

## Malaise of Indolence: (Dis)Engagements with the Future among Young Migrants in Shanghai

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**Abstract** Rural-to-urban migrants in China have often been portrayed as striving subjects, living in “suspension” for the sake of the entrepreneurial futures they desire. Drawing on fieldwork conducted alongside young café workers in Shanghai, this article highlights more ambivalent engagements with the future obscured by emphases, within the social sciences, on the intentional, active aspects of subjectivity. Relatedly, it analyzes moments of purposelessness as more than emotional downsides of precarity, in a context where official discourses of the “Chinese Dream” coexist with vernacular celebrations of indolence. Purposelessness is a form of refusal, allowing young migrants to dwell in the present, if only momentarily. Yet, the very act of articulating unwillingness through playful idioms of indolence does not mean embracing disengagement as a norm. Rather, it nurtures a sense of ethical discomfort and self-responsibility. This malaise of indolence might prevent the translation of temporary disinvestment into a clear politics of refusal. [ambivalence, aspirations, neoliberal subjectivity, post-reform China, purposelessness]

### Introduction

“I’ll probably venture (*chuang*) here in Shanghai for two more years and see where I come up to... But I must make progress!” Standing behind the counter, café worker Manyu and her colleague Fei, both newly recruited, struck up a conversation with me in the middle of a rather unbusy afternoon in October 2017.<sup>1</sup> Manyu, a 20-year-old woman from a small town in Shandong Province, came to Shanghai about two years earlier after graduating from a technical college where she obtained a vocational tertiary degree in Korean. Much to her parents’ dismay, she had followed a classmate to Shanghai and moved between jobs in cafés. Her trajectory, she explained, was motivated by progress, something that required effort (*nuli*). Bending over the counter, with a look on his face that conveyed exhaustion, 25-year-old Fei declared: “You foreigners tend to live freer and happier lives.” In China, the young man added, life requires a constant struggle (*fendou*). Failing to enter this struggle meant an inability to earn money, something that Fei, who had turned away from industrial labor to enter the low-paid service sector, described as his dream. It was not about money itself, but the becoming—otherwise it would afford—another lifestyle, a reshaped relationship to self and others. But, Fei confessed, “to set goals for oneself is exhausting.”

Across lines of gender and age, these young café workers repeatedly evoked their struggles and efforts at self-development to eventually escape a condition known as *dagong* to

entrepreneurial futures. The term, *dagong*, describes low-paid wage labor, both in the industrial and service sector, often connoting exploitation and hardship. But in the café, *dagong* meant more than a condition one had to transcend.<sup>2</sup> By placing young migrants in the heart of the metropolis, the cosmopolitan-appearing service sector gave shape to possibilities for expanding life trajectories beyond that very condition. Aestheticized forms of labor and encounters with things foreign—food, Italian-brand coffee machines, bossa nova tunes humming in the back—afforded the imagination of, and aspirational efforts toward entrepreneurship. Plans to start a business or open one’s own shop quickly emerged as recurring features of self-narratives.

The image of China’s migrant workers pursuing the “good life” despite institutional constraints is familiar in the anthropological literature (Bregnbæk 2016; Yan 2003, 2008; Zavoretti 2017). On the one hand, my ethnographic observations offered yet another story of youth embracing self-development projects and striving toward entrepreneurial aspirations in China (Anagnost 2013; Hansen 2012; Hanser 2002; Ip 2017; Ling 2019, 178; Rofel 2016) and beyond (Maitra 2017; Pettit 2018, 2019; Takeyama 2016). As my interlocutors found precarious jobs, much of the “now” was to serve a different, albeit uncertain, future. In China, these orientations to living are underpinned by a hegemonic cultural framework that Hansen (2015) has described as a “temporal sequence of advancing,” in which individuals are deemed responsible for their own success. This “displacement of the present” (Xiang 2014) echoes what Berlant (2011), writing on the Euro-American context, calls “cruel optimism”: attachments to fantasies of the “good life” that are simultaneously self-sustaining and damaging for the subjects, who continuously adjust to their precarious condition. As this “temporal mode of ceaseless striving” (Hansen 2015, 53) fails to result in actual improvement, migrants enter a prolonged state of “suspension” (Xiang 2021). Pausing routines and embracing impermanence in a constant “rush to the future” (Xiang 2021, 238), they improvise hypermobile trajectories, changing jobs frequently or moving between cities over years. Between actual moves, future orientation pervades the every day, imbuing moments of work, rest, and leisure with projections and fantasies. Time spent rehearsing these dreams can be a form of mobility in itself, however immobile (Rofel 2016; Wallis 2013, 183). These “affective engagements with the future,” Rofel (2016, 182) has argued, constitute “what helps migrant workers pull through the present.”

On the other hand, emphasis on the reduction of “the present to an empty vehicle to the future” (Xiang 2021, 239) does not seem to tell the whole story. They naturalize forward-looking orientations as a “constant mode of being” (Hansen 2015, 53) requiring no efforts to sustain against other temporal and affective (dis)orientations on a moment-to-moment basis. From a phenomenological perspective, the extent to which lives can be lived entirely from and for one’s projections into the future seems debatable, even in a Chinese sociopolitical context marked by pervasive emphases in official discourses and public culture on “dreams.” Fei’s exhausted demeanor suggested that while aspirations shape these young migrants’ trajectories and self-narratives, purposeful modes of being may not be as easy to sustain as implicit in models of neoliberal subjectivities through which “life-making” in reform-era China has been analyzed (Anagnost 2013; Rofel 2007, 2016). Engaging with Fei and his

colleagues daily during fieldwork in central Shanghai, most striking w my informants' "fluctuating affect" (Hizi 2021), as their optimistic striving and sense of becoming sometimes receded into the background.

The aim of this article, thus, is two-fold. First, drawing on the "unfinished" (Biehl and Locke 2017; Dalsgaard and Frederiksen 2013) stories of two young, male informants—Fei and his once colleague Kang, it seeks to document these ambivalent oscillations. Ambivalence, here, has roots in disappointment and borders on skepticism without ever crystallizing into disillusion. It also arises out of non-sovereign aspects of subjectivity—a "susceptibility" (Harrison 2008) to the strains and sometimes pleasures of urban living that leads to a "non-coincidence of the self" (Harrison 2008, 440). Constituted through shifts from aspiring to fatigue and indolence, the everyday experience still allowed for "interval[s] in which the event of the present can occur" (Levinas, cited in Harrison 2008, 435). The article thus brings nuance to portraits of migrants as epitomes of the "desiring subject" (Rofel 2007) and "striving individual" (Yan 2013), despite acknowledging that these normative ideals capture something of the discursive renderings of life pursuits, recurrent in casual conversations and posts on social media.

Second, and relatedly, the article zeroes in on those "manifestations of the subject over time" (Dalsgaard and Frederiksen 2013, 53), which interrupt investments in future-oriented modes of being. Focusing on expressions—both bodily and discursive—of indolence and fatigue, I attempt to do more than describe them as the emotional downside of living through precarity (Pettit 2019, 730; Pettit and Ruijtenberg 2019). For they are inevitable aspects of existence, which emphasizes on the intentional, active aspects of subjectivity within the social sciences have often obscured (Harrison 2008; Nouvet 2014). What happens when subjects no longer feel inclined to remain aspiring, purposive, striving, if only temporarily?

In Fei's and Kang's story, indolence as a bodily mode may well constitute "events whose 'whole reality is made up of refusal'" (Harrison 2008, 434, citing Levinas; for a kindred argument, also see Nouvet 2014). This refusal sometimes remains non-intentional or unconscious, or it is actively expressed, in a context where the dominant "temporal sequence of advancing" (Hansen 2015) has been increasingly contested through emerging, often humorous repertoires circulating among Chinese youth. As we will see, "salted fish" (*xianyu*) is one such vernacular metaphor for individuals inhabiting a no-longer-purposeful time.<sup>3</sup> Whereas official narratives of the "Chinese Dream" reiterate the pressure to aspire and strive, popular depictions of indolent subjects without aspirations challenge these collective moral imperatives (Pang 2022; Szablewicz 2014; Tan and Cheng 2020). However, the disruptive potential of indolence, as an "inconvenient affect" generating a sense of the impossible in a context marked by profound inequalities (Nouvet 2014, 97), remains to be seen. As Kang's story illustrates, the very act of articulating unwillingness through idioms such as "salted fish" does not result in valuing present orientations against the "drive for success" (Yan 2013). Rather, these humorous representations nurture a sense of ethical discomfort and self-responsibility. This malaise of indolence, I suggest, might prevent the translation of temporary disinvestment into a clear politics of refusal. While scholars offer hopeful interpretations of recent claims

of indolence as pregnant with political potentiality (Pang 2022; Tan and Cheng 2020), my ethnographic research encourages a more nuanced understanding of the consequentiality of such repertoires when deployed within everyday experience. Neither entirely optimistic nor disillusioned, my interlocutors navigate their precarious social reality through ambivalence.

### **Migrant Youth, Dreaming China**

The café workers I befriended during my 15-month fieldwork in Shanghai belong to, and identify with, the *jiuling hou* (post-1990) generation. They came of age in post-reform China, an era often associated with state-driven consumerism and profit-seeking, as well as pervasive discourses of individual achievement. Lacking farming skills, these “new-generation” migrant workers (Kan 2013, 71) usually possess a good command of Mandarin as well as of new technologies, much needed to navigate the labor market. Although they tend to be better educated than first-generation rural migrants, many do not hold a secondary education degree. Like their predecessors, they describe the experience of the big city as a necessity for youth to see the world. Distinctive, however, is that they do not imagine their urban life as a transient stage. Echoing depictions of the “domestication of youth” in rural areas (Yan 2003), their narratives largely associated their places of origin with inactivity and constraints that left no room for their own life plans.

Shanghai epitomizes the “affective cityscape” (Takeyama 2016) where urban dreams can be pursued. The privately owned coffeehouse, which became my fieldsite—Midi Café, as I call it—is located in a central, bustling neighborhood, within walking distances from Nanjing Road, a symbol of the city’s consumerism, and from the Bund, where colonial architecture stands juxtaposed to buildings that represent China’s fast-paced modernization. Here, the city embodies “projects that give a geographical expression to a core value” (Gardner 2015, 203): prosperity and upward mobility.

A recurring theme in China’s internal migration scholarship (Rofel 2016; Schillbach 2016; Siu 2015; Wallis 2013), aspirations for the “good life” are by no means specific to migrants (Hizi 2021; Rofel 2007). Yet, if increasing obstacles constrain the quests for social mobility of various social groups within the Chinese population (Bregnbæk 2016), migrants remain structurally disadvantaged by *hukou* policies (“household registration system”), which tie them to their rural birthplaces and restrict their rights to legal urban residence.<sup>4</sup> Like in other geographic contexts where the informal service sector capitalizes on aspirations for mobility (Maitra 2017; Takeyama 2016), low wages, long working hours, and employment instability prevail (Otis 2012; Zavoretti 2017).

Aspirations arise out of collective, normative frameworks (Appadurai 2013; Fischer 2014; Frye 2012). In China’s reform era, some scholars argue, aspirations have served as a privileged site to form neoliberal subjectivities (Rofel 2007). From this perspective, government projects and inner lives intersect to produce self-reliant, striving individuals (Jacka 2006; Wallis 2013, 180; Yan 2003). Yet, how young migrants’ yearnings toward entrepreneurship

fit in the party–state’s agenda is ambivalent.<sup>5</sup> In recent years, the “teleoaffective structure” (Bryant and Knight 2019) that Hansen (2015, 52) identifies as a “PRC version of time-as-progress” has crystallized into the pervasive rhetoric of the “Chinese Dream,” orienting toward the future despite lack of social mobility. Coined by President Xi Jinping, this formulaic phrase encourages individualistic pursuits within the framework of national goals. Youth, more particularly, are exhorted to dream (Bregnbæk 2016; Tan and Cheng 2020). Young migrants are increasingly interpellated in official discourses as subjects of consumption (Sun 2020) and state-promoted entrepreneurial culture (Wang and Tan 2020, 523–524). In the context of increased obstacles posed to non-local *hukou* settlers in the city, however, the government also aims to persuade migrants to return to the countryside to partake in rural modernization projects (Ip 2018, 334).

If the language of dream often emerged in my informants’ narratives, they nonetheless seemed far removed from the nationalistic dimension of state rhetoric (see also Hansen 2012). State rationalities also did not exhaust the clusters of affects associated with life beyond *dagong* (Rofel 2016, 183). Like the young migrant workers in transnational Italian fashion production of Rofel’s (2016) work, the opportunities to “learn a range of different forms of cosmopolitan knowledge” (186) fueled my interlocutors’ “affective engagement with a possible future in which one could have another mode of being” (182). “Another mode of being” here means entrepreneurship, as opposed to their “existing mode of being” (183)—that of migrant worker, a condition shaped by exploitative forms of labor. Moving beyond *dagong* would also help them secure the financial resources needed to fulfill those social expectations associated with adult masculinity, such as homeownership and marriage.

Overlooked here, however, is how such affective engagements with the future are not only *about* desired modes of being; they *are* in themselves modes of being, that is, “specific ways of thinking, feeling and acting, of relating to things, to others and to ourselves” (Moore 2011, 1). Modes of being are not only historically situated but also contingent upon lived situations. Aspiring is thus best viewed as an emergent affective process. Rather than a self-sustaining backdrop rendering everyday experience bearable, aspiring—*xiangwang* in Chinese, literally “orienting toward”—needs to be performed and sustained. Temporal do not necessarily follow from prescribed cultural frameworks, nor can existence be reduced to intentional, purposive activity (Harrison 2008). Inherent to all human existence are moments of “cessation, breakdown, or failure of such performances” (Harrison 2008, 432).

In what follows, I examine these shifts between engagements with the future and “stasis and drift without project and orientation” (*ibid.*, 432–433) as both affective experience and object of discourse. It thus echoes previous efforts to disrupt the habit of writing about our interlocutors’ lives from the perspective of coherence (Schielke 2009). Understood as a tension between varied embodied orientations to which subjects are drawn “through the simple fact of corporeal existence” (Harrison 2008, 424 n.1), the ambivalence I observed called for an analytic framework that retains forward-looking orientations and the non-purposeful

within a single analytic framework while grasping the relationship between the two (Hizi 2021).

Understanding indolence as inherent to corporeal human experience, I am reluctant to reify this affective mode as specific to new-generation migrants. Granted, scholars generally find that these generations are less willing to endure hardship than China's first generation of rural-to-urban migrants (e.g., see Ling 2019, 186–187). Yet, former generations of migrant workers might well have experienced moments of indolence, while valuing the capacity, in various social circumstances, to speak bitterness or silently endure labor-induced hardship as a means to achieve recognition (He 2021). Similarly, my young informants may at times refuse to struggle, and yet reassert the norm of hard work at others. Rather than indolence as corporeal experience *per se*, what may be distinctive of the younger generation is the ways in which they represent such states of being. The popularization of new idioms through digital media now allows young migrants to present themselves, sometimes, as non-aspiring, non-striving “salted fish.” Central to my analysis is this movement from indolence as “corporeal expropriation” that “cannot be described as enacting an attitude or disposition” (Harrison 2008, 432) to culturally shaped constructions deployed in self-narratives.

### Non-Purposeful Being

In the social sciences, the primacy of intentional action has resulted in “the stripping of a whole spectrum of bodily states and phenomena of any abiding theoretical and existential significance” (Harrison 2008, 432). This article draws inspiration from recent conceptualizations of disengaged states of being such as weariness, self-abeyance, and indolence (Berlant 2011; Harrison 2008; Huët 2021; Frederiksen 2017; Nouvet 2014).<sup>6</sup> A suspension of action and will, they convey a negation of the “ultimate obligation” to “aspire after and undertake” (Levinas 1978, 24–25): “the *hesitancy* and pulling back of an existent before the event of being/becoming” (Harrison 2008, 434). Be it painful, labor-induced exhaustion or joyful idleness, indolence among marginalized subjects has been read as inherently pregnant with political, ethical, and existential significance (Frederiksen 2017; Nouvet 2014).

Common in this literature is an apprehension of indolence as corporeal mode, below meaning-making processes and representation. In these accounts, the political potential lies in the openness of affectual experience, which “contributes to the constant (re)regeneration of what feels, and thus might become, doable or impossible” (Nouvet 2014, 97). While sympathetic to this emphasis on the visceral and its indeterminacy, fieldwork conducted alongside young migrants invites us to consider how semiotic processes and their attendant affectivity may inflect the potential of corporeal experience. In China, idleness and deflation among educated youths acquire negative moral valence through education, self-development programs, official discourse, and other quarters of public culture (Hizi 2021). As opposed to having a purpose, feeling *mimang* (being confused, directionless) alarms. Low affect—and the accusations it encounters—thus prompts returning to efforts.

In recent years, however, states of inanimation have acquired new meanings through alternative cultural repertoires among China's youth, some of which turn the negative valence of "low affect" on its head. Arising out of ethnographic fieldwork, my interest in future orientations that are dissolving coincides with an increased popularity on social media of playful, metaphorical depictions of detachment from the normative quest for success. Most recently, overworked young Internet users have spread a call to "lay flat" (*tangping*), to interrupt the constant pressures posed by jobs whose exhausting conditions they now exchange about publicly. Legitimizing "low desire" (*di yuwang*) and rest, the term went viral, attracting scholarly attention. Pang (2022), for example, has commented on the disruptive potential of the *tangping* movement. Without constituting outright resistance, this "passive revolt," Pang suggests, might give rise to political consciousness. Overall, scholars tend to read terms such as "salted fish," "lay flat," and their attendant memes as counter-valorizing, ironic comments on normative modes of subjectivity (Pang 2022; Tan and Cheng 2020).

Although carried out before the emergence of the *tangping* movement, my fieldwork revealed precursors of this language of indolence among my informants, prompting further reflections on the work of expressions such as *xianyu*. As young migrants draw on these new repertoires, creating shifts in self-narratives, do these modes of self-depiction stir up social critique? Do these forms of narration lead to collectively "embrace negation and disengagement over intention" (Frederiksen 2017, 19)? Or are subjects pushed toward renewed commitments (Hizi 2021)?

### Senses of the Possible

"Very pretty!" Recruited a few days earlier, Fei and Manyu enthusiastically commented on each other's appearance in newly purchased white hemp blouses typically worn by the café's employees. In the small, white-brick walled café, they seemed to embrace their role and self-image eagerly—that of the *kafēishi* (literally, "master of coffee"), a term which for these young people denotes a form of skilled labor—a sense of self-worth that became an object of irony for their employer.

While this type of social space in Shanghai can be traced back to the semi-colonial era (Pang 2006), in the last decades, cafés have mushroomed in the metropolis. Owners rely on the abundance and disposability of a labor force that often consists of lower-educated migrant youth seeking new employment opportunities in this fashionable sector of the service economy with a cosmopolitan flavor (see Hsu 2005). Affective images of café workers as committed professionalized young people have also circulated through public culture: soap opera *Huanle Song (Ode to Joy)* shows one young female character of rural origin finding a job in a café and developing thorough sensory knowledge about coffee.

The alluring façade of the job, however, barely concealed its precarious condition: employees had no formal, legal labor contract, or social security and received low monthly incomes (waiters received between 3000 and 4000 RMB—between US\$450 and US\$600, while the

manager's salary reached 6000 RMB—approximately US\$900).<sup>7</sup> But if “coffeehouses provide collective spaces that satisfy a myriad of needs to a new generation of young wealthy and trendy urban consumers” (Lv and Qian 2018, 52), they also offer young migrants a legitimate place of one's own in the city. Cafés, as a workplace, provide, a window onto “society,” a space of encounters with both Chinese urbanites and foreigners. Some of my informants contrasted this type of employment with imagined or formerly experienced factory labor, a claustrophobic existence mostly spent between the shop floor and the dormitory, on the outskirts of the city. By the time I met them, both Kang and Fei, to whom I now turn, commuted over two hours daily from their rented rooms in remote areas of the city, for a more symbolically rewarding job in the heart of Shanghai.

### Routines of Becoming

A 27-year-old man from the rural periphery of Xi'an, Kang had dropped out of university after one year and stayed in cities like Zhengzhou and Beijing where he worked in cafés. In Shanghai, first recruited as an ordinary employee of Midi café, Kang was quickly promoted to “manager” (*dianzhang*). The son of a farmer turned entrepreneur, he often articulated clear life pursuits: “I came to Shanghai to do a little something,” explaining how he could not resign himself to a life of ordinariness (*pingyong*) and merely participate in his father's business as his family wished. His plan was to open his own milk-tea house by the time he turned 30 (*sanshi er li*). In the café, the everyday performance of his role fit with his self-described ambition for personal development. He took great interest in following the challenges posed by newly opened businesses, projecting himself as an entrepreneur.

The framing of one's working life as self-development was sustained through casual social interactions with colleagues. One evening, I joined Kang and waiter Manyu, for dinner after they left their workplace. Kang was supposed to be on a day off, but his boss had asked for his help earlier. Although Kang mentioned that unpaid extra work annoyed him, he did not look resentful, conceivably enjoying his own sense of involvement. Being a manager was not only a job but a learning process that involved his person as a whole. Optimism marked the conversation, arising from the pleasures of recognition.

Interactions with the boss were central to this process of learning (*xuexi*) and self-making. A man in his forties who spent a part of his life in Japan, the owner inspired mixed feelings among his employees. He was often described as a particularly exacting person, anxiously monitoring the workplace in ways that produced stress. While a few employees did quit after a short period, others, like Kang, frequently found themselves on the verge of quitting, yet endured while progressively finding possibilities to negotiate their relationship with the owner. One important way to adjust was to recognize how hardship provided opportunities to learn further. As the three of us chatted and joked over beer and spicy food, the conversation repeatedly shifted back to workplace matters. If their relationship had taken a new, more friendly turn, two months after his recruitment, Kang came to recognize the authority and personality of his boss as important resources for his own trajectory. He repeatedly shared expressions such as “our boss always says that...” Kang emphasized how he had



acquired good habits and awareness under the influence of his supervisor, a process he called a “reform” (*ganbua*).

Self-making occurred in the small yet careful tasks one must perform, retrospectively conceived as occasions for self-improvement. Kang recounted in detail how he had to rewrite the entire menu in both Chinese and Japanese characters, working on the typography and using different colors. The menu mattered to Kang, not only as an elegant visual outcome permanently displayed in this semi-public place but also because of what he had learned while producing it: to consider one’s achievement as “not good enough.” For the time being, ambitions (*yexin*) seemed to offset the disgruntlement caused by unpaid hours and unreasonable requests by his employer. In many ways, Kang’s temporal experience at the café involved feelings of “being at home in things as they gradually develop,” “a sense of security in one’s orientation to the future” (Hansen 2015, 59). Kang’s confident adjustments contrasted with Fei’s story, to which I now turn.

### Oneiric Realism

Fei, who grew up in the “rural voids” of Guizhou Province (Driessen 2018), struggled to perform his new role properly. While his colleagues maneuvered skillfully through the aesthetic rituals and affective labor of the café, Fei often found himself embarrassed as he reacted awkwardly to customers whose demands he failed to understand. At other times, he experienced loss of face (*diulian*) when trying to argue against manager Kang’s admonitions in front of patrons. Only 10 days after starting to work at Midi Café, the owner fired him. If manager Kang recognized Fei’s hard work despite his clumsiness, the boss was adamant that he remained “simple and innocent” (*laoshi*, a term that carries ambiguous connotations), a person whose mode of thinking rendered him unsuitable for the job.<sup>8</sup> This dismissal marked the beginning of Fei’s struggle for a stable labor routine.

Only a few days later, Fei found a new precarious position in another nearby café, on the ground floor of a high-rise office building accommodating banks or foreign companies. His job this time did not include taking orders and other “front” tasks. Relegated to work behind the kitchen door, he was learning how to prepare Western-style sandwiches. Declaring himself very satisfied with the job, the learning process, by his own account, was painstaking. Fei blamed himself for “needing 10 days where most people only need a week” in order to learn certain tasks. Scrutinizing oneself against the brilliance (*youxiu*) of high-achieving others often resulted in young people feeling anxious about lagging behind. “In the city,” Fei commented as we were sitting, surrounded by customers having business meetings, “one can easily be ruled out.” Only a few days later, this disturbing feeling of being replaceable arose again when Fei was fired for the second time.

Unlike some of his colleagues who repeatedly asserted their intention to open their own shop, the contours of Fei’s imagined entrepreneurial future were far from settled. Open-endedness combined with shifting and contradictory ways in which Fei engaged reality (*xianshi*). In my informant’s words, *xianshi* could mean the bitter (*xinku*) and heart-exhausting (*leixin*) condition Fei inhabited, a source of dread to be kept at bay. This perception of reality explicitly

combined with an imperative to dream (*mengxiang*): “One should not live within reality, one should have dreams!” Fei said, as we sat in the café. But on other occasions, Fei mobilized the concept of *xianshi* to define the range of objects he felt he was entitled to desire: “I do not seek unrealistic things. For example, I wish I could go to university, but I know it’s not realistic ... I’d like to learn how to play the guitar, but it’s not realistic.”

To navigate reality, Fei deployed various practices of (dis-)attention and imagination, embedded in the scenes of the urban environment. Although Fei struggled to adjust to the demands of his job, fleeting encounters with foreign customers he identified as members of a global elite—with whom he felt unable to interact properly—sparked further desire for self-improvement (*tisheng ziji*). He told me that he was considering using his free time to study English. The language skill would not only enable him to reduce the social distance between himself and his foreign customers, “displaying one’s ability to maneuver in such a space” (Rofel 2007, 121), but also broaden his future possibilities in the city.

During his short periods of unemployment, Fei relied on the “technologies of the imagination” (Sneath, Martin, and Pedersen 2009) provided in the city to maintain himself, at least virtually, avoiding feelings of stagnation and marginality, retaining a sense of his aspiring self. Although deeply troubled by his successive failures to secure, if only in a subordinated position, a foothold in Shanghai’s cosmopolitan world, Fei refused to spend this imposed free time in his tiny room on the suburban outskirts of the city.<sup>9</sup> Instead, he traveled daily to the city center, where he no longer had a conventional reason to be, and passed his days in a well-known bookstore right in front of the café. There, shelves of books on “successology” (*Chenggong xue*) kept a “rumour of good life” (Maitra 2017, 152) alive. Amid self-help books, Fei picked a biography of famous businessman Ma Yun (Jack Ma). Having read of Ma’s outstanding command of English and early career as a tourist guide, he talked about trying to learn the language and set up a similar business. Beyond the content, the experience of reading was also one of shifting inner states. He invested his attention in hopeful objects such as celebrity biographies that could simultaneously imply a way for Fei to conjure up distant, desirable worlds, dis-attending to his predicament and indulging in distraction and soothing reverie. Sitting on the floor of the bookstore afforded a reprieve, and Fei did take naps while reading.

On the one hand, everything in these situations seems to speak of “affective engagements with the future” (Rofel 2016), from the bookstore as a place associated with knowledge and learning to Fei’s objects of attention and contemplation of grandiose life-making plans. Reading about China’s most famous entrepreneur in the bookstore might drive Fei’s imagination in ways that resemble “immobile mobility” (Wallis 2013). While it would be naive to interpret Fei’s actions as motivated by an un-ambivalent hope for success, his frequenting of the bookstore could be viewed as a form of productive leisure: the cultivation of purposefulness against despair, through which he maintains a sense of future possibilities.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, an analytic stance aligned with existential anthropology (Jackson and Piette 2015) focuses on the details of modes of presence to complicate this perspective. The

image of Fei falling asleep while reading speaks vividly of multiple, contradictory orientations: a struggle to remain focused, to make valuable use of time, merging with a desire for quiescence that only sleep can fulfill. Optimism and perseverance recede silently into the background, turning into “self-abeyance that do[es] not occupy time, decision, or consequentiality in anything like the sovereign registers of autonomous self-assertion” (Berlant 2011, 98). Fei’s nap on the bookstore’s floor “intimate[s] the end of intention and action,” to “trace a passage of withdrawal from engagement” (Harrison 2008, 424). My point here is not to downplay the centrality of future projections to Fei’s life but to rehabilitate his momentary dwelling in purposelessness, however entangled it is with contradictory states of being.

### Paused Struggles: Reclaiming the Present

In the lives of young migrants, although aspirations arise from encounters with the city’s places and things, affective cityscapes do not impress upon subjects in unidirectional and determinate ways. This section attends to moments in Fei’s and Kang’s lives of disengagement from ceaseless striving, moments in which their usual emphasis on effort and planning is reversed.

#### The Act of Quitting

Once again, Fei started a new job, this time as a restaurant worker. During the following weeks, he oscillated between disenchantment with exhausting working conditions that literally *smelled* of downward mobility—he disliked the aroma of oil on his clothes, contrasting it with the flavor of coffee—and contemplating his near-future plans, which he sustained through encounters in the workplace. First, he met a colleague who managed to simultaneously occupy two jobs to support his family. Then, a street cleaner with whom Fei established a fleeting friendship told Fei how he used his spare time productively by enrolling as a food delivery worker thanks to an online app. Contemplating new possibilities was facilitated by the use of his mobile phone: sitting in a nearby bookstore’s Starbucks café, Fei explored the app which, according to the street cleaner, matched demand and supply in an area.

Although considering employment possibilities was already a form of action, a move forward (Rofel 2016, 183; Wallis 2013), prospective efforts were often measured against the exhaustion caused by urban living and labor—“exhausted to the point that one turns into a dog” (*lei cheng gou*), in Fei’s words. Around the second time he got fired, between moments of active search for a new job, Fei confessed his incapacity to carry on. Leaning on a table, looking disoriented, Fei suddenly declared that all employment prospects, from salesclerk to café waiter and real-estate agent, were meaningless. “It is unrealistic to stay in wage labor until you’re 27 or 28... So much effort for so little...” Although he kept referring to his life in the city as a valuable “experience” (*tiyan*) for young people, Fei sounded pessimistic. “More than a half year... These seven or eight months... really...” Fei did not finish his sentence as if too painful. Intrusively, I asked him whether he could share his feelings. “A waste (*langfei*),” was his reply. Amid constraints, pushbacks, and failures, Fei’s bargains over his present and highly uncertain future revolved around finding a path out. “I tell myself that perhaps in a

smaller city, I would develop better,” Fei said as if thinking out loud. “Or maybe going back [to the home province] is a good choice... But if I go back, I won’t really know what to do... Stepping in or out, both are difficult (*jintui liangnan*).”

In Fei’s hesitation, his projections into the future all seemed unconvincing, calling for a different move than further “displacement of the present” (Xiang 2014). Fei’s new position did not help restore optimism, and his sense of indolence grew stronger. About three months after he had been recruited to the noodle restaurant, Fei told me at length about the overwhelming negative affects he experienced: “In the morning, when I wake up, I’m in a pretty good mood, but as soon as I enter the restaurant, it changes.” He described the tastelessness (*fawei*) of the tasks he had to perform daily, to benefit somebody else. He complained about a colleague’s upcoming resignation, which would only result in a heavier workload. The efforts, Fei told me, were incommensurate with the 4000 RMB (less than US\$650) monthly salary he received. Visceral unwillingness progressively morphed out into conscious refusal. “To put it simply,” he concluded firmly, “I don’t want to work.” Being asked about his former plan to multiply his sources of income through delivery work, he confessed that he “did not have the heart to do it” (*mei you xinsi qu zuo*).

“[A] refusal in face of action, an impossibility of beginning” (Levinas 1978, 28), indolence is “not a material impossibility of performing an action” (*ibid.*, 25). Fei *could* have carried on, but instead he chose to disrupt the circuit of new beginnings, opting for inoperativity, “rejecting the reduction of life to use” (Honig 2021, 102). Only a few days later, Fei quit his job and returned to his village. Although the sudden death of a relative justified his move, it became clear as we talked on WeChat that his departure had little to do with family obligations. Rather, returning temporarily brought an end to a feeling of groundlessness (*zhan bu zhu jiao*).

Perhaps Fei’s indolence was future-related: Rather than a refusal to strive, it signaled a reluctance to work without reward. Quitting and returning could be a way to regain forward momentum (Fast and Moyer 2018). A prelude to job-hopping (*tiaocao*), Xiang describes quitting as yet another manifestation of migrants’ “urge to run away from the present” (Xiang 2021, 239). Indeed, Fei ran away from an unbearable present. Yet, his unwillingness, as we exchanged later over WeChat, to answer questions about his next plans (*dasuan*) not only conveyed his sense of embarrassment; it also spoke of a need to interrupt the ongoing “displacement of the present” (Xiang 2014) for the sake of imagined futures, to suspend the exhausting task of goal setting he sometimes complained about. For indolence, again, is “a holding back from the future,” “a being fatigued by the future” (Levinas 1978, 29). It affords the sense of a present on Fei’s own terms, however illusory.

### Dwelling in the Comfort of the Now

In Kang’s story, the reclaiming of the present assumed less dramatic forms, stemming not only from the pressures of labor but also from the pleasures of workplace-based sociality, at times “rendering the quotidian inoperative... intensively” (Honig 2021, 30).

At Midi café, the performance of daily tasks involved repetition, stress, the fatigue of long, occasionally unpaid, working hours, unpredictable rhythms of rest and activity, and occasional boredom. Employees submitted to the disciplines of affective labor, although to a much lesser extent than in the closely monitored cafés and retail spaces of upscale shopping malls described by others in different geographical contexts (Maitra 2017). As requested by their boss, my informants were not to play with their mobile phones while standing at the counter. Customers should be greeted with the right tone of voice, according to the model rehearsed during morning training sessions—*nibao, huanying guanglin* (“hello, welcome”)—notwithstanding that some customers barely bothered to answer the enthusiastic performance.

The organization of the working day, however, left room for friendly interactions with colleagues and regular customers; chat, jokes, and laughter were frequent. Ambition did not prevent Kang from retaining a sense of pleasure in his present life, even at the risk of losing the very sense of pursuits that brought him to the city.

One evening, I met Kang, Manyu, and their new colleague Zhu for a hot pot. Kang and Zhu had spent their day off traveling to the shores of a coastal suburban area, posting pictures of their idle afternoon on WeChat. At dinner, the atmosphere was lively and casual, yet anecdotes from the workplace loomed large over the discussions. Kang frequently alluded to their employer, mentioning how he and his team had been praised by the boss for their important contribution to the growing success of the café. Manyu made fun of his colleague, imitating his self-congratulatory tone as they again recounted the anecdote of Kang painfully rewriting the whole menu on the slate. More important than self-development perhaps, Kang’s former achievement had become a resource for pleasurable sociability. His nascent friendship with Zhu also gave him the occasion to leave his life plans aside and indulge in the present moment. Kang and Zhu talked about their intention to “travel and have fun” during the forthcoming Spring Festival holiday, despite their parents’ disappointment: Youth justified evading family responsibilities.

In post-reform China where self-development has been imposed as a normative temporal orientation, scholars have examined how present-tense experiences among the youth nonetheless come to be valued in their own right rather than as vehicles to an uncertain future. Young Chinese Christians, for example, seek to regain a sense of a meaningful existence outside of materialistic pursuits (Bregnbæk 2018). In like manner, aspiring Chinese students in Scandinavia momentarily embraced not-yet-purposeful time during their sojourn abroad. For young, ambitious rural migrants, too, in the midst of lives spent in “suspension,” non-purposeful time occurs as illustrated by the laughter, the outings, the sharing of hot pot as “slow food,” affording a slowing-down of time (Honig 2021, 27–28). Yet, unlike discursive emphases among students and Christian youth on the existential significance of respite from ceaseless striving, how my interlocutors valued such moments remains ambiguous.<sup>11</sup>

By the time we had stopped eating, Manyu announced that she had to leave to meet another friend. Kang, Zhu, and I discussed whether we were to leave as well. “Let’s stay. We are salted

fish (*xianyu*) anyway...” said Kang in a rather cynical and weary tone. The term surprised me: In a WeChat conversation a few days before, Kang had used it to describe himself, someone with “no desire to struggle,” in comparison to Fei who read businessmen’s biographies and “contemplated success.” Borrowed from a Hong Kong movie, *Shaolin Soccer*, the phrase “salted fish” is a metaphor for a “corpse”—the antithesis of the normative, striving subject (Tan and Cheng 2020, 92). Interpreted as an expression of disenchantment in scholarship (ibid.), *xianyu* is reminiscent of *diaosi* (“loser”), an earlier catchword whose deployment has become ordinary among Internet users. The term has been analyzed as an expression of pervasive disillusionment among the post-1990 cohort about “the lifestyle of the so-called tall, rich and handsome [being] neither fully desirable nor generally achievable in the contemporary urban landscape” (Szablewicz 2014, 272). But if *xianyu*, like *diaosi*, implicitly points to an objective structural condition, Kang’s appropriation of the term, as we will see, suggests a fraught experience of one’s subjective transformation into a non-striving, non-aspiring individual. The very enunciation of one’s indulging in non-purposeful time seemed to re-frame such moments of indolence as wasted time.

### Troubled Indolence

Indolence, Levinas (1978, 28) tells us, “is not peace.” It is as pregnant with “an inevitable ‘one must’” (ibid., 25) as it is with refusal, leaving one with the impossible choice to “embrace negation and disengagement over intention” (Frederiksen 2017, 19). This last section examines the ethical discomfort generated by a sense of dissociation between aspirations as a hallmark of narrated subjectivity and losing investment in the future.

#### “Salted Fish,” or the Pressure to Aspire

Sitting with Kang and his friends at the dinner table, I pressed further: Why “salted fish?” Putting her coat on, Manyu answered in a mocking voice: “Those without dreams are *xianyu*!” I asked her whether she identifies as a *xianyu*. As she left the room, she repeated: “Those without dreams, those without pursuits are salted fish! And I do have some!” Zhu explained: “Those who are not salted fish are those who do what they like for a living and have a purpose; but we have no goals, no aspirations.” Kang complained about the repetition of their daily routines, a way of life he disliked. Making his mobile phone jump in his hands, he added: “This is representative of the life of the *xianyu*.” Typical among youth according to Kang, being a *xianyu* had become “a chronic state” (*changtai*). “A pathological state (*bingtai*),” Zhu rephrased. “But today, we had a purpose: We went to the sea!” he added, jokingly. They went on to describe their recent outings: going to the movies in the evening, sharing good meals, watching films back at their inner-city youth hostel where they both stayed. “We have no pressure at the moment,” said Kang. Because Kang had often told me about his plans, I asked whether he would describe himself as a person without aspirations. “As far as I’m concerned, I’m about right. I have my own ideas. But for the moment,” he fastened to add, “I can only be a salted fish.” When Zhu said that the capacity to aspire depends on one’s financial condition, which requires “efforts,” his colleague disapproved: “This is only an excuse; the real reason is that you make no effort!”

If *xianyu* conveys disenchantment (Tan and Cheng 2020), disillusion might have partly explained Kang and Zhu's dispositions toward their present and future. Unlike Fei, Kang had not been confronted by major disruptions, but neither was he immune from the ordinary injuries of urban living. A few weeks earlier, Kang and I had walked through the neighborhood's old alleyways as he was looking for a room to rent. Moving to the area would have spared him the morning hour-long commute to the café. Our search had been fruitless, mainly because of exceedingly high rents and the disparaging attitudes of Shanghai-born residents, undermining the self-confidence Kang often displayed at work. In an unusual low-key mood as we were taking a rest on the Bund, Kang seemed no longer disposed to perceive the city as attractive. "Let's move away; it seems that there's absolutely nothing here. It is just that Huangpu River..." He added, "I just wanted to try something else." After we left the restaurant, Kang showed me the outside of an apartment he and Zhu had visited a few days before, in an old building, but another customer had made a better offer. "It would have been so nice," he sighed.

Yet, Kang's evocation of *xianyu* does not exactly express disillusionment with reality, but a reluctance against indulging in the comfort of repetitive routine. My own observations of life inside and outside the workplace had led me to believe that his dissatisfaction was experienced, or at least verbally condemned for its lack of value, only in *moments*. When he lived through the "now" with little consideration for the "later," Kang's routines did not seem all painful. Against the figure of the young "desiring" migrant, we should be reminded that "while a person may frame his or her story in terms of abstract moral principles or social roles, these do not necessarily determine his experience or explain her actions" (Jackson 2013, 198). Self-imposed disciplines in migrant lives and ethical principles give shape to everyday practices (Zhan 2015), and "individuals fashion their present selves to cohere with an idealized future" (Frye 2012, 1567). But the here and now is also "a matter of pure sensation and gut feeling" (Jackson 2013, 197–198) that mostly evade conscious deliberations. The way things actually *feel* does not always match how we might feel morally compelled to construe them in retrospect, or how they may come to feel over time. This gap may constitute "a site of ethical struggle," involving the different "ways in which we see ourselves" (Jackson 2013, 198). An unproblematic affective tonality so far, indolence is suddenly experienced by Kang as an inconvenient subjective transformation, generating a sense of ethical discomfort toward one's difficulty in "encounter[ing] the world purposefully" (Hage, cited in Frederiksen 2017, 18).<sup>12</sup> The use of *xianyu* here performs an ambiguous naming gesture. While giving cultural shape to present orientations, the mockery implied by this self-deprecating representation reasserts a temporal ordering of existence that renders difficult any framing of everyday experience outside of the tropes of forward momentum or stagnation, negating the value of the present *qua* present.

### Responsibilities for the Possible

If Kang expressed disaffection toward his *xianyu* lifestyle, Fei similarly indulged in self-blame and affliction. As I could see from the video posted on WeChat after his return to Guizhou, Fei reclaimed some time for himself, driving through the landscapes of his home province.

Our conversations, however, revealed that these moments of rest were not lived mindlessly either. For a single young man like Fei, returning made him feel miserable (*langbei*), after years of roving (*liulang*), after years of endured hardship and deception. A few months later, however, Fei came back to Shanghai, this time to work as a driver in a logistics company, away from the cosmopolitan-appearing service sector.

Kang, too, went on the move. In early 2018, he quit his job at the café for a more rewarding position in the nearby upscale shopping mall. Before quitting, I heard him complain to colleagues about how his sense of professional dedication had been betrayed by the attitudes of his superiors. Job-hopping might have allowed him to regain forward momentum to linger while enjoying a higher income.

Having experienced unwillingness to work or the light-heartedness of routine, both Fei and Kang resumed their aspirational journeys. My ethnographic material shows no clear sign of a durable state of disillusion that would lead to the “rejection of the heteronormative notion of upward mobility outlined by neoliberal models of ... Chinese ideal citizenship” (Szablewicz 2014, 272). Recall the exchange between Zhu and Kang: The former holds that success is contingent upon one’s economic condition, while the latter qualifies this line of thinking as an excuse concealing a lack of effort. Young migrants held ambivalent attitudes toward their condition. They obviously remained aware of the disadvantage associated with their status as they stepped into a highly competitive job market in the global metropolis. Kang did refer to informal employment as unsound, preventing him access to welfare. He told me of the impossibility for “outsiders” to get a job at Starbucks Coffee. His narrative, however, did not emphasize discrimination. Instead, Kang found a justification: “communication among employees might be easier,” as they would master the local dialect. For Fei, who kept contact with a former Shanghai-born, well-off client of the real estate agency for which he once worked, their different social backgrounds were identified as an obstacle to the deepening of their relationship. During his short period of unemployment, Fei was aware that his low education reduced his access to jobs, even unskilled ones, and he described his deprived schooling conditions in rural Guizhou. Yet, he often blamed his allegedly poor intelligence. Overall, neither Fei nor Kang pointed critically to structural constraints. The metropolis, instead, was often described by Fei as a genuinely meritocratic environment, much in contrast to the rural areas, where *guanxi* (interest-based reciprocity) was a *sine qua non* condition for success.

Whatever their awareness of structural constraints, my informants expressed a readiness to adjust, reasserting their responsibility for self-development. If boundaries are real, they could still be crossed. Dwelling in the present felt uncomfortable or painful because there was more to be encountered in the city than mere “rumors of the good life” (Maitra 2017). Quite often, they found evidence of success—a boss one befriends, a former customer or colleague, another job opportunity—keeping horizons of possibility alive. If their present felt like a waste or worthless repetition, they themselves were to blame. My intention here is not to portray my informants as dupes embracing the illusions of the “Chinese Dream.” They may always retain a sense of ambivalence, doubt, or indolence preventing full investment in



aspirational pursuits. Either way, complete disillusionment hardly occurs in a Chinese urban context whose very infrastructural organization embodies a forward-looking movement, and where, perhaps more than in other parts of the world, there is room for young people to reorient their consciousness toward the evidence—however scarce—of the possibility to become more than what one is. In more reflective moments, they confronted a culturally shaped and materially encountered pressure to aspire, as the self alone remains responsible for missing out on opportunities—for being a “salted fish” without a goal. To this pressure, they may respond, against indolence or the pleasures of reclaiming the present.

“One must be responsible for one’s future,” Fei often repeated during his short unemployment period, admitting that he found himself easily contaminated by the indolence (*landuo*) of his cousin (also his roommate). While the ethos of self-responsibility was largely shared among my informants, perhaps China’s economic slowdown might generate a sense of the impossible—the lucid perception of a world that almost inevitably drives its subjects to their “attrition” (Berlant 2011, 98). The most recent popularity of Internet idioms such as “involution” (*neijuanbua*)—fierce competition without social mobility—or “garlic chives” (*jiucai*)—overworked and underpaid, yet resilient, subjects—shows a growing awareness regarding structural conditions (Pang 2022). Yet, evidence of unattainability seldom correlates with the rejection of good life fantasies (Berlant 2011; Pettit 2019). Had my informants spoken the language of economic slowdown or involution, would their trajectories differ? Stuck between critical perceptions of an unfair social world and an equally uncomfortable feeling of stagnation, a sense of participation (Xiang 2021, 246) is preferred, cruel optimism notwithstanding.

## Conclusion

China’s rural migrants, Xiang (2021, 240) tells us, are both resigned and hopeful. This article adds to our understanding of this ambivalence, by describing moments in which a non-purposeful present is reclaimed. We must remain alert to how these oscillations may come to matter. On the one hand, these experiences mi have contributed to the recent popularity of calls to “lay flat,” nurturing a “passive revolt against both the Chinese hardworking culture and the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject” (Pang 2022). Perhaps the emergence of such repertoires attests to the transformational power of affective disengagement. On the other hand, Kang’s appropriation of idioms of indolence reminds us that such representations do not necessarily help value one’s purposelessness. These are unfinished stories, however. It is worth inquiring further into potential disruptions of this malaise: What might drive the negation inherent to indolence toward constituting a more transformative “arc of refusal” (Honig 2021)? As I complete this article, I learned from Fei how, a few months ago, he returned to Guiyang, the capital of his home province, to work for a local logistics company. Working in logistics, he has not escaped wage labor, and yet he still couches his choice in the language of self-development.

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## Notes

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1. Fieldwork in Shanghai’s city center was conducted between June 2017 and June 2018, with subsequent visits as I continued to live in the city until the end of October 2018. Every informant’s name has been changed.
2. Florence (2007, 122 n.2) has commented on the ambivalence of the term *dagong*, which may also convey a sense of modernity and prosperity. See also Ling (2019, 179) on how *dagong* connotes “autonomy.”
3. This formulation echoes Hansen’s (2015) reference to a “not-yet-purposeful time.”
4. Established during the Mao era, this system introduced two hierarchically ordered classes of citizens—urban and agricultural—in order to restrict rural-to-urban migration. In cities like Shanghai or Beijing, despite reforms legalizing temporary work, both residence permits and access to citizenship remain largely constrained.
5. In her study of migrant youth attending vocational school in Shanghai, Ling (2019, 178) finds that the desire to become one’s own boss is often expressed by young men. My own fieldwork makes it difficult to generalize on the gendered dimension of entrepreneurial aspirations. Some female café workers talked at length of their long-term plans to open their own shops. In one such case, a young woman in her early twenties from Anhui Province commented on the encouragement she received from her father, who opened a Japanese restaurant in Shanghai. He did not pressure her to fulfill common expectations associated with gender roles.
6. Other works focusing on moments of idleness and boredom (e.g., Masquelier 2019) recognize the significance of these modes of being, which is in their future-oriented dimensions. Such analyses run the risk of reproducing what Harrison (2008) describes as a subordination of the non-purposeful to action.
7. These monthly salaries are above the minimum wage in Shanghai, which reached 2300 RMB (approximately US\$333) in 2017. My interlocutors generally paid a monthly rent between 1000 and 1500 RMB to share a room.
8. Ling (2019, 190) notes how “outsiders” (i.e., not Shanghai-born) are often deemed “slow at learning and adapting,” in the words of one officer she interviewed. Despite his negative judgement toward Fei, the café owner seldom expressed such views. An “outsider” himself, he sometimes praised other migrant employees. However, Fei’s bodily *hexis* and sense of awkwardness as someone coming from a remote area might have contributed to his evaluation.

9. Schillbach (2016) has documented how life in suburban Songjiang District—where Fei used to rent a room—is being produced as part of imaginaries of a global Shanghai for middle-class migrants. By contrast, Fei conveyed a sense of aversion from this area, describing the streets there as dark and unsuitable for young people.
10. Fei retrospectively noted that he liked making coffee as a profession because the act of drinking one cup inscribes one in the present moment.
11. See an earlier analysis of this situation in Amin and Richaud (2020, 869–870).
12. I transpose Huët's (2021, 388–389) discussion of the becoming-event of fatigue, through which the subject experiences her own transformation. Huët's argument, however, is that this passage from fatigue as affective tonality to fatigue as event opens up new, politically significant possibilities.

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