). It seems that to speak of hope in the context of feminism, then, is necessarily to speak of hopelessness; hope is, in Mary Zournazi’s (2002, p. 15) terms, “what sustains life in the face of despair”.

ISSN 1479-7585 print/1740-1666 online/10/040313-09
© 2010 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/14797581003765283
Zournazi’s (2002) collection of interviews with academics and writers on the topic of hope has been a central point of inspiration for this collection. In thinking through the future of feminist theory, we take as our starting point her claim that hope is “not simply the desire for things to come, or the betterment of life. It is the drive or energy that embeds us in the world — in the ecology of life, ethics and politics” (Zournazi 2002, p. 15). Indeed, in his analysis of theories of hope, which takes as its starting point the scant attention that has been paid to hope and a recent growing interest in it in the context of the emotional turn, Darren Webb (2007, p. 67) recognises “an important distinction between ... two sets of questions: those concerning the nature of hope (what hope is) and those concerning its characteristics (what it is to hope)”. Furthermore, he argues that:

two overarching meta-modes of hoping can be identified. The first is directed towards a specific objective and takes the form of "I hope that/for p". The second lacks a concrete objective and takes the form of an open-ended orientation towards the future. (Webb 2007, p. 68)

Webb’s point here about the two “meta-modes of hoping” — which he calls “goal-directed hope” and “open-ended hope” — echoes Zournazi’s insights and can also be found in other work on hope: for example, the goal-directed hope provided by the beauty industry (see, for example, Peiss 1998) and by new medical technologies and developments (see, for example, Novas 2006), and the open-ended hope involved in what Webb calls the “patient hope” that Gabriel Marcel writes of, where “hope refuses to lay down conditions, makes no claims on the future and insists on nothing” (Webb 2007, p. 69), and Ernst Bloch’s hope, “experienced as a restless, future-orientated longing for that which is missing” (Webb 2007, p. 71).

The essays in this collection commit to explore further the apparent tension between hope as tied to particular “things to come” and as a “drive or energy”. That is, they all grapple in some way with how hope figures and structures feminist theory as a movement directed towards achieving certain goals (of full equality, for example) and as a movement which is in itself inherently hopeful. They are all attempts to consider carefully what it might mean to theorise the affirmative, where, as Maureen McNeil’s short position paper on the turn to the affirmative in recent feminist work on nature and the material warns, to theorise the affirmative and/or to theorise affirmatively should not mean the loss of the critical edge of feminism.¹ In this sense, and as we explore further below, these essays might be characterised as doing a kind of cultural studies of hope, which Sara Ahmed (2007, p. 7), writing on happiness, describes as “a willingness to refuse to consent to its truth”. For Ahmed, what is so important about cultural studies is this willingness, which “suspends belief”:

¹. This short paper, a version of which was presented at the workshop, is included by kind permission of Maureen McNeil.
In this mode of suspension, we can consider not only what makes happiness good, but also how happiness participates in making things good. Cultural studies can allow us to explore how happiness can make certain truths "true" and certain goods "good". (Ahmed 2007, p. 7)

Drawing on this argument in relation to hope, we are suggesting that what is involved in an "affirmative" theorisation of hope and feminist theory is not necessarily a belief that hope is true and good (although it may well turn out that hope is, indeed, "good"), but rather a consideration of what hope does.\(^2\) Does hope necessarily imply a fantasy of perfectibility, a progression to a utopian future, or might it also be conceived of as an attachment, a tendency, an inclination, a lure? Does life tend towards hope, happiness, optimism? And, if so, what are the consequences when hope fails? Who decides which hopes are false? What is the cost of giving up hope? Exploring hope in this way, we suggest, might help to understand and explore what has been argued to be both the success and failure of contemporary feminism.

Angela McRobbie’s work on the current situation of feminism provides a particularly helpful starting point for an understanding and contextualisation of how hope might be a concept that is worth exploring in relation to feminist theory. McRobbie’s (2004, p. 256) argument is that in Western post-industrial countries, feminism is involved in a "double entanglement", where it is at once "taken into account" and "repudiated". Focusing particularly on media representations of gender, femininity and sexuality, McRobbie suggests that certain aspects of feminist critique (including, but not restricted to, critiques of heteronormativity, the standardisation of a beauty ideal and restricted access to public spheres of education and work) have been so widely incorporated into mainstream culture that they are seen as arguments that have been won. Feminism, which may be acknowledged as important once, is now seen as been and gone — or, better, must be shown to have been and gone; due to its potential transformative power (which "haunts" the present), it must be repudiated. Thus, McRobbie (2004, p. 256) argues that feminism is "almost hated" (and we may wish to question that "almost") and analyses examples from popular culture to demonstrate how young women in particular (are forced or encouraged to) distance themselves from feminism in order to show that they are not past it (see also Gill 2006).

What seems to be at stake in these, and other, arguments is that feminism is currently in crisis. This notion of crisis is not new, dating back at least as far as debates around post-feminism and third-wave feminism in the mid 1990s and in the academic feminism of the time (Einhorn 1995; Kaplan 1996; Whelehan 2000). Indeed, it is possible to argue that a narrative of a crisis "of" feminism (feminism having failed or being over) as well as "within" feminism is central to the third wave itself. This notion of crisis is particularly visible in popular feminist writing. Imelda Whelehan (2000, p. 194) typifies this when she claims that "a ‘crisis’ in

\(^2\) Indeed, this is also the argument that Ahmed (2007, p. 7) makes for a cultural studies of happiness: "Rather than begin with the question “what is happiness?” a cultural studies approach asks: “what does happiness do?” To what do we appeal to when we appeal to happiness?"
feminism seemed to have been consensually acknowledged” as early as the mid-1980s; intriguingly, she attributes this to the increasing recognition at that time of differences within the category of “woman” and indeed the category of “feminism”, as feminism fragmented into “differing internal movements [with] their own do’s and don’ts” (Whelehan 2000, p. 211). Whelehan’s notion of an identity crisis in the women’s movement is further borne out in concerns about the ways in which feminism gets appropriated and twisted by consumer capitalism: in Natasha Walter’s (2010) claim, for example, that the notion of “women’s liberation” has been reduced to a sexual liberation which is, in reality, a resurgence of sexism. This individualising and isolating version of “liberation”, for Walter, masks a deep internal hopelessness, in which discomfort with the status quo is silenced.

A sense of feminism in crisis would seem to indicate that feminism is now hopeless. However, it seems to us that there may be other ways of conceiving the present state of feminism which suggests something else. For instance, if there is a crisis in feminism (and this point is debateable), this need not necessarily result in hopelessness. Gayatri Spivak (2002), for example, makes an explicit link between crisis and hope. Drawing on the resistance of “subaltern” groups, “cut off from lines of colonial mobility”, she argues that “bringing to crisis is an enabling moment”:

> crisis is an un-anticipatable moment which makes something inherited perhaps jump into something other, and fix onto something that is opposed. For me, crisis is not the leap of faith because it brings faith into crisis, but rather is the leap of hope. And that’s how I would connect the potential of crisis and hope in resistances of all kinds. (Spivak 2002, p. 173)

Spivak’s connection here between resistance and hope is important for, on the one hand, it could be argued that a crisis of feminism is caused by the movement no longer being (able to be) resistant. McRobbie’s argument about the “double entanglement” of feminism points precisely to this situation. It is feminism’s success in becoming mainstreamed that produces a sense of hopelessness. Feminism has been so successful that its critical nature has been neutralised — hence the appropriation of feminism by George W. Bush as a major part of his rationale for going to war on the Taliban in Afghanistan, or, as Claire Colebrook explores in her essay in this collection, the figure of Republican US presidential hopeful Sarah Palin as “at least in some senses an effect (however monstrous) of feminist hope”. In terms of Spivak’s understanding, then, it would seem that the integration of feminism into “lines of colonial mobility” produces a moment of crisis not as enabling but, on the contrary, as disabling. According to such a position, feminism is no longer a progressive movement.

On the other hand, though, Spivak’s point regarding crisis as a “leap of hope” seems suggestive. In particular, Spivak’s explanation of crisis as “an un-anticipatable moment” is helpful in developing a different, more hopeful, understanding of feminism. This sense of un-anticipation as inherent in hope and hoping is evident not only in Spivak’s conceptualisation but also in how Brian Massumi
(2002) links hope with affect. For Massumi (2002, p. 212), affect “gives you the feeling that there is always an opening to experiment, to try and see. This brings a sense of potential to the situation”. Massumi (2002, p. 211) thus wants to separate hope from “an expected success” and makes a distinction between hope and optimism in order to place hope “in the present” (emphasis in original). The notions of the relations between hope, optimism, temporality, affect and potential occupy a number of the essays here. Claire Colebrook, for example, argues that hope, which “seems to be the orientation beyond the present that splits the present”, is (for feminist theory in particular) both “intoxicating in its capacity to ... open a world beyond the given” and “toxic [in] precluding us from acting and living in the now”. Rebecca Coleman and Mónica Moreno Figueroa examine the temporalities of hope through a focus on beauty as it emerged in their empirical research with white British girls and mestiza Mexican women. They conceive beauty as an embodied affect, an inclination (Berlant 2002) through which beauty is placed in the past or deferred to the future. Felicity Colman, drawing on Guattari’s concept of becoming-woman and working with and through the style of a manifesto, argues that feminist manifestos implicate and produce a particular gendered time, whereby (feminist) subjectivities can operate outside of market-based economies and “[take action, ... intervene, ... re-imagine and reconfigure the forms of current existence”.

Such a focus on hope as both actual and potential, and as that which might be unanticipated, helps us to think through how the apparent crisis of feminism might be understood differently. In particular, what emerges across the essays in this collection is a rethinking of time as more complicated than a linear model would suggest. At stake in a number of these essays are questions involving the status of the past, present and future in and for feminist theory — for example, what is the role of the past in determining the present and future? How might desires for a better future be actualised? What is the condition and possibility of transformation in contemporary feminist theory? One of the ways in which feminism is seen to have failed is, as already indicated, through young women’s reluctance to identify as feminist and with feminism. Although this situation may not bear empirical “truth” (the activities of the London Feminist Network, as just one example, show that many young women are involved in feminist networking and campaigning), if we accept that young women find it difficult to see themselves as feminist, it is not only necessary to examine what “feminism” means for these women (and here Gill’s and McRobbie’s work, among others, is extremely helpful), but also to consider what temporality is attributed to the feminist movement. For example, as a number of feminist theorists have pointed out, the temporality of feminism cannot be conceived as straightforwardly linear.

3. See, also, Ahmed (2007) who, drawing on the etymology of happiness — ’coming from the word “hap” suggesting chance’ (p. 12) — suggests that a theorisation of happiness ’might be one that is open to the “perhaps” of what happens’ (p. 13).
Lisa Adkins (2004) offers a particularly interesting position on the seeming failure or crisis of feminism, which she argues is an idea produced through a particular temporal model. For Adkins (2004, p. 427), it is only possible to imagine feminism as "having passed" if feminism is understood to be a particular way of knowing that depends on "teleological and progressive notions of history". Adkins identifies and critiques the ways in which feminism and popular culture more generally are "cast" in "generational, familial and reproductive terms", and argues that this is key to the very idea of the failure of feminism:

the passing of feminism and the dynamics and characteristics of post-feminist popular culture are cast as an issue of a failed reproduction of feminist consciousness, a failure of generational reproduction, with younger women refusing to inherit their feminist legacies. (Adkins 2004, p. 430)

For Adkins (2004, p. 441), then, what becomes crucial is a consideration of feminism not only in terms of loss, nostalgia and melancholia, but also of how "feminism is implicated in and is co-determinous with the rapid transformations of cultural and social life that accompany modernity". The ways in which power relations between different generations and/or what are seen as different developmental capacities are reproduced in (social, cultural and feminist) theory is examined further in the essays included here. Taking as her focus the role that is given to new media in causing and understanding youth suicide, Debra Ferreday analyses the mobilisation of a notion of "the death of hope" in both news reports and academic theorising. For Ferreday, what is of concern is how a media effects model is perpetuated so that "the death of hope is [seen as] an effect of consuming particular forms of media" and, as such, "young people’s mourning, and particularly online mourning, is dismissed, seen as excessive or insincere". Celia Jameson examines how the troubled concept of the Stockholm syndrome is attributed to subjects who are seen as more open or susceptible to the affectivity of others. She critiques recent theories of affect, such as those proposed by Massumi, as intrinsically hopeful, and argues instead that theories of collective trauma offer ways to conceive "the bonds between people in traumatic contexts" as hopeful.

All of the essays here are interested in considering the state of feminist theory. Our understanding of theory is not, as some contemporary feminist (and other social and cultural) work might suggest, a turn to the abstract; theory, as we conceive it here, is not a system that is detached and removed from the everyday world of inequalities and difference (although McNeil’s short paper here argues that the affirmative tendency in feminist theory risks losing sight of the continuation of inequality). Our interest in hope is, in part, generated by a desire to explore the inherent interconnectedness of life and theory. Drawing on Claire Colebrook’s (2003) work on happiness, we are interested in exploring life as something other than a “mystified false consciousness requiring the illumination of theory” (Colebrook 2003, p. 133). For Colebrook, drawing on a number of philosophical understandings of happiness, theory is not that which makes intelligible everyday life, but rather theory is immanent in and a creation of
INTRODUCTION: HOPE AND FEMINIST THEORY

everyday life. Theory is thus not that which should “judge” life but that which should be “held to account by the everyday” (Colebrook 2003, p. 134).

Indeed, writing on what she terms “cruel optimism” — a concept which has been another inspiration for this collection — Berlant (2002, p. 72) argues that her development of the term “optimism” is a specific response to a kind of cultural theory that deems scepticism “the only ethical position for the intellectual to take with respect to the subject’s ordinary attachments”. A cultural theory that prioritises optimism rather than scepticism is not to be overwhelmingly positive, but rather to “be aghast at the ease with which intellectuals shit on people who hold a dream” (Berlant 2006, p. 23). It is an attempt to think through why people “do not prefer to interfere with varieties of immiseration, but choose to ride the wave of the system of attachment that they are used to” (Berlant 2006, p. 23), without rendering those people active or passive, or duped or brainless. Or, as Claire Colebrook (2003, p. 134) puts it in another context: “why is it that human life, in its everydayness, so often appears to choose its unhappiness?” Berlant (2002, p. 74) is particularly interested in what she terms “the most disappointing thing of all”: “the faith that adjustment to certain forms or practices of living and thinking will secure one’s happiness; for example, the prospect of class mobility, romantic narrative, normalcy, nationality, or better sexual identity”. “Stupid optimism” (Berlant 2002) or “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2006) attends to the hopelessness of people’s dreams but does not denigrate these dreams, or reduce this hopelessness to individual people. For Berlant, hope, dreams and optimism are social, cultural and economic processes, and their stupidity and cruelty must be understood as such.

In different ways, the essays in this collection deal with the simultaneity of hope and hopelessness, dreams and futility, optimism and cruelty, in, of and according to feminist theory. The essays develop critical cultural theory, where hope, theory and everyday life and practice are intimately entwined. Michael Taussig (2002, p. 44) explains his “suspicion that a lot of intellectual activity, at least in the twentieth-century Western cultural orbit, correlates lack of hope with being smart, or lack of hope with profundity”, and, similarly, the authors here refuse to “shit on” hope — hopes, dreams, optimism are taken and treated seriously. For a number of the contributors, hope involves and is produced through the critical practice of reading differently. For example, through an analysis of the feminist science fiction novel The Fifth Sacred Thing (1993) by Starhawk, Joan Haran proposes that the novel be read “as theory”, that is as “enabl[ing] the reader to identify imaginatively with the embodied experience of putting theory into practice”. Such an imaginative identification, she suggests, instigates new ways of doing politics, where feminist hoping is linked to the definition of Utopia not as the final attainment of a complete and perfected

4. Berlant’s argument here is in a collection of essays on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. It is Sedgwick who suggests that cultural theory has become sceptical and it is Berlant who argues instead for a turn to optimism.
state, but as a wilful and processual struggle. What clearly emerges in these essays, then, is that hope functions in a range of ways and creates different relationships to different temporalities, subjects, objects, dreams, desires and possibilities.

Acknowledgements

This collection of essays emerged from the workshop Hope: A Workshop on Feminist Theory, which was held in January 2009 as part of a series of events organised by the Feminist Media Studies Research Group and supported by the Institute for Advanced Studies, the Centre for Gender and Women's Studies and the Institute for Cultural Research at Lancaster University, UK. We would like to thank those who participated in the workshop in different ways for making the event so productive and rewarding, and special thanks to Les Back, Anne-Marie Fortier, Imogen Robertson, Fiona Summers and Imogen Tyler.

References
