

The Advocate Self of(f) Beaten Paths: Travelling Colonial Roads in Neoliberal Times

Practice Based Research Paper

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Abstract

Social work often conceptualizes advocacy as synonymous with social justice and critical praxis (Smith, 2011), which seemingly affirms the heart of the social work profession. Though many claim an advocacy role or agree that advocacy is essential to social works cause, little is known about how the advocate self is constructed, understood, and practiced. 6 self-defined, Ontario-based child and youth advocates were interviewed in this study to explore how they engage in their own self-making processes; specifically advocates for children and youth who are involved in the child welfare system.

This research is informed by post-structural, anti-colonial, anti-racist, and other critical theories and worldviews. It deploys a narrative approach and an analytic framework of Foucauldian discourse analysis to explore how child and youth advocates are shaped by, and in turn, shape dominant relations of power that work against, or in solidarity with children and young people towards social justice.

Findings reveal that the roads travelled by child and youth advocates in their self-making processes are complex and ever-changing. The narratives of child and youth advocates reveal that they are both co-producers and disrupters of dominant discourses and power-knowledge systems. Additionally, it is argued that the advocate self is not a bounded self, but that it is “discursively mediated and politically situated” (Macias, 2012 p. 10). Finally, the research concludes with an argument for the necessity to historicize social justice imperatives in order to gain insight to the current tensions experienced by social justice advocates and further, opportunities for resistance.

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Dedication

I dedicate this project to all of the young people, who I have known and have yet to know. Your experiences, voices, struggles, and resilience have left footprints all over these pages and in my heart. While we adults argue over meaning and ‘what’s best’, you disturb and unsettle what is common and ‘true’ every day. Only each of you know what your justice and peace looks like – may you continue to carve your paths in the ways that you know how.

In the meantime, I’ll try to keep the adults, including myself, in check. No promises!

Chapter 1: Braving the Path

“Suppose we want truth: why not rather untruth? and uncertainty? even ignorance?” (Nietzsche, 1990)

Introducing Me and the Topic

This is my attempt to drive my own story of self and social ‘work’ elsewhere. It is my attempt, albeit small and seemingly insufficient, to rewire my own internal navigation system and complicate the stories that we are told – and the ones we tell ourselves – about what it means to be an advocate for social justice.

The story of social work and social justice is one with many narratives. For me, these stories have taken on new meanings through critical conversations in my classroom, within my heart, and throughout the process of this research. It is my understanding that the standard story of social work and social justice is that it is “not inaccurate, but that it is incomplete (Fortier & Wong, 2018, p. 2), and in its partiality, it sustains and legitimizes colonial, racist, capitalist, among other oppressive structures. Depending on who is reading this, you will have your own story to tell. This report in its entirety is merely my own interpretation of the story, informed by my identity, positionality, and relationship to the research. I invite you to read and engage in your own process of knowing, whatever that means for you.

Advocacy discourse in social work education often conceptualizes advocacy as synonymous with radical practice, and therefore becomes a necessary ‘skill’ and ‘competence’ for social workers to ‘complete’ their mission of social justice (Jeffrey, 2005). I have long considered myself a social justice advocate, largely for matters concerning children and youth in the child welfare system. I have practiced in various youth-driven grassroots organizations, youth advisory boards, and as a youth policy informant; practices that a standard social work textbook would consider traversing the ‘micro, mezzo, macro’ trio of the profession. I have come to learn

that despite where and how we practice, advocacy work is a complex space to occupy. The next section is my own story of unlearning and unfolding advocacy and social work, which ultimately lead me to this research topic.

Dale Turner (2006) writes that every narrative or story holds messages and morals that are up to the listener to interpret and bring meaning to. He adds, “because stories are retold many times, and by different people, a kind of communal moral landscape develops, and by participating in this landscape a community develops a shared conception of morality” (Turner, 2006, p. 50). It is my belief that social workers and similar professionals share a conception of morality, informed by perceived histories, that governs their fields and subsequently, their practice. I believe that social workers and similar professionals have learned to govern themselves across this moral conception, but also govern those they seek to support. King (2013) explains history as “the stories we tell about the past”, which Badwall (2016) asserts, are never outside of relations of power. It is also my belief that the many ways we tell the story of social work and social justice informs our identity as advocates; how we come to understand ourselves as advocates for social justice, the way we imagine our advocacy practice, and ultimately, the ways we exercise power over ourselves and others through such conception.

It was towards the end of my BSW degree that I was introduced to philosopher Michel Foucault. I became submerged in his works, and started to question the ‘truths’ about my work and identity that were previously unquestionable to me. I became particularly intrigued with Foucauldian notions of self, and how the makings of the self could be linked to the constant interaction between history, power and knowledge (Macias, 2012), and how in turn, human beings are made subjects (Foucault, 1982). Foucault’s ideas truly came to life for me in the first week of my MSW degree, where I first came across Amy Rossiter’s essay “Innocence Lost and

Suspicion Found: Do we Educate for or Against Social Work?” (2001). Unbeknownst to me at the time, her article, along with my growing understanding of Foucauldian philosophy, would become the impetus for the completion of this research, but more so, a disturbingly re-conceptualized sense of selfhood.

In this essay, Rossiter (2001) discusses her own complex relationship with social work as a profession of caring and helping, and asserts that when we care and help out of a violent, colonial history, we become troubled in our identity as care-takers and helpers. Her article (2001) is among the first where I was introduced to the concept of “innocence” in social work; a belief that one can choose whether to enact harm and control onto others, or be the agent of social change. She cites how the split between “casework ... as control, and community work as social change” (Rossiter, 2001, p. 4) has become a dangerous myth in that it implies there is a space where one can ‘do’ social work and social justice without enacting harm. Rossiter helps me - a white, cishetero, middle-class, able-bodied and educated young social worker – to understand how my own identity and the history of my profession of choice make it all the easier to perpetuate oppression in many ways. She urges me to ‘unsettle’ the notion of critical social work, with attention to the social work subject’s commitment to skills, mastery and competency; conditions which Macias (2012) notes, “makes up the social worker” (p. 3). These in turn, works to legitimize the profession and practices it takes up – ones that continue to enact historical, colonial violence.

I went home and read her article again – at least six more times. With lukewarm tea in one hand, her article in another, I felt the crash of two tectonic plates: my identity and my new-found realizations, and suddenly, the epistemological ground that I have walked on mindlessly for years crumbled beneath me. In its quake, it sent waves of unrest, forming a new, unethical

and troubled sense of selfhood. In its release, I find myself here; in a messy and complex relationship with social justice and advocacy, and a realization that indeed, social work *is* a problem for my identity (Rossiter, 2001). Problematizing this identity further, Rossiter (2001) writes:

“As much as I'd like to have a practice of freedom that is pure and free from doubt - a technique - there is no such ahistorical, decontextualized space. We are always acting in and through a history in which the contradictions of history are lived out in our practices, and no person - even ones who do it perfectly can be extracted from history.” (p. 12)

It was this notion of contradictions that struck me. So I wandered down Foucauldian roads, critical theory in hand, and thought about my own advocacy work with children and youth. I thought about the times I supported a group of children following the vandalization and abolishment of their school's Gay-Straight Alliance, or another through a difficult medical transition. Standing with youth at the picket line, or as a policy informant for matters concerning youth-in-transition. I thought about how I listened, cared, and supported youth in their various struggles. It sounds nice, doesn't it? But these are Foucauldian roads, ones that take us down stories of the past, marked by a colonial and imperialist history that is alive and well today. These roads make me shudder, as I realize that in the same spaces that I have listened, cared and supported, I have invited child protection, consulted police officers, and directed policy at tables solely filled with other white adults. I began to voice these concerns to others who I worked with, and realized that they too, faced ethical tensions and were deeply troubled by the contradictions in their work. I thought deeper about the advocate self, and found that I was less exhaustive in my thinking. I became interested in the experience of the advocate self, namely how the self constructs and understands itself, and what dominant discourses and power relations exist in such construction. I wanted to explore and historicize the “shared concept of morality” (Turner, 2006, p. 50) among child and youth advocates, and chose to speak to six of them in the

Greater-Toronto Area, while complicating their experiences – and my own – using Foucauldian discourse analysis and anti-colonial, anti-racist theories. I thought about my MSW classes, which challenged my preexisting ideologies and imperatives of both child welfare and social justice by unpacking its colonial origins. I grew suspicious of the compatibility of social workers and other professionals to advocate for child and youth in such systems when Children’s Aid Societies still serve as one of the major employers of social workers today. I became curious, though admittedly doubtful, of Rossiter’s (2001) notion that small victories can “coexist with trespass” (p. 21), and wondered if and how other child and youth advocates are actively resisting dominant discourses that oppress, rather than liberate children and youth in child welfare.

The title of this project echoes my findings; that child and youth advocates for social justice are walking countless paths, many beaten ones and some less travelled. The advocate self, therefore, is not a “bounded” self; it is “discursively mediated and politically situated” (Macias, 2012 p. 10). The research will reveal that treading colonial and neoliberal paths in search of justice makes for a very complex and confusing road map. My hope is that these complexities can become all the more apparent, and that you, the reader, can allow yourself to wander off the beaten path and reimagine the stories that you’ve been told – and the ones you tell yourself – about social work, social justice, and what it means to be an advocate.

Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

Choosing a critically-oriented research framework is anything but a neutral and objective task, and I, the researcher, am no exception to this process. Reid et al (2016) remind researchers that seeking critical research paradigms activates the interplay of choices and values, ones that “guide the choice of the problem under investigation, the paradigm that guides the investigation, the context of the research, the theoretical framework used,” (p. 36), and the ensuing conduct of

the research. This process, according to the authors (2016) requires a look inward to determine which values and questions we have about the surrounding world; for these questions are “powerful shapers of the world we see” (Reid et al, 2016, p. 36).

I mentioned earlier that the story of social work is one with many narratives. The more accessible versions are the stories of the settlement house movement and rise of the Charity Organization Society (COS), with key figures such as Jane Addams and Mary Richmond (Chapman and Withers, 2019), portraying benevolent and caring beginnings of professional social work; a story far removed from the profession’s oppressive and colonial legacies. As social workers, we have not only been schooled through this narrative, but socialized across standards of ‘care’ and notions of ‘help’ influencing our identities as ‘caregivers’ and ‘helpers’. As social workers, we reinforce and actively produce this narrative as practitioners, policy informants, educators, *researchers*, and *advocates* of the cause. This dominant narrative of social work as originating in social justice and radical advocacy is a narrative that ultimately serves some and marginalizes many. It omits the colonial legacies of exploitation, marginalization and oppression that served to professionalize the ‘social worker’. It ignores the already established ways that many individuals and communities engage in supporting and caring for each other through traditional knowledge and wisdom. Yet, social workers and similar professionals today, by virtue of their job title, are often credited as holding the knowledge and truth in this regard.

In unsettling this reality, I must ground myself in theories that expose how normative truths and knowledge’s are products of histories and power relations. I must carefully choose a methodology that can explore how makings of the self are inextricable from power-knowledge regimes and the dominant discourses they exude. I found myself leaning more toward a Foucauldian philosophy, and how discourses serve as structures of knowledge and practices that

allow us to claim ‘truth’, understand our world and make decisions in our practice as social workers (Parton as cited in Chambon, 1999). A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) can allow me to examine the various discourses that enable the construction of social truths that are deemed ‘obvious’ and ‘common sense’, and reveal the relationship between power and knowledge as “problematic, difficult, and dangerous” (Foucault, 1991) to the advocate self. Power-knowledge, in a Foucauldian framework, grants certain discourses the status of truth or knowledge, and therefore, “inform who the subject is within these discourses (Hunter, 1996, as cited in Macias, 2012, p. 4).

It is difficult to define FDA as a theory or a methodology. Indeed, many who take it up approach it in quite different ways. Nonetheless, FDA allowed me an entry point to explore the advocate self, cracking open the more insidious operations of power, and challenging and complicating glorified notions of advocacy and social justice.

A Foucauldian understanding of ‘ethics’ is important for my study. Foucauldian ethics can be understood as ‘care done to the self’, or what “subjects do onto themselves to define themselves and others in relation to power and knowledge” (Foucault, 1990, p. 77). It is the notion of ‘freedom’ that subjects exercise in doing so, that Foucault describes as “the ontological condition of ethics” (Foucault, 1984, p. 284). Simply put, ethics is freedom informed by reflection (Foucault, as cited in Kritzman, 199, p. 284). A Foucauldian account of ethics becomes especially relevant in a time where ‘critical self reflection’ and ‘reflexivity’ dominate pedagogical conversations and conceptually work to shape the “subject”. Foucault (1982) believed that human beings are transformed into subjects through power, specifically in three interconnected, but distinct modes of objectification: scientific classification, dividing practices, and processes of subjectification. All become clearer later in my research when discussing the

child and youth advocate in the context of professionalism, polarities between the ‘advocate’ and ‘child/youth’, and technologies of discipline, governance of the self and others.

Immersing in Foucauldian thought can be overwhelming, especially for early researchers. I do believe, however, that Foucault’s philosophy has served to challenge myself to think beyond what I previously thought was possible in matters of social justice. Macias (2012) writes that Foucault’s notion of ‘intellectual wandering’ can be understood as an ethics that commits to being unsettled and self-detached in our own subjectivity; something Foucault notably recognizes as “dangerous work” (Chambon et al, 1999, p. 54). I hope to create choice and possibility for myself to engage in intellectual curiosity and ‘wandering’ ethics throughout this research paper, while acknowledging that as a researcher, professional and subject of power, I can never fully escape the power structures constantly moving through and within me.

There are some growing critiques of Foucault’s conceptual applicability under colonial conditions (Penak, 2019; Stoler, 1995). In my desire to expose “the self between culture, imperial instrumentalities and discursive orders” (Drake et al, 2019, p. 127), I believe it is necessary to also engage meaningfully with other critical scholarship including but not limited to anti-colonial, anti-racist, and post-structural, critical theory. These theories challenge essentialized notions of helping professionals like social workers, and expose the colonial continuities that sustain hegemonic scripts about their identities and practices, such as advocacy. I will later outline the applicability of these theories, and what I believe to be the necessity of their use in Chapter 2, where I conduct a literature review that dissects the underpinnings of social work and advocacy with children and youth. My findings are presented in Chapter 3 through a lens of FDA, and then discussed further in Chapter 4, with more attention to anti-colonial, anti-racist and other critical theories that expose some omissions in Foucault’s work.

Research Design and the Participants

Through purposive and snowball sampling, 6 self-identified child and youth advocates became the participants and voices of this project. These sampling methods allowed me to interview people that I already knew, though not particularly well, and make connections to others that I did not know. Majority of the advocates interviewed were previously unknown to me. As expected in a one year, condensed graduate program, time constraints became a barrier in the recruitment process. My initial plan was to speak to 8-9 advocates. As per my earlier reflections on the contradictions of self and practice, it felt rather contradictory to me to continue to seek participants for the sake of “more data” or a “greater capacity for generalizations”, when the essence of this research was to disturb such positivist urges. My research, at times, also adopts an auto-ethnographic approach. As much as this research explores how others construct their advocate self, I also identify as a child and youth advocate, connect deeply with the findings and subsequent analysis, and so I believe it is important to implicate myself in the discussion. For this reason, I consider myself the 7th participant of the study.

In my recruitment, I initially reached out to Toronto-based, child and youth focused agencies, organizations or coalitions that specified either an advocacy mandate, or mentioned advocacy as an agency function in their online promotional materials. I reached out to them directly via e-mail with a research flyer attached, inviting participants to contact me if interested in my project. I also circulated information about my study to professional contacts that I had already established but did not personally work with.

At the end of this section, I will more formally introduce the child and youth advocates in this study. As you might notice, individuals were diverse in their identities, education, trainings, and other markers. I did not formally collect any self-identifying information, other than the

individual's pseudonym choice for confidentiality purposes within the transcripts and report. I only noted what participants decided to share with me in the interview and member-checking process. It was far more important for me to see when, and in what context people introduced the various aspects of their identity in relation to understandings of self and their advocacy practice. I discuss the ethical implications of this in the next section.

My sole criteria for participant inclusion was that individuals were 18 years old or older, self-identified as a child/youth advocate, and had experience advocating for children/youth. I recognize the flexible nature of my inclusion criteria. It was not my intention, however, to set rigid boundaries and standards for participation in this project. I hoped to leave the inclusion criteria as open as possible, as I did not want to pre-define the identity of an advocate, but see how others constructed such definitions and placed meaning onto them. My own discussions of advocacy, as well as the ones narrated by the participants, may not be the same definitions that you, the reader, resonate with in your own life. In reiterating Turner's (2006) point about interpretation and meaning, I believe each individual will have a different definition of advocacy based on their own subject positionality and relationship to their history. Though I am a social worker myself, it is not the social worker per se that is the focal point of this research, but the self that is entwined with the constructions and practice of advocacy. Throughout the report, however, I do make explicit references to, and implicate social work to complicate and question its professional stance and 'commitment' to advocacy as part of its social justice mission. Other professions, especially those concerning children and youth, namely child and youth work, family studies, international development and other social sciences, similarly reflect social justice imperatives and advocacy initiatives and therefore, are also in question. For purposes of this paper, I will be referring to any professional or those practicing advocacy with children and

youth as a ‘child and youth advocate’. I previously stated that I chose this deliberately in order to invite any interested participant who self-identified with the term, in order to understand how individual’s construct and understand it. In doing so, however, I am contributing to a body of knowledge of what it means to be a ‘professional’ or an ‘advocate’ in colonial and neoliberal times. As I learned through this degree, it is violence to deem anyone the professional or advocate for someone’s life other than the one who is living it – including all children and youth. In this process, I am an active constructor and re-enforcer of power-knowledge systems that oppress the very people I seek to liberate. I do try, however, to place both ‘the professional’ and the ‘child and youth advocate’ simultaneously under a critical gaze in an attempt to open new possibilities for understanding self as tied to dominant power structures and the knowledge they exude. Nonetheless, I cannot escape the fact that in my chosen definitions, I research in alignment with white, Western standards of professionalism.

In conducting the research, I facilitated individual, one-on-one semi-structured interviews with each advocate at a time and place of their convenience and comfort. My initial thought was to conduct a focus group with child/youth advocates. Upon further reflection, I no longer believed that a focus group environment could allow participants the space to truly speak to their individual, advocate “selves”. I believe that semi-structured, individual interviews not only minimized confidentiality risks for the participants, but also allowed for an environment where advocates could speak more comfortably about their own individual journey to advocacy. I am curious, however, how a focus group might have influenced the participant’s responses.

The shortest interview was 38:17 minutes long, and the longest one was 1:01:24 minutes. Audio recordings and subsequent transcripts were kept in a password-locked folder in my laptop files. I opted to transcribe the interviews myself, using the ExpressScribe transcription software.

The software allowed me to lower the speed of the audio, and therefore, not only allowed me to type more efficiently, but take greater notice of various parts of my conversation with participants that I had not noticed previously during the interview.

I did not hold myself to any rigid, standardized methods of coding. I attempted to take on a “Foucauldian ethics of reading” (Macias, 2012), and take notice of the ways that the transcripts I was reading turned into something that I wanted to hear, and also allow myself to be critical of the text and subsequently, my own relationship to practice, knowledge and truth. Macias (2012) writes that as readers of text, we can locate the power-knowledge regimes that leave us “search[ing] and read[ing] for certain things” (p. 11). In engaging in this critically reflexive process of reading, I first read through all transcripts in their entirety, and then began searching for any immediate commonalities. I looked through and created documents with all of my interview questions and their corresponding responses with each participant, and re-read and cross-referenced to streamline bits and codes. Eventually, after a long process of re-reading and cross-referencing, I landed on two main themes: how the advocate self both engages in processes of producing, and disrupting dominant discourses and power-knowledge regimes. These themes fit under the overarching theme, i.e., the advocate self as part of, and resistant to contradictory ways of ‘being’ and ‘doing’ the advocate self. Throughout the coding process, I became incredibly aware of my own influence in how data was categorized and subsequently analyzed. It was in these working moments that I felt like I was holding violence in my own hands. As much as I tried to engage in an ethics of transcribing, reading and coding that would lessen the power imbalances of the researcher and the researched, I learned that there is no innocent space like that when you are deconstructing someone else’s narrative and putting your own name on the title page. In my attempts to mitigate harm, I only present my own interpretation of the data and will

not assume that the participant's responses are the sum of their experiences. These individuals did not owe me their time and their words – something that is often a big misconception in traditional research. I hope that through my own thoughtfulness around this, I can avoid creating a single story about those in my study, and those affected by it.

Speaking to the participants reaffirmed my initial suspicions that discussing advocacy as practice would also be woven with deep, personal and complex stories of self. Though my interview questions were 'semi-structured', conversation often flowed organically, inviting the outpour of frustrations, passions and hopes of the participants. All the theories and literature that would 'prepare' me for my interviews suddenly became more challenged than reaffirmed, opening new and unexplored avenues for exploration. Here, I will provide a quick and short introduction to each of the participants so that you, the reader, can get to know them a little bit better. I firmly believe that each person knows themselves better than anyone else, and so it is important for me give space for the participants to introduce themselves in their own words. The short information provided here is what participants shared when asked to introduce themselves in the interview, or during the member-checking process, or combinations of both. In no particular order (and with use of their chosen name/pseudonym), introducing Renee, Kelsey, Amy, T-Roy, Cameron, and Sue Harsh:

Renee: Renee identifies as a child and youth advocate, with lived experience in the child welfare system as a former youth in care. Renee is an immigrant from Trinidad and Tobago, immigrating to Canada at a young age. Renee has advocated in different capacities including child welfare, youth justice, and later, in the Ontario Child Advocates office. Renee holds an educational background in child and youth work, and is currently working towards a degree in

social work. Renee enjoys advocating for anyone who has faced any type of discrimination, marginalization and/or oppression by systems of power.

Kelsey: Kelsey identifies as an advocate with a background in child and family studies, with experience in group home work, including licensing for group homes and foster care homes, and later, in the Ontario Child Advocates office. Kelsey identifies as a woman of privilege with reference to her skin colour, gender identity and expression, ability, nationality, among many other categories. Kelsey's guiding belief in her advocacy work is that each of us deserves to be deeply loved for who we are. Her advocacy is to support environments that allow love between people to flourish. In addition, Kelsey believes that uncovering who you really are is one of the most beautiful gifts we can give ourselves. Kelsey believes that when we understand who we are, from a deeply rooted place, we can give so much more love and support to others. She does not believe her role as an advocate is to speak on behalf of others as an end state, but to support someone in a way that allows them to learn more about themselves, fall deeply in love with themselves, and then know that they have their own capacity to heal, love, and advocate for themselves and others.

Amy: Amy identifies as a child and youth advocate with experience working in school boards, with CAS as a placement student, and holds an educational background in social work (BSW, MSW). Amy identifies as South-Asian, and utilizes a bottom-up approach to advocacy. Amy feels that we need to identify, acknowledge, vocalize and advocate for social justice issues that are affecting us at the micro-level, as the issues that impact us in our daily lives are reflective of the statement "the personal is political".

T-Roy: T-Roy identifies as both a child and youth advocate and a lived expert, as someone who has lived experience as a former youth in care. T-Roy defines himself as a black

young person, who is passionate about learning and has an educational background in STEM. He is passionate about advocacy that supports youth to bring out the gifts and strengths within them. T-Roy became involved in advocacy work after high school, and is particularly attracted to advocating for permanency for youth who are ageing out of care.

Cameron: Cameron identifies as a child and youth advocate in the world of social work. Cameron has held various roles as an advocate, including working for CAS, the Child Advocates Office, and with the Ontario Ombudsman child and youth unit. Cameron identifies as an advocate who takes on systemic advocacy, using a rights-based lens.

Sue Harsh: Sue Harsh is an individual with predominant experience in youth work, including those who have received services from CAS. They are a child and youth advocate with significant experience in community-based advisory committees, where they can influence bias towards shared decision-making that actively gives power back to those impacted by the social issues at hand. Sue Harsh identifies as a racialized minority who was not born in Canada, with an educational background in social work.

Considering Ethics

This research has been reviewed and approved by York University and complies with the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. In keeping with the ethics approval process, I submitted by research proposal, informed consent form, e-mail script, draft interview questions, and recruitment poster for approval. At the time, I did not believe there was any major ethical considerations beyond confidentiality, informed consent, and emotional risks due to sensitive topics surrounding child welfare. Participants were able to chose a pseudonym for the report and transcriptions, in order to ensure their own confidentiality. I prepared

counseling and support referrals, and reiterated to the participants, verbally and in the consent form, that they did not have to answer any questions, and could stop the interview at any time.

These were my major concerns at the time of my first proposal to the ethics committee. Reid et al (2016) urged me to rethink my identity as a child and youth advocate, and my initial perceived identity as an ‘insider’ in the research process. The authors (2016) write: “as researchers we are never fully outside or inside the community” (p.57), because our position as research grants us an extreme amount of power; power that can influence the research process with human participants. As I alluded to in the previous section, this report is solely my account of the data that was gifted to me by the participants. There is no escaping my own subject positioning to the data, and therefore, my own perception of it. I want to make this clear – what you are reading is merely my own story, as well as my own interpretations of wonderful, genuine and insightful conversations that I was lucky to have with six other child and youth advocates. This does not take away, however, the fact that I am a subject and object in this research process, and that in my attempt to disrupt dominant discourses, I am also reinforcing them. More frightening, is that this Practice-Based Research Paper (PRP) will be archived, though likely confined to York’s PRP library, and inform history to come about ‘the advocate self’ and its surrounding discourses. In the case of this research, I learned early in the process that it is impossible to be objective. I remain adamant, however, that my research is not truth, but simply my own perception of others narratives.

Though I am familiar with Heron’s (2005) notion to “write [my]self into [my] paper[‘s] (p. 342) in critical academia, I think about how these explorations of self have often existed as entry points to seek a place of innocence that can rid me of the discomforts I feel when interrogating my own identity and practices. But the reality is, nothing could have prepared me

for the feeling that accompanies the research process when you know you are singlehandedly choosing what is “worth” noticing, analyzing further, or what is striking, contradictory, or *relevant*. Nothing is more contradictory to me at this moment than me sitting behind my Macbook Air, as a *master’s of social work* student of an esteemed university, doing research on the complexities and contradictions facing advocates of social justice. I hope that you too, can see that in my perceived devotion to social justice through this research, I am also submissive to the structures that grant me this degree and demand the completion of this report. Even more troubling is my complicity to do just that. In my chosen design, I neglect the stories of literally countless children and youth in care who are at the receiving end of advocacy efforts, largely driven by professionals in my field of choice. I conduct this research keeping my own subjectivity and its power in mind, but also fearful of the ways that I am ignorant of its influence.

Backwards, Forwards, Sideways

By now you might have noticed my affinity for metaphors of movement, direction, and wandering. I see this report as embarking on winding, uncertain roads, with many stops along the way. Fitting, when one participant described advocacy as a process where “[you] go backward, [you] go forward, [you] go sideways” (Sue Harsh), I felt that this quote reflected the complex travels of the advocate self that I saw emerging through my own data analysis. Specifically, how the advocate self reflects the interconnectedness of time, place and meaning. This notion of moving “backwards, forward and sideways” in advocacy, as quoted by participant Sue Harsh, will serve as way for me to present my findings. I do not assume for a second that advocacy and social justice work offers a linear, carefully-calculated and formulaic path. It is the complexity and tensions in such movement that became the major theme of this research.

I hope that this chapter could set the tone for this journey, one that I invite you to join me on. It has discussed my rationale and motivations to pursue this project, and the accompanying frameworks that guide my coding and analysis. I have also introduced you to my research design, and the six participants who journeyed this path with me. I honestly discussed my fears regarding the ethics of this research, and the archiving of data as acts of violence. Chapter 2 will explore some existing literature that I have come across during this research process, including common themes and gaps that I identified in relation to my own research topic. Chapter 3 will introduce the participant's narratives in backwards, forwards, and sideways motion, informed by a Foucauldian framework of critical discourse analysis. Here, I will explore the ways that I believe the participants' narratives produce (backwards) and disrupt (forwards) power-knowledge, and reveal the advocate self amongst contradictions, something I name the 'sideways' of social justice work. This notion of the 'sideways' will be explored further in Chapter 4, moving slightly away from Foucault and towards a more meaningful engagement with anti-colonial concepts and perspectives. The report will then conclude with a reflection of my own travels throughout the research process, and what this study can offer to those embarking on similar paths.

Chapter 2: A Literature Review

Preamble to the Literature Review

This literature review revealed that discussions of the advocate self, particularly its constructions and practices, are seemingly limited. Although not much exists on the constructions and imperatives of the advocate self, I found that there was quite a body of literature that focused on the contradictory narratives embedded within identities that rely on advocacy discourse; namely social work and cognate professions. Since my study focuses on child and youth advocates, particularly those concerned with young people in the child welfare system, an understanding of how these structures came to be is necessary to historically situate the advocate self. History-telling as a political strategy (Chapman and Withers, 2019) is an important aspect of my approach, because I believe that the literature we choose to reveal says much about the stories we want to tell. I will first ‘unsettle’ the ‘settler’ accounts of social justice and social work and challenge the dominant narrative of social work as benevolent, social justice oriented, and the social worker as a champion of advocacy. Then, I will attempt to reveal dominant discourses of advocacy circulating in professional social work and existing studies with young people. I will lastly discuss the contradictions and tensions that social workers face with advocacy under neoliberal conditions, along with limitations to the literature review.

Unsettling Settler Accounts of Social Work and Social Justice

Starting points matter. If you have ever been exposed to a social work classroom, perhaps you are familiar with the standard origin story of social work as a tale of organized charities and settlement house movements. Chapman and Withers (2019) write that most trace the beginnings of social work as far back to the late nineteenth century, where prominent figures Jane Addams and Mary Richmond led social change through their advocacy in alleviating poverty and

improving the social conditions for the poor and otherwise marginalized (Trattner, 1998). This story of social work reflects one of fierce advocacy for societies “most disadvantaged and oppressed, ...those unable to find a voice of their own, and traditionally charged with creating conditions for social reform (Trattner, 1998 as cited in Brown, Ball, and Livermore, 2015, p. 46).

A quick google search of the ‘history of social work’ will present pages upon pages of this story. Many anti-colonial, critical race scholars (Chapman and Withers, 2019; Jeffrey, 2002; Reisch, 2008; Stoler, 2000) have traced back the story of social work to expose what is actually oppressive and violent beginnings. Jeffrey (2002) and Stoler (1995), like myself, utilize FDA in their accounts of social works history; they do so to locate the emergence of what Foucault named *biopower*. Biopower refers to the workings of power on the human body for the purposes of regulation, management and control (Chambon, Irving and Epstein, 1999). This is vastly different than the standard account of social work born out of benevolence, helping, and advocacy. Part of unsettling the settler account of social work means exposing the ontology of forgetting (Pon, 2009) the settler colonial context that allowed social work to flourish as a technology of control (Tuk and Yang, 2012). In one of her own literature reviews, Penak (2019) writes that the historical account of social work is one of a “white European endeavor, which is enacted upon racialized populations” (p. 97). There are many examples of this in the literature, but because my study focuses on child and youth advocates with a specific emphasis on child welfare, I will *very* briefly use child welfare as an example here:

I emphasize ‘very’ because the history of child welfare across settler-states is impossible to discuss in a single page; its realities are centuries in the making, and marked by complex systems of oppression that are arguably more apparent today than ever. Today, social workers who work with children, youth and families in the child welfare system often see themselves,

and are simultaneously seen as young people's biggest champions. A genealogical approach to child welfare in Canada, however, exposes child welfare as a colonial modality through the use of Indian Residential Schools, child apprehension and displacement, criminalization, among other forms of oppressive institutionalization and treatment. These modalities were deployed by the Canadian state to control and manage Indigenous communities; the intent being the erasure of Indigenous peoples and their ways of life (Landertinger, 2017). This era marked the emergence of children's aid societies (CAS), which are often seen as motivated by standards of care, but that "care was defined and policed by those who apprehended children; it was not measured by the children themselves, their families, or their communities" (Chapman and Withers, 2019, p. 35). Cindy Blackstock, a fierce advocate for Indigenous children and youth, centers much of her work on the role of social work in the colonial violence enacted on Indigenous communities through child welfare practices. Blackstock (2009) writes that the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples of 1996 documented that social workers were key players in the residential school era as informants for committees that forced Indigenous children into residential schools. The logic that 'if we knew, we would have acted different', Blackstock (2009) argues, cannot apply to social work because the profession was so blatantly supportive and complicit in such times. She writes that although Indigenous communities were not without their familial challenges, there is currently "no Aboriginal language[s] in Canada [that] [have] a word for child removal or apprehension as we understand it in contemporary child welfare law" (Blackstock, 2009, p. 29). This reinforces that child welfare as it exists today is not simply a well-intended service meant to protect and empower families. It is, and has always been a form of protecting settler futurity (Tuck and Yang, 2012) through the management of families.

Other anti-colonial, anti-racist writers such as Chris Chapman and A.J Withers (2019) take up a genealogical approach to their work to disrupt the common conception that social work magically appeared with the rise of the settlement houses. They provide a multitude of accounts, across Canada and around the globe, of racialized communities being active in social justice efforts long before Jade Addams and Mary Richmond, and yet are never accounted for in the origin stories of social work. The authors (2019) write:

The standard account of social work is simply a white account of white social work. It ignores racialized peoples' contributions to the mishmash of interventions into our social world that has been called social work for over a century, and thus constructs social work as white in both the past and the present. The few historical figures we name, alongside countless Black anti-slavery and anti-lynching advocates, community organizers, settlement workers, and other activists and charity workers, were active in forging the foundation of modern social work. (p. 78)

The authors (2019) then go on to emphasize that “white history is told as a shared history” (p. 79) whereas other histories are marginalized and ‘Othered’. Yellowbird and Gray (2016) reinforce this idea and Blackstock’s (2009) previous point that Indigenous communities have long had their own ways of helping and caring for one another, but that this way of life has been neglected from dominant narratives of social work and appropriated within mainstream social work education.

It is not possible to contextualize these ideas in their entirety. It is impossible, not only within the limited scope this paper, but because I believe there is no such thing as knowing anything in its ‘entirety’. Sunera Thobani (2007) posits that the imposition of whiteness through colonial violence has exalted white bodies over racialized bodies; this makes for a moral economy where human value, worth, legitimacy, and knowledge is granted only if people approximate to the moral ‘high ground’ of white people and conform to “white, non-disabled, ruling class, cisheterosexual norms” (Chapman and Withers, 2019, p. 240). The critique is that

racialized people can never ‘achieve’ this status on the basis of their race; in turn, legitimizing the ‘innate’ morality of white bodies and their exalted status.

Social workers are exalted subjects because the narratives of ‘help’ and ‘care’ that are embedded in the profession’s stories of origin work to reinforce that we are ‘good’ and ‘moral’ people who want social justice and to advocate for others. This self-exaltation leaves little room to imagine the harm that we can do. Heron (2007) adds that when we think of ourselves as moral, it enables the bourgeois subjectivity and sense of entitlement to come out; imperatives that are inscribed with innocence. Blackstock (2009) frames this concept nicely with respect to working with children and youth:

The concept that we can do harm or even do evil rarely appears on the optical radar screen of professional training, legislation or practice in anything other than a tangential way through procedural mechanisms such as code of ethics. This is particularly true for those of us who work with children – believing that those who want to do good, trained to do good – could do harm to children is astonishing and upsets our sensibility of the world. Talking about it even seems too much, as it breathes life into its possibility, so often, we are silent (p. 31-32).

Unsettling the most commonly told stories of social work demands an exploration of how our identities came to be. This is by no means a full account of history but it does provide some insight into the story of social work as one informed by a violent process of colonialism.

Colonialism, however, is not an event, but a structure, (Wolfe, 1999 as cited in Tuk and Yang, 2012), and is very much alive today. The next section will discuss how advocacy is currently framed in social work education, as well as in the professions regulatory colleges, ethical codes and dissemination of information.

Framings and Teachings of Advocacy in Contemporary Social Work

In a Foucauldian sense, the university functions as a localized and institutional form of power where knowledge emerges as truth (Preece, 1998). It is valuable then to discover the

dominant discourses and portrayals of advocacy that are circulating within social work education, which ultimately shapes us as professional subjects and informs our advocate selves. The ways that advocacy is constructed and disseminated across social work education is very much in line with the dominant narratives of social work discussed in the previous section. Advocacy discourse in social work is deeply embedded with ideals of radical practice, empowerment, and action-oriented change for those who experience interlocking oppressions (Pease, 2002). Much of the critique of advocacy education in social work classrooms is actually the lack of it; that the changing role of social work from ‘radical’ to ‘case-management’ focused makes advocacy increasingly difficult to teach or overall inappropriate to everyday practice (Boylan and Dalrymple, 2000; Hick, 2005). Similarly, Macias (2013) writes that those who are committed to critically-centered pedagogical approaches in social work are facing the seemingly impossible task of balancing a critical social work curriculum against processes of neoliberalization. As a former BSW student and current MSW student, I can attest to my own experience that advocacy was seldom mentioned, certainly not taught as practice, and in the rare moments it was mentioned, it was framed as synonymous to taking action, exerting voice and driving social change.

Despite this, social work’s respective governing colleges frame advocacy very differently. The Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW), for example, uses advocacy 14 times in their Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice handbook (2008). In their Code of Ethics guidelines, the college writes that social workers and social service workers “shall advocate for workplace conditions and policies” (OCSWSSW, 2008, p. 1) aligned with the code, as well as “advocate change in the best interest of the client, and for the overall benefit of society, the environment and the global community” (OCSWSSW, 2008, p.1).

However, can these two guidelines, alongside one another, possibly be reconciled in practice? Nonetheless, advocacy is framed as action-oriented, through voice in the workplace and driving greater social change. ‘Advocacy’ also appears under the principle of Integrity (p. 12), and is framed again as client-centered and social change driven, and yet, it also appears as the exercise of professional discretion and judgment: “a social worker or social service worker will use professional judgment in determining how to advocate” (p. 15). The code even provides a working definition of advocacy in their glossary: “the act of directly representing or defending others; championing the rights of individuals, groups or communities through direct intervention or through empowerment; a basic obligation of the professions and its members” (p. 18). The Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW) even has an advocacy tab under “collective action” on their website which states:

“OASW has a strong history of successful political advocacy. From advocating for the establishment of the *Social Work and Social Service Work Act, 1998*, to enabling those with a doctorate in social work to use the title "Doctor" when providing clinical services; to securing pilot funding from government for a Professional Development Fund and most recently a highly effective province-wide advocacy campaign to ensure Registered Social Workers have access to the title, "psychotherapist." OASW is a non-partisan organization committed to working with any government in power to advance the Association's strategic priorities and directions, including advocating for the improvement of policies and programs directly affecting social work practice and the client groups served.” (Advocacy and Government Relations, OASW, n.d).

The section then goes on to discuss advocacy under three headings: social determinants of health, human rights, and promotion of the profession (Advocacy and Government Relations, OASW, n.d). Again, advocacy is balanced alongside discourses of professionalism and social justice and equity. This same theme continues with the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), demonstrating that advocacy is a global discourse in social work that assumes a social justice mission.

Many social workers must register with their provincial colleges in order to qualify for various job positions. The colleges and associations of social work are representative of our professions, and therefore, inevitably shape the way that social work discourse is disseminated to others. In regards to advocacy, the colleges, associations, and education system all similarly frame advocacy as radical, macro-level change towards social justice.

How is Advocacy [for Children and Youth] Discussed in the Literature?

The last section briefly discussed how advocacy is framed and taught in current professional education and across the governing colleges of social work. The definition, role and effect of advocacy specifically with children and youth is not as prevalent in existing literature, but is relevant to consider for this study. I found that what even constitutes as ‘advocacy’ is difficult to define, as definitions of advocacy have not been consistent across the limited literature that exists. When conducting this review, it was clear that advocacy defined could be a skill, a practice, a value, a framework, an experience, a mission, a relationship, or a social movement among many other things; this demonstrates that advocacy is uniquely constructed by each individual who seeks to define it. Advocacy is also not limited in the literature to a particular discipline. It is interesting to note however, that it is not as frequently explored by social work than those of law, critical disability studies and other independent advocacy services, despite advocacy occupying a large part of social work’s mandate and mission.

There are several themes that emerge as a foundation to understanding advocacy as it relates to young people. First, the literature discussed different forms of advocacy, the two main ones being *case advocacy* (micro, individual concerns) and *structural advocacy* (policy, legislative and institutional change) (Lagaay and Courtney, 2013). These two are often dichotomized in the literature as if they have no bearing on each other. Preston (1995, p. 5)

describes advocacy as: “power and how it is shared; - rights and how they are respected; - information and how it is accessed” (as cited in Dalrymple 2002). Many other writers and researchers similarly frame advocacy as an action-oriented, rights-based approach to working *with* and *for* a person to ensure their voices are heard (Bendo, 2018; Howe, 2009; Lagaay and Courtney, 2013; Pithouse and Crowley, 2006), with the ultimate goal is self-advocacy (Swadener, 2003; Harkins and Singer, 2018; Boylan and Dalrymple, 2009; Lagaay and Courtney, 2013). The idea of having, sharing, or giving ‘*voice*’ was perhaps the most prominent feature of advocacy in the literature, which suggests that this might also be how others imagine their advocate selves and practices of advocacy.

Children in the literature have often defined advocacy as regaining a sense of control, being respected by an adult, exercising choice, feeling included and having someone “fight in [their] corner” (Lagaay and Courtney, 2013; Oliver, Knight and Candappa, 2006). Youth in a study by Dalrymple (2003) revealed that independence and friendship were most important to them in their experiences of advocacy. Oliver, Knight and Candappa (2006) similarly found in surveys and interviews of 10 different advocacy services, young people related to advocacy as an emotionally supportive service that could lead to change. We can see here how discourses of the ‘good’, ‘moral’, ‘friendly’ social worker discussed above are present within the way young people see advocates. This might suggest that there is a mutually constitutive relationship between how young people view their advocates, and how advocates view themselves. Goodley (2000) also cautions those striving towards a ‘perfect’ approach to advocacy, and how this can be a slippery slope towards what Dalrymple (2005) calls “professional chat” and the “crusader role” (pg. 8). Townsley, Marriott and Ward (2009) also critique the notion of a “best model” for

advocacy, and that different approaches are needed, but that the young person's needs remain at the forefront.

Independently sanctioned advocacy as best practice was also a common theme in the literature. This is often attributed to the need for advocacy to be constructed by young people themselves, and that the construction by commissioners of government or agency services can lead to the proceduralization of advocacy (Bowes and Sims, 2006). Government appointed child advocates often are subjected to a lack of enforcement and accountability, while frontline workers in institutional care settings are often reluctant to actualize advocacy principles (Grover, 2004). This theme is relevant to my study given the recent decision of the Ontario government under Doug Ford to close the Ontario Child Advocates Office (OCA), removing independently-sanctioned advocacy from the province. I will come back to its further historical context later.

In another study by Oliver, Knight and Candappa (2006), youth stated that advocates could compliment the work of a social worker and act as allies for the same cause. Pithouse and Crowley (2006), found, however, that only a few of the young people in their study had positive experiences of social workers promoting advocacy, expressing that this is often an uncommon occurrence. Overall, the literature reveals that advocacy is thought to be most effective when it is fundamentally independent of government systems and agencies, and is firmly rooted in the community that it serves (Townsley, Marriot and Ward, 2009). Oliver, Knight and Candappa (2006) emphasize this importance as well, by reiterating that advocacy must involve the young person's network of supports. Bowes and Sims (2006) suggest that especially for children of marginalized identities, community-based advocacy is most effective on the basis that historically, advocacy movements have largely been white movements. The relationship between whiteness and advocacy meant that the voices of advocates became sources of 'expert

knowledge’, because it was often white people who occupied professional advocacy positions. This, as Kenkel and Couling (2006) write, works to silence community knowledge and wisdom. Communities, which hold what Dalrymple (2004) calls “natural advocates”, must be recognized as equally – but I argue – more capable, in their abilities to responsibly carry out advocacy with young people. This, Dalrymple (2004) notes, is the beginnings to creating a culture of advocacy.

Bendo (2018) urges for a systematic investigation of the effectiveness of professional child advocacy services, both independent of and within government funded structures, for the opportunities they present and the barriers they face. I also add that there is a strong need to explore how advocates construct, understand and see themselves in their roles, in order to consider how current political conditions influence how advocates are implicated in their work. The next section will explore the literature regarding social work as a social justice oriented profession situated within a neoliberal climate, and its (in)compatibility with advocacy practice.

Advocacy and Tensions Under Neoliberalism

Foucault believed the rise of neoliberalism acted as a form of governmentality (Lemke, 2001). Power, in this neoliberal context, is not so much concerned with how it contains and restricts, but how individuals are capable of regulated freedom (Garland, 2006). Therefore, neoliberal power is not to be scrutinized as a concrete, linear relationship between self and another, but how actions of the self work to modify the choices of another (Smith, 2011). In brief, “[power] is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action” (Foucault 2000b, as cited in Smith, 2011). Many of the participants in my study hold professionalized advocacy roles, meaning they benefit financially or through an increased professional status through their advocacy efforts. Constructing and practicing the advocate self becomes complicated when it is bound with

professionalism that operates under neoliberalism. This means that my study must account for the processes in which social work subjects emerge as professionals, as a key element of professionalism is power (Hugman, 1991 as cited in Dalrymple, 2004); while keeping in mind that neoliberal power, as mentioned above, has complex implications on self-making and subsequently, relationships to others.

This research was partly motivated by my own emotional response to the axing of the OCA office, and my suspicion of whether its closure was the result of neoliberal budget-balancing or perhaps something more covert. Regardless, Ahmed (2000) argues that the emotional attachments we have to events or others impacts our sense of self and belonging to others. Given that many of the interviewed child and youth advocates of this study were either former employees of the office or otherwise impacted by the closure of it, I believe it is important to contextualize the OCA's office sudden closure. Although I argue this study could apply across Canada, it is situated and took place in Ontario, and therefore it is informed by Ontario's history and ever changing political climate.

At the time where Canadian child service providers began to adopt the UNCRC's principles and recommendations into their mandates, there was a growing struggle for independent advocacy in the provinces. Child and youth activists began to recognize the problematic nature of government sanctioned advocacy services, particularly in regards to limitations in mandate and finances. This makes sense when we consider that funding is inextricable from political willingness, which can change at anytime (Howe, 2009). Dalrymple (2005) adds that dependent funding models for advocacy initiatives are oppressive because the advocate mandates are constructed by those that commission its services. A growing realization of this occurred alongside the first child advocacy office within Ontario's Ministry of Children,

Community and Social Services. This office only authorized investigatory powers, did not have advocacy in its mandate, and was so short staffed that it had to primarily service youth through a telephone hotline (Howe, 2009). Consequently, it could not adequately service the influx of youth with concerns about their own lives.

In the late 1990's and early 2000's, however, Chief Advocate Judy Finlay began to promote legislative advancement for the independent advocacy of children and youth in Ontario. Finlay and her team sought to bring awareness of a possible office to Ontario's public, build various youth-friendly community alliances, and challenge and pressure the Progressive Conservatives tirelessly (Howe, 2009). Eventually, under the oppositional Liberal party led by Dalton McGuinty, the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth Act (2007) was passed (OCA Archive, 2019-a), opening the first independent office in Toronto, and later, in Thunder Bay.

The office of the OCA (2007) under Provincial Advocate Irwin Elman was recognized on an international stage for its excellence in promoting and enforcing child advocacy in four domains: individual rights advocacy, systemic advocacy, community development advocacy, and investigations (OCA Archive, 2019-b). Its mandate was to "promote the views and preferences of children and youth, and partner with youth to bring their issues forward" (OCA Archive, 2019-b). Elman engaged in "listening tours" to establish various initiatives, partnerships and inquiries for children in care, with the purpose of advocating for legislative and policy change. The OCA Archive's (2019-c) outline several youth-led initiatives including, but not limited to:

- My REAL Life Book; Testimonies of young people in the child welfare system
- Feathers of Hope; Space of dialogue for First Nations youth in 92 northern, Ontario communities to discuss their realities with policy and decision makers
- Hairstory; Platform for Black youth in Ontario to speak about their experiences in care, rights-advocacy education and change
- We Have Something to Say (WHSTS); Looking at policy and lived experience of children and youth with disabilities

- Our Voice, Our Turn; Facilitation of hearings for youth leaving care, to offer insights for change in the child welfare system
- You Are Not Alone (YANA); Elevating the voices of LGBTTTQQ2SIA youth in care
- I Do Care; First rights-based report to collaboratively work with youth as decision makers for policy around health rights
- Youth Radio United; Broadcasted youth voices regarding social justice, life in care, marginalization, arts and sports; airing on Ryerson's CJRU 1280 station
- Developing Ontario's first "Children and Youth in Care Day"; May 14th, to raise awareness of youths ongoing resiliency in care
- Amendments to the Child Youth and Family Services Act (CYSFA) including findings from youth-led initiatives

The Progressive Conservative government under Doug Ford announced the repeal of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth Act (2007) on November 15th, 2018 in an effort to 'balance' the provincial budget. Bill 57, "Restoring Trust, Transparency and Accountability Act" of 2018, passed all readings, transferring only investigatory powers to the Ontario ombudsman and axing the mandate for advocacy. Additionally, the ministry announced the closure of the Thunder Bay office, though stated commitment to ongoing consultation and participation of northern Ontario communities. Ontario is now among only two other provinces/territories without an independent child advocacy office (OCA Archive, 2019-b).

An outpour of youth, families and child activists across the province and country expressed their disapproval of these changes in protest, claiming that cuts to independent child and youth advocacy would inevitably work to harm young people in the child welfare system. Much of this critique is also supported by existing literature; that advocacy should be independently sanctioned as historically, reliance on a single provincially mandated advocate has perpetuated systemic oppressions in child welfare (Grover, 2004). The Ontario Ombudsman, Paul Dubé states clearly in their websites Q&A: "The Ombudsman and our staff are not advocates" (Frequently Asked Questions – Child and Youth, n.d.). Like social work, ombudspersons receive its legitimacy from the same capitalist structures that maintain

oppression and hinder human liberation (Rose, 1990), and without an explicit advocacy mandate, might do little for children in care. Despite this critique, advocacy has been an increasing focus in agency mandates within the social service sector. Child welfare services, for example, can be considered “local units of government” (Duffy and Collins, 2010), and are also subjected to a funding and regulatory model that focuses on child protection from families rather than structural oppression, making advocates emerge as necessary. Different studies also highlighted the increased standardization of assessment and how it creates a “defensive social work” (Green, 2007), one that requires social workers to self-govern and prioritize the interests of stakeholders rather than those of service users. One example is the Ontario Risk Assessment Model (ORAM); a tool that has also been critiqued to support the proceduralization and standardization of child welfare. An institutional ethnography by Parada, Barnoff and Coleman (2007) found that social worker’s relationship to risk assessment tools compelled them to see children and families in “narrow and forensic ways” (pg. 54). It is important to understand that the increased proceduralization in child welfare is not far removed from the increased proceduralization that occurs in government-sanctioned advocacy offices. Haralambie (2008) draws from research with lawyers and notes that despite training and expertise, lawyers often come and go in a child’s life and therefore, are unable to yield a truly positive result of advocacy for the child. I believe that social work is similarly implicated in this reality, and that frontline child welfare workers and child and youth advocates alike must often quickly detach themselves from a young person due to overflow of case loads and time constraints; a reality of neoliberalist workplaces. The implications of this however, are that young people may begin to feel ambivalence towards the role of, and approaches taken up by advocates, therefore silencing their voices.

Social workers who do attempt to take on advocacy roles, however, find that they are only respected as advocates if they did not overstep management and become overly demanding. “To rock the boat” is to cause problems, as noted in Duffy and Collins (2010). I argue that this form of self-regulation by social workers reflects a historically governed space of who is allowed to act assertively; which historically did not include women or racialized communities, to name a few. This, in turn, sustains the colonial project of social work by failing to challenge broader workplace structures. Social workers acting as advocates often are often also advocating against their own workplaces, which creates a seemingly paradoxical reality. Dalrymple (2005), found that interestingly, social workers expressed the prioritization of workplace advocacy as less important over the course of their employment. Similarly, Vis, Holtan and Thomas (2010) found that social work students compared to experienced case workers in child welfare, found child participation in decision making to always be necessary, as opposed to experienced case workers who subscribed more towards protectionist discourse. Case workers in this study (2010) also generally felt ambivalent towards taking up advocacy in practice and lacked confidence in doing so. The authors (2010) suggest that social workers decrease practiced advocacy over time for several reasons: the child welfare system as not child-friendly, malfunctioning case processing, or simply the “novelty effect” of social justice education wearing off in practice. Child and Grønberg (2007) looked at the role of advocacy more generally in non-profit organizations, and suggested that most non-profits either were unsure of, or did not partake in advocacy whatsoever. Many of the above listed studies either explicitly referenced, or alluded to neoliberal workplace restructuring as problematic to child and youth advocacy efforts.

In a study by Smith (2011), she notes that the 1990’s represent a time of mourning for social workers who came into contact with regressive workplace policies. This worked to

reinforce the settler-narrative of social work as having its origins in the mission of social justice. Their ‘mourning’ was rooted in nostalgia for a time when social welfare and advocacy promoted human rights and social justice. Smith (2011) argues that this “privileged mourning” taken up largely by white, female social workers neglects those who did not benefit from this history, primarily racialized, working class subjects whose accounts of grief provided a counter narrative, one that includes a Canadian history of exclusion and colonization. It is evident that social work subjects cling to strong moral defenses against neoliberal cuts and workplace restructuring, and yet continue to be complicit within these same structures. An awareness of these competing narratives is important for my study in order to see whether, and how participants situate themselves within them, and how this influences their constructions of self and the self-making process. Finally, Grover (2004) reminds social workers that advocacy is not intended only for caseworkers courageous enough to challenge their own actions. Like Grover (2004), I argue that if advocacy is synonymous with social work and social justice, then social workers must rethink how they carve a space for this role in their own practice, especially within a neoliberal climate that ultimately works against advocacy efforts and transformative social change.

Common Themes and Gaps

The literature revealed that advocacy is uniquely constructed and has diverse definitions and understandings by both advocates and children (Goodley, 2000; Dalrymple, 2005; Townsley, Marriott and Ward, 2009). The settler-colonial and neoliberal context that gave rise to, and maintains current discourses of advocacy is complicated and difficult to trace within existing literature. Perhaps the greatest overarching theme is that of many contradictions; that the social justice oriented mission of the profession today is challenged alongside current pedagogy, mandates, neoliberal tensions, and settler-colonial relations of power.

My literature review has many limitations; some which are mentioned throughout this chapter. It was difficult to find studies similar to mine given the fact that advocacy is not quite yet a contested idea in dominant discourse. I largely attribute this to the idea that advocacy is inherently a radical social work ideology, rather than rooted in settler narratives; leaving it unexplored and unquestioned. Something that is largely missing in the literature is a critical account of settler-colonialism in the development of the profession and how it informs the sense of self of those who take up the identity of an advocate. The historical and social contingencies of child advocacy in particular are under-researched; most research that does exist is relatively dated and developed mostly outside of Canada, even more rarely in Ontario where this study is predominantly focused. Many articles point to the neoliberal restructuring of workplaces as a source of tension for advocacy work by social workers, but I argue that to neglect an anti-colonial, critical race lens is to reinforce settler power.

Much of the existing literature also lacks diverse methodologies. Many existing studies around advocacy practice deploy quantitative approaches in the form of surveys, but I argue that such approaches can homogenize the histories that may lead advocates to their work and shape their constructions of self – histories that have excluded many individuals from the advocate role. Additionally, majority of studies neglect a narrative, discourse-focused approach. I believe that an understanding of subject positioning is helpful to explore how individuals act with and through an ever-changing discourse. A critical methodology is also necessary in order to challenge our everyday actions that we consider ‘normal’ and ‘natural, and explore different narratives of advocates that might differentiate from its exalted positioning.

It is here that I place my research questions, which were informed by my initial curiosities, strengthened by the literature review, and used to guide my discussion with child and youth advocates and the subsequent analysis:

- 1) How is the “advocate self” constructed and practiced by advocates who work with children and youth involved in the child welfare system?
- 2) What dominant discourses and power-knowledge are reflected in the narratives taken up by child and youth advocates?
- 3) In what ways do child and youth advocates construction of self and practice disrupt dominant discourses and power-knowledge?

Chapter 3: Exploring Participant Narratives and Discursive Practices

Navigating Foucauldian Roads of Analysis

The narratives of the participants allow for an entry point to re-arrange the common notion of ethics as concern with the other (or the Other) (Macias, 2013), and instead, make the subject visible against power and knowledge (Foucault, 1984; Macias, 2013). With this concept in mind, this chapter will journey backwards, forwards, and sideways (Sue Harsh) with child and youth advocates, and the complex ways in which the advocate self is both productive and disruptive to power-knowledge systems in the construction and practices of their diverse identities. It is not possible given the limited scope and time constraints of this paper to cover all of the themes that emerged and stories shared. My focus will be on ones that were most prominent and reoccurring in the data. I bear the weight of my own influence here, and therefore, conscious of my hand in the objectification of the participant's narratives.

Searching Backwards: The Advocate Self as Productive to Power-Knowledge

Imagine for a second that the path to social justice was something of a winding road. I would posit that metaphorically speaking, most of us would visualize transformative resistance as a push forwards, while oppressive ways of being would be a journey backwards. Obviously this is an overly simplistic and deterministic metaphor, and liberation is not a linear path, but I wondered how "moving backwards" (Sue Harsh) in our advocacy experiences can present itself as an opportunity to identify the ways that power moves *through* and *within* us; not merely as an exclusive, repressive force, but *productive* to the shaping's of our realities and "rituals of truth" (Foucault, 1991, p. 194). Therefore, in this Foucauldian attempt to "expose [discourses], and render [them] fragile" (Foucault, 1998, p. 100-1), we must ask ourselves as child and youth advocates: how can we turn around, look backwards, and question our 'truths' and 'knowledge'?

that up until this very moment, have lived within us without question? Through what mechanism can we open the floodgates of critical inquiry, and *see* backwards and inwards at our practices and identities that make us who we are, expanding the scope of our own scrutiny?

The first questions I usually asked participants were a variation of “what does advocacy mean to you?” and/or “what drew you to advocacy work with children and youth?”. These questions called for the personal reflection of participants into the nature of their work and broader identities. Participants most prominently framed their responses alongside discourses of empowerment, helping and support:

But the advocacy parts always been a part of my journey, like helping people speak their mind and their voice, especially when they're not given ‘permission’ to, that's when I'm particularly interested in supporting people. (Kelsey)

What drew me to, you know, advocacy, I think just, just noticing that sometimes, you know, young people need they need someone to like stand with them, not necessarily speak for them, but to give them the access...that they need. (Cameron)

So even listening to children, that's, that's advocacy. You know, because you're giving them that importance. You're giving them that value, they are validated. What you're saying - I understand, I get it, you know? And just letting them know that. (Amy)

Many participants also discussed advocacy as synonymous with social justice work, highlighting discourses of radical and critical practice:

Advocacy is digging deep. Advocacy is making exceptions. Advocacy is sometimes stepping over the line and confronting those barriers that are there. It means challenging the forces that be. It means challenging power. It means being unique and standing up for justice when sometimes the world around you doesn't seem to, to believe that there should be justice. (Renee)

I think it means being vocal about things that you consider injustices that are linked to like social historical, political, like, traces of oppression. And um, I think it involves thinking about larger groups that you either represent - or don't - that can be disadvantaged. (Sue Harsh)

A two-fold definition of ‘discipline’ becomes necessary here to understand the ways that power and knowledge operates in our own understanding of self. ‘Discipline’, in a Foucauldian sense, can be understood as the ways we guide our own and others behaviours through various social technologies, and more broadly, disciplines as fields of knowledge. Discipline is what allows human beings to turn into an object of study and produce a specific kind of person (Powell and Khan, 2012). Social work, for example, invites individuals to willingly participate in self-making processes that contribute to the production of – as we see in the above excerpts – the “helping self”, “supportive self”, or even the “critically-reflexive” and “advocate” self. Foucault considered professionalism a mechanism of discipline, in that professions become associated with specific practices that solidify their identities and knowledge base, thus legitimizing their roles and authority (Powell and Khan, 2012). Professions like social work face less scrutiny in this regard, as professions of authority masked by discourses of benevolence and social justice, capable of critical reflection and thus, holders of truth and solution to societies problems.

These discourses are prevalent in the participant’s narratives. They are important when we consider how constructions of self are influenced by the professions that we choose, or as I argue, feel were crafted just for us. Every single participant asserted with utmost confidence that their identities as advocates were “organic” (T-Roy), “inborn” (Amy), “natural” (Renee), and/or “not something you can study for” (T-Roy). I resonate with participants when they tell me their pull to advocacy work ‘makes sense’ because of who they are as passionate helpers and seekers of social justice. Like many of the participants, I am unable to precisely mark the ‘X’ in my own life story where all the signs pointed to social work. Foucault encourages us to refuse these processes as neutral or without history. I urge you to consider how personal and professional identities as advocates are one in the same, informed by a history and present that mutually

constitutes the conditions that legitimize which ‘competencies’ and ‘skills’ matter when working with young people, for example. Through our professionalization, we become expert travelers in dominant discourses of what it means to support, empower, advocate, and so on. Yet, as the literature review revealed, we are also increasingly mobile in discourses that cater to the neoliberal workplace because this is what ultimately grants us legitimacy. Here, we can begin to understand how the advocate self becomes a professional subject that internalizes its ‘competencies’ and ‘skills’ through self-regulatory, social work-centric practices like ‘critical self reflection’ or ‘self-reflexivity’, and then imparts its ‘realizations’ onto others; thus becoming producers of knowledge that holds what it means to be a “good” advocate, “good” social worker, and so forth. This as dominant knowledge creates contradictions for individuals who are not historically represented in this respect; implications that will be later discussed.

Discourses of professionalism were prevalent in the ways that advocates talked about their perceived successes, citing times where they could put their various skills into action and influence a positive outcome for a young person. These discourses were most evident, however, when participants discussed tensions in their role as an advocate with other bodies. Cameron noted that in his transition from working in the frontlines of child welfare to the Ontario Child Advocates Office, a shift in conduct was required:

You have to be more diplomatic...you're still meeting with kids, obviously, and you're meeting with service providers, but you're, you're talking to like deputy ministers and assistant deputy ministers and so there's there's a certain level of like, you know, you're always professional. But now when you get to those levels, it's, it's, it can be challenging. Because at those levels, a lot of times things are based on money and funding... (Cameron)

Cameron’s narrative reveals how as one climbs the hierarchy of power, a “certain level” of professionalism is demanded of us. Other participants also shared how they learned to conduct themselves differently when speaking to children, parents, child protection workers, or the

“uppers” (Renee) such as funders, policy informants and law makers. Child and youth advocates learn to position themselves along the hierarchy of established power and knowledge thus shaping conduct and practices with the powerful and knowledgeable. A Foucauldian ethics emerges when the advocate self shapes itself congruent to the way its identity is positioned to power and knowledge. Most participants noted that the greatest tensions they faced in their work were with other adults, namely those who did not fit the ‘recognizable’ image of a professional, often alluding to their lack of qualifications, skill, or knowledge. Child and youth advocates are effects of power-knowledge systems, while simultaneously producing them through their own willing subscription and expectations from other ‘like-minded’ professionals. A major contradiction surfaces; one where we, as advocates, learn to mold into the very structures that we seek to work against. These processes under neoliberalism and colonialism in the workplace will be discussed in the next chapter to further illuminate their complexities.

Discourses of professionalism were more pronounced when participants discussed legislation, ethics, rights, and policy as guides to their practice:

Yeah, so when kids are sometimes placed in group homes, or foster homes, workers would say “this what is best for them. This is where they need to be, there's nowhere else for them to be, this is the best place for them”. We would say that, although that is true, they don't like it here. They don't like this, this surrounding, this environment. And because of that they have the right to go through what they call an RPAC, which is a Residential Placement Advisory Committee. And so best interest of the child is maybe that they stay there; however, their right says that they have the right to go through this panel, which could potentially lead to a move. (Cameron)

And I think that's important because when you look at kind of the way organizations run, right, there's there's like legislation. Yeah, which is the law. And then there's policy and procedure which just what your organization comes up with. And sometimes those things don't match up either. So I've had instances where, like employees, agencies will say, well, that's the policy. And I'll say, well, that's great. But this is what the law says. And this is what you have to follow. (Cameron)

I think one thing is the, the code of ethics that guide our practices. And I think if we read that and understand it and immerse ourselves into it, I don't think there will be

anybody on this earth who will be marginalized, who will be, you know, stereotyped or who will be bullied... (Amy)

The above participants draw on discourses of best practice as reliant on the confident use of law, rights, and codes of ethics. Cameron describes a clash between ‘best interest’ ideology and young people’s rights, a common tension in the context of child welfare. In the second example, Cameron names tension when an organizations policies and procedures do not match up with the law, opening the space to advocate on its behalf. Amy references the Social Work Code of Ethics as the ultimate social justice guideline – although it is unclear which codebook she specifically makes reference to. All of the above excerpts demonstrate Foucault’s concept of governmentality in action. FDA would consider how societal directives under law, human rights, professional codes and policies are extensions of power and entice surveillance, inviting subjects to regulate themselves and others according to their contents (Lemke, 2011). There are many assumptions at work here. One assumption is that the ethical codes, standards and principles disseminated by our governing colleges exist for those we seek to advocate for and support. The literature review presented various definitions of advocacy from several social work colleges (OCSWSSW, OASW, CASW, NASW), which largely framed advocacy as advancing the profession and its own futurity. This makes sense when we consider the rise of the profession alongside settler-colonial technologies of control, which will be discussed further in the next chapter. Another assumption is that state-sanctioned directives, such as law and professional codes of ethics, can always account for the many ethical nuances that are inevitable in the realm of child and youth advocacy. Consider this next example: Renee recalls an experience where she was called to advocate for a youth in care who was transitioning from male to female and requested a tampon, but “the facility [said] no”. Renee explains that “the staff [said], ‘well, it becomes more of a danger to give a tampon to a kid that’s not going to use it for a menstrual

cycle', so they are looking at the risk factors to giving the tampon". Renee then goes on to explain her own internal battle of ethics:

And it's like, you fight the fight, but in the back of my head, I'm like, you got a take a step back. And think about this. And ethically, where do you draw the line? How do you do what you do? How do I be that great advocate for a person who has the right to live the way they want to live, but still be respectful of that policy. And I going to do something that places this kid at risk? (Renee)

Renee's example contextualizes the ethical nuances that cannot simply be 'answered' through any pre-prescribed directives of the state; they are inherently embedded in constructs of identity that are fluid and ever changing. These are only a few of many instances in the data that illuminate some of the "how's" in how child advocates "do what they do" (Renee) in their practices. A Foucauldian account of law, policy and similar instruments can provoke us to move beyond their seemingly natural originals and 'good' intentions, and towards a suspicion of how problems are being represented, promised to be solved, and how the choices in representations privilege some and marginalize others (Bacchi, 2009). Law is an expansion of power (Turkel, 1990), and in using it as our ultimate practice handbook, we then become co-producers of it by virtue of our complicity.

Another dominant discourse that emerged from the data was the discourse of child protection when it came to the advocacy requests of children and youth in care. These were most evident in the ways that participants navigated through tough decisions facing young people:

I'm a bit more pragmatic in the way I view children's abilities to make decisions in their lives. I do believe there's development appropriateness to what decisions a child can make and other decisions I don't believe they can make and need to be protected. So I am constantly kind of having that discussion in my head when I'm acting in an advocacy role with the young person. (Kelsey)

Like it worried me too as an advocate, like what do I do? Because an advocate you have to you think about the kid but you also got to think about the community. And what if I do something that could affect the community, and am I fighting for something that could potentially be harmful to her? And I saw in that very moment

that as much as I wanted to help her, my fight might be harmful to her. Because I could, I could have kept fighting for something that placed her... living independently, that was what she wanted, when I don't know that she was really ready for that. (Renee)

Many participants grappled with the advocacy requests of children alongside their own reflections of what constitutes safety. Discourses of protection emerged when the advocates reflected on some young persons 'readiness' to make decisions across developmental lines. In the second excerpt, Renee also makes a distinction between the 'kid' and the 'community', and that safety for one may not always mean safety for the other. Dalrymple (2005) critiques the societal imperative to preserve 'childhood', and questions the discursive arrangements of vulnerability as a natural state of youth, instead arguing that youth can become vulnerable because of the "social mechanisms which impinge on their lives" (pg. 5). A Foucauldian analysis can solicit an entry-point that reveal possible myths of a 'protected' and 'innocent' childhood (Drake et al, 2019), which has discursively risen alongside Eurocentric, largely middle-class ideals of within the "bourgeois world of modernity" (Stasiulis, 2002, p. 510). The literature review similarly discussed how the rise of protectionist discourses worked to justify practices of child apprehension of Indigenous children and youth – and still do. It becomes important to consider how the reproduction of protectionist discourse can inscribe a moral panic of child concern that paradoxically creates the conditions that harm children by discursively ejecting them from making decisions about their own lives, while simultaneously upholding colonial power structures. Despite such critiques, protecting the 'vulnerable' child still prevails as a dominant discourse alongside disciplines like medicine and child psychology, seeping into social justice frameworks taken up by social workers and child and youth advocates.

We are not outside our awareness of power, and so we are bound to reproduce them. As the first half of this chapter nears its end, I feel it is important to note that none of the discourses

that emerged in the participant's stories were unaccompanied with their counter-discourses and own awareness of their many contradictions. FDA 'makes sense' when you seek to unpack dominant discourses and power-knowledge, but often times, I felt like I was drowning in scholarly adaptations of FDA that framed the neoliberal, professional subject as an unknowingly complicit, ignorant bystander in a world of discourse and power. In fact, the participants of my study are the opposite. They are in a constant dance with having experienced and/or witnessed the unjust realities facing young people, and then having to navigate their neoliberal workspaces that tell them what they can and cannot do in their roles. You can hear it in their voices. You can feel it in the way their words poured out in distrust for the systems that cause young people pain. You can feel it in the ways their voices ached as they re-oriented themselves back into neoliberal talks of risk assessments and mandates, as if something within their soul rejects its place in young peoples lives. The next section will speak to the ways child and youth advocates disrupt dominant discourses and power-knowledge. I hope it instills in you, as it did for me, a reignited hope and an unapologetic search for new futurities.

Searching Forwards: The Advocate Self as Disruptive to Power-Knowledge

In an effort to be both consent-conscious and give the participants ample resources to prepare for our interview, I made sure to send everyone a copy of the interview questions prior to the actual interview. I wasn't sure what the participants would think of my questions and admittedly, whether I felt confident enough to let the conversations naturally run their course. At first, we would both gently refer to our interview question sheets, ensuring that we were both on topic and answering things accordingly and appropriately. But as conversations went on, and we got to know each other a bit better, I noticed that participants would push the sheets further away, then omitting them completely, and what they really felt began to emerge from their

hearts. To this day, when I listen to the interview audio recordings, my chest tightens, and my breath hurries and falters as if I were listening to their stories for the first time. Their stories take me places. They take me to the floor of the hospital hallway, psychiatric crisis unit, waiting with a young person to be called in. They take me to my car, where I am driving a handful of youth home because the last time they walked, they were stopped by police. Suddenly I am grabbing a tissue for another's tears. I am watching her use the same trash bag to pack her belongings as she moves to her next foster home. I am noticing another one smile for the first time in weeks. Watching them play the lead role in the school play, winning their first soccer game, making a new friend. Then, witnessing them do all of these things, to another, years later.

The participants too, travelled back to times like these, telling their own stories, sometimes with tears, often with pain, but always with hope and love. In these moments, their stories of the past and hopes for the future united and ignited with mine, and suddenly, two strangers sparked what I can only describe as spirit meeting collective resistance. It was in these beautifully vulnerable moments, when participants availed themselves to the opportunity to share their stories, that they cracked through their subjectivities as powerful professionals and instead, transformed into disruptors of knowledge and power, creators of resistance, searchers of a new way forwards.

Participants challenged power-knowledge systems in the ways that they considered their professional subjectivities within neoliberal structures. One participant, T-Roy, challenges professional discourses here when discussing his own understanding of advocacy:

It's not a job. It's more of a, you know, it's almost like your life is a story right here. And each new chapter brings something else. It's like, okay, how can I tackle this issue in advocacy? How can I, you know, how can I use my lived experience to tackle this issue? So it's, it's more of, when you see it as a job, that's when it starts and ends. But you know, it's not really a job. It's kind of like, you know, that's part of your life. So it just kind of continues. (T-Roy)

He then goes on to discuss his own tensions in advocacy work, differentiating between ‘skill’ and ‘mind and heart’:

But I think what does frustrate me, frustrate me a little bit is, at first, it used to be you know, putting my faith and trust in the practices of social advocacy. Someone who obviously you know, someone who studies to be a doctor, should be a good doctor. But not all doctors are good doctors. Someone who studies to be a teacher should be a good teacher. But again, not all teachers are good teachers...there's two parts to becoming a good to be a good advocate or being good anything. There's, you have to have the, the mind space for it and the heart for it. And you obviously have to be good at the skill. A lot of people are good at the skill, but they don't have the heart and the mind for it. You know, so that's, that's what frustrates me with advocacy a lot of people... have the skill and they're educated and they're, they're able to do... the work. To do the reporting... they get all that stuff but, but when it comes to, you know, being able to, like reflect on the experiences or accept the experiences of young people who are coming from very different backgrounds – that they're trained to do, they just, you know, its hard. (T-Roy)

T-Roy uses his experience as a lived expert to disrupt the professional discourse that promises eager post-secondary students that they will be equipped to work with children and youth from and within care because their program curriculum is set up just so. Other participants also noted similar tensions, illuminating the previously discussed conflict facing social work today, namely neoliberal contradictions between the ‘critical’ and the ‘practical’. The participants all grappled with whether the neoliberal subject and the critical advocate can even be reconciled, and how today's social work education can exacerbate such conflicts. Their narratives allow us to begin to unravel these difficulties, and potential opportunities for resistance when adopting a philosophy of social justice in a time where proper documentation and meeting agency targets trumps all. When our advocacy work simultaneously means our own economic survival, the line between the advocate self and the neoliberal subject becomes blurred. However, all of the participants spoke openly about times when they challenged management or the ‘uppers’ when they felt agency directives were moving further away from youth-centered advocacy practice. They also

gave countless examples of times where they joined forces with young people and exercised creative means of shifting control back into their lives and reaching desired outcomes, citing countless victories. These narratives of success demonstrated the need for independently-sanctioned advocacy that is created by young people, for young people. These professionals challenge dominant discourses of professionalism in their advocacy because they bend the rules prescribed by others of what can and cannot be done for children and youth. Some challenge discourses of professionalism in their advocacy as lived experts, whose practice frameworks are inextricable from their lived experience. As women, people who are racialized, and in other ways been placed on societies margins, they challenge who can speak up and when, by doing so in their workplaces, in their participation in my study, and in the remarkable and mundane moments of their respective lives. They do this not without fear, but despite it.

Participants challenged what is right and just under discourses of the law, policy, and standardized procedures:

And rights, like this, the notion of like, rights...human rights are tricky too and bring in like tensions within themselves. (Cameron)

Well, the rules are the rules, right? Well let your child live under them rules and tell me how you feel. This is where I get myself in trouble [laughs]. (Renee)

I've kind of thought, like policies and procedures is what keeps you in the box. And that's not to say like legislation, is perfect, because there's a lot of gaps and barriers in legislation as well. (Cameron)

Participants drew from a range of experiences in their advocacy work, from all levels of practice, where they noticed the incompatibility of various laws and policies as they related to young peoples lives and advocacy requests. Participants challenged power-knowledge systems of the law, policy and other state directives as being the ultimate source of guidance by bringing these concerns to their colleagues, management, and for some, even working alongside young people

towards legislative reform. In coding the data for this study, it was clear participants named major tensions with policy as barriers to meeting youths expressed needs. Participants tensions often echoed Carol Bacchi's (2000) take that policy as discourse often frames the government as first responders to "'problems' that exist 'out there' in the community" (p. 48), while it is not 'problems' that should be the starting point for analysis, but the way that perceived problems are 'problematized' (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016). In other words, the way that the 'problems' of youth in care are constructed in social policy plays a key role in how youth in care are constructed in dominant discourse, and therefore, their relationship to power-knowledge. Participants challenged these constructions of youth by expressing how they really felt about the many ways that law, policy and child rights become barricades in young peoples lives.

Participants then went on to discuss child welfare as a social institution. In their discussions, participants either explicitly mentioned, or alluded to colonial power structures:

Child welfare is built on as a direct manifestation of white supremacy and white colonization. So it's very interesting to see how those could profit off it or trying to rethink, like, what it looks like to empower people who've been had like multiple generations of trauma attached to exactly where their paycheck comes from, including myself. (Sue Harsh)

Yeah, well I think the system, I think that the the system itself works the way it was meant to work. Yeah, and the only way to address those systemic barriers is to address them and to advocate for change. (Cameron)

So we have, we have a societal narrative, especially as white folks in the Western world that is centered around our power, but it's silent. And that lets us keep the power. And we think that we're objective, therefore there's nothing to be changed. Therefore, we've earned the power that we have therefore you may keep. People aren't willing to give it up. (Kelsey).

The participants above challenge dominant discourses about child welfare that make it out to be anything but a colonial modality established by the state to control and manage populations by mobilizing discourses of care as inflictions of power. How many times have you heard someone

say ‘the system failed that child!’ or some sort of variation of it? We are long overdue in realizing that the number of institutionalized and dead children and youth under state care are not the sad and unfortunate exceptions in what is otherwise an essential human service. As Landertinger (2017) puts it, the “Canadian child welfare system emerged as an imperial undertaking. It was created for the proliferation of the white race, made to save the damaged but salvageable children of the nation. Whiteness and settler colonialism formed this system” (p. 331). When we take a Foucauldian genealogical approach to child welfare in Canada, we can see how “the system itself works the way it was meant to work” (Cameron), and how the myth of protection and ‘anti-oppression’ that the system performs is simply incompatible with its colonial roots. As conversations of child welfare intensified, these were some of the personal thoughts and experiences that participants shared, challenging discourses of protection by grounding their narratives in the ideological view of the Western child and family:

The husband was out, the wife was home with the little one and when we went down, you know as CAS, it was like, you know, there was no bed for the child and it was that ‘okay you need to get a bunk bed by next week night’, you know and and, the family, I know their cultural background – it is okay for them to sleep on the ground. So here again, like Eurocentric values, you know that we are placing on people that you know. (Amy)

And just as an example, that someone told me the story about how their...son forgot like their lunch or something right? And there's some forgot their lunch and the school teacher just like, went out and bought the kid lunch. and then told the parent, I got your kid for lunch so I bought them five bucks. Yeah, 5\$ dollar lunch. So just pay me back whenever you see me. My question is, if that was a kid growing up in Jane and Finch or Malvern or a lower income area of Toronto, or, you know, some family that doesn't have the resources - would that response be the same? I would predict that it wouldn't be.... So there's a level of surveillance that goes into that. And I think once you get, you know, once you're under that surveillance with child welfare, it's it's impossible to get out. (Cameron)

And the system just bring them in these groups, and that's where my frustration probably lies the most: is we take these kids out of these situations that we call neglectful and harmful and, and whatever, abusive. We bring them into a care system and then we abuse them some more. We take away the thing that made sense to

them, we put them under this umbrella and then when they act out, we say they're there they're depressed, and they have behavioural OCD and all these different labels. And without recognizing that if they stop for a second and realize that the behavior it might just be coming because the kid has had to give up, give up what they know to be true? whether it was bad or good? (Renee)

Because they asked me 'Miss, would you call child welfare on like, your neighbour?' And I said, you know, its the right thing to do. It is the right thing to do. And the law is the law, and you have an obligation. But for each person, they've got to make that decision on their own. Because I'm telling you, when you think about what the system is going to do to them, it's hard to pick up the phone'. It's hard, because you don't I know what it's like behind closed doors, right? And how incredibly awful it could be for kids living in the system unfortunately. (Renee)

It is hard to imagine a world without child welfare. It is even harder to fathom the violence that is enacted through and within it. We cannot separate child welfare practices in this country from its colonial, violent history. A few excerpts above, Sue Harsh captures the essence of this project when they question the contradictions between being mobilizers of empowerment discourse and complicit in child welfare. When we think about Foucault's ethics as 'practices of the self', we are reminded how power-knowledge systems operate strategically to chain resistance and produce compliant subjects. In the case of child welfare, there is nothing more at stake to the state than disrupting the processes that can further colonize individuals, from the time of their birth, into settler standards of 'the norm'. Though this project was born out of my desire to explore the advocate self further, it was motivated by my own suspicions of social work's place in child welfare and the compatibility for advocacy within such system. Through participant's narratives, we can see how practices in child welfare today still reflect colonial modalities. As the literature review revealed, and participants reaffirm, 'care' is still measured across standards of whiteness and within the system of child welfare, rather than young people with their families and communities; even down to what constitutes proper sleeping arrangements. Cameron's suspicions reflect Foucault's 'governmentality' and how communities

learn to govern each other as extensions of the state, while Renee further explains how White, classist definitions of ‘neglect’ create justifications for child apprehension that further break down families and their wider communities. Renee challenges power-knowledge and discourses of child protection as a lecturer, imparting her lived experience onto her students and urging them to rethink “picking up the phone” before they call CAS. All participants collectively challenged dominant social work narratives of social justice and benevolence in their open and honest conversations about their work, and sharing their personal and collective histories.

Chambon (1999) discusses the transformative potential hidden in Foucault’s work. When we trace our histories of self embedded in the myriad of social relations around us, we can begin to see that there is nothing natural about the present. As we unfold our established ways of knowing, we can expose the precarious nature of power and knowledge and search forwards in hopes of counter-discourses and transformative change. Searching forwards for movement is much easier on the neck, however, than it is to be constantly looking in the rear view. As we know, this journey that we are on is not as simple as ‘forwards’ and ‘backwards’. The next section will briefly preview the twisted paths of our travels and explain where we might, or perhaps might not be going next.

Standing Sideways: The Advocate Self Amongst Contradictions

This chapter has revealed some of the ways that child and youth advocates are in a “complex and unstable process” (Foucault, 1978, p. 100) through their constructions of self and advocacy practices, being both “an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (p. 101). As we moved through participant’s narratives, we could see how the advocate self imagines itself to be supporting, empowering and radical, while the practices taken up by the advocate self

sometimes reveal tensions within its constructed identities. This is where we saw discourses of professionalism, what is right and just under law, policy and ethical codes emerge. It became evident that both helping and radical identities in professional discourse become reliant on discourses inextricable from neoliberalism and settler-colonialism. This understandably creates complex contradictions. Standing in these contradictions no longer offers a conceptually clear path forward, nor does it elicit the call to reflect backwards. It creates tensions, it troubles our sense of self and challenges the self-making process. These moments are what I began to imagine as the ‘sideways’ of advocacy that Sue Harsh named in our interview. As I conclude this chapter and journey onto the next, I hope to think deeper about the contradictory, complex, and seemingly ‘sideways’ experiences of self and practice.

Chapter 4: Travelling Deeper, Sideways

A Slight, but Necessary Theoretical Shift

The participant's narratives have called for a Foucauldian approach to rethinking the normal and seemingly natural forces in our worlds. I believe that this approach was certainly useful in unpacking the dominant discourses and power relations embedded within the discursive practices of the advocate self. As conversations with the participants grew in depth and breadth, I believed that my research questions also began to beg the question of not simply who is the advocate, but *how* the advocate self understands itself in its own body and the practices it takes up. As I listened to each audio-recorded interview over and over again, I began to pick up on specific moments where I was able to not only locate precise 'characteristics' and 'practice approaches', but separate the *experience* of identity around these moments. This process was pivotal for my research because it revealed the advocate self as not a bounded self, but rather a self split amongst a realm of identities shot through with complexities and contradictions. Perhaps it would be a better ask of my research questions to explore not simply who is the advocate self, but who is the self – or who are the selves – behind the advocate? What are the experiences of identity – or identities – in their moments of tension? What *conditions* make it so?

Although Foucault has been helpful in identifying the varied paths of power and knowledge that bring us to this very moment of reflection, I found myself drawing more on anti-colonial, anti-racist writers who spoke to similar contradictions of self that were prevalent in the data for this study. This chapter will then deploy a more meaningful use of post-structural, critical theories as method to voyage deeper and sideways in the self-making processes of child and youth advocates; especially when this process becomes challenged in moral economies under neoliberal and colonial regimes.

Colonial Continuities, Moral Economies

This study has unsettled some of the ways that the story of social ‘work’ and social justice gets told, heard, and valued. The participants too, as you know, have their own stories to tell of what brings them and keeps them in their work. But what happens if their stories aren’t heard? Or valued? Who gets to decide?

The literature review exposed how a perceived moral economy (Thobani, 2007) exists under colonialism, allowing the social worker to hold an exalted status because of the dominant narratives of ‘benevolence’ and ‘help’ that are embedded in the professions origin stories. This has worked to allow some identities to ‘make sense’ as social justice advocates, while disavowing others based on a perceived moral superiority. This is critical to my study because the narratives of participants revealed that this process does not function as a clear cut dichotomy. Even in their deepest convictions of a ‘natural’ and ‘instinctive’ pull to advocacy work, participants often still posed irreconcilable contradictions between their advocate self and other aspects of who they are. Many of the participants discussed when their identity as a child and youth advocate was met with tensions in their identities as professionals, as younger people, older people, academics, and as parents, to name a few. In these ‘sideways’ moments of contradiction, the inherent nature of their advocate self that previously went without saying, became troubled and no longer made complete ‘sense’ as they perhaps once did before. I argue, like many post-structural, critical race and anti-colonial scholars (Ahmed, 2000; Badwall, 2014; Heron, 2007; Jeffrey, 2005; Razack, 2002), that the identities that ‘make sense’ in the world often do so when their respective pieces align with hegemonic scripts of whiteness, which are inseparable from other interlocking operations of colonial power. Some of the participant’s narratives spoke to this arrangement when their advocate identities interlocked with their

identities as racialized or otherwise marginalized persons. Renee and Amy discuss their thoughts of this experience here:

And I know as an advocate, some of the pushback that I even got was because the color of my skin was black, really, and ‘how dare you stand up?’ ‘How dare you be adversarial towards us?’ You know, it's, I'll be going to a meeting and people will be right out dismissive to me. I had to command that space in order to even be acknowledged. Just because of who I am, you know, and it's crazy, but this is the world we live in. (Renee)

I know I make ripples because I, I come from a background where I'm, my community is marginalized. We are invisible in so many ways, like right now, like, you know, like in child welfare. Nobody talks about that; you know? (Amy)

Renee and Amy speak to the tensions that surface when their racialized identities collude with their role as advocates. Renee recalls painful experiences of being dismissed and unseen, while Amy similarly acknowledges that she knows “[she] makes ripples” in her work as someone belonging to a marginalized community. Self-making processes become challenged when the advocate self, imagined as a loud and radical voice against power, is met with encounters that reaffirm dominant notions of who is allowed to possess voice, or otherwise, *be that self*. Ahmed (2000) historicizes these encounters, writing that they are often antagonistic as they “reopen the prior histories of encounters that violate and fix others in regimes of difference” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 8, as cited in Badwall, 2014, p. 18). My literature review revealed that historically, marginalized communities were marked as “bodies that required regulation and control (Thobani, 2007 as cited in Badwall, 2014, p. 18) or needed advocates. Some participants spoke to moments in their advocacy practice where they could feel tokenistic discourses of diversity pouring through their workplaces and how this impacted their sense of self. These colonial continuities (Heron, 2007) ultimately serve to discursively and quite literally eject the “threatening Other” from driving social change when their voice and presence disrupts what is historically ‘*familiar*’ (Ahmed, 2000). Ahmed (2000) further writes that these “histories of

determination define the parameters of the bodies that are marked as different from the familiar body” (p. 9). Considering contradictions within the advocate self in a divided moral economy suggests that the parameters have already been set on who gets to claim voice, and who was never meant to. Voice becomes politicized and an object of power.

Social Work and Neoliberalism, Co-Conspirators

Earlier in this research, I wrote that this study is not bound to a specific profession or discipline, but rather, appeals to those who take up the constructions of, and practices of advocacy. As a social worker who will soon possess two post-secondary degrees in the field, I feel disturbed at the relevance that the above section bears to the profession of social work, and likely similar professions of its kind. All but one participant in this study already have, or are working towards a social work degree, and so I believe it is important for this study to momentarily turn the gaze back towards the profession of social work to expose its role in maintain colonial and neoliberal structures that work against young people.

Advocacy has become a glorified, ‘catch-all’ term in social work’s mission, mandates and curriculums, all to maintain an image of a profession committed to “heroic activism” (Rossiter, 2005, p. 2), ‘giving voice’ to the most marginalized among us, and my personal favourite, being ‘agents of social change’. This image is enticing for those among us who simply “want to help people” and “change the world”, “fight injustice”, and so forth. Perhaps this is just my own story – but this story we tell ourselves about what it means to be an advocate is rendered fragile and made unsustainable within the managed, or constructed space that is social work. As Rossiter (2005) reminds us, mainstream education does not teach us “how to know social work as a constructed place, and ourselves as constructed subjectivities within that political space” (p. 2). However, “knowing social work” and “knowing ourselves” is not a foreign concept in social

work pedagogy. The move towards critical-reflection and reflexivity in social work functioned as a means to equip social workers with the tools to reflect on their relationships with clients and the social world, and expose their biases, values and beliefs that create tensions (Badwall, 2016; Heron, 2005). In my undergrad, I was told during my first ever social work class that reflecting on what went ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ with a client is the key to “bridging power differentials” with future clients. My last ever BSW class told me it should be critical reflexivity over self-reflection, because reflexivity is able to locate intersections of knowledge and power that simple reflection cannot. Every single participant in this study – including myself – all stressed the importance of this in our advocacy work. Kelsey described it as such:

In my definition of being an advocate, you have to be humble and not make it about you, and yet, you have to know what it is about you that gives the other person power when they haven't had it to get their voice to the table. So it's this funny thing because like you have to tap into your own power and confidence and skill and yet not make it about you. And that's a hard balance. So it's part of being, I think a skillful advocate is being incredibly self reflexive and reflective, because you have to constantly be thinking about how you're influencing what's happening. (Kelsey)

Kelsey, along with the other participants’ thoughts on the importance of self-reflexivity and reflectivity speaks to anti-oppressive discourses in social work that center reflexive practice as necessary to work with marginalized communities. Many post secondary social work programs take on this stance, thus branding themselves as ‘critical’ and leaning towards a more radical form of social work, compared to its ‘clinical’ or ‘traditional’ counterparts. However, the literature review revealed contradictions within seemingly critical pedagogical and professional approaches. Heron (2005) draws on Foucault’s notion of governmentality to illuminate the social work subject as a self-regulating subject, who clings to moral imperatives of ‘getting it right’ (p. 34); or what modern social work pedagogy would name, a more self-aware, skilled, and competent self. This not only further dichotomizes ourselves from those we are working with

(Poon, 2005), but creates a slippery slope towards a search for innocence, because we can relieve ourselves from being implicated in our own critiques. I agree with Penak (2019) who argues that reflective exercises are a way for “social workers and social work students implicated in [the] critique to avoid paralysis and move forward with their work” (p. 97), and successfully rush to a place of innocence (Fellows and Razack, 1998). Blackstock (2009) asserts that mainstream social work invites such detachment, by reflecting on the past and then branding itself as “having learned it’s lesson”. I truly cannot even name how many papers I have written for social work professors who celebrated my ability to name my privilege as a young, white social worker and then come up with appropriate ‘interventions’ for a ‘fake’ (but very real) client in a ‘fake’ (but very real) case scenario. In claiming an inherently moral, unmarked subjectivity, we do little to de-center whiteness from our identity as professional subjects that is in fact, born out of colonial and imperial rule. Simply put: “washing one’s hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral” (Freire, 1985, p. 122). This begs the question of whether it is at all possible to teach how to ‘do’ advocacy for social justice within a self-aggrandizing, and increasingly neoliberalist profession.

Understanding the workings of social work pedagogy can allow us to consider how the violent history of social work is often neglected in professional discourses of social justice and critical praxis. We also see how today’s social workers are facing a contradiction between said imperatives of social justice and what they are taught and expected to do once they enter the workforce. Macias (2015) writes that social workers, educators and students alike are stuck “between a rock and a hard place” (p. 266) within neoliberalism because social work subjects, as Cameron puts it, are “just trained how to carry out the mandate and not ask questions”. Many participants were angered by the increasingly neoliberal ideologies flowing through their

workplaces that valued standardization, employee efficiency and balanced-budgets over the lived experiences of children and youth seeking advocacy services. Sue Harsh shared that they have even been asked by stakeholders of the “costs and benefits of [them] talking to ‘these kids’”. As expected, neoliberal tensions in the workplace often led to discussions about the recent closure of OCA, as many of the participants were former employees of the office, or knew about it as child and youth advocates. Renee’s reflection here encapsulated the essence of many others thoughts:

And the climate has become toxic, right? Because people are in a survival mode. They're not really not working from the place where I know a lot of workers are working from, people are just trying to keep their jobs. They're hoping their programs don't get cut and become one of the next one to be eliminated. So it's ugly, and unfortunately, it's affecting our kids. (Renee)

It is not surprising that many of the advocates experienced burnout in their work. Participants discussed the struggles of knowing that the change they work towards “takes lifetimes” (Kelsey), and that a lot of people will be “dead by the time the change they want to see happen, actually happens” (Sue Harsh). Many participants reflected on times in their lives where they had to step back from their position as advocates, or scale their scope, because the work became too overwhelming. In Kristin Smiths (2011) doctoral study “Activist Social Workers in Neoliberal Times: Who are We Becoming Now?”, she found that her research participants, many of whom self-defined as activists in child welfare, also faced tensions between the demands of their work and maintaining an ethical and moral sense of selfhood; two often irreconcilable tasks. She also utilizes a Foucauldian lens to illuminate how in restructured workplaces, the activist self becomes a self-regulating subject that must figure out how to balance professionalism and personal moral imperatives. This next excerpt from Sue Harsh highlights this (im)balance:

Even if you're doing youth advocacy, sometimes it's, it's strategic not to call yourself an advocate, especially in this day and age - even with the committee that I chair right now. Like we don't have advocacy in our name, because we have to do

consultations with like, the government and other such bodies and like, it's just a lot easier to get into those spaces if we don't call ourselves advocates. (Sue Harsh)

Sue Harsh exemplifies the practice where one must sacrifice naming their identity for the sake of 'doing their work'. This is what Rossiter (2001) presents as the challenge of critical social work – when the self and practice become plagued with contradictions. When we peel back the layers even further, we become painfully aware that these tensions have the most material impacts on the lives of children and youth that we work with. Palumbo and Friedman (2014) write that “neoliberalism is not a single monolithic and it cannot be met with a monolithic response” (p. 97), which is certainly known in the narratives of the participants in this research. The tensions they named reveal yet again that there are parameters of when, where, and by whom a voice can be exuded. Their collective hopes for resistance all call for shining a light on this reality and challenging the dominant forces that invite it into our worlds.

Finally, a Reflection and Return to Foucauldian Roads

This chapter discussed structures of colonialism, moral economies, neoliberalism, as well as social work pedagogy and the governing practices of the self. My struggles to write this chapter, at many times, brought me to tears. I possess a gut-wrenching suspicion, one deep in my soul, that the contradictions we face in self-making are a result of the structures and technologies of governance imposed on us. Putting this into words, however, became a near impossible task. Each time I would sit down to think about an experience of the advocate self amongst operations of power, it would lead to one contradiction, which would lead to another, and then another. I became lost in my notes and found myself travelling deeper, sideways, unable to locate the 'aha' moment that I was seeing in other studies. I began falling trap to my own contradictions that I was critiquing, and made new ones in the process. I started to believe that this topic was truly beyond the scope of my abilities as a researcher and my ability at this time to comprehensively

provide an analysis of interlocking structures of oppression and technologies of self-making.

Despite my gut-wrenching convictions, I felt incapable, unable, and voiceless against the many circulating forces that bombarded me throughout the undertaking of this project.

My rather long winded point of my process of struggle to come to some kind of clear analysis and conclusion, is that it worked exactly the way it was meant to work. I chose a topic that would seek to expose the dominant relations of power and discourses that affect the constructions of child and youth advocates. In doing so, contradictions in my own self-making emerged, powerful forces evidently rising to the surface, and yet, I could not fathom how to make sense of them. I think this is what Foucault means when he says that uncovering the relationship between power and knowledge is disturbing. It is disturbing to realize that racialized advocates must command space through their voice because space and voice were historically never reserved for them. It is disturbing to realize that burnout is a neoliberal tactic that averts change. It is disturbing to consider that the university that grants me this degree and renders me an employable '*master*' of social work is part of the same institution that rendered someone capable to apprehend an Indigenous child from their home just today. Colonialism, neoliberalism, and professional social work are dangerous because they are mutually-constitutive forces that surveil bodies at a distance and uphold moral economies which have already decided the exalted voices over the denigrated ones. The self-making process of the advocate self is messy and contradictory because it is meant to be so. Voice and its access are inherently political because they are constantly being governed; by the state, by others, and by ourselves. The arrangements of our social world are constantly operating to re-inscribe whiteness, churn out neoliberal subjects, and ultimately rescue settler futurity (Tuck and Yang, 2012) at all costs, in complex and often insidious ways. Advocates and their efforts become road blocks in the

colonial project, paving fresh roads that lead to new ways of being. The management of the advocate self is then important for the management of resistance. Managing resistance is imperative to keep our systems in tact, so that the colonial project can thrive and breed new regimes. The complex makings of the advocate self are therefore inextricable from the complex management and control of the populations it seeks to advocate for. If we can manage child and youth advocates, then we can also manage children and youth.

I will end this chapter by slightly shifting away from my research questions, and urge you to think about the closure of the Ontario Advocates Office. The axing of this establishment becomes more clear when you consider the above rationale that I presented. This is not just a matter of budget cutting and cost-savings. It is an exertion of biopolitical power on the bodies of children and youth to manage their voice and capacity for resistance. It is a means of protecting child welfare, among other systems, as a colonial modality by eliminating any ounce of accountability by the state. While this paper has much argued semantics and meaning of self and power, geared largely to other like-minded academics, young people are facing the everyday material realities of our decisions and pre-imposed truths. When I travel back to the times where I hit brick walls my own advocacy, young people showed me how to disrupt what is common and true as a way forward. Young people are telling us what we need to hear every day, exposing the ‘sideways’ nature of social justice and the contradictions it holds for us as their advocates. We too, can break down walls and create new pathways for resistance, though for now, I offer no clear way how. I want to believe, however, that “walls turned ‘sideways’ are bridges” (Shabazz, 2014), and that the walls we face here are no exceptions.

Chapter 5: Towards the End of the Road

Summary of the Findings

This research explored the ways that child and youth advocates, namely those who advocate for children and youth in the child welfare system, construct and practice their sense of self. The findings were presented through a “backwards, forward, and sideways” analysis that spoke to the overarching theme that constructions and practices of self are fluid, alternating in ever-changing directions, and constantly on non-linear paths.

The findings revealed that the advocate self is both a producer and a disrupter of dominant power-knowledge. Participants were co-producers of power-knowledge systems in their investment to social work discourses of empowerment, helping, and support; as well as discourses of professionalism and mastery through the reliance on skill, law, professional code of ethics, and policies and procedures. Participants also produced power-knowledge by drawing on protectionist discourse that limited the decision making abilities of young people seeking advocacy services. Participants disrupted power knowledge in the various ways they challenged oppression under policy, human rights, and the law. They also challenged professional discourse in the many ways they worked creatively with young people to shift power back into their lives. Lastly, participants disrupted dominant narratives of social work and protectionist discourse by exposing child welfare as a colonial modality that imparts Western norms on young people, their families, and greater communities.

A further anti-colonial, anti-racist, post-structural exploration of the findings revealed that the self-making process of child and youth advocates is often messy and contradictory. Some of the major tensions named were those of racialized advocates who experienced racism and were deemed adversarial in their exertion of voice. Other major tensions arose from the

uncertainties of neoliberal workplace restructuring, and feelings that they could not always reconcile social justice with workplace expectations. I posit that social work and neoliberalism act as co-conspirators under colonial regimes that serve to challenge self-making processes and create contradictory constructions and practices of the self. I argue the importance of historically situating the advocate self to illuminate the tracings of its current tensions. I further claim that if we understand the advocate self as not a bounded self, but one that is “discursively mediated and politically situated” (Macias, 2012 p. 10) we can expose oppressive regimes and rethink meanings of resistance through advocacy.

Areas for Future Exploration: Social Work and Beyond

This research turned out to be overwhelmingly packed with underlying complexities that were beyond the scope of my research questions and given time frame to explore further. I do believe that involving more child and youth advocates would definitely have enriched the data and perhaps uncovered deeper connections between themes. I would encourage future researchers who are interested in my study to consider attempting a genealogical approach to discourses of voice, empowerment, and/or social justice at large, to expose how dividing practices of self and others came to be within their respective discursive histories.

I also realized in my review of existing literature that there are virtually no studies that are focused to the experiences of former youth in care who face conflicts in their advocacy work later in their professional lives. I think given the compelling narratives of racialized advocates and advocates who are former youth in care in this study, it would be interesting to see how former youth in care, or otherwise stigmatized and/or marginalized advocates face tensions between their experiences, ties to their communities, and increasing demands of their workplace.

This research also solidified my understanding that social workers are constantly grappling with the tensions that they face in their work. They imagine themselves to be champions of social justice, and yet, often find themselves in a contradictory space. I hope this research can encourage social workers to identify the complex, more nuanced relations of power that operate within their workplaces and social worlds. I think this study is relevant to social work because as a discipline, it is increasingly concerned with its professional legitimacy and need for new skills, competencies and evidence-informed practices. I believe this study encouraged some important lines of questioning that social workers should become more comfortable with asking themselves. Foucault urges us to historicize such questioning:

“Not ‘What can I know?’, but rather, ‘How have my questions been produced? How has the path of my knowing been determined?’ Not ‘What ought I to do’, but rather, ‘How have I been situated to experience the real? How have exclusions operated in delineating the realm of obligation for me?’ Not ‘What may I hope for?’, but rather, ‘What are the struggles in which I am engaged? How have the parameters for my aspirations been defined?’” (1991, p. 46)

If social work can begin to open space to question what we know as a given truth, then perhaps it can begin to expose the varied paths of power that brought us our sense of ‘knowing’. I believe that this has particularly implications for today’s social work curriculum, and that a pedagogical revolution is necessary to challenge social work students to rethink their constructions of self and practice from a historical lens; one that considers the collective impact of colonial power on our varied communities, despite their vastly different material impacts on our respective lives. History-telling as a political strategy proved to be an interesting mode of critical research, and I believe this would be an approach worth adopting in the social work curriculum.

A Personal Reflection of my Travels

It is both a rare and beautiful thing to be able to travel all around this city and journey unfamiliar terrain, to meet and listen to people speak from their hearts, and simultaneously feel

the fire light inside your own. In nearing the end of this path, I reflect on the various teachings gifted to me by each of the participants. Cameron reminds me that “the system itself works the way it was meant to work” (Cameron), and to never assume anything is without its origins and to be left unquestioned, without suspicion. Renee urges us all to “take ourselves out of what [we] know to be true, and place [our]selves in a situation that leaves [us] uncomfortable” while Amy gifts me with the belief that doing so is a strength, and that “[we] can use these strengths to make things better” (Amy). When I become complacent, T-Roy reminds me that advocacy “is not a job”, and that “[my] life is a story...each new chapter brings something else...when [I] see it as a job, that’s when it starts and ends”. When I am feeling defeated, Kelsey urges me to “not get attached to the outcome”, and that “if a young person has had an experience where they feel like they matter, like they have expertise in their own life, like they’ve been head, [I] did great”. In their own moment of reflection, Sue Harsh gifts me with the teaching that we should “want someone who sees their reality and systemic oppression as linked with [ours]”, and not to work from a place of charity and help, but from a place of relationship, connection, and community.

I also cannot forget the teachings passed onto me by the countless children and youth I’ve come to know and proudly learn from. While we adults argue semantics and what constitutes as ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, young people question and resist the ‘common-sense’ and ‘truth’ in the everyday, and help us see the extraordinary in the mundane.

I have learned that the road leading to a graduate degree is one that is often unimagined and not within the physical reach of many. Realities and opportunities live and thrive within structures of power and knowledge, and academia is no exception. It is constantly at work in producing and reinforcing power-knowledge about when and in what context one can be heard, and when and in what context one can be celebrated. I am a product of this system that I have

worked so hard for, often compromising my own mental wellness, relationships and livelihood. At the same time, it is also my gatekeeper to a professional identity that troubles me, and yet keeps its reigns on me. I am both the vehicle and the one in the driver's seat, producing and reinforcing discourse about what it means to be an expert, a professional, a *master*. Yet, I have mastered nothing more than you, or the next person who reads this paper. I do believe, however, that in my own suspicion and open critique of such systems, I make my own small contribution in disrupting dominant discourses and forces of power-knowledge.

Now, how does one simply bring their year-long MSW thesis to its end? Might I offer you a prescription for transformative change? A solution-focused approach? How about a good-old-fashion, social-work-centric self-reflection?

When I neared the end of the first semester of this program, sitting in Barbara Heron's class, I looked around the room and could see that my peers were troubled, just like me, by their new found realizations about the social world and what our place might be within it. In a moment of what might have been defeat, but to me, felt more like a familiar search for hope, one classmate asked: "What's the point?"

Though I am still not sure if the question demanded a rhetorical response, Barbara looked at each of us, collecting more patient ears in the silence, and said: "if you don't do it, you know who will".

I still question whether the comfort I felt in this response was a perfect escape to my place of innocence that is still well, alive and familiar. Upon finishing this project, I am personally inclined to believe that this is most likely the case. But I *do* strongly feel that there is something to be said about where we wander and the stories we tell ourselves when we – and we

will – ask ourselves, what is the point of the work that we do? And perhaps more importantly, what does this work mean to us? Where does this sense of meaning come from?

If this research can create any interest in wandering, my hope is this: That you can embrace the paths that might lead us to untruth, uncertainty, and even a realized ignorance (Nietzsche 1966, p. 9). That when you question intention and meaning in social justice work, you can also question the many pathways that intention and meaning have travelled. These are not neat and linear roads; they are winding, confusing, and never the same as they once were. These complicated travels, however, also make for beautifully complicated selves. As the six participants demonstrated, and I have come to learn, people and their people are journeying the paths towards their own liberation each day, whether their social worker, advocate, or whatever myriad of ‘professionals’ are with them or not. For now, I still don’t know where we position ourselves alongside other peoples struggles. But I do believe this: that social work will never *work*, if we are always in the driver’s seat focused on our own road of continuance. Perhaps it’s time that we park our cars, and explore what else lies on, and off the beaten path.

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Appendices

Appendix A

TCPS2: CORE Certification



Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Date: _____

Name of Participant (printed): _____

Chosen Pseudonym of Participant (if applicable): _____

Title of study: Unpacking the Narratives and Discursive Practices of Child and Youth Advocates

Principal Researcher: Dorothy Koziorz, MSW Candidate, York University

E-mail: dorothykoziorz@trentu.ca Phone number: 289-404-9361

Purpose of the Research

This research explores the narratives of self-defined, child advocates and the ways in which they construct, understand and practice advocacy with children involved in the child welfare system. The recent onslaught of the Ontario Child Advocate office, and the continuous over-representation of marginalized children in care suggests increasing shifts away from social justice for children, young people and their families. Through the narratives of child and youth advocates, this research will be looking at how discourses (i.e. values, meanings, beliefs, practices) and relations of power influence the ways that child advocates discuss their roles and practices, as well as room for alternative knowledge in advocacy work. The findings and analysis of this study will be reported in a Practice Research Paper in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Social Work degree at York University.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research:

You will be invited to share your experiences as a child/youth-advocate, specifically the ways in which you define, construct, understand and practice your advocate role. This interview will be approximately 45-90 minutes at a date, time and confidential place of your convenience and comfort. The interview will be semi-structured, one-on-one interview with me. You can share only what you feel comfortable with and can withdrawal from the study at any point without consequence. You will receive a small honorarium in the form of a \$10 gift card (of your choice) for your contributions and will be asked how you would like to be acknowledged in the research. If you are travelling from outside of the GTA, you will be reimbursed for your travel expenses.

Risks and Discomforts:

We do not foresee any risks or discomfort from your participation in the research. However, due to the nature of advocacy, there is a possibility that you may draw from potentially emotional experiences related to child welfare; whether it be your own, or within your work. Should you experience any emotional distress or discomfort during the interview, you may withdrawal from the study at any time without any consequence. I will have a list of supports readily available and can assist you with more immediate support of your choosing. I will also ensure to follow up and check in with you following the interview.

Benefits of the Research:

In partaking in the research, you may utilize this as an opportunity to reflect on your advocate role and approaches in practice, as well as contribute to a limited scholarly knowledge base regarding the research topic at hand. If you wish, I can also provide you with a summary of the research findings which may also enhance your existing practice. Your contributions may create space for alternative ways of knowing and practice in supporting children and youth in care.

Voluntary Participation:

Your decision not to volunteer, to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions will not influence the nature of the ongoing relationship you may have with the researchers or study staff, or the nature of your relationship with York University either now, or in the future.

Withdrawal from the Study:

If you decide to stop participating, you may withdraw without penalty, financial or otherwise, and you will still receive the promised inducement. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible. Should you wish to withdraw after the study, you will have the option to also withdraw your data up until the analysis is complete.

Confidentiality:

Unless you choose otherwise, all information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research.

Your interview will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and some handwritten notes may be taken during the interview. The audio recordings and transcripts of your interview will be stored on my computer in a password-protected folder. Any notes will be stored at my home in a locked-cabinet. Only you and myself, the primary researcher, will have access to this information. All data will be stored for up to two years and all data will be destroyed on December 31st, 2020. Transcripts and the final report will ensure your confidentiality through the use of a pseudonym of your choosing, as well as removal of your personally identifiable information. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

Questions About the Research?

If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact me, Dorothy Koziorz, at dorothykoziorz@trentu.ca or at my phone number 289-404-9361. This research has been reviewed and approved by the FES Research Committee, on behalf of York University, and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Sr. Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of

Research Ethics, 5th floor, Kaneff Tower, York University (telephone 416-736-5914 or email ore@yorku.ca).

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I, _____, consent to participate in “Unpacking the Narratives and Discursive Practices of Child and Youth Advocates” conducted by student researcher Dorothy Koziorz. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature _____
Participant

Date _____

Signature _____
Researcher

Date _____

Additional Consent

1. Audio Recording

I consent to the audio recording of my interview

Signature _____
Participant

Date _____

Appendix C

Draft Interview Questions

1. What comes to mind when you think about advocacy with children. **Probe:** What does it mean to be an advocate? What does advocacy mean to you?
2. How long have you considered yourself to be an advocate?
3. What drew you to become an advocate for children involved in the child welfare system?
4. How might you describe your current approach to advocacy work with children and youth? **Probe:** Theories/Models/Values/Beliefs/Mentors? **Probe:** What drew you to these approaches and not others?
5. How do you understand issues of identity, particularly marginalization (race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, etc.) as it relates to children/youth in child welfare? **Probe:** How do you approach this in your own work?
6. Tell me about the tensions, if any, that you face the most in advocating for children/youth? **Probe:** What frustrates you the most?
7. Can you tell me about a time where your approach to advocacy “worked”, and when it “did not work”?
8. What are your hopes for advocacy work with children? **Probe:** What might you suggest to others seeking to be child advocates?