When stories change our worlds:
An ethnography of basic income in Lindsay, Ontario

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ABSTRACT

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Based on 3 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Lindsay, Ontario, this thesis explores personal and collective narratives about basic income in the context of the Ontario basic income pilot project that ran in three municipalities in the province from 2018-2019. The pilot project reflected a novel approach to poverty reduction in the province in that it marked a departure from existing means-tested social assistance programs, until it was cancelled prematurely by the new Ontario provincial government. Using the methods of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with former basic income recipients and advocates, the thesis discusses the ways in which basic income captured the imagination of recipients, long-time advocates, and the larger community within Lindsay. It finds that the telling and sharing of hopeful and positive stories were central both to the way basic income was expressed within the community, and to the advocacy work done around it, which sought to challenge long-standing narratives about poverty and work. Finally, it suggests that basic income provided a new narrative framework through which participants in the projects and advocates alike began to imagine a different, and better, future.

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Introduction: Basic income; a journey from idea to lived-reality

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I cannot remember exactly when I first got introduced to the idea of basic income – a thought I shared one night with Roderick and Joli, a couple living in Lindsay, Ontario, with whom I stayed several times during my fieldwork. Funnily, they both echoed, they couldn't really remember either. As we each tried to recall, digging into our memories unsuccessfully, we agreed that, in any case, once we had learned about it we were intrigued and then quite captivated by the idea. It was, in fact, why I was there with Roderick and Joli in the first place. Sitting on their porch on this warm August evening, Joli began telling stories of people she knew in the community whose lives had been affected in some way or other after being on basic income. I sat there, riveted, listening to Joli, feeling increasingly fascinated. At the same time, Roderick was busy thinking of people I could talk to for my research. "There really are lots of stories," he said, as he re-filled our wine glasses, and I took the opportunity to ask them both how they had first gotten involved with basic income.

But let me rewind. For this story, at least in one sense, begins a little earlier, sometime in 2016, (about three years before I began my fieldwork), when the provincial government of Ontario, led by the Liberals at the time, decided to test a new and, to some, quite radical idea: basic income – the idea of providing everyone with an unconditional, guaranteed income. It was to be tested in the form of a three-year pilot project for four-thousand participants from three different municipalities in Ontario that would most accurately reflect the demographics of Ontario – rural, urban and something in-between. Lindsay, a town of approximately twenty-thousand inhabitants located in the Kawartha Lakes region in Southeastern Ontario, was to be one of those three municipalities to run the project, along with Hamilton in Southern Ontario, and Thunder Bay in Northwestern Ontario. So, in the summer of 2019, having decided to make basic income the focus of my master's thesis, I drove to Lindsay from Montreal in my old rust-red (and rusty) Chrysler, which I had bought for this occasion for almost nothing from a friend's dad, to begin my fieldwork.

The pilot project was a central part of the provincial government's new poverty reduction strategy, and its aim was to test "a new approach to improving the health and well-being of people living on low incomes" (Ontario poverty reduction strategy annual report, 2016)[1]. The decision was announced to the public in April 2017, and a little less than a year later people gradually began to receive their first monthly basic income payments based on the annual amount of $16,989 for a single person and $24,027 for a couple.

To basic income advocates, this was a big deal. Activists in Canada and around the world have been advocating for versions of a basic income for many years,[2] and support for the idea had waxed and waned throughout the last century. Though the idea of basic income dates back a few hundred years, it first began to attract popular support in the 1920s and 30s, a period during which the Social Credit Party of Canada, that promoted a version of basic income, was founded (Widerquist, 2007). They had little influence however, and the movement faded. But three decades later, the movement for basic income was reinvigorated, and the idea began to take off once again in the 1960s, attracting and garnering support from both the left and the right. In the US and Canada, the idea was becoming more mainstream, and a version of basic income was almost passed by President Nixon in 1970 (falling 10 votes short in the senate). In Canada, the government published several favorable reports on the idea of a guaranteed annual income (ibid). After failing to take hold, the idea saw another decline in its support, and by the 1980s it was pushed once again into the fringes. Nevertheless, activists continued, undeterred, to advocate for basic income, and an increasing number of formal organizations were being constructed around the idea. In 2008, the Basic Income Canada Network was formed as a sister organization to the Basic Income Earth Network – a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization whose purpose was to promote the idea, and to bring together advocates from "all walks of life" (BICN website, n.d.).

When it was announced that Lindsay was to be one of the municipalities where the project was to be unrolled and tested, Joli and Roderick decided to uproot their life, and move to Lindsay with their 11-year-old daughter, in order to be fully immersed in the life of the project. For the

[1] The report does not list any authors by name

[2] Referred to also as a universal basic income, or simply UBI, and sometimes as a basic income guarantee. In this thesis, I use the term basic income as that was what was used in the Ontario pilot projects.

previous few years, Joli had been actively contacting mayors all over the country, and providing them with a steady stream of materials and resources, in an attempt to educate them on the matter, while Roderick had written countless articles about basic income for various newspapers. Then, upon moving and settling in, together they launched a local magazine, *the Lindsay Advocate*, to provide a voice for the on-going project in Lindsay, as well as for other issues pertaining to social justice and anti-poverty advocacy.

While the Ontario basic income pilot project was not the only one of its kind, it was one of the largest to be conducted to date (Berke, 2018). At the time of my research, versions of basic income had been tested in only a handful of places around the world – piloted either by municipal or federal governments, as in Finland and the Netherlands, or by NGOs, as in Kenya and Namibia (see: Standing 2019). In Switzerland, there had been a national referendum on the idea in 2016 (which was turned down), and, at the time the Ontario projects began, Andrew Yang, in the U.S., was running to be the presidential nominee for the Democratic party with a platform squarely centered on the idea of a basic income (which he called *the Freedom Dividend*). Indeed, even powerful public figures such as Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk, among others, began to embrace the idea. In addition, Hamilton and Mulvale (2019) point out, among other factors, renewed interest in the idea of basic income in Canada came about, in part, because health economist Evelyn Forget and sociologist David Calnitsky re-visited the data from an experiment that had long been archived and never analyzed. That basic income experiment, *Mincome,* took place in the 1970s in a small town in Manitoba (see: Calnitsky 2016 & Forget 2011). In her paper entitled, *the Town with no Poverty* (2011), Forget found that *Mincome*[3] had a myriad of positive effects on poverty, hospitalization and injury rates, mental health, and high school completion rates. And, in his paper, *More normal than welfare*, Calnitsky (2016) found that *Mincome* was seen more positively, and was associated with less stigma and shame than existing welfare programs.[4]

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[3] In the *Mincome* experiment in Dauphin, Manitoba everyone was eligible to apply for the income.
As such, Dauphin was what was called a "saturation site", meaning that everyone living there was eligible to apply for the income (Mulvale & Hamilton 2019) and Lindsay was modelled on this idea)

However, sharing the same fate as past projects, the Ontario projects failed to translate into permanent policy. In fact, despite election promises to keep the pilot project running, the newly elected Conservative government in August 2018 announced that they were going to cancel the pilot just one year into its life. Participants received their last basic income payments in April 2019, shortly before I started my fieldwork. The cancellation was not communicated to project participants directly; instead, they found out about it through media or social media. One participant in the project described how she was sitting in her living room one afternoon watching TV when she saw the headline. “I just froze”, she told me, “I couldn’t believe it. And then after a bit I started screaming at the TV.”

The cancellation of the project was devastating to many in Lindsay; the town was the “saturation site” for the project, meaning that ten percent of the twenty-thousand inhabitants in the town had been on basic income, and so two-thousand people had to suddenly come to terms with having the income they thought they had for three years taken away. The participants in the project were all considered ‘low-income’, which was one of the qualifying measures used to determine eligibility to enroll, and they were not returning to comfortable financial situations. To many, it meant going back to precarious work situations or no work, and to others, it meant going back to being on social assistance programs (welfare or disability) that one participant described to me as being “designed to give people just a little too little”. It wasn’t just the loss of income that hurt, though, as the former recipients I got to know would tell me, it was a feeling of going backwards. Joli would often tear up when talking about it, and she could tell numerous stories of how former basic income recipients that she had grown close to in the community had fallen ill – mentally and physically – after the cancellation. It felt like the cancellation hung over the interviews I conducted. At the same time, as many of the people I interviewed would share with me, and as I felt throughout my time in Lindsay, what had also been born out of the existence and the life of the projects was nonetheless hope, and a temporary window through which participants were able to imagine something else – a way of thriving and not simply barely surviving.

The debate

On many occasions during my fieldwork in Lindsay – on late summer evenings on Joli and Roderick's porch, at a local restaurant or coffee shop, or outside of various community events, I would find myself in conversations about the ins and outs of basic income with people involved in it in some way. We would talk of its possibilities and limitations, and of the myriad of intersections between this idea and other social issues: poverty, disability, the rise of increasingly precarious employment, looming automation, and the shortcomings of the current social assistance system and the stigma surrounding it. These conversations would echo larger debates on basic income that have taken place in both the media and in more academic venues in recent years, debates which have, for the most part, been largely theoretical. The idea has been debated and argued both for and against from a wide array of different perspectives, and from both the right and left of the political spectrum.

Part of the debate – especially in contexts in which there are already existing social assistance programs in place, (such as in Canada) – revolves around how basic income can serve to alleviate poverty more efficiently, address inequality, and offer an alternative to welfare measures that have become increasingly 'neoliberal' – punitive, stigmatizing, and centered around back-to-work efforts (Calnitsky, 2016; Mulvale & Hamilton, 2019). Also at the center of much of the debate is the question of work – be it because of a fear of jobs lost to increasing automation, a changing world of work, questioning the value and structure of paid labour, or because of a fear of people not working once they receive basic income (see: Calnitsky, 2017; Weeks, 2011; Standing 2007; Ferguson 2010).

Indeed, the introduction of basic income marked a fundamentally new approach in Ontario's (and Canada's) politics of income distribution, in that it would somewhat decouple income from expectations of work – something which many basic income scholars have argued is one of the core tenets of basic income (see: Van Parijs 1995, Widerquist, 2006; Weeks 2020). As Ferguson (2010) points out, "the most radical shift from traditional social democracy visible in the arguments for a BIG [basic income grant] is the explicit rejection of formal employment as the "normal" frame of reference for social policy", and, as such, social assistance becomes "radically

decoupled from expectations of employment" (12-13). To some who argue in favor of basic income, the idea denotes the possibility of moving away from wage-based labour to some degree, and it offers individuals an option *not* to work, a so-called 'exit option' (Calnitsky 2017; Weeks, 2011, 2020; Wright, 2010; Van Parijs, 1995, Calnitksy 2017). Similarly, Weeks (2020:2) argues, while "waged work would not be replaced by such a social wage, the link between work and income would be relaxed, allowing more room for different ways of engaging in, or possibly opting out of, waged labour". As such, both Calnitsky (2017) and Weeks argue that basic income can enable individuals to enjoy greater freedom because of this freedom from work (see also: Van Parijs 1995, Weeks 2011).

It is precisely for this reason that conservative commentators have been opposed to the idea (see: Gobry, 2014; Tencer, 2020; Loriggio, 2018). They regard the policy as risky because it might disincentivize people to work, an undesirable outcome of social policy. Indeed, when the pilot projects were cancelled by the newly elected Conservative government in Ontario, social services minister Lisa MacLeod defended the cancellation by arguing that the program was a disincentive to work, thereby discouraging people from becoming "independent contributors to the economy" (Loriggio, 2018, quoting MacLeod).

Criticisms of basic income have not, however, been restricted to conservative circles. As Widerquist (2006) points out, some argue the idea would facilitate exploitation exactly because of decreased labour power. In Canada, the New Democratic Party, for example, have been sceptical towards the idea of a basic income until recently, because of their close alliance with labour unions who have traditionally had a "strong orientation to 'good jobs' with union protection as the bedrock of economic security" (Mulvale & Hamilton 2019, 7). Indeed, many on the left have shared this scepticism, and have questioned whether it really will facilitate positive transformations, or if it is just another "neoliberal mirage" (Calnitsky 2017). As Ferguson (2010) points out, some of the ways in which basic income grants in South Africa have been presented reflect values that are often ascribed to a neoliberal ideology, such as risk-taking behaviour and 'being' entrepreneurial – in short, that basic income could "enable the poor to behave as proper neoliberal subjects", so that basic income "would provide not a 'safety net' (the circus image of

old-style welfare as protection against hazard) but a 'springboard'—a facilitator of risky (but presumably empowering) neoliberal flight" (12).

As such, basic income, both as idea and policy, has been and continues to be perceived as both progressive and regressive; on the one hand, as a step towards more dignified social assistance policies or towards an emancipatory utopia in which our relationship to paid work might be redefined; on the other hand, as a path towards a dystopian society in which people will stop working, get free money for nothing and get lazy – or, on the flip side, become 'good neoliberal subjects'. Certainly, the debate reflects tensions and disagreements about what kind of ideological position the policy really reflects and what it might really bring about if realized – tensions and disagreements that are perhaps grounded in the fact that basic income has been mostly considered, studied, and imagined from theoretical perspectives. Indeed, there has been very little empirical research done on the topic and, moreover, it has received very little anthropological and ethnographic attention. Such anthropological and ethnographic attention, would, I suggest, enable a different kind of perspective, which would in turn provide room for a more multifaceted understanding of basic income, one in which it does not necessarily reflect any single ideology but can be taken in different directions by various actors. As Ferguson (2010) notes: "that certain political initiatives and programs borrow from the neoliberal bag of tricks doesn't mean that these political projects are in league with the ideological project of neoliberalism" (9). To this, I would add, considering the multifaceted nature of the support for the idea, as well as what I found during my own research, basic income does not necessarily reflect *any* particular ideological position, but can be taken up and understood in different ways by people depending on their standpoint.

This, in turn, brings me to the story I want to tell. Thinking back on those evenings spent on summer porches, and on days spent wandering around and sitting in my favourite coffee shop in Lindsay, I reflected on what made this expression of basic income novel and different was the way in which this idea, that has mostly been considered from a theoretical perspective, became something personal, something emotional and something around which a community formed. It came to reflect something lived, rather than something abstract. It translated into something that people created their own stories around, which they shared and circulated with others. These

stories have oriented my own to the study of basic income. As Carole McGranahan (2020:8) notes, "anthropology is a storied discipline" and, as anthropologists, "we tell stories to make theoretical arguments. We use narrative to convey both story and theory." To this we can add that anthropology is also "the study of stories being told", as stories are always being told in a particular social and cultural context (Maggio 2014, 3). Indeed, what I came to feel characterized much of 'the mood' surrounding basic income in Lindsay, (and a little beyond), was the telling of stories in various ways. Some told their personal stories of being on basic income, and some of feeling trapped inside a narrative that they felt cast them as unworthy in some ways for not working; some shared the stories of people they knew who had been on basic income, or stories they had heard from others about it. Yet others shared their personal journeys of changing their minds about basic income once they had heard stories from the community about how it had helped people in various ways. There was also, on another level, among advocates, a belief in the transformative power of stories and, therefore, the circulating of them serves also as a kind of strategy. Yet, these stories did not reflect any rigid ideological positions but rather a multivalence.

However, these stories are not often discussed in the debates. It is my hope that this thesis, with its ethnographic approach and focus on the narrative dimensions of the policy, might contribute to filling a little part of the gap in the literature, and add to the ongoing debate on the topic, as I delve into this 'storied landscape' of basic income in what follows. I am inspired by a narrative analysis approach, which Marie Eastmond (2007) describes as "grounded in the phenomenological assumption that meaning is ascribed to phenomena through being experienced and, furthermore, that we can only know something about other people's experiences from the expression they give them" (249). As such, narratives, (and as such stories), tell us something about how people make sense of their world (ibid).

In the first chapter, I focus on personal narratives of basic income recipients who I interviewed during my fieldwork. Based on these personal accounts, I suggest that basic income was imagined differently than other forms of social assistance – in this case, specifically, disability support – and provided, in some pronounced ways, a different narrative framework for my participants to think about their life and their disability. As such, basic income, (at least for a

short time), enabled a hopeful imagining of a different kind of future in which associations between work and self-worth were relaxed.

In the second chapter, I focus on the stories of advocates, and on the ways in which the policy was perceived in Lindsay. I explore what I suggest is a kind of emerging shared narrative surrounding basic income, which arise from hopeful and positive stories being told, shared and circulated in the community and among advocates. Just as the existence of the policy seemed to enable a hopeful imagining of something else for the individuals I write about in the first chapter, so too did the existence of basic income in Lindsay seem to carve out an opening through which it was possible to imagine something else and something better for the community. I suggest that the stories as well as the acts of sharing them, arising from this opening, animated much of the community that came together around basic income.

In the third and final chapter, I further discuss dominant narratives on paid work and productivity, narratives central to the arguments which advocates sought to question and challenge in overcoming resistance to basic income. I then discuss what kind of imaginary future possibilities were (albeit temporarily perhaps) enabled by the existence of basic income. And, while this vision was not anything neatly defined nor anything that reflected a particular ideological position, it entailed a process of continual questioning and re-imagining of what a dignified and meaningful life might be. This was, I suggest once again, guided by stories of basic income told, listened to and shared.

What comes out, and indeed what I hope this thesis might in some way or another shed light on, is thus a kind of storied landscape in which people, personally and collectively, engage in acts of imagining – something else and something better – and wherein the introduction of this new policy, however short-lived in reality, created a space for re-imagining notions of worth relating to work, ability and productivity.

Methodology: on beginnings, connections, methods and positionality

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Beginnings

Now, a note on another beginning – that is, on *my* beginning in a sense, and on my own positionality within this research. When I first began exploring the idea of basic income, I became captivated by it – sometimes to the point of my friends and family making fun of me for being slightly obsessed, and for often relating any discussion back to basic income. As such, by the time I applied for my MA in anthropology I already knew I wanted to write about this topic in some capacity. And while I would like to think I have journeyed far and wide since then, and have nuanced and deepened my views and understandings, especially after going through the process of researching, doing field work and writing this thesis, my interest in basic income, and my position as a supporter of it, should be clearly stated.

I believe that there is room to be an advocate in this kind of research. As Carole McGranahan (2020) notes about anthropology, (or perhaps more about anthropologists), we write "to tell stories that matter, and to share new insights about the human world that might change it for the better. In anthropology there is an idea that, at a minimum, we believe this knowledge can be transformative" (2). Indeed, part of the reason why I wanted to do this research came out of a motivation for positive social change. And while this motivation remained, what became equally important (and the two are related) was the way in which the stories that were told to me about basic income deeply mattered (and still do) to the people who told them. These were either stories about themselves, or about people they knew or had heard about in some capacity. Indeed, reflecting on what Eastmond (2007) notes about narrative analysis – that "we can only know something about other people's experiences from the expression they give them" – in the context of this thesis I found that this expression was most often the telling of stories (often hopeful and positive ones). This focus on storytelling flows through the thesis and also informs the main arguments made. As McGranahan (2020) writes, "our telling of stories told to us is itself a theoretical exercise. Narrative helps us 'translate knowing into telling'" (7).

Positionality

My position as a supporter of basic income helped me to gain access to participants and to 'the field' during my fieldwork. While the reasons for supporting the idea often differed among the people I encountered, who were involved in advocacy work around basic income, the premise I shared with supporters – put broadly, a desire for social change – created a kind of trust, and a sense of shared sensibilities. As Davies and Spencer (2010) point out, there are aspects of the researcher's emotional experiences that can present opportunities for understanding the field and the people within it (2010:3). As such, the researcher's subjectivity is empirically useful in so far as emotions can work as tools for knowing (Davies & Spencer, 2010:14). The basic income recipients I interviewed and got to know during my fieldwork were living on low-incomes, were on social assistance, before and after being on basic income, and were living with disabilities. As such, it was often an emotional experience to listen to and learn about their life stories, and to be entrusted with very personal information. My own emotional and sympathetic responses to their stories, and my disclosure to them of my own political views and positions on various issues was necessary to gain their trust, and to be considered as a kind of 'ally'. Moreover, from a personal perspective, growing up myself in a small town (in southern Denmark) – where there were higher than average rates of poverty, unemployment and social assistance recipients compared to the rest of the country – made me more sensitive to some of the issues pertaining to their life situations. As Hastrup notes, "all ethnographers are positioned subjects, and they understand phenomena in certain ways, as their positioning in the field is influenced by their lived experiences which enables, or inhibits, particular kinds of insights" (Hastrup in Okely & Callaway 1992, 118). These conditions, grounded both in my own experience and in my position towards the topic at hand, enabled, and perhaps also inhibited in ways I am not aware, some of the insights I gained, as well as influencing the direction of this thesis.

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On that note, I move to the next beginning of sorts – that is, when I set out to begin my fieldwork. Driving from Montreal to Lindsay means spending quite a lot of time on highway 401 west. But, after about 4 or 5 hours, you get to turn onto a smaller highway and head north and

eventually onto Road 35, a country road surrounded by hilly fields, wooden barns and fewer gas station stops. You also notice there are less cars, and that most of the big trucks have been replaced by smaller pick-up trucks. The road eventually turns into Lindsay Street, and runs parallel with the Scugog river that goes through the town. You drive by the riverside cemetery, Lilac Gardens (a park), a Home Building Centre, a Tim Hortons and Ark Beauty Salon until you get to Kent Street, the main commercial street in Lindsay.

When I first arrived, I tried to keep in mind articles I had read about ethnography that would often describe a feeling of being kind of lost when beginning fieldwork, and I tried to keep in mind the words of those professors who had told me and my fellow graduate students in various seminars that we should try not to worry if nothing happens for a while. I tried to stay confident when, for several days on end, nothing much happened, and I couldn't quite muster the courage to just go over and talk to people. I wasn't sure where I was going to stay, but I was hopeful that it would somehow work itself out, or that an opportunity might present itself. But, as it were, it didn't, and so after spending that first afternoon in Lindsay sitting on a bench, eating lunch at *Mr. Sub* (a fast-food place akin to *Subway*), and looking longingly at everyone around me, hoping that somehow someone would just begin to talk to me about basic income, or that the pilot project or its after-affects would be visible somehow somewhere, I gave up and drove to Toronto to spend the night with some family. And I could not help feeling, a little bit at least, as if I already had failed. How was I going to do any Geertzian 'deep hanging out,'[5] and how was I going to find a way in, not to mention a way to become immersed, into this town? I decided to make a flier to hang up in the social assistance office, and briefly thought about making a large cardboard sign that said that I was looking for people to talk to about basic income that I would walk around with. I am still grateful that that idea never came to fruition.

At first, I remember that I thought Lindsay looked almost like a town out of an old Western movie. It has a population of 20,713, (based on the 2016 census), and has gone through a few different name changes in its approximately 200-year old history. Apparently, it was named Lindsay in 1934 after an assistant to the town's founding surveyor got shot in the leg. This man's

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[5] Geerts (1998) originally termed "deep hanging out" as part of the method participant observation

name was Mr. Lindsay, and so the town became Lindsay. However, in 2001 it was officially re-named City of Kawartha Lakes, but I *never* heard of anyone referring to it as such, except when they were telling me this fact – otherwise everyone called it Lindsay. Therefore, I have chosen to refer to the town as Lindsay in the following.

The street and sidewalks of Lindsay are wide, with square buildings along both sides of Kent Street – the town's main street – of different heights and colours, and with store fronts on the ground floor. There are diagonally placed parking spots along the five most lively blocks in town, so that it was never difficult to find parking. And driving was the main way most people got around. There was, I knew, a bus line that goes to and from Lindsay but I never saw it. There are street benches on every block, and an array of different businesses ranging from a thrift store, several pharmacies, a bank, a nail salon, an optician, a bakery, a dollar store, a bulk food store, a *Pizza Pizza*, a quilt store, and on the fifth corner of that lively part of town is a coffee shop called Boiler Over Coffee Vault, where I spent a lot of time. They have an outdoor terrace where I would often sit in the sun, and drink coffee after coffee while writing in my notebook. If you pass that corner and continue down Kent Street, you pass by city hall, a light mint green building, and next to it is the public library and a park that would often be full of school children during their lunch breaks and when school was out. And, as you continue on, the town gets progressively more outskirts-like with a gas station, a *Money Mart*, and a funeral service with a few houses sprinkled in-between. Further down the street yet is the local hospital, Ross Memorial, and the social services office and Service Canada. If you go back up towards the lively part of Kent street and turn right at the coffee shop, you find the local Salvation Army, several churches and a local brewery and restaurant, among other shops; and in the more residential side-streets that criss-cross the main street, there are single-family houses, often made of wood with the occasional brick one thrown in, that have colourful wrap-around porches and front lawns, a few of which are adorned with small sculptures, signs, flower pots and Canadian flags. On one of these more residential streets, a side-street to Kent, there is a small breakfast place called Judy's Place, where I would go and eat a very affordable egg and bacon and endless re-fill coffee breakfast. As I became more comfortable in the place, I began to have small interactions with the locals, but it wasn't really until I met Joli and Roderick that I got to know the people involved in basic income in Lindsay.

Connections

I first got in touch with Joli through Sheila Reghr, who is the chair of the Basic Income Canada Network (BICN), and before I began my fieldwork I had emailed back and forth with Joli. She had added me to a Facebook group, (called the "Ontario basic income pilot projects"), which had been started in the wake of the projects' cancellation by a few former basic income recipients in Lindsay, but its members were from all three project sites. At the time, I wasn't sure if I was going to go to Lindsay or Hamilton to do fieldwork – and I did end up spending a little time in Hamilton. I had been following some of the posts on the group for a few months, and I decided to publish a post describing my project – that I was a Masters' student in anthropology from Concordia University and that I was looking for people who had been involved in the basic income projects in either Lindsay or Hamilton to interview.

At first, I got no replies, and by the time someone finally contacted me I had just got to Toronto after spending a few days in Lindsay. That's when I met my first participant, Fiona from Hamilton, who I write about in the first chapter. She put me in touch with Tom Cooper, head of the Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction (HRDR), an anti-poverty organization. Tom invited me to Hamilton for a day sometime in early August for a basic income event the group was planning because a researcher from the UK was visiting and wanted to get a sense of the advocacy work being done around the Ontario basic income pilot projects. Here I met several people who had been part of the basic income pilot projects as well as people involved in other ways – including a film crew making a documentary on the projects, a few researchers from McMaster, and people involved in HRDR. Observing and being a part of the events of the day informs part of my third chapter. At the end of the day, I asked Tom Cooper if he could put me in touch with any basic income advocates in Lindsay and he said I should meet Joli and Roderick and Mike Perry, all of whom he knew well and had worked with. It had been a while since I had first been in contact with Joli, so I contacted her and Roderick again and went to Lindsay to meet them. After our first meeting, they generously invited me to stay with them and they helped me get connected to the things that were goings on in the town regarding basic income. They put me in touch with many of the people I write about, especially in the second chapter.

Methods

I conducted approximately three months of (ethnographic) fieldwork in Lindsay in the summer and early fall of 2019. My methods are those closely associated with an ethnographic approach – participant observation and qualitative interviews. Sarah Besky (2015) argues that "doing fieldwork involves moving through and experiencing space in ways particular to our projects and the places we work" (84). And while my fieldwork involved walking and driving around Lindsay, getting to and from it, and to Hamilton as well on occasion, it more often involved sitting down and engaging in conversations and discussions. It involved listening to stories in various spaces – in a coffee shop, on a street corner, at Joli and Roderick's house, at a planned event and during the interviews I conducted. As Maggio (2014) points out, "storytelling is the act of telling a story, and the anthropology of storytelling should consider it as such and look at everything that happens around it" (3). As such, "the process of storytelling is contextual" (ibid, 3). It was consequently important to spend time understanding the social, cultural and historical context within which these stories were being told, which included especially the history and current state of social assistance policies in Ontario, and the narratives in which they were embedded, which my participants would often bring up.

Using pseudonyms and real names

For most of my participants I use pseudonyms, but I use real names for those who are more public figures, advocating for UBI in the community. For those of my participants who were a part of the basic income project I always use pseudonyms, even though they might be public figures in some way, and also despite knowing that some of them would not have objected to their real names being used.

Participant observation

In a way, much of what I have already described constituted 'doing' participant observation – being in Lindsay in various ways, the before, during and after interviews, staying at Joli and Roderick's house, being engaged in evenings of discussion, or attending various events. As Jackson (2012) discusses, doing fieldwork involves a process of oscillation between absorption in a task and reflecting on it, of being part of and being apart from, of tuning in and tuning out, (Jackson further argues that this is not just particular to ethnographic fieldwork but also to the

nature of human consciousness (2012:8)). Though I was not always fully 'immersed' during the time I was doing fieldwork, as I would often leave Lindsay and come back, nevertheless, during those months I felt like I was constantly in this process. When I was not engaged in a conversation or interview, or not involved in some kind of event where I was focusing most of my energy on observing my surroundings, I was reflecting on what I had seen, heard, and noticed; this often involved thinking about the stories I had been told about basic income, and where and how they had been told to me. I would also reflect on what I had felt upon hearing these stories, or how someone might have perceived my reaction to them; had I been empathetic enough, or had I spaced out in any 'important' moments? How did the stories I heard reflect certain theoretical positions or arguments? Was I being too rigid or too influenced by certain positions in my interpretations? I would also sometimes think about where some story I was told, or an observation I had made, might fit in my thesis.

Lastly, I would sometimes worry about whether my observations or interpretations were happening appropriately within 'the field' especially when my focus was often in the realm of the imagination in some way, on the stories people would tell, and how these interacted with these large abstract ideas and narratives. And while Maggio (2014) notes that a story told by someone in any given moment is always situated in a context, place and time, I still consider the boundaries of 'the field' as somewhat blurred and malleable. Some of my interpretations indeed go beyond Lindsay.

Interviews

I conducted 14 semi-structured interviews. Depending on how I would meet my participants, the interviews almost never felt formal – beyond the initial greeting perhaps, and the signing of consent forms. They were all recorded, and none of my interviewees expressed discomfort with this. For the first few interviews I had a list of questions prepared, but, eventually, after a few, I would structure the interviews less and mostly ask questions as they arose organically in the course of the conversations. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009: 32), the qualitative interview is, quite literally, an 'inter view' – an interaction between interviewer and interviewee, which aims to understand aspects of the informant's life world; as such, it entails openness and a curiosity to what is said. Indeed, I often felt that the interviews, especially those I conducted with

former basic income recipients, were insights into their life worlds in some way or another, insights which they would generously provide. I think part of their willingness to share was also due to the timing of when I did the interviews – the basic income projects had recently been cancelled, and I think many former recipients wanted to share their experiences and/or some of their frustrations. The interviews almost always involved the telling of a life story in one sense or other. As Ochs and Capps (1996) observe, narratives of personal experiences often focus on past events, but at the same time narratives about the past are always told from the temporal perspective of the present, and are therefore also linked to imagined future life worlds. Indeed, the experience of being on basic income would often orient their personal narratives as they told them to me — in part of course because it was an interview on basic income – and they would often involve a description of their life before basic income, a description during it, and then a questioning of what comes next. And, on these notes and reflections on beginnings, connections, methods and my own role in all this, I turn to the first analytical chapter.

…

Chapter 1: Loosening ties between worth and work

> "It was incredible. The possibilities that it gave us – that it even gave us possibilities!
> It showed me that government does talk to us and listen.
> The right government. And we had been missing that piece."
>
> *– Diane, former basic income recipient*

I begin with some of the personal stories of basic income that I encountered during my fieldwork and interviews. Through what often evolved into several hour-long conversations on street benches, in living rooms, or in the local coffee shop, I gained some insight into some of my participants' experiences with basic income. The way in which these individuals felt about basic income and experienced it was interwoven with their personal life histories, hardships and often chronic illnesses, and, as I came to understand, it was also closely intertwined with how they felt about being on other forms of social assistance. At times, the way my participants compared being on basic income with being on social assistance was articulated through certain metaphors, which I came to realize were quite central to the way in which they felt being on basic income, and how they imagined the two respectively.

Indeed, the basic income projects were different in character from existing forms of social assistance in that they represented a "no-strings attached" approach. As opposed to Ontario Works (OW) – the welfare program that was previously deployed – you did not have to meet certain criteria of showing up at employment centers, applying for X number of jobs in X number of days, or meeting with social workers. And, as opposed to the Ontario Disability Support Program, (ODSP), you did not have to prove that you suffered from a chronic illness that prevented you from working. The main criteria, besides being a resident in one of the three municipalities where it was being tested, was that you had to be "living on a low-income" defined as "under $34,000 per year if you're single or under $48,000 per year if a couple" (government of Ontario, Basic Income Pilot Project official website). At the same time, there were also some similarities to existing social assistance programs, such as the 50% claw back

rate. For every dollar earned while on the basic income 50 cents was taken off your basic income. Moreover, the basic income amount – $16,989 per year for a single person and $24,027 per year for a couple – was arguably still not quite *livable,* (perhaps especially considering that the initial estimate was that anything under $34,000 is considered low-income).

Yet, while these continuities with existing social assistance programs were present, the projects did, nonetheless, represent an acknowledgement on the side of the government that something was not working, or, at least, that a new approach might be needed to more adequately address poverty. As reflected in the provincial government's 2016 poverty reduction report, it was an acknowledgement that too many people in the province were living below the poverty line, and that something about the current social assistance regime was failing people. Of course, this is perhaps not so surprising when, for example, the maximum amount of income received on OW is $721 per month, which comes to $8652 per year – a far cry from that $34,000. In a CCPA report from 2016, it is estimated that the OW amount is 59% lower than what you need to just crawl above what is considered the low-income threshold (Tiessen, 2016). Similarly, for ODSP, though the amount people receive differs more widely depending on individual circumstances, the CCPA projects that it is on average 33% less than what is considered a living wage (ibid).

These figures reflect and flow out of a history of considerable cuts to the province's social welfare programs, especially since the 1990's, under the Conservative's "Common Sense" revolution (see: Dolson 2018; Maki 2011; Gavigan & Chunn 2007), which I discuss further in this chapter. These unlivable amounts also reflect a narrative which frames the poor, the unemployed, and those who are not able as undeserving and unworthy (see: Ferguson 2015; Wacquant 2009; Calnitsky 2018). The way in which this narrative is experienced, and, in turn, challenged, is what I focus on in the following. What I found was that basic income – in part, because of its novelty and its departure not just from some of the structure of social assistance programs but also from the narrative(s) surrounding these – sparked a feeling of hopefulness, and carved an opening in an otherwise stigmatizing system through which a new kind of possibility was temporarily imaginable for some of my participants.

The individuals I write about here were part of the basic income pilot projects, and they received basic income anywhere between six and eighteen months, (either as a monthly check or direct deposit). Most of them are from Lindsay, but Fiona, who I met with on several occasions, is from Hamilton. They are also all women. Most of them were on disability support (ODSP) at the time I was doing fieldwork. Speaking mostly to women was not a deliberate choice (and as such, I do not explicitly approach my participants' stories from a 'gender-perspective'). While it was, I think, largely coincidental that I came to speak mostly to women, (in that many of them were introduced to me by Joli), and while it is true that I did not, in any sense, partake in any kind of choosing based on gender, this predominance of women interviewees is perhaps also a reflection, (largely un-conscious), of being more comfortable in approaching women, and vice versa. This, however, remained unspoken between us. These women experienced poverty or income insecurity, all in varying degrees, as they were all living on low incomes, as well as living with chronic illness. And, in part because of this, the relationship between work, ability (and disability), and self-worth was a central theme that flowed through our conversations, and as such, are central themes in their stories of basic income.

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When I first arrive in Lindsay on a hot afternoon in early August, having driven there from Toronto, I spend most of the day walking around – up and down Kent Street – the main commercial street – and through the residential areas around the river that runs through the town. Passing an old wooden house with a wrap-around porch, I see a small poster hanging on the front window on which is written, in colorful letters: *Support BI*. Feeling a little lost, unsure of what to do next, and how to begin my fieldwork now that I had arrived, I spend a lot of time sitting on a street bench, observing the passing people and cars. I am struck by how large the vehicles are – mostly pick-up trucks and SUVs zooming by. After a few days of bench sitting, car watching, drinking Tim Hortons coffee and driving around, I go to the town's social service office, further down Kent Street, both to hang up a flier I have made, asking former basic income recipients for interviews, and because I thought the social workers there might be able to provide me with some information, or even with some contacts. I sit outside for a while, trying to formulate questions that I want to ask the social workers, but, at this point, I feel so unsure that I can't

manage to gather anything coherent, and so I decide to simply enter the large grey concrete building, with its large parking lot wrapped around it. On the first floor I find a Service Canada office, and next to it, the social assistance office. There is a bulletin board outside the office, and I immediately notice a poster which reads: *Dinner for former Guaranteed Income Recipients*. It is an invitation to a series of four dinners that will take place throughout the spring and summer; the dinners are organized by the local Salvation Army to offer community support and guidance for former recipients, after the program had gotten cancelled (recipients received their last BI checks in late March 2019). There it is, I think: a mark of basic income's existence in the community, and an acknowledgement that there are after-effects of the project's cancellation.

As I stand writing notes in front of the board, a woman comes out of the office and asks if she can help me – perhaps my prolonged presence in front of the board while taking notes on it seems a little strange and suspicious – and I tell her that I am doing research on basic income. Her tone changes immediately and completely and, smiling, she tells me, yes of course I can, and, as she turns to go back into the office, she hesitates, turns back towards me and she tells me that she may know some former recipients that might be interested in talking to me. I thank her profusely, and she returns to her office. After standing there for a little while longer, I decide to follow her. She seems a little confused at my return, and I inquire if I can maybe just ask her a few questions about the basic income projects. I tell her that, as she is a social worker in Lindsay, I am sure she has some valuable insights. At that exact moment, a woman enters the office with a letter in her hand and the social worker, seemingly a little relieved, says, "ah, here you go, Rose was on basic income, I'm sure she would be happy to talk to you;" and then, to Rose, "Hi dear, she is doing research on basic income, would you talk to her?" and, back to me, "Rose is a very honest person, she'll tell you the truth".

Sink or Swim?

> "Either you have to sink or you swim. Being on basic income I was swimming. Now I feel like I am sinking again…"
> *– Rose (former BI recipient)*

"Today is a bad day," Rose tells me. We're sitting outside the social assistance office on a wooden bench in the foyer, while she is unfolding the letter – the reason for her appointment. Rose suffers from Crohn's disease and has been on ODSP (disability support) since 2000. When she first heard about the basic income project from her daughter's friend, she was sceptical. "I thought it was a scam actually, and then people were telling me that they got it and they had a house, and I had understood it that you couldn't have a house, you couldn't have this and that, but then I knew people who had brand new cars, houses, and their partner had died, and were *not* living on a dime and they were still getting it!" So, Rose applied for basic income, a process she describes as easy and uncomplicated. She did not have to provide "endless documentation" to prove her condition, as she had under ODSP, and she was not met with any of the suspicion she felt during the application process for disability. The income she received from basic income was also less conditional than her ODSP – they did not scale back the amount according to her husband's income as is done with ODSP. She hesitates for a moment, looks at me, and then opens the letter and says, "here I'll show you, I don't mind."

I ask her how people around her, her family for instance, reacted to her signing up to be part of the basic income project. She tells me that everyone seemed happy for her. And, she also felt happier herself on it. But, at the same time, she tells me, there are people, *people who work*, who she knows look down on her, even though they don't say it to her upfront. I ask her if that changed when she was on basic income. I wondered if she felt a distinction because she had seemed to suggest feeling happier on it. She says, both yes and no. She had still felt looked down upon. "I am a poor person," she tells me, "like there is poor and middle class and high class. Like my sister, she looks down on me because I am poor." Rose tells me her sister is in the 'high class,' because she and her husband own a farm and he is a fireman and she is a teacher.

Rose's husband has worked at Walmart for 25 years, and his hours vary – often he is not given a schedule more than one week in advance. His time is at the mercy of the corporation, week to week, which, in turn, makes the amount that Rose gets from ODSP unreliable from month to month as the amount is tied to his income. But on basic income, the amount stayed the same each month. She tells me, while lowering her voice, that if she wanted to, she could cheat the system – that, in fact, she knows people who do. This one woman, for example, does not let ODSP know

that she lives with her boyfriend, even though she should report his income because they are technically considered to be common-law. If she doesn't report it, her monthly income is higher. Yet, there is disapproval in Rose's voice; "it isn't fair that some people cheat when I am trying to do my best to do everything right. I would never be able to do that. Eventually you get caught anyway," she says.

Being on basic income for a short amount of time did not make Rose feel like she could completely step outside of being poor, nor feel completely like other's perceptions of her had changed. Yet, not having to prove anything except your income level from the year before was a great relief. To receive ODSP assistance, for instance, you have to "prove your poverty." In this case, when Rose initially went on ODSP, she had to prove her chronic illness, and why and how it meant that she couldn't work. Her poverty is, it would seem, intrinsically connected to her illness, both in the way she feels about it, and in the very fact that she has no other access to income than ODSP, which does not afford her a life out of poverty. To her – at least in that moment in time when we sat there and talked – poverty felt like something that defined her life situation. It was something she felt looked down upon for, even by a close family member. "Either you have to sink or you swim," she then tells me. I nod. And then she adds, "being on basic income I was swimming. But now I feel like I am sinking again."

'Like going down a dark alley at night'

Making a distinction between disability insurance and basic income, and associating disparate feelings to each respectively, was something that other of my participants seemed to do as well. Diane tells me that on basic income she was finally able to get ahead; Joanie that she felt suffocated by being on disability insurance, but on basic income she felt like she could breathe more freely; Fiona that it was a major life changer for her, because she could start doing what she called, "self-improvements." On a material level, having more disposable income each month made it possible to not just live from one pay-check to the next, and participants were able to either save a bit of money each month, or slowly crawl out of debt. This made new material conditions possible, and enabled each to imagine different possibilities for the future. Rose tells me that each month she and her husband had to go to Money Mart to borrow money to make

ends meet – a financial service company that lends money immediately with (very) steep interest rates. “You are basically buying debt,” Rose says, but, with even the slight increase in income on basic income, she tells me they do not need to go to Money Mart any longer.

Rose describes the feeling of having to go to Money Mart, knowing you are falling deeper and deeper into debt, as one of sinking. And if you are not sinking, you are, at best, stuck. Hage (2009) calls this feeling, “stuckedness”. As Heather and Diane express me to, there is no apparent way to ‘get ahead’ when you are on social assistance; you are perceived in certain negative ways, and always have ‘a little too little.’ Hage (2009) has written about what he calls *existential mobility* – that is, “that a viable life presupposes a form of imaginary mobility, a sense that one is going somewhere” (1). Besides their obvious lack of material mobility, this idea also resonates with some of Heather, Rose and Diane’s frustrations – this lack of an imagined mobility – regardless of what that might mean to them each. Heather tells me that on basic income her monthly income rose from $1921 dollars to $2100, which was enough to start saving. Because, she says, “right now they got us in a position where we can't move forwards, we can only move backwards and that's more menacing to society that anything else, because the reason why so many people are on OW or whatever get bad reputations is because they are so fucking poor that maybe they have to do something illegal, you know, and that's what happens, that's a big factor.” And in Diane’s words: “It is like going down a dark alley in a bad neighbourhood at night.” It’s unsafe, and there is no light.

The narrative that (still) makes you sink

> “Yes, I would often hear people telling me, you know, the usual thing, like *get a job* or *you are just being lazy*, or *you’re a leech on society*… You know, things like that.”
>
> – Fiona, former BI recipient

Margaret Somers (1994), argues that “people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that

‘experience’ is constituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives” (10-11). These narratives, Somers points out, are rarely of our own making. The feelings that Rose describes, feeling looked down upon, the feelings of ‘stuckedness,’ and those which Fiona describes in the quote above – that come from being judged as lazy and exploitative – all reflect something central within a dominant narrative on poverty.

In the following then, I consider some of the literature that describes policies underpinned by such a narrative, and which helped to shape it. There is a considerable literature about the ‘neoliberalization’ of the welfare state. Much of this critique centers on the way in which the state actively engages in a moral judgement of the poor through the formulation and design of social assistance policies that contribute to an ongoing process of stigmatization and social exclusion of welfare-recipients. Literature on social assistance policies in the North American context suggests that concurrent with the ‘neoliberal turn,’ beginning in the 1980s, welfare policies have become increasingly punitive, and have contributed to demonizing and vilifying welfare recipients (see: Gottschalk, 2000; Handler and Hasenfeld, 2006; Maki, 2011; Wacquant 2009; Dolson 2018). Income tests, punitive sanctions, the application process, and other bureaucratic processes that characterize most current social assistance programs often can produce feelings of stigma and of shame (Handler & Hasenfield, 2007; Biewen & Steffes, 2010; Gottschalk, 2000).

As Morgan and Maskovsky (2003) argue, with the ascent of neoliberal welfare reform policies in the United States beginning in the 1980s, and taking off in the 1990s, welfare recipients and the urban poor were placed under intense scrutiny, and their social and personal value became increasingly linked to productivity. Social assistance became heavily influenced by a narrative that, at its’ worst, sought to cast welfare recipients as lazy frauds, un-willing to work for a living (Standing, 2019). The idea of the lazy or undeserving poor, though, is not novel to the neoliberal age; in fact, the moralization of productivity has roots back to the “1834 English poor law” in England, in which the poor were distinguished as either undeserving or deserving, depending upon their situation and ability (Holloway and Golightley, 2016). That said, however, the 1980s

and 1990s did see a significant proliferation of this perception as Nelund and Woolford (2013) point out, and the “emphasis and value placed on paid work carries a particular valence during neoliberal times” (ibid, 15). Operating from this premise of distrust, the line of thought goes that any welfare policies, (if any should exist at all that is), should be heavily conditional. As Standing (2019) points out, this view came mostly from the right-wing of the political spectrum. But, he argues, as the left was pushed into a position of defensiveness, they came to also defend this kind of conditional model, albeit grounded in the belief that social assistance policies *should* exist. (An irrelevant distinction for the poor, it should be noted.) Consequently, a narrative of questioning the poor’s ‘deservedness,’ and a moralization of poverty, became increasingly normalized (Standing 2019). Moreover, Nelund and Woolford (2013) argue in their ethnography of welfare recipients in Winnipeg, Manitoba, that this narrative, and what they call “neoliberal citizenship,” is somehow internalized by welfare recipients so that they perform what is expected of them, reflecting an awareness of what is undesirable in terms of the view and expressed attitudes to welfare and work. They find that their participants “resist the stereotype of being welfare dependent by presenting themselves as embracing of work, no matter the quality of the job” (ibid, 15).

In Ontario, more specifically, the neoliberal or ‘punitive turn’ have also influenced the province’s social assistance policies heavily. When Conservative Premier Mike Harris came to power in Ontario in 1995, he launched what his party called a ‘common-sense revolution.’ Its aim was sweeping privatization – cutting existing social programs and services, (including social assistance), as much as possible (Dolson 2018). As Dolson (2018) describes it, what happened can be seen as “a discursive shift from an ‘entitlement-based’ universal regime to an exclusive and targeted work-based regime” (6). The premise was now that the individual assume most (if not all) responsibility for their own poverty, and that the best way to get out of poverty is, simply, employment. This is a moment in history that many of my participants mention to me. Fiona tells me that since the gutting of social assistance under Harris, the rates haven’t really gone up, not even to match inflation. However, she tells me, “before Doug Ford’s government, we were getting closer to catching back up to where social assistance was before Mike Harris made all those cuts. And he was in the 90's, and we still haven’t caught up to where we were, and now we won’t.” Indeed, in 1995, Harris cut social assistance rates by 21.6 percent and

introduced what he called "the welfare diet," claiming a social assistance recipient could in fact live on far less that what they were receiving. The motivation behind this was presumably to signal even further to the unemployed that if you are going to live off government money you will have to live on the bare minimum. And while the reforms were criticized at the time, and continued to be, social assistance rates, as Fiona tells me, still have not recovered, never mind kept up proportionally with the cost of living (Kennedy, 2020).

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When I meet Fiona, the first thing she tells me is that she is happy people are doing research on basic income because she was afraid that all the stories and data would be lost after the program's cancellation, because the research funding was also cancelled. We are sitting on a bench shaded from the July sun in downtown Toronto. She had asked me to meet her in Toronto instead of in Hamilton where she lives, because it was a good opportunity for her to get out a little. She has lived in Hamilton her whole life and feels suffocated by the city sometimes and so, she tells me, she is always down to take advantage of an opportunity to get away. I'm drinking an iced-coffee and she's having a blue slushy from the Tim Hortons that was our designated meeting place at her suggestion. She is amazed when I say that I've never had a blue slushy in my life, and she insists I try it. She seems comfortable, and tells me she's already given lots of interviews to newspapers and even some talks about her lived-experience, as she puts it, about being on basic income, and also some about living in poverty. "But," she said, "it was more fun speaking about basic income." Because the perspective was different; she got to focus more on the positive, the things she felt enabled to do, and not those she was unable to do. She felt like her mental health stabilized when she was on basic income. "One of the biggest triggers," she explains, "because I have borderline personality disorder, is finances, not having enough, not being able to afford to eat. Most people don't think this, but when you're living in poverty you are essentially trapped in your apartment, you don't have money to go meet your friends for coffee, to go grab a lunch or take a random trip out of town for the day. And it doesn't help that ODSP watches your every step, like I have to report to them everywhere I go." She also tells me enthusiastically how being part of the pilot project made her realize further what she was passionate about doing, and it allowed her to connect with other like-minded people to engage in

anti-poverty advocacy work – especially (which she notes is slightly ironic perhaps) after the cancellation. It gave her a sense of community.

While we're talking, she checks her phone several times, and apologizes. She explains that it's because she's waiting to hear back from a job she has applied to, a part-time one at a shoe store, but she still hasn't heard anything and it has been a week. It's always the same story, she says, but she's still hopeful. I ask her why she wants this job, and she says everyone always thinks that people on social assistance don't want to work, and tells me readily about some of the nasty things she has heard from people – like *get a job*, or accusations of being lazy or being a leech on society. A few weeks later when I meet her in Hamilton, together with a few other former basic income recipients that she has done advocacy work with, she tells us:

> "See, I spent my entire life in poverty, I guess, I didn't realize this until I got on basic income, I guess in my head I thought, kind of, I didn't deserve better because every day of my life was a constant struggle. Even with BI ending I actually feel like I deserve better and deserve to live like a normal person. and I don't know if anyone else noticed this on BI, but didn't you find you got treated better out in public, at local stores, that you were treated as everyone else, that you weren't a poor person? Cause I know that one thing I have noticed since losing BI, is it's amazing how many small and local businesses treat you like shit if you are poor. I had a few instances, one was at a local restaurant in Hamilton, *Bread Bar*, that I will never visit again …I smoked at the time, I walked in and I had the waitress literally jump back yelling "Ew, smoke, ew" and then the person I was with – because I was just like whatever cause I'm used to that shit", but she wasn't – she is a social worker and she stood up and actually tried filing a complaint but the manager of that restaurant never bothered responding. And then the second incident was *Bread Bar,* again, on James Street, I went there because they have really good bread pudding and I was with my mom and I was wearing my winter coat, and like that winter coat is very much on its last legs and a bit dirty because I couldn't put it in the wash because of the tearing, and me and my mom were quite literally given the bums rush. Told to stand in the corner while they prepped our order and rushed out of there as quickly as we could. And I was like, I can't be the only person getting this sort of experience who is poor."

Here, Fiona is making an unambiguous distinction between what she felt like on BI and what she felt like before; using the language of deservedness, she expressly feels more deserving on BI, which seems to have had a direct positive impact on her self-esteem. This is true for Fiona despite the fact that the amount of income she got on BI was not much more than on ODSP, on account of the way her rent is figured into her ODSP, because she lives in public housing, (on basic income she had to pay more of her rent). Nonetheless, the feeling and experience between the two is profoundly different for her. I ask her why she thought she was treated differently on BI, if there perhaps was anything different about her appearance, or if it was because those small businesses knew she was on it, and she answers no to both. Instead, she tells me that she saw herself differently, that she felt empowered and able to distance herself from that which she normally feels constrained by. The way she categorizes her poverty temporally is the time before and the time after BI – she feels able to step outside of the feeling of being in poverty somehow while on BI, even though the income amount was not significantly different. The story she tells herself about her place in the world was profoundly altered by her experience of and while on basic income. As Standing (2017) proposes, perhaps "the emancipatory value of basic income is greater than the money value" here.

David Calnitsky (2016), who has written about a previous experiment that took place in Dauphin, a small town in Manitoba, in the 1970's, called *Mincome,* that also sought to test a new approach to social assistance, argues that Mincome was perceived as significantly different than existing welfare policies. Although the experiment suffered a similar fate to the Ontario projects, and was prematurely cancelled, with most of its data archived and ignored until recently, Calnitsky argues that it ran long enough to reveal that Mincome appeared more "normal" in the eyes of participants than welfare did. He writes that "the bright line dividing the deserving and undeserving poor turned fuzzy" (ibid, 28). Indeed, what he seeks to suggest is that the narrative surrounding Mincome (effectively basic income) that was internalized by participants (and even non-participants) was significantly different than other welfare programs.

Thinking back to the constructed dichotomy between the deserving and underserving, it is reasonable to suggest that the central factor, which separates the two, is work – the lines are drawn between those who can and do and those who don't and can't. Indeed, as Ferguson (2010) points out, these kinds of policies represent a shift away from a back-to-work or 'productivist'

approach because of their unconditionality. The existence of these new policies, he argues, represents the possibility for a new politics of redistribution, one which, on the one hand, rejects a neoliberal rationale of a work-centered approach but which also, on the other hand, exists within a neoliberal framework - the latter of which I return to in chapter 3.

Back on the bench in downtown Toronto, Fiona tells me it is not even that she doesn't *want* to work, but that it's more that she can't handle a regular full-time schedule because of both her mental and physical disability. Fiona grew up in public housing in Hamilton with her mother and brother and as long as she can remember her mother was on and off social assistance programs – on welfare and later on disability insurance. But, she emphasizes, her brother refuses to apply for any social assistance even though he struggles to find work because he doesn't trust the government. Pausing for a moment, she says, "I mean yes. It's hard to trust the government when it's continually slashing your ability to work, it's kind of hard to trust they have your best interest at heart."

When I ask Fiona, and several other of my participants who were also on ODSP, why they think that the amount given is so insufficient, many answer that it is to incentivize people to work. Rose tells me: "I think what it is, they are trying to get people back to work. So, they are trying to take away the feeling that it is, oh yeah great to be on disability but we are taking this much away so you will get off it. And I understand that. Like I do. It's like with OW, they push and push and push you to go out and get a job". Do you think it works? I ask. "No, like I said I would love to work".

Fiona told me the same thing. I asked her if she thought ODSP worked. "No", she answered.

"Do you think that with the implementation of the basic income project, that was one of the aims of the project was to actually test if people would work?" I asked her.

"I think part of it was to help. Those of us on disability got an extra 500 dollars because there is a lot of stigma if you are on disability that you are not able to work. There are people on disability who are able to work, it's just ODSP does not give you enough. Even if you are unable to work you still don't have enough to survive on. And if you can't, you should have the bare minimum, enough to survive, enough for a little bit of leisure activity, which is not possible, not at all no."

"Do you think it opened up the possibility of allowing people not to work? But at the same time not necessarily being stigmatized for not working?" I then asked. It was a little clumsy. It was early in my fieldwork.
"No, I actually don't know anyone who didn't want to work. Yeah. I think most people given the choice between social assistance and work would choose work."

The subtle misunderstanding that happened here was something I felt guilty about, and tried to clarify afterwards, but I was never quite sure if I succeeded. Fiona thought I was asking if the basic income project allowed for a proliferation of "laziness," in a negative and derogatory sense; in other words, she thought I was reiterating a line of thought she has encountered and been victim to countless times, namely, that social assistance opens-up a space for people to *not* work, and that this is a *bad* thing, because work, (paid labour here), in this line of thought, is always the end-goal. What I was trying to ask her, however, was firstly, whether the project differed from existing social assistance policies in its position and relationship to work, and secondly, if she thought that basic income in this context had sparked a kind of 'post-work' sentiment – if it reflected a questioning of paid work, or enabled an opportunity to be without work without feeling stigmatized. This kind of misunderstanding, especially early in my fieldwork, before I perhaps understood fully the sensitivity or even defensiveness that would arise in response to this kind of question happened several times.

Of course, from her response, and indeed from the misunderstanding itself, it becomes clear that the answer to my question is not really so simple, but that there is an insistence on the *willingness* to work. An insistence that responds to the narrative, and the ideology behind it, that ties worth and work together, drawing the lines between worthiness and unworthiness along those who work and those who do not or cannot.

Janet, who was also on ODSP and on basic income in Lindsay, tells me that she is ashamed of not working. But that she can't really help that she can't. "I went to university, I went to college and I couldn't," she says, "I tried periodically getting jobs, and I love them but I eventually ended up being let go because I miss too much time from being ill. And being called not dependable is

such a hit to me. So, I thought, I can contribute to my community by volunteering. And basic income allowed me this. I think it made me feel a lot better."

And, as another window into what this narrative of deservedness might feel like, Heather told me:

> "We lost our autonomy. We are disrespected again. Like they don't care. We are just the scum of the earth. And we were not, we were productive people in society, just because we can't no more, doesn't mean we aren't still using our brains you know… We are."

She is here referring to the cancellation of the basic income project. Heather suffers from fibromyalgia and has a tumor in her back, and as such is on disability insurance. She was happier and a little freer on basic income, she told me. She had a few hundred dollars more in her bank account every month. There was something new about it. We're sitting in her living room in the social housing apartment building where she lives in Lindsay. Diane also lives in the building and is actually the one who has put me in touch with Heather. In it, most of the tenants have been on basic income (because it is a public housing unit, most tenants were automatically eligible). Her cat is caressing her leg as we are speaking and she is petting it lovingly. The small-ish living room is filled with plants, some of which are smoke-able and which she tells me she uses for pain alleviation. There are several paintings and drawings on the walls, some of which her daughter made, she tells me proudly, and some of which her grandchildren drew for her. She misses them as she doesn't get to see them very often. They live far away and the logistics are always difficult. Her eyes are teary and I can't help but tear up as well. Her words have re-played in my head many times since I then. We sit in silence for a moment, and probably sensing my emotional response and reaching for a little lightness, she adds, "I call it the farmers attitude - if you aren't working you ain't worth anything!" She laughs a little and picks the cat up into her lap. "Yeah. We need to find a way to change that," I can't help but say.

The value of *doing* (and the stigma of not)

The feeling of having to defend your worth is, I think, what got me; feeling the need to assert that she is still a living, thinking being, even though she cannot use her body to work. Unlike Fiona, however, Heather didn't feel the need to say that she would like to work, but she did feel some need to assert that, at one point in time, she was a productive member of society. In her ethnography on chronic illness, agency and productivity (and the tension between these), Hay (2010) asks, "why would the inability to *do* augment suffering?" (1). Here, being unable to work, and on disability, means not only having to cope with your chronic illness but also being and feeling excluded from the perceived category of those who are worthy and productive. As Hay finds, "people who cannot be productive while chronically ill are at best pitied and at worst condemned, their suffering delegitimized and their worth devalued" (2010, 11). The very thing you are not able to do, and that which you might yourself value, is that which is given centrality, and this is a condition to which you must continuously concede. Describing the experiences of her participants who all suffered from chronic illnesses, Hay (2010) finds that, ‘‘’doing something' surfaced as a pivotal point in patient experience" (4). This, she points out, suggests that "agentive productivity is a cultural expectation that is a central part of what Polanyi (1989) has called a 'basic cultural grammar' and others might term a 'master narrative' (Jameson 1984; Lyotard 1984) or the doxa (Bourdieu 1977) of a meritocratic society" (ibid, 4). As such, there is "no culturally acceptable approach to illness that regards endless days of doing nothing as an appropriate response to being sick" (ibid, 11).

This tension is reflected within the policy of disability support itself; while it is given because it is acknowledged that some are not able to work to make a living because of their illness, it still operates partially under the same rationale as workfare. We can wonder why a policy that acknowledges *inability* to work still pushes towards work as the end-goal. Part of the answer is perhaps grounded in something similar to what Hay theorizes – that is, an expectation that there is agency to be found, agency to *do*, to be productive, even within the conditions of chronic illness. As she notes, "patients can assert moral worth by not letting their condition 'stop them,' and their efforts are socially acknowledged and applauded" (3). There is no culturally acceptable alternative.

In a more general sense, Weeks (2011) argues work is not just an economic practice, it is also essentially a social one – something certainly felt by these women. It can indeed be seen a central part of the 'master narrative' or 'doxa' that is felt. As a model, as Ferguson (2015) puts it, "the twentieth-century social democracies …. were built on the putatively universal figure of 'the worker'. The Keynesian welfare state, as we know, was founded on a pact between capital and organized labor, and the domain we have come to know as 'the social' was constructed on the foundation of the able-bodied worker" (3). As a consequence, "the list of those requiring 'social' intervention (the elderly, the infirm, the child, the disabled, the dependent reproductive woman) sketches a kind of photographic negative of the figure of the wage-earning man" (3).

Returning then to basic income – what I heard in these women's' stories was that basic income had provided a kind of brief lifting of their otherwise heavy burden of illness and poverty. This was perhaps in part due to the end-goal premise of the pilot project being novel and different than existing social assistance policies. It was, as such, also imagined differently. It was *not* a policy for those who were "not able." Instead, it presented a space in which it became possible to imagine something beyond the categories of undeserving and deserving. It perhaps became (temporarily) possible to imagine a "realm in which people do not resist but embrace as ideal the cultural expectations they cannot meet and that oppress their sense of value in the world" (Hay, 2010, 4). Indeed, perhaps it became temporarily possible for Fiona, Rose, Heather and Diane to imagine a new set of ideals and values and a new feeling of worth that goes beyond paid work.

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Chapter 2: Hoping, fighting and telling stories

"If the story of the global justice movement tells us anything it's that the moment there appears to be any sense of an opening, the imagination will immediately spring forth."

- *David Graeber*

"To me, the storytelling was the most compelling. To see how you can understand people's perspectives, and how people understand these things though stories, was the most powerful."

– *Sarah, basic income advocate*

In this chapter and the next, I stay with this idea of an imaginable realm, wherein a re-imagining of worth, or what is valuable, becomes temporarily possible. Continuing with the themes of imagination and narrative, I move from these individual stories to collective ones, so to speak, as I consider the emergence of a kind of shared narrative around basic income, which is born out of the stories that were told and shared in the community and among advocates. I look at the ways in which 'a basic income imaginary' manifested temporarily in Lindsay, and begin to map out the social movement surrounding the idea. Spending time with and getting to know some of the advocates in Lindsay fighting for basic income, who I came to greatly admire, I found expressions of hope and a profound passion to fight for positive social change, despite the recent cancellation of the projects. And though basic income was no longer a tangible reality in the community at the time I was doing my fieldwork, it seemed to live on somehow in stories people would share about it, and in the continual process of storytelling surrounding it.

I draw on the concept of *the radical imagination*, which Knasnabish and Haiven (2014) argue is an important analytical concept when looking at social movements. It is "a collective activity produced through dialogic encounters rather than an individual possession or faculty, the radical imagination is our capacity to conceive of the world as it might be otherwise, and it animates movements for social change" (2). And while I turn further to the vision that was imagined of

what that world might look like in the next chapter, I suggest here that the *capacity*, and the act of engaging actively in a collective imagining of how it might be otherwise, was a profound part of what animated the movement, manifested in the stories circulated and shared throughout the community in Lindsay.

As Knasnabish (2019) further points out, the advocacy work done in a particular social movement is inevitably enmeshed and entangled in the socio-cultural context in which it exists. The advocacy work, and indeed my own fieldwork, involved looking at the moral economy of Lindsay – as Mau (2007) notes, most social communities, "tend to invoke a moral repertoire for all kinds of social exchanges and transfers that leads them to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate social practices" (1). Drawing on the work of E.P. Thompson, who originally formulated the concept of the moral economy[6], Mau defines it as a social community's notions of "the just distribution of resources and social exchange" (1). As basic income reflects an alternative approach to income distribution, the introduction of the pilot project was bound to somehow interact with the moral economy of the community, (and not just in Lindsay but province- and nation-wide as well). Social assistance, for instance, was often seen as somehow "illegitimate," because the ties between work and worth in the community were strong – recall for example Heather's phrase *the farmers attitude* – "if you aren't working you ain't worth anything".

Yet, as Sarah articulates it (in the opening quote above), the stories surrounding basic income that seemed to speak back to this, the 'counter-narratives' so to speak, enabled an understanding of a different kind of perspective. As Carole McGranahan (2020) argues, "the worlds built through stories create truths, they do not just hold or represent them. Stories give frameworks to hopes, to morals, to politics, to ethnographies" (77). And further, as Kirin Narayan notes, "storytelling, after all, does nothing except shuffle words, and yet through the words' arrangement, new worlds are built and filled with an imaginative wealth" (qtd. in McGranahan,

[6] The concept of the moral economy was originally formulated by E.P. Thompson in his research on widespread foot riots in rural England in the 18th century, but later taken up, used, and interpreted by many scholars and researches. The concept was used widely by James Scott in his research on peasant rebellion in Southeast Asia (1977), and more recently, economist Samuel Bowles have written extensively about it. The definition I use is formulated by Steffen Mau (2007).

2020, 76). The little world built through these stories and around the story-telling in Lindsay gave a framework to a hope and a different kind of moral (and indeed also to this ethnography), and "filled with imaginative wealth" enabled a kind of radical imaginary. And lastly, because of their 'closeness', the stories helped to create a kind of legitimacy.

The Lindsay advocates

"I was working for the Ministry, and I had for a long time, and eventually I just got tired of the cubicle, you know, and I decided to go out on my own. And then, I actually became part of the precarious work culture. And, at first, we were skeptical about basic income. But then from my perspective, I realized there was something to this," Roderick tells me. I had asked him and Joli how they got started with basic income advocacy work. We are sitting at Boiling Over Coffee Vault, one of the few, if not only, independent coffee shop alternatives to Tim Hortons in Lindsay. It is Saturday, early afternoon in mid-August, and there is the smell of freshly brewed coffee in the air. It is sweltering hot, the sun is shining in through the window, the leather-like fabric of the couches we are sitting on is sticky, and there is a constant progression of black flies landing and departing from every surface.

"Well, actually, we started out conservative," Joli tells me, and replies to my obvious surprise with a 'I know, right?' look.

"I've always been a moderate conservative growing up, like in my 20's, but the more I read about basic income the more I started to like it, the more it started to shape all of my politics, and I consider myself a progressive now!" Roderick says. They both laugh.

"But," Joli quickly adds, "we don't define ourselves as Liberals! We really want to keep it as a non-partisan issue." Roderick nods in agreement.

"For me," she continues, "I came at it from an empowerment and resilience angle. And okay once we went through a bunch of research, we thought ok, this does actually seem to work – given certain existing social service structures are kept in place, and so, I thought with all the crap going on in the world, the only way people are going to have time to care is if their basic needs are met. And I saw this as a solution for more of the caring work, especially for women too, and the advocacy work. People have time for it when they have their basic needs met."

Joli is doing her doctorate research on the impacts of the pilot project, together with three researchers from various universities, gathering stories from participants through a survey at first and then subsequently doing interviews with a portion of the survey respondents. This is especially important because the official research that was planned to assess outcomes of the project was cancelled when the actual project got cancelled.

"When we heard Lindsay was one of the cities for basic income, we thought this was a sign we should launch something, a progressive vehicle here in Lindsay, to support not just basic income but other measures to put people ahead of corporations and so on," Roderick explains.

"So that is when you started the *Lindsay Advocate*?" I already knew about the *Lindsay Advocate* because I had seen and read several articles by them which had been linked on the Basic Income Facebook group I had joined, by way of an invite from Joli. The Facebook group had been started by a few recipients in Lindsay when the projects were cancelled, and now continued to be a platform for ongoing discussion. There are several copies of the paper spread out on the coffee table, as well as one Joli handed to me when we first sat down. When they print a new issue, they distribute the paper to all the local businesses.

"Yeah, we did it online for a year and now we publish it physically too. We were living in Cambridge, Ontario, and then we just packed up our stuff to move here to be completely immersed; we wanted to experience the full three years, because I'm curious about many of the [same] things as you are. And we played an active role in spreading the stories and the human perspective," Joli answers, and Roderick picks up, "and at first, there was very little awareness in the community about basic income in the beginning, and this is a very conservative town traditionally, you know, they didn't know what it was, we had to constantly define it. We had to constantly help them understand what it was. The education process was long, the government had trouble initially with getting people to sign up, they had to do outreach through various social service groups."

"If you start getting the key actors involved, making them see that this is necessary, then policy changes."

"But then it changed back!" Joli laments. Roderick and I both nod to join in her disappointment. Joli waves to a woman at the other end of the coffee shop. "That's Diane, I wonder if she sorted out her issue." She gets up and goes over to say hello. They greet each other enthusiastically. Roderick and I talk a bit about the coffee.

"Were you involved in encouraging people to sign up for basic income?" I ask when Joli comes back.

"Absolutely, yes."

"And what were people's attitudes, were they reluctant, skeptical or they just didn't know what it was?"

"All of the above!" Joli says emphatically. "But once the poorer people realized what could happen most of them were on board, unless they were on ODSP because they were a bit more fearful they would lose other benefits."

"Do you think people associated it less with stigma? Was it seen differently than other forms of social assistance?" I knew this was a bit of a loaded question.

"Well, you know, the business community supported basic income, and then the mayor and the council finally came around because originally they had rejected the idea. The business community loved the idea. A lot of businesses were started because of that – Ancient Wisdom down there and *Fresh FueLL* right next door," Joli points down towards the street. *Fresh FueLL* is a take-out health food restaurant and *Ancient Wisdom* a wellness and alternative medicine store. This was the first time, out of what became many, that these two examples about how basic income was spent were brought up and shared.

"Yes", Roderick adds, "It shows the power of basic income to help entrepreneurs."

"So, do you think it was well known who was on basic income?" I ask. Joli quickly says that she doesn't think so.

"But I think that many people nevertheless chose to share because of that lack of stigma that you talked about. It wasn't like oh yeah, I am collecting welfare, it was slightly different. Also, because so many people were doing it," Roderick reflects.

"And when you have one in ten people on it, everyone knows somebody! And it makes it more socially acceptable, and they weren't all stay-at-home people, some people worked at the museum, or restaurants. And these are all kinds of people, upstanding citizens you know," Joli compliments. She sighs. "A lot of people saw a dead-end for their future and that is a terrible way to have to live. Very discouraging." We sit in silence for a minute. A few black flies land on the rim of my coffee cup and take off again. It's getting hotter as the morning is progressing, and Joli invites me to come with her to the local Salvation Army to help set up for a support dinner for former basic income recipients. I accept the invitation happily and ask her if I can also

actually attend the dinner, while acknowledging that I understood, if that might seem weird or inappropriate. She thinks for a moment but then says that I am welcome.

Though I didn't realize it when I first met them, Joli and Roderick would become central for my research. They facilitated many of my insights into and connections with the community in Lindsay, and they were themselves also central to the very life of basic income in Lindsay. They welcomed me into their home and Joli, who knew just about everyone involved in basic income in the town, introduced me to many of the basic income recipients I interviewed. Because she was loved in the community – for her passion for social justice, her fighting spirit and her ability to sincerely listen and learn – I quickly gained trust in interviews because she had vouched for me. She seemed to take a kind of fluid approach to her knowledge of basic income and intersecting issues, and listening to new stories and experiences fueled her advocacy work and her passions. Roderick was a journalist and writer, and had written extensively on basic income. He shared Joli's love for sharing stories, and, besides that, he and I also shared a particular affection for Montreal, and for Leonard Cohen's music and writing. They were a good team. They would often joke about being a kind of basic income couple, complementing each other in their skills and likes.

In the summer of 2019, when I was doing my fieldwork, the cancellation was still fresh and hung heavily in the community. Besides organizing events and writing and publishing articles on basic income, Joli and Roderick had also created a questionnaire for the local candidates, as this was the time leading up to the federal election, (those being from the Conservative Party, the Liberal Party, the NDP and the Green Party), to create more awareness for the community on where the candidates stood on specific issues, including basic income. While I am focusing on Joli and Roderick here, there were other advocates fighting this as well. Mike Perry, a social worker and former lawyer in Lindsay had been so upset about the cancellation and that he, along with three former BI recipients, launched a class action lawsuit against the provincial government, which had been taken up by a law firm in Toronto, that now represented them. I understood that they were doing what they could to prevent a feeling of hopelessness sink over the community. They continued to publish stories on people's experiences, and on the aspects which they believed basic income might help to improve – food security, health, child poverty, housing – and

continued to plan further advocacy work; all this despite feeling that the path to basic income now seemed a little longer and a little steeper after the abrupt cancellation.

The moral economy of Lindsay (and beyond)

The advocates were aware of the challenges of introducing a policy such as basic income into a traditionally conservative community, and they came by it quite honestly as they had themselves started out conservative, and opposed to it. This background enabled them to balance different views and understand better those who were sceptical, and those who feared it. They believed from their own experience that education, and simply learning *more* about basic income, could go a long way in generating support. One of the most compelling aspects to make their case, they believed, and one which had been enabled by the existence of the pilot project, was to share and circulate stories of how basic income had helped those who have been left behind.

What was unique to Lindsay, compared to the other two test sites, Hamilton and Thunder Bay, was that it was the site that had the most participants in relation to population. As such, there was a certain normalization that occurred by way of the sheer number of people on it; as Joli put it, when you have one in ten, everyone knows someone on it. Moreover, there was, as the advocates perceived it, something novel about the way in which people 'on it' were seen, and recalling Joli's reflection, that so many people were on it made it somehow more socially acceptable, also because these people weren't all 'stay-at-home' people, but all kinds of people who were perceived as 'upstanding citizens.' Just as Rose, Heather, Fiona and Diane imagined social assistance a little differently than basic income, Joli is here suggesting that this might have also been the case in the wider community as well.

Part of the legitimization that thus occurred arose from the fact that those on basic income were not all 'stay-at-home people.' I should mention that this does not reflect Joli's opinion on 'stay-at-home people' in any way; instead, she was conveying something deeper about the narrative surrounding the relationship between unemployment and deservedness, and indeed about the moral economy of the community. Part of why basic income was perceived as more legitimate and socially acceptable was because it was not just for those who didn't work. I am

understanding 'stay at home' as unemployed here. This, in turn, harkens back to the literature on deservedness, and to the history in the province of 'workfare.' It speaks to the narrative that made Fiona feel branded as a poor person, made Heather feel unworthy because she wasn't a productive citizen, and Rose feel like she was sinking – a narrative wherein earning your own living, working and getting ahead is considered a kind of moral ideal. As such, the fact that basic income was not seen as going against this moral ideal, and therefore seen as more legitimate somehow, presented an opportunity. It was a kind of 'in' to advocate further for basic income – there was a kind of possibility of constructing a new kind of narrative and set of imaginative qualities around basic income than those surrounding government hand-outs. As such, there was an awareness and a reciprocal relationship between the moral economy of the community and the advocacy work. The advocates knew that if, and when, the business community, for example, supported basic income, it would, and did, gain even more ground.

And pitting basic income against current social assistance policies that were widely seen as failing was a strategy that resonated with many. As Mike Perry put it, "no one likes the current welfare system. Nobody! Everybody hates it: rich folks, recipients…" He saw the cancellation of the projects partially reflected as a refusal on the part of the government to try something new, and there was an incredible frustration at the sense of taking one step forwards and then going backwards again – "are we *really* living in the time when we can't try something new?" Mike Perry played a pivotal part not only in pushing back against the cancellation, but also in 'bringing' basic income to Lindsay in the first place, by advocating and pitching it to the provincial governments as one of the sites for the pilot project. When he heard that the province was planning a pilot project on basic income through his work with a local food security group, he decided to host a basic income summit in Fenelon Falls, a small town next to Lindsay, but part of the same municipality. He recognized, as Joli and Roderick, that there might be a lot of scepticism about it in the community, so one way to encourage attendance was to say, regardless of what you might feel about this idea or not feel or think about, just come out and hear more and share your opinions. And, as it went, he told me, there was a larger than expected turnout. And for similar reasons, he told me, they were careful about not framing it as a government hand-out.

There was a hunger for something else and for something better, reflecting an agreement and recognition among advocates, and those who had first hand experiences with living in poverty and being on social assistance that something about the income system was not working. The push for basic income in this context came from a desire to fight poverty, and change that which makes people feel and imagine "a dead-end for their future." As Graeber (2011) argues, "hopelessness isn't natural. It needs to be produced. If we really want to understand this situation, we have to begin by understanding that the last thirty years have seen the construction of a vast bureaucratic apparatus for the creation and maintenance of hopelessness, a kind of giant machine that is designed, first and foremost, to destroy any sense of possible alternative futures" (39). Thinking of the system of social assistance broadly in its historical and current context, as existing within this "giant machine", it indeed, based on the stories I encountered, produces a feeling of hopelessness and imagined dead-end for the future. Yet, as Graeber also maintains, "the effect however is clearly temporary. If the story of the global justice movement tells us anything it's that the moment there appears to be any sense of an opening, the imagination will immediately spring forth" (2011, 40). Gradually throughout my fieldwork, I came to think of basic income as a kind of opening challenging this kind of hopelessness and stasis that Fiona, Heather, Diane and Rose also seemed to feel. And, moreover, one which indeed represents a departure from the current social assistance scheme by also questioning and shifting something within the moral economy of the community. Indeed, as I have suggested, advocates too saw a path within this opening to gather further support for the idea – and this path included sharing and circulating some of the hopeful and compelling stories of basic income that had begun to spring up in the community.

Hopeful Stories

"You know, you got to kick at the darkness
'til it bleeds daylight" - *Diane*

"When they looked at it, the demographics of Lindsay itself, we have lost a lot of industry you know, huge, unemployment is high, poverty level is high," Diane tells me on a warm morning in

early September at Boiling Over Coffee Vault where she has met me for an interview after Joli put us in touch. “And we include in that postal code, rural and urban. So, when they chose us, lord, lord! The possibilities it gave us!” I nod enthusiastically. As we are talking, Joli and Roderick pass by outside the window and wave to us. Joli smiles warmly and, hesitating for a moment, decides to come in. They were on their way to visit a building, (the oldest one in Lindsay, Roderick tells me), that they were considering renting for a basic income event they were organizing. “Sorry to interrupt,” Joli apologizes to us both, and to Diane, “I just wanted to come in and give you a hug!” While Diane tells her about an issue with she is having with ODSP, Roderick tells me a story about a parking enforcement officer he had just run into, who was about to give a parking ticket to a car with a Quebec license plate, but had then decided not to because he didn’t want to scare off visitors. Roderick had noted to the officer that, in any case, there was lots of available parking around. We both laugh, and know that it was most likely my car. After a few moments, they leave, and Diane and I resume.

Having been a supporter of basic income even before it came to Lindsay, and painfully aware of the shortcomings of disability support (ODSP), which she was now back on, Diane had been full of hope when they announced Lindsay would be one of the test sites. She had been there with Mike Perry from the beginning when they pitched Lindsay as a site for the pilot, and, after the cancellation, she was publicly outspoken about her experiences, and in pushing back against the decision. She participated in interviews with several newspapers on the projects, and spoke at events on basic income. And, besides her own, she was also full of stories about people in the community who had been on basic income. She had sworn to keep fighting, as she put it, and to keep telling these stories because she had seen hope, and she had seen some light in her community. To her, sharing these stories were about advocating for basic income and continuing to create awareness about what she saw as a potentially transformative possibility for the community. It was also a deeply personal and emotional undertaking for her. It was, in one sense, a way of coping – as anthropologist Michael Jackson (2002) notes, storytelling indeed can be “a coping strategy that involves making words stand for the world, and then, by manipulating them, changing one’s experience of the world” (18). As Diane tells me, “I gave my word I will fight and I will keep fighting. There is this expression I heard from a Bruce Cockburn song, you know, you got to kick at the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight. And you know, you really gotta.” It

was for her daughter, for her grandchildren, for her friends and for her community. She tells me about the heart attack she suffered a few years back, about her chronic illness, and about her daughter who she is worried about. And, she tells me about today, which had started off stressful because she received a letter from ODSP about a suspension of her income. She is pretty sure it is a mistake, but the possibility has made her morning dark. It was frustrating that they can just with an automatically generated letter cause so much stress, she says grimly.

I remember my meeting with Diane quite viscerally. When she spoke, she had this way about her that drew me into a kind of unquestioning need to continue fighting and hoping for something better. In line with what Jackson (2002) argues, storytelling here can be seen as a "vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances," and thus, "to reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one's own imagination" (2002, 15). Indeed, Diane told me some 'lighter' stories of a couple who were able to save their small taxi company, a friend who was able to start her own home-based business, and about *Fresh FueLL* and *Ancient Wisdom,* both small and local businesses that were able to save themselves because of basic income, stories told to me by Joli, Roderick Mike and others. And she told me some heavier stories. One woman was able to leave a bad situation of domestic abuse because she could afford to. Diane now fears for her though, after the program has been cancelled. Not a unique story, she adds, it is one out of many. "I know a lot of women won't leave if they can't afford a place to live, they will stay. They don't have options. … Basic income helped a woman leave domestic violence. It helped a woman get out. You can't keep people unsafe in their own homes because they are not going to leave. So, it saved one. It may have saved another. But I know it saved one." Joli had also told me a similar story, and I knew this was a sentiment shared and echoed among several of the women involved in the community.

Yet, although clearly the cancellation had been devastating, Diane still found hope because it had helped create an opportunity to fight in a more focused way for these issues, which she saw as interconnected, with basic income at the center of them. The social housing building she lives in got, in her words, "completely saturated," with basic income. And she, along with her friend Heather, who lives in the same building, who I was introduced to by Diane, both encouraged

people to sign up, and it kind of snowballed from there. “It actually wasn't because of me,” Diane insists, “I just told a couple of neighbours and I let them do it. They were more than capable of doing that. I believe in networking. And they were so supportive of so many people, where I live, and outside of that too, of anybody they knew.”

“It was kind of amazing, most people in the building were on BI. It was incredible,” she continues, “there was this man, I’ll leave his name out, who was always walking hunched over who was suddenly walking upright. When I asked him why, he said it was because he had finally gotten a back brace. Can you imagine? Just something as small as that and he was suddenly walking upright. And, he said, 'I can go volunteer again'. … And when you get used to seeing people in a certain way, then you don't realize, like I didn't realize it was happening. And this gentleman, he is such a sweet soul. I didn't realize until he mentioned something and then it was all visual. It was all visual, the change. That he was walking around slumped shouldered, being weighed down, looked like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, but I didn't see that because I was used to seeing it. Like, I am in it myself, but I didn't realize my other neighbours were in it until I'd seen what the pilot was giving them.” Heather told me that the number of ambulances coming to and from the building seemed to significantly decrease during the time when most people in the building were on basic income – the sirens were so much rarer suddenly. “I told Joli too to look into the statistic,” she added, “because it really felt like a lot less. And the fights between tenants in the building also got a lot less. I really think so.” They both imagined and felt that the energy and the feeling seemed to change in their building during the time of basic income; that there was a spark of optimism. People were walking more upright; the burden of a system that wears you down momentarily lifted.

I wondered of course if it was mostly Diane and Heather who might have noticed and felt this but when I asked Diane if people in the building were talking about it, she emphatically said that they were indeed. In all kinds of places. And that it was “basically the same thing as I [Diane] have said, the freedom, the dignity, the hope. The hope was the biggest thing I heard.” There was a kind of mutually reinforcing hope, a sense of hope not only felt by the individual but one collectively felt and share. Thinking of the concept of the radical imagination, the stories shared are indeed a “collective activity produced through dialogic encounters” (Haiven and Knasnabish

2014). And further, as Maggio (2014) suggests, “it could very well be argued that a story is the author of people, because we are changed by the stories we tell as much as those we listen to (Frank, 1997).” Similar to what Jackson (2002) also noted, making a story (and its words) stand for the world, momentarily changes one’s experience of the world, and sharing them then perhaps changes others’ experiences too. The hopeful ‘worlds’ within the stories actively generated a sense of something else for the basic income recipients, and created kind of different feeling to the way people related to each other. The story of the man walking upright after being on basic income, a story indeed with a strong symbolic quality, captured somehow the dignity, the freedom and the hope that was spreading. Basic income in the building was a kind of opening through which an imagination had sprung forth.

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A few doors over from Boiling Over Coffee Vault, a little further up Kent Street, I visit former journalist and retired communications officer at Community Care, Mike Puffer. I meet him at his wife’s pharmacy, the only locally run pharmacy in Lindsay competing with the larger Shoppers Drug Mart and IDA – both of which populate the street within just a few blocks of each other. Roderick has put us in touch – he knows him from when Mike used to run the local newspaper in Lindsay, *the Lindsay Daily Post*, and Roderick would pitch stories to him when he was first starting out as a young journalist. After the newspaper closed in 2013, Mike began volunteering with Community Care, a local health and community support agency, as their chief communications officer, from which he had just retired when I met him, and was helping his wife run the pharmacy. When I set up the interview, I don’t know about the pharmacy and just walk from Boiling Over Coffee, where I spent the first part of the morning, to the address he provided me. It turns out to be a pharmacy, a snug building with flowers out front and a light-green sign above the door. And, slightly confused, I don’t know that it is his wife who greets me inside either, and who calls Mike on the internal phone line to come down. Yet, it all comes together for me when Mike comes down and asks me to follow him upstairs to his office, and on the way he gives me a little history of the place, of the pharmacy, and of his life in the town. I tell him it is quite novel for me to be in the backstage of a pharmacy. Especially one with such a warm and welcoming atmosphere.

Having lived in Lindsay for most of his life, Mike gives me some insight into what it felt like when basic income came to town. He tells me that as there are not a lot of jobs in Lindsay any longer, a lot of people are forced to work in the greater Toronto area, or in Oshawa. And, like his kids, a lot of young people leave the town for work, or to go away for university and don't come back because there aren't many opportunities for them there. He tells me that when the basic income pilot started, he heard hopeful stories from both his clients, and from around the town:

> "It was, I think, really starting to make a difference. There were examples of, I mean we had some of our clients come in and speak to management and tell their story. We had more than one example of people who were saying that the support was making a difference in their life-styles, it was letting them take a step up, and I think the Ford government wanted to present it as if it was just a handout to people who were just doing anything… There were examples of single moms who were able to put their children in a new daycare and as a result could get a job... Because before they couldn't, and they had to stay home. So, they were feeling good about that. There was one example of a lady who runs her own home-based business and she was investing the money in marketing her business and allowing it to expand and grow... I heard through the grapevine how there was one mother, who, she probably didn't have very good accommodation, maybe it was a basement apartment for her and her kid, and it wasn't that healthy, there was mold. And she was able, with a little bit more money to get a real apartment, healthier, which in the long term, is a savings to the system. And many more examples of that, just on and on, you've probably heard lots of them too and so has Roderick. It wasn't just a handout! It wasn't being wasted."

I had indeed heard lots of hopeful examples – this was of course partially a consequence of mostly talking to supporters of basic income in the community. There were likely also stories circulating that were of a different character, and I had heard from participants that they had personally encountered negative attitudes towards basic income. Yet, I would suggest that those who did engage in this kind of hopeful story-telling around basic income believed in it, and supported it and, as such, most of the stories going around were these hopeful ones. And, echoing advocates, some of the prevailing attitudes towards government 'hand-outs' – central to the moral economy of Lindsay – were prevalent in these stories. There was a sense that 'on' these welfare programs money is wasted (and recall Mike Perry's assertion that *nobody* likes

them), but that the costs for basic income was worth it somehow because it was tangibly changing peoples' lives in many ways. It was allowing for increased engagement in the local economy – something that was highly valued. Along with the woman Mike mentioned who was able to market her business, a recurring tale, the story of *Fresh FueLL*, a health food take-out restaurant on Kent Street, right between Mike's pharmacy and Boiling Over, run by a couple who were on basic income, came up often in conversations. This was one of the more 'well-known' basic income stories, and Joli and Roderick had also run a story on them in the Lindsay Advocate[7]. It was clear that this was a story people were proud of, because it allowed a renewed engagement in the local economy. And also, Mike added, if I ever got a chance to speak to them, (which unfortunately I didn't), they would probably tell me that basic income helped their business on many levels – not the least of which was that because people in the community had more money, they suddenly felt like they had a lot more clients.

There was a deep feeling of disappointment among advocates, and for those directly affected who had been on basic income, in Diane's words, a feeling of being *gutted*, when the project was cancelled. As Mike speaks to, as do Joli, Roderick and others, there was in large part also a frustration about the way in which the Conservative government, the Ford Government, had, in part, justified the cancellation by dismissing it as just another useless work-disincentive hand-out to people who might just be spending it carelessly, especially when so many of the stories around BI spoke both to deeply felt basic needs being fulfilled, and to the money being spent in very 'useful' ways. Following the announcement of the cancellation in August 2018, in an article from *National Post,* social services minister Lisa MacLeod stated, "it [basic income] really is a disincentive to get people back on track," explaining the Ford government's decision to cancel the projects by explaining that ministry staff had told her that the program was not helping people find work, nor to become "independent contributors to the economy" (Loriggio, 2018).

I interviewed the former police chief of Lindsay, John Haggerty, who was equally frustrated with this explanation. He was a friend of Roderick's, who had put me in touch with him. John had become an avid supporter of basic income, and what had indeed first convinced him, was the notion that it was a better and more efficient way to use tax payers' money than the current social

[7] See: https://lindsayadvocate.ca/luis-and-leanna-segura-fresh-food-hip-hop-and-climbing-for-mangoes/

assistance programs. When Mike Perry was advocating for Lindsay to become one of the test sites, he had come to speak to the police group where John was a Rotary club member, and he told me there was a healthy portion of scepticism in the group, no doubt. But part of what made sense to him was the numbers, as he put it. And this partially came from a feeling of being deeply disenchanted with the current social assistance system; one which, to him, is failing people and trapping them in cycles of poverty. He told me too that the CEO of the local hospital at the time spoke about how there would be a reduction in ER visits, and that there was evidence to suggest that basic income would bring about improvements in individuals' health; something that Mike Puffer also spoke to. And I couldn't help but think of Heather's experience and how she had told me that ambulance sirens were barely heard anymore to and from her building 'during' basic income.

John also told me about his personal journey of moving away from some of the more normative and negative assumptions of poverty towards an understanding of what might help to actually address it. "I of course was in policing for 35 years, and I got to see poverty," he told me. "And generational, like almost a generational trap of that poverty. I have a story – another kind of awakening for me – I like to use Twitter and Facebook to engage with the public, show them things that I have seen. So, there is one story that I told a few times. And it is my butter story. So, I read a report, a very brief report about how these two people were shop-lifting and they stole a pound of butter. And I thought how silly that was! And I have seen a lot of things being stolen, alcohol, meat, but for gain really. So, I tweeted about how I couldn't believe that people would steal butter. And then, you know, people chirped in on that, saying, oh you know maybe they were marginalized. Maybe they had toast and they needed butter! And then someone tweeted, well, maybe they were hungry. And I thought, oh my god! So, I went deeper and I read the report. It showed that they were two recovering addicts who had been to the food bank and had gotten bread and had gone home to their three kids and they wanted something on the bread so they stole butter. And I thought what an ass I was. It never had even entered my mind that someone would need to steal butter."

The radical imagination

This awakening, as John calls it, is another such ‘opening’ through which the imagination springs worth. It speaks to the belief expressed in these acts of story-telling within the community – and among the advocates – the capacity of stories to change minds. Indeed, following McGranahan’s argument that “the worlds built through stories create truths” (2020, 77), what happens when the little world created within these stories gets shared is somehow transformational.

“What is it about basic income then that to you is different?” I ask John. “It gives people hope, I think,” he answers, without much hesitation. This expression of hope existed within these stories that were circulated and shared and had become sometimes even synonymous with hope and, aided by Joli’s metaphor here, offered an alternative road to that dead-end. The world within these stories that offered hope were compelling, and, as Graeber puts it, there is nothing natural about hopelessness. The advocates fighting for basic income knew this. These stories were not abstract and theoretical, they were concrete, and they were close. As such, they were able to circulate a sense of hope in a tangible and relatable way, and they were compelling to those who may otherwise adhere to values that might be contradictory to those surrounding basic income. Everyone knew someone on basic income in the community; the policy moved from abstract idea to having a life within the community through these stories at these moments in time. In this way, they perhaps helped to re-write, even momentarily, the ‘deservedness narrative,’ and ‘the worthiness in work narrative’ – both central to the moral economy – and as such, open the possibility of formulating and mobilizing different and broader notions of worth.

Thinking then of the concept of the radical imagination, Khanabish argues that it is indeed not only “grievances, no matter how deeply felt,” that bring about “powerful social movements capable of driving social change into being” (2019, 3). “Acknowledging this,” he argues further, “is vital if we are to disabuse ourselves of the demobilizing and patronizing notion that movements emerge when the oppressed and exploited have ‘nothing left to lose’ or that they coalesce spontaneously when the time is right. This second truth encourages us to dwell on how movements come to be, how and why people come together in struggle, and what counts as

movement success and failure" (3). Instead of dwelling only on these grievances, which he criticizes much scholarly research on social movements for doing, we should recognize the centrality of the radical imagination in animating, and bringing into life, powerful social movements. He describes the radical imagination as:

> "…a collective activity produced through dialogic encounters rather than an individual possession or faculty, the radical imagination is our capacity to conceive of the world as it might be otherwise, and it animates movements for social change. Since the radical imagination is something people do together it is also a profoundly social phenomenon bearing the marks of the context in which it is enmeshed, and the forms used to mediate and circulate it. This, in turn, has profound consequences for the way activists sustain themselves, organize for social change, and connect with others beyond their ranks" (2019, 2-3).

While the push for basic income certainly cannot be divorced from the grievances and material concerns deeply felt in this context – poverty, stigma, shame, and the inadequacies of current social assistance policies, not least disability insurance as discussed in the previous chapter – what I nonetheless experienced as the prevailing animating force at the heart of these dialogic encounters was hope and imagination. These acts of story-telling, arising from an opening that basic income carves out, allows for a collective activity of imagining *something else,* something better – an 'otherwise' – and they are indeed profoundly social. They evolve and take on a life of their own through sharing. They are, as the advocates I got to know were aware of, enmeshed and entangled in the social and cultural context from which they spring. In dialogue with the moral universe of the community, there is an understanding of 'what' needs to be addressed and challenged in order for basic income to possibly materialize as permanent policy. This, in turn, relates directly to the reason why the projects were cancelled. Thinking of the imagination, before turning further to the *radical* in the following chapter, as Knasnabish and Haiven do as "a process by which we collectively map 'what is,' narrate it as the result of 'what was,' and speculate on what 'might be'" – precisely this process of narration of what is, what was, and what might be, can be found within the stories, and is at the heart of the movement, and the collective dialogic encounters. To Knasnabish and Haiven this is vital because, as they insist,

“we cannot let go of a radicalizing idea of the imagination because it speaks to our ability to create something else, and to create it together. And the sort of hope, courage and possibility the term evokes are in short supply these days” (2010, 2-3).

Chapter 3: Radical change and imagining something better

"We don't worry about the rich who do nothing,
but we worry about the poor who do."

- Joli

Standing on a small podium, facing her audience, Joli's voice projects out. She has been sharing her provisional doctoral research results on the pilot projects[8]. She has paused for a brief moment after having shared stories from former basic income recipients; glimpses of hopefulness and possibility and some of the despair that the abrupt and premature cancellation brought about. I sense that she is choking up. She concludes with the quote above. When she said it, I remember thinking that it was so self-evident in a way, and of course for all intents and purposes, a simplification. Yet, at the same time it precisely captured the issue at the heart of this struggle – the double-standard embedded in a system that penalizes, stigmatizes and places under intense scrutiny the poor for not working, and for what they do and what they don't do, and not the rich.

In her use of the general "we," Joli is, in a sense, speaking to that "master narrative" (Jameson 1984; Lyotard 1984) or "doxa" (Bordieau 1977) in which "doing something" or "agentive productivity" as Hay puts it, is a central part (2010, 4). And the reason 'we' care is in part because, as Hay argues, productivity has been moralized; it is inextricably connected to moral worth and, in this context, especially as it relates to paid work. Hay defines productivity as "engaging in activities of personal or social value" (2010, 5). And while these can be "any activity that contributes to well-being, that is, the physical and socio-culturally constructed necessities, circumstances, or engagements that are deemed personally or socially important," paid work is often central to this (ibid, 5). Indeed, this is one of the aspects, if not the central aspect, of the moral economy of Lindsay, and beyond, that advocates sought to question and

[8] In collaboration with other researchers and the BICN, she has been conducting a survey on the effects of pilot project. At this point it is based mostly on written responses to survey questions but from there qualitative interviews were also planned to be added.

challenge. As I explored in the previous chapters, this was momentarily questioned, (or suspended), because the stories surrounding basic income – those of others or those of oneself – spoke for a moment to something else. Here I ask, what might that something else look like?

As such, in this final chapter, I look further at the little worlds within the stories, so to speak, and towards what vision of the *world as it might otherwise be* as expressed by the movement and within the collective dialogical activities that characterized its practices. But first, I take a step back to consider that which advocates saw as the root of the 'problem,' by drawing on the *radical* part of the radical imagination – the moralization of productivity and work and its centrality within a hegemonic narrative. Additionally, drawing also on Weeks' (2011) argument that work has dominated most political and social imaginaries, on both left and right – *how* to challenge and question this, and, in turn, what alternative to envision, was not easy and there was not a fixed way to do this – rather, it was characterized by an attempt to shift the focus from what effects basic income might have on work towards those it might have on health, well-being, and a life well-lived.

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Everyone I have met who has been involved in basic income in Lindsay and in Hamilton, (and beyond), is here. The event is organized by Roderick and Joli and is taking place on the second floor of one of Lindsay's oldest buildings, 150 years old. It looks a little like an old and grand train station, the kind you would see in old western movies, with red and brown brick, large rectangular windows with rounded finishes and a big sign that reads *C.L Baker* towards the top under a round stained-glass window. It is now home to *the Pied-Eye Monk* – a recently opened local brewery and restaurant, which explains the newly-built expansion of the building in painted wood. When I first saw it, I thought it kind of ruined the old look of the building, but no one else seemed to really express that opinion and rather people seemed enthusiastic about it being used as a local brewery, so this modern edition wasn't minded. I had been to the restaurant with Joli and Roderick but not upstairs. Up the stairs and through a small hallway with washrooms, there is a large room with folding chairs set up in rows and a little podium in front.

Joli and Roderick have been talking about it and organizing the event for months. Former senator and mayor of Toronto Art Eggleton, a long-time outspoken public advocate for basic income, is the main speaker, but others speak too – Sheila Reghr, the chair of BICN and Joli. I have just arrived and am greeted warmly by the people I know. “Help yourself to some coffee, dear,” a familiar voice encourages me. There is quite the turnout and the room is buzzing with chit-chat. I look longingly towards the buffet with large coffee pots set up. Feeling a little self-conscious about where to sit, standing with my notebook ready, I greet a few people, and choose a seat in the back. I am admittedly pretty excited to be here, and it feels like a window into part of the movement. I try to take everything in, but as it is, the rendition here is a partial picture, and for the purposes of the chapter, (and the thesis at large), I focus on just some of the things said.

The first rows of chairs are reserved for former basic income recipients. I know that this has been thought out and I know the organizers want it to be an inclusive event in all ways possible, and are aware that indeed sometimes these types of events aren’t exactly that. Roderick begins his introduction – he defines basic income, stresses its centrality in the fight against poverty, as an antidote to the gig economy, empowering people in the face of rising neoliberal policies that have left many behind, choosing people over corporations, income as a *right* not a privilege for the few. People clap enthusiastically. There is a feeling of excitement. He talks about the *Lindsay Advocate* and his and Joli’s effort to make a meaningful contribution to the cause. Joli takes the podium, and she works her magic, connecting this to real life stories. These are real people, we have real stories. “Out of pure passion, we created a survey. In 6 months, we gathered 600 responses, all overwhelmingly positive.” “It was based on a hundred hours of conversations.” Hers is a call to action – it is so important to bring this issue forward, while recognizing the catch of how we can possibly have time to do activism when we have to spend all our time worrying about meeting our basic needs or looking for work, and yet, in turn, how basic income exactly can enable more activism by meeting these basic needs; by freeing up time and thought.

Former senator Art Eggleton takes the stage. He knows Joli and Roderick well and has been a long-time supporter and advocate for basic income. By any measure, he stands out from most of the audience here. He is wearing a black sports coat, a lightly colored pink collared shirt, shiny shoes and striped socks. His demeanor is at first serious, almost a little stiff seeming, and I can’t

but think how much it stands in contrast to Joli's. He speaks in a low voice, but then seems to loosen up, makes a few jokes, and says "it's time for basic income." He presents statistics on poverty and underlines the inadequacy and deep contradiction of the current measures meant to address it – "our system doesn't fight poverty, it institutionalizes it." There is a "*hear hear,"* from the audience. "A basic income won't provide for 'the good life' but it should lift people out of poverty." "We have to re-value what work means." But, "we have a very strong work ethic in this country – people are going to want a better life."

There is more applause from the audience as he finishes and it is Sheila Reghr's turn. As she steps up to the podium she greets Tom Cooper from Hamilton who has just arrived at the back. Some people in the audience turn and wave. She speaks of similar issues and says, gravely, "I am scared about what scarcity looks like in this system. It has struck even us the immediacy of it." She brings up AI and automation and the challenges ahead as more and more jobs will be lost. She mentions the Canada Child Benefit. I understand it is a strategy of the larger national movement to liken basic income to forms of already existing policies of distributive income not linked to employment status. "It's good for the economy, it's good for job creation." (Kind of almost an aside like a 'we of course have to say that'…) "People still have an attachment to work. We have to re-educate ourselves on what we mean as work." But, "most people will want to work".

In the following Q and A session – Mike Perry stands up – "Firstly, I am glad you guys came to us [to Lindsay] for a change!" His tone is warm. Some laugh and nod in agreement. "What I want to ask is what are we doing wrong?! We have fought and fought!" Art answers: "Go meet with MP's or MPP's. We haven't convinced people in office yet." Mike: "well, then change them!" This brings a big applause from the audience.

Thinking radically; the root of what (has) to change (and how to)

Thinking again of the radical imagination, I turn here to the second part of the term – the radical – which Haiven and Knasnabish (2010) formulates as follows:

> "The notion of the radical inherits its most powerful meaning from the Latin radix or root, in the sense that radical ideas, ideologies, or perspectives are informed by the understanding that social, political, economic and cultural problems are outcomes of deeply rooted tensions, contradictions, power imbalances, and forms of oppression and exploitation. As a result, radicalism does not so much describe a certain set of tactics, strategies or beliefs but rather speaks to a general understanding that even if the system as a whole can be changed through gradual institutional reforms, those reform must be based on and aimed at a transformation on the fundamental qualities and tenets of the system itself" (3).

Now, I do not think that many of the advocates I met would identify themselves as particularly radical – that is, in a more 'mainstream' understanding of the word, which, I think, is often understood quite differently than the understanding Knasnabish and Haiven presents here. Yet, refocusing the meaning of *radical* from a set of tactics, strategies, or beliefs to *radical* as grounded in a belief that change comes from addressing the root of the system, I believe allows for further insight into the movement and its practices. In the acts of collectively imagining *something else,* which, as I have suggested, is characterized in part by storytelling, there is an effort to address that which is at the root of a system that traps people in poverty, stigmatizes, disempowers, and applies double standards to the rich and to the poor. There is an implicit agreement that to change oppressive policies, and a broken system, we need to challenge the narrative that underlies and supports it; a dominant narrative on poverty and work (and on not working). As Beckert and Bronk (2016) argue, "political power rests with those able to make their narratives, imaginaries and expectations count" (80). And, as Sarah, an advocate and former basic income recipient told me, "I think it was going to take the proponents to start changing the narrative from the beginning, instead of always talking about how we can get more low income people working."

In this narrative – a kind of 'master- or metanarrative' – paid work is perceived as valuable in and of itself, and the fact that we have to do it for a living is taken as an inevitable facet of life, as Weeks (2011) also argues. And indeed, while there is a myriad of different imagined versions and definitions of basic income as well as diverse reasons for why people support it, and

conversely, why many are against it, one would be hard-pressed to have (or find) any debate on the matter – theoretical, ‘practical’, applied, or anything in-between, that does not address and question, or somehow problematize, work, its moral implications and its place within a dominant narrative. Within the movement, there was an understanding that the biggest obstacle to actualizing basic income is the fear that people (poor people, that is) will not work. As Beckert and Bronk (2018) further point out, “economic narratives can sometimes be found as stand-alone vectors of general orientation that structure the action-guiding beliefs of those who adopt them – as seen, for example, in stories of new eras, promised fortunes, or dystopias that must be avoided” (21). One such narrative presented by some who are opposed to a policy like basic income, is indeed a kind of dystopia in which people become lazy and just sit around all the while receiving free money for nothing. This is reflected also in social service minister Lisa MacLeod’s statement following the decision to cancel the pilot projects: “when you’re encouraging people to accept money without strings attached, it really doesn’t send the message that I think our ministry and our government wants to send. We want to get people back on track and be productive members of society where that’s possible” (Berke, 2018).

The challenge was then how to strategically respond to this. How does one go about changing a narrative from ‘the beginning’ as Sarah reflects? And then there is the question of what we want to move towards on the other side, so to speak. What is *the otherwise?* Basic income is not in itself the goal, so much as a vehicle towards something else – something better.

Towards a revaluing (and re-imagining) of work?

During my fieldwork, I went to Hamilton and participated in a roundtable discussion on basic income organized by the anti-poverty organization, Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR), led by Tom Cooper. The event was organized mainly for a visiting researcher on basic income from the UK, Michael, to give him an insight into the advocacy work on basic income in the context of the Ontario pilot projects. It was a full day of exploring the ins and outs of basic income based very much on participants’ experiences. I was personally delighted to be there for my own research’s sake. HRPR had in the wake of the project’s cancellation organized a speaker

series called “Living Proof.” The name summarized the strategy well: using people’s stories to prove that basic income worked. I was later told that the group was trying to come up with a name for the speaker series when, during a discussion about how to promote these stories, one recipient said, “I mean just look at me, I am living proof that it works!”

As Michael was especially interested in strategies for how best to advance basic income, there was a significant emphasis on exactly this. Resonating with the frustration that was felt by many in Lindsay that the pushback against basic income, and the reason for the pilot’s cancellation, centered around the argument that people will not work, Jessie explained:

> “One of the things I keep on encountering as a pushback against basic income was the disincentive to work, like the assumption that you give people free money and they are just gonna to sit on their ass and play video games all day. But there have been basic income pilot projects all over the world in the last 50 years, both in the developed world and in the developing world, encompassing a number of populations in a number of different scenarios. And in studying those, and I've seen it ‘cause I have been researching this, that disincentives to work doesn't really exist. In fact, people who are receiving basic income get more incentive to work. It is an investment in a person so a lot of people like myself or others who were on the Ontario pilot or pilots around the world and using the money to go back to school or get better jobs or invest in businesses and see and make that money grow. And so, it is interesting that one of the biggest push backs, or biggest struggles against basic income is that oh you will just be lazy, or there is this whole disincentive to work, which doesn't exist. And how do we change that narrative and how do we move away from that protestant work ethic or pulling yourself up by the bootstraps.”

“It is just so deep isn't it...” Michael reflects.

“It is, it is deeply ingrained this idea that if you are in poverty then it is your own fault and that is not true at all. How do we change that and how do we shift that on a societal scale?”

While I will not go into great detail on the event in its entirety, I focus just on one part of the discussion that involved several former basic income recipients and advocates from Hamilton, and a few beyond. Tom Cooper kindly gave me the floor to ask my questions, and I asked, (a

little clumsily), being part of the basic income movement here in Ontario as they were, to what extent, or whether at all, that questioning and challenging the notion that we have to work was a part of the conversation. I asked, “I wonder, having been a part of the Hamilton BI movement, is it a part of the conversation whether or not, not just defending those who can't work but also that those who don't want to work don’t have to? Is that part of the conversation at all”. It was, admittedly, a vague and awkward phrasing, and I was misunderstood. Tom responded with a trace of frustration, “no! That is always the question that opponents of basic income will throw out there, Jessie has had some personal experience with that. Someone wrote a really mean article inferring that, but it is the exact opposite of what is true.” I felt bad. It was so similar to the way Fiona had misunderstood me when I had asked her about work and insisted on the willingness to work. Tom interpreted my question as if I was asking if people would not work and implicitly that that was negative because that was exactly the prevailing attitudes and insisted on the opposite being true. Because they had heard it so many times of course. Ironically, I was of course trying to reject it. I tried again, “No no, that is not what I meant! It was more like in response to the pushback argument that on basic income people won't have an incentive to work – is the response then like from you guys to mainly insist that people will want to work and will work, or is there also a questioning of the very fact that they have to? How do you feel the basic income movement and the pilot projects are challenging the way work is thought of? And, I guess, automatization seems to me to be maybe the only avenue to looking into basic income as an alternative to work or a way out of work, but I'm wondering if part of the conversation is also what really gives us meaning...”

John chimed in, “Well, the whole paradigm that exists right now is based on paid labour, and it is way too hard for people to be able to get it into their heads that labour is something that works in the capitalist society, but the things that don't count in the GDP number also matter equally as much. And I have no idea how we change that conversation to be honest. But I think that is a conversation that needs to be had as to what is it that gives your life meaning. I mean to me community is everything. It has nothing to do with what you accomplish.”

“Yes, I think we definitely need to shift what we conceive of as work but I am beginning to wonder like is automation the frame in which to do that. Because I think that Joanie, your story and others, have nothing to do with automation,” Michael added.

And Joanie, “Yes, I think the conversation does have to change. Because I often hear, well you don't have a job. Ok, well, if you stepped into my life, most people working full time don't work as many hours as I work! If I could go into a 40 hour/week job it would be way less stressful than the life I have right now, and add to the fact that even if I were to get employment nobody would keep me on because I have a daughter with a disability who misses 90 days of school per year. So, how do you balance that? I bring in care givers that are paid to take of her so that I can go to work and make minimum wage, which is less than is going to keep us out of poverty anyway. So, that that person can look after my child so my child is neglected from her parents. It is a vicious little cycle.”

“I totally agree,” I respond. And Michael adds, “And we don't need to have a conversation about AI and robots, to have that conversation. We talk about automation and AI and we immediately start thinking that that is a problem in 20 years-time, but actually this is a problem now**.** AI has nothing to do with being injured at work or not being in the work force, contributing in other ways. I think talking about it in an automation way actually kind of shifts away from the lived experience that you all have.”

“And,” Jessie asks, “what does that work look like? I would love a world where people don't have to push buttons in a factory – like, is the work meaningful? Is this something you enjoy?”

“For me,” Joanie says, “I actually do get people who tell me ‘oh but you want to work, right?’ And I am like, well actually, I don’t want to work! I have a disability, and the best care I could get is *not* rigidly maintaining a work schedule. Doesn't mean I haven't volunteered most of my life, it doesn't mean I don’t contribute to my community. When I first got Ill, my biggest challenge, beyond suddenly being in poverty and dealing with my illness of course, was psychologically that I couldn't be who I thought I was, and I had been productively working on being all those things and it took me a long time to finally realize that work is not the beyond all and end all of who I am as a person. So sometimes I do like to shock people and tell them, no I actually don't want to work! Do *you* really, really want to work?!”

John adds, “a lot of the stories I've heard from BI, is that it allows you to re-think your purpose, and how you want to be in society and for a lot of people, participating in community in a different way than you would be able to if you had a different type of job that wouldn't allow you to contribute as much. When they were doing a survey to see who would apply for BI, some people didn't want to for example lose their connection with their case worker. And that even

speaks to such a desire for community and social belonging... It was really alarming to realize how isolated people are. And how much having the freedom to build community can really help."

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Weeks (2011) argues that "the problem with work is not just that it monopolizes so much time and energy, but that it also dominates the social and political imaginaries" (47). Drawing on C. Wright Mills' argument that "judgments are rarely made about the world of work as presently organized as against some other way of organizing it" (1951, 229, qtd. in Weeks, 2011, 46), she proposes that "the assumptions at the heart of the work ethic, not only about the virtues of hard work and long hours but also about their inevitability, are too rarely examined, let alone contested" (46). She asks: "What kinds of conceptual frameworks and political discourses might serve to generate new ways of thinking about the nature, value, and meaning of work relative to other practices and in relation to the rest of life […] What might we name the variety of times and spaces outside waged work, and what might we wish to do with and in them? How might we conceive the content and parameters of our obligations to one another outside the currency of work?" (46, 47).

That work dominates most social and political imaginaries is indeed evident within the movement's 'imaginary;' it is reflected in the individual and shared stories of basic income and through the choices made by advocates, which stems in part from their awareness of a deep cultural, political and economic attachment to work. And it is reflected in John's uncertainty about how to or frame a conversation that questions the unequal value placed on paid labour compared to all those other valuable things in life. It is also reflected in the speeches given at the event in Lindsay: the ambivalence of pushing for a revaluing of what works means while at the same reinforcing the value of a strong work ethic and the idea that some amount of (paid) work is necessary for "the good life."

Yet, it does not reflect a reluctance to question work; rather it reflects an insecurity on how to do this 'on the ground' so to speak, and not just 'in theory', because of its centrality within a

dominant narrative where arguments centered on what is 'good' for the economy, (job creation for instance), are taken more seriously than, for instance, what is good for well-being, what might provide people with a sense of autonomy and time for care work. Like John said, trying to argue for the value of those things that do not count in the GDP is difficult. And, as suggested in the previous chapters as well, for the individual it is also difficult – as Joanie says, not working meant feeling lost and suddenly having to rethink her sense of identity.

Yet, reflecting on Weeks' questions in relation to these kinds of occasions, especially on the other side of my fieldwork – the discussion in Hamilton and the event in Lindsay – I began to think about them as mirroring a kind of vison of an 'otherwise' in themselves. Besides the content of the story told, they, in themselves, already reflect a kind of narrative or conceptual framework for a collective re-imagining of notions of work and worth *otherwise*. This lies in the very act of engaging in a processual questioning and re-imagining of these aspects. In a sense, these events mirror what I felt was the spirit of the movement and its practices (at least at the time I was doing fieldwork) – being engaged in exploring, questioning and imagining *something else*. In this way, the basic income project, even though it was cancelled and the policy was never carried to fruition, provided a kind of framework in that it brought people together to engage in these kind of 'dialogical encounters,' as Knasnabish and Haiven would put it, essential to a pursuit of 'alternative future-making.' In this space, the telling of basic income stories could continue to exist, and, as John says, these stories open a space wherein we can shift the conversation to what else gives your life meaning and value – something indeed fluid and necessarily multifaceted.

Towards an 'otherwise' – and a conclusion

Neoliberal; emancipatory; or maybe not really any one thing?

I stay with the idea of 'multi-facedness' for some final thoughts about the 'otherwise' that is imagined on the 'other side' of basic income. To this end, I include a final story about storytelling. I return briefly to Lindsay. On the morning after the event with Art Eggleton, I

interviewed Jessie in Joli and Roderick's basement. She knew Joli and Roderick through their advocacy work and had come to Lindsay for the event. We were both staying at their house and both a little tired from staying up late the night before, drinking a little too much wine and discussing basic income. Art Eggleton had even joined us for a drink to Joli's surprise and delight. Jessie is a photographer and advocate from Hamilton. In anger and frustration following the project's cancellation, which was then followed by artistic inspiration, she had begun a photo series called *Humans of Basic Income*, meant to document and share people's stories of being on basic income after the cancellation. She had also been on basic income herself. Inspired by the popular photo series *Humans of New York*, she would ask her subjects, former basic income recipients, to write their story, (highlighting whichever aspects they wished), on a white cardboard banner with a sharpie. She would then take their portrait as they held the banner in front of them. The summer I met her, which is now almost two years ago, she was just beginning the series and collecting stories, but even then, she told me, there had been an overwhelming amount of interest in it – beyond the circle of basic income advocates, she had also been contacted by many different media outlets for interviews and invited to speak at various events. She was admired for her portrait series, which was very moving. As with the stories that were told and shared within Lindsay that people found compelling because they were close, these stories had perhaps captured the imagination of a broader audience, and linked basic income to personal and intimate stories.

I noticed that many of the stories highlighted participation in the economy in various ways. I wondered if she would include any stories of people who would refuse to work, or get "lazy" and "waste" their basic income – in other words, stories that would live up to those dystopian scenarios imagined in more conservative circles. We had been talking about encountering these kinds of attitudes, and she had also brought it up during the discussion session in Hamilton. She was, just as the Lindsay advocates were, deeply frustrated by them. She said that she wasn't quite sure if she would. This was maybe in part because she hadn't really come across a story like that – most of the stories spoke of people doing useful things with the income, buying healthier food, going back to school, investing in their futures in some ways, as she would put it.

Thinking of the stories of basic income that in some ways highlight participation in the economy, I asked Roderick one evening what he thought about using the argument that basic income would provide a work incentive. And, I asked whether he thought it is easier for, especially more right-leaning, people to support basic income if we stress how it might enable and incentivize people to start a business, take a risk, engage in entrepreneurial endeavors. I was thinking about another kind of argument made against basic income – by the left this time – that it is neoliberal; a criticism grounded in the fact that some of the arguments made for basic income share some traits with neoliberal values, as Ferguson (2010) points out. Roderick reflected, "I think we need to get to the point of it being able to challenge the nature of work. But I don't think we are there yet. Some people are seeing it as an anti-poverty thing, but really, I think if there is an *in* to grow basic income, it might be to use that kind of argument to convince people that people will spend their money wisely, and participate in the economy, etc."

This kind of argument was, and is, reflected in the support for basic income by public figures such as Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, and partially Andrew Yang in the US. Tom Cooper also brought this up, explaining that people on the left that he knew could not imagine aligning themselves with people like these. And, he went on, in Canada, more recently Floyd Marinescu in some ways represented this kind of view. In Canada though, he continued, this was a new 'approach' since the advocacy work surrounding basic income had historically come mostly from an anti-poverty standpoint. Floyd was a little different – that summer, he had put together a statement from one hundred Canadian CEOs in support of basic income calling for the provincial government to reconsider the cancellation of the project – partially because basic income was good for business.[9] He then founded the advocacy group *UBI Works*. But I got a sense also from Floyd – not directly as I never got a chance to meet him, but from Jessie and Tom, who both knew him, that he did indeed care sincerely about fighting poverty. On a kind of strategic note, Tom reflected: "I think we have to figure out a way to marry those two views if we are going to continue a narrative."

In this vein, as Ferguson (2010) asks, can we imagine something that is both 'genuinely pro-poor' that at the same time shares certain traits with a neoliberal ideology? At first, I was

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[9] See: CEOs for Basic income website: https://ceosforbasicincome.ca/

personally a little conflicted about those elements highlighted in the stories shared, and which I recognized also in Jessie's portrait series – willingness to work, investing in one-self in various ways, being entrepreneurial – traits that Ferguson points out are "recognizable to look neoliberal." Yet, Ferguson argues, "that certain political initiatives and programs borrow from the neoliberal bag of tricks doesn't mean that these political projects are in league with the ideological project of neoliberalism ... they can, I suggest, be used for quite different purposes than the term usually implies" (9). And moreover, "the sorts of new progressive initiatives I have in mind seem to involve not just opposing "the neoliberal project," but appropriating key elements of neoliberal reasoning for different ends. … Instead, I suggest, (and this is a deliberate provocation), that some innovative, (and possible effective), forms of new politics in these times may be showing us how fundamentally polyvalent the neoliberal arts of government can be" (9). This perhaps offers one such perspective that enables a 'marrying' of these views. And in turn, it offers also a way to think of the vision, *the otherwise,* that basic income makes possible – one that is indeed polyvalent or multifaceted. To Calnitsky (2017), basic income offers a kind of emancipatory vision and though that might be "hazily characterized," it is one "defined by human flourishing and real, substantive freedom". To Weeks (2011), a 'post-work' society is similarly not neatly delineated or thought out but one "yet to come."

Returning to Jessie, and indeed all the other instances of story-telling, the idea was, in a sense, to challenge a dominant narrative with other kinds of stories; to ultimately question those problematic aspects within the narrative on poverty, deservedness and work, the 'root', with a multiplicity of positive stories on basic income. Indeed, put a bit prosaically here, if at the root there is a story then let's "replace" it, or match it, with other stories. And these stories did not (and didn't have to), reflect any rigid ideological or political standpoint.

In conclusion; A storied landscape and beyond

To the people I got to know, the stories they told and listened to enabled an imagining of *something else*. They spoke to and reflected an alternative kind of world; one that indeed includes elements of a 'post-work imaginary' in its questioning of work and its function in providing worth; and one in which, to borrow from Calnitsky, the dominant values are human flourishing and a kind of freedom. I hope this thesis has given an insight into the kind of opening that I have argued basic income, at least temporarily, enabled in various ways, personally and collectively, in Lindsay and a little beyond; an opening to imagine beyond poverty, beyond stigmatizing social assistance policies, and to challenge those aspects within the moral economy that moralizes productivity and ability as the sole virtues. I hope it has shed some light on the feeling of hope and the acts of storytelling I believe were so characteristic of the advocacy work surrounding basic income, the purpose of which was, fundamentally, to fight for positive social change.

I leave behind what I came to think of in some ways as a kind of storied landscape. For at least a little while, basic income stories became woven into the cultural fabric of Lindsay – and perhaps a little beyond. And though this may be a small corner of that fabric, it nonetheless reflects how compelling positive and hopeful stories can be, and it reflects a willingness of people to listen and begin to question certain aspects of their own previously held beliefs. It also reflects how narratives matter deeply to people; how when given an alternative kind of narrative framework – one which, for instance, does not hold paid work and productivity as the main activities through which ones gains worth and recognition – people can begin to imagine other and better things about themselves and their lives. Lastly, it alas also reflects people left behind and a feeling of hopelessness surrounding the current conditions of social assistance and poverty in Ontario today, (and perhaps also nation-wide), and as such speaks to the importance of continuing to question and challenge certain narratives that underpin stigmatizing and punitive policies for the poor.

I hope this thesis contributes positively to an ongoing debate on basic income, and perhaps contributes to challenging the idea that the policy necessarily represents any particular

ideological or political position – and, as such, that it could present an opportunity for a new, (even non-partisan), approach to the politics of redistribution – one which listens to the experiences of the people it is meant to affect and opens up the possibility of something else and something better.

Goodbyes, the Covid-19 Pandemic, and closing thoughts

The day I interviewed Jessie was the last I spent in Lindsay. After our interview, which turned into talking about an idea for a basic income event we could do once I was back in Montreal, showcasing some of her photos and some of my research, Jessie drove back to Hamilton. We had planned to stay in touch about the idea, and we had thought the spring a good time to potentially do it – spring of 2020. Yet, instead that winter and spring brought the Covid-19 Pandemic, world-wide lockdowns and a whole new kind of reality. Millions around the globe lost their jobs, mostly those who were already in precarious positions, and millions more had to find ways of balancing work and life outside the boundaries of offices and workspaces. And, health and illness was on everyone's minds. It also brought basic income further into the national spotlight. Needless to say, the event never happened. Social events seemed like a distant memory a few months in. But Jessie remained active in her advocacy work and I recently saw her talk at a 'webinar' about women, work and basic income in the context of the pandemic.

There was a smell of fall in the air the day I was leaving Lindsay – it was early October and the leaves were starting to change color. I felt a little nostalgic already. Before driving back to Montreal, I was going to attend a local federal candidates' debate in one of the churches in Lindsay that Roderick was moderating and that he and Joli had helped organize. It was a few weeks before the federal election in 2019. I knew Roderick would ask the candidates about basic income, and I was very curious to see what they would say. Before heading to the church, I took a little detour around the town, saying my goodbyes to the streets, the wrap-around porches and the colorful western-looking buildings, and I stopped to get a coffee at Boiling Over Coffee Vault. I eventually made my way to the church. After the debate, I said my goodbyes to Joli and Roderick, followed by a 'see you in the spring.' It was a little sad. And though I haven't made it back yet, I have since been in touch with them – exchanging emails or through a basic income

Facebook group I am part of, and I still on occasion read *the Lindsay Advocate*.

When the pandemic hit and the country (and world) went into lock-down, I kept thinking back to all the people I met engaged in advocacy work, and how they might be thinking and feeling about all the renewed attention around basic income. It felt almost like a strange vindication for the premature cancellation of the Ontario projects. I was reading articles almost every day for a while about how this might finally be the time for basic income; that the pandemic might finally be making the strongest case yet for the policy. I found myself in discussions, (over the phone of course), with friends or family about how the emergency income support measures introduced federally – the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit, a $2000 monthly payment to those not covered by employment insurance – indeed were basic income-like policies. I wondered whether they might translate into more permanent measures. Once they were introduced on a national level, they might be difficult to take away again, I reflected. And when this seemed to be rejected by the Trudeau government, I found the reason to be these same narratives on work and productivity – there was still a fear that, if translated into permanency, this kind of policy would prove a disincentive to work. Even in a context when the world didn't fall apart when millions around the globe stopped working, and when the value of certain kinds of jobs were being questioned, this kind of dystopia was, and is, still prevalent and somehow convincing. This critique was also coming from Conservatives who were not particularly supportive of the income support measures. But, many more on the left began to support it – the NDP, for instance, which has historically been sceptical of the idea, came out in support of a guaranteed basic income and urged the government to implement such a policy nationally.

The need for these emergency response measures was demonstrating some of the flaws of the current income system. In the debate, I would sometimes find that the Ontario projects were mentioned as a reminder that the idea had been tried right here in the country already. I heard Sheila Reghr talk about basic income on the radio show *the Current* on CBC, and read an OP-ED by Evelyn Forget and former senator Hugh Segal, (who had helped draft the Ontario projects), calling for a national guaranteed income measure. I had even read an article about the couple who started *Fresh FueLL* in Lindsay on the role of basic income in helping local economies, and

Roderick was recently on a TV show called Counterpoint[10] on (a conservative leaning one, as Roderick described it) to argue the benefits of a basic income. The BICN sent out an invitation to its members to submit personal stories about being on the CERB that they would be collecting for further advocacy work. Floyd's *UBI Works* was also getting going and he was appearing in a lot of webinars, interviews and articles. The debate and advocacy work had gained a renewed appetite, and it is still ongoing.

I often think about how many of the themes I encountered in those stories during my fieldwork are echoed in those now felt in the context of the pandemic – illness and ability, hopelessness and hope, unemployment and poverty, the help the CERB has offered, and, finally, seeing an opening towards imagining a different kind of society. I think about Lindsay and the dignity, the material benefits and the hope basic income conferred on its recipients, and how that had a strong and positive ripple effect throughout the community. I think about the multi-faceted nature of basic income, its multivalent appeal to different constituencies and ideologies and motivations, and how that perhaps suggests a multi-pronged approach to ushering it into legislation and application. Perhaps going forward in this pandemic and post-pandemic reality, the story we can tell about basic income is not only that it does not disincentivize work, but also that it includes space and hope in its narrative for those people who can't work, and for those, who for various reasons, chose not to work, (in the conventional sense of what is meant by work, embedded as it is in a neoliberal paradigm), but would rather pursue a passion or hobby or some unpaid service; it is a story that supports the value of such pursuits, and that embraces as legitimate the vast arena of undervalued and unpaid work, such as caregiving and childcare, work that ought to be valued and remunerated. The implementation of something like basic income, having the power to create community in new ways, and the imagination to posit the possibility of a new paradigm, or a significant adjustment of the prevailing one, might even lead to the development of a more sustainable society, one in which we continue to question what work is essential, and what might be just for the sake of productivity and unsustainable economic growth. Exploring these aspects further in a post-pandemic context would be an interesting next step for further research.

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[10] On: www.thenewsforum.ca

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