# 'In the World': Toward a Foucauldian Ethics of Reading in Social Work

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**Abstract**

Teaching and learning critical and anti-oppressive frameworks pose many challenges within social work as a profession invested in notions of practice, competency, helping, and benevolence. Course content that generally interrogates social work's helping role and social workers' identity as helpers is at times met with dismissal that it does not teach practice skills. At other times, learners paradoxically argue that material that challenges the making of the profession and their identity in fact confirms and reaffirms their professional roles. These reactions suggest that a number of actions and negotiations take place in the apparently mundane relationship between reader and text, actions that cannot solely be attributed to texts. This paper uses a Foucauldian approach to ethics to render the relationship between reader and text thinkable and problematic and to explore processes of subject formation being negotiated by readers in their contextual relationships with texts. The central argument of this paper is that by rendering the reader-text relationship thinkable, we can explore transformative and critical reading ethics that account for how power and knowledge regimes interconnect with processes of subject formation in reader-text relationships in social work.

*Keywords*: social work education, subjectivity, Foucault, reading, post-structuralism

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> The point is that texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society—in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly … Whether a text … is considered dangerous or not: these matters have to do with a text's being in the world, which is a more complicated matter than the private process of reading. The same implications are undoubtedly true of critics in their capacities as readers. (Said, 1983, p. 35)

In the spring of 2011, Amy Rossiter, a well-known Canadian social work scholar, visited the School of Social Work where I teach to give a number of talks on her work on Levinisian ethics and their contribution to social work (Rossiter, 2011). At the time of her visit, my graduate students were reading her work in which she has built on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (1969) to pose a two-pronged ethical interrogation of social work. On the one hand, she questioned social work's reliance on knowledge—conceptual, representational, and theoretical frameworks and models—used to explain and represent people's conditions at the peril of the complexity and unintelligibility of their unique experiences (p. 4). On the other, she

acknowledged that justice advocacy—an important mandate for critical and anti-oppressive social work—requires strategic forms of representation and knowledge (p. 10). Building on "Levinas' insistence that ethics precedes knowledge," Rossiter advocated for an "unsettled" ethics as a *"deliberate practice of ethics before knowledge"* (p. 11); a practice located "on the razor's edge," which is that narrow space in which we practice "in full view of the tensions and contradictions derived from social work's professional status and knowledge claims" (p. 2), and in which we remain committed to "chronic alertness" and "struggle with the vast historical legacy" of knowledge and "practice techniques" (p. 11).

As I sat in class and in the audience reading, discussing, and listening to Rossiter, I was intrigued, though not completely surprised, by the manner in which some students and colleagues were taking up her ethical argument. Confronted with the challenge of resisting the desire to reduce people to knowledge, readers commonly interpreted Rossiter as instructing us to 'simply be' with our clients, to centre practice precisely on those traditional conceptual and practice frameworks that envision social work as being about the development of interpersonal relationships and are part of the knowledge claims Rossiter has asked us to question. As one person stated, "Rossiter has taught me that I just need to listen and be with my clients," while another indicated that she was teaching us to "communicate and relate to our clients with the 'right side of our brain'" adhering, I supposed, to scientific bodies of knowledge[1] that propose that the right side of the brain promotes more emotional, intuitive and subjective thinking and expression.

While it is to some extent accurate that Rossiter has called us to think of unsettled practice as a skill to approach and engage the Other, these interpretations embody a striking paradox. While suggesting that we should simply 'be' with our clients, these interpretations also assume that this way of 'being' happens within traditional and historically specific interpersonal, therapeutic, and communicative models that reinforce what we already know about social work: Namely, that as a practice, social work is about the development of relationships that are determined by historically specific theoretical models such as "lateralization of brain function." These interpretations are paradoxical because they take up Rossiter as both challenging and reinforcing knowledge. In the process, these responses turn the question of unsettlement into settlement, securing the social work subject's entitlement and knowledge. Perhaps momentarily unsettled by Rossiter's challenge that we should not assume we know the face of the Other, the subject quickly recovers and reintegrates herself by reading into Rossiter what she already knew all along. In the process, Rossiter's proposition that we avoid processes of interrogation

[1] This notion of the distinctive function of left and right side of the brain is based on the concept of "lateralization of brain function" that has resulted in a general belief in popular psychology that the right and left sides of the brain are responsible for different and distinctive personality traits. In some instances, correlations have been made between gendered behaviours and brain lateralization (see, for example, Dardo & Volkow, 2012; Manning & Chamberlain, 1991).

that lead to a secure answer and reinscribe knowledge about the Other are implicitly rejected in favour of a settled sense of knowledge and practice.

What stops us from letting Rossiter's argument fully enter our consciousness and unsettle what we think we know about social work? At the centre of Rossiter's 'unsettled' practice is an implicit interrogation of social work subjectivity as sustained on notions of competency, mastery, and practice skills: conditions that make up the professional. How does the professional, then, read a text that challenges what is at the centre of professional identity? Most importantly, can we open up the relationship between subject/reader and text in ways that allow us to propose a critical ethics of reading that can bring to light processes of subject formation and their embeddedness in knowledge and power relations? What are we to gain from such an exercise? In this paper, I explore these questions by using a Foucauldian (1990, 1995, 2007) approach to processes of subject formation and ethics to render both the practice of reading and the relationship between text and reader thinkable and problematic. I suggest that in mundane and ordinary practices of reading, subjects enter into specific kinds of relationships with discourses located within larger and historically specific power–knowledge regimes, and within which they come to know themselves as subjects. Foucault (1994b) called these practices of subjectification ethics.

The purpose of this endeavor is ultimately to propose a critical approach to ethics of reading that on the one hand, strives to uncover the *technologies of self* (Foucault, 1994f) mediating and mediated by practices of reading while on the other hand, can unravel, undo, and trouble such technologies. The central argument of this paper is that a Foucauldian approach to ethics can crack reading practices open, rendering them thinkable in ways that can make the subject also visible. I hope ultimately to propose an ethical practice of reading that remains politically, historically, and socially situated in its awareness of the relationship between reader and text, and of how power and knowledge regimes influence what happens in this relationship.

I use the concept of text loosely in this paper to refer not only to the written word, but also to a variety of teaching tools such as lectures, presentations, discussions, and audiovisual materials whose content and function as teaching tools can be considered texts. When referring to the reader, therefore, I also mean to include listener, viewer, student, participant, and even teacher. Further, I am not interrogating the content of texts or suggesting that texts exist as unquestionable forms of knowledge. Texts are historically specific expressions of power–truth, the site in which larger discourses and struggles over meaning manifest themselves (Foucault, 1982, 1984). They also emerge within local and global social power relations that determine and influence politics of knowledge production, distribution, and acceptance, and the conditions under which we consume them (Hook, 2001; McKenna, 2004; Richardson, 1996). As such, texts are influenced and located within material conditions and procedures that enable "writing, speaking and thinking" (Hook, 2001, p. 523). As Said added in the quote at the beginning of this paper, texts emerge and exist in the world and within historically specific contexts. As I discuss in this paper, when we read we enter into mutually constitutive relationships with

texts, relationships that are also worldly, contextual, situated, and socially mediated. While keeping in mind this mutuality as well as the discursive character of text, in attempting to render reading practices thinkable, I intentionally and strategically turn my gaze from the text to the reader and toward similarly discursively mediated and socially situated practices of reading.

## Foucault and Ethics

Building on the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Foucault defined his intellectual project as centred on the question of "how one becomes what one is" (Nietzsche, 1983, p. 155; see, for example, Foucault 1989, 1994a). Implied in this question are two main conditions: one, that 'what one is'—the self—is not a "simple given"—a truth that just needs to be discovered—but a condition that is created and comes into being within historically specific relations and social processes, and through highly regulated, disciplined and normalized processes of subject formation; and two, that the making of the self can be traced by paying attention to the constant, dynamic, and mutually implied interplay of power, knowledge, and subjectivity that causes the subject to be always *"in process,* a work in progress and never finished" (Schrift, 2000, p. 155). This interplay of power and knowledge results in the conditions by which "certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals" (Foucault, 1989, p. 308). Therefore, by interrogating the subject, Foucault in fact also interrogates power, knowledge, and the social world within which the subject is situated and within which the subject comes to be.

Subject formation, therefore, takes place within power–knowledge regimes (Foucault, 1980, p. 93). The interdependence of power and knowledge makes it possible for certain discourses, such as psychoanalysis, psychiatry, or in the case of social work, specific social theories, to attain the character of truth, knowledge, or science and, in the process, inform who the subject is within these discourses (Hunter, 1996). These regimes of truth emerge historically within specific relations of power not as tools to uncover an unknown essence of the subject and the social world, but as tools to discursively produce the self and her social environment (Rabinow, 1994). In other words, what we understand as those qualities, desires, behaviours, and conducts—for example, rationality, self-reliance, morality, freedom, etc. (Brown, 2005)—that are associated with ideal human identity are, in fact, historically and discursively produced conditions emerging from constant struggles between power and knowledge. In the context of social work and within the history of the West within which social work emerges, those conditions and characteristics are deeply intertwined with race, gender, and class social relations and with the role assigned to social work in the policing of social structures and the maintenance of taxonomies of difference[2] (for example, Drinkwater, 2005; Moffatt, 1999; Parton, 1999).

[2] Scholars in the fields of post-colonial studies and critical race theory have greatly informed this aspect of critical social work analysis (for example, Golberg, 1993; Razack, 2002; Stoler, 1997; Thobani, 2007).

Foucault is sometimes interpreted as offering a rather pessimistic view of the relationship between power, knowledge, and subject in which the subject is simply the calculable, divisible, intelligible, and manageable effect of power–knowledge regimes and in which the subject has no agency[3]. However, Foucault's understanding of power–knowledge regimes is both repressive and productive (Sawicki, 1991). The subject is not only the effect of power–knowledge relations, but also the enactor, a producer of power and knowledge. Power is productive in the sense that it requires the active participation of subjects in the organization of the social world and its structures and, through a "will to truth," in the production and distribution of knowledge as truth (Foucault, 1994c). It is also productive because power acts in a dual and interrelated process: both by making it possible for subjects to actively use power/knowledge to perform on others (or the Other) regulation and discipline and by creating the conditions for self-regulation that grant certain bodies the status of subject (Foucault, 1990, p. 5).

It is in this context that a Foucauldian concept of ethics emerges: a practice understood as the work that subjects do onto themselves to define themselves and others in relation to power and knowledge (Foucault, 1990, p. 77). To be sure, ethical practice is the work that individuals do to train themselves in relation to power and knowledge and to know themselves as subjects through the use of power/knowledge. Ethics are, in fact, the actual practices that allow subjects to become. Foucault called these practices technologies of self that "permit individuals to affect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thought, conducts, and ways of being so as to transform themselves in order to attain certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection and immortality" (Foucault, 1994f, p. 225). Let's not forget that happiness, wisdom, perfection, and immortality are discursively produced within power–knowledge regimes. Ethics is, then, fundamentally the practice of self-mastery understood as the "enslavement of the self by oneself" (Foucault, 1985, p. 79). As a practice, ethics is not a set of rules or a code of conduct; rather, as Foucault (1994a, p. 286) observed, ethics is a "way of being and of behaviour … a certain way of acting"; it is work that subjects perform, "a distinctive form of intellectual practice, a singular form of critical thought" (Rabinow, 1994, p. xxxv).

Ethics entails a preoccupation with the self, which requires a constant process of rendering the self intelligible to the self, as well as a "*fundamental and ontological practice of freedom* [emphasis added]*"* (Foucault, 1994a, p. 285). Freedom is what makes it possible for the subject to enter into mutually producing relationships with power–knowledge regimes and with those discourses that, through their enactment by subjects, become truth. For example, in looking at historically specific practices of self-writing, in the form of journals or letters, Foucault traced the practices and techniques enacted by the subject in order to render herself knowable not only to others but also to herself (Foucault, 1994e). Writing, as a particular technology of self, argued Foucault, mediates specific relationships between the self and the self in

[3] For a good overview of these arguments see, for example, the work of Samuel Chambers (2001).

which the self renders herself intelligible and manifested in the text (see also Davies, 2000). The process of rendering the self intelligible is mediated by those discourses that through power–knowledge struggles have acquired the condition of truth. It is these discourses that the self now uses to write herself on text. Self-writing, as Foucault has demonstrated, changes over time according to the discourses and regimes of truth that determine it. For example, in Greek antiquity, self-writing focuses on the body and on practices like eating and walking as techniques to achieve a good life. This contrasts with the preoccupation of the self with the soul in later Christian self-writing in which temptation and sin are central concerns in the making of the self (Foucault, 1994e, p. 221).

In sum, ethical practices such as self-writing constitute a "self-forming activity," a concrete and active process of becoming, a technology, and an ascetics of self (Foucault, 1994b, p. 265). As such, they are activities that lead subjects to do concrete work on the self in order to facilitate the recognition of themselves as subjects and as objects of their self-forming action. Technologies of self are located within social power relations in which the self comes to know herself through her relationship to the social world. Self-writing, self-reflection, and self-making are not intimate practices, but practices that take place and are informed by the social world (Rabinow, 1994, p. xxxii). Ethics in this sense is a political action: a practice that is taking place in the social world and within social power relations. Finally, ethics is fundamentally a practice of freedom; even if freedom is narrowly defined, ethical practice cannot be imposed through power exercised from above in conditions of exteriority, but requires the participation of the willing subject both in social relations and in her own self-formation (Foucault, 1994a). Ethics is an agentic practice.

## The Context of Reading Practices in Social Work

Students' responses to Rossiter's ethical challenge are by no means unique; nor should they be assumed to be inaccurate, mistaken, or insufficient engagements with Rossiter. On the contrary, as research conducted by authors in areas of social work practice and pedagogy, and my experience and the experiences of others teaching in social work demonstrate, a common and rather routine response to arguments that challenge not only the competency basis, but also the location of social workers and the social work profession within systems of dominance, is a retreat to practice skills as venues to rescue social work subjectivity and practice (for example, Heron, 2007; Jeffery, 2005; Jeffery & Nelson, 2011). It can, in fact, be argued that the responses of students and audiences are embedded within larger power–knowledge relations in which discourses of competency, professionalism, and practice determine not only what students expect to gain from reading practices but also what they are expected to do in their professional life. What students and audiences are doing when using Rossiter as a tool to inform and confirm practice is precisely what they are expected to do within a profession centred on specific kinds of practices generally defined as the "benevolent treatment of society's marginalized and 'unfortunate' individuals and groups" (Jeffery, 2005, p. 411).

Critical social work approaches have been characterized by a general commitment to shift the gaze of social work away from the populations with which we work and from bodies of knowledge concerned with prescribing courses of actions with those populations and toward social work itself as a specific kind of social institution (for example, Fook, 2003; Hick, Fook, & Pozzuto, 2004; Lindsay, 1994; Pease, 1999). In the process, these approaches have identified a number of functions associated with social work from its role in enabling the observation, management, discipline, and normalization of populations marked as Other (Drinkwater, 2005; Margolin, 1997; Moffatt, 1999; Parton, 1999), to its location within histories of racial, gender, and class dominance (Park, 2006; Yee & Dumbril, 2003) and its implication in the constitution and maintenance of unequal power relations (Baines, 2007; De Montigny, 1995; Dominelli, 2009). Moreover, by deconstructing the function of social work, these critical approaches have interrogated the very idea of practice as a performance of subjectivity (Jeffery, 2005). Critical social work, therefore, extends its critique to the constitutions of social work subjectivities as invested in hegemonic, racialized—namely white—middle class notions of helping, respectability, and benevolence that, in fundamental ways, make up the practice basis of professional expertise (Heron, 2004, 2007; Jeffery, 2005). As Jeffery (2005, p. 410) observes in the context of anti-racist social work education, "social work as a set of practices" very much resembles "whiteness as a set of practices." As a result, questioning the makeup of the subject implies a questioning of the very practices that make up social work.

A common response to critiques of the social function of social work and its link to exclusive processes of subject formation is a charge that critical social work approaches do not offer concrete practice skills (Rossiter, 2001). This charge suggests, on the one hand, that critiques of social work are not part of social work, while on the other hand, it sustains the notion that if social work can come up with a 'right' way of doing practice, then the practice function of the profession and the professional subject can be salvaged. This push to return to practice, as Jeffery suggests, does not only deny that social work and white dominance are inseparable, but also that attempts to rescue practice are attempts to rescue the social work subject and to reinscribe the profession and subject on the same power relations within which they come into being.

Underlined in the charge that critical social work does not teach practice and that practice can salvage social work is a perceived and rather unsustainable dichotomy between 'being' or becoming and 'doing' social work, in which 'doing' social work 'correctly', as in the form of competency skills, is perceived as the solution to the historical conditions and power relations that produce the subject (Jeffery, 2005, p. 413). In a manner that resembles the responses to Rossiter's argument, Jeffery and Nelson's (2011) research demonstrated that when social workers face social difference—difference that can undermine notions of competency and uncover racism and dominance—they tend to find refuge in older practice models based on the idea of social work as being fundamentally about interpersonal skills based on 'being' with clients and on "getting along, communicating well, and creating positive interactions" (p. 248). This emphasis on

relationships, continued Jeffery and Nelson (2011, p. 248), "essentially flattens power differences between worker and client," allowing social workers to imagine relationships as ahistorical and decontextualized spaces and themselves and their clients as equals. In the process, the power relations embedded in helping relationships become obscured. As Margolin (1997, pp. 5–6) has added, the idea of social work being about relationships between individuals allows social workers to remain secure in their role of friendly visitors, a role that social workers can carry on while "remaining oblivious" to how helping relationships in social work are steeped in power. "Illusions of non-observation and non-accountability," continued Margolin, are sustained by the "obfuscation" of the observing role of social work under the guise of friendliness and relationships (p. 24).

On a similar note, discussing the work of McIntyre (1997) and Schick (2000) on how whiteness is enacted by teacher-education students, Jeffery (2005) argued that when confronted with challenges to their whiteness, challenges that commonly immobilize them, students generally respond by devising professional practice as "a state of action," as "the one place that could provide a space for the participants to 'do something', or at least fantasize about 'doing something'" (McIntyre, 1997, as cited in Jeffery, 2005, p. 414). Similarly, as Schick (2000, p. 227) argued, when coming face to face with difference and with their role and implication in the maintenance of dominance, professionals generally turn to "technical–rational solutions" that afford them control and management and, in the process, "maintain the difference between themselves and others." Moreover, critical self-reflection, which is considered a necessary condition of anti-oppressive practice and is commonly proposed in critical social work approaches, also seems to inscribe itself as competency and practice. As Jeffery's research with social work educators has demonstrated, when asked to reflect on "how a new more racially conscious social worker would be different" (Jeffery, 2005, p. 415), her respondents suggested that 'knowing' who we are as subjects—self-awareness—constitutes a necessary skill that can secure practice and the helping prerogative of the subject. The emphasis on practice skills, in the form of cultural competence, interpersonal skills, and practice techniques, as the solution to conditions of inequality and dominance can only be sustained if we ignore both how practice is located within power relations and how the subject is constituted in practice. In other words, the act of finding refuge in competency is dependent on the disregard for how power relations produce the subject in the very act of doing professional practice.

Therefore, within the context of normative discourses of practice, the responses of students and audiences to Rossiter's argument are neither surprising nor unique to her text. In my own teaching experience and in the experiences of colleagues, we commonly witness how students respond to critical social work texts by at times feeling momentarily unsettled, responding usually with guilt or anger but quickly recovering and reconstituting a sense of themselves as professionals by reshifting the gaze of critical texts away from them and the profession back toward social work practice and, by extension, the Other as target of practice. In the process, they rescue and reconstitute their sense of self as good people. Thus, texts that illuminate whiteness end up telling students what to do when working with racially diverse

people; texts that question the colonial foundation of social work inform students about what it means to work with indigenous populations; texts that challenge heteronormativity and able-body dominance inform practice with sexual minorities and differently-able people, and so on. This attitude means also that class discussion and assignments regularly turn to a search for the 'correct way' to do social work: to recover, rehabilitate, and rescue the helping mission of social work and, in the process, the helping subject. These attempts to rescue social work imply a belief that if we just learn 'to do practice right', the profession and the subject can be redeemed with just a few adjustments.

Something worthwhile to explore happens in the intimate and routine practice of reading that allows subjects to engage in specific kinds of negotiations and actions through which they shift and reshift their own gaze and the gaze and focus of the text. Reading practices, while apparently innocuous, intimate, and personal, take place, as Said's quote at the beginning of this paper suggests, in the same worldly spaces and within the same power relations that produce the text: The text and the reader are both in the world. In the current context of social work, reading practices take place within the larger discourses over the meaning of practice and the making of the subject that I have discussed above.

A Foucauldian approach to ethics as embedded in processes of subject formation can shed light onto practices of reading as also ethics involved in the constitution of the reading self. This approach can hopefully prevent the continuous attempts to separate becoming or being from doing or practice in social work by purposefully looking at being and doing—reading and becoming a subject—as inseparable and undistinguishable processes constantly being negotiated in reading practices. Specifically, Foucault can illuminate how what we do to text, what we allow texts to do to us, and what we do as a result of reading are in themselves processes of becoming, of bringing ourselves into being within situated, historically specific, and power-contingent relationships with text, with larger social discourses manifesting themselves in text, and with the world or social environment in which these relationships are located. Understanding reading in this way may allow us to ask: Who am I in this practice of reading? And how am I making and remaking myself through reading?

## Reading as Ethics

In the context of a profession historically constituted as a contact point between respectable society and its Other, and in which competency and practice remain normative discourses, pedagogical practices that question, unsettle, and render visible what subjects do in their encounters with text are necessary to disrupt the social function of social work. An ethics of reading that pays attention precisely to what we do and how we become in the practice of reading means that we need to pay attention to what Ahmed (2000, p. 144) called "modes of encounter:" the 'how' rather than the 'what' in the relationship between reader and text and between reader and the "Other as text" (p. 147). Foucault's preoccupation with ethics, as that which subjects do in their relationship with power–knowledge regimes in order to produce themselves as subject, offers a blueprint to open and explore the relationship between

reader and text and to understand how subjects make themselves though reading. Foucault allows us to illuminate the moment in which the text as a manifestation of power/knowledge provides the subject with something on which to hold as well as the moment in which the subject reads into the texts more than the text intended.

If we understand processes of subject formation as discursively mediated and politically situated processes, which in social work takes place not only in the classroom and in the encounter with texts, but also in sites of practice and in the very discourses that provide students the reasons to become social workers, we can conceive of reading practices as spaces and moments in which multiple struggles over the making of the subject and the meaning of social work are negotiated. In other words, we can understand encounters between text and reader—taking place in the socially mediated space between writing and reading—as spaces and moments in which the subject renders herself a subject through the reading of the text. Following Foucault's (1994e) example that self-writing is an ethical practice that allows the subject to render herself a subject in the act of manifesting herself in her own writing and through the telling of herself in the text, I propose that a similar process takes place in the act of reading because reading does not happen in a passive manner in which the reader simply takes in what the writer writes. Rather, the reader reads meaning into the text, making sense not only of the text, but also of herself, her social position, her desires, and her professional mandate: in sum, her subjectivity. Thus, reading makes the text into more than what it is. Reading, in this way, can be seen as a dynamic and co-producing process: a process that takes place in reading as a socially situated and historically mediated encounter that informs the intimate moment in which the reader touches the pages and her eyes rest on the words.

Paying attention to what happens in the encounter between reader and text means, as Foucault (1994d, p. 117) suggested, that rather than assuming a particular reading of text is accurate or inaccurate, we "step back" from simple and thoughtless action or reaction to "present the encounter," "its meaning, its conditions, and its goals," "to oneself as an object of thought" and study. Thus, a Foucauldian ethics of reading pays attention to the process of reading as a dynamic process of (re)construction and (re)constitution of the subject and the text that takes place in the encounter in which the reader makes the text part of herself (makes sense of it) at the same time that she allows the text to make her part of it (makes sense of her). In this way, the act of reading, as a discursive practice, is an event, a moment, and an encounter in which the reader does things to the text at the same time that the text does things to the reader.

This approach to reading-as-ethics does not automatically lead to a set of 'correct' or 'ethical' reading codes. Attempting to find a set of 'applicable reading skills' or a set of ethical norms for reading would be counter to the Foucauldian approach to ethics discussed above. It would also contradict critical social work scholars' interrogation of social work's desire for competency and practice skills that may rescue social work and its subject. Rather than a set of applicable norms more in tune with traditional conceptions of a code of ethics as moral codes that determine 'right' or 'wrong' in conditions originating externally to, while still regulating, the subject (Dell'Ollio & Simon, 2010), a Foucauldian approach offers a method of

inquiry and interrogation that can allow subjects to explore how they engage in ethics as a practice of self-making in their day-to-day lives and in their most mundane activities.

A process of inquiry about reading practices as ethics can allow the subject, on her own and in her relationship with others, to make her own process of subjectification, as mediated by her encounter with texts, visible to herself and others. This process may also make evident the reading subject's enactment of power–knowledge regimes—not only those explicit and implicit in the internal constitution of the text, but also those that constitute the larger discourses within which text and subject are produced. This reflection may lead to an awareness of the ways in which subjects allow or block texts from entering their consciousness and informing their own subjectification. In other words, reading imagined in this way as an active engagement—a mutually constitutive process between text and subject—can allow the subject to make explicit those negotiations that either reinforce or challenge the (un)desirable effects of the text in the subject. A Foucauldian approach to reading ethics, therefore, can open the possibility for the subject to reflect on the kinds of operations that she affects on the text to transform the text into something that tells her what she wants to hear. At the same time, the subject can trace the kinds of operations the text affects on her in order to turn her into a specific kind of subject in the reader–text relationship. This reflection can potentially allow the subject to upset the text and her relationship to it and/or to let the text upset her and her relationship to practice and knowledge.

This conception of reading as a co-constitutive process renders the intimate moment and assumedly unconscious act of reading visible and thinkable as a site of analysis and deconstruction. This process can be guided by constant inquiry about the negotiations at play in reading that allow the subject to become. In thinking of reading as an ethic—as a self-making action—the reader may ask herself how the actual act of reading is located within larger power–knowledge relations that already predispose her to search or read for certain things. For example, the reader may question the need to look, as a student recently observed when asked to think about her reading of a text, for what the text is telling her about her "helping role" and her relationship with those in need of help. In uncovering how the subject reads the text as a 'helper,' the reader may also explore the operations that she may affect on the text in order to make sense of it as a 'helping text': What words or sentences acquire more importance? What kinds of double meaning are given to certain expressions? What is read or implied into the text and what is read between the lines? What is ignored or 'unread' in the power struggle over meaning that results in the subjugation of some knowledge and the privileging of another? What twists and turns must the subject make in order to avoid reading, and effectively 'unreading,' certain things in the text while unrelentingly searching for that which reconstitutes the helping self? Furthermore, the subject may reflect on the normative professional discourses of helping that already inform her encounter with the text even before her eyes rest on the first words. What role do those discourses play in allowing or stopping the text from making new sense of her as a subject?

It is important to reinforce that it would be problematic to assume an extreme postmodernist attitude toward reading in which, as students sometimes do, we may argue that either there is no truth, or that all statements are true. Further, we should not assume that since texts are themselves discursive, they constitute simple opinions that can be dismissed or that there is no 'in/correct' way of reading (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2009). Both assumptions ignore a critical aspect of Foucault's argument, that knowledge and the subject are impregnated in power and situated within social power relations. As Foucault argues (1994a, p. 297), the question of truth and true action is a question of how certain conditions are taken up, given meaning and, thus, institutionalized and inscribed within power regimes. Practices of reading are, in themselves, also socially situated sites in which the reader manifests and materializes those power–knowledge regimes that already locate her and the text within larger social relations. As DiAngelo and Sensoy (2009, p. 444) suggest, through reading, we "rouse a collection of interrelated knowledge claims that together function to uphold [or disrupt] existing relations of power." In this way, when readers read into Rossiter's argument that an 'unsettled' practice means being certain in their belief that social work is about relationships, they enact power–knowledge regimes that have become normative discourses of truth in social work. Those same power–knowledge regimes have come to inform technologies of self that come into play in ethics of self at work in the reading of the text. This means that we do not simply read ourselves into the text, but that what we read into the text is informed by relations of power: those that make us and those that inform how, when, and what we read. The critical ethical challenge is to read text while in full view of how power–knowledge regimes inform the reading and allow us to make ourselves in the process of reading. By remaining historically and socially situated, therefore, a Foucauldian reading ethics requires that reading be firmly situated within and in full view of social power relations. This can have transformative effects by making the working of power in knowledge visible to the subject while implicating the subject in the production or disruption of power–knowledge regimes.

## Situated Ethics of Self-Detachment and Intellectual Wandering

The act of reading and thinking about reading, as Foucault has suggested, can potentially "separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, thinking what we are, do, or think" (Foucault, 1994, as cited in Rabinow, 1994, p. xxxv). Here we find a space for a transformative ethics that requires not only the conscious rendering of reading practices visible and thinkable, but also the conscious search for new ways of reading and thus being, doing, and thinking in the encounter with texts. Foucault's suggestion is one that encourages us to approach readings with a commitment to maintaining certain attitudes that can actively shift the subject-making process, its negotiation within text–reader relationship, and its situation within power–knowledge relations. Two interrelated and mutually sustaining attitudes are identifiable: one, what Foucault called a commitment to "*se deprendre de soi-même,"* generally translated to mean "to release oneself from oneself" or "self-detachment" (Rabinow, 1994, p. xxxviii); and two, a commitment to an attitude of intellectual 'wandering,' what Foucault

called *égarement*, which Rabinow translated as "straying afield of oneself," "to err, to wander, [and] to stray from the norm" (1994, p. xxxix).

In relation to self-detachment, Rabinow (1994, p. xxxvi) proposed in his discussion of Foucauldian ethics a transformative approach to ethics of self that requires that we commit to practices that disentangle, detach, and reform "the (power and thought) relationships within which and from which the self is shaped and takes shape." This means that a transformative ethical practice is one that remains inquisitive in regards to the subject's own processes of subjectification and how it is informed by power and knowledge. This inquiry may allow her, on the one hand, to observe her own self-making, rendering it the object of reflection and critical inquiry in ways that ultimately allow her to free herself from what she has believed herself to be in order to search for other ways of being, doing, and thinking. On the other hand, this inquiry can lead to a condition of awareness and weariness in relation to those discourses that inform subjectification: the power–knowledge regimes that constitute the normative field within which subjects are invited to take on the position of subjects.

The English translation of *se deprendre de soi-même* as self-detachment might be semantically limited, for it can lead to an interpretation that suggests that self-detaching means simply to separate or disconnect oneself from a discursively produced self that stands separate from the detaching self. This interpretation may suggest that the subject enacting the detachment remains fundamentally intact in the separation. It was not until I read Foucault's expression in my native Spanish (*desprenderse)* that I was able to grasp the complexity of the self-detaching attitude that Foucault proposes. In its Spanish meaning, *desprenderse* or "self-detachment" is a pronominal verb[4] that signifies a double action: It can mean to free oneself, or to become detached from something, as well as to free something, or detach something from oneself; that is, to get rid of, to shed something from oneself. Self-detachment in this double meaning allows us to see the attitude that Foucault encouraged as more than simply the act of separating ourselves out from those normative discourses and practices that produce us as helpers. In recognizing that the self enacting the detachment is also the self on which the detachment is enacted allows us to imagine an ethics of detachment as also a process of internal transformation and disentanglement that is more than simply the act of excluding or refusing to attach ourselves to discourses and traditions of helping in social work, but also to throw into question and potentially remove those same traditions from the very core of our subjectivity.

Critical to a Foucauldian conception of power is the notion that power acts at the level of desire, a capillary level in which knowledge and power do not only have

[4] A pronominal verb is a verb that requires a reflexive pronoun in addition to a subject pronoun because the subject performing the action of the verb is the same than the object on which the action of the verb is being enacted. Pronominal verbs generally signify that the subjects of the sentence are acting upon themselves; thus, the use of self as a prefix in the English translation of "*se deprendre de soi-même,"* as "to release oneself from oneself" and which Rabinow abbreviates as "self-detachment."

an impact at an intellectual level, but also at an affective level, turning power/knowledge into those desires, emotions, and motivations that make up the self (Foucault, 1992, p. 107). Self-detachment, then, means also to question those intimate desires to be a helper, make them the subject of study, reflection, interrogation, and, thus, detachment. Self-detachment in the context of a Foucauldian ethics, therefore, acquires a double commitment that can be explained as both a commitment to *detach oneself from* those power–knowledge regimes that have made the subject what she is, and a commitment to *detach from oneself* those same power–knowledge regimes that have been internalized within the subject and become part of the most intimate core that make the subject a subject.

In social work and in the context of my previous example of the student reading as a helper and making the text a helping text, the mere act of making visible the reading and 'unreading' practices that the subject enacts necessarily uncovers the practices of subject-making at play in the text–reader relationship. What a commitment to detachment can allow is for the possibility of consciously self-detaching from those discourses and their manifestation in desire that, having been made visible, can now be set apart from the self. In other words, reading with a commitment to self-detachment can allow the subject to question and detach from those larger discourses that invite her to read the text as a helper, allowing her to open herself up to having the text enter her consciousness and become the instrument she uses to disentangle and detach from herself the helping subject. The process of rendering power/knowledge visible while maintaining a commitment to self-detachment can lead the subject to consciously separate herself—in a way that reinforces Foucault's ontological assertion of the subject's freedom—from both the helping-self and from normative discourses of helping in order to set herself adrift and in search for other ways of being, thinking, and doing.

This leads us to Foucault's challenge to render ourselves permanently committed to intellectual wandering. Wandering as ethics can be understood as both a commitment to intellectual curiosity and a commitment to remain unsettled in our own subjectivity, capable of constant self-detachment, self-making, and remaking. Wandering is a commitment to a constant process of self-detachment that propels the subject to constantly think and rethink her own socially situated self-making in ways that turn her into a permanent work in progress. Wandering as the act of straying from the norm—from those discourses and desires that produce and regulate the subject—becomes in Foucauldian ethics a commitment to an aesthetics of the self that Rabinow defined as the process of making "the self a continuous creative task" (1994, p. xxxviii). Practices of reading that remain committed to wandering can lead to at least two possible forms of ethical practices. In some instances, the reading of the text can cast the subject adrift from professional discourses—those within and without the text. The text can become the instrument that the subject uses to cut ties from professional discourses that produce her as a helper. In allowing the text to challenge normative professional discourses, the text can also cast the subject adrift from herself, from the notions of subjectivity produced by those normative discourses manifested within and without the text. In other instances, the subject may imagine the text as a temporary port in which she can set anchor, allowing the text to

affect her own self-making in ways that remain in full view of the power–knowledge regimes that determine subjectification. The reader may ask, for example: Who am I as I read this text? What kind of subject does this text allow me to become? What are the social and political implications of this act of becoming? What transformative effects can this act of becoming have? How does this text allow me to imagine different ways of being? Ultimately, the commitment to wandering may allow the subject to refute or interrogate any sense of settlement and comfort—those moments in which the subject experiences the text is telling her what she wants to hear and in which the subject becomes settled in her subjectivity and tempted to remain anchored in the text. Reading with a commitment to intellectual wandering, in this way, can render the practices of subject-making and reading messy and unsettled.

Finally, it is important to reassert that self-detachment and intellectual wandering should not be assumed to reinforce liberal notions of freedom, independence, and open-mindedness sustainable only if we ignore power. On the contrary, a Foucauldian reading ethic is one that, while capable of self-detaching and intellectually wandering, remains critically aware that reading is always a socially and politically situated practice, a practice taking place in the world. As a result, self-detachment does not mean freedom in a liberal sense, or the absence of power, but a situated awareness of both how power–knowledge regimes inform reading and how the act of detaching from those power–knowledge regimes is also the enactment of power. In other words, we do not detach from power/knowledge to become free from power. The act of self-detachment itself is an act steeped in power. Further, when we temporarily or permanently reattach or set anchor, we do so to other discourses or ways of being that are the product of power/knowledge. Meanwhile, intellectual wandering does not mean aimless drifting separate from power or unaware of how power represses and produces. Intellectual wandering is a commitment to remain in full view of how power has historically worked and continues to work on and through us as professionals, as well as on those and through those with whom we work. Intellectual wandering means a situated, politically aware, and subversive search for more socially transformative and subversive ways of being, doing, and thinking: an ethical practice that, in the same way as reading, takes place in the world.

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