Viable geographies

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Abstract
What is a viable life? This paper addresses this question with reference to viability as a concept and young people’s social action across the world. The notion of viability offers a framework for examining how young people ‘think across’ different domains of life – such as education, work, environment, politics and cultural practice – and develop ecosystems of practice that connect these domains together. In addition, the concept of viability draws attention to the alternative nature of these ecosystems of practice – how young people commonly use these ecosystems to ‘think against’ dominance – and how they also ‘think out’ to produce new ideas.

Keywords
crises, ecosystems of practice, life, social, viability, youth

Viable geographies
The climate and ecological emergency is [...] only a symptom of a much larger sustainability crisis. A social crisis. A crisis of inequality that dates back to colonialism and beyond. A crisis based on the idea that some people are worth more than others and therefore have the right to exploit and steal other people’s land and resources. It is all interconnected. Thunberg (2021)

I Introduction
Linked crises associated with social inequality, political authoritarianism, and environmental collapse are threatening the lives of non-elite populations around the world (Castree, 2014) and have especially marked negative implications for young people aged between 16 and 30 (Cuervo and Miranda, 2019; Skelton and Aitken, 2019). This paper examines how young people are responding to these crises with reference to the concept of viability.

Young people’s experiences of global crises are diverse, reflecting inequalities within the youth population (Skelton and Aitken, 2019). Some of those young people marginalised by global processes are unable to exercise effective agency (see Mwaura, 2017; Cuervo and Miranda, 2019) or engaged in reactionary practice (Chatterji et al., 2019). Notwithstanding these important aspects of difference and inequality, however, emerging research suggests that large sections of the youth population globally, who are marginalised in relation to dominant processes of change, are engaged in social action that is broadly ‘positive’. The term positive is understood here in Amartya Sen’s (2014) sense of activity that has the net effect of enhancing the capabilities of relatively marginalised sections of society.
Moreover, a dimension of this positive action is a tendency for young people to develop integrated forms of action that traverse life domains (Dawson, 2014; Oosterom et al., 2019) and provide bases for critique and new ideas (Cooper, 2014).

In this paper we develop the notion of viability as a way of understanding and foregrounding these processes. The concept of viability draws attention to the neglected issue of how, in situations of crisis, people commonly reflect upon the interrelationship between domains of life, for example, the domains of food, education, health, work, safety, politics, and infrastructure. They also create forms of integrated action — what we term ‘ecosystems of practice’ — that connect life domains. The concept of viability, in its biological sense of a system that develops relatively or wholly independent of an existing system, also foregrounds the oppositional nature of young people’s ecosystems of practice. In developing integrated forms of action, young people frequently ‘think against’ dominant socio-political regimes. Finally, the notion of viability encourages reflection on how these integrated forms of action often draw upon and generate new ideas. Young people’s practice commonly serves as a seedbed for ‘thinking out’.

The remainder of the paper is divided into five sections. In the first section, we contextualise our argument with reference to recent work on global crises shaping young people’s lives and set out the concept of viability. In the next section, we develop the notion of viability in relation to how young people ‘think across’ different social spheres. The subsequent two sections further elaborate our theorisation of viability through examining the somewhat oppositional nature of these systems of practice — ‘thinking against’ — and the often generative nature of young people’s practices: ‘thinking out’. The final section reflects on the importance of viability as a focus for future geographical and social science research.

II Viability in times of crises

Converging economic, social, political and environmental crises are threatening young people in many parts of the world (OECD, 2020). Free-market capitalism and practices of austerity have not created employment consistent with young people’s ambitions, and automation and mechanisation are eroding job opportunities. The Global Financial Crisis of 2007–2008 and Covid-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 had a disproportionately negative impact on young people’s ability to obtain secure work, especially in the majority world but also in many parts of the minority world (ILO, 2020; OECD, 2020). An inability to acquire stable employment has prevented young people from acquiring financial independence, reconfigured social relationships, and obstructed young people’s access to key assets (Newell, 2012; Sommers, 2012).

Most young people also face difficulties in acquiring welfare goods, a point that is especially relevant to the majority world but has broader pertinence. In the educational sphere, the poor and often declining quality of public schools and universities has undermined young people’s lives (Jeffrey, 2010; Razsa, 2015). Educational malaise is linked in turn to the rapid diffusion of models that privilege market considerations over the quality of education (Young et al., 2017). In the health sphere, youth-specific needs, around, for example, sexual health and mental health, are unavailable (e.g. Soldatic et al., 2021). Moreover, the failure of the state to develop adequate primary healthcare in large parts of the world has left many young people as carers (Robson, 2004; Krishna, 2017; see also Sparke and Williams, 2022).

These economic and social crises are often playing out in contexts of growing authoritarianism and political marginalisation, especially in Asia and Africa, but also more broadly. Populist authoritarian governments frequently discipline and threaten sections of the youth population (see Ralph, 2008) while also acculturating young people to sectarian positions (Chatterji et al., 2019). Even where government remains relatively democratic, young people often feel increasingly detached from representative politics (Skelton and Aitken, 2019).

The climate crisis and related forms of environmental loss and degradation exacerbate the socio-economic difficulties that young people face across many parts of the world, for example, by reducing access to water and viable agricultural land...
These climate change-related issues often have particularly adverse impacts on young people, who are commonly in the frontline of efforts to protect their communities against environmental loss (see Chakraborty, 2018).

Socio-economic, political and environmental crises have uneven implications for young people according to intersecting axes of inequality and difference based, for example, upon gender, sexual orientation, race, class, religion, gender, ability, and age (Honwana, 2012; Skelton and Aitken, 2019; see also LaDuke, 2005; Banks, 2016). In addition, there are marked geographical variations in how these crises are unfolding. For example, the intersections of social and climate-related emergencies are especially evident in Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of the Asia-Pacific, especially South Asia and the Pacific islands. Notwithstanding these important points about the unevenness of young people’s experience of global rises and their reactions, however, there is a great deal of research that suggests that a very large number of young people in the period between the mid-1990s and early 2020 across substantial parts of the world were threatened by global crises.

Responses to these crises are diverse among young people. Some have engaged in actions that do not enhance the capabilities of marginalised sections of society and reproduce aspects of the status quo (e.g. Sukarieh and Tannock, 2014; Young et al., 2017). For example, some highly marginalised young people become involved in hyper-competitive forms of neoliberalism (Jeffrey and Young, 2014) or reactionary right-wing nationalist politics (Chatterji et al., 2019). But many young people have responded to crises and associated socio-economic ruptures through ‘positive action’ (Sen, 2014). They have done so in relatively institutionalised settings (see Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010) or, more commonly, in everyday life (Hopkins, 2004; Kraftl and Horton, 2018; Skelton, 2016; see also Smith and Gergan, 2015; Krishnan, 2016; Dyson, 2018).

A critically under-researched dimension of this action, however, is the extent to which it has involved young people in creative efforts to ‘think across’ different life domains, such as the domains of food, work, education, health, infrastructure, safety, politics, and the environment. In addition, there has been very little reflection on how young people sometimes build on such ‘thinking across’ to create forms of integrated action nested in daily living, which might be as ‘grand’ as a performance of how life should be lived within a global social movement (Halvorsen, 2017) or as ‘mundane’ as a neighbourhood community gardening program that links work, education, and health (Guerlain and Campbell, 2016).

It is important to understand this ‘thinking across’ to appreciate the inventiveness of young people’s action. Consideration of thinking across also helps to align scholarly analysis with how youth on the ground conceptualise their own practice, which is often in terms of the broad concepts of ‘survival’, ‘living’, or ‘viability’ itself (Dawson, 2014, 2022). In addition, analysis of thinking across can help to illuminate young people’s potential to assist in policy-making; for example, young people may be particularly well-positioned to challenge silo-ed approaches to ‘development’ (see Kraftl et al., 2019).

Consideration of viability offers a means of addressing the scholarly gap in work on thinking across. Hage (2019: 81) argues that the term viability suggests a relatively encompassing approach to life – integrating economic, social, political, cultural, affective and symbolic dimensions of living – and that this comparatively ‘whole’ approach is often key to the action’s effectiveness. Hage primarily applies viability in this sense to a study of how dominant power marginalises populations. In Hage’s view, neoliberal governmentality is centrally concerned with ensuring that many populations live in situations of ‘just bearable life’ or ‘minimal viability’, which requires dominant institutions to monitor a wide variety of aspects of people’s lives. Nevertheless, Hage also refers to ‘proper viability’, a term he uses to refer to how people on the ground rebuild lives across multiple domains in situations of difficulty or crisis. For Hage (2019: 81), people’s efforts at achieving proper viability often entail linking together economic, social, and environmental objectives; proper viability involves pursuing, ‘A viable life that sees environmental care and the promotion of sustainability as key to one’s “going places”’.

In this paper, we advance Hage’s (2019) account of proper viability in three ways. First, we theorise...
the process through which young people might develop the type of encompassing approach that Hage associates with proper viability. We argue that the process of developing this encompassing approach is best imagined as efforts to create ‘ecosystems of practice’.

Massey (1999) emphasises the need to specify how terms imported from the biological sciences are deployed in social science contexts. In using the phrase ecosystem of practice, we draw on the idea of an ecosystem as a ‘[dense] network of interconnected organisms and inorganic resources’ that is dynamic in nature (Tansley, 1935; quoted in Auerswald and Dani, 2018: 112). The term ecosystem of practice thus directs attention towards the movement of materials and activities across varied domains of life, the changing nature of this integrated action, and the importance of non-human entities in people’s practice (Lang, 2009; see also Auerswald and Dani, 2018; Schäfer and Mayer, 2019). These connotations of the term ecosystem make the concept more suggestive for our purposes than alternative terms such as ‘assemblage’ (cf. McFarlane, 2011), an argument that links our work to that of scholars advocating for ecosystem-based approaches in economic geography (Auerswald and Dani, 2018; Schäfer and Mayer, 2019) and public health (Lang, 2009).

Ross et al. (1997) point out that policymakers and the public may not readily understand the term ‘ecosystem’ as a perspective or metaphor. In our view, this risk is outweighed by the capacity of the term ecosystem to evoke the vibrant, interconnected and changing nexuses of practice characteristic of many young people’s responses to crises globally. Ross et al. (1997: 114) also argue that the term ecosystem may occlude other possible conceptual approaches. We address this point by comparing our emphasis on ecosystems with young people’s ideas on the ground, which frequently relate closely to the notion of ecosystems of practice.

Second, we develop Hage’s work by arguing that young people’s ecosystems of practice typically involve maintaining some measure of independence from dominant economic and political regimes and sometimes entail critiquing those regimes. Butler’s (2006, 2012) work on ‘liveability’ is somewhat helpful in developing this point about alterity (see also Zaharijević and Milutinović Bojanić, 2017). Butler argues that the development of practices analogous to what we are terming ‘ecosystems of practice’—in her terms, the pursuit of ‘liveability’—is often closely tied to efforts to make claims for recognition. People are seeking social and economic viability but also to be acknowledged as individuals whose lives count in wider society (McNeilly, 2015; see also Butler and Athanasiou, 2013). This point connects with Greta Thunberg’s insistence on linking climate change to questions around the moral valuation of human life (see also, e.g. LaDuke, 2005; Laurie et al., 2005; Tsing, 2015). The emphasis placed by Butler on recognition also links closely with new work on LGBTIQA+ experiences in building liveability in the UK and India (Browne et al., 2021).

Notwithstanding the value of Butler’s formulation, the term ‘liveability’ does not in itself foreground the extent to which ecosystems of practice challenge dominant ideas (but see Browne et al., 2021). By contrast, viability draws attention to ecosystems of practice that are relatively or wholly independent of, and in some cases opposed to, prior ecosystems.

Third, the value of ‘viability’ lies in its capacity to connote productiveness. Hage (2019) refers to proper viability being associated with principles of social belonging and an ethic of environmental care, but the nature of this association, and especially the role of ecosystems of practice in actively producing these ethical ideas, requires further examination. We will argue that the ecosystems of practice that emerge out of young people’s engagement with global crises often produce new ideas. Cooper’s (2014) work on ‘everyday utopias’ is helpful in reflecting on this generativity. Cooper uses the term everyday utopias to refer to forms of integrated action analogous to what we describe in this paper as ecosystems of practice. One of Cooper’s central interests is how these ecosystems of practice relate to the production of ideas. She argues that everyday utopias arise out of powerful ideas but, crucially, also generate new understandings of how life should be organised. There are also parallels here with Clive Barnett’s (2011) argument that ethical ideas often emerge out of situated struggles
that, in turn, inform subsequent political contestation (see also Laidlaw, 2013).

These three additional perspectives on ‘proper viability,’ in Hage’s (2019) sense, offer a basis for defining viable geographies as consideration of how people think across different domains of life and build ecosystems of practice that often challenge dominance and engender new ideas. We elaborate on viable geographies in this sense in the remainder of the paper through considering young people’s efforts to conceptualise connections between different domains of life and, in turn, build ecosystems of action (thinking across). We then examine the alterity of their action (thinking against) and the generativity of these ecosystems of practice (thinking out). In developing this argument, we also address calls for scholarship related to young people and marginalised communities that bridges the majority world and minority world (Cuervo and Miranda, 2019; Holloway et al., 2019; Katz, 2004). We also respond to recent appeals for reflection on how young people create ideas of sociality, spatiality, hope, and ethics (Sastramidjaja, 2019; Valentine, 2019; van Blerk, 2019).

### III Thinking across

Global crises have triggered ‘single issue’ youth mobilisation, for example, in relation to corruption (Webb, 2013), sexual rights (Marsh, 2021), and road safety (Jackman, 2021). But a tendency for young people in the context of crises to think across life domains and then ‘act across’ these domains through developing ecosystems of practice is marked. This point emerges clearly in research on young people and marginalised communities that bridges the majority world and minority world (Cuervo and Miranda, 2019; Holloway et al., 2019; Katz, 2004). We also respond to recent appeals for reflection on how young people create ideas of sociality, spatiality, hope, and ethics (Sastramidjaja, 2019; Valentine, 2019; van Blerk, 2019).

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Although broad socio-economic, political, and environmental crises are often the general context for thinking across and building new ecosystems of practice, young people’s action often emerges out of more specific emergencies. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020–2022 heightened the need for young people to ‘think across’ different domains of life and create, often somewhat new, ecosystems of practice in some parts of the world (see Christou et al., 2022; Castree et al., 2020: 411; see also Sparke and Williams, 2022). For example, Christou et al. (2022) describe the capacity of young people participating in the Youth for Climate Crisis (Y4C) organisation in Cyprus to redirect their oppositional action during the Covid lockdown. They energetically sought to link Covid to environmental catastrophe and persistent social inequity via the connecting ideas of ‘liveable futures’ and of their

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being multiple socio-environmental ‘pandemics’ and (see also Mehrotra and Soldatic, 2021; Sastramidjaja and Rosli, 2021). At the same time, young people involved in Y4C responded to the impossibility of face-to-face public mobilisation by creating a new ecosystem of practice online that built on their efforts to ‘think across’ climate, inequality, and health.

There are similarities between these accounts of young people thinking across and developing ecosystems of practice and recent work on young people engaged in ‘nexus thinking’, typically defined as reflection on the multiple connections between different key resources (Kraftl, 2020a; Kraftl et al., 2019). For example, Kraftl et al. (2019) describe Brazilian teenagers who seek to understand and engage with the water, food and energy nexus (Kraftl, 2020a: 234; see also Walker, 2020). Paralleling wider work on ecosystems of practice, Kraftl et al. (2019) emphasises a concern among young people with linking elements often held apart and embedding this effort in everyday life.

Kraftl et al. (2019) also allude to how young people link this ‘nexus thinking’ to wider economic, social, political, and cultural questions. Recent accounts of young people thinking across and developing new ecosystems of practice develop this point further. As the quotation from Greta Thunberg at the start of the article also suggests, young people commonly connect issues around water, food, and energy to questions of economic security, political recognition, cultural subjectivities, and technological change. This point emerges especially clearly in Oosterom et al.’s (2019) account of young people’s action in Kachin state, Myanmar. Oosterom et al. (2019) show that young people had responded to a period of state oppression and conflict – involving environmental degradation, land grabs, population displacement, and widespread youth underemployment – by reflecting on what was required to make their lives viable across multiple life domains. In turn, they worked to achieve that viability, integrating a wide variety of forms of action. Their ecosystems of practice included engaging with issues of water, food, and energy that are central to the literature on nexus thinking (cf. Kraftl, 2020a; Walker, 2020). But young people’s ecosystems of practice also involved running camps in churches that distributed medication, providing free tuition, participating in counter narcotic vigilante movements, using Facebook to spread images of peace, seeking legal justice for victims of alleged atrocities, campaigning against externally imposed development projects, petitioning to improve history teaching in schools, and mobilising around sexual violence.

Viability is not only a conceptual device useful for understanding thinking across and ecosystems of practice; viability is also a theme on the ground, marking and encouraging young people’s efforts to think across multiple domains. For example, in her work on the emotional well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA + youth, Karen Soldatic (pers. comm 2021), describes young people as, ‘actively creating viable lives outside yet intertwined with Indigenous and mainstream settler society’ (see also Soldatic et al., 2021). The importance of viability as a theme of ground-level discourse is even more prominent in research on the degrowth movement, which highlights a central interest among young people in imagining a viable life as their political object (Kerschner et al., 2018: 1619). Aljets and Ebinger’s (2016) argue that participants in the degrowth movement in Germany movement described themselves as people ‘living degrowth’ through a highly integrated set of strategies that included energy saving, climate control, sharing, gifting, the building of productive social relationships, and veganism (see also Kala et al. (2017) on voluntary simplicity).

This focus on viability as an idea on the ground also connects with young people’s common – and often increasing – concern with issues of survival in the context of global crises (e.g. Dawson, 2014; Korzenevica, 2016). For example, drawing on fieldwork with economically and politically marginalised young people in an informal settlement on the outskirts of Johannesburg in 2010–2011, Dawson (2014) describes how socio-economic crises pushed young people into a constant negotiation over how to make individual futures possible in the city; viability in the sense of survival had become a daily concern (see also Ralph, 2008; Thieme, 2018; Dawson, 2022). As one young man told Dawson (2014: 872) ‘We [are] trying so hard to survive’ (see also...
Dawson, 2022). Animated in part by this concern with survival, young people in Dawson’s (2014) study channelled effort into acquiring short-term jobs, haggling over access to shelter, finding sources of illegal or quasi-legal income, cultivating key social relationships required to survive in the city, and ensuring a measure of protection against arbitrary state violence (Banks, 2016; Honwana, 2012; Kamete, 2010). In a similar vein, Korzenevica (2016) uses field research in eastern Nepal in 2012–2014 in the aftermath of a protracted civil war to emphasise young people’s intense concern with survival. In this instance, their focus on survival was simultaneously personal and collective. They addressed a need to make their own lives financially and socially viable through diversifying their incomes. Simultaneously, at the community level, they organised teams to build toilets, erect electricity cables, and assist more generally in the development of infrastructure and educational opportunities as a basis for preventing urban outmigration and ensuring their village’s viability.

IV Thinking against

Young people’s efforts to think across and create ecosystems of practice can be negative as well as positive in Sen’s terms (2014). For example, Kraftl’s (2020b) analysis of young people’s engagement with plastics suggests that their ecosystems of practice sometimes threaten environmental sustainability. In addition, young people’s positive practices may involve working with dominant organisations, for example, due to pragmatic considerations (Aljets and Ebinger, 2016). Nevertheless, the ecosystems of practice that young people have been producing in the context of crises are often somewhat independent of – and intended to oppose or even replace – dominant practices. In ‘thinking across’ young people are also commonly ‘thinking against’, paralleling the work of Butler (2012). Maple Rasza’s (2015) work with anti-capitalist activists in southern and eastern Europe in the 2000s and 2010s is indicative. Rasza outlines how political mobilisation was entangled with efforts by young people to create lived examples of change at the everyday level. Students converted physical or institutional sites into experiments in viable living. Universities served as places of communal eating, shelter, first aid, knowledge exchange and political discussion (see also Halvorsen, 2017). Squats offered bases for exchange, small business, and developing a subculture of non-conformity (see also Vasudevan, 2015). These experiments were geared to challenging ‘mainstream’ social and political organisation. For example, in a reversal of standard approaches to student union politics, students rotated leadership roles such that individuals could not acquire privileged access to social networks.

Lynch (2020) develops similar themes in an account of the youth-led technological sovereignty (TS) movement in Barcelona: a decentralised network of cooperatives, associations, and community initiatives founded on the principle of open-source digital development. Technological sovereignty participants educated others, improved people’s access to services, and hitched their mobilisation to opportunities to build relationships, acquire work, and reflect on urban life and viability. This ‘thinking across’ in turn created opportunities to ‘think against’. Technological sovereignty movement participants campaigned against corporate approaches to technology, urban surveillance, and the alienation of people from technological systems.

The notion of ‘thinking against’ must be advanced cautiously for several reasons. Most notably, only some of the positive action developed through ecosystems of practice takes dominant neoliberal capitalism as an overriding point of reference. Renkert’s (2019) work on the ecotourism initiatives of indigenous Kichwa Anangu community members in Ecuador illustrates this argument (see also Laurie et al., 2005). Drawing on work on diverse economies (see Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2011), Renkert describes young people’s involvement in this region in developing a system of ecotourism aligned with global ideas of degrowth. This entailed linking tourism to communal governance, cultural reclamation, employment, and the renewal of local services, all underpinned by an encompassing focus on the local notion of ‘Sumak Kawsay’ (‘the good life’). Local people used dominant practice – embodied in extractive industry, the commodification of indigenous culture, urbanization, economic growth, and
intensive agriculture – as the negative foil for their relatively novel ecosystem of practice. But their action far exceeded a simple attempt to work ‘against’ dominance, particularly in their invocation of Sumak Kawsay.

Young people’s determination not to be defined by their rejection of dominant practices is reflected in other studies. Jeffrey (2010) conducted research with low caste (Dalit) young people who sought to prevent and investigate sexual and physical violence perpetrated against low castes in north India. In addition to seeking justice for violent events, low caste activists argued that the long-term prevention of violence required ecosystems of practice focused on Dalits’ ‘whole lives’ (puri jivan). This included the development of youth clubs, work internship opportunities, sports activities, theatre productions, and initiatives around the improving the local environment. These practices were oriented towards critiquing dominant higher caste practice, but Dalits also stressed the centrality of Dalit histories of action for their ecosystems of practice. The accounts of Renkert (2019) and Jeffrey (2010) of young people’s ecosystems of practice thus connect with geographical work on autonomous geographies (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006), diverse economies (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2011) and alter-childhoods (Kraftl, 2015), which are similarly concerned with showing that dominant forms of capitalism do not define practices of alterity.1

Two further caveats are required in reflecting on ecosystems of practice as efforts to ‘think against’. First, young people’s capacity to participate in ecosystems of practice that counter dominance often varies across social divides, and gender is an especially relevant axis of inequality. For example, several studies note the difficulties that young women face in fully participating in ecosystems of practice that connect work, education, infrastructure and the environment, often especially in the majority world (Diouf, 1998; Koskimaki, 2017). Moreover, the ecosystems of practice that young people develop are contradictory in multiple ways. They frequently reproduce dominant ideas around gender, caste, religion, and other forms of inequality, even as they challenge some aspects of these inequalities (Dawson, 2014).

A second caveat relates to neoliberalism as an ideology. Many young people around the world are responding to crises through reproducing dominant norms associated with free-market capitalism – for example, around competitive ‘success’ – and are eroding the capabilities of marginalised sections of society (Jeffrey and Young, 2014). Moreover, the notion of connecting different domains to act upon ‘life’ resonates somewhat with neoliberal discourses of individual enterprise (Gooptu, 2013). Scholars have emphasised emerging narratives of success that foreground the capacity of young people to make strategic personal decisions about how to participate in the market and balance their work alongside other dimensions of life (e.g. Gooptu, 2013). In addition, the idea of a ‘whole life’ that needs to be made viable is entwined in histories of patriarchal and capitalist power, for example, through narratives of ‘development’, and in neoliberal visions of individualised progress and growth (Hage, 2019).

Nevertheless, even if young people’s action bears the imprint of neoliberal discourse or of ‘development’ as a modernist project, they may be ‘positive’ in Sen’s (2014) sense. In addition, neoliberal capitalism does not have a monopoly on notions of competitive enterprise, which also emerge within many so-called ‘traditional’ contexts in the majority world. For example, Thomas Birtchnell (2011) documents the importance of ideas of individualistic notions of ‘jugaad’ – the capacity for enterprising improvisation – as an important grassroots ideology in India linked to notions of environmental thrift. Nor is the idea of ‘life’ yoked to capitalist visions of modernity; there are many contexts in the majority world in which ideas of ‘life’ are enunciated, as in the case of Kichwa ideas of Sumak Kawsay (‘the good life’) in Ecuador. Young people’s efforts to think across and think against, while ambivalent in many cases, often have the net effect of enhancing the capabilities of relatively marginalised sections of society.

V Thinking out

Young people’s ecosystems of practice also generate new ideas. This generativity may be social. It should be noted that young people’s pursuit of viability may not involve building inventive social relationships.
Survivalism and ‘prepping’ among young people, for example, suggests a process of breaking away from social networks (McKenzie, 2021). Nevertheless, new ways of building social relationships are a key theme of much of the work on young people’s efforts to achieve viability. Young people’ attempts to think across and build new ecosystems of practice often entail ‘thinking out’ in the sense of imagining and creating novel lines of social solidarity that bridge and partially dissolve hierarchies based upon class, authority, religion, sex, gender, and caste (Krishnan, 2016). For example, Henry (2017) notes that young people have been important in drawing together university administrators, local labour activists, environmental NGOs, and the government to develop ecosystems of practice that address the problem of food insecurity on US campuses. Meanwhile, the development of unlikely alliances is a running theme of Rasza’s (2015) account of anti-capitalist mobilisation.

The inventive nature of young people’s sociality is also evident in how youth link different generations (cf Hopkins and Pain, 2007). This is especially clear in work on feminist organizing in some parts of the global South (Nagar, 2021; Sharma, 2018), which highlight how young women have formed bonds with older women in thinking across and thinking against. The theme of inter-generational links and recovering past knowledge is also prominent in work on indigenous and First Nations activism. For example, LaDuke (2005) describes how First Nations young people in Canada have developed ties with older members of their community in trying to renew indigenous livelihoods in the face of dominant power (see also Laurie et al., 2005; Daigle, 2015, 2019). Dawson (2022: 1) similarly argues that young people seeking basic amenities in urban South Africa also prioritised developing a broad set of social relationships based on mutual respect, such that their action was concerned with ‘living, not just surviving’. Accounts of the social dimensions of new ecosystems of practice also stress the significance of non-human entities in these ecosystems (Butler, 2012; LaDuke, 2005) thereby commonly critiquing anthropocentric approaches (cf. Cairns and Krzywoszynska, 2016). As Tsing (2015: 211) puts it, ‘as life-enhancing entanglements disappear from our landscapes’, configurations of human and non-human actors ‘orchestrate forms of survival’ (see also Castree, 2014).

Another dimension of the generativity of ecosystems of practice relates to spatiality and place. Much of the literature on young people’s ‘thinking across’ highlights the extent to which young people are bringing together different spaces. For example, Smith and Gergan (2015) have documented systems of living in urban north India wherein young people link work, education, and style to connect themselves imaginatively to other parts of Asia (see also Dyson and Jeffrey, 2022a).

In addition, young people are often ‘thinking out’ through linking their ecosystems of practice to other such ecosystems in other places, a process that may strengthen their action or heighten the risk of it being co-opted or diluted, as noted by Laurie et al. (2005). The Occupy Movement sought to expand its reach and impact through developing close links with other Occupy movements nationally and internationally (Halvorsen, 2017). The Technological Sovereignty movement entailed networking with other youth-led movements in Barcelona around housing, food, energy, cultural practice and health ‘sovereignties’, and participants also developed connections with movements in other countries (Lynch, 2020; cf. Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Featherstone, 2011; Browne et al., 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic, while often preventing international contact in the early 2020s, also encouraged some forms of cross-regional and global collective organising. For example, Khadka and Adhikaari (2020) argue that young people leading different environmental organisations across South Asia developed closer connections during Nepal’s lockdowns via online networking. Similarly, Dyson et al. (2021) maintain that students during the lockdowns in Melbourne, Australia, became collectively aware of the depth and scale of the problem of food insecurity within universities and began to make connections between their situations and those of students in other parts of the world.

Place building is also a notable theme of work on young people’s ecosystems of practice. For example, Koskimaki (2017) shows through work in the Indian Himalayas how young people in urban areas tied
their efforts to mobilise around acquiring work, improving education, and protecting the environment to a particular discourse of regional development. Through multiple student political organisations, NGOs, as well as in everyday settings, they revived and promoted a vision of the Indian Himalayas as a place of beauty, spiritual meaning, and environmental purity, and thus as a viable region.

In a similar vein, Diouf (1998) describes marginalised young people in urban Senegal who developed ecosystems of practice in which they rethought their work, relationships, engagement with the city and approach to the state. This effort also served as a fulcrum in which young people learnt to reimagine Dakar, renaming streets, rethinking the meaning of particular places in the city, and in other ways, ‘attacking the state’s modalities of management and dismemberment of urban space’ (Diouf, 1998: 34).

The theme of the remaking of place and spatialities is even more prominent in much of the work on attempts to perform visions of everyday viability within social movements. For example, Viviana Asara (2017), in research on the Indignados movement in Barcelona, stresses the crucial importance of occupying and rethinking public squares in critiques of the dominant state. Young people sought to model ways of inhabiting and reflecting on the square as a basis for ‘life’, focusing especially on the use value rather than capitalist functions of the square. One participant told Asara (2017: 9) that Plaza Catalunya, ‘Was like a small paradise, in which strong comradeship [was] being lived, and where you were generating your own resources’ (see also Halvorsen, 2017).

As this quotation also suggests, the theme of hope – in the sense of being able to feel positive, imagine a future, and plot a course towards that future – is often bound up in young people’s efforts to think across and think against (see also Nairn, 2019). Young people are using ecosystems of practice to reflect on hope as a primary social issue.

Hope-making in the context of demoralizing crises often involves establishing optimism. Thorpe (2016) worked with young people in Gaza who used parkour to develop practices that bridged different elements of life. Parkour was a basis for establishing a club, new social relationships, opportunities for personal and cultural expression, practices of learning, and subtle forms of protest against the destruction of their urban environment. This ecosystem of practice provided a basis for joy and hope. Young people belonging to the ‘PK Gaza’ club at the centre of Thorpe’s (2016: 211) study titled one of their social media posts, ‘Even in pain there is hope’.

The process of thinking across and thinking out has often involved efforts to revive ideas of a future. For example, Renkert (2019) describes how those participating in ecotourism in Ecuador helped to map out detailed plans for the further development of their ecosystem of practice. The production of hope also often involves efforts to prefigure the future in the present, as evident, for example, in Halvorsen’s (2017) work on the Occupy movement and elements of Rasza’s (2017) account of eastern European radicalism (see also Dyson and Jeffrey, 2022b).

Another element of hope is the capacity for young people to assist others in plotting a course from a current state to an imagined future. This more strategic element of hope is also an element of how young people ‘think out’. Ecosystems of practice are often pedagogic spaces peopled by young people who position themselves, for example, as ‘guides’ (see Dyson and Jeffrey, 2022b) ‘motivators’ (Jakimow, 2019) or agents ‘collectivizing hope’ (Nairn, 2019).

Yet another dimension of young people ‘thinking out’ concerns ethics. This theme is developed in the work of Michelle Daigle (2015, 2019) working with First Nations people near Ontario, Canada (see also LaDuke, 2005). Daigle examines how, through inter-generational networks in which youth sometimes feature prominently, Anishinaabe people have ‘thought across’ the spheres of food, cultural practice, work, the environment, housing, social relationships and health. This involved the revival of traditional forms of trading, gifting, hunting and exchange; development of community gardens; initiation of cooperatives; remaking of established cultural practices; and educating others on local foodscapes – all activities that also entailed thinking against dominant colonial settler discourse. This mobilisation has also involved ‘thinking out’ to reflect on the local idea of ‘mino bimaadiziwin’ (‘living the good life’), which is encapsulated in ‘The
rebuilding of intense and spiritual relationships with family and land, the reclamation of ancestral territories, and the re-envisioning, experimentation, and embodiment of alternative political economies’ (Daigle, 2015: 211). The resulting ‘everyday utopias’ (Cooper, 2014) are not simply based upon an existing set of ethical constructs. Rather, Daigle shows how ethical ideas emerge out of the process of thinking across and thinking against. This recursive process – ethical ideas inform viabilities which inform ethical ideas and so on – aligns closely with Cooper’s (2014) understanding of the relationships between better imagined worlds and the social production of ideas. It also connects with Barnett’s (2011: 252) call for geographies attentive to how sites of struggle serve as the bases for the emergence of intuitive understandings of ‘injustice, indignation, and harm’.

The ways in which efforts to ‘think across’ and ‘think against’ might produce ethical ideas is also exemplified in Archambault’s (2016) ethnography of young people’s relationships to plants in Mozambique. In the face of unemployment and the difficulty of meeting gendered visions of acceptable adulthood, many young men in urban Mozambique have focused on cultivating plants, partly as a hobby and partly as a source of income. Notably, Archambault argues that young men have come to love their plants: they have strong romantic attachments to the plants in their care. Young men trade and exchange cuttings and plants with each other, and with older women in their region, building on their shared enthusiasm. Archambault foregrounds the ethical dimensions of human-plant relationships. Young men see their love of plants as a response in part to a feeling that relationships with humans have become transactional. In addition, they characterised their relationships with plants as morally superior to regional capitalist cultures of intensive horticulture.

The link between viability and ethics similarly emerges in Jane Dyson’s ethnographic work (2019) in rural north India. Dyson argues that young people who returned from metropolitan cities of India to live in their home village had a type of ‘fresh contact’ with their home. Many of these young people, especially men but also several women, responded to this sense of experiencing their home village anew by becoming informal spiritual workers. These roles involved them simultaneously drawing together aspects of village life related to work, learning, health and the environment – as well as experience gained in urban areas – in the pursuit of both material and spiritual viability. They also discussed the appropriate way for villagers to comport themselves ethically in relation to each other and their landscape. Young people produced ethical ideas of the landscape and local practice through the spiritually-focused ecosystems of practice that they had created.

The examples provided by Daigle, Archambault, and Dyson should not detract from many instances globally in which young people’s ecosystems of practice have highly ambivalent or even destructive impacts. As Victor Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo (2016) point out, in many settings dominant institutions acculturate young people to develop ecosystems of practice that reflect colonial settler stereotypes, for example, regarding human exceptionalism and people’s ‘hyper-separation’ from nature. Africa Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw’s (2017) make related points in their research on children’s ‘awkward encounters’ with their environments.

Nevertheless, the ethical value that young people ascribe to their ecosystems of practice, as reflected in the work of Daigle, Archambault, and Dyson, is a common theme of several recent accounts of young people’s action. As Butler puts it in elaborating on the ethics of liveability, ‘A life which would somehow precede or transcend the multifarious levels and forms of support (institutional and infrastructural) […] does not merit a name of a good life’ (Butler, 2006: 3, quoted in ZaharIjević and Milutinović Bojanić, 2017: 178; see also Hage, 2019). In Archambault’s (2016) analysis, young men ascribe equal importance to their own lives and those of their cherished plants. In Daigle’s (2015) analysis, ‘mino bimaadiziwin’ (living the good life) entails people fundamentally valuing the ecosystem in which they are embedded. In Dyson’s (2019) account, the spiritual and ethical value of the Himalayan environment far exceeds its function as an ecosystem of practice sustaining human viable life. The insistence in these studies of locating young people as part of wider earth systems, while also not privileging their humanity relative to other elements, links closely to broader recent scholarship on post-
people and young people (Pyyry and Tani, 2019), children and youth engagements with the Anthropocene (Krafl et al., 2020), and studies of how children imagine ‘common worlds’ comprised of a wide variety of equally valued human and non-human elements (Taylor and Giugni, 2012; Weldemariam, 2020).

People as well as non-human actors are central to these ethical ideas, too. A major principle underpinning people’s action across the examples provided by Daigle, Archambault and Dyson – and also embedded in the work of, for example, Threadgold, Soldatic et al., Dawson and Oosterom et al. – is also that one’s own life cannot be viable unless other people’s lives are viable, and not simply for the practical reason that communities are important in the provision of individuals’ needs. A fundamental ethic of shared survival, or living and thriving beyond survival, within a set of intimates runs through much of the scholarship on young people thinking across, thinking against, and thinking out.

**VI Conclusions**

Thinking across domains of life is a key element of many people’s strategies and efforts at survival or thriving in numerous parts of the world, a point exemplified in the words of Greta Thunberg at the beginning of this paper. In illuminating thinking across, ecosystems of practice, thinking against and thinking out as key dimensions of positive action among young people, our paper has the potential to open up an interdisciplinary field of enquiry on viability. It thereby addresses a call within geography for novel concepts alive to the complexities of post-Covid societies (Castree et al., 2020). It provides a conceptual basis for analysing the similarities and differences in varied contexts between ecosystems of practice that involve thinking across spheres, thinking against neoliberal capitalism and environmental destruction, and thinking out to reflect on core aspects of life.

In developing this argument with respect to young people we also address an appeal among those working with youth for research more attuned to the shared hardships and achievements of young people in the minority and majority world (Cuervo and Miranda, 2019; van Blerk, 2019). We also engage with, and extend, work on the various ways in which young people remake aspects of their daily lives (Krafl, 2013; Skelton and Aitken, 2019; Valentine, 2019).

More broadly, we have offered a conceptual framework for analysing a common dimension of how people respond to interlinked socio-political, economic, and environmental crises. The concept of viability directs attention simultaneously to three aspects of much agentive practice in contexts of crisis and emergency. First, viability foregrounds the extent to which people, in situations of difficulty, commonly reconsider many elements of their life at the same time, make connections between different aspects of their life that might otherwise be held apart, and come to reflect critically on how life domains are often silo-ed. ‘Liveability’ (Butler, 2012) and the potential to construct ‘everyday utopias’ (Cooper, 2014) can become paramount concerns. In some contexts, this process has been associated with a type of narrowing such that young people come to focus more on viability in the sense of core aspects of survival, even while they also recognise the importance of thinking beyond survival (Dawson, 2014). Young people often, in turn, use this understanding of connections across core, survival-related domains of life to create ecosystems of practice – a process analogous to what Hage (2019) terms the pursuit of ‘proper viability’. We have argued that viability itself is also a theme of young people’s efforts to think across. Notions of viability emerge out of, and encourage, the building of links across domains of life.

Second, more subtly, the term viability directs attention towards alterity because in certain contexts it connotes partial or more complete independence from a dominant system. The rise of a wide variety of youth-led progressive mobilizations since the mid-1990s in which surviving or living differently has become a practical and thematic concern provides a particular logic for developing viability as a concept (see Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Holloway et al., 2019). In very many contexts, young people are using their ecosystems of practice to ‘think against’.

Third, viability suggests generativity and fecundity. As Cooper’s (2014) work also suggests, viability
is about the potential for the propagation of new ideas within an ecosystem of practice: young people are ‘thinking out’. This paper has focused on some of the most important such ideas: sociality, space, hope, and ethics. Ecosystems of practice are often nests of intense sociality which challenge and reformulate social relations. They emerge out of young people’s attachment to specific places but also reinforce and expand that attachment, as many studies show (e.g. Koskimaki, 2017; Oosterom et al., 2019). In addition, ecosystems of practice are developed through spatial relations and remake those relations just as they are embedded within and often help to transform ideas about time, especially notions of hope and the future.

In addition, in relation to ethics and life, people’s quest for viability is also about learning what it means to lead a ‘good life’ in all senses of the words ‘good’ and ‘life’ (Butler, 2006; see also Barnett, 2011; Laidlaw, 2013; Robbins, 2013). We have suggested that young people come, through creating and participating in ecosystems of practice, to value those ecosystems instrumentally as bases for social survival (thinking across) and political critique (think against). But they also value them intrinsically as ecosystems requiring care and veneration – a product of ‘thinking out’ beyond immediate questions of socio-economic and political survival or of critiquing aspects of dominance. Viability in these contexts refers to basic human survival as well as to the survival of the carapaces of economic, cultural, social, political, and environmental practice that they perceive to make human life worthwhile.

Future work on geographies of viability thus entails examining how people think across domains of life and develop ecosystems of practice in pursuit of survival or viability, whether and how these ecosystems oppose dominant power, and the nature of the social, spatial, temporal, and ethical frames that inform and emerge out of the effort. Future research that builds on this conceptual framework could also address more specific questions, of which three stand out. First, it is important to understand further the discursive, material, and social process through which people in different contexts engage ‘thinking across’ (see also Kraftl et al., 2019; Walker, 2020). This might include consideration of how various encompassing ideas – such as ‘viability’, ‘development’ or ‘justice’ – encourage lateral thinking and promote new ecosystems of practice. For example, Christou et al. (2022: 11) argue that one of the defining characteristics of young people’s action in the Y4C movement in Cyprus was their capacity to ‘bring together’ unassociated ideas through the grammar and language of a broader frame’. Second, it would be instructive to consider how specific materials, spaces or places serve to encourage thinking across (e.g. Tsing, 2015; Oosterom et al., 2019). For example, Oosterom et al. (2019) argue that it was the material and social form of the region of Kachin that was crucially important in encouraging young people in rural Myanmar to connect different domains of life in pursuit of viable futures. Third, it would be useful to examine situations in which people debate the relative value of concentrating effort on addressing problems occurring in a single domain of life vis-a-vis action that connects multiple domains of life. For example, Schneider (2013) highlights considerable debate within the Occupy movement regarding the value of focusing solely on issues of income inequality versus concentrating on conceptualising and living out a vision of an alternative future that integrated concerns around food, shelter, health, education, work, politics, safety, and infrastructure. The combined impact of investigating these three questions will be the emergence of geographically sophisticated studies that examine how, in situations of crisis, people respond to the question: What is a viable life?

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