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A Pregnant Pause? Reproduction, waiting and silences in the relational endurance of austerity

Sarah Marie Hall

University of Manchester, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This paper brings together relational geographical writings on the politics of waiting, austerity and social reproduction, and also speaks to feminist methodology and praxis. I draw on a recent research project exploring experiences of reproduction in austerity, in particular having any or more children, to think about how austerity in the UK is endured in everyday life. I engage with geographical ideas about temporality – pauses, silences and futures – to unpick everyday and intimate experiences of economic change in the UK. I offer multiple interpretations of 'a pregnant pause' in this context. Firstly, of pausing and waiting 'with' decisions to having any or more children as a direct result of changes in the name of 'austerity': welfare cuts, precarious housing, unaffordable childcare etc. Secondly, the pauses and silences in public discussions about the economic impacts of austerity on reproduction, as a rarely shared experience and one that participants seldom spoke to anyone else about. And thirdly, the literal pauses and silences in verbal discussions on this topic, and how to respond in method and praxis. In doing so, I refocus discussions about the everyday life of austerity towards a relational politics of endurance.

1. Introduction

Everyday life is often about waiting. Waiting for a cuppa to brew. Waiting for a bus to arrive. Waiting for a programme to start. Waiting is a full body experience. Waiting may make us feel anxious, awkward, and uncertain, hyper aware of our bodies and surroundings. Waiting can be made pleasant and comfortable, a space of safety, reflection and even resistance. Waiting is relational, we wait for and with people. Waiting can remind us of our place, spatially and socially. Waiting, after all, is far from an even socio-economic experience (Corbridge 2004, Hall 2022a, Jeffrey 2010, Massey 1992). Nor is waiting a case of inactivity; waits, pauses and silences can be busy, reflective and meaning-filled (see Holdsworth 2022).

With this paper I share ideas and findings about endured waithood, about the experience of waiting for something and sometimes waiting nothing. In doing so I reflect on the nuances and textures of temporalities of waiting – pauses, silences, tempos, rhythm – and how they are lived in and with. Of course, waiting does not happen in a vacuum – waiting happens some*where*, at some*time*, for some*thing and* some*one*. In this instance, I focus on how austerity cuts in the UK to public spending, and their impact on welfare, social, health and care services, employment, housing, and compounding longer-term and intergenerational deprivation, have a set of enduring and endured social conditions (Hall 2022b, Horton 2016, van Lanen 2021, Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar 2019). Across Europe, it is widely acknowledged that the UK government has most vigorously pursued austerity ideologies and policies, and for a long time. This has included billions of pounds of cuts to public services such as local government, welfare, health care and education (Pearson 2019). As a result, the UK is commonly considered to now be the most unequal society in Europe (also see Hiam and Dorling 2022). It is in this context that I explore an aspect of social reproduction, specifically having any or more children, to think about how austerity is endured and enduring in everyday life. To do this, I engage with and contribute to feminist geographical writings on the politics of waiting, austerity and social reproduction, including in methodology and praxis.

The title of this piece – 'A pregnant pause' – is a play on the various elements of this everyday endurance of austerity. Of pausing and waiting 'with' decisions to have any or more children as a direct result of changes in the name of austerity. Of pauses and silences in public discussions about the economic impacts of austerity on reproduction, as a rarely shared experience. And of the literal pregnant pauses and silences in verbal discussions with participants on this topic. As well as

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E-mail address: sarah.m.hall@manchester.ac.uk.

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redressing these pauses and silences through airing, sharing and writing about them here, I want this paper to be part of a refocusing of discussions about the everyday life of austerity *towards a relational politics of endurance*. By this, I mean the ways in which everyday lives are endured with, for and about other people, selves, places, times and things. I focus especially on notions of waiting, pausing and silence, as experienced in and across time, as relational temporalities. Enduring waiting, I argue, becomes intensified under austerity, when lived time can acquire a new rhythm, beat or tempo. To clarify, enduring waiting is not always dystopian or unenjoyable (Hall 2022a, Holdsworth 2022), but austerity produces temporalities that in turn can curtail possibilities for how to endure otherwise. Throughout I also draw out the features of these relationalities, to show how they are lived, remembered and imagined in everyday life.

With what follows I firstly chart geographical debates that frame my argument, starting with the temporalities of austerity, before discussing work that brings together temporality, reproduction and austerity. Following this, I describe the research project and methodology, namely Oral Histories and Futures interviews, from which my findings are drawn. These findings are then arranged into three themes; paused decisions, paused discussions, and paused talk. With the conclusions I return to the notion of a relational politics of endurance for understanding austerity past, present and future.

2. Temporalities of austerity

Geographical understandings of time and temporality are knotted together with ideas of place, space and relationality, and this becomes especially clear when we consider the everyday life of socio-economic change. Wide ranging literatures have considered the temporal politics of neoliberalism (Horton 2016, Stenning et al. 2010), economic development (Jeffries 2010, Massey 1992), post-modernity (Bauman 2017, Holdsworth 2021), and more recently Brexit (Hall 2022a) and austerity (Kiely, 2021, Knight and Stewart 2016). Taking a wider thematic lens, the politics of time has long been of concern to geographers, and is one way to expose socio-spatial tensions; consider, for instance, the differently classed, racialised and gendered implications of slow fashion, slow food, slow academia (see Holdsworth 2021). To consider the geographies of time is, then, to highlight that time is lived, is structured and structures political and economic contexts (Bastian et al. 2020, Sharma 2014). The temporalities of socio-economic change are also always relational; experienced with other people, things, memories and imaginaries.

On the temporalities of austerity, recent scholarship has reflected on experiences of waiting, enduring and staying in, with and for austerity. Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar (2019) write poetically and painfully about the relationship between austerity, endurance and exhaustion, using a language of weariness as 'steady continuation' (p.164). They describe this experience as 'the relative invisibility of durational everyday forms of slow suffering' (ibid, p.156) – how austerity is both lived with *and* resisted, if not at a delayed time and place. Kiely (2021, p.718) also powerfully recounts the experience of waiting in the context of mental health services in austerity, and how during such periods of 'durative waiting' are in fact holding patterns, where statis is disguised as progress and motion.

A growing body of research, including by van Lanen (2020, p.15; 2021), also considers how austere conditions shape life-course experiences and expectations, with some finding delays to 'progressing', particularly in terms of 'home-making'. This resonates with Baraitser's (2017) text *Enduring Time*, in which she considers waiting and endurance as a type of generational delay, that it emerged as 'a kind of attachment to the "present tense" of an intergenerational event, an event that happened in the past, but continues to play out through time" (p.116). Rather than being sharp or abrupt, endurance is understood to be mundane and prolonged, an experience characterised by slowness (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar 2019). This experience is often discussed an inherently embodied and affective, the feeling of time and delay on the body as a form of violence and suffering (see Olson 2015). As Knight and Stewart (2016, p.3) explain, 'in moments of extreme crisis, time becomes elastic—the time waiting for a bomb to explode or a fist to land can seem like an eternity, or a blink of the eye'. Nor is endurance – of crisis or otherwise - singular and particular; it can be plural, ephemeral and experienced on multiple fronts (see Hall 2019). At the same time, endurance can behold various temporal features (see Baraitser 2017), such as rhythms and tempos, notes and beats.

Extending this political economy of endurance, as it might be described, Baraitser (2017) draws on Povinelli (2011) to argue that 'if we want to endure, we have to acknowledge that endurance within zones of social abandonment' – to which I would also add economic abandonment – 'is not a matter of "escape" through attempts at the overthrow of capitalism, but instead, a commitment to living in its seams' (p.2). To live 'in the seams' has deep resonance during austerity, where living in and through socio-economic change can better be understood as an experience of getting by or ploughing on (Hall 2022c, Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar 2019), often marked by precarity and peripherality. Moreover, this living in the seams, I want to stress, is inherently *relational*. It extends to (and transcends) other people, as well as other times and selves (see Hall 2022d), including more-than-human forms (Hall 2019).

Indeed, writing on paranoid temporalities, Hitchen (2021, p.306) describes how space-times of waiting in the setting of library services in austerity 'becomes something *shared*. The space–time of waiting here is not a collection of feeling individuals, but instead a social event', of living within uncertain futures (emphasis in original). For Horton (2016), in research exploring the closure of youth services, this manifests more as anticipated futures, embodied as an intensification of anxieties of waiting for what may come next. Similarly, on decommissioned places and post-industrial landscapes, Dawney (2020, p.33) reminds us that 'stories of living on, of endurance, and of making lives in places [which can also be] circumscribed as futureless by political and economic regimes'. A sense of being on hold, of stuckness, can be immobilising, disruptive and disorienting (see Straughan et al. 2020). This bears an important reminder that endurance may not always be fruitful or ultimately rewarding; that the things we wait for may not come (Hall 2022b, Hall 2023).

Temporalities of austerity and more generally of everyday life also of course shape research temporalities and relationalities. This includes questions about how to research over or with time when resources are limited (Christopherson et al. 2014, Hall 2017); enduring responsibilities to people and places (Warnock et al. 2022); and waiting, dwelling and staying with others – what Mason (2021, p.3) describes as 'a productive relational practice with new collaborative ethics and affordances'. Waiting has also been explored as a methodological approach, as part of an ethnographic sensibility that prioritises relationships-in-place (Hall 2022a, Holdsworth 2022, Mannay and Morgan, 2015, Pascoe Leahy 2022). This includes waiting through doings as well as pauses, noise as well as quiet, and understanding 'silences and omissions as meaningful' (Hall 2022c, p.310; also see Barron, 2022). Silence also has added implications in the context of austerity: of both 'the politics of difference enforced through austerity (quietly and subtly), and the effect austerity policies can have on recipients and debates (quieting and silencing)' (Hall 2022c, p.311).

These and other lexicons of temporality – staying, maintaining, repeating, delaying, recalling, remaining, ending and enduring – are exciting and intriguing; how might we as geographers engage further with these politics of time in the same way we devote such attention to space? The notion of endurance holds particular significance for relational thinking, I argue, because it encapsulates time as passing in different modes; a time that is lived in and with, leading to some*thing* else. Indeed, the phrase 'a pregnant pause', as used in the title, speaks to this idea, as a pause expected to be followed by something significant. To work with this idea of a pregnant pause, then, is to bring together these

ideas about lived time – including, for instance, anticipation, suspension, delay, stuckness, staying; waiting, pausing and enduring – as *relational temporalities*. I now turn to discuss the convergence of temporality, austerity and reproduction in academic writings, and develop further the notion of a relational politics of endurance.

3. Temporality, austerity and reproduction

Uncertainty, ambiguity and endurance are also key futures of literature on reproduction and temporality. Taking account of a wider feminist scholarship across geography, sociology and anthropology, time and temporality are acknowledged to characterise experiences of reproduction. Here I refer to reproduction through the broad lens of biological reproduction, to include fertility, infertility, pregnancy, gestation, parenthood, fostering, abortion, adoption, childlessness, and so on (Hall 2023). Temporality is implicit in writings on reproduction, such as Mansfield (2017) on epigenic temporalities in foetal life; Nordqvist's (2021) work on reproductive storytelling and donor conception; Browne on pregnancy without birth (2022a, 2022b); Pralat (2020), Perrier (2013) and Saunders (2021), who each write about the moralising that surroundings timings of motherhood; Wanka's (2022) commentary on the norma-temporality of life-course decisions; Wilkinson (2020) on queer temporalities as 'non-reproduction'; and of course Edelman's (2004) searing critiques on repro-futurism.

Taking a broader view, social reproduction is more generally understood as a temporal phenomenon, in terms of how the labour of sustaining daily life, generations and society provides a rhythm and temporal structure for the everyday (Baraitser and Brook 2021, McKie et al 2002, Mitchell et al. 2003). In the context of austerity, these space-times of social reproduction have come under intense pressure and scrutiny. Austerity policies, as Pearson (2019, p.30) describes, 'treat women… as an expandable and costless resource which can absorb all the extra work that is a necessary corollary of the reduction of the state and collective resources which help sustain life'. To these ends, endurance and waiting can themselves also be understood as socially reproduced through and by uneven austere policies.

A growing body of work also considers the particularities of austerity, temporality, and so-called biological reproductive temporalities. Hughes (2021), for instance, writes movingly of the wait for a permanent academic contract as an example of the temporal politics of fertility. Matters of employment, mobility and fertility become tightly bound as features of latent capitalism. Relatedly, Lebano and Jamieson's (2020, p.127) work reveals how women aged 30–35 Italy and Spain are 'postponing having children' because of their socio-economic circumstances (also see Saunders 2021). Others have also written of reproductive deferral in an austere context, which for Davis and Cartwright (2019, p.91) is couched in an understanding that many young people struggle to make the 'transition to adulthood'. However, to talk of deferral is to suggest that the 'thing' is going to happen, just at a later time. Indeed, my own previous ethnographic research has highlighted that reproductive decisions are not only being deferred but potentially also *defaulted* as result of austerity cuts (Hall 2022b). I also posit that such experiences, what I call 'carrying the future', are embodied, emotional and relational, and variously laborious (Hall 2023).

Working through these temporal politics is key, in terms of how they shape both everyday lived experience as well as broader patterns of socio-economic change. Austerity is a condition not just of the moment, at a time of implementation; but it is *always* delayed and deferred. Austerity is lived and has its own life (Hall 2022d), and it is here that the notion of a relational politics of endurance becomes so significant. The endurance of austerity is felt through and in relationships to and with others and to oneself, as well as in relation to space-times of what has, could and may not happen. Austerity has already been endured in the UK for at least the last twelve years; more if one considers its entanglement with the longer-term harsh realities of neoliberalism and recession (Hall 2022d, Horton 2016). The remainder of this paper focuses on unveiling these endurances, as they relate to reproductive decision-making, and how the lived time of austerity is relationally endured.

4. Oral Histories and Futures

The study from which my findings are drawn took place in 2020, with an empirical focus on reproductive decision-making in the context of austerity. While in previous research exploring everyday economic change I have mainly drawn upon ethnographic methods (Hall 2019, Hall 2022a, Hall 2022b), with recent work I have explored the possibilities of biographical, longitudinal and creative methods. Innovating with oral history methods – a technique and practise that encourages the sharing and documenting of marginalised life stories (see Davis 2017) – I aimed to collate narratives around not having any or more children because of austerity cuts in the UK. As I explain elsewhere (Hall 2023, p.33-34), 'to provide insights on reproduction and austerity… I wanted to deploy a methodology that was sensitive, empowering, and with possibilities to capture the passing and prospect of time'. With the Oral Histories and Futures method, I made a few key tweaks to oral histories, by innovating with; the temporal framing (with an integrated focus on the future rather than only pasts); the participant demographic (by interviewing younger people rather than older generations); researching in the midst of crises (rather than in retrospect); and by incorporating a creative element (in this case, writing a postcard to ones future self and reflecting on it during the interview).

The methodological aim of the project was to find ways to capture and provide insight into reproductive decisions made, in the making, and to be made. As noted, austerity policies in the UK have had devastating impacts on people and communities, reframing socio-economic relations and driving further socio-spatial inequality (also see Pearson 2019). My focus was on North East England, a region with high levels of poverty following deindustrialisation in the 1980s, since exacerbated by some of the harshest and most detrimental austerity cuts the UK (CLES 2014, Hall 2023). It also has some of the lowest birth rates in England (ONS 2017). Participants were recruited through a mixture of in-person visits to local community centres and by sharing posters online with social centres, childcare organisations, local libraries and amenities via gatekeepers, social media, and online networks and noticeboards. The interviews all took place either online or on the telephone (due to coronavirus lockdown measures) and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. As a gesture of gratitude, participants were all given a £20 voucher. In total, twelve participants[1] aged 21–44 were drawn from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and living circumstances. The project was intentionally smaller scale to allow for a focus on experimentation and creative methodological potential.

By incorporating activities, and bringing together reflections on the past, present and future, I argue that Oral Histories and Futures can provide in-depth understanding of everyday lives in the round (Hall 2023). Moreover, by making room for discussion, reflection and silences, Oral Histories and Futures can also open up space, time and relations of care, patience and endurance. I will extrapolate on this later, and now move to discuss key findings related to temporality and endurance in austerity. I arrange these findings around three types of pauses, as a feature of time and reproduction: paused decisions, paused discussions, and paused talk. Across these themes I draw out the relational politics of waiting, pausing and enduring at a time of austerity. I focus on the experiences of seven participants so as to present a detailed

[1] Participant demographics: nine identified as women and three as men; ages ranged from 21 to 44 years; three identified as Black British, two as British Asian, one as Chinese-Malaysian and six as White British. All participants had partners and were currently in heterosexual relationships. Five had no children, five had one child, one had a partner who was pregnant with their first child, and one person had two children.

and coherent argument. All names have been changed to pseudonyms.

5. Paused decisions

Across the Oral Histories and Futures, there was a strong, common thread when it came to pauses and social reproduction: that the social and economic conditions of austerity had a deep impact on reproductive decisions. There were various ways in which this was felt and experienced, depending on the participants' social, personal, and economic contexts. In each Oral Histories and Futures interview, participants talked specifically about the costs of daily living, structural inequalities, and sometimes a specific set of what we can understand as austerity policies, including the closure of Sure Start children's centres, reductions in welfare and housing benefit, local government spending cuts, and cuts to child and social care (Hall 2019, Horton 2016, Pearson 2019). These were endured experiences, having been lived in and with for a long time (Baraitser, 2017; Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar, 2019), and with austerity having often compounded ongoing, long-term experiences of poverty and marginalisation (Hall 2022d, Hall 2023, Saunders 2021, Stenning et al. 2011). Participants spoke about what had happened, what had happened differently, and what might happen: crossing temporalities readily throughout their narratives.

Yusuf[2], for instance, explains how when it comes to making reproductive decisions, his main concerns revolve around financial insecurity. He relates this to having a varied and unpredictable income:

> Okay, erm… what worries me, saying is, you know the financial stability? Like the job that I do at the present, there's no fixed hours, but it's all like, work-wise, based on you know, very ad hoc servicing and, you know, repairs generally. Not everyone's going to come each day to a garage to get what they need to get doing. So I think each varies, like with the workload each week. So it's not fixed, set pattern of working. Like one day you could be repairing sort of four, five days, straight on from nine 'til six and go home. Next day, it's another comes and he wants the oil changing and the servicing done. Some weeks and months it's very busy doing all the work for the garage, but that's what I worry. Like, there's no job security or stability … there's not enough trade anymore like there used to be years ago. And I think I did look in to other garages, I could get a job with another and there were like, very limited jobs in the trade. And that's what worries me, like, if I was to have kids now… how would I get that much money where I'm able, you know, to do all of that? That's what I worry about, like it's impossible or not possible, what should I do?

Here Yusuf speaks with a strong sense of temporality when he discusses his financial circumstances. Daily rhythms ('each day'), medium-term patterns ('weeks and months'), past industries ('years ago') and future opportunities ('what should I do?') are all discussed as they relate to decisions to have children (also see McKie et al 2002). His decisions are paused because of feelings of slowness and statis in his current employment situation (Kiely, 2021), meaning that having children is not an option right now. Moreover, he indicates that he also does not know when or if this might change, that having children may be 'impossible or not possible' and so leaving decisions unresolved (Dawney 2020, Hall 2023).

While having quite different lives, Carmen[3] expressed similar concerns to Yusuf about how a lack of financial security meant decisions about reproductive futures were paused:

> I guess it's like reaching the big three-oh and sort of especially once I got engaged and that, it's kind of, sort of typical question to lead onto, I suppose, but obviously buying a house I've still got quite a few credit cards and sort of… sort of, and I just don't feel in a position to be able to you know, go part-time or anything like that yet. [My partner], he would like a family as well and… appreciates that we're now probably not as young as we once were but it's probably still something that we sort of say when, rather than if, or what have you, so it's still something on the cards, just not yet. […] I think it's important to start off family life on the right footing, hit the ground running as such.

Carmen here makes overt references to her life-course ('the big three-oh', 'as young as we once were') as not having the trajectory she would have liked, with indebtedness, a lack of savings or ability to afford to work reduced hours meaning the decision to have children has been postponed (Davis and Cartwright 2019, Lebano and Jamieson 2020, van Lanen 2021, Wanka 2020). There is of course also the nod to aging as a biological obstacle to reproduction (Davis 2017). The phrase 'I just don't feel in a position to be able to' is especially telling, whereby Carmen, like other participants, talked about personal circumstances not being aligned for decision-making about having children to be possible. Added to this, she speaks about this period of waithood for decision-making as having a different temporality to the fast and charged life ('hit the ground running') she associates with having children. Relationalities also come through strongly in her and Yusuf's account, with multiple references to family, partners, and future possible selves.

For Jonny[4] and Nafula[5], their housing situation was the key prohibitive factor in being able to make decisions about having any or more children. Concerns around the affordability, suitability and sustainability of housing is a resounding theme in literature on lived experiences of austerity, given rises in private rents, cut to housing benefits, a lack of investment in social housing, and home ownership being increasingly unattainable for younger generations (Hall 2019, van Lanen 2020, Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar 2019). Here, Jonny and Nafula refer directly to these housing circumstances, shaped by everyday austerity, as impacting on their decisions to have any or more children:

> Jonny: In terms of having children, if you have any children it does increase the requirements, both in terms of housing and income or savings. […] I suppose it's more sort of an on-going concern of our more than an actual problem in itself.

> Nafula: We actually need a bigger house if at all we get more children. Because you see, we have now the baby's room, but the baby's room cannot accommodate another baby. So we'd actually want to have another bigger house, for now to have another room for the other baby. Or maybe a bigger room for both of them, something like that.

Both participants refer to a rumbling, enduring wait to be able to make decisions about having children, what Jonny calls 'an on-going concern'. Both he and Nafula frame the problem in a pragmatic way, of certain things – in this case suitable or spacious housing – not being in place in order for decisions about having children to be considered. While they were both paying mortgages on their homes, other more precarious rental and living situations were also rife amongst participants.

For Lauren[6], living at her parent's house and working part-time were

[2] 30, male, British Pakistani, working as a mechanic and living with his partner in a rented flat.

[3] 30, female, White British, living in a mortgaged house with her fiancé, no children, working as a civil engineer.

[4] 26, male, White British, working as a software analyst, and living with his wife in their mortgaged house.

[5] 29, female, Black British, working freelance, living in a mortgaged house with her partner and child.

[6] 21, female, White British, student and working part-time, living with her parents.

significant structural and relational obstacles to being able to contemplate decision-making about having children. This was compounded by her partner being in debt and having to live with his parents so he could afford to pay this off, thus meaning they could not live together (see Hall 2023). This inter-personal disruption was experienced on several fronts, an endurance of multiplicities and relationalities:

> my boyfriend did, when he was younger, have some financial troubles. So, he's just getting back on his feet, sort of, over the past year. And my dad also, exactly the same, getting into a little bit of debt. So, I think I learned from a young age to be very careful with my money and, you know, respect it.

Lauren relates her boyfriend's indebtedness to her own father's problems with debt and debt management, and then again to her past and current relationship with money. Here we see how waiting can be endured both with and because of other people and experiences, which in Lauren's case extended to her parents, her partner, and to their respective past selves too. Enduring austerity, in this case concerning matters around reproduction, was then relationally interlinked with other people, selves and times. Jodie[7] also described a sense of stuckness, of being 'still stuck in the rent trap' (Davis and Cartwright 2019, Straughan et al. 2020, van Lanen 2020), as preventing further life decisions with her partner, such as having more children, from being tabled.

In terms of reproductive decision-making, then, these narratives encompassed a wide range of experiences and examples for why participants felt that their economic circumstances had shaped them having any or more children. These were sometimes various, cumulative and overlapping (Hall 2019, Knight and Stewart 2016), some of which I have already touched on. They were often also structural constraints that become relational in how they are lived and shared with others. This included: a lack of suitable housing, not being able to move out of parental homes, precarious work, unsubstantial social security, no or limited maternity cover, reduced part-time opportunities, unaffordable childcare, being unable to take time off work during pregnancy, maternity or leave after a child is born, unstable relationships caused by financial instability and debt, no savings or guaranteed income to afford a child (including by IVF), medical complications caused by returning to work too soon after giving birth, and more. In some cases, loss and absence were also attributed to economic challenges, including infertility, miscarriage and abortion.

However, what is important to stress is that it was not just having any children or more children that participants described as being paused, but *the decision-making itself*. The need to feel ready and prepared was outstandingly pronounced, itself a relational concept as it draws in past, current and future selves, relationships, expectations and social contexts. And so narratives revolved around the waithood of decision-making, of waiting for readiness, preparedness and security; but knowing it could be a long and fruitless wait (Hall 2022b, Hall 2023). This might include waiting on other decisions or life aspects, too, like jobs, housing and relationships – a relational space–time – across which interpersonal decisions about reproductive futures would endure. Alongside this, memories, imaginations, aspirations and expectations would be drawn in, all as relational components that shaped reproductive decisions.

This is not to say lives, time or relationalities were entirely or systematically on hold (e.g. see Straughan et al. 2020); for time is of course impossible to still. It was not an event that they were waiting for, but for a respite in their current circumstances; a space and time in which to be able to even contemplate making reproductive decisions. Austerity serves to compress and intensify lived time, making enduring often difficult and painful. This meantime, to echo Sharma (2014), was also relationally endured. Jonny, for example, described how the period in which he moved back to the UK from Japan, lived with parents, looked for work and supported his disabled mum, was a time in which decisions about having children simply could not be made. But it was a busy period nevertheless. Decisions were on hold, but life or other lives were not.

Yusuf, for instance, acknowledged the role of upbringing and disinvestment in local economies as shaping his life expectations (see above), whilst at the same time projecting these reflections onto future imaginaries (Hall 2023, Horton 2016, Saunders 2020). For example, he discussed how he wants to pass this meantime, this pause, in a meaningful and productive way, through education and work (see Holdsworth 2022), and how this can help bring him to a place of being able to make reproductive decisions:

> So I think once I've done two years of study, I've been looking in to this, I can enough income and have a job and trade, that I can bring up a child and I'm happy with that. But that's what I've been looking in to. So when I reach 34, 35, I can do that, d'you know? That's what I'm working towards.

Yusuf indicates that he has been actively thinking on how to pass the time, how to endure the current deferral about decisions to have children and relates this in a very lucid way to his future self. The Oral Histories and Futures method helped to draw out these plural temporalities and relationalities as they shape reproductive decision-making in austerity.

For Jodie, decisions about having children also flitted between being situated in past and future selves and relationships. Describing problems of debt and inter-personal problems with her partner, she explained:

> Jodie: So much had happened with money and moving house quite a few times and stuff, that it just, we just thought like, I just said 'I don't know if I want to have'… I would love to have had another one, but I don't know if I wanted to take the chance of losing income again. And with being self-employed I'd have had, at the time I'd have had no maternity pay. And his [partner's] work was insecure. And I did have a point of maybe a couple of years ago, of thinking 'oh maybe we should've'. Because now like, I do maybe feel like it's been too late.

We see here the benefits of temporal flexibility within the Oral Histories and Futures method. In this short extract Jodie flits between tenses, from 'so much had happened', to 'I do maybe feel like'. The remark that 'so much has happened' is also a reminder that pauses are not simply inaction. Moreover, Jodie's rich response suggests that decisions also endure, they have their own temporality of making and being made. An endured decision-making process can feel even more protracted and temporally unbound – it is not just a thing or moment being paused, but the ability to even contemplate decisions. In what follows I turn to the pausing of discussions about reproduction in austerity.

6. Paused discussions

Moving now to reflect on the pauses and silences within both public and private discussions about the economic impacts of austerity on reproduction (Hall 2022c, Hughes 2020, Pearson 2019), participants often described taking part in the project because the topic struck them. This was directly related to a lack of discussion around their experiences of obstacles to reproductive decision-making – both within their social worlds and more broadly as discourse – meaning that opportunities to share their stories were rare.

Reflections about pauses in talking about reproductive decision-making were readily acknowledged by participants, and most often when I asked (what I thought would be) an innocuous question – 'what made you take part in this research?':

[7] 39, female, White British, living in a rented house with her husband and 9-year-old child.

> Jonny: So the reason it sort of interested me quite a lot is because myself and my wife have been discussing this for… probably a couple of years now really, and sort of trying to work out whether or not we want children, and when we'd want them. So just because it was sort of something we already had our minds on it, as it were. So it did jump out at me because of that.
>
> Jodie: It just struck a chord, I suppose. That I've not really… I do think about it, and I suppose me and my husband have talked about it a little bit, but we've not really.
>
> Carmen: I was quite intrigued when I saw the advert and thought it's obviously a topic which at least one other person has sort of picked up on, so yeah.
>
> Lauren: Because I feel like it's quite a niche area and people don't really research it. So as soon as I seen it I was like yeah, I do want to participate.

Intrigue, connection and mutuality shine through in these responses. Jonny and Jodie note that it is something they have talked with their partners about – a relational experience – and that it has been a topic of enduring interest to them ('already had our minds on it', '[we] have talked about it a little bit'). Carmen and Lauren instead refer to a relational space with me as researching the subject, that I had identified their experiences as important but under-acknowledged and untapped ('one other person has sort of picked up', 'it's quite a niche area').

It is perhaps unsurprising that the Oral Histories and Futures became part of the decision-making processes described in the previous section. Speaking to a researcher about this subject was an opportunity for participants to mete out the details, to lay all the different pieces of the puzzle down, to see how they fitted together and to create their own picture with them – and crucially, to share this with someone (Hall 2017, Hall 2022a, Mason 2021). Oral Histories and Futures were designed to give participants a sense of control about the story they want to tell. However, because the discussion (within oral histories) is usually in hindsight and focuses on past experiences (see Davis 2017), it is less common for a researcher to become part of an ongoing set of decisions.

My reading here is that this sharing and unburdening, as it were, is related to a lack of opportunities to share otherwise. When participants described previously having discussed or shared with others their experiences of reproductive decision-making and what they were going through and carrying (Hall 2022b), the encounters they were involved in were rarely supportive or reciprocal. This adds further texture to understandings of relational endurance as being experienced with or alongside others – for better or worse. Such discussions could be antagonistic, unrequited, or something participants actively avoided. Added to this, it was far more common for people to raise the topic of expectations to have children with participants, rather than it to be placed in a supportive conversation. Moralising surrounding parenthood (see Perrier 2013, Pralat 2020, Saunders 2021) can, then, also be applied to the experience of not having children. I am reminded here, as Massey (1992) warns, not to read relationality romantically, for relational spaces are as likely to create mutuality, solidarity and connection as they are friction, tension and exclusion.

For Jonny, conversations with family about reproductive decisions were more frequent when he and his wife were planning a move to Japan, where his wife is from and her family live. For those asking questions, Jonny described a presumption that his life-course was following a heteronormative pattern (David and Cartwright 2019, van Lanen 2021, Wanka 2020, Wilkinson 2020). He calls this a 'curiosity' on their part, but one which has nevertheless been part of the endurance surrounding his experiences of austerity and reproduction:

> I mean, my parents sort of made little jokes about it when… before I went to Japan. But they don't mention it quite as much now, so I think they've come to the conclusion that we might not be having children any time soon […] Just like little hints and like, asking if they'll be having any grandchildren, or like little pitter-pattering of feet around or anything like that anytime soon. Not like seriously or anything like that I suppose, it was just curious… they had curiosity about it. And their way of asking was making little jokes I suppose and seeing how I reacted.

Carmen described a similar set of circumstances:

> I suppose I'm getting to that age where people are starting to ask, you know, when am I going to start a family and I honestly just don't feel in the position yet to be able to start a family.

In these instances, Jonny and Carmen talk about having to avoid the conversation else defend their current situation and the fact that they have not yet made a decision about their reproductive futures. As noted in the previous section, participants regularly talked about having a particular set of stabilities in place, and the need to feel preparedness or readiness to have children (see Hughes 2021, Lebano and Jamieson 2020, van Lanen 2021). This can, then, become a relational space of recalcitrance, creating dissonance within relationships, and result in a building of tensions between people, selves, and social norms.

This was especially clear when Yusuf talked about his family and community, and their discussions about reproductive decisions (Nordqvist 2021, Saunders 2020). He explained, 'I come from a South Asian community […] there's a lot of community pressures, like conforming to a norm, like getting married, having kids, being financially stable, going off to university, having a good education, having some nice kid'. Again, discussions with family were paused on the matter of having children, because the terms of the engagement did not feel mutual or reciprocal. Rather than a conversation, these encounters seemed more like an interrogation and (though not described by participants in this way) might also be understood as a form of micro-aggression (see Hall 2022c). Yusuf spoke about how these engagements started from a place of expectation rather than of understanding:

> My mother, whenever I go and see her in Birmingham, she's always like 'you'll risk it all now, why don't you have any children yet? Where's my grandson?' […] and she's like 'I want to have, you to have a baby as well', do you know? So yeah, so a child.

For Jonny, Carmen and Yusuf, all of whom had a partner but did not have children, questions from relatives (usually parents) about when they would have children were out of sync with the rhythms of everyday life and their sense of the future. Instead of being supportive or meaningful discussions about the difficult decisions they were making, the obstacles they were traversing, or the factors they were weighing up (Hall 2022b, Hall 2023), the conversation was pitched by immediacy and urgency (Olson 2015). This, I argue, compounds feelings of waiting and the weight of anticipation, individualising the experience and the time and place in which it occurs. Participants gestured feeling both out-of-time and out-of-place as a result, as examples of relational temporalities during austerity. This makes it difficult to have conversations about reproductive decisions and the obstacles presented by austerity, and instead a silence sets in.

Therefore, it is not only the temporalities of pauses and silences that are endured – emotionally, corporeally, imaginatively – but also the relationships that constitute these space-times. Likewise, austerity produces everyday temporalities that can also shut down relational connections and intimacy, as well as pressuring space-times for comforting experiences of endured waiting (see Holdsworth 2022). Building on this, in the next section I explore how pauses in verbal speech can be a space for methodological reflection.

7. Paused talk

Considering the praxis of 'pregnant pauses', participants expressed a deep sense of relief about sharing their narratives on this subject. It seemed the project was interpreted by those who took part as an attempt

to breach this pause, or at least an opportunity for togetherness in the waiting. These reflections can contribute to emerging literatures on waiting and staying as method (Hall 2022a, Holdsworth 2022, Mannay and Morgan, 2015, Mason 2021) and pauses and silences as relationally endured (Barron, 2022, Hall 2022c).

The Oral Histories and Futures interviews were often deeply personal and emotional encounters, and participants tended to describe them as cathartic rather than provocative. They were sharing conversations they had been having (at least with themselves), and acknowledged it to be a relational space of them talking and of me listening:

> Carmen: it's not something that, I don't come from a very sort of… overly sort of open family if you know what I mean… but sometimes it's nice to get this worked out, actually.
>
> Janine[8]**:** Yeah, no, [I feel] not bad, not bad. It's certainly a trip down memory lane, I must admit. So I think I definitely need a good cup of tea after that… Thank you for listening

These ideas of getting it 'worked out' and 'taking a trip down memory lane' establish the interaction of the interview as shared, productive, and somewhat liberating. In the previous section the animosity of discussions about reproductive decisions was revealed to create tensions within familial relations that themselves had to be endured. It makes sense, then, that participants saw their engagement in this research as a sort of relief, a chance to talk in a non-judgemental environment and to not be silenced (Hall 2022c).

For Jodie, the time during the Oral Histories and Futures interview also represented a pause in and of itself:

> Thank you. It's been nice to just have a chat and just think about the last few years, because you don't get much time to pause.

The notion of sharing her story as providing the space to 'pause', to make time, indicates that Jodie also saw the interview as an opportunity for connection and relationality. Her comment that 'you don't get much time to pause' also reminds of the intensity of everyday life (see Baraitser 2017; Holdsworth, 2021; Wanka, 2020). It is in and through this relentlessness that enduring experiences, like austerity, *continue to be endured* – and that this endurance is a spatial, a temporal *and* a relational experience.

All the participants in the project were making time for these interviews; time does not suspend in these moments but is instead mutually and relationally experienced. In this case, it was in participants talking, pausing and sharing, and me listening. Stomachs rumbled, doorbells rang, pets needed feeding, but participants wanted to stay on the call. Jodie further explains:

> I suppose you haven't really the time, but just to talk about what you thought would happen with having children and then the reality of it. […] So I just thought, yeah. It's something I could take some time to talk about.

This idea to 'take time', and to make time 'just to talk' – what we might also think of as pausing to reflect – mirrored the period of endurance that participants were experiencing. Furthermore, oral history interviews often have a different temporality to semi-structured interviews; the purpose is not a conversation or really even an interview as we know it, but more a space and time in which people share their experiences (also see Davis 2017). In the case of this project, it included not only things that had happened, but what participants thought would happen, how they could have happened differently, and future happenings and non-happenings, too (see Hall 2022b, Hall 2023).

Participant's narratives were largely self-led and all very thorough. They started at the beginning, talking through significant parts of their life, initially in loose chronology, which then became more relaxed, and interest driven. Early memories of where they grew up, upbringings, relationships, education, work, where they live, where they moved, and so on, were interwoven as both personal and relational stories: relational with other people, times, places and selves. In being so involved and detailed, the narratives were rarely linear or voiced in perfectly formed sentences; but this is not an expectation or preference, either. Gaps in conversation, silences, pauses were all common, as they are in most forms of spoken communication within and beyond research.

These pauses and silences can acquire new meanings in the context of a difficult and emotionally heavy topic, such as economic obstacles to reproductive futures (also see Davis 2017, Pascoe Leahy 2022). Loss, precarity, and instability can be jarring to experience and to recount, and the interviews would be incomplete without disjointed lines of thoughts, trailings off, and unfinished responses. One of the key skills for oral historians is to sit with silences, to resist the urge to fill them with responses or questions, but just to *be with* the person sharing their story. Carrying out this project remotely, due to Covid-related social distancing restrictions, added to the endurance of silence; a pause on a phone-call can feel like a lifetime. This resonates with Knight and Stewart's (2016, p.3) concept that 'time becomes elastic' in contexts of crisis. But silence is not a non-answer. As feminist oral historians identify, going along with the story as told or not told can be part of an ethical and empowering encounter (Hall 2022c).

As a paced conversation, with its own tempo and rhythm, the Oral Histories and Futures were characterised by stops, starts, pauses, breaks and waits. Silences were also spaces of activity and doings with meaning (Hall 2022c, Holdsworth 2022), thinking on memories and ideas, jotting down thoughts. Participants had things that popped to mind while they sipped a drink or went to the toilet. When returning from a short break during our conversation, Jonny started back with: 'yeah, yeah. I had a thought'. And an answer or thought might not always be emerging, whereby equivocations and uncertainties were just as telling: the 'I don't knows' and 'I'm not sures'.

In addition, while completeness of life stories and futures was not my aim – an impossible achievement, surely – it was nevertheless clearly important to participants. My interpretation here is that this was part of a personal politics of resistance to being silenced and to enduring waiting and paused decisions. There was a strong sense of a relational politics of the self, and that participant's narratives were part of a 'coming to terms with' their experiences, memories and futures. Sharing and telling their stories in a comprehensive, deep and meaningful way highlighted to me that participants were often also talking about non-events, non-things, periods of meantime, but there was still *something* happening.

This meant the Oral Histories and Futures interviews were often lengthy, as an endured and sometime exhausting experience. When I asked participants towards the end of the interviews how they were feeling, responses included:

> Yusuf: Yeah, I'm okay. There's nothing there… that's okay, I've told you the whole story.
>
> Jonny: I think we've covered pretty much everything I can think of
>
> Jodie: I feel like I've vented my whole life story'

Thinking of research spaces *as and in endurance* also leads to conversations about endings or what Pascoe Leahy (2022) calls 'afterlives' of interviews. As conversations closed, participants spoke about how their experiences would continue after the interview, what they might do and how they might feel. Many described wanting some space and time to mull over what we had discussed, for some quiet reflection and solitude. They said they would have a walk, hug their pet, or get a cup of tea – and told me to do the same. Janine, like others, added: 'I hope you're okay too. I hope it's not depressing for you'. There was a resounding concern and understanding that they had been heard, and that last few hours had been a shared, relational pause.

[8] 33, female, White British, unemployed and in receipt of Universal Credit, living with her boyfriend in a rented flat.

8. Conclusions

Focusing on experiences around reproduction, particularly decisions about having any or more children, with this paper I've highlighted everyday endurances of and in austerity. Drawing on narratives from innovative Oral Histories and Futures interviews in North East England, I have argued that endurance is a form of relational politics: that we endure with, for, about, alongside other people, selves, places, things and times. I demonstrated this using three empirical themes.

Firstly, paused decisions concerning reproductive futures, I showed, were significant in shaping present and prospective temporalities of everyday life. It was not only having any children or more children that participants described as being halted, but also the decision-making itself. This was a period of relational endurance, including with past and future selves and relationships, and one that might ultimately be fruitless. Despite this, participants clearly expressed that their lives, and those of others, were not on hold but instead that this was a relationally endured meantime. Secondly, discussions about reproductive decision-making were also often paused. Participants explained that opportunities to share their stories were rare, and in fact could be antagonistic, unrequited, or something they actively avoided. They described having to endure the emotional, embodied and imagined relationalities that came with such tensions. As a result, the Oral Histories and Futures interviews became part of participants' relational experiences of reproductive discussion, where otherwise they could be faced with silence. Thirdly, on paused talk, the relational space of the interview represented a pause in and of itself, as well as an opportunity for connection and relationality. Taking and making time for the interview, pausing to reflect on their experiences and thoughts, mirrored the endurance of austerity and reproductive concerns that participants were facing. Moreover, in these encounters, it was clear that silence is not a non-answer, but is a shared, relational and meaningful space–time.

Within these findings, relational endurance has also been shown as lived, remembered and imagined in everyday life. Thinking relationally is a key tenant of feminist geography, and geography as a discipline, though this tends to translate to a focus on space. Here, I have teased out the significance of temporality in relational politics, in both research and praxis. A politics of the relational endurance of austerity is one which pays attention – conceptually, methodologically and empirically – to the temporal implications of personal *and* structural obstacles to reproductive futures. It focuses not only on doings, happenings and sayings, but significantly also non-events and non-things. Relatedly, the ideas in this paper have been brewing for a few years now, and in some ways also represent a sort of pause; as pressure to always produce, write, have immediate findings does not sit well with feminist praxis of waiting with ideas, people and places. To share this writing then also raises questions about academic praxis. How do we think *with* others, including on the relational politics of writing in and with endured austerity? Who and what else waits, stays and pauses in the everyday life of austerity? What differences, diversities and inequalities does this produce? And how are multiple endurances of austerity understood, researched and addressed within academic life? Collective responses to these questions are important, because how, what, where and with whom we wait, pause and stay are politically enduring concerns for future geographies.

9. Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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