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# “A game show at the end of the world” The currency of youth in UN climate summitry

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## ABSTRACT

What do the lived experiences of young people tell us about the currency of youth in United Nations (UN) climate summitry, at a time in which youth is endowed with symbolic capital? Initially, self-representing as ‘youth’ in and around UN climate summits appears to open doors for young people, particularly since the creation of additional youth engagement mechanisms that followed the 2019 Fridays for Future protests. Based on four years of fieldwork, this article shows that youth can be both a limited and limiting currency in global climate politics. Indeed, the currency is finite, leading different youth groups to compete for speaking slots and visibility. Further, an increasing amount of young people have come to realize that youth is a limiting currency to advocate for environmental justice claims. These findings, which would not have been possible without an ethnographic and collaborative approach, contribute to existing calls challenging the ways that theory, research, and practice are oriented toward young people in climate politics.

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## Introduction

Since the Fridays for Future protests spearheaded by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg that staged thousands of climate strikes around the world in 2019, opportunities for young people to influence United Nations (UN) climate politics appear to be increasing. For example, youth summits such as the inaugural Youth Climate Action Summit in New York City began to run concurrently with significant climate conferences, and the UN Secretary-General established a Youth Climate Advisory Group to counsel him on climate policy.

Based on an ethnographic study that included working with young people in climate summits between 2019 and 2022, this article finds that, counterintuitively, this period is marked by increased dissatisfaction with the possibilities that engaging through the category of representation of ‘youth’ opens for young people. Through in-depth interviews and participant observation, the article finds that the multiplying channels aimed at promoting youth engagement did not yield their intended outcome. Instead, young people

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experienced burnout, frustration, and competition, with one interviewee notably calling youth climate activism ‘a game show at the end of the world.’ Furthermore, excessive attention on youth had profound political implications, as they overshadowed other temporal and conceptual understandings of the climate crisis, such as those experienced by Indigenous peoples.

This article focuses on young people’s lived experiences rather than on political depictions of youth or adult rhetoric about youth. More specifically, it explores the possibilities and challenges that representing oneself as youth confers to those who choose to foreground this identity in and around UN climate summits at a time in which, thanks in part to the Fridays for Future movement, the category received increased attention. This is relevant because multilateral climate summitry<sup>1</sup> does not permit intersectional representation (Grosse and Mark 2020): instead, young people must pick through which one category they choose to engage in multilateral conferences. For a young person, choosing to engage through one category or another is a strategic decision: engaging in UN Climate Change Conferences (also known as Conference of Parties, or COPs), for example, as a representative of Young NGOs (YOUNGO) means foregrounding one’s age and speaking on behalf of other young people worldwide. One could also choose to engage through another recognized group, such as Women and Gender, thus foregrounding their gender instead of their age.

The article proposes the use of the term ‘currency’ to describe the strategic advantages associated with deploying a particular social category of representation. Here, the focus is on the social category of youth, differentiating it from the term ‘young people,’ which refers to a particular age range. I attribute the term to Sophie, an 18-year-old member of a young NGO who explained her choice to speak on behalf of youth in a meeting instead of on behalf of another category. She remarked, ‘Youth holds currency these days. I decided to capitalize on it.’ The term has its limitations: unlike actual currencies, there is no finite quantitative limit to youth – one cannot exhaust this currency by its frequent use. In this sense, it aligns with Bourdieusian symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1991), capturing its active, agentic use in climate activism, while remaining neutral regarding the forms of capital it can be exchanged for. Symbolic capital encompasses publicly recognized influence linked to individuals and positions, from which symbolic power emanates. Within Bourdieusian field theory, symbolic capital denotes the facet of concrete, influential power that can be amassed and traded with other forms of capital, like economic, social, or cultural capital. Similar concepts include leverage or bargaining capital.

What do the lived experiences of young people tell us about the currency of youth in UN climate summitry at a time in which it is endowed with symbolic capital? During the peak of media attention for the Fridays for Future movement, this question can provide insights into the dynamics of this social group within the realm of climate politics and how political and media focus influences the advocacy and activism of young individuals. More specifically, this article explores the limits of youth as a currency. It investigates the ways in which the currency is limited and limiting for young people in global climate politics. Youth is indeed of limited quantity in and around UN climate summits; it is a polyphonic category, where dissimilar groups compete for attention from media and delegates. Further, it can be a limiting currency for some young people seeking to advocate for environmental justice. The article warns that intergenerational framings contribute to obfuscating other forms of inequity and are easily coopted by with discourses

on the climate crisis that many young people take issue with. Finally, the article delves into how young people counter the above flaws in the currency of youth.

### **Understanding young people's experience of climate politics: towards an institutional and youth-centered approach**

Scholars have looked at how and why environmental activism has grown so rapidly since the 2019 Fridays for Future protests (Pickard 2019; 2021; Sloam, Pickard, and Henn 2022), the types of mobilization and their associated value systems (de Moor et al. 2021; Henn, Sloam, and Nunes 2022), media responses to the protests (Ryalls and Mazzarella 2021), as well as the activities of youth climate activism during the COVID-19 pandemic (Haßler et al. 2021). Nonetheless, fewer studies have tackled two critical areas of the movement and youth climate activism more generally: the nexus of youth-centered and generated theories, concepts, and methods, and youth climate activism and political institutions.

First, this article seeks to respond to the call for a shift toward youth-centered theory, concepts, and methods and a more open and participatory research approach that delves into how young activists envision the world (Bowman 2019; Walker 2017). This article looks at lived experiences of young people at the interface between youth and climate summity (Abbott and Wilson 2015), problematizing in doing so the issues Bowman identifies with the very terms of youth political engagement, which 'prefigure the young person as something of a societal investment in a commodity future, as they are the raw material from which society will reproduce itself and also the bearers of that society' (ibid, p.301) and that do not serve young people well despite paving the way for political and media attention.

Second is the nexus of youth-led climate activism and political institutions, particularly globally. Thew, Middlemiss, and Paavola (2020), for example, have argued that studies of non-state actor participation have paid little attention to younger generations even though youth was formally recognized as one of nine civil society constituencies in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2009. As the Fridays for Future movement explicitly calls out political inertia and has chosen more adversarial channels of protest over other forms of participation, the nexus between the movement and political institutions such as the United Nations – in the words of an interviewee, 'how the movement lands' at the UN – can be revealing of both the ability of the institution itself to respond to youth claims and of young people's trust in the institution. In a study published in 2017 and, thus, before the Fridays for Future movement, Kwon noted that young advocates at the United Nations expressed dissatisfaction with what they perceived to be their inability to participate meaningfully. Other groups also experience exclusion, although of a qualitatively different kind: Grosse and Mark (2020) noted exclusionary practices against Indigenous groups in climate COPs, highlighting, among others, disparities in attention with the youth climate movement. This article delves into the workings of this attention on youth for young people.

### **The politics of attention in social movements**

In social movement scholarship, attention is usually studied in connection to news media coverage or participatory new media ecology (Tufekci 2013). The media's role in making and unmaking youth-led movements has been notably studied by Gitlin (1980). When

looking at the 1960s and 1970s student uprisings in the United States, he pointed to several factors that led to the movement's inability to sustain itself, including established journalism's fear of and opposition to mass movements; the rise of the individual leader, which he attributes to both the media and of movement's communication organs; and the failure to sustain post-student institutions and roles which he connects with media hegemonic routines and biases. Fridays for Future and the associated explosion of interest in the category of youth offers another opportunity to study the role of media in the making and unmaking of a movement in the digital age. Existing literature on the political economy of media raises hypotheses in terms of methodology.

For example, the literature on 'Internet-related ethnography' (Postill and Pink 2012) suggests following users across online and offline communities to explore how digital and analog engagement mutually shape each other. Online and offline media appear intimately connected in defining youth as a category or keyword (Williams 1976). Bonilla and Rosa (2015) write that when analyzing the online and offline manifestations of the #Ferguson outrage in the United States, 'the hashtag serves as an indexing system in both the clerical sense and the semiotic sense.' In many ways, youth functions in the same way in its online and offline manifestation: it is packed with meaning by those who choose to engage with it, to index their work through it. As for the literature on the monetization of political speech on social media (de Gregorio and Goanta 2022) and on influencer culture on platforms like Instagram, it indicates that the success of the youth category could be linked to a broader political economy of media that feeds on attention (Wu, 2016). Other work has shown that the monetization of movements such as #MeToo can undermine solidarity and collective action, as commercialization can lead to moral licensing and support through symbolic gestures rather than direct action (Das, 2019).

### **A polyphonic movement: the contributions of critical youth theory and the environmental justice literature**

In contrast to the above-mentioned work, this article had a more explicit transnational focus due to the global nature of the climate crisis and the movement. This necessarily involves an examination of power dynamics: climate conferences are characterized by significant economic, political, and technological power disparities that are intertwined with historical issues related to colonialism and responsibility. These disparities are not limited to the imbalances among Member States or between Member States and civil society delegates but also extend to internal power dynamics among civil society groups. The research on the environmental and youth climate movements has brought attention to the power asymmetries that exist both within and between these groups.

Environmental justice scholars have made a crucial distinction between Western environmentalism and the environmental justice movement. This distinction underscores their differing perspectives on the environment and its intricate ties to settler colonialism and racialization (Curnow and Helferty 2018). This body of literature traces the historical roots of the environmental movement back to the colonial endeavor, highlighting how environmental discourse was employed to validate exploitative practices and the displacement of Indigenous communities (ibid). In turn, the youth climate movement has been similarly characterized as a form of 'subaltern activism' that shares with environmental

justice movements the characteristic of being placed in contrast with mainstream environmentalism (Bowman 2019).

I separate the youth-led climate movement with the social category of youth and posit that the latter takes a life of its own when understood and deployed by institutional actors. This raises new questions: What work does this social category perform in relation to environmental justice claims? Does it operate in a subaltern fashion in global climate politics? The social constructivist literature on youth suggests that its popularity over the past three decades is intertwined with the neoliberal agenda, characterized by an economic theory emphasizing autonomous individual actions while downplaying the significance of social organization and collective efforts (Sukarieh and Tannock 2014). Muthoni Mwaura (2018), for example, contended that youth engagement in student environmental activism appears depoliticized but is intricately linked to the broader political economy, enabling young individuals to cultivate neoliberal, individualistic identities, professionalize, and acquire the social and cultural capital needed for participation in a neoliberal society. Sukarieh and Tannock (2014) advance the larger argument that youth is a particularly useful social category for the neoliberal project, speaking of the embrace of 'positive youth development' by institutional actors such as the World Bank. The rhetorical deployment of youth, in their view, tends to depoliticize social analysis by circumventing political and ideological conflict and offering one-size-fits-all narratives about youth worldwide.

Critical youth studies, in turn, combines the above two perspectives in that it is preoccupied with both power asymmetries and youth as a social construct, with a focus on its forms of classification. Kennelly (2011), for example, sees two representations of young activists at the national level in Canada and describes the 'uneasy sibling relationship' between the 'youth citizen' and the 'youth activist': 'The young activist,' Kennelly writes, 'is a troublemaker and hooligan, disrupting the apparently legitimate practices of the state' (ibid, p.25). O'Brien, Selboe, and Hayward (2018), writing specifically about youth activism and climate change, present a typology for understanding youth dissent as expressed through climate activism. Recognizing the complex empirical reality of youth concerns about climate change, this typology has distinguished three types of activism: dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent. This article draws on these two typologies, which are helpful in theorizing young people's experiences of climate summits. Kennelly dichotomous categorization is useful in that, as per the strict rules of participation in multilateral negotiations, the UNFCCC only welcomes a 'youth citizen,' which 'represents the symbolic accommodation of activism into liberal democratic codes' (Kennelly 2011, 25). As for O'Brien, Selboe, and Hayward (2018), they offer a useful further sub-categorization of the 'youth citizen' into 'dutiful' and 'disruptive' youths.

### **Delineating the currency of youth**

I conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews with young individuals aged 18–35, as YOUNGO admits members up to the age of 35. These interviews explored how they interpreted the responses of political and media figures to their youth-oriented activism and the strategies they devised to overcome what they perceived as a lack of influence. Notably, some Fridays for Future activists were below 18 at their first

COP attendance in 2019. To comply with ethical considerations and extend my insight into their experiences within the movement and the United Nations, I interviewed these activists once they reached 18.

To understand how the currency of youth functions, I took a broad approach to identify interviewees both within and outside the youth space. Youth included any individual, group, or movement that foregrounds that identity. This led me to initiatives as varied as, among others, the Youth Climate Action Summit (which preceded the Climate Action Summit), the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, YOUNGO meetings before and during COPs, such as the Conference of Youth, and a range of events, protests, and counter-summits. Youth carries a fluid meaning; frequently associated with intergenerational perspectives on climate injustice, institutional actors and young individuals can imbue it with significance, often linking the term to a broader narrative of social progress that ties historical change to younger generations and youth-led activism (Sukarieh and Tannock 2014). My focus was not to encompass all these interpretations but rather to examine how this identity influenced the experiences of young individuals engaged in climate summitry. I propose to use the term 'summitry' for events that are often referred to as conferences or other forums to indicate the porous boundaries of my field site and include a range of online and offline spaces through which young people sought to exercise influence on United Nations climate politics (Bullon-Cassis, 2022). Indeed, in observing youth in and around UN climate summits, I was looking at the nexus of two distinct sites: on the one hand, the summits themselves – which included but were not exclusive to UN Climate Change Conferences – and the rapidly-changing space of digitally-fueled protest on the other. The word 'summit' also hints at a more hierarchical and pyramidal power structure than other terms such as 'conference'.

During the three COPs I attended between 2019 and 2022, I interviewed 15 young people who chose other categories of self-representation, such as Indigenous Peoples Organizations. Finally, I also interviewed youth advocates and activists who have never or no longer participated in UN processes and re-interviewed several interviewees in the latter half of my fieldwork to understand how their relationship with the social category of youth evolved after a few years. Some of the 60 interviews collected between 2019 and 2022 were obtained through snowball sampling, though I often approached relevant young people directly with the above strategy in mind.

I obtained badges through my university, which was accredited by the UNFCCC through the Research and Independent NGOs (RINGO) constituency. However, I wondered how to be welcomed at youth meetings *per se*, both within and outside the UN. My age was ambiguous: I was in my early thirties at the start of my fieldwork, still eligible for YOUNGO membership but at the upper age limit. Nonetheless, I was welcomed in youth spaces and rarely encountered resistance to my presence as a researcher. All interviews were anonymized: the names attributed to quotes in this article have been changed.

I remained attuned to the workings of collaborative knowledge production in practice, though this proved challenging at times. Kill (2021) noted hierarchical and intersectional relations between researchers and epistemic counterparts in youth research. Nationality, race, class, gender, and identity markers affect young people's positions in spaces like UN Climate Change Conferences and their connection with researchers. My own positionality was not easy to pinpoint. I am a fair-skinned, cis-gender woman affiliated with academic institutions from the global North, but also a multilingual, multinational, and multiethnic



individual. The latter enabled me to connect with young people from multiple backgrounds – including many who did not speak English – but does not preclude equal access to all young people. To avoid overrepresenting some voices, including those with whom I shared common languages, I sought to attend as broad a range of meetings as I could and liminal spaces to climate summitry such as counter-summits, grassroots organizing, and protests.

Combining interviews and ethnographic fieldwork opened doors to explore important dimensions of this currency. It prompts consideration of biographical actions, like foregrounding one's age, as a co-constituted mechanism (Stanley 2000). I further apply this concept to grasp how biographic data, such as youth, operates within a political economy, even when obscured by moral language or political generalities (Coletu 2019). In my research, I pay attention to how youth serves, or does not serve, individuals whose experiences vary by race and gender and how the symbolic capital of youth can be exchanged for other forms of capital, including economic capital.

Further, the term currency also captures the various ways its relative value can fluctuate. Appadurai (1986) explored the politics of value with particular attention to the ways objects attract or lose value through circulation, describing recorded mutations in an object's value as its biography. In this article, I record the biography of the currency of youth as my interviewees have come to understand it throughout my fieldwork. This longer-term perspective complements existing research on reasons that bring young people to participate in youth-centered climate activism (Haugestad et al. 2021) but does not look at what happens after. This article draws on O'Brien, Selboe, and Hayward's (2018) framework, which is particularly helpful in capturing the polyphonous elements of youth advocacy at the UN.

## A limited currency: multiple, competing youths

### *Multiple youths*

My fieldwork first revealed that the youth-centered climate advocacy space had become increasingly polyphonous since 2019. Marc, a 30-year-old YOUNGO advocate, noted, 'Youth is not one thing, now more than ever. I do not know how we are going to combine critical voices such as Fridays for Future with the spirit of constructive engagement that exists in YOUNGO. We just do not see the way forward in the same way.' I had interviewed Marc during COP 25, the 2019 UN Climate Change Conference, which marked the first participation of Fridays for Future activists. They garnered substantial visibility during this event, with Fridays for Future press releases delivered to a packed audience, and their authorized protests, known as 'actions' within the UNFCCC framework, attracting crowds eager to document and share videos and photos featuring these young activists. Media and political interest reached its peak towards the end of the first week of COP when Greta Thunberg arrived in Madrid.

Conversely, Fridays for Future activists showed little interest in engaging with YOUNGO's daily meetings – also known as 'SpokesCouncils' – which review the agenda of the day and offer a space for all youth advocates to meet. Carmen, a 19-year-old Fridays for Future activist, said: 'I went to a few of those meetings. However, they're so institutionalized that I get bored. I'm an activist, not a politician. I mean, yes, what I am



doing is politics, but not politics you can do by sitting in a chair. Ultimately, they are kind of like the UN – I do not like being controlled. I don't know what information they share with the UN Secretariat.'

These statements reflected a broader trend that emerged from my fieldwork: despite the singular narrative of youth that exists in UN summitry, a multiplicity of youth climate advocacy groups co-existed and understood themselves and each other *in relation* to their level of dissent towards multilateral politics. The currency of youth was therefore deployed by young people for a range of institutional aims: at times, youth served to support, or work within, multilateral summitry. At other times, it operated in a more confrontational manner. O'Brien's framework of dutiful and disruptive dissent, mentioned above, offers useful avenues to distinguish the actors involved.

### *A dutiful currency*

The currency of youth was sometimes deployed in favor of 'dutiful dissent,' which represents cases in which young people's concerns are voiced within existing or newly created institutional spaces: 'Through dutiful dissent, youth activists work within existing systems to express their discontent with business as usual and to promote alternative responses to climate change. This type of dissent represents resistance to the status quo, yet it also adheres to the "script" of current institutions.' (O'Brien, Selboe, and Hayward 2018, 42). I encountered two groups that recognize themselves as dutiful: youth delegates, and the UN Major Group for Children and Youth. When deployed by these actors, the currency of youth works within the rules of procedure of multilateralism, sometimes even going towards strengthening it.

Youth delegates are the most obviously dutiful in that they are closely associated with nation-states and have formal means to consult and thus represent the younger generation of their country. Youth delegates, closely linked to nation-states, formally represent their country's youth at UN multilateral negotiations, contributing to delegation strategy, advising, and speaking on behalf of young citizens. Another example of dutiful youth is official UN youth constituencies such as YOUNGO for the UNFCCC. Members are, respectively, individuals under 35 or organizations that either have a youth-based membership or are 'youth-serving.' Their decision-making and writing process is consensus-based. As such, they seek to replicate UN values and processes, such as that of representativity.

These practices are adopted by other groupings of youth individuals and groups around UN summitry, which have sought to voluntarily fill in the lack in multilateral processes by mimicry. For example, a group of Youth Climate Action Summit attendees spontaneously decided to create an outcome document that, they hoped, could be presented to the Climate Action Summit the following Monday. Similarly, when the 2020 Climate Change Conference (COP 26), which was to be held in Glasgow, Scotland, in December 2020 was postponed by a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a group of young people took it onto themselves to organize a 'Mock COP.'

### *Youth and disruptive dissent: Fridays for Future*

For Fridays for Future activists, foregrounding their youth represented an avenue to be disruptive rather than dutiful. For O'Brien, Selboe, and Hayward (2018, 44), 'disruptive

dissent can be considered a type of activism that arises when young citizens concerned about climate change question and seek to modify or change existing political and economic structures [and] disruptive actions explicitly challenge power relationships, as well as the actors and political authorities who maintain them, often through direct protests and collective organization.'

Fridays for Future are disruptive because they do not go through typical advocacy channels, bilateral meetings, or statement drafting. Instead, they used media-heavy channels to make their points, such as speaking to the media or conducting visible protests. They were not, however, 'dangerous,' O'Brien *et al.*'s (ibid, p.44) third category of youth dissent, in that they do not challenge the existence of the institution itself nor its basic tenants, but rather demand it, and the Member States themselves, to be more efficient.

They are also disruptive because their mode of functioning does not mirror that of multilateral diplomacy. They do not aim for compromise: their goal is instead to put pressure on certain positions. Further, their roles were assigned according to symbolic factors or ability. Jaime, an 18-year-old activist from Chile explained he was chosen as spokesperson in his country because he represented what the movement sought to 'be about' in Chile: 'I was nominated to this role because I am young and from Valparaíso, which is a region that is a symbol of the fight for environmental and social justice in Chile.' Rather than offer policy recommendations, Fridays for Future adopted a standardized form of messaging: Miguel, a 20-year-old Chilean activist, noted that 'It is about putting pressure on politicians, without saying "please" – it is an order. It is a copy of what Greta is doing.'

### **Competing for attention**

Did all this attention on youth, particularly disruptive youth such as Fridays for Future, open space for advocacy for other young people? John, a 25-year-old YOUNGO member, responded: 'Absolutely not. Quite the opposite – the space for the rest of us has diminished.' Several YOUNGO members told me they often felt 'in competition' with Fridays for Future. Because the spaces for youth to be represented either in UN events or in the media are limited, the currency of youth's capacity to garner attention is limited, too – there is only so much of it to go around. Thus, it could be argued that dutiful and disruptive youths compete for attention. It indicates that as a currency, youth is a means to gain attention and a resource for advocacy and activism.

How attention on these groups is distributed in relatively hermetic global policy spaces such as multilateral climate diplomacy matters, too: each group described above mediates institutional dimensions of the climate crisis. For some, it is a crisis that does not put the workings of multilateral institutions such as the UN in question; for others, more so.

### **A game show at the end of the world**

By the end of my fieldwork in 2022, the currency of youth had become more competitive, and thus scarcer, even in the digital sphere. In December 2021, I met Joan, a 21-year-old youth climate activist I had been following on social media for several years in New York City. She had authored one of the bestselling books on youth and climate and was a well-known face at climate strikes in New York. She described her decision to stop engaging in

climate activism as follows: 'When I got involved in the climate movement, I was in purely for the climate. This was 2016: climate activism was not cool. So, imagine that I was going on a jog, and suddenly, I helped inspire other people who were now jogging with me. At first, I thought we were all going on a jog together. Then, I felt that they were racing me. I did not know that I was supposed to be competing. I thought, if they are racing, then I guess I should be racing too. And then I said: I did not want a race, so I will pull back.'

She explained the 'race' as being motivated by the political economy of media, hinting at all the ways in which the currency of youth could be traded for economic capital: 'Because it does feel like when there is so much media and so many brand deals, sponsorships, and Instagram followers, this becomes the game show at the end of the world. It becomes the popularity contest at the end of the world, where one of the youth heroes can rise to the top of being inspirational. And then it just becomes so disingenuous and so fake. And once I started to feel like I was being competed with, I felt like we were no longer together. Like they are kind of praying about my downfall a little bit.'

Therefore, the affordances of social media platforms – where algorithms and money determine followers and visibility – are increasingly at play. Joan was not the only one to point out the increasingly competitive and monetized nature of the digital currency of youth. Carmen, a Fridays for Future activist whom I met again in Glasgow after she left the movement, explained she had done so because it had become a 'brutal' space. She spoke about her feelings of powerlessness as she saw influencers who had little to do with climate but who jumped on the climate activism 'beat' and got 'book contracts and badges' to get into the UN. We were speaking from a nearby café because she had not been able to find a badge and, she added, 'Why do they get a book deal? I have been one of the faces of the movement for years, and I have not.'

### **A limiting currency: the limits of youth for environmental justice**

Carmen continued to express her grievances, including how 'saddened' she was of speaking with the media and feeling 'betrayed' by them: John, a long-standing 30-year-old YOUNGO member, who had been engaging in COPs since 2013, similarly noted that 'the pandering and tokenization of youth has gotten worse because of all the attention.'

Thus, how disruptive, can the currency of youth really be? This issue was already at the forefront of concerns from Fridays for Future activists at the 2019 UN Climate Change Conference – the first COP for all of them except for Thunberg, as the movement had taken off that year. The Conference had been relocated to Madrid from Santiago due to protests in Chile. Despite this, the Conference had a distinctly Latin American flavor, with many young activists having been flown in by the UNFCCC and other organizations to compensate for the change in location. For young South American activists, issues about climate justice – a perspective that acknowledges climate change can have differing social, economic, public health, and other adverse impacts on underprivileged populations – were at the forefront of their concerns.

### **Disruptive youth and climate justice**

The 2019 Climate Change Conference was a wake-up call for many that youth was an ambivalent currency to promote these issues as it could easily be co-opted and

instrumentalized by others who could monetize this attention through, for example, news media articles. For one, they felt frustration towards journalists and policymakers who foregrounded their age and circumvented the content of their message. As José, a 19-year-old Fridays for Future from Chile activist noted: 'Unfortunately, the media and politicians use us to get attention, but they do not take us seriously when we want to talk about social justice. I bring it up, but they end up cutting out these sections when they publish the article. All they want to write about is Greta, and what we do on a day-to-day basis.'

Disruptive youths such as Fridays for Future began to realize that an excessive focus on youth also made intertwined issues of class and race less visible. I interviewed a young Bahamian YOUNGO member on a bench, not far from where people were forming a long queue to see Greta and other Fridays for Future give a press conference. He seemed defeated: 'I have been doing this work for years, and so have many others in the global South. This is racism and classism. It's middle-class Europeans, getting attention for what we've been doing all along.'

Others lamented the tokenization of youth and appropriation of the youth climate movement by the UNFCCC Secretariat. Irene, an English YOUNGO member, was frustrated with the event organized by the UNFCCC in honor of International Youth Day during COP 24, noting, 'They had to acknowledge the youth movement outside, but the way they do this is they try to keep it under their wing, with super strict time slots and a staged event.'

### *Indigeneity: a more confrontational currency*

Their witnessing of other, non-youth groups' comparative treatment compounded this realization. In another article (Bullon-Cassis 2021), I wrote about the 'structural invisibility' of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) youths in climate summits. I recounted the harsh response an Indigenous youth-led protest at COP 25 received, in contrast with a Fridays for Future one that was instead celebrated and hypothesized various ways in which 'indigeneity' represents a more threatening category than youth. One is the category's difficulties in respecting the rules of multilateral spaces, including the ban on 'naming' countries and corporations at COPs. As Nara, a 20-year-old woman active in the Indigenous Peoples Organizations Major Group explained, they fought historically and geographically situated fights – for example, against the construction of pipelines, as exemplified by the 2016 Dakota Access Pipeline protests. These activists, my interviewee noted, 'deserved to have sparked the start of the global climate movement. Instead, it was Greta.' In 'naming' countries and corporations, the Indigenous youth break the rules and resemble 'the young activist [which, to the contrary to the "youth citizen"] is a troublemaker and hooligan, disrupting the apparently legitimate practices of the state.' (Kennelly 2011, 25). Hence, the concept of 'indigeneity' suggests a confrontational perspective on the existence of nation-states, which directly contradicts the primary organizational principles of multilateral summits.

Thus, indigeneity highlights the 'settler-colonial relationship' (Coulthard 2014) that links states with Indigenous peoples, Coulthard's (2014) analysis challenges recognition as a method of organizing difference and identity in liberal politics, questioning the assumption that contemporary difference and past histories of destructive colonialism

between the state and Indigenous peoples can be reconciled through a process of acknowledgment. Thus, the recognition of 'indigeneity' by Member States at the UNFCCC with, for example, the establishment of the Indigenous Peoples Organizations Major Group is not enough to challenge this relationship.

The currency of youth is instead deployed politically to package and promote a specific version of 'social change [...] a phenomenon that has been particularly pronounced in capitalist society, with its relentless promotion of radical social, economic and technological invention' (Ewen 1978, 24). The very word 'disruptive,' used to describe Fridays for Future in this article, belongs to the lexicon of entrepreneurialism and is embedded within the dominant discourses of green capitalism that prevail in climate COPs. Endorsed by economic elites such as those behind philanthropies, green capitalism proposes to merge sustainability with profit-driven environmental practices for growth (Morena 2023). Morena (ibid) has suggested that elites who advocate for green capitalism have publicly offered support to Greta Thunberg and her peers to gain backing for the solutions they propose (ibid). For Marie, a 24-year-old from the United Kingdom, this is indeed why 'youthwashing,' which she described as 'business co-opting youth for their benefit,' is so frequent at COPs. She, and others, ran the @youthwashing campaign on Twitter. Along with many others, she feared that the disruptive version of the currency of youth repackaged business-as-usual climate politics in a young body.

### *Competing temporal and conceptual framings of the climate crisis*

The currency of youth can also overshadow other understandings of the climate crisis. For example, indigeneity and youth have competing temporal and conceptual framings. Sonia, a 27-year-old Indigenous woman, said: 'We have to name those [corporations and countries] because we are facing them immediately.' In doing so, she expressed fundamental disconnect between the framing of climate change as a threat to young and future generations with the environmental destruction that Indigenous peoples have been facing, not just in the present day but since their colonization by Western nations. In conferring symbolic capital to youth, the United Nations, along with media, political, and business elites instead endorsed a specific framing of the temporality and nature of the Anthropocene which portrays the crisis as a battle across generations, essentially framing it as a burden placed upon younger and future generations.

Grosse and Mark (2020) have argued that the COPs are 'colonized' partly by looking at Indigenous exclusion from the knowledge systems deployed in climate talks. The very use of the term 'anthropocentrism,' which is widely used in environmental literature, political discourse, and by many youth activists themselves to indicate one of the key issues underlying environmental destruction has been shown to obfuscate our understanding of environmental issues since it 'imputes human-centeredness to a destructive ideological system which sweeps aside the welfare of both humans and non-human species.' (Kidner 2014) Like Latour, Kidner traces this system to a fundamentally conceptual displacement where technological metaphors began to invade natural philosophy. Latour (2017, 2018), for example, argued that the 'new climate regime' should engender no less than a profound mutation in our relation to the world, i.e. a move away from 'modernist' ontologies, including a belief in the ability to know and control Nature. Following this profound shift in our relation to the natural world, it was also necessary to denigrate many aspects of

nature, including Indigenous practices, as ‘irrational’ or ‘wild,’ given their failure to fit within the new conceptual formulations. The calls by Thunberg and Fridays for Future to ‘follow the science’ stood in stark contrast, at least at the beginning of the movement.

### *An unpaid currency*

Thus, while Indigenous young people were sometimes ‘adultified’ (Epstein, Blake, and González 2017) – treated more harshly, for example, when disobeying the rules of multi-lateral summits – youth proved to be a currency tied to the age category of teenagerhood. Young people complained that they were rarely compensated for their hard labor: it was often assumed that they would work for free. At the UN, prior to 2019, mentions of youth were often found in connections designated tracks for professional entry at the UN such as the Young Professional Program for the UN to hire recruits, which requires a university degree and often a year or two of work experience. During my fieldwork, the currency was associated with a younger age group, and thus connected with international law’s resistance to recognizing the existence of, or promoting, the idea of working (and thus paid) children (Taft 2020). This was a pervasive trend: towards the end of 2022, I interviewed a member of the Secretary-General’s Youth Climate Advisory Group, arguably one of the more prestigious newer roles for youth advocates created in recent years. ‘All I want is to get paid for my work,’ he answered when asked what he wanted to do next. ‘It’s just ridiculous how they expect us to do all this work for free.’

Similarly, several interviewees further complained that there was ‘no money’ attributed to collective youth initiatives: for example, the newly created Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth received no funding at all: ‘She [the Envoy] has to do all her fundraising herself.’ This extended to digital advocacy: Carmen, the Fridays for Future activist I met in Madrid, seemed ready for the next stage of her life, a stage where her activism is more recognized with financial incentives: ‘I’m tired of doing all this unpaid work,’ she repeated. Thus, to continue operating through youth and get paid to do so, young people left cooperative movements to opt for individualist practices. These occurred on social media, as described earlier in this article, or at the UN. One interviewee at the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development said many young people engaging in the UN Major Group for Children and Youth (UNMGCY) ended up being ‘UN horny’ – meaning, as I understood it, that they hoped to transform their unpaid participation in conferences into paid labor at the United Nations through, for example, consultancies or staff positions.

### *A flawed currency: strategies of resistance*

Despite the above limitations to the currency of youth, many young people concerned with environmental justice remain active in youth-related platforms at the UN. For example, interviewees with affiliations to more contentious anti-capitalist or anti-racist groups reported that they would often apply for ‘actions’ as YOUNGO for convenience, as foregrounding their youth rather than their other applications makes it easier for the application to be granted. For others, UN youth constituencies offered continued access and opportunities for advocacy: it is not uncommon to see young people stay affiliated with YOUNGO or the UNMGCY beyond the upper age limit.

### *A stronger currency through alliances*

Dutiful and disruptive groups also made strategic choices to ally with each other and use different means of advocacy for different purposes, staging common protests inside and outside of the COPs. For example, the co-founder of the Swiss Youth for Climate movement co-launched the Climate Youth Negotiators Program in 2022, a rapidly growing initiative seeking to train and connect young delegates at UNFCCC negotiations. Others have sought to build bridges with Indigenous groups. At COP 25, Greta Thunberg attempted to do so herself during a press conference: in a room packed with journalists there to see her, she offered the platform to Indigenous youths instead and remained silent. Nonetheless, Sonia, a 27-year-old Indigenous interviewee, confided that the ‘reporting on that was still problematic because the headlines were “Greta offers space to Indigenous youth” instead of “Indigenous youth addressing the issues they came to talk about.”’ However, much has been learned in the Fridays for Future movement since: over the past three years, the movement has placed greater emphasis on environmental justice claims and has actively sought to incorporate diverse knowledge systems. For instance, during COP 26 in Glasgow, young Indigenous people lead the march initially organized by Fridays for Future. Additionally, some of the activists I interviewed have since shifted their focus, moving beyond promoting science-based actions to also underscore the significance of Indigenous knowledge. It is important to highlight that certain movements inspired by Fridays for Future, like Youth for Climate France, have openly adopted civil disobedience as a strategy since 2022. This development raises fresh inquiries into the evolving interpretations associated with the concept of youth.

### *Leaving youth*

Despite these strategies, it appeared that youth is a category of representation that some young people decide to leave altogether, either for other currencies or due to burnout. It was explained to me by a group of long-standing YOUNGO members that many ‘of the more radical young people left YOUNGO in favor of other Major Groups after the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, which was a huge letdown to them.’ Since then, even some youth-led organizations have chosen to no longer self-represent as youth, they added: ‘SustainUS [a non-profit, nonpartisan, youth-led advocacy group in the United States] is still around for example, they have a delegation here. They are not engaging with YOUNGO. YOUNGO is just not that useful to them.’

Carmen, a Fridays for Future interviewee, told me in Glasgow that she was ‘no longer involved in the movement,’ suggesting she ‘suffered from bad mental health issues after working so hard for so long. I was burnt out after Madrid [COP 25]. I seriously doubt I would have developed health issues at 17 if it wasn’t for this. Not just me, many others, too.’ I asked her why Fridays for Future was still a protest-based organization: ‘Marches have their purpose. They’re mostly for those who are not yet completely “in” the movement. But they don’t effect change in and of themselves. There are many former Fridays for Future activists who feel like I do. We are just trying to move on towards something else.’

### *Leaving the UN*

Leaving the youth category is not the only option. In fact, many young individuals decided to no longer participate in UN climate summits altogether following their



disappointment with the Paris Agreement in 2015. This has led to a dwindling of numbers in YOUNGO, with Marc, a 22-year-old YOUNGO member, suggesting that ‘the YOUNGO members you are seeing here and now are support constructive engagement rather than more direct action because these are the youths that stuck around.’

A similar trend has been taking place with Fridays for Future activists: those who decide not to engage with UN process any longer sometimes embrace ‘dangerous’ modes of dissent instead, joining groups such as Extinction Rebellion (XR). This trend amplified after the COVID-19 pandemic with entire movements such as Youth for Climate France shifting strategies and choosing civil disobedience over peaceful protest: ‘What makes this type of dissent dangerous is that it generates new and alternative systems, new ways of doing things, new types of economic relationships, and new ways of organizing society.’ (O’Brien, Selboe, and Hayward 2018, 45). Miguel, a 25-year-old XR Spanish activist, said: ‘I have no intention of even going to COPs. In our view, you must disobey explicitly.’

## Conclusion

Outlining the lived experiences of young people in UN climate summitry reveals that the currency of youth has significant weaknesses in this setting and at a time of heavy media attention on youth. It operates as a finite resource, creating competition among various youth groups for speaking opportunities and visibility. Additionally, when advocating for environmental justice, it tends to overshadow alternative timeframes and ways of framing the climate crisis. Moreover, the currency can be appropriated into discourses that many young people find problematic. This raises questions about symbolic power such as the one held by youth versus other forms of capital such as economic or political capital, in the global field of climate politics which primarily meets in person once a year at COPs. It also raises broader questions about attention in activism and in political discourse: who gets to receive attention, and, once one receives it, how can one best use it?

Navigating attention can pose a challenge for movements, as it also implies that their identity takes a life of its own within media ecosystems or political organizations that categorize them and even sometimes instrumentalize them. Four years after the beginning of my fieldwork, few interviewees supported prioritizing intergenerational perspectives on the crisis. Instead, they favored intersectional and climate justice frameworks. The international presence of Fridays for Future had diminished; not only had it struggled to regain momentum after the COVID-19 pandemic, but young people seemed to have lost confidence in protest as an effective, long-term strategy, opting for advocacy or civil disobedience, or disengaging from activism entirely. Moreover, the political context surrounding the 2022 and 2023 COPs in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates did not provide a conducive environment for these events to serve as a focal point for activism.

Unpacking the complex workings of the currency of youth also unveils the diversity of young people’s motivations, experiences in, and contributions to global climate politics, both in terms of their relationship with political institutions such as the United Nations and their inner conceptualizations about the world. While this research design does not allow for broader generalizations about young people globally – despite outreach efforts to increase their representativity, those present at the UN represent a very narrow and skewed subset of politically active and climate-conscious young people.

One may hypothesize that these young people mediate broader debates and polarization around the climate crisis and what fundamental societal shifts it requires.

Future research could delve into the gendered implications of youth's limited influence, building on existing work regarding young women and girls shaping environmental responses (Bendo, Goodwin-De Faria, and Ciufu 2022) and traditional media's portrayal of girl activists (Bergmann and Ossewaarde 2020; Taft 2020). The current perception of youth as disruptors is closely tied to female leaders such as Alexandra Villaseñor, Luisa Neubauer, and Greta Thunberg (Taft 2020), and this operates primarily through platforms like Instagram and Twitter, which are often male dominated. Thus, should the currency of youth be weakened by said platforms, women are both excluded from the political spaces that matter and instrumentalized by the masculine politics that still dominate many nation-states. Instead, they would be relegated to the 'traditionally feminine mode of discussion' associated with the public sphere (Goodman 1994, Vanner and Dugal 2020).

This research holds political significance for those involved in politics and dealing with young individuals. The heightened competition among young people, as illustrated by my interviewee's description of a 'game show at the end of the world,' needs to be tackled by means such as a more equitable distribution of resources and the encouragement of collaborative rather than individual voices, both in online and offline contexts. In line with Bowman's (2019) call for open, participatory youth research, any analysis on how to address weaknesses in the currency of youth should be undertaken along and after immersion with young people themselves.

## Note

1. I propose to use the term 'summitry' for events that are often referred to as conferences or other forums to indicate the porous boundaries of my field site, and to hint at the pyramidal power structure of these events.

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