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**Emejulu, A. & Bassel, L.**

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# Austerity and the Politics of Becoming

AKWUGO EMEJULU<sup>1</sup> and LEAH BASSEL<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Warwick <sup>2</sup>University of Leicester

## Introduction

In this short contribution, we attempt to explore the ways in which austerity measures – deficit reductions through tax increases and cuts to public spending – generate unexpected political subjectivities among women of colour activists in Britain. In particular, we examine how the dramatic cuts to public spending and the privatization of public services simultaneously subject women of colour by further destabilizing their already precarious economic position *and* create new possibilities for women becoming radical agents for social change. We argue that the dynamic for mapping this process of women of colour becoming new (or, at least, different) political agents is found in the oftentimes disrespected and devalued social relations of caring and care work (Erel, 2011). We argue that caring for and about Others is a dual process of subjectivation through the (re) privatization of care through the roll back of the social welfare state and a politics of becoming which generates new solidarities for collective action among women of colour.

Taking seriously the dynamics of women of colour's activism under austerity matters because it disrupts the binary in EU studies scholarship that privileges a focus on the macro politics of EU institutions over the lived experiences and outcomes at the micro-level. By intruding into this space to tell a different kind of story about austerity politics, it might perhaps be possible to reframe how we think about the ongoing economic crisis, whose interests are served by governing institutions and how we might think differently about resistance to the crisis – beyond the tropes of documenting a populist far-right backlash. We begin by first mapping the changing landscape of austerity and its disproportionate impact on women of colour in Britain. We then turn to explore how women of colour confront the challenge of care by investigating how care acts as both a barrier to public space and as the fulcrum for a new public politics.

## I. The Material and Discursive Violence of Austerity

The 2008 economic crisis was sparked after global financial institutions gambled with subprime mortgages through complicated synthetic financial instruments such as collateralized debt obligations, and plunged global capitalism into chaos after these supposedly 'safe' investments rapidly depreciated (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017a). In order to save the global capitalist system, nation states in which the crisis was concentrated, such as Britain and the United States, bailed out these institutions through a massive transfer of wealth. It is this transfer of wealth from public to private hands that then sparked austerity measures. In Britain, since 2008, more than £1,162 billion has been allocated to saving ailing financial institutions from collapse (National Audit Office, 2017). Unlike what took place in the eurozone,

Britain chose to undertake a voluntary programme of austerity. The massive hole in the public accounts had to be reconciled and austerity was the policy proposal taken up in Britain in 2010. Indeed, the then Conservative-Liberal Democrat government led by David Cameron saw the crisis as an opportunity to dramatically reshape the British social welfare state and the conception of social citizenship (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017a). Britain is distinctive in its response to the crisis as austerity was, for a time, justified across the political left and the right as a consequence of an overweening social welfare state. However, this surprisingly durable economic consensus among elite state actors has now fractured with the Labour Party, the official opposition, breaking ranks under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn and the Shadow Chancellor, John McDowell, to call for an end to austerity and a return to the social welfare settlements of the post-war period (The Labour Party, 2017).

Curiously in the British context and in the context of the *JCMS Annual Review*, debates about Brexit and austerity remain almost completely separate. Although the worst is yet to come in terms of austerity with more than £12 billion of cuts to public services still to be implemented, this programme of cuts and privatizations is not necessarily informing Britain's approach to economic and monetary policy after its planned exit from the EU. Instead, austerity has largely disappeared from public debate; it seems to have been crowded out by the on-going difficulties of the protracted Brexit negotiations.

What is important to note about the economic crisis and austerity measures is that they are largely represented as crises for an undifferentiated middle class and the *white* working class. In the hegemonic discursive constructions, the middle classes experience the crisis as a new phenomenon of precarity: a university graduate will have to struggle on zero-hour contracts for long periods; permanent, well-paid jobs are difficult to find; final salary pension schemes have closed; it has become increasingly difficult to get on the housing ladder. Thus, in one sense, the crisis is represented as a temporary inconvenience for the economically privileged. For groups who can draw on their wealth to secure their economic position and buy access to vital social welfare services such as healthcare and education, austerity is largely an invisible process. The crisis and austerity have also been represented as an insurmountable challenge for the white working classes. In these discursive constructions, white working class men and women have found themselves in circumstances where local services have disappeared and the eligibility requirements for certain kinds of benefit have become more stringent (Goodhart, 2017). These tough economic conditions combine with an already existing hostility to immigration, which, in turn, become the explanatory factor for a backlash against the establishment as seen in the 2016 Brexit vote, misrepresented as the will of the 'white working class' (Emejulu, 2016).

This dominant narrative is compelling but misleading in that it erases the complex dynamics of race, class, gender and legal status that have helped to determine which groups have been hardest hit by the crisis and austerity. The economic crisis has been a slow-moving disaster for women of colour which they experience largely outside the public eye. As we have documented in great detail elsewhere (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017a, 2017b; Emejulu and Bassel, 2015, 2017a, 2017b;) women of colour are impacted by the crisis and austerity measures both discursively and materially. Firstly, women of colour largely disappear in accounts of the crisis and austerity. There can be no place for women of colour in the story of the economic crisis as their experiences confound the hegemonic narrative. Both middle class and working class women of colour – but particularly Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black African women – have seen their household

incomes plummet since 2008 (see Women's Budget Group (2018) for further details). This is for two reasons. First, women of colour, on the whole, are more likely to be living in the poorest households and are more likely to be unemployed, underemployed or in low-skilled, low-paid work. Second, women of colour are also more likely to be living in larger households with more dependents – older adults and children – requiring care. Thus when public spending – particularly real terms cuts in unemployment insurance and housing benefit – is curtailed, these women lose a vital source of household income. Importantly, when controlling for class, women of colour in a more secure economic position also see greater falls in their income in comparison to their white counterparts. This is because these women are more likely to work for the state in the feminized caring professions of teaching, social work and nursing. Thus, when public spending is cut, this also destabilizes employment – and income – for women of colour.

In this tumultuous year in which we have witnessed far right and proto-fascist groups make important breakthroughs in electoral politics particularly in Germany and Italy, women of colour disrupt the taken-for-granted narrative about the relationship between austerity and the populist far-right politics. Women of colour's precarity under austerity has not seen them turn against immigration or vote for racist and xenophobic parties. In fact, we are currently seeing a revival in radical grassroots Black feminist and Afrofeminist politics in Europe (Emejulu and Sobande, forthcoming, 2019). Thus, the dynamics under austerity are more nuanced than is usually represented. However, in order to capture this complexity we need to have an appreciation of intersecting inequalities – unequal social and economic outcomes derived from the ways in which race, class, gender and legal status interact – and an understanding of how care work in both private and public spaces, creates particular kinds of political subjectivities for women of colour. It is to this point we now turn.

## II. Subjectivation by Care: Muslim Women and 'Failed Care'<sup>1</sup>

We now explore how caring for and about Others is a *dual* process of subjectivation. In this section we explore the first face of care. Through migrant women of colour's experiences of becoming British citizens we see the (re) privatization of care and roll back of the social welfare state at work. This face of the politics of becoming (see also Khan, 2019) is one in which care is turned against some women of colour, for not caring in the 'right ways' to instil 'British values' and prevent extremism. Yet, at the same time, the increasingly neoliberal nature of the process (Turner, 2014) exacerbates the ways in which the broader withdrawal of state care and support of women can severely hamper some women of colour's participation in the naturalization process and public life more generally.

Care acts both as a barrier to public space and as the fulcrum for a new public politics (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017b; Erel, 2011; Lister, 2008). In the process of becoming British citizens, migrant women of colour face a vortex of conflicting demands (Bassel and Khan, in progress; Bassel, 2016).<sup>2</sup> In particular Muslim migrant women – specifically Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslim women – are often portrayed in public discourse and social

<sup>1</sup>The findings on the naturalization process in the UK are drawn from work supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number ES/K010174/1). The research material can be accessed on the UK Data Service ReShare website, persistent identifier: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-852967.

<sup>2</sup>This section draws on the Economic and Social Research Council project 'The UK citizenship Process: Exploring Immigrants' Experiences' (ES/K010174/1) and specifically Bassel and Khan's article in preparation.

integration policy as victims of social isolation who need English to do their job of socializing young people better (more generally see Luibhéid, 2006; Tyler, 2013). We can understand the ways in which these Muslim women are interpellated by the state as ‘failed care’. Muslim women are portrayed as isolated victims for whom no one cares (except, grudgingly the state) and also passive objects who fail to care for – and sufficiently control – their sons which leads to violent disorder and extremism.

These refrains of failed care have been consistently repeated by state actors – on both the left and the right – for almost 20 years. One of the earliest instances of the deployment of failed care is seen in the Labour government’s response to rioting in the northern English cities of Oldham, Bradford and Burnley in 2001. The multiple causes of these riots, including intimidation and violence by far right groups, were largely ignored. Instead, the disorder was attributed to the lack of English proficiency, particularly of mothers of the young men who participated in the disorder (who, it should be noted, did not participate in the rioting and for whom it was assumed they could not speak English). A ‘meaningful concept of citizenship’ was needed, that would foster loyalty to the nation (Turner, 2014, p. 337).<sup>3</sup> Understanding English was linked with social cohesion and ultimately led in 2005 to the introduction of a naturalization process that seeks to bureaucratically impose ‘British values’ via citizenship tests, a ceremony, and administrative procedures in order to ‘become’ a British citizen. The citizenship test, in particular, was posited as the solution to a lack of community cohesion and the failed care of Muslim mothers.

More recently and especially in the context of young British people travelling to Syria to join Islamic State (IS), the former Prime Minister David Cameron called for an end to the ‘passive tolerance’ of separate communities which, he argued, left many Muslim women facing discrimination and social isolation, and proposed the launch of a £20 million language fund (*The Guardian*, 2016). The proposals mandated that migrant women demonstrate proficiency in the English language if they were living in the United Kingdom on a five year spousal visa, and left open the possibility that these women would be detained and deported if they were unable to provide evidence of improvement in the language. Similar to the Labour government’s response in 2001, young Muslims’ disorder was attributed to their mothers’ failed care and lack of English.

Dame Louise Casey’s *Review into Opportunity and Integration* (2016) commissioned by David Cameron evokes the same failed care figure: the Muslim woman – particularly the Pakistani and/or Bangladeshi Muslim woman – who is simultaneously a victim of domestic violence, socially isolated, facing discrimination in the job market and unemployed, failing to learn English and, as a result, struggling to manage her children. In addition to language provision for these women, Casey proposed to reinvent the process through which one becomes a British citizen ‘which is of huge national, cultural and symbolic value’ to include ‘an Oath of Integration with British Values and Society on arrival, rather than awaiting a final citizenship test’ (Casey, 2016, p. 168).

Cameron’s pledge to support Muslim women to learn English and Casey’s very general recommendation to support ‘targeted English language provision’ are silent on the state withdrawal of care through austerity. They do not acknowledge the legacy of

<sup>3</sup>Adrian Blackledge notes the significance of extending the language requirement to those applying on the basis of marriage in the Nationality Act 2002. ‘Asian immigrant women should be required to learn English as soon as possible, because their failure to do so brings about community segregation and lack of social cohesion which threatens society’ (Blackledge, 2005).

funding cuts to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services which have contributed to social isolation. Instead, failed care, which is transmitted through culture and religion, are constructed as the problem, and English language training and a new and improved citizenship test process, the solution (Bassel, 2016). English language, as before, is to act as the ‘panacea’ (Greenwood and Robins, 2002, p. 507; Sasse, 2005, p. 678) to the ills caused by a lack of integration (Khan, 2013) and serve as an antidote to radicalization. These Muslim migrant women are the vehicle for this panacea of English language because they are biological and social ‘reproducers’ of the nation (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989; Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1997), who will, it is argued, raise young people with the correct values (Lonergan, 2017; Yuval-Davis *et al.*, 2005; see also Morrice, 2016a). It is vital, according to Casey, for this existing culture of failed care to be transformed by using the English language as the vehicle to impose the correct British values – and in turn, the correct forms of care and control – on Muslim groups.

Yet, for those women of colour targeted by these discourses and policies, austerity looms large in experiences of becoming British. Government funding for ESOL has been dramatically cut back and a 2011 Equality Impact Assessment demonstrated that women and ethnic minorities would be disproportionately affected (BIS, 2011). In July 2015 the Skills Funding Agency announced that ESOL courses for students receiving Job Seeker’s Allowance would be cut with immediate effect, affecting 16,000 individuals and again with a disproportionate effect on female and ethnic minority learners (Ashworth, 2016).

Finally, we can see how discourses of ‘failed care’ intersect with a broader ‘crisis of care’ that shapes women of colour’s experiences of becoming British citizens. According to Nancy Fraser, this crisis of care takes a particular shape: alongside state and corporate disinvestment from social welfare (particularly but not exclusively since the 2008 economic crisis), women are recruited into the paid workforce, externalizing care work onto families and communities while diminishing their capacity to perform it. The result is a new, dualized organization of social reproduction, commodified for those who can pay for it and privatized for those who cannot, as some in the second category provide care work in return for (low) wages for those in the first category (Fraser, 2016, p. 112). As we have argued above, this is not new. What changes is how the crisis is resolved for some and made worse for others, particularly women of colour. And for some poor and working class Muslim women, their failed care, in this broader crisis of care, means they become objects of state intervention and demonization.

When experiencing the process of trying to become a British citizen both material and discursive dimensions of austerity come to light.<sup>4</sup> Cost is a key challenge: a minimum of £1000 per adult (£50 for the test, over £1000 for naturalization, plus any preparation courses, solicitor fees, etc.) (Bassel *et al.*, 2017, p. 19). These findings echo studies on legalization processes in the United States which document how ‘gender and class intersect to make the legalization process unaffordable – and eventual legalization unachievable – for the poorest women’ (Salcido and Menjivar, 2012, p. 353).

<sup>4</sup>This withdrawal coincides with increasingly demanding test requirements through which it is no longer possible to obtain citizenship through the ‘ESOL with citizenship’ route where a course could be taken instead of a computer-based exam. This was a realistic route for migrant women with lower language proficiency (Morrice, 2016b). Since October 2013 both language proficiency and passing the Life in the UK computer-based test were required. These challenges are erased when visibility in public debate is tied directly to being a threat to British values and a victim of patriarchal oppression.

The lack of childcare acts as a barrier to preparation that has become more acute under austerity. Preparation strategies themselves are highly gendered in the broader context of 'time crunch' and the politics of survival that women of colour negotiate under austerity in Britain (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017a). Every minute counts between childcare responsibilities that some women of colour living the 'crisis of care' are not able to outsource so must cover themselves, while at the same time trying to meet the demanding requirements of the naturalization process. It has become increasingly difficult to access affordable preparation and English language classes that have childcare facilities, further impeding access to the ESOL classroom. Public services, particularly childcare, libraries and sports activities for children, had been the key way in which some migrant women could participate in everyday life alongside caring responsibilities (Loneragan, 2015). Cuts to these services, particularly at the local level, isolate women who are already in a precarious social and economic position.

The citizenship test process appears to be gender neutral but, in fact, interacts with gendered social structures and ideologies (Salcido and Menjivar, 2012), including the gendered division of labour and of caring responsibilities. It is part and parcel of the austere politics of becoming, literally becoming a British citizen in this case. This face of subjectivation by care is the product of border control and austerity through which migrant women of colour experience material and discursive violence and barriers to public space.

However, women of colour are not merely objects of state policy and control. In the next section, we examine how austerity spurs new resistances through which caring and care work is the spark.

### III. Care as a Freedom Dream

Care creates unexpected political possibilities for women of colour. To only view care as a barrier to public space and to collective action is to misunderstand the complex ways in which care operates to simultaneously close down and open up opportunities for activism (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017b). In mapping women's of colour's activism against austerity, against the far right and for migrants' rights in London,<sup>5</sup> we find that care is the crucial social relationship that guides many women's activism and is an important dynamic for building solidarity for collective action.

For these activists, we can think about care as both a praxis – theory informed action – and as prefiguration – a process of becoming and creating new political subjectivities. To understand care as praxis is to recognize how *caring about Others* is a radical act. *To care about Others* requires the development of a political imagination that takes seriously the lived experiences of the most marginalized. This caring is radical particularly in the context of the commodified care as we discussed above. Caring in this sense is not mere empathy but an act of re-valuing and re-validating the views and experiences of those who are systematically dehumanized and disrespected because of their particular positioning at the intersections of race, class, gender and legal status.

<sup>5</sup>This section draws on the University of Warwick funded project, 'The Politics of Catastrophe', in which Akwugo Emejulu is the principal investigator. We thank Inez van der Scheer for her research assistance on this project.

For instance, this British Asian anti-deportations activist in London discusses how care and protection for Others is the foundation for how she knows and understands the social world and this care makes possible her radical activism against the British state's border regime:

'What is central to basically how I frame all of my politics is I know the things I do are because I have this sense of having care for the people around me ... But then how does that feed into ... sharing radical politics ... and making sure that we can continue to undo the power of ... state institutions' (Interview, MR1, London, 2018).

Here we can see how care operates as a freedom dream. Care is the organizing principle that galvanizes collective action but caring about others does not end with protecting groups from harm. To care about Others makes possible the ability to build solidarity and seek to counter state violence. We see care operate in a similar way for this British Asian prison abolitionist in London. For her, care represents a window to a new world. To care about others is to imagine a society in which everyone – but especially women of colour and migrant women – are cared for by the state and by other citizens:

'forty-six per cent of women in prison are also survivors of domestic violence. A lot of the women who go through the refuge system are also the women who go through the prison system ... An understanding that a world without prisons is a world where we have adequate services ... for domestic violence, for addiction, for housing, for employment, like mental health services' (Interview, PA1, London, 2017).

Note how the state functions very differently for each of these activists. For the anti-deportations activist, the state must be dismantled – there is no hope for reform. For the prison abolitionist, however, there is a possibility of reform by transforming the state from a punitive to an egalitarian and redistributive institution.

To care about Others also involves caring about the impact and consequences of one's collective action processes. For this mixed race anti-austerity activist in London, we can see how caring means recognizing Others as political subjects and struggling to build coalitions so that everyone can be free:

'We're completely autonomous [as a collective] ... But we have to look to where our points of reference have got the experience over many decades of how you work collectively, how you work in a way which does not undermine anybody else's struggle, but in fact does everything possible to bring ... struggles together in a principled way, and in a way that is not about personal ambition, but it's about a complete ambition for all of us, a whole movement' (Interview, AA1, London, 2018).

We can also understand care as prefiguration. By 'prefiguration' we mean politics that seek to build and live a future new world through practices in the present. For the activists we interviewed, *caring for Others* is to refuse neoliberal, racist, sexist, xenophobic, homophobic, ableist frameworks that govern their everyday lives. Thus, to care for Others is an act of refusal and an act of becoming simultaneously: care rejects hierarchical domination and attempts to create new political subjectivities.

For example, this woman of colour prison abolitionist describes her prefigurative politics like this: 'At the end of the day what I'm really interested in is creating an alternative social reality ... we've got a glimmer of what it would be like to live otherwise in a world



that isn't this world and that was beautiful' (Interview, PA2, London, 2017). This activist was involved in a high profile occupation of the site of a former women's prison. In a 'place of so much pain' it was important to create 'something beautiful' (Interview, PA2, London, 2017) and live, even for a short while, the new world. The motivation for the occupation was that the prison was a place of *carelessness*: where families were broken up, where women of colour experienced institutionalized abuse and/or died under suspicious circumstances and where women, who should have been receiving support for mental health problems or as survivors of domestic violence, were criminalized. To occupy the prison was a bold act of radical care to recognize and remember the inmates' suffering and to try to build a new politics through caring about them, their families and their struggles.

Activists also use care as a way to create radical political identities. Through self-care and by valuing themselves as activists attempting to survive everyday life, they are able to build community and take radical action – such as direct action to oppose funding cuts to anti-violence against women's services, in the case of this British Asian activist:

'That self-care, self-preservation Audre Lorde stuff ... Like how radical is it in this world where no one wants us to have a nice time and enjoy things ... It comes back down to we [women of colour activists] are more concerned about survival than like this longer term ... idealised, I dunno, communist, socialist, whatever, society' (Interview, PA3, London, 2017).

Through a prefigurative politics of care, this allows the activist women we spoke with to revalue the kinds of activism that are important to them but that are too often delegitimized by ostensible social movement allies: that of everyday survival. Survival may not be prefigurative but recognizing and taking seriously the struggle to stay alive under violent and oppressive austerity measures, border enforcement and carceral regimes makes possible the ability to think expansively about what politics is, what politics looks like and who gets to be a political agent. In this way, the activist women attempt to create new political subjectivities by using care as a way to revalorise their grassroots activism and understand it as a radical politics of everyday possibility. Care also functions as a bridge to a new world in which the violent systems that devalue, disrespect and delegitimize women of colour are destroyed and a new world is built that puts caring for and about Others at its heart.

## Conclusions

In this contribution we have attempted to explore the dual processes of care for women of colour in Britain. To understand what the EU is and how it functions it is important to map the ways in which those who are forcibly invisibilized and silenced speak and take action in and against governing institutions. Mapping the micropolitics of women of colour activists is crucial as a counter-narrative to the incomplete but nevertheless hegemonic story that typically gets told about European austerity politics. Exploring the dynamics of care for women of colour gives an insight to the hidden yet consequential politics of domination and resistance. On the one hand, care further subjects women to state intervention, control and violence. For Muslim migrant women in particular, a discourse of failed care is deployed against them to justify everyday state intrusions in their

lives. These failed care discourses are further exacerbated by austerity measures and a tightening border regime in which women are compelled to 'become' British citizens but the means to do so are withheld from them because of dramatic cuts to local services and seemingly impossible eligibility requirements for naturalization and citizenship. Care, however, also functions as a galvanizing force for collective action. In the context of the current Conservative government's hostile environment policy and on-going austerity measures, caring for and about Others functions as a practice of freedom – a refusal to reproduce hierarchical exclusions and violence. Caring for and about others also functions as a hopeful and hoped for future. To care for others – especially the despised and disrespected – helps to build the new world in the present. To care is to make real a fragile and precarious utopia. To care for others is to become free, even for a short time.

Care is a double-edged sword of domination and resistance. Care is a politics of becoming. For women of colour, care is a process by which one is compelled to act. Women of colour's struggle for justice and recognition cannot be separated from caring and care work. How women of colour care is the foundation of their public politics and the normative case for care is crucial for understanding the micropolitics of EU studies.

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## Interviews

<i>Interview participant</i>	<i>Location of interview</i>	<i>Date of interview</i>
MR1 is a British Asian anti-deportations activist	London	January 2018
PA1 is a British Asian prison abolitionist	London	December 2017
AA1 is a mixed race anti-austerity activist	London	January 2018
PA2 is a woman of colour prison abolitionist	London	December 2017