

**‘Who can bear to lose the world’?
Young people vs. capitalism in British Columbia**

**by
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Abstract

The past few years have been a very bad economic moment for young people in British Columbia. From virtually unprecedented levels of unemployment, a quickly increasing cost of living, the state's condemnation of young people's ways of living, and rampant mobilization and protest over land, identity and climate, many young people in British Columbia are struggling to live full lives. This collection of papers politicizes the research process and challenges dominant ideologies about youth by confronting the grown-up assumption that the wisdom of adults can best tell us how young people fare during financial crisis. Rooted in geographical political economy, this collection is anti-disciplinary in its exploration of young people's geographies in British Columbia, showing how capitalism works in the real world, through the eyes and experiences of young people.

This collection is comprised of three papers. The first, *Adult trouble* shares strategies and approaches for adults working with young people. Incorporating original research with adults working and researching with young people, *Adult trouble* encourages adults to address the systemic imbalances young people experience, instead of repeating practices that affirm adultist hierarchies. The second, *Work sucks, I know* describes a summer of unrest and workplace transformation at the hands of young food service workers. Using Instagram as a mobilizing platform, the paper analyzes their posts alongside news media from the summer of 2020 to describe how these young workers changed their working conditions. The third, *'Being in life without wanting the world'* describes how young people are dragged down by capitalism's bad objects. Through the work of Lauren Berlant, this paper shows how young people rework the good life promised to them when they grow up to be adults in capitalism.

Keywords: young people; capitalism; adultism; social media; activism; cruel objects

For Seth. Thank you for building a world with me.

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“And one might be wrong about everything” – Lauren Berlant

Chapter 1.

Introduction

“don’t get over it, if you’re not over it.” – Sara Ahmed

From virtually unprecedented levels of unemployment, to an already inaccessible and still rising cost of living, to the regional rise of white supremacist movements, and rampant mobilization and protest over land, identity and climate, the past few years have been a very bad time for many young people in British Columbia. Like other young people in similar political and economic geographies, these young people live with the weight of an unforgiving capitalist economy that has disproportionately marginalized them. The result is nothing less than a calamity.

Many adult professionals—academics, policy makers, activists and journalists—have watched young people’s “failure to launch” into capitalist adulthood with concern and oftentimes derision (Petersen 2020). Discussing what Linda McDowell (2017) calls a “lost generation”, Maysoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock (2015) argue there is widespread recognition that something fundamental has shifted for children and youth across multiple, diverse geographies. In every practical sense, many of today’s young people have been raised under what Miranda Joseph (2014) calls a “revised social contract” in which they cannot count on social security, good wages, pensions or inheritance. This generational uncertainty cannot help but shape young people’s unfolding struggle for economic agency and security. However, many young people with diverse identities and/or from dispossessed groups unevenly “suffer the consequences” and bear the burdens of capitalist and colonial dispossession and degradation (Katz 2018, 725). For these young people, the economic mechanisms against which they struggle aren’t new and have been at work since before the financial crisis, even if since 2008 precarity has been particularly pronounced (Erk 2017; Hardgrove, Rootham and McDowell 2015; Katz 2018).

This collection is concerned with how young people are dragged down by but continue to live with and through capitalism. Here capitalism refers to an economic, political and social system that is defining but not definitive. For J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996, xxiv) capitalism is a “social relation, or class process, in which nonproducers appropriate surplus labor in value form from free wage laborers.” Throughout this collection, I, and the young people I write about, wrestle with capitalism as a force that may always *define us* as productive because while [at the time of writing] *we are not* appropriating other people’s labor, our labour is appropriated.

Capitalism *defines us* because it touches everything, but its power is ultimately constituted by its “outside” (Gibson-Graham 1996), that which is “by definition” non-capitalist. Of course, the line is blurry. But the nature of the relations we consider non-capitalist—love and family, community, spirituality and more—constitute the world against which capitalism is differentiated. The complex social world is itself shaped by what (and who) of these dynamics exist in relation to each other and to the capitalist political economy which so starkly determines the life chances of so many. This means, as Jackie Wang (2018) says of neoliberal capitalism, that its “outsides”—the supposedly “non-economic” activities and discourses that make it whole, including privatization of what’s public, deregulation, normalization of the debt state, carceral techniques and so forth—shape and are shaped by global capitalism. But these processes of mutual constitution also mean that for young people the story is not just one of victimhood. Capitalism isn’t something that just happens to young people: they also imprint themselves on the political economic dynamics that shape their lives. In this relation, capitalism isn’t a singular, homogeneous entity with the same impact every time. Instead, the *defining* parts of capitalism aren’t singular—they’re made up of “various positions and political dilemmas in which people find themselves...[that] are neither inevitable nor necessary” (Mann 2013, 4).

As a result, even while capitalism imposes material, political and cultural burdens upon young people, they actively challenge and reconstruct their lives and are routinely called to contest, resist and rework the information and structure of opportunities available to them (bergman 2022; Sukarieh and Tannock 2015; McDowell 2017; Tuck and Yang 2014b). Even though agency within capital is constrained and oftentimes limited, young people are not dupes or empty vessels. They work to enact a visceral autonomy over their lives simply by living them in the shadows of adults, capital and other

oppressive systems of power like colonialism, white supremacy and heteropatriarchy (brown 2017; Means 2017; Tuck and Yang 2014b; Rollo 2018).

The three papers in this collection address a series of concerns and questions I had as a young person about what it meant to live within and potentially survive capitalism to imagine and live in other worlds. When I started this project, I felt stuck and frustrated by the fact that what we know about young people's lived experience of and resistance to capital is virtually all theorized and explained by adults. This means that much research about young people's diminishing futures can't be trusted to determine the position of young people in the political economy of capitalism, neither theoretically nor empirically. This wasn't surprising to me since I knew through lived experience that young people are routinely disparaged for whatever identity, social or economic forms they embody. This means that if they make choices that do not service the imperatives of global capital and the adults that reinforce it, they experience rampant ageism and a derision of their agency (Barajas 2022; Chen 2018; Peterson 2020; Rollo 2020). So, instead of just simply congratulating those who make it and continuing to query those who don't, can't or won't, I wanted to fill this space with a political economy of youth that prioritizes the young people's conception of their varied, complex experiences of as they make their long run to capitalist adulthood.

In light of this commitment, this collection celebrates young people who are making do and getting through, pushing into and against the dynamics and systems that burden and oppress them. The papers have also become spaces where I look and live queerly—refracting, entangling and showing up to build something new with the people around me. Like Berlant (2020b), "I'm looking for accomplices for building other worlds from within the world." The young people and adults I had the pleasure of talking with during this project—people who contributed as part of the research, as well as those folks in my community who were curious alongside me—also told me they desired other worlds inside and outside of capital and they showed me how they were, together, imagining and living "an abundance of futures" beyond surviving a totalizing capitalism (brown 2017, 23; also see Berlant 2020b).

It's a pleasure for me to share with you what I learned. This introduction sets the stage for the three papers to follow. In it, I describe my research objectives and questions, orienting you to the purpose and intentions of each paper and reflecting on

my approach. I then provide context for my work and an introduction to key theoretical and conceptual foundations: youth in B.C., the category of youth and agency and autonomy. Lastly, I provide an overview of my methodology and the methods used for each paper. The purpose of this introduction is to show how the three papers, despite the diversity of data sources and approaches, fit together, or at least stand side-by-side.

1.1. Research objectives, questions and reflections

In this section, I outline the research objectives and questions put forth in my research proposal, reflect on the choices I made, and describe how each of the three papers speak to my goals. I had proposed that my research would politicize the research process and challenge dominant understandings of youth by confronting the grown-up assumption that the wisdom of adults can best tell us how young people are faring during financial crisis. To do so, I rooted this project in geographical political economy and adopted an anti-disciplinary, youth-liberation ethos to explore young people's geographies in British Columbia. I wanted to focus on B.C. because this geography was what was available to me and it's one I grew up in and in which I had participated as a youth activist for many years.

When I started my PhD, I identified as a young person who experienced many of the same conditions shared by young people throughout this collection. Since then, however, I turned forty, bought a house, became the parent of a teenager and found my first ever full-time, serious job. I now feel more like an adult. Before, my interest in doing the work in this collection was scrappy and pushy, as I tried to reshape the conditions of youth from the inside. But now at the end of my project and in the position of adulthood, what being young meant to me in the before times has instead sharpened my responsibilities in adulthood. Specifically, my commitment to the liberation of children and young people is much more serious in my new position. Idzie Desmarais (2022, 47) writes that "so often the same dynamics of adult-child relationships found in the broader culture are recreated even by radicals who treat children with disdain, or who see themselves as still holding rightful authority over them."

I do not wish to hold authority over anyone or any topic. I want to use this collection to upend the understanding that theory originates in the "academy" (Ahmed

2017). I want to challenge the habitual adultism that overdetermines intellectual authority, according to which only adults are “viewed as credible authorities and able to act, while youth serve as recipients of knowledge and action” (Bettencourt 2020, 154). Being an adult now doesn’t make me any more authoritative than a few years ago when I identified as a young person. Moreover, the young people’s stories, experiences and ideas that I grasp and pull into this collection, even ephemerally, aren’t really anyone’s to hold or to hope from, and you’ll see that these tensions fully shape the research objectives and outcomes described below.

1.1.1. Adult trouble: Confronting adultism in work and research with young people

My first objective was to better understand how to establish a research agenda that invests in emerging and radical solutions for young people in capitalism. I wanted to know:

- How do young people enact their experiences within their political advocacy?
- Is agency sufficient for understanding young people’s political economic experiences, responsibilities and responses?
- What kind of theoretical frameworks are needed to ensure radical solutions for young people in capitalism?
- How do young people construct a “theory from below”?

In asking these questions, my goal was to consider geography’s commitment to emerging and radical solutions for children and young people in capitalism. These could include the willful refusal to participate in the reaffirmation of dominant representations of young people and labour, an exploration of young people’s (un)governability and a commitment to understanding their resistance and resilience. I was also curious to know how repositioning children and youth at the centre of a political economy of capitalism might deepen our understanding both of their experiences and of capitalism itself. I wanted this project to centre young people as what Piketty (2014) refers to as “flesh and blood” citizens and to better understand the ways young people in B.C. experienced and conceptualized capitalism.

In the first paper, “Adult trouble: Confronting adultism in work and research with young people”, I invite the reader into conversations I had with seven adult accomplices

working with or researching alongside young people. “Adult trouble” embodies my own “refusal stance”. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2014a) argue that those who are in a position to research individuals’ or communities’ “damage” have a responsibility to create and practice forms of refusal in their work through the adoption of a “refusal stance” at all stages of their research, from conception to methodology to writing and production. In the design phase, Tuck and Yang (2014a, 815) suggest that the most important kind of refusal is “to resist the urge to study people (and their ‘social problems’) and to study instead institutions and power.” I take up a refusal stance in “Adult trouble” by gazing “back upon power” to try and understand how adults get in our own way despite our intentions to work in liberatory, supportive and care-full ways with young people.

“Adult trouble” takes aim at adultism and describes how adults can leverage their resources through mutual care and reciprocity to push past their own adultist edges and work with young people to shift, crack and upend the interdependent systems of power that oppress many young people (capitalism, colonialism, white supremacy and heteropatriarchy). This paper offers four ways adults can be accomplices and better allies to young people—negotiating power, radical empathy, generating refusal and enabling reparations—that together are affirming and generative. My goal is to explain what I have learned about what it takes for adult accomplices to establish working relationships with young people that invest in emerging and radical solutions for them within capitalism.

1.1.2. Work sucks, I know: Instagram as a platform for young people’s labour grievances

My second objective was to understand how young people make sense of their relationship to capitalism, with a focus on their work experiences in British Columbia. I wanted to know:

- How do young people make sense of their work experiences?
- How have young people’s political economic geographies been exacerbated by colonization, citizenship status, neoliberalism and financial crisis?
- What kind of economic infrastructures and opportunities are available to and actualized by young people?

By asking these questions, I committed to deepen my understanding of capitalism's impact on young people and to better grasp how young people make sense of their relationship to capitalism and wage work. To do this, I sought to understand how young people account for and make sense of their experiences of work, employment and financial hardship in B.C. While I also explore these questions with the young people I interviewed for the third paper, in "Work sucks, I know: Instagram as a platform for young people's labour grievances" I take a methodological and analytical turn.

I did so because during the summer of 2020, like so many other young people impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, I was at home and unemployed. To cope, many of us were connecting with others via social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which became important sites of political activism where people mobilized against the dispossession of Wet'suwet'en lands, police violence against the Black community, the ongoing #MeToo movement and the mistreatment of Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) workers in, among other arenas, the food service industry. In some instances, movement strategies credited to Black users of Twitter, such as de-platforming (removing someone from a social media platform) and cancelling (denouncing someone and removing them from their position), can also unseat and destabilize bad actors, making social media a potential site of transformation for users with grievances, specifically against businesses and celebrities (Clark 2020; Saldanha, Multe and Rahman 2022; Van Schenck 2023).

"Work sucks, I know" tells the story of young workers at three East Vancouver food businesses who used Instagram to call out their employers for the precarious and violent conditions in their workplaces. In the context of widespread layoffs in the food industry during 2020, these workers built communities of complaint and, in some cases, fundamentally changed the ownership and operation of their workplaces. To do so, they navigated a complex web of digital/physical spaces and relationships to challenge abuses in the workplace. In the paper, I analyze their posts alongside news media and academic writing to centre the interrelationship between complaint, digital political protest, economic grievance and more familiar forms of worker organizing. I explore how they leveraged their grievances through their digital networks to influence their economic relationships and to create safer workplaces for themselves and others.

In reflection, “Work sucks, I know”—somewhat unintentionally—meets my second objective head on. I didn’t ask the questions I thought I would or ask in the ways I had originally intended, but through this case study I learned how economic crisis exacerbates precarity in young people’s working conditions while also creating opportunities that enable them to create infrastructures where they could enact their economic and political agency within capitalist firm structures.

1.1.3. “Being in life without wanting the world”: Young people, identity + loose objects

My third objective was to understand young people’s expectations of their future encounters with capitalism and work. I wanted to know:

- How do young people conceive of and describe their labour trajectories?
- What do young people think about their futures in capitalism?
- How are youth disregarded as disposable subjects in political economic theory of labour?
- In what ways are the future lives of young people devalued by capital and the state?

By asking these questions, I committed to examine the framing of youth in political economy as a “pre-adult life-stage”, a stage through which political and economic citizenship is realized by maturing “out” of youth by way of education and employment. Orthodox modes of political-economic analysis tend to examine the barriers young people face en route to capitalist achievements as a means of understanding how tough economic times destabilize traditional trajectories into capitalist adulthood. I argue that a total reframing is needed here. My interest is less in the barriers faced, than in what young people think and do when they are smashed and destroyed by capitalist political economies. There is a fair amount of work on why the smashing happens; what is required is an effort to understand how young people survive the smashing and whether they can imagine life beyond it.

“Being in life without wanting the world’: Young people, identity + loose objects” describes how young people reject and rework the good life promised to them when they grow up to be adults in capitalism. I interviewed nineteen young people from B.C. and, leaning hard on some Lauren Berlant’s key ideas about (bad, cruel, loose and

unbearable) objects, explore how young people conceive of and constitute their identities in youth and adulthood. Specifically, the paper describes how bad objects shape how and who my young interviewees thought they should be when they grow up into adulthood and identifies the ways these young people are loosening those objects because they want a different way of being in the world than the one to which they were supposed to aspire. Using Berlant's work in this way helps me make sense of their understandings of the experience of the unbearable objects capitalism offers them.

In reflection on the work in this paper, I don't think I found clarity in my attempt to understand young people's expectations for their future lives in capitalism. Instead, I learned how capitalism has worn them out, leaving them almost wholly disinterested in living in any kind of political economy that includes the bad objects of adulthood. I didn't get the sense that they thought a different world was available to them; rather, through their fire and energy, they were relating to their objects differently than capitalism expected them to, still somewhat hopeful they would break and smash capitalism into a thousand pieces.

1.2. Context + concepts

This section provides background on the context and main concepts for the papers in this collection. I first offer a brief introduction to what we know about the political economy of young people in British Columbia and then describe two major concepts engaged throughout each paper: the category of youth and agency + autonomy. Each of the papers in the collection works with these concepts in their own way, so they are presented here as a starting point.

1.2.1. "Youth" in British Columbia

Limited geographical political economic research about young people's experiences of capitalism in British Columbia is available. In 1994, Tanya Behrisch, Roger Hayter and Trevor Barnes (2002) conducted interviews with grade 12 students in Powell River to assess their vocational expectations and found that a student's class and family relationships influence their longer-term plans. Siobhan Oliver (2008, 105), interviewing grade 12 students in Vernon, B.C., found that young people's expectations about the future are inherently geographical and shaped by "interwoven factors

stemming from 'spaces' including the home, the school, and the local labour market", all of which influence their transition out of high school. Miu Chung Yan, Sean Lauer and Surita Jhangiani (2008, 132) interviewed Vancouver-based new generation (immigrant) young people with and without university degrees to better understand why new generation youth in Canada tend to have "lower incomes and less desirable jobs." They found the youth they interviewed were easily able to find jobs, but that those with university degrees had more ambitious career goals and would hop job to job to build their resumé's. Both Oliver (2008) and Chung Yan, Lauer and Jhangiani (2008) point to the lack of research on young people's (un)employment in Canada as a motivating factor for their projects.

Two other papers that aren't specifically related to work and employment give us a broader look at the economic experiences of young people in B.C. In 2010, Carlos Teixeira and Jamie McEwan (2012) interviewed 30 post-secondary students and 10 key informants at the University of British Columbia's Okanagan campus in Kelowna. They found that student housing in Kelowna was unaffordable for students, who opt to couch surf, share rooms with friends or commute long distances from "cheaper" towns in the valley. They also found that many students faced age-based discrimination in finding housing and called for additional research to better understand how housing pressures impact students' coping mechanisms, success in post-secondary education and mental health.

Finally, Vanessa Sloan Morgan (2020) reported on Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) with 40 Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people from the Nechako Lakes School District in 2018 and 2019. Sloan Morgan generously describes their research methodology, the purpose of the research and mechanisms for delivering "workshops" where youth came together. They tell of a January 2018 workshop where young participants "held Symposium attendees accountable for answers about why youth had not been meaningfully engaged in conversations on cumulative impacts, or the long-term and multiplying effects of resource extractive endeavors", and demanded future engagement (Sloan Morgan 2020, 456). Sloan Morgan's exploration of how young, Indigenous voices speak to environmental dispossession and decision-making is a pivotal shift in how geographers (and social scientists) can interpret the economic worlds of young people in B.C.

Alongside this disparate but important work exists deep literatures on the socio-emotional condition of young people across the province. Research on mental health, child welfare, substance use, incarceration and environmental and public health gives us a much-needed glimpse into the lived experiences of many of British Columbia's youth—the risk, however, is that much of this work can pathologize instead of liberate (Aldred et al. 2021). We are also lucky to have the enduring work of policy and research institutes such as the McCreary Foundation, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and Generation Squeeze to remind us that young people in B.C. face notable economic disparities.

Broadly, even though young people in Canada are more likely to be employed than their peers in the global North, they are increasingly “squeezed” by stagnant incomes and rising costs of living, while simultaneously having “less time and mounting debts” (Expert Panel on Youth Employment 2017, 4). Because of precarious employment and diminished access to economic opportunities available to previous generations, some argue that young people in Canada are at risk of reduced lifetime earnings and savings (ibid). Policy makers have found that for young people with marginalized identities and social locations, their economic experiences can be even more dismal. Those who are Indigenous, immigrant and/or newcomers, queer, non-white, disabled or have lived in foster care and/or are from rural and remote communities face increased barriers to accessing employment and economic security (ibid). In what has been called “quiet crisis” (ibid), the economy has failed young people across Canada.

Additionally, as a 2017 Generation Squeeze report shows, B.C. is the worst performing economy in Canada for younger generations (Kershaw 2017). This report, among others, suggest this is because of high rates of working poverty in the province (24%), and the “last in, first out” hiring practices that mean youth are less likely to have employment to help them weather tough-economic-times (Expert Panel on Youth Employment 2017). Preliminary impacts include the 40% of young people (ages 20-29) who live with their parents (Milan 2016), and the ways that, since the mid-1990s, young people's labour market participation has generally been low (Schrier 2014). Similar to international dynamics, after the 2008 financial crisis young people in Canada bore the effects of austerity disproportionately (LaRochelle-Côté 2013).

In the trenches, I often wondered why researchers and organizations in B.C. struggled to report on the socio-economic situation. Unlike in international or United States-based economic research, academic research on young people's economic experiences in Canada, and B.C. specifically, is almost non-existent aside from the handful of papers described above. Through my research I learned that this is at least partly because we lack sufficient data about young people's economic and labour experiences. Federal and provincial researchers and policy makers have too little information about young people's employment and material conditions to adequately address economic issues (Expert Panel on Youth Employment 2017). For example, Statistics Canada currently only analyzes "youth" aged 15-24 years old in most of its work, which includes determining the official youth unemployment rate and other analyses like the number of NEET youth ("Not in Employment, Education or Training") or post-secondary attainment reports.¹ Furthermore, when additional research examines economic problems like the experiences of the working poor, the data is not assembled for specific age categories or tends to focus on the hardship parents face supporting their very small children.

1.2.2. The category of youth

Definitions of "youth" as a life stage or a social group are notoriously fuzzy and rarely determined by young people themselves. There is no universal "child", no formal process of "child development" and "young people" are present in every demographic and at multiple scales (Aitken 2018; Dunn 2018; Joseph 2014). As carla bergman says in the introduction to her collection *Trust Kids! Stories on Youth Autonomy and Confronting Adult Supremacy*, "we've all been kids, and rather than collapsing us into sameness here, I'm instead highlighting this shared experience amid and within this uneven and unfair world" (2022, 10).

Maybe because childhood and being young is a life stage everyone moves through in different ways, people who aren't young anymore nonetheless feel justified in taking it upon themselves to determine the bounds and content of the category of youth.

¹ The rate's analysis is also insufficient. Currently Statistics Canada only calculates the rate to age 24 or 29 depending on the circumstances. Further, they do not collect enough data outside of major metropolitan areas and because they only call landlines to complete their survey, they do not have access to significant numbers of young people to adequately report on their status.

Of course, defined by institutions and actors like friends and families, public spaces like schools and parks, and relations with the state and capital, young people's identity is always shaped by external forces. But, as Stuart Aitken (2018, 17) suggests in a roundup of children's geographies, a young person's identity is also "always plural and relational"; there are many ways to know the period of being young: "childhoods are multiple and variable and they are emergent, predicated upon social, political, historical, geographical, and moral contexts." Similarly, Sukarieh and Tannock (2015, 4) argue that young people's identities and the category called "youth" or "young people" are constantly "worked upon, molded, [and] given form and substance" by the world and relationships beyond them.

As a site of adult accumulation, commodification and desire, the category "youth" has expanded over time to encompass a wider age range, and to articulate with a variety of identities including different classes, races, nationalities, ethnicities and religious identities (Katz 2008; Jeffrey 2008; Sukarieh and Tannock 2015). While this categorical expansion has been useful for research, Sukarieh and Tannock (2015) argue that political economic work on youth must examine how the state and related infrastructures shape how we talk about the experiences of children and youth. In human geography, a "social generations" approach to age categories has emerged as a strategy for describing the ways young people gather and relate to one another around specific encounters and/or politics (also see Aitken 2018).

Theories of social generations have been used to better understand young people's shared material and political conditions since the 1980s. In this framework, young people are categorized not by age, but by shared generational experiences. While generations are typically defined temporally—the "millennial" generation, for example, is usually defined as including those with birthdates between 1980 and 2000—social generations are grouped by shared social conditions (Woodman and Wyn 2014). Judith Bessant, Rhys Farthing and Rob Watts (2018, 49) suggest that "generation" can be a category that enables us to understand specific shared circumstances: "a generation is not a fixed homogenous 'thing', but a social entity brought together by dynamic socio-political events that happen in their lives, which provide a general 'worldview' or zeitgeist in the sense that a generation acknowledges certain events as highly significant."

Tuck and Yang (2014b, 4) argue that for young people, this realm of shared experience is a structural—and historical, political and generational—location. For them, “youth is a legally, materially, and always raced/gendered/classes/sexualized category around which social institutions are built, disciplinary sciences created, and legal apparatuses mounted.” The literature describes young people’s experiences as shared, generational histories via a number of socio-economic events that, held together, form a kind of zeitgeist:

- “the rise and spread of a neoliberal worldview that powerfully shaped the policymaking processes of many governments and the popular culture of many societies” (Bessant, Farthing and Watts 2018, 51; also see Erk 2017; Thornton 2017);
- “the advent of digital technology” (Bessant, Farthing and Watts 2018, 51; also see Mason 2015);
- “political-economic process of globalization” (Bessant, Farthing and Watts 2018, 51; also see Katz 2008);
- increased labour precarity (Standing 2011)
- escalating impacts of colonization, including residential schools, landlessness and dispossession (Simpson 2017; Simpson 2021).

However, if young people do share generational experiences, these do not flatten or obscure the inequality and unevenness that characterize experiences within a generation (Piketty 2014; Dunn 2018; Bessant, Farthing and Watts 2018). Instead, what is and isn’t shared enables us to better understand how many “young people are positioned, how they experience their world, and the nature of their relations with older people” (Bessant, Farthing and Watts 2018, 35). In this sense, “generation” can make sense of how young people make sense of their own worlds, including their material conditions, illuminating how young people “see themselves and others in their generation in far more complex ways than many people give them credit for” (Bessant, Farthing and Watts 2018, 143). The category “youth”, then, isn’t something we can hold or pin down. Instead, it’s a fractal; it’s something we can reflect upon and through—a collection of shared structural conditions, affective moments, assessments and commitments that shift and change with the people who make it and experience it.

1.2.3. Agency + autonomy

Young people are rarely considered political subjects in their own right. Instead, they are treated as objects who serve the needs of global capital via “productive relations [that] determine the terrain upon which children and childhoods are produced and reproduced” (Ferguson 2017, 113). Since young peoples’ allegiance to capital is expected, even taken for granted, their grievances are often derided and deemed apolitical. In this framing, young people get in the way of the “real politics”, and their grievances are unworthy of capital’s, the state’s or society’s serious consideration.

Like other nondominant communities and identities, young people are an easy target for capitalism’s demand for compliance. The state abets this by relying on infantilization as a means of controlling and repressing young people (Ahmed 2014). Toby Rollo (2016, 3) argues that since the dawn of the political subject, young people have been characterized by the absence of full human agency and are routinely prescribed as being a “lesser or deficient, or otherwise incomplete form of human being.” Jaime Jimenez and Fernando Reinares (1998) suggest that infantilizing is a classic Foucauldian governance strategy: when deprived of maturity, subjects become, or at least appear, more amenable to unrestricted forms of control and surveillance. Similarly, Jacqueline Kennelly, Stuart Poyntz and Paul Ugor (2009) suggest that because young people experience multiple subject positions, the stories we tell about capitalism’s impacts on their lives can make them appear helpless and lacking agency.

In human geography, adult allies try to talk back to these dominant political theories by explaining the multi-scalar agency young people have. These geographers acknowledge that “young people are ‘beings’ in-and-of-themselves with their own set of rights and privileges” (Aitken 2018, 14) and are politically motivated to make young people visible in academia, politics and society where their voices are absent (Holloway, Holt and Mills 2019, 458). However, much of this work romanticizes young people’s agency in life and resistance, casting them as “innocents in the operation of broader power relations” (ibid, 461) rather than subjects entangled and impressing upon those relationships.

Theoretically, agency represents a set of rights and responsibilities—specifically the power to make decisions for oneself. These are, of course, in all instances

circumscribed in geographically and historically specific ways: by “structural” and contingent forces like capital’s power in the workplace, adults’ power in the household and community, and colonial or gender-based hierarchies (Aitken 2018; Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010; Kogler, Vogl and Astleithner 2022; Rollo 2016; Strauss 2018). While children and young people have inherent “human rights”, adults are virtually always positioned as the subjects privileged with the power and authority to enact those rights for them. This means that agency for children and youth is often described as something they “grow into”, that they can only realize later, when they grow up to make the same decisions as those adults who gave them agency in the first place. Aitken (2018, 14) argues that this reaffirms the idea that “young people will grow out of childhood and become-the-same as adults”, thus depriving young people of the possibility to “become other”.

Like the category of youth itself, agency is overdetermined because its realization in young people is expected to allow them to shift them from being “objects of” to “subjects of” capitalism, thus diminishing the suffering and smashing of youth. This conception of agency, however, affirms that it arrives as a hand-me-down from adults and their systems, either through age or privilege, and is always conditional on social location and access to resources. The insistence that young people will gain agency through a natural transition into a happy, capitalist adulthood also normalizes the ongoing erosion of material conditions for large segments of younger generations who will never be afforded the opportunity to live a happy life in capitalism (Breslow 2021; Katz 2005, 2008; Rollo 2020; Sukarieh and Tannock 2015).

The agency that young people can enjoy is instead rooted in their daily lives, acts and relations through which they form their possible selves. Abby Hardgrove, Eleanor Rootham and Linda McDowell (2015) argue that agency is based on individual and collective experiences that blend with one’s self-concept and the opportunities one may face. Once activated, these possible selves can provide useful images for potential outcomes that motivate young people’s decisions, strategies and behaviour, enabling young people to picture what their life can or could become. Even if agency for young people is always relational and never completely autonomous (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010), it is not something children and youth grow into: they are already agents in their own lives and their agency emerges through everyday practices (Holloway, Holt and Mills 2019). Agency is created through a reliance on multiple geographies, temporalities

and constitutive relationships between individuals and the collective agencies they might participate in. Agency's unevenness also has its own geography that can be mapped in space and place, and can even encompass political scales, material landscapes and impeccable timing (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010).

For a long time, I was obsessed with the assignment of agency to young people. I now believe that obsession reflects how I positioned myself as a young person, a kind of "hey, we're here, see us...now!" vibe. However, I have since come to understand some of agency's limits as a theoretical tool, because it rarely addresses the power relations that position youth as 'voiceless' in the first place (Khanna 2011). Rollo (2016) and bergman (2022) explain how even in work that recognizes young people as participants in life leaves them "voiceless" because it centres on how adults might facilitate or speak for young people, instead of standing up for and alongside them. Magnusson (2005, 164) suggests that in certain settings the assignment of agency skews political opportunities for young people:

"instead of politics, we have created niches where we allow youth to participate, and we have created new languages, for example, civic engagement, character education, and public work. These niches and languages distract us—and youth—from participation in decisions about substantive political issues, and they allow us to avoid the real conflicts and divides that are part of politics" (also see Rollo 2020).

For young people to transcend adult regulation, the adults, families, communities, peers, organizations and state infrastructures they relate to must respond to and act upon young people's rights, decisions and individual choices—what I refer to as their autonomy. Since the level of autonomy a young person is able to exercise varies depending on their socio-economic and legal status, many young people require multi-scalar resources and supports to realize themselves as autonomous beings. Rollo (2016, 237) offers radical children's geographies as way of understanding the autonomy of young people: geographers need to resist the urge to describe how "the young adapt to adult geographies or emulate adult capacities." Rollo (ibid, 240) suggests that radical children's geographies could enable adults to recognize young people on their own terms by being "grounded in and responsive to the orders established by children."

Autonomy also speaks to a handful of liberation theories that can inspire us to map young people's own ways of knowing and theorizing. Influenced by the Black Radical Tradition, these liberation theories "arise from social struggles, take into account the needs of the many, and concern intersecting forms of power" (Johnson and Lubin 2017, 15). They are a cumulative response to radical, Black struggles for freedom in the face of the ongoing conversion of humans, non-humans and the earth into values to be accumulated and owned (ibid). Gay Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (2017, 17) argue that the Black Radical Tradition evokes a future that enacts "new forms of imagination and struggle through which to achieve liberation," enabling liberation theories such as Ahmed's (2014) willfulness maxim, H. L. T. Quan's (2017) ungovernability, Audra Simpson's (2017) refusal, brown's (2017) emergent strategy, Leanne Betasamoske Simpson's (2021) blockade and bergman's (2022) solidarity at home to renew our commitment to young people as they already are and/or want to be.

Held together, the liberation theories of will and ungovernability (Ahmed 2014; Quan 2017) strike me as a compelling frame for understanding young people's autonomy. In *Willful Subjects*, Ahmed (2014) accounts for the willful child who, throughout the history of political theory, is designated for conversion and/or demise. Rooted in the Protestant tradition, the willful child must do whatever the mother wishes or face punishment to preserve the family and social order. Throughout Ahmed's willfulness archive she shows how children who are non-compliant have been described as spoiled, disobedient, non-reproductive, not-yet-a-subject, and a voluntary criminal, among other attributes.

Ahmed's assembled child is a willful subject. For Quan (2017, 174) willful subjects are "those who do not look to be ruled, as well as those who actively refuse to be ruled, including making themselves unavailable for governing." Ahmed (2014, 2) demonstrates that to be willful involves "persistence in the face of having being brought down, where simply to 'keep going' or to 'keep coming up' is to be stubborn and obstinate." Young people's autonomy fits Ahmed's willfulness maxim, since for them "any will is too much will when you are not supposed to have a will of your own" (ibid, 139). The willfulness maxim is the responsibility to be in charge of what you are charged with (will) and a way to relate to others who have been similarly charged: "willfulness can be an electric current, passing through each of us, switching us on" (ibid, 168),

For Quan, to be willful is to have a will for a different future, and to practice ungovernability as we reach for something we do not yet know. Quan (2017, 174) operationalizes Ahmed's willful maxim and James Scott's treatment of "the art of not being governed," to draw attention to "the multiple ways in which ordinary people and communities resist governing by state and non-state rule-making projects." This democratic sensibility or 'ungovernability from below' enables "life forms that actively seek independence from rule making" and "threatens the unjust peace of dominant orders" (ibid, 175). By being ungovernable from below, individuals and communities make themselves unavailable for governing, and as such, the state and other dominions are unable to "assert control over subjects" (ibid, 175).

Autonomy is a form of ungovernability that can help us conceive of young people's place in the universe outside of being ruled by adults. Quan (2017, 181) argues that for adults, a "motley crew of rule-evaders" have always resisted state-building and rule-making projects and that we must "recognize *how others live*, especially other genealogies and life forms that are independent of the imaginaries of the state and capital." For Quan (ibid, 182), acts of "running away and community building"—like marronage—can be a way of knowing about subjects that assert life outside of the state. Similarly, for young people autonomy can be a form of running away and pushing against to assert a life outside of what adults and state infrastructure predetermine for them.

1.3. Approach

Throughout my research I have relied on anti-racist, queer, feminist and decolonial research practices. My work aims to politicize the research process and challenge dominant ideologies about young people. This methodology was inspired by feminist interventions in economic geography, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), refusal (Tuck and Yang 2014a) and other decolonial methodologies like Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie's (2015) Critical Place Inquiry (CPI).

It was clear to me that in British Columbia we currently only understood young people's geographies through either quantitative descriptive research or qualitative YPAR approaches that mined young people's hard experiences. CPI helps highlight the ways that young people's identities are place-bound and specific to local histories and

geographies. As Tuck and McKenzie (2015, 32) describe it, the relationship between humans/non-humans and places is an embodied practice through which “place shapes us individually and collectively, and in turn...we shape and reshape place.”

As a methodology, CPI requires the approach to be designed in affinity with the place where the research happens and for the chosen research methods to purposefully engage in the politics of that place. In the context of my research, CPI required me to interrogate the ways that this place (B.C.) shapes young people and the way that young people impress themselves upon this place. I employed the frame of Youth Liberation Methodology to avoid reproducing colonialism, adultism and imperialism in my research (Khanna 2011). Throughout my research—and as you’ll see in “Adult Trouble”—I confront(ed) the harm and extraction that doing research can bring.

At its core, this collection infuses economic-geographical analyses of young people’s relationship to capitalism with young people’s voices and reflections. Most of what we currently know about young people is created by adults and reinforced through family relations, community infrastructures and state control. To me, this means that it is essential that writing I do about young people must, as much as is possible, affirm their individual and collective identities and experiences. Typically, researchers would choose to use YPAR approaches to include youth in the research process. Framed as “research for, with, and by marginalized youth” (Khanna 2011, 38), YPAR can be a multi-dimensional and relational experience for young people, who take leadership within collaborative research processes led by adults (Bettencourt 2020). YPAR processes can enable young people to leverage their insider knowledge to gain a deeper systemic understanding of their material position, as well as of the ways they are perceived in popular discourses (Bettencourt 2020; Cahill and Torre 2007).

Because I faced funding and time limitations, I wanted to use a methodological approach that did not need to enact YPAR processes to be able to challenge adultist dynamics in research. Instead I adopted Bettencourt’s (2020, 163) key conditions: that “[1] adults must first be willing to challenge traditional norms of scholarship and engage in work that may be dismissed by the academy,” that “[2] adult researchers must commit to a process of ethical reflexivity by engaging in self-work around the privilege they possess in systems of youth oppression,” and “[3] adult researchers must prioritize a youth-centred design that can meet the needs of various participants.” By adopting these

conditions, I believed that “one way or another [youth] can resist and build the life [they] want” (Hern and The Purple Thistle Collective 2013, 27).

Despite being guided by an overarching approach, I used multiple data sources for the papers in this collection—interviews with adult allies, interviews with young people, news media analysis and analysis of Instagram posts. Each of the papers describe the methods used in that paper, but they diverge wholly from the original plans I put forward in my proposal. Part of this is because I needed to shift my approach due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also because I was curious to try non-extractive (or less-extractive) methods of data collection. In reflection, my use of distinct methods for each paper enabled me to be creative and dig deep into places I didn’t think I would go in the first place, but the labour of this approach was itself overwhelming and made my overall project a lot more “work” I justifiably needed to do.

1.3.1. A note on form

This collection of papers—and the political project of which they are a part—shows, through the eyes and experiences of young people, how capitalism actually works in their worlds. My work here is shared to show creative ways of approaching and writing about our questions. Nothing in here is meant to be read as a performance of expertise, but instead an invitation to sit with some of the most challenging dynamics and relationships that impact the lives of young people across the province.

This dissertation has been written in “paper format” and consists of three manuscripts prepared for publication in academic journals.² I use Chicago author-date style to manage references and in-text citations and the text is presented here in Simon Fraser University’s preferred thesis font for thesis submissions, Arial 11 point. I much prefer Avenir or old school Times New Roman, but there you have it.

² As of August 2023, “Work sucks, I know” has been submitted to *Digital Geography and Society* and is currently in review. I plan to submit “Adult Trouble” and “Being in life without wanting the world” to *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* and *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* respectively.

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Chapter 2.

Adult trouble: Confronting adultism in work and research with young people

“At this point, we have all the information we need to make change; it isn’t a matter of facts. It’s a matter of longing, having the will to imagine and implement something else.” adrienne maree brown (2017).

“The all-ages work of carving out ways to thrive together amidst disasters, building friendships across differences, entering solidarity and generosity, and of course trusting kids, is not a straight line. It’s an entangled tapestry of different voices, and it’s beautiful. But there is still a lot of work to do.” carla joy bergman (2022).

2.1. Introduction

Most of what we currently think we know about young people’s experiences of capitalism comes from knowledge that is produced by adults, including academics, policy makers, educators, social and healthcare workers, political activists and journalists. Many of these adults work in systems where they use their knowledge to reinforce adult supremacy (adultism) through family relations, community infrastructures and state programs (Ahmed 2014; No! Against Adult Supremacy, n.d.). Adultism is a form of prejudice against children and youth that grants adults an assumed structural privilege based on the presumption that young people are inferior because of their age (Bell 1995; Rollo, McDermott, Kahn and Chapel 2020). Sebastien Barajas (2022), John Wall (2019) and Callum Sutherland, Francesca Caló, Arthur Steiner and Ellen Vanderhoven (2022) have recently argued that addressing and conceptualizing adultism is an urgent matter in geography to address the marginalization of young people in the discipline and in community broadly.

State-delivered youth programs and academic disciplines like youth studies and children's geographies infrequently engage with adult privilege and fail to address adultism's impacts on young people (Barajas 2022; Bettencourt 2020; Sutherland, Caló, Steiner and Vanderhoven 2022; Wall 2019). This means that many adults fundamentally can't trust kids or be accomplices who contribute to the kinds of social, economic and political change many young people are calling for (bergman 2022). In attempting to address the privileges associated with their position, many adults challenge their individual, disciplinary and organizational biases by using methodologies and practices of a participatory, relational and rights-focused manner with young people (Bell 2008; Cahill 2007; Robson 2018; Sime 2008; Tuck and Yang 2014b). But, despite the scope of practice or good intentions, sometimes adults inadvertently reinforce or produce new forms of adultism when working with young people. This can happen when adults mine trauma in young people's lived experiences, choose to not co-design or co-deliver a program or intervention, avoid forms of reciprocity, or do not shift systems of power that impact a young person's life or community. This can end up reinforcing adultist hierarchies—which is problematic if the intent of the work is to be ethical, relational, fair or justice-seeking (Bettencourt 2020; Sutherland et al. 2022).

Adultism is something geographers need to think about, but also something adults need to *do something* about. Adults have an opportunity to be accomplices who struggle alongside young people in multi-generational, anti-adultist ways by generating “counter-proliferative solutions to adultism's insidious structuring” (Sutherland et al. 2022, 3; Khanna 2011; Rollo et al. 2020; Wall 2019). A political project, this paper invites the reader into conversations I had with seven adult accomplices working with or researching alongside young people. It describes how adults can leverage their resources through mutual care and reciprocity to push past their own adultist edges and work with young people to shift, crack and upend those interdependent systems of power that oppress many young people (e.g. capitalism, colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy).

In this paper I offer four ways adults can be accomplices and better allies to young people. The first, *negotiating power*, creates a container in which adultism's automatic hierarchies can be examined. The second, *radical empathy*, explains the central role of empathy as a way of relating across age-difference. The third, *generating refusal*, explores young peoples' rejection of adult-led methodologies, pedagogies and

activities. The fourth, *enabling reparations*, offers ways in which adults can address economic inequity in their relationships with young people. These approaches may be new to some or known to others, but they reflect alternative ways of knowing and caring for each other (Montgomery and bergman 2017). Held separately these approaches are not new to children’s geographies or youth work but held together they are affirming: “preaching to the choir is always undervalued. But as a world-confirming strategy of address that performs solidarity and asserts righteousness, it is absolutely necessary to do” (Berlant 2011, 238).

This paper is broken up into two main sections: foundations and approaches. The first section describes how I approached this work and what methods I used, as well as a description of participation as a failed way to address adultism, and an introduction to the material and political context for struggling alongside young people. The second lays out the four approaches that adult accomplices can use concurrently when world-building with the young people with whom they research or work. Ultimately, my hope is to push adults who research or work with young people to consider how their practices, approaches and ways of working can meaningfully contribute to the wellbeing of young people, helping meet their demands for justice.

2.2. Foundations

This section introduces the reader to foundational information and arguments found in this paper. Here I describe my approach and methods I used, introduce dialogue about young people’s participation in research and describe what is at stake for young people, offering a “why” to adults who work alongside young people.

2.2.1. Approach

My approach to this paper is shaped by my lived and learned experience in the struggle for equity and justice in the geographies of young people. Due to my own proximity to the issue, I empathize with the sense of uneven precarity that characterizes the experience of young people both as individuals and in their communities. I have been a research participant as a young person and worked as a community-based researcher both as a ‘youth’ and now as an elder millennial in diverse urban, rural and Indigenous communities in British Columbia. I have, like the anthropologist Audra

Simpson (2017, 20), been “paying attention for years before my formal fieldwork began.” I witnessed firsthand, and sometimes contributed to, the ways research or youth work can damage young people and their communities by fixating on what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2014a, 812) call “stories of pain and humiliation.” Orienting work with young people around traumatic experiences can reinforce stigma (Sime 2008), position those who refuse to participate as deviant (Switzer 2020), reinscribe racial hierarchies (Vinjenthira, Ali and Manogaran 2018), and reproduce discipline-wide publishing practices that deter authors from accounting for the impacts of their methods (Robson 2018).

As an adult researcher, I embrace Tuck and Yang’s (2014a, 814) refusal stance. For Tuck and Yang, the refusal stance is “a stance to be assumed,” where the researcher refuses to objectify of people in their research and instead “interrogate power and privilege and trace the legacies of settler colonialism in everyday life.” I use this paper to ask questions about the systemic imbalances in research and work relationships between adults and young people, rather than to uncover and ruminate on exactly how young people are damaged by the behaviour of well-meaning adults. In early 2020 (pre-pandemic) I spoke with seven researchers and practitioners using a qualitative, semi-structured interview guide. Participants were not required to disclose demographic or identifying information, but many of them shared how they identify and how it informs what they shared with me. They represent a diverse group of people with differing and complex identities and experiences, and I provide a brief description of the research participants below.

I initially invited ten people who research or work with young people to participate in a conversation about the experience: seven people responded and participated (two researchers and five practitioners). The two researchers live outside Canada; all five practitioners work in British Columbia (three in urban and two in rural settings). Five participants identified as adults and two identified as younger people who had adult-like responsibilities in their work with people younger than them. I refer to these two as adults throughout the paper and make note of their youthfulness when it was part of the conversation. Both researchers identified as cis, white women with working class backgrounds. Of the practitioners, one identified as Indigenous, two as queer, one as a cis, white male and four as adults. One of the practitioners worked in elementary schools, while everyone else worked with teenagers or young adults in out-of-school

settings. All practitioners worked in well-known, influential and celebrated community-based programs that centre the experiences of young people in their design and delivery. Every effort has been made to protect the identity of the practitioners and their programs using pseudonyms and de-identifying the content of their work or research. I offered honoraria (\$30 CDN) to all participants and the majority requested it be donated to an organization or person of my choosing.³ Interviews were conducted using Skype or Zoom, recorded and then transcribed in Scrivener. I then organized the content of the conversations around emerging themes.

2.2.2. Beyond participation

An emerging body of work in children's geographies reflects what has long been known and shown in social justice work, community-based research and youth studies: that the lives of children are "already imagined and pre-constructed" by adults (Wall 2019, 4; also see Bettencourt 2020; bergman 2022). Geographers have consistently questioned the social, economic and political impacts of capitalism on young people and have sought ways to bring youth into their research or work (e.g. Cahill 2007; Holloway, Holt and Mills 2019; Jeffrey 2012; Rollo 2016). This section provides an overview of the inclusive approaches adults have used to bring young people into geographical research and youth work, and discusses more recent interrogations of adultism and adult privilege.

Most of the research that "talks back" to the hegemonies that impact young people overlooks their modes of expression and action, including their use of social media, political movement organizing and diverse cultures, and omits that of young Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015; Tuck and Yang 2014b). Recognizing that young people have deep knowledge of their lived experience, geographers have long relied on a practice of bringing young people into the research process at a variety of scales (Aitken 2018a; Bettencourt 2020). They understand that young people's ways of seeing or being in the world tend to go unnoticed (Holloway, Holt and Mills 2019). Stuart Aitken (2018a, 14) argues that geographers see "young people are 'beings' in-and-of-themselves with their own set of rights and privileges" and are motivated to use their resources to make young people more visible in academic

³ The funds were redistributed to young people who participated in Youth for Wet'suwet'en.

research by bringing them into the research process as competent, rights-bearing co-participants (Bell 2008; Sime 2008; Robson 2018).

Young people are often included in research through some form of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). While perhaps well-intended, YPAR isn't necessarily liberatory, but can instead affirm adultist hierarchies because adult researchers and practitioners initiate and lead the process, which reinforces young people's marginality relative to the researcher's intended audience (academia, politics, the state, etc.) (Bettencourt 2020; Cahill 2007; Lauren J. Silver 2020). Typically described as "research for, with, and by marginalized youth" (Khanna 2011, 38), YPAR can, however, be a multi-dimensional and relational experience for young people who take leadership within adult-led collaborative research processes (Bettencourt 2020). It can also support young people to "connect their lived experiences with national trends, social and cultural systems, and academic language," enabling them to gain a better systemic understanding of both their material position and ways they are framed in popular discourse (Bettencourt 2020, 161; also see Cahill and Torre 2007).

YPAR and other modes of including young people in research and work about them is used by adults who seek to recognize young people in their work, even if their agency is always relational, uneven and incomplete (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010; Holloway, Holt and Mills 2019). For young people to transcend adult-determined regulations and attributions of agency or autonomy—including research ethics processes and state infrastructures that define the point at which young people are deemed 'agentic'—adults need to recognize the ways young people, whatever their age or stage, actively construct their lives and negotiate the forces that shape them. In other words, young people are not empty vessels, or mere products of their context; they routinely contest, resist and rework the information and opportunities passed on to and imposed on them (McDowell 2017; Sukarieh and Tannock 2015; Tuck and Yang 2014b).

The degree of agency a young person is able to exercise varies depending on their socio-economic and legal status. To realize their agency in a world built by and for adults—even as participants in an 'engaging' and 'participatory' research process— young people may require different types of resources at a variety of scales. This means that adults' focus on young people's "agency" in the research process can overstate their contribution, because the form that agency takes is determined by the researcher.

Nishad Khanna (2011, 23) argues that an over-emphasis on agency means that young people often show up “mainly through [the researcher’s] consultation with young people in order for youth to ‘have a voice’”, while the “power relations that position youth as already ‘voiceless’” go unaddressed (also see Aitken 2018b). As Toby Rollo (2016) argues, the intent to include young people as participants in research paradoxically recenters adults as facilitators or speakers for them.

When adults “give” agency to young people in their research or project, the work becomes limited by the adult’s intentions and environment. The assignment of agency can actually skew young people’s potential contribution by creating “niches where we allow youth to participate” (Magnuson 2005, 164). When a project is predetermined by the adult, important issues that impact the lives of young people can fall outside those deemed relevant to participation. This means that despite adult researchers’ focus on young people’s agency, they avoid taking the next step in taking that agency seriously, i.e. helping realize meaningful acts of systemic accountability by, for example, advocating for substantive program funding or participating in political advocacy. They take the first step by turning towards understanding young people’s worlds as they are, but not the next, and arguably more important one, building future worlds alongside young people. Linnea Bodén (2021) makes a similar point with their ‘scale of ethics’ in academic research about young people, which ranges from research on children (“ethics as inclusion”), research for children (“ethics as fairness”) and research by children (“producing potential new worlds”). Bodén argues that even research by children can lack accountability and transparency, obscuring power relations between adults and young people while also concealing the “scholarly” conditions that constrain care-full dialogues on research.

An emerging body of work in children’s geographies points out that participatory methods and adults’ good intentions have been unable to rectify young people’s marginalization in both academia and community because they have failed to adequately question adultism. Samantha Punch (2020, 130) argues that this is because generation and age have not been mainstreamed in Geography or Sociology. Punch says that the siloing of inquiries into differences and interdependencies between adults and young people to child-centric sub-fields. This has enabled the “mother fields” to not question or challenge structural relationships in generations and to take for granted the differences between adults and young people.

Other geographers continue to put forward theoretical arguments aimed at addressing the positioning of adults in relation to young people. For example, Wall (2019, 4) proposes “childism” as a way of using children’s experiences to examine systems and norms anchored to the “powerful bedrock of adultism.” The fundamental aim of “childism” is a critique of adultism by approaching childhoods not just as research objects, but also as “prisms or microscopes through which to deconstruct historical expressions of adultism and reconstruct more age-inclusive social imaginations” (Wall, *ibid.*).

Barajas (2022) then brings privilege theory into conversation with childhood studies to address the problem of privilege in adulthood and childhood. Rollo (2018) and Jacob Breslow (2021, 3) similarly argue that childhood itself can be a privileged embodiment that protects and prioritizes certain groups of young people while also being a “long standing means of marking marginalized populations as inferior.” Barajas too argues that some children enjoy an automatic privilege because of their membership in dominant groups, where they receive resources from adults and state systems. This relation obligates them to reciprocate by honouring and ‘respecting’ the norms and laws of their parents and caregivers so they can receive advantages through “real forms of earning” including “praise, grades, pocket money, use of parent-restricted devices, small freedoms, etc.” (Barajas 2022, 8; Ahmed 2014). For other children who are poor, non-white, immigrant, disabled, fat or queer, they are instead considered ‘at risk’ and unable to earn the same privileges as children with automatic privilege because they tend to perform the work that adults do: “wage labour, care work, domestic work, subsistence agriculture, etc.” (Barajas 2022, 8).

Barajas (2022) suggests that employing a “childish critique” of adult privilege can address the freedoms (i.e. agency) associated with adulthood and enable researchers to deeply theorize age. Sutherland, Calò, Steiner and Vanderhoven (2022, 12) build on Barajas’ (2022) work and address how adultism—even in spaces of inclusion and respect for young people’s agency—is a “proliferative, hegemonic spatiality which encircles and traverses sites of resistance.” In their study of community music facilitators, they found that anti-adult sentiments and actions are proliferated in work with young people that interrogates adult privilege, facilitates interdependence between young people and creates flexible learning environments. They encourage geographers

to study “proliferated cultures of intergenerational (and intragenerational) interdependence” that protect young people from adultism.

2.2.3. What’s at stake?

Before we move to a discussion of anti-adult strategies, approaches, and tools and below, it is worth considering why the adults I interviewed are committed to pushing past their adultist edges and struggling alongside the kids they work with. As in many other colonized places, centuries of resource extraction and colonial laws continue to dispossess Indigenous youth in British Columbia of their lands, cultures and economic values. Many non-Indigenous, non-white and other marginalized young people also face ongoing forms of discrimination and exclusion. For this generation of young people, the post-1980s neoliberal restructuring of the province’s economy has had acute consequences, and subjects them, if unevenly, to a generational uncertainty defined by austerity and dispossession (Markey, Halseth and Mason 2008; Hall 2022; Sloan Morgan 2020).

These dynamics don’t just have individual material impacts for young people, but also, as Helena Pimlott-Wilson and Sarah Marie Hall (2017) argue, young people’s experiences are nested within a wider political and socio-economic context shaped by the uneven nature of neoliberalism and the austere state. Many adult researchers and policy makers have identified these political-economic circumstances as calamitous for young people globally, and many in British Columbia bear economic and political burdens associated with their identities, classes, abilities, locations and loss of lands (Generation Squeeze, n.d.; Bessant, Farthing and Watts, 2018; Joseph 2014; McDowell 2017; Sukarieh and Tannock 2015).

At the end of each of my interviews, I asked everyone what they thought was at stake for the young people in their work and communities. I wanted to hear how they witnessed and understood what might be won or lost in their relationships and communities. I wanted to know what they were fighting for alongside young people. Their answers gutted and inspired me. I share a few of them below, in the hope that we can see ourselves and young people in our own communities too.

Luca - I think about myself as a kid and like all these instances when I was trying to have economic agency so I could participate in capitalism ... and kids are inside of capitalism and they're trying to navigate it with a sense of belonging or autonomy ... and wherever we can insert critical thinking about belonging and economics and the products that are directed at kids and how to inhabit a school, all of these things, maybe that's what's at stake for them.

Aubrey - For the young people we work with they are in really precarious situations and things can go one way or another. There's a larger sense that they just need something to feel positive about and to get support through and to have stability and a reason to get up.

Ari - I think that the obvious question would be a sense of future. I absolutely think their autonomy is really at stake. If I were a younger person now, I'd find it very disconcerting that my future was in the hands of someone who didn't consider my view.

Sam - I just want kids to know they fucking matter. In a world that keeps telling black and brown kids they're insufficient, I want them to know that they're enough. Just who they are matter.

Charlie - What's at stake for kids is the same that's at stake for the rest of us, quite honestly, they just have more of their live to live through it than we do.

For adults to stand alongside young people in these conditions, it is essential that research and writing about young people affirms their perspectives on their individual and collective identities, experiences and worlds. In carla joy bergman's (2022, 13) *Trust Kids! Stories on Youth Autonomy and Confronting Adult Supremacy*, she notes that "when adults write about youth oppression, especially us parents, we tend to centre ourselves." In the next section I do this—I centre the experiences of adults by way of caucusing. Caucusing is a space where people who share a hegemonic identity (in this case adult peers) can meet to understand their privilege. It is a common strategy in mediation and solidarity in social movements (Topolářová 2020). In their work on disrupting and decolonizing settler-colonial market time in geography departments, Isaac

White and Heather Castleden (2022, 651) show that creating time and space for caucusing, or ‘peer-to-peer mentorship’ is a way for white peers to learn about the systems of racial power they benefit from and perpetuate, while also creating “space to engage in self-reflection, reflexivity, and understanding whiteness without burdening Indigenous Peoples with narratives of ‘where do I start, what should I do?’.” By presenting learnings and reflections from adults who work with young people, I invite other adults into this space to learn strategies, approaches and ways of working with and struggling alongside young people.

2.3. Approaches

This section lays out four ways that adult accomplices can “world-build” with the young people they research with or work alongside. A political project, these strategies call into question the grown-up assumption that adults know best. Rather than champion participatory methods as the most ethical and inclusive way for researchers to uncover young people’s lived experiences and hopes for future worlds, I hope these strategies inspire adults working with young people to reorient their practices to address their concerns directly. These approaches invite adults to ask themselves why they work with young people, why they do it the way they do, and what the impacts of their work can be for young people. Used together and potentially alongside established YPAR methods, these approaches can support a deeper understanding of the relational complexities that impact and constrain young people’s geographies.

The four strategies described in this section are negotiating power, radical empathy, generating refusal and enabling reparations. When adults enact these approaches, young people can be supported to “resist and build the life [they] want” (Hern and The Purple Thistle Collective 2013, 27). Further, a practice informed by these strategies can contribute to a “more transformative politics” for all participants in the research process, helping to ensure young people sustain a “local vitality in the face of imposed change” (Katz 1998, 139), to help researchers create containers for their research that nurture, support and generate the just and liberated worlds young people long for.

2.3.1. Negotiating power

The first strategy, negotiating power, recognizes the relations of power and influence in relationships between adults working with young people, challenging adultism where it is most comfortable. Most adults who work with young people, if not all, are rooted in adult-centric institutions like universities, K-12 school systems, health authorities or state-based social welfare agencies. Their work with young people is inseparable from and necessarily invokes the power embedded in those systems. This is true both in the formal institutional sense—i.e. in the fact that scholarly or government policy-driven research is conducted from a position of privilege, and assumes by definition the status of ‘knowledge’—but it is also true in the broader systemic sense. Like any adult, young people with diverse social locations are also impacted by those modes of social organization, formal and informal, that continue to uphold white supremacy, colonialism, and heteropatriarchy.

Moreover, because adults have entrenched and sustained power over young people, adults’ privilege in their work process appears natural, a precondition in the construction of working relationships which tends to exacerbate a researcher’s commitment to adultism, even against their own intentions (Ahmed 2014; Bettencourt 2020; Green 2020; Patel 2020). Bettencourt (2020, 154) argues that adultism permeates research relationships because “only adults are viewed as credible authorities and able to act, while youth serve as recipients of knowledge and action” (also see No! Against Adult Supremacy, n.d.). Adultism thrives on the false belief that adults have automatic power over young people, and that adults are entitled to make decisions about them without their consent or input.

Some people I interviewed regretted that adultism was part of who they were as adults, saying, “adultism is something you try to tone down in yourself.” For Ari, ‘toning down’ adultism meant that in her job she must challenge norms by being willing to create work that might be rejected by the academy, and to understand better how, as an adult, she benefits from the oppression of young people (also see Bettencourt 2020). For Ari, challenging internalized adultism like this required constant reflection and negotiation with herself, other adults and the young people in her research projects.

We'd have reflections with ourselves about how it went. We were very honest with young people that's [being a researcher] the position we had. We were very clear that at no point did we make out like we were youth workers or that we were in the same position as them. We made ourselves available to be held accountable by young people.

However, practicing reflexivity in relationships with young people also requires adults to acknowledge and work through the systemic inequities that shape their work and practice. Carol Lynne D'arcangelis (2018, 340) suggests that "self-reflexivity is most valuable when approached as a window into structural oppression and privilege, and not only into the power of researchers as individuals." This means that when adults interrogate how adultism is reinforced by the systems they benefit from, they can begin to create a supportive research environment that aims to reduce injustice, generating opportunities for those who typically have less power (Bettencourt 2020; Montgomery and bergman 2017). With adults practicing reflexivity and communicating that in their work with young people, they invite young people to also share their experiences of power, inequity and difference in the institutions and systems in which they—and the adults they work with—are embedded.

Young people already understand their relationship to hegemonic systems and the people—including adults—that represent it. Ferguson (2017, 114) says we know this in capitalism because, "children and childhoods are engaged in a constant negotiation between a playful, transformative relationship to the world and the more instrumental, disembodied state of alienation required to become laborers for capital." Luca, an artist I interviewed, told me how the young people they worked with in schools understood "what the rules are," and that relationships between adults and young people, especially when school is the research site, were always asymmetrical: "it's just full of power imbalance and we are there to try to mitigate it and it's not something we can control and it's not really collaborative."

Participants described how building equity into relationships between adults and young people is more likely when the relationship is structured to mitigate power differentials from the get-go. Using the example of supporting teenagers to form co-ops, Sam, a community organizer remarked:

We have a big staff now, we hired one or two adults to work with the kids to anchor it, but it's all kind of learning for all of us. I just try to describe it to them as like we're trying to figure out a better way to be in the world. And you should think of it as a kind of exploration. There's no correct way to be, it's not like you're adhering to our policy or not, we just keep trying to talk about the context of a cooperative and what it's like to make decisions equitably.

For Sam, using non-hierarchical words like cooperative creates space in their working relationship with young people for a conversation about how the work is organized and how it can undercut authority. In their own struggles for social reproduction, young people are always negotiating their relationships to the structures and people that constrain and enable their lives, as they work to make and remake their worlds (Ferguson 2017). When adults commit to negotiating those relationships alongside young people, they can better promote their interests and those of their families.

2.3.2. Radical empathy

Informed by feminist ethics of care, *radical empathy* is a pathway to a better understanding of systemic oppressions, historical violences and lived experiences of young people (Caswell and Cifor 2016; Smith 2018). By centering empathy and understanding, radical empathy challenges how the work adults do with young people is conducted and constructed. When enacted in research, Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor (2016, 28) argue that radical empathy goes beyond the basic requirements of system-approved ethics by stressing “the ways people are linked to each other and larger communities through webs of responsibilities.” As a practice for working with young people, radical empathy prioritizes deep, meaningful connection between adults and young people, and encourages everyone to feel what others experience and carry. To do this work, adults must bring their whole self to their work or research, engendering closeness as an asset instead of a liability (Caswell and Cifor 2016; Smith 2018).

But what does this look like in practice? Ari told me that understanding how they felt about and responded to their research practice involved more than thinking about

positionality, or momentary self-reflection. For them, building an empathetic understanding of participants' experience directly informed how they approached the research relationship with young people.

I find that when I'm doing fieldwork it's more than a reflexivity, I can really feel those senses of injustice or those moments when someone feels uncomfortable. I don't want someone to feel like that and I didn't want that to be my baseline of emotions in fieldwork. I also think that it's not always the same, but if you're from a non-traditional background, you can really imagine what it's like to have the researcher come into your home or community and ask some of the questions I see laid out in papers and books. And just knowing that that could have been my family, that could have been me, it is really unnerving.

Holly A. Smith (2018, 9-10) argues that in research, radical empathy can enable people to examine their "own thoughts, feelings, biases, and privileges in relation to the collections [they] steward, the institutions where [they] are located, and the communities [they] do or do not engage with, and why." By reflecting on her own lived experience in relationship to their research, Ari enacts a radical understanding of how a negative or unsure relationship will impact the work in the immediate time frame and beyond.

Radical empathy can also be a way for adults and young people to relate to one another without subsuming difference. Caswell and Cifor (2016, 32) remind us that despite the closeness and solidarity radical empathy affords, in practice researchers need to "remind ourselves not to erase differences between bodies, not to turn a blind eye to power differentials, and not to reinforce hierarchies that permanently position some as caregivers and others as care recipients." When practicing radical empathy, adults need to consider how difference appears in their relationships with young people. Luca explained to me that radical empathy enabled them to better navigate difference at a program site where they were engaging an elementary classroom in a community art project:

The school we worked with was designated as an inner-city school and there is so much going on for the kids. There was a lot of stuff we saw that [showed us that] we didn't know the extent to what is going on for those

kids. I just feel like it seemed so cruel for kids to have to be there in their bodies. At the time we tried to squeeze so much out of the project, but in retrospect when the teacher was already tapped out and the kids had so much going on, it's been good to be able to reflect on what the kids needed and make something that was valuable to them.

Luca shared that for them, radical empathy takes the form of harm reduction, through which, as adults, they can engage young people where they're at, so as to be better able to anticipate and respond to their needs with care. This meant being flexible in program delivery by reorganizing their project trajectory and outcomes to meet the capacity, interest and desires of the young people they were working with.

2.3.3. Generating refusal

The third strategy, *generating refusal*, acknowledges that if adults grant agency, authority and control to young people in their relationships, they purposefully engender both their own refusal of the status quo (adult power) as well as young people's refusal to work with adults. For Tuck and Yang (2014a, 815) refusal is rejection of the settler colonial project that creates objects out of research participants and their communities. They show how researchers can adopt a refusal stance in their work by refusing to turn research objects (i.e. participants) into academic subjects, shifting their unit of analysis "away from people" and turn the gaze "back upon power" to challenge colonial ways of knowing in the academy. Sara Ahmed's (2014, 97) refusal is will or the willfulness a person enacts to overcome obstacles they no longer want to "obey out of their own free will." In *Willful Subjects* Ahmed shows how children are pre-figured as being willful who need be broken within liberal education and political traditions that rationalize violence against them to preserve the nation state. When young people are willful by refusing adult power—or when adults are willful by rejecting the expectation that they will wield such power—together they turn away from the state's expectation that adults will enforce obedience.

This means that when adults negotiate the power in their relationships with or have radical empathy towards young people, they are better positioned to choose other than violence and subjugation in their relationships. Thinking laterally and compassionately, adults are better positioned to create spaces built on trust which can,

in turn, be spaces ripe for young people's expressions of will and autonomy (bergman 2022; Bettencourt 2020; Fox 2019; Holloway, Holt and Mills 2019). Kelly, a service provider I interviewed, told me how they worked laterally with the both the young people who accessed their services the young people who worked there. They described to me how a big part of that job was navigating the never-ending requests for youth's time and energy from other adults:

I have heard and witnessed that constant asking for participation, you know, whether it's "can you share my poster" or "can you put up this" or "can you send out an email" or "can you set up a focus group." I was surprised by the level of asks we'd get. It's kind of cyclical in nature. It's a lot to ask of young people and I don't know if we ever really support them because not a lot of research happens about the good stuff. You're digging up all this crap and not having a debrief after. I tried to debrief them, but I'm not a counsellor.

Indigo told me that as a youth researcher working on a project led by adults that she navigated bad feelings about the project with her peers:

I've definitely heard from our youth here that it's overwhelming. That even if they're being compensated each time, they feel like they have to dig up the same answers over and over again. They're just overwhelmed by all of the people kind of bombarding them, right?

When adults constantly ask young people to share vulnerable parts of their lives these research practices they can reinscribe adultist hierarchies that wear out young people and the adult allies that work alongside them (Fox 2019; Tuck and Yang 2014a; also see Berlant 2011). Worn out young people flex their capacity to refuse in an effort to balance the power at play in these relationships by turning down invitations to participate in research or programs even if participating might benefit them (Fox 2019; Sylvestre, Castleden, Marten and McNally 2017; Tuck and Yang 2014a).

Also known as research or participation fatigue, this refusal, Tom Clark (2008) argues, can jeopardize the quality of research and limit future opportunities for research

in that community. When young people refuse to sign consent forms, refuse to show up to focus groups or interviews, or refuse to give the 'right answers' on a survey, adult researchers are pushed to expand their intentions for working in community (Fox 2019; Sime 2008). In research specifically, saying no can be a crucial way for young people to even a power imbalance they have identified previously (Switzer 2020). But it is not easy as Aubrey, an adult who co-leads research with young people, described it:

Saying "no" can be a really difficult thing for young people coming into a space like that, there are all kinds of pressures: we need contracts, there's time pressures, there's the power imbalance because we brought it to them. As we try to find work-arounds or a solution, "no" has got to be on the table. Sometimes it means that it might be more appropriate for some people to work on a project instead of others and sometimes it might be a bit too close.

I asked Indigo what researchers can do when the questions and content are "too close" for young people. She suggested that researchers "could read other people's research. They could research on the internet, or even ask service providers what they've witnessed." But she was also conflicted about this response, because she knew from their own experience that young people's participation could be more meaningful: "I also feel like the direct youth input is sometimes more genuine. You're getting the full story rather than the second-hand regurgitated story, so I don't know..." Overall, participants were clear that research and work with young people should centre their needs and desires, while also upending power structures through trust and refusal. In the renegotiation of power, young people can become co-leaders in research and programming for them, becoming more than just a site of data collection or a "fixed" statistic, expanding those spaces where other forms of knowledge and ways of being in the world can grow and thrive (Tuck and Yang 2014b; see also Simpson 2017).

2.3.4. Enabling reparations

The fourth strategy, *enabling reparations*, refers to ways that adults can actively address economic inequity in young people's lives. Reparations are the equitable redistribution of wealth and power to correct for historical and ongoing violence and

exclusion (Escolar 2016; Resource Generation, n.d.). When adults redistribute the resources and clout that they have access to in their working relationships, reparations can partially address the wealth gap that has impacted Indigenous, Black and people of colour, through the legacies of slavery, and ongoing processes of subordination and colonization (Coates, 2014; Resource Generation, n.d.). Because universities and state systems have benefitted from racism and settler colonialism, enacting reparations in relationships with young people at these sites can be transformative (Escolar 2016; Fox 2019; Puch-Bouwman 2014; Silver 2020).

The work of reparations is also powerful in its capacity to poke holes in “those deeper fabrics that uphold a classist, racist and discriminatory society” (Coates 2014, n.p.). Researchers and service providers who receive state funding for their work or choose to work with young people who are surveilled and controlled by the state, have what Jennifer Driscoll (2019, 541) calls a “reparatory responsibility” to “make amends to young people who have been let down by society.” It is for these young people that reparations can be operationalized to acknowledge the very real impacts of violence and economic exclusion on young people. Because there is no road map for this work, it must happen in the relationships that adults have with diverse young people, and should be directly informed and led by Black, Indigenous and people of colour in researchers’ institutions, personal lives and communities.

Reparations require adults to cultivate reparatory responsibilities alongside the other material and relational commitments in their work, using their resources to redistribute economic wealth through the provision of direct cash transfers and meaningful employment. The people I interviewed for this project were clear that the standard practice of offering a gift card for coffee or movies is a completely inadequate way to acknowledge the labour young people contribute to research, and only confirms that adults don’t trust young people: they won’t even let them decide how to spend their money.

Sam told me he was frustrated with the way researchers conflate reciprocity with tiny financial acknowledgements:

Participation is people in power getting poor people to do the work for them for free. You ask people to come to a meeting or do a weekend design thing, but one person in that room is getting a \$100K salary and everyone else is doing it on their own time. That doesn't work. Basically, it is always totally unfair. At the end of this they're going to be a prof working towards tenure and for these kids the best-case scenario is working at some bullshit job living in some shitty apartment. It's just totally extractive.

It is because of this extraction that, Silver (2020) argues researchers need to do a better job leveraging academic resources to support radical spaces for young people. In our conversation Indigo suggested that a better way to use resources would be to pay young people the same wage researchers make because “their feedback is valuable. If we're asking them to take the time out of their day and their experience and for them to dig up all that stuff for us, we should be compensating them fairly.”

The people I interviewed also suggested that in addition to honoraria, researchers and service providers—and their host institutions or organizations—should make a concerted effort to hire young people in long term, well-paid positions. Kelly, Aubrey and Sam told me they hired or economically supported young people in their organizations by paying living wages or supporting young people to start businesses. Hiring young people made their organizations more accessible, because it increased the representation of young people in their space. As Kelly put it:

I was talking with a caregiver last week in the waiting area and I hadn't thought of it at the time, but they turned to me and said that “it's really cool that you hire young people to work here.” She pointed to the staff at the front desk and I thought, “oh yeah, I guess they are young people.” I hadn't thought that it's actually young people when you in come here and that the optics of it make them feel more comfortable coming in.

In this case, hiring young people was not intentional, but natural for Kelly because she was always working in relationship with young people. It is worth noting that Kelly, Aubrey and Sam stressed that hiring young people and working alongside them did not erase power imbalances, but could ameliorate them insofar as it represented a more formal engagement with young people. It allowed and encouraged

them to contribute to traditionally 'adult' realms of decision-making in the organization more broadly.

These efforts show that when adults embed material reparations into their work with young people, they not only promote equity and justice, but together with young people they create emerging spaces where all participants are contributors in service to not yet known and generative futures (Escobar 2015; Puch-Bouwman 2014; Silver 2020). Charlie, a researcher I interviewed, felt strongly that because young people often do not have the resources to operationalize their ideas or activisms, when adults support young people "in the ways you would with any other people" the possibility of lessening the impacts of capital and its associated injustices increased. When well-resourced adults commit to reparations in relationship with young people, they can better challenge those contexts in which many young people experience economic disadvantage.

2.4. Conclusion

Luca, Ari, Kelly, Indigo, Aubrey, Charlie and Sam were steadfast in their belief that creativity, flexibility and curiosity in work with young people relied on long term, slowly-built relationships (Luca told me that the magic started to flow on their project in the third year). It is in these relationships, they told me, that adults can learn how to be better allies or accomplices for young people. Sam told me that this work "takes forever, but once you get in those relationships it feels weird and awkward to write about them." This could be why all the adults I interviewed championed moving away from research and into generative activities with young people, like offering adult labour to support youth political mobilizing, adults financially supporting young people's businesses and projects, or adults co-creating art with young people. By choosing to do work other than academic research or service delivery, Luca said it was the constant back and forth they had with young people that ended up driving their projects. They called this getting each other 'stoked' and 'following the stoke', because they trusted young people to lead by bringing vision and new directions to their shared work.

If you've made it this far, I hope that these strategies reflect some of what you're already doing or give you a glimpse of what could be possible in your current or future commitments to young people. In this paper I have shown the limitations in adults' current approaches to working with young people, furthering the case for an ongoing

interrogation of adultism in geography and childhood studies. I've offered four approaches adults can use synchronously—negotiating power, radical empathy, generating refusal and enabling reparations—to generate new worlds with young people in their communities.

For me, it's an incredible lucky position to be an adult who gets to read this and decide whether or not they are going to be more inclusive, empathetic or empowering in their work with young people. Young people are living full, bright and resilient lives whether adults enable them or not. Being able to learn from and build relationships with communities of diverse young people is an immense privilege that researchers have a responsibility to come correct to. Whether it's through radical empathy, the strength to challenge one's own position of power, the patience and fortitude to create spaces of trust that welcome young people's refusal, or a meaningful commitment to reparations, being an accomplice alongside the lives and work of young people can be full of joy and hope. It can also be the additional labour young people need to build alternative futures outside of the pressures of capitalism, white supremacy, bigotry and adultism. I hope this paper challenges you to be in your community, to reconsider the forces that structure your beliefs and to work into the parts of you that can grow here. I'll see you out there.

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Chapter 3.

Work sucks, I know: Instagram as a platform for young people's labour grievances

"I wish Anthony Bourdain were alive today to articulate the insanity of living in a country where cooks were the largest occupational group to die in a pandemic and restaurant owners are pouting that nobody wants to work in restaurants anymore" - @GothestSloth July 1, 2021 on Twitter.⁴

"I don't care about celebrity gossip. I want small scale gossip. I want to know why the night shift employees at Kohl's are mad at each other" - @SolomonGeorgio Oct 22, 2020 on Instagram.⁵

3.1. Introduction

As an off-and-on worker, owner and advisor in the food industry I have learned firsthand that many people—customers, employers, suppliers, politicians and policy makers, and reporters—don't really care about food service workers. My own sense of the injustices food service workers experience is rooted in my own experiences elbow deep in the dish pit, serving sticky drinks at the bar or cleaning the espresso machine's greasy hopper at the end of a long shift. Despite the lack of formal labour organizing in the food service industry, solidarity runs deep among food service workers, who help each other get jobs in each other's workplaces, make sure each other are home safely after late night industry parties and empathize with each other when a supervisor

⁴ Anthony Bourdain was a well-known American chef and incisive critic of labour relations in the food industry.

⁵ Kohl's is the largest department store chain in the United States.

screams pure hatred at them from across the floor. When I've presented preliminary drafts of this paper, other graduate students and academics who paid their way through university working in the industry would use the question period to commiserate and share their own experiences of harm. Friends who I shared my emerging work with would do the same and talk about their friend, so-and-so, who tried to start a union at a café, but they were fired, or their other friend who was assaulted by the owner of a popular neighbourhood restaurant, so we don't eat there anymore. These interactions contributed a lot to how I conceive what workers' grievances represent in food service.

Workers in the food service industry have a lot to complain about but limited spaces to do it. So, perhaps it's unsurprising that in Summer 2020, during a pandemic that made their work dangerous and even more precarious, young workers from several prominent Vancouver-based cafés, restaurants and breweries took to Instagram to air their grievances about working conditions. Creating anonymous, public Instagram accounts—posting screen captures of private messages and tagging the accounts and geolocations of their workplaces—these workers described the harms they experienced including wage theft, unpredictable working hours, unsafe working conditions, rampant racism and gender-based harassment, as well as the constant fear of being fired or harassed further for asserting their rights at work.

Because the precarious and violent conditions reported by these food service workers are business-as-usual in BC and are enforced by the Province of British Columbia through low wage policies and non-existent workplace protections, what they complained about probably wasn't news to many. In the context of widespread industry layoffs due to the COVID-19 pandemic and inspired by the rise of political protest in the summer of 2020, these young workers were finally able to hold their employers accountable and reshape the terms of their employment. They did this by organizing on social media to collect and publicly share their stories of harm while simultaneously levelling demands against their employers and in some cases even changing the ownership and operations of their workplaces.

In geography, a small body of adult-created literature about young people's use of social media is growing (e.g. Bork-Hüffer, Mahlke and Kaufman 2021; Truong 2018; Wilson 2016; Volpe 2021). Yet there remains a gap in what we know about young people's use of social media to address economic issues, particularly those at work.

Important feminist interventions in digital geographies offer a framework for understanding the ways in which people with multiple, diverse identities and social locations use digital technologies to maintain their lives, co-create knowledge and impress upon their social networks (Elwood 2020; Elwood and Leszczynski 2018; Woods 2021). But all this literature neglects age as an intersecting identity category.

Against this backdrop, I use this paper to answer two questions. First, I wanted to contribute to digital, children's and labour geographies' methodologies by asking how young workers use social media (and Instagram in particular) to influence their economic relationships through digital means. In this paper I describe how young workers at three popular East Vancouver food businesses complained about how they were treated at work in ways we aren't used to recognizing because what information we have about young people's working conditions is almost always accessed through adult-controlled systems where young people have little power—traditional news media, labour organizing, finance and adult-created academic research. Second, since young people's use of social media is largely considered to be derivative, superfluous or damaging to their mental health, I wanted to understand if and how these young people could use Instagram to create the safer and fairer workplaces they sought for themselves and their coworkers.

Navigating a complex web of “digital-social-spatial arrangements” and relationships to challenge violent working conditions and abuses in their workplaces (Elwood 2020), these young workers often faced fear and retribution for raising their concerns at work. Existing external pathways, like unions and worker protections, have been unable to rectify harmful working environments in the food service industry. I center these workers' stories and demands as grievances and shape their objections somewhere between complaints (Ahmed 2021) and economic grievances (Kern, Marien and Hooghe 2015; Kurer et al. 2019). I then show how, by using Instagram, these young workers fundamentally gave us a new way of understanding how complaining about your boss to strangers on the internet could severely impact an industry known for preying on the vulnerability of young workers.

By asking how young workers used Instagram in this moment (Holowka 2018), this paper contributes a way of looking at workplace grievances when they are informed directly by the actions and experiences of young workers. Looking at their grievances

this way helps us understand how these young workers took advantage of a social and political moment to exercise their own power and autonomy to influence their economic relationships through digital means and create spaces where they could ‘thrive otherwise’ (Elwood 2020), building new worlds for themselves and their communities.

3.2. Approach

I engaged with a wide range of materials and ideas—academic and not—to be able to focus in on this very small but important moment. As I shared in the introduction, there is a gap in geography about what we know about young people’s use of social media to address their economic grievances, so I took an anti-disciplinary approach (Mann 2012) and sought out a variety of ideas, disciplines and sources to make sense of what I witnessed unfolding on Instagram in Vancouver between June and September 2020. I opened my arms wide in search of academic writing, quantitative data and news media to be able to describe what I learned and how I began to think about it. As academics we build on each other’s work and stand on the shoulders of giants, because by showing that we know what came before gives us permission to say what we need to say. But the way that these young workers weaponized Instagram to hold their employers and communities accountable requires a different way of telling their story that centres their experiences (Besen-Cassino 2014; Bettencourt 2020; Opitz, Chaudrhi and Wang 2017; Silver 2020; Tuck and Yang 2014). As such, I’ve front-loaded the methods, stories and voices of young workers in this paper and embedded relevant literatures into my theory-making throughout.

My situatedness in relation to this community meant that I watched the events unfold on Instagram before I thought to “study” or write about it. Further, because of my own proximity to the industry, I witnessed the conditions the workers shared in a way similar to what Simpson (2017, 20) refers to as a “very strong a priori ‘ethnographic sense’ of what was going on.” Like Simpson, I’ve been “paying attention for years before my formal fieldwork began.” This meant that I took the screen shots of the posts I write about in this paper because I felt goosebumps—like something exciting was happening—and I wanted to be able to keep track of it and share the news of the workers’ uprising with others who lived in that neighbourhood or frequented those businesses, too. Over winter 2021 I would hear reports of a shortage of 40,000 staff from the restaurant and tourism industry and I wondered where those young workers went

and why the conversations food industry associations, business owners and politicians seemed to ignore the lived experience of food service workers during COVID (see CBC News; McAdams and Gordon 2021).

Generally, my methodology is a hybrid form of (digital) ethnography: a “cumulative way of seeing, recording, and writing about the world” where I seek to “examine the internet [Instagram] as a space of practice” through my own “(lurking) participant observation” (Duggan 2017, n.p.; also see Leszczynski 2018). In digital geographies, ethnography can help us develop practical knowledge to navigate research in particular apps and platforms (Koch and Miles 2021, 1394), but as a form of research is limited in its ability to build capacity in the researcher (in this case myself) when they are already a user of the platform or already in relation to the community that other platform users create content about. Duggan (2017) suggests that “there is also a pressing need to incorporate forms of analysis that go beyond ethnographic understanding,” and Koch and Miles (2021, 1394) suggest that is possible by “bringing qualitative understandings into engagement with more quantitative and GIS-based approaches [to] make use of available data to help to visualise and more systematically analyse patterns of app and platform use” (also see Laestadius 2017). To this end, by holding digitally created data (i.e. Instagram posts) in relation to my own in-person observations, academic analysis, quantitative data and news reports I am able to focus my methodology toward “digital culture and practice rather than necessarily life ‘online’” (Duggan 2017, n.p.) or what Elwood and Leszczynski (2018, 632) call “an array of digitally mediated spaces and practices” to gain “extremely valuable insights that could not be obtained from a big data approach” (Laestadius 2017, 580-581). This kind of creative methodology, as Dowling, Lloyd and Suchet-Pearson suggest (2018, 781), can “open knowledge production to the more-than-rational” and produce knowledge “in new and different ways.”

In this paper I share content from nine Instagram posts from three separate, public Instagram accounts about three particular businesses in rapidly gentrifying East Vancouver.⁶ I have anonymized the posts even if anonymity isn’t guaranteed because of the public nature of their grievances (Laestadius 2017). I have also given the businesses

⁶ There were approximately six public accounts representing grieved accommodations and food service workers from East Vancouver businesses during the summer of 2020. Some have since been deleted.

fake names—Grimey’s Coffee, Brewery ForLess and RIP Burgers—in a further attempt to anonymize the workers. To collect the posts, I used the screen capture function on my phone and created an archive of posts in Scrivener from June to September 2020, removing content that was subsequently deleted during this period (Laestadius 2017). I used Quirkos to complete initial line-by-line coding to identify shared themes among the posts from the three Instagram accounts. I then analyzed those themes alongside my own observations and relationships to other customers and workers at these businesses, news reports about the same Instagram posts and employee dissatisfaction in the food industry in East Vancouver, as well as academic articles about similar experiences (e.g. Brickner and Dalton 2019). This allowed me to consider the analysis in relation to other ways of knowing to better understand the severity of their complaints (Price 2021).

Finally, I want to make note of my use of the category of “young people” throughout this paper. As you can imagine, categorically determining who is and isn’t a young person in the food service industry is challenging only in so much that the category of youth is wonky and uncomfortable, primarily because the form and content of “youth” is rarely if ever defined by young people themselves (Joseph, 2014). As a site of adult accumulation, commodification and desire, the “youth” category has expanded both vertically, encompassing a growing age range, and horizontally, to articulate with a variety of identities now widely assigned to life-stage, including a proportion of the population of different classes, races, ethnicities, nationalities and religious identities (Katz 2008; Jeffrey 2012; Sukarieh and Tannock 2015). Because of this expansion, the dividing line between who is a young person or an adult has become incredibly blurry. Instead of relying on age as a divider, Bessant, Farthing and Watts (2018, 45) suggest that “we can construct [generational] categories because we can speak about people sharing certain kinds of conditions” such as a shared generational disadvantage (see Section 3 below for a detailed description of this).

This means that while I am an outsider insofar as I have not been a worker at any of these businesses, my proximity as a patron and community member with a listening ear in crucial Vancouver-based whisper networks means I write with a deep understanding of both the conditions that informed these stories as well as the demographic make-up of the staff and owners at these three businesses. Even though their Instagram posts were anonymous, and I had enough personal and geographical

distance from these workers at the time they made their posts, I know exactly who the owners are and who they typically hire to staff their businesses. This lived experience held in relation to the quantitative data about the industry and social media use in Section 3 enabled me to make a safe choice in identifying those workers who posted on Instagram as young people.

3.3. “A new way of looking at the world”

With as much hindsight as I can muster in one year, it’s clear that 2020 came in with a bang and many folks are still reeling. When I reflect on the impacts of that year on the lives of young people, it seems obvious that these young workers would speak out against the status quo in the food service industry. But the developments that led to this moment aren’t linear. Instead of unfolding in clear, traceable steps, three specific but interrelated dynamics coincided in space and time: a history of harmful working conditions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a wave of protest to which young people played a key role. In other words, at the same time, young food service workers experienced both an accumulation of unacceptable working conditions, a severe socio-economic contraction during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and participated in multiple, complex digital and physical protests throughout the year. In the midst of these developments, young workers built solidarity across differences to create a shared position from which to face the world that faced them.

3.3.1. Working conditions in the food service industry

Even before the pandemic, working conditions in the food service industry were abysmal at best. Overtly anti-union, the Accommodation and Food Services industry in BC employs restaurant and food service managers, cooks, servers, food counter attendants including baristas, as well as kitchen helpers and light duty cleaners (Anderson 2020; Brickner and Dalton 2019). In 2019, the sector employed just over two-hundred thousand workers in BC, 39% (78,900) of them 15-24 year-olds (BC Stats 2021; Statistics Canada 2021a). In Vancouver, 11% of working residents work in food service and accommodation, 74% of them in restaurants (City of Vancouver 2017).

Food service workers experience a litany of anti-worker mechanisms. These include low-wages (median annual income of food service workers in Vancouver in 2016

was \$17,620 compared to a median individual income of \$32,946 for all workers), the prevalence of part-time (42% in 2020) and temporary (16% in 2020) work, as well as a lack of human resources infrastructure in the small businesses (less than 20 employees) that make up 69% of the industry in Vancouver (City of Vancouver 2017, 2; WorkBC). These exploitative mechanisms are state-enforced, in the form of a low minimum wage and a serving wage,⁷ as well as a general lack of worker protections, which increases exposure to wage and tip theft, unpredictable working hours, lack of sick days, sudden firings, unsafe working conditions, racism, gender-based harassment and constant fear of being fired for asserting their rights at work (Anderson 2020; Besen-Cassino 2014; British Columbia; Fox 2021; Matulewicz 2015).

I provide detailed examples of these abuses below (Section 4), but it's important to recognize here that food service work is structured in a way that degrades and renders precarious young workers in particular. "Precarity is when your life is in someone else's hands", and for young food service workers their age increases their exposure to poor working conditions which in turn increases overall precarity throughout their working lives (Berlant 2011, 192; also see Blackstone, Houle and Uggen 2011 and Matulewicz 2015). In the industry, many employers create working conditions that benefit their business but, in turn, degrade their workers (Matulewicz 2015). Because these practices are embedded in employer-worker relations, "a company's formula for success soon [becomes] associated with a decline in care for staff well-being" (Ottenhoff 2020).

The industry favours young workers because it can pay them less (Denstedt 2008). In 2020, the average hourly wage of young people in the food services industry was \$15.55; three dollars less than their adult coworkers in the same industry and three dollars less than young workers in other industries (WorkBC).⁸ They also experience higher rates of part-time employment (68% in 2019), the prevalence of which is often attributed to the fact that they are still enrolled in formal education, or to the myth of a labour market in which precarious, low-waged jobs are temporary stops on a journey to

⁷ The "Serving Wage" was eliminated in BC in summer 2021. BC Gov News (June 1, 2021). "Minimum wage surpasses \$15/hour." <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2021LBR0022-001048>. Last accessed Dec 1, 2021.

⁸ The Living Wage in Metro Vancouver for this same period is \$20.52/hr (Living Wages for Families).

high-wage stability (Besen-Cassino; Brickner and Dalton 2019; Matulewicz 2015; Statistics Canada 2021a). Moreover, because BC employers can provide an employee with their work schedule on a daily basis, being part-time makes it very difficult to know one's work schedule in advance (British Columbia). Lax regulations regarding minimum work hours (two hours per shift in BC) also enable a "just-in-time" staffing practice where workers are only told their start time, and can be sent home for any reason on any given day (Matulewicz 2015, 409).

Finally, discrimination and identity-based harassment are rampant in the industry, with race, gender, immigration status and sexual orientation commonly-targeted differences. Woefully understudied, Dempsey (2021, 2) argues that these practices devalue food service labour and are rooted in ideas of the "ideal domestic server" that historically construct food service work as low-status, unskilled and "organized along hierarchies of gender, race, and class." This shows up in hiring practices that prioritize "attractiveness" (Matulewicz 2015), incessant bullying, harassment and sexualized violence (Blackstone, Houle and Uggen 2014; Ottenhoff 2020) and "near-constant" "racism, sexism and queer phobia" (quote from Fox 2021; but also see Davies 2018 and Brickner and Dalton 2019) which pool together in what Ben Anderson (2020) calls "small ponds of nepotism, exploitation, patriarchy and white supremacy." As Fox (2021) says, "working in service sucks."

3.3.2. Impacts of COVID-19 pandemic

Just past the one-year anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic, BC Premier John Horgan blamed young people for "not paying as much attention" and "putting the rest of us in a challenging situation" as cases among 20-39 year-olds rose (Wong and MacMahon 2021, n.p.). He asked young people to not "blow this for the rest of us". The backlash from young people online, in the media and from other politicians was tremendous (DeRosa 2021; Russ 2021).

For young people Horgan's comments were "a slap in the face" because as the last group to be vaccinated (except children), those under the age of 39 kept the province's essential services running throughout the pandemic, working as grocery clerks, health care workers and delivery drivers (Russ 2021). In March and April 2020, 48,203 young people under the age of 25 lost their jobs in BC's food service industry

(Statistics Canada 2020). In May and June of the same year, the provincial unemployment rate for youth aged 15-24 hit 29% (it was 10% in 2019). 208,080 young people applied for federal relief via the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), 17.5% of the provincial total (BC Stats 2020; Government of Canada 2021). Some questioned why workers aged 15-24 who lived at home were applying for CERB (Clemens, Palacios and Li 2020), blind to the fact that in austere times the whole family provides material, financial and every day practical and caring support (Hall 2018).

For young food service workers, Horgan's attack on "reckless young hooligans" was salt in an already festering wound (Russ 2021). Young food service workers and young people in BC were some of the pandemic's biggest economic losers due to unexpected, long-term layoffs which caused mass unemployment. If they did choose to return to work, lackadaisical and inconsistent safety measures increased workers' stress and exposure to customer-initiated violence and harassment (Bufquin et al. 2021). In one instance, a customer at a Richmond, BC McDonald's was caught on camera "lashing out at staff after declaring he was unhappy with the service, tearing through plastic safety guards, throwing a garbage can at staff and violently knocking down displays and cashiers' tills while customers and staff can be heard yelling at him to stop" (Hernandez 2021).

The \$CDN 2000 per month CERB provided workers did not offer economic stability for food service workers (it amounted to \$12.50/hour, more than \$2 below the provincial minimum wage). But it did give young people "time to think about what we wanted. Which, as it turns out, might not be to make a living for other people while we rag-and-bone our way through life" (Fox 2021). The unexpected and long-term layoffs of young food service workers during the pandemic created space for them to reflect on their experiences at work, and to build important connections with their coworkers and communities on social media to upend their workplaces and address the poor working conditions awaiting them upon their return.

3.3.3. Summer of Protest

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, young people were organizing and participating in multiple, complex digital and in-person protests across British Columbia. Since the 2008 financial crisis, worldwide youth-led protests and mobilizations have received

extensive media and political attention (Sukarieh and Tannock 2015; Monticelli and Bassoli 2018) even if their actions are seen as getting in the way of ‘real politics’ (Collins 2020). These young activists typically face “considerable personal risks” when they engage in activism in their communities (Collins 2020, 2). Brickner and Dalton (2019, 489) argue that young people centre themselves in activism because they are “politically engaged around the issues of economic inequality that shape their lives.” This engagement can take the form of direct resistance to the framing of young people as neoliberal subjects whose productive and reproductive capacities are in service to capital (Ferguson 2017; Joseph 2014; Katz 2008).

Young people in BC continue to prove that their grievances are, in fact, worth the state’s attention. They have a long history of organizing to address their economic, environmental and socio-political grievances, including those that stem from settler-colonial dispossession (Sloan Morgan 2020). Young people were involved in the Vancouver Island Coal Strikes of the 1910s, the Gastown Riot of 1971, anti-old growth logging protests at Clayoquot Sound in the 1990s, Ali Howard’s 2009 Skeena River swim to protect wild salmon, and more recent climate change-aimed school walkouts across the province (Boudreau 2018; Hume 2019; Isitt 2018; Little 2019). Over the past decade, Indigenous young people have also worked with adults and elders to lead land-based actions to protect unceded lands from major industrial projects. These include the since-cancelled Petronas LNG on Lelu Island and Enbridge’s Northern Gateway pipeline, as well as recent province-wide actions against Coastal Gaslink’s “going in at all costs” pipeline on Wet’suwet’en territories in the northern part of the province (Follett Hosgood 2021; Wilker 2020).

Because the early parts of the pandemic required many young people to self-isolate to protect themselves from the virus, they turned to social media to communicate, share their experiences and mobilize in-person social protests. Riding the wave of in-person Wet’suwet’en Solidarity protests, rail blockades and government occupations held in Vancouver in January and February 2020, young Vancouverites organized quickly in May and June following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police (Hill et al. 2020; Ross 2020). Many Vancouver food businesses also posted a black square on June 2nd in solidarity, alongside millions of Instagram users trying to “stop business as usual” on the platform and acknowledge police violence against Black people (Bakare and Davies 2020). The performance of #BlackOutTuesday triggered non-white writers

from Bon Appétit to call out their leader, Adam Rappaport, for wearing brown face, and subsequently surfaced their grievances about the “toxic culture of racism and exclusion” they faced at work (Zhang 2020). Inspired by these actions, food service workers in Vancouver publicly called out #BlackOutTuesday posts as hypocrisy for the racism they endured as employees (Tindale 2020).

The increased visibility of ongoing digital activism against employers as well as ongoing in-person protests aimed at systemic racism created environments where young people’s emerging socio-economic and political complaints stirred up other complaints, which in turn encouraged other young people to participate in public opportunities to voice their dissatisfaction (Ahmed 2021; Blackstone, Houle and Uggen 2014; Kurer et al. 2019). On July 4, 2020 a former employee of a well-known and celebrated East Vancouver-based coffee chain posted a carousel of word-based images on her personal Instagram account calling out her past employer for fostering a hostile environment. Her post triggered a cascade of public call-outs against many employers in the Vancouver food service industry enabling young food service workers to leverage their own important digital-social connections to speak out against racist, homophobic and violent working conditions.

3.4. The shape of complaint

The structure of work in the food service industry deters workers from making complaints about working conditions, violence and identity-based harassment. Embedded industry-wide practices of mistreatment become the status quo for young workers, who typically have poor knowledge of their rights (partly because businesses in BC are not required to post information about worker’s rights) (Holgate et al. 2011; Matulewic 2015). The high percentage of small firms with low staff numbers contributes to the lack of human resources structures in these workplaces, which means perpetrators of harassment and poor working conditions—managers, owners and supervisors—are who hear complaints and address grievances if workers share them (City of Vancouver 2017; Matulewicz 2015). Approaching managers is likely to fail (Holgate et al. 2011; Mao and DeAndrea 2019).

Many food service workers, then, choose not to complain to their employer about harassment and working conditions, but to quit and find another job (Denstedt 2008).

But, when “[workers] leave because of a problem, a problem can be what [they] leave behind” (Ahmed 2021, 278). An ex-worker at Grimey’s Coffee posted to Instagram that she left her job because she couldn’t put up with the way she was treated anymore. But a year later she decided to publicly share her story, stating she had “been too silent” about her experience: “I put up with it for so long and I’m still disappointed that I didn’t respect myself enough to speak up.” Even if food service workers change their workplaces, they do not necessarily change the industry, instead creating a vacancy for a new worker in the same work environment.

As a worker, speaking up to and against an employer who persistently enforces harmful working conditions can increase exposure to those experiences, making it even harder for workers to choose to express a complaint (Ahmed 2021; Ottenhoff 2020). In their post the ex-worker from Grimey’s Coffee said they didn’t blame others for having a hard time standing up to the owner because their behaviour can “flip like a switch”, making it “hard to know what to expect and exceedingly intimidating to think of confronting him.” Workers at Brewery ForLess also posted they were “always disregarded for having anything to say” and that they did not “have a way to speak up (we don’t even have an HR)” without risking losing their jobs. In another post a worker said that they were labelled as aggressive for complaining, which is a “‘familiar’, known and routine” treatment of workers with diverse identities, especially black women, where their identity trumps their contributions and abilities (Holgate et al. 2011).

When employees do complain, however, they evaluate the consequences and impacts they might endure (Mao and DeAndrea 2019). For workers at RIP Burgers, they chose to speak out by commandeering their business’ Instagram account and made a verbal agreement with the disaffected owner to keep the post and comments up as a form of community accountability. The owner subsequently deleted the post and the workers reflected that they were “definitely naive in assuming it would be followed.” Because employees are more likely to complain if the environment is safe (Mao and DeAndrea 2019), these workers waited until ownership at their workplace changed before sharing a new message of accountability to the RIP Burgers Instagram page.

While the procedure for making a complaint is not always laid out in advance (Ahmed 2021), complaints about conditions at work are traditionally addressed by organizing workers into unions. However, unions have struggled to organize both young

workers and food service workers (Brickner and Dalton 2019, Hodder and Houghton 2019; Cha, Hogate and Yon 2018). There is an abundant literature about why unions have failed to adapt to the peculiarities of service work (Denstedt 2008), which identifies several factors, including the fact that unions are late adopters of technology (Sipp 2016), the high cost of servicing small workplaces (Kumar and Schenk 2006), and solidarity increasingly challenged by worker mobility (Jordhus-Lier and Tufts 2015). In the accommodations and food service industry, unionization rates are far below the Canadian average of 4.6%. In BC, the numbers are even lower: 1.6% of those under 25 years old, and 2.4% of those aged 25 years to 44 years (Statistics Canada 2021b).

When disaffected workers do create solidarity and attempt to unionize in food service, they are often fired (Anderson 2020; Brickner and Dalton 2019). Workers at Brewery ForLess explained that unionization attempts that location had failed in the past because of fear of reprisal and that when “when the faintest whiff of a possible union attempt was sniffed out a huge swath of staff were fired without cause.” Workers fired for trying to unionize their workplace expose a “system that denies its members safe, easy, and effective ways to make their voices heard” (Gosset and Kilker 2006). This system of deterring unionizing has a long history in BC as workers have been dismissed, sometimes at gunpoint, for attempting to organize themselves as a collective bargaining unit (Isitt 2018).

This is not to say that unions are the perfect solution. Unionized workers do not necessarily feel comfortable or safe raising their concerns with the union (Holgate et al. 2011). For example, Kirk (2018) shows that 76% of unionized employees in her study left employment before making a claim, and a further 17% ended their employment after submitting a grievance. This could be because “workers suffering from repeated low-wage work spells tend to report lower levels of systemic trust” (Shraff 2019, 36), leading young food service workers to choose not to participate in traditional forms of labour organizing and systemic change. By not seeking support from their unions, workers internalize the issue and expect to deal with it themselves. Holgate, Pollert, Keles and Kumarappann (2011, 1098) argue that this form individualization becomes the norm as “workers with problems cast adrift, unable to deal with bullying, harassment, victimization, discrimination and non-compliance with the contract of employment.”

People in power (i.e. employers) benefit when the system of harassment makes other people (i.e. workers) feel alone because it forces them to find ways of solving their problems that do not hold employers accountable (Ahmed 2021; Holgate et al. 2011). So, in Summer 2020, young food service workers in East Vancouver did find a new way of solving their problem of abuse at work and that snowballed until they were no longer alone.

3.5. All together now

Since most young food service workers do not have a union or a Human Resources department to complain through, we do not have a clear understanding of the shape of young food service workers' complaints outside of that relationship. We can get a general idea from classic texts like Barbara Ehrenreich's (2001) *Nickled and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* and Sarah Jaffe's (2021) *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone* that low wage and precarious workers seem to be trapped in jobs they continue to do because it gives them a paycheck.

Young workers at each of the businesses featured in this paper described horrific, yet relatable, experiences that amount to what workers at RIP Burgers called a "toxic workplace environment." Workers at Brewery ForLess posted that they worked "12-14 hour days," were being "paid under minimum wage," that they would have "money deducted from their pay without consent," that "everyone had some kind of back or wrist injury," and that "the production floor was dangerous...the conveyor lines were disgusting, covered in pink mold that nobody ever had time to clean." A Grimey's Coffee worker posted that "for years the staff [have] been treated as expendable objects," that employees and technicians were verbally threatened and intimidated, and that when staff were offered a raise it was conditional upon them taking money away from staff in lower positions.

It seems that food service workers have little control over the labour process because they are unable to effectively exercise their 'voice' (Denstedt 2008) because, as Besen-Cassino (2014) argues, low-waged workers' discretion and creativity is eliminated in low wage workplaces. However, the East Vancouver businesses targeted by workers on Instagram were "cool places" that appeared (externally) to foster environments where

workers could be creative and contribute to the social goals of the business (Ottenhoff 2020). Being “cool” is crucial to young people’s feelings of self-acceptance and social belonging (Skelton and Valentine 1998) so working somewhere with a progressive-appearing and community-oriented vibe is seen as somewhere young people could make use of their skills and creativity (Besen-Cassino 2014). In these environments, staff and customers would co-create value for these businesses and in turn build public trust in the company (Helm 2011; Hidayanti, Herman and Farida 2018).

To appear “cool”, these East Vancouver businesses employed women, people of colour, gender diverse folks and queer workers to portray an inclusive brand. However, there is a gap between how an institution presents itself as cool, safe or diverse and its actual practice (Ahmed 2021). When a business relies on workers’ identities to uphold their brand they show how gendered and racialized power dynamics that are “built into the structure of employment relationships” in that workplace (Brickner and Dalton 2019, 489; Fox 2021). In this environment, a worker’s identity validates their employer’s brand and increases the worker’s exposure to identity-based violence and harassment in the workplace. Posts from all three businesses identified racism and misogyny as regular treatment by their employers with one worker from Brewery ForLess posted that the managers and owners would “flirt and try to take advantage of staff members during Christmas parties.” A worker from Grimey’s Coffee explained that a “male manager” repeatedly made “racist, sexist comments as well as sexual passes/comments to other staff” but that they were told to brush it off. And the subtext from comments on posts from RIP Burgers was the owner’s predatory behaviour, including allegations of sexual assault toward multiple staff and community members.

Issues related to a worker’s identity can inform their broader socio-economic analysis and political commitments which enables them to speak up and organize their workplace (Brickner and Dalton 2019; O’Brien 2021). Workers with diverse identities (i.e. non-white, non-cis-male) are likely to have “everyday political experiences” (Hadfield-Hill and Christensen 2021, 833) and may have already been politically active around issues related to identity (O’Brien 2021). Hadfield-Hill and Christensen (2021) refer to these types of “everyday knowledges, mobilities and interactions” as small-p “politics.” Collins (2020, 3), in their work on young people’s environmental activism, argues that these forms of small-p political action “exist outside of formal systems [and] are based on and

in young people's own socio-cultural worlds" making them more effective mechanisms for political change.

Because mistreatment of workers in the food service industry is "business as usual" it might not seem obvious to an outsider why young workers would want to organize themselves. Antonakis-Nashif (2015, 102) argues that publicly speaking out about seemingly invisible injustices reflects a desire to "change realities" which these young food service workers did when they enacted the "potentially subversive politics" present in their workplace (Richardson 2018, 250). Workplaces in the food service industry are important sites of subversive politics because their precarious structure can potentially trigger individual and collective political activation (Montincelli and Bassoli 2018). Further, workers who are recently unemployed are more likely to participate in non-institutional forms of political participation (e.g. not unions or formal politics) (Kern, Marien and Hooghe 2015). This means that the rapid growth in youth unemployment in Vancouver during summer 2020 may have led to the "wave of protest behaviour and other forms of participation" (Kern, Marien and Hooghe 2015, 481).

In a union environment a worker's grievance is likely to be framed as a violation of a Collective Agreement and the labour of complaining often happens on work time. However, what these young workers posted to Instagram are examples of what workers do on their "own time" instead of their "owned time" (Richardson 2018, 253). In this instance, young workers politicized their grievances linking their economic grievances to protest mechanisms (Kurer et al. 2019, 872) and positioned their very personal complaints as a collective issue. Because deciding to complain happens in the "company of others" young food service workers in East Vancouver formed digital versions of what Ahmed (2021, 21 and 274-275) calls "complaint collectives": assemblages of people, experiences and stories that become a support system—"what we need, who we need, to keep a complaint going." These workers unknowingly invited other young people to complain alongside them, as a worker from Grimey's Coffee explained: "since my resignation, more people, past employees/people in the industry have shared stories with me that show [the owner's] behaviours aren't changing and that he continues to get away with it." Together they assembled on Instagram to create the noise they needed to try and ensure their employers weren't going to "get away with it" anymore.

3.6. Let's give them something to talk about

As a picture-based social media platform, Instagram has what Karlyn Harris (2019, 9) calls a “particular value” because the “platform is often the visual embodiment of a user's identity or self-representation—be it actual or aspirational—rendering it useful to discover how participants view themselves within the process of observing, experiencing, and creating place.” The high numbers of young people who use the platform to create content about their day-to-day lives and creative work also make Instagram an important site for geographical research. In the summer of 2020, Instagram had 14.2 million users in Canada, 60% (8.5 million) of whom were under the age of 35 (Napoleon Cat 2020). A 2020 report from the Ryerson University Social Media Lab that surveyed 1500 Canadian adults found that 89% of respondents aged 18-24 had an Instagram account and that overall, those who work full-time (58%) or part-time (64%) are more likely to have an Instagram account than self-employed or unemployed users (Gruzd and Mai 2020).

In addition to young people being on Instagram for personal reasons, young workers use Instagram to communicate with other staff and to promote their places of work by sharing stories, “liking” posts, or geo-tagging their personal posts of their workplaces (van Zoonen et al. 2016). As users of these platforms, young workers are expected to be “good digital citizens” who produce valuable content for their employers, which in turn feeds “new forms of algorithmic governmentality and control,” as well as new forms of consumption (Lynch 2020, 3). Because people who want to learn about food often start and finish their search in digital media (Price 2021), many customers in Vancouver turn to Instagram to connect with food businesses across the city. This is an example of how social media platforms like Instagram, Leszczynski (2019, 1149) argues, “have become essential components of how cities are brought into being through everyday digital-visual practices.” For food businesses whose popularity on Instagram relies on geographical proximity and engagement, employees actively contribute to their employer’s digital presence—at no cost—by boosting their organizational reputation through likes, shares and geotags (Cervellon and Lirio 2017; Opitz, Chaudhri and Wang 2017; Richardson 2018; Sakka and Ahammad 2020).

Employee participation on social media is “inevitable and impossible to eliminate” (Dreher 2014, 345) and workers can influence their private social networks which could

negatively or positively impact their employer depending on the message (Helm 2011). This level of influence depends on workplace hierarchies as employees tend to have more power than their employers on social media which changes how employees feel and perform in relation to work (Opitz, Chaudhri and Wang 2017; Sakka and Ahammad 2020). Social media technologies like Instagram, then, “constitute a new contested terrain of conflicting interests between top-down managerial control and bottom-up employee sousveillance” (Taylor and Dobbins 2021, 264).⁹ In this environment employers should address workplace issues so that employees do not feel compelled to share negative experiences on social media because when employees attack their employers on platforms like Instagram the business’s reputation could suffer disproportionately (Opitz, Chaudhri and Wang 2017).

By using Instagram as an organizing platform, these workers conveyed meaning through a highly visual culture where they built solidarity through hashtags, geotags and comments, creating conversation with many users at once (Harris 2019; Laestadius 2017; Rose 2016). When they started sharing their stories, they spread through Instagram rapidly. This is because conversations on Instagram can take place through comments on posts rather than requiring a new post each time someone wishes to respond. I cannot understate the profound impact these grieved workers had on their employers via Instagram as their stories multiplied and escalated beyond their initial reach to enormous audience (Opitz, Chaudhri and Wang, 2017). The sheer volume of comments and likes on posts about these three East Vancouver businesses was overwhelming to capture and catalogue. For example, one of the word-based posts I analyzed for this paper had 1400 likes and 340 comments when the highly aesthetic food pictures surrounding it have less than 500 likes and between 15-40 comments. Because of the way that Instagram algorithms promote picture-based posts and the posts of other users who are geographically proximal to other users, this significant increase in likes and comments on these word-based posts is a direct result of significant post-sharing via private message and public sharing to other account’s “stories”.

⁹ Sousveillance is “bottom up” surveillance where employees have “agency to contest management misbehaviours, voice workplace concerns or use SM technologies for the purposes of worker activism” (Taylor and Dobbins 2021, 265).

Prior to this moment, these young food service workers had no options to successfully challenge the toxic culture of their workplaces (Anderson 2020) and it's important for us to consider what about using Instagram made it different. When workers lack internal platforms for expressing their grievances they may choose to disclose their experiences on social media (Mao and DeAndrea 2019). Because online activism isn't seen as legitimate as in-person organizing, young people create in-between spaces "in order to enact their agency and make their voices heard" (Collins 2020, 5; also see Hadfield-Hill and Christensen 2021). However, digital technologies are embedded in young people's day-to-day lives making Instagram's position as a mobilizing tool not a large effort for them as it just provides the "basic conditions of possibility" (Burton 2019, 4; also see Collins 2020 and Bork-Hüffer, Mahlkecht and Kaufman 2021).

Additionally, the broad use of social media by existing activist networks to pressure employers and other forms of capital via deplatforming makes Instagram an obvious container for workers' complaints (Brickner and Dalton 2019; Sipp 2016; Collins 2020). Young people's use of digital technologies to affect change in their workplace isn't naive but instead an active choice that they make based on heightened media competency (Bertram and Verne 2021; Bork-Hüffer, Mahlkecht and Kaufmann 2021). This is because, as an in-between space with ambiguous boundaries (Holowka 2018), social media platforms are "embedded within the rhythms of everyday life in complex and relationally nuanced ways" (Woods 2021, 4). An "entangled space" (Bork-Hüffer, Mahlkecht and Kaufmann 2021) co-constituted in relation to other socio-spatial processes related to identity (Elwood and Leszczynski 2018) Instagram functioned as a space where these young workers reclaimed power by levying the support of their online communities to shift the narrative of the businesses they work for by reducing their employers' own social capital in digital and community spaces.

The content of these workers' complaints required an anonymous space where the workers felt like they had control over the situation. When affected employees can hide personal information about themselves they may be more "confident about the communication process, focus more on their genuine thoughts, provide a detailed description of the situation, and finally perceive the message to be more convincing and efficacious" (Mao and DeAndrea 2019, 178). Typically, digital containers for workers' complaints happen via whisper networks on private groups (e.g. on Reddit, Facebook, Instagram chat groups or Discord) where workers can speak freely with each other,

“counter-reacting to management control and allowing solidarity to grow” (Taylor and Dobbins 2021, 275; also see Trusolino and Ships 2023). Even more so, these posts affirmed for workers who internalized this mistreatment that they should not be treated this way: “for anyone who needs to hear this—if you are in an abusive, manipulative workplace it is not ok” (Grimey’s Coffee).

The food service workers who ran the Instagram accounts featured in this story would receive private messages from other workers, screen capture their stories and share them anonymously to the account’s feed. However, staff at RIP Burgers took an extra step and commandeered the business’ Instagram account to share their solidarity with customers and past employees who publicly shared stories of harm perpetrated by the owner. In their post these workers described “an important space for people to come forward” and thanked “everyone that has been able to come forward to share their stories.” As customers and past employees continued to submit their stories to shared Instagram accounts, workers listened by responding to these posts and encouraged others to share their stories if they wanted to: “I hope opening up about my experience can give others the space to do the same if they feel the need” (Grimey’s Coffee).

That so many workers from multiple East Vancouver food businesses came forward with stories—particularly disclosures of identity-based discrimination, harassment and assault—speaks to the need for employers to provide safe and effective ways for employees to voice their concerns (Mao and DeAndrea 2019). Using a public platform like Instagram to share grievances became an important way to affect change because public support is important for “raising awareness and pressuring employers” to respond to employee needs (Brickner and Dalton 2019, 495). As a form of glitch politics that “rewire a city toward other possibilities” (Elwood 2020 following Russell 2012), these workers’ complaints exceeded the intent of the platform itself as workers did more than share their experiences—they also levelled demands against their employers and asked the East Vancouver community to make the same demands of their favourite neighbourhood breweries, coffee shops and restaurants.

At RIP Burgers the staff posted that their labour would no longer benefit the owner so they “collectively agreed that [they] would not work at the restaurant until a change of ownership was completely confirmed.” Ownership at that business changed swiftly and over a year later the accountability statement is still live on Instagram. Staff at

Brewery ForLess called for “immediate action” including sensitivity training for management, clear training plans, a public accountability process including disciplinary measures as well as a “union that protects all employees and maintains a safe work environment.” Fundamentally it appears that not much has changed at Brewery ForLess, signaling that the workers’ posts were not as effective for changing their material conditions as they hoped. Brewery ForLess periodically post “News” to their website about how they’re improving as an employer while workers continue to share grievances on Instagram reflecting Ahmed’s (2021, 50) statement that “creating evidence of doing something is not the same thing as doing something.” Workers from Grimey’s Coffee posted across multiple Instagram accounts and in the comments of the business’ account calling for the removal of the owner and other management who perpetuated the toxic environment. The owner publicly resigned within a few days and a year later workers at Grimey’s Coffee have unionized.

By sharing their stories publicly, these young food service workers also tried to “safeguard against any reemergence of a toxic workplace environment” (RIP Burgers) by encouraging other food service workers to stand up for themselves. On a Grimey’s Coffee post the author turned their “experience of institutional violence into a shared resource for others” by sharing a carousel of word-based graphics, two of which included resources for mental health support and the BC Employment Standards Branch (Ahmed 2021, 285). In doing this they demonstrated how young people negotiate a complex web of digital and physical spaces and relationships to not only challenge the abuses they experience at work, but also how they mobilize and build solidarity across their position as workers. By organizing on social media, these young workers gained more control over the labour process when they prioritized their own voices and needs over the interests of their employers, even if they did not fully alter the materiality of their working conditions (if they returned to that workplace at all). Some workers also created an opportunity to unionize their workplace which speaks to the important ways that traditional labour organizers can pay better attention to the diverse needs of young workers and the intersection between identity and workplace grievances (Brickner and Dalton 2019, 496; also see Jordhus-Lier and Tufts 2015).

3.7. Conclusion

In summer 2020 young food service workers complained on Instagram about the precarious and violent conditions they experienced at three businesses in East Vancouver. In the context of widespread industry layoffs due to the COVID-19 pandemic and inspired by the rise of political protest in the summer of 2020, these young workers were able to hold their employers accountable and, in some cases, reshape the terms of their employment. Organizing communities of complaint on Instagram, they collected and publicly shared their stories while levelling demands against their employers, making an effort to create the safer and fairer workplaces they sought for themselves and their coworkers. Coworkers, customers and other East Vancouver businesses took note and pressured these businesses to change their practices and ownership. Anderson (2020) argued that these workers' actions might not create long lasting change and encouraged them to unionize and formally organize their workplaces. What I hope I have shown in this paper is that when these workers shared their grievances on Instagram, they weren't only looking out for themselves and those workplaces specifically. Instead, they positioned their very personal complaints as a collective issue and created a movement in their community where young food service workers from several businesses called out their employers and described how they wanted to be treated at work.

When they shared their complaints, these workers created what Ahmed (2021, 283) calls a "complaint archive" where complainers collect their stories and create "somewhere to go, somewhere to be." Holowka (2018, 160) referred to a similar assemblage as an "archive of feelings" where the collected stories become "important cultural archives that allow for the visibility of otherwise institutionally-erased bodies." Since what information we have about young people's working conditions is almost always created by adult-controlled systems where young people have little power, the archives these workers created on Instagram are important places where we can witness thriving, living and complaining under conditions that seemed impossible (Elwood 2020). I have showed how these young workers used Instagram in this moment and have framed their grievances as purposeful actions they took to exercise their digital power and autonomy to influence their economic relationships to create a safer industry for themselves and other workers.

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Chapter 4.

“Being in life without wanting the world”: Young people, identity + loose objects

“Once you let the death of world in, all that follows is life” (Lauren Berlant 2020b).

4.1. Introduction

In September and October 2020 I asked nineteen young people from across British Columbia about what it means to be a young person in relation to capitalism. These conversations motivated and inspired me. Talking with these young people about who they were and why they turned toward the future (if at all) enabled me to be hopeful about a future we were making together. In early 2021, I got burnout and turned away from my PhD project but continued to roll their words around in my brain. Since then, I watched the pandemic stretch on and on, the cost of housing and groceries rise and the white-supremacist, freedom convoy roll east, confirming that for many communities hardship and struggle aren't temporary experiences, but lived, daily realities. So it started to feel disingenuous to assume young people would overcome by saying here, “hey look, capitalism is hard on them but they'll be fine, we're *hopeful*.”

Instead, they told me how they were being smashed and destroyed by capitalism (some more than others) and I wanted to know how that experience impacted their identities as young people. Current working definitions of the category “youth” are notoriously fuzzy. Miranda Joseph (2014) argues that it is rarely shaped by youth themselves, but by a number of institutions and actors including their friends and families, public spaces like schools and parks, as well as relations with the state and global capitalism. Maysoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock (2015, 4) also suggest that both the category of youth and young people's individual lives are constantly “worked upon, molded, given form and substance by the actions of the world and people they

engage with.” The vast majority of research frames young people’s experience as if they’re stuck waiting to be adults (Allen 2016; Bessant, Farthing and Watts 2018). But the young people I spoke with told me they didn’t want to become adults, not in the traditional sense anyway.

I learned from them that their identity as young people was constituted through their objects—those things outside of them that make up their world. Specifically, who they thought they should be when they grew up was shaped by bad objects (objects that harm them), and their identities as young people today were instead shaped by loose objects (objects they’re loosening). Looking towards the bad objects that adulthood offered them, these young people were cautious and unsure about becoming adults, both because they didn’t think they could attain those bad objects and also because the bad objects they were already dealing with were wearing them out. Instead, they told me that when they got older they wanted a different way of being in the world than the one to which they were supposed to aspire.

In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022), and elsewhere, Lauren Berlant works through films and texts to describe why the protagonists are stuck with or choose to be attached to bad objects.¹⁰ Berlant (2022, 171) shows us how the protagonists “figure out ways to make otherwise”, how they are “loosening” their bad objects. Maybe it’s my sentimentality following Berlant’s death in 2021, but their 2020 talks on YouTube gave me a glimpse into how they were processing the crises of their time and the end of their life through some of their biggest ideas. By turning to Berlant’s work to make sense of these young people’s understanding of their experience in capitalism, I’m doing much the same—processing Berlant’s biggest ideas through their crises and reflections.

¹⁰ In this paper I work with the ideas of Lauren Berlant to process my conversations with young people, including their texts *Cruel Optimism* (2011) and *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022), as well as two talks they gave in autumn 2020 over Zoom that were recorded and posted to YouTube. The first was a lecture on *Cruel Optimism* at Skopje Pride and the second was the Lynch Lecture at the Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies, where they were in dialogue with Rebecca Wanzo and Dana Luciano, facilitated by Dana Seidler. In both talks, Berlant spoke from their home office, and reflected, through the multiple crises of 2020—the COVID-19 pandemic, a Trump presidency, and the rise of protest against police and radicalized violence—on their work in *Cruel Optimism* and their then unpublished text *On the Inconvenience of Other People*.

The paper is structured as follows. I open by describing Berlant’s key ideas and situating bad objects in the geographies of young people. I then describe my methodology and lay out the substantive sections of the paper. The first of these shows how the bad objects of adulthood seep into young lives, and describes how these bad objects are—and consequently why becoming adults is also—unappealing and overwhelming. The second shows how young people co-constitute their identity as youth in capitalism. The third emphasizes young peoples’ loose objects, highlighting those actions or shifts they take to transition their objects to live otherwise. The conclusion considers directions for future research.

4.2. Berlant’s key ideas

This paper engages Berlant’s work to better understand how young people are entangled with and loosening their objects. Ben Anderson (Anderson et al. 2023, 119) writes that Berlant’s work is a key resource in geography that offers us “a vocabulary for depleting, difficult worlds” (119).¹¹ This section describes Berlant’s key ideas I work with and build on in this paper: subjects, objects (bad and loose), attachment and cruel optimism.

First off, you, in your body, are a subject; so too are other human and non-human entities around you. For Berlant (2011, 52) our subjectivity is *within us* “as a structuring condition for apprehending anything.” Berlant (2011; 2022) argues that a subject is constituted by the external world’s force. For example, in *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant (2011, 184) shows through the Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne films *La Promesse* (1996) and *Rosetta* (1999) that children occupy a subjugated subjectivity that is overdetermined by adult attachments, objects and worlds. In their dependency, young people “mistake love for subjection to the will of others who have promised to take care of/love them” (Berlant 2011, 184), “learn to try and take up as little space as possible” (ibid, 186) and must take adult lives “seriously as something other than already wasted” (ibid, 187). Below, I argue that young people’s subjugation to adult subjects, objects and worlds encourages them to loosen those objects at hand.

¹¹ In late 2022 Ben Anderson organized a two-part special section in *The Geographical Journal* that brought together 30 geographers to write about their encounters with Berlant’s ideas. It’s rich and beautiful and worth a read.

Objects, then, are the things outside of you that make up your world (Berlant 2020b). For Berlant (2020b) objects aren't specific, tangible things you can hold, even though you feel their weight—they are “clusters of features that have taken on a conventional solidity.” Anderson (Anderson et al. 2023a, 120) describes them as overdetermined and incoherent phenomena—“whether a nation or love, BoJack Horseman or heteronormativity, a person or our collective attachment to the promise of Berlant's work.” Not all objects are bad, but Berlant is clear that the world gives us bad objects we try to obtain “so you can have the experience of wanting something and having something” (Berlant 2020b).

We hold objects through attachments. For Berlant (2011, 23), attachments are affective. They organize the objects in our worlds and construct the present. Attachments are a “cluster of promises” that are “optimistic” because attachment to the object is what *brings you* into the world (Berlant 2020a). Cruel optimism, then, is an attachment (“cluster of promises”) to an object (“cluster of features”) that someone hopes will be good to them, but isn't (Berlant 2011). In *Cruel Optimism* Berlant (2011, 28) describes this attachment as “held in a relation of reciprocity, reconciliation or resignation,” but in 2020 described the affective structure of cruel optimism more harshly: it “points to being stuck or suffocated in the exact same place where individuals or groups have also attached their optimism for flourishing” (2020a). In other words, we have to consider the possibility that “the objects that sustain you turn on you, and threaten the world you have come to rely on” (2020a).

Berlant (2011, 28) sometimes calls bad objects “cruel objects”, and insists they aren't so much threatening as tiring, because they are meant to wear out the subject. Berlant (2020b) says that even though people are worn out, they optimistically attach to the cruel object because “they fear that its loss will be the loss of everything.” But when an object *feels worse*—“a threat that feels like a threat,” that shatters its bearer or is “something we hate”—it becomes unbearable (Berlant 2022, 151-152). Berlant (ibid, 25) says we can loosen all of our objects (if we want to) by revisiting our relations to them. But unbearable objects, Berlant (ibid) says, are prime for loosening because they, like ourselves, aren't solid: “objects are always looser than they appear,” and loose objects aren't finished products or replacements for bad or cruel objects—they are, rather, reimagined and reshaped. Objects are not an *either/or* but a *both/and* (Anderson et al. 2023a). Imagine that loose objects being worked on or spilled over and sorted through

are like coffee beans that tip out of their jar and spill across the floor. But you threw the jar and, like Gibson-Graham's (1996) capitalism, you smashed it into a thousand pieces. After you sigh at the mess you've made, you get down on the floor to clean it up—and then you go make coffee.

4.3. Bad and cruel objects in geography

What happens when the bad objects turn on young people? Perhaps the most helpful way to answer this question is to look at examples of bad and cruel objects in recent geographic and sociological research about cruel optimism. Judith Bessant and Rob William Watts (2014), for instance, show that the bad object that animates the 2009 EU Youth Strategy's is the state's insistence that young people rely on post-secondary and tertiary education for individual recovery from the 2008 financial crisis. The EU's response to economic collapse was to encourage young people to take on "more education and training as a project to enhance the participation of young people in a vibrant economy" (Bessant and Watts 2014, 135). Bessant and Watts argue that the Strategy sells young people a bad object, because even though increased enrolment in post-secondary education aligns with EU education targets, it is paired with increasing levels of youth unemployment, underemployment and childhood poverty. In this situation, the state downloads responsibility to individual young people for their own—and the EU's—economic wellbeing. The EU doesn't just sell young people the fantasy of "the good life" through educational attainment but offloads the state's responsibility for economic prosperity to (young) people. This further embeds neoliberal personhood by affirming "the fantasy that the subject is freer somehow than a subject whose state might be delivering resources to everybody" (Berlant 2020a). States purposely promote bad objects, instead of creating good infrastructure, to sustain the state's own "sense of continuity in the world" (Berlant 2020b).

Eleanor Rootham and Linda McDowell (2017, 415-416) also engage with Berlant's concept of "bad objects" in their study of young working-class men who 'strive' to find work after their local Honda plant shuts down, leaving them jobless. They describe the bad object in this instance as the young men's "aspiration for social mobility and middle-class respectability through employment" (415-416). These young men internalize neoliberal individualism to 'strive' for work through their perseverance, scholastic achievement and their gendered position amongst other working-class

masculinities in the community. Berlant (2020a) argues that this can only be achieved by an entrepreneurial subject that is “always trying to gain the system”, but that “the system” can’t be gamed. Rootham and McDowell show how these young men cannot “gain the system”: they land low-wage, insecure jobs they do not want because economic recession, combined with shifting geographies in the manufacturing and service sectors, determine what kinds of jobs are available to them.

In a study of Finnish young people, Kristiina Brunila, Saara Vainio and Sanna Toiviainen (2021) identify the bad object in the completion of education and subsequent “achievement” of a career. They show how neoliberal Finnish education operates a “therapeutic ethos” to produce young people who are “resilient, future-oriented and competitive enough to take control of their lives and changes.” They argue this orientation toward a “positivity imperative” demands young people “dream big” and invest in their education and careers, even as their economic outlook shrinks. The young people in their study internalize this imperative and take the blame: “it is their own fault if they cannot find a job and that the future is in their own hands” (Brunila, Vainio and Toiviainen 2021, 322). Brunila, Vainio and Toiviainen argue this is cruel optimism: young people keep doing what is expected of them in neoliberal capitalism even if that threatens their wellbeing amid what Berlant (2022, 96) calls a “massive institutional failure that has led to infrastructural collapse.”

Jean-Paul D. Addie and James C. Fraser (2019, 1372) examine residents organizing as the People’s Movement for Equality and Justice (People’s Movement) in the Over-the-Rhine (OTR) neighbourhood of Cincinnati, Ohio. The People’s Movement seeks to “alleviate poverty, homelessness, and urban decline in the OTR”, alongside the gentrification and ‘clean up’ activities of the Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation (3CDC). Here, the cruel object is residents’ aspiration to “remain ‘in place’ in the context of neighbourhood change” (1378). Addie and Fraser (2019, 1389) show how staying-in-place via cooperative living is more attractive to those residents who experience the anxiety of looming dispossession than it is to those who have a different subject position, because if the attachment is fulfilled they do get to stay-in-place. However, Addie and Fraser (2019, 1378) argue that the promise of “staying put” to participate in cooperative living with new residents is a cruel object, since it is underpinned by toxic racial and spatial hierarchies that flatten differing subjectivities and wear down occupants with frustrated hope.

Finally, in work with single moms pre-Brexit, Ruth Raynor (2021) uses cruel optimism to suggest the moms' cruel object is hope. As an affective position, Raynor (2021, 567) argues that hope is positively oriented toward the future. But for the moms she works with, hope is an object that constitutes cruelty, since "absenting from optimism leaves women feeling vulnerable to harm that is just around the corner." Raynor shows us what Berlant (2020a) means when they say "that people are stuck repeating their relation to a system that has fundamentally already thrown them out and they're trying to get back in and that's all they've got."

4.4. Method

The data this paper analyzes is the result of 19 interviews in the fall of 2020 with young people who live in British Columbia. I worked through and thought about what they told me over two very messy years of my life, and returned to their words to read, sift and code in the fall of 2022. I didn't try to look for discrete, strictly defined themes in the interviews. Instead, I looked at what they told me in a messy, queer way by paying attention to the uneven and inconsistent ways that the intersecting identities of these young people are disoriented towards struggle (Ahmed 2006; Berlant and Warner 1995; Cowen 2020; Kinkaid 2023; Marchbank and Muller Myhrdahl 2019).

To find participants for interviews I turned my private Instagram account (1500 followers) public for a week, posted a description my research and asked young people if they wanted to participate.¹² I asked that participants self-identify as a young person (ages 18-40), live in British Columbia, and engage in a conversation about capitalism. Anne Helen Petersen (2020) argues that analysis of young people's identity prioritizes white experiences—particularly white millennials'—so my recruitment script emphasized that I was especially interested in speaking with young people who were Black, Indigenous or People of Colour. Aside from age and geography, I did not ask any demographic questions or quantify the distribution of identities (genders, races, sexual identities, class positions, disabilities, sizes, etc.). Instead, I asked participants if they

¹² I typed my ethics-approved recruitment script into a Note on my phone, took screen shots of that and posted it to my account. I asked people to email me instead of managing recruitment over Instagram messages. More than 350 people shared my post, over 2450 people saw the post and 24 people reached out to me to be interviewed. (I quit Instagram for good in November 2022).

thought “youth” was a category, and if so, how it intersected with their other identities. I learned that everyone I interviewed had multiple, intersecting and complex identities as young people. They told me they were immigrant children, ‘a woman and a person of colour’, an immigrant citizen, visibly Muslim, ‘not the most slim person’, ‘bi-racial, black and white’, identify as black’, a man, extrovert, Leo, Iranian, Indian, Canadian, refugee, poor, Indigenous, able-bodied, ‘struggled with mental health’, bi, ‘grew up in Pakistan’, ‘adopted from China’, ‘BIPOC youth’, ‘woman and queer’.

In our conversations I asked interviewees: “What does it mean to be a young person?” both for themselves and for other young people. I asked them: “What does it mean to be an adult?” and how being young impacted their experiences at work. I also asked them what they thought about cops, if they participated in activism, if they’ve ever received social assistance, and what they thought about social programs for young people. I asked them if they thought social, economic and political change was possible for their communities and what they wanted to be when they grew up. The conversations I had with them tell us how these young people are grappling with crisis (economic, social, health, climate) in capitalism. It gave me a glimpse into how they saw themselves in the world, how they struggled against capitalism and how powerful systems like white supremacy, colonialism and the heteropatriarchy kept them down.

The interviews took place over Zoom and lasted approximately 60 minutes. They were open conversations that worked from an interview guide I shared in advance. I asked each participant which questions they were most interested in discussing, and before any transition to a new topic, I asked if that was something they wanted to talk about. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed, with close attention paid to the affective dimensions of the conversations.

Kim Allen (2016, 809) argues that research with young people is “rife with methodological and ethical dilemmas,” and that conducting one-off interviews with young people is not a form of inclusive and participatory or transformative research. For precisely this reason, I was careful not to mine these young people for their traumatic experiences of being young. I didn’t want to show that I assumed their lives were hard or that they needed to share the hard parts with me—but some of them chose to anyway. The things we can learn from these conversations are not representative of a particular cohort of young people, in British Columbia or elsewhere, and I do not mean to claim

that their complex identities are representative of any specific element thereof. I use pseudonyms for all participants and use they/them, he/him, and she/her pronouns throughout.

4.5. Adulthood's bad objects

For many people, adulthood is associated with the accumulation of Fordist ideas of the good life, or what Berlant (2011, 168) calls “cruel objects”, whose reproduction “absorbs most of the energy and creativity people have.” Whether it’s families establishing independent households (Choi and Ramaj 2023; Chen 2018), two-car garages in a white suburb (Odell 2019), producing surplus value for capitalists through full-time productive work (Weiss 2021), or the promise of security (Petersen 2020) and secure employment (Thieme 2018), when we associate adulthood with economic self-reliance we marginalize those people and communities who participate in life in ways not made essential by capitalism (Pimlott-Wilson 2016).

Initially I did not think to ask my interviewees what being an adult meant to them, or what they wanted to be when they grew up to be one. Because of the conversational nature of the interviews, I found that using the foil of adulthood enabled young people to think about the complexities of their own identities as young people and to reflect on some of the adulting they were already doing. The young people I spoke with don’t just “face barriers to enter into adulthood” (Flynn and Schartz 2017, 494) or find their “achievement of traditional markers of adulthood are significantly delayed” (Best 2011, 915; also see Allen 2016). Instead, they said the achievements of adulthood (bad objects) were imposed on them, and their lived experiences of these bad objects as *young people* made becoming an adult undesirable and overwhelming. This echoes Hadas Weiss (2021, 154), who found that for Spanish young people, adulthood’s attainments were “traps, responsibilities or burdens.”

For Laurel, being an adult meant achieving someone else’s version of the good life: “When I was a teenager I thought when I was 30 I would be so old and have a career and have kids and be married [laughs], you know, those heteronormative markers set by society.” When we discussed whether adulthood meant stability for Laurel, they said, “I don’t necessarily believe it, but it’s the standard that’s been set to define what an adult is.” Petersen (2020, xviii) argues that for young people—millennials in particular—

adulthood's promised security and stability "never seems to arrive." In our conversation, Hannah reflected on the possibility of having kids when she was an adult, but she didn't expect to have stability: "when we have kids, I'm not going to have my shit together, but I'm going to feel like I have certain adult responsibilities."

Sid shared that for them, being an adult meant they would have enough savings that in an emergency situation they "wouldn't be like completely fucked." But they questioned whether settling down and having a family or a permanent job meant they couldn't continue to have adventures: "it's such a weird mindset, because that doesn't have to be." Hannah also told me that the things they associate with adulthood aren't 'real': "they're just stereotypes, or like, social norms." Similarly, Jay wanted to challenge the oppressive systems he grew up with that told him that "to participate in society as it stands you have to make a lot of acquiescences to norms and rituals and systems, specifically, that were there before you." Instead, he said, "I want to change these systems that I no longer believe are serving people...there's got to be a different way." Jay's statement exemplifies Nigel Thomas' (2019, 330) argument that young people, particularly children, "often have a clearer understanding of the threats, and of the ethical priorities, than many adults." As Berlant (2011, 188) says, "the child, the subordinated subject, learns early that the relations of reciprocity are likely to be betrayed when the only way to survive the world is to resort to informal economies and the bribes and bargains of biopower, with its discourses of untruth." In my conversations with Sid, Hannah and Jay, I sensed they knew they had been betrayed and so were able to identify threats to their identities or socio-economic wellbeing, but believed that the feeling of threat would dissipate or soften when and if they became adults.

The idea that the material expectations associated with adulthood aren't "real", and that the pressures of adulthood feel imposed, resonates with Berlant's (2011, 184) suggestion that "children organize their optimism for living through attachments they never consented to making, that they make do with what's around that might respond adequately to their needs." It also resonates with Cindi Katz (2008) who shows how young people can become repositories for adults' desires, fantasies and anxieties, casting them as an accumulation strategy to secure their family's economic future. Building on this, Allen (2016, 813) argues that young people internalize these "cultural norms and expectations about what [they] should achieve, and by when" which regulates their ideas about and interests for the future (also see Kogler, Vogl and Astleithner

2022). In her take down of the pressures facing millennials, Petersen (2022, 63) asserts that young people's ambition are shaped by "parents, pop culture, friends and schools."

The imposition of the material expectations associated with adulthood presumes that adulthood is the natural next stage *after* being a young person. Hugo rejected the conventional sequence that tells us adulthood is naturally the next stage of life following youth:

"I think adulthood is kind of a term that has been placed on a lot of us. I think it's more just entering the next stage of development and I just don't know if adulthood is where I'm like, okay, that's where my next step is."

The common-sense of individual development tells us that adulthood follows logically and inevitably after youth. But as James E. Côté (2016, 857) points out, "the boundary between youth and adult can be very fuzzy." Gill Valentine (2019) too argues that youth as a category is ambiguous and typically dissolves into either childhood or adult-oriented concerns, marginalizing young people's distinct experiences. John Horton and Peter Kraftl (2006), however, challenge the common-sense assumption that adulthood is a fixed end product of youth. Hugo shared with me that despite not yet transitioning into "adulthood", he was, like other young people I interviewed, already entangled with the negative aspects of many "adult" objects. I explore this entanglement below.

4.6. Adulthood, entanglement

Adulthood is often framed as something unattainable for young people or something that takes longer to achieve because expectations oriented toward adulthood do not match young people's actual lives (Durham 2021; Sukarieh and Tannock 2016; Lisa Ellen Silvestri 2021; Thieme 2018; Weiss 2021). Even though none of the young people I spoke with identified as adults, whatever their age, identity or socio-economic status they were already entangled with adulthood's bad objects. In the section above, Laurel, Hannah, Sid, Jay and Hugo identified adulthood's bad objects as expectations imposed on them and described how those bad objects don't work for them, For Berlant

(2011, 169) they are in the “time of *not-stopping*,” entangled with objects that encourage them to reproduce *the bad life*, a life “stuck in what we might call survival time, the time of struggling, drowning, holding onto the ledge, treading water.” The people I interviewed felt themselves compelled to become entangled in adulthood’s bad objects to be able to survive in their communities: they worked more than full time (‘grinding’), had the socio-economic responsibilities of adulthood, and struggled to get by.

Valentine (2019, 30) argues that after the 2008 financial crisis, young people and future generations “will not be able to accumulate and consume in the same way” as their parents, caregivers and generations before them. This means that for many young people, youth is a “time of *not-stopping*,” when they must navigate and negotiate a social category that “combines elements of both childhood and adulthood” (Sukahrieh and Tannock 2016, 1286). Millennials often refer to this entanglement as ‘adulthood’: adulthood as a series of actions or behaviours, not a state of being or identity (Durham 2021; Petersen 2020; Silvestri 2021). Sid told me they understood adulthood as a future hardship they had to endure—“I feel like it’s gonna be really hard to do a lot of the adult things”—even though they also told me that being young now was hard and expensive, a “time of *not-stopping*”: “all the things that we want to do now as a young person and spend our money on...sometimes when I think about how much things cost, I’m like, wow, that’s insane.”

Young people’s ability to cope with this entanglement varies with their identity, class and place (Allen 2016; Chen 2018). For the young people I spoke with, the disparities were striking. For example, Aura told me she can’t accumulate and consume the same way a white cis-man can. She said, “the economy is literally so clearly geared towards benefiting white, cisgendered men, and it’s so clear that segregation between everyone else never ended...you just see it every day.” Aura’s comments reinforce Amy Best’s (2011, 916) argument that persistent inequalities in the structural position of many young people shape and define their “adult responsibilities and obligations.” Aura felt like she was entangled with more bad objects than a white, cisgendered man, and that this was a bigger economic and political burden for her and the other young people of colour she knew.

4.6.1. 'Grinding'

Despite unprecedented levels of educational attainment, contemporary young people experience increasing inequities associated with declining employment security, stagnating wages and general financial insecurity (Means 2017; Piketty 2014; Côté 2014). Yet young people are often framed as people who “do nothing” (Durham 2021). But the young people I interviewed worked at a combination of jobs, either multiple part-time, one or more full-time jobs, or one full-time job and a side-hustle, like selling art online, reselling goods like jewelry online, or tutoring in youth action projects in their community. As Sid put it, “we have this grind culture, you know of ‘oh, everyone has to work, you go to work’ and it’s hard to get out of that.” Sid’s experience is common among young people in Canada, whose available employment options are often temporary, part-time or underpaid. They are increasingly “squeezed” by stagnant incomes and rising costs of living, leading to “less time and mounting debts” (Expert Panel on Youth Employment 2017, 4).

Instead of feeling like they had economic freedom or were able to rely on themselves (Silvestri 2021), young people told me that being in that grind is exhausting. When I asked Fatema what she thought about working full time, she said:

“It’s really exhausting. I don’t really, like, dream of labour, I don’t want to work. Like, I don’t have a dream job. I feel so exhausted all the time now that I work full time and all of that effort that I have during the day and throughout the week, so much of that is going to a company and I don’t particularly feel fulfilled all the time.”

Hannah and Gwen were also tired from working. Hannah said she began to experience burnout at her job because she worked more hours than she was paid and agreed to travel a lot more than she wanted to: “We’re expected to do a lot in our roles, and a lot of it is stuff we’re expected to do successfully without the training needed to do it well and in a safe way. So for this particular job, really figuring out boundaries has been helpful.” Gwen told me that over 2019-2020 she hit burn out: “I was just burned out so much last year, like overworking myself.” Weiss (2021, 154) heard something similar in her work with Spanish young people following the late 2000s financial crisis. The

young people she worked with told her that since they were unable to find stable, well-paying jobs, they ended up substituting them with temporary jobs—“traps, responsibilities or burdens”—that tired them out. In *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation*, Petersen (2020, 248) writes that western work culture has standardized burnout. Young people “work harder for less, and blame our fatigue and precarity on our own failings instead of society’s.” Aura told me she was over it: “I’m done, like I’m just done. I don’t have the energy to just keep that charade up.”

4.6.2. More responsibilities + not getting by

To have agency under capitalism, young people are positioned to require adult support or adulthood’s bad objects (Breslow 2021; Rollo 2018). To hold bad objects means you grow up. This means that to have agency in capitalism young people must take on the same responsibilities as the adults who “grant” them agency. As Max said, “if you’re being an adult, you take on more responsibilities than a young person.” Darius told me he was unemployed and had moved home during the pandemic, so felt less like an adult. But many young people—especially Black, Indigenous, people of colour and poor young people—carry the burden of adulthood’s bad objects and do not get to occupy the category of childhood or youth free of responsibility (Best 2011; Breslow 2021).

Indeed, the young people I spoke with had many adult responsibilities even though they weren’t yet fully adults. For example, Max lived with and took care of their younger sibling because their parents lived in another country; Gwen was responsible for learning how to find a job or a career because their parents were “dirt immigrants” who didn’t know how youth employment worked in Canada; Riley lived at home and was making dinner for their family during our interview. Angie had significant responsibilities to her community and her land, and Carmen was supporting their parents to maintain their property.

Taking on adult responsibilities as young people made it hard for them to get by. Dana did not live with her parents but went to school full time and had a part time job and a side-hustle to pay rent and living expenses. Some of her friends who lived on their own and paid their own bills struggled to make ends meet: “I think that’s not enough for them.” Laurel had similar concerns about her friends: “I don’t think any of them will ever

get married or have secure employment...it's depressing to think about how a lot of people are struggling to get by and doing odd jobs just to make rent." Both Dana and Laurel show us that for young people, taking on more responsibilities through multiple jobs or living on their own deepened their entanglement with bad objects—they had to keep piling on responsibilities to try and “get by”.

In their research on millennial women in Canada, Nancy Worth (2016a) argues that “getting by” is a strategy that millennial women use to express their agency through temporary age and gender exploitation at work. Worth (2016a, 1207) understands young people temporarily “accepting the status quo” by “putting up with poor treatment” at work as a form of cruel optimism, because it was clear their conditions would not “eventually” become safe and stable. Tatiana Adeline Thieme (2018, 538) examines practices of “getting by” that go beyond getting through precarious work to “describe a process of being caught in—but also creatively detangling oneself from—the vicissitudes of labour limbo.” Sarah Marie Hall (2019, 69) writes that for young people to get by in (or through) austere times “often requires intricate tapestries of care,” that include “everyday social infrastructures” of family and extra-familial relationships.

Yet the young people I interviewed didn't tell me they would get through adulthood's bad objects, because to them they were unbearable objects—they create a “pressure that points to a system at its limit”. Taking them on would mean system collapse (Berlant 2022, 152). Instead, young people wanted a “less-bad experience” (Berlant 2011, 117) so were loosening unbearable objects, to be able to imagine and get to the world beyond.

4.7. Youth identity (it's unbearable)

“Underestimate us at your peril: We have so little left to lose” (Petersen 2020).

Most of how we currently understand youth in capitalism—including children, adolescents, teenagers, young adults and adults in their mid to late 30s or even 40s—is

like anyone else: productive subjects in service to capital. J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006, 77) argue that economic identity in capitalism is limited to specific subject positions: “consumer, worker, self-employed, unemployed, capitalist entrepreneur, investor, to mention the most obvious.” Katz (2008) deepens this by showing how children and youth become repositories for adults’ desires, fantasies and anxieties, an accumulation strategy for their family’s economic future. In this frame, young people are sold one of capitalism’s greatest lies—that they just needed to find a cool job they love—so they can secure their consumptive destiny through wage labour or entrepreneurship (Jaffe 2021; Petersen 2020; Berlant 2020a; also see Joseph 2014).

In capitalism, it’s hard to imagine living otherwise because capitalism refuses other ways of believing (or being). Capitalism devalues “all of people’s life-making activities” (Ferguson 2017, 2), “destroys the scenes of life” (Berlant 2020a) and only gives us “bad objects to attach to” (Berlant 2020a). The young people I spoke with knew that their identities as young people or adults were bound by capitalism’s material conditions and limitations, and reinforced through their relationships with adults. Their identities were, as Berlant (2022, 171) argues, “constituted by the external world’s force.” Like many other gen-z’ers and millennials, they rejected this. Instead, they showed me how being young at the end of the world—navigating ageism, apocalypse and solidarity—shaped their complex identities as young people.

4.7.1. Being young, “just a young person”

Young people are framed as pre-adults who will attain political and economic citizenship through the completion of education and participation in the workforce. As such, their position as young people—struggling to get by, protesting in the streets, enacting care in their communities and families during crisis—is often diminished by adults. This framing and subjection positions young people’s age-based identity category (e.g. “youth”) as a bad object worth loosening across the category. This is because whether it was parents, employers, media or the state, the young people I spoke with *all* experienced harassment or derision because of their age.

Experiencing age or generational disdain is an unfortunate part of being a young person. Petersen (2020, xxiii) argues that the word millennial is typically to white, middle-class youth: “to talk about our high expectations, laziness, and tendency to ‘destroy’

entire industries.” Stereotyped as the “over surveilled, overprotected kid” who grows up to be weak and lazy, young people have been consistently told they could afford to participate in capitalism if they gave up avocado toast (Anderson et al. 2023a). This totalizing ageism ignores the diversity within age categories like gen-z and millennials (Chen 2018; Strauss 2018).

For the people I interviewed, being young meant that alongside other forms of discrimination such as racism, sexism, transphobia, classism, xenophobia and ableism, their identity as young people was shaped by their experience of ageism. Fatema told me that since she started working a full-time job (a marker of adulthood), she felt “less youthful” but continued to be seen as “just a young person” because she was one of the youngest people in the workplace. Riley told me that ageism was “frustrating” and Hannah told me that in her experience “being a young person isn’t something you want to advertise when you’re seeking gainful employment and applying to competitive programs.” For her, being young was viewed negatively by employers and decision-makers. Darla told me she thought this was because “older generations don’t validate us, like our identities are not legitimate to them, which makes it hard to become legitimate as a young person.”

Ageism is a widely believed to be a temporary condition that dissipates as young people age into adulthood (Barajas 2022). Nancy Worth (2016b, 1305) shows that for young people, ageism can dictate “what it means to act or look ‘professional’” in the workplace, and that “social norms/power structures about our aged and gendered selves (among other kinds of difference) impose on how and if our work identities are recognized.” Exploring millennial women’s experience of work, Worth (ibid) argues that forms of ageism experienced at work are often framed by millennial women as “temporary exploitation”—a framing that is itself a form of Berlant’s (2011) cruel optimism: the exploitation deemed a necessary step on the way to stable future employment.

The ageism my interviewees experienced wasn’t a temporary inconvenience on the way to something easier or better, however, but instead a form of discrimination embedded with others they experienced. For example, Sid told me that ageism wasn’t something they really looked into because they have been “impacted more deeply by racism and sexism.” Carmen told me it was weird for her to break down her different

identities because holistically she experiences lots of systemic oppressions which leave her excluded: “I’ve tried to put those intersections together, because we’re trying to catch up and feel whole or included, while also, like, knowing that we’re excluded from a lot of things.” Similarly, Justice told me that like other parts of their identities, ageism is exclusionary and “can deter people from being able to participate.” Since the young people I interviewed had diverse, intersecting and complex identities and experiences, ageism on its own wasn’t particularly isolating or alienating. Moreover, the shame associated with their generation’s failure to enjoy or achieve capitalist adulthood wasn’t something that was affirmed through ageism.¹³ Instead, the ageism they experienced was a complimentary ground for struggle in a world that didn’t belong to them anyway. They saw that world ending as part of their generational experience and believed that keeping up the status quo by perpetuating unbearable objects would ensure everyone’s demise.

4.7.2. Being young, object apocalypse

Our objects can create whole worlds because they are “clusters of promise, projection, and speculation that hold up a world that we need to sustain” (Berlant 2022, 27). Objects bring us into worlds, shape their edges and generate content and relationships. Is it too much of a leap to believe that when an object fails us, the world it constitutes also fails? For the young people I spoke with, the world was ending and (potentially) taking them with it. Aura told me that she tries to avoid sounding pessimistic, but sometimes thinks “our world is broken.” Apocalypse and the feeling of the world ending are not new ways of seeing the world, but for many non-white, colonized, poor, disabled and queer/trans people, the apocalypse and end of the world has happened many times over.

Kyle P. Whyte (2018) points out that Indigenous peoples have already endured many hardships and see the “current situation as already having been through a crisis that is ongoing” (also see Hsu and Yazell 2019; Todd 2016). Cassie Thornton (2017) suggests that for poor people—“losing economic subjects”—the economic apocalypse and of the world is something that happens often as they hustle to terrible jobs and have

¹³ Young people are regularly characterized as experiencing shame for their economic failures (Raynor 2021, Allen 2016, Pimlott-Wilson 2016; Bessant, Farthing and Watts 2018).

too little money in the bank. Sarah Jaffe (2021, 15) proposes that the apocalypse is in fact already here—“it is becoming increasingly clear that fewer of us than ever are needed to produce what is necessary for human flourishing. Our current world of work is helping to doom the Earth.”

Like Jaffe, Fatema told me that young people were doomed: “I think we’re all kind of toast. Like, from millennials and onwards...that’s kind of my general feeling about it.” But Veda didn’t feel like the doom was just for young people. Everyone in her community was facing the same issues, whether they paid attention to them or not:

“we’re all growing up in the same world regardless of our experience in that world. We’re still growing up with the same climate effects, we’re still growing up with the same level of capitalism, we have all these issues, we have the mental health issues. And even though my issues are different, it doesn’t mean that you don’t have them, even if you don’t see them. You might not believe in climate change, but it is happening to your world. And when our world is on fire, it will be on fire for you, too.”

For these young people, living through the apocalypse—the failure of their objects—is a part of daily life. It means the end of multiple worlds defined by objects: the white, colonial and capitalist one, the one where the planet survives if we consume in better ways, the one where being healthy is possible, and the one where if they got the right education and the right job they would be free and autonomous subjects. Some of these endings were welcome, others brought grief. They felt doomed because they also knew that the systems of power that dominated their lives wouldn’t magically cease to exist and that they were a part of replicating them. This is how Jay described it: “we have to serve the system as opposed to the system serving us.” Carmen told me that they, and other young people they know, have “been traumatized to the point where we replicate white supremacy to be able to survive. To survive their entanglement with adulthood’s bad objects, Jay and Carmen are required to uphold and serve the systems that oppress them—“when the object breaks into you there’s no erasing it” (Berlant 2022, 171). A big part of navigating life in the end times for them was feeling those objects break into them, understanding the edges of their worlds and determining that the system inside them was not what they wanted, even if from the inside they weren’t sure they could even work towards something new and different. Berlant (2020b) calls

this “living at the limit” where you question how you live at with and through the limit, knowing it “can’t be scaled by optimism” or better objects: “It has to be transformed by the way we process how we move through the world.”

4.7.3. Being young, together

The young people I spoke with navigated their age alongside other parts of their identity, and I sometimes took multiple turns asking versions of the same questions about what being young meant to them. Despite this, they were quick to identify which generation they were part of, a youth identity as a form of togetherness, even if their individual identities as young people were complicated. Some identified squarely as millennials or as gen-z, but many felt like they were in between. For example, Gwen told me how her birth year was at the cut off between gen-z and millennials so felt in between: “cuz I’m 1997 I know I’m supposed to be gen-z, but like that’s the cut-off for millennial and gen-z and I relate to millennials and their struggles, but at the same time, I relate to gen-z’s chaotic energy.” Being young was something political, and cultural, that they co-created with other young people who shared the same interests and struggles as them: their year of birth, being uncertain about their future, growing up using technology, being on TikTok, creating memes and online activism, being “messy” in their lives, understanding (or not) 90s references, the position of young people in their community, witnessing large global events like 9/11 or the financial crisis, or experiencing “collective traumas like a pandemic” (Hannah). Being young was something they did together.

Angie told me about how her identity as a young person was complex but co-constituted in relation to other young people in her community.

“I think youth is a collective identity and it does become a touchstone. And there is this kind of thing, like even within my community, where young people are like, ‘oh, let’s just do this ourselves because we don’t want to get those old people involved,’ so I find kinship there with other young people. My queer identity is also important to me, but it’s very much a secondary identity to my Indigeneity and my relationship with my family and place.”

This reminded me of something Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2021, 49) wrote about her kids in *A Short History of the Blockade*. Simpson described her kids' identity as a relation between her, the land and protest: "one of the markers of aging if you're an Indigenous parent is when your kids hear about the protest before you do." She says that "instead of me taking them, they took me," and shares she watched her kids "as they used their bodies to build a beaver dam" against angry settlers and the vehicles of white people in a Wet'suwet'en solidarity protest. I know Angie was deeply involved in Wet'suwet'en solidarity protests, and imagine Simpson's kids seeing her Instagram posts and hitting the streets, heading out to "imagine other worlds" together as young people (Simpson 2021, 57).

Hall (2019) argues that weathering everyday austerity—which in British Columbia is tied inextricably to capitalism, crisis and colonization—relies on friendships and intimate relations to get through and see what is possible. Without collapsing young people into sameness, being young can be something young people do with each other, across their diverse identities and lived experiences. There can be solidarity there, and in that space the young people I interviewed, even though they didn't know or even talk to each other, named things they shared with each other, including the edges of what wasn't working for them in capitalism. Gibson-Graham (2006, xxv) argue that the "possibilities for influencing change are identified in the face of a realistic understanding of the extent and limits of the forces that constrain them." This means that for these young people, being young was just as much about their entanglement with unbearable objects as it was about wondering, like Berlant (2020b), how we'd "get out of the impasse of where survival is the only horizon" to a place where we can "imagine beyond survival."

4.8. Loose objects, choosing otherwise

"I'm looking for accomplices for building other worlds from within the world" (Berlant 2020b).

Berlant taught us so much about our relationship with ourselves, other people, systems and our objects. Operationally, cruel optimism tells a story about people who are attached to objects they know harm them, but they hold on anyway. To me, framing youth people's economic experiences as cruel attachments to bad objects feels less rude than telling a generation of people that they've "failed" to be part of the economy in a certain way. But, for the young people I talked to, cruel optimism wasn't a familiar relation since their cruel objects—the bad objects of an adulthood in capitalism—were unbearable objects and would never bring them any good. They knew through their entanglements that those objects were unbearable and systematic and they didn't want to have to live with them anymore. This section describes how the young people I spoke with were loosening those objects so they could change them from within life (Berlant 2022).

Berlant (2022, 28) argues that our objects provide a "foundational world infrastructure" for us. We can't just lose them, we must loosen them, by shifting, destabilizing, reshaping and remaking them. For young people in capitalism the "foundational world infrastructure" is how capitalism determines the edges, content and objects of their age-identities (young and adult). The identities of the young people I spoke with were wholly determine by capitalism because, as Gibson-Graham (1996) show us, capitalism is positioned as the only economy or way of organizing life. Gibson-Graham (1996, 265) argue that this positioning can be totalizing which suggests that we cannot just "chip away" at capitalism, but must instead transform it "in its entirety or not at all." Chipping away at capitalism, however, is a political project the young people I spoke with were interested in (and surprise, a deep interest of mine). To chip away involves shining a light on the complexity and diversity of capitalism's shaping of the identity of young people.

Sara Ahmed (2014, 64) shows us how capitalism and empire have shaped the domination and control of (and violence towards) children which, in western liberal political theory, is "presented as being for the child." This violence means that regardless of difference within the category, children and young people signify a "subject-to-come," occupying a subject position they don't inherently get to choose (Ahmed 2014, 123; also see Breslow 2021). And if they choose not to grow up into attachment to unbearable objects, their "nonreproductive adult bodies can thus appear as willful children, or

perhaps as willfully childlike, as selfish, as spoiled, as refusing the demand to grow up” (Ahmed 2014, 120).

Berlant, Gibson-Graham and Ahmed all build worlds for us to be willful where we can flail around, test, smash and unlearn our objects.¹⁴ The young people I spoke with are willful—their identities are incomplete and in flux because they are constructed through difference and brokenness (Gibson-Graham 2006; Berlant 2022). With willfulness they break free from the duty of their subjectivity “wandering away from the right path” (Ahmed 2014, 116) staying in proximity to their objects, “thinking about what else the atmosphere can do” (Berlant 2022, 171). Below I describe how the young people I spoke with didn’t think it was possible to lose their objects but were curious about being near those objects in new ways, potentially changing what they could do (Berlant 2022). In other words, by being entangled with unbearable objects, they were able to know how it broke them and how they would break it, too.

Young people were loosening the imposed pressures of adulthood, specifically the pressure to achieve someone else’s version of the good life, through taking on added responsibilities and turning away from the activities and relationships that brought them joy. The young people I spoke with didn’t want to dedicate all their time and physical and emotional energy to productive labour when they didn’t know where their future was going. Angie, Aura and Hannah all participated in precarious, productive labour and told me how they were making space in their lives to take care of their mental health—loosening the pressure put on them to grind haphazardly into adulthood. Angie told me “I say no to a lot of things because I have limited time and energy. And I also have a mental illness that makes it hard for me to function all the time at a really high level.” Aura told me that taking care of her mental illness was the reason why she was dropping out of her undergrad program:

“For so long in my life even if I didn’t like something, I would just kind of grin and bear it. And I just kind of pushed myself through things and it has taken me into a lot of dark places. So I was just like, ‘you shouldn’t do that to yourself again.’ I had a conversation with myself like, ‘this isn’t the best

¹⁴ Berlant is a big fan of flailing and playing around. I’ve had a Berlant quote on a sticky on my computer’s monitor for months. It says, “a lot of people just fling themselves into stuff.” It’s how I feel and what I’m doing right now.

and it's not like it's forever, you know, you can take a year and come back here, like do anything else...it's not final."

Berlant (2011) argues that long-term "embodiment" of capitalism is an obstacle to physical and mental flourishing: "the object is already in them as a structuring fact of life, but they can't bear to live with it in the way they know how" (Berlant 2022, 152). Angie and Aura show us that their entanglement and experiences of unbearable objects have impacted their mental health so they're choosing otherwise. Brunila, Vaina and Toiviainen (2021) show that young people who aren't sure where their futures are going can be psycho-emotionally vulnerable and require support to be resilient. This means that the worlds we're building require environments where young people can do, be and thrive. Hannah told me she could see the long-term impact of orienting her whole life around working and was beginning to shift how she related to work: "I don't want to wake up 20-30 years from now and be like, 'what are you doing? Why did you run yourself ragged like this? You had time, take a break.'" Her affective attachment to productivity wasn't optimistic, it was exhaustion.

The young people I spoke with also told me they wanted to be autonomous and bring their own identities into adulthood. For Sid instead of relying on an identity that capitalist adulthood set out for her, this meant "living my own life and figuring out my own values and my own ways of doing things." For Carmen this meant living in queer community and "being able to bring my own story and other queer people of colour stories into the forefront of creative spaces, more than they are now." As described by Jay and Carmen above, when subjects are so embedded in capitalism they can sometimes replicate the system's toxic traits—such as neoliberal individualism, which you might read in Sid and Carmen's comments here. Deborah Durham (2021, 8) describes these undercurrents as "neoliberal maneuvering" and questions what extent it impacts our affective achievements. In earlier work, Best (2011) shows that predictable social roles for young people became unmoored by neoliberalism and replaced with individualism. Allen (2016) adds that this individualism—a neoliberal logic—makes it challenging for young people to speak about their experience as a structural inequality.

However, I read Sid and Carmen's aspirations above as acts of loosening their objects because of the structural inequalities they experienced—Sid as a person of

colour wanting a different life than the one their white, middle-class parents showed them and Carmen wanting to bring their story forward to build community. While I interviewed them as individuals and they shared their individual experiences with me (because my questions were about them), held together we can explore what it means to reframe their experiences collectively. Writing about Indigenous young adults' career decision-making, Deepak Matthew, Ria K. Nishikawara, Alanaise O. Ferguson and William A. Borgen (2023, 14) argue that it's typical to think of Indigenous young people's career choices from a worldview founded in individualism. They call for a rethink of "career as merely an individual exercise, with success and failures mostly resting on the shoulders of the one making the decisions, and to reframe it as a contribution of and to the community." Here I loosen the object of neoliberal individualism and call Jenny Odell (2019) in alongside Sid and Carmen's contributions.

Odell (2019, 151) argues that the "American obsession with individualism...— anything that insists on atomized, competing in parallel, never touching—does the same violence to human society as a dam does to a watershed. We should refuse such dams first and foremost within ourselves." For Odell (2019, 199) we refuse dams by slowing down in places where we can notice something new, where "there is probably some thread we can afford to be pulling on." Odell (ibid) calls this slowing down and thread pulling as "resistance-in-place" which is "to make oneself into a shape that cannot be easily appropriated by a capitalist value system. To do this means refusing the frame of reference" (Odell 2019, xvi).

For Sid resisting-in-place is an act of object loosening by not replicating their white parents' or other white middle-class families' values in their community, but instead choosing to be with their partner and maybe one day have a family, but also still go on outdoor adventures and choose somewhere to live that enables them to have work that contributes to their community. For Carmen resisting-in-place meant using their creative job as a place where they can navigate and share their identity, loosening their workplace to be a space where their community is front and centre. Both Sid and Carmen were unlearning their objects—reorganizing and extending them through personal processes—and keeping them open for transition by refusing adulthood as their frame of reference (Berlant 2022).

Darius, Fatema, Hugo and Ida were loosening their objects through desires to use their future work or jobs to contribute to their communities. Darius enjoyed making a contribution through his work: “to me work should be looked at as an opportunity to help your society.” Fatema wasn’t sure what her future would look like, but only that “I want to be able to make time for the things that bring me joy, and I want to be able to help with things that communities need.” Hugo was clear that as a physician it was an obvious choice for him to have a private practice, but that he was more interested in a leadership role where he could work in communities to influence healthcare policy. And Ida wanted to work alongside her community:

“if I can be of service to who...whatever their community needs are, health, land, property, power, identity, body, whatever it is, I want to be there. I want to be of service, I want to be helpful. I don’t need to be at the centre. Just whatever helps me help everyone else. Because in a way, everyone else helped me and we are all connected.”

In Thieme’s (2018, 543) work on the hustling practices of Kenyan youth in Nairobi, they argue that the “hustler” isn’t only a survivalist, “but also potentially an activist, a community organizer, an entrepreneur, and opportunistic jack of all trades.” Jeffrey and Dyson (2021) argue that dominant institutions manipulate the future to their benefit, but arguably by existing in an economy defined by precarity and grinding, and through strategies of getting by, Darius, Fatema, Hugo and Ida have all shown how they are committed to shaping their communities and reinterpreting what work means to them (Thieme 2018). They have, as Berlant (2022, 12) puts it, splintered “the fantasy that there will be a world that rewards one’s labours of reproduction” and have chosen futures where the “reward” could be relational through service in their communities.

Finally, pushing against systems of power was another way that young people were loosening unbearable objects. Odell (2019, 61) tells us that the world needs our participation more than ever: “again, it is not a question of whether, but how.” The young people I spoke with refused to be “good kids” who were compliant to oppressive systems and they told me that, for them, this was a big part of the identity of a young person. Veda told me that she associated being young with “your outlook on the world,” meaning being political and active in socio-economic change. She said,

“I’m young because I see myself having to fight for climate change because that’s My Future. I’m young because I see myself fighting for women’s rights because that’s My Future. I think that you’re young as long as you still feel like you have to fight for something.”

Even though it can sometimes feel like capitalism is totalizing and that, as bergman (2022, 10) writes, “the deepening hold of capitalism on our everyday lives has made it more difficult than ever to imagine and enact social change and autonomy,” Veda shows us that she is interested in chipping away at capitalism. More than that, too, is that for Veda the action of chipping is part of her identity as a young person which is her loosening what being young means to her.

The young people I spoke with also showed me how they were participating in the world: they were pushing back against (“loosening”) unbearable objects and could do this because they had a fire inside. Jay said, “I still have an incendiary energy to me where I see things and I want to speak truth to power. And I want to change these systems that I no longer believe are serving people, there’s got to be a different way.” Gwen shared that she had a similar energy, but that it wasn’t solely because she was a young person, reflecting her own complex identity. She described to me how her Filipino identity, and experiences of racism instigated her “drive and passion.” And Aura told me that people would tell her that she was “mature for her age,” but that for her being young was knowing you need to fight for injustice: “yeah, like bullying cops on the internet. That’s what makes us who we are.” Angie told me that she loved the energy of young people. She loved how they will just fix things and get things done: “I really love the solution-oriented nature of young people in that they haven’t embraced so much of the system that they feel that it’s just unmovable.”

Veda, Jay, Gwen, Angie and Aura all felt pressured to choose unbearable objects to become adults but showed me that being young depended on having a certain fire or energy inside them that they would lose once they became adults. As if the work to live through an unbearable object meant they would lose their fire. Berlant (2020a) argues that “there are certain populations that are deemed inconvenient to the reproduction of power”, and they were purposefully inconvenient, refusing to reproduce the power the kept them and their communities attached to unbearable objects.

4.9. Conclusion, growing up?

“You have the right to live and to live well” (Berlant 2020a).

This paper has shown how young people’s identity in capitalism—alongside their other identities like race, ability, class, gender, sexual orientation and size—can be constituted in relation to bad objects. Even though none of them identified as adults, they all told me how they were entangled with adulthood via its bad objects: achieving someone else’s idea of the good life by grinding and working more than full-time and having more responsibilities but still not getting by. Their closeness to and entanglement with bad objects significantly impacted their identity as young people through experiences of ageism, object apocalypse and a collective sense of what it meant to be young. For these young people their objects were never cruel objects, they were unable to form optimistic attachments to them because their entanglement affirmed for them that these objects would never be good to them. They would never constitute the worlds they needed.

Instead, these objects were unbearable, and these young people weren’t interested in being “stuck repeating their relation to a system that has fundamentally thrown them out” or “grimacing because all they have left to hold onto is something they also kind of affectively know doesn’t work” (Berlant 2020a). Rather, they were loosening their unbearable objects—slowing down the situation and walking around in it—in efforts to live otherwise (Berlant 2020a).

By loosening unbearable objects these young people were being willful. In *Willful Subjects* Ahmed (2014, 2) demonstrates that to be willful involves “persistence in the face of having been brought down, where simply to ‘keep going’ or to ‘keep coming up’ is to be stubborn and obstinate.” The young people I spoke with were loosening objects and resisting capitalism from within it which might look like obedience. Ahmed (2014, 141) argues that it’s possible to obey willfully if disobedience is the end-game. Sometimes this means that young people have to say yes on the way to saying no. H. L.

T. Quan (2017) shows us that to be willful is to have will for a different future and to practice ungovernability as we reach for something we do not yet know.

When young people reach for something they don't yet know, unbearable objects break into them and they are changed by it (Berlant 2022). By loosening the unbearable objects of adulthood in capitalism, by letting those objects "become unbound" in them, young people become the loosened object and they become ungovernable (Berlant 2022, 171). Laurel told me she equates "being an adult with not being fun anymore." I'm stoked for her and the other young people I spoke with to grow up ungovernable, flailing around, running away and having fun with other young people (who then all get old together).

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Chapter 5.

Coda

At the end of this project, I remain endlessly curious about how young people who are dragged down by capitalism continue to live with it, and potentially, through it. It's that cliché of asking for mental health advice “for a friend”—sometimes I've just been looking for ideas and inspiration about how to get through myself. The research affirmed for me that young people aren't dupes or victims—they know when their lives and social and economic situations *feel bad* and are unfair. They navigate the edges between taking personal responsibility through individual lifestyle changes, internalizing late capitalist shame and understanding how capitalism suffuses the systems that put pressure on their lives and decisions.

Years ago, I committed making this project and dissertation a force that could address what it meant for young people to live within and potentially survive capitalism, so they could imagine and live in other worlds. By navigating the complexities of their identity, material existence, activism and ally-ship they imprint themselves on the political economic dynamics that shape their lives. In this relation, capitalism isn't a singular entity with the same effects on every individual or group in every instance. As one might expect, then, when young people push or press back it won't have the same effects every time. This makes growing up and out of young adult-hood a time of experimentation—trying things out, making mistakes, taking risks and willing themselves forward with hope.

Each of the papers in this collection has a different methodology and a different story to tell. The first paper, “Adult trouble: Confronting adultism in work and research with young people”, invites the reader into conversations I had with adult accomplices working with or researching alongside young people. I used this paper to confront adultism head on. It describes how adults should be leveraging their resources (money, time, social capital) through mutual care and reciprocity to pass along the benefits of their adult positionality to young people. I learned, from both the adults I spoke with and through the literature, that all adults have “adultist edges” they need to work through to be able to be accomplices to young people. Part of this means they have to shift, crack

and upend the interdependent systems of power that oppress many young people (capitalism, colonialism, white supremacy and heteropatriarchy). I want the paper to be action-oriented, especially since I interviewed practitioners. So, the paper offers four strategies that, held together, are affirming and generative: negotiating power, radical empathy, generating refusal and enabling reparations. Using these strategies, I hope adults who work/research with, or write about, young people can establish relationships with them that invest in emerging and radical solutions, within (and against) capitalism.

The second paper, “Work sucks, I know,” is my favourite child. It is a window into the summer of 2020 and the experiences of young workers in the food service industry who were *just done* with their employers. So, they used Instagram to call them out for the precarious and violent conditions in their workplaces. In doing so, they built communities of complaint and, in some cases, fundamentally changed the ownership and operation of their workplaces. To share their story, I had to obscure and anonymize much that I knew from just previously living in the neighbourhood and being part of the food scene and queer East Vancouver whisper networks. Knowing just how bad these workers had it, I was so stoked to see them navigate their position on Instagram and leverage it to challenge workplace abuses. I researched intensely for this paper, to validate their experiences and develop new methodologies for social media analysis in digital and labour geographies. Analyzing their posts alongside news media and scholarly work I was able to explore the interrelationship between complaint, digital political protest, economic grievance and more familiar forms of worker organizing.

The final paper, “‘Being in life without wanting the world’: Young people, identity + loose objects”, was so fun (and gutting) to write. Over the past few years, I began to sit more deeply with Berlant, and at some point, I started to understand what the young people I interviewed shared with me through my new lens as a “Berlant scholar.” I want this paper to describe how the young people I spoke with reject and rework the good life promised to them if they grow up to be adults in capitalism. I interviewed nineteen young people from B.C. and, leaning hard on some Berlant’s key ideas about objects—bad, cruel, loose and unbearable—explored how they conceive of and constitute their identities in youth and adulthood.

Specifically, the paper addresses how bad objects shape how and who my young interviewees thought they should be when they grew up (even if they didn't want to grow up at all). This paper, though, could benefit from a sibling paper. When I interviewed these young people in 2020, half my questions were about work and identity while the other half were about the potential for economic change and their experiences of and interests in political activism (social media and direct action in particular) in support of Wet'suwet'en solidarity protests, Black Lives Matter, Downtown East Side displacement and abolition. There's a thread to pull there, specifically concerning how they knew that putting their bodies, resources and brains on the line were part of surviving (and getting through) capitalism—that if the system was going to change, their community and their joint actions were an important part of making it happen.

Writing three papers with separate content and research methods was both exhausting and thrilling at the same time. My heart and brain expanded. I tried new ways of looking at some of the complex problems that have been following me around for years. As time wore on, I grew more wary about making claims with my work and more curious about what I didn't yet know or would soon uncover for myself (that someone else very likely already knew about all along).

5.1. Knowledge translation, future plans

The most important message of this dissertation is that young people's lives are legitimate. If I've been able to get this across, that's a big win for this project. However, if my only offering is this academic commodity, I betray my own political commitments (and practices) to accessibility and reciprocity for and with the people and communities whose voices I share here. While I've come a long way from publishing a zine-thesis for my master's degree, I definitely went into this research feeling constrained but curious if I could turn out something more meaningful to me and to non-academics (Oliver 2011).

According to Lauren Silver (2020, 176), researchers have a conceptual and productive authority that benefits from a long history of "extraction and the taking of data *from* communities" (also see Khanna 2011). Feminist geographers have elaborated a profound critique of the production of knowledge in geography. Beverley Mullings (1999, 338) argues that because of their position, researchers hold all the authority when interpreting and writing up their research, controlling the outcomes and the ultimate

theory or message. Caitlin Cahill and María Elena Torre (2007) and Juanita Sundberg (2005, 26) suggest that this position, and the requirements of attending to a career in academia, make experimental research challenging, specifically when the “products” of “alternative” research projects such as workshops, reports, non-theoretical papers, multi-media or “subject”-led representations, carry very little value in academia but nonetheless demand a great deal of labour, care and skill. Indeed, Mullings (1999, 339) argues that in economic geographies, disciplinary work is bound to roots in orthodox neo-classical economics, which puts considerable pressure on geographers to provide accounts of a “real world” that conforms to the “conventional criteria of validity, reliability and objectivity found in quantitative methodologies.”

Keisha Green (2020, 125) emphasizes the need to value different forms of research output equally: “and not just value in lip-service, but real value placed on varying forms of research production by the institution and by our colleagues.” And while creative or alternative projects and outputs are possible for faculty or academy-based practitioners, these outputs are typically insufficient for graduate students’ final projects. For many grad students, doing expansive or inclusive participatory projects can be challenging based on program demands and timelines, as well as limited resources to pay for and generate creative work.

I felt these limitations deeply and approached my conversations and interactions with the people I interviewed for these papers with care in mind. I did so by offering generous honoraria for each participant, communicating kindly and being flexible, and by ensuring our conversations made space for the things they wanted to talk about or directions in which they wanted them to lead. I know I could have been a better practitioner by reducing the amount of time between my last interviews (in 2020) and the production of this work (mostly in 2022 and 2023), and perhaps by creating more opportunities for those I interviewed to engage in a deeper research project that, based on the interests they shared with me, could have the potential to be meaningful or generative for many folks.

In my interviews with young people, we openly lamented together the limitations that the journal article or dissertation imposed on my ability as a person to meaningfully share the outcomes of our conversations. I asked them how they liked to receive

information and how else they'd like me to share what I learned beyond journal articles or the dissertation.

Darla told me, "I like how in the end you're asking about how you can make your research findings available to our community," and suggested I translate my papers into Farsi and distribute them to Iranian academics who live in the Lower Mainland. Other participants like Justice, Hannah and Hugo said they would like me to create audio-recordings of my papers or invite participants to be on a podcast together to talk about being young and sharing their experiences that way. Justice said she liked audio formats because, "I find it difficult sometimes to read studies and findings. Like obviously it's inaccessible and only accessible to people who can read a certain type of academic language."

Others encouraged me to create visual and written texts accessible to more people on social media or websites. Aura and Angie suggested I make short videos for social media platforms like Tiktok, Youtube and Instagram, while Riley, Ida and Sid proposed I make or hire a local artist to create infographics and engaging visuals to share on social media or in public. Others like Laurel and Veda advised me to write articles for B.C.-based news sources like The Tyee or the Mainlander, or use Twitter to disseminate my research in a similar way.

Overall, they told me they wanted me to share my work in accessible ways—using plain-speak language, dialogue and visual approaches to reach as many people as possible—since, as Riley said, "as much as I love learning things, I rarely go digging through papers to get the answers." They all understood putting together a dissertation as a necessary evil that they were happy to contribute to, and I felt solidarity from them when they would say, "good luck" to me as our calls ended. But when Hugo told me that my work will get out into the world if I'm hired into a leadership role ("Like you need to be...your experience and your understanding of all this needs to be promoted") and Aura told me she wanted me to "team up with somebody in the community" to lead a dialogue where we can share new methods and talk about the issues young people are facing, I felt seen in a way I wasn't expecting. Like not only did I benefit from their participation in my research project, but they were also counting on me to get out there and work alongside them.

While I haven't yet chosen which post-dissertation activities I'm going to work on—and I very much have earned a long nap—the challenges and experiences of the young people I bring together in these papers are enduring. There will always be so much work to do, more questions to ask and more problems for which we must seek meaningful solutions. Throughout this collection I point out gaps and areas for growth in youth geographies in B.C., but more data, an actual disciplinary infrastructure and a never-ending abundance of care and solidarity for young people sound like a good start to me.

5.2. References

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