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Stories of Youth Politics in Action: Uncovering Youth Political Spaces for Local Governments

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Uncovering Youth Political Spaces for Local Governments

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Introduction: Stories and Subjectivity

The voice from across the room is caught between defiance and silence, "[I want] to be able to do whatever you want that is legal without being criticized. People criticize you for the smallest things. I want to live freely." It takes a moment to catch up to the moment—after all, we'd just heard about haunted houses and petting zoos—important ideas for sure, but not quite on the same level as, "I want to be able to do whatever you want that is legal…" A couple of kids chuckle, nod their heads, they know what's being said, the rest of us don't understand. I lock eyes with the fidgety twelve-year-old boy across from me and ask for help, "You want to be able to do whatever you want that is legal; tell me more?" I'm not ready for what comes next. "If my friends are like, walking around in the evening or something, the cops always stop and ask what we're doing. It's not like we're doing anything wrong." Whoa, he's talking about carding, he's talking about profiling, and he's talking about life as a racial minority, in a public housing complex, in the City of London, at twelve-years-old.

I want to be able to do whatever you want that is legal—a twelve-year-old dream for London and a powerful political statement. Right, of course, we're talking politics now, with a kid who minutes earlier had defined politics as "some kind of bug, a pol-i-'tic.'" Strictly speaking, "I want to be able to do whatever you want that is legal," isn't exactly a model for grammatical correctness or linguistic clarity, in fact, as I think about it I realize that the sentence, on its own, sounds 'childish', certainly not the way an adult would say it. But that's just it, an adult didn't say it, a 'child' did. A twelve-year-old gets knowing-chuckles, nods, and glances from the other kids in the circle when he says, "I want to be able to do whatever you want that is legal." They know what he means. His words trigger memories, stories, and images of what 'adults' might call carding, profiling, social exclusion, economic marginalization, and the challenges of being an immigrant in London, Ontario—but we don't use any of those words. We're speaking a different language; an almost-visual language of personal experience and story.

I've see this before, two months earlier at a school board engagement conference; grade sevens scattered around the room, sprawled on the floor, markers in hand, armed to attack giant chart-paper outlines of bodies (yes, bodies). The adults facilitating the session have asked the kids to cover the bodies in words and phrases that describe the way that grade eight is going to look like, feel like, and sound like. The

kids carve their thoughts into the bodies in words that you might expect: homework, responsibility, stress (yes, grade sevens are talking about stress). As I walk around the room a single marker-etched word emerged as a trend, 'hard'. The teachers smile knowingly at each other; everyone knows that grade eight is more difficult than grade seven. But I want to know more about this four-letter word. "What does hard mean?" I ask the nearest group of tattoo artists. After a short conversation the group decides that 'hard' means 'boring'. Grade eight is going to be 'hard/boring' because class isn't going to be interesting and because the work is going to be too easy[1]. In my unscientific survey of three groups I find variations on the 'hard' equals 'boring' theme, but what remains consistent is that the answers all deviate from the 'hard' equals 'difficult' assumption of the assembled teachers.

Just like "do whatever you want that is legal," means something in the room at Limberlost, "hard," means something to each group of young tattoos artists. At my tea-stained desk, white-downtown noise rushing through the torn window-screen, I feel responsibility descending from the humid July-air. I think back to the cramped, florescent-lit Limberlost Chaplaincy, and to the bodies strewn across the school board conference floor, and feel tremendous responsibility to find a way to amplify and protect the words that young people say. But it's about more than words; it's something that I think I have to call 'discourse' but for now I'll call 'meaning'—it's about the meaning communicated by the young voices at Limberlost, on the conference floor, and in the stories that I am about to tell you.

I use the word 'stories' intentionally. I use it because I intend to write a paper that recognizes and foregrounds the subjectivity of my position as a deeply embedded contributor to the research that I have done. I'm comfortable calling my research narratives and stories because that's ultimately what I think all research is. Postructural writers have led me to believe that language and speech are unable to fully capture experience in a way that conveys the impact that experience has on the speaker (Rorty 195). For this reason, even the most technical, scientific research involves a process of transforming something visceral and speechless, into something that makes sense in the social world (Bochner 157, White, quoted in Bochner, Rorty). More crudely put, we

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[1] So 'hard' actually means 'easy'? Hard = boring and hard = easy. Right.

feel experience; yet the only way to communicate feeling is through words, and words are limited in their ability to convey the exact *feeling* of our experience.

Because, rather than in spite, of this subjectivity I believe that this paper will capture the essence of generalizable lessons about where to find and how to recognize expressions of youth politics. I believe that the following stories will help to uncover a language (what we will later call 'discourse') of political expression that rarely makes it to the eyes or ears of formal political processes. I will argue that local governments must create space for this type of language to be spoken within formal political processes if they hope to engage young residents in the work of government. Without it, local governments will continue to see low levels of youth engagement; and the engagement that they see will be distorted by translation from one language to another[2].

The Narrative Voice: An Autoethnographic Approach

In my mind I hear echoes of the boy from across the Limberlost circle, "I just want to be able to ***[write]*** whatever I want that is legal without being criticized." I don't want to write an 'illegal' paper, but I do want to write a different kind of 'legal' paper. I feel pressure because I've been trained to write academic work in a distant, abstract, objective voice; "the father tongue, a high-minded mode of expression that embraces objectivity" (Leguin quoted in Bochner 159). But I just can't bring myself to write that way, not with the responsibility to amplify and guard the meaning that young people speak. As I sit at my desk I realize, as the old saying goes, that my words are weapons. They have the potential to carve mistaken meanings into the pages of this paper. If I translate too much, if I drift too far into the abstract, or if I write in a language too far from the language that young people speak I'll be making a mistake. I have to find a voice, a style, and a tone that simultaneously satisfies the rigour of the academic environment and the almost visual, defined by personal experience, narrative, and story language that I hear young people speak.

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[2]Like any group of people, young people have an immense diversity of views on subjects and issues. However, I suggest that certain segments of the youth population practice a political discourse that clashes with the established discourse of formal local government processes.

It's early July. I'm sitting in Starbucks, headphones in, three-hour-old green tea in front of me; feeling ideas percolating, but unwilling to drip onto the page. My phone lights up, an email, a welcome distraction. It's from a friend who'd spent ninety minutes listening to and poking holes in my ideas earlier this week. She's sent me something that she thinks will help. I'm sceptical, but I click on the link. I start to read, "Narrative is the best way to understand the human experience because it is the way humans understand their own lives" (Richardson, quoted in Bochner 155). I'm starting to feel like there might be something here, but I don't want to jump before I'm sure. Then I get hit with this:

> If we experience our lives as stories, then why not represent them as stories? Why shouldn't social scientists represent life as temporally unfolding narratives and researchers as a vital part of the action? Shouldn't there be a closer connection between our research texts and the lives they represent? (Bochner 157).

Wait, have I got this right? Bochner thinks that we can, even should, tell stories in social science research? I'm still sitting in Starbucks, headphones in, three-hour-old green tea in front of me, but now I have an idea to chew on. I read a couple of Bochner's articles, find others who have adopted his methodology, and explore some of the criticisms of his approach. I'm hooked.

I discover that autoethnography is a form of academic writing that introduces the first person, presents research as story, highlights emotional experience, and documents the 'ebb and flow' of the relationship between researcher and subject over time (Bochner 158). The result is the presence of Leguin's "mother tongue" which brings subjectivity, conversational expression, emotion, and personal experience into academic writing in hopes of building a relationship between author and reader (Bochner 160). This allows research papers to become "acts of meaning" that invite readers into conversations about the stories and narratives being presented in academic work (Bochner 158). It feels like this approach could help me to balance the interests of the young people that I work with, with my desire to produce a coherent academic paper.

Over the course of the next sixty-odd pages you'll read a number of stories.

Some of the stories will look and sound like stories, and some of them will sound a little bit more like academic writing. Each one is intended to uncover a different aspect of youth politics and to make a case for why local governments need to learn how to recognize the spaces and languages that define the youth political sphere. The first two stories will take you through the theoretical framework for this paper and the review of applied academic literature that guides much of my thinking. The third major story is actually a series of three stories of youth politics in practice. You will read about the White Oaks Park Basketball Court Project, the political campaigns of Amir Farahi and Morgan Baskin, and the London Youth Advisory Council. Hopefully you will find these stories interesting, instructive, and rigorously analyzed.

So, without further ado, let's get on with it.

Story One: Finding Discourse
Chapter One: Welcome to a Community of Inquiry

It's the middle of October, the middle of the second month of my Masters degree in Public Administration. I've been back at school for a month and a half, and I'm struggling to keep up. The reading is coming from all directions and I'm having trouble fitting it in around work and a volunteer job managing a City Council election campaign. I'm on the edge of jaded. The lead up to the municipal campaign has reminded me just how difficult it is to talk about the elephants in London's local government room. Politicians, media personalities, and community leaders are spinning, looking for difference to enhance; conflict or 'contrast' points as they call them in the 'biz'. The only thing holding my spirit in check is a weekly conversation circle with a group of 15-25 year old Youth Councillors at the London Youth Advisory Council (LYAC). They've cast formal meeting procedures aside in favour of talking circles that allow them to keep the 'grey' in 'black and white' political conversations. It's a striking contrast; young people embracing uncertainty and complexity, while the fight outside rages over moral claims to the 'right' and 'wrong' ways to govern a city. For two hours every week I believe that a politics based on relationships, discussion, and story can exist; for the rest I'm not so sure.

One day in October, Camilla Stivers changes everything. I'm a confused generational stereotype. Her book is open on my iPad, but I'm madly scribbling notes in a grey fabric-covered notebook[3]. The contrast isn't lost on me, but I'm far too focused to pay any attention. I spend the better part of three days pouring over every last page of *Governance in Dark Times*. Stivers' is giving me a language, a framework, a concrete way to think about politics based on relationships, discussion, and story.

Stivers introduces me to communities of inquiry; places (virtual or physical) where individuals come together out of shared interest to bring their unique views into contact with one another for the purpose of bridging the gap between 'fact' and 'knowledge' (Stivers 1562). Stivers introduces the concept of a community of inquiry through the work of Charles Sanders Peirce who says, "science requires a community of inquirers whose discovery of reality in the long run requires that its current practice be governed by consensus" (Stivers 1563-1564). Stivers takes this to mean that "any process of inquiry requires a set of ground rules for conducting inquiry and evaluating the results" (Stivers 1564). These ground rules are created through discussion, "in communities that form out of interest in and/or commitment to a particular project or focus" and are used to guide consideration of a problem or question (Stivers 1564). Stivers relates this concept to democracy by quoting John Dewey's notion that "democracy [is] the only mode of public life that match[es] the knowledge process" (Dewey quoted in Stivers 1564). Dewey says "conversion of facts into knowledge can only be done through interpretation, debate, discussion, and persuasion" (Dewey quoted in Stivers 1577). More interpretation, debate, discussion, and persuasion by more people means more knowledge and more democratic freedom—cool.

Stivers gives me a word, 'discursive'. She calls the creation of knowledge, within a community of inquiry, a 'discursive' process; one in which discussion between unique individuals builds shared understanding about different ways to frame problems and solutions[4]. I feel like she's given me a hammer, something to use to strike the nails that

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[3] The e-book is cheaper than the print copy.
[4] I do not take this to mean that a single, common frame will emerge from a discursive process but as we will discuss later, a discursive process allows for participants to develop a grasp of the extra-linguistic (beyond-words) meanings of different words, phrases, and articulations of experience voiced by individuals in the conversation.

protrude from my thoughts about local government. Okay, great, 'discursive' means something along the lines of 'through discussion'[5]. I can work with that, I can say, "*local governments need to have more meaningful discussions with more people."* Then I see it; I'm a hypocrite. If I claim to know 'the way' to make local government better I'll be violating the terms of a community of inquiry by making an absolute knowledge claim. I think I get it now. The reason why Stivers' book works is because she walks the talk. She demonstrates an unsatisfying, but altogether necessary unwillingness to declare her own arguments to be 'true' and, in doing so, activates her own technique, a discursive community of inquiry. She's brought me—from my mid-October-iPad-notebook-crisis—into a conversation between her proposals and the mainstream ideas that she critiques; she isn't 'right', she's part of the conversation.

Chapter Two: More Meaningful, More People?

I've used my discursive hammer for two months. I'm so attached that I can barely formulate an answer to a political question without falling back on a call for more discussion. A friend tells me that my only 'Truth' is that knowledge forms through discussion. I'm at a point where it seems like the only reasonable way to stop wars is to talk more[6]. However, I haven't done much thinking about what *'more meaningful' discussions with more people'* means in the context of local government. It's not good enough just to chuck a bunch of people into a room, say 'discussion is the only way to create knowledge' and assume that everything is going to turn out for the best. The words fake, frustrating, and tokenistic jump into my head; all conversations are not created equal.

—Enter Carole Pateman.

Agreements and disagreements over the meaning of words, phrases, and experiences become an allowable part of the discourse so that individuals have the ability to approximate meaning closer to what the speaker is attempting to communicate.

[5] Those worried that I've clumsily defined 'discursive' to mean "through discussion" need not fear. As the story progresses I discover more and refine my understanding. However, in fairness, 'discursive' can be defined as "progressing from subject to subject" which does sound a lot like a discussion, so I wasn't completely off-the-mark.

[6] Obviously, I'm exaggerating a little bit. Although…when you think about it, getting together to talk would probably go a long way towards solving most major conflicts.

Sometimes inspiration comes from surprising sources. I'm struggling to put together a particularly challenging statistics assignment for Dr. Bob Young. I'm not far from drowning in statistical confusion when I walk into his office. I've come in hopes of advice about how to solidify a fuzzy research proposal about youth political expression. Dr. Young listens patiently to my attempt to explain what I'm interested in exploring. Among his list of suggestions is to explore the work of Carole Pateman. Pateman introduces me to a refined understanding of the word 'participation'.

Before reading Pateman, I'm accustomed to seeing 'participation' used casually as, "the act of taking part in something." Participation, in this sense, is a fairly benign concept that raises few eyebrows. In local government circles, 'participation' is often used interchangeably with 'engagement' and more frequently than not is considered the lesser of the two concepts[7]. Some might argue that the difference is purely semantic[8], however Pateman convinces me that the distinction between 'participation' and 'engagement' is important because 'participation' alludes to a broader structural movement in favour of participatory democracy that strives to integrate citizens into the structures of government such that actors (individuals) can legitimately influence each other in making plans, policies, or decisions (French 3)[9]. 'Engagement', on the other hand, is often used to communicate a quasi-moral responsibility for governments to involve citizens in decision-making processes, as a kind of 'best practice' rather than a matter of democratic necessity.

One of Pateman's central points is that the idea of 'participation' has been around for a long time. She demonstrates that participatory democracy is rooted in the

[7] Discussions about working with citizens often use the word 'engagement' to describe the ideal pursued by municipal government administrators. Anecdotal evidence from classroom discussions suggests that 'participation' is considered to be a lesser form of citizen involvement than 'engagement'. "We want more than participation, we want engagement" seems to be the common paradigm.

[8] The word 'semantic' is often employed in colloquial settings to demonstrate that someone is focusing too much on separating two similar terms and that the concepts communicated by the two are almost identical in practice.

[9] If that sentence was sort of exhausting to read, I apologize. Perhaps a different way to put this is: The word participation makes me think about participatory democracy (there is no such thing as 'engagement democracy'). Participatory democracy means changing the way that government, workplace, and social 'rules' work so that more people have 'real' influence over the way that decisions are made.

work of theorists John Stuart Mill and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Pateman). I won't claim to be an expert on these two writers, but I do want to introduce a few key thoughts will be important when we discuss the way that young people participate in politics.

The first thought comes from Mill. He says that participation in local government is important because it provides citizens with opportunities to develop the tools necessary for participation in broader societal structures. He says it a little bit differently, "It is at the local level where the real educative effect of participation occurs, where not only do the issues dealt with directly affect the individual and his everyday life but where he also stands a good chance of, himself, being elected to serve on a local body" (Mill quoted in Pateman 24). In other words, Mill says that it's easier to participate in your local community because you understand the issues being discussed (because you experience them yourself); it's easier to get elected (because there are fewer people there and because you probably know more people); and you'll learn more about participating because you'll get to participate. This last bit, about learning how to participate, or as Mill says, "the educative effect of participation" is important to remember as we move forward. Like most things, the best way to learn, is to practice. Mills says that the best way to practice participation is to participate more. I'm not going to go into it extensively right now, but think about what this could mean for the way that we engage young people in politics. Notice that Mill says, "the educative effect of *participation*" not 'the educative effect of *mock*-participation or civic education'.

The second thought to consider comes from Rousseau. Rousseau writes extensively about the relationship between freedom and participation. Freedom is a particularly slippery term and probably falls into the category of essentially contested concepts, so I don't want to spend too much time talking about it, but Rousseau's writing suggests that true freedom requires all individuals to come into contact with the interests of the public through a participatory process. In other words, Person A's participation brings him or her into contact with the participation of Person B, who is then necessarily in contact with the participation of Person A. Rousseau says it like this, "The individual's actual as well as his sense of, freedom is increased through participation in decision making because it gives him a very real degree of control over

the course of his life and the structure of his environment" (Pateman 26). Rousseau's model extends participation beyond the confines of political institutions. He believes that participation must be present in all spheres of life so that individuals have the opportunity to exercise and develop their participatory muscles (Pateman 30)[10].

Mill and Rousseau echo each other on this point, but Rousseau emphasizes the importance of participatory structures outside of government because he believes that they play an important role in developing the ability for individuals to participate in government. If we understand Mill to be writing about the importance of participation in the "local body" Rousseau can be understood to be writing about the importance of participation in venues that are 'smaller' (micro) or 'lower' (sub) than the local body. As we move closer to our discussion of the way that young people practice politics, let's start thinking about places where young people are already participating or could be learning to participate (by actively participating) that are 'below' the level of local, provincial, or federal politics.

Mill and Rousseau are writing about a world built on participation, a world that relies on connection and the freedom to participate as central features of functioning political systems. They emphasize 'connectedness' between human beings and positive freedoms rather than isolation and negative freedoms[11]. This understanding contrasts with the more widely accepted view of freedom, advanced by Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes' "Leviathan" is a formative political science text that positions the state as the guarantor of security. The state is what protects us from the 'natural' inclination of human beings to be self-interested, violent, and essentially isolated (Hobbes). In order to gain this protection we turn responsibility for governance over to the state in return for private freedoms, like the ability to buy, sell, contract, and raise children (Stivers 1255). Camilla Stivers challenges this notion by suggesting that our understanding of human beings, as

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[10] If that doesn't mean anything to you, think about what it would be like to expect a 'say' in your workplace, at your school, or in your family. This might be formal like having a vote, or informal like being guaranteed a role in major decision-making conversations.
[11] A positive freedom is the freedom to do something, while a negative freedom is freedom from something. In order to obtain a negative freedom we usually have to give something up to a central authority.

naturally inclined towards violence and isolation, is not an empirical absolute (Stivers 1271). Calling on the work of philosophers Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger, Stivers suggests that acceptance of this view is a choice that denies contrary evidence that suggests that humans are inclined towards connection and cooperation. Fundamentally, Stivers proposes an understanding of freedom as a mixture of freedom *from* and freedom *to* participate in governing (Stivers 1286)[12].

Chapter Two: Power and Participation

Now, before we move away from the idea of participation there is one other loose end to tie up. Conversations about 'involving citizens' or 'increasing participation' in local government have a tendency to sound kind of vacuous (empty/fluffy) because it is hard to argue with 'more participation'. After all, who can really argue with giving people more opportunities to 'take part in something'? However, let's think a bit more about how we experience the *feeling* of participation.

Imagine that you're a soccer player and you've been selected to play on Canada's World Cup team. You practice with your teammates, prepare for the games, but spend the entire tournament on the bench; you're coach never asks for your input. In the news stories about the tournament your teammates and coaches say things like, "Each player on our team is an equal participant in our success whether she is on the field or on the bench." It's a nice sentiment, but chances are good that this isn't the kind of participation that you trained for. Standing on the sidelines of a soccer game isn't a perfect analogy to help us understand participation in local government, but the purpose of the story is to highlight the simple fact that, like conversations, not all participation is created equally. When our input makes a difference, when our participation really matters, we can *feel* it.

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[12] If that was a little bit dense, try to carry the thought of freedom *from* and freedom *to* into our youth political stories. Here's a quick example to help this stick in your mind. Most schools have rules that protect young people from the influence of certain external organizations. They do this because they want to protect young people *from* politics. However, from a different angle you could also understand this as a denial of the right *to* participate in politics.

Pateman helps to put words to the different *feelings* of participation by giving us a definition that provides a clear guide to evaluating its quality. She introduces a definition of participation by French, Israel, and Aas that reads "A process by which two or more parties influence each other in making plans, policies, or decisions" (French 3). This provides the basis for a participatory 'scale' that will help us to view acts of youth politics later in this paper. Pateman gives us three types of participation: Pseudo-participation is defined as a feeling of participation that resembles persuasion, consultation, or education rather than participation; Partial Participation is a situation where two sides interact before a decision has been taken, but one party has final decision-making power; and Full Participation occurs when each individual member of a decision-making body has equal power to determine the outcomes of a decision.

We've just gained a new word—power. There are a million ways to understand power, but for now I only want to touch briefly on it. Think back to our soccer example. What kind of participation is this? In order to provide an answer it is necessary to think about who holds the power to make the final decision, and who or what defines what 'full' participation is. A first glance at the coach-player relationship, based on anecdotal evidence of sporting culture, demonstrates a relationship where players listen to coaches and coaches make final decisions; sometimes with and sometimes without the participation of his or her players. This seems to demonstrate that the coach has the 'power' to make decisions. However, if we look more broadly we can see that the coach is subject to a lot of different influences. What are the expectations of senior management of the team? Are there conventions about when to add a new player to the lineup? Is it considered appropriate to let players have input on the lineup? The list of possible influencing factors goes on and on and each person experiences them differently. The coach and the player are embedded within systems of domination that cause individuals to abide by and actively shape common norms and practices (Fry & Raadschelders 44)[13].

This is profoundly related to power because it speaks to the way that power is experienced at an individual level. We don't usually take time out of our day to think

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[13] This concept comes from the work of Max Weber.

about the systems of domination that influence our actions, or to evaluate the kind of participation that we're experiencing. However, we usually have a *feeling* or *sense* of our place within a hierarchy or the 'meaningfulness' of our participation when we're in different situations[14]. The individuals who occupy positions of power within these systems are often those who are able to best recreate and practice the norms that it sets out. Your *feeling* about your power or about the 'meaningfulness' of your participation in a given circumstance likely corresponds to your standing within any number of overlapping systems. Our coach, despite being influenced by broader systems of domination, has a high degree of power and decision-making authority because he or she posses the power vested in the role. The player has a different amount of power and a different kind of decision-making role because of her role within the same structure.

Chapter Three: A Better Understanding of Discourse Gee, Lakoff, Bourdieu, Foucault

Stivers, Rousseau, Mill, Arendt, Heidegger, and Weber form the substance of my critical lens. They challenge me to write differently, to work differently, to think about politics differently, and give me a language to articulate the importance of youth participation in local politics. I look through this lens as I create the proposal for this Major Research Project (MRP). I want it to capture something new, something unsaid, something distinctly related to my experience working with young politicians.

I walk into my supervisor's office with a proposal, a few scattered ideas, and a desire for guidance. I talk about the conversation at Limberlost, about learning that hard can mean boring, and about young people transforming into adults to gain a political voice. I talk about power and systems of domination. I'm circling a topic, but it's not exactly what's in my proposal. Then I make a comparison, something that I'm not quite comfortable with, but something that has been bouncing around in my head for a while, "I've learned a lot from critical feminist reading and I think that the political system

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[14] If you don't know what I'm talking about, think about a meeting at work, a decision about where to go for dinner, a discussion at the bank, or any other moment where you've had to work with someone else to make a decision. Did you feel like you 'had a say'? In the end, where does the power to make the decision get made?

excludes young people in almost the same way that it has and continues to exclude women." I'm not sure how he'll react, so I go quiet.

My supervisor, Andres, looks at me, choses his words, and then says something like, "I think what you are saying is fascinating."[15] Then Andres reminds me of a conversation from class, "Do you remember talking about the gap between the posts? We have a name for the posts, but we do not have a name for what is between them." Of course I remember; I've been telling my friends this story for months. Andres continues, "There are two kinds of reality. Big 'R' reality is made up of every possibility out there, beyond what we can imagine. Little 'r' reality is the opposite, it is everything that we have named, everything that we can imagine, everything that we can reach out and touch—it is solid. When we name something, we reach into big 'R' reality and grab it, and then we pull it over to small 'r' reality so that we can touch it." I think I see where he is going—the posts are little 'r' reality, the gaps big 'R'. He finishes the thought, "What you are trying to do is grab something from big 'R' reality, give it a name, and bring it into little 'r' reality so that we can touch it." Whoa. Women's rights used to be unimaginable, part of big 'R' reality, until people started to name them and fight to bring them into little 'r' reality. Maybe youth politics and youth rights are still over in big 'R' reality waiting for someone to bring them over to the little 'r' side?

This is when the word discourse truly enters my vocabulary. Until this moment the word 'discursive' symbolizes "through discussion" and the word 'discourse' means "discussion." My definition isn't necessarily wrong, but it needs to be refined before it can help us to demonstrate how young people perform and experience politics. Andres suggests that I pursue discourse analysis. He directs me to a book by James Paul Gee that introduces me to a more technical meaning of discourse.

Gee focuses on two main elements of discourse analysis. First, he writes that discourse has a close relationship to syntax; the structure of language, the way that words and phrases fit together to form sentences (Gee 17). Second, he broadens the definition to include what he calls 'language-in-use'; the study of language beyond grammatical structures to include "actual utterances or sentences in speech or writing in specific contexts of speaking and hearing or writing and reading" (Gee 19). Gee

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[15] Things are looking up.

compares discourse analysis to putting together an animated film. Each film is made up of drawings that form each scene; these scenes then have to be sequenced to tell a story. A syntax-based discourse analysis looks at language, like the animated frames, to determine what it says and why it is sequenced in certain ways.

After reading Gee I find myself in a bit of a crisis. I make a presentation to a group of my peers that says as much. The material that I want to analyze doesn't lend itself particularly well to direct syntactic analysis because a lot of it is secondary material. I return to Andres, vent about my dilemma, and walk away with writing by George Lakoff. I'm a little bit anxious, but I hope that some of my answers will emerge from the pages of Lakoff's writing.

However, before I dive into Lakoff, I reach out to a friend for help. She's a former linguistics student who I've spoken to about discourse analysis before. After a conversation on Facetime, she sends me a series of articles. Some are examples of discourse analysis; these help to make the concept real. But two more conceptual pieces jump out to help me. The first is an article about the work of Michel Foucault.

Foucault helps to refine my understanding of discourse further. Foucault establishes a meaning for discourse that goes beyond language; he calls it a system of representation (Foucault quoted in Hall 72). Discourse means "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment" (Foucault quoted in Hall 72). The key move is from a linguistic understanding of discourse to a definition that blurs the line between language and practice. Discourse creates appropriate and inappropriate standards about how to talk, write and act in relation to particular topics in particular circumstances. In other words, it creates a pattern of behaviour that governs the way that knowledge about a certain topic is communicated and created.

So let's take a moment to think about this in relation to the way that young people participate in local government. The practice of formal politics, as performed in city halls, legislatures, and popular media forums, is dominated by powerful 'groups of statements' and social cues (discourses) that establish what is appropriate, what is valuable, and what will be heard. In order to participate in politics, young people, generally speaking,

are encouraged to adopt, as best as they can, the language and cultural norms that define acceptable behaviour in a given institution.

The discourse of government is a discourse of knowledge; knowledge, in the tradition of Foucault, is always a form of power and knowledge linked to power has the power to make itself true (Foucault quoted in Hall 75). Within Western-governments, policy, procedure, and perhaps most importantly, convention wield considerable power. Those with knowledge of these structures establish rules, norms, and languages that dictate how people must act if they want to engage with governments. Because knowledge of policy, procedure, and convention is the knowledge needed to decipher and create the rules of the political game, it becomes 'true' that an appropriate level of fluency in these areas is necessary to obtain power within a given governmental structure.

It's at this point that Foucault intersects with another writer, Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu says, unsurprisingly, that competence in a language is achieved by using the language. However, he points out that to use the language you have to expose yourself to the judgments of individuals who speak the language better than you do (Bourdieu). At a certain point there is a degree of diminishing return for 'practice' because people start to form opinions of you based on your inability or ability to speak the language. For example, think about the way that we judge a child practicing language versus the way that we judge an immigrant adult practicing language.

Now, imagine this—you're eighteen-years-old, you're a fluent English speaker, but you've never been City Hall before, and you certainly don't understand what a motion, planning application, or committee report is. You have two choices. One, you can push your ignorance from your mind and speak the only way that you know how to; two, you can try to translate what you have to say into this new language of government. If you go through door number one you risk being dismissed or misinterpreted because your audience doesn't speak your language, and if you go through door number two you risk obscuring your point because of your halting grasp of a new language. Bourdieu suggests that you're likely to go through door number two because people tend to form their language in response to the probable value of the language within social structures.

You perceive the language of government to be more powerful in this setting so you start to translate. Either way you're at risk of losing the integrity of your voice, but in the act of translating you expose yourself to a public evaluation of your ability to speak a foreign language.

Before I move too far from this scene, I want to explain why I assume that the 'natural' discourse of the eighteen-year-old is likely to hold less social value in a government setting. Folk theory tells us that government is complicated and that policy often needs to be 'dumbed' down or turned into 'plain language' so that 'average' people can understand it. However, Bourdieu points out that social hierarchies respond to fluency in the dominant language. In this case, the most powerful individuals are those who have the dual ability to speak the formal language of government and the 'common language' of the people. Fluent speakers of the dominant language are applauded for being able to speak the language of the common folk, but common folk are not applauded for being able to speak the dominant language. The social hierarchy must accept the value of the dominant language in order to recognize the common language as being symbolically important. Bourdieu calls this a strategy of condescension (Bourdieu).

We see this hierarchy enacted in the situation with our eighteen-year-old. Adults who speak to young people are said to be 'getting down to their level' and are often applauded for their ability to 'speak youth'. A young person who can speak 'adult' language is often applauded for his or her mastery of the language[16]. In order to applaud either case there must be an acceptance that one language is 'ideal' and therefore more powerful.

Now, 'surely', you might say, 'surely you can't be saying that young people are the only ones impacted by this power dynamic'. If you're saying this, you're correct— young people are not the only demographic impacted by the formal and informal rules of political discourses. In fact, should you want to, you could 'divide the pie' in any way that

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[16] However, a young person is often applauded in a way that emphasizes their mastery at such a young age and highlights their potential for the future, rather than the present worth of their words. This will be explored in detail in the Amir and Morgan story.

you'd like and analyze the unique impact that the discourses of government have on the way that any number of labeled groups (re)present their experiences to the political system[17]. However, this paper contends that young people, as a group, are uniquely oppressed by this power relationship because age remains a relatively untouched contributor to marginalization. Age on its own comes with a set of disenfranchising characteristics that amplify the disempowering aspects of membership in almost any other marginalized group. In other words, consider groups typically considered to be structurally disadvantaged—women, ethnic and religious minorities, LGBTQ2 individuals, the differently-abled, etc.—add the word 'young' or 'youth' to each—young women, young ethnic and religious minorities, LGBTQ youth, differently-abled youth, etc.—and consider the deficiency of societal and democratic power that comes along with the addition of this sub-categorization. Depending on your experiences, you might find yourself thinking what I have come to believe—that young people are our society's most systematically oppressed demographic[18].

At this point I've really started to understand why discourse analysis is the right approach for this topic. Discourses are directly related to power and have the ability to include and exclude. An individual's ability to recognize a discourse, and to speak within it affects one's ability to influence decisions. However, before I can move forward with a

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[17] It is important here to note Lefebvre's belief that categories such as 'women' or 'the poor' do not exist outside the spaces made for them by development agencies. His work, initially caused me some intellectual paralysis because it seemed to reject any kind of labeling, thus making it impossible to make generalized comments about groups of people that empirical observation clearly point to some common shared experiences. However, as is often the case, Foucault rescued me by demonstrating that any institution (which I have also taken to mean categorization or label) is capable of breaking with or repeating power relations that have existed in the past. Thus, demographic categorizations (despite their potential for misuse) if employed with full, nuanced awareness, have the ability to contribute to new, critical perspectives that rebalance power structures.

[18] The point of this statement is not to create an oppression arms race or a competition to determine who is the most oppressed. Nor is it to suggest that, for example, a white 17-year-old cis-gender, heterosexual male is more oppressed than say, a 54-year-old racial minority living on the street. The point is that age on its own carries with it a degree of marginalization that exacerbates existing levels of oppression and negates certain aspects of privilege.

conceptual understanding of discourse, I need to add in two concepts from the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson.

First, Lakoff introduces me to the concept of metaphors as conceptual systems[19]. He demonstrates how underlying metaphors structure the way that society conceives of and discusses certain concepts. For example, Lakoff points out that Western culture operates under a common metaphor that 'argument is war'. We use phrases that invoke war imagery like, "he shot down all of my arguments" or "attack a position" to describe the process of arguing. Lakoff's claim goes beyond just 'talking' about arguments in war terms. He says that we actually experience and conduct argument in terms of war. This means that our language is metaphorical *because* the concept and its actions are metaphorically structured in our thoughts[20]. Lakoff asks us to imagine a culture where 'argument is dance' rather than 'argument is war'. In such a culture 'argument' would look nothing like what we think argument looks like. In fact, we probably wouldn't even see their 'argument' as 'argument' because it wouldn't look like our metaphorical understanding of argument; it would look like dance (Lakoff 5). Why is this important to youth political discourse? Well, maybe youth political discourses look, sound, and are experienced differently than what we understand politics to be? I'm going to suggest that we may think that we're watching 'dance' (something other than youth politics) when we are in fact watching expressions of youth politics.

The second Lakoff concept that I want to briefly explore is the 'conception of an embodied person'. This idea is far too complicated to find a substantial home within this paper, however, the basic concept is important. Lakoff tells us that the burgeoning discipline of cognitive science demonstrates that the mind is not separate from the body and that human reason and conceptualizations come from the neural structure of our

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[19] Most of us know what a metaphor is (a heart of gold, a blanket of snow), but Lakoff goes beyond identifying metaphors, to talk about their specific role in the creation of meaning.

[20] This is a bit of a nuanced point. Essentially Lakoff is saying that language doesn't make 'argument is war'; it is the other way around. He says that "metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because they are metaphors in a person's conceptual system (Lakoff 6). In other words, the metaphor is in your mind before you speak it out loud..

brains[21]. This means, "every understanding that we have of the world, ourselves, and others can only be framed in terms of concepts shaped by our bodies" (Lakoff 555). This is important to our discussion of youth politics because it demonstrates that all human beings, regardless of age, share the same 'equipment' necessary to form conceptions of the world and to interpret experience.

Story Two: *Locating Youth Politics*

      I've alluded to a world of youth politics, beyond the eyes of adults, but I've really only given you a theoretical understanding of why I believe this to be true. In the interests of making this a little bit more real I want to walk you through a story from my political history. It's my first political memory, and the moment that I knew that there was a role for my peers and I in the decisions being made about our lives. Throughout the story I'll take a few detours to relate the scene to some of the writers who have given me the language that I use to articulate my ideas. The section that you just read is the theoretical lens through which I hope you will view this paper. The following section is a slightly more 'grounded' discussion of applied theoretical work. If you want, you can think of this as a kind of literature review.

Wooden Tables and Bags of Chips

      On any other June day, the wooden tables with the chipped corners and metal legs would be laden with post-winter mountains of missing mitts, toques, and snow-pants. But today, they've transformed into a playground pavement storefront. Brown corrugated cardboard boxes, overflowing with blue and white polypropylene packaged ruffles and waves sprinkle the ground like salt. The bell rings, students flood the asphalt, parents materialize, loonies, toonies, and five-dollar bills exchange hands—a line forms. A grade one boy clutches a dollar in one hand and his mom's hand in the other. The chip sale is to raise money for charity, he knows that, but what he knows more than anything is that the kids behind the table are important—they're big kids, they're in charge, they're so cool. At the front of the line he sees the pencil marks and Sharpie-

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[21] This is a huge argument; so let's not get too deeply involved in it. This is an oversimplification, but I think that it's fair to say that Lakoff suggests that certain basic patterns of thought occur because of the physical structure of our brains.

engraved markings that betray the wooden-table disguise, but all of that melts away as the boy sees Mike, his Students' Council President, looking down from behind a wall of potato chips. It's a simple thing, choosing a flavour, but with the gaze of a big kid upon him the choice seems impossible, agonizing, scary. Mike, the President—this big, in charge, cool kid—can make or break the moment; he makes it, "Adam, what kind of chips do you want?"

Mike knows his name. How does he know his name? Adam's excited, he's proud, and he feels like he belongs, all because a thirteen-year-old Students' Council President knows his name. He doesn't have the words to describe it, but politics is real now; here, on a playground, with a thirteen-year-old politician in a space created by lost-and-found tables, bordered by bags of potato chips, politics is happening.

As I tell this story I think back to Lakoff's ideas about metaphor. I think about the imaginary culture where argument is dance rather than war. I don't think that I have enough information to conclude that there is a dominant conceptual metaphor for politics, but I think that it's fair to say that most people perceive it through the lens of debate (often synonymous with argument, which is understood through the metaphor of war) and through the lens of formal democratic structures (voting, participation in political parties, attendance at town hall meetings, etc.). The problem is that these lenses don't help us to understand what is going on at the charity chip sale. However, something from Gee does help. Gee says that "social goods are the stuff of politics…[politics] is about how to distribute goods in a society: who gets what in terms of money, status, power, and acceptance on a variety of different terms…when we use language, social goods and their distribution are always at stake" (Gee 8). Status, power, and acceptance are all concepts that help to explain the feeling of pride and belonging that was created in the chip exchange.

It is difficult to put yourself back into grade one or grade eight to think about how money, status, power, and acceptance are negotiated, but doing so helps to open up a whole other dimension of politics, just outside of adult political discourses. Therese O'Toole appears to be thinking about this when she cautions against large quantitative research studies that impose narrow definitions of politics on youth respondents

(O'Toole 72). These studies often measure youth participation in terms of formal, recognizable political systems and institutions. They tend to demonstrate declining participation in voting, political party membership, and declining awareness of legislative issues and political figures. These results lead many commentators to conclude that today's young people are politically apathetic. O'Toole suggests that we need to evaluate youth political involvement against youth-created definitions of the term. In doing so, it is obvious that young people are far from apathetic and are expressing political views in ways that are not effectively captured by 'adult' eyes or formal systems

The idea that youth politics exists 'beyond adult eyes' comes from Bronwyn Wood, who challenges us to look for liminal spaces "betwixt and between" between adult and youth worlds, for evidence of young people expressing political views[22]. Young people tell us a lot about their politics by the way that they structure environments like playgrounds, social hierarchies, and other spaces where they have a certain amount of agency. These interactions happen within formal systems and policies, often governed by adults, but the ways that young people operate within these spaces is decidedly youth-led (Wood 344) [23]. The interaction at the chip sale table is a perfect example of this kind of liminal space. The interaction took place in full view of all of the adults, but the exchange of status, power, and acceptance took place under the surface of the visible scene, within the social context shared by the two young participants.

This demonstrates that young people are active participants in the socio-political systems that influence their lives. Society's common view of young people is that they are 'becomings', beings with future potential rather than present value (Kallio and Hakli

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[22] Occupying a space on both sides of a threshold

[23] It is also worth noting that young people subtly influence the ways that adults create rules and policies to govern spaces where young people operate. For example, playground rules are often developed to reinforce the way that young people purpose the space. Older students are told not to use playground equipment designed for younger students. This regulation is more a recognition of the way that young people have chosen to use the playground than it is a prohibition against older-student-use. Older students have ruled use of the 'little-kids playground' out of social-bounds anyway.

4, Wood 337). As a result, many view political activity as a future role for young people, rather than something that they are actively engaged in (Wood 337, Cele 76).

If you're not quite sure about the active participation of young people in socio-political and socio-economic structures, let's risk over-romanticizing a grade school memory and return to our charity chip sale. The Thames Valley District School Board sets broad governing policies for the elementary and secondary public schools in the City of London. A brief search of the Board's policy book demonstrates that the Food and Beverage, Fundraising Projects for Schools, and Attendance/Safe Arrival of Students policies all apply to charity chip sales. In addition to Board policies, school-based policies relating to facility usage, student attendance, and extra-curricular activities apply.

Further to formal policy development and implementation, the cultural approach of each teacher and school administration to student politics, fundraising, and student absences for extra-curricular activities influence the chip sale. At the hyper-local level, processes relating to the election of Students' Council representatives, student attitudes towards their Students' Council, formal and informal Students' Council fundraising procedures, the choice of chips as a fundraising product, and the Council's selection of an appropriate charity influence the situation. Additionally, parental attitudes are important because children do not have independent incomes with which to buy bags of chips and therefore maintain a degree of control over the behaviours that their children can and cannot participate in. Finally, for the sake of argument lets expose the chips themselves. Bags of chips are labeled with barcodes, nutritional information, bilingual text and their production is governed by a host of regulations relating to taxation, the environment, and worker safety. In this case, the chips were brand name chips rather than local or homemade which makes the regulation of global trade, multi-national corporations, and financial systems relevant to our story.

Throughout this description of the myriad structural and political influences on the playground chip sale, a grade-one has been standing at the epicenter of this interaction. In fact, by exchanging his dollar for a personal interaction and a bag of chips, the student enacts a portion of each structure—simultaneously validating and resisting

aspects of each. This goes beyond a reductionist point about the complexity of the world; it demonstrates that Adam, a seven-year-old, is both influenced by and influencing the systems of domination, that enable the charity chip sale[24]. Said differently, this micro-political, bag-of-chips moment happens because social, political, and economic forces have conspired to create an opportunity for Adam to make a choice about whether or not to validate some or all of this conspiracy by handing over his dollar.

At the core, young people are political. They are active participants in political systems that shape the world that they live in. This is important because there is a notion that young people can be protected from politics; walled off from them so that they are not corrupted or dominated by powerful voices. This view aligns with the idea of negative freedoms. By pursuing this line of thinking we deny the subtle and overt ways that political systems impact young people and value freedom *from* politics over the freedom *to* participate in political systems.

Philosopher Martin Heidegger says that we are born into the world 'being with'. What he means, I think, is that by virtue of existing in the world we are instantly enmeshed in relationships with people, decisions made by people, and the actions that result from those decisions. If this is true, young people are political beings from birth. If we accept that young people are, by virtue of their consciousness, political beings, we are forced to consider whether it makes sense to ask if young people can be 'convinced' to engage in politics. More appropriate questions might be: Where and how do young people practice politics? Why are young people rejecting participation in formal political systems? How do political, social, and economic systems impact young people and how do young people impact these systems? Asking these questions would begin to teach adults how to recognize youth political participation where it is already happening (even when it doesn't look like formal politics) and help to validate the political roles that young people occupy in their immediate environments.

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[24] Remember when we talked about Max Weber earlier?

The charity chip sale appears, to the outside world, as a relatively benign interaction between two young people. However, this interaction is politics practiced in a form that renders it invisible to most adult observers. Beyond needing to learn how to identify and validate these situations as political, it is important that we also recognize the place that youth political practices occupy in the hierarchy of political discourse. Even if we can conquer the challenge of uncovering and validating sites of youth political activity, many will continue to see this form of political discourse as 'lesser than' discourses of adult politics. Creating spaces where the discourse hierarchy is rebalanced or intentionally skewed in favour of youth discourses will be important to ensuring that our understanding and integration of youth discourses is more than tokenistic. Prout challenges us to view childhood or youth in a generational context. He suggests that childhood cannot be conceived as merely an underdeveloped shade of adulthood. Childhood must be understood as a unique state of being, delineated by unique language, activity, and social experience that can be situated within a broader conversation about generational human experience. In other words, adulthood is not a more developed or 'better' state of being than childhood. Children are equally human, but speak a different language and live within a context defined by unique experiences.

Before moving on, let's sum up the lessons learned from the charity chip sale. One, youth politics may not look the way that 'adult' or formal politics looks. Young people may not call it politics and we may not recognize it as politics without looking carefully. Two, youth politics is often practiced in spaces 'betwixt and between' adult and youth spaces. This means that it is often hard for adults to participate in or identify where it occurs. Three, young people are situated within social, political, and economic systems. These systems impact their lives from the moment that they are born. However, young people are not passive participants in these systems, they actively reinforce and resist them through their behaviour. Four, youth political discourse is not nearly as powerful as adult/formal political discourse so a rebalancing is necessary to create spaces where young people can speak and be heard from within their own discourse. It isn't just about teaching young people how to speak an adult discourse; it is about recognizing youth political discourse as valuable in and of itself. And fifth, childhood or youth must be viewed through a generational rather than a developmental

lens so that the discourse of childhood or youth is not dismissed as being a lesser form of adult discourse.

Story Three: Youth Politics in Action

Have you ever tried to tell a story without telling *the* story? I sat in a meeting yesterday, tying myself in knots, trying to make an abstract point without telling the story that the point was attached to. The passive faces around the table made it easy to see that I wasn't communicating what I wanted to communicate. I didn't tell the story because I felt like the specifics of the story might take too long to explain. However, after failing to communicate my abstract thought I realized that sometimes the abstract needs the story to make any sense. I stopped talking, literally shook myself out, and started again—this time with a story. I shouldn't have been surprised that I needed story to explain myself. Marshall Ganz writes that human beings learn through stories because they communicate values through the articulation of the unexpected. Ganz says, "A story communicates fear, hope, and anxiety, and because we can feel it, we get the moral not just as a concept, but as a teaching of our hearts. That's the power of story." He also says that young people are particularly impacted by story because they are uniquely aware of the "world's pain" and uniquely hopefully about the "world's possibilities" (Ganz 2009).

In the interests of writing something that speaks to young people, and something that reflects my membership in the category of 'young people' I'm going to tell you three stories. Each story is a 'real-life' story of youth political discourse in action. The stories will help to uncover a world of youth politics 'betwixt and between' adult and youth worlds and demonstrate the different ways that young people interact with the discourse of local government. The first story captures the political discourse of the basketball court by telling the ongoing story of a community's desire to refurbish a local basketball court. The second story explores the contrasting discourses enacted by two eighteen-year-old candidates for local government office. The third story explores the London Youth Advisory Council (LYAC) and its role as a site of blended formal and informal

political discourse[25].

Chapter One: Basketball Politics

If you have the right guide, the view from the top of the White Oaks Park hill can teach you a lot. You'll see the four schools and five thousand students that border the park; the too-long, poorly-timed bus routes that make it hard to get to the factories in time for a morning, afternoon, or evening shift; the high-density apartment complexes that house many of the area's newcomers; White Oaks Mall where the 'old-guys' meet for coffee and a chat in whatever combination of languages they decide to speak that day; the jail (Middlesex-London Detention Centre) where too many neigbourhood kids end up; the too-frequent (if you ask the kids) police patrols around the perimeter of the park; the Daisy Mart parking lot community hub; the newly renovated Community Centre; the baseball diamonds, tennis courts, climbers, and skate park; and of course, the basketball court. When you're at the top of White Oaks Park Hill you're standing at the centre of a community.

My first trip to White Oaks Park is with Wadhah Baobaid, the Ward 12 Youth Councillor on the LYAC. Wadhah was elected, in a community-wide election, to represent his community on the LYAC, a group dedicated to involving young people in local government decisions. Wadhah brings me to the top of White Oaks Park Hill to help me *feel* the stories that he has been telling at our weekly meetings. Down the hill, about 80 meters away, is the cracked pavement of the White Oaks Park basketball court. It's starting to rain so the court is empty, but on any other day you'll find it full of young basketball players 'playing ball'.

The court is where community began for Wadhah. He remembers walking by the court, as a new London resident, and meeting an older kid who helped him to fit into the community. He talks about the link between the court, basketball, and his growth as a human being:

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[25] Remember the definition of politics that we're using: "social goods are the stuff of politics…it is about how to distribute goods in a society: who gets what in terms of money, status, power, and acceptance on a variety of different terms…when we use language, social goods and their distribution are always at stake" (Gee 8)

"…nothing [is] as passionate as basketball, 'cuz you really learn everything there, like when I was saying, like you literally, like you learn to lose, because it's a quick game, because you're losing, you can lose, you know what I mean? At the same time, you've gotta think about it this way; there, it's not like other sports…it's mainly you versus you, because you gotta take the shot, you take it at the right time, a little hold, like you gotta make it, there's a lotta, like analogies that you can take throughout your life with."

He's telling me something beyond learning how to lose, or how to 'take a shot' at the right time. He's talking about a formative place where kids are shaping and being shaped by the worldview practiced on the basketball court. It's a place where status and acceptance are negotiated and conferred through the politics of the basketball court, "Anyone can make a team, as long as you call next 'hoop'. No one cares if you're the worst player…no one's there to judge, no judgment." His friend Ferras backs him up, "No one's gonna be like, *we don't wanna play this guy*, it's like '*yo' we got next game.*" Ferras describes how, to an outsider, the conventions of the court might appear shocking, or even violent, "guys get into arguments, but they're fine after the game…it's just part of the competitive nature." Wadhah describes bringing his fellow Councillors out to watch a basketball game, "they're like oh, *tell them to relax*, I'm like, *nah, nah, you gotta let 'em play, no they're not gonna fight.*"

The governance of the White Oaks Court continues away from the court, in a 250 person Facebook Group, formed over an argument about how to best communicate game times. This group and the court are the legislative chambers of the basketball community; policy debates about the socio-political order and the criteria for the distribution of social goods take place here. However, despite the active negotiation of power, acceptance, and status present in the governance of the basketball court, few will recognize this as a political space. These young people are seen to be 'playing basketball' or 'having fun' rather than as active participants in the creation of a social reality[26].

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[26] Which is undoubtedly also true.

The story gets even more interesting when the politics of the basketball court come into contact with the politics of City Hall. Seven years ago the physical condition of the White Oaks Park Basketball Court (WOPBC) started to noticeably deteriorate. Repeated dunks bent the nets, the mesh wore away, grass started to grow between the cracks in the pavement, and a large frost-induced mound appeared at the centre of the court. The players decided to do something about it. Ferras recounts the tale:

> Okay, so the petition was something that we did, was it four or five years ago? Umm, at the time there was a guy, it wasn't me that started it, it was my buddy, and he was older so he kinda knew about this kinda stuff; and he got me into it because you know, we had the [Facebook] group, so we're like, *we'll put a bunch of names in the email and send it off*, so we send it off to the City. I don't know who he sent it to—he told me he sent it to a City representative. So I said, okay, Parks and Rec or whatever, and he sent it off.

The players use the only method of formal political engagement that they know how to use, a petition. But let's take a closer look at what's going on here. The 'petition', as Ferras calls it, isn't really a petition; it's an email with a 'bunch of names' supporting improvements to the basketball court. The email is sent to a 'City representative' but not submitted through the formal channels for citizen petitions. Thus, in the eyes of the formal political system it's not a petition[27]. Then the broken telephone game begins:

> Nothing happened, and then they built the courts at the school so we assumed that they got our letter and they just put it (the courts) in the wrong place, so that kind pissed us off a lot because it was like, this is weird, the same time that we did this petition, a month later there's new courts, but not where we play. And it's trespassing too when you want to be there past 6pm, so we kinda got really mad about that, and [the guy from the City] was saying that he didn't know about it, but I mean, that's what we were pissed off about, that they--all of a sudden-- these new courts are coming and nowhere where we can play. One of them was

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[27] See Phillips for a parallel example of the rejection of a grade one classes' petition because of its failure to meet formal standards for submission.

in the sandbox, like it was literally in the sandbox and a basketball [court there], like what the hell, what is that even about?

The players never got a response to their 'petition' and then interpreted a completely unrelated project undertaken by the neighbouring school board as a flawed and even malicious response to their request.

Some might say that confusion and system illiteracy explain most of this situation, but the point that I'm trying to make is more nuanced. This is an example of clashing discourses. Formal political discourse gives documents (like petitions), committee meetings, and linear, objective processes the power to arbitrate decisions about projects and policies; they are deemed to be 'of value'. However, on the basketball court, documents, committee meetings, and processes have nothing to do with the way that community norms are negotiated. On the basketball court, interpersonal interactions (online and in person) and relationships are the currency of decision-makers. Rather than framing interactions with the City in terms of relationships (the way that decisions on the court would be made) the players accepted the dominance of the discourse of formal politics and approached the problem through an unfamiliar discourse (Bourdieu).

While we don't know what happened to the petition, or if the players sent it to the 'correct' department at the City, we do know that they felt compelled to 'translate' their basketball experience into the language of the formal system. In the process of trying to decipher this new way of speaking and behaving, cues were missed and assumptions made about the way that the 'system' was reacting to their activities. The players assumed that their petition had been received and that the City's reaction was to go ahead with a poorly planned response without consulting with the community. In reality the 'response' to the petition wasn't a response at all; it was a completely unrelated project carried out by a local school board, but the players were not fluent enough in local government to know the difference. The most common (and well-meaning) response to this kind of story is to call for increased civic education or the streamlining

of government processes[28]. This is undoubtedly part of the solution, but I think that a much larger conceptual shift needs to take place. What if, instead of framing the problem in terms of youth civic-illiteracy, we framed the problem in terms of civic 'youth-illiteracy'?

You see, the WOPBC story is far from over—Wadhah and Ferras made sure of that. Wadhah recognized that the basketball players were "living in a different world" and decided to use his role as a Youth City Councillor to stop people from falling through the cracks of the two systems:

> So one day I was actually walking by the court and I seen the guys playing there and you know what, I came to them and I was like, *you know what why don't I do a basketball tournament or some way to organize these guys* and I start talking to them and they're like, *oh yeah, we already have a group, this Facebook group that already tells us what time to come play and whatsoever*. And I said, *really*? And then I went on the group and I got added and they accepted me, you know what I mean, to be added to the group.

Wadhah wanted to help fix the basketball court, but he knew that he needed the trust of the players if he was going to get them involved in his effort. By recognizing this he frames the problem in relational terms, rather than formal political terms. His relational frame and commitment to bring a basketball tournament to the community inspires Ferras to (unbeknownst to Wadhah) help recruit players for the tournament:

> He started calling people going and getting people and then after that me and him we were on the same page cuz' he was originally one of the original guys that started the Facebook group, but that's pretty much where my engagement started and then after there me and Ferras build the partnership, friendship moving forward.

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[28] The thinking goes: 'If young people were taught more about the system then they would be able to navigate it more effectively'.

Wadhah frames this relationship and partnership with Ferras as the most important contributor to the success of the basketball tournament. Wadhah's personal relationship and Ferras' relationship with the players in the basketball community are positioned as key political considerations. The trust that Wadhah and Ferras build with the basketball players gives them inside access to the ways that young people have been expressing their political views through their use of the ever-deteriorating basketball court.

Usage of the court has changed significantly. In the early days, the court used to get upwards of 100 people, including spectators, out for games played under the lights of parked cars[29]. Players came from all corners of the city because they knew that White Oaks Park was the place to play basketball.

> Yeah, the cops, police cruisers used to come 'cuz they didn't know what was going on, and then we would just tell 'em that we were playing ball and people were just watching; and they were like *oh, oh, we didn't know that this stuff happened*… And it was fun, you'd see people you hadn't seen in a while, like old friends from other areas coming down and it was crazy, it was always fun. I mean honestly the main reason that I want a new court is just to bring the people back"
> – Ferras

Today, the court attracts about 12-15 players per day, the players from other neighbourhoods stay away, and White Oaks players have started to travel to play the majority of their games in other parts of the city. Ferras and Wadhah see the impact that this migration is having on the younger generation growing up in the area. They note that there is a kind of race to the bottom occurring. Fewer kids are outside these days, which creates a culture where parents don't feel comfortable letting their kids go outside which further reduces the number of kids outside. Part of their drive to fix the court is

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[29] The majority of London's parks close at dusk and nighttime activities on the court are technically considered to be trespassing. However, the players asserted some control over the court by lighting it with headlights (cars are also not allowed in the park) and interacting with local police officers in a way that allowed the games to continue. Thus, the space where the games were played was truly 'liminal' and a perfect example of a location 'betwixt and between' formal rules and local practices.

motivated by a desire to restructure the social landscape for the next generation of young people in the area.

Fixing the court is also about identity. Just like cities and neighbourhoods around the world focus tremendous amounts of energy carving out economic and cultural niches for their communities, so too do the White Oaks basketball players. The White Oaks that Ferras and Wadhah grew up in is the centre of the London basketball world and they want to protect that identity for the next generation:

> This area is just weird like that, it's just, it has always been, like even now, when we're playing someone gets into like a little scuffle, you'll hear somebody yelling "White Oaks is back, White Oaks is Back" like that's just how it is, that's just the way we are, it's like competitive nature and if you go to New York it's the same thing, like Rucker Park just smack talk, guys get into arguments, but they're fine after the game, you know what I mean, it's just part of the competitive nature. – Ferras

So, with all of this political expression going on, one has to wonder why it isn't getting to the eyes and ears of City Hall. Part of the answer is a lack of trust between the players and representatives from the City. There is no consistent venue for individuals from these two groups to meet in communities of inquiry to build a common language or discourse for sustained communication. As a result, 'one-off' attempts at establishing contact fail to make a positive impact. I ask Wadhah and Ferras to tell me what would happen if someone from the City of London were to decide one afternoon to walk out on the court to talk to the players.

> Like people come and talk to them? Nah...Cuz you're in their territory, you wouldn't feel even comfortable as the City; like even when we saw the guy [from the City] before he came, he was walkin' around, me and Ferras, we knew it was him, like *okay, don't go, don't go talk to him*; you know what I mean... it's not like we were trying not to be friendly; it was just gonna be awkward, what were we gonna say, *oh hey guys, look, you haven't been here for how long*?" -Wadhah

In Wadhah's statement there is evidence of a 'basketball discourse' that exists beyond the City's grasp. It communicates something more than just the norms and social behaviours of the community, the silence, distance, and avoidance enacts a political perspective about the City's past conduct in the area. This kind of behaviour is often interpreted as being 'anti-social' or even hostile, but if explored more carefully can be viewed as an ironic kind of respect[30]. Ferras jumps in at this point and adds an even more fascinating layer to the basketball discourse:

> It'll be a lot of sarcasm, a lot, they'll (the City) come to the court and say, how you guys doing; [and the kids'll be like,] *you know we're just playing on this shitty court.* It'll be a lot of sarcasm like that, because guys in this area, they don't, they're not scared to speak their mind, you know, we'll just come right out and say it, we don't mind. –Ferras

As I start to think about the role of sarcasm, Wadhah reminds me of one of our visits to the basketball court. Wadhah had brought a group of people from the LYAC out to meet the players on the court. The meeting was ostensibly about the condition of the basketball court but the first thing that the kids said, with a smirk on their faces, was, "We want a new Food Basics." I ask Wadhah and Ferras why they feel like the kids chose to talk about the Food Basics when they knew that the conversation was going to be about the court. This is where it gets really interesting—you need to read this part in its entirety:

> Wadhah: I think it makes them feel comfortable, they're like, it's like you know the kid that's not trying in school and he knows that he's gonna fail, so he's like, why am I even gonna study? I'm not even gonna show; and you're making it worse, you're gonna go swear at the teacher; so you're gonna have another excuse to say that there is more than one excuse, you know, that's mainly the way that I can see the example.

> Ferras: So repeat the question

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[30] If I don't say anything to 'you' then at least I'm not being 'mean' to you.

Adam: So, if I know a guy is coming to see the court because they maybe want to fix it and my answer to them is "I want a new Food Basics," why is that my answer?

Ferras: I think, I think, people just want to express how mad they are about this area. I feel like people and just the second they get a chance to they're like, oh well, like, oh am I ever gonna get a chance to say this again; so why not just throw it out like, oh, you know since we're talking about change, let's go ahead and throw in all the other things that we want to change, it's kinda like, the opportunity is here, it's now or never type of thing. That's how I think most people in this area feel because it's been neglected for so long right. I mean the White Oaks, I'm just referring to the basketball court, I dunno about the Food Basics and stuff like that.

Wadhah: He was joking about it, he was just being sarcastic

Ferras: Opportunities, but at the same time he's (the kid) trying to show that this area sucks

Wadhah: Yeah, this area, literally

Adam: Why not just say that directly?

Ferras: I feel like there's a reaction

Wadhah: There's a barrier, there's so many barriers

Ferras: There's so much things that come up with that though; like this area sucks, why does it suck; oh, because, then you're narrowing it down to really one thing instead of then, he'll be like, you know a city person who doesn't live in this area won't understand why one small basketball court makes such a huge difference; you have to live and be here to realize.

This conversation demonstrates that the sarcastic "we want a new Food Basics" comment is encoded with a powerful statement about community neglect and socio-political alienation. There are two tragedies here. The first is that most public administrators will never hear more than, "we want a new Food Basics" and the second is that the young people will never have this view validated as 'political'. As a result they will continue to see their self-expression as being something 'other' than politics. In other words, they'll grow up thinking that they do not have political opinions when in fact they do; they're just expressed differently than what society is used to. The consequence of this belief shows up when these young people reach the age of majority or voting age and feel like they are completely separate from the formal political system. Formal participation, like voting, seems foreign and difficult because they have been led to believe that they have never participated before.

Wadhah and Ferras grew up playing on the WOPBC, so they know how to listen carefully and differently to the players on the court. Their willingness to listen helped them to put together a translation of player behaviour for City of London officials and for an entry into the Kraft Project Play contest[31]. They have recently secured $25,000 of funding from Kraft, moved up the City's refurbishment funding from 2016 to 2015 and are competing nationally for a chance at $250,000. This is a success story because of what Wadhah and Ferras have been able to do, but interestingly the two of them identified my role[32] as being essential to maintaining the consistency and accuracy of the translation[33]. They talk about a meeting, some two weeks ago, between Kraft officials, City officials, and the three of us:

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[31] Local community projects create online profiles, get short-listed for a social media contest by Kraft (a food company) officials, and compete for project funding.
[32] I work for the London Youth Advisory Council as a Community Organizer and help to navigate community projects through the political and bureaucratic landscape. I have been working with Wadhah and Ferras on this project for the last year.
[33] I accept that my role is important, but I don't want to take unnecessary credit for what has happened. Wadhah and Ferras have been the driving force behind the project.

Wadhah: At one point I didn't even know what they were talking about. Like literally, when they had the City and the Kraft was talking, I looked at Ferras and me and him were just like, we had literally, like usually you

Ferras: Like zoning

Wadhah: Usually you can have some hints but this one was off; and secondly, and when I was asking him like, I made sure, like I usually don't come off as clear; I'll make sure not to speak much and the only thing, few words that I said, I made sure that like they were really calculated, I wasn't allowed to like oh, just speak, it's okay to make mistakes, okay, what are you trying to say you know? It was like no, you have to be on point, everything was measured. And even when they were asking questions they were like trying to measure the court in basically, in their questions you know, answered those questions, this checklist. It wasn't like okay, what is your story? And then from there we can go back to the checklist.

Ferras: And there was one point where they were talking about how Tony [from the City] was saying that it takes a while for us to put the papers in and I'm like, in my head I'm like okay, why does it take so long if we have money? You know what I mean? The money is there, it just takes the point where, building a design and going out and doing it and in my head, cuz I don't understand the signing of the zoning or papers that you have to go through and I'm just like, well the money is there, hire someone and do it. Why does it take so long? As long as we have the right idea, why does it take so long to put all these papers in when the money is there you know? That like that's something that I didn't understand so I was like okay, so now I have to kinda not say that because I don't wanna make anybody look bad or anything, you know what I mean. Cuz at one point I kinda felt like, even the Kraft people were thinking that, like oh why would it take so long if the money is there? And then I, and I didn't know, I'm like should I say that or should I ask that question another time with Tony? And that's what I did, I emailed Tony and asked why would it take so long if the money is there.

Wadhah: There's a lot of censoring

It is important to read this entire interaction because it demonstrates how, even with experience as community advocates, the discourse of the basketball court is still embedded in the way that Wadhah and Ferras interact with political and corporate structures. Wadhah notes how the 'checklist' used by the Kraft officials constrained the discourse and how the meeting privileged 'objective' facts instead of story and narrative. Ferras talks about censoring his questions about sensitive topics because he didn't want to embarrass anyone. This reminds me of the ironic show of respect that stops the basketball players from interacting with City officials when they visit the court.

Take a Break and Recap

Okay, so we've covered a lot of ground in this story about the WOPBC; amongst the many things that we can learn from this situation, here are some relevant ideas to carry forward. First, the basketball court is a site of political activity. It may not look like politics, but there is tremendous negotiation of power, acceptance, status, and social good happening. Two, this political activity is not isolated from the issues of formal politics; issues of identity, community, and resource allocation are embedded in the conversation on the court. However, these connections are often lost when things are translated from the discourse of the basketball court to the discourse of formal politics. Third, political interactions on the basketball court are framed in terms of relationships and identity narratives, while interactions with the formal system are framed in terms of documents, processes, and policies. This contrast caused the basketball players to take political action through documents rather than through relationship building. Fourth, the problem isn't necessarily that young people are civically illiterate. It is important for public administrators to understand that they are largely youth-illiterate[34] and that

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[34] If you're having trouble with categorizing 'youth' and 'adults' don't worry, so am I. These categories, as Lefebvre reminds us, only exist when we create them. The point isn't to suggest, necessarily, that these discourses are age-bound, it is to suggest that no matter where you go there is a local discourse. You can 'divide the pie' however you want (ie. Into age categories, ethnic categories, racial categories, interest-groups, etc.) and find a unique discourse amongst each group. Local governments can't be expected

learning the discourse of young people is as important as it is for young people to learn the discourse of formal politics. Fifth, the discourse of young people might look like one thing and actually be indicative of something completely different. For example, the WOPBC is characterized by sarcasm and silence, but the sarcasm and silence communicates political alienation, mistrust, and at times a desire to protect the community from further disappointment. And sixth, by not validating the basketball discourse as politics we separate politics from lived-experience. As a consequence, young people don't feel like they know anything about politics when they are asked to participate in the formal system.

Chapter Two: Amir and Morgan in an Adult World

In the previous chapter we heard from Wadhah and Ferras, two young people translating the discourse of youth politics into something that the formal system understands. They gave us a window into what the discourse looks and sounds like on the basketball court and the way that that discourse has to be re-packaged for different audiences. In this chapter I want to introduce you to Amir Farahi and Morgan Baskin, two young (18 year old) political candidates who viscerally experienced the challenge of bringing their native discourses into contact with the discourse of local politics.

In the spring of 2014, Morgan Baskin surprised Torontonians by deciding to run as a candidate for Mayor. At the time, the City was reeling from a series of absurdist actions by its Mayor Rob Ford, leading many Torontonians disillusioned and in search of political change. The coverage of her campaign announcement by Global News features Morgan standing in front of the Mayor's office saying, "Unlike a lot of adults, I'm willing to say when I'm wrong, I'm willing to admit, 'Ok, I don't know how to do this. Let's ask someone who knows.' And not pretend I know it all" (Shum). The video piece is tasteful and gives Morgan a chance to frame her candidacy in her own terms. When asked if she believes that she can win Baskin says, "We elected someone who's done a

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to understand each discourse, but I think that it is reasonable to expect them to make every attempt to learn as many as possible and to admit that they may not understand every discourse.

whole bunch of illegal things, why not elect someone who is 18." However, just below the video, a caption betrays the prevailing attitude towards young people in politics, "Articulate 18-year-old makes her case for why she should be elected mayor of Toronto." Why is it notable that an 18-year-old is 'articulate'? Better still, what does 'articulate' mean and in what discourse or language is she articulate? The underlying assumption is that young people are not articulate, and that articulateness is defined by one's ability to speak from within the dominant discourse of 'accomplished' adults.

Two days later, the London Free Press runs coverage of Amir Farahi's campaign announcement. The article introduces Amir's story, "His passion for politics came to him as naturally as walking -- as a child in Iran, he grew up in a hothouse of political debates as noted scholars, activists and public figures often visited his parents' home (LFPress Staff). It also allocates a paragraph to the ideas that Amir hopes to cover in his campaign. The article identifies Amir as a 'Western student' but all in all, offers a fairly balanced portrait of his candidacy. However, what's interesting is that Amir seems to be on the defensive about his age right from the beginning. The article ends with an interesting comment, attributed to Amir, "He said he hopes voters will be persuaded he is running a credible, ideas-based campaign, so that his age isn't noted as anything but an interesting fact by the time voters go to the polls in October" (LFPress Staff). Despite saying that he doesn't want his age to be a consideration, Amir's language suggests that he feels obliged to prove that he is capable of operating like an 'adult'.

Morgan and Amir provide interesting examples of the constant code switching that young people have to do in order to participate in formal politics. Code switching is "the practice of alternating between two or more languages or varieties of language in conversation" (Dictionary). As demonstrated by Global's captioning of Morgan's video announcement, and Amir's pre-emptive response to questions about his age, it is clear that young people are under pressure to perform as adults if they want to be taken seriously in formal politics. This pressure to behave as 'adults' causes the young person to consciously consider the way in which his or her 'natural' or 'authentic' voice will be interpreted within the discourse of formal politics.

Image 1

In a post-election Twitter conversation between Amir, Morgan, and Emma Blue of the London Youth Advisory Council, the two (now-former) candidates were asked, "During your campaign, did you feel like you had to adopt an 'adult voice' to be taken seriously or could you be authentic?" Morgan's response is featured to the right. In her response she talks about the pressure to live up the standard of 'articulateness' expected from the discourse of formal politics, but also about the importance of attempting to be "visibly and publicly young" in order to avoid alienating young voters. Morgan's approach to the election is captured in the last part of her third tweet, "I was trying to appeal to young people after all[,] adults were a bonus."

Amir's response to the question contains some similarities to Morgan's but the language and the message differ quite substantially. Amir takes the position that young people *are*

Morgan Baskin ✔
@MorganBaskinTO
Follow

I certainly felt the need to be conscious of how articulate I was being. In a way I think I wouldn't if I was older. #changepoli @LondonYAC

7:06 PM - 11 Mar 2015

↩ ♺ 3 ★ 3

Morgan Baskin ✔
@MorganBaskinTO
Follow

I heard a lot of "you are so articulate" "you know so much" in a way I 100% wouldn't have if I had been 40 instead of 18. #changepoli

7:08 PM - 11 Mar 2015 · Toronto, Ontario, Canada

↩ ♺ 4 ★ 10

Morgan Baskin ✔
@MorganBaskinTO
Follow

Though I was also conscious to be visibly & publicly young I was trying to appeal to young people after all adults were a bonus. #changepoli

7:10 PM - 11 Mar 2015 · Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Amir Farahi
@AmirFarahi
Follow

@LondonYAC I was both authentic and an adult hoping to shatter the narrative about an young person running for office.

7:07 PM - 11 Mar 2015 · London, Ontario, Canada

↩ ♺ 2 ★ 2

London Youth
@LondonYAC
Follow

So you don't feel that you had to change your approach, @AmirFarahi? Interesting. #changepoli

7:09 PM - 11 Mar 2015 · London, Ontario, Canada

↩ ♺ ★

Amir Farahi
@AmirFarahi
Follow

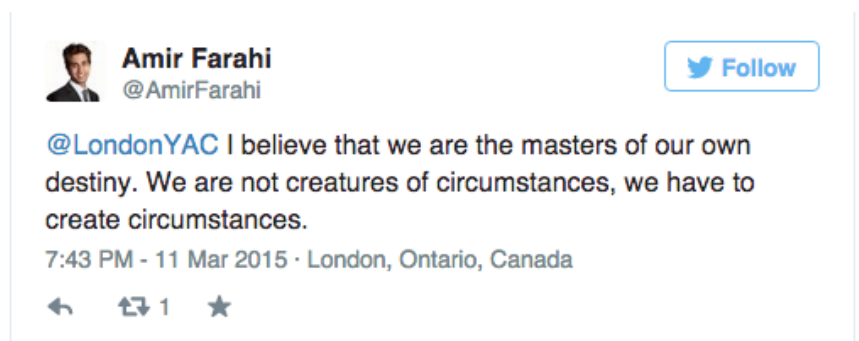@LondonYAC The point was that just because you're young doesn't mean you cannot be an adult.

7:10 PM - 11 Mar 2015 · London, Ontario, Canada

↩ ♺ 1 ★

adults and that being young doesn't mean that you cannot be an adult. In a later tweet he says, "everyone was interested in my age for 2 months. But slowly we gained momentum and ppl paid attention to my platform." While Morgan's reflection on her campaign demonstrates a 'youth first mentality', Amir's approach seems to focus on playing the 'adult-game' better than the adults.

Image 4

The differences between the two individuals play out over the rest of the Twitter conversation. Morgan sprinkles personal anecdotes into her answers (see image 3) that could be seen as out of place in formal political discourse while Amir maintains a degree of formality and intensity (see image 4) that more easily fits within the discourse of formal politics. You can also see the contrasting styles represented in the Twitter avatars (photos); Amir in a suit and Morgan dressed more casually.

> **Amir Farahi**
> @AmirFarahi ✔ Follow
>
> @LondonYAC I believe that we are the masters of our own destiny. We are not creatures of circumstances, we have to create circumstances.
>
> 7:43 PM - 11 Mar 2015 · London, Ontario, Canada
>
> ↩ ↻1 ★

I don't want to appear to suggest that Morgan is speaking in a more 'authentic' youth-voice than Amir, because that kind of a claim would start to sound absurd fairly quickly, but I do think that that Amir's discourse fits more easily within the expectations of the formal political system than Morgan's does. I'm proposing that both 'ways of speaking' are of value, but that certain ways of speaking more closely aligns to the norms and behaviours expected from politicians.

The retrospective conversation with the LYAC paints very clear differences between the two candidates, but in reality, both drifted in and out of different voices throughout the campaign. In a

> **Morgan Baskin** ✔ ✔ Follow
> @MorganBaskinTO
>
> Oh no, I was jamming too hard in the @Starbucks I'm in for #changepoli and made eye contact while chair dancing... #imnormal #ipromise
>
> 7:47 PM - 11 Mar 2015 · Toronto, Ontario, Canada
>
> ↩ ↻ ★2

campaign promotional video Morgan demonstrates an awareness of the instability of the line between adulthood and childhood (or more accurately 'teenage-hood') when she says:

The things I value in my life right now are what are perceived as very adult, and I think we perceive that teenagers don't value those things. And it's kind of a lie that we've bought into as a society.

On one hand she seems to echo Amir's statement, from his Free Press article, about it being possible to be young and an adult at the same time. However, she juxtaposes this statement with video footage of her reaction to reaching a milestone number of Twitter followers. The language suggests that she is more of an adult than we think, but the video footage offers a contrasting narrative. Taken together the clip almost reads as a challenge to society's preconceived notions about what marks someone as young or adult.

Amir maintains his relative formality throughout the election, but offers a contrast to his initial message in a speech towards the end of the campaign, "I *want* my age to matter because I believe that we need to create space in our political system for people like me. We have a system that allows for 18 year olds to run and we should accept *that* as reason enough for them to do so." In this passage he appears to shift from his earlier position that young people should be listened to because they are capable of being adults, to a position closer to Morgan's that suggests that young people need to be given opportunities to speak as young people (even if they don't sound like adults).

Over the course of the campaign Amir developed a comprehensive policy platform, whereas Morgan (in her own words) had a minimal platform because she felt like no one would notice. As a result of this and his natural inclination to speak in policy language, Amir

Image 5

Pat Maloney ✔
@PatatLFPress

Cannot believe Ward 6 candidate Amir Farahi is only 19. Really sharp, poised, informed, eloquent. #ldnvotes

RETWEETS 24   FAVORITES 26

8:12 PM - 29 Sep 2014

began to receive support from local media (see image 5). This support, while undoubtedly positive, contained the same markers of society's general inclination to assume that young people are generally politically unaware and unable. After it was all
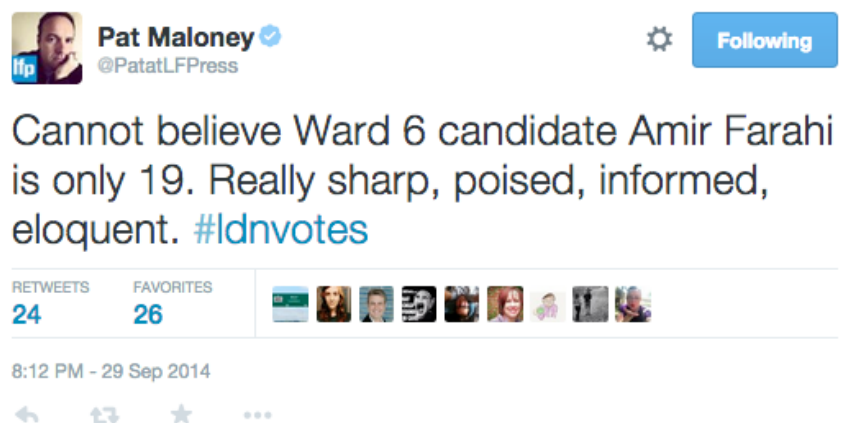
said and done, Amir's campaign ended with 847 votes, a 13.01% share of the vote in London's Ward 6 riding and Morgan's campaign ended with 1009 votes, a 0.1% share of the vote in Toronto's Mayoral race.

It might sound trite, but part of the reason why I wanted to tell you about Amir and Morgan is to demonstrate how dangerous formal politics can be for young people. The practice of formal politics, as performed in city halls, legislatures, elections and popular media forums, is dominated by powerful discourses that establish what is appropriate, what is valuable, and what will be heard. In order to participate in politics, young people, generally speaking, are encouraged to adopt, as best as they can, the language and cultural norms that define acceptable behaviour in a given institution. The way to get what you want, the argument goes, is to speak in a way that policy-makers will understand. The irony in this approach is that most attempts to be heard involve translations that separate young people from their lived experiences. The process of translation diminishes the value of their original expressions of experience and establishes the language of the formal system as the language of value. As a result, young political candidates like Morgan and Amir are often judged on the quality of their translations, rather than on the quality of their 'original' language. This creates a catch-22 for young politicians. They are either forced to speak the language of the formal system; therefore adopting a second language that alienates them from their own experience and from the experiences of their peers. Or, they must actively resist the language of the formal system by speaking in a way that is not validated, understood, or respected by the formal political system. To complicate matters even further, young candidates who adopt the language of the formal system often have their candidacy framed as a learning process, an opportunity for young people to 'grow into' the dominant discourse of government and adulthood, instead of a serious bid to be a representative in the present.

It is almost possible to view this argument through the lens of authenticity, however, I am hesitant to employ it because, as Richard Rorty claims, there is no way to describe reality in the way that reality could describe itself if it could do so (Rorty). For the sake of argument, I'll claim the term authenticity as a rough approximation or metaphor, rather than anything that can be absolutely stated, and do not claim that the

political performances of young people lack authenticity. Instead, I suggest that many young politicians are caught between competing forms of authenticity. They are caught trying to determine which parts of their lived experience fit within the formal political system and are forced to develop a filter that allows certain ideas, references, and words from their lives to mix with the language that they begin to encounter as candidates in a formal political environment. For candidates like Amir and Morgan, this creates a new kind of mixed discourse that contains subtle and overt resistance and acceptance of elements of the dominant political discourse. For others, their discourse becomes an authentic reflection of the way that they believe that they must perform to be heard by the political system. The characteristics of the discursive worlds that most young people come from are almost always profoundly different from the context that they encounter in formal political systems. Thus, young people are almost always operating within a new discursive framework, and translating their experiences and ideas from one context to another. Translation work is difficult and even the best of translators admit that everything from nuanced contextual meanings to major cultural differences have a tendency to be misinterpreted and go missing. Young people, like most people, are not trained translators, and therefore, begin any engagement with government from a disadvantage.

Take a Break and Recap

Alright, so now you've heard the stories of Amir and Morgan; let's recap a few of the ideas that we should carry forward. First, Amir and Morgan both emerged as young people, embedded within sites of youth political expressions. In order for either to run, they had to make the political choice to extract themselves from the norms of the youth political world (which dictate that running for office is not something that young people do). However, as they morphed into candidates for 'real' or 'adult' politics, they were forced to largely abandon the politics that might exist within their 'youth' circles in order to articulate ideas to the broader 'adult' population. Thus, youth political spaces have a

tendency to disappear from formal political discourses[35]. Second, the discourse of youth politics is firmly regulated to secondary power status by the formal political system. Amir and Morgan were both praised for being 'articulate' in the language of formal politics. In a way, their electoral currency was related to the way that adults validated their ability to speak a language different from the language that they associated with childhood. Like Bourdieu tells us, in order for a society to recognize someone as having exceptional skill in a particular kind of speech, we must tacitly accept a hierarchy of discourses. Third, there is significant danger for young people who chose to interact with formal political discourses. From the very beginning they are at a disadvantage because they are speaking a second language, for the first time, and translating all of their experiences so that they fit into a new context. Even the best translators lose things in translation, so it is likely that some political ideas go missing in the movement from one discourse to another. And fourth, speaking a new language can be dangerous because competence in a language is achieved by using the language, but to use the language you have to expose yourself to the judgments of individuals who speak the language better than you do. At a certain point there is a degree of diminishing return for 'practice' because people start to form opinions of you based on your inability or ability to speak the language. Young people must speak their new 'language' in a profoundly public setting and are at risk of being judged based on their immediate ability to 'fit in'.

Chapter Three: The London Youth Advisory Council (LYAC)

This chapter will focus on the way that the London Youth Advisory Council (LYAC) relates to my assertion that there is a parallel world of youth politics beyond the metaphorical capacity of our current understanding of politics[36]. However, before we get there I need to take a brief detour back through the definition of politics that Gee set out for us many pages ago. Gee told us, "[politics] is about how to distribute goods in a society: who gets what in terms of money, status, power, and acceptance on a variety of

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[35] In Morgan's case, she continued to try to introduce youth perspectives and approaches to municipal issues into the discourse of the campaign. However, these perspectives often seemed 'out of place' or outliers in debates and media coverage.
[36] Before I begin I want to make it abundantly clear that I'm a staff member at the LYAC.

different terms (Gee 8). We need to revisit Gee ahead of our discussion of the LYAC because his definition works in concert with Warren Magnusson's ideas about sovereignty and self-government to explain the way that the LYAC conceives of itself[37].

The Canadian notion of sovereignty equates the constitution of the state with the constitution of political space. In other words, the state contains all of the available political power in the country and once it is divided amongst provincial and federal levels of government there is none left for autonomous political entities[38]. As a result of this conception of sovereignty, nothing outside of the political power granted by the constitution can truly exist (Magnusson 13). This view of sovereignty is not objective truth:

> When Aboriginal peoples assert a right of self-government, they do not say that this right was given to them by the state. On the contrary, they say they have always had this right, and that it is a right that no state can take away from them (Magnusson 13).

It is difficult for most of us to understand this perspective because it suggests that both kinds of authority can exist in parallel without one governing the other[39]. This forms a profound contrast with the sovereigntist view of the state as the only source of political authority. Magnusson challenges us to recognize the parallel practice of 'self-government' implicit in urban life. He suggests that "the practice of self-government is

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[37] At first, this might seem like a bit of a sidebar, but stick with me because I think this will help to frame our conversation about the LYAC.

[38] This is somewhat different in the United States, but is more or less still the case.

[39] This idea is the basis for the two-row wampum. The two-row wampum is a visual representation of the basis for treaty agreements between the Haudenosaunee and European settlers who came to North America. It lays out two parallel rows of beads that represent two different ways of going through life. These rows run parallel but never merge. Between the two rows are three rows of beads that symbolize peace, friendship, and forever. This represents a commitment to travel along two parallel paths with mutual commitment to maintain peace and harmony with the whole circle of life. The two-row agreements were based on the notion that each culture had different ways and different cultures that did not have the right to pass laws that governed each other (Powless).

apparent on every Toronto subway car, in every village street, in every hospital and daycare centre" and that the "space of everyday life is a political space…a space constituted in a domain that is other than the domain of the state" (Magnusson 15).

At the very least, Magnusson's exploration of sovereignty reminds us that politics and governance is far more complex than just deciding upon the appropriate formal political jurisdiction for a policy debate to occur. Now let's close the circle. Gee's definition says "[politics] is who gets what in terms of money, status, power, and acceptance on a variety of different terms" (Gee 8). Combined with Magnusson's exploration of parallel forms of political authority and activity, we can see that it is normal and predictable for political spaces to exist outside of formal government structures. If that is the case, it becomes even more possible to think back to the politics of the charity chip sale and the politics of the basketball court and to conceive of them as legitimate political spaces.

The London Youth Advisory Council is an example of a parallel political authority. However, it is unique because the space facilitates the discussion and distribution of the, status, power, and acceptance parts of Gee's definition of politics[40]. The LYAC is a group of 15 elected Youth Councillors from across the City of London. They meet weekly to discuss issues and challenges facing the City, with a special eye towards amplifying youth perspectives. The LYAC is different than most youth councils because it does not focus on providing feedback on issues being discussed at City Hall; it focuses on giving young people the chance to make their own decisions about what needs to be discussed. As a result, a blended political space is created where young people interact with dominant political structures, while simultaneously building one in their own image, with it's own sphere of influence and authority[41].

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[40] The 'money' part of Gee's definition is absent from most LYAC conversations. This difference is likely fodder for extensive meditation on the role that economic considerations have on the discourse of a political space, but that's for another paper.
[41] Here's an example to help you understand what I mean. Earlier this year a 12 year-old elementary school student came to an LYAC meeting to talk about her experience as an active feminist. She spoke about the challenges that she faced gaining

It's easy to see the organizational presence of the LYAC as the key component of its existence, but more foundationally the LYAC is about building and modeling a form of political discourse that bridges the gap between youth and formal political discourses. The LYAC, has taken the foundational elements of formal politics—elections, meetings, policy positions, debates, elected Ward representatives, and bureaucrats—and blended them with identifiable aspects of youth political discourse—relationships, stories, consensus, talking circles, and lived-experiences—to create an alternative political space that attempts to bridge the gap between traditional and 'youth' political discourses. To make this a little bit more 'real' it is helpful to understand some of the specific ways that the LYAC has blended its perceptions of traditional political norms with youth ideas about the way that politics 'should' work. This might look a little bit bizarre in the middle of a paper, and might more traditionally be included as an appendix, but based on the way that most people read papers, I suspect that including this information as a chart will increase the likelihood of it being read in advance of the rest of this section.

Image 6 – The LYAC Political Discourse

City Council Norm	Youth Perceptions of City Council Norm	LYAC Normative Paradigm	LYAC Practice
City Council Meetings	Young people often articulate that they find City Council meetings to be formal, competitive, and complicated.	Meetings should be informal places where individuals feel comfortable to share their stories. Meetings should embrace emotion, subjectivity, and tales of lived-experiences, in	The LYAC still calls its meetings, 'meetings' but colloquially we refer to them as 'talking circles' as an ode to their roots in indigenous decision-decision making structures. LYAC meetings take place away from City Hall and often move around the

acceptance from her peers and teachers, as well as some of the successes that she has had asserting her views and making change in her environment. This kind of expression does not have a place within the formal political structure at City Hall, but it does have a place at the LYAC. The experience of presenting to the LYAC validated this young person's political activities and provided an opportunity that was valuable in and of itself. The next step for the organization is to help carve out a space within the formal system for this kind of conversation to occur.

		pursuit of an open space where consensus and collaboration are privileged over contest and competition.	community. Councillors sit in a circle and discuss the issue(s) that they have chosen to address. Participants are encouraged to share personal stories, build on statements made by others, and are not required to abide by a formal meeting structure like Roberts Rules of Order[42]. There is no voting and are no motions.
Meeting Minutes and Reports to Council	Policy reports are complicated, abstract, and difficult to read.	Reports should read like stories. They should contain emotion, subjective, human experience, and context for each idea expressed.	The LYAC creates 'Polistories' after each meeting. They are part story, part meeting minutes, and part policy document. 'Polistories' are accounts of each LYAC meeting created by its young volunteers. Volunteers observe the meeting and note everything from the body language of the Councillors, to the stories told, to the policy ideas expressed, and attempt to capture the 'story' of the meeting. Each section of the report features a relaxed, conversational title[43].
Role of Public Administrators	Public Administrators 'serve' the Councillors and are supposed to provide objective policy advice. They should not be involved in politics.	Public Administrators are human beings first. This means that they have ideas, opinions, and biases. These subjectivities have a	The LYAC has Researchers, Report Writers, Social Media Coordinators, and Staff. At Council meetings, these individuals are asked to allow Councillors to do most of the talking, but to

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[42] View LYAC "Meeting Types" in Appendix 1
[43] View the 'Polistory' format in Appendix 2.

		place in Council discussions. Public Administrators and Youth City Councillors have different roles but they are equal members on a team that is attempting to build a strong city for young people.	share their ideas and perspectives if they feel like they are important to the integrity of the discussion. A 5-10 minutes period of time is set aside at each meeting for the youth public administrators to offer their perspectives
Approach of City Councillors at Meetings	City Councillors are there to debate and vote on motions. Meetings are where decisions are made.	Youth City Councillors are there to share experiences, gain an understanding of various problems, brainstorm potential solutions, and identify what they don't know enough about.	Meetings are a place where new ideas and problems are introduced and discussed. Councillors are first asked to articulate how they relate to each topic, usually through the telling of personal stories. Once problems and issues are well understood the Councillors determine whether they have enough information or experience with the issue to offer solutions or recommendations. If not they defer the creation of solutions to a later meeting and request research support from the young public administrators.
Role of Gallery/Spectators	Members of the gallery (unless it is a public participation meeting) are expected to sit quietly and observe.	Members of the gallery should have an opportunity to participate in the meeting if they want to.	A period of time at the end of each meeting is allocated for members of the public to react to what the Councillors have said during the meeting.
Training	City Councillors learn how to do their jobs and about the services that the City offers before they begin their terms.	City Councillors should be involved in ongoing training that broadens their understanding of the City that they serve and builds their capacity to	LYAC Councillors hold Council Meeting throughout the community and ask individuals to teach them about their role in the community. LYAC Councillors hold a monthly Community Story Meeting

		think critically.	where three individuals from the community tell the Councillors a story about his or her life. These stories put Councillors in touch with ideas that they have never thought about before and also provide a platform for community members to tell their stories.
Elections	Elections are competitive and about obtaining the most number of votes.	Elections are about connecting with your community, sharing new ideas, and developing the skills of candidates.	Before each LYAC election, the organization hosts a training session for potential candidates. The candidates are taught a balance of skills necessary to run an election campaign and participate in discussions with their fellow candidates. Candidates are encouraged to prioritize the spirit of the election over the competition of the election.

A three-page chart is long, but hopefully it helped to provide you with an understanding of some of the ways that the LYAC is attempting to build a political discourse that is more accessible to young people. The specifics of the LYAC's attempts are interesting and relevant, but perhaps more important are the ways that this attempt is changing the kind of politics that LYAC Councillors are engaged in.

As a result of the difference in structure and discourse, conversations at the LYAC take on a different character than those that occur at City Hall. Olivia says, "[The LYAC] is a place of open communication and discussion where every voice is not only heard, but amplified, cared for, and respected." Charles says, "It's a place where young people can be taken seriously." Jess says, "It's a safe spot where people can share ideas…and just talk about things that interest them in a way that isn't normally talked about." Themes start to emerge from these responses—safety, openness, sharing, and

uniqueness. These aren't words that you'd associate with the formal political system reflected in popular media.

As a result of the different environment created by the LYAC, in its meetings and in its interactions with the community, the LYAC speaks and listens to a different kind of political discourse. Olivia recounts a story about one of the other Councillors speaking to a young person who said, "Isn't putting our garbage in the garbage can just like putting our litter somewhere else?" This kind of perspective might be laughed at under normal circumstances, but Olivia says, "I'm like *that, that is politics, that is policy, that is brilliant*—they (kids) can ask the questions that I am no longer able to ask because I have been trained to see it differently." Olivia is a grade twelve student herself, but she is already aware of the fact that people younger than her understand the world differently than she does. Even more profoundly, Olivia is able to see this young person's simple language as political expression—an expression of wisdom, rather than a marker of childhood naiveté.

This story illustrates the importance of speaking to young people about politics, as they define it, but it also highlights something subtler. Young people don't use the word 'politics' to describe their personal interactions with the distribution of social goods like status, power, and acceptance. They have their own language to describe these kinds of situations. This makes me wonder what we can't see because we can't speak their language. The Councillors immediately jump to questions of identity and acceptance. Jess says:

> All the drama on the playground—ageism within that, that we don't actually recognize, like the JKs can only play over here, the grade eights play over here, like even in the yard it's all sectioned off by grades so that there isn't as much interaction between, why would a grade eight hang out with a grade three? What does it mean if they do hang out?

Anooshae follows up with:

> I feel like it kind of also starts from like maybe like stereotyping…like oh, you're from here, you must be like this kind of person, oh you're a girl, you must suck at sports. Maybe that's where politics also starts.

Olivia adds:

> I think that the first time you interact with politics is trying to figure out where you exist in a hierarchy within the school.

The onslaught of commentary about identity within social hierarchies, status, and acceptance triggers Gee's definition of politics, but these kinds of experiences are rarely defined as such. We call this, 'growing up', 'bullying', 'finding yourself', 'gossip', and 'friendships'. There's nothing inherently wrong with any of these words, but none of them 'fit' particularly well within the discourse of formal politics. This raises two important ideas for local government officials to consider. First, we need to recognize and validate the search for identity as an inherently political process, but more importantly, we need to think about how to create space for the words mentioned above within formal discourses. Anooshae articulates the power imbalance that exists when you attempt to speak in terms of friendships, identity, and growing up, within the discourse of formal politics:

> I also feel like if you're talking to someone with more knowledge about, it like political leaders and if you were to talk in the same way that you would talk to like someone that like a younger kid that doesn't know much about politics, I feel like they older people would judge you; and say you don't know politics because you're talking about it like this, but it's like, we do it's just like we're talking in a way that makes sense to us, kinda like how we say like there terminology, the way that they explain politics is completely different and like we may do it too, but we're trying to get to the same idea, just in our age it's different the way that we explain it to them, so I think they may feel like we're, not immature—not well-versed.

The LYAC flips this on its head by providing a space where the search for identity and meaning is situated at the core of politics. Looking back on the reasons why LYAC Councillors chose to run for Council, it is unsurprising to see that, at the core, the most common motivation for running for election was to find meaning or identity:

Olivia: "A year ago I ran because I moved here and I was like man, I hate Central [my highschool], I don't want to do stuff there. I was like, I need to find an outlet because I'm used to volunteering all the time and I'm bored and I don't like things that are going on, and I like I need something.

Anooshae: "I had just recently run for the Huron elections and I had lost and I was like, *you know, maybe there's a reason why I lost this election because there is something bigger waiting for me*. And then you gave me that call and it was just perfect."

Jess: I ran for the LYAC because I was searching for meaning in my life. I needed more than what I was doing…I wanted to do something bigger with my life. I was in that like, weird in between space, where I was you know finishing school, and freaking out about that and I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I knew that I needed to find meaning, I needed to find something that would get me out of where I was cuz I wasn't in a good place."

Scott: "I needed something to do outside of my career 50 hour weeks, so I thought that was a cool idea."

Charles: "I jokingly brought it up to my parents that I'm thinking of running to this, on this thing and they just took it and ran with it; wouldn't let me get out of it, which was good because if it wasn't for them I would have backed out, 100%. Yeah, yeah it was just this, this idea of politics as uh as a formal sort of inaccessible thing that was something that I didn't see my place in, so if it was left up to me I wouldn't have followed through. Definitely wouldn't have followed through with it, I remember my first four emails to you were addressed to Mr. Fearnall, they were, I remembered that, then you finally called me and said 'hey

Charles' and that was, that sort of stopped politics being this um, crazy formal inaccessible thing."

By practicing an alternative political discourse, that allows identity into the conversation, the LYAC has been successful at gaining access to new political perspectives, from different sources, and it has been successful at attracting politicians who are openly motivated by a search for personal meaning.

Take a Break and Recap

So why is all of this important to our conversation about uncovering youth discourses of politics? First, the LYAC is attempting to create a blended form of political discourse that bridges the gap between the way that young people experience and practice politics and the way that the formal system discusses it. Second, by approaching youth political expression this way, the LYAC is discovering and validating new political issues and ideas. By amplifying youth expressions of politics, the LYAC Is helping to connect lived experiences in youth lives to formal structures of politics. Third, the LYAC is helping to create space for young people to articulate their 'political' experiences in their own language. This space allows young people to avoid translating their voice into another language and losing aspects of their expression in the process. Fourth, by creating a space for young people to speak about 'politics' in their own language, the LYAC is beginning to rebalance the power dynamic that privileges formal political discourses over youth expressions of politics. And fifth, the political discourse being practiced is attracting a new kind of individual to something called 'politics'. In a way, the LYAC is attempting to shift the popular paradigm about what politics is and is reclaiming the word in hopes of changing the way that it is practiced.

Story Four: Why Local Governments and Public Administrators Should Care

Some may not need me to answer the question posed in the title of this story, but others will have difficulty understanding why local governments and public administrators should care about uncovering and understanding discourses of youth politics. As I come towards the end of this paper, I feel like I owe myself the indulgence

of making my most personal argument first—*it's the right thing to do.* Take a moment to consider whether that can be justification enough for you to support an effort to engage with discourses of youth politics. Some of you will feel, in your hearts, that it is the right thing to do and you'll do it. Public administrators are frequently asked to make their arguments in economic, efficiency, strategic, or organizational terms. Sometimes I wonder if, in doing so, we're devaluing the things that we're arguing for. Is arts funding really important because of its impact on the economy? Or is it important because you've seen it change lives and because you've felt the energy after a standing ovation? Intangible? Absolutely. Irrelevant? No. So before we go on, let's take a minute to let the argument for learning discourses of youth politics exist in purely human terms. It's the right thing to do because engaging with young people, in their own language, benefits young people—it makes their lives better. If that's enough for you, use the stories above and the lessons that you draw from them to enhance your own language and the richness of your arguments.

For those of you that need more, or just want to think about some different ways that we can apply the lessons learned from the stories above, let's carry on.

Reason number two—*young people aren't (by any stretch of the imagination) the only group being systemically excluded from our democracy.* Admitting that young people speak and practice politics in different ways requires local government administrators to accept the high-level concept that political discourses exist and differ across ethnic, cultural, interest, and identity groups. If we are able to introduce 'discourse' to the discourse of local government we will provide individuals, who feel alienated from government, with a language to help explain why they feel alienated. At the same time we will give governments the language and the perspective needed to reach out to these groups, admit its inability to connect with certain discourses, and help to create spaces where each alternative discourse can be practiced and blended with traditional approaches. Earlier, I said that we need to think about re-framing youth civic-illiteracy, as civic 'youth-illiteracy'; imagine countering dominant narratives about the apparent civic illiteracy of other groups, with similar turns of phrase. This argument has never just been about young people; it has been about introducing the idea that

government has a greater responsibility to recognize the barriers created by its discursive traditions.

Reason number three sounds almost as trite as reason number one—*because we can*. As demonstrated by the White Oaks Basketball Project and the LYAC, it is possible to create spaces for alternative discourses to come into contact with formal political systems. In the White Oaks case, community organizers have diligently translated between discourses and are slowly building a language of shared value. The LYAC has been more intentional and perhaps more direct in its attempt to create an alternative political space for young people to establish their own norms and language of value. The fact of the matter is that we are capable, as public administrators and as humans, of creating spaces for new discourses. It takes time, energy, and constant discussion, but it can be done. My experience attempting to crack the youth code tells me that, with enough effort, we can crack any code and find ways to incorporate the discourses of any group.

Reason number four is a little bit more of a traditional argument, but it's still an important one—*we want to attract more people to politics*. Participation in formal political structures is weak in many demographic areas. Women, ethnic and cultural minorities, the elderly, and the young (to name but a few) all show lower levels of participation in traditional politics. Securing the participation of these demographics is not as simple as 'getting the message out'. The barriers that these groups face are structural and must be addressed at a deep system level. Without overly generalizing or homogenizing these groups, it is important to identify ways that the language and norms of traditional local government structures excludes their participation. Mill believed that local government participation was the key to participation in other levels of society. If we take this seriously at the local level we have the potential to create impact that ripples far beyond the borders of our communities.

Reason number five—*we're oppressing young people without realizing it*. This might sound a little bit dramatic, but I challenge you to think about the number of times that you've heard people refer to someone's opinion as 'childish', 'naïve', or 'idealistic' in

a positive sense. Just like other human rights movements, we often fail to notice the micro-aggressions that young people experience everyday. These phrases reinforce a view of childhood as a lesser state of being than adulthood. In my world, childish, naïve, and idealistic can be spun as positive characteristics and further evidence to support the need to understand the unique wisdom that can be found when young people are able to communicate in their own languages.

Reason number six—*we're losing things in translation*. By turning a blind eye to the 'space around the words' and the nuance of feedback presented in alternative discourses, we are losing important pieces of information about lived-experiences in our communities. Imagine a young person breaking her ankle on a basketball court, crying out in pain, and the anger that her parents feel about the impact of poor facility maintenance in their neighbourhood. Now imagine that same concern presented in the language of City Council—parks maintenance schedules, liability concerns, and safety risks—all important considerations but not nearly as visceral as a child in pain with angry parents. In the process of translating this experience from the basketball court to City Hall we have lost something; we've lost the anger, the pain, the frustration, and the story—the story is important.

That brings us to our final (for now) reason—reason number seven—*we're missing out on good ideas*. Young people have wisdom that we're missing out on. Young people, by virtue of being a different age, come into immediate relationship with different socio-political and socio-economic systems than those who have come before them. As a result, it is only natural that they have different ideas about how to interact with these systems. Not every youth-generated idea is going to be a solution to one of the world's problems, but we stand to learn something about the next age of our society if we start to listen to young people before they are 'adults'. If we can anticipate the needs of the future by listening to those who viscerally experience and participate in the reality of the present we increase the speed at which we can innovate and adapt as a species.

The Epilogue: A Concluding Note

I can't possibly end this paper without thanking a number of people for their support throughout the last year. I began my journey in the Local Government Program unsure about what I wanted to focus on. I started with a vague notion about wanting to look at storytelling in local government. I didn't think that I was getting anywhere with this until I realized that this entire paper was a story or perhaps, more aptly, a collection of stories. I still want to think more specifically about the role of narrative and story in local government, but for now I'm glad that I found a way to make it part of this paper. I have Dr. Neil Brooks from Huron University College to thank for one of my earliest conversations about bringing public administration and story together.

Early in the year my MRP supervisor Andres Perez made an indelible impact on my year. He connected me to the work of Camilla Stivers and reminded me of my love for theory. His support, through many crises of confidence, has been invaluable and I thank him for his patience.

My colleagues at the London Youth Advisory Council including each and every member of the 2014/15 Council own a piece of this work. They permitted me hours of access to some of the most profound political insight that I could ever have hoped to encounter. They changed my views about politics, about what was possible in local government, and helped me to find a language to articulate my ideas. I'd especially like to thank Matt Ross, Emma Blue, and Selma Tobah for letting me form, re-form, and ramble on about my ideas. Their advice after each of these verbal exercises was always helpful and calming.

Thank you to my classmates in the MPA program. We spent long hours ranting, debating, critiquing, thinking, discussing, relating, and identifying more about local government than I could ever have expected. We truly formed a community of inquiry and I hope that we will continue to stay in touch over the years to come.

I should also take time to thank friends and family who watched me disappear for the better part of the last year[44]. As I worked through the final writing stages of this paper I went even further underground. Thank you for understanding, for not judging me too harshly for avoiding social events, or for my occasional disconnected, rambling, recitations of various arguments in this paper.

Finally, thank you to everyone that has read this paper. It was a joy and a struggle to write, but at the end of the day I'm glad to have written something. I hope that you were able to understand, for the most part, what I was trying to say and that reading it has left you with some new questions, if not a few new answers.

—Until next time.

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[44] Interestingly, it is difficult to know if someone is disappearing until they have disappeared, so they may not have realized that I was disappearing until they could no longer see me. But, at any rate…

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