Internationally, there is a growing argument amongst policy makers and academics that broadening spectrums of young adults are 'at-risk' of various types of material, social, physical, and cultural insecurity. In this way, the traditional identification of transitions from youth to adulthood, marked by points of permanence such as stable employment, are beginning to fray. Through various academic, popular, and policy literatures, young people today are imagined as being both 'threatened' by social inequality as well as a 'threat' against which our notions of security and social cohesion are constructed.

This edited collection includes empirical and theoretical work concerning the relationships between youth/young adults, public policy, and educational research, with its primary focus being new forms of public policy in Canada that, we argue, are emblematic of international policy instruments examining the policy and economic participation of young people. Examining key sites of youth participation, including post-secondary institutions, community-based programs, and work/employment programs, the included case studies examine how young people navigate and learn from everyday experiences of marginalization and violence while at the same time illuminating how these experiences are organized and reproduced through the very institutions that are meant to shape young people's engagement in society.
Youth as/in Crisis
Youth as/in Crisis

Young People, Public Policy, and the Politics of Learning

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Post 9/11, our research, like many of our colleagues, has turned towards the complex social phenomena that are related to the global expansion of capitalism and imperialist interventions around the world. Beginning with projects looking at the relationships between so-called “radicalization” and liberal democracy, we have explored questions of citizenship, migration, national security, post-war reconstruction, democracy promotion, and neoliberal social policy. Increasingly, the threads of these activities began to illuminate changing social conditions around young adults. The financial crisis of 2008 and the resulting escalation of youth unemployment, austerity measures, and the emergence of social movements has increasingly directed our attention to the forms of social, political, and material crises facing youth. Our heads were also turned by the students in our classrooms, many of whom live in conditions of economic precarity and are highly vulnerable to forms of cultural and state violence. From our students, we heard demands to address the conditions of their lives, both with activism and scholarship, but it also became clear that existing explanations of the relations between youth, capitalism, and the state were insufficient.

We turned our attention to how youth, understood to categorize individuals from the age of adolescence through age 30, are uniquely positioned within the cultural, economic, and policy landscapes of political, material, and social insecurity. From the perspective of public policy, young adults are a population who require educational institutions and social services to organize their social, political, and economic participation in society. Securitization policy targets young people as the “threat” against which notions of security are constructed (Giroux, 2003, 2009). For example, questions of national concern across Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom include: staggering statistics on youth unemployment and underemployment; youth participation in informal/illegal economic activities and violence such as gang affiliation and street drug trafficking; the susceptibility of youth to radical and fundamentalist worldviews; and the mode and operation of their political expression (Hagedorn, 2008; Kennelly, 2011; Tilton, 2010; Venkatesh & Kassimir, 2007). Paradoxically, social policy also seeks to construct young people as particular subjects such as flexible knowledgeable workers and virtuous and engaged moral citizens (Kwon, 2013; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2015; Tilton, 2010).

Research suggests that there is a mutually reproductive relationship between the erosion of social services at the community level, transformations in education, and
the shift from a professional approach to youth that advances notions of human development and social integration to one based in competitive individualism, criminalization, and control (Giroux, 2003, 2009; Saltman & Gabbard, 2010; Vanketesh & Kassimir, 2007; Wacquant, 2009). Within this shift, several noticeable trends in the lives of youth emerge: social problems stemming from the insecurity of youth, such as poverty and youth deviance, become framed as criminal problems; processes of policing overshadow and marginalize the social service mission of public institutions and hasten the decline in the rehabilitative ideal in relation to youth; there are systemic increases in racial profiling within public institutions serving historically marginalized populations such as Aboriginal and immigrant communities; differentiated raced, classed, gendered effects can be observed, such as an increased emphasis on the behaviour of boys, obscuring questions about sexualized violence; and the construction of a school-to-prison pipeline (Giroux, 2003, 2009; Kupchik, 2010; Rios, 2011; Saltman & Gabbard, 2010; Tilton, 2010).

The age group “youth” has acquired a prominent place in global and national policies. This population has been recognized as “precarious” vis-a-vis a wide variety of social and economic institutions, particularly in relation to interrelated crises of war, displacement, national and economic security, and transformations in global capitalism that affect their political, cultural, educational, economic, and social well-being. Youth is seen as an age group readily “radicalizable”, technologically prepared to engage in “digital revolution,” culturally ready to absorb and propagate ideas, and with an enormous appetite to consume a vast array of commodities. Youth is also considered the force to be recruited, organized, mobilized, trained, or skilled by the state.

In this book, we propose that the field of adult education can expand and renew its methodological, theoretical, and practical approaches by embracing the category of youth not as distinct from adults but as a social category that is being equally regulated and invoked by the same social, cultural, economic, and political forces. At the same time, we speak back to the field of youth studies, which often redirects our gaze to either social institutions/spaces (e.g. schools, civil society, social movements) or social processes (e.g. “transitions” or “radicalization”) that are meant to stand in for, and represent, the experiences of youth. Youth studies is, perhaps, as guilty of fetishizing the concept of youth as adult educators are of fetishizing the concept of “adult”. Either construction, we argue, fundamentally obscures the social relations that constitute human life. As Sukarieh and Tannock (2015) argue, “something happens when we start thinking of a minimum wage worker in his or her 20s as a youth or emerging adult, rather than, for example, a member of the working class” (p. 25).

THE POLITICS OF INCLUDING AND ELIDING YOUTH

We approach the study of youth from our standpoint as researchers and practitioners in adult education. Adult education, which has a long history of education work
outside of formal institutions, has an ill-defined and anxious relationship with the concept of youth. Our research on youth and young adults, which has already met with resistance from within the discipline of adult education, unsettles the well-understood and theorized age-based category of adults. Youth appears as necessarily, and perhaps naturally, outside the scope of a field that is designated as adult education. To make this argument requires notions of identity (youth and adult) as having innate characteristics, whether they be biological or psychological in origin. For example, relying upon the notion of adults as intrinsically self-directed and youth as inherently deficient in this regard, would exclude youth from adult education on the basis of their relationship to formalized schooling. Youth would be seen as lacking an agentic character and too extensively disciplined by the demands of primary, secondary, and post-secondary education. From our perspective, such an age-based demarcation of youth/adult obfuscates our understanding of the population, which consists of a network of interlocking hierarchies of age, gender, race, class, language, ethnicity, and sexuality. One can argue, as Sukarieh and Tannock (2015) do, “...it is often unclear what the term “youth” marks out that is particularly distinctive or unique in society, that is not also shared by many adults” (p. 3). It is this inter-constitutive understanding of youth/adult as social groups that opens up the possibility and space for us to engage with their lives as they are being constructed and (re)produced through differentiated relations of power, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality.

By recognizing designations of youth and adult as social constructions we understand their parameters and meaning to change over time and in relation to political, cultural, and material conditions in a given historical moment. It is undeniable that in our historical moment the concept of youth has particular salience, both in terms of how policymakers, researchers, and corporate executives understand young people, but also crucially in terms of how youth understand themselves. We want to take seriously Sukarieh and Tannock’s (2015) position that the concept of youth as a social category is particularly malleable as a political category, one that has often been deployed at historic moments in which reorganization of cultural norms is key to the reproduction of capitalist social relations. In this way, we suggest that one way to read the papers collected here is not simply as an attempt to capture the contours of youth, or the state’s response to a “youth crisis”, but to glimpse a set of preconditions that are important in terms of understanding the kind of historical change we currently live within. This is has long been an important aspect of the development of adult education scholarship.

Adult education, as an interdisciplinary field, is uniquely positioned to respond to these so-called “crises” and the tumultuous political and material environment that characterizes this historical moment. For example, the field of adult education has made significant contributions to the understanding of the relationship between learning/working and social categories of gender, race, class, sexuality, migration, lifelong learning, various sorts of “skills,” and training (Cooper & Walters, 2009; Guo, 2013; Livingstone, Mirchandani, & Sawchuk, 2008; Mirchandani & Poster, 2016). Canadian adult educators undoubtedly have been at the forefront of theorizing and
documenting war, diaspora, learning, masculinity, militarization, transnationalism and globalization (Gorman & Mojab, 2008; Mojab, 2010; Taber, 2015). Further, adult education has profoundly expanded the body of knowledge concerning activism, social movement, civil society, popular education, and participatory democracy (Brookfield & Holst, 2011; Choudry, 2015; Choudry & Kapoor, 2010; Hall, Clover, Crowther, & Scandrett, 2012; Manicom & Walters, 2012; Mayo, 1999; Mayo & Thompson, 1995; Welton, 2005). This body of knowledge has helped us to explicate the connection between capitalist social relations, labour market dynamics, adult learning, resistance, social movement, and community organizing.

However, after decades of transnational and empirical research in social movements including women, anti-racism, anti-imperialism, anti-war, and student movements, we have noticed the circulation of some key conceptual categories such as “civil society”, “movement learning”, “training”, “organizing”, “prior learning”, “experiential learning”, “incidental”, “lifeworld”, and “community”. As researchers working in areas concerning women, war, poverty, migration, feminist resistance, and democracy, we found these conceptualizations provided only partial descriptions of the conditions we observed in our research. We found, as Dorothy Smith has argued, that “the concepts that interpret the social are treated as if they were its underlying dynamic” (Smith, 2011, p. 22). To address this problem, we had to go beyond the boundaries of our disciplinary home and read deeply in feminist theory, cultural studies, political economy, history, migration studies, youth studies, geography, philosophy, anti-colonial studies, and then return to foundational texts of adult education, including Freire, Gramsci, Marx, and their seminal interpretation by Paula Allman.

For example, civil society was conceptualized as mostly confined to a “sphere”, a “third space”, autonomously functioning outside the realm of the state and market. This approach isolated civil society as a space of hope and as an alternative community structure where the hierarchies of social, racial, sexual, cultural, and gender relations could be overcome and the forces of the state and capitalist market economy could be challenged and altered through grassroots mobilization. The theorization of skill training and lifelong learning, as another instance, predominantly excluded the experience of racialized workers. Studying the experience of migrant female workers’ access to jobs, we posited lifelong learning as lifelong training when it is applied to women of colour, and skill training as “deskilling” and “reskilling” or “skill learning” for the majority of migrant workers (Mojab, 2009). Another study of women, war, incarceration, and violence concluded that we need to expand our learning theories beyond the understanding of trauma and healing in order to be able to observe the resiliency of women, their enormous capacity to resist and survive, hence the notions of “survival” and “resistance” learning (Mojab & McDonald, 2008; Mojab & Osborne, 2012). This reworked observation encouraged us to make critical interventions in knowledge production in our field (Carpenter & Mojab, 2011, 2017). Recognizing the collective and transnational totality of our being, doing, and learning under the patriarchal, imperialist, and racist conditions of our
time, we proposed that our field should cross the network of geographical, social, historical, cultural, and political borders set up for us by the persistent liberal, white, male vision and imaginations.

This knowledge intervention, we suppose, can also guide us in our response to the current economic and social upheavals. The massive population displacement, dispossession, rise in poverty, joblessness, violence against women, racism and emboldened white supremacy, the threat of fascism, and the continuation and expansion of imperialist wars make extraordinary demands on education in general and adult education in particular. Today, global neoliberal capitalist relations have consolidated and congealed their structure and ideology to the extent that any forms of social relations cannot be understood as independent and autonomous phenomena; from class formation to racialization, indigeneity, to gender and sexuality or even the category of youth and adults, these relations cannot be understood as de-linked, isolated, and functioning outside capitalist social relations.

This analysis suggests that we should read, analyze, and understand youth as a concentration of many determinants in this widely confusing, shifting, and contradictory capitalist order. Youth are embraced by this complex system as either agents of change or perpetrators of violence, as consumer/client of cultural products or subject of/subjected to “cultural imperialism”, and radicalization; they are seen as a “threat” or are “threatened”; they are “securitized” or “empowered”, or they are treated both as-risk and at-risk, they are “in” crisis or they “are” the crisis (Carpenter, McCready, & Mojab, 2016). These material and ideological conditions of youth life should be the focus of a renewed theorization in the field of adult education.

To achieve this, we would like to suggest that adult education theoretically and politically is well poised to revive the overlooked notion of class struggle as a point of entry in explicating the lived experiences of youth/adults, and as a learning theory/method where we can all be persuaded to transform our living conditions through engaging in collective action. Class struggle as an entry point of analysis directs us to discover and uncover the contradictions in our lives as an expression of conflicting interests in socially stratified communities, locally and globally. Comprehending life as class struggle will move us beyond a learning or pedagogical approach designed to change “consciousness without changing the world” (Bannerji, 2015, p. 172).

Thus, with this book, we argue that the field of adult education should be responsive to a new wave of theoretical and political debates emerging from other disciplines such as geography, anthropology, political science, women’s studies, diaspora, cultural studies, and in mobility and migration studies. Our field has evolved enormously in the last couple of decades from focusing on individual learning and practice through the lens of psychology and behavioural science to now building the discipline through borrowing from women and queer studies, critical race and cultural theories, or modes of organizing communities and workplaces through cooperative practices or expounding race, class, gender, migration, and work.

As we contemplate expanding our knowledge of the lives of young adults and the ways in which they experience this world, we recognize a hesitation among
adult educators to open up or revisit the socially constructed, age-based categories of youth/adult. While both the definition and social/cultural boundaries of youth/adult remain relatively fuzzy, a tenuous relation between these two social categories has already been articulated (Grace, 2013; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2015). Still, both categories appear to be feeble to us, especially when we want to speak about things that happen to men and women or things that they can make happen in order to change, improve, or enrich their lives. In our analysis, therefore, youth/adults enter into complex and interconnected social, political, cultural, and economic relations. The works collected here are an introductory and nascent attempt to take up this complexity utilizing strong analytical contributions from the field of adult education.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The chapters contained herein represent a wide range of research conducted within Canada, beginning in 2014 to the present. Some aspects of this research are specific to Canadian federal or provincial policies regarding young people, but we believe that they are particular examples of increasingly universal discourses and practices concerning youth and young adults. To this end, we have organized the chapters in three sections to help facilitate a discussion between theory and empirical research. Across these chapters, you will see authors take up, from differing perspectives, various debates, including: resiliency and resistance, intersectionality and social relations, precariousness and insecurity, agency and subjectivity.

First, this introduction and the two subsequent chapters provide an entry into the debate of youth as/in crisis from the standpoint of epistemological and methodological considerations of how to approach the experience of young people and the theorization of social crisis. Specifically, in Chapter 2 (“Youth” as Theory, Method, and Praxis), Genevieve Ritchie critiques a theorization of youth and the crisis of young adults as articulated by policymakers and researchers relying upon the assumptions of human capital theory, liberalism, and bio-cognitive developmental approaches. She embeds this critique within a broader articulation of the ideological centrality of the concept of youth within the neoliberalization of capitalist social relations. In Chapter 3 (Critical Youth Participatory Action Research: Ideology, Consciousness, and Praxis), Paula Elias takes up a critique of the epistemological and ontological foundations of youth participatory action research by interrogating what constitutes “critical consciousness” within the methodological framework. Through her critique, she argues that the hegemonic constructions of choice and desire infuse critical research with youth, thus calling into question knowledge production with, for, and about young people that is fundamentally grounded in abstraction from social, material, and historical relations.

The second section of the book includes critiques of policy and programmatic initiatives across Canada that attempt to address various crises of young people. In Chapter 4 (Alternative Futures for Work-Related and Vocational Education: Stratification and Entrepreneurialism) Kiran Mirchandani and Meaghan Brugha trace
efforts to promote entrepreneurialism amongst youth in Canada, in both government policy and career education literature, arguing that such efforts build upon, and exacerbate, existing forms of social marginalization. In Chapter 5 (The “Youth Crisis” in Nova Scotia: An Examination of Masked Relations) Stephanie MacKinnon examines the problem of “out-migration” of youth from the Maritime provinces of Canada seeking employment elsewhere. She discusses policy response by the government of Nova Scotia, arguing that state responses to depressed labour markets are to transfer the burden of employability and job creation onto youth themselves. In Chapter 6 (The Ontario Youth Outreach Worker Program as Racialized Spatial Praxis) Ahmed Ahmed and Sara Carpenter discuss the development of the Ontario provincial youth outreach program and its reorganization utilizing a model of behavioural change. They argue that through the targeting of particular communities for intervention by the province, the program pathologizes youth of colour and low income youth, constructing them as subjects in need of control by the state. In Chapter 7 (Difference Is: Sexual and Gender Minority Youth and Young Adults and the Challenges to Be and Belong in Canada) André Grace explores the forms of repression and violence faced by sexual and gender minority youth in Canada. He offers a model of cultural work, the Comprehensive Health Education Workers Project, to make suggestions on how educators might change their practice to address marginalization of sexual and gender minority youth.

The third section of the book includes a number of empirical case studies providing insight into the relationships between young adults and the forms of learning that emerge within particular political and material relationships. The notion of youth and crisis is broad and these chapters provide entry points based on research concerning employment, health, political engagement, leadership development, migration, sexuality, and race. In Chapter 8 (Where Do I Begin? Educational Citizenship and Sexual Minority International Students in Ontario) Trevor Corkum explores the experience of young people negotiating sexual and gender identity in the contexts of migration and diasporic communities. In Chapter 9 (“Isn’t the Right to an Education a Human Right?”: Experiences of Precarious Immigration Status Youth Navigating Post-Secondary Education) Tanya Aberman, Philip Ackerman, and members of the Toronto-based Non-Status Youth Network, utilize poetry and creative writing to explore the forms of exclusion and violence faced by non-status youth, specifically the problem of access to post-secondary education. In Chapter 10 (Exploring Transitions of Young Black Men Who Have Sex with Men [MSM] in Canadian Urban Contexts) Lance McCready and David Pereira explore the contested notion of “transition” from the standpoint of young Black MSM, arguing that their particular positionality in Canadian society challenges dominant conceptualizations of youth experience and transitions to adulthood. In Chapter 11 (The Politics of Participation: The Progressive Potential of Young Adults’ Formal Political Engagement) Chloe Shantz-Hilkes examines the political participation of young adults, challenging dominant constructs of apathy and disengagement, and describing young people’s approaches to navigating alienating political environments. In Chapter 12 (Youth,
Crisis and Learning: The Experiences of Ontarian Young Adults in a Leadership Development Program) Scott Zoltok researches a provincially sponsored leadership and social entrepreneurialism program, exploring the dynamics faced by young adults as they confront precarious economic futures while navigating state discourses of individualism and exceptionalism.

The work collected here serves as the foundation for our current project, Youth, War, and Migration, in which we take up our proposed analytical framework and build upon long-standing commitments in adult education to fully explore the lived realities of young people. We argue that adult education already has the theoretical and methodological tools necessary to utilize a feminist, anti-racist, and critical orientation to the study of the lives of young people, particularly given commitments to reflexivity, participation, multiple avenues for expression and voice, critical institutional analysis, and commitment to an anti-oppressive framework. From our standpoint, adult education necessarily involves the ethical, political, and epistemological commitment to fleshing out the complexity of our social world as it is lived and changed by everyday people.

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PART ONE
THEORIZING YOUNG PEOPLE
2. “YOUTH” AS THEORY, METHOD, AND PRAXIS

INTRODUCTION

The category “youth” appears as a stage in the natural progression of an individual’s life. There is, however, deep and expansive politics that give meaning to the category youth. Within contemporary debates, the struggle to define youth has positioned young adults at the centre of policy frameworks, state-led initiatives, and international development discussions, which are concretizing various distinctions between “emerging” and established adults in terms of a range of characteristics, including their civic and economic participation. The efficacy of the category youth can be linked to its broadening reach, expanding both upward into age ranges above 25 (and even 35 in some cases), and downward to incorporate those in their late teens. The ballooning category is then politicized by threats of large mobs of disaffected and jobless youth, or a promise of the economic potential that lies latent within a population of young people eager for the correct education and training (Damon, 2004; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2015; United Nations, 2016; World Bank, 2006). Historicizing the social construction of youth, Sukarieh and Tannock (2015) demonstrate that the category youth has never simply described an age range, and has usually been deployed to serve the changing needs of the elite. For example, characterizing youth as a time of leisure and unconstrained consumption normalizes white middle-class family formations and occludes the economic and social struggles of working-class and racialized people. In their assessment, moreover, today’s understanding of youth has its roots in the rise of industrial capitalism and the associated configurations of public and private spheres. Constructing youth as not yet completely independent participants in the public sphere has engendered a transitional life stage between child and adult, which is both a potential threat and a great resource. The category youth, therefore, must be understood as bound to the norms of social reproduction, and the ballooning of the category should give us reason to pause and reconsider the relationship between capitalism, neoliberal ideology, and the rise of youth as a distinct (and extended) period in one’s life.

The following analysis begins with the observation that across policy discussions, which draw on a framework known as the positive approach to youth, young adults are being described in contradictory terms. Rather than attempting to resolve the contradiction that the positive approach espouses, my analysis seeks to understand the epistemological and ontological rooting that form the contradiction “youth at-risk”/“youth as-assets”. Situating the positive approach to youth within human capital
theory, I argue that dominant articulations of youth are part of the ideological fabric constituting the neoliberal form of capitalism. The contradictory position of youth can then be understood as a tool for naturalizing human capital, and individualizing the social relations that young adults experience as racialization and gender.

The latter phases of the discussion are broadly organized by the question of how to challenge dominant social relations. If we do not accept human capital as the universal solution to the challenges faced by young adults, which threads should we tug on to unravel capitalist social relations? Sociological discussions of youth have been largely organized by a metaphorical transition into adulthood, which characterizes youth as the transitional stage between child and adult. Surveying the literature that employs, rejects, or re-orients the youth as transition metaphor, I broadly sketch out the conceptual moves that gave rise to the generational approach to today’s youth. Although the generational approach has overcome some of the limitations of the youth as transition framework, it perpetuates an atomizing ontology. The ontological foundation of the generational framework mirrors the positive approach, and thus the two approaches articulate distinct yet complementary frameworks for explicating the experiences of today’s young adults. At the crux of my critique is the argument that we cannot understand the particularities of youth experienced today in abstraction from the history of accumulation and dispossession. The discussion concludes by emphasizing the historical and capitalist social processes that form the preconditions for contemporary formations of youth. Rather than viewing youth as historically and socially distinct, I contend that the ideological apparatus constituting the youth formation engenders the appearance of distinctiveness, while the material essence, firmly rooted in the capital/labour contradiction, simultaneously exhibits continuity.

The overarching analysis is rooted in a dialectical epistemology and ontology, which understands phenomena through their internal contradictions. A dialectical contradiction is the internal struggle between two opposite forces that mutually and reciprocally shape the relation as a whole. For example, the capital/labour contradiction is constituted through, and takes its shape from, the ongoing struggle between capitalists and workers. While the appearance of a given phenomenon, such as youth, may articulate the contours of a particular social relation, we must also grapple with its essence to understand the relation as a whole. There is, in other words, an internal contradiction of essence and appearance that constitutes youth. This is not to say that appearances are somehow less real or do not orient consciousness and praxis; rather, my concern is that if appearances are interrogated in abstraction from material essence only a partial explanation can be formed leaving us ill-equipped to critically transform social relations as a whole (Allman, 2007; Marx & Engels, 1970). Explicating Marx’s dialectical theory of consciousness and praxis, Paula Allman (2007) notes that critical/revolutionary praxis cannot be imposed upon people and instead must be chosen through a thoughtful engagement with their material conditions. While consciousness (and praxis) is the active sensuous and relational practices/experience of humans, critical/revolutionary praxis requires knowledge of both the essence and appearance of phenomena. Drawing from the
weighty philosophy of Marx and Allman, the following discussion rethinks the appearance of the youth formation, that is, a particular formation of theory, method, and praxis coalescing into the category youth, and situates this formation in the ongoing struggle between capital and labour.

CATEGORIZING YOUNG ADULTS

Today’s young adults are confronted by a complex arrangement of economic frameworks and political policies that depict youth as lacking employable skills, while simultaneously removing access to socialized services. Drawing a contrast with the labour market conditions of the 1990s, the United Nations (UN) notes that young people entering the labour market today are significantly less likely to be able to gain secure employment. Furthermore, a “staggering number” of young people are not currently in education, employment, or training (a phenomenon referred to as NEET) “delaying their full socioeconomic integration” (UN, 2016, p. 12). In the United Kingdom and Australia, at the very same time that NEET young adults became the target of government policy initiatives, social welfare policies for those under 25 were being cut, making it harder for young adults to access income supports. Accessing tertiary education, however, is also understood as prolonging the transition into adulthood when it is accompanied by lower levels of financial independence, and remaining in the family home (Bessant, 2002; Furlong, 2006, 2009; Lawy, Quinn, & Diment, 2010; Roberts, 2011; Statistics Canada, 2000). What is striking about the depiction of youth as ill-equipped and overly dependent is that the status of adulthood becomes harder to attain at the very same time that austerity measures critiqued so-called social (welfare) dependency. Failing to attain the markers of independence, synonymous with adulthood, can then be constructed as a problem faced by individual youth, and the category youth at-risk emerges as a social problem in need of attention.

Linking the rising global youth unemployment rates with illiberal political conditions or cultural inequalities, youth are described as at-risk. Everything from bullying, racism, and political activism to gun violence or militarized extremism has been employed to illustrate the seriousness of ignoring disaffected youth (The Ministry of Child and Youth Services [MCYS], 2014; World Bank, 2006). At the crux of the youth at-risk problem is the argument that youth who do not participate in the labour market and liberal democratic traditions will have their individual development and personal agency impaired, which is said to breed mistrust in public institutions and cause social disengagement (MCYS, 2014; UN, 2016; World Bank, 2006). Bessant (2002) argues that the youth at-risk category is a wide net cast far enough to include all young people, thereby making policy interventions both responsible and necessary. The formulation youth at-risk theorizes individual development as a problem for social stability and economic growth. In this sense, youth at-risk embody a complex array of social problems, and youth policy interventions are a method for tethering individual development to economic growth.
The category youth at-risk, however, does not work alone. The notion of youth as-assets forms the complementary opposite to youth at-risk. From the perspective of the World Bank, youth is an important transitional period of intense learning when the human capital necessary for thwarting the intergenerational transmission of poverty can be acquired, which will, in turn, encourage private investment in the economy (World Bank, 2006). The skills learned and developed by young adults are thus placed at the centre of an economic development model, and the acquisition of human capital is positioned as the primary purpose of training and education. In developed capitalist societies the so-called demographic dividend that youth embody is said to ease the economic strain of an aging population, and, if managed correctly, can reduce costs to social services (MCYS, 2014; World Bank, 2006). There are a number of observable tensions that arise from the categorization of youth as simultaneously at-risk and as-assets. For example, contemporary cohorts of young adults constitute both a burden on, and solution for, state expenditure. Moreover, no matter if youth are NEET, lacking skills, victims of racism and bullying, or highly educated yet not financially secure, fostering the human capital of youth can transform all young adults into society’s greatest asset. On the surface, the contradictory position of youth (that is, youth at-risk/youth as-assets) could be said to dissolve into the multitude of individuals, or atomized units, that constitute society as a whole. If, however, the contradictory position of youth is problematized as indicative of a deeper formation of social, political, and economic relations, then we need to question not only the contemporary appearance of the youth formation but also its epistemological and ontological rooting.

Before delving deeper into the contradictory position of youth, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider the liberal ontology that undergirds dominant articulations of youth. As Himani Bannerji (2015) argues, from a liberal vantage point the social whole is conceived as a collection of discrete issues, or atomized units, that can be arranged into different aggregations for the purpose of analysis. The atomized ontology of liberalism thus precludes the mutual constitution of phenomena and building knowledge of social formations presents the cumbersome task of establishing links between abstract categories. Both Dorothy Smith (1999, 2011) and Himani Bannerji (2015, 2016) argue that the epistemological fracturing of social relations constitutes an ideological practice of knowledge production that renders the social relations of ruling less visible. More than simply a synonym for politicized discourse, ideology is a historically specific practice of knowledge production, rooted in the specialization of intellectual labour, that grants primacy to concepts, and as such, ideas are positioned as the prime movers of history while individuals are reduced to the bearers of discourse. Liberal ideology, and thus by extension neoliberal ideology, conceals its atomizing ontology by naturalizing the separation of the individual from society and then reconstituting the social whole through a democratic contract articulated as legal rights and responsibilities. The contradiction between the liberal tenet of formal equality, and the observable continuation of exploitation and oppression reflects both the severing of ontology
from epistemology, and the historical interweaving of capitalism and liberal democracy. At the very same time, the disharmony between theory and experience presents a fissure that can be cracked open to expose the obfuscations of liberal and neoliberal theory. Turning now to the conceptual apparatus constituting youth, it is important to be attuned not only to the particular concepts that are deployed as a response to the contradictory position of youth, but also the extent to which youth discussions conceal or mystify broader social and historical relations.

**The Positive Approach to Youth**

A common thread that runs through more recent youth policy initiatives is the positive approach to youth development (also termed the ecological approach). Explicitly rejecting the idea that young people are in some way deficient or lacking self-sufficiency, the positive approach to youth argues that young people are intrinsically resilient and capable of contributing to society (Damon, 2004; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2008). The notion that young people are naturally resilient and capable is not in itself an ideological premise. However, youth resilience sits at the centre of a linear and universalizing model of human development that is oriented by the neoliberal theory of human capital (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2008; World Bank, 2006). Theorizing the transition into adulthood, the positive approach positions the abstract young individual (devoid of race, class, and gender) as separate from society, and the praxis of becoming an adult is conflated with the acquisition of human capital. While the model of youth development presented by the positive approach abstracts young people from the socio-historical relations of race, class, and gender, it must contend with the concrete realities that young people face. In other words, having severed young people from material social relations, the positive approach must create the ideological glue to reconstitute the social whole. The resilience and capabilities of young adults is that glue.

By challenging social welfare frameworks, which aimed to shelter young people from the pressures of the economy, the positive approach argues that youth ought to bear their full share of rights and responsibilities. The resilience of young adults has been used as a justification for scaling back income supports, as well as linking youth services to entrepreneurship, internships, and volunteerism (Damon, 2004; MCYS, 2014; World Bank, 2006). In other words, the asset embodied by youth is unwaged labour. The precarious and insecure work experiences of young adults are concealed behind the ideological premise of natural resilience. Furthermore, targeted as youth at-risk, Aboriginal, newcomer, racialized, and queer young adults are described as facing additional barriers to gaining work experience and accessing education. Here again, the trifecta of unwaged labour, that is, volunteering, internships, and entrepreneurship, are positioned as a method for building capacity, which will help young people overcome individual barriers to social participation before they reach adulthood (Damon, 2004; MCYS, 2014; World Bank, 2006). Funnelling complex histories of colonization, patriarchy, and racialization into the contained category youth at-risk allows the positive approach to individualize and temporally delimit
the experiences that inform and organize racism, homophobia, and misogyny, while simultaneously erasing the historical relationship between unwaged labour and capitalist accumulation. Various manifestations of discrimination can then be treated as ontologically separate from one another (and histories of dispossession), and human capital is positioned as the universal solution. Not only does the positive approach to youth position capitalist social relations as the solution for, rather than precursor to, oppression, but it also attempts to naturalize class relations by imbricating human capital in the process of becoming an adult.

Discussing the social construction of youth, Sukarieh and Tannock (2008, 2015) argue that the rise of the positive approach to youth coevals with neoliberal political economy. As such, contemporary articulations of youth must be situated within the broader neoliberal objective of fortifying the class power of the capitalist elite. In the hands of neoliberal advocates the contradictory position of youth is deployed to valorize liberal capitalist democracy and erase or vilify the praxis of young adults when it strays from liberalism. The more general denial of youth resistance gestures to a preservationist thread within neoliberal ideology. In the aftermath of financial and refugee crises, and with the intensifying rumbling of fascism, the unresolvable contradictions of liberal capitalist democracy are festering. Drawing youth into the class project of reproducing neoliberalism is a mode by which the current form of capitalist democracy, and its corresponding forms of consciousness, might be preserved. The reproduction of existing social relations implies a predetermined end, and as such youth must be positioned as the heirs to, rather than the architects of, the future. The relationship between youth, that is the next generation of workers, citizens, parents, and caregivers, and the trajectory of social relations brings the importance of youth into view; which is to note that at the heart of the youth formation is not only a model for the future but the question of class struggle. The struggle to define youth is, therefore, an arena for reproducing, reforming, or critically transforming social relations. The question that needs to be brought forward into the following section is the extent to which scholarly debates either normalize or confront the existing form of capitalism, and its associated neoliberal ideology. Are youth conceptualized as the bearers of neoliberal discourse, or as agents of critical/revolutionary transformation?

Surveying the debate that surrounds the school-to-work transition, the following section sketches out the epistemological terrain that gave rise to the generational approach to youth. Early discussions pertaining to youth transitions, which predate neoliberalism, have largely been dismissed as too simplistic or falsely universalizing a single step transition into adulthood, and for this reason, I have not included them in the discussion. It is worth noting, however, that some earlier class-based critiques of a universal youth experience, such as Willis (1977), have been de-emphasized by the epistemological trends of the 1980s and ’90s, which focused attention on individual identity formation (Furlong, 2009; Rudd, 1997). I have chosen to pick up the thread of youth transitions after the epistemological turn toward individualism because I am explicitly interested in the less visible convergences between neoliberal ideology and the theoretical framing of youth consciousness and praxis.
THEORIZING YOUTH

From a Transitional Stage to a Distinct Generation

The metaphorical transition into adulthood articulates the idea that young adults move through a set of stages, attain predetermined markers signalling independence, and then arrive at the status of adult. As such, the transition metaphor describes an abstracted process that will be influenced by the contextual particularities of a given milieu. Implicit in the transition metaphor is the notion that young adults have not yet reached the status of full citizen/worker, and that the transitional period can be smooth (single step from school-to-work), prolonged, or interrupted. Following the logic of youth as a transitional stage, the primary role of education, training, civic engagement, and preliminary labour market participation is to aid the process by which one reaches the endpoint known as adulthood. Research done with a transitions approach has successfully delineated the ways in which deindustrialization, the rise of service sector jobs, and the increased labour market participation of women have reshaped the general character of the school-to-work transition (Furlong, 2006, 2009; Lawy, Quinn, & Diment, 2010; Rudd, 1997; Thompson, 2011; Wyn, 2014). Conversely, calling into question the explanatory power of the transition metaphor authors, such as Davis (2014) and Raffo and Reeves (2000), suggest that greater attention needs to be given to cultural or ethnic identities, and individual narratives of young adults. At the crux of this debate is a deeper, unresolvable tension between whether emphasis ought to be placed on either the forces of socialization (embodied in the family, workplace, etc.) or the individual agency of young adults. Reframing the central tension between agency and socialization, we can also note that the transition metaphor is premised on the universality of experience (all people become adults), while agency-centring approaches highlight the particularities of individual experience.

Retracing the conceptual divide between agency-centring and transition-based approaches, Woodman (2009) notes that the current orthodoxy in the sociology of youth is to work with a middle ground approach. Such approaches tend to emphasize notions of bounded agency or structured individualization. Furlong, Woodman and Wyn (2011) critique the middle ground approach for its failure to transcend the false binary of structure and agency, and instead argue for a focus on social generations. Similarly, Wyn (2014) and Cuervo and Wyn (2014) argue that emphasizing notions of belonging in connection with an analysis of a social generation is a way to explore the relationship between subjectivity and place (or context). Although the notion of a social generation moves beyond the false binary of structure and agency, I contend that the generational approach is rooted in an atomized ontology and depicts social relations as interactions between units of analysis. Taking a closer look at how the generational approach has been elaborated by its primary theorists Wyn and Woodman, I find reason to question the extent to which the framework provides a theoretical basis for challenging the various forms of oppression, exploitation, and dispossession that young adults are currently confronted by. Additionally, it is
worth noting that although both authors gesture to the fact that race impacts the lives of some young adults, neither has taken up an explicit consideration of race or racialization. Thus, my analysis begins from the observation that race has been relegated to an individual subjective experience and/or discrete category, rather than a formation of social relations that orient the consciousness and praxis of all young adults, albeit in very different ways.

**Distinct Yet Partial: Explicating the Current Generation**

The generational approach outlined by Wyn and Woodman (2006) starts from the premise that there are distinct material conditions and associated subjectivities that constitute the current generation of young adults. For Wyn and Woodman, a generation is more than simply a birth cohort, it is also formed through the social, political, and economic context that organizes the lives of individuals. The distinctiveness of our current moment is emphasized by pointing to the increasing prevalence of non-standard work hours and employment insecurity, as well as increasing access to, and time spent in, education and training (Furlong, Woodman, & Wyn, 2011; Wyn, 2014; Wyn & Woodman, 2006). A social generation, therefore, is not a universalized phase of life, but rather is a commonality of conditions and experiences that mark each contextually specific grouping of young adults. For Furlong, Woodman and Wyn (2011), moreover, cultural responses to shifts in material conditions “can no longer be neatly mapped onto structural positions such as class or gender” (p. 363). The political economy of what they term to be *late modernity* reconfigures the experiences of young people so that class-based resources are less important than individual aptitudes (Furlong, Woodman, & Wyn, 2011). To summarize, their analysis is balanced on the premise that there has been a decisive shift in material conditions that more or less aligns with the current generation of youth. Social change sits both at the forefront of the framework and creates a definite temporal division in the characteristics of capitalist social relations.

The centrality of social change is not the sole defining feature of Wyn and Woodman’s theory of a social generation, however. For Wyn and Woodman (2006) the implications of social change must be understood through the distinctive features of generational subjectivity. The dual foci of context and subjectivity are intended to emphasize the fact that young adults actively navigate and respond to changing labour market demands or consumptive cultures. Young individuals are said to build subjective narratives of personal choice, cultural capital, or self-management as they attempt to find their place or sense of belonging within the generational context. Today’s young adults, moreover, are said to understand the self as a project and engage in so-called identity work, which enables them to be adaptable (Furlong, Woodman, & Wyn, 2011; Wyn, 2014; Wyn & Woodman, 2006). Viewed through the generational approach, the process of becoming an adult can also be understood as a subjective process of navigating and making sense of one’s social, political, and economic context. As such, the emphasis on a normative or universal transition into
adulthood is pruned back to expose individualized aptitudes and generational values within a contextually bounded social moment.

Having summarized the generational approach to youth, I would like to pause for a moment and reconsider the units of analysis that the framework builds and deploys. The generational framework is premised on the segmentation of temporality and begins from the vantage point of western liberal capitalism. In other words, the generational approach grounds its conceptual apparatus in two implicit, yet decisive, divisions: firstly, late modernity is severed from earlier forms of capitalist production and accumulation; secondly, the capitalist core is severed from colonial history. The uneven history of capitalism, therefore, falls from view as the relationship between self and society is articulated in primarily local terms. Further, there is an interesting tension linked to the framing of history and dynamics of social change. Societal change and subjective agency are positioned as central to the framework, yet young adults are presented as managing or coping with the current form of capitalism, rather than active participants in defining the character of today’s, or future, society. Generational subjectivity is limited to making sense of one’s location within the generational context, which simultaneously elevates ideation and elides the praxis of young adults. Concerned with neither past nor future forms of youth consciousness, generational subjectivity is shaped by, and tacitly oriented toward, the reproduction of existing social relations.

Although the generational approach may not be explicitly oriented toward the reproduction of neoliberal political economy, the framework, nonetheless, accepts the norms of neoliberal capitalism and thus mirrors the positive approach to youth. A clear point of convergence between the generational and positive approaches can be observed through the utilization of the categories of marginalization and exclusion. Furlong, Woodman and Wyn (2011) note “not all young people ‘fit’ into a generational patter.” In their words, “A generational approach may possibly lead to a lack of sensitivity to marginalization and exclusion if the focus is not extended to the different units that occupy a single generational location” (Furlong, Woodman, & Wyn, 2011, p. 367). In other words, the experiences constituting a generation are understood as discrete units occupying dominant and marginal positions within the generational whole. The categories “marginalization” and “exclusion”, however, are abstractions empty of concrete experiences and capable of describing any manifestation of oppression. Empty of concrete human praxis and social history, marginalization and exclusion can only be articulated in individualized terms. Much like the reliance on so-called barriers to participation within the positive approach, notions of marginalization and exclusion construct the self and society as binary opposites and confine the question of transformation to the individual.

Not only does Wyn and Woodman’s theory of a social generation flatten and individualize the social relations that constitute oppression and exploitation, the approach mutes the cacophony of rhythms that make up youth experience in general. In more concrete terms, despite residing in western countries and being surrounded by youth who “fit” the generational framework, the norm for refugee
“youth” includes long interruptions in education (due to war and displacement), low wages, inadequate access to age-appropriate public schooling, experiences of racism, as well as feelings of isolation and alienation (Bonet, 2016). Beginning from the vantage point of so-called excluded youth, we can note that the generational whole is posited despite its contradictory parts, rather than through the concrete particularities of youth consciousness and praxis. A middle-class western subject position is, thus, implicitly constituted as the norm, and the categories marginalized and excluded stand in for the experiences of migrant and racialized young adults. In short, the theory of a generation subsumes experience.

Although the generational framework begins from a different point of entry to that of the positive approach to youth, the shared ontological underpinning orient both analyses toward the reproduction of existing social relations. Thus, the question that remains is how to conceptualize and explicate the experiences of young adults in a manner that reveals something about our current moment and how to critically transform it. On that note, Bannerji’s critique of ideology is, again, instructive. As Bannerji (2016) explicates, when concepts are divorced from their material grounding they “admit no epistemological disclosure as to their own construction”, and as such they become highly mobile, arbitrary frames for interpretation (p. 9). The limitation of the generational approach is not that it highlights the distinctive characteristics of the current social moment, but rather that it does not situate the particular experiences of today’s young adults in the historical evolution of the relations that are now defined as youth. Distinctiveness is taken as definitive, and thus the epistemological disclosure that the youth formation might admit is swept away. Built upon abstractions, concepts such as barriers, exclusion, or marginalization can only rearticulate their ideological forbearers. The task for building anti-ideological knowledge, then, is to reverse the ideological severing of ontology from epistemology, and to understand concepts as particular formations of social relations rather than the determinants of reality (Bannerji, 2015). Taking a wider view of the youth formation, the remainder of the discussion fleshes out some of the historical and social conditions that were de-emphasized by both the positive approach and the generational framework. Situated in the ongoing cycles of capitalist accumulation and dispossession, the relationship between the essence and appearance of the youth formation begins to take shape.

**A Materially Situated Approach to Youth**

Historicizing the relationship between the labour of young adults and capitalist accumulation, Sukarieh and Tannock (2015) illustrate the cycles of integration and removal that characterize the role of youth in the labour market. They note that early industrial capitalists targeted young unmarried, often female, adults as a source of cheap, temporary, and easy to discipline labour. This particular characterization of youth labour was later transported to formerly colonized regions and became the norm of factory production during the 1970s and 1980s. Prior to
the global relocation of industrial production, the labour market participation of teens and young adults in the core capitalist regions declined as secondary and tertiary education expanded. However, the expansion of the service sector, in the latter part of the twentieth century, saw a rise in jobs targeted at young adults irrespective of who performed them. From the vantage point of capitalists and governments, one of the key advantages of utilizing the labour of young adults is that they have been historically constructed as non-adults, which justifies lower wages, employment insecurity, and irregular work hours. The casting of service sector jobs as youth jobs serves the dual purpose of normalizing the claim that students ought to have a part-time job, and that service sector workers do not depend on their paycheques or require job security (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2015). The larger picture of youth labour is, thus, one of expansion and contraction where young adults are pulled in and out of the labour market relative to the cycles and locations of accumulation.

The participation of young adults in today’s labour market continues to be geographically uneven, and international migration for the purpose of employment is becoming increasingly significant. Global youth unemployment has shown a fairly steady upward trend and currently sits at 13%, with the highest rates in Africa and the Arab states at around 30%. Moreover, the percentage of employed young adults living in poverty is above 25% in the Arab states and around 75% in Sub-Saharan Africa. Low wages and poor working conditions were also a significant factor in the increasing willingness of young adults to emigrate from the Caribbean and Latin America. Although the global unemployment rate for young women remains higher than that of young men, unemployment rates aggregated by sex across locations are uneven. For example, the unemployment rates for young women are lower than those for young men in Europe, Eastern Asia, and North America, but significantly higher in Africa and the Arab states. In developed countries, the rate of NEET young adults increases significantly for those between the ages of 19 and 30 (International Labour Organization, 2016). Importantly, this snapshot of youth in the labour market echoes the partial explanations given by both the positive and the generational approaches. Deindustrialization has shifted the labour market experiences of young men and women in developed areas, and the staggeringly high levels of underemployment and unemployment in formerly colonized regions are greatly concerning. Conversely, the picture that the current youth labour market paints is not dissimilar from the broader history of young workers, particularly in the formerly colonized areas, constituting a highly-exploited section of the labour force. Young adults are a prominent grouping in the unemployed and underemployed population, and the ideological apparatus constituting the youth formation is routinely deployed to minimize the rights of workers and increase rates of exploitation. In this sense, youth labour simultaneously expresses a distinct appearance and the historical continuity of class exploitation. The significance of the contradictory position of youth can be seen through the manner in which global accumulation shapes, and is shaped by, the youth formation.
In a recent discussion of imperialism, finance capital, and dispossession, Judith Whitehead (2016) reconsiders the current relationship between the active and reserve army of labour. She notes that in 2012 the reserve army of labour (those unemployed and underemployed) exceeded that of the active army by a billion people. In Whitehead’s assessment, the dominance of finance capital, which is increasingly delinked from labour, has created the conditions for dispossession and accumulation without proletarianization, particularly in the global south. In other words, contemporary modes of dispossession are creating a mass of pauperized people, many of whom are young adults, but not reabsorbing them into the working class; our current moment is, thus, one of labour expulsion (Sassen, 2014; Whitehead, 2016). Whitehead connects the intensification of authoritarianism, patriarchy, and fascism to the global dynamics of finance capitalism and pauperization. Given that the youth formation exists to both discipline highly exploited labour, and silence dissent, her analysis underscores the significance and utility of youth. Her analysis, moreover, raises the issue of the relationship between labour expulsion, youth, and racialization and begets the question: In which ways will the pauperization of young adults reshape the character of racialization and migrant labour in the capitalist core?

CONCLUSION

Viewed through its internal contradictions, youth can be understood as a particular formation of ideological constructs and corresponding forms of consciousness and praxis. More than simply an age range or transitional stage, the youth formation provides insight into the contradiction that mutually shapes labour and capital. While the current generation of youth does display distinct characteristics, theoretical approaches that elevate the current experiences or subjectivities of young adults elide the broader historical processes that pull young people in and out of the labour force. At the centre of both liberal and neoliberal approaches to youth is an atomized ontology that individualizes the consciousness and praxis of young adults. Recasting experiences of race and gender, or marginalization and exclusion as individual challenges severs human praxis from knowledge, and contributes to the ideological fragmentation of social relations. Confronting the social and historical relations that organize the experiences of young adults requires that we begin by reconnecting ontology and epistemology.

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