

**Living Our Circle: Aboriginal Students Claiming a Space in Higher
Education**

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Abstract

This study utilizes qualitative research methods to examine how Aboriginal students access and experience post-secondary education (PSE). Previous research has found that Aboriginal peoples exhibit much lower rates of PSE compared to other Canadians (Cloutier, 1984; Cliff et al., 1997; Sarkar and Stallard, 1997; British Columbia, 2000a; University of Alberta, 2000). The underrepresentation of Aboriginal students within these spaces suggests that systemic barriers influence how higher learning is accessed and experienced. Understanding Aboriginal student experiences is critical, as education remains a primary method for improving health, socio-economic status, employment, social networks, and a sense of control over life circumstances (Ross & Wu, 1995).

The aim of this study is to investigate the social and material conditions that impact Aboriginal students. Participants were recruited via purposeful sampling through the Centre for Aboriginal Student Services (CASS)¹ at a post-secondary institution in an urban city in southwestern Ontario, Canada. A post-colonial theoretical framework assisted in exposing how colonialism continues to influence how current Aboriginal students arrive at and experience higher education. An analysis of five Aboriginal student narratives revealed that access to affordable housing, transportation, food security, and reliable childcare influenced their PSE experiences. Many participants cited PSE as a method for reconnecting with their communities and cultures; however, results indicated that Aboriginal students continue to experience racism within the PSE institution. Access to Elders, traditional medicines, and campus resources that focus on Aboriginal students specifically CASS, facilitated a sense of belonging.

¹ CASS agreed to be identified directly throughout the writing of this thesis.

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Language and Definitions

A great deal of consideration has been placed on the language that is used in this thesis to recognize the diversity of First Peoples of Canada. Although there are many terms used to delineate various communities, and other scholarly work referenced throughout this thesis may employ differing languages and definitions; I have selected to use Aboriginal as the primary method for identifying First Nations, Inuit, Métis, status, non-status, self-identifying, and all other members of this community. I recognize there is a risk of generalizing associated with this term; however, it is also the most widely accepted and commonly used expression to describe First Peoples within Canada. Below are some of the most common terms and definitions used to describe First Peoples.

Aboriginal

Refers to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit; this term is most commonly used within Canada. The term Aboriginal is defined based on the *Canadian Constitution Act 1982* (“Indigenous Foundations,” 2016).

Indigenous

A general term used to describe First Peoples, typically used within international contexts.

First Nations

Characterizes both status and non-status peoples of Canada who are neither Métis or Inuit.

Inuit

Describes the First Peoples of the North, whose traditional lands stretch across the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Northern Labrador, and Quebec (Allan, 2013).

Métis

A distinct cultural group that originated from relations between First Nations and European descendants. The Métis have distinctive cultural and linguistic traditions with traditional lands primarily based in Western Canada (Allan, personal communication, 2016).

Indian

The term "Indian" refers to the legal identity of a First Nations person who is registered under the *Indian Act*. The term "Indian" should be used only when referring to a First Nations person with status and only within a legal context. Aside from this, the term "Indian" in Canada is considered outdated and offensive due to its complex colonial use in governing identity through legislation (i.e., "treaty" and "non-treaty," etc.). In the United States, the term "American Indian" and "Native Indian" are both in current and common usage. (“Indigenous Foundations,” 2016).

Self-identifying

Any person of First Nations, Métis, and/or Inuit ancestry may self-identify within the context of their choosing.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

It's strange to me how people always want me to be an "authentic Indian" when I say I'm Haudenosaunee. They want me to look a certain way, act a certain way. They're disappointed when what they get is... just me. White faced, red haired. They spent hundreds of years trying to assimilate my ancestors, trying to create Indians who could blend in. But now they don't want me either. They can't make up their minds.

They want buckskin and face paint, drumming, songs in languages they can't understand recorded for them – but with English subtitles, of course. They want educated, well-spoken, but not too smart. Christian, well-behaved, never questioning. They want to learn the history of the people, but not the ones who are here now, waving signs in their faces,
asking them for clean drinking water,
asking them why their women are going missing,
asking them why their land is being ruined.

They want fantastical stories of Indians that used to roam this land.
They want my culture behind glass in a museum.
But they don't want me.
I'm not Indian enough.

They say I'm fake, but they don't realize that every time I have to write and speak to them in English, the language of the colonizer, I am painfully aware of what I've lost. So I sneak around quietly, gathering pieces – beads here, a word there, a dance, a song, until I'm strong enough to stand tall and tell them who I am.

They tried to make Indians like me who could blend in.
My great grandmother moved her children out of their community into the big city of Toronto to try hiding in plain sight.
Keep it.
Hush.
Hush.

I will break the silence.
I am clinging to every piece of my mom, my grandma, my great grandma that I have. I am clinging to any bit of tradition that found its way through the cracks, like a plant growing towards the light. I have always been in love with these small pieces of resistance.
My great grandmother told my dad to bury my umbilical cord in the dirt behind my home, now a tree grows from that piece of me. I am connected.

When my aunties gather around tea I will absorb every story they tell.
I will stare at photos of my Akshotha until they speak to me.
I will scavenge all the bits of knowledge from here and there and pull them together close to my heart.
Cover them.
Protect them.
Bundle.

I will knit with my grandma's needles. The only piece of her I have. I will knit until I know her.
I will forgive. Forgive my mom, her mom, and her mom, for what they couldn't teach me. They always did the very best they could.
I will hold on for dear life.
I will dig my hands into the dirt.
I will let them drag and pull on me
until the earth is embedded under my fingernails.
But I won't let go.

- Shelby Lisk

A professor once told me that art has the unique ability to connect people with culture. It is through this medium that we can learn the stories of those who have come before us, as well as those who walk with us on the journey to understanding self, community, and nation. So in all casual encounters in which I am forced to respond to ‘Aboriginal problems,’ I will forever be tempted to forward this poem written by Shelby Lisk, a Haudenosaunee photographer, visual artist, and recent graduate of the Bachelor of Fine Arts program at the University of Ottawa (Lisk, 2016). In truth, there is nothing ‘wrong’ with Aboriginal people, it is rather the centuries of colonization in which imperial agendas have dominated our bodies, land, and cultures. Yet, I find myself expected to have the answers because I am Aboriginal and ‘educated.’ When I respond with colonialism as being the root of disparity, I am regularly met with blank stares. This word, let alone history, has yet to fully operate within public consciousness.

I initially found Shelby’s poem on social media; it was linked to a website called *Red Rising Magazine!* a virtual space created by a group of engaged Aboriginal youth who wanted to share their “unfiltered” stories (Red Rising, 2016). I was overcome with emotion while reading Shelby’s poem, feelings that became more intense with each passing line. It was as if she was speaking directly to me, and judging by the comments (a customary exercise of web surfing), she was also speaking to the lives of many other identity seeking individuals. Intrigued, I clicked further to find that *Red Rising* was formed after a day of action called “Water Wednesdays,” an initiative to raise awareness around “Winnipeg’s water source” (Red Rising, 2016). In fact, the site was created as a response to media representations that “[had] our stories skewed by the interviewer to fit their narrative (Red Rising, 2016). Together the youth organized to claim a space, their identities and their voice, sharing stories in their own ways, and on their own terms.

And this is where we stand, continually searching for a space to find ourselves and a voice that can bring light to our stories of education, that can expose the everyday interactions that predictably fail to see the privilege in our absences. We try to find the words, the teachings, and the lessons that our ancestors would want us to learn, cover, protect, and bundle. Embarking on a relenting search to unearth extracts of culture that may remind us of who we are and where we come from, until we are brave enough to share this with others. Shelby's words poetically express how colonialism has fragmented relationships with self and community, while also speaking to the resiliency of our search for learning and maintaining culture for the future. So here I begin, determined to share stories, perhaps in different way from my ancestors, but in the only way I know how. This thesis was conceptualized to make space for Aboriginal students to share how they have come to and experience higher education, in hopes that these words may translate a little louder, and perhaps remain a little longer. These are the stories of small resistances.

The remaining portion of this introduction is dedicated to examining the ways in which colonization has contributed to the marginalization of Aboriginal peoples with regard to displacement, incarceration, health, and education. Findings from the Truth and Reconciliation commission provide context as to how residential schools have influenced the relationships between Aboriginal peoples and education. The stories of three Aboriginal young women, Shannen, Janelle, and Nadine are included to show how education is experienced within communities such as Attawapiskat and to elucidate how colonial legacies continue to inform how education is presently experienced. The chapter ends with my attempt to locate myself within the research, while highlighting how my experiences as an Aboriginal student have informed my desire to conduct this research.

Understanding the Past in the Present for the Future

‘Understanding the past in the present for the future’ is an Aboriginal way of knowing that can assist us in examining how a colonial history is the foundation for the contemporary marginalization of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The residential school system is perhaps the most logical place to begin to understand how history has shaped the current experiences of Aboriginal students. However, it is also important to recognize how colonialism in a broader sense has influenced our lives and bodies. In that legacies of these histories both create and reproduce negative constructions of Aboriginal identity, stereotypically positioning individuals and communities as criminal as well as culturally and physically inferior. In addition to residential schools, the Sixties Scoop was a period extending from the 1960s to the 1980s in which thousands of Aboriginal children were also removed from their families and communities and placed in ‘non-Aboriginal’ homes (Sinclair, 2007). This government mandated initiative operated under the rhetoric of cultural inferiority, but this time positioning Aboriginal parents as financially incapable of caring for their children (Kimmelman, 1985; McKenzie & Hudson, 1985; Phillips & Bala, 1991; Timpson, 1995; Sinclair, 2007). The Sixties Scoop was thought of as a war on poverty that contributed to the disproportionate number of Aboriginal children placed under the care of child protective services (Sullivan & Charles, 2010). Financial disparity was used to legitimize the ‘saving’ of these children under the presumption that a ‘better life’ would be provided. What resulted were generations of Aboriginal youth who experienced a heightened sense of difference in which adoptive families were unable to care for their cultural health (MacDonald & MacDonald, 2007; Abdulwasi, 2015).

Colonialism has also led to the surveilling and over policing of Aboriginal bodies, practices that can be seen in the disparate rates of incarceration observed in Canada and abroad.

In 2007/2008, “Aboriginal adults accounted for 17% of adults admitted to remand” within Canada (Perreault, 2009, no page). The overrepresentation of adult Aboriginal incarceration is indisputable since this group comprises only two percent of the overall Canadian population (Trevethan, Moore & Rastin, 2002). This trend has similarly been observed in Australia, also a country with rich colonial histories where “Aboriginal prisoners represent 22% of the total Australian prisoner population, the highest proportion in 10 years” (Krieg, 2006, p.534). Krieg suggested that inadequate delivery of health and social services contributes to high rates of incarceration, also believed to be a consequence of colonialism (Krieg, 2006).

The social and physical health of Aboriginal peoples are fundamentally implicated within much of these legacies. Previous research has found that Aboriginal women experience a higher burden of new infections in Canada (Shannon et al., 2008), and according to the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), “Aboriginal women represented 48.1% of all positive HIV test reports among Aboriginal people between 1998 and 2006” (PHAC, 2007 as cited in Hawkins, 2009, p.12). A study investigating HIV transmission among urban Aboriginal youth found that colonialism influenced internalized understandings of the disease in that “Aboriginal youth were the only group to hold their own community responsible for high infection rates” (Larkin et al., 2007, p. 181). The study further suggested that incorporating an understanding of colonial histories into awareness and prevention programs is fundamental for, “disrupt[ing] racist stereotypes associated with AIDS” (Larkin et al. 2007, p.181).

Colonialism does influence health in that its legacies contribute to systemic marginalization across several social and material conditions that construct barriers to the most basic necessities of life. Social conditions are comprised of identity, culture, racism, and social exclusion. While material conditions are physical characteristics of life including SES, housing,

transportation and food. For example, Baskin et al. (2009) examined food insecurity among urban Aboriginal mothers. The study exposed how relationships with food insecurity additionally intersected with poor access to transportation, education, culture, and social services. Some participants internalized their experiences of food insecurity, taking the blame, many failing to recognize how access to these resources has been socially determined. The authors therefore advocating for a critical awareness of the impact of colonization on Aboriginal peoples, and “that there be public education, including within the educational system, on colonization, structural issues, poverty and racism, and that racism be included as one of Canada's social (structural) determinants of health” (Baskin et al, 2009, p.37). Baskin and his/her colleagues’ work is especially valuable in that they posit poverty in direct relation to other structural determinants, and in turn countered those legacies that stigmatize individual agency, while effectively highlighting the strength of Aboriginal mothers to care for their children in the face of systemic domination. It is through a paradigm of interconnection whereby colonialism is examined in relation to underlying social and material conditions that we may begin to better understand the educational experiences of Aboriginal post-secondary students.

Before we consider the present, it is important to note how the history of the residential schools have influenced the lives of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) reports are perhaps the most recent and valuable body of knowledge that recognizes the forced assimilation and cultural genocide that was enacted through this system. In 1920, the Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs Duncan Scott demonstrated to a parliamentary committee that the goal of the residential schools was to assimilate Aboriginal bodies into Canadian society. In his own words: “Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic” (as quoted in TRC,

2015, p. 3). In the pursuit of this goal, the Canadian government, along with the Catholic, Anglican, and United churches, worked to physically displace children from their families and communities. The forced removal of Aboriginal children was legitimated on the premise that residential schools would provide students with the necessary skills to contribute to Canada's changing economic climate. It would later come to be known that education was not a priority of residential schools, but rather, a method to control and assimilate Aboriginal bodies.

Language was an essential component of this project that effectively stripped students with the ability to communicate in traditional languages. The control of language was a fundamental feature of imperial domination by serving as "the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin 2002, p.7). The removal of language (and relatedly culture) was central to the assimilative tactics employed within residential schools. Not only were students isolated from their families and therefore unable to maintain their traditional languages, but they were predominantly taught in French and/or English, which most Aboriginal students could not understand. Those caught deviating from the language of instruction were often physically punished for doing so.

The control of language was but one form of domination implicit in the residential school experience. Life for these children also entailed intense physical labour, neglect, and various forms of abuse that became normalized practices within these supposed 'learning' environments:

For the students, education and technical training often gave way to the drudgery of doing the chores necessary to make the schools self-sustaining. Child neglect was institutionalized, and the lack of supervision created situations where students were prey to sexual and physical abusers. (TRC, 2015, p.4)

Survivors additionally recalled the severe punishment tactics used to maintain control:

Children were not only strapped and humiliated, but in some schools, they were also handcuffed and locked in cellars. Overcrowding meant that even those children who were not subject to physical discipline grew up in an atmosphere of neglect (Survivors Speak, TRC, VIII).

Education was clearly not the goal of the residential schools, but rather a method for fragmenting the children's relationships with culture and community. Beyond mandatory religion classes and chores, little time was allocated toward 'learning.' Those who were lucky enough to escape and/or survive these institutions, were left with very little ability to read or write in English or French. Worse still, those who did escape, had often lost the ability to converse in traditional languages, which meant they could no longer effectively communicate with family and/or community members. The forced removal and isolation of children from parents and siblings were strategies used to ensure that language and culture were abandoned completely.

By the late 20th century, stories of malnourishment, illness, physical and sexual abuse, and death were rampant. Inadequate food, poor living conditions, and intense physical labour were precursors for illness and death. The deteriorating health of students was of little concern for the government and religious institutions that viewed these atrocities as nothing more than the cost of educating the 'uncivilized.' While government officials portrayed these rates as simply the price that Aboriginal peoples had to pay to become 'civilized,' or rather, "the price they paid for being colonized" (TRC, 2015, p. 90). The horrifying histories of residential schools prove that education for Aboriginal peoples in Canada has undeniably been a colonizing endeavour. This marginalization is illustrated by the physical and cultural displacement which

was rationalized through the notion of imperial superiority, a view that persists even today. Furthermore, the loss of culture resulting from the residential school system continues to be experienced generationally. Undoubtedly, colonization and its mechanisms such as residential school systems have affected how Aboriginal peoples presently view, access, and experience education. The cultural genocide enacted through institutions of education is far too complex for this introduction. It is, however, important to acknowledge how these histories contribute to our current understanding of education for Aboriginal peoples. Moreover, engaging with this historical context and its repercussions might be used to support a brighter future for the generations that follow.

Shannen's Story

Although the last residential school closed its doors in 1996, little has been done to improve the current state of Aboriginal education in Canada. This is evident in the overarching gap in educational attainment that exists among those in our community (Adelson, 2005; Richards, 2008). More recently, the lack of educational resources available to many Aboriginal communities has become more visible in part because of community advocates such as Shannen Koostachin. Shannen became an ambassador of education for her home community of the Attawapiskat First Nation. She never attended a proper school and spent most of her life learning in 'temporary' portables located just meters away from a condemned building that sat upon 30,000 metric tonnes of diesel waste. Her school did not have proper heating or ventilation, which led to difficulties with sewage systems, and resulted in frequent rodent infestations. Her dream was to become a lawyer, but she understood that achieving this dream would require more resources than were available to her. Shannen advocated for a "safe and comfy" school that would provide a culturally based education for the children of Attawapiskat ("About Shannen Koostachin,"

2016). She accomplished this by encouraging Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children across the country to write letters to the government demanding the construction of a new facility.

Thousands of students heeded her call, and the government responded by promising the children of Attawapiskat a new school.

In 2008, then Minister of Aboriginal Affairs Chuck Strahl reneged on this promise, citing a lack of available funding. Shannen persisted, traveling across Canada and demanding equal access to education for the children of Attawapiskat. She was nominated for the International Children's Peace Prize for her work, and finally, in 2009, the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs once again promised the community a new school. A year later, ground was broken, but sadly on that same day, Shannen was tragically killed in an automobile accident. As the founder of Shannen's Dream, she left behind the hope that all children should have the opportunity to fulfill their educational aspirations. Attawapiskat is just one example of countless Aboriginal communities such as Nishnawbe Aski and Serpent Lake First Nations that remain without access to adequate educational resources and basic necessities of life.

Janelle and Nadine

Although Attawapiskat has since received a new elementary school, several challenges continue to exist for those who wish to continue their education to high school and beyond. In 2015, 14-year-old Janelle Nakogee was forced to leave her community in Attawapiskat to attend high school over 1000 kilometres away in Parry Sound, Ontario. She told *Toronto Star* reporters, "when I was leaving, it broke my heart to see my mom cry" (Smith, 2015, Conclusion section, para. 22). Janelle had recently completed eighth grade at the newly constructed elementary school which Shannen and the community had fought for, for over a decade. Her friend and classmate, Nadine Tookate, spoke of her youngest sister who was just beginning kindergarten,

commenting that “she’ll never have to be so cold that she has to wear mittens to pick up a pencil” (Smith, 2015, para. 3). Janelle’s and Nadine’s story was published in a September 2015 issue of the *Toronto Star* to highlight the lack of attention paid to Aboriginal issues despite a pending Federal election. The failure to acknowledge Aboriginal concerns, let alone voices, is indicative of how Aboriginal peoples remain excluded from not only political processes in Canada, but also the discussion of what issues our politicians need to address. This neglect goes beyond politics, and is also reflected in the way that research frequently disregards our voices and experiences.

Shannen’s, Janelle’s, and Nadine’s stories are of critical importance, as they reflect the legacies of colonialism that continue to shape the lives and educational opportunities of Aboriginal peoples. The purpose of this research is to provide a space for Aboriginal students to share their experiences of PSE, while highlighting the social and material conditions that have intersected to shape their educational journeys. The arrival at these research questions was the direct result of my own relationship to education, and the social and material conditions that have influenced my personal journey. Participant experiences of PSE are complex, reflecting the intersectional nature in which social and material conditions operate in the lives of individuals. In order to better understand this complexity and intersectionality, it is essential that we consider the stories, experiences, and daily lives of individuals who negotiate many coexisting conditions on a routine basis (Tynan, Atkinson, Bourke, & Atkinson, 2004). By centralizing the voices of Aboriginal post-secondary students, this project aims to understand how PSE is currently experienced, while exposing the complex relationships to social and material conditions that influence these encounters. The research questions that guide this project are:

1. How are Aboriginal students accessing and experiencing post-secondary education?

2. What are the social and material conditions influencing these experiences?

The objective of this research is to make space for Aboriginal student voices, so they may articulate how post-secondary education is experienced, with a special focus on the social and material conditions that are encountered throughout. This is particularly important for attempting to resist the colonial legacies that have constrained and continue to reverberate in the lives of people in our community.

Locating Myself

Locating the self is an essential feature of Aboriginal research methods (Absolon & Willett, 2004; Baskin, 2005; Lawrence & Dua, 2005; Wilson, 2008). In essence, situating the self allows others to understand who you are and where you come from. This entails “ensuring that those who study, write, and participate in knowledge creation are accountable for their own positionality” (Absolon & Willet 2004, p. 97). Locating the self within the broader context of the research encourages transparency and makes clear the motivations for seeking the research knowledge. The process of coming to understand my Aboriginal identity continues to be a journey of self-discovery. It is for this reason, that I feel a great sense of discomfort in attempting to locate my Aboriginal identity. In fact, it has been through this project that I have been able to connect more intimately with (my) culture. Everything that I do know about my ancestry was either learned through secondary sources such as books, genealogy reports, and historical archives. I have gleaned information from family members; however, these historical accounts often shift in relation to the position of the storyteller. With that said, I will provide my best attempt to locate who I am and where I come from.

I identify as having both Dene and Welsh ancestry. My Dene name is *ōhk’acho*, which in English translates to Kingfisher. The Kingfishers are brightly coloured birds native to the

Northwestern coast of Canada, and are thought of as messengers that possess the ability to communicate ideas clearly and coherently. My colours are blue and purple, associated with wisdom, intuition, confidence, and power (Cote, personal communication, 2016). I was gifted my name and colours only as the result of my engagement with the Aboriginal community on the university campus during my graduate studies. Throughout the duration of this project, I was able to establish relationships with Elders who acted as both mentors and advisors throughout the research process, and who taught me that understanding the land of our ancestors is important for establishing our connection to culture and identity. With that said, my grandfather John Kyran Boland, was born on the Fort Franklin settlement located on the shores of Great Bear Lake in the Northwest Territories (NWT). His father was William Boland, a prospector from Cardiff Wales, and his mother, Georgina Blondin, was a Dene woman from the Mackenzie Region.

I have very few primary accounts of my families' relationship to our traditional land in NWT, or Dene culture. In truth, my family never really spoke much about being Aboriginal. Undoubtedly, this disconnection is rooted deeply within processes of colonization. The manner in which my family had relocated, was stripped of status (which was later reinstated), and assimilated into the body politic has contributed to our lack of awareness of who we are and where we come from. I did, however, manage to locate a secondary interpretation of our connection to the land in NWT. This came in the form of an ethnography written by Cornelius Osgood, an early 20th century researcher hired by the Canadian government to explore the remote Aboriginal communities of the far north. Osgood's experiences were later published in a book called *Winter* (1953) that became more of a recollection of his survival, than a study of the 'primitive' as it was originally intended. In this text, he spoke of a fur trader named Bill Boland who became essential to his survival.

Bill is described as a respected trapper and trader who assumed a patriarchal responsibility for ensuring the community had enough resources to survive. Georgina had a much lesser role in this story, only making occasional appearances to take pleasure in the newcomer's survival weaknesses. Bill taught the researcher how to trap, set fishing lines, and navigate a dogsled team over the unpredictable frozen lakes and rivers. He allowed Osgood to live in one of his out buildings, when the makeshift tent would no longer protect him from the harsh elements. This memoir has provided the opportunity to view a secondary glimpse of what life was like for my family in this remote settlement. Despite reading the book twice, I still long for a story told from my families' perspective. There are still many questions left unanswered. What was Georgina's history? How did their many children end up scattered across the country? The link between these histories remains fragmented, and once again, I rely on shifting accounts of the transition between a remote northern lifestyle, to the hustle and bustle of urban Toronto.

My grandfather, Kyran Boland, died the year before I was born, but from what I understand, it was quite likely that he and his siblings spent time at the *Sacred Heart Residential School* in Fort Providence NWT. This school had a reputation for children never returning home; at last count, there were reportedly over 300 students who died while in the 'care' of the Sacred Heart school (LeBeuf, 2011). The family eventually relocated when Georgina was transferred to an Edmonton hospital, where she would later pass away from tuberculosis. The family continued to move east and eventually arrived in Toronto. It is here that my grandfather met his wife and they settled on a farm in the small hamlet of Goodwood, Ontario, where they would have five children of their own. Life for a racially mixed family in post-war rural Ontario was difficult and ostracizing, being regularly subjected to racialized taunts within the small community. Farm life was also difficult. My mother always told me "if you didn't work, you didn't eat," and described

cleaning stalls, caring for livestock, and collecting water both before and after school. Farming was a way of maintaining life, and school was simply not viewed as productive to these realities. As a result, neither my mother nor any of her four older brothers would complete high school. Other than the stories of life on the farm, not much was ever shared with me about my Dene ancestry.

Identity and Education

To be clear, education in itself is a colonizing endeavour. In what follows, I highlight how my identity has been imagined within these spaces, and how I have at times, suppressed my Aboriginal identity as a mechanism for survival, and in other instances, relied on this identity as a means to connect with others. Through these examples, I elucidate how stereotypical representations of Aboriginality are reproduced through everyday social interactions within the education system, both in my role as a teacher and as a student, and how these misrepresentations have led to an invisibility that has become a regular part of my life.

As a teacher of physical education, identity seems to be a common conversation that I engage in with students. One day, I was teaching a girls' gym class when one student proceeded to ask the 'what are you?' question. With four little words, she made it clear that I did not fit easily into established categories, and that my whiteness was indeed precarious. This came as a surprise to me, for throughout my own high school experience, I had never really felt that different from my peers. My skin, hair, and eyes were just slightly darker than the majority of white, upper-middle class students who populated my small town suburban high school. My name allowed me to move through this space quite freely, without any question of being outside of the 'norm.' It was only until I stood in front of a class full of diverse adolescent girls who openly questioned my slight variation of 'white' did I ever really consider my identity as being

‘other.’ Somewhat hesitant, I asked the student for further clarification. She looked at me as she shook her head back and forth, “well, you look white but there is definitely a little something else there.” The entire class began to shout, “she’s Italian,” “no she’s Greek,” “it could be Persian.” I was fascinated by the way the girls attempted to pin down my identity. I had always believed that I could somehow hide behind my name. In that moment though, it became clear that my body was just slightly different enough to warrant further examination.

I debated how to answer my student’s question, as I have often been hesitant to divulge my Aboriginal heritage. When I do choose to share this information, it is only in the few instances when my identity is questioned. After I explained my background, the class took quite an interest in my mixed heritage. One commented, “I have never seen an Aboriginal person in real life!” while another quipped, “so if John Smith and Pocahontas had a baby, would that be you?” The students were fascinated with my identity and Aboriginal culture. Indeed, this exchange epitomizes how Aboriginal identity is repeatedly constructed around ideas of the romantic, mythical, other (Dion, 2009), which in turn locates Aboriginal identity as something that no longer exists in contemporary space, but instead is a historical fixture that is perennially reduced to stereotypical representations of the warrior, savage, or in this case, Pocahontas.

The misrepresentation and preceding invisibility of Aboriginal identity within discussions of what it means to be ‘Canadian’ may have contributed to the belief that many of my students had never seen an Aboriginal person in ‘real life.’ I assured the class that they had most definitely seen an Aboriginal person, after all, I had taught them for six months before the topic even surfaced; they had just not been able to categorize me as Aboriginal. This inability to locate my identity may have stemmed from a perceived performance of ‘whiteness’ or perhaps my failure to reproduce stereotypical representations Aboriginal culture. The invisibility and the idea

of being viewed as ‘authentically Aboriginal’ are issues that Thomas King (2003) discusses in his book, *The Truth About Stories*. He writes, “in the end, there is no reason for the Indian to be real. The Indian simply has to exist in our imaginations...For to be seen as “real,” for people to “imagine” us as Indians, we must be “authentic.” (p. 54). The girls did not see this aspect of my identity because I did not fit in to the imagined, ‘authentic’ Aboriginal they have come to construct.

There have been occasions though when students have been able to accurately place my identity; however, these instances have been very few and far between. More recently, I had a student ask, “Miss, are you native?” Surprised by the question, I asked how she had drawn this conclusion. She responded, “I lived near a reserve for like a week. You look like them.” My feelings of this interaction were mixed. I was initially disappointed by this generalization, followed by simultaneously feeling both happy and sad that I was perceived as having ‘enough physical characteristics’ to be viewed as ‘authentic.’ In my previous experiences, most are unable to locate my identity. I have operated within an in-between space that has allowed me the choice to share or suppress this information, a privilege that many within my immediate family go without. My decision to share this with students is primarily done to assist in recognizing the diverse ways in which Aboriginal peoples live and work. I also encourage students to deconstruct ideas of Aboriginality that limit identity to stereotypical representation, which forces community members to prove their ‘authenticity’ within very narrow spaces.

On one very hot June morning I was charged with teaching yet another girls’ physical education class. Being the last week of school, and my defunct position as a ‘supply,’ you could say that the majority of the class was not interested in following the lesson plan that included several games of ultimate Frisbee. I was able to get a solid warm-up and about fifteen minutes of

passing before most had all but given up, alternatively choosing to congregate at the side of the field talking about whatever was more important than throwing a Frisbee. I approached and was immediately met with “Miss, its ok, we are having a sharing circle.” Interested, I sat down replying that I also knew a few things about sharing circles. The girl next to me told me she was Mohawk and we spoke briefly of our respected Aboriginal identities. We spent the remainder of the class passing the Frisbee along allowing the opportunity for students to share their feelings and the causes of their current stress. It would be disrespectful to share these conversations, but I can say that many of the students expressed gratitude after completing this exercise. As I sat writing my notes to the teacher, periodically looking up at a Chief’s head plastered on the side of the gymnasium wall, I wondered how my exercise in ‘emotional health’ would be taken up. Unfazed, I hit the submit button, smiling and thinking that I am also in love with these small resistances.

Identity has also become a prominent fixture within my own education, particularly at the post-secondary level, where it seems there is greater awareness of processes of racialization. I remember being quite intimidated as I walked into my first graduate class. It was comprised of a small group of racially diverse students who frequently discussed identity and their experiences of oppression, domination, and resilience. Race was often central to these exchanges, and these experiences elucidated how processes of racialization become significant for the way that education is experienced within institutions of higher learning. I remember being quite withdrawn during these discussions, partly because I felt uncomfortable with my privilege, but also because I felt my identity was invisible.

I was enamoured by the way that fellow students were able to reveal their pasts and how these histories were never challenged. Everyone had a story, and I felt awkward and out of place

knowing that a part of my identity afforded great privilege, while fully aware that assumptions had already been made about me based on the presence or absence of racialized signifiers. As Kannen (2011) writes, “in the space of a classroom, our bodies speak for us in ways that we may not intend or even realize” (p. 104). I felt uncomfortable with the privilege that my body and name afforded, but at the same time, feeling some security in knowing that my Aboriginal self could move through space likely undetected. Nevertheless, I knew there was still a risk of being found out, at which point I would have to engage in conversations that habitually challenges the genuineness of my identity and experiences.

Months after this class ended, I had a conversation with a fellow student whom I had sat next to for that entire term, and in this exchange, I chose to reveal my Aboriginal identity. The reaction to this information was quite typical. Questions were centered around status, how much blood quantum I possess, where my band resides, and if I receive free education. This is not a novel conversation; this is a discussion I endure every time I choose to share this information with the world. The interesting aspect of this exchange was the acceptance I had felt after this revelation. There was a sense of camaraderie based on racialized experiences within higher education, which reinforced the relationality of identity (Kannen, 2011) in the classroom. There was a bonding over the sense of ‘otherness’ that was constructed around my Aboriginality. It was a perfect example of how I have come to operate within a hybridized space and how identity is unstable and shifts in relation to our social locations and interactions with others.

When I arrived into the graduate program, I did so with every intention of pursuing work that might support the health and well-being of Aboriginal peoples and communities. I felt a great desire to give back to the very community that supported my education financially, but my reciprocity was about more than money. I wanted to engage in research in a way that was unlike

what I had been regularly exposed to, instead seeking to engage with community based research that would centralize voices that were conveniently absent from the bulk of literature I had read. I contemplated several topics, with my background in physical education taking the lead in much of my earliest attempts to devise research questions. However, these really never felt right, and I began to reflect on how I arrived at this privileged academic space, knowing full well that I was indeed lucky to be here. I wondered where the other Aboriginal students were and how they were able to get here? I knew that I was not alone, and with this, I began on the journey to find myself, my culture, and others with whom I might be able to relate. What and who I found was more than I could expect. The voices and stories of my fellow students that articulate how education is more than just a piece of paper. It is about better futures for ourselves, families, communities and nations.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

The following chapter provides an overview of the existing literature surrounding Aboriginal education in Canada. This chapter is organized into three parts, the first being ‘The Gap,’ which utilizes epidemiological studies that highlight existing trends in Aboriginal PSE. The second section, ‘Explaining the Gap’ incorporates broader research in the fields of health, particularly with regard to social determinants that can provide a more holistic assessment of the underlying conditions influencing Aboriginal PSE. In doing so, I deliberately move away from a cultural deficit approach and an emphasis on agency, which blames culture or individual. Finally, ‘Closing the Gap’ consciously includes the work of Aboriginal researchers who have demonstrated how the culture of Canadian education has failed to adequately support the needs of Aboriginal students. The works of these scholars were included to further centralize voices of the community, but also because of the propensity of Aboriginal research to view knowledge(s) as interconnected. It is with this paradigm that an enhanced understanding of how history has contributed to the present challenges of Aboriginal PSE is established.

The Gap

The TRC’s first of eight calls to action underscored the urgency of “minimizing the existing gap in Aboriginal educational achievement” (TRC, 2015, p. 5). Community leaders have organized and expressed that formal education is a crucial area through which health and quality of life might be improved. The First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC), which advocates for PSE for Aboriginal peoples, views higher education as a primary method to combat poverty and dependency. “It is imperative that we close the learning divide for First Nations people – a divide resulting in enormous socio-economic costs. We know that if we are

to fully participate in the economy, we must have the necessary skills” (Kavanagh, 2011, p.1). Previous research has thoroughly established that Aboriginal peoples historically achieve lower levels of formal education compared to non-Aboriginal counterparts (Cloutier, 1984; Cliff et al., 1997; Sarkar and Stallard, 1997; British Columbia, 2000a; University of Alberta, 2000). This trend has also been observed in other countries with deep colonial histories such as Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (Wesley-Esquimaux & Bolduc, 2014). Although Canada has observed minor improvements in Aboriginal PSE over the last decade, Statistics Canada reported that only eight percent of Aboriginal peoples had a university degree compared to 23% of the Canadian population, a minimal increase from the six percent previously reported in 2001 (Statistics Canada, 2006). Richards (2008) additionally utilized 2006 census data and found that “[w]hile younger Aboriginals are seeking more education than previous generations, they have not kept pace with the increase in education among other Canadians” (p.1). Maltest et. al. (2002) reinforced this finding, establishing the number of Aboriginal students enrolled in PSE to be increasing, yet still below the rate of the overall Canadian population. Despite these figures, there is optimism in the growing number of Aboriginal students enrolled in post-secondary institutions. A survey of First Nations people living on-reserve showed that 70% of those between the ages of 16 and 24 hoped to complete some form of post-secondary education, and almost 80% of parents hoped their children would do so (Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2005).

Some research suggests that gender may influence how Aboriginal students engage with PSE. Statistics Canada (2010) found that Aboriginal women complete PSE at higher rates than Aboriginal men, reporting that, “thirty-six percent of Aboriginal women have a post-secondary certificate, diploma or degree, compared to 50% of non-Aboriginal women” (Statistics Canada,

2012). Nevertheless, this is still below the rate of the national average. Although Aboriginal women are more likely to access PSE, “they tend to seek out education through different pathways than other women, typically returning to high school and university as adults with a family in tow” (Statistics Canada, 2012). There are several factors related to accessibility of PSE for Aboriginal men and women. The State of Knowledge on Aboriginal Health (2012) identified barriers encountered by Aboriginal women including: financial (14%), work (14%), pregnancy (12%) and family responsibilities (11%). Aboriginal men, however, isolated employment as a primary barrier to higher education (The State of Knowledge on Aboriginal Health, 2012, p. 48). Despite the evidence suggesting that Aboriginal women face additional barriers, they were nearly “twice as likely to have a university certificate, diploma or degree” (7.1% compared with 4.5%) (State of Knowledge on Aboriginal Health, 2012, p. 49). Subsequently, Aboriginal women continually achieve higher rates of PSE in spite of the complexity of the aforementioned barriers.

In order to understand these complexities, further research must examine the conditions and resources available to Aboriginal students to enter into and continue PSE. For example, Wesley-Esquimaux and Bolduc (2014) state that “[r]esources focused on supporting Aboriginal women and their children during their post-secondary education may help to strengthen the number of Aboriginal women entering and graduating postsecondary streams” (p. 19). Generally speaking, we know very little about the manner in which Aboriginal students encounter social and material conditions, such as socio-economic status (SES), housing, food, culture, identity, and social support, or how these relationships shape their educational journeys.

Explaining the Gap

Examining the low levels of Aboriginal PSE in Canada must include a holistic lens that accounts for the intersectionality of social and material conditions operating in students’ lives.

For example, previous research has pointed to the lack of financial resources; poor academic preparation; lack of self-confidence, motivation, and role models with post-secondary experience (St. Denis & Hampton, 2002; Malatest, 2004; Rae, 2005; Holmes, 2006; Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2008; Restoule & Smillie, 2008; Hudson, 2009). Although important, these findings place emphasis on individual agency and do not consider how relations of power and unequal distribution of resources across conditions intersect to influence relationships with higher education.

SES and financial constraints were the most commonly cited material barriers to PSE cited among Aboriginal populations (Alcorn & Levin, 2000; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000; Maltest, 2004; APS, 2006). SES dictates not only how Aboriginal students access PSE, but also how students are able to remain in these spaces. Aboriginal students are less likely to graduate from their program of study with “the drop-out rate among Aboriginal students [being] between 33 and 56 percent higher than non-Aboriginals” (Parkin & Baldwin, 2009, p. 9). It is conceivable that the observed drop-out rate might also be linked to the financial constraints associated with higher education.

While financial burdens may contribute to the growing trend of Aboriginal people accessing PSE well into their adult years, a study that reviewed the transition of Aboriginal students in higher education found that most had arrived as mature students, indicating that social and material conditions were fundamental to how PSE was accessed. Specifically, the authors found that “when they were younger, these students were not able to access or chose not to access post-secondary education through the so-called “regular” way” (Restoule et al., 2013, p.2). The return to education in adulthood suggests that substantial barriers exist for Aboriginal youth wishing to extend their education beyond high school. Gaining an understanding of the

complexity of these conditions is important for any prospect of reconciling education in the future. This research attempts to understand the socio-cultural realities of Aboriginal post-secondary students currently enrolled in higher education. Such an approach is necessary because “Aboriginal academic achievement is influenced by a complex mix of socioeconomic, sociohistoric, and sociocultural realities that are the residue of the colonizing efforts that continue to underscore the contemporary reality of Aboriginal peoples in Canada” (Battiste & Barman, 1995, p.3; Hill & George, 1996; Castellano et al., 2000). By examining the experiences of Aboriginal post-secondary students, we may gain a better understanding of how colonial legacies encountered through social and material conditions contribute to the post-secondary experience.

Aboriginal students undeniably experience unique challenges and systematic barriers as a result of colonization. Previous research has established key conditions that influence opportunities for PSE, itself a critical determinant of health. These include SES, housing, food insecurity, and geographical location (Reading & Wein, 2009). The experiences of material conditions such as income inequality, decreased nutrition, and the lack of housing and protection from elements have been linked to health disparities through increased exposure and experience of stress (Frohlich, Ross & Richmond, 2006). Minimizing the gap in education then becomes a pragmatic approach for cultivating better health at both the individual and community level. As a critical determinant of health, education remains a primary means for improving socio-economic status, employment, social networks, and sense of control over life circumstances (Ross & Wu, 1995). Moreover, those with higher education are more likely to be happily employed and experience better health (Mashford-Pringle, 2008; Edgerton, Roberts, & von Below, 2012). As the journey to reconciliation continues, it is critical that all Aboriginal peoples have access to

both mainstream and culturally relevant forms of education. This is crucial as previous research indicates that higher education can provide the experiences, knowledge, and skills that may support sovereign and self-sustaining communities for the future (Malatest, 2004; Holmes, 2006).

In addition, because education has been established as a key determinant of health, to address this education gap might also correspond to improvements in other social determinants of health such as SES, employment, housing and food security. Nevertheless, it is precisely these complex conditions that construct barriers around the accessibility of PSE for Aboriginal students. The intersection between SES and PSE is a “catch-22” (Mendelson, 2006, p.9), meaning that while higher education is a way out of low socio-economic status, low socio-economic status makes it less likely that higher education will be obtained. Financial insecurity may contribute to the lower levels of Aboriginal representation within spaces of higher education. This may also reflect the lack of resources invested into Aboriginal education and social services more broadly. In the words of former Auditor General Sheila Fraser, “a disproportionate number of First Nations people still lack the most basic services that other Canadians take for granted” (Office of the Auditor General, 2011, p.12). It is not surprising then, that “only 39% of Aboriginal people between the ages 25-69 have completed some form of PSE within Canada” (Restoule, 2001, p.50).

This lack of basic necessities which in itself is rooted in colonial histories has contributed to health disparities that continue to exist today. Specifically, “Aboriginal people in Canada experience ill- health disproportionately compared with the rest of the population” (Adelson, 2005, p.45; Newbold, 1998; Statistics Canada, 2008; Mundel & Chapman 2010). Shorter life expectancies of up to five to seven years lower than the general Canadian population have been

linked to increased levels of chronic illnesses such as obesity, diabetes, respiratory and cardiovascular diseases experienced among the community (Estey et al., 2007; Statistics Canada, 2008). Viewing education and health as inextricably linked is necessary in order to shift our attention to the underlying causes of disparity and to consider how improvements in social and material conditions would therefore be the most effective means to improve the education of Aboriginal people. It is undeniable that the lack of basic necessities has a deleterious effect on the education, health, and quality of life for individuals and communities. The current living conditions of many Aboriginal communities have been compared to that of developing and/or underdeveloped countries. In fact, “[a]ccording to the United Nations Human Development Index, which measures health through longevity, educational achievement, and adult literacy, First Nations people in Canada rank 68th in the world” (Reading & Wien, 2009, p.10). The complexity of social and material conditions certainly contributes to the increased rates of chronic illness, but most relevant for this study, they are related to the underrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples in spaces of higher education. Nevertheless, even with these despairing statistics and the ‘catch-22,’ there remains a small but growing population of Aboriginal students present within post-secondary institutions.

Accessing spaces of higher education is only one facet of the Aboriginal PSE experience. The lack of representation and self-determination may also present additional challenges for students. Richardson and Blanchet-Cohen (2000) identified four central challenges to post-secondary programs for Aboriginal students, namely “access, rates of completion, Aboriginal control of Aboriginal education, and relevance” (p. 181). The failure to see or incorporate Aboriginal worldviews within PSE may also contribute to students’ difficulty in engaging with the learning occurring in these spaces, or additionally view it as relevant to their lives. Indeed,

formalized education invariably privileges Western forms of knowledge translation that operate in opposition to Aboriginal worldviews. Cherubini and Hodson (2008) explain:

In short, the education of Aboriginal children in Ontario schools is overwhelmingly punctuated by struggle – struggle to see one’s culture or language in the classroom, struggle between conflicting values, struggle for understanding and a never ending search for relevance that often results in spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical disconnection from that education (p. 11).

The failure to view Aboriginal education as a holistic experience contributes to the lack of relevance and autonomy over learning, sustaining a legacy of distrust associated with the historically ethnocentric practices instilled through residential schools (Dickason, 2004; Malatest, 2004; Office of the Auditor- General, 2005; Restoule et al. 2013). A survey conducted by Restoule et al., (2013) found that a large proportion of Aboriginal post-secondary students continue to be skeptical of PSE, with “about 57% report[ing that] they “did not trust the education system,”” a finding that is all the more damning since respondents were “current or graduated post-secondary students” (p. 5). The study also suggested that many Aboriginal post-secondary students felt they did not belong in the institution, which may be attributed to the manner in which racism continues to be experienced within the system. Indeed, the rates are quite staggering in that “[a]pproximately 90% of respondents experienced racism on campus,” and as a result, “63% had sought guidance or counselling services provided within the institution” (Restoule et al., 2013, p.6). Examining how racism is encountered throughout PSE may contribute to our current understanding of the legacy of distrust, which remains just as significant today as it was during the residential school era. By including the voices of current Aboriginal students, this research attempts to expose how institutional racism is symbolic of the

colonial legacies of residential schools, and how the reproduction of cultural inferiority continues to be experienced intergenerationally.

Previous research has established how Western education operates under the rhetoric of cultural difference that disregards ‘Other’ paradigms and worldviews (Henderson, 2000; Kovach, 2005; VanEvery-Albert, 2008; Hart, 2010). Battiste (2002) describes this education as operating “on behalf of the exclusionary and/or assimilationist nation, whether at the elementary, secondary, or postsecondary level. Public education has meant prolonged marination of colonialism and neocolonialism for every formally educated person today” (Battiste, 2002, p. 91). It is for this reason that PSE can only be viewed within the context of colonialism, and that it deliberately ignores alternative paradigms of knowing and/or learning. The knowledge that is represented and valued within PSE is almost always reflected through a top-down Western paradigm. Furthermore, “when most professors describe the ‘world,’ they describe Eurocentric contexts and ignore Indigenous perspectives and understandings” (Hart, 2010, p.4). The reproduction of knowledge from a dominant Western worldview may correspondingly contribute to the lack of Aboriginal representation within these spaces. For Aboriginal students who do find themselves in these learning environments, they may encounter a heightened sense of isolation and invisibility throughout much of these experience or as Henderson (2000) describes it, as sense of “looking into a still lake and not seeing their image” (p. 76). The disparaging low levels of physical representation, curriculum content, and pedagogical methods for learning, highlight the relations of power that maintain the status quo and further marginalize Aboriginal voices within academic spaces.

Aboriginal paradigms emphasize interconnection and community that are principle features of learning often overlooked within mainstream education. This is in striking contrast to

post-secondary institutions where “[t]he nature of individualism is reinforced, and the connection to community is virtually non-existent” (VanEvery-Albert, 2008, p. 50). The emphasis on individualism imposes further challenges for Aboriginal students as it diverts largely from an Aboriginal worldview that observes education holistically, and as inherently connected to the land and community. Beyond the lack of representation and denial of cultural ways of knowing, differences in pedagogical approaches to learning may also influence how PSE is experienced amongst Aboriginal students. Alternatively, Aboriginal methods emphasize community based learning that “requires a process of participation, consultation, collaboration, consensus-building, participatory research, and sharing led by Aboriginal peoples and grounded in Indigenous knowledge rather than neo-colonial command” (Battiste, 2002, p.86). The opposing standpoints of knowledge translation is but one difference; Aboriginal pedagogies frequently emphasize learning through storytelling. The distinction of written word as being the fundamental method of knowledge transference denies and further marginalizes the value of learning through stories: “I detest writing, the process itself epitomizes the European concept of ‘legitimate’ thinking; what is written has an importance that is denied the spoken (Means, as cited in Kovach, 2005 p.53). The manner in which writing is viewed as the principle and superior form of knowledge translation is evidence of how colonialism continues to exclude Aboriginal voices and perspectives. Written word similarly neglects how knowledge may be translated from differing perspectives. Specifically, “Indigenous epistemology is fluid, non-linear, and relational. Knowledge is translated through stories that shape-shift in relation to the wisdom of the storyteller at the time of the telling” (Kovach, 2005, p.53). The emphasis on Western forms of knowledge translation invariably adds another element that must be negotiated by Aboriginal students.

Closing the Gap

Closing the gap in Aboriginal PSE will require an examination of the intersection of social and material conditions operating in the lives of Aboriginal students. This is significant in that each individual has a unique relationship to colonization and experiences varying conditions of life in which legacies continue to be encountered. It has been suggested that colonialism is in fact a broader determinant uniquely affecting Aboriginal health (Czyzewski, 2011; Paradies, 2016). With the bulk of Aboriginal students now attending school in publicly funded systems away from reserves, improving upon current systems now becomes important not just for moving toward an era of reconciled education, but also for improving overall health. It is for these reasons that the quality and relevance of education must be improved for Aboriginal students in the future. “While off-reserve education outcomes are better than those on-reserve, the provinces, too, need to undertake reform” (Richards, 2008, p.1). The relocation of Aboriginal peoples to more densely populated areas in itself could result in a loss of social and material supports available on traditional lands and territories. Migration may also pose additional challenges for accessing not just basic needs, but also for the way in which Aboriginal youth engage with education, and the manner in which opportunities for cultural continuity are available within new spaces.

Colonialism has instilled a legacy of dependency that has contributed to patterns of social suffering that continue today. Frohlich, Ross, and Richmond (2006) suggest that such marginalization not only contributes to physical health, but also negative feelings of identity, emotional, spiritual well-being. Specifically, they state that “poor economic conditions [are] directly attributable to low cultural esteem, and lack of cultural identity, which is critical to feelings of self-worth” (Frohlich, Ross, & Richmond, 2006, p. 136). Mainstream Canadian

education has ignored Aboriginal peoples, values, and worldviews, contributing to an ongoing legacy of distrust for such institutions. Closing the gap therefore requires a holistic lens that critically engages with the relationship between culture, education, and health that values and is inclusive of Aboriginal paradigms. The persistent gap in education also suggests that little has changed by way of assimilative practices that remain entrenched in the culture of education, which encourages students to disassociate education from their worldviews. “The magnitude of the gap in itself prohibits Aboriginal Peoples from exercising a choice between leading a traditional lifestyle and a lifestyle integrated with other Canadians” (Richards, 2008, p.1). The challenges for Aboriginal students are complex, yet many seek out PSE as a method to reconnect to identity, culture, and sense of community that have been lost (Restoule, 2008).

Forming a sense of identity through community might be a way through which Aboriginal students can reconcile feelings of ‘otherness’ and isolation within PSE. Baskin et al. (2008) situated community building as a method that empowers Aboriginal students to share stories of strength while challenging systems of domination and oppression. Organizing through community building permits Aboriginal students to question their lived experiences and interrogate the relations of power that contribute to subjugated positions. Baskin et al., (2008) elaborates that...

...having Aboriginal instructors and content in some of our courses strengthens us to challenge those that do not, the importance of learning about the history of colonization in order to create a more just future, and how education can be part of one’s healing journey (p. 90).

Reconciling education for Aboriginal peoples must involve connections with culture and community. The process of decolonizing education ought to include these worldviews so that

meaningful reconciliation might be possible. In other words, the challenges for Aboriginal PSE must be analyzed holistically, solutions should be constructed collaboratively, and Aboriginal voices and worldviews must be considered valuable sources of knowledge. The increasing number of Aboriginal faculty and students within the academy spurs the potential for new perspectives and possibilities for the future.

Furthermore, Aboriginal participation in the efforts to reconcile education is fundamental to our ability to move forward. Indeed, “Indigenous peoples must participate in educational decision-making; they must be allowed to transform the existing crisis” (Battiste, Youngblood, & Henderson, 2000, p. 15). Advancing our understanding of Aboriginal PSE and closing the gap will require leadership from within the community, combined with collaboration with allies who are committed to respecting, valuing, and empowering Aboriginal knowledges. At the same time, improving the representation of Aboriginal students within PSE must be viewed holistically to account for the underlying social and material conditions that construct barriers to these experiences. The committee for Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development suggest that such conditions undoubtedly influence Aboriginal PSE, further stating that, “no single ‘barrier’ operates in isolation from other circumstances relevant to each learner” (Kavanaugh, 2011, p. 33). This research seeks to examine the complex manner in which social and material conditions operate in the lives of Aboriginal post-secondary students, and how PSE is experienced in light of such conditions. Looker and Lowe (2001) additionally highlighted the need to “conduct more research that examines the resources available to Aboriginal students and the unique circumstances they are likely to encounter when participating in post-secondary education” (p.12). This research begins to address this gap by examining how social and material conditions

are regularly encountered by Aboriginal post-secondary students, while also assessing the resources that are available to support their educational endeavours.

The purpose of this research is to create a space for Aboriginal students to speak directly to the challenges and successes of their post-secondary experiences. While including Aboriginal paradigms that can empower ourselves, families, and communities. Despite the colonizing role that education has and which subsequently maintains the deep distrust towards the education system, Haig-Brown (2008) argues that education remains a unique space in which decolonization might be accomplished. Namely, through community building and identity formation, Aboriginal students can engage in the work required to decolonize our minds and experiences within PSE “by recognizing (in the sense of coming to know again) what we consider our (hi)stories to be and what meanings we make” (Haig-Brown, 2008, p. 255). It is possible then that notwithstanding the limited representation, legacies of colonialism, and challenges associated with intersecting social and material conditions, Aboriginal students can and do succeed within PSE, and more importantly, the community can and will locate opportunities for organization and decolonization.

Summary

The focus of this chapter was to provide knowledge around the current levels of Aboriginal representation within PSE in Canada. Emphasis was placed on evaluating the gap in education in relation to health and the underlying conditions that create barriers to the accessibility of higher education. It additionally demonstrated how the present culture of PSE fails to consider or include Aboriginal ways of knowing, contributing to a legacy of distrust, in which current students may experience a heightened sense of ‘otherness’ within academic spaces. The chapter was completed by establishing how education in its current form fails to

meet the needs of Aboriginal students and how decolonizing education is of critical importance for the future of education in Canada.

CHAPTER 3

Theory

The following chapter provides an introduction to theoretical understandings of identity and culture supported by the works of theorists including Hall (1996) and Bhabba (2012). It begins by contemplating the politics of Aboriginal identity by drawing on the relations of State power that work to establish boundaries, primarily through the regulation of status. Notions of the third space are included to provide an alternative epistemological standpoint for identity, drawing on the ideas of hybridity and how this positionality might be useful for the manner in which research might be conducted. The chapter ends with an overview of the historical foundations of post-colonial theory and the critiques for its present uses. Included in this are how this theoretical orientation has been employed within previous Aboriginal research and how it has informed and is taken up within the study at hand.

The Politics of Identity

Cultural theorists such as such as Hall (1996) and Bhabba (2012) have established that cultural identity is neither static nor concrete. Hall (1996) describes the fluid nature of identity as, 'always in process' in that it cannot always be 'won' or 'lost,' sustained or abandoned. Thus, identity is a socially constructed phenomenon that reflects not only how we see ourselves, but also how we perceive others to see us. Despite these dynamic particularities, there remains a comfort in the capacity to label and define cultural identity. At the most basic level, Hall (1996) situates cultural identification as a process that seeks to locate commonalities among people, groups, and communities with whom we share similar values, beliefs, and ways of life. Furthermore, identification is "a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation" (Hall, 1996, p.2). This process though is not always

easy or simple. The challenge of cultural identification for Aboriginal peoples is unique, in that it does not always account for the diversity of nations within nations, which is particularly relevant for the 600 plus Aboriginal communities that exist within Canada, with their own distinct customs, traditions, and ways of knowing. Furthermore, the history of colonization has often resulted in a loss of and/or disconnection from culture due to assimilative practices that continue to be experienced over generations. Those identifying as having in-between identities or those experiencing cultural disconnection as a result of colonization, might find it additionally challenging to assert these identities, as well as place themselves concretely ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ of the community.

Often when Aboriginal heritage is known, the immediate question is, do you have status? The complexity and politics of Aboriginal status in Canada are deeply rooted in existing relations of power that allow the State to define membership from the ‘outside’ and from above. The politics of Aboriginal status in Canada goes beyond the focus of this thesis. Instead, I wish to highlight how the government continues to centrally control the provision of status. This is primarily accomplished through reducing identity to blood quantum and one’s ability to prove ancestral lineage through government documentation. Those with status are individuals who are legally recognized by the Canadian government to be ‘Aboriginal’ for the purposes of the *Indian Act* (Waldram, Herring, A. & Young, 2006). The *Indian Act* was first introduced in 1876 “[and] was designed to facilitate the administration of programs to Indians, as well as to facilitate their assimilation into mainstream Canadian society” (Waldram, Herring, A. & Young, 2006, p.11). Government sanctioned status has indeed been a colonizing effort that has sought to divide, control, and remove Aboriginal peoples from identity, land, and culture. Many individuals, nations, and communities have resisted the provision of government status for these very

reasons. Power and politics are undeniably at play, and there remain divergent ways in which Aboriginal identities are constructed and asserted. Writer (2001) explains:

Most non-Indians define Indians on the basis of individual biological or genetic makeup (blood quantum) and physical attributes (skin color/physical features). In contrast, most Indian people define themselves on the basis of relationship to their specific tribal group through what (extended) family one belongs to (relatives/family) and where one is from (community/location) (p. 44).

Aboriginal identity then, although malleable, is more than just status. It is a connection to community, land and culture that is important for the understanding of oneself and for healing and overcoming legacies of colonialism that have denied this very right. Similar to Writer (2001), Restoule (2000) discusses the politics of identity and how power is often shifted to the observers to discern Aboriginal identity from the outside. Alternatively, he encourages us to consider the act of identifying with Aboriginal culture, as this redistributes relations of power to the self, and how one chooses to assert identity in relation to culture. In doing so, one “accounts for the historical time and contextual place in which one may choose to identify as Aboriginal” (Restoule, 2000, p.103). Although I hold membership within my community, my hesitation for asserting such an identity stems from a lack of connection to the land, community, and culture. This relationship is just beginning to be restored albeit through connections and teachings different from my Dene heritage. The diverse existence of Aboriginal identities and fragmented relationships to land and community therefore makes the act of identifying with Aboriginal culture more conducive to the complex realities that exist today. My personal relationship to colonization is unique and indeed different from others within the community. This is why identity and efforts of reconciliation must consider the possibilities of a third space, to include

those that remain ‘in-between’ and are locating alternative methods for reconnecting to culture and community.

The Third Space

Bhabba (2012) offers a third space as a sense of cultural hybridity that problematizes the construction of identity through difference, where the space in-between is familiar, yet different, and where identity cannot be assumed to be one or the other. Rather, identity “is indeed something like culture’s ‘in-between’, bafflingly both alike and different” (Bhabba, 2012, p.54). The third space therefore provides the idea of hybridity that allows us to theorize with new eyes, new experiences, and new concepts of identity. It allows for innovative possibilities that do not seek to legitimate one epistemology over another, but allows us to view the world through a set of blended paradigms. It is within this hybrid space that I often feel myself operating, walking with my feet in two worlds and never completely feeling inside either. Bhabba (2012) further explained the notion of cultural hybridity and how it may add to our current understanding of culture:

Hybrid agencies find their voice in a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty. They deploy the partial culture from which they emerge to construct visions of community, and versions of historic memory, that give narrative form to the minority positions they occupy; the outside of the inside: the part in the whole (p. 58).

The premise for accounting for a third space was the result of my own positionality as well as the manner in which identity became an integral theme throughout the research. Most participants spoke to the notion of hybrid identities and how the essence of ‘walking in two worlds’ have come to influence their lived experiences both inside and outside of the academy. The third space then becomes an important facet of the research and a compassionate position from which to

theorize and construct new knowledge from 'outside the inside.' Hybrid identities in fact can become a useful tool for decolonization, as the space affords the ability to see value in diverging ways of knowing. It is from this space that we can begin to understand emergent positionalities and ontological experiences, "so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority" (Bhabba, 2012, p. 259). Such notions of hybridity have in fact served me well in my everyday interactions, but perhaps more importantly, provides an opportunity to construct new knowledge informed by shifting identities and experiences.

Moreover, hybrid spaces align closely with Aboriginal thought, which does not seek to place knowledge within hierarchical systems of power, but rather sees value in all knowledge and views them as inherently interconnected. In the words of Keshone, "Every culture and every learning has value and meaning" (personal communication, 2016). The idea of the third space affords a privilege in identifying in-between cultures, yet is somehow illusive, never achieving a complete sense of belonging. The third space is useful for understanding the ways in which identity is characterized and experienced, particularly in relation to Aboriginal peoples. In fact, the third space has been previously taken up in Aboriginal research as a means to disrupt hierarchal understandings of knowledge (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Ng, 1993; Scheurich & Young, 1997; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999; Haig-Brown & Dannenmann, 2002; Haig-Brown & Nock, 2006; Haig-Brown, 2008). Previous Aboriginal research have employed the third space to position diverging epistemologies as being both understood and respected. In this sense, the third space could be a space "for intellectual interactions of peace, friendship, and respect for differences" (Haig-Brown, 2008, p.253). Furthermore, Aboriginal research has utilized the third

space within a framework of standpoint epistemology, which provides a double consciousness or a heightened awareness throughout the research process:

Standpoint epistemology begins with the idea that less powerful members of society have the potential for a more complete view of social reality than others, precisely because of their disadvantaged position. That is, in order to survive (socially and sometimes even physically), subordinate persons are attuned to or attentive to the perspective of the dominant class...as well as their own. This awareness gives them the potential for “double vision” or double consciousness – a knowledge, awareness of, and sensitivity to both the dominant world view of the society and their own minority...perspective. (Neilson, cited in Cherubini & Hodson, 2008, p. 27)

The third space, as illuminating as it has been in my personal encounters, provides a unique entry into research that attempts to weave through difference, while maintaining respect for divergent and often opposing methods of knowledge production. At the very core, the challenge of this research has been the legitimization of differing epistemologies, worldviews, and ways of knowing within an institution that although progressive, continues to struggle in taking seriously Aboriginal methods and worldviews within the schema of academia. The foundation of this research rests in the ability to decolonize the research process and acknowledge and respect Aboriginal paradigms, while blending dominant Western forms of knowledge production most commonly accepted within the institution. The third space is therefore utilized as a means to locate alternative positions of cultural identity, while also informing hybridized and blended practices for academic research.

Post-Colonial Theory

The inclusion of post-colonial theory is important for recognizing how hierarchical relations of power are established and sustained within institutions of higher learning. To colonize or take control is heavily entrenched in the notion of imperial superiority that continues to subjugate Aboriginal peoples and knowledge within Canadian education. Post-colonial theory is concerned with the politics of knowledge (and its production) and how power informs and sustains new forms of colonial domination. As Young (2001) writes, “postcolonial theories are perhaps best conceptualized as a family of theories sharing a social, political, and moral concern about the history and legacy of colonialism — how it continues to shape people’s lives, well-being, and life opportunities” (p.19). It is for this reason that post-colonial theory may provide a lens through which we can deconstruct the experiences of Aboriginal post-secondary students and shed light on the history and legacy of colonialism, while also attempting to give expression to the agents of those experiences.

Post-colonial theory originated from theorists such as Anderson (1983), Fanon (1992), and Said (1997) who studied imperial domination in places such as Africa, India and other parts of South Asia. Post-colonialism is concerned with the experiences of the colonized with regard to race, ethnicity, culture, and identity (Shohat, 1992; Ashcroft, 1995; Loomba, 1998; Hall, 2000). It was Frantz Fanon (1959, 1961, 1967) who developed the most detailed understanding of the psychological consequences of colonization. His work “revealed the racist stereotyping at the heart of colonial practice and asserted the need to recognize the economical and political realities that underlay assertions of race ‘difference’” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2002, p. 123). The introduction of Subaltern studies in the late 20th century added to the theoretical foundations of post-colonial theory through examining the experiences of colonized peoples in South Asia. Its significance was in the way it problematized how imperial power contributed to the

construction of racial hierarchies of race and culture, such as black/white and east/west. Binary representations were further problematized by Said (1997) who deconstructed Orientalism, as a representation of difference sought to homogenize culture and position the Orient as irrational and backward to the civility of imperial rule. Fanon (1967) and Said (1979) were instrumental in theorizing the inseparability of knowledge and power, and identified how the power to name and describe from a Western perspective is fundamental to understanding oneself in relation to the 'other,' (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1990; Young, 1990). Fanon (1992) later conceived how the production of colour lines sustained racial hierarchies and rationalized the very examination of the 'other' from an imperial perspective, "for not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (Fanon, 1992, p. 240). The examination of power relations that constructed hierarchical understandings of race, culture, and difference were the major contributions of post-colonial theorists such as Fanon and Said.

Spivak (1988) later cautioned against utilizing a Subaltern lens to depict all experiences of the Orient. She argued that not all marginalized peoples are in fact Subaltern, only those that have been truly unrepresented or forgotten. More recently, post-colonial theorists have considered how movement, both forced and/or voluntary, has shaped our current understandings uses of this theory (Loomba, 1998; Loomba, Kaul, Bunzl, Burton, & Etsy, 2005). Contemporary post-colonial theorists such as Bhabba (1994), Loomba (1998), and Agnew (2005) further consider how migration and the production of hybrid identities implicates the use of this theoretical approach. The relocation and movement of people across borders has contributed to the production of diasporic communities in which hybrid identities becomes central to cultural analysis. The current utilization of post-colonial theory has now extended to encompass intersectional realities of culture in a post-colonial era:

The production and representation of the self as a subject in the post-colonial era can be a laborious process that involves taking an inventory of the many facets of gender, race, class, and other socially significant criteria embedded and encoded in one's identity (Agnew, 2005, p.12).

Scholars have thus expanded their paradigms to consider the significance of the intersections of race, gender and class, as well as the problematic implications of excluding histories (Appiah, 1994; Prakesh, 1994; Gilroy, 2005; Loomba et al., 2005). Some critics of this theory have suggested that post-colonialism is too theoretical and not sufficiently rooted in material concerns (Ahmad, 1992; Dirlik, 1994). However, Darby (1997) argues that despite its shortcomings, post-colonial theory has an expansive understanding of the potentialities of agency, which attempt to loosen the power of Western knowledge and reassert the value of alternative experiences and ways of knowing (Fanon, 1968; Thiong'o, 1986; Spivak, 1987; Bhabha, 1994; McEwan 2001).

Post-colonial theory has been taken up in previous Aboriginal research as a method for highlighting relationships and imbalances of power, something that is imperative in acknowledging the history of colonial education in Canada. For example, Viswanathan (1987) examined education as a colonizing practice that sought to assimilate 'primitive' Aboriginal bodies through the rhetoric of Western superiority that reinforced cultural difference and the construction and domination of the 'other.' Colonization has formed and sustained, "the naturalizing of constructed values (e.g. civilization, humanity) which conversely, established 'savagery', 'native', and 'primitive'" (Viswanathan 1987, p.17). Post-colonial theory therefore has guided this research in identifying how colonialism, that was entrenched in the assimilative agenda of the residential school system, continues to be reproduced in the lives of Aboriginal post-secondary students. As Smith (1999) notes, it is a mistake to "name colonialism as finished

business...There is rather compelling evidence that in fact this has not occurred...the institutions and legacy of colonialism have remained” (p. 98). The ongoing impact of colonialism in a contemporary sense can be seen in the longstanding disparities with regard to education and health experienced as a result of marginalized access to such services:

[T]hese health disparities have manifested from a long history of oppression, systemic racism, and discrimination, and are inextricably linked to unequal access to resources such as education, training and employment, social and health care facilities, and limited access to and control over lands and resources (Frohlich, Ross, & Richmond, 2006, p.136).

Post-colonial theory therefore sensitizes scholars to identify how colonial legacies endure and are experienced, as well as the unequal relations of power that continue to inform the conditions encountered by Aboriginal students.

This theoretical approach is essential for understanding how colonial legacies shape everyday lived experiences, focusing on the voices of students that have been largely overlooked in previous research. In doing so, I “decentre dominant culture so that the perspectives of those who have been marginalized become starting points for knowledge construction” (Reimer, Kirkham & Anderson, 2002, p.12; see also Gandhi, 1998; McConaghy, 2000). Aboriginal students are central to the study and positioned as leaders who possess the knowledge and insight to speak back to existing inequities that directly influence their lives. Many Aboriginal scholars have utilized post-colonial theory as a means to blend and ‘Indigenize’ Western research methodologies. Battiste (2000) highlights the growing number of Aboriginal scholars that contribute to post-colonial discourses as a means to reclaim and reposition Indigenous voices, knowledge, and analysis. Therefore, post-colonial theory is perhaps the most appropriate method

for repositioning Aboriginal voices as central to the production of knowledge, rather than peripheral subjects to be studied. Based on this literature, a post-colonial theoretical framework was selected to foreground how legacies of colonialism continue to be experienced by Aboriginal post-secondary students. This approach is primarily concerned with relations of power and was utilized to expose how they constrain access to PSE and how this continues to be influenced by intersecting social and material conditions. Therefore, this framework goes beyond a cultural studies approach that would examine how Aboriginal bodies experience PSE, to further identify structural barriers embedded in unequal relations of power that constrain Aboriginal students within institutions of higher education. Post-colonial theory assists in exposing relations of power; however, one must be careful to avoid the inclination to construct an 'us versus them' dichotomy. This is important because, as McConaghy (2000) points out, the coloniser and the colonised dichotomy is no longer useful; instead, McConaghy (2000) states that "the important task is to better understand the specific nature of specific oppressions at specific sites, to understand current forms of oppression" (p. 8). Post-colonial theory was selected for its ability to claim space within academic research so that Aboriginal students can identify and speak back to the conditions and relations of power influencing their educational journeys.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the politics of identity as it relates to Aboriginal peoples. It also discussed a third space and how hybridized identities and epistemologies may be useful positions from which to produce knowledge within academia. Historical foundations and contemporary uses of post-colonial theory were highlighted, with particular attention paid to how it has been implemented within previous Aboriginal research. The rationalization for this

theoretical framework was situated within the analysis of power, that repositions the voices of Aboriginal students as central to the understanding of how systemic domination continues to influence how education PSE is presently experienced. In the next chapter, I discuss how post-colonial theory has guided the inclusion of decolonizing methodologies and narrative research principles that seek to disrupt relations of power embedded in the research process. The chapter additionally outlines reflexivity, guidelines for ethical community engagement, recruitment, data collection, and caring for participants.

CHAPTER 4

Methodology

Decolonizing Methodologies

Decolonizing methodologies were utilized to further Indigenize the research agenda and to include Aboriginal ways of knowing that are often absent from academic research. For example, this research goes beyond a Western perspective that views education and health as separate to include an Aboriginal paradigm, which emphasizes a holistic and balanced approach to life grounded in medicine wheel teachings. “It is the fundamental interconnectedness that appeals to Indigenous peoples, as it conforms to their shared world view, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of life” (The State of Knowledge of Aboriginal Health, 2012, p. 41). It is within a holistic approach, that we may begin drawing connections between education, health, and Aboriginal identity to view experiences of education as intrinsically related to overall health and well-being. Within a medicine wheel teachings, health is “often rooted in a holistic conception of well-being involving a healthy balance of four elements or aspects of wellness: physical, emotional, mental and spiritual” (King et al., 2009, p. 76). Based on these definitions and Aboriginal paradigm, education is viewed in this study as inextricably connected to health and the social and material conditions that shape the experiences of Aboriginal post-secondary students.

Education as a colonial endeavour influences how Aboriginal students experience institutions of higher learning. Since education is connected to other determinants of health, negative experiences of education can subsequently have an impact on overall social and material well-being. Understanding the interconnected nature of these conditions then becomes a valuable opportunity for integrating Aboriginal epistemologies that can extend our knowledge and conceptualization of how health is implicated within the experiences of PSE. Integrating

Aboriginal worldviews is essential to this research; however, it is also important to note the diversity of our communities' distinct cultures and traditions. Participants in this study identified with several positionalities and often referenced hybrid identities and their positions in-between cultures. As a result, participants were encouraged to identify and 'speak from' their distinct social and cultural positions that informed their understanding of culture and identity. Jan Pettman's (1992) concept of 'speaking from' reminds us that it is important to consider our own socio-historical/professional locations, our motivations for seeking out research relationships, and the power relations that position us all. It is important to recognize that there are many Aboriginal ways of knowing that informed how participants understood their current realities in the educational space. Participants were encouraged to speak from their unique identities and understandings of culture that permitted the freedom to discuss the most meaningful facets of their ontological experiences.

An additional decolonizing methodology that was included in the study is the strengths perspective. Empowerment is critical, not just for our community, but also for the manner in which scholars continue to add to the existing body of knowledge. Paraschak and Thompson (2014) identifies the strengths perspective as a methodology that seeks to empower communities to build upon knowledge and address challenges in a manner that privileges our voices. Using this approach as a foundation, this study considers the experiences of Aboriginal post-secondary students as a strength and focuses on the agency of students in relation to systemic barriers and challenges. In doing so, this decolonizing methodology serves to empower our community to formulate solutions for the existing inequalities that influence everyday lived experiences.

Narrative Research

Post-colonial theory guided the decision to engage with narrative forms of data collection. This was because of its emphasis on storytelling as a means for knowledge translation that closely aligns with Aboriginal worldviews. Narrative methods were used to examine how Aboriginal students experience PSE, while considering how identity intersects with various social and material conditions. Narratives therefore provided a “distinct form of discourse” in which people engage and make meaning (Chase, 2005, p. 656). Narrative research can take many forms but generally seeks to collect stories, describe lives and reconstruct narratives of those experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). The work of collecting and reconstructing stories became a method for understanding how Aboriginal students create meaning from their experiences allowing “researchers to present experience holistically in all its complexity and richness” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p.2).

A narrative approach was additionally selected for its ability to further Indigenize the research process through the use of storytelling, which privileges oral traditions commonly used amongst diverse Aboriginal cultures. It has been suggested that experiences can only be described through stories, since “experience happens narratively...Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19). It is on this premise that the stories of Aboriginal students were fundamental to the research process, to both gain an understanding of the complexity of these experiences while creating a space for students to inform future directions. As Dyson and Genishi (1994) state, “[s]tories help us transform the present and shape the future for our students and ourselves so that it will be richer or better than the past” (p. 243). Stories therefore are valuable points of entry for understanding how PSE is presently experienced and how it ought to be improved in the future.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that narratives can be analyzed within a three dimensional process. The first dimension is at the level of interaction that contains the personal and social characteristics of the narrative. The second dimension, involves re-structuring narratives into a past, present, and future frameworks. The final dimension considers the situational effects of the physical place in which the narrative was constructed. This three dimensional framework assisted in recognizing the unique identities and social characteristics of each participant. Situating narratives into a past, present, future arrangement was a method for connecting narratives to Aboriginal ways of knowing that emphasizes the interconnected nature of all experiences. The final consideration was placed on the manner in which narratives were constructed within various locations of educational institution itself. The situational effects including the contextual features of physical spaces influenced how narratives were ultimately constructed.

A layered story approach was used to account for the intersectional nature in which social and material conditions were encountered throughout PSE. Although there are no concrete methods for engaging in this intersectional work, layered stories presented a holistic approach for understanding not only how conditions were experienced, but also how meaning was derived from the unique circumstances that each participant encountered. “Layered stories have the effect of showing the social construction of individual lives and perspectives, and they underscore each person’s creative, active interpretation of experience” (Anzul, Downing, & Ely, 2003, p.80). This work is both inherently ‘messy’ and interpretive, as it goes beyond analyzing what was said, to considering how it was lived, and the meanings that were drawn from those experiences. The interpretive element of the layered story component was complex and additional attention was given to body language, pauses, and what was inferred but not overtly

stated. I reminded myself when writing that, “we want to construct artful versions of experience that offer a complex sense of the lived rather than the reported” (Anzul, Downing, & Ely, 2003, p.80). Considering the multifaceted dimensions in which narratives were constructed, layered stories positioned the words, body language, pauses, and physical spaces as dynamic forces that created layers of meaning within differing contextual arrangements. Importantly, Riessman (1993) points to the contextual features and interconnectedness of stories suggesting, “individuals’ narratives are situated within particular interactions but also within social, cultural and institutional discourses, which should not be omitted in their interpretations” (Riessman as cited in Webster & Mertova, 2007, p.33). Layering student narratives thus extends analysis beyond a linear approach of understanding (i.e., past, present, future), to examining how stories are socially constructed across a variety of contextual conditions.

Reflexivity

Narrative research is foregrounded within a social constructivist paradigm that considers how we create meaning out of stories. Indeed, the narratives in this research were co-constructed between the researcher and participants in which meaning was derived from these interactions. Both the narratives and meanings drawn from these stories were collaborative endeavours, as it was acknowledged that, “all claims to knowledge, truth, objectivity or insight are founded within communities of meaning making” (Gergen, 2001, p. 2). Practicing reflexivity throughout each stage of the research process has been integral to the project. This requires considering how my social and cultural positions have informed the ways in which the research was organized and executed. Creswell (2013) discusses reflexivity as “the act of positioning oneself to highlight how the researchers’ historical and cultural experiences have informed the research process” (p.47). Thus, engaging in this research has involved a constant reflection on my personal

relationship to culture, education, and the social and material conditions that have influenced these experiences. Reflexivity required situating myself within the larger context of the study, which was accomplished by identifying myself to Elders, participants, and the community at CASS of the experiences that prompted my interest in this research topic.

The primary method for completing this reflexive work has been through the use of a research journal. The journal became a tool for reflecting on my personal experiences and how they have contributed to the construction of research questions, the selection of theoretical frameworks, methods for data analysis, and ultimately the dissemination of knowledge. This is particularly important throughout the stages of data analysis, and understanding how my experiences may influence how participant narratives are constructed and ultimately re-storied (Creswell, 2013).

Community Engagement

Positioning myself and practicing reflexivity was an important step in allowing the community to understand who I am and where I come from. This was accomplished by situating my own experiences and interest for seeking this knowledge that would foster transparency for my reasoning and motivations for this research. “They want to know what prompts our interest in the topics we investigate, to whom we are reporting, and what we personally stand to gain from our study” (Wolcott, 2010, p.36). It was on this premise that I approached Elders at CASS to share my story and interest in pursuing this topic. The project was deemed necessary by Elders who considered the research to be relevant to the needs and priorities of the Aboriginal student community. From there, a community engagement plan was created in collaboration with members of CASS to ensure that the research project identified, considered, and respected Aboriginal ways of knowing. Careful consideration was placed around the protocols for

engaging in research surrounding the experiences of Aboriginal students. It was agreed that an advisory council would provide ongoing support and guidance throughout the research process. The council consisted of three diverse community members representing diverse genders, life cycles, sexualities (two-spirit), and cultural affiliations. Members of the advisory council met periodically throughout the project to ensure that research activities were culturally appropriate, respectful of Aboriginal knowledge, and accurately represented the voices and stories of participants.

The Aboriginal student community from which I recruited is diverse, and as a result, the analysis drawn from the project is not representative of all Aboriginal experiences. Reciprocity to the community is essential, as it was initially developed to provide a space for Aboriginal voices within academic research. It is for this reason that member checking was included as an important component of the research project. This was done not only to validate the accuracy of findings, but also to mitigate the relations of power inherent in the research process. Respecting and caring for the stories of participants is an important aspect of completing research ‘in a good way.’ Member checking was essential to ensuring that participant experiences were accurately represented, but also that participants had the power to steer how their stories would be represented in the final product. I acknowledge that even the most well intentioned and crafted research projects have the capacity for exploitation. I carry this responsibility and remain committed to collaborating with community members to ensure that the knowledge produced accurately and respectfully portrays the lived experiences of participants.

Recruitment, Data Collection, and Informed Consent

Six Aboriginal students were recruited using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling involves recruiting participants who are most likely to accurately address the research question

(Blandford, Furniss, & Makri, 2016). Posters detailing the information and involvement for this research project were placed at CASS. This was additionally emailed to the Aboriginal student Listserv by administrative personnel. A copy of the poster can be found in Appendix A. Any student currently enrolled in a post-secondary program at York University that identified as Aboriginal was invited to participate in the study. Aboriginal identity was characterized as any First Nations, Inuit, and Métis (status or non-status) and self-identifying members of the community.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their involvement in the study. A copy of the informed consent was distributed to each participant outlining their rights and details of participation. A copy of the informed consent can be found in Appendix B. Both the researcher and the participant obtained a signed copy of the informed consent for their records. Each participant was provided with a tobacco offering prior to the interview process. Tobacco is traditionally offered when one asks for knowledge or seeks assistance from Elders or other members of the community (Allen, personal communication, 2016). This also became an additional method for incorporating cultural practice within the academic research process. The tobacco offering was a way to signify the collaborative nature of the project while honouring the voices behind these stories and taking responsibility for the manner in which they are cared for. “[The] practice of offering tobacco with humble thankfulness is to petition guidance from the spiritual realm to the physical realm” (Restoule and Wilson, 2010, p. 32). Additional efforts were made to ensure that participants had the opportunity to smudge prior to the interview process if requested. Smudging has many purposes, however, it is sometimes used to release negative energy and prepare for teachings and ceremonies (Allen, personal communication, 2016). This was accomplished by conducting interviews at CASS where access to materials was

readily available. In cases where interviews took place outside of this space, I personally provided materials and the opportunity to smudge at an outside location prior to the interview process if requested.

Interviews were scheduled around the availability of the participant and lasted on average between 60 to 90 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide was used, consisting of open-ended questions designed to elicit responses around students' experiences of and those leading up to post-secondary education. A copy of the interview guide can be found in Appendix C. The intention was to encourage participants to respond in ways that were reflective of their individual lived experiences. The interview guide provided a general structure for the sequence of questioning while affording the ability to further explore unique experiences. Berg (2004) suggests that semi-structured interviewing may pose questions in an altered order depending on conditions and flow of the interview. This form of interviewing was able to provide a method for obtaining genuine responses that were reflective of the multiple realities of individual participants. In other words, participants were sometimes asked to elaborate further in areas that were unexpected or that went beyond questions that were originally created for the study. This method was selected for its ability to provide flexible questioning, allowing the freedom to investigate the complexity of the experience in a way that was most meaningful for participants, as well as allowing me "to probe beyond the answers to [my] prepared standardized questions" (Berg, 2004, p. 81). Flexible, semi-structured questioning also became a method for applying a holistic form of interviewing and data collection that could examine complex experiences within an Aboriginal paradigm.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analytic memos were completed after each interview and were used for additional analysis. Corbin and Strauss (2014)

identify analytic memos as devices that can be used to organize the researchers' "internal dialogue that occurs throughout the interview process that can be of valuable assistance throughout various stages of data analysis" (p.107). Participants were invited to engage in member checking. Although all participants initially accepted the invitation, only one participant provided feedback on her narrative. It was reiterated that member checking was completely voluntary and not a stipulation of involvement. Although six participants were originally interviewed for the study, the data of one participant was ultimately lost. Efforts were made to restore data through file recovery as well as additional attempts to re-schedule a subsequent interview. Neither of which were successful, analytic notes from this interview were kept to assist throughout the analysis stages, however, only five narratives are presented in the final research paper. The sixth participant was ultimately omitted due to the lack of available data to accurately reconstruct a complete narrative.

Caring for Participants

Participant interviews at times became emotionally charged. Steps were taken to ensure that support for participant well-being was included within the design. This included providing information on counselling services, traditional healing, and emphasizing the participants' right to refuse answering questions in which they were uncomfortable. Opportunities to smudge and the right to withdraw from the study were also communicated to participants.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality for participant narratives is important, and as a result, pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity. Participants were offered the choice to select their pseudonyms, and most participants welcomed this practice and some opted to choose a traditional name. Additional consideration was placed on the inclusion of specific quotations that could result in

the participant being identified through deductive disclosure (Kaiser, 2009). Respecting the voices and experiences of participants is critical to this study. The ramifications of making participants visible were continually assessed throughout the project and the researcher remains accountable to the manner in which participant experiences are represented and how confidentiality is maintained. On-going discussion around confidentiality and anonymity was integral, and participants claimed their own power in deciding the level of detail included within the final narratives.

Ethics Approval

This research project was reviewed and approved and by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee of York University's Ethics Review board prior to the commencement of recruitment and data collection. It conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines and followed the Tri-Council policy for 'Guidelines for Research Involving Aboriginal/Indigenous Peoples,' that adhered to the general principles of community engagement outlined in Chapter 9 of the policy.

Summary

This chapter outlined how post-colonial theory informed the methodological components of this research project. This included the use of decolonizing methodologies such as 'speaking from' and the strengths perspective. A justification for narrative research highlighted how storytelling closely aligns with Aboriginal methods for knowledge production. Methods used for recruitment, data collection, and ethical community engagement were additionally discussed. Finally, measures for safeguarding confidentiality and caring for the stories and well-being of participants were explored. The following chapter is comprised of participant narratives that

reveal how Aboriginal students access and experience higher education and the social and material conditions that influenced these journeys.

Chapter 5 **Sharing Stories of Education**

Introduction

The stories communicated throughout this chapter have been organized into a past, present, future framework that was selected for its ability to provide a chronological sequence of events that will allow readers to understand how participants ultimately arrived to PSE. Organizing stories in this way also aligns with the Aboriginal paradigm that reveals how past experiences have contributed to current understandings of education and how we can utilize this knowledge to strengthen the future of Aboriginal PSE. A layered story approach was included to highlight the intersectional manner in which encounters with social and material conditions have influenced these educational journeys. Moreover, layered stories also made visible the interconnected nature of participant experiences while providing additional analysis for how participants constructed and gave meaning to their experiences of higher education.

Jane

The interview with Jane took place in the office of my supervisor. When Jane first arrived to this space she immediately noted the “fanciness of my office.” I was quick to correct her, working to position myself as simply as a student similar to herself, and that in fact I was really not “fancy” at all. We began the interview with Jane describing how she spent the bulk of her childhood growing up in the city of Toronto. After her parents divorced when she was thirteen, she moved with her mother and younger sibling to a small community in Northern Ontario. She spent all of her high school years in this community, but would later return to the city to live with her father to pursue higher education. Jane identified as both Iranian and Mi'kmaq, acknowledging that she “always knew that she was part native,” yet commented that her mother and grandmother never spoke about being Aboriginal. Further reflecting on her

childhood, Jane discussed the ‘otherness’ she associated with her Iranian background, and how she would not learn of Aboriginal culture until she arrived at PSE:

So it’s kind of been a journey for me to identify. I still sometimes I just don’t know what to say because my dad is Iranian and so when I was growing up I was already dealing with that kind of like multicultural perspective and my grandma had never talked about being Aboriginal, she still doesn’t talk about it, it’s like some kind of like some internalized racism. So it’s been like hard to even know what Nation I was...I went to see a lot of Elders and now I can say like I have Mi’kmaq ancestry, but I still feel a little weird saying I’m an Aboriginal person...but I also feel weird saying like just I’m multi-racial...it’s just odd how to identify.

Jane therefore inhabited a hybrid space, albeit one which she found it difficult to place her ‘multi-racial,’ multifaceted identities and to understand what it meant to identify in these various ways, leaving her feeling “weird” and “odd” or not knowing.

The challenge to better understand her Aboriginal identity led Jane on a journey to learn about her culture through education, one that was largely self-directed. This lone undertaking demonstrates the absence of Aboriginal knowledge and culture within Canadian mainstream structures and institutions more broadly. She spoke of how a lack of awareness or inclusion of Aboriginal histories and issues framed her early educational experiences. Thus, connecting to her Aboriginal heritage through these means would not come easily, and she would have to personally locate and seek out the guidance of Elders when she arrived at the post-secondary space. It was through these relationships that Jane was able to access culture and traditional knowledge that would positively contribute to her sense of identity as she progressed throughout her PSE.

Reflecting on Legacies

Jane’s ‘multi-racial’ identity unquestionably played a role in how she experienced education throughout her adolescence and into higher education. She began her high school

career in a remote northern community, and described the relocation from the city to a small town as a difficult transition, one which left her feeling immediately different:

It's that small town, and I was probably like the most ethnic person in my classes. In Toronto, I always lived in the same house. It was a really multicultural neighbourhood, so I think that's another thing of why it's really different. All of a sudden like you're different in a way, but it was also kind of like you're exoticized or something.

Interestingly, Jane notes how her sense of Otherness, shifted dramatically when she moved from a “multicultural neighbourhood” to a town where she was “the most ethnic.” Furthermore, this sense of difference is constructed as being ‘exoticized,’ such that not only is Jane positioned as outside of the ‘norm’ of the community, but she is also constructed as romanticized, mythical, and ‘other’ (Dion, 2009).

Jane did note a small number of Aboriginal people within the town; however, she commented that many did not overtly express their identity, and that even those she knew, “they wouldn't ya know I think they wouldn't identify.” Jane would soon encounter how the ‘othering’ of Aboriginal identity would manifest through sport, recalling how a hockey team from a neighbouring community, a squad comprised mostly of Aboriginal players, would often be at the receiving end of racist taunts. She stated that “there was a like a really racist name that [fans] would call them... they had a really racist name for that team.” Clearly, even though she was not the specific target of these racist epithets, the experience caused her pain and she is unable to even repeat the name. This serves as a reminder of how we cannot dismiss racism that occurs in sporting context as just ‘part of the game,’ a way to gain a competitive edge over an opponent, or the detrimental effect that witnessing racism can have. Indeed, Jane's initial transition from a multicultural city to the confines of a small town exposed her to varying forms of racism that positioned Aboriginal identity as ‘other’ and culturally inferior. She experienced

racism throughout high school; however, this would be just one of many challenges that she would encounter during this time.

Jane's relationship with material conditions such as SES, housing, employment, and food insecurity would add layers to the complexity of her educational experience. Housing was a condition that she often described as having an influence on her high school education. She explained how her mother worked multiple jobs to ensure adequate housing, but the stress of employment and her position as a single mother would eventually take a toll on her mother's health. Furthermore, her family's financial instability left her family vulnerable to food insecurity, and the declining health of her family meant that Jane felt unsupported throughout her high school education. She described how her mother was diagnosed with depression, and how health intersected with her families' financial security: "My mom worked at two different [jobs] and then when she got like really depressed she quit. She didn't work for like a year or something when she was depressed."

The stress of this experience eventually deteriorated the relationship between Jane and her mother, and although Jane's parents shared custody, the geographical distance and high cost of travel meant that she would spend less time her father. Her experiences with intersecting social and material conditions including employment, SES, housing, food, geographical location, and social support, would eventually have an effect on Jane's health as well:

I also went through like kind of...I won't say mental health issues because I don't identify as like that kind of thing. I don't want to label myself in that way, but I went through stuff in high school; it was definitely some substantial things. Like at one point, I was diagnosed with bi-polar and it was just like so crazy to think of now and how they over diagnose people. It's kind of you don't take like circumstantial things into consideration at all.

Jane resisted diagnosis as it failed to consider her relationships with these conditions, circumstances that would certainly have an impact on someone's capacity to excel, let alone

succeed in high school. Jane shared one particular story that highlights what it is like to live with food insecurity, as well as the impact that it can have on mental health. She described the secrecy her mother exhibited when utilizing the local Food Bank:

One Thanksgiving my mom got a turkey from the Salvation Army like ya know whatever they give at the Food Bank places...and it was such a secret like she wasn't saying where she got it from... and it was like missing a leg. I'm not going to lie it was missing a leg! But it was a Food Bank turkey. So ya I was working then because like the kind of thing when there was no food cuz no-one cared, it was a depressing time.

Although Jane seemed somewhat amused with her reflection, laughing and gesturing to the size of the one-legged turkey, she concluded the sentiment with her arms crossed and eyes down, which suggested that her experiences with food insecurity were emotionally difficult. I felt inclined to quickly interject with my own turkey tale, briefly explaining that in my family we call those 'utility turkeys,' and that although visually unpleasing, they in fact taste quite good. We laughed, but it was becoming apparent that complex living conditions influenced how Jane engaged with education. Furthermore, the story highlights how health and education are connected and how her relationship with these conditions culminated in her decision to quit school. She described it as a time when "my family like was kind of like going through degradation and it's hard when no-one really cares if you go to school anyways... then I just quit." Vulnerability across SES, housing, and food security played a significant role in Jane's health and in her decision to leave high school. Coping with the stress of these realities and feeling as though no one cared, positioned education as secondary, and not important at the time. The reality, though, is that the experiences Jane did have in high school had led up to this sense of being invisible and forgotten.

The High School Experience

The social and material conditions of Jane's life contributed to the limited value that she placed on education, thinking that "maybe it's like a waste of time in a way. Just like the busy work and like just keeping you occupied and just kind of meaningless." Only a few credits short of a high school diploma, she disliked the classroom so much that she eventually just stopped going:

I didn't even graduate high school actually. I honestly don't even know how many credits it was like so minimal, so I was trying to do online classes or whatever because I ended up just not liking high school. Right after I stopped going, that's when they got a Native studies class. I remember being like I wanted to make moccasins and that's what everyone in the class was like we get to make moccasins...but they didn't talk about Native issues at all.

Perhaps Jane's interest in school would have remained had the curriculum included subjects that were relevant to her experiences. Jane noted that the Native studies class piqued her curiosity, but was critical of how it was taught because it did not engage with matters facing Native people. The value that Jane places on critical engagement with Native issues is demonstrated in her own effort to incorporate her interest in Aboriginal issues within her education, one that went beyond making moccasins. Recalling a project that she completed on the residential school system, she said:

I did a project on residential schools...and I almost feel like that was a blood memory or something because I don't know, I had a really strong like reaction to even if I like talk about like the idea or concept of residential schools like it's just like really upsetting... like it's really a connection there somehow.

While upsetting, Jane felt a spiritual connection to this history, demonstrating the powerful effect that learning about one's history can have, particularly in the case of Jane whose family did not talk about being Aboriginal.

The connection to this history caused Jane to reflect upon how racism was embedded within the classroom culture. She noted, "there [were] many things that I think about that were

just not right that the teachers would like allow in terms of like racist kind of stuff.” She pointed to a particular discussion between a teacher and a student that revealed how notions of Western superiority were reproduced within these spaces:

A lot of little things I remember. One teacher was talking with an exchange student about how there's lots of like immigrants, and it was racist like how the approach they were talking about it from. Like people coming to the country and taking away the culture and that kind of thing. It was just like lots of little stuff like that, so that was just not my vibe.

The language of ‘taking away culture’ suggests that immigration had threatened the ‘norm.’ This sense of immigrants being a threat or that dominant culture is under siege, is racist because it constructs immigrants as ‘Other,’ as foreign, and reinforces how the ‘norm’ i.e. Western, white, patriarchal education, must be protected. Jane further described how she believed education to be a classed experience that was used to position students within binary college/university streams:

My math teacher wrote you know something like I only got a 50 something in my grade nine math class, the university one, and he wrote something advising me to switch to the college one. I remember taking that to heart because it's not just like you learn math differently or something, but you know when it's like the two streams of college and university, you know the students with the good parents and all that stability, they take the university and you want to be them. You don't want to be the ones who are smoking outside Tim Hortons you know like so you're scared to be lower or something.

Jane observes how the two different streams reinforce class differences by funneling those who already have stability (read: SES, housing and food security, and so on) into the university stream. On the other hand, those who are directed into the college stream, while still a post-secondary institution, are seen as lower and associated with images of delinquency or failure. The impact of this type of streaming is particularly clear in Jane's case. She believed that her teacher's comments insinuated that she was of ‘lower’ class, which in turn contributed to her decision to ‘settle’ for college.

I was like totally settled for like I can just go to college or my settling was still college... but like ya know just get something. I don't even know really what I thought, but it was

just that I really didn't want to try anymore I think. It was like this is your path in life now. I mean that's the kind of message he was saying.

Nevertheless, Jane's astute observation of how the two streams fundamentally are grounded in and reinforce different class positions illustrate that it was not her ability to learn, but rather, her living conditions that hindered her studies, and "the kind of message" she was hearing that contributed to her 'path in life.'

Jane believed her education reproduced notions of class difference which in turn caused her to internalize feelings of inferiority with regard to race, class, and academic performance. This was not always the case; she did not always believe that university was out of reach. She recalled the period in middle school when she believed that going to university was a real possibility:

All the way up until high school, I was kind of like a kid in my head, like I was going to go to Harvard or I'm going to go like to an Ivy league school like that kind of thing. Then I got to high school and like I didn't think there was like a point to things. Like you know you're just struggling with that kind of like meaningless like what is it? I didn't care because there were too many other things to look at that were right in front of me... like I can't really plan right now right, and you are just trying to escape in ways.

Although Jane describes her dream of going to Harvard or an Ivy league school as being a kid, there is an innocence to her time before high school where it seems she feels as though anything is possible. As she became older, Jane became more aware of how social and material conditions would create boundaries to her ability to pursue a university education, such that she no longer planned for the future, but only wished to escape her present.

Jane's circumstances seemingly improved when she moved back to the city and began living with her father. She reflected on this time as a period of 'awakening,' and explained how improvements across, housing, food, and social support contributed to her ability to pursue a higher education:

So when I moved to my Dad's he's like the opposite...but actually it's kind of nice to have that structure. So I was really motivated and resilient just coming out of everything, you just want to I guess succeed. He provided the stable base...It also it seems like a duality of this is the other side because our house up north used to always be messy too because no-one cared and I felt resentful. I can't imagine being in university and I just wouldn't be and still in that kind of environment, but it's like waking up I guess to what's kind of possible. From having the actual structure foundation that allows for those kind of opportunities and supports.

Jane's description of her change in living conditions reinforces the relationship between structure and agency. She identifies the stability, structure, and foundation that she found living in her father's home as inspiring her to be motivated and resilient. It is telling that she states that she cannot imagine being in university if she was still in an environment where she did not have this stability.

The changes in Jane's living conditions provided the structure that she needed to pursue PSE. She applied as a mature student to a college program and eventually utilized a bridging program that provided access to university. She recounted how proud and supportive her family is of her educational accomplishments, stating that "they are pretty proud, but it almost seems like it's just what people do these days, but like my grandma does tell me like she's really proud of me." Although Jane understood that PSE had become somewhat normalized in her new environment, her mother and grandmother may have perhaps understood more intimately the barriers to such privileged spaces, offering validation and cultural support that would later become prominent throughout Jane's PSE journey.

Moving Through Higher Education

Although Jane's conditions had improved, she continues to experience difficulty in funding her education, relying primarily on Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) and a few small bursaries she has received along the way. Without status, Jane is ineligible for band funding and the majority of scholarships directed toward Aboriginal PSE. The ability to fund

higher education is important because for Jane, PSE became the primary method for re-establishing her relationship to Aboriginal culture. Nevertheless, Jane described how her preconceived notions of university had differed from her classroom experiences:

I really like the Indigenous studies part. I wish that there was more, I wish that it was not just like a minor. I wish that well I guess isn't it supposed to be like Indigenous studies but then it's not?

Drawing on the varying language used to define the Indigenous studies program, Jane explained how the lack of conformity and low number of applicants influenced the program: “[it used to be called] MIST...that's the old term I believe... because they don't actually identify as just like Indigenous studies because I think they didn't have enough applicants or something.” She stressed how the program struggled with not just enrolment, but also with the fact “that there's not enough Indigenous teachers.” Jane further reflected on how this lack of representation affected her learning:

I have one [Aboriginal professor] right now, but like I'm taking Indigenous Thought and that's like a white prof. It is weird and it's more talking about the history in a way. I feel like Indigenous Thought is misleading it shouldn't be called Indigenous Thought.

Jane feels that the course title is not appropriate, not only because of its primary focus on history, but because it is being taught by a white professor.

Jane spoke of other difficulties she had encountered with culturally based courses, in that they were often misleading, not just in representation, but also in pedagogical approaches. She reflected on how storytelling was used as a learning device, but also how it became a means to which stereotypical notions of Aboriginality became reproduced within classroom spaces:

There are things that have bothered me in that class. Everyone has to do storytelling, so every class there's like two people who will do presentations and it's supposed to be like ten minutes. It goes longer usually but it's about how you relate to Indigeneity. From like the second class we had it started, and this is a year class so it's like what kind of basis do people who aren't Aboriginal have to be like talking about it? There's not a lot of Indigenous...there's only a couple Indigenous students in the class, but what a lot of the

people do with their storytelling is just go through a lens of oppression and what stereotypes they've heard and it's almost like perpetuating stereotypes. I feel like the storytelling's are pretty unregulated. I think [the professor] should be giving more direction or something because what people have done is just talk about 'oh I'm not Indigenous, but I'm whatever background,' and then just talk about their own background. Some people have gone have been like from a country that was also colonized, but I just think it's so unnecessary because it's not regulated and people just end up doing whatever, it just seems really weird.

The attempts to locate relationships to Indigeneity through storytelling were done in ways that relied on stereotypes that positioned Aboriginal peoples as problematic or broken. Perhaps what may have been lacking was a critical awareness of colonial histories, where the 'unregulation' of stories permitted negative constructions of Aboriginality to become reproduced within the classroom. Jane explained that:

A lot of people just talk, like I don't want to say it but, 'I've never seen an Aboriginal person before.' First of all, how do you know that? Like you know what are you picturing in your head? Like it's so ignorant like you saying you haven't seen, like some sort of preconceived notion of us? Should we be wearing feathers or something? Then they'll be like I heard that they commit suicide a lot or they are alcoholics and those kinds of things. So it's just like, you don't need to like do this. Every class someone has to say it, it always gets me mad because it's always from this negative view. Nobody ever talks about land or like I don't know maybe you could try and get involved in something like allies or you could speak to it from that like ya know, it's just really like lazy.

Jane associated the 'laziness' surrounding this exercise with the failure to impart a critical understanding of how power and colonialism have contributed to the marginalization of Aboriginal peoples.

As she recounted this example, the change of tone in Jane's voice implied that she was angered by the result of this exercise. Nevertheless, she remained silent through much of the presentations. Eventually she felt compelled to speak back to the 'negative lens' in which students positioned Aboriginal peoples and issues:

So at the end of it, I [said] why do you always approach it from the lens of oppression? Why does it always have to be negative? It just seemed to be redundant that all of these presentations are like this, and then I got attacked because they thought I was personally

attacking them. I was like it's not about you, it's not about your presentation, it's just that this is the theme that keeps coming up.

Jane's anger had turned to frustration as she recalled how this exercise reproduced stereotypical notions of Aboriginal identity in the classroom, and how they worked to sustain a deficit paradigm, which led to Jane remaining silent through much of these activities. To complicate matters further, when she did attempt to resist this negative lens, she became ostracized and isolated. Unable to connect to culture in the classroom in the manner that she desired, Jane shifted her attention to engage more deeply with the Centre for Aboriginal Student Services.

Finding Spaces for Culture

Jane explained how CASS provided the resources that would not only help her to connect to culture, but also assisted her in coping with the stress and isolation she experienced within the classroom:

I do really appreciate CASS and the traditional counsellors and the teachings that we get in circle. I really like appreciate the medicine room, like I'll just go and smudge and it's so nice to have that. I just did literally like two days ago, I did a project about like it's for a research paper, I did intergenerational trauma and healing for Indigenous peoples and talking about residential schools, but the thing is I really wanted to provide the other side. So I talked about the seventh generation and the seventh fire prophecy and like waking up to our traditional ways and I really identify as being part of that seventh generation and reclaiming our identity. I think there is so much power in that and revitalization, when you see this really positive stuff you're like I don't wanna always talk about the bad the tragedy. I don't wanna propagate the label of the victims, I hate that too.

Jane discussed the importance of having access to Elders and traditional medicines, while drawing on seventh fire prophecy to position herself within the period of change and enlightenment. The seventh generation is an Anishinaabe prophecy that believes the spiritual awakening among this generation will provide a path to healing that is needed for the future (Bergstrom, Cleary, & Peacock, 2003). It is from this paradigm that Jane engaged within a strengths based approach for Aboriginal culture that informed her participation at CASS. She

herself had experienced many challenges on her journey to PSE, but suggested that it is through culture and community that she has been able to overcome negative feelings toward these experiences. She insinuated that a stronger connection to culture in her earlier years might have provided her with the tools to cope with some of the challenges she encountered along the way:

Maybe when we were younger and we were having hard times if we had a community that incorporated these kinds of traditional ways, like it is communal, the culture and it does support, it's like a net. That would have been helpful ya know.

In Jane's case, accessing a community did not come too late, as she suggested that it is through culture and community that she has been able to overcome negative feelings towards her experiences in the past.

The cultural connection that Jane garnered through her engagement at CASS also contributed to healing past relationships, particularly with her mother, whom she described as having "brought me on this journey of looking towards, like integrating that Indigenous side. Not just like identification, but looking for teachings." Coming to understand and practice culture was a method through which her family was able to heal from past traumas, become stronger in identity, and understand health as balanced and interconnected. Although Jane had explained that her relationship with her mother had been tumultuous in the past, it would be her mother who would encourage her to locate traditional teachings and embody them within her daily life.

Speaking to her health, Jane described how medicine wheel teachings assisted her in managing her overall well-being:

[It's] more balanced. If you wanna apply the medicine wheel then it's like there's the physical circumstances, then things are interconnected so it's like the emotional ya know. [If I] get depressed and things and like the spiritual that's where that existentialism comes in. It's like there's no meaning not seeing yourself as part of anything, you're not seeing the higher part... then mentally and emotionally, your self-esteem could be affected.

Applying medicine wheel teachings to her everyday lived experiences became a way in which Jane has been able to preserve a higher sense of self within the institution. Jane strives to maintain balance within the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual realms as a means to manage her health and all of her relations. She acknowledged that since she has learned more about cultural teachings, she has been better able to cope with her experiences within the institution.

When asked what she believes were the most significant challenges of PSE, Jane quickly identified colonial legacies embedded in the institution, particularly the devaluing Aboriginal epistemologies:

Colonialism is still in the institution and ya know. We don't necessarily get to apply Indigenous knowledge or ways of thinking, and it is a different way of thinking. For example, I got a note from [an Elder] I was kind of like letting some assignments go, and I was kind of like having a little bit of relationship problems. I was really kind of on a wave emotionally. I was like ahhhh; I can't do anything! I mean it's not just because of the relationship, but just like a little depression or whatever, but where people would usually maybe get like a psychologist note or something for mental health, like these are the things that are seen as legitimate...Some of them don't believe anything to do with mental health either. [I had a friend] he actually had a really serious illness and the professor had assumed that it was gonna be an excuse about 'oh he was depressed' or something like that, and he was really rude to him, and he wasn't even going to talk to him. He told him after 'oh I assumed it was mental health,' and it was like why is that not legitimate? That's not incorporating the medicine wheel like aspect of it. I don't have like the kind of note they want, and then I went to [the Elder] and I got the note and I just felt like that it would be perceived as less legitimate. I think depending on the professors they could have been, but because I have like an Indigenous professor maybe that's just me assuming too, but like it was accepted.

Here, Jane was able to elucidate how mental health was positioned as an illegitimate illness, despite the fact that mental health is a growing issue for many students within PSE.

Nevertheless, even in spaces where there is arguably more awareness, it continues to be viewed as a lesser more stigmatized health concern. She draws on the relations of power in which a note from an Elder might not be accepted as 'legitimate,' and how this impeded her ability to remain

in balance. Jane's account reinforces how Western notions of health are viewed as the standard and only legitimate sources of knowledge operating within the institution, thereby positioning Aboriginal epistemologies such as medicine wheel teachings as culturally inferior, and therefore absent.

Gaining a sense of empathy was important for Jane and her ability to develop into a higher being. She reflected on how her sense of resiliency that resulted from her ability to endure tough situations: "I think the resilience that comes from when you just come up hard because you have to. There's just a wider gap you to fill to get to the same level as someone else ya know." Locating and becoming an active member at CASS was one avenue through which Jane was able to understand her past experiences as well as develop a sense of empathy toward others. She spoke of her introduction to CASS, and described how she found a community in which she felt an immediate sense of belonging:

I did a project that was about residential schools and truth and reconciliation commission. It was right before they did the [TRC] report, but I did my presentation on a residential school survivor. I was looking for a book on national crime. I had looked at it online and there was a library at CASS and thought that was really cool because I really like reading, especially like Indigenous studies. So when I came, I heard someone talking about spirit memory, and it was interesting because my mom has always talked about her inherited memories. I'm not sure about everyone, but for my mom having come to it and relate to it. I also have some things like I think with the residential school, so he was talking about it, and it just clicked. It was just that moment and I was just like really intrigued and like this is the kinds of conversations that they have in here? And I just hung out and like putting names to things that we've experienced but you don't ever hear. When my mom would talk about stuff when I was younger, I was just like you kind of just not take it seriously when I was kind of in this Western perspective. So CASS has allowed me to like be a lot more open with its teachings and stuff. It's just like really the best part about university is that it brought me to it. I mean just like coming here it has led me and allowed me to develop my journey to go farther and find out things that I would have never have, but it's just that this is the way that I'm finding out.

Jane spoke about the connection to culture and community that she accessed through PSE, in that her education allowed her to find a community in CASS. This community allowed her to open

her mind to cultural teachings. There was an excitement in her voice as she described ‘putting names to things,’ such as spirit memories, something she may have not taken seriously when she was embedded within a Western perspective. Engaging in these conversations with fellow students provided Jane the freedom to have discussions on topics that might be ‘othered’ in different spaces on campus. This opportunity was something that Jane had come to appreciate about CASS, stating that “you can engage in this kind of conversation ya its really nice.” Weekly circle was an additional activity that Jane used to connect with others. She described how “when we talk in circle like a lot of people have the same thing, I just feel inadequate because I feel like it’s hard to relate to others.” Locating a sense of belonging through the cultural practice was a way for Jane to ‘relate’ to other students and find a space for herself within the Aboriginal community on campus.

Claiming Cultural Knowledge

Jane believes that methods such as sharing circle and other traditional practices are important for improving PSE for Aboriginal students. Nevertheless, it may require a re-evaluation of who is deemed ‘qualified’ to teach such knowledge. Furthermore, Jane suggested that the dominant Western method for knowledge translation within the institution might not apply to cultural knowledge that many Aboriginal students desire. She additionally isolated the possibilities for increasing Aboriginal representation through the instruction of traditional knowledge:

If they’re going to have Indigenous base classes, I think the professors should be Indigenous and because the value should be then on the traditional knowledge, or ya know not from like a colonial standpoint. I don’t think they should have to have like necessarily a PhD or whatever, and I think they would have more ya know, like be opened up to more resources like Profs.

Here, Jane rejects the need for Western evidence of expertise (i.e., PhD). Indeed, Jane indicated that increasing the level of Aboriginal representation might be possible through establishing Elders as educators who possess the knowledge required to teach Aboriginal students about culture. She noted that this would necessitate a re-evaluation of what knowledge counts and who is considered ‘qualified’ to teach within the institution. Until that level of representation is reached, Jane encouraged future Aboriginal learners to seek out community and reclaim culture through relationships with organizations such as CASS. In her words: “Go to the Centre for Aboriginal Students and you know we are trying to reclaim those ways, and you can find people who will help you, just like minded people,” suggesting that through community organization, we can begin to reclaim culture within spaces of higher education.

Red

I began the interview with Red in the medicine room at CASS. She identified as a Métis mother of two who constructed her identity around her relationship to land and the colonial history of domination in which she positioned herself as in between:

I’m Métis, so I’m on both sides of the equation, but as far as I’m concerned I don’t agree with what my one ancestors did to my other ancestors. I still look at it just like ya know, I have to go to the side that was unjustified. I mean you can look at my skin I’m like probably more on the non-Aboriginal than I am the Aboriginal, but I look at my Aboriginal ancestors and I learned from where they came from.

Red also established her relationship to identity through coming to understand the land and physical environment from which her ancestors originated, regardless of racialized signifiers in which she believed was absent from her physical body. She arrived to university through a second career training program that was offered to her in lieu of workplace injury compensation. Red described this as being “govermentted” and was alternatively offered an opportunity to be re-trained, but “when they chose to re-train me they wanted to pick what they wanted to send me to

school for.” Thus, the opportunity to access PSE with financial support, while appealing, also limited her ability to select her course of study. Furthermore, while she nevertheless seized the opportunity, she found her experience to be heavily monitored. She stated that “I was on the Dean’s list after a year and a half, WSIB said that I wasn’t cooperating and doing what I was supposed to do, so they stopped paying me.” Red was informed that she was not performing up to program expectations. Unable to support her education without financial support, she left the institution all together.

Coming Back to Higher Education

Years later, Red returned to PSE, this time funding her education primarily through OSAP. This funding would also be jeopardized after Red found herself facing a charge of academic dishonesty, which resulted in “withholding my OSAP.” Red was thus in a precarious situation, with her primary source of income being withheld. This forced her to take a ‘deal’ where she would plead guilty in exchange for a ‘D’ in the course. With a slight raise in her voice, she described how she accepted this ‘deal’ out of desperation for the funding to support herself and her children. Even through these ordeals, Red found her own way to resist the charge of academic dishonesty:

[I wrote] I don’t agree with this, but under duress that my OSAP is being held, it is now September and I don’t have any funds, I’m accepting this since I’m passing the course with a D and I still get the credit.

The intersection between SES and PSE was explicit in Red’s ability to access university, while multiple structures of power influenced how she navigated the institution once she arrived.

Funding was paramount to her experiences, although extenuating conditions such as social support, housing, and childcare would come to influence how she engaged with education.

For example, Red described how a lack of affordable housing placed additional stress on her, particularly within the early stages of her education:

I was already on a waiting list for subsidized housing. I got a phone call and my daughter and I were like ok what the hell are we going to do? We need to get out of this place. It was probably in that last week we got this phone call they have a place available and I'm like you couldn't have come at a better time!

As Red spoke, she began displaying a sense of fear, speaking quietly as she recalled her experience of housing insecurity, before erupting into loud laughter. It was clear that it had been a very anxious time and that she felt an immense sense of relief in being able to obtain subsidized housing just before she would enter PSE.

Even with affordable housing, Red explained how financial insecurity greatly influenced both housing and childcare. She shared how "I fell behind just a year before school started in rent so I had to get my daughter babysat while I worked to pay off my rent." SES, housing, and affordable childcare were prominent features of Red's lived experiences as a student. Financial vulnerability meant that Red would seek out bursaries and scholarships as a method to help offset the cost of PSE:

Sometimes I look at outside bursaries. The last couple of years there has been outside bursaries or the last year and a half, but for the most part it's usually just in house bursaries. I've had a few I don't know exactly what this stands for but the PET bursary, which is an Aboriginal bursary.

Again, Red would laugh at the level of financial support offered to her through the institution, and although she was grateful for the support, she understood that it would not significantly assist her educational endeavours. Red pursued financial support both internally and externally from the institution, while also applying to resources directed specifically for Aboriginal students. It is clear that this is an ongoing task for Red:

I go through them all to see if I qualify because the more you qualify the more chances you have that you will get something. You are competing against everyone else, I think

there was one year when I didn't get any bursaries. [The institution] gave me like 456 dollars, it was a joke. I'm like that doesn't even pay for a class and I'm like whatever, thank-you anyways!

Funding her education was quite difficult, and although she had received some financial support, they were often not enough to offset the financial burden of higher education.

Vulnerability with regard to SES intersected with a lack of affordable housing and childcare that created challenges around her daily experiences within the institution. She described how these circumstances negatively influenced her academic performance and the subsequent improvement after establishing a connection to culture via Indigenous Studies. She stated how "I was only getting C pluses and I didn't like that. I got into Indigenous studies and was getting A's. I'm like I found my niche." Red initially located a sense of belonging in the faculty that was validated by her improved grades. Nevertheless, the experience of being in Indigenous Studies was complicated. For example, she was taught by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal professors, although like Jane, she emphasized the importance of Aboriginal faculty for instilling cultural knowledge within the classroom. She felt that "because you would think that those Indigenous professors would be closer to that culture to understand and to have that connection." Red acknowledged how relationships with culture were important for learning within the academic space, while problematizing how the institution employed non-Aboriginal faculty to teach cultural material that often made her feel uncomfortable:

Faculty that aren't really Indigenous and they don't really know. There was an anthropologist teaching Indigenous Studies, so we've had these odd professors. [One teacher] was talking about like Indian tacos...he was talking about Indians, hence someone told him we're not Indians! He goes 'I'm not allowed to call you Indian? So how can we have Indian tacos? Shouldn't we call them like First Nation tacos? Or Native tacos? or Aboriginal tacos?'

The matter of fact way that Red described this interaction revealed how students adamantly resisted this insulting term, as well as the manner that it was so thoughtlessly reproduced by a

professor occupying a position of power. By associating this name to a food further negated the history, origins, and uses of this term. This exchange reveals how language, as a form of domination reproduces a cultural hierarchy that positions Aboriginal students as inferior within the academic spaces.

Red recounted another instance when cultural appropriation manifested through an assignment that was supposed to be focused on cultural resistance:

There was this Italian guy that they used to represent a Native person. They had put his picture up for Indigenous resistance all over campus. [We] walked through and saw it all there and now we are furious because he's not even Native! An Italian guy representing Indigenous resistance?! So these are like the professors that we get if we don't get a Native Professor. It's hit and a miss.

Red additionally reflected on a conversation that highlighted how domination and notions of imperial superiority became magnified in the classroom:

I had one TA tell me that residential schools were good. Residential schools were a *good* thing because it taught Aboriginal people. I didn't stay in that class. About two weeks later I quit because I didn't like him. He told me that this land was his land because his ancestors were born here and he was born here so this was his.

For Red, these experiences highlighted the legacies of colonialism evident within the institution through the reproduction of stereotypical language, inaccurate representations of Aboriginal culture, and a lack of Aboriginal faculty. Domination over language, land, and representation highlight how legacies of colonialism continue to marginalize Aboriginal students within education.

Red progressed through the program, despite feeling unsupported by her faculty and described how multiple charges of academic dishonesty threatened her future in the academy:

Third year of Indigenous Studies was a bit of a hassle, they tried to get me kicked out. [The teacher] had advised me that I was citing all wrong, but didn't have to teach me exactly how she wanted it cited. So when I wrote my paper everything was cited, but she said it wasn't correctly cited and charged me with plagiarism. I took the plagiarism charge, although I didn't agree with it. In the Indigenous Studies field there was no

proper training on how to do citations. We didn't have no writing classes, you just kind of had to learn on your own. So going through the first three years, I was following a certain Indigenous Studies perspective.

Red explained how a Western epistemology informed the curriculum content and how following an 'Indigenous studies perspective' was dissimilar to the 'norm.' She accepted the charge of academic dishonesty, even though she did not agree with it. In her final year, her performance was again perceived with suspicion and she was charged with academic dishonesty for a second time:

I asked for a grade reappraisal, so they charged me with academic integrity again! After I had already had the paper marked! There was nothing marked from that C plus that said anything about my citations being wrong or that I'd plagiarized my paper.

Red's eyes began to fill with tears as she reflected on her experiences with accusations of plagiarism. Clearly, these charges had deeply affected her emotional well-being. I handed her a tissue as she explained how she ultimately 'won' her case by proving that she had adhered to institutional policies on academic referencing. Her experiences in dealing with multiple charges of academic dishonesty exemplify how Western concepts of knowledge dissemination are privileged within the institution, and how she was continually monitored to ensure she was performing in the 'right' way.

In such a context, 'finding her voice' was an integral way for Red to speak back to unfair treatment she had experienced throughout her education. Forming a voice became a method of resistance to the unequal relations of power that governed her experiences. This would be significant when the institution motioned to change the name of the program without the acknowledgement or inclusion of the community:

They were changing the name without advising any of the students. They went up to [the Department] and asked them what they should call us. All the students were like 'what do you mean you are changing our name?' It became a huge issue. So we got into Senate, argued the fact that they had gone to different departments to name us, then of

course the person that was changing our name was not even Indigenous herself. There is one particular professor that stood up to me in Senate [who] wasn't even Indigenous and they're teaching Indigenous Studies, and she went ahead and tried to change our name.

The lack of Aboriginal representation and the power to change the program name without consulting the community is yet another example of institutional domination. To claim a voice and resist to this process, the community organized to include students, faculty, and campus organizations; however, this still was not enough to overturn the decision and the name change proceed as originally intended:

We lost the vote and they changed our name. They assured us that they weren't going to change the program, meanwhile we went from 42 credits to 48 credits, and I'm like I thought we weren't going to change the program?

Not only was the name changed without the collaboration of the community, so too did the program requirements. The failure to include Aboriginal voices in these proceedings caused controversy and sparked animosity:

One professor came up to me and she said WHO ARE YOU? WHAT BUSINESS OF IT IS YOURS ANYWAY? It's no business of yours what we change this name to! She wasn't Indigenous, she wasn't an Indigenous studies professor and like she's here yelling at me?

The change in Red's voice insinuated that the professor was attempting to intimidate, although Red was seemingly more surprised by this encounter than scared. Nevertheless, it is Red's belief that it was her role in this resistance that caused her to be heavily surveilled throughout her time.

The culmination of the name change and the various charges of academic dishonesty led Red to believe that her voice did not count, and that she had to continually prove herself throughout the course of her studies. One could say that Red had lost that sense of belonging that she originally felt when she first arrived to the program. Red would have the last word, however, rather than grieving a loss, she chose to reject the program altogether by refusing her degree despite having all of the qualifications to graduate:

They went to give me my degree and they're like are you not graduating? And I'm like, I don't know if I want this degree, and they're like 'what do you mean you don't want this degree?' I'm like I don't know if I want it anymore...but they're like 'you're already done,' and I looked at him [and said] I'm not done! I'll letcha know when I feel like it.

Red had a slight smirk when explaining her resistance. Nevertheless, knowing that graduation is deemed as the epitome of success, this refusal was in fact serious business. Several factors contributed her decision, but it was primarily centered on her perceived inability to graduate with a certain degree of respect, and feeling as though her experiences would not allow her to graduate in a 'good way.'

I could have graduated last year with a degree, but I just didn't want the degree under the principles of it. I need to graduate with some respect, I mean from my department it wasn't there, that's one of the reasons I refused the degree. I guess graduation would be a big [success] only for the simple fact that I have some family members that didn't think that I should have gone to school in the first place. I guess the biggest success would be my graduation also due to the fact that [they] don't think that I should be graduating. Between my department and now between parking they think 'oh let's throw her into more hurdles.'

The culmination of Red's resistance and finding her voice was to reject the institutional recognition of her 'success' within PSE. While this could not have been an easy decision since it is clear that she had to overcome both family members who did not have confidence in her and institutional barriers, her refusal is a reflection of and resistance against the extent to which she was disrespected and marginalized throughout her PSE career.

Red did seek out CASS as a community that could offer her support, although this was not done immediately. In fact, she initially utilized this resource as a quiet space "to be able to do homework and it was safer to leave our stuff in the centre." Red identified CASS as a 'safe space' that would eventually provide the sense of belonging that she felt was no longer available through her faculty:

For the most part for my first few years I was quiet. This centre actually came to be pretty helpful over the years only because of the stuff I have gone through here. I've had Elders of course stand behind me saying no you were right.

In light of the extent to which she felt silenced, misrepresented, and unwanted, that she was able to feel supported via CASS and to know that there were people standing with her, were invaluable.

Red reflected on her overall experiences of education, and described it as a transition from being a quiet student who was forced to find a 'voice' to speak back to a form of education that was not aligned with her worldviews or path in life:

I got to a point where you can push me so far, and then like now I'm going this way. I got to the point where now I'm putting my foot down you know. I came to university and I was quiet and it wasn't till the fact that you pushed my buttons that now I need to say something. Even when I stood up to Senate and still was quiet in classes, it wasn't until all of the BS came through and I had to fight up in senate to be able to stay here. I've come here to learn and you try and get me kicked out because I'm not following your path? I'm not you, I'm not going to follow your path! I'm me, and I'm going to learn my direction and as far as I'm concerned, I'm going the right way.

Red appeared confident when describing how she was able to remain in the academic space in her own way, demonstrating that she had indeed developed a strong voice throughout her time in PSE. She was steadfast in her commitment to continue on her 'path' despite any of the challenges that the institution may impose.

Ayita

The interview with Ayita took place at CASS, in the office of an administrator who generously allowed me to borrow the space. I began by asking Ayita how she identified, her reaction revealing that such an imposition was much deeper than merely words on paper. Her initial response to the act of identifying was that this was indeed a "loaded" task. She nevertheless did appease the question, even after my multiple attempts to communicate that she did not have to answer anything that made her uncomfortable. Regardless of this choppy start,

Ayita did identify herself as an Algonquin doctoral student. She grew up with both parents and one sibling in numerous locations across the United States. Although she moved frequently, she spent all of her years in one high school, which she immediately noted had a lack of Aboriginal representation.

My sister and I, and one other guy were the only Indigenous students in the school. Now my graduating class was over 400 people so there were four hundred thirty something people I think was my graduating class. So ya know we are talking about a large school and we have three Indigenous students.

This absence of other Aboriginal students influenced her struggle with identity and belonging and her feelings about high school. She recalled how “I wanted to quit school all the time because like we looked Mexican, but didn’t speak Spanish, and I wasn’t from that culture so I didn’t fit in there. Then I didn’t fit in with the white kids either.” The sense of ‘otherness’ Ayita experienced throughout her high school years might have contributed to her desire to locate an Aboriginal community when she progressed to the post-secondary level:

I was just learning about my culture by that time. I always knew I was Algonquin; Dad would take us up to the reserve in the summer sometimes. So we got to visit, but didn’t have any like ya know Native friends. So by the time I got to university, I was thinking oh maybe I can find like more Native people and stuff, and there wasn’t, so I started an organization.

Like Jane who also recalled “always” knowing that she was part Native, Ayita uses similar language to depict her self-awareness and knowledge of identity. Nevertheless, the complexity of her identification is evident as she describes her connection to her culture as something that was just beginning at the time, and her sense of rootedness to the reserve is temporal, something that happened occasionally in the summer. Clearly, Ayita wished to find other Native people and perhaps even make Native friends, a desire likely related to her sense of isolation and difference during her high school years.

Wanting to find “more Native people and stuff” and finding no available campus resources, Ayita took matters into her own hands and developed her own Aboriginal student organization. She discovered that the lack of representation on her campus made developing a student organization a difficult endeavour. Ayita recalled that “[the university] is either 40 or 60 thousand people; it’s huge. I think out of all those people there were only a few that identified.” Unable to locate or organize a community of students, Ayita refocused her efforts to events such as Pow-wow as a method to re-connect to culture. As a dancer, she found Pow-wow to be a logical platform upon which she was able to establish a relationship with her Aboriginal heritage. She described her initial method for learning cultural dance as somewhat unconventional: “I didn’t know anything about Pow-wow at all. I was given a VHS that was a copy of a copy of a copy of American Indian dance theatre and that’s where I learned the dance.” Ayita taught herself, and would later explain the “overwhelming” feelings she experienced while attending her first event:

It was the first time I saw these people I wasn’t related to. I was like 19 ya know, so it was just this overwhelming kind of like ya know of all of this is supposed to be part of me, but I’m not part of this, and how do I do it?

In light of Ayita’s ongoing desire to find an Aboriginal community, it is understandable that she felt powerfully moved by the experience of locating a community in which Ayita felt reflected. Nevertheless, it is clearly a complex experience. Ayita feels a disconnect where she is “supposed to be part of” but is “not part of” culture. This is symbolic of how Aboriginal peoples have endured the physical and material loss of culture throughout a history of colonialism. The legacies of this domination are now experienced generationally, and required Ayita to become a ‘part of’ culture because she and Aboriginal cultures continue to remain on the periphery. Those with the desire to reconnect to culture and tradition must search for opportunities to do so. For

Ayita, dance and Pow-wow became a means to reclaim her identity and a space within the community, and it was through these experiences that she would learn how to blend her interest in culture with education.

Blending Culture with Education

Ayita described her transition from high school to PSE as period of increased awareness and learning of herself and culture. Ayita would eventually graduate from her undergraduate degree, and pursue a Masters where she would continue to develop her interest in blending culture with higher education. She used her experiences of Pow-wow to cultivate her sense of identity and connection to community, and in doing so, described how she was able to find the confidence she needed to pursue a PhD:

I know from being a Pow-wow dancer how Pow-wow goes in and out of ceremony and kind of like it's more than like the origins of the dance. So I think when you find what your niche is, what calls you, what you're passionate about, then it becomes easier.

Through Pow-wow, Ayita was able to identify her passion, and her calling. Indeed, she found a sense of belonging. Within the context of Ayita's sense of isolation, difference, and otherness, that she was able to successfully "find" a niche is particularly significant. It is understandable then that she would describe that things became easier, once she was able to find surer footing upon which to stand (and dance).

Ayita incorporated culture into her education as a method to connect her sense of identity and relationship to community. Still, she repeatedly stated how a lack of Aboriginal representation shaped these experiences, particularly at the graduate level. She explained how her role as a teaching assistant exposed her to the scarcity of knowledge of Aboriginal history and culture that operated within the institution. In response to this lack of Aboriginal visibility within curricula and teaching materials, Ayita described how she incorporated Aboriginal

content into tutorials. She stated that “I have made an effort to bring it in to whatever I'm teaching, so that [students] get exposure to it. If we are talking about communications and it comes up, I bring it in.” The students in Ayita's classes generally welcome this knowledge, although she remains cautious and purposeful in how she presents material. Specifically, she aims to emphasize strength so that she may situate the community as moving toward a better future:

[The students] were really surprised you know. I like to present it in that way, like I don't want them to feel sorry for us or to have that pity. So I try to make it like ya know well we're coming into greater things and you know yes we have a lot of catching up to do because all of this and that needs to be taken care of...

Thus, Ayita selectively employed a strengths based approach for discussing Aboriginal issues, while also acknowledging that challenges extending from a history of colonialism have informed differential access to basic necessities, never mind privileged spaces such as university.

It was within this strength based paradigm that Ayita positioned herself as both a teaching assistant and researcher. This approach is critical because, given the long history of colonial practices, it becomes easy to view the deficits, and more difficult to connect and reclaim culture. However, to feel part of and linked to culture is fundamental for overcoming these legacies. Certainly, a higher degree of Aboriginal representation within PSE may help alleviate these barriers, particularly because of the trend among Aboriginal students to utilize higher education as a means to connect to culture and ‘escape’ challenging social circumstances. In this regard, Ayita discussed her acceptance into a highly competitive doctoral program as one of her greatest successes:

I mean getting in of course was huge because it's like very selective, one of the top programs in Canada. I think it's like the top second or third one, the top one in Ontario. They only select eight or nine students a year and one International student, so ya know, I thought there's no way, I mean how many people are applying? Who's going to be interested in me?

That Ayita was accepted into a highly selective program is worthy of praise and celebration, and is not just a reflection of Ayita's abilities, but also perhaps indicative of the kind of potential and success that remains untapped within Aboriginal communities. Nevertheless, increasing the level of Aboriginal representation within PSE is but one facet of redressing the education gap. It is also imperative to recover, make visible, and validate Aboriginal knowledge within the institution, as a fundamental step in decolonizing higher education. In Ayita's case, re-instilling a sense of value around culture and epistemology might have worked to mitigate the sense of inferiority that influenced how she characterized her position within the institution.

Legacies of Social and Material Conditions

The challenges of accessing PSE undeniably extend from the complexity of intersecting social and material conditions that shape Aboriginal students' lives, many of which also shaped and constrained Ayita's journey through higher education. She identified her family as the primary source of social support that she needs to pursue graduate work, describing her mother as her "biggest cheerleader." Although Ayita identified social support as integral to her success and survival in PSE, she also described how financial insecurity contributed heavily to her experiences of education. She spoke of PSE as a means to exercise agency over employment and overall SES; however, even with a Master's degree in hand, Ayita struggled to find meaningful employment. In fact, employment insecurity would contribute to Ayita's decision to pursue a Doctorate degree:

The States was in a recession at the time and it was really difficult to find a job, so I waited tables for three years. I should have just gone [to a PhD] like right away, but I got to go to Australia and dance. When I came back, I ended up getting a job in Toronto and I ended up moving up here. There was no relocation [incentives] and it was kind of like you're supposed to be grateful to have a job. So it cost me a lot to move here and get established and import my car and first and last on a place. This is when the Canadian and the US dollar was about the same, so it wasn't an advantage that way.

Ayita described how she was forced to move in order to secure employment, reminiscent of the trend to relocate Aboriginal peoples and communities in the pursuit of resources that can support a better quality of life. Her experiences of relocating led to additional financial and emotional strain, given the few resources available to assist her with this transition. She would eventually settle; however, it would not be long until she experienced employment insecurity, as she “was downsized after eight months.” The loss of employment, the cost of relocation, and a lack of professional and social support networks contributed to the vulnerability she experienced:

There I was I was locked in a lease and I'd spent all of my savings. I was looking for a job and I was here and I just don't have a professional network because this was my first job. I don't have an educational network, so I was *really struggling*. So I just figured well I'll throw my hat in the ring for a doctoral program right, so that's when I started looking at who had what and chose to come here.

Financial insecurity forced Ayita to consider all available options for her future, including the possibility of pursuing a doctoral degree which she had contemplated several times before. The vulnerability of living in a new city with few social networks and material resources contributed to Ayita's decision to return to PSE.

Funding additional graduate studies would afford new challenges for Ayita. Although she sought out band assistance on several occasions, she was never able to secure any financial assistance in this way:

They used to not fund if you lived in the States, and then I don't know it was like I kept getting turned down. Then there was like no research on being in the States, they would fund you if it was available. Then they said I wasn't a priority because they give priority to undergrads or like people right out of high school.

Several factors contributed to her inability to access band funding, such as geographic location, lack of available funding, and rules around eligibility. Ayita's experience further discredits the stereotype that all Aboriginal students enjoy a free education. In reality, very few resources exist

at the community level to support higher education. Ayita's story provides insight into some of these barriers. Particularly relevant is the trend to fund students transitioning directly from high school, neglecting the tendency of Aboriginal students to return to higher education in adulthood.

Unable to access financial support through her band, Ayita described how financial insecurity became a persistent feature of her experiences throughout PSE:

I funded my Masters through being a TA and like you know not eating. I didn't know how I was going to [make ends meet]. It's way more expensive to live in Toronto and the funding package is about the same.

While Ayita notes that she did receive a funding package from her university, it was clearly not sufficient to meet the costs of living. Compounding this financial insecurity was pressure from the institution to focus on education while avoiding outside employment. She stated that "they give you money because your funding package is to be a TA and be a student right so that's supposed to magically be enough that you are concentrating on your studies." Institutional funding and the lack of power to seek employment outside of the university space contributed to the financial insecurity that Ayita encountered; however, she also explained how many students found ways to resist this control. She noted that "I know people in my cohort that aren't getting additional funding and we're not supposed to take jobs outside being a full-time student and being a TA. So they just have jobs that they don't talk about." Due to the high cost associated with PSE, she explained how many students are forced to work externally to the institution. The student "don't talk about it" because should the institution learn of this income, it may exercise power over financial resources in other ways. Ayita learned this firsthand. She recalled an occasion when she completed work throughout the summer semester, and how her earnings were deducted from her funding package:

It's really bizarre because like I did a presentation over the summer and ya know I think they paid me like 150-200 hundred dollars. It wasn't a huge amount it was only an afternoon, but that drew off my funding package so it wasn't even worth it.

Thus, income insecurity and institutional control over finances contributed to her experiences in higher education. Ayita would eventually apply for emergency funding through several third party community organizations to help offset the cost of “eating” and other basic necessities such as shelter and transportation. She described her feelings at the time: “I was really nervous, so I had applied for Dreamcatcher fund for like an emergency. They gave me support and I also applied with Indspire.” She described being “very fortunate” when she was able to secure financial assistance through these avenues, although “initially it wasn't a lot but it was still something.” Beyond the stress of relocating to a high cost city with little financial resources, Ayita described how institutional control over employment and funding have negatively influenced her graduate experiences. The vulnerable social and material conditions of Ayita's life are perhaps indicative of how colonialism continues to shape the lives and experiences of Aboriginal post-secondary students.

Education as Colonialism

Colonial legacies certainly played a role in how Ayita understood her presence within education. In her earlier experiences, she spoke of how she “hated high school” and wanted to “get it over with.” Although she attended densely populated universities, she recalled a strong sense of ‘otherness’ that stemmed from the lack of Aboriginal representation within these spaces. She spoke of representation in relation to government policies which sought to control the bodies of Aboriginal peoples:

There was a push to get people to go to the cities to find jobs and stuff so like [the city] had like ya know pockets of Indigenous populations... kind of the same thing, but like in the suburbs not very much, and there's no reservation in [the State] so there's like nothing around.

Thus, Ayita's sense of isolation in the various educational institutions she attended was, at least in part, due to policies that resulted in the migration of Aboriginal people in a way that led to only "pockets" of neighbourhoods that were Indigenous. Even beyond her schools then, Ayita likely did not have a 'place' or a community where she could feel rooted and connected. It is not surprising then that Ayita had negative feelings about school, a place where one often makes life-long friends and memories, but where her isolation and otherness was heightened.

Ayita's understanding of colonialism also informed how she engaged with her graduate work:

I didn't like anthropology or like what I know of it. Of course it's colonizing, ya know put us under a microscope and just like objectify us. Ya know pick them up and examine them, flip them over. So I didn't want to do that.

The exploitation of Aboriginal bodies through 'research' informed how Ayita engaged with graduate studies and her desire to undertake research differently. She described a passion for (her) culture that motivates her research endeavours, as well as a strong ally relationship with her supervisor who supports her academic pursuits. Nevertheless, at times Ayita did not feel entirely supported within her faculty, relating this to the hierarchy of knowledge that operates within the institution:

I really like what I'm studying. I'm very passionate about our topic, my supervisor is just the bomb she is fantastic. I have a great committee, but I haven't felt supported in some ways from my department because there's a lack of Indigenous faculty there that can support me. When I would find somebody who could do like Indigenous research methods and stuff, I would be told no, because they weren't strong enough and whatever. There was what the department wanted, so I'm writing one of my comps in Indigenous research methods and ethnography and auto-ethnography and kind of like the differences and how all that fits together. So like I'm leading that part ya know no-one is like helping me formulate the questions and stuff.

Here, Ayita identifies how the privileging of Western forms of knowledge production further subjugates her passion for Aboriginal epistemologies and research methods. The lack of

representation and general ignorance of these research paradigms resulted in Ayita feeling inadequately supported, forcing her to self-direct much of her learning in this area. Although she viewed her supervisor as an ally, Ayita explained how the ‘othering’ of Aboriginal methods influenced how she understood her work and position within the academy:

I think it’s important that they understand that doing an Indigenous framework and approach has value. That it’s thought through that it’s like ya know we’re not like let in because we’re Indigenous and just talking and making stuff up. I think that they need to understand that.

Clearly, the lack of understanding for Indigenous frameworks and approaches impacts Ayita’s interpretation of her place in the academy. It is telling that she states that “we’re not like let in because we’re Indigenous.” There is an obvious connection being made here between the lack of value place on Indigenous ways of conducting research and the lack of recognition of Indigenous students as scholars.

This binary positioning of Western and Aboriginal research methods is neither helpful to the educational experience nor conducive to the future production of knowledge. It also contributed to the ways in which Ayita internalized her sense of belonging, or lack thereof, thinking that “I didn’t think I was cut out for grad school. I didn’t think that I was this stellar scholar.” The history of cultural exclusion became evident when Ayita spoke of the challenges she has encountered with claiming a valued position in the institution. She stated that “it drives me absolutely crazy. Like my mom and like other people she’ll say it’s always to the effect that I got in because I’m Native because they gave me a chance.” She articulated how colonial legacies have reproduced an internalized sense of inferiority that has been passed on generationally, and how she has often felt out of place or on the periphery throughout her education:

But ya know they are 'giving me a chance,' I still feel like that sometimes. Then it creeps into my mind too because I’m the only Indigenous student in my cohort. I think did they

just let me in because they needed an Aboriginal number? Am I really good enough? I don't know?

Despite her heightened awareness of the impact of colonialism and feeling frustration with family members who think she was only given a chance because she is Indigenous, Ayita continues to struggle with being able to claim a space in academia and with wondering whether she is really good enough to be in the classroom, let alone academia.

Ayita did acknowledge how she was able to claim a space through using Aboriginal research methods, but explained how differential value placed on these approaches contributed to her overall academic experience:

Even though Indigenous research methods is moving beyond Indigenous Studies and anthropology, I'm introducing it and it's starting to spread but there's still a push back. The university is still very Western, white, patriarchal, so it's kind of like well you get funding and SSHERC if you give them a very cut and dry kind of like traditional, Western, whatever.

Here, Ayita identifies the impacts of relations of power that largely privileges Western forms of knowledge production, particularly with regards to funding for research. She described her frustration associated with the undervaluing of Aboriginal knowledges and the task of constantly having to “reinvent the wheel.” Ayita herself was largely unaware of Aboriginal research methods before entering into her graduate studies. In fact, it was a non-Aboriginal classmate who introduced her to existing literature on the topic. This demonstrates a growing awareness of Aboriginal knowledges within the institution, and that collaboration amongst students is occurring, regardless of how this knowledge is prioritized.

Ayita also observed the general unfamiliarity with Aboriginal histories among the undergraduate students she encountered. She described how “it always surprises me teaching that when my students have no idea about residential schools. When I would ask if anybody knows about the residential schools I've had like maybe two or three who know. They have no

idea.” Ayita attributed this lack of knowledge to a colonial education that has not only excluded Aboriginal people from opportunities for higher education, but also has contributed to the invisibility of Aboriginal history within existing curricula:

The communication books have one line in there that said the greatest loss with the residential schools was the loss of our language, and it’s like ya know yes, AND culture, *AND, AND, AND...* They just made it sound like oh well, it’s just like this one little sunshiny line. Like oh well the residential schools were great except for this, but onto the next topic!

Ayita was highly critical of how colonial histories resulted in the loss of culture and how little attention is paid to this within existing curricula, further supporting a general unawareness for how deeply Aboriginal peoples have been affected by these histories. At the same time, Ayita’s experience demonstrates the resilience of Aboriginal students to connect to these histories within institutions that largely ignores value of such knowledge.

Establishing a connection to culture did not come easily for Ayita. She explained the loneliness and isolation she has felt throughout her time in PSE. She admitted that “it gets lonely too right because you’re not talking to anybody except your students basically you spend a lot of time isolated reading, writing, analyzing.” For Ayita, the privileging of individual performance invariably creates a further disjuncture between Western and Aboriginal approaches for learning. Arguably, Aboriginal students experience additional isolation as the result of the inability to learn within a cultural paradigm that emphasizes education in relation to the collective and community. It is here that the role of campus resources must be examined to further our understanding of how cultural communities such as CASS support Aboriginal students throughout post-secondary endeavours.

Locating Community

Ayita was first introduced to CASS during a campus tour, but explained how she did not immediately engage with the space in her first year. She has become more engaged with the community more recently. She felt that “it just seems that this year there is a lot more programming. I think that’s really engaging between like all the drum making and moccasins and the naming. There's always something good going on that we need.” CASS’s emphasis on culture based programming allowed Ayita to become more involved in the community. This network offered her a more meaningful connection to culture that was not otherwise available, and she articulated the importance of Elders for providing her with guidance throughout her PSE journey:

Having CASS on campus is a tremendous help this year. In particular, with the Elders and having knowledgeable people who can support the students. I felt that they could particularly support me, their experience in having been through the process and there's a lot of in's and out's, bureaucracy, and lines to dance, and where dance around that the [Elders] have navigated. Without CASS it would have been a lot more difficult.

Ayita identifies the importance and support of Elders as role models and mentors who have ‘navigated’ the system, in facilitating her own experience. This example in particular serves as evidence that Aboriginal students require a sense of social support and community, for ‘dancing’ or ‘performing’ in ways foreign to Aboriginal worldviews.

In addition, for Ayita, CASS provided both social and material support when she found herself experiencing financial duress:

I wasn't working and I had no money, and didn't know how I was going to make it all work. I was paying to park because I didn't have enough money to buy a parking pass, I was like 80 dollars short. So instead of paying 15 dollars a day to park, and that’s going to like eat through my [money], but I can't buy a pass, so I came in here and I was just like desperate. I was just like is there any kind of like emergency fund? There was not, but they were able to help me out with a loan that I paid back right away, and I was like really good with that.

Ayita explained how CASS assisted her in connecting to culture, but was also a space where she could seek guidance and support when she was facing difficult situations. The role of CASS instilled a sense of community and belonging that Ayita could rely on when she required assistance with the everyday challenges of operating and performing in the academic space.

Moving Toward the Future

Ayita identified a lack of support, representation, and awareness for Aboriginal histories as fundamental challenges that require immediate attention for the future of Aboriginal PSE:

I think it's just been the lack of support has been the biggest challenge. Not knowing what's possible not being inspired to do more ya know. I mean you have to at least have some idea that it exists before you can aspire to ya know greater things. Like you explain it so much you just start to take it for granted ya know. Like these people that haven't been brought along to that point that understand where you are starting from. So then you have to stop and back track or you get met with a lot of resistance too, I mean there are people that still think that you get everything for free.

Although Ayita states that the lack of support is the primary challenge, her quote also highlights how she must serve as educator for those who do not understand her history. Common misconceptions of Aboriginal peoples, histories and cultures were a persistent feature of Ayita's educational experiences, to the degree in which she has felt the need to educate others on the issues that individuals and communities continue to encounter. However, this is not always easy and sometimes people may resist this understanding.

She shifted her attention to the recommendations put forth by the TRC, positioning reconciliation as needing to be interdisciplinary and of the highest importance for advancing the future of Aboriginal education:

I know that the university as a result of the TRC they are looking at more Indigenous staff and what does it mean? They're trying to wrap their head around that and that's not an easy fix ya know? Cause first they have to understand what they need, then they have to find budget and staff to do it. So ya know that's probably three years out? Three to five years out? So I know that is not going to help me, but what would be helpful if there were more people that support Indigenous research methods. You know or not having to

reinvent the wheel all the time, or people are like more aware so we didn't have to stop and explain EVERYTHING *all the time!*

Ayita observes that there are challenges in implementing the recommendations of the TRC, such as budget and timing. Regretfully, she notes that she will not likely benefit from any changes during her time as a PSE student. Thus, in the meantime, she would like to see greater support for and understanding of Indigenous research methods.

Ayita did provide advice to future Aboriginal students, in which she decidedly constructed a more optimistic picture for the future:

I really think times are changing that people are becoming more aware of the residential schools, the TRC, everything that's coming to light. The universities are responding to our needs by planning to hire more staff, and I know Winnipeg has like you can do a Masters of Indigenous Knowledges.

She highlighted the growing awareness of Aboriginal issues, and the push to respond to the needs of Aboriginal students through increasing representation and offering a larger variety of course selections. In her last parting words, Ayita expressed the duality of the Aboriginal experience, one of which is comprised of both survival and hope: "My advice would just be ya know hang in there, change is coming it's really exciting." While noting that it is hard, there certainly remains an optimism in Ayita's words for the future of Aboriginal education. To move toward reconciliation relies on the ability to hear Aboriginal voices, and the ability to work collaboratively, while instilling a degree of sovereignty for our capacity to determine the necessary changes for bettering our future.

Nikita

The interview with Nikita took place in a common area located at CASS, and although this led to some periodic interruptions, our discussion was able to maintain focus despite the few distractions. Nikita identified herself as an Aboriginal woman of mixed Mi'gmaq and Canadian

ancestry. As a result, she elucidated a hybrid space that influences how she operates and views the world: “I am Mi’gmaq and Canadian, so I walk in two different worlds as you could say. I was brought up by my mother who is Mi’gmaq and who is very traditional.” Nikita identifies closely with her Aboriginal heritage, having grown up predominantly under the care of her mother who was dedicated to teaching her about culture and tradition.

She explained how disenfranchisement contributed to the generational experiences of poverty that impacted her family, and how assimilative practices embedded within the Catholic school system informed her feelings about education. Nikita grew up embedded within her culture and positioned PSE as a means to provide a better life for herself and her children, and to exercise agency over the colonial legacies which she has encountered:

Poverty definitely had an impact on my education, my great grandmother and great grandfather were both Mi’kmaq on my mother’s side, and my great grandfather was enfranchised when he joined the military in WW1. I believe it was that loss of identity right there which has been passed on through generations through enfranchisement. Then the depression of my grandmother’s generation further marginalized my family, so they became very impoverished so I mean post-secondary education was not even an option. I am very aware of the problems that exist in the community as a result of colonialism and intergenerational trauma. However, I’m also aware of the strengths in the community and the people. I have worked a lot in both areas, and I draw upon the strength that informs my work as a student. My mother was too young going through residential schools, but she did go through the Catholic school system as a lot of Mi’gmaq children did, and it was very traumatizing for her. There was a lot of abuse that she suffered in that system, and I don’t think that she was able to support me educationally as a young child, and that formed my own ideas of education and that is not an uncommon story. That is a very common story, there is still I think 75 percent of high school children now who have one parent at least, or one grandparent that’s gone through the residential school system. The dropout rate is still three times higher than that of non-Aboriginal students, so that also reflected my attitude towards school and my inability to complete high school until I became an adult, and had to go back.

Here, Nikita explains how colonial endeavours such as disenfranchisement and government control of Aboriginal status have influenced how her family has encountered social and material conditions, and how these relationships contributed to poverty and differential access to PSE that

now spanned over generations. She also positioned colonialism as a generational experience, and how intergenerational traumas influenced her thoughts and beliefs of education. Nikita would also employ a strengths paradigm that informed her role as a student, explaining how returning to school later in life was necessary to overcome the legacies that marginalized her access. She finds strength in knowing that she is not alone, and that Nikita was able to access PSE in spite of these challenges.

Later, Nikita illustrated how colonialism continues to influence her education, specifically pointing to how State control of status has excluded her from funding that could support her education and future:

As an enfranchised and non-status Indigenous person, [funding is] just not an option unless we deal with applying for records and citizenship and all of that which is very difficult. I mean it will be something that I look into if I have the time, but it's a very difficult process. I mean just uncovering family lineage is very difficult as well. My mother has managed to piece it together but it's a matter of applying and being tenacious.

The provision of status does not automatically provide funding for PSE; however, it does provide eligibility for resources that could support higher education. Nevertheless, as Nikita describes, there are structural barriers associated with status and it is a highly politicized process requiring a certain degree of 'tenacity.' The manner in which the Canadian government retains control over Aboriginal status highlights the relations of power that allow the State to dominate the lives, bodies, and resources available to Aboriginal peoples, resources which could improve overall quality of life, including access to higher education.

Colonial legacies shaped how Nikita experienced poverty, and she reflected on her childhood as a time of 'survival' in which education was not a main priority:

I was raised by my mother who was just struggling to survive. Really at that point, until I was older she hadn't even finished her high school education. So she was getting any job that she could to raise two children on her own. So life was tough right, it was hard. So growing up, I never thought I could go to college, like it just wasn't a possibility, it

wasn't in my mind. Can't afford, can't do it, not going to work out doesn't matter ya know.

Nikita described how her families' relationship to social and material conditions contributed to her thoughts of education, and how she believed that PSE was out of reach, secondary, and not conducive to 'survival.' She recalled "moving around a lot," although, her mother would eventually access a co-operative housing program that Nikita credited to providing a degree of stability. She recalled: "I think it really helped us, I don't think we would have had the same quality of life if we hadn't been able to get into a co-op."

Access to affordable housing provided an enhanced quality of life, but she also described the complexities of living within a mixed-class neighbourhood, articulating how it offered a degree of social capital, while simultaneously reinforcing class difference. Nikita would eventually leave this home as a teenager, an action that would invariably create more challenges for her education:

Our place was just so small and crowded. I ended up leaving home when I was 16/17 years old, but I still wanted to pursue an education as much as I could. So I was I was going to school on welfare and living and sharing a house. Working to survive and going to school at the same time was really difficult.

Overcrowded living conditions contributed to her decision to leave home. Nevertheless, this did not necessarily improve her ability to effectively be a student, despite her desire to pursue education. Nikita went to three different mainstream high schools until "I finally just couldn't take it anymore" and ultimately enrolled in an alternative program that she hoped would provide greater flexibility. Her description of her time in high school illustrate how financial insecurity, employment, and housing influenced how she would engage with education at this time:

What's open to a high school student with no money? Basically crap basement apartments right. I still pursued and still tried and I went to an alternative high school, which really suited me, but by then I think I was 18 years old. My grades, I had missed so many credits it was like catching up and it just became too stressful, too stressful. I had a

job and just saying I couldn't do this anymore. I can't continue to struggle, so the money was more appealing at that point. I had to survive. I didn't have any support so ya working, working, working.

She attempted to complete her high school education while working and supporting herself, but ultimately she was unable to maintain this lifestyle:

I was on my own but I still continued to struggle to try and go to school and try to survive on my own before it became too much. I was 19 and I was like I'm getting too old for this, I can't do it, and college didn't seem like an option. It wasn't a possibility at that time.

Nikita tried to balance being financially independent while still pursuing an education but surviving became more important than education and her circumstances led her to believe that higher education was out of reach. Nikita never received her high school diploma, and would not return to PSE until she was an adult, when she was perhaps more capable of overcoming the barriers to these privileged spaces.

Coming to Education through Community

For Nikita, coming back to PSE involved accessing community resource programs that afforded opportunities for educational upgrading. From there, she entered college as a mature student, and then ultimately bridged to a university program. She reflected on her journey to university, highlighting how colonialism influenced her relationship with education, and how these legacies continue to be experienced by the Aboriginal community at large:

I think that when I first got into it, it was because of my own struggles that I faced in the community. My own struggles as an Aboriginal woman and all the struggles I see people going through. I kinda went in wanting to save the day and save the people and I quickly realized that that is not possible and it's not empowering.

Nikita pointed to how colonialism has constructed barriers around PSE for Aboriginal peoples. Interestingly, she at first wanted to 'save' people in her community and then realized that this was not empowering. Rather, because the barriers are systemic, she felt that solutions must be

formulated across conditions both for and by the community. In fact, it was a community organization that placed Nikita on the path to higher education, and it was through the community that she was able to locate academic upgrading and some financial support throughout the early stages of her journey:

It was a paid training program which thank goodness ya know. It was eleven dollars an hour and I paid my babysitter ten of that, but I still got it, and that is what has enabled me to get into college and onto university. I could have never gone without some serious upgrading.

Thus, community programs offered a level of financial and social support that facilitated her early transition to PSE, but Nikita found returning to education as an adult to be quite difficult. As a single mother living in a high cost city, the support that she received through community organizations was paramount to her ability to return to education in large part because the funds paid for childcare.

Nikita believed that PSE could provide a better life for her family, while also placing her in a more advantageous position to reciprocate the support that she had received from the community:

So that was my beginning and there I realized that this was what I wanted to do. As long as I'm doing community work, that's where my passion is going to lie. It lies within becoming that support in the community, just as I was supported in getting to education. Or else I would have never been able to go back to school and college unless I had that beginning training.

From the outset, Nikita felt connected to community, both in terms of being the recipient of support for her PSE, but also in her desire to give back and help others. It is clear from her words that “community work” or said another way, working with and for her community is what gives her strength and motivation.

Although Nikita, now four years into her PSE, spoke confidently about having found her passion, her initial impressions of PSE were not positive. She recalled “not having anyone else

with me, not having anybody was really alienating.” Nikita even contemplated dropping-out on several occasions: “It was really difficult I wanted to leave. It was a very different experience coming to university. There was a lot of students right out of high school and I was like I can’t do this; I can’t do this.” The inability to relate to other students contributed to a sense of isolation that she encountered early in her university experience. Indeed, Nikita described PSE as “exhaustingly hard work.” Within such a context, her relationship with community and culture provided invaluable assistance. She became actively involved in the Aboriginal community on campus and spoke passionately about the opportunity to work in an ‘Indigenous’ way during her involvement in organizing Pow-wow:

Being able to work in a really respectful Indigenous way of working in a circle, I can’t explain it. I have been on a lot of boards and stuff but working with all the students and the volunteers and executive to plan this enormous incredibly crazy three-day event here it’s so inspiring. It’s so amazing to work where you are respected and valued and it takes a long time. There were obstacles and bureaucracy that had to be negotiated along the way but it was worth it.

Maintaining an aura of tranquillity, Nikita spoke of how community mobilization provided her with the opportunity to connect to culture through her education in a manner that she respected and valued.

Despite this positive recollection, Nikita’s experience also suggests that Aboriginal culture continues to be met with resistance. Specifically, she provided further evidence as to how institutional dominance reproduces Western notions of superiority through higher education:

This was our 14th annual Pow-wow...and I was determined this year like we were going to have a sacred fire. Sacred fires have always been a part of Pow-wow, it’s a place for people to pray, they can say their prayers for loved one’s or for anyone that has passed on. Jingle dancers they will bring prayers for people to the sacred fire after they have danced for them. It’s a very part of our culture, but we’ve never had a sacred fire. So in order to have one this year, I had to apply [for a] temporary use of space that approves all uses of space to get a fire pit, which is one of the one’s you use in your back yard. We had to get approval to be set-up outside beside the fountain ya know surrounded by concrete. It took about 30 emails and nobody wanted to approve it because it hadn’t been

done before, and it was forwarded to many different departments and so it took about a month to get the BBQ pit. I really had to be explicit in the emails and explain all the history of our cultures and traditions and how it was important. It finally was approved in the eleventh hour like the day before the Pow-wow. We needed a fire permit as well, so we needed approval from the fire department and we had to send pictures of the BBQ pit and the space to make sure it wasn't touching anything, and so that's just one example of bureaucracy.

Drawing on her example of obtaining approval for sacred fire as part of the Pow-wow, Nikita demonstrates how institutional policies construct boundaries around how Aboriginal people are permitted to practice culture. This matter extends more deeply to the power to control land, and the imperial domination that continues to dictate what activities are deemed 'appropriate.'

Nikita explained how her journey and desire to extend her education to the graduate level is a pragmatic way to exercise agency, one that she understands is not afforded equitably to all members of the community. A graduate degree would give her the opportunity to be considered for her dream job, while also allowing her the chance to create systemic change that is needed for the future. However, there are barriers to this level of education, in the form of added layers of institutionalization, that prevent Aboriginal people from holding positions that might better their futures:

It comes down to that piece of paper. [My dream job] only takes Masters students, but that line is already there. That barrier is already there, which is problematic because many Aboriginal students cannot get to a Masters. They can't, they can't afford it, so that's the barriers. I couldn't work in the Aboriginal program; they wouldn't even look at my application because I'm not a Masters, so that's why I want to do it.

Nikita points out that the restriction of only accepting Master's students, creates an additional barrier for Aboriginal people who cannot afford to pursue graduate work. Yet, it was these complexities that added to her desire to improve the system for the future generations:

I do want to end where I began, which is in the Aboriginal community. I started off 15 years ago because there was a need to get First Nations people, Aboriginal people into post-secondary education because there was a large gap.

Fifteen years later, it is clear that Nikita remains steadfast in her desire to give back to her community.

Nikita spoke of her personal experiences of the 'catch-22' and how barriers to PSE only become increasingly magnified as one continues beyond the undergraduate level. Her interest on the topic extends from the lack of Aboriginal representation within the student body that have informed her own experiences, as well as her desire to become part of the solution to minimize the gap in Aboriginal PSE:

My interest in Aboriginal education stems from the fact that at this point being here, there are very few Aboriginal students. There are very few students from the community that are able to continue their educational journey, it's difficult because they face so many barriers and that's very concerning to me. So if I can become part of the process to facilitate getting into post-secondary school and closing that gap, I would love to be part of it.

Nikita's desire to deconstruct such barriers is evidence of the dedication of community members to organize and strengthen our futures. This commitment is critical, in light of the numerous barriers that Aboriginal students may face. For example, Nikita explained how she encountered racism and cultural insensitivity throughout her classroom experiences:

This actually goes back to when I wanted to leave, there was a teacher who created a very unsafe environment for students. She had included a teaching into her readings and it wasn't just a reading an Indigenous author had written; it was a teaching a traditional teaching. I was reading it, [and] I was getting more and more uncomfortable, like why was this being incorporated into the curriculum? And why this teacher felt it was appropriate to include? From what I've been taught, you receive teachings from Elders when you're ready, and when that Elder decides it's time to pass on that knowledge. Ironically, this is what the reading was about was receiving teachings from Elders. I felt it really disrespected the whole idea of Indigenous knowledge. I got very upset and talked to a few people in the community and decided to approach this teacher, which was quite difficult for me. So this is a barrier, this is a struggle that I've come across over and over again. When teachings are appropriated by non-Indigenous teachers and presented in the wrong way.

Nikita discussed how the appropriation of Aboriginal knowledges was disrespectful and not in keeping with Aboriginal ways of passing on knowledge as she understood them. She went as far

to seek the guidance of people in the community because she felt unsafe, very uncomfortable and troubled by the practices of the teacher.

Perhaps most problematic in this encounter was the way Nikita was treated upon expressing her discomfort. She described that “I did confront her and she said ‘oh sorry sorry you don’t have to be the token Indian now that you have told me that you are Native, you don’t have to be the token Indian in the room.” In that moment, it appeared that Nikita was ostracized, alone, and reduced to a derogatory stereotype. What could have been an opportunity for Nikita to exercise ownership over her education through connecting classroom material to community and culture, was further negated by relations of power that reinforce a top-down approach to learning normalized within higher education. These were not isolated events and Nikita explained how there have been several instances when she has encountered institutional domination. Again, the community organized, and Nikita described how the formation of an advisory committee sought to claim a space for culture in education:

It’s happened a few times where these kinds of things keep happening, and that’s part of the reason why with the AAC, the Aboriginal Advisory Council [was created] to ensure that there is competency training for faculty around these areas. There are only so many things you can do, getting that validation and getting that from community is the way to get through these struggles.

Thus, community organization became a method for coping with the struggles that Aboriginal students encounter within classroom settings. The community provided Nikita with the support she needed to continue on with her PSE. In light of all of these challenges, it comes with no surprise that Nikita positions her greatest success in PSE as simply remaining in the space:

I don’t know it’s kind of strange. I mean just being here is a success right. Being able to ya know all these courses and getting to the end of my bachelors that is a success. Going on to the Masters and getting into the Master’s program that is a success. Doing well and being acknowledged for that success as well sticking it out, ya know that is the success, that’s it.

That Nikita describes her time as “sticking it out” is telling. It does not suggest a pleasant experience but one that she has had to endure, so much so that simply getting to the end or even just being there is a success in its own right.

Community Health

The ability to progress throughout PSE and extend her journey to the graduate level would be more challenging without the support of the community. She spoke of the social support she has received from Elders, access to traditional medicines, as well as the connection to culture that CASS provides to cope with the challenges of operating within a colonial institution. This was of particular importance throughout her initial transitional phase. In recalling the time, she stated that “connecting with CASS and again relying on this safe space here where there is Indigenous support really made the difference.” Nikita recalled that “I quickly made friends and settled in and got to know people here. I got the much needed support from CASS and became more involved and more focused and was able to get through that first year.”

Significantly, Nikita specifically referenced health and having the support of a healer who encouraged her to continue with her studies:

Having a healer and having access to a healer that told me you can't quit, you cannot quit, you have to go on because there have been too many people that have quit because of the way that you are feeling. Too many Aboriginal students that have walked away because they can't handle it.

Beyond these encouraging words, having a sense of community as well as access to traditional resources assisted Nikita's ability to be balanced that would mitigate the feelings of isolation and allow her to maintain her overall health, defined broadly. She described CASS as ensuring a “safe space that support ya know spiritually, mentally, emotionally all those areas. It validates who I am, and allows me to connect to people and events and allows me to stay close to the

community.” Social support was indeed important for how Nikita is able to ‘perform’ within higher education. She also explained how culture assisted her in managing her well-being, and how medicine wheel teachings inform her experiences as a student:

When we are students we sit in one quadrant, we sit in the mental, and we’re stuck here and what happens is that we’re not balanced anymore. We’re not living our circle right. We’re not creating that circle of care around ourselves, and we have to think of it that way. We have to ensure that we are living here, here, and here [gesturing to directions in the medicine wheel] or else we become imbalanced and we become sick. I have learned a lot on how to manage stress and balance that time and how to take time to schedule leisure. I have learned that being so busy ironically is to just stop and take that time and I use a planner... it’s just a planner and I make sure to balance the mental, physical, spiritual and emotional parts of myself through activities, I make sure of that.

Nikita clearly values maintaining a balanced life and nurturing her mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional needs. CASS helped to facilitate this approach to health by providing a space and through facilitating a connection to culture, such that Nikita could ‘live her circle’ and manage her time and health in accordance with medicine wheel teachings. The community also was a place to seek validation, acknowledgement, and security when she encountered difficult experiences.

Nikita further described how her relationship with Elders has contributed to her ability to include culture within the classroom:

I’ve also been able to bring in Elders from the community that I know to do teachings, because I think that is a very very important part of learning. If we are going to be learning about Indigenous worldviews, then we need to have Indigenous people teaching those worldviews because too many times these teachings are just appropriated through academic writing from not Indigenous writers. [Culture] impacts everything I do, it’s who I am, and what I bring with me. I did a presentation around missing and murdered Indigenous women and I was really lucky and amazed to teach and do the strong women’s song. I was supported by so many women who came in and we just broke down the doors of that room and scared the hell out of the teacher (laughing). She wasn’t expecting that, my group wanted to do something out of the box, so we did this presentation and ended it with this song the room was stunned.

Incorporating Elders and increasing the level of representation of Aboriginal knowledge was important for providing a voice that has yet to be validated within classrooms. The idea that Nikita's presentation was 'out of the box' is indicative of how Aboriginal knowledge continues to be 'othered' and absent. Until value can be attached to Aboriginal paradigms by the institution, the community will continue to support, create, and claim opportunities for culture within education. It was on this premise that Nikita encouraged future Aboriginal students to seek out community as a way to gain support throughout PSE. She advised students to "get involved with Aboriginal student groups and services as a way of getting that extra little bit of support because it's a tough time. It's a difficult time to be a student, it can be very overwhelming." Nikita situated community as integral for supporting the success and well-being of future Aboriginal students.

Nbi-Kwe

The interview with Nbi-Kwe was perhaps the most challenging. Due to the lack of available space, I was forced to interview her in a campus coffee shop. She began by identifying herself as a Chippewa woman, who divided her time growing up both on the reserve with her father, and off with her mother and younger sibling. She described her family structure as "complicated," and although she spoke fondly of her time on the reserve, she described periods when life on the reserve would be challenging. Much of this was attributed to identity, and Nbi-Kwe explained how Bill C-31 influenced her status and position within the community:

Despite having connections to all the people, I wasn't status, so I experienced a lot of the like lateral violence. Even though I wasn't there the whole time...just the way that people are treated differently because of status. It's like having lived next door to all of these kids your whole life like being immersed in culture and everything with them, right alongside them, and being treated as second class because of status.

Bill C-31 was a government policy that relinquished status for children of inter-racial marriage, which had tangible effects for how Nbi-Kwe's would construct her sense of identity and belonging. Namely, status contributed to how she was perceived as an 'outsider' within her reserve community.

Despite the challenges of living as what she described as "second class citizens," Nbi-Kwe was quite fond of life on the reserve, and enjoyed living within close proximity to family. She understood how colonialism had impacted her community, not just with regard to identity, but also in the relationship to culture:

Everybody on the res on our res anyways everybody is so disconnected from culture. My dad has only in the last I would say ten years started learning anything culturally. He never learned anything his whole entire life, so if you look at it in that way outside of the colonial mindset.

The disassociation with culture had interestingly occurred on the reserve, in a space where the government had allocated and 'permitted' the practice of culture. This demonstrated how colonialism has a history of controlling bodies and how processes of assimilation have become entrenched and internalized over several generations.

A disconnection with culture also proved to have social and material effects, as Nbi-Kwe described the struggle with identity and its related effects on health:

I can remember a lot of parties...a lot of parties. I mean my grandma was struggling with alcoholism so there were issues there, when she came out of that the world brightened and things changed. There's also the health factors like dealing with that, I mean she had a really hard time with her Indigeneity because of the way that she had been taught. The general issues there, but she also lost like all of her siblings she's one of seven, and she and her younger brother were the only ones left. All five of her older siblings died from cancer, every single one of them.

Colonialism undeniably played a role in her family and community that proved to have serious social and material effects particularly for identity and health. Nbi-Kwe noted how education, as a colonial endeavour, influenced her grandmother's sense of identity, and how substance abuse

became a means to cope. Nevertheless, Nbi-Kwe described a strength and resilience in re-establishing a relationship with culture, which she believed assisted her grandmother in overcoming alcoholism to enjoy a much better overall quality of life.

The social and material conditions of Nbe-Kwe's life influenced how she engaged with education. She spent most of her high school years living with her mother, and described how unconventional living arrangements contributed to her experiences. Although she always performed well academically, the uncertainty of housing often left Nbi-Kwe feeling tired and stressed. It was only when she reflected upon this time did she realize how it might have affected her. She stated: "I just learned to adapt. I can't think of the instances when it was a big issue, but I feel like it probably did, and I just didn't even know it because it was too insane to notice."

When asked what made this period 'insane,' she explained the sense of responsibility she felt for her younger sibling and the challenges of coping with substance abuse that affected her family:

Well ya know the I was the primary caregiver to somebody that was three years younger than me. I was ya know the responsible one, I mean add alcoholism to the mix and ya know... and things got worse through high school and it's just like having to go back and forth it was a matter of a lot of things [tearing up] yeah so... I mean violence, different men in your life... and it's all of those things together as kind of like I dunno I guess it sounds awful and I love my mom, but I think I thought that if...if she had gone to school like my dad...that her life and our lives would be different.

My probing into these conditions caused Nbi-Kwe to become emotional, and I immediately felt a sense of guilt and awareness of how discussing these histories in a public space had placed her in a vulnerable position. At this point, caring for her well-being was of greater importance than 'collecting data.' I reinforced that she did not have to answer questions in which she was uncomfortable, and we could stop the interview at any time. Regardless of these contextual features, Nbi-Kwe continued describing her role as the 'responsible' caregiver as well as

instability of housing and related effects of substance abuse influenced her relationship with education.

She believed that PSE could provide a better quality of life which could have lasting benefits for future generations. She spoke affectionately of her father whom she viewed as a role model for returning to PSE, and described how she utilized education as a means to “escape,” while also attempting to gain a sense of ‘normalcy’ along the way:

I guess when my dad went to college when I was younger, I thought he was a super hero. I actually looked at him like a super hero and he's going to school! My mom didn't graduate from high school and there was a time when I was younger that she tried to go back, but academics were never her thing and she just wasn't able to do it. So I guess I looked at it like it should be something to aspire to that was always the goal. I also wanted to be able to go to university, and I guess I also saw it as a way out. So a way out for sure. I think that was probably the priority, I was like ok if you can do this then you can get away from all the crap that I'm dealing with ya know. This crazy lifestyle and whatever and instead I can go and be normal.

Nbi-Kwe viewed education as a means to exercise agency over the conditions she experienced in her youth. The vulnerability surrounding her identity and the social and material conditions contributed to her sense of ‘otherness,’ and how her lived experiences were somehow outside of the ‘norm.’

Nbi-Kwe had reached adulthood when the reversal of Bill C-31 had come to fruition, contributing to her ability to gain status that would later assist her in accessing PSE. Status provided Nbi-Kwe with material resources that would help her offset the financial burden of higher education, but the acquisition of status also had social effects. She problematized how government control has contributed to many Aboriginal people rejecting status, yet for Nbi-Kwe, status became a validation of her identity:

Honestly, I wouldn't have been able to come back to school the way I have without the support that I was able to get through the band. It shouldn't affect you in that way, but it really gave me a sense of belonging. I'm aware that you know there are a lot of people resistant to the status cards and ya know there are full blood Anishnaabe and

Haudenosaunee people who reject it because they don't want to be identified in that way, but I guess my experiences, growing and being treated to a lesser extent, it was almost an acknowledgement of who I was.

Status not only provided a sense of validation of her identity, but also contributed to her ability to find a voice and sense of belonging within the community. In that voice, Nbi-Kwe reflected on how she was able to form a stronger resistance to the misconceptions she has encountered surrounding her identity:

I felt like having that little piece of plastic meant that I could stand up and have that voice that I was afraid to express before. Because that piece of plastic that status that when people go 'oh you don't look native, like you know why don't you have dark hair? Or what are you talking about like is your great great great grandma some sort of Indian princess or something?' Like I could get out that piece of plastic and be like no, and I mean now that I've had a chance to come to terms with that, and learn more about it, and just like have an idea that's different, but at the time it was the validation that I personally needed in order to I guess step into my role as an Anishinabek person. There's no way I'm not going to ever like stop having resistance, but I know that at the time it changed me.

Status provided Nbi-Kwe with a sense of validation to assume her identity within the community. She explained how her identity had been constructed around racialized signifiers, such as "dark hair," or the mythical construction of the "princess," that she was perennially forced to resist and demystify. Nbi-Kwe was aware that identity is more than just status or a "piece of plastic." It is also culture, community, a history and a future, and coming to understand these relationships would be integral to how she would engage with higher education.

Resiliency in Higher Education

Nbi-Kwe completed high school and was encouraged by her school's guidance counsellor to pursue a university degree. At the time, she was more concerned with 'escaping' her realities than selecting a program of study that would prepare her for her future. She recalled thinking, "I was like ok well I'm kind of good at it so sure yeah that's what I could do. It was prestigious and it was far away." The transition was difficult, and she described this as an

acrimonious time in which she was just coming to understand who she was in her identity. This uncertainty contributed to the value she placed on higher education as well as how she believed she could assume her identity within the space. Nbi-Kwe began to question herself, and the financial strain of PSE created stressful conditions in which she felt that she could no longer manage:

I just kind of got to a point where the financial burdens were getting to be too much and I was getting nowhere. Then other factors ya know figuring out who I was as a person, and all of these things like weighed down, and I'm like I need to step back. This is not the time or the place for me.

The weight of financial burdens, and her personal journey of learning who she was, made Nbi-Kwe think that she need to “step back” from PSE. She ultimately left the institution.

It would be years before she would revisit the idea of higher education, characterizing the “resurgence of cultural identity,” as a key moment that placed her back on this path. Nbi-Kwe referenced social movements such as Idle No More (INM) as key a feature for coming to understand who she was and her place within the community. She spoke of INM as a movement that encouraged her to reconsider PSE, and inspired her to contemplate how she might become part of the change for the future. It was at this time that that she enrolled a college program that would allow her to “dip her toe in” without having to decide her future entirely. Although she had previously been enrolled in a university program, Nbi-Kwe found that college offered her exposure to higher education without immediately having to select a specialization, thereby allowing her to locate her passion and path:

The resurgence of the Indigenous identity movement was really starting to come along. I was finding out who I was and seeing other people pushing for cultural identity. Seeing that things were happening and things that need to happen within not only political stuff but legal structures in Canada that could make a difference. I was like yep that's where I feel my place is to make a difference for my community other communities like the Indigenous people of Canada. That was my first year of college and that was when I was just getting started. It was a gateway really that's what it came down to. I took that

program loved it, and decided that ya know being in law was something that I wanted to pursue, so I needed the undergrad to do that and the articulation agreement meant that I could do it in half the time. That's what it started as, and now it's a matter of understanding our society in how we as Indigenous people interact with Canadian structures has really focused my studies to try and make it about like I can use it in a useful way. It's partially the community, my own community, and Indigenous communities at large.

Social movements such as INM inspired Nbi-Kwe to claim her identity and position within a larger community. Seeing herself represented within the larger political movements afforded her the opportunity to reflect on how a higher education might be useful for the future.

Although INM inspired Nbi-Kwe to continue forming her identity, she described how a sense of 'otherness' influenced her self-confidence particularly within the early stages of PSE:

I tried to get involved with different people at the organization a little but I was still not quite there in terms of my resolve. I guess I felt like I didn't really, I still didn't feel like you really belong there. Then as I was like nearing the end of my time, I really started to like have some faith in that. I guess it was faith in myself of seeing that I was capable of being back in the academic setting.

Identity played a role in the manner that Nbi-Kwe imagined her position within the institution.

Feeling a strong sense of identity contributed to her growing confidence and sense of belonging, as she transitioned from a college to university.

Extending her PSE to university would pose additional financial burdens, although Nbi-Kwe's newly acquired status would mean that she would be eligible for band funding that would assist in off-setting some of the costs:

I had funding in college because it was the first program, I wasn't funded at university the first time around because I didn't get my status until later. In college, I didn't have to work during the school year because I had those rights to get living allowance. Even though I had funding in college, I had to work in the summer without a doubt. [The] funding was only while you were in school, and even so it's just enough to get by on. I had to work [in university] because it's considered a second program and [it] has different funding, so it just works differently. Now that I'm here at university, it's been a matter of like I have to have something in order to survive. They do it a little bit differently as a graduation bonus but you have to figure everything out along the way, so you can qualify for different things, but then you get a bursary or whatever when you

graduate to help you pay things off. I still have to live with loans and it's the typical student life even though I know that I will have some help in paying that off when I'm done but not all of it by any means.

Status did contribute to Nbi-Kwe's ability to access financial resources; however, funding structures with varying levels of priority meant that college would be the first time that she would receive financial support. When Nbi-Kwe bridged from college to university, she no longer qualified and therefore relied on employment to supplement the cost of her education. She described how she continued to live with loans and the 'typical' student life, and how financial constraints meant that she would work as much as possible to help alleviate the costs of PSE.

Balancing multiple jobs alongside education would have an impact on her health. She described the stress and fatigue associated with this lifestyle: "There's really no break right like going from full time crazy school to full-time work putting in as many hours as you can." In light of this stressful life, she acknowledged the importance of her personal and social support network, in particular her husband, who provides both emotional and financial support:

I'm lucky enough to have my husband, if I didn't have my husband, if I didn't have him it would be very different. So I know that the dynamic is changing things a little bit for me because I've always had not only the personal support but he's also there because he works full-time. I do have financial support from him to an extent. Funding from the bank was helpful in for my first year back, but I mean I'm still paying off debts from university when I went and wasn't funded, and the way that our funding works, I haven't been funded while I'm here.

Nbi-Kwe positioned her social support network as important to her financial and emotional experiences of higher education. Having a stronger sense of identity and having provisional access to bank funding contributed to how she was able to access and perform within the university space.

Gathering Culture Through Education

Nbi-Kwe dedicated a significant portion of her time in PSE to re-establishing a relationship with culture and continuing with identity work that informed how she engaged with the academic space:

Since being here the cultural aspect of it has been one of the things that I've really been focusing on because I really didn't do that. I really didn't have the opportunity to do that outside of the educational space, which I think is a big problem. Since I've been here the culture and identity aspect of it has been a huge part of how I go about my daily life. Just trying to make sure you keep a hold on to those values and those teachings and understandings of the world and keep your world view true while trying to still like answer the questions the way they want answered right. So I think it's a balancing, I don't even know if it's a balancing act, like you want that grounding inside but still being able to put on the face that you need to put on.

Although she utilized the institution as a method for reconnecting to community and culture, she also noted the problematic nature of completing this work within a colonial space, and how Aboriginal culture is not fully acknowledged or valued within the institution. Culture had come to inform how Nbi-Kwe goes about her daily life, yet 'living her circle' had limits within the post-secondary space. Similar to Ayita, she further described how relations of power created an environment in which she has had to 'perform' and make decisions on how and when she can incorporate Aboriginal knowledge into her education:

It's a performance that's what it is. Can you perform in the way that you want to? You gotta work like really really hard every time I have some leeway on an assignment it's like I'm gonna put the things that I want to research and the things that I want to talk about into it as best I can. I [have been] instructed that I do too much social commentary, so instead of changing everything that I was doing, I just put a statement in there that as an Anishnaabe person, I have to look at the world from my worldview which is a different understanding of the world that encompasses social, political, economical, environmental, everything so in order to address the issue, I have to address these things along with it, and that's just how it is.

Nbi-Kwe demonstrates the hard work that performing within the PSE institution entails. She uses words like 'balancing act,' 'performing' and 'leeway' to illustrate the ways in which she manages to remain true to her values and identities, sometimes putting on the "face" of

performance, and at other times, she inserts her worldview when there is flexibility in assignments. She also gives an example where she is more explicit of her identity and her epistemology, stating boldly that as an Anishnaabe person, she understands the world in a particular way. Nbi-Kwe's experiences and approach to education from a holistic paradigm expose the differences in epistemologies and how the institution reproduces Western forms of knowledge translation that often fails to recognize how knowledge and experiences are fundamentally interconnected. Yet, the ways in which Nbi-Kwe has included her interests and culture are evidence of her resistance and resiliency as an Aboriginal student working to re-claim a space within the institution.

Healing Through Community

Nbi-Kwe spoke of the significance of culture and community and how CASS assisted in connecting her to resources that would support her educational experiences. It was through her involvement in CASS that she became more engaged with activism and developing a space for cultural programming on campus. She discussed the importance of Elders in contributing positively to the institutional environment and how these relationships have contributed to her overall sense of well-being:

I go to CASS to cry all the time. You can't talk to [the Elder] without her making you cry, and that's what I say to people like this is [the Elder] and she'll make you cry because she just tells you that you are wonderful and you can't help yourself. We're not used to that gratification and we're not used to being told that. Especially your first time, you always cry, *ALWAYS*. Just the feeling that you get in that room with the group of people that come to circles it's just there's nothing like it, nothing.

Relationships with Elders provided Nbi-Kwe a sense of validation that she had not received in other facets of her education. Sharing circles provided her the opportunity to connect with other students and to heal through common experiences that had informed education. More broadly, it is clear that the Elder and perhaps even CASS in general, provides a safe space where she is able

to be vulnerable and feels accepted, no longer needing to perform and negotiate her identity.

Furthermore, through CASS, Nbi-Kwe described a deeper connection to culture that contributed to her sense of belonging not recognized in other spaces within the university:

The community and the whole space is literally a home away from home you know. You need to get stuff done you don't go to sit in the library in those uncomfortable chairs, you go to CASS and there's like two people there and you get down to work right. You need somewhere to go on a break you go to CASS, you need support or you need guidance you go to CASS. It's the ideal home that you never had away from home.

Thus, Nbi-Kwe identified CASS as a space that provides students with the opportunity to connect to culture, as well as a safe space to practice that culture that might not be accepted elsewhere. It is home.

Considering the Future Through Current Success

Nbi-Kwe centered the successes of her PSE around her ability to integrate culture and community. She felt this was fundamental to her education:

Coming back to university and publishing and it being about my own community, I think that was one of the biggest [successes]. Also Pow-wow, the turnout and the way that we came together like the way that the meetings went, and the way that we were all able to work together. I've never been involved with such a big event in such a huge capacity. I've also never felt like the gratification that I felt when it was starting like never in my life have I ever been involved in something that is so big, I'm like oh my god like we did this. There are like 1000 people here to experience this and to see our culture and to share and celebrate and we did this together it was amazing what happened, it was incredible.

Giving back and working cohesively as a community to share culture in a meaningful way was central to how Nbi-Kwe was able to garner a sense of gratification through her education. She also described the success of being accepted into a professional program and extending her PSE beyond the undergraduate level. Overcome with emotion, she reflected on how she was able to accomplish this goal that she had set out years ago: "I felt like I had to fight tooth and nail EVERYDAY." Being accepted was a dream come true, yet, Nbi-Kwe reduced her position within PSE as the result of an institutional mandate to increase Aboriginal representation:

I'm a special applicant...under the Aboriginal category. I mean I'm not going to let that take away from what I'm going to do with it. I mean however I got there that's not the important part. It's just getting there, but yeah I mean absolutely there's no doubt that that's what's getting me where I am, and it's not even a question of whether or not it's a stat. I'm going because I'm the check box. I mean I have no doubt that what I'll do with it will be meaningful. It's just the journey that I've put to get there is the important part, but I know part of that is because I fill that that quotient.

The recent emphasis on increasing Aboriginal representation within PSE contributed to Nbi-Kwe's sense of value that minimized her academic accomplishments. The internalized sense of inferiority suggests that increasing the level of representation is simply not enough, and that additional efforts to decolonize education to legitimate Aboriginal epistemologies as a valued form of knowledge production is necessary.

When asked what Nbi-Kwe believed were the most significant challenges to her PSE, she pointed to the lack of knowledge of Aboriginal issues that has led to a culture of 'ignorance' within the institution:

I think for me, some of the hardest things about being here is dealing with some of the ignorance. I take particular issue with that especially I guess in light of my new identity and new connection with everything. Learning about all of the things like a lot of this material I knew about, residential schools growing up my grandma went, I knew about a lot of the social conditions, I knew some of the reserves were bad, and I knew all of these things but learning the details and how it came about, and the actions that were involved and these kinds of things. It was really difficult for me to accept the ignorance that still comes particularly from people who are who have dedicated their life to academia and they still haven't learned the things that they need to learn about, the places that they're in, and the people that they are dealing with, that's really problematic to me.

Nbi-Kwe observes how despite the availability of information and resources within the institution, they continue to be under-utilized or simply ignored. She believed that understanding Aboriginal histories is imperative for instilling a level of respect and cultural competency, while the absence of these histories upholds the colonial mindset in which the institution continues to operate.

Nbi-Kwe further explained how resistance to these histories creates additional challenges for Aboriginal students:

If there was a second thing that I would put is how resistant to change and acceptance of our Indigenous issues that institutional structures can be. You know we're not just a resource for you to send students to. We have a place and the reason we have this place is because of our unique standing, our unique culture, and are unique existence. I think that it really comes down to the university embracing that and understanding our position here and giving us some sort of standing in terms of determining our future and how things work. Obviously funding is never a bad thing because realistically I mean funding is what it is, and it's here today could be gone tomorrow. As it is we only know that CASS is going to exist for one more year. We don't know if funding is going to continue beyond then because we haven't got a renewal, and the university doesn't pay for anything. They pay for the physical door and the lights and that's it. Everything else is provided from outside funding so it would be nice to have those things to ensure that we have a future space for students, so that they can continue to do the good work that they do. It's a HUGE ask but I think it comes down to changing people's understandings and whether that comes down to the idea that we have mandatory courses or comes down to just ya know having more universities supported. I think mandatory courses are great, but then it comes down to whether we have the capacity to do that? And if we are going to do that how do we do that in a good way? While supporting our own people to be in those positions because what is the point if we're not having our people in those positions? The point is that we want to have our own voice right.

Increasing representation as well as self-determination and the autonomy to decide how Aboriginal people engage in PSE are significant issues which Nbi-Kwe believed must be addressed in the future. To support Aboriginal education entails increasing resources and the awareness of Aboriginal histories. This in turn will inform our capacity to develop collaborative working relations going forward. Indeed, Nbi-Kwe extended these principles to all future efforts for reconciliation: "it comes down to nation-wide right. I mean these are issues that are continually discussed everywhere we go." The challenges that face Aboriginal peoples and communities are multifaceted; however, through education we may begin to unpack and instill a critical awareness of just how much we have lost, and how much there is to gain from culturally based education in the future.

Summary

The results chapter sought to centre the voices of Aboriginal students in an effort to portray the lived experiences of education. These stories exposed how education is but one component of a larger effort to support the future of Aboriginal peoples. The complexity of narratives is evidence of how education implicates and interconnects all of our past histories, present conditions, and how this can no longer be viewed in isolation from identity, health, culture, and community. These narratives reveal how education can become a space where we can all begin to understand our colonial histories, but how this has yet to be fully adopted within the institution, and how this is fundamental to our ability to move together toward a better future.

Chapter 6 **Discussion**

Introduction

The following chapter provides a discussion of the collective themes that emerged from participants' narratives of higher education. The first theme premises colonialism as a determinant of education, in that participants were continually aware of how this history had systematically influenced opportunities for PSE. Thus, participants' stories problematize research highlighting the gap in Aboriginal PSE, scholarship that regularly promotes a neo-liberal rhetoric of individual agency. Instead, the women's lived experiences force us to examine how intersecting conditions that facilitate or hinder education are in fact socially determined. The stories of participants also illustrate the students' strengths and commitment to continue on their journeys to PSE in spite of complex social and material realities. A second theme is the critique of the lack of Aboriginal representation within PSE. This influenced how the participants negotiated their identities and culture, in that they had to do so within socially constrained contexts. This led many participants to seek out understandings of culture outside of classroom spaces. A third theme is the importance of decolonizing education, not just for minimizing the Aboriginal PSE gap, but also for instilling an awareness of how colonialism has influenced the lives of Aboriginal peoples. This step may help to deconstruct stereotypes and negative reproductions of cultural inferiority that continue to operate within institutions of higher education. The final theme discusses the resilience of participants to locate opportunities for establishing relationships with their culture and community and to claim a space to 'live our circles,' regardless of how Aboriginal epistemologies, values and worldviews are prioritized or erased within colonial spaces of higher education.

Colonialism as a Determinant of Education

The utilization of post-colonial theory assisted in demonstrating how colonialism continues to influence the lives of Aboriginal post-secondary students. It is imperative to acknowledge these legacies, particularly since many of the participants explicitly name colonialism as a critical factor that shaped their lives and educational experiences. The bulk of the narratives revealed the ongoing social and material challenges the women faced, reinforcing Smith's (1999) claim that "colonialism remains unfinished business" (p.98). The State undeniably played a role in the lived experiences of participants and their journeys to PSE. Specifically, relationships to the *Indian Act* exercised through disenfranchisement, Bill C-31, and removal and relocation policies, sustained domination with regard to status, identity, culture, and systemic marginalization that constructed barriers to privileged spaces of higher education.

The most direct consequences of these colonial endeavours were viewed in the loss of identity and relationships with land and culture(s) that resulted from a history of imposed domination. Many participants discussed familial relationships to residential schools to demonstrate how history continues to impact the contemporary experiences of Aboriginal students within PSE. The residential school system is perhaps the most significant example of how government control of Aboriginal peoples through education has manifested in the loss of culture. Furthermore, many participants spoke of how legacies of residential schools had come to influence how education was presently conceptualized and experienced. Nbi-Kwe spoke of her grandmother's struggles with her Aboriginal identity as resulting from the "way she was taught" in residential school, and how this contributed to Nbi-Kwe's own fragile sense of identity and culture, despite spending much of her adolescence growing up within a reserve community. Legislation such as Bill C-31 prevented Nbi-Kwe's ability to gain status, imposing additional challenges to accessing PSE, and simultaneously positioning her as a perceived

outsider within that community. The difference that she experienced throughout her adolescence had an influence on how she internalized her sense of self. Although Nbi-Kwe was critical of the notion of status, the acquisition of this later in life did assist her in accessing band funding that would provide financial resources for PSE, and afford her with a degree of validation that contributed to her the ability to assume and assert her Aboriginal identity within the academic space.

Nikita made several mentions to the effects of residential schools, namely for its influence on the low levels of Aboriginal representation within PSE, while positioning her mother's experiences within the Catholic school system as having a direct effect on how she currently views education. For Nikita, disenfranchisement contributed to generational experiences of poverty which in turn influenced her early experiences of education. She was unable to complete high school and believed that PSE "did not matter" simply because it was out of reach. Similar to Nikita, Jane also experienced vulnerability across social and material conditions that contributed to her inability to complete high school. Both would not return to PSE until adulthood, consistent with previous research that found Aboriginal students to be more likely to engage with higher education later in life (Statistics Canada, 2012). Participants' narratives demonstrated how colonialism contributed to intergenerational traumas, including disconnection from culture and related loss of identity. Furthermore, participants inherited the impacts of colonialism in various forms of marginalization, legacies that became significant to how and when participants accessed and experienced PSE.

Previous research has established key conditions that influence opportunities for Aboriginal PSE including SES, housing, food insecurity, and geographic location (Reading & Wein, 2009). The results of this current study confirm that increasing the presence of Aboriginal

students requires attention to underlying conditions such as SES, housing, food, transportation, and childcare. All of the participants acknowledged that systemic marginalization with regard to material conditions including; income, housing, employment, education, and so on, had resulted in differential access to PSE. Additionally, the results indicated that in order to increase Aboriginal representation in PSE, improvements to underlying conditions such as SES, housing, transportation, food, and child care must be addressed. Reading and Wien (2009) situate these underlying determinants as fundamentally interconnected with colonialism and impacting health and overall quality of life. Participants' stories revealed how marginalization across underlying determinants influenced how PSE was accessed, and how education was positioned as secondary to basic necessities such as housing, food, and employment. The complex manner to which these conditions operated signifies the messiness of lived experiences, reinforcing that these conditions do not operate in isolation or outside of history.

Financial vulnerability was the most commonly cited barrier to PSE cited by participants, consistent with previous research (Alcorn & Levin, 2000; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000; Maltest, 2004; APS, 2006). SES was often discussed in relation to income disparity that had been passed down generationally. Many participants came from working class homes where experiences of poverty were not uncommon. Financial insecurity made it difficult for participants to access PSE, and therefore less likely to do so. However, participants were able to access PSE in spite of the costs associated with higher education. Arguably, the catch-22 (Mendelson, 2006) for participants in this study was the ability to remain in PSE while encountering a multitude of complex social and material challenges.

Narratives additionally revealed how housing and employment insecurity influenced education; this was especially magnified for participants with children, where family

responsibilities and access to affordable childcare were added layers to the PSE experience. Previous research found Aboriginal women to be more likely to engage with higher education as adults, “typically with children in tow” (Statistics Canada, 2010). Yet, these findings do not consider how these experiences are lived or the conditions that contribute to the relationship between Aboriginal mothers and higher education. For Red, accessing subsidized housing became fundamental to her ability to engage with PSE. Although, even with access to affordable housing, she explained how childcare was needed so that she could work in order to “catch-up” on rent. Nikita discussed how she accessed a community program that provided a degree of financial support while pursuing a higher education, although most of which was already allocated, “spending ten of eleven dollars” that she earned on childcare. Red’s and Nikita’s stories were similar in that they revealed how employment, housing, and childcare intersected with PSE and how these conditions were informed by colonial legacies and therefore exceedingly socially determined.

Both Jane’s and Nikita’s stories are evidence of the interlocking relationship between conditions, and subsequent barriers around PSE. Conditions such as SES, housing, and employment insecurity were fundamental to how both viewed PSE as out of reach throughout adolescence, and a reason for why neither of them considered higher education until later in life. Nbi-Kwe and Ayita transitioned to PSE from high school in a more ‘traditional’ sense that involved progressing to PSE directly from high school. Still, both Nbi-Kwe and Ayita expressed how income insecurity, identity, and a sense of isolation would impact their experiences. Nbi-Kwe described how SES and identity contributed to her decision to leave PSE shortly after her arrival from high school, and how she did not revisit higher education until she had been granted status that allowed her to access financial support from her band community. Ayita discussed

how removal and relocation policies contributed to her experiences of PSE, and that despite government efforts to increase Aboriginal representation in urban spaces through such policies, her experiences of higher education were in fact underscored with the invisibility of Aboriginal peoples, students, and culture. Financial insecurity added to Ayita's experiences of PSE, and even though she had status, she did not receive band funding despite being eligible.

Overcrowding and limited access to affordable housing, extending from financial insecurity, were significant to participants' education through adolescence and for some, well into adulthood. Many participants described always having struggled with adequate and affordable housing, a challenge that was an intergenerational experience in which colonial endeavours, such as disenfranchisement, residential schools, and state control of status, and their legacies continued to reverberate in their families' lives, generation after generation. This contributed to how participants routinely characterized PSE as out of reach or inaccessible. The women emphasized how these legacies influenced social environments, constructing barriers to how and when PSE was accessed. For Jane, improvements across conditions meant she no longer had to struggle with the daily challenges of housing and food, and where she received social support that allowed her to focus on higher education as being a tangible reality.

The bulk of these narratives demystify the common misconception that all Aboriginal students enjoy a free education. Only one participant in this study was successful in accessing financial support from her band community. These resources are often dependent on status and thus, they invariably support only a small portion of a larger population. Although existing funding structures differ from community to community, Nbi-Kwe's and Ayita's stories demonstrate the barriers to this funding that typically privileges students transitioning directly from high school. Many of the existing funding structures have not yet responded to the trend of

Aboriginal students returning to PSE as adults. Clearly, changes to current systems are required to better support the growing number of Aboriginal students returning to education as adults.

Both Red and Ayita were able to access a degree of financial support through third party Aboriginal organizations, although this support was again dependent on status. Thus, a large portion of Aboriginal students are excluded from accessing financial resources that could support higher education. Nevertheless, it should be noted that third party community based organizations assumed a significant role in providing participants with resources needed to pursue PSE. Nikita was able to access a community program that assisted in academic upgrading as well as providing a degree of financial support throughout her transition to PSE, despite not having status. On the other hand, Red and Ayita were able to access some financial assistance via scholarships or bursaries to help offset the costs associated with higher education. For Ayita, this was imperative for her ability to remain in the space, as she able to secure emergency funding from both Inspire and Dreamcatcher that would assist her in the cost of food and transportation.

The effects of colonialism contributed to how many participants experienced delayed access to PSE, resulting from sustained marginalization that for many, situated PSE as unattainable or out of reach. Parkin and Baldwin (2009) indicate that Aboriginal students are more likely to experience higher drop-out rates than all other populations. While factors contributing to this trend have not yet been thoroughly established, both Jane's and Nbi-Kwe's stories may provide context to the complexity of the aforementioned trend. Nbi-Kwe explained how financial constraints were compounded by a lack of "resolve" with regard to her identity that contributed to her leaving PSE shortly after her initial arrival. Jane additionally described how vulnerability across conditions such as housing, employment, and food, as well as a perceived lack of relevancy of the secondary curriculum contributed to her leaving high school in

her adolescence. Nikita spoke of her transition to PSE as an isolating experience in which she “didn’t have anybody with her,” and where she wanted to “quit all the time.” The stories suggest that there are no single explanations for the observed drop-out trends, and that in fact there are multiple and intersecting conditions that contribute to Aboriginal students leaving education both at the secondary and post-secondary levels. As Frohlich, Ross and Richmond (2006) state, “improving the health and education of Aboriginal peoples requires attention to underlying causes of disparity rather than exclusively to the outcomes themselves (p.140). Results pointed to SES, housing, employment, childcare, identity, and cultural relevancy of education as conditions that may contribute to the overall retention of Aboriginal students. This finding reinforces the importance of examining structures of inequality, as opposed to emphasizing individual agency, in addressing the education gap.

Previous research on the PSE gap has focused on trends and rates of participation, that reinforce agency and ignore the structures of power that influence how and when Aboriginal students access and experience higher education (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000). In a fundamental sense, the gap is a colonial issue. Minimizing the gap must go beyond examining material conditions that create barriers to accessibility, to additionally include how Aboriginal students encounter PSE as a socially constructed experience. The trend for Aboriginal students utilizing education as a means to connect to culture, as well as the identity work that ensued within these spaces naturally warrants such an examination. The catch-22 scenario that Mendelson (2006) offered arguably extends beyond financial barriers and material conditions. Participant narratives reinforced how Aboriginal students utilize PSE as a means to connect to culture, although once these relationships were established, participants found it increasingly difficult to practice or integrate culture into their education. This was further complicated by the

low levels of Aboriginal representation, and general unawareness of Aboriginal histories and culture operating within the institution.

Representation: The Search for Identity and Culture

Many participants expressed a desire to restore lost connections to culture and believed that higher education would be a logical method to accomplish this task. This was similar to previous literature that situated Aboriginal PSE as a period of increased awareness of identity and culture (Restoule, 2011). However, the degree to which Aboriginal identities, voices, and culture(s) remained invisible within classroom spaces created challenges for undertaking cultural work within an inherently Western institution. This finding in particular, reinforced the importance of this current study because it foregrounds participants' voices and stories as a way to make inequities visible and so that "other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse" (Bhabba, 2012, p. 259).

The difficulty in reconnecting with their culture in classroom spaces was primarily thought to be the result of the relative low level of Aboriginal representation within the institution. Representation was characterized in a variety of ways, in relation to the amount of Aboriginal faculty and students present within these spaces, the inclusion of Aboriginal histories in teaching materials, the availability of culturally relevant pedagogies, and the diminished value attached to Aboriginal worldviews. In these ways, representation became integral for how participants experienced higher education.

For example, participants described how the few numbers of Aboriginal faculty contributed to unsafe, appropriated, isolated and 'tokenized' experiences of PSE. The cultural 'learning' that occurred within classroom spaces was often problematic, in that instructors often relied on Western perspectives that were largely unaware of Aboriginal histories and culture(s)

and thus contributed to misinterpretations. This resulted in culturally insensitive learning environments, a finding that was reminiscent of Hart's (2010) statement that "[w]hen most professors describe the 'world,' they describe Eurocentric contexts and ignore Indigenous perspectives and understandings" (p. 4). Misunderstandings of culture and racism have proven to be significant features of Aboriginal PSE (St. Denis & Hampton, 2002; Malatest, 2004; Rae, 2005; Holmes, 2006; Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2008; Restoule & Smillie, 2008; Hudson, 2009). Regrettably, all participants described having negative experiences in this regard.

The absence of Aboriginal students throughout Ayita's high school experiences encouraged her to additionally seek out community when she arrived at PSE. At the time, she believed that this would be possible, simply as an extension of a larger student bodies that exist in higher education. Ayita's inability to locate a community or cultural resources throughout her undergraduate degree, reinforced the existing gap in Aboriginal PSE (Richards, 2008). The nonexistence of such resources might be symptomatic of the relative few numbers of Aboriginal students, or reflective of the level of institutional value that is placed on Aboriginal culture more generally.

Red's and Jane's narratives provides other examples of the lack of Aboriginal representation in higher education, and the impact of its absence. Red explained how language and the emphasis on writing as the primary mode of knowledge translation dominated her experiences and reinforced "the European concept of 'legitimate' thinking" (Means, as cited in Kovach, 2005, p.53). The consequences of her following an "Indigenous method" resulted in multiple charges of academic dishonesty that positioned her performance as 'suspect.' Red also exposed how language was used to reduce herself and other Aboriginal students to "Indians"

within the classroom, and how a misrepresentation that resulted in a non-Aboriginal figure occupying a space dedicated to cultural resistance became a symbol of prolonged domination. For Jane, this became evident in how cultural pedagogies such as storytelling became misinterpreted and appropriated, resulting in the reproduction of stereotypical notions of Aboriginality that situated individuals and communities as problematic and/or broken. Her courage to find a voice to speak back to the negative reproductions of inferiority, exposed her to the consequences of resistance in which she felt subsequently isolated and attacked by her peers.

Participants continually critiqued how low levels of Aboriginal representation contributed to lonely and isolated experiences within PSE. Ayita spoke of how a lack of representation reinforced her sense of ‘otherness’ and how the absence of Aboriginal histories within curricula inspired her to include this content within her own teaching endeavours. She stated how the relative non-existence of Aboriginal epistemologies continues to reproduce “Western, white, patriarchal” education. Subsequently, as the only Aboriginal student within her faculty, Ayita discussed how isolation contributed to her struggle to incorporate her worldviews and that limited representation led her work to be positioned as ‘other’ and of lesser value, a reflection of ongoing systemic domination. It was for this reason that many sought out opportunities for learning with Aboriginal faculty, designating the importance of these community leaders for imparting cultural knowledge that non-Aboriginal professors “might not understand.” Yet, stories highlighted how there remained very few opportunities to learn from Aboriginal professors who are more likely to understand and create a safer learning environments for imparting culture within the classroom.

What contributed to the complexity of participants’ experiences was that every encounter was informed by a colonial history, one that normalizes systemic dominance. Nikita experienced

blatant racism when she found the strength to assert her identity within the classroom, but was later told by the professor that she “didn’t have to be the ‘token.’” Being reduced to this position suggested that Nikita was alone, did not belong, and that her voice did not matter. When Nikita offered to utilize her relationship with Elders to assist in teaching traditional materials, the professor negated this relationship, using a position of power and dominance to ‘teach’ Aboriginal content without community consultation. Nikita’s story substantiates how Western education inadequately supports Aboriginal students and how “individualism is reinforced, and the connection to community is virtually non-existent” (VanEvery-Albert, 2008, p. 50). Sadly, this encounter was a missed opportunity to include culture through student relationships with community and to facilitate collaboration within the classroom.

The ‘othering’ and negation of the notion of ‘culture as intrinsic to Aboriginal education’ caused many participants to compartmentalize Aboriginal worldviews. Nbi-Kwe discussed having to “choose” when she could incorporate culture into her studies. The validation she garnered from Elders such as “being told you are great, we aren’t used to that,” illustrates how community support served a way to heal from the Western performances that informed her experiences. This confirms how Aboriginal students have yet to effectively incorporate worldviews into the bulk of their education and how Aboriginal ways of knowing are perennially situated as inferior within academic spaces. It is on this premise that minimizing the gap and increasing Aboriginal representation within PSE must involve efforts to decolonize education. It is not just the need for physical representation within the student body or the professoriate, but also a need to make history and cultural practices available to Aboriginal students who seek this knowledge.

The recent commitment to increasing the presence of Aboriginal bodies in PSE was juxtaposed with the subjugation of culture, which informed the women's experiences and contributed to how participants constructed their 'othered' positions within the institution. Frohlich, Ross, and Richmond (2006) suggest that a lack of cultural identity can contribute to low cultural self-esteem and self-worth. This became apparent when Nbi-Kwe spoke to her presence as a "statistic" and "checkbox," while Ayita internalized her value as the only Aboriginal student in her faculty and wondering, "am I good enough? I don't know." The rhetoric of inferiority was magnified within Ayita's inner circle, when her acceptance was positioned as symbolic in that "they were giving her a chance," exposing how colonial legacies have contributed to internalization of value and self-worth reproduced over generations. These stories highlighted how minimizing the gap in Aboriginal representation is not just a numbers game. It is a social endeavour, one that must begin with a critical examination of the history of colonization. Reconciliation will most likely begin with increasing representation, but it cannot stop there. Decolonization within the institution, via a heightened and more critical awareness of colonization, must ensue in order to create healthier learning environments. Representation must go beyond the politics of physical bodies to additionally embrace the acceptance of Aboriginal knowledge within institutions of higher learning. This may create more supportive and inclusive learning spaces where Aboriginal students can begin to develop a sense of self-worth for their positions within PSE. The participants' stories revealed how this has yet to be encouraged within the majority of these spaces.

Decolonizing Higher Education

Participants discussed the lack of awareness for Aboriginal histories, epistemologies and worldviews that continue to operate within the institution. The assimilative nature of education

might not be as pronounced as it was during the era of the residential school system. However, these legacies remain carefully hidden within the institution such that Aboriginal students are prevented from incorporating culture into education and therefore must seek to locate these opportunities outside of classroom spaces. According to Bourdieu, educational dominance “functions to transmit privilege, allocate status, and instill respect for the existing social order” (Bourdieu as cited in Grenfell & James, 1998, p.30). The maintenance of empirical order was magnified through Red’s experiences in which she was heavily monitored and forced to “prove” her performance of a ‘good student’ within narrow spaces of knowledge production legitimized by the institution. Nbi-Kwe spoke directly of the performance of Western values in which she struggled to keep her “worldview true” while “still answering questions in the way they want.” Ayita negotiated domination with regard to her research in which Aboriginal methods were perceived with less ‘rigour,’ and where she had to prove that she was not “just making stuff up.” Indeed, Ayita stated that there was a general lack of understanding of Aboriginal histories, and she must therefore “re-create the wheel,” and feels frustrated when she has to “explain everything.”

The lack of representation and legitimizing of Western performances were consistent with previous findings that suggest Aboriginal students must make a choice between “leading a traditional lifestyle and a lifestyle integrated with other Canadians” (Richards, 2008, p. 1). Participants spoke of the difficulties of incorporating Aboriginal worldviews into their education, indicating that a performance was occasionally necessary for the ability of students to “survive” PSE. It is for this reason that the gap in Aboriginal PSE cannot be solved without accounting for colonialism, its legacies and ongoing manifestation within the education system.

Limited understanding of Aboriginal worldviews was especially pronounced with respect to the failure to view education in relation to health. For example, both Nikita and Jane described how medicine wheel teachings informed how balance was maintained across the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical realms of well-being. In an academic setting, there is considerable mental stimulation, but this can lead to an imbalance, and thus there is a need to ensure that other realms of health are nurtured, something that academic institutions are failing to do. Indeed, despite the heightened awareness of mental health issues that face undergraduate students and a call to better support those who are struggling, Jane's experience illustrates how 'mental health' may be viewed in a dismissive manner or even with skepticism by a professor. Furthermore, the fear that Jane expressed in which she was concerned that a note from an Elder would be perceived as "less legitimate," reinforces how Aboriginal paradigms of interconnection remain absent and how institutional domination is a form of colonialism uniquely affecting the well-being of Aboriginal students (Czyzewski 2011; Paradies, 2016).

Systemic racism enacted through cultural appropriation, reproduction of stereotypes, and domination over language and the inclusion of culture indicate that assimilative practices are still alive and well, and how efforts to decolonize education remain on the bottom of institutional agendas. The internalization of inferiority as a consequence of insufficient representation can invoke negative feelings toward identity, which became significant for how Aboriginal students establish a sense of belonging within the institution. The feelings of difference and 'otherness' that stems from a history of colonialism that sought to 'tame' and assimilate Aboriginal bodies remains as much of an issue today as it did during the residential school era. Adjunct with the disregard for Aboriginal knowledge, it is no surprise that participants experienced a sense of isolation, in which they feel pressured to 'perform' in a Western way in order to 'survive'

academia. The agency required of Aboriginal students to overcome systemic social and material barriers and reconnect with culture is indicative of larger colonial issues that continue to govern the lives of Aboriginal peoples. The stories of participants exposed how education is a colonial endeavour, and in its current form “has meant prolonged marination of colonialism and neocolonialism for every formally educated person today” (Battiste, 2002, p.91). These legacies resulted in participants locating opportunities for cultural knowledge outside of classroom spaces.

Living our Circle: Aboriginal Students Claiming a Space in Higher Education

Participants discussed how reconnecting with identity and culture within a PSE context was accomplished outside of classroom spaces. The trend among students to engage in this work was the result of the lack of Aboriginal representation within the classroom, as well as the misrepresentations of Aboriginal peoples and culture that created unsafe and isolated learning environments. In contrast, Elders, faculty, administrators and fellow students at CASS never questioned the ‘authenticity’ of participants, many of whom identified as having hybrid or in-between identities. In fact, CASS welcomed and accepted the multiple identities of participants, neither privileging one over another. Alternatively, participants were allowed the freedom to ‘identify with’ Aboriginal culture which Restoule (2000) believes is imperative to disrupt the relations of power that allow identity to be discerned from the outside and that frequently rely on stereotypical notions of ‘authenticity.’ It was under this premise that CASS became a ‘third space,’ that provided participants with the autonomy to identify with Aboriginal culture, and that supported the formulation and embodiment of identity and culture demonstrated by participants throughout their experiences within PSE. For example, Jane and Nikita found it difficult to relate to or connect with other students, and both would turn to CASS to assist them throughout

these times. Jane utilized weekly circle as a way to connect, while Nikita sought the guidance of Elders when she felt alone and as though she could not continue within the early transitional stages of her PSE.

Institutional dominance was an underlying theme; however, participants also shared stories of resilience and the ability to find a “voice” to resist colonial practices that would assist in creating their own opportunities for integrating culture into education. Coming back to culture as an adult in itself is indicative of how colonialism has fragmented relationships with culture, while the manner in which participants had to search for meaningful connections that mostly occurred outside of classroom spaces reveals how colonialism is maintained through institutions of higher learning.

The strength of these narratives remains in how participants were aware of how colonialism had influenced relationships with PSE. Stories revealed how participants were conscious of how history had informed inequity across social and material conditions, causing the majority of participants to revisit PSE as adults. Participants were also aware of how these legacies had informed Aboriginal representation with regard to physical bodies and the absence of critical understandings of colonization within Western curriculums. Bourdieu argued that higher education naturalizes the reproduction of knowledge to maintain social order, but also that “one form of knowledge, one way of doing things, has to be imposed and accepted” (Bourdieu as cited in Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 24). The imposition of Western education was regularly resisted, with participants demonstrating creativity in locating opportunities and methods for incorporating culture and community into education. Thus, the participants involved in this study were not complacent and did not passively accept the education being offered to them.

CASS was significant for how students were able to locate social support that assisted in coping with a general unawareness for how colonial legacies imparted domination across representation, culture, and epistemology. Nbi-Kwe cited a culture of “ignorance” with regard to this sentiment, and how CASS was fundamental in providing her with the validation to resist notions of education that did not align with her cultural worldviews. Baskin et al. (2008) believes that organization and community building is a method of empowering Aboriginal students to share stories of strength while challenging systems of domination and oppression. Community building facilitated through participant involvement with CASS became a method to secure a sense of value and belonging where it was otherwise not available within the institution. It was through CASS that participants were able to strengthen their resilience and dedication to understanding identity, culture, and community, an endeavour that was supported through programming and relationships with fellow students, faculty, Elders, and administrators.

Participants recognized CASS as a “safe space” where the learning and embodiment of culture was accepted, indicating that engaging in this work might be dangerous or have consequences in other spaces within the institution. Restoule et al., (2013) found that a majority of Aboriginal students continue to experience racism throughout PSE, and many of whom sought counselling provided within the institution as a result. Although participant stories revealed that racism was part of their experiences of PSE, there was no mention of accessing counselling services as a result of these interactions. It is plausible that participants did utilize CASS as a space that afforded cultural healing in place of Western approaches to counselling which are offered within the institution. For Jane, CASS allowed her the opportunity to “put names to things” and to decolonize her mind in ways that she was unable to accomplish throughout her adolescence or within other facets of her education. Red described CASS as a community that

offered support when she encountered institutional racism that positioned her performance as ‘suspect’ and impeded her ability to graduate with “respect.” Ayita spoke of relationships with Elders as paramount to her ability to navigate “bureaucracies,” and knowing which “lines to dance.” Similarly, Nbi-Kwe isolated Elders as mentors who provided her with support and validation to express culture and integrate identity within her academic pursuits. Nikita believed that CASS was fundamental for her ability to maintain balance along the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional realms that allowed her to “live her circle,” thereby creating a “circle of care” for herself throughout her education.

Participant stories exposed how Western modes of education were not blindly accepted, but rather, how CASS provided opportunities for community organization that would facilitate the ability to claim a space for culture within education. The strength of the community revolves around the capacity to organize and support each other in the face of institutional domination. Participants demonstrated various forms of cultural advocacy work, whether through organizing and working in an ‘Indigenous’ way to produce events such as Pow-wow, finding a voice to speak back to the reproduction of stereotypes, or including a strengths based paradigm within teaching roles. Participants exhibited a dedication to finding ways to incorporate worldviews into their education. Claiming a space for culture within the institution was not easy, and CASS was positioned as fundamental to the ability to accomplish this. Nbi-Kwe described how this space enabled students to “continue to do the good work they do,” and where students could learn and practice culture in a meaningful way.

Integrating culture into PSE assisted participants in locating a sense of self and belonging within an institution that continually positioned Aboriginal students, culture, and histories on the margins. CASS allowed participants to reconnect to traditional knowledge that would assist with

integrating culture and enhancing our ability to “live our circles.” This would not be possible without the efforts of those who have come before us, the wisdom of Elders, and the role of community leaders who continue to provide the knowledge required to heal and cope with our present challenges. Participants acknowledged that CASS was a “safe space” to turn when the ‘othering’ of culture and worldviews became magnified within classroom interactions.

Participants were able to receive social support from a community that offered the opportunity to become closer to culture. In turn, this facilitated in developing a “resolve” and “voice” to allow students to claim their own space for culture and identity within education. The stories that were generously shared by participants exposed how the present challenges of Aboriginal PSE have been informed by colonialism, and how perhaps, much of these histories remain unnoticed or unattended within spaces of higher education. Yet, these stories speak to the resiliency of the community to organize, to overcome past difficulties, to manage present challenges, while remaining optimistic for the future. The manner in which participants were aware of how colonialism had influenced their current challenges is the strength we need to move forward for the future. The stories shared in this thesis reveal how our small resistances continue to challenge the status quo of higher education, and how through community, we have and will continue to organize together to ensure that culture remains alive for future generations of Aboriginal students.

Summary

The project began on the notion that conditions of life influence how Aboriginal students arrive to and experience PSE. Centering these experiences was important for several reasons. First, focusing on lived experiences is informed by Aboriginal research methods, specifically, using the cultural paradigm of storytelling. Second, narratives can provide “vivid illustrations of

the importance of these issues for people's health and well-being" (Raphael, 2008, p.231). Through stories, participants were able to provide context for how inequity contributed to marginalized access to PSE, as well as how institutional domination contributed to how education is presently lived and encountered. The themes drawn from this study provide insight into how colonialism influenced participant experiences, and how its legacies manifest through social and material conditions, which in turn became determinants to higher education. Despite this, participants were able to successfully draw on interconnected Aboriginal paradigms that resisted notions of individualism and a neo-liberal logic of agency operating within institutions of higher learning and the Canadian state more broadly. Alternatively, participants were indeed aware of how colonialism had contributed to the absence of Aboriginal bodies, histories, and culture and how processes of institutional domination informed their current realities of education. It was on this premise that participants actively engaged with CASS as a method for re-establishing a connection to culture that would enable participants to become confidentially situated in identity and to embody culture as a means to claim a valued space for themselves within education.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how Aboriginal students access and experience PSE. Narrative methods were utilized as a cultural paradigm for knowledge production, where Aboriginal students were invited to share stories of how they arrived to and experienced higher education. A post-colonial theoretical framework assisted in analyzing how colonialism continued to influence the lived experiences of Aboriginal students. Results indicated that material conditions such as; SES, housing, food, childcare, geographical location and transportation; significantly contributed to how participants accessed and remained in spaces of higher education. Band communities and third party agencies provided a degree of financial support for overcoming the aforementioned barriers. Although, the majority of participants were excluded from these resources, as eligibility was often dependent on status and typically privileged students transitioning to PSE directly from high school.

Most participants discussed PSE as a means to re-establish a lost connection to culture that further exposed how colonialism had affected the lives of Aboriginal students. Many discussed the limitations of engaging with this work within an inherently colonial space that often did not account for or include cultural worldviews. The privileging of Western forms of knowledge production operating within the institution caused some participants to at times compartmentalize cultural understandings, pragmatically selecting when and if such knowledge could be included and accepted within their education. Participants were indeed aware of how colonialism had influenced the journey to PSE and how this contributed to the low levels of Aboriginal representation with regard to physical bodies, curricula, and culture. As a result, participants often resisted Western forms of education that did not align with cultural worldviews. Participants discussed the consequences of resistance that ranged from isolated

classroom experiences, intense surveillance and monitoring, and blatant and directed forms of racism. Isolation due to disparaging levels of Aboriginal representation as well as systemic and institutional racism contributed to how participants sought community as a means to cope and heal through culture. Similarly, CASS was identified as a “safe space” in which Elders acted as gatekeepers to traditional knowledge that assisted participants in developing and managing healthy relationships to self and community. In a sense, CASS operated as a ‘third space’ through which participants, many of whom situated identity as in-between or hybrid, were provided the autonomy to identify with culture. This in turn provided a sense of value and belonging that had not been previously established within experiences of PSE. For participants, CASS provided a cultural awareness, validation of identity, as well as social support that assisted in negotiating colonial spaces of higher education.

Narratives revealed how participants sought to maintain balance across mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical realms of health and well-being that informed relationships with education. It is on this premise that improving the future of Aboriginal PSE could also be viewed in relation to health, where perhaps opportunities for blending Aboriginal health paradigms, such as the medicine wheel teachings with a social determinant framework may provide collaborative endeavours for improving both the education and health of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Marmont (2005) additionally suggests that future directions in social determinant research must also view health as a holistic experience: “It is likely that both material or physical needs and capability, spiritual, or psychosocial needs are important to the gradient in health, which will, therefore, be an important focus” (Marmont, 2005, p.1102). Participant stories are an indication of how PSE in its current form does not promote balance across physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental realms of the medicine wheel, therefore, cannot not adequately meet the needs of

Aboriginal students. Indeed, alleviating this gap and increasing representation requires attention to the underlying material conditions including the redistribution of income, access to affordable housing, food, transportation and childcare. Yet, increasing representation is but one facet; decolonizing education is critical for “creat[ing] a more just future” (Baskin et al, 2008, p.90). Instilling a critical awareness of colonization is the most logical method for demystifying stereotypical representations that continue to marginalize our very existence. To accomplish this, Aboriginal peoples must be afforded the autonomy and self-determination to lead the efforts in making these histories as well as our culture(s) visible for future generations.

Recommendations: Creating a Circle of Care

The project was designed as a means to ‘speak back’ to educators and governments for the purpose of creating a space where students could self-determine what is required for the future of Aboriginal education. Thus, the recommendations put forth here are a collaboration between participants, an Elder, and researcher voices. Participants expressed the need to increase financial investment into Aboriginal PSE and to re-examine eligibility requirements as well as funding structures that currently exclude a majority of students who remain without status. Expanding efforts for reconciling underlying barriers to higher education include redistribution of income; affordable housing and childcare, food security and transportation. These factors were found to be significant for minimizing the existing gap in Aboriginal PSE. Several participants discussed the need to introduce critical approaches to understanding Aboriginal histories and cultures within foundational courses as being a first step to decolonizing the education being offered within the institution. Furthermore, increasing Aboriginal representation in teaching positions, research methods, epistemologies, curricula, and pedagogies will offer further support for decolonizing education in the future. Moreover, escalating resources and the

availability of cultural programming through Aboriginal campus organizations is needed in order to create spaces for Elders, Traditional practitioners, and Medicine people to teach and practice cultural ceremonies within educational institutions. This includes but is not limited to sweat, pipe, and naming ceremonies, vision quests, and traditional camps that will allow students to connect with the land. An Elder also pointed to the importance of Indigenous herbology and making space for those with knowledge of plant medicines. Finally, affording the opportunity for Aboriginal peoples, leaders, communities and Nations the autonomy and right to self-determine the future of Aboriginal education is fundamental for decolonizing and reconciling the gap in Aboriginal PSE in Canada.

Considerations and Future Directions

A caveat of this research and its findings is the relatively small sample size used to conduct the study. The stories shared are not representative of all Aboriginal post-secondary experiences. The purpose of this study was not to invoke generalizations, but to examine the experiences of Aboriginal students through culturally relevant research methodologies that would expose the relations of power governing participant journeys to and through PSE. It should be noted that participants involved in this study were highly engaged students, and it is likely that there remain populations of Aboriginal students who do not identify or participate in campus related activities. Considering the positive role that CASS assumed in participant narratives, further research as to why some Aboriginal students do not seek community resources available through institutions should be considered. Culture played a significant role in how participants characterized experiences of PSE. Further research might also explore how the embodiment and of cultural practice, and perhaps the role of Elders in facilitating the overall health and well-being of Aboriginal students would be of interest. Finally, all participants in this

study identified as Aboriginal women consistent with previous literature that found this segment to more likely to engage with PSE (Statistics Canada, 2012). Additional research is required to further examine this trend, as well as the resources required to increase the level of representation of Aboriginal males in spaces of higher education.

I arrived at this research question because I was intuitively aware that there were other Aboriginal students within PSE who had important stories to share, and that we could together learn from our present circumstances, in order to move to a better future for Aboriginal PSE in Canada. I sought to accomplish this task in the most culturally appropriate manner possible, opting to use Aboriginal methods such as storytelling for knowledge dissemination, while also positioning these voices within a strengths paradigm that might mold academic research into an empowering endeavour. Reflexivity was central throughout every stage of the research process because I am close, and at times perhaps too close, to the topic at hand. This was an emotional journey through which I was afforded opportunities to learn about myself, my identity, and culture that helped me cope with the turmoil that resulted from my mission to create a safe space for Aboriginal voices. I struggled with transcription, having to repeatedly listen to painful recollections that reminded me of my journey and those of my loved ones. At the same time, I found some comfort in knowing that I was not alone. I struggled with reconstructing stories, attempting to centre student voices while incessantly reflecting on how my story was influencing the interpretation and dissemination of knowledge. I struggled with maintaining the integrity of stories. I made decisions about the ‘quality’ of the data, knowing full well that these stories were more than words. They were lives, histories, and possibilities for the future. I felt pressure to ‘cut’ the ‘unimportant,’ although, I personally felt as though it was all significant. Even if it was believed to be out of the scope of research question(s), for me, it was all related. When

participants could not bear to read their stories when I went through member-checking, my responsibility as the ‘researcher’ became increasingly cumbersome. Participants conveyed a trust in my ability to retell their stories, which only became a source of added pressure. I felt the weight of that responsibility to tell stories in a ‘good way,’ and in these times, I began to draw on my traditional role as a messenger, rather than a ‘researcher’ that somehow felt devoid of any emotional attachment. Culture did provide comfort in the isolation that I encountered throughout the writing stages of this thesis. I burned a lot of sage. This medicine became a good friend throughout these lonely months, and I was reminded that I was not as alone as I once thought.

As this project drew to its end, a news story broke on a fellow post-secondary student named Jesse Mâskwêskanaw Thistle and his journey to PSE. I was aware of Jesse through my involvement at CASS, and many students had spoken about Jesse’s resilience in his higher education journey. He had become somewhat of a role model for the younger students who were also engaging in their own journeys of self-discovery through what we know today as ‘higher education.’ I was immediately captivated by Jesse’s story. Certainly his successes as both a Trudeau and Vanier scholar or being awarded the Governor General’s Silver Medal for his scholarship on Manitoba’s Road Allowance Communities are impressive. But instead I found myself drawn to his dialogue of culture, and how his journey to recovery began with understanding his Métis-Cree heritage. Indeed, his story spoke to me in more ways than one. As he described the invisibility of Aboriginal peoples, I recounted why I had chosen this research endeavour. When he spoke of his heritage, and his technique for “deny[ing] it all together” (Winter, 2016), I thought of the years that I also spent doing just that, hiding in plain sight from an identity and a culture in which I knew very little.

I reached out to Jesse via social media and coincidentally found a post that he wrote in response to his story published in the *Toronto Star*. Somewhat upset, he described how the article sensationalized his words, misinterpreting and conveniently omitting pivotal aspects of his journey to PSE, such as the role of his wife in his recovery from substance abuse, or that he had not learned of his history or culture in “classes,” but rather under the supervision of Dr. Carolyn Podruchny. While the most discerning oversight was that his research centered around road allowances in Saskatchewan, where his ancestors originated from Red River, and not Manitoba as printed. Reading his post, I could not help but be reminded of *Red Rising* and the youth who are dedicated to creating a space for ‘real’ stories.

While the *Toronto Star* focused on Jesse’s agency to pick himself up and transcend seemingly insurmountable obstacles, I could not help but focus on his spiritual journey to recovery, and how this was not accomplished within the classroom, but through reconnecting to his family history and the land to which they called home. Jesse spoke of intergenerational trauma in a way that echoed the words of many participants: “it’s about losing all relationships with land, with Elders, with community, with yourself and your identity” (Winter, 2016). He too stated how at times he felt that he was “playing Indian,” but that “reconnecting with [his] heritage that healed [him] in many ways” (Winter, 2016). Although the media had depicted his road to recovery as the result of educational intervention, and perhaps in some ways it was, I felt as though his true healing came from culture, and an understanding of who he was and where he came from. I couldn’t help but think of how our research had become somewhat of a ‘third space’ that provided an opportunity to understand who we are and the extent of our relations. It is profound that we both had found a space within academic research to include culture and to engage in work that has value and meaning for ourselves, families, and Nations.

The stories provided support to the notion that we should not have to find or create spaces for culture within classrooms or research. We should not have to ‘search’ for the teachings that are so desperately needed to heal from a history of unknowing. We should not have to ‘perform’ in ways that act as a reminder of what we have lost. These stories expose the traumas associated with education as we currently know it. However, for every challenge shared by Shelby, Janelle, Nadine, Shannen, Jane, Red, Ayita, Nikita, Nbi-Kwe, Jesse, and myself throughout our journeys of education, there is also immense strength. This was demonstrated in our dedication to re-claim identity and culture, and embodying these teachings within in everyday experiences of education and beyond. These remain our greatest resistances.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Hello, Aanni:

I am a member of the Tulita Dene band and currently in my second year of graduate studies in the School of Kinesiology and Health Science at York University. I am researching how Aboriginal post-secondary students access and experience post-secondary education. My goal is to offer the opportunity to share your experiences and to centre the voices of the community within academic research.

I am seeking Aboriginal students (status, non-status, and self-identifying) who are currently enrolled in post-secondary studies. The project will involve one-on-one interviews that will last approximately 60-90 minutes in length. All interviews are confidential and participants will remain anonymous throughout the duration of the study. Interviews will be scheduled at your convenience.

If you are interested in sharing your story, please contact me at: ashley43@yorku.ca

Miigwetch,

Ashley Richardson

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Project Title: How Aboriginal Students Experience Post-Secondary Education

Investigator: Ashley Richardson, MA (York University)

Supervisor: Dr. Yuka Nakamura, PhD (York University)

This Informed Consent provides a general idea of the research project and what your participation will involve. A copy of the Informed Consent should be kept for your records and reference. If you have any further questions or concerns, please feel free to contact Ashley Richardson at ashley43@yorku.ca.

Purpose of the Research: The objective of this research is to examine how Aboriginal students experience Post-Secondary education. This study will use qualitative research methods, specifically, semi-structured one-on-one interviews with students who are willing to share their stories.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research: You are invited to participate in an in-depth interview that will last approximately 60-90 minutes in length. Interviews will be scheduled at your convenience. Telephone/internet interviews may be conducted if needed. Some participants may be asked to complete an additional interview.

Risks and/or Compensation: This research project has the potential for inducing emotional unrest as a result of participant experiences. Information on where to receive counselling services will be provided should the need arise. There is no financial compensation for research participants, however you may request a copy of the final report. Participants will be consulted throughout the project to assist in validating the accuracy of research findings; your feedback is voluntary.

Benefits of the Research: Participants will have the opportunity to share their stories of Post-Secondary education. This project aims to centre the voices of students within academic research and will seek to identify success strategies that may be useful for future community members.

Voluntary Participation: The decision to participate is completely voluntary and you may choose to cease participation at any time. Your decision will not influence the nature of your relationship with York University either now, or in the future.

Withdrawal from the Study: You can stop the interview at any point in time or decline to answer specific questions without consequence. Your decision to cease participation, or refusal to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researcher, York University or any other group associated with this project. Should you decide to withdraw from the study, all data collected as a result of your participation will be destroyed.

Confidentiality: The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim; the name of the participant will not be recorded. Any material used in publications resulting from this study will

remove identifying characteristics and may be paraphrased to maintain your anonymity. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law. All interview material and data will be kept in a locked facility accessible only to the researcher. You can review your transcript at any point in time during the study, and within two years of the conclusion of this project. Unless you request otherwise, all interview materials will be destroyed.

Questions about the research? If you have questions regarding the research or your role, you can contact the researcher or her supervisor, Dr. Yuka Nakamura (nakamura@yorku.ca). York University's Graduate Program office may also be contacted at 416-736-5728. This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and will conform to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, you may contact the Senior Manager and Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, York Research Tower, York University, telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca.

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I, _____, agree to take part as a volunteer in this project. I understand the data will be kept in strict confidentiality by the researcher. I give permission to be interviewed and audio recorded. Electronic and audio files will be stored on an encrypted flash drive that will be kept in a locked filing cabinet only accessible to the researcher. Protected files will be stored on a password-protected computer and all hardcopies of interview materials will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. I understand that I can view a copy of my transcripts at any time during the study, and that all interview materials and data will be kept in a secure location accessible only to the research staff. I understand that within two years of the conclusion of this project, unless I otherwise request, all interview materials will be destroyed. I understand that the research may be published, but that my name will not be associated with the research project. I understand that I have the right to refrain from answering any questions posed and that I can terminate the interview at any time at my discretion. Likewise, I am aware that I can withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. I will be provided the opportunity to ask any questions that I see fit. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent to be audio-recorded throughout the interview process.

I agree to be audio recorded and understand that interview data will be used in the development of the research report. Participants will be consulted throughout the project analysis to assist in validating the accuracy of research findings; your feedback is voluntary.

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Investigator's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Introduction and Background Information

- 1) Tell me about yourself. How do you identify? (status, non-status, self-identified, First Nation, Métis, Inuit, community affiliations?)
- 2) Do you have any siblings?
- 3) Do you have any children/little people?
- 4) Do you speak any other languages?
- 5) What are you currently studying?
- 6) What is it about this area of study that interests you?

Social and Material Conditions

- 7) Tell me a little bit about what it was like growing up in your family/community? **Probes:** Where did you live, who did you live with, what were your family responsibilities? How would you describe your relationships with your family/community members?
- 8) Did you always live in the same house growing up? **Probes:** Did you move frequently? What kinds of spaces (apartments, houses, shared spaces), How would you describe these space(s)? Did you have a room? Did you share rooms? Were they adequate spaces for your family? Physical conditions? Was there ever a time where you or your family had nowhere to go? Can you describe what this experience was like?
- 9) Who would you say were your primary caregiver(s)? How have they influenced your life?
- 10) Tell me about your first experiences of work. Was your working necessary to your family/community? How?

11) What other types of jobs have you experienced? **Probes:** Was there any specific job that stands out? What makes it memorable?

12) Do you currently work while you are in school? **Probes:** is working a necessity to your survival? Describe what it's like balancing a job and school at the same time.

Educational Experiences

13) Describe to me what your high school experiences were like? **Probes:** did you enjoy it? Why or why not? Was it difficult? Was there ever a time where you quit or wanted to quit? Why?

14) What were your thoughts of post-secondary education at that time? Did it feel achievable?

15) Tell me about when you decided to pursue post-secondary studies. **Probes:** was there a specific person or experience that encouraged you to apply/pursue PSE? How did this influence you?

16) What is your family's relationship to PSE? **Probes:** Have any other family members attended PSE? How does your family and/or community feel about PSE or education more generally?

17) How did you get here? **Probes:** what was the process like? How did you decide which program to pursue? Did you have to move away from your family? How did this influence your experience?

18) How do you fund your post-secondary studies? **Probes:** Do you pay yourself, scholarships/bursaries, family/friend support? Community funding? Third-party? OSAP? Describe how finances influenced your experiences?

- 19) What your first day of university was like? **Probes:** What do you remember. How did you feel?
- 20) How do you currently feel about your post-secondary experience? **Probes:** Have you adjusted to the expectations/lifestyle? What are the challenges that you are currently facing? Differing world views? Social and/or material?
- 21) How would you say culture influences your post-secondary experiences?
- 22) What would you say have been the most significant challenges for you as an Aboriginal person in your post-secondary education?
- 23) What have been your greatest successes?
- 24) How did you become a member of the CASS? In what ways is this organization important to you? How do you believe it is important for others in our community?
- 25) What types of supports do you feel you need in order to improve your experience?
Probe: What advice would you give to younger generations looking to pursue PSE?
- 26) Is there anything that I have missed, or is there anything else that you believe is important to share? Do you have any questions?