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‘Foreclosed Futures’: Hope, Precarity, and Ambivalence in Contemporary Cornwall

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Durham University

Abstract

This study examines the future imaginaries of Cornish youth navigating a ruralised context of socio-economic deprivation. Cornwall has been idealised under external narratives as a region of tranquillity, beauty, and relaxation. However, such perceptions obscure the lived realities of local inhabitants, who experience some of the highest poverty rates in the UK. Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with nine participants aged 18–23, this research critically illuminates the experiences of young people in the Southwestern rural periphery. Operating through the analytical lens of affectual attachments, the study explores how normalised capitalist narratives of 'success' intersect with youth future imaginaries, shaping unrealistic aspirations and reinforcing cycles of deprivation. Three affectual themes structure the analysis: hope, precarity, and ambivalence. Chapter 4 examines hope as an attachment to the promise of home ownership amidst a burgeoning housing crisis, showing how such hope sustains aspirations even as it perpetuates a *cruel optimism* (Berlant, 2011). Chapter 5 investigates the precarity of employment, highlighting how seasonal and unstable work engenders existential stagnation and forecloses secure futures. Chapter 6 analyses ambivalence as the anchoring affect, capturing the tension between a desire to remain rooted in Cornwall and the need to leave for economic survival. Collectively, these chapters illuminate the paradox of youthful endurance in a region where futures are foreclosed. By critiquing dominant narratives that romanticise Cornwall as a "rural idyll" (Bosworth and Willett, 2011: 208), this dissertation exposes the structural inequalities underpinning deprivation and argues that Cornish youth remain trapped in a cycle of hope and constraint. This study advances the conceptual framework of affective geographies and calls for urgent recognition of the challenges facing young people in Cornwall.

Keywords: Cornwall, Deprivation, Youth, Future imaginations, Attachment, Affect, Hope, Precarity, Ambivalence

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Cornwall, a region renowned for its picturesque landscapes and rich cultural heritage, occupies a paradoxical position within modern British society (Willett, 2009). Externally perceived through the lens of the "rural idyll", it is commodified as an "escape from modernity", designed for external consumption (Bosworth and Willett, 2011: 208, 210). However, beneath this romanticised imagery lies one of Europe's most deprived regions (Willett, 2023). Economic opportunities are scarce, the housing market is prohibitively expensive, and average earnings lag 16% below the national average, leaving many residents, particularly the youth, stalled in poverty (ibid).

For young people in Cornwall, this structural disparity creates an affective atmosphere of uncertainty, where idealised narratives of the region obscure lived realities of hardship and deprivation (Willett, 2009). To unearth this contradiction, this dissertation employs the analytical framework of affective attachments to examine the intricate interplay of hope, precarity, and ambivalence experienced by Cornish youth. By analysing how structural deprivation and affective attachments influence their future imaginaries, the study makes the overarching claim that young people in Cornwall have no sustainable future in the region (Berlant, 2011). Titled *'Foreclosed Futures,'* this research challenges romanticised perceptions of Cornwall by exposing the ways in which capitalist frameworks marginalise rural peripheries and perpetuate cycles of deprivation for young people inhabiting such 'left behind' regions.

The central claim of this dissertation is supported by three thematic chapters: hope for housing, precarious employment, and ambivalent attachments. By linking the affective experiences of Cornish youth to their material conditions, the study interrogates "the affective geographies of everyday life", demonstrating how rural deprivation shapes their existence (Anderson, 2006; 734). While these young individuals are excluded from a hegemonically naturalised sense of "ordinariness", they have been conditioned to believe that prosperity is "perpetually on the horizon", attainable through ambition, hard work, and, above all, hope (Anderson, 2014: 126). By analysing hopeful attachments as 'promises' of a sustainable future in Cornwall (Berlant, 2011), the study reveals how "specific forms of power operate affectively" to sustain individuals in a cruel relationship with an unattainable future (Anderson, 2022: 398). However, in a capitalist society where alternative systems are unimaginable (Fischer, 2009), this hope is both cruel and necessary, sustaining lives that are "met by a world of inadequate objects" (Berlant, 2016: 124). The ambivalent nature of

this attachment underscores how precarious living conditions in Cornwall are endured through hope, which simultaneously sustains and harms those facing deprivation (Berlant, 2011).

To analyse “how affects relate to and become part of social-spatial relations” in Cornwall, this study adopts a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews with nine Cornish youth aged 18–23 (Anderson, 2014: 1). This methodological approach highlights the deeply personal and subjective nature of the research, allowing participants to express their own narratives of hope, struggle, and resilience. While the sample size is not statistically representative, it offers rich phenomenological insights into the lived experiences of a marginalised demographic. Despite Cornwall’s well-documented housing and employment crises (Willett, 2023), little attention has been given to how young people navigate these challenges affectively. By addressing this gap, the dissertation not only provides empirical insights but also advances the conceptual framework of affective imagination as a lens to understand rural deprivation. It critiques dominant narratives that portray rural areas as idyllic, revealing the structural inequalities and affective contradictions that define life in these contexts (Bosworth and Willett, 2011).

Ultimately, this study is a call to action – a plea to confront the uncomfortable truths of young people’s existence in Cornwall. To take a step forward, we must first take a step back and unveil the *real* Cornwall that is masked under the guise of the idyllic countryside (ibid). Investigating the imaginations of young people provides a critical pathway to achieving this.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Overview

2.1. Deconstructing the imaginative

We all imagine the future. While this may seem mundane, the emotional and affectual responses intertwined with imagination fundamentally shape contemporary actions (Mische, 2009; Cuzzocrea and Mandiche, 2016). Deconstructing an individual's imagination is akin to unpacking their interpretation of the world. Warnock (1978: 14) asserts, "To ask at what time a man first has any ideas is to ask when he begins to perceive". From this perspective, imagination is the internal embodiment of thoughts and ideas, uniquely formed through sensory and cognitive engagement with the local environment (Dixon and Durrheim, 2000; Prince, 2013). Perception initiates this process, acting as the point where external stimuli are absorbed and shaped into imaginative thought (Warnock, 1978). Thus, imaginations are not abstract but deeply rooted in sensory realities and shaped by subjective interactions with social, cultural, and economic contexts (Prince, 2013).

Deconstructing the imaginations of Cornish youth sheds light on both their future orientations and the structural forces shaping them. Using an analytical lens of affectual attachments to objects of desire (Berlant, 2011; Anderson, 2022), this dissertation examines youth imaginative orientations amidst socio-economic deprivation (Brannen and O'Connell, 2022; Zipin et al., 2015; Van Lanen, 2021). Daniels (2011: 182) states that to imagine is "to bring material and mental worlds into closer conjunction, to connect the mythical and the mundane". By analysing these imaginations, I aim to link youth future dispositions to the socio-economic constraints of their environment, arguing that attachment to a successful future in Cornwall functions as a mechanism of entrapment, reproducing regional inequality and foreclosing youthful futures (Berlant, 2011; Anderson, 2022).

2.1.1. Hope(lessness) in a rural periphery

Affects and orientations towards the future are intimately contingent on the concept of hope. Desroche (1979) encapsulates the essence of hope through the religious belief of the 'miracle of the rope', whereby a rope is thrown up towards heaven, and rather than dropping, it guides and facilitates the ascension. For Desroche (1979: 1), "hope is a rope", it guides the subject towards the unknown and facilitates positive action. In this sense, imagining hope is implicit of action in the contemporary towards a positive future, regardless of whether the achievability of this future is known or not (Mische, 2009). Cook (2017: 110) fosters this narrative, stating that "Hope appears to flourish in the absence of complete certainty". Hope

is not a guarantee of a desired future, but rather a coping mechanism for dealing with uncertainty (Eagleton, 2015; Bryant and Ellard, 2015; Zinn, 2016). Desroche (1979:3) captures this: “forces of pressure pose and define a question. But it is the forces of aspiration which formulate and offer an answer”. Through this account, hope serves as a resolution to the constraints of the local environment, a remedy for “blunted” youthful imaginations (Prince, 2013: 699).

Whilst this dissertation does not dispute the utility of hope in revitalising positive aspirations (Cook, 2017), it does question its implications for the Cornish youth who hope for ‘normal’ futures of success in an inherently unequal capitalist economy (Bazzani, 2023; Van Lanen; 2021). At what point does hope become cruel when it only exists in the imaginative and has no material implication? By no means does this dissertation advocate for the abandonment of hope and recognition of despair for the Cornish youth. Rather, it contextualises hope as an attachment to a desired future that is unattainable in the contextual socio-economic environment (Anderson, 2022; Berlant; 2011). Through this critical lens of hope, Cornwall’s deprivation emerges as a product of a capitalist system which fosters hope in young people while denying the realisation of their aspirations (Duggan and Muñoz, 2009; Hage, 2003). As Bloch (1986: 112) discerns, “danger and faith are the truth of hope”, in that the very act of hoping for a better life can be what sustains individuals on hopeless trajectories.

2.1.2. Attachment to a ‘cruel’ future

The perceived inescapability of capitalist dominance in contemporary society forces us to question whether hopeful futures in Cornwall can be imagined (Fischer, 2009). Amidst socio-economic deprivation, young people in Cornwall face persistent barriers to achieving what is deemed a ‘normal’ successful future (Bazzani, 2023), relegating visions of “the good life” to mere fantasies (Anderson, 2022: 397). Yet, as young people, we are drawn to this fantasy, attached to it, made to believe that hoping for it will inevitably lead to its realisation. This section looks to ‘unsettle’ an attachment to a future that provides both meaning and cruelty to a way of life (Anderson, 2022; Berlant, 2011). Fostering the argument of *Cruel Optimism* (Berlant, 2011), I look to analyse attachments to a ‘cruel’ future in Cornwall through an ambivalent lens, framing such an attachment as both harmful and necessary for navigating life amidst deprivation.

Anderson (2022: 392) defines attachments as “enduring trajectories that ‘bring closer’ something which comes to feel necessary to a way of life”. Attachments, then, are more than

a relationship between a subject and an object of desire; they become “promises” of an optimistic future, shaping “what matters to life” (Anderson, 2022: 392, 394). This idea of attachments as “promises” is crucial to understanding their dual role as both sustaining and cruel (Berlant, 2011). Becoming attached to a promissory object entails dependence, subordination, and control by that attachment (Brown, 1993; Butler, 1997). Through this reliance, attachments become cruel “when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving” (Berlant, 2011: 2). In Cornwall, young people become attached to a successful future in the idyllic region which is becoming increasingly unrealistic amidst rising house prices and insecure employment. Such attachments illuminate “how specific forms of power operate affectively” to "keep disenfranchised groups 'in their place'", in turn protecting the socio-economic hierarchies integral to capitalism (Anderson, 2022: 398; Prince, 2013: 709).

If a promissory object entraps a subject in a harmful and cruel trajectory, then why do people stay attached to it? Berlant’s answer is contingent on the idea of ambivalence (Ruez and Cockayne, 2021). The subject can find itself “bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming” (Berlant, 2011: 2). Attachments can be cruel, yet still necessary in giving purpose to one’s life. This ambivalent analysis of attachment underpins my overall claim. Whilst the Cornish youth may not have the ability to achieve what is considered a ‘normal’ future of success, this dissertation does not simply look to proliferate such a narrative. Rather, it appreciates the ambivalent, enigmatic, and conflicting nature of attachments as symptomatic of a precarious and unstable life naturalised within this contextually specific neoliberal rural atmosphere (Berlant, 2011; Cairns, 2013; Cockayne, 2016).

2.1.3. Contextualising the ‘real’ of ‘Capitalist Realism’

Fischer’s (2009) influential writing in *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?* Is an essential text for situating my thesis claim within a capitalist society. Fischer (2009: 7) argues that capitalism is so entrenched as a political-economic system that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism”. For Fischer (2009: 9), capitalism not only controls global economic and political activity but “seemingly occupies the horizons of the thinkable”. Our imaginations are situated within a society that is controlled by capitalism. Through this understanding, we begin to learn “how power holds subjects through their attachments” (Anderson, 2022: 393).

Capitalism “would be nothing without our cooperation” (Fischer, 2009: 10). Whilst we can attempt to reject capitalism, its embeddedness within society has made it impossible to not actively consent to its continuation (Gilbert, 2015). In the context of this dissertation, the hegemonic understanding of a ‘successful’ future for young people is naturalised as the only viable option for success (Sellar, 2013). For the Cornish youth, attachment to this future, whether hopeful or doubtful, is active consent to a capitalist system (Gilbert, 2015). In returning to Berlant’s (2011) ambivalent approach to attachments, the persistent exclusion under capitalism induces a contradictory and uncertain approach to future imaginations; for whilst attachment may bring pain, it is necessary to sustain life where there is no viable alternative political-economic system (Fischer, 2009). Building on Fischer’s analysis, this dissertation simply seeks to ‘get real’ with young people’s futures in Cornwall. For Fischer (2009: 9), “To ‘get real’ is to confront a state-of-nature where dog eats dog, where you’re either a winner or a loser, and where most will be losers”. As previously stated, the aim is not to diminish a sense of hope and optimism for the Cornish youth, for that is essentially what sustains us as human beings (Berlant, 2011). Rather, this dissertation confronts the harsh truths of being a ‘loser’ in a capitalist society. Parting from existing literature that prompts hope for young people living amidst deprivation, this study exposes the unequal nature of capitalism and the dangers of promoting hope for a youthful population that ‘has no future’ amidst capitalist constraints.

2.2. Contextualising Cornwall: A region ‘left behind’

To deconstruct the imaginations of the Cornish youth, we must contextualise the environment in which they inhabit. Prince (2013: 697) discerns how “visioning one’s self in the future is inextricably bound with place”. This section synthesises academic literature to closely link Cornwall's contemporary identity with the scars of post-industrial decline, emphasising an incapacity for current prosperity rooted in an inescapable backward orientation (Bosworth and Willet, 2011).

Cornwall’s designation as “arguably the most deprived area of Britain” is neither a new nor unknown phenomenon (Williams, 2003: 55). 22.7% of the Cornish population are currently ‘economically inactive’, a figure higher than averages across the South-West region and Great Britain as a whole (ONS, 2024). Cornwall’s socio-economic condition stresses beyond the general characteristics of rural peripheries; the region has and continues to be in a state of crisis. Poverty and homelessness can be seen as “endemic” as the region is labelled not

only one of the poorest parts of the UK but of the entirety of Western Europe (Willett, 2023: 1).

2.2.1. Post-industrial decline

Willett (2009: 2, 6) attributes Cornwall's "almost continual socio-economic decline for more than a century" to a politics of identity, rooted in "historical continuity". This continuity reflects the post-industrial decline of mining and quarrying, which not only provided economic opportunity but also fostered "pride and group purpose" (Kennedy and Kingcome, 1998: 48). By the 1800s, Cornwall had become "one of the most industrialised areas in the world" (Williams, 2003: 57) and was regarded as "the pinnacle of achievement in mining", a "global elite" in the sector (Kennedy and Kingcome, 1998: 47). The industry's success was epitomised by the saying: "wherever there was a hole in the ground, there would be a Cornish man at the bottom of it" (Willett, 2009: 14). This external recognition was matched by internal reliance; by 1750, 25% of the population depended on metal mining, which employed 30% of men and 10% of waged women (Rowe, 1953; Deacon, 1997). Beyond economics, the industry galvanised an attitude of independence and a "strong native discourse of differentiation and local patriotism" (Deacon, 1997: 14).

However, during the 1880s, Cornwall's flourishing mining environment began to erode under "growing economic clouds ominously gathering around the Cornish mines" (Deacon, 2016: 67). Overseas competition from regions like Australia, Bolivia, and Malaysia created a tin-production battle Cornwall could not win (Gannon, 2016). Unable to lower production costs, rapid mine closures followed throughout the twentieth century (ibid). This post-industrial decline triggered a "collective identity crisis" in a society dependent on the mines (Willett, 2009: 15). Neglecting economic diversification, Cornwall entered a prolonged state of socio-economic paralysis. Kennedy and Kingcome (1998: 48) discern that the "trauma of de-industrialisation is as significant for Cornish identity as loss of Empire is for Britishness". Cornwall's fixation on historical triumphs places it in a "fossilising" imaginary that "only really exists in nostalgia" (Kennedy and Kingcome, 1998: 47, 48). This backwards-looking identity estranges Cornwall from English modernity, framing its people as relics of the past (Bosworth and Willett, 2011). This detachment from the fast pace of modern life has fuelled a tourism and heritage industry that fills employment gaps but relies on external investment, exposing the region to capitalist exploitation (ibid). Cornwall's post-industrial decline highlights a transformation in its political identity "from one of production, to that of the

consumption of amenity value", driving contemporary patterns of exploitative investment that further isolate the region from modernity (Willett, 2023: 3).

2.2.2. A commodified identity: 'Neoliberal Ruralism'

Cornwall is commonly discussed as a region 'left behind' (Williams, 2003; Bosworth and Willett, 2011). However, through an external lens, such perceptions of the region have become romanticised to signify a "slower pace of life" and an "escape from modernity" (Bosworth and Willett, 2011: 209). Kennedy and Kingcome (1998: 46) discern how this conceptualisation of Cornwall postulates an imaginary of the region as a "mythical" other, imagined with "no illusion that is other than a fairy tale, commodified for outsiders to consume". This mystic observation is depicted by the authors as the "Cornish pastiche" (ibid: 52), a pastiche being the transformation of reality into images. Such transformations in Cornwall have unconsciously historicised the region into a living mosaic, consuming all lived realities and "leaving nothing but empty sign" (ibid: 52). In analysing such perceptions, the authors question: "where does all this leave the Cornish?", when "the fiction is more genuine, more real than the direct experience" (ibid: 46, 55).

Willett (2009) addresses Kennedy and Kingcome's (1998) inquiry. For Willett (2009: 5), these external narratives induce a "paradox of Cornwall" that can be understood as a "tension between a perception that it is a place to have a high quality of life, and the reality of living in the region". Cornwall's externalised depiction as a "sexy location" has fuelled a rural housing crisis, whereby rising house prices exceed local wages (Bosworth and Willett, 2011: 206). Willett (2023: 2) discerns how "houses are completely unavailable for persons on Cornish incomes". To explain this housing crisis, I borrow Smith and Hubbard's (2014: 98, 99) concept of "Neoliberal urbanism", applying it in a rural context to encapsulate the "relentless commodification" of the housing market. In proposing a 'Neoliberal ruralism', Chapter 4 investigates how Cornish youths display hope for a future in the region that is becoming perpetually unlikely amidst rapidly rising house prices.

2.2.3. 'Bait' (2019): A cultural product of Cornish precarity

Mark Jenkin's *Bait* (2019) starkly portrays precarious life in contemporary Cornwall. Shot in grainy black-and-white 16mm film, its aesthetic underscores the harsh realities faced by working-class communities, particularly fishermen grappling with the twin pressures of gentrification and the commodification of their heritage (Brookes, 2024). The protagonist, Martin, exemplifies the erosion of traditional livelihoods as affluent outsiders transform the

coastal village into a tourist enclave, pricing out locals and stripping them of economic agency (ibid). Tensions between residents and newcomers highlight structural inequalities, with seasonal work, unattainable housing, and an economy favouring outsiders pushing locals into perpetual uncertainty (Willett, 2023). The film's bleak tone, disjointed editing, and haunting sound design further heighten the pervasive sense of despair and frustration, reinforcing Cornwall's depiction as a 'left-behind' region where capitalist forces produce a future that feels not just precarious but fundamentally hopeless (Fischer, 2009).

Martin exemplifies the 'precariat', a new taxonomy of workers trapped in unstable labour conditions (Standing, 2011). Beyond economic insecurity, precarity entails "a lack of a secure work-based identity", fostering ambiguity in both the present and imagined future (ibid: 9). As a fisherman, Martin's identity is deeply tied to his trade and the local harbour (Prince, 2013). This attachment entraps him in a dying industry, where declining demand and soaring housing costs sustain a form of *cruel optimism* (Berlant, 2011). Clinging to a vanishing way of life suspends him in a liminal state – his future is uncertain, and alternatives remain scarce (Fischer, 2009). For Brookes (2024: 255), "the presence of this ambiguity appears to be the ongoing unfolding of uncertainties and the demands that this places on both the material and the metaphysical".

Bait establishes the affective atmosphere of this dissertation, capturing both the enduring attachment to an industry of the past and the precarious consequences of remaining tethered to it (Berlant, 2011; Anderson, 2022). Through its depiction of precariousness, the film serves as an entry point for analysing how young people affectively manage "life without the promise of stability" (Tsing, 2015: 2). Chapter 5 interrogates this further, operating through the analytical lens of precarity amidst changing labour relations.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This project is a socio-cultural investigation that qualitatively explores young people's future imaginations within a localised context of socio-economic deprivation. Examining the future is inherently complex, as it involves exploring orientations towards the unknown (Blass, 2003; Brannen and O'Connell, 2022). However, analysing such future orientations has the capacity to reveal in-depth insights into individual experiences within society (Van Lanen, 2021). Given the nature of this topic, a qualitative approach was essential to unpack the "dimensions of humans' lives and social worlds" (Fossey et al., 2002: 717). Semi-structured interviews provided the primary empirical data. As imaginations are deeply intrinsic and reflect personalised accounts of existential knowledge (Carabelli and Lyon, 2016), interviews were necessary to allow participants to "express their own thoughts and feelings" (Berg, 2007, p.96). Consequently, this study did not conduct primary quantitative research, given that standardised measures cannot adequately capture the rich perspectives necessary to fulfil the research aims. However, secondary statistical data was utilised where appropriate.

3.1 Participant selection

The study selected participants aged 18–23 who had grown up in and currently reside in Cornwall. This age range aligns with Poobalan et al.'s (2014: 909) definition of "emerging adults" – a group navigating future possibilities and thus central to this research. Participants were recruited through purposive and convenience sampling to meet these criteria (Robinson, 2014). Of the nine participants, six were recruited via the researcher's personal connections, including distant family and school friends – an approach that was cost-effective and encouraged more open, in-depth conversations (Cohen et al., 2007). The remaining participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Fox, 2009), where existing respondents referred others they felt were appropriate.

While nine interviews cannot fully represent Cornwall, the aim was not a generalised representation but to explore how imaginaries are shaped by the region's status as 'left behind' from British 'modernity' (Bosworth and Willett, 2011). Narrowing the study to a specific area within Cornwall could have introduced localised factors that might obscure these wider structural dynamics.

3.2 Semi-structured interviews

Nine intensive semi-structured interviews were conducted for the study, each lasting between 45-60 minutes. Despite only conducting nine interviews, the research is within the parameters of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) which is 3-16 interviews (Smith et al., 2009). Adopting a phenomenological approach, this study investigates the imaginations of the Cornish youth to gain deep insight into the personalised impacts of inhabiting a specific socio-economic context (Cherrier, 2005). Therefore, "no particular number of participants should be interviewed" to produce comprehensive data (Alsaawi, 2014: 152).

All interviews were conducted online via Zoom due to the geographical dispersion of participants, making in-person interviews impractical and costly. A limitation of this method is the reduced ability to observe non-verbal cues, such as body language, which could have helped assess affective responses like anxiety (Cope, 2009). However, online interviews offered participants flexibility (Oliffe et al., 2021), reducing the likelihood of shortened or cancelled interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were appropriate as they endorse "in-depth probing" while ensuring the interview stays "within the parameters traced out by the aim of the study" (Berg, 2007: 39). An interview guide consisting of open-ended questions permitted participants the freedom to shape their own responses in the absence of the interviewer's direct influence (Alshenqeeti, 2014). This was essential in ensuring that responses were a true reflection of the participants imaginative orientations. The guide was deliberately structured to begin with short, simple questions, starting with: 'Where do you picture yourself in 5 years?'. This not only forced respondents to engage with future temporalities but also directed the remaining discussion. Subsequent sections were made contextually specific to life in Cornwall to satisfy research aims and maintain empirical focus. However, it is important to note that each interview followed different lines of questioning based on previous responses, as the interviewer ensured to be "listening more than talking" (Robson, 2011: 282).

3.3 Transcription and coding

The interviews were recorded using a mobile phone to aid the transcription process. The transcriptions were subsequently organised through thematic coding to help 'make sense' of the data (Cope, 2009). Relevant themes from the conceptual overview influenced the categorisation of the coding process (ibid). However, unexpected emerging themes were

also coded to let the data ‘speak for itself’ (Gould, 1981). For Coffey and Atkinson (1996: 29, 30), effective coding involves “thinking creatively” to “go beyond the data”. Thus, thematic codes were organised into different affects that were implicit throughout the interviews. This was particularly useful for my analysis, as engaging with affects draws "attention to the objective and discursive terrains which induce particular atmospheres and feelings about the future in neoliberal capitalism" (Pettit, 2019: 725, 726). An example extract of a coded transcript can be found in the Appendix (Appendix 1).

3.4 Ethical considerations

Interviews can be considered “an intrusion into respondents’ private lives” depending on the “level of sensitivity of questions asked” (Alshenqeeti, 2014: 44). As this study investigates the personalised accounts of imagining the future in a localised context, it was essential to take ethical precautions. A consent form was emailed to participants prior to interviews (Appendix 2). This informed respondents that all data would remain anonymous, be strictly used for this dissertation, and be deleted after the study was completed. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect individuals’ identities (Appendix 3).

My positionality as a “privileged knower” of the study’s aims and direction potentially produced a power imbalance (Nunkoosing, 2005: 699). In recognising this, a contextual overview of the investigation was provided to respondents prior to receiving consent, ensuring participants were aware of how the data would be used. Given the harsh realities of Cornwall’s socio-economic context, the respondents were deemed a potentially marginalised group (Shaw et al., 2020). Therefore, interview questions were designed to be sensitive with regards to living amidst deprivation, ensuring respondents did not feel “emotionally damaged or offended” by any implicit assumptions about Cornwall (ibid: 279).

Chapter 4: The promise of home: Hope amidst housing inequality

“As a young adult, it’s not exactly easy to buy a house in this economy anywhere, let alone in somewhere where everyone wants a second home.” – Chloe.

Cornwall is enduring a rural housing crisis. As a ‘left behind’ region, its “backwardness” has become “bound up with attractive characteristics such as a slower pace of life, quietness, picturesque countryside and an escape from the less attractive aspects of modernity” (Bosworth and Willett, 2011: 209). Externally perceived through this lens of “the idyllic countryside” (Bosworth and Willett, 2011: 196), Cornwall has become exposed to a contextually specific form of capitalist exploitation I term ‘neoliberal ruralism’. As Chloe observes, Cornwall is a site of consumption for affluent individuals seeking second homes. Housing is now the 21st most expensive in Britain, while average incomes remain 16% lower than the UK average (Willett, 2023). This paradox reflects Cornwall’s entrenched inequalities that are obscured under the guise of the “rural idyll” (Bosworth and Willett, 2011: 196). For young people like Chloe, hoping to live in Cornwall is increasingly an optimistic fantasy, distanced from reality.

This section examines hope as an affective attachment to secure housing in Cornwall. Using hope as an analytical lens shows how young people stay attached to the ‘promise’ of homeownership amidst the growing constraints of ‘neoliberal ruralism’ (Anderson, 2022). Drawing on interviews with Cornish youths, this section borrows Pettit’s (2019) concept of cruel hope to reveal how young people cultivate hope for a future life in Cornwall that is increasingly difficult to obtain under an intensifying ‘neoliberal ruralism’. Amidst such housing insecurities, hope is sustained through a sense of belonging and resilience to rising house prices, nurtured within the Cornish community (Ramalho, 2021). However, I present this shared sense of hope as merely an intensification of an attachment to the object of housing, suspending young people in a cruel, enduring trajectory (Berlant, 2011). Analysing hope as a cruel attachment to secure housing helps explain why young people have no future in Cornwall.

4.1. Cruel Hope: An attachment to staying in Cornwall

“What gives me hope is just the thought of staying, like, I just love it here. Like the thought of owning my own home and raising a family here is so nice and it gives me that hope to stay.” – Tom.

Understanding the cruelty of hope requires an understanding of attachment (Anderson, 2022; Berlant, 2011). For Tom, Cornwall represents not only the place he grew up but also what “matters” and “feels necessary” for the “sustaining of life” (Anderson, 2022: 397). He further notes: “It’s a way of living that you can’t quite find anywhere else … those very subtle aspects of life that are hard to quantify their value but make Cornwall like no other place on Earth.” In this sense, Tom is attached to the ‘promise’ of owning a house which “brings closer that satisfying something”; that ‘something’ being a comfortable life in Cornwall (Berlant, 2011: 2). Similarly, Emma reflects: “I just don’t see why you’d want to leave. Like, how can you get better than this?”. For Berlant (2011: 23), “When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make us and make possible for us”. Through this lens, Tom and Emma’s attachment to Cornwall is rooted in the ‘promise’ of a house, yet this ‘promise’ is systematically distanced through the external consumption of the housing market. A study by the Institute of Cornish Studies revealed that a couple on a median Cornish income can only afford an apartment in 6 of the 47 postcode districts in Cornwall (Willett, 2023). For the youth, therefore, attachments to a comfortable life in Cornwall have become “significantly problematic” - yet hope for such a future persists (Berlant, 2011: 14). This chapter analyses hope as a “shared narrative of future possibility”, fostered within communities and subsequently internalised by the youth (Ramalho, 2021: 852). Proposing hope as an affectual response to communal resilience explains not only why young people have no future, but also why the region remains trapped in cycles of deprivation.

One way in which hope emerged from collective unity was through a deep sense of belonging to the Cornish community. A study by Ramalho (2021: 849) in Cebu, the Philippines, found that “social cohesion, feeling of belonging, and cultural values” has the capacity to cultivate individual “hopefulness” amidst a “time of crisis” and “protracted uncertainty”. In discussing why he wants to stay in Cornwall, Sam stated:

“I feel like being Cornish comes with a sense of community that I’ve never really seen or like heard of from elsewhere … Cornish people just look out for one another, you know? I mean, If I left, I just don’t think I’d ever find that again.” – Sam.

Antonsich's (2010: 645) theorisation of 'place-belongingness' as a "personal, intimate feeling of being at 'home' in a place" illustrates how Sam's hope for housing is tied not just to property ownership but to his embeddedness within a strong regional social fabric. This aligns with Falcone's (2024: 2) findings on youth retention in rural New England, where "creating meaningful connections with other individuals in their larger community" fosters a sense of belonging that helps counteract out-migration. However, the rise of 'neoliberal ruralism' in Cornwall poses significant barriers to young people wishing to stay, making such social connectivity a source of hope that is ultimately rendered "unrealistic" by the housing market (Downman, 2008: 428; Willett, 2009). Sam's assertion – "I just don't think I'd ever find that again" – resonates with Blunt and Dowling's (2022: 9) conceptualisation of home as a "spatial imaginary", a framework that views place not merely as a physical location but as a constellation of "ideas and feelings" in a "related context" (ibid). Emotional attachments to place, therefore, constitute more than just a connection to physical space; they are shaped by the social relationships that transform places into "meaningful locations" (Cresswell, 2014: 12). Emma reinforces this sentiment: "It's the people. Having a chat with randomers on the beach, saying hello every time you're out and about. That's what makes it home." Such reflections highlight how the community fosters "feelings of hopefulness" amidst the "persistent condition of risk and insecurity" imposed by 'neoliberal ruralism' (Ramalho, 2021: 845). Ultimately, this analysis unearths how "our most cherished or beloved objects might harm us" when such objects of desire are systematically unattainable (Anderson, 2022: 398).

Another significant source of hope for young people imagining a future in Cornwall is the community's resilience to 'counter-urbanisers' and second-home ownership, rooted in a strong native identity (Willett, 2023; Deacon, 2016). Reflecting on the influx of "foreigners" to the region, Tom observes: "There's a difference between what people think it is to be local and being local. Actual locals very much stick as a pack, and that's something that you can't buy into." This sense of identity aligns with Porter's (2014: 311) assertion that "Those who live there self-identify as 'Cornish' rather than 'English'". Emma further embodies this notion of 'Cornishness': "Cornish people like to think that we're kind of our own country. You know, they're just very proud, and that sort of culture of independence and pride is so, so strong." This distinct identity of 'difference' (Porter, 2014; Deacon, 2016), rooted in Cornwall's historic mining heritage (Kennedy and Kingcome, 1998), forms the "bedrock of resilience" for young people aspiring to secure housing in the region (Eggerman and Panter-Brick, 2010: 71).

Willett (2009: 92) highlights this identity, noting that “locals believe if Cornwall were treated as a country, it would enjoy a much better socio-economic system”. Tom echoes Willett’s findings: “You can’t help but wish they [outsiders] weren’t here.” This collective desire to preserve Cornwall’s uniqueness reflects the resilience of locals in resisting external commodification. Such resilience represents an internalised “confidence that enacts an immunitary biopolitics” against the pressures of ‘neoliberal ruralism’ (Grove, 2014: 240). By cultivating this confidence, young people find hope through becoming “active agents in their own survival” (Grove, 2014: 249). However, the very solitude and cultural distinctiveness that locals seek to protect is the very asset driving rising house prices. Bosworth and Willett (2011: 208) describe this as the “mechanism of the rural idyll”, where perceptions of Cornwall as an “escape from modernity” fuel external consumption. In this paradox, hope operates in its cruellest form: the life in Cornwall that young people are attached to is the very object perpetuating their suffering (Pettit, 2019).

This section has discussed the cruelty of hoping for a future in Cornwall amidst an increasingly competitive housing market. Adopting Hage’s (2003: 12) perspective, hopes are "capable of overriding the determining powers of the inequalities experienced within this present" (Hage, 2003: 12). Consequently, “The power of these hopes is such that most people will live their lives believing in the possibility of upward social mobility without actually experiencing it" (ibid). Through a sense of belonging and resilience, fostered within a cohesive community, hope sustains Cornish youths in a relation of attachment to a future in Cornwall that is increasingly unrealistic amidst rising house prices.

Chapter 5: Precarious work, precarious lives: Insecure employment

“I’m in a position where I’m living paycheque to paycheque. I want to have a life outside of my work, and it worries me that I won’t be able to.” – Abi.

Abi’s words reflect more than individual hardship; they voice a broader condition of precarious youth life in Cornwall. This chapter explores how young people like Abi experience a form of precarity that extends beyond economic insecurity, shaping both their present lives and imagined futures. Drawing on Standing’s (2011) notion of the ‘precariat’, Abi is not simply a low-wage worker but emblematic of a population structurally denied stable livelihoods and secure opportunities. As I argue throughout this chapter, rural precarity in Cornwall is marked not only by material instability but by an existential condition of ‘stuckedness’ (Hage, 2003): a sense of suspension in the present without the possibility of forward movement. This is not merely a lack of jobs – it is a temporal and affective trap, a life lived without a future. Returning to *Bait* (2019), the figure of Martin, a fisherman struggling amidst tourism-driven gentrification, embodies this – “he does not have enough work beyond subsistence and does not know what tomorrow will bring” (Brookes, 2024: 243). Working through this affective lens, the chapter unfolds in three stages. First, I examine Cornwall’s structural reliance on seasonal tourism, which produces unstable, cyclical work that fails to offer meaningful progression. Second, I trace how this economic instability generates a broader experience of existential inertia – what Tsing (2015: 2) calls “life without the promise of stability”. Finally, I analyse how young people endure this through forms of collective affective adaptation, where the absence of future progress is normalised, and networks of care provide shared resilience (Worth, 2015). Ultimately, this chapter reveals how youth precarity in Cornwall is not only economic but deeply temporal and affective. It is through understanding this lived experience of ‘stuckedness’ that we can grasp why young people in Cornwall have no future in the region.

“They [tourists] view Cornwall as like a playground almost, and then they go back to the real world.” – John.

John captures how Cornwall is perceived as an “escape from the trappings of modernity”, making it one of the UK’s most desirable holiday destinations (Bosworth and Willett, 2011: 209). Romanticised images of quaint villages and sandy beaches have created a “hyper-reality or ‘Disneyfication’” of the region, imagined with “no illusion that is other than a fairy

tale, commodified for outsiders to consume" (Kennedy and Kingcome, 1998: 48; 46). This fantasy underpins an economy heavily dependent on tourism, which generates nearly £2 billion annually and supports about 20% of local jobs (Cornwall Community Foundation, 2025). Although tourism filled the gap left by the mining industry's collapse (Kennedy and Kingcome, 1998), it has entrenched insecure, seasonal, and low-paid work (Willett, 2009). Over 40% of Cornwall's jobs are part-time, and more than 70% of hospitality roles pay below the 'living wage', underscoring the precarity of a tourism-driven economy (Cornwall Community Foundation, 2025). Luke reflects on the effects of this seasonal dependency:

"There's plenty of work for like 3 to 6 months out of the year. But in winter, there's no work as everything's just dead. It's like this thing that hangs over. The town is like a *malaise*. Its dark and empty, nothing really goes on and it's like a shell of itself." – Luke.

Luke's description of seasonal employment captures Butler's (2011: 13) articulation of precarity as a "heightened sense of expendability or disposability". Although summer brings a surge of economic opportunity, the constant threat of winter unemployment suspends young people in a state of liminality, blocking career progression and financial security. Taylor (2021: 587) reinforces this sense of economic 'disposability', describing precarity as "the *potential* loss of financial self-containment". Tom, a kayak tour guide, reflects this pervasive sense of threat: "Tourists always say like 'oh you've got it so good, this is your office, you're so lucky'. But they only see one side to it. No one wants kayaking tours outside of the summer." Tom highlights the dual nature of his work, where full-time summer employment is overshadowed by the 'potential' threat of unemployment. Both Tom and Luke's experiences of seasonal work reveal not just financial insecurity but a deeper affective uncertainty. Faced with "an inability to move forward within normative context-specific value systems" towards fantasies of "the good life", they are caught in a precarious 'stuckedness' that stalls both career and life aspirations (Pettit, 2019: 724).

As previously discussed, precarity extends beyond economic instability, as "unstable work destabilizes daily living", inhibiting subjects from constructing a viable sense of self within capitalist narratives they are excluded from (Allison, 2012: 349). Allison proposes a "precarity of the soul", an experience of inertia rooted in future uncertainty (ibid). When asked about his aspirations, Charlie stated: "I don't know. Out of school, I wanted to go into accountancy, but I haven't had much luck." Allison (2016: 1) notes how "the precarious lack handrails for anchoring the future". Charlie embodies this imaginative disconnect, where the

inability to make professional progress induces a reluctance to engage with alternative futures, leaving him in a state of stagnation “outside of the forward movement of modernity” (Bosworth and Willett, 2011: 208). Abi, another respondent facing employment difficulties, echoed Charlie’s disconnect: “I try not to think about it [the future] too much, it stresses me out.” This relegation of the future reflects what Berlant (2007: 288) calls a “normativity hangover”, where subjects live suspended in the present as the desire for “normative intimacy” becomes unattainable (ibid: 285). Inhabiting this space of inertia, individuals often experience an existential crisis, questioning their purpose as they feel “excluded from the very life they were once expected to (re)produce” (Allison, 2012: 354). Amidst intense insecurity, they come to feel socially displaced within their own national society – an affectual symptom of precarity Allison (2012: 351) calls “ordinary refugeeism”. Tom portrays this sense of estrangement:

"You feel kind of exoticized in a way, you know? … They look at you like an object, like fascinated with how different your life is from theirs.” – Tom.

Tom’s experience illustrates how precarious workers in Cornwall may feel estranged within their own country, embodying the “ordinary refugee” (ibid) and reflecting the region’s perceived “backwardness” (Bosworth and Willett, 2011: 209). In such conditions, “feelings of ineptitude, isolation, and defeat are endemic” (Allison, 2012: 354). However, Allison also suggests these affects can foster a shared “refusal and resistance” when experienced collectively (ibid). From here, I argue that precarious living has become naturalised in Cornwall, fostering mutual resilience amidst ongoing insecurity (Worth, 2015). This helps explain “how hope is kept alive in situations of prolonged precarity”, revealing why Cornish youth remain tethered to an uncertain, often unpromising future (Pettit, 2019: 722, 723).

5.1. Enduring Precarity: ‘Relational Autonomy’

“I finish school in summer, but I don’t really have any plans for next year yet, which makes me a little anxious … Pretty much all my mates who left school at 16 don’t have jobs in the winter periods … it can be really tough.” – Chris.

For Taylor (2021: 587), precarity often consumes “forgotten about, thwarted populations, geographically placed in regions that are predominantly post-industrial”. Cornwall epitomises this ‘left behind’ space, where precarity is less the exception than the affective

condition of youth life (Allison, 2016). As Chris expresses, anxiety and uncertainty are normalised features of employment, inducing insecurity even while still in education. This reflects what Worth (2015: 609) terms “borrowing insecurity”, where the struggles of family and peers shape young people's expectations, dulling ambition and predisposing stagnation. In Cornwall, where precarity is ambient, young people anticipate instability and become suspended in a life that, despite “not leading particularly anywhere”, gets “lived nonetheless” (Butler, 2016: 1). This resonates with Ahmed’s (2004: 117) theory of ‘affective economies,’ which challenges neoliberal ideas of individuality by showing how “emotions circulate between bodies” within intimate social spaces. Here, precarity becomes not a private burden but a shared social condition inherited by Cornish youth.

However, according to Worth (2015), such endurance to a precarious life should not be framed as a lack of ambition, but rather as a product of communal interdependency, which can be understood through the lens of ‘relational autonomy’. Worth (2015: 603, 604) discerns that conceptualising the “self as social” allows us to understand how “our affective connections shape our perception and decisions about employment”. Decisions to stay in Cornwall are heavily shaped by community ties and networks of care. When discussing why she wants to stay in Cornwall, Emma shared:

“My family have lived here for years, and my grandparents live literally just down the road. I go have a cup of tea with them almost every day and help them with shopping and stuff. I couldn’t imagine not being able to do that.” – Emma.

For Emma, her emotional connection with her grandparents supersedes the importance of a stable career elsewhere. As Tronto (1993) argues, care is not merely a coping mechanism but a political act that contests neoliberal ideals of individualism. In Cornwall, staying close to family is not necessarily a failure to flourish but a challenge to normative trajectories of success under capitalism, revealing a different ethic of endurance shaped by interdependency and place-based care (ibid). As a result, these forms of relational care both sustain and constrain Cornish youth in their navigation of precarity, offering an affectively rich but economically limiting form of survival. Through this lens of ‘relational autonomy’ (Worth, 2015), we see “how people not only materially survive but emotionally survive” precarious employment in Cornwall (Pettit, 2019: 725). Recognising autonomy as socially embedded and shaped by interdependency explains why young people remain in a region where precarity is pervasive and prosperous futures are foreclosed (Worth, 2015).

Chapter 6: Ambivalent attachments to inadequate objects

"I definitely feel hope and excitement for the future. Like, the thought of having my own place or finding a job that I love and I can do at home, those thoughts really do excite me." – Sam.

This dissertation has situated the continued deprivation of Cornish youth within a geography of attachment to a sustainable future in Cornwall – one rendered unattainable by an unequal housing and employment economy, rooted in an externally imposed Cornish "backwardness" (Bosworth and Willett, 2011: 209). At this point, one may question why young people remain attached to a future that appears fundamentally 'cruel' amidst such constraints (Berlant, 2011). This chapter unpacks this paradox through the lens of ambivalence, which moves beyond a binary of positive and negative emotion to reveal a complex, relational entanglement of affect shaped by societal inequalities (Ruez and Cockayne, 2021). Drawing on Berlant's (2011: 24) concept of *cruel optimism* – "the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" – young people like Sam sustain hope for a future systematically distanced from their reach. Yet, in a capitalist society where alternative political-economic systems are devoid (Fischer, 2009), such optimism cannot be viewed as entirely negative. As Berlant (2011: 14) writes, "Optimism is, instead, a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently". Hope, therefore, is both cruel and necessary – a source of meaning when "life is met by a world of inadequate objects" (Berlant, 2016: 124). For Cornish youth, the deeper fear lies not in inadequacy, but in that "the loss of the promising object/scene itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything" (Berlant, 2011: 24). This results in the "cultivation of an ambivalent relation to actually existing attachments", where hoping for a future in Cornwall holds individuals in a cruelly sustaining trajectory, underpinning why they have no future in the region (Anderson, 2022: 398). This chapter explores ambivalence in two forms: first, as a desperate clinging to hope amidst deprivation, whereby individuals who remain in Cornwall navigate hardship through optimism, imbuing meaning into an otherwise inadequate life (Berlant, 2011); and second, as a loosely held attachment, in which young people leave in search of stable work but maintain the hope of returning. Both paths converge on the same conclusion: there is no prosperous future for young people in Cornwall. Analysing this through the affectual lens of ambivalence reveals how Cornish youth navigate being "losers" in a capitalist society, where the coexistence of contradictory feelings reflects their uncertain, unequal place in a world defined by *capitalist realism* (Fisher, 2009: 9).

"I would rather sacrifice a job that I thought I once wanted to be able to stay at home and be happy living in Cornwall where I love." – Emma.

Li et al.'s (2019: 108) conceptualisation of "place attachment" helps us understand how an "affectual bond between people and places" can transcend material concerns like insecure employment. Emma's desire to remain in Cornwall, regardless of material outcomes, exemplifies this attachment. For Emma, Cornwall is not just home – it is central to her epistemological and ontological sense of self. She affirms this: "I've never known anything else, and if I'm honest I don't think I ever want to." Her attachment thus exceeds preference; it sustains a familiar existence, even amidst the "inadequate objects" entwined in Cornish life (Berlant, 2016: 124). Li et al. (2019: 108) note a similar phenomenon in Shenyang, China: "Residents are both socially and economically dependent on their neighbourhoods, while their quality of life is negatively affected by various forms of neighbourhood disorder". The power of these place attachments, then, lies in its ability to cultivate a dependence that overrides hard times and "transcend rationalities" (England, 2025: 54). Despite currently enduring employment difficulties, Tom notes: "I don't think I could have grown up in a better place … I 100% want to raise my own family here". For Berlant (2011: 28), "cruel optimism is in this sense a concept pointing toward a mode of lived immanence", where young people like Tom "choose to ride the system of attachment that they are used to", finding meaning in the imperfect life they know. Ambivalence surfaces here in the tension between what appears to be a clear desire to stay and the emotional defence mechanism this desire might represent. From this perspective, clinging to a future in Cornwall – despite it being "enthralled" with what is "impoverished or abusive" – can be read as an affectual response to an ambivalent attachment to inadequate objects, keeping individuals in Cornwall as they reject the realities of their existence (Butler, 1997: 45). As Berlant (2016: 120) encapsulates: "By trying to remain clotted with the object of desire, by insisting on having an object in a particular way, we can refuse its contingency and our fragility. We can remain in the drama we know."

"The community is what makes it unique. Like, if you live in Cornwall and you're having a tough time or, like struggling with something, there isn't one person who wouldn't help you if you asked." – Chris.

As explored in Chapters 4 and 5, a strong sense of Cornish community provides vital hope and resilience for young people facing structural challenges in employment and housing. This ethos of collective support – described by Chris as “unique” to Cornwall – arises in a region where conventional, future-oriented optimism is scarce. Here, hope lies not in material security but in shared struggle and solidarity. As Li et al. (2019: 108) observed in their study of a declining neighbourhood in China, “The material and spiritual support that residents gain from a declining neighbourhood can alleviate the life constraints they must cope with”. For young people in Cornwall, who embody what Berlant (2016: 120) calls “the inconvenience of being an imperfect or flailing subject”, survival requires alternative modes of endurance – ways of “getting through” that sustain “continued attachment to life” amidst precarity. In the absence of stable pathways to prosperity, this hope becomes a form of resistance, offering meaning to lives otherwise lacking in promise (ibid). Within this communal fabric, we see the dynamics of *cruel optimism* (Berlant, 2011), where individuals remain attached to “trajectories that bring closer a promissory object, closer but rarely fuller present” (Anderson, 2022: 406). Yet this attachment should not be dismissed outright. As Ringel (2021: 881) cautions, hope must not “too easily be subsumed by the specific logics and politics we or others imbue it with”. Instead, it remains ambivalent, a force both sustaining and constraining. John articulates this ambivalence in the face of limited opportunity:

“You need to accept that you're maybe not going to get the kind of high-flying job that you might have once envisioned for yourself, um, if you want to stay here. But I don’t necessarily think that has to be a sad story.” – John.

John’s refusal to see an unprosperous future in Cornwall as entirely negative reflects a form of hope that, while seemingly cruel, becomes essential in the absence of alternative life paths – capturing Zournazi’s (2002: 14, 15) insight: “Hope can be what sustains life in the face of despair, yet it 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”. Rather than framing young people’s futures in Cornwall through a lens of pessimism, we must recognise this “intimacy between the negativity of a cruel relation and the positivity of world-building enabled by the optimistic structure and energy of attachment” (Anderson, 2022: 401). Although “the future is a losing bet” for Cornish youth, “abandoning it has enormous stakes” when alternative futures in the region are foreclosed (Ahmann, 2024: 2, 3).

6.1 Confronting reality: ‘To get on, get out’

“I don’t think living in Cornwall is an option for me. I’d love to come back in 20 years or so, but if you want to get on in Cornwall, you have to get out and find an actual career that will allow you to have a lifestyle here.” – Chloe.

While this dissertation has primarily focused on those aspiring to remain in Cornwall, a minority of respondents expressed a different perspective: they feel compelled to leave in order to pursue sustainable careers, with the hope of returning once financially secure. Chloe’s reflection encapsulates this painful ambivalence – her attachment to Cornwall endures, but economic realities render staying untenable. Her situation exemplifies the tension between place identity and mobility driven by structural constraints (Gustafson, 2001; Pedersen, 2018).

As Corbett (2006: 295) argues, “Rurality is powerfully associated with the past”, often entrapping residents in a state of “stagnation”. For young people like Chloe, staying may mean resigning to abandonment, while leaving risks severing ties with a place fundamental to their identity. Charlie captures this existential dilemma:

“That feeling that you have to choose between the high-flying job and staying in Cornwall is difficult because people do want to be successful and opportunities here are so low … There’s no security or comfort in either.” – Charlie.

Pedersen (2018: 688) contends that “migration to the city is considered a necessary precondition for success”, reinforced by dominant discourses linking “urbanity with career opportunities and moving forward”. Within these normative frameworks of aspiration (Sellar, 2013), rural youth often pursue urban migration as a presumed necessity (Abbott-Chapman et al., 2014; Du, 2015). Yet, mobility does not sever attachment, it often intensifies it. As Pedersen (2018: 687) argues, places are not merely spatial coordinates but social and cultural foundations that offer “rootedness, anchor point and stability”. Leaving, therefore, entails not only economic opportunity but emotional and existential rupture, as young people are parted from the places where their identities were formed (Gustafson, 2001).

“Take money out the situation, and I think everyone would stay.” – Luke.

This ambivalent orientation to the future - whether to stay or leave - reveals the deeper precarity of life in a ‘left behind’ region. Both options are laced with insecurity and ultimately expose the absence of a prosperous future in Cornwall. Luke’s observation underscores this central theme: departure is not a matter of desire, but of necessity. In confronting this reality, young people must navigate the cruel choice between future prosperity and existential belonging - a choice symptomatic of being a marginalised entity in an exploitative capitalist framework (Berlant, 2011). Ambivalence, then, is not a lack of clarity or direction, but the affective expression of structural abandonment.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This dissertation has explored how Cornish youth navigate the challenges of rural deprivation through affect (Anderson, 2006). By situating their future imaginaries within a geography of attachment (Anderson, 2022), this study offers a nuanced perspective on the persistent reproduction of poverty in the region. Interviews with nine young people living in Cornwall reveal that their future aspirations are intertwined with identity politics, where Cornwall represents not just a place but a socio-cultural anchor for existential belonging (Antonsich, 2010; Pederson, 2018). This belonging cultivates a perceived 'promise' of a sustainable future in the region – a promise that remains unattainable amidst accelerating external commodification (Berlant, 2011; Bosworth and Willett, 2011).

Through the lens of affectual attachment, this dissertation argues that Cornish youth have no future in the region (Anderson, 2022). This claim is substantiated by three analytical chapters, each demonstrating how affect – hope, precarity, and ambivalence – shapes their attachment to a region where opportunities are scarce.

Chapters 4 and 5 formed the empirical core of this study, with chapter 4 focussing on the relationship between hope and housing, and chapter 5 connecting precarity with employment. These chapters revealed how an attachment to a future in Cornwall is intricately tied to a sense of hopeful resilience, fostered through social ties (Ramalho, 2021), relations of interdependency (Worth, 2015), and a proud native identity (Porter, 2014). Paradoxically, while this belonging offers a source of existential stability and meaning, it simultaneously binds individuals to a trajectory defined by despair and limited opportunities (Berlant, 2011).

This dynamic encapsulates an attachment of ambivalence – a central theme explored in chapter 6 that anchors this study. Ambivalence emerges as both a sustaining force and a cruel constraint, compelling Cornish youth to navigate an untenable choice between economic mobility and affectual belonging (Berlant, 2011). For those who contemplate leaving, the decision becomes a negotiation between prosperity and the emotional pull of home, underscoring the deeply conflicted nature of their attachment to place. Such ambivalence underpins the argument that Cornish futures are foreclosed. It perpetuates endurance in a landscape of inadequate material prospects, allowing these limitations to persistently define lives (Berlant, 2016). This enduring tension – of being "flailing" subjects

in a marginalised rural periphery (ibid: 120) – reflects the lived experience of Cornish youth and highlights the broader implications of marginalisation in rural contexts.

Returning to the central thesis of this dissertation, some may find the statement, 'The Cornish youth have no future in the region', uncomfortably blunt. However, this tone is deliberate, crafted to provoke critical reflection on the deeply precarious, stagnant, and deprived realities of Cornish life. These realities are consistently overshadowed by the dominant narrative that portrays Cornwall as nothing more than a picturesque tourist destination for wealthy outsiders (Kennedy and Kingcome, 1998). To offer empty promises of hope to a rural youth systematically denied equitable opportunities in a capitalist society would serve only to deepen their deprivation further. While some scholars examining Cornwall's challenges choose to celebrate its 'difference' and sense of individualism in contrast to broader societal norms (Porter, 2014; Willett, 2009; Willett, 2023), a pressing question remains: What meaningful change has this perspective brought? What tangible difference has this romanticisation made in addressing the real issues faced by the region?

To create meaningful change for the youth of Cornwall and for the generations that follow, it is essential to first confront the harsh realities of their systematic exclusion. Recognising the severe lack of opportunities available to young people in this rural area is a necessary step toward fostering genuine progress. The romanticised portrayals of Cornwall as a "rural idyll" must be stripped away to reveal the lived realities of hardship, poverty, and precarity (Bosworth and Willett, 2011: 208). These are the daily experiences of local residents who have no voice in shaping how their region is perceived by the outside world. This dissertation does not offer a glamorised account of Cornwall. Instead, it is an urgent call for recognition of the truths that define life in this neglected region. By centring the voices of local youths who endure these hardships, this study offers an unfiltered perspective on the realities of inhabiting a region left behind by English modernity (Bosworth and Willett, 2011). If these truths continue to be overlooked, the fragile optimism of Cornish youths will remain both their sustaining force and their cruel trap (Berlant, 2011).

This dissertation acknowledges the limitations of its small participant sample in representing the entirety of Cornwall. Nonetheless, it highlights the utility of affect, imagination, and attachment in uncovering profound insights into the lived realities and envisioned futures of the region's youth (Anderson, 2022). Therefore, it invites further investigation into the future

imaginaries of Cornish youth and demands urgent recognition of the stark realities faced by those systematically ‘left behind.’

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Appendix

Appendix 1 – Transcript Coding Extract

Coding Key of affects:

- Hope
- Doubt
- Anxiety
- Precarity
- Ambivalence

Interviewer: Where do you picture yourself in five years' time from now?

Participant: Gosh, I really don't know. I would really love to be in Cornwall, but again, the lack of opportunities, housing, all that kind of stuff. It's difficult.

I don't see myself realistically being able to stay, even though I really, really want too. I guess I'll live away from Cornwall for a little bit but with plans to come back.

Interviewer: So, your ultimate hope is to live in Cornwall in the long term?

Participant: Um, yes, I would love to live in Cornwall if I can, like I'd love to stay here and I hope I do.

But, like, I would definitely like to experience living elsewhere for a little bit, because it's like even Living in Exeter for uni, which is not a big city at all, feels like, so *woah* [emphasis]. Because it's, like, so different to life down here. So, I think, yeah, I would definitely like to experience something else for a while, but like, long term I would like to come back, definitely.

Interviewer: Oh, awesome. So what experiences or influences have shaped your aspirations for the future?

Participant: That's a tough question.

I guess, um, in terms of like wanting to stay in Cornwall, like that kind of aspiration, I think probably just like living in Cornwall my whole life, I do feel like it is quite a distinct place.

Like I do think it is very, it feels sort of like I have a real identity with Cornwall. I feel like my Cornish identity is very important to me. And I think living in Cornwall, living in like small communities, where like everybody knows everybody and that kind of thing. I think that makes you not want to leave.

But I also think that like, Um, going to uni and, like, hearing about what it's like to live in big cities or hearing about job opportunities elsewhere, that does sometimes make you think, like, is staying in Cornwall the right thing or not?

Interviewer: Yeah, definitely. Yeah, of course. So when discussing the future, what kind of emotions do you feel? whether it's kind of hope, excitement, anxiety, a combination?

Participant: Yeah, I think definitely a combination. But for me, I think, like, definitely hope and excitement. It's amazing here and I definitely want to live here when I'm older.

But obviously, the anxiety is definitely there because housing in Cornwall is very expensive, um, and because job opportunities are very low. So, I think like you feel excitement at the thought of the life you want, but anxiety about how easy it will be to reach that life.

Interviewer: And with the hope, do you think that hope is almost more tied to a future outside of Cornwall?

Participant: I think for me, I'm definitely hopeful for the potential to stay, like I would like to stay, that's like what I want to do. But I think, like, I think there is a mix of both. Like I think the thought of maybe living Elsewhere for a little while is definitely like an exciting thought because it feels so different. But the like, the proper hope for me would be hoping that I'm able to live in Cornwall and like still have a good job and have a nice house and that kind of thing.

Appendix 2 - Consent form

Durham University

Dissertation Consent Form

This research is being carried out by Henry Blake – an undergraduate student from the Geography Department at Durham University, UK.

The aim of the research is to investigate young people's future imaginaries in the context of Cornwall's socio-economic landscape. This dissertation seeks to connects the future orientations of youthful participants to theories of hope, attachment, and precarity. In doing so, I look to analyse how Cornwall's position within a capitalist society shapes how young people view the future and thereby navigate the present.

To conduct this research, the following method will be used:

- Semi-Structured Interviews.

The findings will be used to write an undergraduate dissertation. The dissertation contributes to the final year of the degree. The research will not be circulated beyond the normal examination and assessment processes within the Department of Geography.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any point. All data collected will be kept confidential and used for this dissertation only. All primary data will be destroyed after the dissertation is assessed. Any identifying characteristics will be removed, and your anonymity will be preserved. If you have any questions concerning the project, your role within it, how any data you provide will be stored and used, please ask.

Consent

*This part of the form is for **direct** participants in the research.*

Please read the information above and fill in the form below. Please feel free to ask any questions you may have about the project and how your data will be used.

	Yes	No
I have read and understood the information sheet above.		
I have had enough time to reflect on my participation in the project.		
I understand the purpose and nature of the study and have had the opportunity to ask questions for clarification.		
I understand that I can withdraw at any time and that I can refuse to answer any question.		

I understand how anonymity apply in my case.		
I consent to being audio recorded.		
I am participating voluntarily.		

If you choose to withdraw from the project all data associated with you will be destroyed.

Name …….

Signed…….
Date……..……..

Thank You!

Appendix 3 – List of Participants

Pseudonym	**Gender**	**Age**	**Living with parents**	**Employment status**
Abi	Female	21	Yes	Employed seasonally
Charlie	Male	19	Yes	Unemployed
Chloe	Female	20	Yes	Student (University)
Chris	Male	18	Yes	Student (School)
Emma	Female	21	Yes	Employed full-time
John	Male	21	Yes	Employed seasonally
Luke	Male	22	Yes	Employed seasonally
Sam	Male	22	Yes	Employed seasonally
Tom	Male	23	Yes	Employed seasonally