

## **On Trampled Ground: Unsettling Critical Social Work in Un/Sanctioned Safe Consumption Sites**

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### **Abstract**

In her work, Rossiter (2011) considered the violence inherent in representation and called for a critical social work that is committed to an unsettled practice. In following Rossiter's call, this article works to unsettle the trampled ground on which I walk to draw out the unsettled nature that is critical social work within the slippery and often unknowable parameters of grassroots and professional social work spaces. In utilizing my own experience in the unsanctioned Moss Park Overdose Prevention Site and the sanctioned Toronto Safe Consumption Site. I ask: What is critical social work? How is it tied to resistance and subversion? What happens when radical roots are co-opted by the state? In three sections, Grassroots, Professional, and Positionality, I assert that social work must always be unsettled in order to resist oppressive practices within. Using harm reduction and safe consumption services to discuss an unsettled practice, I conclude that social work must always be unsettled and must continuously work to decentre itself.

*Keywords:* critical social work, harm reduction, safe consumption site, grassroots, professionalization

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### **Introduction**

The ground was trampled.

When I arrived at Moss Park, striding unsure, diagonally from the northeast corner, I noticed the ground. The intersection of Jarvis and Queen Street East held full; swollen with a history of all the people who walked here before. All the people who came. All the people who left. The intersection was itself a story: a visual (re)telling of intersecting lives; speaking itself into the world over and over again in a cacophony of voices and honking horns and the low rumble of moving bodies. The tents were not set up yet, so I walked to a group of people, their faces only familiar when they flicked in the late summer light, only knowable to me in vague memories of seeing them around. It had only been a few weeks since a group of activists and community members erected tents in a final defiant scream

to stop the torrent of overdose deaths that had continued to rise. The deaths kept coming, while applications for sanctioned safe injection sites sat caught behind red tape on cluttered desks. Cop cars circled like flies around shit but rarely made any moves, rubbing their hands in the sticky chasm of an injunction that melted the borders of legal and illegal. We hauled necessities out of a white van: foam cases of red and black Naloxone<sup>1</sup> kits, boxes of syringes, donated tanks of oxygen, long and heavy boxes of glass crack pipes and coveted meth bowls, white tents, camping tents, folding chairs. In the last days of August 2017, I walked on ground that was not mine, stepped on mostly dirt where grass had once been, and started the set-up for that afternoon's guests, who would come to use their drugs in a tent. Grassroots.

The ground was trampled.

And when we<sup>2</sup> ask what critical social work is, I think about the trampled ground. I think about the footsteps, the circles that have been trodden, wearing the earth beneath us; this earth, this mud and grass, that holds us while we hold each other. I think about the afternoons and evenings I spent doing the social work that is picking up discarded and brightly coloured cookers from the ground and watching for breath movement while I silently count one, two, three, four. The social work that is distributing supplies and donated food stuffs and teaching how to administer Naloxone and administering Naloxone and holding a hand because there is nothing more to say but something still to share. I think about the social work that is the defiance of pitching a tent on this trampled ground and refusing to leave. The social work of keeping people alive in the intangible slow death that is being marked as poor, as drug user, as non-compliant, as excessive. Critical. This ground is trampled.

In her post-structural recounting of Levinas's ethics, Rossiter (2011) explained that we can never fully know the Other; that people are not irreducible to singularity and that their fullness spills, "overflows," and that this overflow escapes our knowledge and comprehension. Very simply, she wrote, "Persons exceed representation" (p. 983). And in this excess, in this "desire for totality," in the thickness and violence that is done in believing we can encapsulate, comprehend, represent, and know the Other, Rossiter asked us to defy this desire; to buck against hard-held through lines of social work that stand on the professionalization of Knowing. But she cautioned that even when we know the violence in singularity, there still needs to be some kind of representation—totality—in order to organize, to speak, to adjudicate, to have justice. The crux then, is "that we cannot do without our conceptions of people but our conceptions bear violence" (p. 989). Rossiter (2011) called for a post-structural, unsettled social work practice that is committed to both holding and witnessing the tensions inherent in the violence of representation and in the

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1 The term Naloxone in common parlance refers to a group of opioid antagonist medications marketed in a variety of forms and under various brand names (e.g., Nalaxone, Narcan, Evzio).

2 I use "we," "us," and "our" throughout this article in order to broadly refer to myself as a social worker and to others with whom I have worked, regardless of professionalization or title. While some parts of this article are specifically critical of professional social work, what I hope to underscore with this language is a sense of the ways in which social work effects everyone doing this work.

“necessity for justice and service” (p. 989). It is here that I want to begin: by following Rossiter’s call to action through a commitment to an unsettled practice, I would like to unsettle the trampled ground on which I walk, drawing out the unsettled nature that is critical social work within the slippery and often unknowable parameters of grassroots and professional social work spaces.

In an attempt to understand what I don’t know, what I think I know, what I may never fully know, I utilize my own experiences of both the unsanctioned Moss Park Overdose Prevention Site (OPS)<sup>3</sup> as well as the sanctioned Toronto Safe Consumption Site<sup>4</sup> (Toronto SCS) as an entry point to ask, What is critical social work? And more specifically: How is critical social work tied, or not tied, to the often intangible space of subversion? Leaning into my experiences of both grassroots and professional work within safe consumption sites, I want to know: What does critical social work do within the confines of state regulation? What is radicalness when it must become regulated in order to fit a need? It is my assertion that critical social work must always be in a process of unsettling, must always be in tension in order to be critical, and that those who work within social service spaces must remain unsettled.

I begin with a short discussion of my subject position and an explanation and definition of harm reduction as it pertains to substance use and safe consumption sites. I then move into a short discussion of the unsanctioned Moss Park OPS, as it was in the park, to consider it a site of subversive and decolonial action. Following, I discuss my current workplace, the sanctioned Toronto SCS, to consider what happens when grassroots organizing is taken up by the state. The final section engages in a discussion of my own position as a critical social worker and as someone who does not use substances who works within a safe consumption site; as a professional who does not know. I conclude with Smith’s (2012) considerations on repoliticizing harm reduction. Enlaced within these arguments, questions, and discussions are short reflective pieces of my own experience of being in these spaces. This is done not only as an entry point into the feelings of an embodied practice but as a literal disruption and a witnessing through discomfort (Boler, 1999) of social work practice in line with Rossiter’s (2011) call for an “unsettled practice.”

Importantly, this telling is my own. The experiences I speak to in this work formulated through embedded discourses of social work and “helper” and professional and the social work that is angry, that grieves; the social work that rested in me when I was once so restless. In considering an unsettled practice, it is important to historicize my own positions, recognizing that I am a settler on this ground, both on this land and as a person who has not been a recipient of the services offered at a safe consumption site. My own subjectivity tangled in this mess, I stepped on to this trampled ground through a series of missteps and stumbles, privilege and access; landing on the grass and mud of Moss Park after receiving a quick phone call to fill in as a volunteer and a lifetime of trying to minimize harm alongside the people I care about. My discomfort swells, balloons in the

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<sup>3</sup> I use the terms “overdose prevention site” (OPS), “safe injection site” (SIS), and “safe consumption site” (SCS) interchangeably, unless referring to an actual organization. OPS, SIS, and SCS all refer to spaces or agencies that are equipped to support and monitor individuals who are injecting substances.

<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of confidentiality, the name of this organization has been changed.

recognition that this is only part of the story, that there are so many other stories that this one is indebted to.

The definition of *harm reduction* I am working with daily has been patched together from a variety of sources and people I respect and am thankful to for their teachings, stemming in part from the people I met at Moss Park OPS. My own practice of harm reduction came slowly, unknowingly, and tied tightly to a sense of bodily autonomy: as an individual who used self-harm as a coping strategy well into adulthood, harm reduction had become a way to keep myself safe within my own unsettled skin. In later having the opportunity to support other young people engaging in self-harm, I was able to hone what it meant to radically care, building on the principles of harm reduction that meet people where they are and standing with them in the face of structural and systemic violence. That said, I would like to give a definition here to clarify what I mean when I talk about harm reduction that is specific to substance use. Recently, I came across a quote from well-respected harm-reduction worker Monique Tula, speaking at a National Harm Reduction Conference in New Orleans in 2018, that I feel encompasses the breadth of harm reduction as it is known in Toronto, Ontario, Canada:

When we talk about harm reduction, we often reduce it to a public health framework, [one of] reducing risks. That's harm reduction with a small "h-r." Harm reduction is meeting people where they're at but not leaving them there.... But Harm Reduction with a capital "H" and "R"—this is the *movement*, one that shifts resources and power to the people who are most vulnerable to structural violence. (as cited in Godfrey, 2018, para. 11).

My working definition of harm reduction therefore encapsulates public health frameworks (i.e., distribution of supplies, safe consumption sites, safe supply programs), meeting people where they are at as a lens, and harm reduction as a practice that attends to structural and systemic issues as systems that must be revolted against. Different parts of harm reduction become differently important depending on the space that one is in or the needs that are being met: harm reduction looks different on the ground of Moss Park in a tent and on the floor of Toronto SCS, but both are important sites to consider the making or breaking of an unsettled critical social work practice.

### Grassroots

If critical social work is the practice of unsettling, of living and breathing through the tensions and violence inherent in representation and in the doing aspects of service, then critical social work must be a practice of subversion and liberation. Of disobedience. The Moss Park OPS in the tents was created out of a need; it was a strategy of resistance from the voices of the margin that could no longer wait for dominant power structures to decide their fate. It was a defiant and angry ongoing protest against an ongoing discourse of representation of people who use drugs as excessive, indulgent, and unworthy. Critical. People who use drugs have been looking out for each other long before a tent was pitched and christened "safe;" long before it was splashed in headlines.

The individualizing and totalizing power of the state, as Foucault (1982) conceptualized it, helps to identify the ways in which people who use drugs have been constituted through state-led power structures and a "matrix of individualization" (p. 783)

to become individual subjects. In his work, the creation of the subject happens through individualization techniques of power that “attaches him [the subject] to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects” (p. 781). People who use drugs are thus constituted through their individualization, through an imposition of truth about their identities as outside of normative discourses of self and further outside of the moralizing parameters that make up welfare societies. Those who use drugs are over and over again disavowed as excessive, both personally in their substance use and further because they insist upon taking up space despite already being considered unworthy of existing side by side with “productive” citizenry: unsettled selves, using substances for their own stake in agency that unsettles the machine of moving, “productive” bodies (Powell & Khan, 2012). In the case of pitching a tent and doing drugs in a park, people who used drugs refused to relinquish their own agency to the state power that had created their subjecthood through individualization, docility, and self-regulation and counted on their deaths; in their own refusal to die, in literally reversing death with the help of (hard fought-for) Naloxone and oxygen, they resisted both the regulation of their bodies and the fixed representation of the community.

In the civil disobedience that was pitching a tent and doing drugs, community members, activists and some social workers shifted the terms of the conversation, building spaces (from the trampled ground up) to the epistemic disobedience of non-return. In his contribution to decolonial knowledge-building, Mignolo (2009) interrogated Western concepts of knowledge, working to decentralize epistemologies built on colonial ideologies of marking bodies. In it, he suggested that the argument for decolonial options begins from a place that questions the “civilization of death” (p. 161), a place that attempts to dislodge the rationality that dictates who lives and who dies through the layered technologies of modernity, colonialism and neo-liberalism. The social work of keeping people alive. In pitching a tent and doing drugs, community members had staked a claim to their own lives, (re)claiming literal and figurative spaces to maintain agency and speak not back to dominant power logics that had already normalized their deaths but outside of them, among themselves. In so doing, individuals participated in acts of epistemic disobedience that worked to subvert predetermined subjectivities.

In step with Mignolo (2009), both Coulthard (2014) and Tuhiwai Smith (1999) implored readers to consider a critical social work that requires the active engagement of both civil and epistemic disobedience that unsettles the professionalization of what we perceived as social work. The social work that is the defiance of pitching a tent on this ground and refusing to leave. The trampled ground on which those tents were pitched required a continuous epistemic shift, an epistemic unsettling, from the settled reciprocity of liberal social work that reproduces white supremacy and coloniality through a Western lens of recognition, both within the deployment of state power through exclusion and individualization and within the disciplining of already disciplined knowledges such as social work. The subversion inherent in pitching a tent and refusing to leave, in living when one has already been assumed dead, leaves no room for a practice of social work that remains obedient.

The role of social work within grassroots movements sits in the tensions that roil in its professionalization. Although almost entirely driven by people who use drugs and

people who had lived whole lives near and in the intersection of Queen East and Jarvis Streets, social workers were also a part of pitching tents and refusing to leave. However, the crux of this argument that calls for an unsettled practice hangs on a practice that unsettles and refuses to be obedient: betraying social work as a practice of Knowing can necessitate a practice that breathes in tandem with grassroots organizing and utilizes professional privilege to subvert professionalized and regulated spaces that uphold social work.

### **Professional**

As much as a safe injection site was needed, there was a further need for a space and funding to operate. The ground was trampled. There needed to be a space with walls; walls that did not rip—just a little more—each time they were unfurled and furled back up. A sink. A floor not made of trampled grass and later a floor not on wheels. There needed to be money, funding, food, more oxygen tanks, phone lines, privacy, oximeters. There needed to be the safety that only a physical organizational space is uniquely privileged to provide. Safety. Protection. Sterility. Regulation.

#### Surveillance.

By August 2018, a year following the set-up at Moss Park OPS, there were total of eight sanctioned SCS or OPSs in Toronto (Watson, Kolla, van der Meulen, & Dodd, 2020, p. 76). The protest. The defiance of pitching a tent and of doing drugs was a protest that was operationalized in part to gain the things that were needed for safer drug use and to embody agency; to amplify the voices on the margins, the bodies that were simultaneously named and unnamed in the tangle of liberal and neo-liberal policies that at once purported to support and leave for dead people who use drugs. The social work of keeping people alive in the intangible slow death that is being marked as poor, as drug user, as non-compliant, as excessive. By the time I came to work at Toronto SCS, there was already a rhythm. Codes (not names) for guests who came to use, rules for conduct, assigned seats, timed use, timed bathroom visits, locked doors and fobs, walkie-talkies for staff to communicate, a colour-coded computer system that reminded staff who had been where and for how long, a record of every drug that every person used on any given day and how many shots they had done, file notes on who was “taking space” and when they could come back to use again, who had been banned, who were on No Trespass orders. The flow of movement within the space trod already well-worn norms of surveillance from start to finish of an individual’s stay with us.

The neo-liberal co-option of social justice on its face looks like help—even care, if you smile just a little. The reality is that in trying to attend to the very real needs of drug use, of pitching a tent and demanding to be seen, harm reduction and the SCS ran the risk of being sanitized, absolving the state and social work of violence. Powell and Khan (2012) provided two streams to understand surveillance, regulation, and discipline within social work: information and communication technologies and professional discretion. Both, they wrote, are inextricably tied to Foucault’s technologies of discipline through observation, normalizing judgements, and examination. Although there were forms of regulation that governed the actions and movements of people who used and volunteered in the Moss Park

tents, the resettling of the SCS indoors moved this into a governmental system that insisted on regulation both as a mechanism to control drug use (and therefore those who would dare indulge in such illegal excess) and to further professionalize and managerialize those who attended to individuals who used drugs. Record keeping is key to maintaining regulation (of both workers and service users), fragmenting individuals into lists of characteristics, decontextualized actions, and drugs they have used, only then to solidify their reassembly through written texts that are forever vaulted, standing in for the individual themselves. Professionalization of social work rests on the power endowed by the state to (re)write individuals into existence through precise and systematized coded language that generates an account of the self of the service user and negates the self of the worker (de Montigny, 1995).

The creation of the SCS through the state holds social workers in the liminal space between “dangerous” individuals and “respectable” citizens (Parton, 2008), where social workers must utilize their own discretion to make sense of and shift the boundaries between the two groups, officially equipped only with the tools and language provided by the state. Discretion as a part of surveillance “professionalizes” social workers in the slippage that is complying with organizational needs and doing the social work of human service that does not, will not, comply. Powell and Khan (2012) stated that “discretion provides a paradoxical space for the operation of power both enticing resistance and inviting surveillance” (p. 141). We dance on this trampled ground, unsettling the dirt, wriggling through the thin borders of surveillance and resistance. In the space of the SCS we find ways to operationalize our professional discretion, ways to use up governmental funds, take advantage of titles, cause trouble for management, put our bodies between service users and cops, who still circle like flies around shit regardless of the walls that government funding has afforded.

Following Rossiter’s (2011) call for an unsettled practice, it must follow that we use our positions to push back, to resist, to subvert. White (2009) traced workplace resistance, drawing out the variety of ways in which social workers do resistance. Within the professionalized and co-opted space of the state regulated SCS, resistance often looks like ducking cameras and giving more time to service users who need it. Resistance requires us to unsettle the violence that representation does; to live in the discomfort of utilizing governing bodies to our own ends. However, resistance requires the “selling” of resistance to all workers in order for it to work. In the Toronto SCS, workers’ discontents spill onto one another, often leading to clashes that ultimately disadvantage service users. For instance, asking people to leave when their allotted 20 minutes is up, although in line with floor protocol, is a deliberate act of abandonment that follows through with managerialized notions not so much of time allotment itself but impressions of capacity and scarcity designed to limit who has access to (life-saving) services and constrain the acts of workers. The intangible web of rules and policies, explicitly within the sanctioned SCS, precariously holds both workers and service users and connects them through regulation, so that if one part of that regulation is not met, then all parts fall. Service users will always be harmed in this web, sacrificed at the expense of upholding rules and pushed out when workers cannot agree among themselves how closely they will follow the rules, how many more people they can feasibly and safely allow in to utilize the services, and how much of their discretion they have access to in the surveilled space of a government organization.

In negotiating life, we are regulating death. The creation of the SCS by the state keeps social workers (and the general public) busy with policy and jumping through regulation as a form of “helping” to keep them less interested in the social oppression, the slow death, that has created conditions of need in the first place. Are we as social workers professionally complicit, even complacent, in the regulation of “safe drug use” because it looks like we have achieved the goal of being seen and heard by the state? Was that the point? The appropriation of harm reduction methods by the state renders both harm reduction and drug use itself “respectable” in the eyes of the state: occurring in the sterile and regulated walls afforded through municipal, provincial, and federal funding packages, those who do drugs are effectively “cleaned” and rendered inactive, washed of the ground on which tents were once pitched. But pitching a tent and doing drugs was more than pitching a tent and doing drugs: it was an active and deliberate shift away from state gaze, a conversation within itself that unsettled government-sanctioned complacency of who should have access to living and whose death mattered. The doing of critical social work within the sanctioned “safe” sites then will only be found in the continued unsettling and dismantling of neo-liberal attempts to (re)appropriate radical methods. Front-line harm reduction activists who once pitched a tent in a park and refused to leave now work in regulated SCS spaces: they continue to uphold these values under the radar of health and state policies (Smith, 2012, p. 215), their resistance finding its way to the fore in quiet moments of discretion and loud instances of refusal. The resistance that led to pitched tents, however temporary, blooms and recedes and blooms again in these regulated spaces despite having to grow in them.

### **Positionality**

I have sat in bars, looked over my beer, and smugly stated that I work in a safe injection site. Radical. The representation of myself as Good. As Social Worker. As Activist. As Innocent. The representation of myself as Critical Social Worker set against the people that I serve, Those In Need. The ambivalent space that is social work as it settles into a nexus of history, violence, and practice finds me churning in embarrassment with what I thought I was. The messiness that is social work itself does not easily divide between grassroots and professional, does not play nicely into the “heroic activist” narrative (Healy, as cited in Rossiter, 2005, p. 3) I had so badly wanted to read into myself. The violence enacted, always enacted, in my desire to not only know the Other but to take pleasure in my knowing is telling of the tension and slips found in the making of social work itself—telling of the colonial, saviour-style packaging that social work is so often (re)packaged in.

In Chambon’s (1999) reading of Foucault, she concluded that social workers do not start “where the client is at” but where they see a service user at a given point, embedded and tangled in norms, regimes of truth, representations, and “cultures”: service users are not outside the activity of social work but rather, a result of it (p. 53); both made by the other. Social work sustains itself in the creation and recreation of need. So too, social workers are created within social work. Considering the definition of harm reduction given at the beginning of this article, which rests on “meeting people where they are,” as critical social workers working within the parameters of state regulation, we further need to (re)consider social work’s position in relation to both service users and to a system of violence in which we can only try to reduce the harm.

Rossiter (2005) explained that accessing discourses-in-use allows us to assess our own power and how “discourses position us in relation to other professionals and to clients” (p. 19). My position as a professional social worker, as someone who does not use the drugs that the service users who access my workplace do, finds me tripping over and over again on this trampled ground. My “expertise” resting quietly on my privilege of being formally educated, of being white and able-bodied and cis-gendered; a cover for all of the things I do not know, cannot know, about pitching a tent and using drugs. My “expertise” over and above that of the people who come to use drugs at my workplace. If my assertion is that social work must always be unsettled, must always be in tension, then it is imperative that I remain unsettled in not only the work I do but also in how I frame myself as a professional. Leaning into the mess that is social work, I push hard on my professional discretion and the social work that is picking up brightly coloured cookers from the ground. My desire to be innocent, to say that I am doing good, is already a violence that flies in the face of the people who come to use at Toronto SCS because sometimes a small part of me believes that this is good enough or that I have done well enough. Being caught up in the business that is jumping through the hoops of social work, we forget the social oppression that continues to regulate our complacency and the construction of myself set against the construction of service users. This is a set-up. The professionalization of Knowing the Other is a trap that relies on social workers themselves settling into explicitly depoliticized spaces (such as an SCS that must rely on health policy to operate) that have been taken up by the state and (re)introduced as a sanitized version of its (trampled) grassroots. An unsettled, critical social work practice could look like opening the joints at which we cross: unsettling the long-settled subject of the social worker who is “sustained on notions of competency, mastery, and practice skills” (Macias, 2012, p. 3), who Knows, who is formed through the Other and cannot be defined without.

### **Conclusion**

This ground is trampled.

The low growl of the intersection of Queen East and Jarvis Streets moves forward, even in grief; for those who came. For those who left. Pitching a tent and doing drugs in Moss Park was an act of defiance: community members refusing to be told they were not worth their own lives; the civil disobedience of living. And when we ask what critical social work is, I think about the ground, this ground, the unsettled and trampled earth beneath us. Smith (2012) considered how to repoliticize harm reduction, asserting that it must first be reconceptualized as a fluid and living process that can move with/in in/formal spaces. Secondly, he asserted that community members, activists, and other stakeholders must work in community to radicalize and change the terms of the conversation by acknowledging and exposing the structural forces (pp. 216–217) that have marked community members as poor, as drug user, as non-compliant, as excessive. Lastly, Smith (2012) asserted that harm reduction must always place at its centre people who use drugs and people with lived experience as the force that drives resistance.

Who gets to tell? Who represents, and who is represented? As an outsider who occasionally falls into the inside, this telling is only partial, only built on what I see, what I get to see, what I want to see, and what has been shown to me in quiet moments of sharing.

My vision is blurred in this gaze, my sight formed and re-formed through my own lens and the privilege in being given the space to tell. An unsettled practice that commits to recognizing the violence inherent in representation, that commits to unsettling this ground, must always then de-centre itself.<sup>5</sup>

In an attempt to understand what I do not know, what I think I know, what I may never fully know, and in a desire to know what critical social work does in the grassroots and professional spaces of the Moss Park OPS as it was in the park and in the sanctioned and regulated Toronto SCS, and with acknowledgement and (re)examination of my positionality and experiences in these spaces, this article has asserted that critical social work must always be unsettled; uncentring itself, and holding in tension the discomfort of the violence inherent in representation. I think about the footsteps, the circles that have been trodden, wearing the earth beneath us; this earth, this mud and grass, that holds us while we hold each other. This article is only a part of the wider conversation that asks critical social work to unsteady itself, unsettle, and walk this trampled ground.

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<sup>5</sup> Due to the very personal nature of this article, there are important pieces with regard to harm reduction, safe consumption sites and the racialized, classed, and gendered state-imposed structures of drug use that go beyond its scope. For those wishing a fuller reading of harm reduction and safe consumption sites in Ontario, Watson, Kolla, van der Meulen and Dodd (2020) provided a thorough overview of pleasure and drug use, the development of the overdose prevention site in Canada and in Toronto and the impacts of moving from grassroots to a more bureaucratic system.

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#### Author Note

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