

ASSEMBLING VIOLENCE: SOCIAL WORK'S COMPLICITIES WITH FASHIONING
IDEAS OF THE UNWORTHY AND THE ERASURE OF NEED

**ASSEMBLING VIOLENCE: SOCIAL WORK'S COMPLICITIES WITH FASHIONING
IDEAS OF THE UNWORTHY AND THE ERASURE OF NEED**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis grapples with the inadequacies present within the function of contemporary social work, which fosters a practice that conceptualizes idealized visions of ‘those in need’, rather than attending to the real needs of those accessing social work programs. Specifically setting out to examine these institutional failings as they relate to the growing number of individuals experiencing homelessness across Canada, the paper introduces a guiding theoretical and epistemic framework, termed the ‘Assemblative Process,’ centred primarily on unpacking the constitution of ‘assemblative bodies.’ This work progresses through the three stages of this framework, first engaging in a critical genealogical historiographic study of social work’s development from the Enlightenment to our Colonial-Capitalist present, culminating in a technology capable of exerting state power over members of our community. It then utilizes this foundational understanding of social work to engage in a hybridized comparative policy analysis rooted within critical narrative/discourse to constitute a ‘point-in-time’ representation of the ‘assemblative body’ as it exists within both the 17th to 19th century Vagrancy Acts and Hamilton, Ontario’s Encampment Protocol, which was rescinded in January 2025. The final aspect of this analysis involves a ‘diffractive analysis’ of the findings across both the first two parts, leading to a discussion which suggests that perhaps our critiques of contemporary social work practice may be better oriented to other facets of the profession.

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CHAPTER 1 – AN INTRODUCTION

We are at a “tipping point” of homelessness in Ontario, with a rapidly growing population of individuals experiencing homelessness, and estimates suggesting such a number could double over the next decade without substantial interventions (Association of Municipalities of Ontario, 2025). This has been a reality felt close to home in Hamilton, Ontario, where an averaged estimate suggests we have seen a near 65% increase since public reporting began in 2020 (City of Hamilton, 2025a; City of Hamilton, 2025b). Figures so alarming, the city chose to declare a state of emergency to mobilize increased levels of support towards these populations (Peesker, 2023). Such has become a common theme among Ontario municipalities as, alongside this concerning growth, funding for social and housing support services has ballooned substantially in hopes of slowing or eliminating the growth of homelessness. The Association of Municipalities of Ontario, a consortium of the 444 municipalities within Ontario, released a report highlighting the approximately \$4.1 billion allocated for housing and homelessness responses in 2024 (Donaldson et al., 2025), with estimates around ~\$200 million earmarked for these services within Hamilton alone (City of Hamilton, 2025c). While substantial pockets of this funding are being funnelled into large-scale projects related to building supportive and affordable housing, a notable portion of it is being directed at support programs designed to be the ‘first responders’ to homelessness.

Social work regularly orients itself within this ‘front-line first responder’ position and finds itself tasked with assisting individuals in meeting basic needs, navigating complex systems of care, and coordinating support across different organizations, often as a part of various social service and health care organizations (Johnston et al., 2017; Ashcroft et al., 2018). It is in these

roles that I have found myself for the first few years within the field. During this time, through my interactions with several systems and social institutions, problematic aspects of social work's approach to developing and organizing care systems have become increasingly apparent. Our 'care' systems continue to operate through a disconnect between the needs of those accessing services and the methods of organization being prioritized within social work. Such methods of organization include a focus on developing efficient, standardized pathways to 'treatment' and 'rehabilitation,' and, from what I have seen in relation to homelessness, a prioritization of methods of displacement to 'reclaim' public spaces.

The rollout of Homeless and Addiction Recovery Treatment Hubs (HART Hubs) is one such example. These sites have become an 'all-in-one' replacement for a variety of programs that set out a standardized pathway to support those experiencing "overlapping challenges related to mental health, addiction, homelessness and other barriers to care" (Government of Ontario, 2025). These sites are heralded as improving the potential of support and creating "safer communities" (Government of Ontario, 2025) in contrast to previous programming, such as supervised consumption and treatment sites, which were admonished as spaces which enabled and encouraged substance use and abuse (Lang, 2024; Moro, 2025a; Moro, 2024). While this is not the time to critique these models and their function, they stand to exemplify the broader shift within social work contexts to unifying and standardizing approaches to care. These processes fundamentally erase the individuality of those who access these care services, leaving those who do not respond positively to this specific framework of care without support.

On the other hand, the rapidly increasing efforts to relocate a downtown men's shelter to accommodate substantial investment into a stadium across the road represent the city's desire to 'move homelessness out of the way' through efforts of displacement (Radley, 2021; Moro,

2022). For a majority of the development discussions, the shelter has been largely absent from these city planning discussions, even though initial renderings and zoning maps were created with a notable exclusion of the shelter from the area (Van Dongen, 2023; Moro, 2025b). The shelter, rather than being recognized for the value it can provide in such a centralized location, being well connected to relevant support programs, is seen as an obstacle to economic development, which can simply be ‘moved’ out of the way as soon as it is deemed inconvenient.

These examples highlight a couple of many different injustices occurring daily, which are echoed by my own experiences in the field across daytime shelters, community hubs and within supportive housing. My argument stands that social work has come to internalize problematic ideals around how we ought to support those individuals and communities the practice finds itself interacting with. It is through this argument, and in recognition of a population of individuals experiencing homelessness continuing to grow, that I call for social workers to dig deeper into understanding how the practice has come to normalize these damaging and discriminatory methods of organization.

Through this thesis, I will explicate the severance between the needs of those with whom social work interacts and the ways social work conceptualizes them. Specifically through an examination of its corroboration with projects which standardize and define, through the eyes of the practice, what a given individual ‘is.’ In other words, this research will examine the conceptions that have developed over time, which constitute both how social work organizes itself around a given social issue and how society more broadly perceives an individual associated with such a representation. The discursive function which describes this standardized subject is represented through a conception I have come to term the ‘assemblative body,’ which will be further defined in Chapter 3.

One set of policies, which I position as particularly emblematic of our community's representation of such a body, is Hamilton's Encampment Protocol. In brief, the Encampment Protocol was a piece of legislation in effect from August 2023 to January 2025, with the primary purpose of permitting and regulating the presence of encampments on public lands and developing a centralized support system to service these sites (City of Hamilton, 2023a; City of Hamilton, 2023b; City of Hamilton, 2025d). It was born through a recognition that with an overwhelmed emergency shelter system and stagnant housing opportunities, there needed to be some form of centralized support for those forced, or who chose to, live in encampments. The development process included numerous community consultations, including with those residing within encampments. Through this project, rather than provide commentary on the efficacy and implementation of this program, I hope to utilize it as a medium to represent how, as a collective, the community, the city, and even those living in encampments, represent themselves in relation to this perceived social 'issue.' Later in the paper, I will utilize these policy discussions to develop and nuance a point-in-time representation of the 'assemblative body' which is contained within.

While still grappling with how social workers themselves are implicated in the creation and maintenance of the assemblative homeless body, this paper relies upon a distinction between 'social work' and 'social workers.' Taking inspiration from Leslie Margolin (1997) in her book *Under the Cover of Kindness: The Invention of Social Work*, this paper will envision 'social work' as an arrangement of ideas and histories, not confined to one set of people or professions, which converge within our social world as a *technology of power*, and 'social workers' as those who engage the 'doing' of social work through means of wielding such a technology. In other words, 'social work' exists separately from 'social workers' as a utility which, in part, normalizes

and makes acceptable the observation and regulation of individuals *outside* of public spaces (Margolin, 1997). Our explorations throughout this paper will make it explicit that such a technology of power *fundamentally relies upon* these standardized definitions of a population, which are constituted within the assemblative body, to organize itself around and respond to a target population.

Pulling all I have outlined above together, the core focus of this paper becomes the examination of both the constitution and inter-relation between our two ‘subjects’ of interest: social work, as a technology of power, and the assemblative bodies it relies upon to enact its capacity to surveil and control a population. While critical social work literature has individually focused on the implications of social work’s historical development on our contemporary practice (e.g., Chapman & Withers, 2019; Rossiter, 2001), and its interaction with standardized ‘bodies’ in various capacities to direct the actions of social workers (e.g., Kafer, 2013; Smith, 2011), it has not done enough to engage with these two ideas in tandem with each other; engaging with social work’s history of participating in the assemblage of tropes, and then arranging itself in response to them, rather than meeting people’s needs. Through this recognition, this research organizes itself to ask the question: what potential lies within the ‘assemblative body,’ and its inter-connection with ‘social work,’ as it exists as a technology of power, and what can it teach us about how social workers choose to organize ourselves and our approaches to care around social issues within our communities? Within this analysis, I am also interested in unpacking the constitution of both ‘social work’ within the historical contexts in which it was born, along with the constitution of the assemblative homeless body, both with historical and contemporary settings. In attaining these understandings, I hope to better

understand how social workers operate alongside and through these registers, both as complicit agents of ‘social work’ and in the internalization, creation and maintenance of these bodies.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Before delving into the more abstract aspects of this project, which will become the primary focus of this paper, I intend to ground these discussions in a historiographic exploration of social work. More specifically, this chapter will establish the necessary understanding of social work’s development into a technology of power. One that fundamentally relies on ‘assemblative bodies’ to orient and enact its power systems, bodies which this project aims to better understand. Much of the work I have done so far leads me to associate social work’s initial ‘explosion’ of development with the large-scale societal shifts occurring between the late 17th and early 19th centuries, as the Enlightenment and its related projects took hold in the Western world. As such, this historiography will unfold as a critical genealogy of this period, tracing the development of social work as it exists within Enlightenment contexts to the contemporary landscape in which it is enacted today.

The analyses within this chapter engage with these histories across several different realms. First, it provides an overview of some of the substantial shifts and ideological prioritizations that emerge and are institutionalized within the Enlightenment. It then examines the intersection of these ‘societal revelations’ alongside the developmental contexts of a rapidly evolving social work, followed by a tracing of these two sets of ideas across time, from the Enlightenment to the Colonial Capitalist realities in which the practice exists to this day. Collectively, these analyses break down how we have come to prioritize and validate specific

‘idealized’ ways of being and knowing, especially as they are enacted through a myriad of power relations, knowledge structures, and various forms of language and story that have been mobilized across these histories. In this vein, rather than learning about and critiquing the particular individuals or intentions that lead to the shifts and developments across this period, this chapter focuses its efforts on exploring and attending to the historical conditions that make these specific ways of knowing, being, and ‘helping’ seem natural. As such, by the end of this chapter, the reader should be familiarized with social work’s convergence with various registers of policy, technology and systems of care through which it has developed its knowledge systems and methods of organization.

The Enlightenment's Influence on Societal and Discursive Development

The Enlightenment is a period spanning from the 17th to the 19th century, often revered for the large-scale ‘intellectual’ developments occurring across the period (Moravia, 1980; Peters, 2019). During these times, ideas from some of history's most renowned philosophers and scientists revolutionized systems of science and rationality, prompting substantial shifts in how Western society conceptualizes how one ought to live in society and, by extension, how the state and our social structures stand to support such a life (Moravia, 1980; Peters, 2019). While this period gave rise to several different methods of prioritization and organization within Western society, I argue, in line with previous work done by Chapman & Withers (2019), that two shifts in particular stand out as notably influential to the development of social work as a technology of power and control. Rooted within this argument, the first section aims to establish an understanding of how exactly these ideological and moral shifts began to shape and direct discursive and societal developments across the Enlightenment.

The first of these shifts concerns our methods of producing knowledge, and a related reinterpretation of how a ‘modern’ society should determine the value of knowledge. The Enlightenment was an era marked by a firm conviction that science and rationality were the primary drivers of societal progress (Chapman & Withers, 2019). One notable feature of these processes was the scientific separation of ‘observer’ and ‘observed’: “the knowing human mind” and “the matter being considered” (Hyslop, 2012, p. 406). This distinction, both explicitly and implicitly, began to scientifically legitimize distinct categories of humans based on various markers of differentiation, such as race, gender, sexuality, class and dis/ability (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Hyslop, 2012). As these categorizations were legitimized within scientific and then broader social contexts, a discourse was deeply entrenched within these systems, which constituted the existence of various taxonomies and hierarchies of humans, each possessing differing ceilings of moral and socio-economic potential along with capacity as ‘rational’ actors (Chapman & Withers, 2019).

Through these taxonomies and hierarchies, arguments grew that various markers of differentiation – i.e., race, gender, sexuality, class, dis/ability - were exemplary of reduced potential and thus represented a population which was ‘less than’ those who embodied the idealized norm existing at the pinnacle of this social hierarchy (Hyslop, 2012; Chapman & Withers, 2019). While discrimination based on these factors undeniably occurred before the Enlightenment, what we witnessed during this time was the scientific institutionalization, based on these markers, of an unideal or monstrous ‘Other.’ These groups were not only considered as ‘less-than,’ but as populations which needed to be ‘saved’ or ‘educated’ by the rational ‘ruling’ class (Almeida et al., 2019; Chapman & Withers, 2019), as is defined by the embodiment of the idealized “white, educated, heterosexual, bourgeois male” (Hyslop, 2012, p. 407). This shift is of

particular interest within this paper because it highlights the beginning of large-scale movements to create institutionally regulated and, in many cases, mandated pathways for ‘rehabilitating’ these populations – a space where the enactment of social work would become heavily relied upon.

The belief of the rational, ruling class not only being positioned to, but *obligated* to save and educate this established ‘Other,’ stands as the basis of the second shift relevant to the development of social work within this period. Around the time of these ‘discoveries’, communities became increasingly interested in understanding how to conceptualize and ‘treat’ those who were forced to exist within the realm of this established ‘Other’ (Chapman & Withers, 2019). These efforts gave rise to various institutional responses, which were fundamentally rooted in the notions of moral and rational superiority held by this ruling class and the potential it had to ‘save’ those existing at the periphery of idealized society. Two of the most substantial responses that exemplify these forms of institutional response lie in how society had organized itself to address pauperism and lunacy.

Both sites were targeted through the enactment of various laws and processes, which outlined state responsibilities for those designated within each set of individuals. While statutes governing similar populations can be found dating back several centuries, we see substantially increased initiatives during the early-to-late stages of the Enlightenment to redefine the state’s role in ‘dealing with’ these populations. Pauperism, for example, was targeted through various Poor Relief Acts across the 17th century, eventually culminating in a complete overhaul through the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 (Roberts, 1981). These policies ushered in a multitude of regulations and restrictions on the lives of the poor, including the streamlining of support through the institutionalization of workhouses, and removing or substantially reducing any ‘outdoor

relief’ – that is, assistance occurring outside of the ‘benefits’ provided by the workhouse. We began to see the reliance on conceptions of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ as well as measures of ‘less eligibility’ which ensured that no one in receipt of public assistance was provided more than any labourer participating in the market (O’Connell, 2009; Roberts, 1981). We see sanity, madness and lunacy – what we now term ‘mental illness’ – substantiated and acted upon through policy in very similar means. An abundance of policies were introduced during these times, both through the Poor Laws and various Madhouse, County Asylum, and Lunacy Acts across the 17th and 18th centuries (Roberts, 1981). These laws set out directives that define the line bordering ‘sanity’ and ‘lunacy,’ how and when individuals shall be admitted to ‘care facilities,’ and the standardization of treatment protocols for those deemed mad or deviant within madhouses and asylums (Roberts, 1981).

Both of these overlapping legislative movements share the same underlying themes and motives, which we see reflected in their real-world integration. They establish guidelines for how the state, the market, and society at large ought to envision and interact with those deemed poor or mentally ill. These statutes exist under the guise of supporting and ‘rehabilitating’ these populations, but are still fundamentally grounded in legitimizing often violent and torturous state efforts to control and assimilate these groups into the defined spaces of normalcy and morality (Dubber, 1998). Beyond allegedly responding to pauperism and madness, these sites were also utilized to isolate, reform and rehabilitate any population deemed as ‘undesirable.’ On numerous occasions, we witness the bending of what categorizes someone as ‘poor’ or ‘mad’ to specifically target populations. Women, racialized populations and those who stood outside of behavioural norms, such as those non-conformant to heterosexual expectations, all became targets of taxonomies which justified their continued separation from the rest of society. ‘Drapetomania,’ a

diagnosis given to slaves who tried to escape, ‘hysteria,’ a catch-all diagnosis for various ‘shortcomings’ of a woman, and sexual perversion, a diagnosis which included homosexuality as a defining feature, are all examples of criteria developed which specifically targeted a population (Szasz, 1972; Tasca et al., 2012; Crozier, 2001). These facilities were then used to subject individuals to violent and dehumanizing ‘treatment’ which persisted until individuals agreed to assimilate into the ‘ideal’ society attempting to be crafted (Beveridge, 1998; Peterson, 1982; Scull, 1989).

These shifts and emerging institutional responses fundamentally represent the ‘birth’ of our two subjects of interest within the broader contexts of this research. Social work begins to fill a growing need for an apparatus capable of representing these ruling ideologies and engaging with the public beyond the traditional realms of the state. As this power is constructed through various registers of policy and practice, the state becomes increasingly capable of spreading its motifs on how one ought to exist within the world, continuing to prescribe social categories that represent not only what an individual requires to be ‘rehabilitated,’ but also the potential they hold in the process of rehabilitation. In other words, conceptions, representative of state desires, which lay the groundwork for how to best encourage the development of these populations in ways that benefit this ‘idealized’ society many in the Enlightenment were attempting to create. Forming between these spaces is social work, establishing itself as a function of power, and the assemblative bodies it comes to rely upon to organize itself and act through.

The Intersection of Institutionalized Difference on a Burgeoning Social Work

After establishing the presence of these ideological and moral shifts, alongside their broader societal implications and institutional responses, the foundational aspects of social work and the groundwork for its development into an apparatus of power already begin to take shape. In contrast to the other ‘institutions of care,’ also gaining traction in responding to these ‘unideal’ categories of human, which explicate a specified directive of care, social work developed in a way that allowed the state to extend its reach and control to the ‘borders’ of its idealized society. In these contexts, social work filled a need as an apparatus to control entry at these ‘borders’ and to encourage individual ‘development’ in ways that facilitated one’s acceptability into the sphere of inclusion. This section continues to expand upon these initial understandings, examining the interrelated development of social work within these contexts, with specific attention paid to the ways these contextual realities began to define the trajectory of social work into the contexts we are interested in better understanding through this project.

Alongside this described *function* of the practice, vitally important knowledge creation processes were occurring within these institutions of care, with psychiatry, medicine, and social work all competing to prove themselves as most equipped to respond to those whom the state had deemed in need. These measures of ‘legitimization’ were often gauged based on the ability of a given profession to possess and exercise specialized knowledge (Rossiter, 2011). As social work has often come to be associated with the aspects of our world which are inherently subjective, and, by definition, unknowable, it has struggled with this process of legitimization (Weinberg, 2010). This means that, throughout its existence, social work has been argued not to possess “clear and credible” systems of knowledge (Hothersall, 2019, p. 860), in the same way that could be argued for the fields of psychiatry and medicine. As a result, social work has often

internalized and followed dominant perspectives in order to be taken seriously (Weinberg, 2016). Issues begin to arise in this process when we examine the ideas these dominant perspectives held as social work has continued its development.

Upon further examination, we can see the manifestation of the tendency to follow the dominant knowledge systems embedded within many of the core functions of social work. All the shifts we covered in this section – especially those related to ‘objective’ classification and saviourism – play an unequivocal role in guiding the function of modern-day social work. The structure of power continues to rely on these categorizations and markers of differentiation in its daily functions within our world; the perceived role of the practitioners has, and continues to be, to describe, categorize, and provide treatment to the individuals who come to us (Rossiter, 2011). Although we tout social work as a practice of equality and advocacy, these epistemological roots embody the complete opposite, as we identify the foundation of our practice as rooted in ideals of rationality, moral saviourism, and the superiority of the Western mind.

These are functions that exist across many different facets of the sectors social work interacts with. Although it is in many ways a cliché to speak about the separation of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor within the British Poor Laws (O’Connell, 2009), I think these distinctions serve as an excellent example of how these discourses attach themselves to the function of social work and persist over time. One could argue that these ideas, and many others introduced in these laws, especially after the 1834 overhaul, continue to define how we approach developing social welfare systems to this day. For example, we continue to prioritize pressuring individuals accessing these social supports into the labour market to benefit society as a whole and maintain that the financial assistance one receives ought to remain below the lowest market wages available. This is evidenced by Ontario Works eligibility requirements including an

individual taking part in “approved activities” to find and maintain employment (Government of Ontario, 2022) and the maximum financial assistance an individual can receive on Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program maintaining well below both the poverty line and the lowest full-time wage in the labour market since *at least* 1986 (Mayo, 2024; Government of Canada, 2025).

It is not as if our social support systems are still required to adhere to the protocols set out within the Elizabethan Poor Laws, but that, simply put, the implementation of these directives creates discursive assumptions which normalize these approaches to providing social welfare, and creates a perspective that any shifts from this established system should be avoided. A phenomenon that I hope to make clear occurs repeatedly within social work. It is through these registers that I argue for the importance of understanding the influence of these histories on the knowledge systems we hold as we examine the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of our contemporary practice. There is no way for social work practitioners to separate themselves from the social work which has been enacted across history; these histories and developmental contexts fundamentally define the shape of professional knowledge systems and how individuals engage in ‘social work’ today (Rossiter, 2001; Scott, 2014; Tsing, 2015b). Without this nuance, at its best, social work’s function becomes supporting the development of individuals in ways that also advance the dominant perspectives’ future envisioning of the world. If our goal is to create authentic, meaningful, and equitable change, these are all realities we must grapple with as we set out to examine the present operations of social work.

Before entering this final stage of analysis, I encourage the reader to utilize these examinations, as well as those that follow, to begin piecing together how policy and ways of thinking about how to respond to a given social issue are processes that are inherently ‘alive.’

While our policy structures and approaches may change over time, we rarely start entirely anew; instead, the previous framings become the foundations on which society builds new understandings. In other words, one can envision the ‘innovations’ of our care systems as being built upon the presuppositions embedded in these initial framings and policy responses, with an obscuring of these underlying assumptions occurring during each subsequent set of revisions. A process which, over time, begins to obscure the ‘why’ of our approaches. Such a cognition holds profound importance within these investigations. We can examine our contemporary realities, unpack the assumptions and beliefs held within social work’s structures of knowledge and methods of organization, but without historicizing these realities, the answers to ‘why’ they exist in the forms they do are unanswerable. What this means for us, as those who examine social work’s function within our modern world, is that as social work continues to establish itself as a vital actor in some of the world’s most pressing social justice conflicts, it becomes increasingly complex to identify where the roots of its belief systems lie.

From the Enlightenment to Colonial-Capitalism: Positioning the Implications of Modern-Day ‘Social Work’

So far, this chapter has explicated two substantial shifts as they relate to the development of social work within this period. This section aims to expand these understandings, tracing them through time from the peak years of the Enlightenment to the Contemporary Colonial-Capitalist reality in which the practice presently functions. The analysis begins in the early 19th century and traces the development of the ideals established in the first half of this chapter, alongside the continuing development of social work into our present contexts. This is particularly relevant to

our research question, as we aim to understand how and why the taxonomies and categorizations that social work interacts with are created and maintained over time.

As has been established, being born within the Enlightenment is an idealized pathway, not only for one's existence in the world, but also for a society built around this categorically 'rational' and 'pure' being, one which maximizes the utility and efficiency of its constituents to optimize economic, scientific and social progress (O'Connell, 2009). In the centuries that followed, the Western world witnessed the expansion of several interconnected projects that sought to shape the development of individuals and define their roles in society. These projects aimed to establish a standard of normative and moral being across the population, in ways that were conducive to making this idealized society a reality (Foucault, 1976/78; Wehrle, 2016). This includes the expansion of or revisions to social institutions, such as schools, churches, and workshops, as well as shifts in "educational practices..., administrative policies, resource entitlements," along with methods of organizing communities (Tsing, 2000, p. 329; Foucault, 1976/78; Zuboff, 2019). Alongside these realities, industrial development began to boom, spurring what would eventually become the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution also brought about unprecedented changes to society, which Larry Hirschorn (1974) describes:

"... [industrial development] fragmented pre-industrial social substance of communities, urban and rural, and upset those balances between man, nature, and his productive organizations which gave pre-industrial life a coherence and unity that can never be regained. Man became "labour," nature became "land," and productive organization became "capital." Organized as these factors were by separate markets, new and destructive imbalances, whether in the form of new urban diseases, selective (as opposed

to communal) starvation, or cycles of business activity marked the quality of life in the early period of industrial development.” (Hirschhorn, 1974, p. 3)

As the world sought to navigate these rapidly shifting, unstable realities, the colonial projects of White Superiority and moral saviourism built upon during the Enlightenment, as established in the first half of this chapter, were seen at the time as the most ‘rational’ path forward. As such, they took a front seat in crafting this new world, allowing for a seamless integration into the socio-economic systems the West continues to rely upon.

Social work, within these contexts, began to be tasked with restoring the “balance of life” (Hirschhorn, 1974, p. 3) for those individuals who were ‘struggling to keep up’ with the changes being ushered in. While social work undeniably fulfilled this role, it also played a secondary role in encouraging the development of the individuals they interacted with, enabling them to navigate the ‘inevitable’ direction society was headed (Hirschhorn, 1974). As we continue this exploration, it is becoming increasingly apparent that social work regularly stands to embody this position: addressing various humanitarian needs while simultaneously enacting state desires. For example, in the contexts described by Hirschhorn above, ‘social work’ tasks social workers with addressing the problems many individuals faced during the rapid rise in industrialization. However, due to the inherent limitations of the social worker, who is obviously not capable of creating immediate structural change to address the conditions producing these perceived deficiencies, the apparent answer becomes identifying solutions for individuals to adapt and conform to the conditions they are subject to, rather than finding ways to escape them.

Does this trajectory not make sense as the natural pathway of development for the profession? As social work has evolved into a “universal feature” of modern society (Hirschhorn, 1974, p. 5), it has internalized and worked to privilege and maintain a set of ideological

principles conducive to these colonial systems, which sought to regulate and control those ‘unideal’ members of society. Social work becomes a tool for these projects, as a technology capable of undertaking these endeavours, forcing shifts in behaviours and ensuring conformance to these ideological principles under the guise of providing selfless care. It is here I want to reiterate my argument from the end of the previous chapter regarding the ‘life’ embedded within our policy structures; rather than recognize and grapple with these all-too-real colonial roots, it has become popularized within contemporary social work discourse to frame the harms caused by our systems as ‘inevitable of operating in a neoliberal context,’ fundamentally disconnecting ourselves from and erasing the coloniality which exists at the roots of all of these systems.

Within modern social work contexts, neoliberalism has been argued to be responsible for a virtually limitless number of social work’s habitualized care structures, which often rely upon misguided and ineffective approaches to ‘helping.’ Scholars have argued that neoliberalism has led to a reliance on funding structures that extend the principles and desires of the private market into the operation of public institutions, with far-reaching consequences across the sectors in which social work is practiced (Marston & McDonald, 2012; Garret, 2019). This includes the development of a ‘non-profit market economy’ that forces the ‘siloing’ of support services and encourages those running these organizations to regulate workflows through categorizing individuals into standardized treatment pathways (Baker, 1999; Eakin, 2007; Baines, 2011; Weinberg, 2016; Garret, 2019). The presentation of these arguments as ‘inevitable of operating in a neoliberal context,’ as has become commonplace across many realms of social work, obscures our understanding of where these ideas and methods of organization originated.

From their conception, these capitalist structures have been rooted in colonial ideals of “conquest, settlement, bondage and migration, and monopoly and extraction” (Ince, 2024, p. 590), all of which are indicative of a larger colonial agenda that is purpose-built to direct the development of these socio-economic systems (Mills, 1997; Cornelissen, 2025). The widespread reliance on slavery for the continued development of these economic structures, and the slave trade itself, are just two examples of colonial idealism being directly correlative *and* constitutive of modern capitalist systems (Mills, 1997; Ince, 2024). Accordingly, attributing the present implications of these systems on the function of social work to ‘neoliberalism’ is not only misleading but fundamentally incorrect, as it erases the histories that exist in contrast to this idealized world. This is not a ‘new’ idea; scholars have been arguing for such an understanding for quite some time, such as through the work of Charles Mills (1997), who argues the ‘social contract’ – a framework argued to be the ‘connective tissue’ of these socio-economic systems – creates a vision of a political system through which society voluntarily collaborates with one another to privilege these systems, thereby obfuscating the violent enactment of power and methods of domination inherent in White Supremacy, which exists as a *political system* upon which these systems rely.

As these colonial-capitalist systems continued to grow, requiring more and more exploitation to remain on their developmental trajectories (Cornelissen, 2025), it could then be argued they almost ‘give up’ on the attempts at rehabilitating the ‘Other’ we see within the Enlightenment, instead opting to utilize these bodies to fill exploitative roles within these economic systems in spaces where those ‘ideal’ citizens did not belong. Social work, in these contexts, then takes its role controlling the ‘border’ of acceptability even further, extending what is fundamentally the ‘illusion’ of participation and being included within this idealized society, in

exchange for the control over the bodies of those deemed the ‘Other.’ All that has been attributed to ‘neoliberalism’ can be more directly attributed to the colonial foundations of these projects, which predate even the ideological ‘developments’ incurred throughout the Enlightenment.

Social Work’s Search for Innocence

While thus far in the paper, I have attempted to outline the development of social work as a technology of power and its profound implication in the knowledge systems it interacted with throughout its existence, as this chapter comes to an end, I want now to grapple with a prevalent, and, as I argue, dangerous vision of social work within our contemporary contexts as the ‘unwilling victim’ of these histories. Chapman & Withers (2019) help us to understand that this idea of the ‘innocence of helpers’ has existed since the Enlightenment and is tied to civilizing imperatives developed through the expanse of colonial projects across this period. Such a perspective is born from a foundational idea that those who engage in social work are better people because they are ‘improving’ others. The pair expand further, writing:

“The moral economy governing social workers’ experience of this ethos is that it may feel like a burden, but it also functions as a source of respectability and exaltation for professional social workers. Our belief that we are better human beings enables us to believe we can transform inferior human beings. This moral differentiation is a violent foundation for caring, sharing, and otherwise social working.” (Chapman & Withers, 2019, p. 197).

Born within these thought processes is the idea that, because social work provides a ‘net benefit,’ some of the violence engaged in during reform is excusable, and one can detach themselves from

the negative aspects of our profession by virtue of their moral superiority. Within the final pages of this chapter, I would like to take a moment to caution against positioning social work as an ‘unwilling victim’ of these operating contexts and emphasize the importance of not attributing the violent realities of social work to inevitabilities.

McDermott Hughes (2017) speaks extensively in one of the chapters of his book about the power that becomes embedded within this ‘victim slot.’ It becomes a positioning that severs an individual or group from their implications in these larger power structures and systems of harm. More substantially, it relegates the agency of any adverse actions away from those who engage in them, back onto these systems. In a simpler sense, it allows for an individual to say, “I am not causing harm, *social work* is causing harm, and I am innocent because I do not have control over that.” By utilizing this line of reasoning, it becomes a seamless excuse, both physically and morally, for an individual to maintain a technology of social work that remains complicit in these violent and discriminatory histories.

What I strive to encourage is a recognition that while these histories both pedagogically and epistemologically define social work, they also stand to define us as individuals. Many practitioners of social work were raised through societal institutions heavily influenced by the ruling ideologies, which privilege specific modes of thought developed through colonial enterprise and the Enlightenment. A positioning that social work practitioners are inseparable from, and that fundamentally defines how they interpret and interact with the world, including our interactions with social work. It is a vital recognition to hold that, although the Enlightenment as a period of development is ‘over,’ the ways social work practitioners are taught to think about and navigate the world are still profoundly shaped by the values developed during that period.

The purpose of ending this chapter on this note is not to suggest that social work, as presently implicated, is an ‘unsalvageable’ technology of care that practitioners of social work should cease all efforts to repair, since there is no chance of separating themselves from the historical contexts through which it was shaped. Instead, I want to encourage a perspective of existing alongside and grappling with the complicity of social work with these discursive and ideological registers of control and conformance rather than becoming complacent within this ‘victim slot.’ It is a means of recognizing that we are all integral parts of this arrangement of histories, ideas, and technologies that gave rise to the frameworks upon which social work is practiced. This recognition is precisely where I position the remainder of this research; it is not research ‘about’ social work, but as a perceived representation from *within it*. This framework of analysis and the methodology to follow become increasingly valuable as we grapple with the reality that all our knowledge, practice approaches, and instincts for care have been shaped by, and, through intra-action, continue to shape, the discourses that are brought into question throughout the remainder of this paper.

CHAPTER 3 – THEORETICAL AND EPISTEMIC FRAMINGS

Grappling with the Complexities of Discursive and Historical Constructions: Introducing the ‘Assemblative Process’ as a Guiding Theoretical Framework

With Chapter 2 having established social work’s presence and corroboration with various projects of colonial and epistemic violence, histories which fundamentally define its function in our contemporary social world, I now utilize this grounding to move into the next phase of our analysis – laying out a theoretical and epistemological framework to guide our future analyses of

the ‘assemblative body.’ Due to the complex nature of how discursive technologies are constituted and function within our social world, the framework developed must be well-equipped with targeted theoretical and ideological tools that help to organize and interpret the various pieces that are discovered. Chapter 3 takes the first step in setting up this analysis, outlining what I have come to term the ‘Assemblative Process,’ a guiding theoretical framework for interrogating the existence of assemblages within our social world. I have organized the framework by centralizing ‘assemblages’ and emphasizing the interconnection between two other pre-existing theoretical approaches, which set out to grapple with the effects of various ‘difference-making’ projects: Confluence and Diffraction.

A Preamble on Language

Before exploring how these frameworks intersect and help us understand the centralized assemblage, it is essential to outline some key assumptions and ideologies that underpin our understanding of the theories. First, and arguably most importantly, combining these theories requires us to break down moments of history – whether that is the production of ideas, spaces of interaction, the development of technologies, or any related construct – in ‘strands,’ and then envisioning our knowledge production processes as an *entanglement* of these strands. The diagram in Figure 1, presented within the next section of this chapter, stands as a simplified representation of how each theory interacts with these ‘strands’; each theory embodies a different stage of investigation as these moments of history interact, converge and separate to produce, maintain and privilege specific ideas and ways of understanding and interacting with the world. It is argued that, through the ‘intra-action’ of these strands – processes which occur *within* the assemblage – it is possible to better understand the existence of ideas across time, particularly as

they relate to defined historical trajectories and influence contemporary realities (Barad, 2007; Bellacasa, 2017; Tsing, 2015a).

This conception of ‘intra-action,’ which occurs inside the assemblage, is also a vitally important theoretical tool to understand as it largely stands as the basis of what the Assemblative Process attempts to capture. Intra-action, developed by Karen Barad (2007), is a broad concept that recognizes all these ‘strands’ as existing through the “mutual constitution of entangled agencies” (p. 33). Barad expands this definition further, and more plainly, later in her book, explaining:

“That is, in contrast to the usual ‘interaction,’ which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through their intra-action... [Further] *agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual engagement; they do not exist as individual elements.*” (Barad, 2007, p. 33)

The way I position these ideas within the framework is through the recognition that these ‘strands’ we are setting out to examine do not and *cannot* exist outside of their relation to the others. Instead, their constitution is fundamentally defined by their relation to and positioning within these other strands, an idea that, as we will unpack later, also comes to be one of the definitive natures of an assemblage. The relational existence of these ‘strands,’ as Barad (2007) explains, means that it is virtually impossible to fully capture these pieces of knowledge production within the confines of our presently existing knowledge structures, especially when we recognize that our interactions with them, as a researcher, cause them to shift and change in unpredictable ways. This modality of intra-action and its deep presence within an assemblage is what I argue makes these concepts so difficult to engage with and fully understand. The core

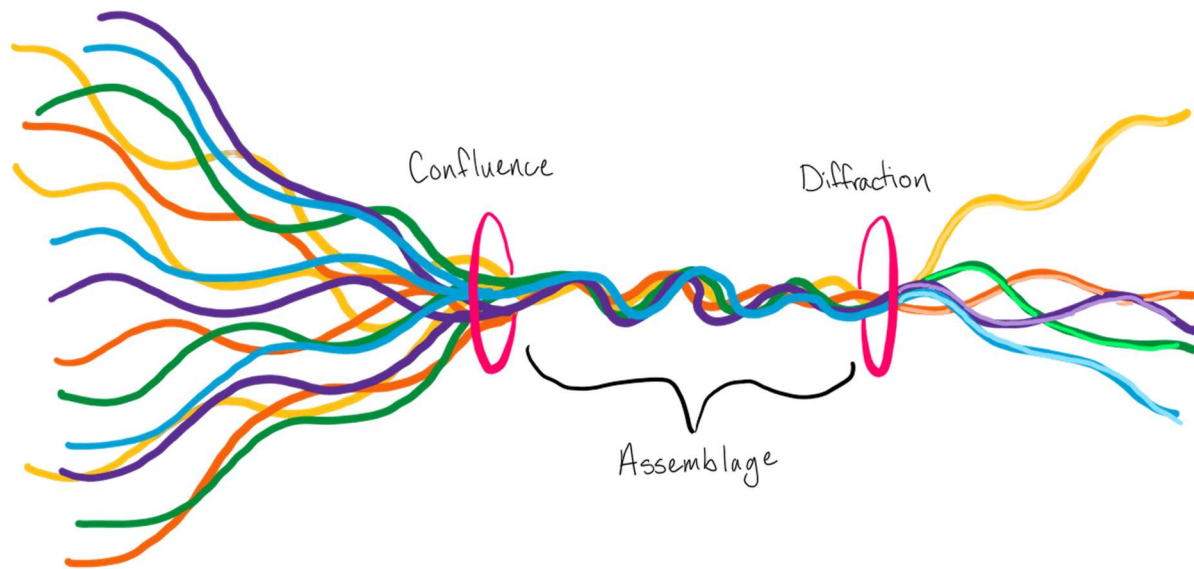
takeaway here is in designing a framework for exploring and understanding assemblages, we must design any apparatus for these examinations in ways that allow us to ‘make known’ *without* ‘making objective’; apparatus which allow us to grapple with the fleeting existence of these facets of our knowledge production system *and* the relational arrangements which inform their existence. It is precisely this that the Assemblative Process attempts to lay the groundwork for.

The ‘Assemblative Process’: Positioning Confluence, Assemblages and Diffraction

The visualization of how I position the interconnection between Confluence, assemblages and Diffraction within this complex landscape of rapidly shifting ‘strands’ of history is represented below in Figure 1. It can be interpreted as a ‘timeline’ of sorts, with time slowly progressing from left to right across the figure. While this diagram heavily simplifies these processes, I hope it serves as a sensory aid to the reader as I begin to work through the function and interaction of each of our theoretical approaches within this section.

Figure 1

A Visualization of our Confluence, Assemblage, and Diffraction Interacting with the History of Ideas (Puersten, 2025)



Confluence.

Starting on the left side of the diagram, these ‘strands’ - which, as previously mentioned, represent ideas, interactions, technologies, or other related constructs that occur or are created at various points in history - flow before collectively converging at our first point of interest. These strands shift, change, and interact with other strands, following no pre-determined route or pattern of development. Confluence sets out to examine the moments at which these various strands reach a point of convergence. Confluence is a branch from traditional understandings of intersectionality and gets its name from a similar metaphor representing the convergence of a system of rivers. It serves to examine when “more than one idea, system, factor or influence run or merge together at a similar point or junction” to “create technologies, processes, and practices

with and through us” (Joseph, 2015, p. 17; Joseph, 2022, p. 486). Confluence encourages us to trace these ideas and histories to their points of convergence and entanglement – where the theory argues that sites of identity, difference, and normalcy are created – to understand the effects that arise from the interaction between these strands of our history. It also posits that these sites of convergence and difference creation do not remain static (Joseph, 2015); instead, their relational nature causes them to shift based on the temporal and contextual arrangements which come to constitute their existence. Within the contexts of this paper and the Assemblative Process, Confluence will serve as a guiding framework for us to understand the development of ‘social work’ as a technology of power. Such has been done within the preceding chapter, examining these sites of difference ‘creation’ within the contexts we are interested in exploring and laying the groundwork for encouraging critical thought around the power relations, language, and ways of being and knowing that have created and sustained social work, as a technology of power, within our social world.

Assemblages.

This central concept of the ‘assemblage’ is derived primarily from the work of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1980/87) but has been expanded upon and utilized by numerous other scholars (e.g., Paur, 2017). ‘Assemblage’ is an English translation of the original French term ‘*agencement*,’ which can be defined more literally as “laying out” or “putting together” (Cousin et al., 1990; as cited in Macgregor Wise, 2005, p. 77). Scholars, such as John Macgregor Wise (2005), who have set out to better understand assemblages, suggest that we should pay particular attention to the ‘active’ nature of the definition of *agencement*. He expands, later explaining, “it is not the *arrangement* or *organization* but the *process* of arranging,

organizing, [and] fitting together” (Macgregor Wise, 2005, p. 77). Through this recognition, one of the fundamental assumptions around the assemblage is a recognition of its fluid nature. Assemblages are perpetually in motion, often existing as fleeting representations of a given ‘thing’ that disappear, reappear, disassemble, and reassemble with no discernible pattern or rationale. As such, an assemblage is not constituted by a set of predetermined parts, nor are they entirely random. Instead, they exist as a *collection of ‘things’* – spanning a limitless spectrum from the physical to metaphysical – which, when brought together, create a domain capable of expressing an identity and laying claim to territory within our social world (Macgregor Wise, 2005). These factors embed assemblages as powerful forces within our world and as originators of discourse; assemblages both *embody* and *create* “discourses, words, ‘meanings,’ and non-corporeal relations that link signifiers with effects” (Macgregor Wise, 2005, p. 80).

These three aspects of the assemblage – their ability to create discourse, express identity, and stake claim to territory in the social world – make them a central interest in this project and within the theoretical and methodological frameworks. By nature of their fluidity, they are inherently unknowable in their entirety, which may seem antithetical to the quest for learning and discovery, but holds great potential for this project. Within the contexts of this research, the ‘assemblage’ becomes a space which exists in contrast to our traditional systems of knowledge creation, where, rather than focusing on categorizing and ‘making known’ the constitutive elements of a given phenomenon, we are gifted a medium to examine and interrogate the processes of ‘intra-action’ we are interested within *without needing to define their existence*. Assemblages will be expanded upon at the end of this chapter, where I will insert them into our present understandings of the ‘body.’ Chapter 4 will shape these bodies into the basis of a methodology enabling us to conceive point-in-time representations of ‘assemblative bodies’

within policy. Then Chapters 5 and 6 will employ this methodology to examine Hamilton's Encampment Protocol alongside the 17th - 19th century Vagrancy Laws to engage in a comparative policy analysis centred around the representations of assemblative homeless bodies within.

Diffraction.

Lastly, on the other 'end' of the diagram, after having moved through the assemblage, we see the existence of the strands which Diffraction sets out to examine. Diffraction is a concept less interested in understanding how difference appears as it is in unravelling how *the effects* of difference emerge, infiltrate our knowledge systems and influence our ideas around how to organize our social world (Barad, 2007). The theoretical framework was initially developed through the work of Donna Haraway; however, Karan Barad (2007) has made substantial contributions in further fleshing out its theoretical construction and has become the foundation for this text's understanding. Diffraction finds its roots as an alternative to the practice of reflection, which, its theorists argue, is implicated in reifying categories of difference. The typical example given here relates to one of the defining functions of reflection, which requires practitioners to create and maintain a clear separation between 'subject' and 'object,' without allowing space to recognize the roles these categories themselves play in defining how difference is acted out and defines knowledge production processes (Haraway & Goodeve, 2000; Barad, 2007).

The purpose of differentiating these processes and engaging in Diffraction "...is not simply to put the observer or knower back into the world... but to understand and take account

of the fact that we too are part of the world's differential becoming" (Barad, 2007, p. 91). Within this project, Diffraction becomes a textual, contextual, and discursive representation of the identity, territory, and discourse which are born within the assemblage. Beyond its ability to assist in the interrogation of these facets of the assemblage, Diffraction also encourages us to critically examine *ourselves* in relation to the assemblage. Such a process informs Chapter 7 of this text, a process of collecting everything we have discovered and putting it into conversation to develop a comprehensive understanding of how 'social work' and the assemblative bodies it relies upon come to define our approaches to creating policy and programming and influence the daily lives of those who engage in 'social work.'

The Potential Within the 'Assemblative Process'

While still explorative of all the core features of the Assemblative Process, it is worth noting that our description above is an incredibly streamlined and simplified representation of how these knowledge production processes play out within the real world. The true nature of how these 'strands' of history interact with each other, and the theoretical framings which make up the assemblative process, are much more complex than any guiding framework can capture. For example: a) strands are not limited to interacting with a singular assemblative process, b) these processes may overlap with one another, causing even more complexity in knowledge production, and c) assemblative processes may lead into one another, but there is no guarantee that any set of 'strands' remains consistent across the two processes. Such a list could continue indefinitely.

The primary takeaway here is that, through breaking a specific knowledge production process down into its various parts and examining the registers it has moved through, we can begin developing a nuanced representation not of *what* these ideas are, but *how* and *why* various parts of our social world have evolved in a particular way around them. I conclude these introductory chapter by stating this is not another project that sets out to examine ‘homelessness,’ prove that our responses are misguided, and redefine another trajectory for us to focus our attention, only for this cycle to repeat. In fact, the results of this project will not even provide a substantive and lasting definition of ‘social work’ as a technology of power, nor the assemblative homeless body. Instead, I am interested in understanding, *right now*, how social work utilizes such an assemblative body to organize itself around homelessness and how that contributes to the problematic approaches to ‘care’ the sector has come to normalize.

None of the theories within the process I have outlined provides us with an ‘escape’ from the limitations inherent to our dominant knowledge and language systems. What they do present us with is a medium for examination to produce a non-objective yet actionable understanding of precisely what we are setting out to understand. Each of these framings, in its own way, grapples with the fleeting reality of our knowledge production systems, allowing us to create definitions that we can work with, which are capable of addressing the subjectivity throughout our social world, while remaining complicit in its own fallibility and finite existence. Such an existence of knowledge encourages us to shift our approaches from ‘finding an answer’ and making ‘objective’ determinations to the act of noticing and constantly being present with the moments of history that stand to define so much of our lives. We are part of these systems, just as they are part of us. I hope the following research, which puts this ‘assemblative process’ into action,

inspires others to grapple with how various aspects of our social world interact with these same systems and fundamentally define much of the work social workers engage in.

Expanding Theoretical Framings and Laying the Groundwork for the Creation of a Methodology

Thus far in the paper, I have established how the histories, discourses, ideas, and technologies developed within and alongside social work have come to define its presence in our world as an apparatus of surveillance and power. I have then presented the ‘Assemblative Process’ as holding potential in assisting us to understand these complex discursive constructions. Taking these two ideas together brings us back to the conception I briefly introduced in Chapter 1, which I have come to term ‘assemblative bodies.’ These assemblative bodies, I posit, are one of the central tools held by the apparatus of control that is social work, which not only excuses its actions but also *stands to direct* the actions of social workers. The remainder of this chapter sets out to further explore this conception of the assemblative body, both through fleshing out its construction and outlining its significance for the remainder of this project. Following these initial discussions, I utilize this conception to ground the development of a methodology which utilizes this body as a medium of examination – one that is made explicit and acted upon across Chapters 4 to 6.

Positioning the ‘Assemblative Body’ Within Our Current Understandings of the ‘Body’

To nuance the body as constituted by an assemblage, I will first define what this idea of ‘body’ has traditionally represented. Often, when speaking about the body, there are two primary

subjects of study: 1) The ‘physical’ body, that is, the function of our biological body – both through its biomechanical potential and how the body we inhabit is conditioned, policed, regulated, and restricted, and 2) the normative body, what could be argued to be an extension of the physical body which exists ‘ideologically,’ and is based within our conceptions and perceptions of an individual which become embodied through normative and moral developments (Foucault, 1975/95; Foucault, 1976/78; Wehrle, 2016). Both conceptions have been well explored across social scientific disciplines, often being examined in relation to their exploitation and coercion through sovereign and state powers. These studies have demonstrated that interpreting the body through its constituent parts offers a nuanced understanding of how policy and regulation are enacted for a specific group or individual, as well as how such a representation is constructed and conceived within our social world.

Where these understandings fall short, however, is that they require us to separate the body from the power structures that interact with it to engage these frameworks. In other words, the power exerted is examined *in relation to* the body, rather than *as constitutive* of the body and vice versa. This is a process Foucault, who has utilized the ‘body’ as medium for examination, tangentially cautions against, explaining:

“We should admit... that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.”

(Foucault, 1977, p. 27)

This, I argue, is where the potential of the assemblative body lies. It stands to create a new focus of study that further expands the potential for the ‘body’ as a target for research. While still encompassing both the constitutive elements of the biological body and those normative and

moral beliefs which become ‘embodied’ within it, the assemblative body provides a medium for examining the exertion of power on and around the ‘body’ *from within* the assemblage. As previously explained, assemblages exist as a relationally connected conglomerate of material and immaterial pieces of our world – an arrangement of histories, discourses, knowledges, beliefs, physical objects and more – which, vitally, create a domain through which an identity is expressed and territory within our social world is claimed. Because of the nature of intra-action within an assemblage, one element cannot presuppose another; it *requires* the consideration of both power and knowledge, as well as the other constituent elements of the assemblage, as inseparably interconnected. Put simply, I am calling for recognition that the assemblative body and social work’s methods of organization are relationally defined; the assemblative body shapes social work’s orientation, and social work’s orientation shapes the assemblative body.

While this multiplicity held by social work and the assemblative body has a near limitless set of interactions which are virtually unknowable in their entirety, what can be discerned, through examination of social work’s operation in historical and present contexts, is that the assemblages involved in this process have embodied colonial discourses encouraging discriminatory and dehumanizing ideals that become centralized guiding forces for defining how social work responds to a given social issue. While my experience primarily lies in homelessness, and so too does the focus of this paper, the analysis has applications beyond these niches of our practice and can be extended to any population social work interacts with. There is, then, value in unpacking how we can set out to better understand the influence assemblative bodies hold over the function of social work. While there is arguably no point in pursuing an all-encompassing definition of the assemblages that constitute these bodies, there is substantial potential for interrogating the intra-actions that occur within them, which come to define various

facets of social work. In other words, there may be possibilities to discern patterns and regularities within these bodies of intra-action, which make future explorations easier, and the involvement of these conceptions more manageable in settings conducive to the development of policy or service delivery models.

CHAPTER 4 - METHODOLOGY

Setting out to Understand the ‘Assemblative Body’

Establishing the ‘Assemblative Process’ is only the first step in developing a framework to better understand the interrelation between social work’s participation in projects which fashion a preconceived notion of need across the populations it interacts with, and the disconnect this causes with the real individual needs held by those interacting with our ‘care’ systems. The next step in this analysis is to focus our efforts on contextualizing the previously established conception of the ‘assemblative body’ and to set out to understand, at least in part, its constitution. So far, we have been able to ‘witness’ an existence at either end of the ‘Assemblative Process’ – that is, the constitution of social work as a technology of power on one end, and the effects of this technology, alongside the assemblage itself, on our social world. I argue that by attempting to grapple with the assemblage that presently exists as a ‘blank space’ between these two sites of difference creation and maintenance, there is potential to better understand the constitution of these embedded assemblative bodies and how they become embedded in our policy responses and practice approaches.

Through my study of these assemblages, I have concluded that they often become materially crystallized, at least temporarily, through the stories we tell ourselves about our social

world. In many ways, these stories function *alongside* assemblages and become one of their technologies for creating these sites of identity and laying claim to territory within our social world; the histories, ideas, and physical realities interact in various ways across time, become relationally defined, and, eventually, manifest through story. By ‘story’ I do not simply mean tales spread orally or through books, but as those constitutive elements of our ontological and epistemological systems. The ‘stories’ we tell ourselves, which both explain and justify our perception and interpretation of the world and that form the foundation of our cultural systems. These stories are the outreach of assemblages *and* are assemblages themselves – they both define and are defined by the assemblages we are interested in better understanding. The language embedded within these assemblages also tells a story. Take, for example, a conversation between two people in which one states they need to ‘clean up the streets,’ in response to a growing homeless population. Such language embeds the ‘story’ of homelessness as a condition of cleanliness, one that positions the homeless individual as ‘dirty,’ ‘out of place,’ and ‘not belonging.’ While caution is warranted in the discretionary expansion of language into these stories, I argue it is not substantially more than what we set out to do with stories in the first place. Perhaps, then, these stories and the investigation of language within hold great potential for investigating the construction of the assemblative body.

Fortunately, there are already frameworks in existence that we can leverage to help orient ourselves when setting out to examine language and story within our world, primarily embedded in the processes of critical discourse and narrative analysis. To orient the methodological approach, I have drawn on Alvesson & Kärreman (2000), Van Dijk (2015), and Smith & Monforte (2000) to conduct a form of critical discourse analysis that borrows from a reimagined form of narrative analysis. While discourse analysis lacks a universally accepted definition and a

standardized approach (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Van Dijk, 2015), several key tenets guide the process for understanding the assemblative homeless body. First, this idea of ‘discourse’ is often separated into two distinct categories, signified by the capitalization of the ‘d’: ‘d’iscourse and ‘D’iscourse. ‘Little d’ discourse focuses primarily on speech and text as it is put into action. This often occurs at the level of the individual and is context-specific (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Conversely, Discourse attempts to encapsulate social reality as a whole, focusing on “the stuff beyond the text functioning as a powerful order force” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, p. 1127). We will adapt these understandings to fit the study of the assemblage. For our project, Discourse will be associated with the study of the assemblages, and discourse will stand as representative of its constituent parts, specifically in this case, story and language being put into action to express the identity embodied within the assemblage.

As we have already come to terms with, alongside story, one of our primary focuses becomes on language; how and why it is used, and what its use signifies or represents. This is why discourse analysis becomes a valuable focus point for the project. As explained by Alvesson & Kärreman (2000, p. 1127-8), “language, put together as discourse, arranges and naturalizes the social world in a specific way and thus informs social practices.” This means that through the language used within a given conversation, we can begin drawing representations of how, in the case of our research, homeless individuals are perceived and constituted within legislative and administrative discussions. Further potential lies in the more ‘critical’ forms of discourse analysis which refines the process, encouraging a shift from simply *describing* discourse, to *explaining* discourse in the context of social interactions, specifically focusing on the ways these discursive structures “enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge” the power structures within our

society (Van Dijk, 2020, p. 467). More specifically, we are interested in the ways discourse, both defines and is defined by the function of ‘social work.’

The above only takes into consideration language, and an equally important piece of the methodology lies within the examination of story, which is why, as mentioned, it also borrows aspects of a revised take on narrative analysis presented by Smith & Monforte (2000). The pair grounds this approach very similarly to what we have already discussed about discourse through the recognition that we, through natural human function, utilize narrative, and by extension, story, to make meaning of the world around us, and define our sense of self. In some sense, there are many direct parallels to be made between this idea of ‘narrative’ and what we have established so far about the assemblage; as such, narrative, within our methodology, will be representative of Discourse. With this definition in place, we can examine how to utilize aspects of narrative that hold potential in helping us better understand and grapple with the discourses embedded in the given conversation being analyzed. The pair suggest that ‘story’ is built through a framing embedded in narrative, which is fundamentally defined by their socio-cultural existence. Beyond this, narratives, similarly to the assemblage, become a standalone actor capable of “shap[ing] the beliefs, feelings, and actions of those who are caught up in them” (Smith & Monforte, 2000, p. 2). At its core, this methodology becomes a process of contextualizing, examining, and analyzing the stories and language used within a given discussion or piece of policy. While seemingly simplistic, these two facets of our knowledge systems stand as nearly entirely constitutive of how these assemblages we are interested in form, and, as such, are our primary focusing points as we put this methodology into action.

Grappling With Limitations and Building an Epistemological Framework to Navigate Them

While the utilization of this methodology provides promise for us to begin piecing together and grappling with some of the constituent parts of the assemblative body embedded within a piece of policy, it does not come without its limitations. The remainder of this chapter sets out to understand these limitations and create a set of epistemological commitments congruent with navigating them in a manner which does not compromise the primary goal of our research. I separate these limitations into three primary categories: 1) that we are all implicated in the assemblage, 2) our inability to make the assemblage known and 3) that the assemblage is endless.

We are all ‘Implicated’ in the Assemblage

The first, and arguably most significant limitation of this methodology, is its reliance on the researcher’s ability to make discretionary and interpretive decisions about the patterns and ideas embedded in the parts of our social world that are being analyzed. This is a general recognition held by those who have put these methodologies into action in the past. It is problematic because any findings inherently become an extension of the researchers’ knowledge systems, rather than a standalone representation of our social world. While there is, to my knowledge, no way of disconnecting from these limitations, I encourage us to find the strength within this limitation, envisioning the potential for deeper understandings, beyond our habitual categorization, when we focus on the edges of these assemblages: the seams, ruptures, moments

of friction across time which exist at the fringes of our knowledge systems and allow us to better understand assemblages.

As such, this commitment stands as an encouragement to make use of our implication; to write from *within* these assemblages instead of about them. Rather than attempt to be unbiased and objective, the findings of such projects *must* operate from a position that recognizes the partiality and bias of any findings presented as they move through the ontological and epistemological registers of the researcher. This becomes one of the strengths of the research, rather than something which illegitimizes its findings. After coming to terms with and accepting the researcher present within these systems and ideas, it is possible to focus less on navigating the barriers embedded within these processes and to attend to these seams, ruptures and moments of friction which exist at the edges of our current knowledge systems.

A Resistance to ‘Making Known’

The next logical step within this set of commitments is to grapple with the limitations inherent to the assemblage itself. There are two, in particular, which I see as substantially limiting the findings we will generate. First, as the assemblage is constituted by significantly more than story and language, the methodology will only reveal one ‘part’ of the assemblage. This means that their relational connection to other, uncovered parts of the assemblage is being left out, potentially obscuring their positioning within the assemblage. While these discovered pieces can still be utilized, it is essential to note that such findings cannot be presented on their own; instead, they must be used as a tool for further discovery and exploration. To extend this further, researchers also must come to terms with the reality that, by nature of studying an

assemblage, any findings will rapidly become dated and irrelevant. These bodies are constantly shifting, losing and adding contextual, discursive, historical, technological, and physical elements and more. My hope for the findings moves away from depicting a representation of the individual embodying the assemblage to inscribing a legible representation of the assemblage itself, which assists in orienting around analyzing the existence of those who embody it within our broader support systems.

The second commitment is as follows: any research utilizing this methodology *must* resist the urge to ‘fix’ or ‘make known’ the assemblage as a static object or physical being. This methodology is disinterested in participating in the institutional impulse to categorize the world in ways that make it easy to interpret and fit into existing knowledge systems. Instead, it comes to terms with the illegibility inherent to the study of assemblages, recognizing this ambiguity as a condition to be honoured, rather than a problem to be solved. This moves into the third commitment: to accept that whenever this methodology is put into use, any knowledge generated will be partial, situated, and produced through specific interactions among discursive, technological, and historical contexts. As such, the primary goal here is not to ‘discover’ truth, but to trace how specific ideas accepted as truths become possible, legible, and actionable. Beyond this, asking and learning about the implications for our social world when these ‘truths’ are relied upon to guide our policy development and program design operations.

There is no ‘End’ to Studying Assemblages

The final commitment, existing as a further extension of these principles, is that there is no definitive ‘end’ to studying and analyzing the assemblage. By nature of the assemblages’ fluid

properties, resulting in their constitution and relational connection constantly shifting, there will never be an ‘end’ to any project which sets out to examine them. This can be one of the most challenging and frustrating barriers to navigate, especially within Western knowledge development institutions, which prioritize efficient and timely knowledge creation and dissemination. This can be one of the most challenging parts of utilizing such a methodology for the researcher who, in these contexts, will likely never feel an adequate sense of ‘completion,’ in the traditional sense they have been conditioned to expect from research projects. Instead, they are forced by these institutional constraints to create knowledge and ‘find meaning’ in the work they are doing.

While I can advocate for changes to our educational institutions and those that focus on knowledge production, such a change will likely not occur quickly enough to eliminate the limitations that continue to affect these projects. Instead, I present the final epistemological commitment: To present the findings of the methodology in ways that allow the research to ‘remain engaged’ with the assemblage, but that avoid, in any way possible, pushing the research into spaces of simplification or generalization. In the context of studying the assemblative body, this is a call for researchers to come to terms with the pieces of the assemblage they uncover and their own implication within them. Then, rather than creating generalized understandings to act upon – a process which stands to institutionally re-inscribe and legitimize a standardized body – utilize these fragments to better understand *why* specific policy or programming decisions have been made, and how the existence of the assemblative body stands to see such decisions repeat themselves in the future.

CHAPTER 5 – METHOD AND ESTABLISHING POLICY SOURCES

At this point, two necessary conceptions have been established. First, that through various historical, discursive, and contextual arrangements, ‘social work’ has developed as a technology of power capable of extending the capacity of the state into the private lives of the members of our society. Second, the assemblative body is a foundational aspect of such a technology, formulated through an assemblage of related historical, contextual, and ideological registers, which, at various points in time, become visible as representations of how social work perceives and organizes around a specific population. Chapter 5 takes the first steps to bridging the gap between these two ideas by utilizing the theoretical and epistemic approach developed in Chapter 3 and the methodological discourse analysis of assemblages outlined in Chapter 4. The chapter outlines the processes and data sources for a comparative policy analysis aimed at constructing a point-in-time representation of the assemblative body as it takes shape, both within the initial framings of homelessness through early Vagrancy Acts and within Hamilton’s contemporary contexts through the rescinded Encampment Protocol. Due to the difference in levels of accessibility of these documents, namely being unable to access the bulk of these original Vagrancy Act documents outside of localized contexts within Britain, the two pieces of policy I am setting out to explore will be analyzed in differing ways, but will still be nuanced in a manner which is conducive to comparing the contents of each.

First, the Encampment Protocol will be examined through the protocol itself, alongside the August 14th, 2024, Hamilton City Council General Issues Committee (GIC) meeting through which the Encampment Protocol was ultimately instituted into city policy. Within the discussions of this GIC meeting, several conversations, debates, and community consultations converge, which paint a broader picture of how homelessness is conceptualized and addressed within

Hamilton. From this meeting, alongside the Encampment Protocol itself, I have compiled and analyzed 14 pieces of correspondence, ~1.5 hours of delegation from 12 constituents, along with an additional 2.5 hours of deliberation between councillors who sought to amend the Encampment Protocol in various ways before it was ready for implementation. These resources consist of anything from letters from ‘concerned citizens’ to reports from city-organized teams which engaged in large-scale community consultations, from members of the Hamilton community both for and against the institution of the protocol. All of which are collectively constitutive of the assemblative body around which this policy was shaped.

The Vagrancy Acts, on the other hand, will be examined through secondary sources of literature from five authors who have studied the Vagrancy Acts for varying purposes across different periods (Chambliss, 1964; Adler, 1989; Rogers, 1991; Ocobock, 2008; Lawrence, 2017). The Vagrancy Acts, as a set of policies, were selected for two primary reasons: first, due to the nature of ‘vagrancy’ being a historicized label for homelessness, and second, due to its institution across the 17th to 19th century alongside the initial ‘explosion’ of social work’s development that was established in Chapter 2. As secondary sources exist through registers of personal interpretation and societal and discursive contexts, the goal in identifying these secondary sources of literature was to minimize the bias of a single take or perspective. As such, these sources were selected across a span of ~50 years, from scholars with specializations in fields spanning the social sciences, including criminology, sociology, and historiography.

Both sets of policy will be read to analyze for stories, language and ideas, which, through my interpretation, come to represent how these policies and discussions constitute the assemblative homeless body as it exists within these contexts. Conducting the analysis in this way enables the findings to put these representations in conversation with one another, providing

a glimpse into how homelessness has historically been conceptualized and how that understanding continues to exist, or not, within our contemporary contexts. By following this process, the findings presented will contextualize the primary focus of this research: understanding how these ‘assemblative bodies,’ in tandem with the function of social work, come to define our contemporary approaches to ‘care,’ which remain fundamentally disconnected from the real needs within our communities.

Framing the Analysis Through the Sources of Data: What were the Vagrancy Acts and the Encampment Protocol?

The Vagrancy Acts

The policing of vagrancy and ‘vagabonds’ has been present in Western society for quite some time before the period we are examining, with general agreement being held that the initial statutes addressing vagrancy were enacted in 1349 in England amid the chaos being caused by the bubonic plague (Chambliss, 1964; Alder, 1989). To remain more focused in our analysis, we will specifically investigate the existence of vagrancy laws around the same time period in which social work experienced its first major expansion in development – that is, across the 17th-19th centuries. Vagrancy laws in these contexts were born out of concern for a growing population of impoverished individuals who, upset with the conditions they found themselves in, were causing an uproar through riots and protests (Adler, 1989). During this period of interest, legislation such as the Vagabond Act of 1713 and the Vagrancy Acts of 1740 and 1744 laid the groundwork for the taxonomies and criminalization of vagrancy that were continually relied upon throughout the next couple of centuries (Rogers, 1991; Ocobock, 2008).

Original conceptions of this ‘vagrant’ figure were explicitly related to those without employment, but, over time, vagrancy came to include criminals and those viewed as deviant alongside those who were impoverished (Adler, 1989; Rogers, 1991; Ocobock, 2008). This expansion of who is considered a vagrant continued in various policy amendments over the following centuries, eventually coming to represent a “heterogeneous group of people: ‘disorderly parishioners, ne’er-do-wells, as well as itinerants... a catch-all category for social undesirables, facilitating a policing of the poor” especially as it related to any perceived threat to social and economic stability (Rogers, 1991, p. 131; Adler, 1989; Ocobock, 2008). Across this same period, for example, we witnessed the label of ‘vagrant’ used to target and apprehend populations ranging from “beggars” and “philanders” to women, “abolitionists” and “homosexuals” (Adler, 1989, p. 209; Rogers, 1991; Ocobock, 2008). Later critics of these policies, such as William Chambliss (1964), suggested that this floating definition of vagrancy was utilized in ways to punish and criminalize specific populations who were seen as a threat to the socio-economic interests of colonial enterprise and the ruling or ‘dominant’ class – one which we have previously defined as represented by the “white, educated, heterosexual, bourgeois male” (Hyslop, 2012, p. 407). In other words, as the needs of these colonial projects changed, so too did the definitions of vagrancy that were represented within these pieces of legislation (Adler, 1989).

Beyond categorizing what vagrancy was, the Vagrancy Acts developed across the 17th-19th centuries also set judicial punishments for those identified as vagrants, with sentences ranging anywhere from a month to multiple years imprisonment with forced labour and corporeal punishment (Rogers, 1991; Ocobock, 2008). The community became included in this process, being rewarded financially for apprehending and reporting vagrants within their

communities, some individuals even making a living as ‘vagrant hunters’ (Rogers, 1991).

Beyond punishing those seen engaging in such acts to be defined as a vagrant, legislation in the 17th century, primarily by way of the 1824 Vagrancy Act, laid out the provisions for *preventative* policing of vagrancy, more specifically, the ability to convict an individual accused of vagrancy based on suspicion alone (Lawrence, 2017). In sum, across these centuries, these vagrancy acts, tasked initially with punishing and rehabilitating those who chose to be unemployed or not participate in the economic system, expanded to include numerous, fluid categories of ‘vagrancy’ as well as directives which allowed for community policing and preventative policing of vagrancy.

The Encampment Protocol

The Encampment Protocol, on the other hand, was introduced in Hamilton, Ontario, in August of 2023. Its purpose was to set out guidelines for encampments on public lands and centralize a support system to service the sites. Decision-making around the protocol was made to be as community-oriented as possible; there were several town halls in which the community could voice their opinion on the matter, as well as by submitting feedback through an online portal, and local organizations hosted private consultations with individuals experiencing homelessness and living in encampments (General Issues Committee, 2023, p. 3). What was born from these consultations was, as the city describes, a “human-centred, housing-first, health-focused, rights-based” approach that fundamentally recognizes and prioritizes housing as a human right (City of Hamilton, 2023a). The city, along with many critics in the community, stated plainly that this was an unacceptable solution in the long term, but with the recognition that encampments would exist in the city regardless of intervention, the city saw this as an

opportunity to enhance the capacity to provide meaningful intermediary support while working on improving access to affordable housing (City of Hamilton, 2023a)

The protocol itself, according to the city (City of Hamilton, 2023b), set out to achieve four priorities: 1) regulate the presence of encampments in the city; 2) find a balance between city parks being ‘overrun’ by encampments, and being open “for recreational purposes”; 3) to “create stability of location” for those living in encampments; and 4) to foster meaningful connection-making between those living in encampments and social support programs while also improving health outcomes. We see this done within the protocol through two types of provisions. First, guidelines about where and how encampments may exist on public lands. There are 17 specific provisions relating to space and place, but generally include items such as not being within 100 metres of a school or daycare, 50 metres of any body of water or sports field, and within 10 metres of any private property, as well as other safety measures such as not blocking fire exits or accessibility ramps (City of Hamilton 2023a).

The other set of provisions outlines the establishment of a Coordinated Response Team led by the city-run Housing Focused Street Outreach, which replaces bylaw officers as the primary responder to concerns relating to encampments. The role of this team was to monitor individuals living in encampments and conduct standardized care planning through screening, connecting individuals with community supports and providing immediate health care interventions such as wound care. They are also responsible for working alongside encampment residents to relocate and disassemble encampments when they are found to be infringing on the terms set out within the protocol (City of Hamilton, 2023a). As the team monitored the presence of encampments in the city, they were also responsible for generating publicly available weekly reports of their interactions with those in encampments and reporting the current location of all

known encampments which have been reported or investigated for being in non-compliance with the protocol (City of Hamilton, 2025d).

Effective March 6th, 2025, the encampment protocol was officially rescinded, and enforcement of encampments now reverts to bylaw enforcement in accordance with Parks bylaw 01-219 (City of Hamilton, 2025e). While it is no longer Hamilton's guiding framework for encampments, the two years it was active provided substantial insight into how our municipal government perceived and sought to regulate the lives and bodies of individuals experiencing homelessness. The protocol was crafted into policy through discussions within the General Issues Committee (GIC) of the City Council. These conversations provide insight into the language and perceptions of homelessness, which appear to be less prevalent within the protocol itself. It is through these discussions that I frame the forthcoming research.

CHAPTER 6 – FINDINGS

Stories from the Assemblage

The presentation of these findings centres around the telling of a discursive story, which takes shape through the ideas, language and collective stories present within the GIC meeting, the Encampment Protocol in conversation with the Vagrancy Acts as they exist across the 17th to 19th centuries. Such a story becomes representative, at least in part, of those constituent parts of the assemblative body we are attempting to examine. Before I begin, please note the following: First, as we consistently return to, there is no way to 'objectively' identify the existence of discourse. As such, what I present within this section is an *interpretation*, made within the limitations of my knowledge systems, of the assemblative body as it is represented in the

relevant documents, discussions, and debates which took place. This limitation also suggests that this is not an exhaustive list of the discourses that were acted out within the stories and language contained within these discussions. Lastly, while all of the conversations within the council meeting remain publicly available, anyone involved in these discussions will be referred to through their initials and, if they are a member of council, include their title. In its entirety, the discursive story discerned through this analysis plays out as follows:

Homeless individuals are affected on a large scale by mental illness and addiction. They regularly deny any form of support and become 'leeches' on system resources, taking away from those more deserving. These realities create individuals who are inherently dangerous and who engage in criminal activities to make money to sustain this corruption. In this process, they become itinerant, travelling from place to place, to be where the drugs and food are, and leave garbage, human waste, and drug paraphernalia such as needles every time they relocate. Any community which has homeless individuals within it becomes inherently impure; property values go down, one's safety is diminished, crime rates rise, and public spaces, designated for tax-paying citizens, are lost. This has a far-reaching impact across the entirety of a community, substantially affecting the potential for economic and social development and growth for businesses and prospective residents.

This discursive story above is not a telling of what is true or false. Instead, it is a perceived representation of the 'homeless individual' as represented in the city council meeting and Vagrancy Act documents which were examined. Such a body was formed through the contributions of those who participated in these debates and became the medium through which we interpret the purported 'need' within the community to respond to. This body becomes the

basis of our policy and program development, fundamentally underlining the existence of ‘the encampment resident’ in the Encampment Protocol. The remainder of this chapter breaks this story down into parts, outlining the conversations and arguments which gave each piece of this story life.

Examining the Assemblative Story as a Sum of Its Parts

Segment 1

The first segment of the discursive story to be explored is as follows:

“Homeless individuals are affected on a large scale by mental illness and addiction. They regularly deny any form of support and become ‘leeches’ on system resources, taking away from those more deserving.”

Most of those who presented to council began their presentation or correspondence with the caveat or recognition that virtually all of those who live in encampments possess mental ‘illness’ or struggle with substance abuse. This was often an earmark early in their statements, such as the one present in A.R.’s correspondence, who stated:

“We understand that many factors have led to an increase in encampments including a lack of affordable housing, mental health, substance-abuse, etc.”

In fact, some who delegated suggested that these two factors and other personal deficiencies are the explanation for virtually all of the homelessness we see in Hamilton. Take, for example, delegate M.M., a retired social worker, who argued we could categorize why homeless individuals choose to come or remain in Hamilton by dividing them into two categories: 1) to

access increased supports, or 2) to be closer to the drug supply. Both reasons presented suggest that the primary influence for homelessness within Hamilton is that they can access support for some personal deficiency or their substance of choice.

Chalking up homelessness to be trademarked by some form of personal deficiency became the core target for many who debated variations in our response to the social condition within Hamilton. This includes city councillors such as B.C., who suggested that focusing on housing upfront has diminished value since those living in encampments *prefer* to live outside due to their mental illness and addiction.

“What we have been hearing from housing providers is that some of the individuals who are now living in tents, and we have heard from folks living in tents. They prefer to live in tents because they get thrown out of their housing. That their drug addiction, their mental illness has become an issue that, without support, they cannot function in that housing unit.” Councillor B.C.

Beyond informing how we respond to homelessness, these perceived personal deficiencies were also utilized as explanations for increased instances of violence against the public and a decrease in safety at large for the community. This can be seen in numerous delegations and correspondence, including one from business owners M.A. and T.T., who explain how their staff have “experienced acts of violence and harassment, who are intoxicated and/or experiencing mental health issues at an alarming rate and do not feel safe walking through our own parking lots after dark.”

While, as will remain through the presentation of these findings, this is not the space to provide comment on the validity of these claims, what we can discern is that our positioning and

framing of these discursive stories pertaining to the ‘homeless’ and, in a larger sense, vagrancy, has remained virtually unchanged since *at least* the 17th century. Vagrancy, which at its origins focused on the “idle and disorderly,” and those “refus[ing] to work for the usual or common wages,” was often directly associated with criminality and mental illness (Rogers, 1991, p. 131; Adler, 1989; Ocobock, 2008). For long periods of time, similar to our present contexts, these individuals embodied this ‘leech’ persona, through which an individual existing as a vagrant was viewed as living on the backs of those who participated in the economic facets of society. Take, for example, this quote from Rogers (1991) who explains how “the spectre of men and women refusing to work, choosing rather to eke out a casual living, was intolerable to a society that placed so much emphasis upon the morality of work and an ordered, disciplined commonwealth whose members could live on their own” (p. 127-8). We have and continue to prioritize the members of our society who hold this ‘moral superiority’ if they maintain their membership within this ‘disciplined commonwealth,’ and pathologize non-participation as some form of individual deficiency – for example, criminality, mental illness or addiction. These definitions extend into the next segment of the discursive story which has been uncovered.

Segment 2

“These realities create individuals who are inherently dangerous and who engage in criminal activities to make money to sustain this corruption. In this process, they become itinerant, travelling from place to place, to be where the drugs and food are, and leave garbage, human waste, and drug paraphernalia such as needles every time they relocate.”

After establishing that there is something inherently wrong with those living in encampments, the next piece of the discursive story begins to detail the impacts of the Encampment on the individual who must interact with them. Most of these discussions focused on violence, unruly behaviour and cleanliness. Take, for example, J.W., who brought forward the following:

“There are far better locations [for a tiny shelter community] which do NOT threaten the peace and safety and sanitation of resident homeowners – for the ‘temporary’ accommodation of the unfortunate individuals concerned.”

These discussions set the stage to embed homeless individuals as inherently dangerous and those ‘contributing’ members of society as being victimized by those living in encampments. Several of those who presented made especially clear how children would be / are affected by encampments, exemplified by both C.K. and L.M., who both stated the following:

“I almost walked myself and my two daughters right into an encampment. I did not feel safe or comfortable as a woman with two young children getting out of my car and entering our building, which has always been a safe space.” C.K.

“As a parent, I do not feel safe letting my child play in this area – which used to be filled with kids playing and is now filled with garbage that is left behind by encampments.”

L.M.

Such concerns were also taken up and argued for by city councillors, such as E.P., who claimed that she had hundreds of letters from her constituents who had voiced similar complaints. Part of our response and framing of how to effectively integrate, or simply as an excuse not to permit, the Encampment Protocol was around these presented threats to community safety, civility and cleanliness.

If we hark back to how these themes were present within the early Vagrancy Acts, it becomes clear that our framings around these features of ‘the vagrant’ express clear parallels to how we continue to conceptualize ‘the homeless person’ in our contemporary contexts. Much of the initial representation we see of ‘the vagrant’ as described through the various committees and Poor Law Commission working on these laws across the early 1800s stands to “highlight the abuses of law and the moral turpitude of the vagrant” (Rogers, 1991, p. 129). As we discussed, beyond presenting the vagrant as the antithesis of a productive, structured community, this conceptualization became a catch-all for categorizing and ‘unideal’ traits present within society (Rogers, 1991; Adler, 1989; Ocobock, 2008). Homelessness seems to be an ‘evolution’ of vagrancy – if you could argue it has evolved at all – as these ‘undesirable’ traits become embedded within our representations of ‘the homeless.’ These traits, rather than being descriptive of the population, become *prescriptive* of the population, encouraging a pre-defined set of behaviour expectations and moral interpretations of the individual who becomes embedded within these social conditions. As we have come to normalize the methods of preventative policing within our modern policing structures, which originated within the 1800s Vagrancy Acts, we continue to witness the ‘pre-policing’ of encampments (Lawrence, 2017); individuals are given this prescriptive understanding of an encampment, regardless of whether they have interacted with one or not, and decide that we must prevent these ‘undesirable’ acts from occurring within their communities. It is at this point that we reach the third segment of this discursive story.

Segment 3

“Any community which has homeless individuals within it becomes inherently impure; property values go down, one’s safety is diminished, crime rates rise, and public spaces, designated for tax-paying citizens, are lost.”

After those who presented spoke about the impact homelessness and the presence of encampments had on the individuals within a community, the next target focused on the impact on the community as a whole. The comments relating to the third segment of the story often combined the notions embedded within the first and second segments to get their point across. Take, for example, L.M., who stated:

“The people who live in this area, paid property taxes, and have invested financially in this area did not do so believing that there would be an encampment of this sort out their front door... The reality is that these encampments bring property values down, lower the security and safety of their residents.”

We observe both the pre-policing of the impacts that the presence of an encampment brings to a community and the ascription of personal deficiencies, which result in larger impacts to individuals and their communities, as seen in statements like the one from L.M. This argument was expressed beyond privately owned spaces – such as homes – to those spaces owned and operated by the city which members of the public have access to, such as baseball diamonds. C.K., the chair of a local softball league, explained the following about the impact on their league:

“My child has been traumatized in a place where she should be able to feel safe, secure, and happy. I no longer feel safe as a woman to go to the little league on my own to

complete any of my duties as secretary... and I am not comfortable with my children, or anyone else's children being in that area."

It is in this segment of the story that we really begin seeing the contemporary implications of how vagrancy was framed in the past. Vagrancy laws, unlike those typically developed, which police specific actions, police a "personal condition, [a] state of being, and social and economic status" (Ocobock, 2008, p. 1). These laws, initially setting out how the state would take responsibility for vagrancy and the poor, have slowly evolved into a medium through which it becomes possible to "control the movement and behaviour of the poor" (Ocobock, 2008, p. 8; Chambliss, 1964; Adler, 1989; Rogers, 1991). This is precisely what we see occurring within these contexts: individuals within these communities internalize both the ascription of personal deficiencies and the threat to the individual, born within the moral and ideological ideals which have been present since before the 17th century, and utilize them as means to dehumanize and excommunicate those who experience homelessness and/or live in encampments.

There are repeated ideas that those non-contributing or 'leeches' on the system do not belong within communities consisting of those who represent the productive population of the commonwealth (Ocobock, 2008). They are painted as criminal and violent, and, as such, are represented as the antithesis of what you would view as a 'neighbour' (Adler, 1989; Rogers, 1991; Ocobock, 2008). As such, in almost every sense, their 'membership' to exist within the community is revoked; in other words, they do not belong to any given place and are seen as intruding regardless of where they find themselves. It is widely acknowledged that many in the community believe these individuals must find spaces for improvement; however, such a process should not occur anywhere near them. L.M. speaks to such a perspective:

“The city continues to prioritize the members of the community who are non-contributing, rather than those who are fighting to add business, income, value, safety, and beauty to their city. I do believe we need to help people so they are no longer on the streets! I do not believe that has to come at the detriment of everyone else.”

This echoes many of the processes we see throughout the 17th century and beyond, whereby individuals were sent to workhouses, prisons, asylums and other similar institutions (Adler, 1989; Ocobock, 2008), to be rehabilitated away from those who remained ‘uncorrupted’ by their ways. It was regularly argued that even the mere existence of vagrants and itinerants inhibited the potential and threatened socio-economic development (Chambliss, 1964; Adler, 1989; Ocobock, 2008). Such arguments lay at the foundation of the final segment of our discursive story.

Segment 4

“This has reaching effects across the entirety of the city, substantially impacting the potential for economic and social development and growth for businesses and prospective residents.”

The focus in the final segment of this discursive story extends everything established so far and focuses on the broader impacts on socio-economic development. Especially from local businesses, we see repeated attempts to express how impactful the presence of encampments would be on socio-economic development within Hamilton. Business owners M.A. & T.T., and S.B., an executive director of a Business Improvement Area (BIA), expressed the following concerns:

“As you can see our businesses are struggling to cope with the ongoing challenges that our BIA now faces on a daily basis. These issues of safety and cleanliness are a constant concern that is negatively affecting their customers and staff.” S.B.

“Simply put, our customers and staff do not feel safe anymore and this is not good for the business or the community @ [sic] large for that matter.” M.A. & T.T.

M.A. & T.T., in their correspondence, also spoke about the impact of “aggressive panhandling” on the customers who access their business. Other members of the community echoed many of these concerns, continuing to expand upon how the presence of encampments fundamentally alters the direction of social and economic development. J.W., for example, speaks about the impact regular citizens will face if a tiny shelter were permitted on a space within their neighbourhood:

“Secondly, the city currently sponsors events which rely on that specific space for tax-paying resident families and friends to gather, to park and/or congregate... all of which attract families and children who will NO longer participate if unhomed, marginalized and itinerant peoples are living there.”

Perspectives such as those shared by community business owners and concerned members of the community make us think critically about the vested economic interests which intersect with the space and place of those experiencing homelessness. Such a topic, as previously discussed, was a central tenet of the original Vagrancy Laws. Thinking back to our analysis, one notable feature of vagrancy laws in relation to these vested interests was around how, when entering the 17th century, the responsibility for apprehending and reporting vagrancy was shifted, in part, to the community alongside the development of a rewards system for those who participated (Rogers,

1991; Ocobock, 2008). These changes led the way for the development of professions whose sole responsibility became to surveil, report and apprehend vagrants (Ocobock, 2008). We already see remnants of such forms of ‘community surveillance’ baked into the Encampment Protocol itself; the community is a part of the enforcement team, responsible for reporting the presence of Encampments potentially in breach of the permitability conditions for the city to monitor and include in their weekly reporting program (City of Hamilton, 2025f). If one piece of our approach, being rooted in the creation of revenue, remains to this day, we must question how the other components of such a framing continue to influence how we design social policy and social programming.

As discussed earlier, the influence of vested economic interests and interest in a particular path of social development are at the root of how William Chambliss (1964) believes these vagrancy acts were shaped. These laws were designed to be discretionarily interpreted in ways conducive to protecting the desired pathway of social, economic and moral development held by the ‘ruling’ or ‘dominant’ class. As an extension of this, social work, as has been argued and proven throughout this work, is a technology *created by* this ruling class to maintain similar ideals to what Chambliss argues is present within the Vagrancy Laws. Social work, within these contexts, also gains the capacity to interpret and position homelessness and vagrancy in ways that benefit its growth and potential. If we investigate this as more than a coincidence, is it not within the best financial interests of the organizations which provide support to our community to provide enough support that conditions improve, and individuals are less costly to serve, but also not enough that they remain reliant on accessing services to pave the way for future funding opportunities? What if we consider that a vast majority of our funding for housing cycles through the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, which, as an arm of the state, has a vested

interest in strengthening the housing market? Social work and our social policy processes are undeniably deeply implicated in the processes in place that aim to keep the development of a society on a particular trajectory.

Beyond these organizations, how can we understand Chambliss' arguments in the context of the vested interest of those who presented to council? With the caveat that not *all* who presented shared the same viewpoint, a vast majority of those who gave delegations or correspondence to council on the matter shared experiences and beliefs which solidified this discursive story as we have outlined throughout this chapter. The 'homeless individual' or 'encampment resident' was presented as the antithesis to what community is about, representing the evils of the modern world, and as having substantial impacts on the feasibility of future business expansion, the enjoyment of present constituents or the growth of people moving into the city.

This concludes the exploration of these two 'point-in-time' representations of the assemblative homeless body. While, as has previously been cautioned, neither of these is wholly constitutive of the assemblative homeless body and, as such, not a representative of a 'truth' which represents those who experience homelessness. What they highlight is how, through policy development processes, a specific framing of homelessness has been developed and acted upon. They show us how our framing of homelessness, and, by extension, how we organize ourselves to respond to it, have remained largely consistent since *at least* the 17th century. The next chapter will pull everything we have learned so far together and attempt to unpack what that means in the context of our original concerns posited at the beginning of this project.

CHAPTER 7 – DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Presenting the Findings in Their Entirety

This project began out of a growing concern rooted both in the rapidly rising number of individuals experiencing homelessness and an apparent disconnect between the conceptualization of need as has been constructed *within* social work, in contrast to the needs held by those attempting to access social support services. Through these concerns, the research set out to answer the question: what potential lies within the ‘assemblative body,’ and its inter-connection with ‘social work,’ as it exists as a technology of power, and what can it teach us about how social workers choose to organize ourselves and our approaches to care around social issues within our communities?

The analysis relating to this question began in Chapter 2, whereby, led by the first ‘step’ in the Assemblative Process – Confluence – the research began with a critical, genealogical exploration of social work’s history, from the Enlightenment to the present, paying specific attention to its development into a technology of power exertion and control. The chapter, in sum, established social work’s presence and corroboration with various projects of colonial and epistemic violence, underlined by idealized notions of rationality, moral saviourism, and the superiority of the Western mind, all of which fundamentally underline, define, and shape the development of social work and its knowledge systems. Social work developed, within these contexts, to fill a growing need for an apparatus which could internalize these value systems, and act upon them beyond the traditional reaches of the state – that is, outside of public spaces into the private lives and domiciles of those within a given community. Beyond these modes of development, it was argued that social work utilizes standardized bodies, later referred to as

‘assemblative bodies,’ based within these knowledge structures, as a guiding force upon which the practice organizes itself and responds to social problems.

Laying out the groundwork to better understand these assemblative bodies, Chapter 3 presented the ‘Assemblative Process,’ and expanded upon traditional understandings of the body within social contexts, to nuance the complexity embedded within assemblages and the assemblative body. Such a theoretical and epistemic framework, provided the foundation for shifting the goal of this research from developing a clear, objective answer to the research question, to creating definitions capable of remaining fluid, and, in part, begin to capture the subjective realities within our social world, which are constitutive of the assemblage at the centre of our research focus through the acts of noticing and being present with those moments of history which stand to define contemporary social work knowledge. Concluding this chapter, was an encouragement to allow the researcher to position themselves *within* the assemblage, rather than attempting to create separation and conduct research *on* the assemblage, in response to the core dilemma as it relates to understanding the role the assemblative body plays in defining the function of social work: that the assemblative body shapes social work’s orientation, and social work’s orientation shapes the assemblative body.

The understandings embedded within the presentation of the Assemblative Process were then utilized in Chapter 4 to piece together a methodology centred around unpacking and understanding the constitution of the assemblative body, as it exists within varying contexts. Born as a hybridization of critical discourse and narrative analyses, the methodology set out to examine the language and story embedded within a given text or set of policies, which stands to constitute the existence of the assemblative body. Chapter 5 then began the first step to putting this methodology to action, presenting the two sets of policy which the project examined: the

17th to 19th century Vagrancy Acts, and Hamilton, Ontario's Encampment Protocol. These two sets of policy were then examined and analyzed to decode the stories, language and ideas contained within, which, when considered together, were constitutive of the assemblative body contained within.

Chapter 6 then worked to present these findings through the presentation of a 'discursive story' which highlighted the centralized site of understanding which became prevalent within these two sets of policy. The story laid out the representation of a 'homeless person' who was basked in personal deficiency and was inherently a detriment to the community at large, negatively impacting both those living within a given community, and its potential for future socio-economic development. A story which has remained consistent over the few centuries between the two policy documents. This story was recognized as a subjective, 'point-in-time' representation of the assemblative body, which was not representative of a certain 'truth,' but, instead, as highlighting the standardized body which is born through and policed within these policy documents.

This final chapter takes place as a 'diffractive' analysis, enabling us to translate the efforts thus far and examine the impact of these discoveries on the policy structures and methods of organization which orient social service delivery. It translates the abstract ideas being grappled with throughout this paper into actionable steps social workers and social service organizations can take to begin integrating these findings into their daily practice.

Making Sense of Our Analyses & Findings: Future Implications

The research question originally conceptualized the problematic aspects of the social work profession to be rooted in its approaches. The findings, however, tend to suggest that, rather than the *approaches* being fundamentally flawed, they are, instead, misguided, because the *framings* upon which the practice relies are rooted in deep histories and participating in colonial and assimilative projects. Expanding the contents of the research, the ‘assemblative body’ becomes wholly representative of these framings, which, by nature of their existence, serve to guide the function of social work within modern society. It is through this understanding that, I argue, our present failings as a profession to adequately respond to and prevent homelessness is rooted; these framings have become the foundation of social work’s collective approaches to addressing homelessness, now manifesting in a plethora of systemic inadequacies and a clear disconnection between the needs possessed by those experiencing homelessness, and the needs the practice is organizing itself to respond to. This recognition, while seemingly simplistic, provides substantial potential as it comes to rethinking what the future of social work may look like. If it is in fact the framings relied upon by social work and is not the practice as a whole, nor its naturalized approaches to care, which are plagued by these histories, then perhaps there is more worth saving than is often touted within abolitionist perspectives, which call for the reconstruction of the practice from the ground up.

To begin re-evaluating where to place future advocacy and change-making efforts, it is important to first grapple with the place of these framings within program design and policy development across the realms social work interacts with. Social work operates within our social world, which is a profoundly interconnected and complex system of interaction which is constantly shifting and changing, meaning it is functionally impossible to accurately construct

categorical representations of need expanding beyond singular individuals. This is one of the central contradictions within the existence of social work; in order to decide how to orient itself, social work *must*, in one way or another, create these categorical representations. In other words, for social work to adequately fulfill its potential as a practice which can create large-scale positive change, it must engage in framing practices which, as has been established repeatedly in this paper, are rooted in deeply violent and assimilative colonial histories. Such a recognition is paralyzing – why should practitioners set out to do *anything* if one misstep holds the potential to cause such immense harm?

It is from this contradictory positioning that Amy Rossiter (2011) positions her framework of ‘unsettledness’ within social work; ‘unsettled’ social work, exists in recognition of “the impossibility of resolving the practice dilemma that the ‘violence’ of social work representations exists in inescapable tension with the need for justice that requires it” (Rossiter, 2011, p. 980). ‘Unsettledness’ is rooted in conceptions of ‘totality’ developed through the work of Emmanuel Levinas, encompassing a mode of thinking that argues through conceptualizing a given ‘thing’ and ‘making it known’ it is done through one’s systems of knowledge and morality, thus rather than ‘creating’ knowledge, these processes of naming, categorizing, and ‘making known’ creates an extension of these pre-existing knowledge and moral systems (Rossiter, 2011; Bellacasa, 2017). This is where the issues rise within the framing processes that have slowly become the target of critique: such a process sets out the guidelines for ‘knowing’ or ‘defining’ what a person is while simultaneously reinforcing a set of boundaries relating to the potential of that person. In other words, by utilizing these framings to define what a person, or group of people, *can be*, it simultaneously creates a definition of what they *cannot* be. As explained by Rossiter (2011), ‘critical social work’ responded to this central contradiction by taking up the

position that there is no ‘right’ way to teach or do social work. Her approach, on the other hand, through this conception of unsettledness is to “teach practice as a danger as well as an opportunity... [to] temper our teaching with caution about social work knowledge in order to manage social work on the razor’s edge of knowledge and inquiry” (Rossiter, 2011, p. 990), it is this, she argues that is ‘doing’ social work. Such a practice does not come easily, and she calls for a fundamental shift in our framing processes, one that shifts to *ethics before knowledge*.

It is through these recognitions that this idea of unsettledness serves as the final connecting piece within the ideological frameworks established throughout this paper. These ideas recognize social work’s existence at the ‘razor’s edge’ of knowledge and inquiry and shifting to *ethics before knowledge* becomes critical in navigating the integration of these findings into the daily lives of social workers. It allows social workers of the future to move past this paralyzing state of contradiction between the potential for care and violence, as they set out to create pathways for the development of policies and programming which leave space for the findings outlined in this research. Utilizing ‘unsettledness’ alongside the utility of the assemblage – that is, the process of ‘laying out’ and ‘putting together’ – allows for the development of a nuanced understanding of the intra-connection and relationality of the knowledge systems social work has come to rely upon. As was done within the analysis, there is potential to use these frameworks when thinking about how privileging a specific ‘framing’ of a recognized social issue both prioritizes and excludes the perspectives and actions of various actors with vested interests across our social world.

Taken together, the findings suggest that it is not the profession itself, which is flawed, but the ideological tools – that is, the framings, rooted within standardized ‘assemblative’ bodies – it utilizes to enact its power. While this does not allow for neglect in regularly monitoring the

development of social work, to ensure it is not aligning itself with projects of violence and assimilation, the assemblative body, through these registers of thought, allow for an expansion of cognizance in understanding social work's implication more broadly; our knowledge systems are constituted by these assemblages – relationally connected moments of history, interactions, ideological and moral development and more – and all these factors converge as we set out to develop new ways of thinking, framing, and learning. As social workers, it is not possible to separate oneself from the various facets of the practice, which exist in this way, but that does *not* mean we should see them as inevitabilities. While this project engaged in the confluent analysis and presented a point-in-time representation of the assemblative body, the final piece of the 'Assemblative Process', that of diffraction, is a continuous effort engaged in beyond the realms of this paper. Through practices such as diffraction, we hold the capacity to continually interrogate our framings of populations, not as separate from us, but as a part of us.

Questions Left Unanswered

These findings encourage me to think more broadly about how these framings and ideological tools affect social work on a larger scale. This includes their relation to questions which happen to fall outside the original scope of the project. In concluding this study, two questions remain for me, standing out as notably substantial to understanding how the findings of this project can be expanded across the whole of social work. The first of these two questions involves asking how the identities constituted and acted upon through these assemblative bodies interact with or define an individual's sense of self for those who are deemed to be represented by them. This project focused more on how these stories affect the processes and practices of social work, but equally important to these conversations in the long-term is understanding how

they construct the other side of our care systems; how do those we work alongside, and, in many cases, become the voices for, come to internalize or identify with these stories?

The second question relates to the integration of these findings into the practical work of social workers, examining how it is possible to create the time and space which is required to explore the implications these framing processes hold on the work social workers engage in. Social work continues to operate in contexts through which time is strictly governed and regulated, focusing on the social workers' ability to move individuals through these care systems, fundamentally hindering the capacity of these critical moments of practice that I call for (Hjarpe, 2022). If there is interest in taking up and integrating these findings into the processes which regulate the daily activities of social workers, and taking the time to grapple with the implications these framings hold over how the practice orients itself around a given population, there must be questions asked around how practitioners and organizations can effectively and meaningfully create space for these processes to occur.

Final Words

The positioning of the social worker is a powerful one; it holds a presence crafted within and through unspeakably violent and discriminatory histories, which is positioned to exist as both the strongest force of care *and* violence within our social world. What this means for social workers who set out to practice is that, whether they want to or not, they collectively become in control of defining and maintaining the assemblage(s) that are both constituted by, and constitutive of, the framings relied upon by the practice. I bring the reader's attention back to the original conception of 'social work' and social workers as borrowed from Leslie Margolin (1997)

and established in Chapter 1. That is, one that recognizes social work as not a ‘practice,’ but as an arrangement of ideas and histories not confined to one set of people or professions, and ‘social workers’ as those who engage in the ‘doing’ of social work by engaging with these arrangements. Within the context of this discussion, this definition suggests that it is not just those who possess the label of social worker who must be cognizant of these findings, but *anyone who engages in the act of ‘doing’ social work*. I call for all social workers, those accredited through education, and those engaged through circumstance and personal desire, to grapple with the implications of this project’s findings. To recognize the deep impact our ideas, words and stories hold in defining both who needs ‘care’ and who is positioned to provide ‘care.’ There is and will never be an ‘easy way out’ for social workers in any context; the practice is foundationalized upon systems equally capable of care and violence. As such, we must constantly be evaluating and re-evaluating the framings we rely upon, prioritizing Rossiter’s ‘unsettled’ call for *ethics before knowledge*. These processes will become easier as efforts persist over time, but, for now, they require a constant, conscious effort as we strive to create lasting, meaningful changes to the ways in which our practice operates.

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