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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Troubling/Transforming Working Lives: Judith Butler, Gender, Work and Organization

“It hits me in the weirdest moments”: How future female workers experience loss in times of planetary crisis

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Abstract

This paper explores how looming planetary crises become present in the lived experiences of future female workers, and how such experiences condition performances of viable subjectivity. Drawing on interview data from a longitudinal study of young women's education and career aspirations, the paper zooms in on moments where concerns about planetary crises were felt in informants' everyday lives. We augment Judith Butler's writings on loss with Karen Barad's concept of “intra-action” to theorize these moments as experiences of loss in which constitutive dependencies and entanglements—otherwise repressed and invisible—touch young women's lives. Against this theoretical backdrop, we trace how such experiences interrupt performances of neoliberal work subjectivity and thereby create a potential for alternative agencies grounded in an ethics of entanglement. The paper thus contributes new insights into young women's complex performances of viable work subjectivity, showing how more sustainable and collective ways of performing the self emerge. As such, we offer researchers and professionals working with and around young women a nuanced understanding of how young women contest and exceed notions of neoliberal individualism.

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KEYWORDS

ethics, future female workers, loss, planetary crisis, resistance, subjectivity, vulnerability

1 | INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we draw on Judith Butler's work on loss (2003, 2004) to explore how planetary crises loom in the lives of future female workers and thus condition performances of viable work subjectivity. Work and organization scholars have documented how female workers under neoliberal orders are expected and expect themselves to develop both an aspirational and productive self and to assiduously pursue a successful work life (Adamson, 2017; Kenny & Bell, 2014; Moonesirust & Brown, 2021; Scharff, 2016; Sullivan & Delaney, 2017). Moreover, with inspiration from Butler, important studies have theorized the complex and energetic interplay between power and resistance, zooming in on the moments at which normative pressures are not only enacted but also interrupted in the flux of subject formation (Cutcher et al., 2022; Harding et al., 2017). This paper contributes to such efforts to grapple with the ways workers both emulate and contest neoliberal norms. Accordingly, we develop a theoretical framework for experiences of loss as well as empirically show how planetary crises touch the lives of young women and interrupt their individual plans and efforts to secure themselves successful work lives.

From 2019 to 2022, we followed 16 young women aged 15–19 years in a longitudinal study of how career interests and aspirations take shape. Our interviews centered on their thoughts about higher education, career, and work life as well as on their aspirations and wishes for their adult lives. The informants told us about how hard they worked in school to ensure themselves access to a higher education and good jobs. They also described the immense expectations they have put on themselves to constantly improve, to be resilient in the face of disappointment, and to remain positive and optimistic as they seek to build good lives.

However, broader concerns about the future of the planet often interrupted these enactments of what one could call neoliberal female subjectivity (Adamson, 2017; Kenny & Bell, 2014; Sandager, 2021; Sullivan & Delaney, 2017). Many informants reported feeling overwhelmed by thoughts of “methane in the atmosphere,” “insects becoming extinct,” “plastic in the ocean,” “global warming,” and “rising sea levels.” They described how such thoughts would “hit them in the weirdest moments”—when riding a bike, opening a refrigerator, or encountering a new, environmentally friendly waste sorting system. These worries about the planet's future intruded on the interviews and disrupted their flow. The interruptions were disorienting experiences, where something seemed to take hold and claim the interviews and our informants although the existence of this “something” was often uncertain and escaped exact linguistic capture and rational reasoning.

For us, these interruptions resonated with Judith Butler's (2003, 2004) theoretical work on loss. As such, we hope to demonstrate that this lesser known, more contested work of theirs can constructively interact with our empirical material. Butler described loss as an experience where one is “hit by waves,” by something that “takes hold” and “claims us” (2004, p. 21). They further theorize loss as an experience that reveals something about who we are, “that delineates the ties we have to others,” and that shows us how such bonds fundamentally constitute us (2004, p. 22). To develop a theoretical framework of the experience of loss, in this paper, we augment Butler's theorizing of loss with Barad's (2007) theory of the performative as “intra-action,” thus gaining the ability to zoom in on and unfold the moments where planetary concerns interrupted our informants' attempts to secure themselves good future (work) lives. This framework thereby enables us to explore how loss, as an experience that reveals the dependencies of subjects, might also offer them new and different forms of agencies and becomings (Butler, 2003, p. 467). Adding theoretical resources from Barad further enables us to bring Butler's writings on loss into conversation with our specific empirical study of how future female workers perform work subjectivities and thus to explore what experiences might interrupt neoliberal identity formation and open the possibility of alternative agencies.

Seeking to extend the ways Butler continues to inform studies on work subjectivity, we offer the following contributions. First, we enhance knowledge on the composite and complex ways in which subjects perform, reiterate, and contest the normative conditions that govern viable work subjectivity (Cutcher et al., 2022; Harding et al., 2017; Kenny, 2010). Specifically, we document how concerns about planetary crises disrupt neoliberal norms and move future workers to recognize their constitutive dependencies. Second, we show *how* this happens by developing a theoretical and empirical understanding of experiences of loss as a series of everyday moments in which subjects are suddenly touched by entanglements and dependencies and where the possibility of alternative agencies grounded in a sense of responsibility to the Other emerges. Consequently, we seek to push Butler-inspired work toward an understanding of how looming planetary crises increasingly influence performances of subject formation in ways that might constitute a source of contestation and ethical transformation.

2 | THE SELF-MAKING OF THE (FUTURE) FEMALE WORKER

Rich and detailed studies have examined subjectivity at work, documenting how workers within neoliberal orders are incited to develop a self that is aspirational, productive, and constantly self-improving (Knights, 2002; Scharff, 2016; Serrano-Pascual & Carretero-García, 2022). Several studies have explored the gendered effects of neoliberal discourses that place normative pressures on women to discipline and perform themselves as working subjects in particular ways (Adamson, 2017; Kenny & Bell, 2014; Sandager, 2021; Sullivan & Delaney, 2017). When it comes to female workers, scholars have depicted neoliberal work subjectivity as entailing self-work to develop the confidence required to ensure success (Gill & Orgad, 2017), resilience in dealing with failure (Gill & Orgad, 2018), and positivity in the face of great uncertainty (Carr & Kelan, 2021; Gill, 2017). As such, it is well documented how female workers are expected and expect themselves to constantly improve and to consider success and failure as stemming from individual agency rather than structural conditions.

Judith Butler's work on subjectivity and performativity has been hugely influential in adding nuances to accounts of neoliberal power. Butler deconstructs any strict polarity between passive subjection and active self-constitution, theorizing the subject as both "the *effect* of a prior power and as the *condition of possibility* for a radically conditioned form of agency" (Butler, 1997, pp. 14–15, italics in original). With Butler's work as a beacon, one can thus explore subjectivity as performances in moment-to-moment iterations (Harding et al., 2017; Kenny, 2010; Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021) where normative conditions and their disruptions exist in an energetic interplay, the two being in constant tension and contradiction (Cutcher et al., 2022; Harding et al., 2017; Thomas & Davies, 2005). In the "interdependent, interstitial and multidirectional interplay" (Carroll & Nicholson, 2014, p. 2) between power and resistance, neither is uncontaminated by the other (Harding et al., 2017). In this light, one can see female work subjectivity as a complex mix of liberation, creative self-expression, *and* subjugation to norms of competition, self-improvement, and individual career progression (Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021). In this paper, we build on such work but we also extend it with questions about how looming planetary crises pervade the lives of future workers in ways that might also help them find ways to contest normative conditions.

Although work and organization studies have given less attention to Butler's later work, in recent years, some scholars have looked to their writing on vulnerability for inspiration. Butler (2016b) argues that the vulnerability subjects endure when suffering from structural inequalities or injurious interpellations may, paradoxically, also be a site of resistance. This makes vulnerability not simply a curse but possibly also a ground for new modes of solidarity (Butler et al., 2016, p. x). Organization scholars have explored vulnerability as resistance to workplace inequalities (Hales & Tyler, 2022), to patriarchal power structures and gendered dynamics in research processes (Plester et al., 2022), to worsened job and domestic conditions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Reiss et al., 2021), and to the discrimination against aging subjects in organizational recognition schemes (Cutcher et al., 2022). Thus, these studies have shown that, as an experience of exposure to power, vulnerability can simultaneously constitute an embodied enactment of resistance (Butler, 2016b; Cutcher et al., 2022; Meriläinen et al., 2022). We are also

interested in how experiences of vulnerability might pave the way for contesting normative conditions. However, by shifting the theoretical attention to experiences of loss, we seek understandings of how contestation may emerge not only through structural inequalities or injurious interpellations but also through moments where the subject comes into contact with its entanglements to the planetary world (see also Meriläinen et al., 2022; Valtonen & Pullen, 2021).

3 | THEORIZING LOSS

To develop a theoretical understanding of experiences of loss, we begin with Butler's writings on attachment and dependency in subject formation, which underpin their later theorizing of loss. Using Butler's understanding of loss as a potentially transformational reminder of our primary dependency, we draw on Barad's (2007) description of constitutive intra-actions to qualify such experiences. This theoretical intertwining will allow us to theorize an experience of loss as a moment in which the subject's entanglements and dependencies become felt, and alternative agencies grounded in an ethics of entanglement become possible.

In *psychic life* (1997), Butler takes stock of criticism leveled at their early theory of performativity (1990, 1993), exploring what it means to be "acted on" at the same time that one is acting" (Dumm & Butler, 2008, p. 97). Steering clear of a strict polarity between passive subjection and active self-constitution, they instead explore the subject as both "the effect of a prior power and as the condition of possibility for a radically conditioned form of agency" (Butler, 1997, pp. 14–15). In Butler's psychoanalytical account, all subjects are formed through passionate attachments to others. This primary dependency "condition[s] the political formation and regulation of subjects and becomes the means of their subjection" (Butler, 1997, p. 7). Hence, dependency is not something people can choose to adhere to or otherwise will away, but rather a tie that marks the condition of the subject's continued emergence. Paradoxically, the subject thus comes to be as *self* only through its formation of attachment to *others*, and to persist in a psychic and social sense, must perpetually submit to its own subordination (Lloyd, 2008). Yet, although attachment is constitutive, "no subject, in the course of its formation, can ever afford fully to 'see' it" (Butler, 1997, p. 8). To emerge fully, the subject disavows its primary dependency.

In *Precarious life* (2004), Butler poses the experience of loss as a potentially transformational reminder of our primary dependency, thus developing an understanding of the ethical potential in loss. They argue that in loss, "something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us" (Butler, 2004, p. 24). When a person experiences loss, that loss can reveal how their own sense of self—and their continued psychic and social existence—depends on others (Lloyd, 2008, p. 94). As Butler writes, "I think 'I' have lost 'you' only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well" (2004, p. 22). What was lost was thus not merely an externality but also part of what constituted "me." According to Butler, this recognition can be made "into a resource for politics" (2004, p. 30) because it cultivates a commitment to identification and thus gives itself to relation (Yusoff, 2012). Indeed, such recognition is a revelation of dependencies with the potential to undo notions of absolute autonomy, thereby making it possible to contest normative conditions and experience ethical transformations in the self. In this way, one can understand experiences of loss as moments in which the subject recognizes its constitutive bonds and where alternative agencies can emerge.

Still, how can we understand this experience more specifically? As mentioned, Butler seeks this understanding by describing loss as a moment where one is "hit by waves," by something that "takes hold" and "claims us" (2004, p. 21). One may experience this "something" in diverse registers invoked "by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel" (2004, p. 24), and the something carries the distinct message that it is "larger than one's own deliberate plan, one's own project, one's own knowing and choosing" (2004, p. 21). Here, loss is a performative encounter with something that often lies at the threshold of linguistic signification and challenges notions of subjective autonomy and control. Yet, this is about as close as Butler comes to the workings of such encounters. In our reading, because Butler wrote *Precarious life* in the aftermath of 9/11 and wanted to speak to the forms of national sovereignty following from that event, loss is somehow tied or restricted to a *response*

to the extraordinary advents of death, destruction, or dispossession in which something prior is lost. In contrast, the concerns about planetary crises in our data seemed to emerge through instants of ordinary life—a bike ride home from school, the utterly routine practice of shutting a window, the flick of a light switch. In all these mundane moments, planetary crises seemed to make themselves felt in the informants' lives. To us, these momentary senses of crisis called for theoretical resources that could extend Butler's understanding of the experience of loss to everyday and material situations where planetary crises all of a sudden become present. We found such a resource in Barad's theorizing of constitutive intra-actions (for other studies that combine Butler and Barad, see Harding et al., 2017, 2022).

In experiencing loss, the subject emerges with its entanglements to the world, or as Barad terms it, with "intra-actions that reconstitute entanglements" (Barad, 2007, p. 74). The term "intra-action" denotes how the agencies at work in a particular moment do not positively exist before that moment but emerge in relationship to each other. Replacing the term "interaction," intra-action emphasizes that entities "emerge from, rather than precede, the intra-action that produces them" (Barad, 2007, p. 128). Similar to how Butler stresses relationality and the subject's ontological dependencies, Barad emphasizes the entanglements of phenomena, in their phrasing "the ontological inseparability of intra-acting agencies" (Barad, 2007, p. 333). However, Barad's stronger focus on materiality enables us to highlight the subject's entanglements not only to human but also to nonhuman others. Accordingly, we are able to theorize an experience of loss as a moment of contact—either through touch, embodiment, or affective sensation—in which subjects re-emerge with *and* through their entanglements to planetary crises: The subject does not *enter* the encounter, but rather becomes *of* it. As such, the encounter is a matter of "being of the world in its dynamic specificity" (Barad, 2007, p. 377). Barad writes: "So much happens in a touch: an infinity of Others—other beings, other spaces, other times—are aroused" (2012, p. 206). We can thus understand experiences of loss as moments where a "heightened attentiveness to the materiality of our relationality" (Valtonen & Pullen, 2021, p. 520) becomes possible. This is a moment where relationships and entanglements—otherwise invisible, considered irrelevant, or positioned as being at a safe, faraway distance—suddenly are present and felt as something that marks the subject and conditions its continued becoming (Barad, 2017, p. 86). Experiences of loss can prompt an "un/doing [of] the self, of touching oneself through touching all others, taking in multitudes of Others that make up the very matter of one's being in order to materially transform the self" (Barad, 2017, pp. 82–83). Loss is a revelation of our constitutive ties to each other but also to our material and planetary world. It is a moment where the subject emerges with and through an increased responsiveness to "the world's patternings and murmurings" (Barad, 2012, p. 207).

Thus, we argue that by adding Barad's thinking to Butler's concept of loss, one can understand an experience of loss as a moment in which the subject re-emerges with and through its entanglements to the world and where alternative agencies grounded in an ethics of entanglement become possible.

4 | METHODOLOGY

The paper draws on qualitative interview data from a 3-year longitudinal study (2019–2022) that explored the everyday experiences, negotiations, and aspirations of 16 young women throughout their upper secondary education. Although many of the participants had part-time jobs, their primary institutional affiliation was not to a work organization. However, as several scholars have shown, the requirements of work permeate contemporary youth cultures and educational contexts, and young people are increasingly incited to create organizational and worker identities (Farrugia, 2019, 2021; Griffin et al., 2017; Lamberg, 2022). Hence, following recent studies challenging a dominant tendency to study worker identities only *in* organizations (Carr & Kelan, 2021; Dill & Morgan, 2018; Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021), we designed our study with a view to exploring how young women reflect on themselves as future workers even before starting their professional careers.

Combining individual with group interviews, we conducted our study in biannual rounds of interviews with the total number being 82. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 min for individual interviews and between 90 and

105 min for group interviews. Participants came from various urban, suburban, and more rural locations around Greater Copenhagen or the Zealand region and had working, middle, and upper-middle class upbringings as well as a range of ethnic backgrounds. We obtained their informed consent during the recruitment process and renewed it before each interview round. Five of the six rounds were physically held at the participants' schools, while the remaining round consisted of video interviews due to the COVID-19 lockdown. The study has been approved by an ethics committee and complies with the provisions of the Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity.

We opted for the qualitative interview method in order to explore participants' experiences related to performing aspirational subjectivities. The interviews followed a semi-structured guide focused on the everyday lives of the participants, how they negotiate expectations, their career hopes and notions of success, and how they imagine pursuing their aspirations. To bring a material and visual element into a study otherwise dominated by language, we also conducted photo-elicitation interviews (Harper, 2002) and focus groups organized as collage-making workshops (Mannay, 2010), thus creating potential for participants to present themselves in different manners. As others have noted (Ravn & Demant, 2017), such interview stimuli can elucidate the intensities of quotidian situations, thereby aiding informants' reflections and yielding detailed descriptions of even the mundane experiences of everyday life.

Data analysis consisted of several iterative stages (Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2009). First, we engaged with the richness of our data through what Thomson and McLeod (2015, p. 46) call a "processual imaginary." As such, we systematically read the data to develop a sensibility for "the 'matter' that comes to 'matter'" through a fluidity of movements between the particular and the general (2015, p. 46). In this process, we were particularly inspired by Riach et al.'s (2016) Butlerian approach, "designed to reveal the organizational processes through which subjects are 'undone'" (2016, p. 2072). Riach et al. advocate an approach aimed at bringing forth, rather than concealing, the complexities of lived experience that come to be conflated in the iterative performances of viable subjectivity, and that thereby opens the possibility of "reinstating alternative performances that potentially challenge subjective normativity" (Riach et al., 2016, p. 2075). In sharing this political ambition, we therefore neither engaged with our data as if it represented an external reality, nor aimed to consolidate and capture the participants' experiences within a smooth account giving the impression of narrative closure. Rather, we attended to aleatory practices, cracks, and interruptions in the very process in which "the subject produces its coherence at the cost of its own complexity" (Butler, 1993, p. 115). The longitudinal design of our study also shaped and informed this approach as it allowed ongoing conversations with the participants about the study and their role in it. Indeed, in the final interview rounds, we could discuss our preliminary interpretations and analytical findings with participants, asking them to expand or nuance them. The informants, we learned, agreed with us about the importance of avoiding reducing them to passive victims of neoliberalism. In their vernacular terms, this was understood as a performance culture embodied by the figure of the "top girl," which continues to dominate public discourse on young people. Many informants expressed feeling less than represented by such popular depictions. Thus, these ongoing conversations guided us to an approach that attends to the hegemonic, neoliberal discourses that still hold sway over their lives *and* that invests careful analytical work in illuminating the cracks and complexities of lived experiences that can tease out alternative performances and agencies. Using this approach, we could eventually identify those moments where the informants described planetary concerns. To us, these moments intuitively resonated with Butler's writings on loss, so we began exploring how their theoretical resources could help us make sense of them. This path proved productive, ostensibly allowing us to unpack how the moments interrupted performances of neoliberal subjectivity and surfaced other feelings, concerns, and relations. Peer review then encouraged us to strengthen the connection between our theorizing and the empirical analysis to more clearly highlight how each assists and advances the other. Responding to this encouragement, we returned to the empirical transcripts, which we re-read alongside Butler's texts, alternating between the two (Harding et al., 2017). These readings led us to more deeply ponder how our data also challenge Butler's writings and therefore to begin searching for additional resources to aid us in extending their concept of loss to material moments of everyday life. In this process, we found Barad's theory of the performative as intra-action helpful because it allowed us to understand experiences of loss as moments where the subject emerges with and through its entanglements. We do not claim that such experiences cumulatively compose a general theory of loss

nor that our theorizing offers a general understanding of the empirical material. Nevertheless, by allowing the data to develop and reshape theoretical ideas, and in turn, letting theoretical ideas present the data in different lights, we hope to have opened up new insights and understandings of the empirical material.

5 | EXPERIENCES OF LOSS IN TIMES OF PLANETARY CRISIS

The following analysis is structured into three sections. First, we consider how the informants enact neoliberal discourses in ways that organize their everyday lives and pursuits of viable educational and occupational futures. Second, we explore moments in which planetary concerns become present, specifically addressing how they interrupt normative aspirational pathways. Finally, we pursue openings for alternative agencies based on an ethics of entanglement. We argue that such ethics is grounded in a sense of dependency and responsibility precipitated by experiences of loss that reveal the subject's entanglements with human and nonhuman others.

5.1 | Neoliberal organization of everyday life and future pathways

Throughout our study, several informants described a felt expectation, or even pressure, to plan extensively for the future and to follow a certain path progression through the education system and into the labor market. As Sia said:

You need to have a plan. Of course, you need to have a plan! What's your plan? ... and you're just kinda "uhm, that's a good question" ... I mean, I feel it's something we've been fed with since ... I mean you start in primary, then there's secondary schooling after that, and then university, and then you get some kind of job ... that's kinda your life put into a timetable.

In this excerpt, Sia describes relating to the future as a practice of making and keeping to a particular plan of progression. She explains this as something she and her peers have been "fed with" and how it organizes her life on a linear trajectory running from schooling, to university, and on to the labor market. Other informants also articulated such concerns about their trajectories, describing their commitments to choose "proper and clever educational pathways," and pursue the occupational "goal" toward which their paths are directed, as Marie put it. Hence, informants felt obliged to continually strive to reach the next level of education and ultimately get a good job. The informants enacted this narrative of linear progress as an individual path they were personally responsible for planning and pursuing. Consider Luna's reflections:

I think it's mainly myself I'm competing with. How much I'm capable of proving that this is something I can do. If I only put in the time and effort, then I can get through it. Then I can get through anything ... We all have some talents, but in principle ... we have some basic capabilities for everything, and then there are some things we're better at ... but I mean, if we want to, we can become good at everything, so to speak. ... which is almost impossible, but with willpower you can accomplish a lot.

Resonating with recent studies arguing that competition is self-directed under neoliberalism (Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021; Mavin & Yusupova, 2022), Luna here describes her work to compete with herself. Although she recognizes that not everyone is equally talented, she rejects this as a hindrance, instead emphasizing individual effort and willpower. She performs herself as a site of limitless possibilities, capable of "proving" and "getting through" anything. Thus, Luna enacts a normative ideal that, with willpower and hard work, individuals can overcome any structural limitations they might encounter.

The role of individuality, hard work, and self-improvement also came across in informants' talk about exam performances and their relation to the future, as this example shows:

Interviewer: Why does it motivate you going to exams where you "have to do as well as possible" [repeating her words back to her]? Why is that important?

Layla: I think it's because I have high expectations of myself. I'm not ... I mean, my mom doesn't care whether I get 02 or 12 [02 is the lowest passing grade in Denmark, 12 is the highest], she doesn't care at all, as long as I do the best I can. But I have a feeling that I need to get the best grades possible, so that I get ... I don't know why, but I think it's so that I can do as well as possible in the future, I mean have the most possibilities, so that I can do what I want to do. So, I always prepare well for exams, and I focus on doing as well as possible, and I get very disappointed if I don't meet my expectations.

For Layla, doing as well as possible is about meeting the high expectations she has set for herself. She describes her practices of sustained hard work and thorough preparation and her feeling that she must achieve high grades in order to get ahead in the future. She also relates exam performance in the present to doing well in the future and gaining the possibilities to create the life she wants.

Thus, across our interviews, informants described their high expectations and diligence when it came to building and sustaining a linear path to higher education and good jobs (see also Pors & Kishik, 2023). Our findings speak to a rich literature arguing that female work subjectivity is characterized by pursuits of success via constant self-improvement (Knights, 2002; Scharff, 2016; Serrano-Pascual & Carretero-García, 2022). The above empirical statements echo studies showing how female workers within neoliberal orders pose high expectations to themselves and how they turn the logic of competition inward, thus meeting a lack of success with self-criticism and self-work to become more resilient or optimistic (Baker & Kelan, 2019; Carr & Kelan, 2021; Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021). As our informants made their careful efforts to build linear paths to successful futures, they also expected themselves to work hard and saw a lack of success as an individual failure. Moreover, they connected insecurities about their performance to fears about their future livelihood (Scharff, 2016, p. 117). Finally, structural conditions, restraints, or inequalities relating to factors, such as family background, gender, and race, often became irrelevant or invisible in our informants' ideas about individual willpower and agency (Ahl & Marlow, 2021; Gill et al., 2017; Scharff, 2016).

However, our interviews also featured instances where narratives and accounts of such futures were interrupted, and informants became less certain of their plans and pathways. In the following section, we explore how concerns about multiple planetary crises interrupted the interviews, the informants' accounts of themselves, and their plans for the future.

5.2 | Experiences of loss

When talking about possible futures, informants sometimes voiced concerns about the state of the planet. Ava said:

... you hear it all the time: it's the end of the world. And soon, we'll run out of space, and we don't have – if we're to find space for all those people – we're over-populated – then we also need space for crops, and then we won't have enough food and very soon the water will rise and then we won't be able to live where we live now, and yeah ...

[sighs]

Such lines of thought often interrupted the focus and flow of these interviews designed to explore educational interests and aspirations as well as future occupational choices and plans. In the midst of accounting for their carefully considered paths to the future, informants like Ava would be interrupted by concerns about climate change, rising sea levels, over-population, and loss of living space and natural resources. During the above interruption, Ava looks to “the end of the world” as she knows it. This impending future emerges with loss—loss of food, loss of space—for which reason it is characterized by vanishing possibilities rather than the pursuit of a path to realizing plans. Ava adds that all this makes her “totally confused in some ways, because they say all this, but I can't see it... When they say the summer has been super warm... then I think 'Fuck, it's global warming' but it isn't necessarily.” In this articulation, Ava's

sense of loss is at once omnipresent and enigmatic, indisputable and yet contested in the absence of tangible proof. Butler's words resonate here, "when one loses, one is also faced with something enigmatic: something is hiding in the loss, something is lost within the recesses of loss" (Butler, 2004, pp. 21–22). What precisely is lost seems to slip away, which confuses Ava. Without a stable point of departure, and with a future that emerges with loss, her account falters, and the rhythm of the interview collapses. Ava sighs, and symptomatically, concludes by asking, "Does it make any sense, or am I just rambling?"

Ava's account of loss as omnipresent was further corroborated by other informants who also described experiences of loss taking place through everyday practices, situations, and locations. Consider the following reflections:

... we're constantly bombarded with all these problems, so you're forced to think about it. Both from news media and ... also just here at the school, we have an environmental council that puts up paper bins, and salad bars in the canteen and stuff like that. So, you can't not think about it. And ... I don't know, for me it's a [feeling of] despair because I don't even know where to start ...

Moving around the school or reading the news, Marie is constantly reminded of "all these problems." In everyday encounters with a newspaper, a recycling bin, or a meat-free meal offer, she describes being compelled to think about challenges and problems. These encounters forcefully evoke associations that are impossible to ignore. Indeed, Marie describes them as a constant bombardment of problems that occupy her attention even if she prefers them not to. The encounters also carry a feeling of despair, seemingly because they cannot be accommodated within some form of linear sense-making: Marie becomes discouraged and does not "even know where to start." The encounters have an intensity and excess that prohibit her from disregarding them, but which also unsettle and escape attempts to organize them within a coherent account. We found such statements scattered throughout the interviews. Informants would describe the small moments in their everyday life that would evoke a sense of loss. They described practices of always being mindful of switching off the light when leaving a room or quickly closing the refrigerator door. Such thoughts would often emerge in everyday settings and seemingly mundane practices:

I try to ignore it, because there's really nothing I can do about it. I mean not really anything that would matter. So generally, I try not to think too much about it. Well, I can think about it like: "We need several meat-free days a week." And we do have that. Or little things like: "We need to remember to turn off the light and shut the door to the refrigerator, even if you only need a bit of butter, you need to shut the door while you put it on." Things like that: "Shut the window. If you've aired out the room, then shut the window, because we shouldn't lose any more heat than necessary." Things like that are on my mind.

Although in this excerpt Ava initially says she is trying not to be overly preoccupied with the state of the planet, she nonetheless ends up recounting several instances where planetary crises make themselves felt. Whether reflecting on her family's dinner routines or the simple act of closing a window, Ava seems unable to escape a feeling of loss. One can read her practices as a way of internalizing a responsibility for climate change (although systemic approaches would be more likely to counter the threat). However, through these everyday practices, one can also discern how planetary crises are evoked in the informants' lives. A finger that flicks the light switch and a hand that closes the refrigerator door constitute experiences of loss in which, as Barad writes, "an infinity of others—other beings, other spaces, other times—are aroused" (Barad, 2012, p. 206). They are brief but potentially painful meeting points of present doings and lost (future) possibilities. Such meeting points were also vividly described by Marie:

I think it's ... I mean it hits me in the weirdest moments, where I'm just doing nothing, when I'm riding my bike home from school or something like that. And it's like a kind of despair because there are really a lot of problems to tackle. I mean, I think it's unbelievable, insects become extinct ... and there's the

ozone layer, though it has improved a bit, and there's something with water, which isn't good, there's plastic in the oceans, there's meat and methane, and I mean I can't even ... there are so many things. I have no idea where to begin! ... yeah, now I've forgotten your question.

Here, Marie describes moments of intensities embodied as hits, but what she encounters in these hits, she cannot quite articulate. At once enigmatic and overdetermined, the hits nonetheless carry a profound sense of loss: Marie recounts the extinction of species, the depletion of the ozone layer, ocean pollution, and more. The sheer intensity of the experience prohibits her from disregarding it and tethering her feeling of devastation to something she can make sense of. This predicament seems to suspend her in a state of ambivalence, whereby she wants to continue on her trajectory but cannot avoid the planetary losses that render individual plans all but futile. In this unsurety, Marie hesitates, unable to keep following her linear path to the future: "I mean, I can't even ... I have no idea where to begin!" she exclaims. Where there should or could have been a time and place to develop identities through transition processes from youth to adulthood, or from education to occupation, there is no safe ground. Loss has fractured that ground, disrupted linear planning, and brought Marie's narrative to a halt ("yeah, now I've forgotten your question"). As Butler writes, in loss, one tries to give an account, only to find the narrative falters as the "I" giving the account becomes mute (Butler, 2004, p. 23). Indeed, the hits seem to overwhelm Marie with the revelation that her control over her path is actually slight.

We have offered these excerpts to show how experiences of loss interrupted our informants amidst their attempts to give coherent accounts and produce viable pathways to higher education and good jobs. Although elusive, these experiences still seemed to take hold [of] and claim (Butler, 2004, p. 21) informants, leaving them confused, disoriented, or in despair. The experiences were both omnipresent and enigmatic, ignored and yet still recurring in the most mundane of situations or evoked with the smallest of touches. To cite Barad (2012, p. 206), "so much would happen in a touch" (a finger flicking a light switch or a hand opening a refrigerator). An infinity of issues arose in the case of our informants, and they appeared to recognize their relationships and entanglements to humans and nonhumans all over the planet. Loss seemed to interrupt individual projects and plans—an interruption causing informants to stumble as their narrative accounts faltered.

5.3 | Entanglements and alternative agencies

When planetary crises crossed their minds, our informants would sometimes pick up their accounts with thoughts about how to become part of a more responsible future. In the following, we therefore discuss how the experience of loss may also be a site in which other forms of agencies and ways of being responsive and responsible can emerge. First, Marie reflected on how loss affects her ability to choose and plan her future, as this example shows:

... you have to think new thoughts and new lines. I actually thought about it recently, you know, fuel, oil, I mean since kindergarten I've been taught that you can't all go to the same table and think you can all get cake. You have to spread out, right? Humanity has completely fucked that up. We're all dependent on petrol and oil to run our engines. Nobody said, "Hey guys, this won't last forever, maybe you should try different things." Nobody did that before ... 20 years ago. That's maybe too late. It has gone too slowly. So, you always have to think [up] new ideas for everything because we're so many people, we can't all depend on one resource.

Animated by what is lost because humanity has ruthlessly exploited the earth's resources, Marie questions the viability of a plan and a project leading down the same path that brought the planet to its current state. The thought moves her to reconsider what it means to pursue a linear path of progress and how that pursuit might affect the planet and other people depending on the same resources she does. She reflects upon how individual desires for certain choices

may compromise a sustainable future and how this means that her future will have to include alternative choices and a preparedness for new ideas and ways of living and working.

Just as it occurred to Marie that her individual trajectory was related to the state of the planet, Aida, too, came to think about the interconnectedness of human ways of life, ecosystems, and possible futures:

Those pandemics are also related to climate change, because if we cause animals to leave their natural habitats and live closer to humans and they have all kinds of viruses and such things that we have not met before and then we get all kinds of diseases. That's what's happening right now. That's what marks our lives. And they predict that we'll have more pandemics, then the economy will be affected and that affects all people. All people *now*. Not all people's grandchildren, as they sometimes say.

Here, Aida considers the co-implication of human and animal life and thus how her own life is entangled in a web of planetary relations. Her thoughts about such entanglements reveal her vulnerability as she becomes re-positioned in relationship to and as dependent on others that affect each other. Being placed as well as placing herself in the midst of this ungovernable web of human and nonhuman lives and processes, Aida describes a felt sense that this web profoundly marks her life—an experience in which the future crises suddenly lie not on some far-off horizon separable from the present. Rather, the future moves close and becomes something that affects Aida (and everyone else) here and now. In this moment, a sensitivity to mutual dependency and vulnerability is cultivated, interrupting individual linear paths to an ostensibly successful work life. Luna, too, was led to think about her life's dependence on others. She said:

Well, when you think about it, it's because we depend on each other, so we all need to take responsibility for our actions. No one is the only one living on this planet, so I can't do all kinds of things and believe that it doesn't affect others. We all affect each other and depend on each other.

Here, Luna leaves behind her previously expressed thoughts about individual willpower and agency, instead re-orienting herself as emerging in and through dependencies and entanglements to others. When finding themselves entangled in a web of mutual dependencies, informants would sometimes express an urge to find other paths that could make them part of more responsible futures. Sia stated:

Well, the climate crisis ... it's perhaps because my generation, the way we've grown up, where we've seen climate disasters get worse and worse. We've been sitting here, at home in Denmark and we could think, well that's not really my problem, but seeing tornadoes where people's whole lives are torn apart. ... How can I become a part of the solution? How to help build the collaborations needed to meet these [disasters]?

In this excerpt, Sia describes how her childhood and youth have developed in tandem with “worse and worse” climate disasters. She explains how the perceived safe distance between northern Europe and the most brutal effects of climate change is an illusion. As her experienced distance between herself and climate disasters collapses, a desire grows to be involved in responsible responses to planetary crises. In other statements, Sia spoke about individual choices, interests, and career trajectories but here wonders how to build communities and collaborations. With open questions, she directs herself at the new collaborations that might solve present and future crises.

Perhaps, we are reading too much into these excerpts. However, we think it relevant to suggest that these interruptions might engender alternative agencies conditioned on the dependencies felt through experiencing loss. Our informants seemed moved to cultivate a responsibility for those others who depend on them and on whom they depend, even though those others were not immediate and present. Again, this might speak to us about how young women come to internalize yet another responsibility for performing themselves as “good and responsible” female

workers, this time in relation to the state of the planet. Still, we suggest that these interruptions also show how, in experiencing loss, future female workers are re-constituted in “response-ability” (Barad, 2012, p. 215). Indeed, we argue that experiences of loss may open cracks in the neoliberal subjectivity, crevices through which new forms of responsibility and agency can emerge. Loss has challenged our informants to realize that these “others” are not an externality but rather a constitutive part of the “I,” whose emergence is contingent and continuous (see also Dale & Latham, 2015). Loss reveals that individual flourishing depends on finite resources that others, too, require (Marie), and that one’s implication in the lives of animal others reaches back and marks one’s own life (Aida). Finally, loss seems to produce a new urge to become part of collaborations and communities that together might build more responsible ways of living and working.

6 | CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This paper began with young women’s concerns about planetary crises and how they seemed to interrupt the rhythm of our interviews as well as the informants’ attempts at giving successful accounts of future work subjectivity. To us, these empirical moments resonated with Butler’s writings on loss (2003, 2004), thus leading us to pursue a set of questions about how such interruptions could make it possible to reinstate alternative performances potentially contesting neoliberal being and becoming in and beyond organizational contexts.

In the first part of the empirical analysis, we explored how young women live and enact neoliberal discourses. In this section, the informants described the hard work and high self-expectations exerted to build and sustain a linear education and career path. Our findings here speak to a rich literature on female work subjectivity, highlighting the disproportionate effects of neoliberal discourses on women who are expected to pursue successful futures via diligence and constant self-improvement (Knights, 2002; Scharff, 2016; Serrano-Pascual & Carretero-García, 2022). The analysis also showed how our informants internalized the responsibility for success and considered a lack of success as an individual failure (Baker & Kelan, 2019; Carr & Kelan, 2021; Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021).

In the remainder of the analysis, we unpacked empirical moments in which informants were interrupted/interrupted themselves with worries about the planet. We suggested that these moments could be understood as experiences of loss in which the subjects’ dependencies and entanglements—otherwise repressed and invisible—became present and touched the informants’ lives. We argued that these experiences undid the neoliberal notions of absolute autonomy underpinning informants’ linear accounts. Instead, other thoughts, feelings, concerns, and relations seemed to surface, and ties to human and nonhuman others were articulated. Loss, we argued, was a particularly potent experience that challenged the informants to realize a subjective porosity and recognize constitutive bonds. For some, this recognition seemed to open the possibility of alternative agencies less fixed in linear paths or normative categories of successful subjectivity and instead grounded in an ethics of entanglement and a sense of a shared responsibility to the Other.

This paper contributes to ongoing efforts to develop Butlerian scholarship in work and organization studies (Cutcher et al., 2022; Harding et al., 2017, 2022; Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021; Riach et al., 2014, 2016). Butler’s (1990, 1993, 1997) earlier work has been hugely influential in nuancing studies of neoliberal power, showing the subject as shaped yet not determined by unchosen conditions and thereby affirming its possibilities for resistance. More recently, scholars have added Butler’s (2016b, 2020) later work on vulnerability as resistance to show that when structural or organizational inequalities render workers vulnerable, this positioning also presents possibilities for resisting those same inequalities (Cutcher et al., 2022; Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020; Plester et al., 2022; Reiss et al., 2021). Seeking to push this literature further, our study takes Butler’s (2003, 2004) work on loss and augments its potential with Karen Barad’s (2007) concept of intra-action. As such, we offer new theoretical and empirical understandings of how contestation emerges not only through the structural or organizational inequalities or injurious speech that position some subjects as vulnerable but also through moments where the subject comes into contact with its reliance on the planetary world and how the looming planetary crises condition and are entangled with its

(work) future. Indeed, although Butler's later writings make repeated attempts at extending the subject's constitutive dependencies to nature and the planetary environment (e.g., Butler, 2016a, p. 131; 2020, p. 41), this aspect is yet to be rigorously pursued and developed in work and organizational studies on contestation and resistance (see, however, Valtonen & Pullen, 2021; Meriläinen et al., 2022). Embarking on this pursuit, we thus offer a timely account of how planetary crises become omnipresent and touch future female workers' lives, thereby highlighting how the planetary world seeps into complex processes of subjective becoming and how planetary crises are increasingly involved in performances of viable work subjectivity. In other words, we contribute some concrete empirical examples of what Butler (2020, p. 42) noted is "regularly dismissed as naive": the interruption of the "neoliberal consecration of individualism" through experiences that reveal how it "affects the very possibility of the continuation of a liveable environment, one on which we all depend" (Butler, 2020, pp. 41–42). Hence, our study provides novel insight into how organizational actors come into contact with the dependencies that render them vulnerable but that also constitute the source of alternative agencies with the potential to contest forms of normative power.

Ultimately, we have sought to introduce *the experience of loss* into work and organizational studies as a source of contestation and ethics. Following Butler (2003, 2004), we tried to show that loss can be experienced as an injunction to responsibility and ethical transformation. It can help to affirm how the subject is invariably acted on as it acts. From such an affirmation, one might just find ways of bearing, rather than denying, the subject's irresolvable ambivalence, an ambivalence undefined yet intimately felt in experiences of loss.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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