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Figures of youth: on the very object of Youth Studies

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ABSTRACT

'Youth' as a social category is used and abused in all manner of ways across an array of fields, platforms, discourses and spaces, Youth Studies notwithstanding. When we talk about 'young people' sometimes we seem to be referring to different phenomena, depending upon our political interests, theoretical perspectives and research methods. This article interrogates how the concept of 'youth' is figuratively put to work. By suggesting different figures of youth, and inviting suggestions for more, I propose that tracing how they are situated in different ontological spaces can develop a clearer conception of our research object(s) and help reduce confusion and the possibility that we are talking past each other. The incomplete picture I want to paint of figures of youth, in quite broad-brush strokes, all inter-relate in something of a feedback loop, a material-semiotic assemblage that forms powerful affects for the ways that 'youth' is brought into being, how youth are researched, governed, co-opted and exploited.

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Introduction

In 2014, then Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott quadrupled the size of the 'work-for-the-dole' scheme that he implemented as Minister for Employment a decade before. Under 30-year-olds would have to apply for 40 jobs and do 25 hours of unpaid labour per month just to keep their welfare support. At the time, the general unemployment rate was 6.1%, while the youth rate was over double at 14% (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2016). Labour market statistics showed that there were only 146,000 job vacancies for 727,000 unemployed and 922,100 underemployed people (Allard and Patty 2014). Invoking the folk devil of the 'dole bludger',[1] the announcements about the scheme did not mention the intense casualisation of the youth job market, the normalisation of short term contracts and free internships, and the rise of the so-called sharing and gig economy, all of which have entrenched economic and emotional precarity in the labour market. The young person in this scenario is an individualised scapegoat for economic challenges over which they have no control.

Two years later, business advisor Bernard Salt (2016) claimed that 'Millennials' just needed to stop eating avocado on toast for brunch at hipster cafes, so they could save up for a house deposit. Housing affordability in media discourses in Australia is a

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central point of discussion of young people's economic position. As one analysis showed, if a young person was even in the unlikely position to be able to put aside $200 a week to save for the then median 20% loan deposit in Sydney of A$204,400, it would take 15.8 years to save the deposit for a house worth the median A$1,022,000. If you skipped one A$22 avocado on toast a week, it would take 14.5 years.[2] The time saving of less than a year is not the greatest incentive. The young person in this scenario is deemed too caught up in instant gratification and just needs to be frugal and responsible. Entering the housing market apparently has nothing to do with fundamental differences in generational economic circumstances.

Youth Studies researchers are well versed in these kinds of episodes, but this figurative usage of young people is not confined to politicians and business advisors, or the here and now. A classic academic example of the 'young people as a threat to the moral fabric of society' genre is from Alan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* (1987). It is worth quoting at length as it so clearly articulates a particular orientation towards the young:

> Picture a thirteen-year-old boy sitting in the living room of his family home doing his math assignment while wearing his Walkman headphones or watching MTV. He enjoys the liberties hard won over centuries by the alliance of philosophic genius and political heroism, consecrated by the blood of martyrs; he is provided with comfort and leisure by the most productive economy ever known to mankind; science has penetrated the secrets of nature in order to provide him with the marvellous, lifelike electronic sound and image reproduction he is enjoying. And in what does progress culminate? A pubescent child whose body throbs with orgasmic rhythms; whose feelings are made articulate in hymns to the joys of onanism or the killing of parents; whose ambition is to win fame and wealth in imitating the drag-queen who makes the music. In short, life is made into a nonstop, commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy. (Bloom 1987, 74–75)

The young person here, viewed from an elite, high culture, educated, middle class position, is a cultural dupe, narcissistically consuming, the vanguard of the decline of civilisation.

Importantly, there are also figurative versions of youth in the social sciences to which Youth Studies researchers would more closely relate. For instance, in Reay's (2015) UK research with working class youth moving through education, young people are given their own voice, where their emotions and class-based struggles emphasise the human face of dehumanising institutions. In 'Sean's story', we see the heavy psychological toil of a boy trying his best, balancing the effort to do well at school with loyalty to his peer group:

> I don't know what to do about my mates. They just muck about all the time. I tell J to stop but he just says I am a wuss and to stop sucking up to the teacher. I'm *exhausted* trying to keep it all together. (Reay 2015, 15, my emphasis)

Just as politicians or business advisors create versions of young people as rhetorical devices to obfuscate social and economic problems or to blame for the decline of western civilisation, social scientists construct their own heuristic versions of youth, depending upon their orientation towards them. In this article, I want to begin to trace some different ways 'youth' works in public discourse, but to also ask questions about how Youth Studies itself may be drawing upon or constructing different *figures* of youth. Key differences in how the figure of youth is summoned in Youth Studies include: those between disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, cultural studies,

criminology, psychology, social work, economics and education; those between researchers who do qualitative work with young people in interviews, ethnography, participatory method and the like (with likely differences within this category); those that themselves draw upon figures of youth and trace the discursive and doxic methods to which they are put to work; quantitative studies that try to measure the lives of the young; and more so-called applied research done by what we call 'stakeholders' in the 'sector'.[3] It is probable then that when we all use the term 'youth', we can be meaning very different things, theoretically, methodologically, ontologically and epistemologically. To be clear, I am not suggesting that specific methods or research disciplines automatically create their own ontological figures (although this is possible). I am suggesting that in the vast and complex matrix of theories, methods, orientations and imaginaries used in Youth Studies, it is an inevitability that we will have to use and work with different figures of youth. They are not always problematic, but a necessary evil when performing social research.

The picture I want to paint of figures of youth in this paper, in quite broad brush strokes, all inter-relate in something of a feedback loop, an material-semiotic assemblage that forms powerful affects for the ways that 'youth' is brought into being, how young people are governed and exploited, and the ways young people – their selves, their lives, their struggles – are researched. By suggesting different figures of youth (and inviting suggestions for more), I propose that tracing how they are positioned across different discursive and ontological spaces may develop a clearer conception of our research object, reduce confusion, and ensure that those engaged in Youth Studies in all its forms are reflexive about how our own work may be implicated in processes of governmentality that Kelly (2000, 2003) warned us of over a decade ago.

'Youth' as a material-semiotic node

An antecedent for this way of thinking with figures of youth can be tracked back to Garfinkel's critique of the cultural, psychological and judgemental dope that can stand in for actual 'people' in the way that research is conducted. Such a 'dope' is not a really a 'person', especially as we obviously can never recreate the complexity of people in research projects. It is instead a theoretical construct, an ideal type that acts 'in compliance with preestablished and legitimate alternatives of action that the common culture provides' (Garfinkel 1967, 68). It is inevitable that researchers perform a version of this in most aspects of doing research. More recently, Haraway (2008, 4) argues that 'figures are not representations or didactic illustrations, but rather material–semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another'. Figures, therefore, 'have stood in for, or gestured towards, or been made to work allegorically and metaphorically for contemporary populations of young people, and for a variety of what might be called youth issues' (Kelly 2013, 615). Figures of youth can illustrate how one thing can be used as a stereotype, cliché, meme, target, scapegoat, folk devil, stigma, discourse, and signifier. A figure can be all these things, sometimes at once.

Youth Studies has seen some prominent work in this area in the past, which I am building upon here. For instance, gender-based critiques of the CCCS sub-culture model argued that the figure of youth that was created in that work had become a 'gang of lads' model, where girls were largely invisible or in supporting roles (McRobbie and Garber 2006).

Others noted that youth only becomes 'present' either as trouble or fun (Hebdige 1988, 17–36). The 'youth as trouble' version appears when youth is a problem, in documentary discourse, in news and media, and in 'supposedly disinterested tracts emanating from the social sciences' (1988, 17). The 'youth as fun' version appears with the invention of the teenager to create a post-war consumer market (see MacDonald and Marsh 2005). 'Representations of youth' show that the 'relationship between young people's experiences and academic 'common sense' about 'youth' is not straightforward' (Griffin 1993, 2). Youth research does not necessarily reflect or misrepresent per se, but plays a key role in constructing the categories of 'youth' or 'adolescent', and stories about youthful forms of deviance or resistance.

Critique was also developed between the binary version of young person created between youth transitions and youth cultures research (Hollands 2015). The 'youth' in transitions research illustrated young people as a student or worker, but could not say much about them in terms of leisure, artistic or consumption practices, with the reverse also being true (MacDonald et al. 2001). As Hollands suggested, 'transition studies need to aspire to become more culturally rich, while studies of youth cultures need to become more aware of the existence of spatial divisions and socially segmented consumption patterns among different youth groupings' (2002, 153). These examples and more are important precedents to thinking about how youth are positioned figuratively in different spaces.

Beyond Youth Studies, social and political processes operate through the invocation of figures. As Tyler's (2013) work on 'revolting subjects' illustrates, figures are used by political and cultural elites to engender disgust and revulsion to lubricate their own interests. Importantly, echoing Foucault's oft-quoted notion of wherever there is power, there is resistance (Foucault 1990, 100–101), Tyler shows that those positioned in this way can then rebel from these misrepresentations. Figures can be used as 'both a theoretical concept and as a method' (Tyler 2013, 10) to investigate the nexus between political, economic and media fields and the governmentalised application of what is consigned as abject. For Tyler, this is a form of statecraft, where neoliberal governance relies on actors such as politicians, experts and journalists to manufacture and maintain a state of permanent insecurity (Wacquant 2008), utilising the constant invocation of Othered threats such as terrorism, criminal gangs, youth-led riots and migrants. The provocation of disgust and fear from these figurative scapegoats then inflects identity making processes, taste and social relations generally. But, as Tyler (2013, 4) argues, what is bracketed out of accounts of social disgust is 'what it means to be (made) abject, to be one who repeatedly finds herself the object of the other's violent objectifying disgust'. These kinds of figures in public discourse, therefore, are dehumanising, objectifying and othering, all potent sites for Youth Studies research. Tyler shows how abjectified figures are 'employed to incite and legitimize "tough" economic measures and punitive government responses' (Tyler 2013, 10). 'Youth', especially in the ways it is invoked in media moral panics, resonates with how Tyler constructs the subjectifying force of figures, as in the above work-for-the-dole and housing market examples.

Importantly, Youth Studies is implicated in some of the problems related to different figures of youth, especially where youth becomes an 'artefact of expertise' (Kelly 2000). When we talk about 'youth' or 'young people' sometimes we seem to be referring to different phenomena, depending upon our political interests, theoretical perspectives

and research methods. For comparison, Sukarieh and Tannock's (2015) argue that 'youth' has been embraced by powerful forces to do specific ideological work, such as when youth unemployment is distinguished from general unemployment it reframes economic problems from an elite perspective and legalises discrimination. This is valuable conceptual analysis of youth, which draws on a selection of data, media, institutions and the like. But, for instance, this conception of youth relies on a different ontological figure than my own empirical work using interviews or ethnography that focusses on their day-to-day struggles. In these two cases, this thing we call 'youth' is quite different, even though we are concerned with the same social problems.

Youth Studies researchers have constructed their own figurative heuristics as a method of analysis, linking broad economic and social changes to the workings of young people's day-to-day lives. A classic example is Harris' (2004) construction of the 'can do' versus the 'at risk' girl to show how young women have become the poster child for success in neoliberal times, where the 'can-do' girl is heralded as a triumphant role model while the 'at risk' girl is perceived as one who has not worked hard enough to 'make it'. 'At risk' girls are compelled to meet expectations and achieve like the 'can do' girl despite lacking the support and opportunities. In my work on hipsters and bogans (Threadgold 2018a) I have used them as figures to signpost affective economies of class. They are 'sticky subjects' in a 'cultural economy of emotion' (Ahmed 2004, 2014; Rossiter 2013). Howie and Campbell (2016) created the figure of the 'guerrilla self' to sketch how young people create entrepreneurial activities to acclimatise to post-GFC economic insecurity, where quasi forms of resistance emerge in reflexive strategies to deal with individualisation and institutionalism, despite the challenges of limited education and employment opportunities. Kelly (2013) has used pop culture and literary figures to illustrate the opportunities, challenges, environments and issues that young people are facing in the balance between forces of Foucault's governmentality and Bauman's re-enchantment. Kanai (2017) illustrates how young people themselves create their own figures to 'tell themselves' in a postfeminist digital culture through the 'best friend', 'Other girls', 'hot guys', 'creeps', and 'the boyfriend', who are reconfigured as resources through which to tell a normative postfeminist self. The creation of figures are heuristically drawn to theorise, analyse and illustrate.

Sketching figures of youth

I have proposed that young people can be conceived as figures of struggle (Threadgold 2018a), reflexively positioned between the doxic governmental promises – study hard, work hard, the meritocracy will see you prevail – and the everyday reality of precarious labour markets, political upheaval lead by conservative and reactionary forces, and global risks such as climate change. Immersed within the epistemological fallacy (Furlong and Cartmel 1997) of false promises and economic reality, I argue that rather than the false consciousness implied by that concept (Côté 2016, 860; see also France and Threadgold 2016), young people are often reflexively realistic about their future. This is but one figure and Youth Studies requires a wide array to cover the complexity of young people's lives. But, importantly, Youth Studies needs to start to consider how some of the figures used within it contribute to, buffer and even reinforce the problematic figures that dominate political and media discourse. In an academic field where so-called

impact is being emphasised, this is one area where Youth Studies can publicly intervene to make impacts beyond our own academic interests.

Figures are likely to be interrogated in Youth Studies, where the representations and discourses of youth that appear in public policy, media 'debates' and politics are criticised. But, importantly for the point I want to make in this article, different Youth Studies researchers draw upon different figures of young people themselves. These figures all produce valuable research. Nonetheless, thinking with figures can make the differing conceptions of what we mean by 'youth' or 'young person' more prevalent in how we construct our research object and how we then communicate and develop our understandings in relation to different motivations for doing research in the first place.

In the following I sketch out an incomplete typology of pairs of youth figures across different spaces – the political, in capitalism, the temporal and in Youth Studies – to begin capturing the multitude of ways that 'youth' is summoned. I have constructed these four spaces not as an effort of strict compartmentalisation, but to loosely categorise the different ways they are used. Elements of these figures inter-relate and the way that they work can be discursively inconsistent, they slide between these spaces as they have blurry boundaries. This inconsistency is an important element of the immanent nature of material-semiotic nodes. Figures coalesce to resonate with how 'youth' itself is treated so inconsistently: active and passive; cultural dupes but economically valuable; risky but in need of protection; echoing one's past while representing the future.

Political figures

Figures of moral panic

Youth moral panics are familiar for Youth Studies researchers. They happen in several ways that often overlap. There are threats to young people; there are cultural panics about practices, lifestyles, popular culture consumption and social media usage; there are social moral panics about how young people are allegedly lazy, irresponsible, disloyal, vapid, ignorant, narcissistic and the like. These ongoing events place young people as deviant, especially regarding risk taking, sex, drugs, alcohol, and violence. It is important to note that the subjectivity of young people in moral panics is inconsistent, where they are denigrated for being both active and passive subjects. In some instances, this resonates with the Frankfurt School model of the passive cultural dupe, discussed further below, where young people are ideologically and mindlessly consuming. In other panics young people are an active 'risk taking' figure, also outlined below. Moral panics are often framed through a generational lens (Davis 1999), where older generations denigrate the young, a relationality that goes all the way back to Aristotle and Plato.

Moral panics sensationalise what are often 'normal' parts of everyday life for young people. Of course, critique of this figure is a crucial area in the development of Youth Studies itself. Cohen (1972) theorised 'moral panic' after the mods and rockers 'riot' in Brighton in 1964, where sensational media representation of young people usually results in a 'polarisation effect' that leads to evermore laws, restrictions and intrusions into young people's lives. Cohen said that moral panics happen 'every now and then', but they now appear a constant (McRobbie and Thornton 1995; see also Critcher 2008). Rather than a social scientific critique of journalistic practice, moral panic theory now

reads like an instruction manual for newsmakers to create and maintain outrage and garner clicks.

Revolutionary figures

Despite the many moral panics about young people being politically ignorant, irresponsible and passive, youth are also positioned as revolutionary figures. It has been common historically to position youth at the vanguard of progressive and emancipatory politics, framed as 'agents of change'. This has been a source of many moral panics and heightened regulation and disciplining of young people. As Sukarieh and Tannock (2015) succinctly point out, the representation of recent global uprisings post financial crises of 2008 as 'youth-led' does specific ideological work, including positioning revolt as youthful exuberance rather than symptomatic of actually existing problems. Further, 'youth led' movements can only be short-lived, and few young people get to take up leadership roles, but many get arrested, displaced, or killed. The 'social media' aspect of the uprisings then highlights their apparently 'freedom forming' aspects, while obfuscating the hyper-modulating (Pettmen 2016), panopticonic (Marwick 2012) and platform capitalism (Srnicek 2017) aspects.

In terms of political figures, 'youth' stands in for all that is wrong in society, but young people are dangerous if they are politically active.

Figures of capitalism

Figures of consumer dupes, civilisational vandals and homo economicus

These figures of youth as consumer dupe has antecedents in the neo-Marxian model of false consciousness, where capitalism ideologically produces mindless consumers, completely un-reflexive. It is also implicit in conservative critiques of young people, as in the Bloom example above, where young people's lifestyles, consumption and politics are a positioned as a threat to the moral fabric of society. This figure is implicated in moral panics about popular culture and social media, where young people lap up what is spoon fed to them by the culture industry, an attitude that lingers in popular discourse, from the dominant public understandings of social media usage (Owen 2014) to media stories linking music taste to school mass shootings (Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011). Across the left and right political spectrum, young people are empty vessels to be filled by the false needs of political manipulation, commercial interests and instant gratification. But where the cultural dupe with a false consciousness is blindly exploited or threatens morality, *homo economicus* is a rational decision-making machine coldly making choices to ensure maximum efficiency and profit. The human capital model sees demands placed on young people to be flexible and mobile, which means leaving one's family and loved ones to pursue a career and treating everything as a competition.

The figures of *homo economicus*, the civilisational vandal and the cultural dupe are 'anthropological monsters' (Bourdieu 2009), constructed for specific functions. While there is nothing wrong with heuristics of this fashion per se, in fact some kind of figure of the human is either implicit or explicit in most social theory, it is damaging when they come to dominate the political, economic and social discourses that distort what is happening in the actual lives of young people for the gain of vested interests and the privileged.

Sexy, cool, edgy figures of co-optation and immaterial labour

Contemporary youth are constantly positioned as mindless dupes or threat to the moral fabric of society. Yet at the same time, in the PR and advertising industries, the image of 'youth' is consistently invoked, where youth is an enjoyable, carefree, state of leisure. The advertising figure of youth is always attractive, having fun, hanging out, in sexy and cool ways. This figure sees any actual edgy or resistive aspects of young people lives denuded from the representation, co-opted and sold, where good consumption equals a good life. The figure of the sexy young person is also central to aesthetic labour in consumer culture. Sex sells, but it seems to especially sell based on young bodies (Coffey et al. 2018; Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017).

In many creative and artistic spaces, especially underground and DIY, young people drive of new forms of art and culture. Younger generations reinvent things – from music to art to feminism to social theory – then are usually told by the older generations that what they are doing is wrong, that they don't know what they are doing, that they are making things worse. At the same time, their practices and creations are extracted and co-opted for profit (McRobbie 2017; Gill and Pratt 2008). Subcultural capital becomes a form of immaterial labour (Threadgold 2018b). This figure of youth is key to the way value is extracted in post-Fordist economies (Farrugia 2018a). Young people are also immersed in affective labour, where their presence is part of the 'vibe' that is being sold: bars and cafes, models, brands etc. Affective labour mobilises a worker's capacities for relationality and embodiment – capacities that are central to human subjectivity – into the creation of value and profit (Farrugia, Threadgold, and Coffey 2018).

> Labour and commodity markets have 'liberated' youthfulness from its biological, age-determined delimitations and have recast select, desirable (i.e. profitable) characteristics of youth as necessary for the maximization of individuals' life chances. (Blatterer 2010, 63)

Young people are certainly at the vanguard of the precarity of the global labour market: they experience low wages, low security and an increasing pressure to do things for free. But they are central to how value is created in late capitalism.

As figures in capitalism, young people are mindless dupes or cold rational decision makers, while their practices and bodies are mined for profit.

Personalised temporal figures of affect

Figures of the immanent future

Young people are invoked as an affective proxy for 'the future', a figure of hope. In the constant panics over and about young people, there is a moral imperative that if young people are 'good' the future will be 'good'. While the future is unpredictable, even intangible, it is also affective. Youth as a figure of the future are a surrogate for anxiety about the future, especially as the present is so precarious and insecure. So, while the future is something that is immanent, it is also ever-present as a reflexive leitmotif (see Bourdieu 2000; Adkins 2018, 32–41).

For instance, in a study in rural NSW, Australia involving the arrival of new extractive industries, locals described youth throughout the study as an abstract symbol of 'the future' where figures of youth were imbued with the region's anxieties surrounding the future of land-use change (Coffey et al. 2018). How exactly 'the future' relates to youth

as a category changed in relation to perspectives on the proposed CSG mining. On the one hand, risks from the degradation of the land and water table were seen as detrimental to future generations because of the threat to farming, especially where farmers were poised to pass on the land to their children. On the other hand, not having the extraction industries come to town was positioned as a threat to economic viability, as there would be no jobs and the 'young people' would move away. Figures of youth symbolise and embodied project dreams of a society's future (Giroux 2003) – but affectivities of this figure were mobilised towards very different 'futures'.

While youth may be used as a stand in for 'the future', research with young people about their own attitudes towards the future reveal deep ambivalences between the individual and the global, between 'choices and plans' and 'hope and faith' (Cook 2016). A disjuncture exists between positive perceptions of the likelihood of achieving ambitions that are rarely linked to pessimistic visions of societal collapse. Many young people display awareness of coming environment problems and are frustrated by inaction, but they also then tend to prioritise individual issues that work towards the maintenance of a governmentalised subjectivity. When faced with the ambivalences inherent in a risk society, the reflexive quest for order is governmentalised (Threadgold 2012).

Any 'sociology of the future' needs to consider the impact climate change and other environmental crises has on the lives of young people. In this sense, the sociology of youth is a sociology of the future, where the study of rapid social change is shaped by new, unpredictable inequalities (White 2011).

Figures of romanticised nostalgia

One's own 'youth' is a permanent and affective 'absent presence' in our lives. At a certain age, a common question we ask of our friends and family in all kinds of social occasions is: Remember when [insert memory here]?

As Brabazon (2005) points out in her work on popular memory studies, texts, places and spaces change meaning over time, constructing different ways of relating to them for people of different ages. Nostalgia implies an affective relation with other people, things, places and times. It can be a source of warmth and joy when reminiscing with friends and loved ones. It can be a more destructive force when used to misrepresent or over-romanticise the past, whether it is post-war nostalgia deployed as background for subcultural violence (Pearson 1983), a nostalgia for a white male dominated past that leads to a pernicious post-colonial melancholia (Gilroy 2005), or the 'Keep Calm & Carry On' nostalgia of post-Third Way austerity England (Hatherley 2017).

The concept of youth is implicit in these relationships, where one's individual orientation towards all manner of things changes over time. 'To study youth necessitates an understanding of loss' (Brabazon 2005, 144). This is closely connected to generational relations, where those who are cultural intermediaries, especially in influential positions such as journalists, critics, and the Commentariat are usually not young people, especially in the more established forms of media. Young people are therefore inculcated to possess what novelist Douglas Coupland (1991) referred to as 'legislated nostalgia', where youth are forced to have memories, knowledge and respect for 'Boomer' icons (Beatles, Elvis, Stones) or more recently, Gen X icons (Madonna, Buffy, Kurt Cobain) (see Davis 1999). The past is present as a form of nostalgia, often melancholic, where everything new

gets compared to, and then most likely, criticised as not being like it was 'back in my day'. This is a struggle over what defines cultural capital (Bourdieu 1993).

The future haunts the present, just like the past. Temporal figures of youth stand in for a hopeful future, remind us of a romanticised past, and can invoke a sense of melancholy about irrelevance and death.

Risk figures in Youth Studies

Cognitive figures of 'risk-taking' youth

Connected to the figures in moral panics are the 'at-risk' and the 'risk taking' figures of youth that are intrinsic to several strands of Youth Studies research. Young people are consistently positioned as a problem to be disciplined, regulated and fixed, that is, they are in a position of 'institutionalized mistrust' (Kelly 2003). This figure of youth is prominent in media and political representations, but is also present in Youth Studies itself in work on deviance, crime and especially in relation to the concept of risk (see Te Riele and Gorur 2015). This figure has been important for the genesis of the field of Youth Studies and to developments within it.

In psychological work, young people are positioned as cognitively developing 'adulthood' as their brains evolve from an unstable and risky child to an apparently stable and secure adult. There has been much debate about these processes in developmental psychology, with the claim that there is a new stage called 'emerging adulthood' (see Arnett 2000, 2006; Bynner 2005; Côté 2014, for different perspectives on these developments). Hayward (2013) criticises these psychological perspectives from a sociological angle arguing that rather than the addition of new life stages, there has been a dissolution. Further, psychological understandings of cognitive development in this regard can be mired in colonial episteme, trapped in a Euclidean spatiality, where 'the cognitive and ethical development of children and young people is mapped on to a distinction between pre-modern, modern and post-modern societies' (Farrugia 2018b, 28).

A more recent concern in this regard has been the turn to neurological models of youth 'development', employing brain scan models and the like – where young people become 'a brain a jar' (Kelly 2012). There are epistemological problems bringing different ontological objects such as the brain, risk and young people into the same framework (Sercombe 2014), where exaggerations of young people's propensity to take risks are presented while ignoring contextual and sociological factors (Sercombe 2010). When young people are perceived as 'hard wired for risk', this reproduces prejudicial stereotypes (Bessant 2008). Demographic, crime and health statistics show that young people do not really take excessive risks compared to adults, and when they do take risks they are more associated with poverty than adolescence, as middle aged people with the same demographic backgrounds tend to have similar risk profiles (Males 2009, 2010).

One of the ways that young people are distinguished in society from other groups is that they are 'not an adult', that they are not yet independent, responsible, wise and the like. Youth is therefore seen in this sense as a state of 'becoming', of becoming something else, developing towards something better: being an adult. But we know that the process of becoming *never* ends. There is no endpoint of becoming until death, and even then, one becomes something else. The figure of young person in transition to becoming an 'adult', whatever that may mean (Crawford 2006; Blatterer 2007) contains

a moral imperative. Youth 'transitions' mark a broader 'progress' through normative moral dichotomies: irresponsible to responsible; promiscuous to monogamous; minor to citizen; ignorant to wise; apathetic to committed. This transition is a discursive one: to become a good student, a responsible citizen, a productive worker, a loving parent, an active consumer. Despite being 20 years since Wyn and White (1997) asked us to rethink this model of youth, it is still the one that dominates public perception and political discourse.

Social figures of 'at risk' youth

The idea of specific groups of young people being 'at risk', of engaging in forms of so-called deviance or antisocial behaviour, or having higher chance of dropping out of school or being unemployed, has been a vital object of study in Youth Studies. The figure of the disadvantaged young person growing up in unequal class society has been central to the foundations and development of Youth Studies research. A problem in terms of the usage of this figure is when structural disadvantages are morphed into individual deficits and pathologies.

Throughout the twentieth century, young people, especially the disadvantaged, were identified as being at greater risk of engaging in criminal behaviour than middle-class youth, research that was central to the development of theories of deviance from the Chicago School onwards. Recent studies have recognised that more and more young people appear to be 'at risk', where 'risk factors' are so broad to include activities that most young people engage in at some time such as drinking, smoking or taking drugs, missing school, being sexually active, or being brought up in a 'non-traditional' family. But, risk factors often seem to be class factors, such as growing up in poverty or not doing well in school.

The figure of 'at-risk' youth therefore has been critiqued on several fronts. France (2008) in a paper that tellingly had the working title of 'Riskfactorology', argues that public policy based on the 'science of prevention' reinforces individualised perspectives that obfuscate structural constraints. This results in a process where 'we then start to see children 'at risk' being seen at fault or to blame for future youth problems, and they are targeted as potential *carriers* of such problems as teen pregnancy, drug abuse, mental illness and delinquency' (France 2008, 11, my emphasis). The figure of 'at-risk' youth has been a central figure in Youth Studies and has been important to make interventions into policy that have influence on the actual lives of young people. Nevertheless, like Becker's (1963) labelling theory argued decades ago, wearing the label of 'at-risk' may itself be a self-fulfilling risk where Youth Studies actively participate in the governmentalisation of young lives.

In terms of figures of risk, young people are underdeveloped risk takers that need to be protected from themselves while also needing to be protected from social and economic risk. Structural obstacles, inequalities and discriminations may be substituted with risk factors, individual failings and character flaws.

Concluding remarks

Asking how we 'figure' youth also implies the question of how we figure Youth Studies. The sort of questions we want to ask young people, the type of analysis we want to perform, and our political orientation will lead us to depict, that is, figure, young people in specific ways. Youth Studies in this sense *needs* various figures of youth. But we need

to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the figure we use. If one's work is about subcultural identities and the way they may create forms of everyday resistance, one risks overemphasising versions of 'youth' that accentuate creativity, agency, and style. If one's work is about how class engenders educational inequalities, there are risks that the figure of the young person created in that work renders them a passive prisoner of their position in social space.

By considering different figures of youth this article promotes a way of doing analysis that is symbolic and material, and offers insights into public and political debates, symbolic and affective processes in the public sphere, and intellectual frameworks in academia and elsewhere. The typology of figures above is leaky; you will see that they share features and characteristics. But this leakiness is important to how material-semiotic figures work: 'Figures collect the people through their invitation to inhabit the corporeal story told in their lineaments' (Haraway 2008, 4). The figures I have sketched formulate a complex assemblage of what this very thing we call 'youth' means. A quite general picture is presented here, obviously made even more complex when the figures are viewed through the different cultural constructions of youth in different continents and countries, or from a Southern perspective (Connell 2007). Recently, the object of Youth Studies – 'youth' as a transition phase between being a child and an adult – has been problematised by the field's own findings. The so-called transition is elongated and blurred, the traditional social markers of 'adulthood' are often now 'achieved' well into one's 30s or beyond (if at all), and those markers – full time work, marriage, children, home ownership and the like – now seem like 'normal' stereotypes from a previous generations transformed into upwardly mobile if not unrealistic aspirations for the current generation.

'Youth' as a social and political category is used and abused in all manner of ways across a variety of fields, platforms, settings and discourses, Youth Studies notwithstanding. Figuring is inevitable in research, as it impossible to capture all aspects of a young person's life. Figurative representations are necessarily partial, fleeting and open to renegotiation. But some figures are more problematic than others. The figures in youth moral panics distort, misrepresent and pathologise the lives of young people and are present whenever young people do not fit the human capital model that dominates political and economic discourse. This scapegoating works to legitimise any responses to social problems as a need for 'biographical solutions' for 'systemic contradictions' (Beck 1992, 137). As 'risk taking' and 'at risk' figures are also central to public representations of youth and are implicated therefore in processes of governmentalisation, Youth Studies needs to impact this influence by advocating alternative figures of youth. While these figures will obviously not be objective truths, a decisive impact that Youth Studies can aim is to publicly challenge these constructions as much as possible and try to minimise our contribution to them.

Notes

1. Colloquial symbolically violent Australian term for a person receiving welfare payments, with 'dole' itself meaning welfare support.
2. See Evershed (2016) and Roberts and France (2016) for further comments. Eating avocados has become a major point of satire and memes for young people in Australia pointing out the absurdity of this argument. As one housing affordability report showed, in 2016, the

national price to income ratio was recorded at 6.9x, in 2001 it was 4.3x. In 2016, 36.8% of a household's income was required to service an 80% LVR mortgage, in 2001 it was only 26.8% of household income (CoreLogic 2016).

3. This term broadly refers to non-academic NGOs, government funded organisations, charities and other social and youth work organisations and institutions.

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