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## **Participating in the impasse? The cruel optimism of the youth participatory democratic project fantasy**

Participatory research often claims to inspire and empower young people to change their lives and communities but what if the problems are entrenched, and the world remains intransigent? This article engages with a participatory, arts-based youth project – the Mental Health Movement (a pseudonym) – that aimed to include young people in dialogue with mental health service leaders to create change in mental health policy and practice. Despite the young peoples' effort, the service leaders mostly failed to change policy and practice which was, especially for the young people, *deflating*. Drawing on Berlant's ideas of fantasy, cruel optimism and the impasse the article names the youth participatory democratic project (YPDP) fantasy to track a contradiction in participatory research practice. Adverse, austerity public sector contexts have diminished the material and infrastructural conditions required to realize aspects of the YPDP fantasy (i.e. it is too chaotic and underfunded for participatory processes to gain traction). The YPDP is a professionalising, institutionalising fantasy that proscribes the transgressive activism and infrastructural practices of care and solidarity that marginalised communities have historically and contemporaneously developed (i.e. if change within the system is not achieved, change outside is obscured). With Berlant, the contextual constraints on the YPDP fantasy is understood as an impasse, a crisis in the good life, which risks youth participants encountering cruel optimism, where holding onto a fantasy risks one's flourishing. To help navigate the impasse, the article presents two fantasies. One outlines the MHM project, the other is an alternative and speculative youth state that builds infrastructures of support for young people to organise amidst adversity. The article concludes by making the case for attending to the relationships between the characteristics of the fantasies we develop, the contexts in which these are circulated, and the lives and commitments of today's youth.

Participatory research often claims to inspire and empower young people to change their lives and communities but what if, in adverse and austerity public sector contexts, the issues

remain intransigent? There are well-established reasons for youth participation in research, practice and service innovation and design, not least that it is a human right (UNICEF, 1989). Participatory research and practice spans disciplines, fields and subjects of study internationally (Brydon-Miller, Kral and Aragón, 2020). For proponents, participation is empowering, democratising, and contributes to social justice with diverse, marginalised or discriminated against communities and groups (Titterton and Smart, 2008; Cammarota and Romero, 2011; McInerney, 2016; Anderson, 2017). However, established critiques present participation as encounters with tyranny, governmentality strategies and institutional control and capture (Kothari and Cooke, 2001; Janes, 2016; [AUTHOR]). Significantly, participatory research does not always realise the *changes* the rhetoric implies (Salimi, et al, 2012; Schubotz, 2020). 'Change' is obviously vague and problematic but surfaces issues of planned or emergent outcomes, changing policy and practice or improving softer outcomes (e.g. trust, confidence, awareness). Of course, all are important and hard to disentangle.

The article's focus is the Mental Health Movement (MHM) (pseudonym). It supported young people with experience of mental health issues to engage in dialogue with policy makers, service leaders and commissioners (hereafter 'service leaders') through a range of innovative arts-based, participatory and democratic practices. Despite the young peoples' effort, the service leaders mostly failed to change policy and practice which was *deflating*, especially for the young people.

To navigate the ethics of mobilising and managing young people's aspirations for change in austerity we draw on Berlant's (2011) ideas of fantasy, cruel optimism and impasse. We follow studies that employ Berlant's 'conceptual architecture for difficult and depleting worlds' (Anderson et al 2022: 119) in youth and participatory research (Chadderton, 2020; Trafi-Prats and Fendler, 2020; Brunila, Vainio and Toiviainen, 2021; Kill, 2022). Our contribution names the youth participatory democratic project (YPDP) fantasy to track a contradiction in participatory research practice. Adverse, austerity public sector contexts have diminished the material and infrastructural conditions required for participatory processes to gain traction. Although seeking to work with marginalised groups, the YPDP is a professionalising, institutionalising fantasy that proscribes the transgressive activism and infrastructural practices of care and solidarity that marginalised communities have historically and contemporaneously developed. This means if change within the system is not achieved, change outside is obscured. With Berlant, we believe the YPDP fantasy is in an impasse, a

crisis in the good life. Significantly, if academics reproduce the YPDP fantasy then it risks young people encountering cruel optimism – where one’s fantasy risks one’s flourishing. To help navigate the impasse, we articulate two fantasies: the MHM project and an alternative and speculative youth state that builds infrastructures of support for young people to organise amidst adversity.

The encounter with deflation has been unsettling. As we will explain, not everyone in the MHM team wants this article published. *We*, the authors, believe that sharing this account is important as it provides timely lessons for the field of participatory research and practice to reduce the likelihood of young people experiencing deflation or cruel optimism. Berlant’s ideas of fantasy in relation to material conditions and extant social infrastructures provide a much-needed re-imagination of the complex and unequal encounters in youth participatory research, beyond managing expectations (Schubotz, 2020; Brodie et al 2019), saturated fields of positive affect, and the epistemological inferiority of participatory practices (e.g. Bartels and Freedman, 2022). We are [AUTHOR 1], from the academic team; [AUTHOR 2] a youth worker and CEO of a project partner; and [AUTHOR 3] one of the youth co-researchers. This account does not exhaust the range of experiences of young people on the project or the possibilities for what the MHM approach might achieve.

### **The Mental Health Movement**

MHM was a two-phase project that aimed to create new practices to include young people in mental health policy and practice innovation. The project began with the idea of creating a youth state. In recognition of many of the limitations of participatory projects that we would come to reproduce (e.g. Duggan, 2022), the youth state was intended to create something new and untried. The funders liked but did not understand the proposal and offered half of the proposed budget. Of course, we accepted the money. With less money and time wasted negotiating the revisions, and even though it was a feature of both MHMa and MHMb funding applications, the idea of using legislative theatre to enact a youth state approach to mental health was lost and it became a legislative theatre and democratic innovation project as that practice was more established. MHMa, was a pilot study, an academic and community partnership that lasted 5 months. Eight young people created a legislative theatre play from their lived experience and it was performed 5 times in front of diverse audiences of approximately 20 people per time. MHMb, continued the legislative theatre practice

supported by participatory research and democracy innovations. The project lasted 10 months, with approximately 25 direct participants.

MHM did not develop a single or fixed participatory approach, and was instead a combination of participatory research, democratic innovation and legislative theatre. As will become clear, we are not just interested in specific research and theatre practices but accompanying contexts, histories, stories and fantasies. Legislative theatre was developed by Augusto Boal as part of a broader set of practices called Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), 'a rehearsal of revolution.' (Boal, 2008, 98) Boal's work grew amidst a tumultuous political-historical context (e.g. Cuban Revolution, Brazilian military coup), informed by revolutionary and emancipatory scholarship (e.g. Marx, Gramsci, Freire). Boal developed forum theatre, an applied and participatory practice to enable individuals and communities facing oppression to create a drama about their experiences and perform it before an audience of 'spect-actors'. Unlike passive audience members, spect-actors watch the play then propose and act out their ideas to address the issues in re-staged scenes. While a Rio de Janeiro city councillor, Boal developed forum theatre into legislative theatre, empowering citizens and councillors to playfully develop policy (Boal, 1998). After the performance and re-staging of the performance, democratic dialogue amongst the audience advises and invites individuals with decision-making power – in our case, service leaders – to commit to changing policy and practice in their services. Legislative theatre has become a globally popular approach with diverse applications. However, this proliferation across depoliticising, neoliberalising contexts risks, 'a fixation on the techniques more than political analysis and the specific struggles that analysis can serve.' (Howe, Boal, Soeiro, 2019, 2). We must attend to the ways in which theatre can reproduce ideology, for example, playing out issues as therapy rather than challenge (Boal, 2019).

### **The theatre of cruel optimism?**

We focus on an episode during a performance of an MHM play, *Listen!!!* A project worker explains to the audience that a planned interval to allow a youth actor to regroup is brought forward because they are struggling. The audience waits for 5 minutes as the cast withdraw behind the curtain to support them.

Youth leadership was a priority for the design of MHM. An exciting opportunity was funding the training of four youth actors from MHMa to become applied theatre trainers in MHMb.

They co-created the play with a new cohort of seven young people. Of those seven that began, three dropped out and another two attended less frequently. Therefore, the experiences for *Listen!!!* came from the one young person whose attendance was most consistent. They are the actor we are waiting to regroup. In applied theatre, focusing on an individual's experience in a play is often problematic. The content is too close to one person's life. There are *right* and *wrong* answers rather than assembled experiences explored in a safer 'third space.' It might become too personal and painful for the individual to perform in public. These concerns notwithstanding, after the break, they returned to complete an incredibly powerful performance. It is humbling to witness a young person commit so much, to make themselves so vulnerable in public in pursuit of educating and making a *difference*. Regardless of the crucial function of the performance to the project, perhaps the play should have been suspended if it exposed a young person to such vulnerability.

Despite the passion and investment from the actors and spec-actors, the service leaders' responses were underwhelming. Notwithstanding the hopes that democratic innovation practices would hold the service leaders' commitments accountable, in part by naming and celebrating action or shaming inaction; emails went unanswered, things fizzled out.

During a post-project debrief focus group several months later, Jack, one of the youth legislative theatre practitioners was still angry at the service leaders' lack of commitment,

Like my heart really went through the floor. Because I was like, we work so hard and they just like will inquire about you know, you're not even going to put it into play but you're going to ask but like you're gonna get told no. And that's going to be the end of your commitment. Like this is ridiculous, like that's nothing.

One of the youth actors responded, saying,

Yeah, I had to leave like during the Q&A and policy thing because I thought we were just taking the piss honestly. I really did. Like nothing was really being addressed. It was the energy was clearly we can't be bothered and then 'I can't' mindset rather than, 'how can I?' Yeah, so that's why I've really not looked up the policies or done any extra effort to kind of be optimistic about it. Because at the end of the day, it's going to be disappointed if they're not [going to do] what they should, and I don't want to feel bad.

The young people created an incredible play based on *their* experience of being ignored and misrecognized by the mental health system and performed it to leaders in that system. Yet the outcome was 'nothing.' To give an idea of context, at the time of writing, MHM developed 13 policy proposals, with 27 sub-ordinate commitments. One was delivered by the project and two are in development, with the rest allocated to other organisations to progress.

Perspectives can change over time (Felner, 2020), so we conducted another debrief conversation with Jack 10 months after the project finished. He described numerous benefits of participating: improving his acting, learning about mental health, working with interesting people. He believes legislative theatre has, 'potential for helping you to understand your life.' However, he said,

You have academics that are not connected to the kind of issues they are trying to organise their project around. They work with people that are affected and they don't seem to realise that this sort of bubble that they create, that there are experiences outside of that. When I think about how [the lead actor] got treated and there was not like a lot of attempts to intervene in the harm that was done to them. I look back on that with negative feelings. When they were doing the project, they were having all these horrible experiences with homelessness, not being able to get a diagnosis. And all this stuff is still going on. I feel like they got very tokenised, and I feel their expectations weren't properly managed. And that is something that I was part of. We would end each session saying, look I know this was stressful but we're going to do this play and we're going to push for changes and we're going to sit with the people that did this. But that's not a great way to push for change because the people that have been harmed put themselves in a situation where they are really vulnerable and the play makes their pain packaged and palatable to the ones working in the services that did the harm, and they can just dismiss it. And it's your fault because you didn't do it well enough and it's also the fault of the people representing these organisations because they can't do anything. I think there's so much wrapped up in that disappointment.

This is very challenging. Participatory projects risk creating 'bubbles' that envelope marginalised young people but exclude their lived realities of poverty, racial, gender, sexuality

and class-based discrimination. If young people need change immediately, and promises are exceeded or unmet, then is this a case of unmanaged expectations?

### **Managing ambitions and expectations**

MHM sits in a context where expansive ambitions for research sit alongside the careful critique of non-academic experiences of research, which are often uneasily reconciled by expectation management. Definitions of participatory approaches are typically hopeful and seductive. For Cornish et al (2023, np) Participatory Action Research is, ‘an emancipatory form of scholarship... tackling injustices and building futures supportive of human thriving.’ In Youth Participatory Action Research, ‘students initiate revolutionary projects to transform themselves and the worlds which they inhabit.’ (Cammarota and Fine, 2008, 10) Collaborative research seemingly creates socially, politically, economically and ecologically transformative outcomes. Of course, there are more considered accounts of what is possible, “We all see research as only one part of our larger, multifaceted struggles for justice and transformation.” (Sandwick, et al 2018, 476) There are also significant differences between being empowered *in* research and being empowered *through* research.

Participatory projects, however, do not always create positive outcomes. Neoliberalising, managerialising and various institutional barriers constrain or prevent genuinely participatory research (Kennelly, 2018). Participation is described as a new form of ‘tyranny’ (Kothari and Cooke 2001) and a practice where tokenism – young people are present but without any genuine voice or agency – is a recurrent concern (Lundy, 2018). The absence of empowering outcomes or social change is not uncommon (Salimi, et al, 2012; Schubotz, 2020). Indeed, the necessity to create forms of participation can reproduce unequal relationships (Fox, 2013). There is a long history of user-led research not creating change in services, even when the organisation established the process for that purpose (Carr, 2012). Felner (2020) admits the participatory phase in her doctoral research with American LGBTQI+ youth achieved little as it ended early due to issues with the institutional review board. She faced awkward questions from a youth participant who received ‘a few hundred bucks’ from the project when Felner achieved a PhD and post-doctoral fellowship.

The tension in MHM between the creation of multiple, softer outcomes but not the primary aim of policy and practice change is found in the literature. International meta-reviews find that numerous projects have created positive outcomes for participating young people, organisations and communities (Shamrova and Cummings, 2017; Anyon et al, 2018).



However, these reviews accept *any* achieved change rather than monitoring expected change. Considering the risks of deflation and cruel optimism, there are other perhaps more ethical and more cost-effective ways of developing young people's soft skills. Obviously, participatory projects are complex, emergent and political so outcomes cannot always be predicted but expected change is an important yardstick for internal and external stakeholders to evaluate participation (Cook, 2008). Indeed, discussing expected outcomes is foundational to ethical research, especially voluntary informed consent.

Jack questioned how expectations were managed in MHM, which is a foundational concern for ethical participatory research (Schubotz, 2020; Brodie et al 2019). We are troubled, however, by the terms and force of *managing*. Do we risk importing discourses and practices of management and managerialism, forms of moral manipulation (MacIntyre, 1984), as an extra layer between adults and young people? Do we risk reworking emergent and political participatory action as linear and risk averse practice that is eager to make dull and uneventful compromises with power? Where young people have suffered the impoverishment of imagination and possibility under neoliberalising projects, we might want them to believe that another world is possible. However, where participatory research is developed as a form of radical hope (Gallagher, Rodricks and Jacobson, 2020) and hope as hope is *disappointable* (Bloch, 1988): how do we *manage* such disappointment?

As is often the case, the project conclusion surfaced a series of concerns and relationships amongst the team. No project is perfect but the debrief interviews and focus groups evidenced that the MHM seemed to be a success. There were, however, the accounts of disappointment and the project's failure in changing policy and practice. Unfortunately, the research team was divided over what we individually chose to hold onto. Some chose to celebrate the improvement in young people's *softer* outcomes (e.g. trust, confidence, awareness), believing criticising the project belittled the young peoples' achievements. More funding would embed and improve the practice and create future policy and practice change that would benefit more young people. Others wondered whether the failure to critically interrogate the project prevented evaluation of which strategies, practices, and tools were effective or merely presumably so. Such questions were necessary to understand how MHM's approach related to the adverse, austerity context in which it had been and would be implemented elsewhere. This disconnection created the impetus to write this article around the role of fantasy in MHM.

## **The Youth Participatory Democratic Project fantasy**

In this section we present the youth participatory democratic project (YPDP) fantasy and name the youth deflation as cruel optimism. This is informed by Berlant, a world-renowned literary theorist whose work weaves together queer, critical, psychoanalytical, Marxist, and affect theory to account for the complex, precarious and hazardous ways in which people find meaning in the adverse contexts of late capitalism. For Berlant, 'Fantasy is the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world, "add up to something.'" (Berlant, 2011, 2) People are optimistically attached to objects, fantasies and visions of 'that moral-intimate-economic thing called "a good life.'" (Berlant, 2011, 2) These attachments are not necessarily positive or good for us. Berlant was interested in the good life of the American post-war settlement: secure employment, heteronormative social and familial relations, upward social mobility and homeownership etc. However, we are interested in the YPDP 'good life' where participatory research is relatively significant in the institutional research landscape, enabling research that responds to neoliberalising instrumental values of the importance of application, relevance and impact in society. The YPDP reconciles considerable differences in privilege, payment and outcome between academics and non-academics participating in projects. It is a fantasy of academics, institutions, organisations and fields of study.

The shift from youth participatory research to YPDP fantasy unsettles taken-for-granted terms such as *project*, *practice* and *research* as they are entangled with wider commitments for democracy and social justice. MHM developed through a combination of participatory action research (Fox et al 2010), participatory democratic innovation (Crowley and Moxon, 2017; Pitti, Mengilli, and Walther, 2023), legislative theatre practice (Boal, 2005), youth work practice (de St Croix, 2016) and a number of academic theories such as assemblage thinking (e.g. DeLanda, 2016). Legislative theatre practice, for example, is not a fantasy. We can identify specific activities and practices, such as playing theatre games to build trust. What makes it powerful, however, are the connections with forms of normativity, genres and fantasies of democracy and social justice. As the participants attach to objects, they provide meaning and significance. Elements of fantasy creep, inspire, move, and leave participants open to new possibilities but also cruel optimism. Of course, fantasies are non-trivial and do not overdetermine failure.

The crucial issue is whether the YPDP fantasy's necessary material conditions and social infrastructures exist in adverse, austerity contexts. Here, 'infrastructure is defined by the movement or patterning of social form. It is the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure.' (Berlant, 2016, 393) Although evidence specifically on participatory research is limited (e.g. Bartley, 2020), neoliberalising, austerity policy making and the COVID-19 Pandemic have diminished capacities and infrastructures that support participation in research and political processes (Hall, 2019, Auerbach et al 2023) and public and third sector organisations engaging with disadvantaged groups, young people and/or innovation (Mattheys, 2015, Bell et al 2019; Fairchild, 2019; Rogowski, 2021; Rimmer 2020; Hastings, Matthews and Wang, 2023). In public services, austerity and public sector reorganisation create contexts in which co-production, 'risks reproducing austerity whilst promising a radical solution.' (Habermehl and Perry, 2021: 559)

Amongst these conditions, cruel optimism is an encounter with the disjunction between our fantasies and life in actuality,

... optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming. (Berlant, 2011: 2)

Cruel optimism risks imperilling our health, wealth and happiness. Where, for example, aspirations of rugged individualism end in failure, debt and personal defeat or where dieting becomes an eating disorder (Berlant, 2007, 2011). If the YPDP is an academic fantasy that confirms an academic's position but somehow ineffective for generating the types of change young people require, especially in austerity contexts, then this creates an unsettling distribution of the causes and encounters with cruel optimism.

### **Fantasies cruel or not?**

Hopes and fantasies are recurrent features of both youth and struggles to improve society. We do intend to police the illusory in fantasy but rather understand the practices and imaginaries of participatory worldbuilding. Our concerns are how particular fantasies are

conjured and circulated, and whether the requisite material bases and infrastructures of care are available and accessible or can be developed and sustained. A significant focus is to parse the components of specific fantasies, determine whose fantasies they are and what is at stake: a good way of living otherwise or cruel optimism.

Jack's idea of the *bubble* questions the YPDP's capacity to develop the types of support can care the young people needed. We thought MHM support for the young people was expansive: living wage remuneration, on-the-project pastoral support and connections to partner youth organisations. These were important, but practices of care seemed to reproduce the project's aim of amplifying the young people's voice rather than address their lived experiences of poverty, absent mental health support and trauma. This is an excerpt from a debrief focus group:

Researcher: Have people been actively like helping you and like taking care of you people like, like calling you outside of the project, what's been happening like that?

Young person 1: Personally no, you know, during the project, there has been outreach so you know, when we're in sessions, or even if we're just on Zoom or something, if, let's say I'm trying to get a point across or say something and someone can't hear me but someone can, someone else would always speak out and be like, Oh, I can hear someone in the background or do the same thing for others...

This inclusion and amplification of voice is significant, especially when these young people have felt excluded and ignored but it is the YPDP fantasy to amplify voice to create change. We find the beginnings of a new, youth fantasy in Jack's description of his non-formal youth participation beyond MHM,

I'm in this grassroots trans group, well there's not really a youth group, it's kind of like a guerrilla youth group. Our actual thing got shut down so we had to keep it going to the extent that we can, as much as we can. The important thing is that care has to be unconditional. You have to show up for people. There is this thing where you don't sort of partition our lives. We have a lot of homelessness in our community like I have had friends and they've had to set up Go Fund Me for their living expenses. It's sort of a thing where people are experiencing so many things at the same time and all of those things are impacted by their transness so you

have to support all of the person as much as you can. You have to have that willingness to kind of like potentially engage in things that aren't what we had in mind when we set this thing up. We've been talking about Palestine recently, like how does *that* fit into our struggles?

Jack describes a form of participation beyond the MHM project's scope, but it captures the expansive and necessary mutual aid and solidarity that trans youth require to live amongst late capitalism's austerity and punitive 'culture wars' (Todd, 2022; Griffin et al, 2023). The YPDP fantasy proposes that marginalised young people's diverse lived experience can be augmented with academic funding, expertise, status and capacity to invent new ways for developing change. Marginalised young people are not diverse data points to enrich research. We must attend to the contexts, spaces and styles of formal, non-formal and informal participation that projects instantiate. For example, formal youth participation typically excludes, 'youth cultural practices, conflicts with authorities, "filling the gaps" of public action and/or meeting the needs of other societal groups and finally "riots" and "unrest".' (Pohl et al, 2020, p.3) This is not about riots per se but how the constitution of research defines what young people *are* and how they can be present and visible in the knowledge produced. It is the failure to account for historical and broader forms of discrimination written through, for example, the legal system, professions and practice that opens the door to cruel optimism. We now explore the MHM fantasy and an alternative, the youth state, organised around infrastructures of care and mutual aid.

### ***MHM's YPDP fantasy***

MHM's fantasy was including marginalised young people in policy and practice development through participation, creativity and commitment. It was connected with practices, tableaux, iconography and rhetoric of participatory democracy and radical politics. Legislative theatre, for example, has a rich history with connections to radical Latin American politics and emancipatory pedagogy. A crucial event in the legislative theatre process is staging the performance so the service leaders are informed and inspired to make concrete policy proposals and then deliver them. This requires service leaders with the capacity to propose and deliver a commitment. The current lack of delivered proposals suggests this requirement met with limited success. How then did the fantasy relate to the material conditions and supportive infrastructures?

As described above, decades of neoliberalising project(s) in the UK has devastated the capacities and infrastructures required for *this* YPDP fantasy. After the 15-year intensification of the neoliberalising austerity regime, the invited service leaders were working in youth services that are in crisis. The mental health system in the UK has been diminished by chronic underfunding, staff shortages and burnout. Growing inequality and poverty have worsened young people's mental health (ACP, 2018; McCurdy and Murphy, 2024). 1 in 5 (23.3%) of 17 to 19-year-olds in the UK have a probable mental health disorder in 2023 (nhs.uk, 2024). Yet, 270,300 children and young people are waiting for mental health support after a referral to Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and 40,000 children experienced a wait of over two years (Children's Commissioner for England, 2024). It is clearly a challenge for a small-scale YPDP to gain traction within the youth mental health context. Thinking with the fantasy requires not just the production and realisation of changes but analyses of the types of change proposed. Proposals were made by both services leaders following the performances or young people during discussions. The aspiration for mental health provision to recognise diversity, individuality and identity was a common feature of the proposals. The proposal below emerged from the concerns of black youth participants, whose identities are subject to criminalisation and police harassment (Perera, 2020), specifically an encounter with the police that exacerbated a mental health crisis,

The police should only attend mental health home visits in the last resort, after a full risk assessment, and wearing plain clothes and limited/hidden personal protection equipment. The police should receive training from young people to increase their awareness of the issues involved when making home visits.

We are concerned that individualising accounts of youth lived experience (e.g. Aisha's traumatising encounter with the police as a black youth) were presented to service leaders with the aim of securing concrete commitments for change within the existing service rationalities and logics. We question whether such proposals sufficiently engage with the entrenched forms of racism and discrimination that are built into policing (Joseph–Salisbury, Connelly and Wangari-Jones, 2021; Day and McBean, 2022).

MHM did not believe that change would be easy or quick, yet there was a contradiction at the centre of *this* YPDP fantasy. Marginalised young people joined a process with the resources and privileges typically unavailable to such groups (e.g. funding, legitimacy,

expertise) but this was entirely conditional on not engaging with disruptive, collective and political action that marginalised communities have historically required to achieve change and fair treatment in society (e.g. Ashley, 2015). The YPDP produces and reproduces forms of academic sovereignty, understood as, 'a fantasy of self-ratifying control over a situation or space—a stance that might or might not be sanctioned by norm or law.' (Berlant, 2017, 308) Although the YPDP unsettles and reallocates power, the diverse legal, ethical and reputational parameters of a funded, academic-led project impose hard barriers as to what is possible or not.

The effects of such constraint are evident in the democratic practices developed to hold the service leaders accountable. Meetings were hosted with the service leaders; blogs, videos and podcasts, emails and Tweets, a manifesto were created and distributed; and there were plans to lobby MPs. The service leaders' proposals were published online to 'name and shame' inaction or celebrate action. Arguably these are how privileged, middle-class, straight, white, cis-gender and professional people think change is realized, and for *them* it might be. Historically this is not true for the marginalized groups that are necessary for the YPDP fantasy. MHM did not build on the established histories of transgressive, political, collective, direct action nor the building of infrastructures of care and mutual aid to demand equal recognition in society and fair treatment from services (e.g. Ashley, 2015; Samuel, 2017; Edelman, 2020; Rose, 2018). The apparent depoliticization, deradicalization and professionalisation of youth participation in mental health is significant in the contexts of the *psy*-professions pathologizing dissent and oppressing communities (Cohen, 2016). It ignores the radical histories of survivor movements, working class mental health initiatives, and Mad Studies in challenging the epistemic, political and cultural bases of the mental health system (Rogers and Pilgrim, 2021; Proctor, 2024). Such professionalised approaches to change obscure and erase collective practices of struggle and the radical imagination (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014; Dyke, Meyerhoff and Evol, 2018; Fisher, 2018; Hardt, 2023).

The YPDP fantasy invites young people into the academic project's sovereign space while separating them as individuals with biographies, lived experiences, skills and capacities, ideas and hopes – or *data* – from their wider identities, forms of belonging, structural critiques of power, and collective struggles. This is not incidental. The individualisation and the separation of individual young people from the collective identities and histories of contestation and

struggle is functional to the neoliberalising ideological project. Diverse biopolitical regimes and governmentality strategies produce and reproduce the liberal, sovereign, autonomous subjectivity as part of regulating populations and forms of life (Lemke, 2001; Miller and Rose, 2008; Rose and Abi-Rached 2013). These practices, including research, create hierarchies of lives, differentiating ways of living that matter or not. Atop this hierarchy is the liberal, autonomous sovereign subject whose claimed rationality and sanity were only part of the dark shadow it casts over forms of *inferior* life defined by mental health and disability stigma, racism, sexism, homophobia, human-centrism, and forms of colonial and imperial violence (e.g. Harney and Moten, 2021; Shomura, 2022). Excluded ways of living often require collective and transgressive struggle to become visible and audible in society yet this is effectively proscribed in the YPDP fantasy. Inviting marginalised young people into change processes that abstract marginalised young people from the strategies required by marginalised communities risks young people encountering cruel optimism.

### ***Youth State Fantasy***

As outlined above, the original inspiration for MHM was to create a youth state. We can think of this as a fantasy, speculative proposition or real utopia (Wright, 2010; [AUTHOR 2]). Either way, it was a relatively simple idea: what if there was a state run by-and-for young people with adults working with-and-for them ([Author 3])? This is inspired by pioneering academic, artist and activist interventions that refuse the unitary, reified and essentialised state (e.g. King, parliament, military). Instead, we recognise the considerable diversity in state arrangements (Jessop, 2016; Dhawan, 2020) and learn from historical, fictive and/or prefigurative states that provide new parameters for critique (Cooper, 2020) and conjure new states into being (De Cesari, 2020). The proposition hinges on the difference of thinking with and enacting a state or state-like form, rather than, for example, a youth project, network or assembly. Of course, a youth state would not have the capacity to tax and raise revenue to invest in services. It is easy, therefore, to dismiss it in the pejorative sense as merely utopian and a distraction compared to engaging with the (actual) state's under-resourced mental health provision. If we are, however, to begin to articulate new youth fantasies for collective political action, Berlant reminds us of the institutional scaffolding, material and social infrastructures required to prevent fantasies becoming cruel (Duschinsky and Wilson, 2015). The youth state could hold these new fantasies and the attached young people.



To understand the rationale for the youth state it is helpful to think about the cultures and practices of radical, collective and transgressive politics. We have argued, the MHM and related YPDP fantasies do not achieve the anticipated changes in policy and practice because they are too constrained by the ethical, legal and reputational barriers to take action that will demand change. Of course, there is no guaranteed approach to change policy. Collective, transgressive and radical action usually fails or achieves initial successes only to create the conditions for hegemonic blocs to reimpose oppressive systems (Nunes, 2021; Bevins, 2023). Our interest is not whether policy change is achieved through breaking rules or, more concretely, windows because this is not all that happens in these spaces. We are interested in translating, building and nurturing the relational practices of mutual aid, solidarity and self-care that accompany and are the foundation of anarchist, radical, queer and environmental communities (Berlant, 2022; Thomson, 2018). For example, a youth activist in the Extinction Rebellion understood their participation as being, ‘part of a “radical community” “radical” in its “kindness”’ (Pickard, Bowman and Arya, 2020, 266). Rather than mobilising young people to ask service leaders to propose solutions to their problems, infrastructures of non-sovereign relationality such as, ‘Mutual aid projects are participatory, solving problems through collective action rather than waiting for saviors.’ (Spade, 2020: 17) These practices were essential to Jack and his trans peers, when they had to self-organise when their formal group was closed due to a combination of austerity and transphobic politics.

Non-sovereign relational practices extant in mutual aid communities are crucial for navigating cruel optimism (Berlant, 2022). Instead of the liberal, sovereign subjectivity that tends towards cruel optimism, non-sovereign relationality, ‘assumes that there is no sovereignty outside of relationships, and that we are always in a loosely woven state of becoming.’ (Berlant, 2019, np). It is this connective, relational and immanent focus on what is possible and can be achieved within and across those present is central to the youth state but also productive in navigating the fantasies that risk encounters with cruel optimism.

There is something of the ‘bait-and-switch’ in YPDPs that the youth state proposition helps reverse. Participatory projects typically promise funders they will fix democracy or climate change but, for obvious reasons, celebrate the knowledge created and the improvement of youth participants’ softer outcomes. Instead, the youth state presents a fundable idea that primarily focuses working young people to build the relationships, practices and infrastructures of care, support and mutual aid and then seeing what emerges from that.

What could these young people do if they identified issues they cared about and engaged as a state? This focus on young people acting in relation to a state creates an alternative to *solutions* to youth mental health such as just more participation or the promotion of (neoliberalising) self-help approaches that push the responsibility onto young people and families for dealing with issues that have structural and systemic causes ([Author 4]).

### **Impasse passim or anxious writing**

This was a challenging article to write which we, in part, attribute to the impasse of the YPDP fantasy. The impasse is an anxious time, where our genres and fantasies become unsettled and we search for new ways of meaning making. There is a case, however, that the YPDP's genres and forms of theory building are inappropriate for navigating its impasse.

The disagreement amongst the MHM team was seen as controversial. Two of the research team submitted formal complaints with the MMU ethics committee, asserting that a draft of this article was unethical and ought not be published. The committee took these objections very seriously, with augmented scrutiny of the article. Our right to publish was upheld. The journal reviewers and editors were very supportive, but it is clear there is uneasiness that not all of those involved in MHM support this publication. Although there are genres of academic writing that acknowledge mess and failure in research (Law, 2004; Davies, Disney, Harrowell, 2021), we cannot find research where there are more substantive disagreements on ethics and outcomes. Instead, we see sanitised accounts of ultimately successful and ethical research (Horton, 2020) that does not do justice to the complexities, intrigues, contestation and politics within-and-across research teams. It is perhaps interesting that ethical issues are often written about in relation to inequality, such as the ethics of academics working with non-academics or junior academics rather than *equals* writing divergent accounts of research. The back-and-forth of query and response was helpful but at times seemed to question our judgement and experience. It has been a time of considerable anxiety and uncertainty. In response, Duggan wrote a defensively dense theoretical draft proposing a genre of writing for academic social responsibility (Resnik and Elliott, 2016; Anand, 2020), in relation to relevant ethics guidelines (e.g. BPS, 2021; BERA 2018). This required the communicate of issues significant to be in the public interest. A reviewer felt the claim was exaggerated. Worse, it fixed and foreclosed the event of the youth disappointment. The idea was dropped. The writing was sustained through conversations with colleagues, learning of their regret at not publishing dissenting views about research that had failed or become problematic.

Conversations with colleagues, informally and in seminars, have contextualised our experience in MHM. Below is an aggregation of illustrative, anonymised views,

*These projects aren't actually meant to work. Failure teaches young people they need to resist. We do these projects because we cannot not do them. We can only hope to develop a series of projects, where funding allows, across a career, making small differences here and there.*

It is difficult to interpret these comments but they capture something important. The profound inequality in society means we must act. However, the modest funding available for participatory projects within the adverse contexts of the English public sector means there is a low probability of creating meaningful impacts (e.g. McCarry, 2010). Jack's testimony raises the question, amongst all the experimentation and learning over an academic career, how many young people might encounter cruel optimism?

We were often asked, *if we cannot do this [the YPDP], then what can we do?* There are many possible implications for this question, but it seemed to speak from the impasse, Berlant's name for how we live on in response to, 'a crisis in the good life.' (Shomura, 2022, 835) Impasses are times and spaces in which our ways of making sense and meaning break down. We lose the familiar orientations of our usual normative frameworks and narrative genres (Berlant, 2011). An impasse is a crisis in the good life, but it is not simply a crisis. Fisher (2018) explains, 'Where crisis finds no decision, there we discover the impasse.' Peterson (1996) locates sources and causes of impasse in,

a society's repeated failure to resolve problems that represent threats to its constitutive institutions... [an issue] reflects an impasse if it figures in the disintegration of institutions where alternative ways of organizing social life cannot be found. (22-23)

Significantly, participatory research has been developed to engage with all Peterson's examples of the impasse, including: violence (McIntyre, 2000), economic issues around debt and inequality (Banks, 2015), ecocide and climate chaos (Darmody, 2022). It is not clear what can we expect participatory research projects to achieve in relation to such considerable issues. Impasses, however, are not necessarily negative but potential events of (un)learning and adapting to living life otherwise (Shomura, 2022, 837). Participatory research with its attention to ideas, hopes and relationships ought to be a crucial tool for such adaptation.

There is a case, however, the YPDP is ill-suited to navigate the impasse in which we are advised to sense, act and attune to an atmosphere of flat affect, 'a genre of symbolic practice [that] focuses attention on the ways in which events can be sensed...' (Duschinsky and Wilson, 2015, 185) Here flat affect equates to the level head of experience. We, the authors, have decades of experience working across multiple projects, sectors and spaces of youth participation, as young people and as adults. Our experience allows us to dwell in times and spaces in which the social field is not saturated by prevailing normativities and genres (Berlant, 2016), resisting the pulls and hails for success by labelling *this* as democracy and *that* as participation.

As a genre of academic practice, participatory research resists learning the lessons of the impasse on three levels: One, there are pressures for academic research to deliver successful projects that lead to world-leading publications and excellent research impact. Two, there is an uneasiness in the encounters between more privileged academics/practitioners and young people that are usually present in research due to marginalised identities and positions. This inequality is perhaps the catalyst for the recurrent concern with for example equality, empowerment, benefit and payment or in our case *change* through the research encounter. In YPDP projects genres of participation, empowerment, success, personal growth and youth leadership discursively and affectively saturate the social field. From the awkward group formation to the sense of achievement discussed in debrief phase, we feel the attachments and affective binds of the lessons learned, progress made, findings found and the stirrings of another project. Indeed, in holding onto the disappointment, are we undermining the young people's achievements? Three, participatory research suffers from an apparent epistemological inferiority. For example, the political nature of participatory research is defended from anxieties that it is a form of bias (e.g. Stewart and Lucio, 2017). In an editorial on Action Research for Transition (ART), Bartels and Friedman (2022) differentiate 'dark' (acknowledging 'ambiguities, mistakes, frustrations, tensions, conflicts and disappointments' in research (p.99)) and 'bright' sides of action research, identifying the responsibility to celebrate and 'showcase' the potential of our practice to address global crises like climate chaos. This pressure to uphold the respectability and utility of the field risks instrumentalising research practice, creating tensions between communicating young peoples' deflating encounters and the potential benefits of the research practice.

There were many voices and many concerns in the production of this article but too many were those of the professional, academic and practitioner, in short, the *adult*. In participatory practice we must navigate the impasse with young people. Daniel, youth co-researcher and co-author, writes,

One thing I've learned through writing this article, there is a lot of focus on young people, how we are doing, whether we are facing issues with money, housing, food, mental health, etc. We're struggling to survive. But my experience in MHM is that you guys 'struggle to survive' as professionals. If you talk about failure, then funding dries up. If you make waves, nothing will happen. But failure still happens, whether or not you talk about it, and not talking about it has led to this kind of complacency about change. No facilitator or decision-maker seems to really expect change to happen, nor can make it happen. And the promises made me feel like they're pinning what little hope remains on the work and effort of young people. This effort, without visible result, has led to a lot of experienced young activists and participants growing cynical or tired of 'institutional promises' and can lead to bunching well-meaning activists who are trying to help in with obstructionist politicians and businesses. We're all struggling to believe and see a way forward, but we have to name the problem and talk about it to actively create that change. Even if we disagree over the points of the project, this conversation is how we move forward.

## **Conclusion**

It is hard to question the YPDP fantasy's promises that the lived experience of diverse, marginalised young people can be augmented with academic funding, expertise, status and capacity to invent new ways of developing change, democracy and social justice. Whether in mental health, poverty, inequality, precarity and imminent climate chaos the need for such change is inarguable. YPDP's are animated by good intentions to do something, anything about these glaring injustices, even without sufficient budgets, capacities and timeframes to realise meaningful change. Holding onto the deflation, separating it from the range of positive and negative experiences and emotions, feels awkward and has created considerable anxiety. We remain convinced of the importance of holding the deflation, as it identifies how the normative saturation of the field – that youth democratic participatory research is inherently

positive – creates the conditions for young people to encounter cruel optimism. Participatory spaces are typically vibrant and generative with the creation of diverse outcomes (e.g. trust-building, awareness-raising etc). Something always *happens*. Yet, literature reviews on participatory practice do not differentiate between anticipated or primary aims in relation to more complex, emergent and softer outcomes (e.g. Shamrova and Cummings, 2017). There is a requirement for developing new literature reviews, with an added concern on primary project aims (Cook, 2008), those communicated to the funders and young people. It is crucial to know whether YPDPs actually renew democracy, innovate in policy and practice, hold service leaders to account etc and what are the strategies, conditions and practices. This would confirm or question an assumption in this article that marginalised communities tend to need disruptive, collective and transgressive political action to achieve equality. Finally, if YPDPs primarily produce softer outcomes (e.g. building trust, raising awareness, building confidence, teaching skills) then there are clearly ways of young people achieving these outcomes without risking encounters with cruel optimism.

It is significant that participatory practice *presumes* participation, which is an expression of myriad philosophical and practice traditions that ground the decision to include, collaborate, enable participation and so on; however, is that always the *best* approach? Nunes's (2021) questions the presumption of horizontalism in radical politics (e.g. Occupy, Arab Spring), arguing persuasively that 'neither horizontal nor vertical' – the leaderless movement or the hierarchical party – are guaranteed to be effective in achieving progressive social change. Focusing on a specific anticipated change (e.g. an electoral or legislative victory) creates a different perspective,

To be radical is to be radical in relation to a concrete situation, by identifying the most transformative action compatible with it, the maximum difference it can withstand and absorb. Outside of that, 'radicality' is a purely aesthetic gesture, the reiteration of a singularity devoid of commitment to actually producing effects in the world... (Nunes, 2021, 271)

One might question the commitments to the necessity of *radicality* in the YPDP, but it is sensible that if practices are to be adapted, translated and embedded in complex and changing contexts then considering the change attempted and achieved is crucial. There are continual risks of hollowing out what might be useful, powerful, radical practices through the understandable concern to secure funding, deliver results and be *successful* (Boal, 2019). It

was the lack of attention to the effects of the adverse, austerity contexts which created problematic dynamics that in MHM led to young people encountering cruel optimism.

Berlant's ideas of fantasy in relation to material conditions and extant social infrastructures provide a much-needed re-imagination of the complex and unequal encounters in youth participatory research, beyond managing expectations (Schubotz, 2020; Brodie et al 2019), saturated fields of positive affect, and the epistemological inferiority of participatory practices (e.g. Bartels and Freedman, 2022). MHM's YPDP fantasy believed that participatory practice can enable marginalised young people to change their world is worthy. However, the institutionalising, professionalising YPDP forecloses the transgressive, collective, political action and developing infrastructures of solidarity and mutual aid that marginalised groups have historically required to realise equality and fair treatment in society (e.g. AIDS and ACT UP (Schulman, 2021)). This individualises and abstracts young people, extracting the data of diversity and discrimination from the marginalised youth in the YPDP. It also erases radical histories and collective possibilities and invites young people to understand changing the world in terms of professionalised, institutionally safe strategies.

Naming the impasse, recognising the crisis in the good life of the participatory project, is an opportunity for unlearning and learning, adapting and change (Shomura, 2022). Instead of seeking to invite young people to populate and translate professionalising YPDP initiatives, what if we re-imagined and learned to develop our practice with young people actively developing strategies around their lives, struggles, strategies and forms of relationality? Youth is a site where new possibilities, orientations and practices are played out in a way that prefigure new ways of organising society. The young people in MHM were living with homelessness, undiagnosed mental health issues, and being trans amidst austerity and transphobia. As the growing climate crisis, soaring inequality, and the grimly named 'cost-of-living' crisis – to mention just a few issues – are met by inadequate action by political elites, young people are understandably losing faith in formal politics, expertise and elite institutions (Pickard, Bowman and Arya, 2020). The School Strike for Climate, Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil and the pro-Palestine demonstrations evidence young peoples' greater participation in direct, collective action (Pickard, 2022). We might learn from the global youth movements' inventive strategies like the legal action against the state of Montana to link climate change to the constitutional right to a healthy environment (Carnell, 2023). Some young people have woken up to the profound crises facing humanity. Academics, practitioners, funders and

institutions need to decide how we join them; will we continue as usual and risk seeding evermore encounters with cruel optimism or will we learn the lesson of the impasse and seek to live and research otherwise? Aware that fantasies must be held, connected with material conditions, institutions, infrastructures, forms of relationality, genres and normativities we have presented the idea of the youth state as young people continue their struggles, not as individuals but collectively and supported by adults working with-and-for them.



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