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Editorial

Introduction. This Is Fine. Not

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Image 1: Excerpt of re-rendering of 2016 'This is fine' comic-meme by artist KC Green for The Nib (https://thenib.com/this-is-not-fine/). Credit: KC Green.

In their conversation on 'How to Change Alt Right Minds' (2022), the trans-female Youtube host ContraPoints and the U.S. political commentator and podcaster Jon Favreau talk about how positive change can be effected in the world. They discuss this on the example of harmful extremist political convictions as well as in relation to climate change, two phenomena that are widely seen as 'problems' (see also ContraPoints 2018). Both agree that hope is a driving factor in effecting active engagement, as it tackles feelings of helplessness that may lead to inactivity or defensive-aggressive positions. With recent world events such as the disemboweling of democracy in the United States, genocidal warfare in the Middle East, tolerance of dictatorships on the global stage, and a general upsurge of far-right positions with twisted narratives and fake 'truths' in Europe and beyond, such feelings of hopelessness may feel especially acute and physical for many people reading this (shared by the author). Problems seem to be all around. Hope may seem to be far, yet something possibly promising new insights, energy, and resilience. But what does 'hope' mean in this context, and how does it relate to 'problems'?

This special issue investigates the potential of 'hope,' which is understood here as a future-oriented political practice. It combines critical

perspectives on 'hope' with thinking about 'problems.' Contributions, which range from articles over conversations in written and spoken form to artistic text and imagery, add to sharpening the analytical usefulness of these ambiguous categories. Both refer to figures of thought in disciplinary discourse as well as to objects in the social imaginary that gain meaning through vernacular exchange. 'Problems,' commonly understood, describe situations in need of resolution. As an analytical category, the term 'problem' is used differently across many disciplines, usually upholding the promise of resolution via response. However, in the case of 'wicked problems' (Rittel and Webber 1973), neither the definition of a problem nor a solution may seem to be within reach. This appears much closer to social realities which are messy and complex. On an emotional level, 'problem' has a moralizing ring to it in everyday usage, equating things that are problematic with being difficult, undesirable or bad, while 'hope' seems to carry morally positive qualities. Opening up a forum to exchange ideas about 'hope' and 'problems' from practice-based and research-focused perspectives, we ask: what does the concept of hope *do*—theoretically, socially, and emotionally—in relation to 'problems'? Can we sharpen these terms or make use of their ambiguous nature in a productive way? Are there alternative terms that are more useful and, if so, what are they? What are the social lives of these terms, and how do they inform research and analysis?

Placed within a moral and temporal dimension of extremes, hope has been discussed in relation to utopian and dystopian thought, for instance, by Craig Browne (2005). These extremes can also be found across a variety of discourses that deal with hope. The first wave of feminism held on to hope as a means to achieve social change. Contemporary queer and feminist voices amplify this notion whilst being aware of their sometimes uncomfortable relation with hope, as discussed in depth by Rebecca Coleman and Debra Ferreday (2011) in their edited volume *Hope and Feminist Theory.* Combining theoretical engagement and activist intervention, Judith Butler (2011), for instance, stated during the Occupy Wall Street movement: 'If hope is an impossible demand, then we demand the impossible.' This seems to resonate with pre-(Russian) revolutionary ideas, taken up by the Russian cartographer and anarchist Peter Kropotkin, who is quoted to have said: 'The hopeless don't revolt, because revolution is an act of hope.' Queer theory taps into both ends of the spectrum, with Lee Edelman (2004) refusing the insistence on hope as something that ultimately serves to affirm conservative moral orders, and José Esteban Muñoz (2019) thinking through possibilities of queer futurity as something to hope for. Similarly divergent positions exist in the humanities and social sciences as well as in the natural sciences and social movements. Lauren Berlant (2011) calls out 'cruel optimism' as a form of self-exploitation via misguided desire, and Frank B. Wilderson III (2020) calls on afropessimist critique to confront the social fact of racial injustice. Jane Goodall (2021) insists that hope is a mode that must inform environmental research practice and scientific inquiry, while climate and ecology research has speculated that the moment to turn the escalating processes of global warming and mass

extinction has already passed. Yet, past and present political, environmental, antiracist, feminist, LGBTQAI+, and labor movements also continuously reinstate the hope for change through struggle. What can we take from such differing positions? How can these different understandings of hope be made productive for exploring the murky middle grounds of life, for staying with the trouble, in the words of Donna Haraway (2016)? And how do understandings of 'hope' and 'problems' as figures of thought play out when grasping the connections between research's actively-intervening and reflectively-analytical elements? Here, Hirokazu Miyazaki (2004) shines a light on the connection between hope and research, stating that 'hope is a method of knowledge formation, academic and otherwise' (p. vii). Following up on this definition, we ask: can research claim agency by engaging with the agentive role of hope as something that is forceful or subversive (see Elliot 2016; Giroux 2004)?

The notion of hope is rooted in Western philosophical discourse and famously linked to the Enlightenment's paradigm of knowledge via Immanuel Kant's 'What may I hope for?'. Critical approaches range from the 'Counter-Enlightenment' (MacMahon 2017) to contemporary engagements with the philosophical canon, for instance, by Dilek Huseyinzadegan (2018), who asks 'What can the Kantian Feminist hope for?' How can a thus canonized concept of 'hope' be interrogated and possibly reappropriated from multiple perspectives, including non-Western traditions of thought, when engaging with phenomena identified as having the qualities of 'problems'? Such may be armed conflicts, war and violence, the changing global climate and ecological transformations that are wreaking havoc on life as we know it, effects of historical events like colonial encounters and contemporary late liberalist doctrines, labor struggles and precarious existence, racisms and many more (see Jansen and Löfving 2009). As scholars, activists, artists, and researchers, we often address 'problems' in that way, usually with the hope of understanding them better, sometimes with the hope of contributing to their transformation and possibly the creation of better futures. But as Jarret Zigon (2009) finds by relating to ethnography that frames understandings of hope among his interlocutors, people recovering from drug addiction in Moscow, it is exactly the everydayness of hoping, defying both ends of the utopia-dystopia spectrum, that describes the social life of this concept best. Yet, as often the case, the narrative of hope and what to hope for was framed by an institution, here the Russian Orthodox Church, which aimed at invoking their idea of faithful hope within a group of people cast out from society.

Contributions to this issue address the entanglements of perspectivally framed 'problems' (in the sense of Haraway's situated knowledges (1988) or, simply put, with an understanding that what one person sees as a problem may not concern another person at all) and the application of hope as a contested concept. Contributors were invited to probe into the usefulness or uselessness of the terms 'hope' and 'problems' and their relation to each other for informing a mode of critical inquiry. In her ethnographic article about a South African informal settlement, anthropologist **Eileen Jahn** unpacks the discrepancies between national

narratives of hope as uniting resilience and communal experiences of neglect by the state, leading to reformulated ideas of hope that diverge from the national ideal of it. Legal scholar and criminologist **Marion Vannier** offers a study of UK prison staff and their relation to aging prisoners facing a life sentence. Her article probes into the structural role of *hope-in-practice* as a stabilizing factor within the carceral system and follows ethical questions raised about hope and who should be entitled to it in this context. Taking a conversational format, the exchange between German-Bolivian artist, curator and researcher **Verena Melgarejo Weinandt** and curator and researcher **Suza Husse** explores the hopeful aspects of a decolonial artistic practice in response to anti-Indigenous racism. Addressing the German White imaginary around Indigeneity, which is tied to figures such as Karl May's Winnetou or the disney figure Pocahontas, they explore how such problematic narratives can be countered through an embodied performative media practice. Artist **Angela Stiegler** discusses collaborative production of work with friends as a method that allows critical engagement with uncomfortable ideas, such as filmic and artistic representations of post-war German culture and continuities of fascism. Situating the problematic within history and art, Stiegler discusses how the intimate realm of friendship can offer a hopeful and creative resource to lingering social 'problems.' *The February Journal*'s own **Pasha Tretyakova** (pseudonym) contributes a personal essay with photo documentation of their performance work that meditates on ambiguous feelings of hope, guilt, and Russia as home from an expatriate perspective. Pasha also conducted a conversation-interview with philosopher **Kolya Nakhshunov**, where the two researchers and friends contextualize the power of hopelessness as a political tool in contemporary Russia, specifically for queer people. The book review section features museum researcher **Amanda Tobin Ripley**'s take on Nizan Shaked's (2022) *Museums and Wealth: The Politics of Contemporary Art Collections,* a book she acknowledges as an important work on the road to an emancipated museum practice that becomes aware of its current complicity with the art market as a system of wealth accumulation.

Cartoon artist KC Green came to internet fame in 2016 with a meme of 'question dog' sitting in a burning house drinking coffee while stating that 'This is fine.' Apart from this famous version of the comic, he also made another rendition of the scene, featuring a much more escalated canine response. The house is on fire, and it is definitely a problem. While the state of the world will continue to challenge, defund, and silence critical thought in various ways in the foreseeable future, we hope that our work at *The February Journal* gives you some food for thought and energy for continued resilient work between research, activism, and art. Thank you for reading.

Notes from the Editors

In other news and on a more hopeful note, the journal can announce its successful move to Berlin Universities Publishing (BerlinUP), which will serve as our publisher going forward. BerlinUP is an open access publisher with a non-commercial, scholar-owned infrastructure and with a general, publisher-independent publication and consultation service. It is jointly supported by the libraries of Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Technische Universität Berlin, and Charité—Universitätsmedizin Berlin. We are delighted to become part of the BerlinUP journal portfolio and express our gratitude to the BerlinUP team, who have helped us with the process of applying and, most importantly, migrating our website to the new servers and new hosting! Heartfelt thanks go to Ronald Steffen and Michael Kleineberg for the priceless help and patience with our many questions. Special thanks go to our editorial manager Ana Panduri (pseudonym), who has looked after this move and the journal while having left academia and publishing. As Ana will gently take a less active role in the journal's day-to-day activities, we would like to say how much we value her time and labor that went into transforming *The February Journal*! We offer our sincere gratitude to Magdalena Buchczyk for her unwavering support of our journal. We are also immensely grateful to our designer Andrei Kondakov for his professionalism and creative vision. And last but not least, we would like to thank all contributors and reviewers whose work stands at the core of this issue. We appreciate your work and are very happy with the different angles on hope and problems that this issue takes.

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Author's bio:

Isabel Bredenbröker is an anthropologist working between academia and art. Isabel's work has focused on material and visual culture, specifically the anthropology of death, plastics and synthetic materials, anthropology of art and museums, queer theory and intersectionality, situatedness and autoethnography, colonialism, cleaning and waste. They have conducted field research in Australia, Ghana and Togo, Greece, South Africa and Germany. Isabel employs multimodal ethnographic methods and engages with different formats in the field of public anthropology: They have produced ethnographic films, worked with field recording and (co-)curated as well as contributed to exhibitions in museum and contemporary art contexts.

Isabel enjoys the collaborative production of works and collective exchange as a different way of engaging with knowledge, also in teaching. Their first monograph 'Rest in Plastic: Death, time and synthetic materials in a Ghanaian Ewe community' was published open access in June 2024 with Berghahn. Isabel is a co-convener of the European Network for Queer

Anthropology (ENQA), an editor of *The February Journal*, and a co-organizing member of the Network for Decent Labour in Academia (NGAWiss).

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