Chapter 11: Young people seeking asylum: voice and activism in a ‘hostile environment’

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Abstract

This chapter sets out the grassroots activism of a group of four young people aged 24 to 29 who were seeking asylum in the UK during the hostile environment. Moving away from normative definitions of political participation as the formal activities of citizens, the work drew upon second wave feminist and Classical Marxist understandings of collective action. The chapter argues that by ‘speaking bitterness’ and creating ‘language from below’ in order to craft a play to dramaturgically depict their lived realities, the young people formed collective action and did politics ‘differently’. They engaged in biographically-meaningful, ‘personal-political’ and ‘political-personal’ activism that focused on the particular needs of their wider group. They also made ‘democracy anew’ by practicing democracy informally and in alternative, co-equal, meaningful and purposeful ways, within a hostile environment that ‘others’ them and alienates them from political and social participation.

Keywords
Classical Marxism; Feminism, Co-production; Young People; Grassroots Activism; Hostile Environment

Key findings

- Alienated from formal political processes, and isolated by an increasingly populist and right-leaning democracy, the young activists aspired to form a collective to do politics ‘differently’.
- Using methods of co-production embedded within the organisation, the young activists engaged in biographically-meaningful, ‘personal-political’ and ‘political-personal’ collective action that resonated deeply with feminist and Classical Marxist politics, focusing on the particular needs of their wider group.
- In making ‘democracy anew’, the young activists utilised many tools of collective action, and found voice and collectivism despite, and perhaps because of, the hostile environment. Their grassroots activism was practising democracy differently.

Introduction

Over the seven years since it first (re)surfaced in 2012 to describe the UK Government's political intention towards net migration into the UK (Kirkup and Robert 2012), the phrase 'hostile environment' has become everyday coinage while the conditions of the hostile environment are ubiquitous. The hostile environment refers to the conditions within which migrants and those seeking asylum survive in the UK and includes measures to prohibit legal working, enforce destitution, and limit access to housing, healthcare, and bank accounts. It is 'characterised by a system of citizen-on-citizen immigration checks […] astronomically high immigration application fees, the continued policy of indefinite detention, the Byzantine complexity of the rules, the enforced separation of some families, the infamous "Go Home" vans and more' (Yeo 2018: paras. 3, 6). The hostile environment is also, however, being exposed by sections of civil society (see, for example, JCWI no date) and challenged by 'non-citizens' (Taylor and Busby 2019).

This chapter offers first a context-setting impression by briefly sketching historical, political and cultural events instrumental in creating this socio-political landscape in the UK and the deleterious effects of the UK's hostile environment on the young people who co-produced the current research—young people seeking asylum in Britain (herein: young activists[1]). The chapter then sets out the ways in which the young activists came together and found voice within, despite, and perhaps even because of, the hostile environment. The research, part of the Europe-wide PARTISPACE study, explored the spaces and styles of young people's social and political participation. In order to understand, and celebrate, the young people's activism within a state-driven and openly racist political climate, the chapter moves away from dominant understandings of political participation as a set of activities carried out by private citizens to influence decision-making and the business of governance (Nie and Verba 1972) and draws upon second wave feminist (Phillips 1991, Rowbotham 1986, Young 1989) and Classical Marxist (Gluckstein 2014) perspectives on collective action and political participation.

[1] The chapter uses this terminology to refer to the young people who took part in the work for two reasons: first, the young people identified as activists during the work and, second, to move away from the idea that 'asylum seeker' captures the extent of the young people's identities and existences. The term 'young activists' ascribes agency and purpose to the young people's work. The chapter per se reverts to 'young people'/ 'young people seeking asylum' in more general discussions and as appropriate.

The UK's 'hostile environment'

Despite migration and the movement of peoples being a long-standing phenomenon, myriad migration laws and policies (United Nations and Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2017), anti-immigration sentiments (Connor and Krogstad 2018), and anti-migration policies, are growing internationally (World Report 2019 2019). In Britain in 2012, when Theresa May, then Home Secretary of the incumbent Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government, announced 'We're going to give illegal migrants a really hostile reception' (Kirkup and Robert 2012), the 'hostile environment' policy publicly (re)surfaced in that national context. However, this process of separating out migrants, and treating them differently, through state actions that cultivate and then apply legally-defined categories to them has been in place ever since people began to flee pogroms and/or search for work in large numbers.

Following a thirty-year period of economic decline (Holmes 1988), the Aliens Act 1905 first introduced immigration control and registration into Britain, but only for those without visible means of support. A Conservative MP who at the time likened those targeted to 'diseased cattle' (Foot 1965: 89) sought to dehumanize migrants, just like the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s when they defined Jewish and other people as 'parasitic vermin' (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum no date). Despite the British state making war on the Nazis, British MPs continued to call for a further tightening of immigration controls against people 'scurrying' (Foot 1965: 221) and, in the immediate aftermath of WWII, efforts to control the level and nature of legal migration continued.

By 1948, the newly created United Nations General Assembly defined Britain's post-war treatment of the displaced people arriving as workers as 'an official policy of discrimination' (Holmes 1988: 210). That did not, however, deter the British Labour Cabinet Committee recommending in 1951 that future immigration controls would 'as a general rule, be more or less confined to coloured persons' (Miles and Phizacklea 1987: 148-49). Continuing to make and apply law according to people's perceived 'race', the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Bill restricted entry by British Commonwealth citizens. In effect, 'immigration' now meant 'black immigration' (Corporate Watch 2018) and the same Conservative administration that authored this 'cruel and brutal anti-colour legislation' (Shand-Baptiste 2019: quoting former Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell) hosted MP Enoch Powell who warned in 1968 that there would be a race war if 'coloured' migration was not controlled. It would be 30 years before the state released the MI5 report which revealed the role of fascists in supporting Powell at that time (Norton Taylor and Milne 1999).

Today's immigration system is based on the 1971 Immigration Act that followed, downgrading Commonwealth citizens to the status of 'foreigner', preparing the ground for Margaret Thatcher's infamous 1978 statement that 'people are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people with a different culture' (quoted in Trilling 2013). The asylum procedure in the UK that, according to Amnesty International in 1999 had produced a 'culture of disbelief' (Guardian Editorial 1999), also enabled, shortly after 9/11, the 2002 Asylum Act, which legalised the eviction of people failed by the asylum system into destitution and barred people seeking asylum from working legally (Moran 2003). At the same time, the then Prime Minister Tony Blair announced his desire to halve immigration (Dean 2012), signalling state-level rejection of the 1951 Refugee Convention principles, even though most of the newest arrivals to Britain were European; de facto, refugees had become key scapegoats to appease anti-migrant voters.

The ideological terrain developed over the last 20 years has included a sustained media campaign that equates 'asylum' with 'scum' (Dean 2012), attacks on civil rights (O'Cinneide 2018), increasing anti-Muslim rhetoric (Poynting and Mason 2007), and the rise of far-right violence and electoral profile (Smith and Shifrin 2019). Government-led policy and practice produced the 'Go Home Vans' (Hattenstone 2018), the threat of 'voluntarily' returning to countries of origin or facing arrest, which infiltrated the third sector (RAPAR 2018, Taylor and Busby 2019), the high-profile immigration raids that demonstrate the state's arsenal against immigration (Tyler 2018), and the failure of that same state arsenal, as exemplified in the suffocation of 39 people in a container in October 2019 (Kelly 2019).

The current study

Despite these alarming political and cultural shifts, there has been a long-standing interplay between anti-migrant law and anti-racist mobilisation. For example, in 1970s Britain the Grunwick Strikers of 1976 worked with anti-racists to form the Anti-Nazi League in 1978 (Chaudhary 2019, Sabbagh 2018). This became the precursor to Britain's current anti-fascist united front, Unite Against Fascism (Holborow 2019), which is supported by all major party political organisations in Britain. Anti-fascist mobilisation persists (e.g. Copsey 2016) and more recently movements contesting the hostile environment have grown (e.g. England 2019). This resistance is crucial in order to prevent the politically-embedded hostile environment—sanctioned by a 'full-blown state racism' (Burnett 2016: 20) independent of party political agenda— taking root culturally (Burnett 2016). It is within this context of active and sustained resistance that the current study took place. Exploring the work

using theories of collective action, and thinking of collective action as a 'particular form of politics' (West 2013: 28) and making of democracy (Blee 2012), enables an understanding of the motivations underpinning the young activists' participation in and engagement with the project, and their intended outcomes (McMahon et al 2018).

The organisation which took part in the current study, Refugee and Asylum Participatory Action Research (RAPAR), is a Manchester-based human rights organisation working with people at risk of having their rights denied. RAPAR is a long-standing casework, research, and campaigning collective, which co-creates and co-produces research and public-facing campaigns about issues that are identified by and important to its members who are seeking asylum. Though they have myriad backgrounds and experiences, RAPAR's members seeking leave to remain in the UK[2] share in common the experience of displacement from their home countries and the reluctance and/or refusal of the British state to extend them safety and asylum. 'YoungRAPAR' is a long-standing group comprising RAPAR members under 30, and it is this group (four young activists, aged 24-29) who took part in the PARTISPACE work, using the principles of participatory action research embedded within the work of the organisation (Moran and Lavalette 2016, Moran et al 2006). All of the young activists in the study had had an asylum claim rejected by the state or had been living in the UK 'undocumented' for a long period of time.

Living in the hostile environment: 'the system'

At the beginning of the research, a colleague introduced the chapter's co-authors to discuss the PARTISPACE project and the participatory action research part of the project. When the co-authors agreed in principle in their initial meeting to co-create a participatory project with the young people in RAPAR, they met immediately with the then existing members of YoungRAPAR. The members of YoungRAPAR had been working with RAPAR (asylum casework) and seeing each other there socially for varying lengths of time. All of the young members were enthusiastic about becoming involved in a research project about young people's participation.

The project began with an open question posed to the group: 'What does the word participation mean to you?' Firstly, the young activists explored and shared the meaning/s of the English word 'participation' in their mother tongues: 'kosala nakati' (Lingala) and 'شمولیت' (Urdu), which mean,

[2] Leave to remain ('refugee status') or permanent residency are immigration statuses granted to an individual who does not have the right 'of abode' in the UK but who has been admitted to the UK for a specific or permanent time, and who is then free to take up employment or higher education.

‘I am joining in’. The group then discussed the relationships of those meanings with the term ‘belonging’, the action of taking part in something with others, and the experience of being a part of ‘something’. One young member said: ‘In my country, we say, one finger can't wash the face, if it is all five, we can wash the face’ (said in Linguala and then translated). Very quickly, however, the group discussion became about how the young activists felt unable to participate. They said that they are not allowed to take part in paid work or to access higher education, and that they felt like they are always ‘waiting’ for something.

Here the group utilised Voloshinov’s (1929/ 1986) theory of ‘language creation from below’ (Moran and Butler 2001). This Classical Marxist theoretical framework explains how existence comes to be reflected in ‘sign’ through the process of social intercourse; the material medium of language. Voloshinov counters a number of positions in his text, including individual subjectivism (that the meaning of the word is exclusively determined by the speaker, as argued by von Humbolt), abstract objectivism (that the meaning of the word is exclusively determined by the context and there is no meaning invested by the speaker, as argued by Saussure), and post-structuralist theories of language as represented by Derrida and Foucault. Through their adherence to Althusser’s mechanical materialism which separates base (the economic organisation of society) from superstructure (ideology, political structures, etc.) (Harman 1986), Derrida and Foucault extend Saussure's arguments by abstracting the meanings of words from their material base. Voloshinov, in contrast, extends the meaning of language beyond that of the relationships between the structure, sound and meaning of words that are perceived as existing within a closed system that is abstracted from the material world (Callinicos 1990).

Further, Voloshinov pre-emptively countered the idea that reality is given directly to the subject on the grounds that consciousness has a direct access to reality and exists separately from words or signifiers (again, see Derrida). The framework does this by making explicit the role of language as the material medium between the socioeconomic conditions within which people are surviving and the individual human psyche. For Voloshinov, the definition of a thing depends upon its historical situation and its contextual boundaries: the words, already existent within the given time period and the given social group, make up the repertoire of speech forms for ideological communication. Therefore, things that exist do not inevitably come to the attention of society. For something to become the object, or the theme, of a sign, it must first become meaningful between people within the social group, it must acquire an ‘interindividual significance’. As it does so, the theme acquires social value: ‘In order for any item, from whatever domain of reality it may come, to enter the

social purview of the group and elicit ideological reaction it must be associated with the vital socioeconomic prerequisites of the particular group's existence: it must somehow, if only obliquely, make contact with the bases of the group's material life' (1929/ 1986: 22).

By harnessing these tools of language creation, the young activists' early discussions revealed that they used the term 'the system' to refer to the totality of structures within which they live and the climate of the hostile environment. They were acutely aware of the constraints that 'the system' places upon them in terms of a precarious status ('Still hanging around, I can't do anything, I'm helpless') and limitations on their ability to participate widely. They referred to participation as 'being listened to, being accepted, being treated equally' at the same time as knowing that they are deliberately isolated: 'They put you far away from everyone' (see also Moran 2003); disparaged: 'A lot of people think they are higher status, hierarchy, you are an asylum seeker and I am not' (see also Dean 2012); and stigmatised: 'Because I am different' (see Goffman (1963) for a discussion of stigma and the 'situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance' (9)).

The group's early discussions were also about the impacts of the asylum process, and the political climate of the hostile environment, on the young activists' daily lives. They reported feeling scared: 'On the bus, sometimes stop, police get on, big men, I will feel OHHHHHH, very scared'; targeted: 'I go some shop, security looking, looking, and then around and then go back and they think, stolen something, I do not feel good inside'; depressed: 'I am so sad, crying, every day crying'; humiliated: 'I came with big courage, I say, 'let me go there'. I queued for one and a half hours. I was very shamed'; anxious about being detained or even deported: 'sick with worry' the night before a reporting appointment; and being forced to remain in a precarious and liminal state as they wait for a decision on their claim: 'The uncertainty is like floating on the water […] we might get rescued but it is a waiting game', which can take up to 20 years to come through (Lyons 2018).

The system in this case was twofold: first, it included the bodies, agencies and structures of decision-making and regulation that govern the asylum-seeking process—the Border Agency, security agencies, housing agencies, and the police, for example. These 'systems of authority' also included an ideology of 'othering' ('They do not want 'us' here. They make us wait and wait') and less tangible sets of beliefs, values and 'interpretive frameworks that rationalise the distribution and exercise of the authority and provide the 'vocabularies of motive'' (Snow and Soule 2010: 9) upon which the system relies. Mills (1940) considered these 'vocabularies of motive' as a context-specific way for systems and structures to rationalise, and then implement, regulations and procedures and, importantly, to punish their violation. In this respect, vocabularies of motive,

alongside what Cohen (2006: 57) calls the 'dehumanising Newspeak of immigration controls', enable the hostile environment to exist, operate, sustain, and continue to suppress. In naming their fears of harassment, isolation, destitution, and, ultimately, deportation, the young activists underscored the ways in which they understood the atmosphere of the hostile environment to enable their othering and oppression, and the reason that they felt unable to participate, politically or socially, in wider society.

Making the 'Faceless' seen and heard

After the discussions about the meanings of 'participation' for the young activists, and barriers to participation, they moved quickly to creating a project that would involve public dialogue and consciousness-raising about 'the system'. At this stage of the study, the chapter's co-authors (the 'professional researchers') had handed the research space over to the young activists and had begun to play more of an observational and supportive role in the work as the young activists discussed among themselves their ideas for a project. At the beginning of the project, the co-authors had been clear that the project would utilise the participatory methods that are used throughout the organisation, inspired by Freire's and Fals-Borda's work and the philosophy that social science research should ensure that the everyday experiences and struggles of the poor, oppressed, and marginalized are moved from the periphery of social inquiry to the centre (Hordan 2008). As the young activists were familiar with this way of working, they did not need any instruction on how such a methodology 'worked' or what it meant, and were reassured from the outset that the project 'belonged' to them. In the same way, the young activists were immediately comfortable with being co-researchers in the work. Co-research in its turn was framed as a 'participatory method of research that situates participants as joint contributors and investigators to the findings of a research project [and which] validates and privileges the experiences of participants, making them experts and therefore co-researchers and collaborators in the process of gathering and interpreting data' (Boylorn 2008: 599). The young activists' ease and unanimity in deciding to create a co-researched awareness-raising project derived from their motivation to participate in wider society, an acute alertness to the inequalities they had experienced because of hostile environment, (see also, La Terra in the current volume), and to be politically active despite their awareness of barriers to their participation and dominant public opinion (Dean 2012).

For this group of young activists, utilising a conventional definition of political participation to refer to activities carried out by a private citizen to influence decision-making and governance (Nie and

Verba 1972) is therefore limited in a number of ways. First, the implication that political participation takes a particular, universal form concerned only with the formal political realm does not address the subtleties around the access of marginalised groups to participation. Second, conventional definitions of political participation rely on notions of citizenship that mean belonging, legally, to a national state, and thereby exclude refugees, even those with asylum. The traditional and formal democratic processes available to 'citizens' are not available to people seeking asylum, even after they have been granted 'leave to remain' (leave to remain does not imply citizenship in the UK). In addition, and importantly, the idea of the 'private citizen' is based upon traditional activities concerned with achieving the 'common good' for all citizens that requires a setting aside of needs that are not common to all (Young 1998). In other words, normative understandings of citizenship and the 'citizen' do not apply to a group for whom traditional and mainstream routes to political participation are neither accessible nor desirable and which sits at the very margins of democratic citizenship (McMahon et al 2018).

Moreover, the young activists expressed a profound distrust in the political system, fear of the immigration system, and a strong desire to do things 'differently'. They were keenly aware that they form part of a marginalised, stigmatised and 'othered' group (Goffman 1963)—broadly categorised as 'asylum seekers' in the hostile environment—and initiated their project with the aim of interacting with the public in order to profile their own understandings of their group's lived experiences. By overcoming the 'invisibility' of the realities of their existence that dominates in the public domain, they wanted to generate a dialogue within and about the hostile environment that manufactures and sustains conditions of inequality and injustice. In this way, the very acts of collectivizing, activating and naming their fears are themselves forms of protest against a 'system' predicated upon dispersal (Glorius et al 2016, Moran 2003) and isolation (Gower 2016).

'It is because of your society that we fade into the background.'

The young activists' discussion about the form of the work resulted in a decision to write, perform and film a play, reflecting the power of art and film in activism and awareness-raising (see La Terra's and Levy's chapters in the current volume) that dramaturgically depicted the lived experiences of being displaced, disbelieved, boundaried, othered, and made to feel out of place in the UK's hostile environment. Drawing upon their discussions exploring participation, marginalisation and vilification, one YoungRAPAR member offered to prepare a script. 'Faceless', the short play that he wrote was also, largely, directed and produced by him, while three others

performed it. Its key aim was public dissemination—to redress dominant public opinion about asylum that the young activists linked so clearly with the hostile political environment—and it featured the 'faceless' person seeking asylum and a 'stranger' to whom 'Faceless' is at first invisible. The play starts:

Someone sits alone, with a blurred face. Many people walk by without taking notice. Another stranger walks by, but back-steps – confused.
Stranger: Am I seeing things?
(Approaches Faceless)
Stranger: Hello? Is someone there?
Faceless: I am... here.
Stranger: Who said that? I'm not – oh, I think I see you! Yes, I see you now!
Faceless: That's further than most can perceive.
Stranger: Why?
Faceless: We are mostly invisible to the average person; but see us, some can...some can.
Stranger: But why is this? Why do you make yourself invisible?
Faceless: We don't. Rather, it is you.
Stranger: (shakes head confused). I don't…
Faceless: Your society makes us invisible. It is because of your society that we fade into the background.

Participation, collective action and a new democracy

The young activists continued to talk throughout the project about their experiences as young people seeking asylum and their motivation to depict their experiences to the public. Both during rehearsals and the filming of the play, their conversations focused on the meanings of the text of the play and what its words represented and depicted, and they continuously adjusted the script to embrace different perspectives and emotions, returning to ideas about participation and activism, and reflecting upon learning. 'Data' in the project comprised materials co-created within the group, including mind-maps which explored the meanings of participation, the young activists' notes on discussions and ideas, the play's script itself and ideas around the play, and the copious fieldnotes compiled by the co-authors on the conversations and reflections in the group. The learning was co-analysed within the group in the frequent reflective sessions that took place throughout the work.

The analysis explored the young people's meaning-making and learning about participation in general, being and becoming politically active, finding a collective voice, and engaging in activism, and identified key points of learning: for example, participation as personal politics and doing politics differently.

'Faceless' the play underscores the ways in which the young activists feel, and are made to feel, invisible and ashamed of their existence, and the pain and fear they feel because of their alienation and precarity. The play is an example of youth-led community activism by young people seeking asylum in the UK. Their exploration of their experiences and their terms for describing aspects of their daily lives—fear, shame, waiting, hiding, confused, anxious, sad, lost, lonely, hopeless, weak, non-existent, voiceless, abandoned, to name a few—represent the hostile environment that Theresa May worked to embed during her tenure as Home Secretary (Kirkup and Robert 2012). During the research, group members referred to feeling unwelcome, unwanted, invisible, and 'outside'. In one group session when the young activists were naming words to express their frequent feelings, one of the members said: 'scared. That's such an obvious one. Why has no one said it already?' Another responded: 'Because that is our daily life'. During the making of Faceless, the hostile environment was both silent and explicit. The young activists frequently became upset, frustrated, and anxious, particularly when scenes emphasised the invisibility of the refugee and the impact of invisibility (and 'disposability', Tyler 2018) on their lived lives.

Making a collective space for personal-political politics

The young activists' work involved spending a great deal of time together and they met at least once per week, over a period of several months, to talk, share their experiences and concerns, and find their common meanings. The conversations generally began with catch-up chats between the members of the group, including the chapter's co-authors, to talk about what had been taking place in everyone's previous week. Some of the young activists had particular experiences to report (for example, a 'signing' at a Home Office reporting centre, which is a legal requirement when an asylum claim is in progress, or a case update). More often, however, these conversations were about how the young activists had been feeling over the previous week. In this respect, they were taking part in the feminist practice of 'speaking bitterness' (Mitchell 1971) where 'speaking bitterness' is the bringing to consciousness of the virtually unconscious oppression; one person's realization of an injustice brings to mind other injustices for the whole group' Mitchell (1971: 62) and the naming of what is often perceived as private problems in the group in contexts where oppression manifests in

the ‘repression of words’ (1971: 62). Part of the young activists’ work, then, was forging and protecting a collective space where they could speak freely and safely and where, using Volosinov’s framework, they could create through and for the play, a language for their oppression.

The community in this respect becomes all of the people who use the same set of signs—words—for ideological communication but who do not necessarily imbue the sign—the word—with the same meaning. The acutely impoverished and multi-trans-located group that made up ‘Faceless’ selected words about their lived experiences of inequality—injustice, fear, ‘the system’, and ‘always waiting’—and their meanings for these words emerged over time, in between moments of silence, thought and reflection. Often buried deeply inside individual psyches, through the collective research processes that developed, the words became voiced with their meanings, shared between the young activists and then publicly asserted by screening their film of their situated utterances, spoken by specific characters within a discrete context in the play. As the work progressed, and when Faceless was being filmed, the group did not shy away from depicting the profound emotional reality of their experiences. A line from the script reads: ‘We struggle with ways to cope. We lose animation. We become lifeless. We feel like machines’ tapping into Goodwin’s (2001) idea of mobilising the symbolic power of language and emotion, rather than just argument alone, in political and collective action.

In harnessing Classical Marxist and second wave feminist tools of collective action—consciousness-raising as making the hidden visible and ‘speaking bitterness’ as the basis of collectivism (Mitchell 1971)—the young activists’ participation became biographically-meaningful and politically relevant in the hostile environment. In other words, their very personal experiences became the basis for their ‘personal is political’ action (see Hanisch’s (1970) work for one of the first uses of this term, though Hanisch did not herself coin the phrase) where the work was autobiographical (McMahon et al 2019) and where the ‘political’ (referring to power relations) was rooted in personal experiences and common, systemic struggles. Hanisch further argued that consciousness-raising ‘analytical sessions are a form of political action’ (Hanisch 1970: para. 4) and that ‘one of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems.’ (para. 5). She concluded that ‘[t]here are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution.’ (para. 5). Understanding about this dialectic that renders the political-personal was palpably demonstrated throughout the current study as those seeking asylum understood, interrogated, and challenged the impact of the political landscape on their personal and group lives (see also the work of Young (1990, 1989), Phillips (1993) and Rowbotham

(1986) for discussions of democracies of group difference that lie ‘outside the conventionally political sphere’ Phillips’s (1993: 80)).

Voice and activism in hostile environment

The young activists—as all young people seeking asylum in the hostile environment—are ‘the dispossessed’ where ‘being dispossessed refers to processes and ideologies by which persons are disowned and abjected by normative and normalizing powers that define cultural ineligibility’ (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 2) (see also Tyler 2013). The hostile environment did not come about in a political and cultural vacuum and manifests in daily lives and realities because those seeking asylum are marginalised, vilified, displaced, made to feel out of place, and kept in enforced conditions of isolation, inequality and extreme poverty. However, being dispossessed is not countered simply by appropriation and by (re)gaining material assets in some way; rather dispossession is the symbolic and embodied deprivation of safety, identity, freedom and autonomy. The most common adjectives used by the young activists to describe their deepest needs were ‘safe’ and ‘free’: ‘to be safe and to be free’.

Grassroots activism, often ‘thought of as an ancillary to democratic politics [or] as serving a conduit into electoral politics’ (Blee 2012: 3-4), brought about new opportunities for the young activists’ democratic participation. In doing so, it also challenged normative ideas of democracy which equate democracy only with governance and neglect the ‘democratising effects of grassroots political action’ (Blee 2012: 4). In the absence of access to formal institutions of politics, or indeed a belief in such processes, the young ‘Faceless’ people engaged in politics in alternative ways that were co-equal, meaningful and purposeful to them (McMahon et al 2019, Walther 2018). In this sense, the grassroots activism of the group was concerned with making ‘democracy and anew’ (Blee 2012) and practicing democracy differently (what Étienne Balibar referred to as a democracy ‘beneath and beyond the state’). This, the young people achieved by committing to both individual and collective agency (Callinicos 2009) within the organisation and involving ‘all members in the co-production of knowledge, theory and practice’ (Moran and Lavalette 2016: 118) where marginalised voices were centred (Moran and Lavalette 2016, Percy-Smith et al 2019). Activism as democracy became a co-produced process concerned with people collecting, deliberating, and working together to bring about change.

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