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Indigenous Experiences of Reconnecting with Culture and Community

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Indigenous Experiences of Reconnecting with Culture and Community

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

Indigenous culture and community is interconnected to Indigenous relationality and essential to understanding an Indigenous worldview. Nevertheless, a history of colonialism marked by enduring acts of cultural dislocation, such as the trauma of residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, the Millennium Scoop, and various acts of legislation and relocation, has led to many Indigenous individuals being raised without connection to their Indigenous cultures or communities. This thesis utilizes an Indigenous Storywork methodology in conjunction with Research as Ceremony, Desire-based research, and a conversational approach to address a central question: How do Indigenous individuals raised without integrated connection to their cultures and communities experience reconnecting with their Indigenous cultures and communities? In relational collaboration with three storytellers who were separated from their Indigenous cultures and communities during their upbringing, this thesis places their stories of reconnection into relationship with each other and three additional publicly shared stories of Indigenous reconnection journeys. This relational approach yields profound insights into the unique experience of reconnection with four overarching themes: Displacement, Confusion, Longing, and Reconnection. These themes intricately detail the multifaceted experiences, obstacles, and strengths encountered on Indigenous reconnection journeys, providing the opportunity to listen, learn, and understand. This research carries potential implications for future research and practice concerning journey-informed work with Indigenous Peoples who have experienced separation from their cultures and communities, deepening understanding of the intricate relationalities and dynamics they may be navigating along their journeys of reconnection.

Keywords: Indigenous, Indigenous Storywork, relationality, cultural dislocation, community, counselling psychology, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

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This work could never have been accomplished without the incredible gift of story that the storytellers shared with me, and now with you. It also could not have been accomplished without the courage and strength of all those Indigenous individuals who were separated and who have shared their story publicly. I want to honour their experiences, and it is my hope that I have done so throughout, but it is still important to explicitly state that I could not have done anything here without them. I am eternally grateful.

I would also like to thank my family, my mom, my dad, my siblings, who were consistent supporters in my times of doubt, helping me to complete this thesis and helping me to see why I am pursuing this path. To all my family back home, Aseniwuche Winewak Nation, it is hard being away, but I hope that I can work to deserve the pride and love you all continue to show me.

Thank you, to everyone.

Dedication

For my sister.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Figures.....	viii
Chapter One: Relationality.....	1
A Note on Terminology.....	4
Introducing Storytellers.....	5
Research Question.....	7
Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	9
Contexts of Colonial Disconnection.....	9
Residential Schools.....	10
Child Apprehension.....	13
Enfranchisement.....	14
Métis Scrip.....	15
Summary.....	15
Truth and Reconciliation in the Field of Psychology.....	16
Decolonization.....	18
Indigenous Cultural Connection & Mental Health.....	19
Protective Factors.....	21
Language.....	22
Lived Experiences of Cultural Separation.....	24
Frameworks of Indigenous Reconnection.....	26
Conclusion.....	29
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	31
Integrated Indigenous Methodologies.....	31
Indigenous Storywork.....	32
Respect.....	33
Responsibility.....	34
Reverence.....	35
Reciprocity.....	36
Holism.....	37
Interrelatedness.....	38

Synergy.....	39
Philosophical Underpinnings.....	40
Desire-Based Research Orientation.....	41
Story Gathering.....	42
Storyteller.....	42
Research Conversations.....	44
Ethical Considerations.....	45
Meaning-Making Approach.....	46
Encircling Process.....	48
Future Dissemination of Findings.....	50
Chapter Four: Findings.....	52
Sharing Stories.....	52
Themes: Indigenous Stories of Reconnection.....	58
Displacement.....	61
External Forces.....	61
Internal Impacts.....	63
Intergenerational Effects.....	65
Wisdom Learned.....	67
Conclusion.....	69
Confusion.....	69
Defined Indigeneity.....	70
Participation Hardships.....	73
Guides and Supports.....	76
Conclusion.....	78
Longing.....	78
Indigenous Enough.....	80
Engaging Authentically.....	82
Shame.....	83
Conclusion.....	86
Reconnection.....	86
Ongoing Journeys.....	87
New Horizons.....	88
Gifts.....	90
Knowledge Shared.....	92

Stephanie Tipple.....	93
Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew, Sky Dancing Women.....	93
Nevada Ouellette.....	94
Conclusion.....	95
Chapter Five: Discussion.....	96
Reflection on Stories.....	96
Personal Learning, Impact, and Relationality.....	97
It is a Journey, Not a Destination.....	100
Complex Relationality.....	100
Isolation.....	104
Self-Understanding.....	105
Reconnection and Decolonization.....	106
Revisiting Language.....	108
Implications for Counselling Psychology.....	110
Strengths and Limitations.....	113
Directions for Future Research.....	114
Final Message.....	115
References.....	116
Appendix.....	132

List of Figures

Figure 1.	The Journey of Reconnection.....	60
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Chapter One: Relationality

tan'si. Hello, how are you? My name is Asher, and I am the author of the work you are about to read. It is a project that intends to reflect the experiences of Indigenous individuals who were separated from their home communities, cultures, and Nations, as well as how those individuals found their way home. In other words, to explore stories of how individuals raised without integrated connection to their cultures and communities experience reconnection with their Indigenous cultures and communities. It places stories of these experiences in relationship with each other to increase understanding of what it is like to go through an Indigenous reconnection journey.

In writing a thesis from an Indigenous perspective, it is of the utmost importance to recognize relationality (Kovach, 2010b; Minet, 2021), which refers to the understanding that nothing exists in isolation and that there is a connected relationship between all beings and the world around them (Fellner, 2016). This perspective also applies to understanding the relationships of and between storytellers, relationships to their cultures and communities, and the relationships between stories and across time. Additionally, it is essential to understand the relationship between myself, as the researcher, and the research. This both shapes how I interpret the research findings and is important as a cultural perspective of growing knowledge and the ways in which each storyteller and listener live with each other and grow the story (Archibald & Parent, 2019; Kovach, 2010a). I acknowledge here, before going into any findings or interpretations, that I am an individual with my own experiences, history, and perspective, and can only understand the world from my lens. This understanding is relationality in connection to an Indigenous research paradigm and is needed to create meaning in the research (Kovach, 2010a). Thus, to begin properly, I must first start with an introduction of who I am.

My name is Asher. I am a son, a brother, a nephew, a cousin, a friend. I am a student and a counsellor. And most importantly, both for myself and how it relates to this project, I am a proud member of Aseniwuche Winewak Nation (AWN), a Cree community currently located in the area around Grande Cache, Alberta, Canada. My Nation has historic ties to this area as well as to the area now known as Jasper, Alberta, Canada. We are the Mountain People. I am Cree through kinship, community, and family, and I have been raised as a member of AWN for my entire life. I was adopted as an infant. To the best of my limited knowledge of my biological background, I am racially white. My mom, the woman who adopted me, comes from a Jewish background, and my dad, the man who adopted me, is Cree. My mom is biologically related to my birth mom, but I am also a second-generation adoptee as my birth dad was adopted through a closed adoption and does not know his genetic family history. As a result, my understanding of my genetic ancestry is limited with only half of my background known to me. However, this has never been a limiting factor in my connection to my family, my community, and my Nation. I am a member of Aseniwuche Winewak Nation through my relationships and upbringing.

It is important to me that my experience and background is understood clearly. There is a growing rise of individuals who make claims to Indigeneity when their connection is dubious or unfounded, sometimes as a means of advancing their career through the misunderstandings of others (Lewis, 2023). I will go into this subject further in Chapter Four. Here, I am going to make clear what my connections to Indigeneity are so that you are entering into this ceremony that is research (Wilson, 2008) with eyes open, not being misled, with an understanding of my intersecting social locations and contexts. I am white. I am also Aseniwuche Winewak Cree through kinship. While some may have challenges understanding this intersectionality, these two statements do not conflict for me. Asking one Nation what is necessary to be a member and to be

Indigenous might get an entirely different perspective than another Nation (Kesler, 2020). I was raised with the understanding that blood quantum, the hypothetical measurement of Indigenous blood through your ancestry (Chow, 2018), is not how family and Indigeneity is understood. I was taught that it is through kinship, through family, through culture, that membership is found. While other Nations and groups may have a different perspective that is also valid, in this research I will honour my family and cultural traditions by following what has been taught to me. I am a member of Aseniwuche Winewak Nation, and the colour of my skin or the tracking of my largely unknown bloodline is irrelevant to my inclusion in my family and my culture.

At the same time, being white, I have a significant amount of privilege. I am not racialized as Indigenous, do not experience racial attacks, discrimination, or any other form of worse treatment because of my skin, hair, or eye colour. There have been many occasions in my life where I have been with a member of my family who is visibly Indigenous and the contrast between how I am treated and how they are treated is immense. My white privilege provides me with opportunities and treatment that is often not afforded to others. This is a bias and worldview that is also a part of me and will likely be present in this research in ways that I am not aware of.

My experience of being white and adopted into my community and my culture at such an age that it is all I have ever known is a major factor of what brings me to this research.

Indigenous communities have faced an onslaught of cultural and familial destruction through colonization. Children have been stolen, Peoples have been displaced from their lands, and families have been separated on a colossal scale (Blackstock, 2017; Choate et al., 2021; Sinclair, 2007; Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC], 2015a). This has left many Indigenous individuals growing up without connection to their cultures and to their communities. My heart hurts thinking about this loss, knowing that the family and home that I cherish so dearly, has

been brutally stolen from others. I am living the inverse of their experience, a privilege that does not seem fair. This places me in a unique position in this research. Through my adoption, I am often in a place of being between two worlds, the intersection of Indigeneity and whiteness. It creates an opportunity and responsibility to connect with that same feeling of being between two worlds among those experiencing reconnection.

Living in gratitude for the way I was raised with Cree culture, language, and traditions has inspired me to understand the survivance stories (Vizenor, 1999) of Indigenous people who did not grow up with these community connections yet have navigated back to their Indigenous relationalities and ways of knowing, being, and doing. It is my hope that this research will help support the effort towards more culturally relevant mental health services for Indigenous individuals who have been separated from their communities and cultures, and for those who are seeking reconnection.

A Note on Terminology

This thesis primarily uses the term Indigenous, which can have a more expansive definition than perhaps appears at first glance (Younging, 2018). Here, Indigenous will primarily refer to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples, though has implications that could apply to the First Peoples of Australia, New Zealand, South America, and elsewhere across the world. This research approaches this subject from a primarily North American context, yet colonialism is a worldwide experience and connections may be present even if not explicit (Bradford, 2020; Funston & Herring, 2016). Additionally, throughout this work, other terms referring to Indigenous Peoples will be present such as in cited works or in experiential accounts. These terms include Aboriginal, Native, and Indian. These terms come with important contextual reference to the locations and speakers who are using them and can also potentially carry

problematic overtones. Recognizing that Indigenous is a unifying term rather than a descriptive one, terms and group titles referring to specific Indigenous Nations or groups will be used when applicable (Yellow Bird, 1999; Younging, 2018). Otherwise, I will refer to the plural, Indigenous Peoples, when talking about something that refers to multiple Indigenous Nations or groups such as collective or common experiences.

Additionally, in this thesis, I am working with individuals' experiences of being Indigenous and their journey of reconnection, which involves developing an understanding of who they are as an Indigenous person. While the term 'identity' is often used in these accounts, Fellner (2016) and Minet (2021) posit that 'identity' does not fully capture Indigenous concepts of being in relation. Instead, it tends to emphasize the individual as separate from their relationships. Therefore, in alignment with an Indigenous approach to knowledge and ways of being, I primarily use the term 'relationality' in place of the conventional Western term 'identity' in this thesis. However, due to common usage, the term 'identity' still appears in quotes and cited works.

Introducing Storytellers

I have started this thesis by situating myself within the research, introducing who I am and where I come from. This feels a natural place to do introductions and so here I would like to also introduce you to the three storytellers who were integral to this project. They gifted their stories of reconnection to me and, through this research, to you. This section includes their introduction in their own words.

Stephanie Tipple (Kitpu E'pit/Eagle Woman) is an l'nu'skw (Mi'kmaw woman) of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry from the Bay of Islands, Newfoundland. She is a member of the Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation but did not grow up readily exposed to her Indigenous culture.

Over the past few years, Stephanie has dedicated her personal and professional life to reconnection, reclamation, and reconciliation. Despite the inevitable confusion and uncertainty, Stephanie's journey has brought significant clarity, fulfillment, and purpose.

Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew (Sky Dancing Woman), Pimohtew Nama Kikway Talkskwayowin (Walks with no tracks), comes from Métis, Cree, and Scottish ancestry on her mother's side. She was told that her father's family had immigrated from Germany. In doing her own research, she found that her great-grandmother was Nehiyaw (Cree) and Irish, born on the prairies, and so she comes from mostly Nehiyaw (Cree) and Irish descent on her father's side, with some Métis as well. She is currently in the process of getting her Métis citizenship through her mother's connection to the Red River Settlement. Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew has been on a long journey of self-discovery, successfully bringing her family connections to their culture that had been lost.

Nevada is Métis-(Cree / Ojibway), Russian and Polish, with ancestry from communities in Treaty 4, 6, and 7 territory, Montana, and North Dakota. She is a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta. Nevada has experienced hardship in her life, including experiences of addiction, and her journey of reconnection has been a major source of spirit for her, connecting her to her ancestors and the strength she carries within. The duality of life, containing both complexities and blessings, everything in between, beyond and before, is also present in the way Nevada connects with her mixed Indigenous relationality. She finds fulfillment and connection through ceremony, prayer, and the relationships she has built.

Stephanie, Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew, and Nevada have each, by participating in this research project, continued the incredible work they are doing in each of their own lives. They are actively working to create space and the potential for other Indigenous individuals who are

on their own journey to feel supported and heard. Their journeys of reconnection are unique to each of them, and yet, as will be discussed later, there is a relationship that exists and shared experiences that carry knowledge and spirit. Their stories of reconnection also carry beauty and difficulty, and I am eternally grateful for the opportunity to be a listener, as well as for the great responsibility of sharing a small aspect of their journey in this project.

Research Question

My research question came from three areas. It came as a result of my own reckoning with relationality, spending much of my life trying to understand my place in my family, in my community, and in my culture. It also came as a result of spending my life among the wider Indigenous community and seeing first-hand the scale at which Indigenous individuals have been separated. Finally, it came after watching the documentary film *Foster Child* (Cardinal, 1987), a source of story and knowledge I will discuss in greater depth later in this thesis, which made me reflect on the way in which I had not fully processed the reconnection journeys going on around me.

These three experiences joined together to support me in realizing how little I understood about Indigenous journeys of reconnection, how much there was to learn, and how deep a connection I felt to it due to my own life experiences. I felt a responsibility to understand more, and to help others understand more, so that those journeys which hold so much importance can be raised and welcomed. Throughout this thesis, we, in a combined relational process between myself as the writer, you as the reader, and the storytellers of this thesis, will work together towards this pursuit of deeper understanding. In Chapter Two, I will delve into a literature review that brings forward relevant literature and context. In Chapter Three, I will go through the methodological processes and philosophies that are present in this research. In Chapter Four, I

will walk through the findings that have been shared across stories of Indigenous reconnection. And, in Chapter Five, I will discuss central takeaways from our work in this thesis. All of this is in the search of an answer to the research question this thesis is based in.

The research question is: How do Indigenous individuals raised without integrated connection to their cultures and communities experience reconnecting with their Indigenous cultures and communities?

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this section, my intention is to place this thesis into conversation with literature that already exists. It is important to recognize that written literature is not unilaterally the most reflective form of history for many Indigenous Peoples, and many groups use oral storytelling to mark history (Archibald, 2008; Hanson, 2009a; Kovach, 2005). Thus, it is important to incorporate Indigenous accounts that go beyond the typical written format, including other forms of history such as oral record. Perhaps the largest collection of publicly shared oral accounts and stories is through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). In honouring written academic work by, for, and with Indigenous Peoples, I will largely be looking to Indigenous scholars that have already gone through the arduous work of placing their experiences as Indigenous Peoples into written and academic forms. I am grateful to be in such an advantageous position that I may stand on the shoulders of giants, and I will do what I can to respect and honour all the work that they have done so that I may be in this position. I will also be bringing other academic sources into the conversation as needed.

This literature review is organized into six sections. First, important historical and social context for the disconnection Indigenous Peoples have experienced. Second, an overview and reflection on the TRC Final Report. Third, a brief discussion of decolonization. Fourth, academic literature related to the relationships between Indigenous cultural connections and mental health. Fifth, academic literature that explores lived experiences of Indigenous individuals' journeys of reconnection. Sixth, frameworks and conceptualizations of the experience of reconnection in academic literature before concluding with a brief summary.

Contexts of Colonial Disconnection

Given this study's exploration of disconnections of Indigenous Peoples from their cultures and communities, this research necessarily confronts colonial processes such as residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, the Millennium Scoop, the foster system, enfranchisement, and the Métis Scrip system. Further, beginning with a ban of potlatch ceremonies in 1884 and the following suppression of other Indigenous cultural practices and ceremonies, Indigenous Peoples were legally barred from engaging in their traditional cultural activities until the revision of the Indian Act in 1951 (Hanson, 2009; Pettipas, 1994). Those who defied these restrictions faced severe consequences, including imprisonment and the confiscation of cultural items.

Additionally, restrictions on travel between reserves and significant reductions in food rations were enforced as punitive measures to deter any attempts of Indigenous Peoples to practice their culture (Pettipas, 1994). These policies and processes all combined to create an intricate system of disconnecting Indigenous individuals from their families, communities, languages, and cultural practices in order to eliminate Indigenous relationalities and ways of life (Blackstock, 2017; Sinclair, 2007; TRC, 2015a). Theft of Indigenous culture and connection can thus affect anyone within a wide range of communities (e.g., urban, rural, reserve, remote, etc.), travelling across generations, leading to many Indigenous individuals currently finding their own ways to reconnect without having learned their languages and the cultural and social norms they would have prior to colonialism.

Residential Schools

Residential schools were a widespread system of boarding schools where Indigenous children were removed from their families, often placed in locations at such distances that would make visitation difficult to impossible, and directly attacked the Indigenous languages, cultures, and relationalities of the children at the schools (Residential School History, 2021; TRC, 2015a;

Young, 2015). They “were a systematic, government-sponsored attempt to destroy Aboriginal cultures and languages and to assimilate Aboriginal Peoples so that they no longer existed as distinct Peoples” (TRC, 2015a, p. 200). Residential schools operated for more than 150 years, with the last school closing in 1996 (Hanson et al., 2020).

The TRC was created as a result of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, “the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history” (Government of Canada [GC], 2022) with a mandate to record and bring awareness to the impact of residential schools. Beginning in 2008, the Indigenous-led TRC spent years meeting with residential school Survivors, their families, and communities, documenting the testimonies of more than 6500 Survivors across the country and holding seven national events (GC, 2022; TRC, 2015a). “The Commission estimates there were as many as 155,000 visits to the seven National Events; over 9,000 residential school Survivors registered to attend them” (TRC 2015a, p. 29). In 2015, the TRC presented their executive summary and ninety-four calls to action highlighting specific and actionable needs across a variety of institutions and governments, which if met, would recognize the impact residential schools had and create meaningful change for Survivors, and for all Indigenous Peoples (TRC 2015a, 2015b).

The TRC Final Report (2015a) details the experiences of children having clothing, language, and other markers of their Indigenous relationality removed, and the extreme personal toll that took on the children. Across this era, the impact on the physical and mental health of Indigenous children separated from their families was immense and devastating. To force children to attend the schools and ensure they could not escape, Indian agents could use a warrant to, “enter— by force if need be—any house, building, or place named in the warrant and remove the child” (TRC, 2015a, p. 63). Over time, beginning around the 1940's, residential

schools became more akin to “orphanages or child-welfare facilities” (TRC, 2015a, p. 71). By the 1960's, approximately half of children in residential schools were present for child welfare reasons, “simply a transferring of children from one form of institution, the residential school, to another, the child-welfare agency” (TRC, 2015a, p. 71).

Physical and sexual abuse was so prominent in residential schools that, by 2014, “the Independent Assessment Process had resolved 30,939 sexual or serious physical abuse claims” (TRC, 2015a, p. 225). This violence and mistreatment of the children in care had additional dire results as “the death rates for Aboriginal children in the residential schools were far higher than those experienced by members of the general Canadian population” (TRC, 2015a, p. 93). Mental health impacts were also quite present, and often connected to physical violence. One Survivor, Raymond Hill, is quoted by the TRC saying: “I lost my language. They threatened us with a strapping if we spoke it, and within a year I lost all of it” (TRC, 2015a, p. 84). Another Survivor, Sarah McLeod, described an experience in which “a miniature totem pole that a family member had given her for her birthday... was taken from her and thrown out. She was told that it was nothing but devilry” (TRC, 2015a, p. 86). Having such a disconnect in language and culture, paired with an intensity and violence, has impacted many Survivors' return to family and community. John Kistabish shared this experience of disconnect, stating “I knew that they were my parents, when I left the residential school, but the communication wasn't there” (TRC, 2015a, p. 85) because he could no longer speak Algonquin and his parents could not speak the French language that he had been forced to learn while at the school. Further, experiencing violence and other forms of abuse as direct punishments for engaging with their culture, community, and language (TRC 2015a) has created complex intergenerational relationships with Indigeneity. Many Survivors and their descendants thus experienced a great theft of their culture and

community in their lives (TRC, 2015a). The unequivocal disconnection and pain that was forced on Indigenous children and families is immense, and it speaks to the importance of the TRC for bringing their stories forward in a way that is respectful to the wishes of those who shared, requiring governments and institutions to respond and acknowledge them.

Child Apprehension

The Sixties Scoop, partially named for its occurrence in and around the 1960's, was an era in which government apprehension of Indigenous children and the subsequent mass adoption of those children into primarily non-Indigenous homes was occurring at alarming rates across Canada, rates that are still disproportionate today (Sinclair, 2007). The 'Scoop' portion of the name comes from the “common practice in BC... to 'scoop' from their mothers on reserves almost all newly born children” (Johnston, 2005, as cited in Sinclair, 2007. p. 66). This was not a singular policy but instead a series of actions simultaneously taken in different child welfare systems across Canada that all contributed to the extreme separation of children and families. This period of history is generally thought to have closed in the 1980's; however, with many recognizing the ways in which it has persisted in new forms, the Sixties Scoop gave way to what is called the Millennium Scoop (Sinclair, 2007).

The Millennium Scoop acknowledges the ongoing apprehension of Indigenous children at disproportionately high rates (Sinclair, 2007). According to a census taken in 2021 by the Canadian government, despite the fact that Indigenous children represent only 7.7% of children in Canada, they make up 53.8% of children currently in foster care (GC, 2023). Some, such as Blackstock (2017), have argued that the current child welfare system is simply a change in naming convention, with the intentions of residential schools maintained through child apprehension in Indigenous communities. This argument is amplified by the many voices that

have spoken to the ways in which the foster system has had a negative, and often traumatic, impact on their lives (Smart, 2021; TRC, 2015a).

As Sinclair (2007) addresses, Indigenous children being adopted into non-Indigenous homes have often faced racism and various forms of abuse (e.g., physical, emotional, sexual). Even within homes where children are not experiencing abuse or racism, foster or adoptive parents may lack the ability to create meaningful cultural engagement for their Indigenous children, resulting in widespread relational and attachment issues as well as difficulties reconnecting later in life (Sinclair, 2007).

Enfranchisement

Enfranchisement refers to the legal removal of an individual's Indian Status, granting them full Canadian citizenship (Kirby, 2020). Despite its historical association with negative and violent treatment, Indian Status often serves as the gateway to accessing Indigenous community resources, including treaty benefits and the right to reside on reserve (Crey & Hanson, 2009). Enfranchisement was commonly practiced between 1869 and 1985 in order to remove Indigenous people from their communities, cultures, and treaty rights (Assembly of First Nations, 2020). Indigenous women who married non-Indigenous men, as well as their children, lost their Indian Status (Kirby, 2020; Stevenson, 2020). Similarly, if an Indigenous man was enfranchised, his wife and children would also be enfranchised. Individuals were also enfranchised when they joined the military, pursued higher education, or even spent extended periods off their reservation (Kirby, 2020; Crey, 2009).

Enfranchisement was presented by the government as a privilege or reward, where the removal of Indian Status meant shedding a perceived disability and gaining higher Canadian citizenship, with alleged increased rights and opportunities (Kirby, 2020; Stevenson, 2020).

However, this view was not shared by many Indigenous individuals, as enfranchisement led directly to the loss of their homes, families, and the ability to practice their culture. Forced to leave reservations without meaningful support, many Indigenous individuals had to abandon or conceal their Indigenous relationalities, resulting in the inability to access their languages, cultures, and communities for themselves and their descendants (Crey & Hanson, 2009; Stevenson, 2020).

Métis Scrip

Scrip significantly impacted the relationalities of Métis Peoples, as it involved applying for vouchers exchangeable for predetermined amounts of land or money, effectively stripping them of their legal claim to Indigeneity and land rights (Ens et al., 2018; Stevenson, 2020). Moreover, the land promised to them (if received at all, due to mismanagement and manipulative practices) was often located far from their home communities. This led to the disintegration of Métis territory and community by isolating individuals on separate, distantly located plots of land, disconnected from their communities (Ens et al., 2018). As a consequence, numerous Métis individuals and their descendants experienced a widespread and intergenerational loss of language, culture, and community (Ens et al., 2018; Stevenson, 2020).

Summary

Canada's history is marked by targeted and violent actions against Indigenous Peoples, which also involved a prolonged assault on their relationalities, aiming to perpetrate cultural genocide and eradicate any traces of Indigenous existence (Ens et al., 2018; Stevenson, 2020; TRC, 2015a). These attacks on culture and relational connections were carried out through legislation, child apprehension, enfranchisement, and Métis Scrip systems, working in concert to prevent future generations from accessing or comprehending their Indigenous relationality,

languages, cultures, and ways of life. Consequently, many individuals and communities have been deeply impacted, devoid of access to traditional cultural teachings and community settings. The TRC and its findings (2015a, 2015b) have been among the notable calls to acknowledge the profound effects of these targeted acts of cultural genocide and to prompt action from all segments of society that have contributed to this harm. Meaningful change is essential to prevent the continuation of such actions.

Truth and Reconciliation in the Field of Psychology

The field of psychology responded to the TRC Calls to Action (2015b) with a dedicated commitment to acknowledging the harm inflicted on Indigenous Peoples and striving for transformative change to prevent such actions from persisting (Ansloos et al., 2019; Canadian Psychological Association [CPA], 2018; Fellner et al., 2020). These changes encompassed recognizing instances where psychology's code of ethics was compromised in perpetuating the cultural genocide of Indigenous Peoples (CPA, 2018, pp. 8-9), acknowledging the dominance of colonial or Western narratives within the discipline, and encouraging psychologists to introspectively integrate Indigenous perspectives and needs (CPA, 2018, pp. 9-23). Furthermore, there was a call for improved education and resources related to Indigenous experiences and the support of Indigenous psychologists (CPA, 2018, pp. 24-31). Although the response primarily urges individual psychology practitioners, its recognition holds significant weight in emphasizing the importance of listening to stories and how they can profoundly influence practices involving Indigenous Peoples and cultures. The significance of these stories serves as a pivotal driving force behind this project.

This thesis also responds to the TRC's Calls for Action (2015b). Though I do take a broader approach to Indigenous journeys of reconnection, recognizing the impact of residential

schools is essential. This includes the ways in which the effects of residential schools have perpetuated through other systems of child apprehension and the impact that has on mental health, culture, relationality, and community connection. It aims to amplify the voices who have spoken to their experiences of being raised external to their communities and cultures, and directly acknowledge the very real ways this experience has affected their lives. It also has implications for further understanding and education of professionals in mental health fields, and the development of further research around Indigenous journeys of reconnection. Finally, the TRC recognized a concern that corroboration of physical evidence is often required in court cases around Indigenous experiences of abuse within the residential school system, which “betrays an unwillingness to take the evidence of Aboriginal people as being worthy of belief” (TRC, 2015a, p. 213). This thesis is not a legal court case, but it is academic work that highly values evidence. As such, this thesis responds to the concerns of the TRC by placing Indigenous stories prominently as a basis for findings, strongly supporting Indigenous stories as worthy of belief.

The TRC is a monumental achievement that has sparked subsequent responsibility and accountability on behalf of systems and structures, such as the field of psychology. The task force report (CPA, 2018) recognizes experiences of the residential school Survivors shared in the TRC process, making Indigenous voices prominent and heard, and creating systems and resources that mark meaningful and impactful change around mental health service provision with Indigenous Peoples. It is a moral duty of all mental health service providers, educators, and researchers in Canada to be familiar with the TRC, what it stands for, and how the harms perpetuated by the mental health system can be addressed moving forward. This also involves an understanding of responses to colonialism that are already present.

Decolonization

The context and history of Indigenous Peoples' experiences has been closely linked to the often-violent colonial practices and their repercussions (TRC, 2015a). This underscores the critical necessity of addressing decolonization, defined by Fellner (2018) as the “active, intentional, moment-to-moment process that involves critically undoing colonial ways of knowing, being, and doing, while privileging and embodying Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing” (p. 284). This active perspective on decolonization interprets it as a dynamic process, consistently recentering Indigenous ways of being (Fellner, 2016, 2018). Decolonization is a term commonly featured in discussions concerning Indigenous experiences (Fellner, 2016, 2018; Stevenson, 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2012) but has also been employed by non-Indigenous groups, communities, and Peoples who have experienced the impacts of colonization (Dei & Simmons, 2011; Hernández-Wolfe, 2013; Millner et al., 2021). Depending on perspective and application, decolonization has been applied to various topics such as gender, parenthood, language, education, trauma understanding, and more (Battiste, 2000, 2013; Fellner, 2016, 2018; Linklater, 2014; Stevenson, 2020; Tipple, 2021).

Tuck and Yang (2012) express concerns that the broader use of the term decolonization in metaphorical contexts dilutes its fundamental meaning, emphasizing that “decolonization specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life. Decolonization is not a metonym for social justice” (p. 21). Within the context of Indigenous separation and reconnection, decolonization has a strong link to the restoration of Indigenous Peoples' ties to their lands, communities, and cultures (Stevenson, 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2012). From this perspective, decolonization is not only about recentering Indigenous ways of life but also about firmly asserting Indigenous self-determination and autonomous sovereignty, particularly through

land (Tuck & Yang, 2012). However, Garba and Sorentino (2020) argue that this approach to decolonization may be short-sighted and carry inherent anti-Black implications, as it does not adequately address the experiences of slavery in connection to land or the nuanced role of metaphor in navigating colonial systems of ownership.

Clearly, decolonization speaks prominently to major aspects of life and culture for many. In the context of this thesis, decolonization could also be interpreted as reconnection, with the act of finding culture and community after being raised separated directly recentring Indigenous ways of being and confronting colonial history (Minet, 2021; Stevenson, 2020). Learning Indigenous languages, cultural traditions, engaging in Indigenous community and asserting personal Indigeneity after a lengthy history of targeted efforts to stop this from happening is decolonization, and further invites more Indigenous voices to be shared and heard (Minet, 2021; TRC, 2015a). In listening to the messages of the TRC (2015a, 2015b), grasping the broader implications of colonialism, and delving into discussions on decolonization and how it can be integrated, decolonization becomes a prominent aspect of this thesis to understand Indigenous reconnection journeys.

Indigenous Cultural Connection & Mental Health

With the value of Indigenous cultures as a protective factor for many Indigenous Peoples (MacDonald et al., 2013; Masotti et al, 2020; Snowshoe et al., 2017), it is important to understand the unique mental health considerations for those who do not have these protective factors. In the “Sixties Scoop” class action case, *Brown v Canada* (2018), the judge found:

The impact on the removed Aboriginal children has been described as 'horrendous, destructive, devastating and tragic.' The uncontroverted [expert] evidence [from across Canada] ... is that the loss of their Aboriginal identity left the children fundamentally

disoriented, with a reduced ability to lead healthy and fulfilling lives. The loss of Aboriginal identity resulted in psychiatric disorders, substance abuse, unemployment, violence and numerous suicides. (p. 2)

The impact of residential schools is profound, evidenced by literature exploring cultural connections within Indigenous families who have experienced varying degrees of exposure to these schools. Gray and Cote (2019) discovered that families who had endured residential schools showed more substantial mental health benefits from increased cultural connection compared to those without such experiences. By concentrating on young adults, Gray and Cote (2019) present a compelling case for understanding the intergenerational effects of colonialism and cultural reconnection on newer generations. Lewis (2022) delves into the effects of residential schools on Elders and the transmission of knowledge across generations. Using the framework of psychosocial development stages, Lewis discusses a modern change in which Elders have limited opportunities to engage in generativity, a vital developmental phase involving the imparting of information, cultural norms, and knowledge to younger generations. This loss of generativity, he contends, correlates with diminished motivation, unsuccessful aging, and compromised mental health outcomes (Lewis, 2022). The link between the exposure to colonial actions, such as the often violent theft of culture and community, and negative impacts on mental health is evident, highlighting the need for research that addresses these impacts.

Numerous scholars have advocated for the integration and respect of an individual's Indigenous cultures and communities as a means to promote mental health and wellbeing. LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerten (1993) argue that individuals who possess a secure sense of self within their cultural relationalities and maintain a positive outlook on those relationalities are more likely to exhibit improved psychological outcomes. Similarly, Carriere and Richardson (2009) suggest “that by supporting connectedness and cultural identity for Indigenous children

and families, service providers may help turn longing into belonging” (p. 63). Conceptualizing mental health in combination with culture is essential when working with Indigenous Peoples (Fellner, 2018; Gone, 2013). While there is, of course, variation in each Indigenous individual's life and personal relationship with their culture, the idea of “culture as treatment” (Gone, 2013, pp. 696-700) is profound and impactful. Many Indigenous individuals, especially those who have endured residential schools, have experienced enhanced wellbeing and reduced instances of experiences of PTSD, addiction, and suicidality through engagement in Indigenous cultural practices such as talking circles, sweat lodges, and powwows (Chandler, 2008; Chandler & LaLonde, 1998; Gone, 2013). It has even been shown to be a protective factor in managing conditions like diabetes (Oster et al., 2014). Simply, a culturally grounded approach has been demonstrated to often be more effective than conventional non-Indigenous therapeutic methods when working with Indigenous Peoples (Duran, 2019; Fellner, 2016; Gone, 2013). This speaks highly of Indigenous culture as a protective factor when it comes to mental health of Indigenous Peoples.

Protective Factors

Building on the understanding of Indigenous culture as a protective element, Duran (2019) demonstrates how cultural activities and practices can be integrated into counselling and psychotherapy. This approach not only celebrates culture but also challenges colonial narratives, decolonizing by emphasizing practices like prayer, meditation, and cultural traditions (Duran, 2019). The shift toward Indigenous perspectives and the decolonization of wellness paradigms takes on important significance, with direct benefits recognized in Indigenous communities (Reeves & Stewart, 2014; Ross, 2014; Waldram, 2008). This transition facilitates the incorporation of long-standing Indigenous wisdom within Indigenous communities, allowing

these traditional insights to effectively support and serve those communities (Duran, 2019; Fellner, 2016; Linklater, 2014).

Indeed, the significance of Indigenous culture in enhancing wellness, establishing protective elements, and contributing to successful therapeutic outcomes is evident. Indigenous communities have a profound understanding of the value of preserving their cultures in the face of attempts by institutions and societal forces to eradicate them (Krieg, 2016; TRC, 2015a). Vizenor (1999) characterizes the resilience and determination of Indigenous Peoples as survivance, encompassing the steadfast preservation of culture, community, and an unwavering commitment to moving forward. Culture emerges as a vital component of wellness for Indigenous Peoples (Duran, 2019; Fellner, 2016), playing an unquestionable role in fostering Indigenous autonomy, aspirations, and unity within the community for many.

Language

Culture and language are deeply intertwined, with language holding philosophies, traditions, and knowledge within, making it fundamental to this discussion (Chiblow & Meighan, 2022). Language also plays a significant role in the history of Indigenous Peoples, particularly in the context of residential schools (Chiblow & Meighan, 2022; TRC, 2015a). These institutions not only forbade but also often punished the use of Indigenous languages as part of their mission to assimilate and remove Indigenous Peoples (TRC, 2015a). Moreover, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (2015b) emphasize the importance of recognizing that “Aboriginal languages are a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society” (p. 2). The colonial efforts to impose the English language can be seen as an attempt to facilitate communication, but this approach is inherently violent. As Kovach (2010a) notes, “the full-on attempt at linguistic genocide has led to the absence of flourishing Indigenous languages and has compromised a full understanding of Indigenous beliefs and practices.” The removal of

Indigenous languages, driven by both direct policies and ongoing acts of separation, has had a profound impact on Indigenous Peoples (Sinclair, 2007; Stevenson, 2020). It has severed a crucial link between them and their culture.

The loss resulting from the deliberate removal of Indigenous languages and culture is profound because language is, in essence, the heart of culture (Duran, 2019; Fellner, 2016; Makokis, 2005). Language serves as a means of communication not only between different Peoples but also conveys fundamental philosophies, knowledge, and perceptions of the world. For instance, “Indigenous languages understand reality as nonstatic nouns, or reality in motion” (Duran, 2019, p. 7). While each Indigenous language is unique and distinctive, the transition from one language to another, such as from an Indigenous language to English, represents more than a mere translation of words or phrases. It involves a fundamental shift in one's understanding of reality (Chiblow & Meighan, 2022; Makokis, 2005). It's no wonder that research on multilingual experiences has revealed felt changes in personality when switching between languages (Panicacci & Dewaele, 2017). Additionally, individuals have reported powerful and protective experiences related to their culture when they dream in a second language (Lum & Wade, 2016). Therefore, the relationship between Indigenous Nations and their languages is of vital importance for understanding their unique relationalities. As Makokis (2005) eloquently states, “Language is paramount to our survival as unique Indigenous Nations because it houses our systems of knowledge that carry the answers of how to transcend colonial symptoms found in our contemporary identities” (p. 120).

The significance of language in the context of Indigenous culture and relationships underscores the importance of Indigenous language revitalization as a means of enacting decolonization. The TRC has called for the inclusion of Indigenous language classes in post-secondary education and the allocation of funding to support Indigenous language revitalization

initiatives (TRC, 2015b). This aligns with Makokis (2005), who emphasizes that “we are living through a period of time where it is critical for us to affirm our presence through the utilization of our own Indigenous languages where a decolonized reality can be sought” (p. 24).

Consequently, the development and implementation of Indigenous language initiatives represent acts of decolonization, a promising trend given the increasing momentum in Indigenous language revitalization efforts (Cranmer et al., 2019; Gessner et al., 2022; Kae, 2023). Learning languages is crucial for enacting Indigenous philosophies and ways of being (Duran, 2019; Fellner, 2016; Makokis, 2005). As Trask (1999) aptly puts it, “language, in particular, can aid in decolonizing the mind.” (Trask, 1999, p. 44), laying the foundation for Indigenized experiences and perspectives. With Indigenous languages being punished or stolen (TRC, 2015a) in many individuals and their descendants’ lives, it opens conversation for the impact on the lives of those who have been separated from their Indigenous cultures.

Lived Experiences of Cultural Separation

Upon a thorough review of the literature, the only sources I was able to find specifically on lived experiences of cultural separation were related to adoption. I was unable to find experiences of cultural disconnection through other means, such as residential schools, enfranchisement, and forced or voluntary relocation from one's home community. Thus, the current section centres Indigenous lived experiences of cultural separation through adoption.

MacLeod's thesis (2018) delves into the intricacies of Indigenous transracial adoption, employing an autoethnographic storywork approach where she delves into her own experiences being Maya Indigenous and transracially adopted into a family of English and Scottish ancestry. She examines the extensive questioning of her relationality and sense of belonging due to the loss of cultural socialization (MacLeod, 2018), a theme also highlighted by Lewis (2022). Both scholars argue that cultural belonging is pivotal in fostering self-pride and motivation. Greater

security in one's cultural relationalities, often nurtured by family support as MacLeod suggests (2018), can lead to reconciling the historical losses and pave the way for meaningful reconnection. Nuttgens (2004) extends this work through delving into the narratives of four Indigenous individuals who were adopted into or raised within non-Indigenous environments. Nuttgens (2004) identifies seven key shared experiences across the participants' stories: Disconnection, Passing, Diversion, Connection, Reconnection, Surpassing, and Identity Cohesion. Generally, these shared experiences relate to anxieties and pressures experienced by the individual around what it means for them to be Indigenous, how to navigate the racist perspectives or expectations of their Indigeneity, and how to approach reconnection if it worked for their personal context.

Lyman (2017) broadens the scope of these findings by examining the cultural development of Indigenous transracial adoptees within, and across, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Her study uncovers four themes: Traumatic Beginnings, Relationships, Identity Development, and Cultural Transcendence. Lyman delves into the historical consequences of governmental interventions that led to the widespread adoption of Indigenous children, especially into white homes, with a specific focus on the impact within the Haudenosaunee community. She explores how these adoptees navigate their relationalities and highlights the significance of reconnection for those who achieve a sense of equilibrium as a Haudenosaunee individual (Lyman, 2017). Lyman's work expands the context of cultural development within a larger Indigenous Nation, complementing the findings identified by Nuttgens (2004) and MacLeod (2018).

Among the most widely cited works encountered during the course of this project is Dr. Raven Sinclair's *Identity Lost and Found: Lessons from the Sixties Scoop* (2007). Sinclair succinctly and powerfully presents the history of Indigenous culture and community loss, tracing

its progression from the Sixties Scoop through to the Millennium Scoop and the child welfare system. She illustrates how Indigenous adoptees placed within non-Indigenous households undergo a process of assimilation. This process not only widens the gap between Indigenous adoptees and their Indigenous cultures and communities but also presents substantial barriers during reconnection. These experiences resonate with those reflected in the studies of MacLeod (2018), Nuttgens (2004), and Lyman (2017), implying these stories of complex Indigenous reconnection experiences are representative and interconnected across Indigenous cultures, groups, and individuals. Sinclair aptly articulates this complexity by stating, “Developing a cultural identity related to one's biology when raised in a different cultural context is exceedingly difficult” (Sinclair, 2007, pp. 71-72).

Across these sources, similarities of experiences emerge, from the individual to Indigenous adoptees as a group, relationships and shared stories are present and powerful. Understandably, it is also confusing and complex, which makes having a framework of reconnection experiences essential.

Frameworks of Indigenous Reconnection

Indigenous reconnection frameworks are a useful tool for recognizing personal development, areas of difficulty, areas of strength, and the ways in which one recognizes reconnection occurring within and around themselves. Here, I will explore frameworks that are present in the literature, beginning with a framework that takes an internal approach and moving towards more external and relational means of understanding reconnection. Similarly to lived experiences, with the exception of St-Denis and Walsh (2016), literature I was able to find on reconnection frameworks were sparse and primarily located around adoption experiences.

Perhaps some of the most directly applicable work being done is that of Cardinal (2016). In her paper, Cardinal reflects on her journey of self-understanding, framed through distinct

perspectives. She introduces the concept of four different eyes, symbolizing distinct categories of personal growth and experiences in the process of reconnecting with Indigeneity: Develop-eyes, Colon-eyes, Indigen-eyes, and Spiritual-eyes. Develop-eyes refers to the growth of one's curiosity around Indigeneity (Cardinal, 2016, p. 88). Colon-eyes refers to the recognition of covert colonial narratives (Cardinal, 2016, p. 89). Indigen-eyes refers to a growing understanding of Indigenous relationality (Cardinal, 2016, pp. 89-90). Finally, spiritual-eyes refers to the active integration of Indigenous paradigms and ways of being into one's life (Cardinal, 2016, pp. 90-91). These eyes are a personal progression system, measured with internal feelings and awareness, that mark reconnection through their development. While this is beneficial, a framework for such a complex experience as Indigenous reconnection needs to account for wider areas of the journey (Cardinal, 2016).

Cardinal (2017) extended her work through gathering the life narratives of seven Indigenous individuals who had been adopted out of their home culture and community. The four themes she identified were (1) an imposed fracture (pp. 110-115), (2) little anchors (pp. 120-128), (3) coming home (pp. 132-138), and (4) our sacred bundle (pp. 141-149). These four themes mark different stages of reconnection journeys where Indigenous individuals recognize a distinct loss of their relationality and move towards finding and deepening relational connections, shifting from areas of otherness towards an internalized and validated Indigenous perspective. Cardinal (2017), in conversation and integration with her previous work (Cardinal, 2016), can be interpreted as creating a framework for Indigenous reconnection that acknowledges both the internal growth of perspective and the progression of personal connection, suggesting a raised importance of finding personal balance across perspectives and relationalities.

In St-Denis and Walsh's article (2016), Natalie St-Denis reflects upon her personal journey of reconnection after several generations and its implications for her role as an Indigenous social worker. Acknowledging the complicity of her field in perpetuating harm to Indigenous communities (TRC, 2015a), St-Denis and Walsh (2016) outline six distinct phases of her reconnection journey: (1) Awakening, beginning to see herself as an Indigenous woman (pp. 2-6). (2) Exploring, meeting with Elders and embracing ceremonies (pp. 6-8). (3) Indigenizing, incorporating Indigenous ways of being into her life (pp. 8-9). (4) Reclaiming, a point of reconciliation between the Indigenous community and previous Western assumptions (pp. 9-10). (5) Belonging, the ways in which she feels at home within her relationalities and among her community (p.10). (6) The Emerging Warrior, recognizing the responsibility to decolonize professions such as social work which have done harm to Indigenous Peoples (pp. 11-13). St-Denis and Walsh (2016) also acknowledge a complexity of experience present with visible Indigeneity due to racist societal perspectives, an observation paralleled by Nuttgens (2004), MacLeod (2018) and Sinclair (2007). Importantly, St-Denis and Walsh (2016) extend frameworks of Indigenous reconnection by recognizing the external barriers that persistently hinder complete reconnection. This contextual awareness complements the personalized approach offered by Cardinal (2016, 2017), adding depth to the understanding of the reconnection journey.

Landers, Danes, and White Hawk (2015) also further the discourse on reconnection frameworks, examining the development of crucial factors that effectively support Indigenous adoptees along their reconnection journeys. Their study explores the significance of having individuals, such as therapists, who possess a deep understanding of complex social relationalities. Moreover, they emphasize the role of the receiving environment and community for those on reconnection journeys, noting higher success when family members or Nations show

preparedness and a welcoming attitude toward these individuals. This emphasis on recognizing complex social relationalities aligns with the perspectives of St-Denis and Walsh (2016) and Cardinal (2016, 2017). Additionally, the importance of the receiving individuals resonates with the discussions on complex family dynamics and attachment, as highlighted by Carriere and Richardson (2009). It's important to note that these viewpoints don't necessarily contradict each other; rather, they complement and reinforce one another by addressing different facets of the complex experience of Indigenous reconnection. Landers, Danes, and White Hawk's (2015) contribution to this framework approach is invaluable, as it delves into understanding the needs of individuals undergoing reconnection journeys while recognizing the inherent relational nature of this process.

Perspectives on reconnection join together across experiences and areas of focus, which speaks to the essential aspects of these journeys: experiencing loss, relational cohesion and crisis management, difficulties around belonging, and finding support and connection. These four shared experiences are well represented, and can be seen through demonstration across mental health, lived experiences, and frameworks of those who are on their journey of reconnection.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the prominent and applicable academic works that are relevant to experiences of reconnection for Indigenous individuals who were raised outside of their Indigenous culture and community. There is a deep and complex history of targeted acts of cultural genocide that has led to widespread loss of Indigenous relationalities, culture, and community (Sinclair, 2007; TRC, 2015a). This, naturally, affects mental health and lived experiences, and has led to the creation of frameworks for various areas of the experience of separation and reconnection. Each source teaches a key factor that is needed to understand Indigenous journeys of reconnection. Combining these sources together, I have demonstrated an

in-depth understanding of the literature that pertains to this topic, across a variety of perspectives and approaches, and how they relate and converse with each other.

The current literature, however, does not address the experience of reconnection in a broader form, including research around those who were not directly apprehended or adopted. With the notable exceptions of Gray and Cote (2019) and St-Denis and Walsh (2016), most of the research in this area is on direct, first-generation experiences of separation. This research adds to this existing work by including the experiences of those whose connection to culture and community was severed intergenerationally, creating an understanding of Indigenous journeys of reconnection among subsequent generations. This topic requires a focus on Indigenous perspectives and story, so having a methodology that reflects that is of the utmost importance.

Chapter Three: Methodology

As I reflect on the meaning of the term methodology, I am taken back to memories of being with my dad, going hunting and fishing, working on projects, picking medicine, and travelling through the woods back home. Those were times where I was learning. I was being taught what to do, how to do it, and how to practice until it became skills and knowledge that are a part of me. In these experiences, step-by-step procedures were not laid out. I learned in the context of relationships, by observing and listening. Trying, failing, and trying again. This is Indigenous research.

Yet within systems and structures of academia, Indigenous research requires explicitly identifying the steps of this project and its every core concept and philosophy. These memories help me understand the discomfort I am feeling over this process. It feels strange to tell you when I feel I should be showing you. It feels weird to identify philosophies instead of living them throughout the project and demonstrating them with my word choice and approach. However, these feelings do not mean that Indigenous knowledge is mutually exclusive from methodological approaches (Kovach, 2005). As such, I intend to do both. In this section I will set out my methodologies while also expressing these ideas through my own demonstration throughout this thesis.

Integrated Indigenous Methodologies

As I considered how I would approach my research, I reflected on my research question: How do Indigenous individuals raised without integrated connection to their cultures and communities experience reconnecting with their Indigenous cultures and communities?

The answer for my methodological approach came to me as an integration of Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008), Wilson's (2008) research as ceremony, Kovach's (2010a, 2010b)

conversational method, and desire-based research (Tuck, 2009). Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008) would enable me to meaningfully engage with and learn from those who have experienced cultural reconnection in a way that honours the relational research space (Archibald et al., 2019). Archibald and Parent (2019) explain how storytelling is an established part of Indigenous learning and growth. They acknowledge the pressures towards established norms of methodological practice in mainstream academic research, highlighting the strength to forgo that pressure and bring into conversation Indigenous ways of being and knowing.

Kovach (2010b) agrees with the importance of integrating Indigenous research and relationship paradigms, adding the importance of a conversational method to the gathering process. A conversational method puts the natural sharing of stories first to evoke a collaborative yarning of experiences that honours Indigenous ways of being with an informal and unobtrusive gathering method that is both purposive and flexible (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Kovach, 2010b). By creating space for stories, Indigenous methodologies bring about the opportunity for diverse experiences to be shared and understood, a connective force for experiences of different intersectionality and social positions (Kovach et al., 2013). This method creates a path towards relationships with those who have experiences of cultural and community reconnection, doing so in a respectful way that is informed and encompassing of experiential and historical context.

Indigenous Storywork

The Indigenous Storywork methodology (Archibald, 2008) is an approach to research that asserts the value and importance of stories as teachers of knowledge. It recognizes oral traditions common to many Indigenous cultures and has the researcher ready themselves to receive the story of those they are working with by enacting seven key principles within themselves and their approach: respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy. Indigenous Storywork puts forward that by having the researcher

create space for a participant's story with these principles, a mutual space of discovery is made where respectful research findings can emerge that are representative of the relationship's potential (Archibald, 2008; Archibald et al., 2019). Throughout this thesis, I refer to my participants as storytellers. This is more representative of an Indigenous Storywork approach (Archibald, 2008) and more accurately demonstrates their contributions to this thesis.

Storywork's seven key principles (Archibald, 2008; Archibald et al., 2019) create a respectful space for Indigenous knowledge gathering (Kovach, 2010a). In fulfilling these principles, I will use Story, a word hereafter capitalized to represent its significance and value, as a framing and interpretative tool for understanding the meaning and depth that is so plentiful in Indigenous experiences of relationality and reconnection. While I have worked to integrate these key principles throughout this project, I have also directed attention to their specific and concrete applications in various aspects of the study.

Respect.

Respect encompasses an approach of openness and a genuine desire to learn. It involves actively listening to Stories and teachings, as well as creating room for cultural traditions and protocols to be observed. In the context of research, respect extends to ongoing relationships with Storytellers, ensuring that their voices are faithfully and respectfully represented, aligning with their intentions and perspectives. Moreover, it is about honouring the diverse range of Indigenous experiences. Respect in research entails providing the Storytellers with the space to be heard, to engage in cultural practices, and to trust that they will be treated with dignity and strength. This includes an ongoing consent process and creating space for their agency and direction to make changes or select how they are portrayed in an academic work (Archibald, 2008; Archibald et al., 2019).

Respect has been incorporated as a guiding principle throughout the entirety of this research, directed towards the Storytellers and their Stories. In conversations, I practiced respect by creating an environment where the Storytellers had the space to share as best fit for them and their Story. We integrated cultural practices such as smudging and prayer as openings to each conversation, always conducted in alignment with the Storytellers' needs. Additionally, I incorporated respect with culturally respectful gifts that demonstrated gratitude and reciprocity. The aim of this project is to respectfully listen to the Stories of Indigenous reconnection, both those shared by the Storytellers and those publicly available, and I treated them with respect as teachers and guides who have chosen to share their wisdom through this project with the direct intention of supporting others.

Responsibility.

Responsibility encompasses the cultivation and fulfillment of ongoing relationships, coupled with a duty to be well-informed about crucial historical contexts, comprehensively understanding of the historical and ongoing experiences of Indigenous Peoples. Engaging in Indigenous research means working with Indigenous Peoples and the building of relationships to which one is responsible. Therefore, responsibility entails actively collaborating with Storytellers and consistently seeking their input on how their voices are being represented and how they will be treated throughout the research journey. As articulated by Archibald (2008), this responsibility involves acquiring knowledge about topics such as residential schools, the historical suppression of cultural practices, and Indigenous survivance. This understanding not only enriches research but also fosters empathy and deeper comprehension of the experiences of Indigenous Peoples (Archibald, 2008; Archibald et al., 2019).

Responsibility serves as a fundamental pillar of this work in several critical ways such as through the comprehensive literature review that recognizes the importance of social nuances and historical context. Additionally, Wilson (2008) emphasizes that responsibility extends both in listening to a Story and in the act of sharing Stories that have been entrusted to you. The Storytellers involved in this thesis have generously granted me the privilege of being their listener, and by listening, I accept the responsibility of faithfully representing their Stories in a good way. To meet this responsibility, I have actively participated in an encircling process that facilitates ongoing consent and provides opportunities for changes, additions, or removals from this thesis. Furthermore, I have exercised responsibility in my approach to the research topic itself, triangulating and listening to the relationships that exist across the Stories of Indigenous reconnection. This approach not only aligns with Indigenous research paradigms (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2005) but also adheres to a core ontological belief that there is no single objective reality (Wilson, 2008). As such, this research holds the responsibility to engage with Stories from diverse perspectives and personal contexts, recognizing the multitude of ways in which Indigenous reconnection is experienced and understood.

Reverence.

Reverence entails the process of learning from and deeply appreciating Indigenous experiences, spirituality, kinship, land connection, and ways of being. In research, reverence involves an active and intentional approach to honouring the research space, particularly in conversations with Storytellers. This includes being mindful not to co-opt the space and instead providing ample room for Storytellers to express themselves freely. Reverence is the act of engaging with the spirit of a process, working collaboratively to create a shared space of discovery. It requires a profound respect for the relationships that exist within this space and an

acknowledgment of how Storytellers may have their own unique connections with spirituality (Archibald, 2008; Archibald et al., 2019).

Reverence is a central theme of this work, acknowledging the importance of experiences and Stories that have often been drowned out, meaning that Indigenous ways of being become essential aspects of the project's core purpose. Furthermore, reverence continues through my ongoing relationality with the Storytellers involved in this thesis and the ways in which I entered into the research space. As Archibald (2008) aptly noted, “silence creates a respectful space for reverence,” (p. 126) emphasizing the significance of giving Storytellers the space to share their experiences and speak freely. Practically, I enacted this through my engagement in our unstructured conversations, where I initiated discussions with initial prompts but otherwise practiced silence to pay respect to the Storytellers, giving space so that they could express themselves and share the aspects of their Stories that they found most important. Additionally, as part of the encircling process, which I will discuss in greater detail later, I practiced reverence by consistently returning to the Storytellers for their feedback with an open heart, body, and mind, and how my future dissemination of these findings will deeply involve ongoing reverence by recognizing them as co-authors if they would like.

Reciprocity.

Reciprocity underscores the significance of giving back and returning value directly to the community and individuals from whom you are learning and benefiting. In research, this principle is manifested through the giving of gifts in recognition of the privilege of being a listener to someone's Story. However, reciprocity extends beyond this immediate exchange, continuing through an ongoing relational process where opportunity to support may arise. Another way in which reciprocity can take place is by giving back to others who may be on their

own learning journey, much like a researcher is supported by the Storytellers during their research process. This commitment to continuing relationships and taking future actions serves as a way of honouring and reciprocating (Archibald, 2008; Archibald et al., 2019).

Reciprocity is an integral principle within this research, and it is brought forward in a few ways. I expressed reciprocity through the culturally appropriate gifts I gave to the Storytellers, expressing appreciation both for the gift of being a listener to their Stories, as well as for the invaluable investment of their time and energy. Additionally, the amplification of their voices and Stories through this research creates an opportunity for their Stories to be heard and applied by counsellors and academics, which could support them or others in the community. I also have a broader commitment to work with the findings of this thesis as a foundational starting point for a community project I discussed with the Storytellers that would provide tangible value for supporting reconnection journeys. This reflects my deep commitment to reciprocity, as it seeks to create lasting tangible value and benefit for the community. Lastly, my own personal relationalities have guided me to this research project as an act of reciprocity. As someone who was adopted into a culture that has offered me unparalleled support and acceptance, I often contemplate the immeasurable gift I have received from my family and culture. I sometimes feel that I may never fully reciprocate in a manner commensurate with what has been given to me. Thus, my engagement in this research is an endeavor to enact a broader form of reciprocity, allowing me to give back to my community in a meaningful way.

Holism.

Holism serves as a reminder of the pursuit of self-improvement across all facets of our existence. It also underscores the recognition that individuals, relationships, and systems are inherently intricate, characterized by diverse aspects and experiences that cannot be

oversimplified. Holism, therefore, functions as a guiding principle for personal growth, aiming to deepen our comprehension across various dimensions of reality, including the intellectual, physical, and spiritual realms of being. In research, holism is manifested through the active pursuit of knowledge and understanding. It is also evident in the way research endeavors to represent and convey what has been learned, with a deep appreciation for the complexities involved and a commitment to evolving through these complexities (Archibald, 2008; Archibald et al., 2019).

I embraced holism in this thesis through an approach based in growing and becoming a more realized person by engaging in this research. Additionally, it embraces developing a deeper understanding of the multifaceted experiences surrounding Indigenous reconnection, avoiding simplified reductions of individuals who are reconnecting. I aim to embody holism in this project by contributing to the understanding of the diverse experiences of many Indigenous Peoples, be acknowledging and addressing these experiences in a relational way. I operate under the premise that each person's holistic complexity encompasses various aspects of their life and experiences, approaching these experiences with respect and relational understanding, recognizing the need to engage with these additional layers of experience.

Interrelatedness.

Interrelatedness encompasses the manner in which we connect with one another and how we engage with and relate to Story and realms of knowledge. It involves the exploration of multiple realities, including the spiritual, physical, and intellectual, as we seek to understand the various ways in which relationships exist around us, particularly within the context of Story. In research, interrelatedness is exemplified through the identification and exploration of relationships that exist between the researcher and the Stories, among different Storytellers, and

by actively engaging in these relationships with purpose and intent (Archibald, 2008; Archibald et al., 2019).

I have woven interrelatedness throughout this research, fostering connections across Stories, between Storytellers and the broader Indigenous community, and by constructing a shared Story that respects and engages with Indigenous journeys of reconnection. While each individual's personal context is inherently diverse and beautiful in its variety, interrelatedness is always present as principles of relationality from an Indigenous perspective emphasize that the self is a collection of relationships and always interconnected (Fellner, 2016; Minet, 2021). Despite the origins of this research topic rooted in separation, it is ultimately oriented towards reconnection, the process of rebuilding and nurturing relationships with community and culture. Consequently, the findings of this research inherently revolve around conversations about relationships and shared experiences, as conveyed by Storytellers from diverse personal contexts. Therefore, this research actively cultivates interrelatedness.

Synergy.

Synergy is the burst of energy, inspiration, and connection that incites our knowledge into works and research. It is a moment when ideas take shape, not necessarily through direct reasoning, but as a result of being inspired. In research, synergy can present itself through conversations that stimulate fresh insights, revisiting quotes or recordings to uncover new ideas, or by approaching the research process with the intent of nurturing understanding rather than merely pursuing a predetermined outcome. Essentially, it involves placing trust in the relationships and the research environment to guide toward meaningful findings (Archibald, 2008; Archibald et al., 2019).

Synergy is not something that I believe can be directly imposed, but rather, it is a space that can be nurtured and cultivated. Archibald (2008) has shared her own experiences with developing Storywork, highlighting the interconnectedness and relationality among Storytellers that create a space where “this interaction created a synergistic Story power that had emotional, healing, and spiritual aspects. The synergistic Story power also brought the Story ‘to life’” (p. 100). Therefore, in this research, I did not predefine synergy as a goal, but an ongoing effort to establish a space characterized by respect and interrelation, trusting that the relationships and Stories shared would naturally give rise to synergy. In this project, I engaged with the Storytellers over Zoom and phone, fostering relationships that I could revisit and reflect upon through recorded conversations. I immersed myself in each of the Stories, repeatedly listening and reflecting, allowing my own relational connections to synergistically guide me toward emerging inspirations.

Philosophical Underpinnings

In addition to Indigenous Storywork, I am integrating the complimentary work of Wilson (2008) and Kovach (2005) to interpret concepts of epistemology, ontology, axiology, and methodology. Conventionally, these terms respectively refer to distinct notions of theory of knowledge and truth, theories over the nature of being and meaning, theories over ethics and morality, and the ways in which one goes about the process and integration of ideas and thoughts. However, Wilson (2008) explains that from an Indigenous perspective, these concepts combine and work together to form a philosophy of an ever evolving and interrelated way of being. It is important to note that there is no one pan-Indigenous perspective and that the many unique Indigenous cultures have differing epistemological foundations. However, a relational epistemology is one that many Indigenous groups share (Hart, 2010). As Wilson (2008) puts

forward, Indigenous research ontology views reality as a totality of experiences of both the physical and spiritual space, rather than positioning these as separate realities.

Epistemology is fluid, changing as each Story is brought to life by the experiences of its teller, flowing through relationships and across generations (Kovach, 2005). There is no one way of knowing truth, and we must grow together through the sharing of knowledge (Wilson, 2008). Axiology, the ethic of the group, can also be understood through more reciprocal notions when it comes to Indigenous research with Wilson (2001) identifying a key ethical need for research to create a benefit for those involved in the research and the world as a whole. Taking these concepts together, epistemology and ontology can be interpreted as a means of forming and recognizing the layered and intricate relationships that are always present, while axiology and methodology are the tools and understandings that are responsible towards respecting those relationships (Wilson, 2001).

Desire-Based Research Orientation

A final but crucial aspect of my methodology is grounded in an understanding expressed by Dr. Eve Tuck in *Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities* (2009). In this powerful article, Tuck calls on communities, researchers, and educators to reorient theories of change and the focus of their research when it comes to Indigenous communities and experiences. Tuck identifies a trend that she categorizes as damage-centred research which portrays Indigenous Peoples as hopeless victims, damaged and needing to be saved. She is not speaking of explicitly racist research such as that coming directly from white supremacist or colonial ideals, but those from communities that seek to be a support yet portray and categorize Indigenous Peoples in a pathologizing way which defines them by the oppression they experience.

Tuck (2009) calls for an end to this style of research but makes explicit that this is not to be confused with engaging in denial of pains, approaching research from the other end of the spectrum with naive and unhelpful portrayals which ignore the hardships and difficult issues Indigenous Peoples can often face. Instead, she recommends a desire-based research approach that acknowledges and identifies the real social and historical effects that are occurring while placing the directionality of the research as one that fully encompasses complex personhood, autonomy of the individual in concert with natural personal contradiction, and which celebrates survivance (Tuck, 2009; Vizenor, 1999). Tuck's concept of desire-based research is foundational to my methodological approach in this research project. I am discussing Indigenous reconnection, which necessitates a full understanding of reconnection journeys, incorporating and understanding the very real and often painful situations that led to a need to reconnect, as well as an experience which employs active hope, strength, and potential. Journeys of reconnection are complex, and a methodology that acknowledges and integrates that complexity is a fundamental need.

Story Gathering

Situated within the ethics of Indigenous Storywork, research as ceremony, relational methodologies, and desire-based research, I set out to explore how Indigenous people raised without integrated connection to their cultures and communities experience reconnecting with their Indigenous cultures and communities. Building understanding of this experience required a series of steps in line with the ethics discussed. This process began with the gathering of Storytellers.

Storyteller

To be considered as a potential Storyteller for this thesis, individuals needed to meet three specific inclusion criteria: (1) They must identify as Indigenous. (2) They were raised without integrated connection to their Indigenous cultures and communities. (3) They have experienced reconnection with their Indigenous cultures and communities. If a potential Storyteller did not fulfil all three of these requirements, they would not be able to contribute meaningfully to answering the research question and would be excluded from participation. Additionally, this thesis worked with Storytellers both directly through conversations and indirectly with those who shared their Stories publicly. Those who shared their Stories publicly were also required to meet the same inclusion criteria to be considered as Storytellers for this research.

Storytellers were gathered in accordance with Indigenous approaches to research, through relational connections (Kovach, 2010b; Wilson, 2008). I knew two of the Storytellers, Stephanie and Nevada, from previous education experiences and I was connected with the third, Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew, through my supervisor, Dr. Karlee Fellner. I reached out to each with a recruitment email and upon receiving an answer expressing interest in the study, we confirmed that they identified with the experience described in the research topic and that they felt comfortable and safe to discuss their experiences for the purposes of this project. After confirming each of these details, we gathered consent to participate in research conversations, as well as to audio and video record those conversations. They were informed that they could withdraw consent at any point and reminded of such before each conversation began. We then organized remote conversations as best fit with each Storyteller's preferences.

Having three Storytellers is a limited sample. However, the small sample enabled more time and space for their Stories in this thesis. Additionally, the goals of this project are to place

Stories of reconnection in conversation with each other, integrating with existing publicly available Stories to find common shared experiences. Thus, in addition to the three Storytellers I spoke with, I engaged with publicly available Stories related to reconnection as part of the knowledge gathering. These Stories include two documentaries and a written legal affidavit. I chose these Stories because they each teach about the expansive experience of separation that has affected many Indigenous Peoples and communities, and key elements of Indigenous reconnection journeys. The Storytellers who these Stories belong to chose to share their experiences publicly to bring attention to the impacts their separation from their community and culture has had, and to help others who may be in a similar position. I will briefly introduce them here:

Foster Child (Cardinal, 1987) is a documentary film under which Métis director Gil Cardinal goes through the journey of reconnecting with his Indigeneity after having grown up in the foster system in a white home.

Becoming Nakuset: Bannock and Matzah (Anderson-Gardner, 2021) is a short documentary film in which we hear Nakuset's personal Story, a Cree woman who has undergone her own journey of reconnection after having been adopted into a Jewish family in Montreal.

Wyatt Wall-O'Reilly's affidavit (2020) in the Reference Case of the Court of Appeal of Québec in Relation with the *Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families*, is a Story told through a series of written legal statements, telling of how he was raised outside of his culture and community, finding reconnection after three generations.

Research Conversations

I engaged in a total of four conversations between February and March 2023. Nevada and I had an audio-recorded conversation twice over the phone, around 40 minutes each time. The individual conversations I had with Stephanie and Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew each lasted around

80 minutes and were audio and video recorded over Zoom. Before the conversations began, I spoke directly with each Storyteller about how the Story they shared would be respected. We discussed how they had complete control over how their Story would be shared in the thesis document, including the ability to end or pause the conversation as needed, and to add/edit/delete from any part of their Story that is written. Research is ceremony (Wilson, 2008), and that means including cultural and spiritual acts when appropriate to honour the space where the research is going to happen. Time and space were made at the beginning so that Storytellers could smudge, pray, or do anything that they needed to do to honour the research ceremony to begin in a good way. At the end of each conversation, Storyteller's addresses were gathered to mail a culturally respectful gift which included tobacco, a braid of sweetgrass, a personal letter of thanks and a \$25 gift card. Storyteller's addresses were deleted after their gift was sent.

Through an unstructured conversation format, I asked the Storytellers initial questions about their experiences regarding reconnecting with their Indigenous culture and/or community from a small list of potential questions (See Appendix). These questions were not followed verbatim and would change between conversations dependent on the context of the conversation. I encouraged each Storyteller to speak to what they felt was important in their Story, facilitating a natural conversational method as described by Kovach (2010b). One of my jobs as a researcher was to ensure Storytellers did not mould their answers to fit a narrative or goal that I predetermined. It was, and continues to be, my job to engage earnestly and thoughtfully with what was gifted to me through their Stories, making meaning in the experience of being a listener and finding relationships across Stories (Archibald et al., 2019).

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was gathered from each of the Storytellers who engaged in direct conversations as part of this research project. This encompassed their consent to participate in

the study, consent for audio and video recording of our conversations, permission to include their personal information, Stories, and quotes in this thesis, the option to use pseudonyms to protect their privacy, the assurance of ongoing consent with the ability to withdraw at any point without consequences, and the opportunity to review and edit any information attributed to them to ensure accuracy and respectfulness. Consent was gathered before beginning each conversation, in an ongoing way through an encircling process to be detailed below, and with the opportunity to make final revisions. This approach prioritized the autonomy and comfort of the Storytellers throughout the research process in accordance with the Indigenous Storywork principles of respect, responsibility, and reciprocity (Archibald, 2008).

As audio and visual recordings were employed in this thesis, it is important to note that the ownership of the Stories shared unequivocally remains with each respective Storyteller. This includes ownership of the recordings of our conversations. While the Storytellers generously provided me with the opportunity to listen to their Stories for this project, this act of sharing in no way transfers ownership. The recordings will be securely stored on my personal, password-protected hard drive for a period of five years from the conclusion of this research. During and at the end of this five-year period, the Storytellers will have the option to obtain copies of their recordings. Following their retrieval, or after this offer has been extended at the end of the five-year period, the recordings will be permanently deleted to ensure the privacy and autonomy of the Storytellers and to honour the principles of respect and responsibility (Archibald, 2008).

Meaning-Making Approach

When discussing the approach to this research early in its process, my supervisor, Dr. Karlee Fellner, suggested that I engage with the Stories told to me through oral listening, an Indigenous approach to learning (Archibald, 2008; Archibald & Parent, 2019). She encouraged me to participate as a listener, sit with the Stories, and see what emerged in my relationship with

what was shared. Through Indigenous Storywork, “orally told Stories [can] be re-lived through the audio recording” (Archibald & Parent, 2019, p. 14) and create synergy.

To facilitate this approach, I relistened to the recorded audio of each conversation several times. On the third listening, I made note of time stamps for pieces of each conversation in which I felt a heightened relationship emerge. In the same way, I repeatedly visited each of the public sources, rewatching *Foster Child* (1987) and *Becoming Nakuset: Bannock and Matzah* (Anderson-Gardner, 2021), and rereading Wyatt Wall-O'Reilly's affidavit (2020) aloud to facilitate the oral process, identifying the moments where I felt myself becoming aware of shared relational experiences that were also synergistically coming forward in other Stories (Archibald et al., 2019). I then returned to the moments of heightened relational connection across Stories and organized them into the evident larger themes naturally occurring through the process which will be discussed in Chapter Four: Displacement, Confusion, Longing, and Reconnection. Throughout the writing process, I would return to the specific timestamps and page numbers, transcribing verbatim those which spoke powerfully to each topic, which in turn revealed subthemes and prompted additional revisits to reaffirm that the relational connections across the Stories and present in myself as a researcher were maintaining.

In other words, the approach of this thesis involved understanding each of the shared Stories as a gift which provides the opportunity to listen and learn. Consequently, the same method for making meaning was applied consistently across the Stories of Indigenous reconnection of this thesis. This involved an oral listening approach in alignment with Indigenous Storywork principles (Archibald & Parent, 2019) even for public Stories to which I did not have a direct personal connection. In my role as a researcher, I maintained a genuine presence through the principles of Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008), creating a receptive

space to take in the wisdom being shared and taught by the Storytellers through their Stories. This approach is the creation of a mutual space of discovery (Archibald et al., 2019), finding meaning that can only occur through the relationship between Storyteller and listener. By actively engaging as a dedicated listener to all these Stories, the development of relational connections among them revealed themselves, finding shared experiences that transcended individual contexts, geographical locations, and different times.

Encircling Process

From an Indigenous research perspective, honouring relationality and respect is essential (Archibald, 2008; Minet, 2021; Wilson, 2008). This research approach requires an encircling process of engagement with Storytellers to uphold ethical principles and ensure a respectful representation of their Stories, experiences, and viewpoints. This ongoing process includes maintaining ongoing consent and providing the opportunity for reflective feedback from the Storytellers throughout the research journey, working so that the findings, themes, subthemes, and quotes align authentically with the Storytellers' experiences and intentions.

The encircling process commenced with the initial conversations and culturally appropriate gift, which was sent and confirmed as received by the Storytellers in February and March of 2023. In May and June, this process continued with emails and texts to the Storytellers based on their communication preferences, where they were provided with descriptions of the four emerging themes from the research, along with their quoted wisdom that would conclude Chapter Four. This step ensured that the quotes accurately represented the Storytellers' intended messages, acknowledging the risk of misrepresenting oral and relational meaning in written text if not carefully handled (Archibald et al., 2019). It also provided an opportunity to change the research direction if the emerging themes were not representative or reflective of their

experiences and Story. Moreover, these emails and texts also provided space for Storytellers to introduce themselves within the work, ensuring that their introductions in Chapter One were accurate and respectful to their voices and background. Upon receiving approval for the four themes, the research progressed. In August, a full version of the thesis was shared with the Storytellers, allowing them to review and make additions, edits, or deletions to ensure their voices were respected. I integrated minor revisions recommended by Stephanie at this time.

The encircling process continued into September, involving outreach to arrange conversations with each of the Storytellers as best fit with their lives and schedules while also considering external deadlines for the submission of this thesis. These discussions revolved around ongoing consent, future dissemination of results, maintaining reciprocity and relationality, and reviewing the findings, themes, subthemes, and quotations for accuracy in reflecting their experiences. Any necessary changes were thoroughly discussed with each Storyteller when available. The first conversation took place with Stephanie over Zoom in September. During this discussion, it became apparent that one of the subthemes required a more fitting title to convey its intent accurately, ensuring that it would not be misinterpreted. Consequently, this subtheme was renamed ‘Engaging Authentically’ to better align with its content and the Storytellers’ experiences. A phone conversation with Kisik Nimihitowin Iskew occurred two days later, confirming the change to the subtheme, and making minor revisions that she identified around the engagement with her Story such as minor word changes to quotes.

I then emailed Stephanie again, providing the opportunity to make further changes if needed and to confirm that the subtheme had been changed. While she did not express a need for further edits, if she had, I would have returned to Kisik Nimihitowin Iskew to make sure those changes also aligned with her, encircling back. At the end of this dialogue period, I offered

another gift of thanks, a \$25 gift card. While a gift had been given following our initial conversation, maintaining reciprocity for the time and energy is important for my own ethics and to engage respectfully in Indigenous research. To neglect offering a gift would be considered ethically inappropriate (Archibald, 2008; Wilson, 2008). Given logistical complexities of mailing, a gift card sent via email was deemed appropriate, confirmed as working with Storytellers, and was received by Stephanie and Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew.

Unfortunately, despite multiple attempts through email, text, and phone, Nevada was unavailable for a conversation between August and September. Nevertheless, this does not signify the end of the ongoing relational process with Nevada or any of the Storytellers. Relationality in Indigenous research, and from my personal perspective, can never be the extraction value from individuals and then departing (Archibald, 2008; Wilson, 2008). It is a continuous and holistic approach that may lead to future collaborations or support endeavors and is ongoing in how I engage with the findings of this research. Particularly, this ongoing relational process will be deeply intertwined with potential future dissemination of the findings, including any publications or presentations that arise from this work.

Future Dissemination of Findings

This thesis involved a collaborative research relationship with Storytellers to make meaning in the research and gain deeper insights into the experiences of Indigenous individuals who were raised separate from their Indigenous cultures and communities and experienced reconnection. It is imperative to acknowledge that this thesis was made possible through the generous sharing of Stories by Stephanie, Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew, and Nevada throughout the project's duration. In line with Indigenous research ethics (Archibald, 2008; Wilson, 2008), and reciprocity as a personal acknowledgment of their invaluable contributions, any future

dissemination of this research, including but not limited to academic conferences, presentations, or peer-reviewed journal publications, will offer them the opportunity to be recognized as co-authors. Currently, there are no specific plans in place for dissemination, as this is an ongoing process. By this, I mean that Storytellers will have the chance to review this thesis in its final and complete form before any discussions or planning occur. If a dissemination process is initiated, I will have conversations with Storytellers to confirm if they wish to be co-authors and to ensure their ongoing consent and the respectful representation of their experiences throughout the process.

Chapter Four: Findings

Stories are an incredible form of knowledge keeping, finding connection, and carrying forth relationships into a verbal, spiritual, and relational space (Archibald & Parent, 2019; Kovach 2010a). For these reasons, and more that are unique to each group and person, many Indigenous Nations and cultures have historically practiced Storytelling as a form of oral history (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2005; Hanson, 2009a). From an Indigenous Storywork perspective, honouring this approach to knowledge is essential (Archibald, 2008). The findings of this study represent a synthesis of learnings through the three Storytellers of this thesis, as well as Stories shared in *Foster Child* (Cardinal, 1987), *Becoming Nakuset: Bannock and Matzah* (Anderson-Gardner, 2020), and Wyatt's affidavit (Wall-O'Reilly, 2020). Through deep listening and relationally engaging with these Stories, four central themes synergistically came forward that speak to the experiences of Indigenous individuals on their journeys of reconnection: Displacement, Confusion, Longing, and Reconnection. In honouring the Stories of each of the Storytellers in this study, the chapter begins with summaries of each Story. Following these summaries, I present the four primary themes along with their subthemes.

Sharing Stories

Story #1 – Stephanie Tipple. Stephanie's Story is one of breaking through generational losses to rediscover the culture and community that her ancestors had been forced to distance themselves from due to societal and colonial perceptions of shame associated with Indigeneity. Stephanie first learned about her Mi'kmaq heritage at the age of eleven and started reconnecting as a teenager when she began questioning the profound impact of her heritage on her life and felt compelled to explore her relationalities further. This journey intensified during her time doing her master's degree in Calgary, where she found support from her supervisors and actively

engaged in Indigenous cultural events and ceremonies. Stephanie shared her transformative journey, describing it as a process of healing and self-discovery that enabled her to explore her own sense of connection and overcome long standing anxieties from her early life. Through this journey, she has embraced various forms of leadership, guiding Indigenous educational initiatives and ceremonies, while also forging paths toward reconnection that can serve as models for others. Stephanie's inspiration extends to witnessing her family members also finding their paths to reconnection. She not only demonstrates her leadership in her current educational pursuits and personal engagement with cultural ceremonies and traditions but also in how she envisions a future where she becomes a guide for Indigenous individuals seeking reconnection. Through these experiences, she has grown and found her Indigenous relationality, fostering her family's reconnection as well. However, Stephanie feels a strong pull towards continuing her journey back home in Newfoundland by building stronger relationships and learning from members of her own community.

Upon reflecting on Stephanie's Story, I am consistently drawn to the message of hope for the future. Despite the long history of stolen culture and fractured communities that has made the path to reconnection challenging, Stephanie persists, driven not only by her own journey but also by her commitment to her family and future generations seeking reconnection. Her Story serves as a testament to the vital importance of Indigenous relationality as a major factor of reconnection and offers valuable lessons on the importance of supporting the journey.

Story #2 – Kisik Nimihitowin Iskew. During our conversation, Kisik Nimihitowin Iskew shared her challenging Story, which revolved around navigating complex systems of Indigeneity, governmental regulations, and reconnecting with family and community. Due to the Sixties Scoop, her mother was adopted, resulting in the loss of vital information about their

Indigeneity, affecting Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew and her children. At the age of twelve, she discovered her Indigenous heritage, prompting her to dedicate much of her time to accessing records, navigating intricate systems, utilizing DNA resources, and connecting with Indigenous leaders to learn more about and reconnect with her culture and community that had been taken away from her family. Through her journey, Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew has found Métis and Cree Indigenous connections, diligently integrating them into her life and the lives of her family members. Although she expressed self-questioning and anxiety about belonging, reconnecting with her culture has brought direct benefits to her life and the lives of those around her. She spoke about how she is witnessing her children growing up with culture as an integral part of their lives now that she has reconnected, evident through their involvement in dancing, strong community ties, and their ability to actively engage with their Indigenous heritage. Likewise, she continues to be drawn to her work within Indigenous communities, where her ongoing reconnection and relationship-building efforts create opportunities for new projects. For instance, she has collaborated closely with Indigenous communities on food availability and birth work initiatives.

Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew's journey leaves me truly amazed at the resilience often needed in journeying towards reconnection. Reflecting on her continuous efforts, spanning many years and often involving navigating poorly maintained records, underscores the considerable challenges involved in the process of reconnection, including the initial struggle of where to start and whom to connect with. Her tireless dedication, both within and beyond these systems, serves as an inspiration, demonstrating that reconnection can indeed be arduous and draining but ultimately paves the way for new opportunities and pathways for future generations.

Story #3 – Nevada Ouellette. During our two conversations, Nevada shared her transformative Story of reconnecting with her culture as a path toward healing and wellness. She battled addiction early in life and faced obstacles in accessing her cultural heritage due to her grandfather's traumas and losses. As she distanced herself from addiction, Nevada encountered the scent of smudge, which brought immediate relief and cleansing. Embracing cultural ceremonies became an integral part of her healing journey, and she discovered Stories about her family's Indigenous connections. Through her search, Nevada learned about her Métis, Cree, and Ojibway Indigenous ancestry. Her reconnection journey involved moments of anxiety, feeling out of place due to her lighter skin colour, and experiencing personal crises throughout her life around her Indigeneity. Nevada has harnessed the knowledge gained from these experiences, witnessing profound positive effects in her educational pursuits. She views her spiritual connection to her ancestors as a vital wellspring of support, and this connection has played a pivotal role in building authentic and loving relationships within her community. Nevada has also integrated practices like sweat ceremonies, smudging, prayer, and other expressions of spirituality and culture into her own life with care and purpose. It is a way of being that is relational and which cannot be interfered with, bringing her healing from within that guides through difficult moments towards connection and spirit. By embracing her experiences, culture, and family knowledge, she continues to discover new ways to practice wellness and self-acceptance across her life.

In reflecting on Nevada's Story, I feel solemn yet hopeful. Nevada's unwavering determination to reconnect with her culture and heal her spirit highlights the immense void caused by the theft of culture and community. Yet, her journey also reveals the profound potential that emerges when these vital sources are rediscovered and reintegrated with care and

purpose for healing and connection. It is a path marked by attentive listening to the guidance of the spirit and ancestors, who serve as powerful pillars of support in forging a path forward.

Story #4 – Gil Cardinal. *Foster Child* (Cardinal, 1987) follows Gil Cardinal, a thirty-five-year-old Métis man on a journey to find more information about himself, his heritage, and most importantly to him, his birth mother who had passed away and who he had never met. He was placed into the foster system when he was two and raised by a non-Indigenous family. Gil approaches his journey in several different ways: (1) going to the department of child welfare to try and access his file; (2) visiting the address where his mom lived; (3) connecting with a social worker who worked with his mom; (4) trying to connect with family members through welfare services; (5) meeting his biological uncle; (6) meeting the man who he thought was his father; and (7) meeting Linda, his late brother Donnie's wife and learning about his brother through her. At each of these approaches, Gil faces new emotional and situational hurdles with differing barriers to accessing information about who he is. Despite this, he finishes his journey through the documentary with recognition of new ways of understanding himself and his connections.

Reflecting on Gil's approach, I was struck by the ways that seeking reconnection after being separated is not an automatic pathway to the removal of pain or negative experiences. Instead, each step of the reconnection journey provides a broader perspective and deeper self-understanding that creates the space to grow and address one's personal, cultural, and community needs. Overall, Gil's Story, with its message of the strength to accept vulnerability in pursuit of self-understanding, is one that has been essential in my own processing and relationship with this research.

Story #5 – Nakuset. In the short documentary film *Becoming Nakuset: Bannock and Matzah* (2021), director Victoria Anderson-Gardner introduces us to Nakuset, a Cree woman

who underwent a profound journey of reconnection after being adopted into a Jewish family in Montreal. This experience has also influenced her role as a consultant on the TV series *Little Bird* (Tailfeathers & Hopkins, 2023), released during the writing of this thesis. Nakuset shares her poignant Story, revealing how she felt alienated and compelled to deny her Indigeneity within her adopted family. Indigenous heritage was disparaged, while Jewish traditions were embraced. However, Nakuset also expresses deep gratitude for her Bubbie, her Jewish grandmother, who offered unconditional love and acceptance throughout her life. Before her passing, Nakuset's Bubbie supported her reconnection journey by assisting with a letter writing campaign, facilitating connections with her birth family, and providing plane tickets to meet them. Nakuset changed her name partly to assert her accomplishments and success as her own, separate from her adopted family, yet she still cherishes the connection between her goodness and the love and support she received from her Bubbie.

Nakuset's Story has deeply resonated with me, prompting me to reflect on the challenges that reconnection journeys may encounter and the crucial role of a nurturing support network. Her journey underscores the remarkable resilience required to assert one's Indigenous relationality in the face of overwhelming opposition. Nakuset's unwavering determination serves as a powerful testament to the significance of the reconnection journey, inspiring me to further acknowledge and honour the enduring strength that individuals like her possess.

Story #6 – Wyatt Wall-O'Reilly. In Wyatt Wall-O'Reilly's affidavit (2020) submitted in the Reference Case of the Court of Appeal of Québec concerning the *Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families*, he shares his Story through a series of written statements detailing how he rediscovered his roots within Aseniwuche Winewak Nation. His grandmother was raised in the community before being apprehended and placed into foster

care with her younger sister, never to be seen again by anyone from the community. Before her passing, she had four children, all of whom were also apprehended. Breaking through a cycle of generational trauma, Wyatt's father provided him with a good life, fulfilling every need except that of his Indigenous culture and community. Despite this, Wyatt yearned to know himself and his heritage, witnessing the impact of trauma on other family members. His longing eventually led him to be invited to stay with his uncle in the community, where he immersed himself in cultural and community activities such as sweat lodges and living off the land. After fifty years and three generations, Wyatt has finally found his way home (Wall-O'Reilly, 2020).

Wyatt's Story holds particular significance for me, given his membership and reconnection in my Nation. His eloquent and purposeful sharing of his reconnection journey serves as an essential reminder of the importance of respecting and upholding the intentions and goals of these Stories, and of the responsibility that comes with being a listener. Wyatt's Story also teaches of the intergenerational impact of separation, highlighting the immense strength required to confront the profound loss and embark on the arduous path of reconnection when culture and community was not a part of how he was raised. His resilience is truly commendable.

Themes: Indigenous Stories of Reconnection

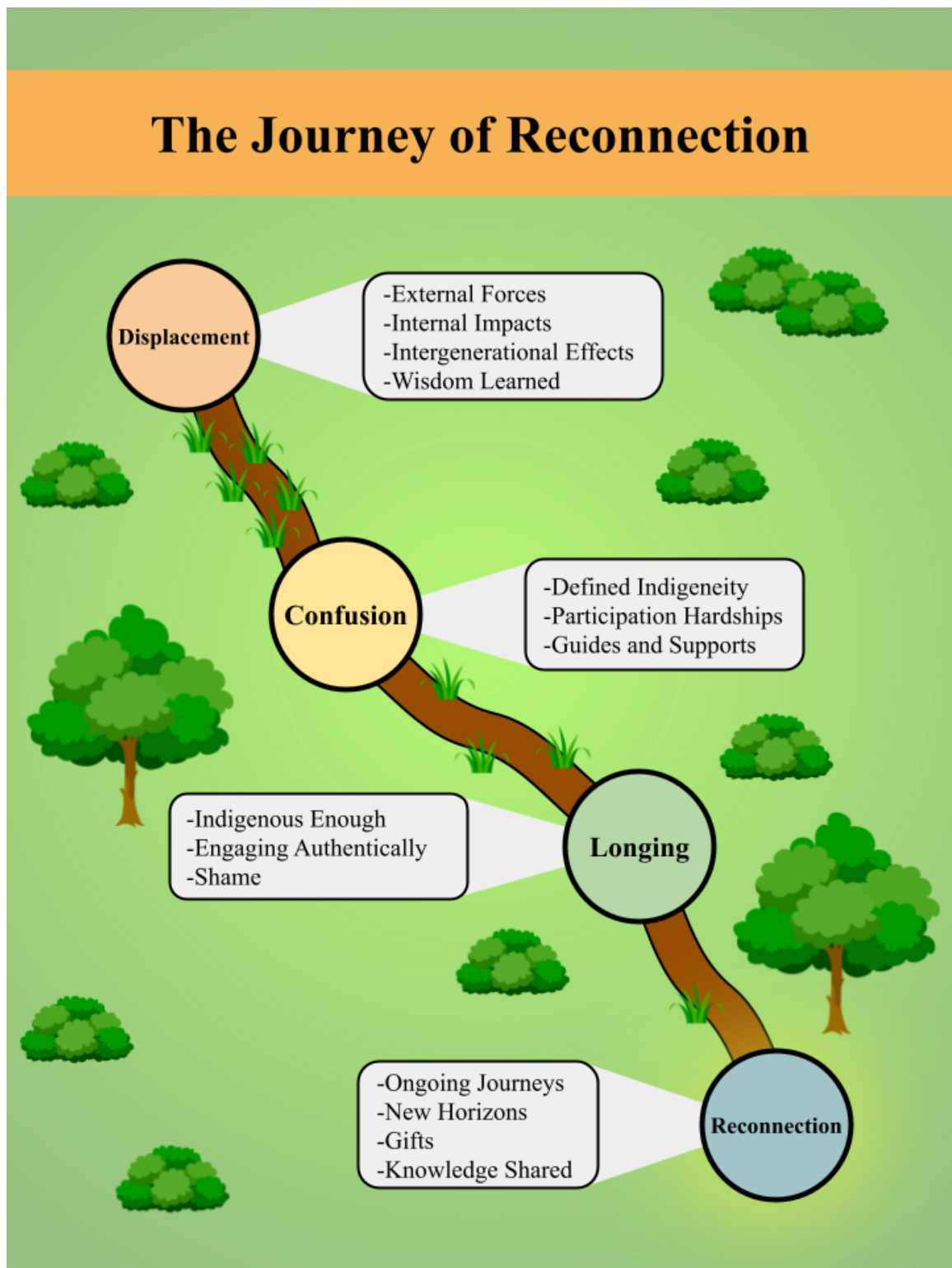
The current section delves into the four primary themes of Displacement, Confusion, Longing, and Reconnection and their subthemes (see Figure 1), and how they are demonstrated in the Stories included in this research. In Chapter Three, I shared a personal reflection on this research process that brought back memories of spending time with my dad and learning on the land. I remember feeling overwhelmed as a child, watching how effortlessly he moved while I seemed to get caught on every branch in my path. Over time, thanks to his guidance, I learned to navigate those journeys with more confidence. This experience of a journey involving the

process of learning to navigate new environments and situations, ultimately leading to self-discovery, strongly resonated with how I have come to understand the journey of reconnection and led me to represent the themes and subthemes of this chapter as such, a path through the trees that reveals itself over time.

While these themes may appear to suggest linear progression or stages, they are not intended as such. Some individuals may experience a linear progression, while others may move through these four shared experiences at different points and times in their lives. Like navigating through the woods, there are times when one may need to backtrack, find alternate routes, or even reorient after getting lost. The path along the journey reconnection is deeply influenced by an individual's personal context, making each journey distinct and unique to them.

Figure 1

The Journey of Reconnection



Displacement

“Very Detached... I Didn't Really Belong”

(Cardinal, 1987, 34:53)

Gil says the subtitled quote while at Donnie and Linda's cabin, reflecting on the mental toll Linda saw in Donnie around his experience of loss of connections. Gil relates to Donnie, even though he has passed away, as the colossal loss of connection was so deeply felt by them both. Gil goes further, sharing that he feels his loss impacting his relationships, his ability to feel and receive love from others, and says that it is an ongoing way of feeling “tenuous about everything” (35:17). Gil is making a direct connection to his experiences growing up in the foster system, but it is also a powerful way of expressing loss as felt throughout his life, a complex loss that does not easily allow for grief as it is tied to something he has not had access to: his relationality, his culture, and his family. This is Gil teaching about displacement, a teaching also shared by each of the Storytellers.

In the Stories, displacement stood out as an ethereal loss that is deeply layered across many aspects of life for those on their journey of reconnection. Present in all six Stories, displacement impacted their relationships, sense of self and relationalities, and led them to feel lost or out of place, unable to access information about who they are. These experiences of displacement shared by the Storytellers touched on four main components: External Forces, Internal Impacts, Intergenerational Effects, and Wisdom Learned.

External Forces.

Indigenous journeys of reconnection are precipitated by the theft of culture, community, or family, historically originating in the acts of cultural genocide previously discussed (Sinclair, 2007; Stevenson, 2020; TRC, 2015a).

Anti-Indigenous racism denigrates Indigenous voices and creates displacement that has lasting impacts on reconnection journeys, a concept that appeared in five of the six Stories in this thesis. Stephanie shared that much of her reconnection journey is “taking the time to undo what colonialism has imposed on [her] family” by reckoning with “silencing, shame, and that horror of... coming out of [her] shell.” Similarly, Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew experienced racism when trying to access mental health support, sharing that “they treated [her] awful. As they found out [she was receiving funding through an Indigenous Nation], it was just like a total switch... being discriminated against because of [her] ancestry.” Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew notes that she is white presenting and does not commonly experience racialized treatment. However, when organizing services over email or phone where the service provider had not met her in person but could see she was connected to Indigenous funding support, the treatment she received became noticeably more hostile. Nevada also described a link between external racism and the way she experiences her reconnection journey as her grandfather was “visibly First Nations, it was just not anything that was acceptable to be embraced... That carried on into [her] dads’ generation... embracing [only] the light-skinned aspects or qualities of who they are.” These experiences identify a link between external racist or colonial messages that criticize Indigenous Peoples and a heightening of a feeling that those who have been separated are missing something that they believe they should innately know about their Indigeneity. Indeed, there appears to be an aspect that others are privy to that they are not, creating a profound feeling of displacement.

For Gil, he lost his relationship with his birth mother and brothers which combined with impacts on his Indigenous relationality (Cardinal, 1987). He ties much of his painful experiences to being in the foster system, and he learns that he was placed into the foster system explicitly because he was Métis. His file simply had the words “No. Métis” (9:07) written in the section

asking whether he was suitable for adoption. For Gil, this revelation is crushing (Cardinal, 1987, 9:10) and a sign of the ways in which he had been treated differently for a culture and relationality he never had the chance to develop or understand.

Similarly, in *Becoming Nakuset: Bannock and Matzah* (Anderson-Gardner, 2021), Nakuset also described this experience, as her visible Indigeneity created a clear separation between her and her adopted family. This led to poor treatment from her adoptive parents and exposure to racist narratives around Indigenous Peoples as bad or wrong:

They would be like 'Don't you know that Natives are the dregs of society.' They used to give me this analogy. If you go to a Jewish household, and you sit at a table, you will have all kinds of food. If you go to an Indian household, you'll have drugs and alcohol. (4:07)

She experienced overt racism for her Indigenous appearance and a resulting sense of otherness and alienation within her adoptive family, leading to self-hatred and a questioning of who she would be as an Indigenous woman. External forces such as anti-Indigenous racism and colonialism clearly fosters displacement, but it is also found in internal experiences of uncertainty and loss.

Internal Impacts.

In displacement, there is a sense that not all is present in a person's world that could be, which can create a feeling of yearning that sparks the need for finding lost connections. Across the six Stories of journeys of reconnection in this thesis, each of the Storytellers emphasized their internal experience. Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew drew attention to this feeling stating, "I never felt like I really belonged in the colonized world. I never really fit in anywhere, at school, or the whole system didn't really feel right..." She shared that this experience was something she saw

in heightened form in her mom, and that experience of displacement was passed down across generations, something she went through as a child of a Sixties Scoop Survivor. Stephanie also felt the effects of displacement, sharing how her family experienced a transition from external sources of racism into internalized shame and silencing:

Shame of having to hide who we are. We couldn't identify as Indigenous, or we would experience racism... Part of it was that really heavy shame... Once I left my community I could see it more clearly. Whereas, when I was home I was living it, I was in the shame. When I stepped out of it I could see it. So, it really allowed me to explore what was behind that shame. A lot of that shame for me came in, really like this lump in my throat and not having a voice. I was a very quiet person. I didn't speak.

Nevada also shared about the ways in which she felt the impact of displacement. As I will detail further later, reconnection was a powerful support for her. Before she began her journey of reconnection she “experience[d] a lot of trauma... From there, [she] engaged in a life of addiction.” Addiction and its psychological correlates are a complex experience often connected to separation and removal from culture and community (TRC, 2015a). Nevada described herself as a “happy child” and that her desire to return to that happiness guided her journey of reconnection. Nevada links moving past addiction with her culture and journey of reconnection, speaking to the ways that displacement can have a layered presence throughout an individual's life. In Wyatt's affidavit (Wall-O'Reilly, 2020), he noted a similar experience:

Everyone deals with trauma and loss differently. I have watched my uncles struggle with trauma, loss and addiction. I have also struggled with these same issues in my life. When I was struggling with these problems, I could not identify what hurt so badly. (p. 151)

Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew, Stephanie, Nevada, and Wyatt have each spoken to a different way in which the removal of their connection to culture or family has created an effect

on their perspective of self or relationship with trauma. Their Stories are powerful examples but not rare occurrences across Indigenous Stories of reconnection (Anderson-Gardner, 2021; C. Cardinal, 2018; G. Cardinal, 1987; Hubbard, 2017; MacLeod, 2018; Nuttgens, 2004; Obomsawin, 1986; Sinclair 2007; Walker, 2018). This clearly demonstrates that separation impacts individuals' internal experiences, marking an important aspect of displacement along Indigenous journeys of reconnection.

Intergenerational Effects.

Separation and theft of access to culture and community has a devastating impact on Indigenous Peoples across generations (Gray & Cote, 2019; Lewis, 2022; TRC, 2015a). Of the Stories of reconnection in this thesis, four specifically spoke to these intergenerational effects.

Wyatt's Story speaks directly to this, the idea that “taking a child away doesn't just affect one generation. It affects many generations” (Wall-O'Reilly, 2020, p. 152). He was raised outside of his culture and community, after having multiple generations of his family lose the opportunity to learn their language and culture. He speaks quite powerfully to the displacement he experienced, the recognition of what he had lost now that he has found his way back home:

It can be hard to realize all I have lost as I try to learn everything I have missed. I am doing everything I can to learn my language and culture and get to know my relatives. I have had relatives welcome me and help me learn. It has felt good to just spend time with some of my younger cousins. They have helped me become who I am today, but it is still hard. My relatives who have been in the Aseniwuche Winewak communities all their lives have been learning their language, cultural practices and traditions all their lives. I am trying to catch up on many years I have missed.

Each of the Storytellers I had a direct conversation with for this thesis also spoke to the ways that displacement has entered their lives through relational connections across generations. Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew shared the ways that information taken from previous generations made accessing her Indigenous relationality difficult:

My mom was adopted, forcibly. She was taken in the Sixties Scoop at birth and put into foster care and then adopted out. Like a lot of Sixties Scoop babies, there wasn't a lot of information or there was misinformation placed on their birth information. So, in the case of my mom, all she had on her birth information for her ethnicity was that she was French, which turns out we don't actually have any French [ancestry]... When my mom was in her thirties... she had spent a long time trying to track down her biological family... She found her father, she was told that she's actually Métis, so she's Cree and Scottish from the Red River Settlement... It's very complicated and has been a long journey... I'm still trying to find out more specifics about our Cree family because when we go through genealogy, often our Cree ancestors are literally labeled 'Cree Woman'... so it's harder to find that information out.

In her Story, Stephanie also shared the ways that she has noticed significant change in perspective across generations, largely sparked by her own reconnection journey having a rippling effect in her family:

I was actually home over Christmas, and it was a really meaningful time with my grandfather. He told me he was proud of me for the work that I was doing, and he said... 'If my mom knew what you were doing, she would roll over in her grave,' which was a really powerful thing to me because that just goes to show the messages that she had internalized, and still that fear and shame... Despite the fact that she would experience

that, he was proud of me... He still doesn't share much and I've kind of accepted the fact that maybe he doesn't need to share with me. I can still connect with him. I don't need to know Stories. I don't need to open up his trauma for me to learn more...

Stephanie is respecting her grandfather's journey by not delving further

Stephanie's great-grandmother distanced herself from her Indigeneity due to internalized shame and racist messaging but also to protect her family, and that protective measure has passed through generations so that now Stephanie sees that trauma still present in her family.

Nevada identified "internalized oppression" across generations through her grandfather's Stories about his experiences being separated from his family and culture:

While we always grew up knowing that we were Indigenous, visibly a blend of Indigenous and European, family members wouldn't really know so much about our culture... My grandpa... even though he was visibly First Nations, it wasn't a part of him that could be embraced... His mom left him when he was a kid and then he was raised by a Métis woman, so it was like that internalized oppression... It wasn't something that was overly talked about... My grandpa's siblings, who are also visibly First Nations, they would also not talk about their upbringing.

Like Stephanie, Nevada found it difficult learning about her culture from her family members. This barrier in communication is understandable, and it also demonstrative of the loss that occurs across generations which adds notable difficulty to each journey of reconnection.

Wisdom Learned.

Displacement is a felt missing connection, a loss of opportunity, an amorphous experience of grief that cannot be succinctly expressed. This intangible quality of displacement can make it hard for someone to understand what they are going through at the time. These feelings often become more understandable with experience and hindsight. As individuals reflect

on their journey of reconnection and experiences of displacement, they gain wisdom and insight into how these experiences have affected them and their sense of self. This process allows for a deeper understanding of the origins of their pain, how it has shaped their lives, and where they can find strength to continue on their journey.

Without prompting, the three Storytellers reflected that the process of our conversation surprised them with how much of their experience they did not recognize at the time and now do, especially with our conversation focusing on the journeys they have made across their lives. The loss of self, personhood, and Indigenous relationalities gives rise to painful life experiences (*Brown v. Canada*, 2018; TRC, 2015a). However, journeys of reconnection are not a narrative of hopelessness. Displacement, paired with recognition of personal needs, has the opportunity to provide guidance to personal strength and wisdom.

While a common topic across conversations, Nevada made this found strength explicit and beautiful, connecting with Indigenous Focus Oriented Therapy teachings around how bodies absorb intergenerational experiences to provide wisdom (Turcotte & Schiffer, 2014). She described an experience she had while feeling intensely overwhelmed during the process of writing her thesis:

It was in my body. It was embodying all of that [trauma] from my ancestors... I almost quit, thinking no I can't do this... I felt like I had a huge heavy brick on my chest... and I couldn't breathe... so I had this vision, and it was my ancestors that removed the brick off my chest. There was my First Nations ancestors, my Métis ancestors of different skin colours, tones. They all lifted this huge... flagstone... off my chest and literally helped me out because I was not okay... In my body at the time, I had all of their trauma.

Connecting with her ancestors and the wisdom she carried with herself supported Nevada through the feelings of displacement, reckoning with the impact of colonial histories and being

separated from culture, to find her strength. Reflecting back on displacement can provide new understandings within a wider context.

Conclusion.

Displacement was an experience that was shared across Stories of Indigenous reconnection. While wide reaching, it generally refers to a sense of loss, inopportunity, or missing something, with implications present from external forces, internal impacts, intergenerational effects, and wisdom learned. By integrating these four components, paired with teachings from the Storytellers, the significance that displacement holds in the lives of those on their journey of reconnection becomes evident, cementing displacement as essential in understanding Indigenous journeys of reconnection.

Confusion

“When You Don't Know Anything, You Distance Yourself from Everything”

(Cardinal, 1987, 15:42)

Confusion is a common thread running through all six Stories, characterized by intense questioning regarding one's sense of place and relationality. Storytellers grapple with profound questions about the significance of their Indigenous relationalities in their lives, how to express their Indigeneity within the broader social and political landscape, and the emotional turmoil and isolation that often accompanies this journey. In the visual representation of the reconnection journey (refer to Figure 1), confusion is shown following displacement. While the journey is not strictly linear, it often appears that way in the Stories, with confusion arising as a natural consequence of displacement. This is when individuals begin to confront the feelings of displacement that have long been present in their lives, but now with the added complexity of

navigating these emotions and environments. Gil's experience, as shared in his Story, provides valuable insights into the nature of confusion.

While on his journey of reconnection, Gil talks to a social worker who had tried to connect him with his mother before she had passed away. Shortly before he speaks the words subtitled, Gil is informed that his mother had difficulties with alcoholism, had lived in poverty, and had chosen to give Gil up for adoption with the hope for him to have a better life than she believed she could provide. He is confronted with information about his mother that he had not wanted to imagine: “I never thought that I was gonna be having these thoughts in my head that my mother was a drunk” (15:30). Receiving new context about his mother's life leaves Gil feeling confused, prompting him to broaden his thoughts about reconnection and contemplate Indigeneity more expansively. Gil is brought to a memory of how a “drunken Indian man [he] saw as a kid made [him] want to turn away from Indian people and being Indian” (16:00). Gil is questioning who he is as an “Indian” person, teaching about confusion as it presents through anxiety, self-doubt, worry, and concern over one's relationality and place among Indigenous Peoples.

In this section, I will be demonstrating the way in which Storytellers experienced journeys of reconnection as deeply confusing. This will begin with how defining Indigeneity is approached and the ways it affects Indigenous individuals trying to reconnect. Next, I will go through the difficulties around participation with Indigenous culture and community for those reconnecting, before continuing into the recognition of supports and guides, and conclude with an overview.

Defined Indigeneity.

When approaching the concept of Indigeneity, and recognizing the self as Indigenous, naturally questions emerge around what it means to be Indigenous. Answers to this question can vary greatly depending on the perspectives involved, such as the difference between government or individual Nation understandings (Lawrence, 2003; Yellow Bird, 1999; Younging, 2018). This natural variety of perspective to defining what it means to be Indigenous can create confusion for individuals navigating their journey of reconnection, an idea that became prominent in three of the six Stories in this thesis. Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew faced confusion coming from different governmental approaches to determining Indigenous ancestry:

In [British Columbia], we can self-identify as Métis, and that's what I've done up until this process of actually trying to get our membership, but in Alberta that's not a thing. You have to actually have your membership to be able to claim your ancestry and so it feels like it softens the voices of a lot of us who've had these challenging complexities with actually obtaining... status cards or Métis citizenships. And I'm curious too because my biological grandfather had told my mom 'Oh you could get status...' It just makes it so much more difficult... It creates a challenge for people who are already struggling with that identity.

Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew's Story speaks to self-doubt that is brought about by the differences in perspectives over what legally qualifies someone as Indigenous, having to navigate who she is in relation to larger systems. Bureaucratic and colonial rules of defining Indigeneity have created confusion, which has in turn had an impact within Indigenous communities. Nevada shared about the complexities of questioning herself, delving into the social aspect of confusion while being among Indigenous community members where she felt she stood out:

It was really nerve-wracking being really light skinned right? And then going into [Indigenous] community because a lot of my life... being in community, I stick out more... For many years, that was such a painful journey... I remember just like being in Hawaii [for an Indigenous field study]... and by this time I was fairly connected with culture... I think it was actually some of [the Native Hawaiian's] own identity stuff that was reflecting onto me and I remember literally crying in the museum... feeling like I don't know who I am... But within these bouts of identity crisis, it's like a more clear, a more put together, more integrated aspect of self comes out of it... Through all these 'Who am I? What is this...?' the emotional part that comes through is a more integrated self... More recently the impact isn't like it used to be... It used to interfere with my ability to maybe want to connect in certain ways.

Nevada's confusion heightened to a point of "identity crisis." When she says that this confusion would be a barrier to her "ability to want to connect," the emotional weight and burden of having to navigate what it means to be Indigenous for those who were separated is clear. The same confusion is apparent in Nakuset's Story, when her adoptive parents lied to her about her Indigenous ancestry, leading to Nakuset asking herself "do I live as a white woman? Do I live as an Indigenous woman? What do I do?" (Anderson-Gardner, 2021, 7:09). Confusion over what it means to be who you are is a fundamentally draining undertaking, yet in both Stories, Nevada and Nakuset strive forwards with new understandings of who they are after finding the strength to survive through these moments of doubt.

Understanding what it means to be Indigenous is a major ideological understanding to grasp for those on their journey of reconnection, creating confusing personal crises, a social and

personal battle in response to a history of Indigeneity being loosely defined (Lawrence, 2003) and simultaneously targeted for destruction (TRC, 2015a).

Participation Hardships.

Storytellers also identified difficulty participating and engaging with the culture and community that they were separated from, a feeling that presented strongly in three of the six Stories. Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew said that the “whole pretendian thing... adds a lot to the complexity” of her experience reconnecting, making it more difficult for those “who genuinely struggle” with their Indigenous relationality to engage and fully participate in their culture and community. Pretendians is a term referring to the phenomenon where individuals, some of whom have been quite prominent, have been found to have represented themselves as Indigenous in a falsified way as a means of taking advantage of support systems or to draw attention to themselves (Lewis, 2023). Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew shared that the presence of pretendians has understandably given rise to more scrutiny and judgement over needing to prove Indigenous relationalities, but this also makes it difficult for those who are in the process of reconnecting who may not yet have documentation to engage whole-heartedly or introduce themselves through traditional approaches of introductions. Further, she shared that “it is important to know how we introduce ourselves traditionally. We introduce ourselves, our family, and where we come from. That is how we traditionally introduce ourselves and each other.” With fears over being perceived as a pretendian due to the intergenerational theft of their Indigenous relationalities and documentation, an additional barrier to fully participating in culture and community presents itself to those reconnecting. This uncertainty around how they will be perceived is not singular and comes out in additional ways while trying to reconnect.

In episode six of *Finding Cleo* (Walker, 2018, March 20, 29:56) Wayne, a biological cousin of Cleo Semaganis and her siblings who were all adopted out of community, solemnly

ponders over why they have not reconnected with their Nation, leading to his conclusion that they must believe they are not wanted and that no one cared about them. He believes that what stops Indigenous individuals from wanting to reconnect and find their way home is the fear that if they do they will only confirm that they are not wanted. As a result, some individuals may choose not to attempt reconnection, believing it is better to avoid the potential confirmation of being unwanted. This fear can be a powerful deterrent in journeys of reconnection. Wyatt (Wall-O'Reilly, 2020) highlighted this internal conflict having returned to his home culture:

It is so hard not growing up with your family. It is hard walking by people who are blood relatives and not knowing who they are, and they don't know you. My relatives here grew up knowing all of their blood relatives. In Cree culture, my grandmother's siblings are considered my grandparents and their children are my aunts and uncles. I am told that I have approximately 20 aunts and uncles and 60 cousins who all grew up around one another, knowing each other and now have more children of their own. I am just now starting to get to know some of them.

Wyatt's words speak to a feeling of isolation, that he is separate and different even amongst those he knows are his family. However, it is not hopeless. Despite the challenges he faces in connecting with a culture and community he has not had access to, he focuses on what he has gained and what he is learning. Stephanie's Story of reconnection takes this concept further, including the additional confusion around connecting with a different Indigenous culture outside her own community, Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation:

It really wasn't until I came... to Alberta that I really immersed myself in Indigenous culture... I've been learning a lot from the Blackfoot, the Cree, and different Nations around here. So, a lot of the teachings that I have right now are not from my own

community... I look forward to going back to my own community and learning more because I feel this block sometimes... I'm really grateful for what I'm learning out here, but I know it's not my culture. It's not my community. So, I really feel this strong pull to go back to my home community.

Both Wyatt and Stephanie have experienced confusion while connecting with culture and community, feeling out of place or lost. They also both include a discussion of hope and opportunity that distinctly frames the confusion they feel as places of personal drive and potential. Wyatt feels the loss of not knowing his family members' names, but he is also doing the work of learning them and becoming more integrated in the community (Wall-O'Reilly, 2020), and Stephanie is learning valuable teachings from other Indigenous cultures while recognizing the importance of the specific culture and teachings of her community. Stephanie had a powerful metaphor to describe the importance of her specific Nation and their cultural teachings for her journey of reconnection:

It's like a tree has fallen over the path and I've been on this path for quite a while... The path is there but it's so old that it's kind of overgrown, so you need to clear the path a little bit as you're going. I think this tree that's fallen across the path is the biggest obstacle that I've faced yet... I need my community's help to get rid of the tree... I can't go any further until I go home... There's only so much growing I can do away from my community.

She came back to the metaphor later in the conversation:

Going back to that path and the block that I'm feeling, I think there's only so much change that I can witness [in myself] while I'm still here [in Calgary], and I think a lot more is going to happen when I go home. I think once I return and really start doing the

work and engaging in my own community, I think I will see the more dramatic shifts... I think there's a lot more change to come.

Stephanie's path is one that she has been clearing for her own journey but is also a path she has intended for others to use, such as her family or others on their own journeys. This is an impressive undertaking, navigating the confusion and creating space for others to follow.

Guides and Supports.

Two major examples of Indigenous individuals who did not have guides and supports which sought to connect and integrate them with their culture and community can be seen in *Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child* (Obomsawin, 1986) and *Finding Cleo* (Walker, 2018). While the specifics of each Story are unique, both follow Indigenous youth, Richard and Cleo, separated from their family and who had made multiple unsuccessful attempts to run away and return home. Both Stories involve their resulting suicides (Obomsawin, 1986; Walker, 2018). Richard and Cleo both wanted reconnection and faced governmental and social barriers which stopped them from accessing their family. They did not have guides or supports to help them reconnect.

In many of the Stories I had the opportunity to be a listener to, guides and welcoming individuals were a constant, and this idea came forward powerfully in five of the six Stories. Nakuset (Anderson-Gardner, 2021) spoke prominently about the ways in which her Bubbie ensured her reconnection journey was supported and safe, saying that “she was like the anchor, the only person that I could talk to and feel comfortable with... She was that Elder who always believed in me” (5:31). Nakuset's Bubbie connected her with her birth family and bought her the tickets she needed to go meet them. During our conversations, all three Storytellers raised the importance of sitting with Elders and learning from them as a part of their reconnection journey

and as a part of connecting with their Indigeneity. Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew additionally shared how valuable it was “reaching out to some Métis matriarchs,” as they helped both her and her daughter feel welcomed and supported, even making her daughter moccasins. Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew has felt a lot of confusion around what cultural teachings she can pass on to her child, and these matriarchs have helped to relieve that confusion with support, kindness, and guidance.

Stephanie shared that much of her ability to engage with culture has directly come about through her connection to her academic supervisors, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, describing them as “the vessel that's allowed [her] to reconnect with culture” and that they “opened that door for [her] to connect with others from different Nations and different communities.” Stephanie's journey has been one of fighting against a felt quietness and shame around connecting, yet with direct support, she is now participating in, and even leading Indigenous cultural activities from many different Nations and Peoples.

Nevada's journey has been one of healing and progression through her difficult times with addiction towards the spiritual and engaged person she sees in herself today. A major source of this life change were cultural leaders which imparted wisdom that the “the spiritual journey, which is connected with identity and connected with culture, goes hand in hand with [her] emotional healing.” Each Storyteller's examples provide a clear demonstration of the way in which having a guide, be they spiritual, emotional, social, or familial, who recognizes the importance of cultural and community connection is paramount to journeys of reconnection.

To cement this concept, Wyatt's affidavit (Wall-O'Reilly, 2020) directly connects the development of his personal self-understanding, feelings of community, and earnest cultural engagement to the way in which a family member reached out and welcomed him:

My uncle Billy invited me to come stay with him in Victor Lake Cooperative outside of Grande Cache in 2014, just after I graduated and I came to live with him for a year. He showed me my roots and where I belong. It was not until I had this opportunity that I understood what had been missing in my life, and where the pain was coming from: the loss of my culture and connection to family. I started to get back into traditional things such as sweat lodges, ceremony, learning about the land and harvesting, and truly finding out who our people are, what our people are. I got a job at the local coal mine and have lived in Grande Cache ever since. (p. 151)

Journeys of reconnection are deeply layered and ongoing, with no quick fix or easy solution. Yet, identifying the ways in which some relief can be present, such as having a welcoming person to guide and support, is an important step to understanding the Indigenous experience of reconnection.

Conclusion.

This section has demonstrated the ways in which confusion can present itself in the lives of those on their journey of reconnection, as well as associated context for where aspects of confusion may be originating from. There is a significant degree of vulnerability that comes from confusion, and those on their journey of reconnection are holding the emotional weight of such while also enduring significant personal work of understanding themselves and their place as an Indigenous person. They are building relationships, understanding culture, and coming to know themselves in a new way. This is confusing but also the space for major personal growth and fulfillment which is the result of a deep sense of care.

Longing

“Today It's Important to Look Indian”

(Cardinal, 1987, 19:30)

Today, it's important to look Indian. Today, it's important to look Indian. Watching *Foster Child* (Cardinal, 1987), these words ring in my ears. Gil said this as he was preparing to meet with his biological uncle for the first time. It is a sentiment that speaks to an intense longing to be accepted, to not to be perceived as different, and to not accidentally be disrespectful to the community and culture that he is trying to connect to. Present across all six Stories of reconnection in this thesis, longing can come in many forms, such as fears over speaking the Indigenous language incorrectly, not knowing how to dance or form other arts connected to the culture, not knowing how to be calm and at home in a social situation, and more that can make someone doubt themselves and their relationality as an Indigenous person.

In the visual representation of the reconnection journey (see Figure 1), longing follows confusion. With the important note that these themes may be navigated in a non-linear way, I chose to represent it as such as longing emerges when individuals begin to establish new relationships as part of their reconnection journey. While it does not necessarily resolve the questions raised from confusion, longing introduces a new layer of complexity and potential as individuals yearn for acceptance and grapple with uncertainty regarding how others will respond to their reconnection with their Indigeneity. This sense of longing often involves a strong desire to be embraced by their Indigenous communities and a longing to reconnect with cultural practices and traditions.

In this section, I will be demonstrating how longing presents itself in the lives of those on their journey of reconnection, across all six Stories of this thesis. This will begin by looking into the concept of being Indigenous enough, continue into engaging authentically, and then move

into the ways in which shame and longing intersect and inform lived experience and mental health. Finally, I will conclude with an overview of what was discussed.

Indigenous Enough.

Within longing, questions over being Indigenous enough express a worry that those on their journey are not going to be accepted, creating a fear over what might happen if they do not meet the hypothesized and unconfirmed ideals of others in the Indigenous community. There are patterns of respect and good practice that are present in every culture and Indigenous cultures are no different. Some common examples might include gifting tobacco as a way of thanks and honouring the gift of knowledge or support, a culturally relevant thanks that was utilized in relationship with Storytellers of this thesis after our conversations. Respect with Elders and knowledge keepers is important, and there may be specific nuances to understand and follow depending on the culture or ceremony. In our conversations, all three of the Storytellers mentioned the bringing of tobacco as an important step in the respect process during our conversations, and of some nervousness during their journeys when approaching a new area of cultural reverence such as sitting with Elders in a respectful way.

Nevada referenced this feeling as she shared that she was questioning her own Indigeneity while in her partner's Indigenous community: “Being a very light skinned Indigenous person who lives in community but is surrounded in First Nations community, it's been a very trying and ongoing time of integrating those aspects of identity.” Nevada can't control her skin colour, yet she has experienced a feeling of not being Indigenous enough because of her lighter skin tone as it creates a perceived separation between her and the community around her. This questioning of what her place is as an Indigenous person due to her lighter skin colour brings additional complications, prompting her to ask herself “was it based off [her] skin colour that

[she] wasn't offered those [cultural resources]?" while she was going through treatment programs to help with her experiences of addiction. Consequently, she was left in doubt of what her place is and how others perceive her, with a longing to be accepted.

Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew brought up that she, and many others she has met who come from mixed heritage, have also questioned whether they are Indigenous enough:

Feeling like you don't belong anywhere and feeling like you don't have a right to claim that ancestry... 'I didn't grow up with culture and I'm mixed heritage. And, I don't know, should I even be calling myself an Indigenous woman?' It adds a lot to that too. So, there's just all these complexities that go on with this journey of claiming that ancestry and that part of yourself.

Stephanie similarly identified a feeling of internalized judgment as a major part of her life. She aims to address this inner conflict with acceptance and by becoming the person who ensures that others are not alone in their journey:

I think what was missing was acceptance, and again that honouring of what I was going through... that's what I want to be when I go home. I want to be the person that I needed back then, the person that ten-year-old me needed... I want to be the support for people to make them feel comfortable exploring those parts of themselves instead of shutting it off, or locking it, or trying to get rid of it. To really change perspective and really be kind and curious with those parts of ourselves.

Stephanie's experience as a leader who has reconnected makes her well suited to provide understanding support to others who might be longing for acceptance. With a sense of longing, there is a desire to engage in a good way. However, not everyone has the same strength of

perspective as my Storytellers, and one must be careful as an intensity of longing can also bring about performative notions of Indigeneity that need to be addressed.

Engaging Authentically.

A distinction is important to this discussion. Gil's quote, "Today, it's important to look Indian" (Cardinal, 1987, 19:30), has the potential to be misinterpreted. That he needs to "look Indian" might present the idea that those on their journey of reconnection are taking on a false Indigenous presence. Two of the Storytellers make an important distinction between performative relationalities and legitimate expression of the self through the pursuit of developing their own Indigenous connections and relationality.

Stephanie connected her feelings of self-doubt and longing over her Indigeneity to portrayals and perspectives of Indigenous Peoples:

I think it's just really important for people to understand the diversity of Indigeneity within Turtle Island (North America), really, because I think we all have this perspective, this stereotypical Indigenous person. We all have this in our mind of what that is, and if we don't fit into that image then there's this discomfort... I think it's really about acknowledging that there's no one Indigenous person and that no matter if you grew up on reserve or you grew up in an urban setting, whether you are light skin, dark skin. No matter what happened, everybody has the right to immerse themselves in their culture. I just think it's so important for people to know that and to know that there are safe spaces out there where they can do that in a good way and not experience judgement.

This assumption of singular Indigeneity that Stephanie has described can create discomfort when it is not achieved or seen in the self. When there is the belief that there is only one correct way to be Indigenous, any deviation can be felt as a failure. Conversely, Nakuset

(Anderson-Gardner, 2021) experienced an intense pressure to conceal her Indigeneity, and perform a different relationality so as not to be seen as Indigenous:

Because I did have a blond brother and a blond sister, [my adopted parents] were just like ‘Tell people you’re Israeli.’ I wanted to please them, and I wanted to be accepted, and I wanted to fit into this family, and I wanted to be loved. I started to develop, like, self-hate. I didn’t like the way I looked. I didn’t like the colour of my skin. I knew that, when I looked in the mirror, what came back was a Native face. When I was a teenager, I was just, like, trying to erase my identity because I wanted to be accepted, but I was never.

(4:23)

Nakuset's parents held specific and racist views about Indigenous Peoples, which they imposed on her throughout her childhood (Anderson-Gardner, 2021). Nakuset's journey of embracing her Indigeneity represents a rejection of these narrow and prejudiced perceptions of what it means to be Indigenous. Instead, she seeks to understand her own life context and the need for self-understanding within her Indigenous relationality. Similarly, Stephanie's authentic engagement with her relationalities avoids falling into the trap of conforming to widespread stereotypes about Indigenous people. Their experiences highlight that the journey of reconnection is not itself a performative act but a genuine effort to authentically engage with the relationalities that were taken from them, allowing them to reconnect with their culture and community on their terms.

Shame.

Four of the six Storytellers identified shame as a part of what they were feeling on their journeys. While sensations of guilt can be motivating factors towards self-betterment, shame is a

dark reflection of guilt that does not promote personal growth that often drags into self-defeating narratives (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2018).

Nevada spoke of a shame connected to skin colour but also of feeling uncertain over which language she should use, feeling shame for not be raised in her culture:

It's kind of like uncovering a whole other piece, so I regularly go through an identity crisis. I'm not quite sure which language to introduce myself in, and I know that just speaks to the ongoing journey... coming from a mixed background but then also not growing up with culture...

Similarly, Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew spoke of intergenerational shame that she saw affecting her mother and herself in that she didn't know what Indigenous teachings or Stories to pass on to her children before she began her journey of reconnection:

Having children of my own started to get me to think about how I wanted to pass down [cultural teachings]. What I had to pass down was not a lot and I wanted more... And then, when I had my children... it brought that up even more that I wanted to be able to pass something down. To have something to pass down.

While Stephanie spoke of collective community shame:

I was a really closed off individual... There were parts of myself that I wouldn't allow myself to experience or feel, and I think part of that was shame in the sense that... the collective shame within my community is very strong.

Shame seems to direct the blame of cultural and community disconnect onto the individual, a concern that it is their fault for not having been raised with connections. Instead, I interpret these feelings through a lens of longing, a desire for connection that sees the value in the Indigenous community and culture that had been taken across colonialism and lost to them

while growing up. These thoughts and feelings are a completely normal experience, present across Stories of reconnection, and are a way of responding to larger social narratives around Indigenous reconnection. The moment of pause comes when these thoughts become internalized and are interpreted as a valid commentary on self-worth. The idea that someone should innately know something they never had the chance to learn because it's a part of their relationality is a harmful rhetoric, and it naturally creates feelings of self-doubt when you don't align with those expectations.

Wyatt has spoken to the pain he feels around not having grown up with his culture, but he also spoke to the ways in which he feels that same comparison between himself and others in the community through language (Wall-O'Reilly, 2020):

My relatives here in Aseniwuche Winewak grew up speaking their Cree language but my father could not teach me my language because he had never learned it. I listen to them speak their mother tongue fluently and am still just learning a few words. It is harder to learn a language as an adult than as a child growing up immersed in it. (p. 152)

Yet, he also spoke of the ways in which finding his connection made him feel fulfilled. I do not believe that shame would provide that same opportunity, but Wyatt (Wall-O'Reilly, 2020) teaches that longing does with its recognition of hope, potential, and personal growth:

My relatives here [in AWN] grew up learning to hunt, pick berries and medicines, prepare animal hides and participate in spiritual ceremonies. I am just now working hard to learn the basics. I am currently working on my first hide. (p. 152)

I do not want to discount that feelings of shame are present, and that they can be felt in many ways as I have seen demonstrated across Stories of reconnection. However, shifting interpretations around these feelings to recognize how they reflect the personal drives and

strength that exists with each individual on their journey is essential to a well-rounded and foundational understanding of the experience.

Conclusion.

In this section, I have gone through many of the prominent ways in which longing, a feeling of not being Indigenous enough and a desire to be accepted, is demonstrated in Indigenous journeys of reconnection. This began with an investigation into the felt experiences of being Indigenous enough. Next, I briefly went through the distinction between engaging authentically and performative relationalities, with additional considerations for the imparting of Indigenous stereotypes onto personal expression. Finally, I shared the ways in which shame can be reinterpreted in a way that re-centres the individual's autonomy and drive. Exploring Indigenous relationality is a collection of many beautiful moments and should not come at the expense of personal value and cultural relationality.

Reconnection

“I Belong to Two Realities. I Have Two Mothers, Two Families, Two Cultures”

(Cardinal, 1987, 40:51)

At the end of *Foster Child*, Gil has returned to where he began, among his foster family, after learning much about himself on his journey. He is at the wedding of his sister that he had grown up with through foster care. It is not a moment of triumph or depression, but a steady recognition of the journey he has taken. He says these words in a voice over, drawing a distinct idea of what reconnection means for him, belonging “to two realities...two cultures” (40:51).

The theme of reconnection is a common thread in each of the six Stories explored in this thesis. It signifies the point at which an Indigenous individual who was separated from their culture and community has successfully found their way back, embracing their cultural

relationality in a manner that aligns with their unique personal context and experiences. In the visual representation of the reconnection journey (see Figure 1), the theme of Reconnection is positioned at the end of the journey. However, it's essential to emphasize that this doesn't imply a sense of finality. Individuals may revisit displacement, confusion, and longing at various stages in their lives. Simply, reconnection signifies a growing sense of self-acceptance and healing, stemming from their responses to these earlier themes in a way that suits their individual life circumstances. This theme will be a recognition of the different ways in which reconnection occurs in the lives of those on their journey, going through the topics of ongoing journeys, new horizons, gifts, and knowledge shared, and will conclude with an overview of what was discussed.

Ongoing Journeys.

Reconnection is ongoing. Thus, there can still be pain and continued hardship that doesn't immediately go away. In the documentary film *Birth of a Family* (Hubbard, 2017), four adult Dene siblings who had been separated for most of their lives find each other and reconnect with their culture and community. The film journeys with them on this point of reconnection, and follows their trepidation, moments of extreme sadness and loss, as well as the times of pure joy and new possibilities. They explore their relationship as siblings, celebrate all the birthdays they missed, approach culture and music through drumming and connection with Elders, and generally reflect on their experiences reconnecting as adults. However, with so many years lost, and layered personal contexts not all of them are ready to approach, there is the unmistakable notion that their journey is continuing, though now with each other instead of alone.

Three of the Storytellers discussed in our conversations that they have found reconnection but still see the work continuing for themselves. Stephanie is seeking further understanding of her own culture and how she can be a leader for others through her journey.

Nevada is continuing her work to learn language, participate in ceremonies, and generally further the integration of culture into her life. Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew is continuing to raise her family with culture and community involvement in ways that were not available to her while also fulfilling her own pursuits as part of the community. Each of these amazing individuals have experienced reconnection, but they have all made clear that it does not mean their reconnection journey has ended.

Reconnection does not erase the hardship of the past and does not remove lost years or painful experiences. However, there is the possibility for more joy and fulfillment through continued reconnection. Each journey is one of ongoing understanding, learning, and growth.

New Horizons.

Reconnection comes in incredible and varied ways. One example that arose was finding the confidence and security to go to cultural events or ceremonies, participating in family and community celebrations. Two of the Storytellers described some of these moments where fears over needing to look Indigenous enough dissipated, and the sense of community and welcomeness filled the space that confusion and longing had previously occupied. Stephanie shared this experience about her reconnection journey, finding new ways to approach family and cultural celebrations with confidence that she did not have when she was younger:

It's kind of like I'm leading by example which is really scary for me because the person that I was, I did not like attention. To think that I would be twenty-five years old and kind of be centre stage in different situations would be terrifying. Like even, I'm thinking about over the weekend, I was helping with the workshop. I led an [Indigenous Focusing-Oriented Therapy] experiential exercise. If ten-year-old me had seen that happening, she'd be mortified. It's just really remarkable to witness change in myself and change in those around me.

“Mortified” is the term Stephanie uses to describe her younger self which I find quite a powerful marker of change of perspective. Her shyness would have been fearful at the idea of having reconnected. And yet, that fear speaks to the incredible power that comes with gaining confidence among culture and community that Stephanie has worked to develop in herself.

A similar example of a way in which reconnection was felt was the integration of culture into their lives. While this may overlap with cultural activities and gatherings in the previous example, this deserves to be paid special attention as it can often be integrated in private and personally meaningful ways such as practicing smudging, prayer, or wearing cultural clothing or jewelry. It is the way in which one's Indigeneity can be expressed and practiced through connections and relationships with worlds of spirit, art, and culture that expresses an internal welcoming of their Indigeneity. Nevada found herself most strongly with this form of reconnection, finding her culture as a path to self-healing and self-fulfillment. She said that the first time she smelled the smudge, it immediately felt as though her spirit was being lifted. This concept of spirituality as a guide to healing was a major factor throughout our conversation:

It was me. It was my wellness, right? When I look at being in balance and having enough time for mentally, spiritually, physically, emotionally... Attending sweats, every week or every two weeks, picking the medicine, doing all that stuff. Those weren't self-care.

Those were part of my needs of how do I live a balanced life, right? Those were just as important as eating, sleeping... As the years progress, I did connect with other cultural [aspects] like powwow and stuff like that, and that's been the integrating identity piece for me as well.

This is not an easy task to do, to internalize and bring forth your connections that had been lost or stolen, and to do so is a beautiful way of experiencing reconnection which teaches of the impact that accessing Indigenous culture can have.

Gifts.

The next common subtheme of reconnection was a recognition of who those reconnecting are in relation to others in their communities. This is present in interactions with Elders, knowledge keepers, leaders, community members, and guides. Moments where someone who had not been raised with these connections can now value and draw on these relationships in a culturally safe way to find connection, acceptance, and knowledge. It is also a personal recognition of the gifts they bring with them into the world, what they bring to relationships and their community. When discussing the experiences of confusion and longing, there is the subtle implication that reconnection only benefits those who are reconnecting, solving the internal crises they are experiencing. However, reconnection brings forth the gifts these individuals bring with them to their communities.

Reconnection is a recognition of personal value, the idea that they have so much to offer to the world through spirit, knowledge, and personal experience. While not as present across the Stories I was a listener to, it is an important aspect of the journey which can be seen through Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew, who has found her way strongly through this form of reconnection. She told me of the ways in which she recognized both the pains and the beauty across the Indigenous community. She has created and worked with sustainable food operations for Indigenous communities and developed Indigenous birth work support systems. Additionally, there are the gifts she brought to her family through reconnection, helping them to reconnect as well:

[My mom's] journey has been a big one. Only recently she started attending [ceremonies], and what did it for her was attending drum circles. The drumming and the singing has been so healing, and now she's going to Indigenous women's gatherings, and she just feels like she's come home is the best way to describe it... Now, we drum and sing together, and with my young daughter. She's eight years old, she's grown up mostly in culture. It started out very small, but she's been attending sweats since she was little and she's jingle danced, and powwow danced, and she's been learning a lot of the Cree and Michif languages. She's spending a lot of time in community. It's amazing to see where that chain was broken that it is now mending. It is mended so much for this next generation with culture. She doesn't have to try to find it.

Everyone has gifts that they bring with them to their community and their culture, but it can be difficult to manage and identify these gifts while also going through a series of personal crises and self-doubt. Reconnection is the acknowledgment of the gifts everyone who has been separated brings with them.

Gifts to the community are also present in the films and other works of art that have been made, raising Indigenous voices and Stories to more listeners. More broadly, there are gifts in Storyteller's creating paths for others, including the sharing of their Story and experiences for this project. The way in which they have navigated the world and what it means for them to be Indigenous provides understanding.

The loss of these gifts can sometimes feel quite hidden and has been an additional great tragedy of what many have referred to as “cultural genocide” (TRC, 2015a). There is so much strength and perseverance that is needed to continue through the onslaught that is and was the attack on Indigenous Peoples, cultures, and relationalities. The loss of so many who had been

separated from culture and community during this process is immense, which can also conceal the loss of the gifts that could have been given to and from these individuals, from the beauty and knowledge they have within. Journeys of reconnection are not just a journey of finding the self but a journey of finding community, of building relationships, and discovering all that can be that wouldn't have been otherwise. It is a long journey, one filled with arduous effort and self-doubt, but it is beautiful and creates so much. It deserves to be recognized and celebrated.

Knowledge Shared.

Throughout this chapter, I have conversed with experiences of exhaustion and anxiety but also of beautiful accomplishments, aspirations, and knowledge from the experiences that have been shared. This knowledge came forward explicitly in four of the six Stories. Wyatt (Wall-O'Reilly, 2020) went through the effort of sharing his Story through his affidavit because he wanted to share the following:

From my own experience, I believe it is very important for children to maintain roots in the communities they are taken from because it plays a big part in who you are. It is a very hard experience to walk through life not knowing who you are, not knowing your own language, not knowing your own people. I feel lucky that I have a chance to connect with my roots now, but I do not want any more children to experience the disconnection that I have. (p. 153)

I finished the conversation with each Storyteller with a question about what wisdom or knowledge they would offer to other Indigenous individuals who are just beginning their journey of reconnection. I felt the need to draw attention to the gifts of knowledge they bring to others, to recognize them as Indigenous and as in relationship with other Indigenous Peoples. Here is what they said:

Stephanie Tipple.

I think it's okay to not know. It's okay to make mistakes. It's okay to fumble and do things wrong and not know where to go. I think that's what holds people back from reconnecting, and I think that's where that lateral violence piece comes in because there's this cloud of cultural appropriation over us, especially for those who haven't grown up around their culture. We're often told that we're not Indigenous enough, that 'you don't have the right to claim this because you haven't experienced impacts of colonialism' when that's so wrong. The fact that we have not grown up around our culture is an impact of colonialism. So, I think that shame piece is common among people who are reconnecting with culture, that fear of doing things wrong or not doing things right. What I would have liked to have been told, and some people did tell me this, to be reassured that it's okay to do this in your own way, and it's okay to take your time and to make mistakes. It's okay to do things wrong, that's how you learn. And it's okay to experience that fear. I did. Reconnecting, even the first time of reaching out to approach an Elder can be scary. There's fear of 'am I doing this wrong? Am I doing this in a respectful way?' When you experience that discomfort, or that uncertainty, that's a good thing because it shows that you care. It shows that you want to do things in a good way. That's the advice I would give people, that it's okay to be scared and not know the answers.

Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew, Sky Dancing Women.

Be proud and don't be afraid to own that part of yourself. Step into your power as an Indigenous person. We really need to reclaim our culture, and every single one of us can do a part in reclaiming and passing that on to the next generation. And so, I would say to those starting on this journey, to not be afraid and to not feel too out of place because you

are not alone. There are so many of us that have a similar Story and that is because of colonization. Don't let those colonized narratives get to you. Keep on that path of what feels right. Find those healthy Elders in your own communities and go to them. Bring them tobacco and ask questions because usually they are more than happy to share that knowledge. Go to ceremonies. I think that's one of the best things we can do on that journey because it is so healing. It heals whatever was preventing, or whatever traumas created that blockage on that bridge between ancestors and us.

Nevada Ouellette.

Well, literally just to pray. Put that tobacco down and pray and call on your ancestors. They will come in. [Indigenous Focusing-Oriented Therapy] is really a great way to connect with that inner knowing. Just reiterating one of the tenets: They are around us, but they are also within us. Ask and you shall receive. Just honour it, keep it going, integrate it. Keep the spiritual and emotional pieces together because they do go hand in hand. Keep those together, get through the identity crisis, and know that things will get better and more integrated after. It's probably part of the process, not only for us but also for our ancestors and those generations to come. It's honouring the important work that our generation is doing. Keep going.

I found each one of these quotes to be incredibly moving. They identify the value and lessons learned from their unique journeys, and the ways in which the knowledge gained from those experiences can be used to lift the community together. It demonstrates the ways in which they have accessed their internal strengths to find opportunity and become leaders and guides that are so integral to the journey of reconnection. It is a perspective from an experience that should never have been necessary, but no one chooses their life, only how they live them.

Conclusion.

The findings of this thesis have sought to demonstrate essential experiences of Indigenous individuals who were separated and raised outside of their culture and community and who then experienced reconnection. Accomplished through the careful listening to the Stories of my Storytellers and of those who have shared their Story publicly, the findings have indicated four themes: Displacement, Confusion, Longing, and Reconnection. Finishing the discussion with reconnection further encourages the pursuit of finding the culture and community that had been taken across a history of colonialism. There is much beauty in journeys of reconnection, an ongoing experience of new opportunities and horizons, filled with personal and community gifts, and finding knowledge to be shared with others.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This thesis has facilitated an introduction to understanding Indigenous experiences of reconnection for those individuals who were raised without connection to their culture and community. Across the six Stories of reconnection, four common themes emerged: Displacement, Confusion, Longing, and Reconnection. These themes were found through common relationships and experiences across those of the Storytellers, Stephanie Tipple, Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew, and Nevada Ouellette, as well as the three public Indigenous Stories of reconnection, *Foster Child* (Cardinal, 1987), *Becoming Nakuset: Bannock and Matzah* (Anderson-Gardner, 2021), and Wyatt's affidavit (Wall-O'Reilly, 2020). These relational and Storied connections present us, as mental health practitioners and researchers, the opportunity to listen and honour the teachings that are being shared with us.

In this chapter, I will begin with personal reflections on Stories and my own learnings, then move into a discussion of the findings and additional takeaways, before revisiting decolonization and language. After this, I will explore implications for counselling psychology, the strengths and the limitations of the present study, directions for future research, and a final message in conclusion.

Reflection on Stories

Throughout my life, I have always been drawn to Stories and what they teach us. They create a space of comfort during difficult times and a respectful space of challenge when my perspective is limited. They also grant me access to others' experiences that I never would have otherwise understood in my day-to-day life. Stories can be entertainment, but they are so much more; they are means of communicating concepts, ideas, emotions, and experiences to each other in a way we can understand. It is an ultimate communal language.

This research, supported through Archibald's Indigenous Storywork (2008) and Kovach's conversational approach (2010b), accesses the language of Story to comprehend and communicate experiences that are vast and complex. Through the gift of Stories from my Storytellers, from the public sources, and from every Indigenous individual who has shared of their experiences of separation and reconnection, I have been granted the responsibility to tell a shared Story of the Indigenous reconnection journey through this research. What an incredible honour. It is a Story of hardships and setbacks, but most of all, it is a shared Story of strength, self-understanding, survivance, and the journey.

Personal Learning, Impact, and Relationality

Following the principles of Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008), the findings of this research come to be, in part, through my relational engagement with the Storytellers and what we have created together. Thus, it is crucial to reflect on the personal learning, impact, and effects on my own relationalities that this research process has had.

Reflecting on my relationalities, I identify as Aseniwuche Winewak Cree through kinship-based relational connections, affirmed by my membership under my Nation's bylaws (AWN, 2021). My adoption has compelled me to develop a nuanced conceptualization of Indigeneity, envisioning it as a two-pronged system: ancestral genealogical connections and kinship-based relational connections. The absence of either prong can lead to significant confusion and potential personal crises. My situation, lacking ancestral connections, has prompted my own journey of reckoning with Indigeneity. While rare and controversial, this experience is not unheard of (Lee & Horn-Miller, 2018; Wilson, 2022).

Throughout my life, I've encountered varying degrees of exclusion, alienation, and scrutiny regarding my connection to the only family I've ever known. However, my family has consistently embraced and encouraged me. For example, my kokum (Cree word for

grandmother) made me a ribbon shirt for my high school graduation, my aunts and uncles expressed pride in my educational pursuits and community involvement, and my dad and sister offered unwavering support during moments of self-doubt when I contemplated concealing my Cree relationality to avoid confusion. I'm immensely grateful for these experiences.

Nevertheless, I'm reminded of the importance of my family and support system in preventing me from feeling isolated. This reflection also underscores the common experience of separation from relational connections among individuals who were raised separated from their Indigenous communities and cultures.

I think I am brought to these memories as I am engaging with the Stories of reconnection because there is much about my experience feeling out of place that are reflected in the findings though from an inverted origin. The displacement that is present around feeling out of place. The confusion over how to act and be. The longing to be accepted and not make mistakes. These are all experiences I can connect with, and so the knowing the Storytellers share are ones that I feel myself growing from as well through my own relationalities. My suspicion is that these connections are coming from a mutual understanding of experiences of missing a prong of Indigeneity and having to navigate that relationality from a point of uncertainty. I also feel myself contemplating on the intricacies present in this relational connection and how oversimplified notions of Indigeneity can place those on the margins of Indigeneity in situations of heightened complexity.

As a child, I watched an episode of Scooby-Doo (Hanna & Barbera, 1969) in which the antagonist used the disguise of an 'Indian witch doctor' summoning an 'Indian ghost' to scare the Scooby gang. Among many racist elements in the episode, there were Totem Poles in the background of the villain's hideout, a cultural practice I had associated with Indigenous Nations

on the West Coast of North America (Huang, 2009). However, the episode appeared to be set in an entirely different environment and culture. I turned to my parents for an explanation and they had to clarify that, especially at that time, many non-Indigenous people mistakenly believed that Indigenous Peoples were monolithic, and they considered the cultural practices of one group or Nation interchangeable with those of another. This perception is often referred to as pan-Indigenous (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016).

The discussion around pan-Indigeneity naturally leads to a recognition of the diversity among Indigenous Nations, cultures, and communities (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Younging, 2018). However, I believe it is essential to delve deeper and acknowledge the diversity of individual experiences within Indigeneity as well. I am cautious about providing a definitive answer to this issue, as I don't want to unintentionally support pretendian efforts (Lewis, 2023). What I want to emphasize is the need for more nuanced discussions around Indigenous relationalities that can support those who may have lost one prong of their connection, such as from separation, and provide space for engaging in Indigenous relationality within the context of their own lives.

At times, I have felt uncertain about my right to engage in my own culture, which is a source of anxiety not shared by my family but is a perspective I encounter in broader experiences from time to time. For instance, discussions of Indigeneity that are connected to “genetic memory” (Duran, 2019, p. 46), healing with ancestry through genetic and DNA connections, are an understanding that fundamentally excludes me. However, these are also perspectives that provide immense support to those who have been separated and are seeking to reconnect as they can draw on the family connections that were stolen (TRC, 2015a). While I feel myself connecting with the Storytellers and the themes that emerged, it is important to me that I am also

reflecting on the ways in which our experiences are different, and the needs and supports of those reconnecting will look different than mine as a result. This has reinforced my commitment to understanding and amplifying the voices of those who are navigating the complexities of reconnection. It is a complexity I feel that I can understand while also recognizing the gifts I have been given regarding my cultural and community connections, and thus, have a responsibility to work with the journey of reconnection in an informed and respectful way.

The Stories shared by the Storytellers in this research have further enriched my understanding of the importance of Indigenous culture and community in the journey of reconnection. It has also underscored the significance of resilience, strength, and the deep human desire to reconnect with one's roots and heritage. Overall, this research has not only contributed to my academic understanding of Indigenous reconnection but, more importantly, has also deepened my ability to understand myself, and who I can be as a counsellor and research moving forward in relation to the journey of reconnection

It is a Journey, Not a Destination

At the beginning of Chapter Four, I described a fundamental reflection from *Foster Child* (Cardinal, 1987), that Indigenous journeys of reconnection are not one of a singular achieved destination that removes the pain a person is experiencing. It is a journey of self-discovery and self-understanding through the examination of culture and community. By their nature, journeys are not simple. I suppose, if they were, we might describe them as a jaunt or an outing. On the contrary, a journey is a series of new perspectives and experiences that create potential through the overcoming of many difficulties along the way, confronting the complexity of relationality and isolation to create the potential of self-understanding.

Complex Relationality

The term relationality has been employed in this thesis instead of identity, following the lead of Minet (2021) and Fellner (2016, 2018). This shift aims to foreground Indigenous ways of being by recognizing the significance of relationships in connection to the self. This acknowledgment of relationality also underscores its inherent complexity, including “the tensions of relationality, the importance of a sense of Indigenous pride and self-determination, the impact of colonization and trauma within relationality” (Minet, 2021, p. 26). Relationality is a fundamental element of Indigenous ways of being and knowing, reflecting the intricacies inherent in all individuals, encompassing their strengths, challenges, and the means by which they forge connections within themselves and their relationships (Minet, 2021). Due to the ways in which those on their journey of reconnection are needing to delve into often exhausting experiences and relationships, they are also undergoing the navigation of heightened complexity in their relationalities.

What does it mean to be Indigenous? What does it mean to be non-Indigenous? It is easy to take these questions for granted as a simple binary that does not require much thought or complexity. With the direct intent of eradicating Indigenous Peoples (TRC, 2015a), the Canadian government has historically had a simultaneously strict and vague series of descriptions of what it means to be Indigenous that has left many in a state of uncertainty (Lawrence, 2003), something that was deeply reflecting in the Stories of the findings around navigating defining Indigeneity. This colonial system continues to create ongoing confusion over what it means to be Indigenous. These definitions differ significantly from Indigenous understandings of Indigeneity. Though there is always variance depending on the specific Nation and individual, Indigenous understandings of Indigeneity are often as “a multilayered term that is informed by a multiplicity of experiences where both similarity and difference exist simultaneously” (Adefarakan, 2011, p.

35) instead of strict delineations of categorization. Moreover, some Indigenous understandings of Indigeneity have adapted over time to acknowledge that many Indigenous individuals no longer reside on their traditional lands and so are connected to community instead of location (Peters & Anderson, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Therefore, for those on their journey of reconnection, these questions of 'being Indigenous' become tormentingly complex. They find themselves caught between two worlds, not easily fitting into the conventional binary discussion that presumes Indigenous is a box you can mark yes, no, or hide as has been an intergenerational pressure as demonstrated by Storytellers in the intergenerational effects subtheme. It is a racial or ancestral dichotomy which enforces an 'us versus them' mentality (Yuval-Davis, 2010) that inhibits Indigenous reconnection through fear of not being Indigenous enough or being accepted into the community. Perhaps this might contribute to understanding why adoption and other placements of apprehended Indigenous children into non-Indigenous homes often have negative outcomes for both the children and their Indigenous community (Bagley et al., 1993; Fallon et al., 2021; Joh-Carnella et al., 2021; Sinclair, 2007; Trocme et al., 2019). The Stories shared by the Storytellers revealed an internal spiraling of questioning and uncertainty they had experienced; a natural reaction given how varied discussion of Indigeneity can be.

Much of historical mainstream Indigenous representation has been clunky, unhelpful, and even horribly racist in less ideal scenarios (Diamond et al., 2009), meaning that other methods for determining Indigeneity are needed. Blood quantum is a way of measuring connection to a community by purporting a hypothetical percentage of blood connected to a certain group based on ancestry (Chow, 2018). For Indigenous connections, blood quantum has been used to determine the amount of Indigenous blood based on where an Indigenous ancestor was in each

person's genealogy (Chow, 2018). While blood quantum is applied by some Nations and groups, other methods for determining Indigenous connections are also used. For many Indigenous Nations and groups, relationality and kinship are the defining factor for community membership (AWN, 2021; Kesler, 2020). However, there are others who prefer the more direct ancestry-based system, and some communities may even adopt a combination of different methods or entirely alternative approaches (Kesler, 2020). These differences in approaches reflect the variety among Indigenous Nations, but they also create the potential for confusion to arise amongst those who may not perfectly align with those approaches to defining Indigeneity.

Anna Wilson (2022) speaks to the exhaustion of having to navigate different systems of defining Indigeneity with what she describes as her rainbow family. Anna's family is from Heiltsuk Nation with both her and one of her siblings being of mixed racial background and their two older siblings being Black, adopted from Haiti. Their family has dealt directly with interrogations from others regarding their relationality and family ties, and even a time in which her brother, Josiah, was barred from an Indigenous basketball tournament for being Black and not fulfilling the blood quantum requirement the organizers had instituted. Despite being a member of Heiltsuk Nation, others questioned his Indigeneity (Wilson, 2022).

A major takeaway from this conversational Story with Indigenous reconnection is that we should all be reminded of the importance of recognizing the patience and depth of understanding required to navigate the complexity of Indigenous connection and relationality. For instance, in this study, we have identified four major common experiences and the ways in which they present themselves, but that should not be mistaken as a simplification. Journeys of reconnection place those who were separated in an area of cultural experience that is not easily defined and so

we should be diligent to create space for understanding, lest they be forced to navigate such complexity by themselves.

Isolation

From a colonial perspective, the individual is often pressured to manage or eliminate their traumas, differing from Indigenous approaches to holistic wellness and mental health (Duran, 2019; Gone, 2013). The colonial perspective encourages individuals to hide their trauma, promoting mental health stigma (Schomerus et al., 2012) and reinforcing the idea that mental health and overcoming their struggles rely only on the individuals' actions. I have come across this colonial concept in my own practice as a mental health therapist while observing clients' attempts to bury feelings within, and the subtheme of Shame demonstrated how these colonial systems can be imparted into the individual. This process can lead to feelings of isolation, as it creates a divide between the individual and those around them who may want to be a support. To move away from the notion that mental health concerns solely rest within the individual, a shift in narrative is imperative (Duran, 2019; Gone, 2013). It is crucial that both the mental health profession and society as a whole recognize the broader factors of community and cultural socialization that significantly influence individual and community wellness (Fellner, 2016, 2018; Sinclair, 2007).

For those on their journey of reconnection, there are additional factors to consider. Indigenous journeys of reconnection respond to a lengthy history of separation, and specific policy that has aimed to destroy Indigeneity (TRC, 2015a). It is the direct confrontation of cultural genocide on the battlefield of their own relationality. Common occurrences of alienation and anti-Indigenous racism contribute to negative perspectives of Indigeneity among those separated (Anderson-Gardner, 2021; Cardinal, 1987; Nuttgens, 2004; Sinclair 2007). Walkem (2015) describes Indigenous children who have aged out of foster care, without their Indigenous

family connections or governmental support, as “radically isolated” (Walkem, 2015, p. 99). A lack of support, differing perspectives on what it means to be Indigenous, and misalignments of cultural continuity can lead to intense feelings of being alone (Walkem, 2015).

Storytellers have shared the ways in which internalized experiences of displacement, confusion, and longing are persistent and how they are often faced in isolation because they do not feel they belong. I believe much of this experience of isolation can be attributed to a disconnect in understanding that isolates those on the margins of community, such as Indigenous individuals seeking reconnection. This disconnection requires individuals to create new perspectives on their own as there are few readily available or easy to find means to articulate their experiences. We need to have more complex discussions around what it means to be Indigenous, what it means to be reconnecting to Indigeneity, and doing so in a way that is non-judgmental and respectful of each individual's personal reconnection journey.

Self-Understanding

As demonstrated in the findings, ongoing journeys of reconnection involve a pursuit of self-understanding. In other words, not total knowledge of the self, but knowledge of the ways in which someone on their journey of reconnection knows who they were, who they are, and who they want to be in connection with their relationships and Indigeneity (Cardinal, 2017; Minet, 2021). With the major complexity of having to understand personal, historical, and social context around Indigeneity (Peters & Anderson, 2013; Sinclair, 2007; Stevenson, 2020; TRC, 2015a), confounding anxieties naturally heighten. This was present throughout the findings, with anxiety and self-doubt coming forward prominently in Displacement, Confusion, and Longing. However, context and connection is what their journey is about; if we perceive it as a process and a pursuit towards self-understanding instead of a destination, it provides individuals with the space for

self-acceptance and reconnection, potentially relieving anxious stressors for a positive impact on individual's mental health (Duffey, 2012).

There are many different perspectives over what being Indigenous means (Cardinal, 2017; Younging, 2018), and considering the variety naturally present across each singular experience and individuals' intersectionalities, enacting everyone's definition in an individuals' expression of their Indigenous relationality is an impossible undertaking. However, I believe that becoming informed on situational context, working towards self-understanding (Duffey, 2012), and making space for mistakes provides an essential framework to support others in navigating a successful ongoing journey of reconnection. All of these ideas were highlighted by the Storytellers in the knowledge they wanted to share with anyone beginning their journey of reconnection, and it is important that we listen to their teachings. Joining other frameworks of reconnection (Cardinal, 2016, 2017; Landers et al., 2015; St-Denis & Walsh, 2016), this framework can support professionals in the mental health field, regardless of who the client is as it facilitates more complex conversations that are flexible to unique context. It is a warm perspective that allows practitioners to have informed conversations with clients on how to understand, address, and apply the journey of reconnection in counselling psychology.

Reconnection and Decolonization

As previously discussed, decolonization is an active process of revitalizing and bringing forward Indigenous ways of being and knowing, challenging the dominance of colonial systems, and rejecting the assumption that these systems represent objective or unquestionable truths (Fellner, 2016, 2018; Minet, 2021). The historical and ongoing separation of Indigenous Peoples from their cultures and communities is a profound and enduring consequence of colonialism (Stevenson, 2020; TRC, 2015a). This separation has been perpetuated through large-scale events such as residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, among others, as previously explored in this

thesis. Given the importance of decolonization, it is crucial to reflect on how the journey of reconnection aligns with and contributes to this process.

From my perspective, decolonization entails the reclamation and reintegration of Indigenous ways of being in place of colonial systems. One of the central objectives of colonialism has been the removal of Indigenous Peoples as distinct cultural groups, seeking to assimilate them to the point of erasure (TRC, 2015a). Consequently, the act of reconnecting represents a powerful and monumental expression of decolonization in action as a healing process (Minet, 2021). It involves a direct confrontation with colonialism and its enduring impacts on Indigenous individuals, their families, and their communities. We can see, especially through the presence of shame and anxiety, the ways in which the Stories and themes of this thesis show the individuals taking on the weight of separation as personal blame, and decolonization presents reconnection itself as shifting that narrative to recognize the ways in which colonialism has created the separation (Cardinal 2016; Minet, 2021). Through the arduous and often exhausting journey of reconnection, individuals strive to assert their relationalities as Indigenous individuals, grapple with profound questions about their cultural and familial ancestry, and engage in community and cultural practices that have been systematically suppressed by government policies and individual actors for generations.

However, it is important to acknowledge that, while reconnection can be viewed as a decolonizing act that directly challenges and resists colonial power structures (Minet, 2021), this is not necessarily the way in which Storytellers have shared their Stories through the findings of this research. Instead, from my interpretation as a listener, their journeys of reconnection emerge as a deeply personal, transformative, beautiful, and spiritually enriching journey. It is not motivated by acting in a decolonizing way but rather by a profound longing to understand

oneself in the context of Indigeneity, community, and culture, which itself then becomes decolonizing. It is decolonizing through the empowerment of reconnecting and understanding the self in relation. This does not mean that it is easy, or that reconnection is an automatic solution to hardships that may be being faced. It is a recognition of the value of self-understanding and how reconnection is a healing process.

Revisiting Language

In Chapter Two, I discussed the intricate relationship between language and culture, emphasizing that these two aspects must be considered as interrelated and even synonymous with each other, guiding perspectives of reality and spirituality. Battiste and Henderson (2000) eloquently teach us of this understanding:

Since languages house the lessons and knowledge that constitute the cognitive spiritual powers of groups of people in specific places, Indigenous peoples view their languages as forms of spiritual identity. Indigenous languages are thus sacred to Indigenous peoples. They provide the deep cognitive bonds that affect all aspects of Indigenous life. Through their shared language, Indigenous people create a shared belief in how the world works and what constitutes proper action. Sharing these common ideals creates the collective cognitive experience of Indigenous societies, which is understood as Indigenous knowledge. Without Indigenous languages, the lessons and the knowledge are lost (p. 49).

With the profound significance of language in Indigenous culture and relationality (Chiblow & Meighan, 2022), it is surprising that language did not emerge as a more prominent theme in the findings of this study. Brief mentions of language appeared periodically, such as Nevada's goals for continue language learning, Kisik Nimihitowin Iskwew sharing how her daughter is learning Michif and Cree, or Wyatt's (Wall-O'Reilly, 2020) recognition of the

difficulty he has noticed learning a language he did not grow up with. However, the much more prominent themes present were focused around emotional and environmental experiences, sharing anxieties, worries, and moments of strength and beauty that were connected to their journey of reconnection. It leads me to reflect on what may be causing this

Several potential explanations for this observation come to mind. Firstly, the focus of our conversations was on the experience of separation and the journey of reconnection. During these discussions, Storytellers may have emphasized their emotional experiences, challenges, and strategies for navigating new interactions, with language not being the most present aspect of their experiences for them at the time of our conversation or when sharing publicly. Secondly, individuals who are in the process of reconnecting with their Indigenous cultures may not yet fully grasp the importance of language in connecting with their Indigenous cultures. While my relational connections with the Storytellers of this thesis lead me to believe this is not the case for them specifically, for some, awareness of language as a critical factor in their reconnection journey may be a developing aspect of their understanding, particularly as it can be difficult to understand an experience one has not yet had (i.e., fluency in their Indigenous language). Lastly, considering the fundamental role of relationships in guiding this research process (Archibald, 2008; Archibald & Parent, 2019), my own background and reduced relationship with Indigenous languages may have influenced the prominence of language in the conversations and findings. If I had more experience and confidence with Indigenous languages, such as Cree which is the first language of much of my family, perhaps the conversations might have naturally led to a greater focus on language.

While it is uncertain how a different researcher's characteristics might impact the prominence of language in such conversations, this observation raises intriguing possibilities for future research. The extreme theft and attempted annihilation of Indigenous languages (TRC,

2015a), highlights the ways in which it is intrinsically connected to culture and Indigenous ways of knowing (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). Exploring Indigenous language usage and its relationship to the reconnection journey, especially when conducted by researchers with a more heightened relationship with their Indigenous language, could yield valuable insights into the dynamics of language, culture, and relationality among those on their journey to reconnection.

Implications for Counselling Psychology

Lyman (2017) has raised the importance of further research gathering understandings of complex relationality needs in order for mental health providers to give culturally relevant care. Similarly, Landers, Danes, and White Hawk (2015) have made a direct call for therapists to be informed on complex relationalities in order to provide proper care and support for reconnection journeys:

Therapists working with First Nations adoptees and their families are uniquely positioned to support reconnection across multiple relationships. Therapists need to know the importance of social identity for First Nations adoptees; this will shape how they help people navigate the reunification process. For instance, supporting the adoptee's claims of First Nations identity, participating in song, ceremony, dance, drumming, and other community events. (p. 27)

Call for therapists to develop understandings of complexity in reconnection (Landers et al., 2015; Lyman, 2017) begins the conversation towards explicitly identifying areas where counsellors can support Indigenous individuals on their journey of reconnection. This thesis and its findings sheds light on the challenges inherent in Indigenous experiences of reconnection. By integrating this knowledge, counsellors can be better equipped to facilitate meaningful

discussions with Indigenous clients. Several specific implications for counsellors emerge as such:

1. Counsellors can use this thesis to address the TRC's (2015b) call for enhanced education on the history and broader consequences of residential schools. This research offers a valuable perspective that enriches the ongoing discourse and deepens counsellor's comprehension, by providing continuous relational and personal context. This illustrates that the separation from culture and community is not merely a historical event but an ongoing challenge affecting many Indigenous Peoples today.
2. Counsellors can actively participate in decolonizing conversations. This research encourages counsellors to engage in discussions that challenge colonial perspectives and norms surrounding Indigenous relationalities. It underscores the complexity of these experiences and the importance of respecting the personhood and autonomy of Indigenous clients, aligning with Lymen (2017) and Landers, Dane, and White Hawk (2015).
3. Counsellors can use this thesis to create safe and informed counselling spaces for clients and themselves. By delving into the intricacies of Indigenous relationalities around separation and reconnection, counsellors can establish safer and more informed environments for clients to explore their experiences. This approach reduces the burden on clients to educate their therapists about their separation and reconnection journeys.
4. Counsellors can utilize this thesis to validate and normalize the experiences related to separation and reconnection. The findings consistently highlight feelings of alienation, isolation, and self-doubt stemming from various sources. Counsellors can play a vital role in supporting clients through these challenges by employing appropriate language that

shows their understanding of the complexities and difficulties associated with the reconnection process.

5. Counsellors can listen to the Stories shared in this thesis and offer clients alternative therapeutic approaches that fit for them. Recognizing that many Indigenous clients who have experienced separation or are in the process of reconnection may not be ready or comfortable with Indigenous therapeutic methods, counsellors can explore alternative approaches that accommodate their specific needs and readiness. Alternatively, counsellors can create a safe space for clients to delve into their experiences of displacement, confusion, and longing by integrating Indigenous approaches to therapy, such as Indigenous Focusing-Oriented Therapy (Turcotte & Schiffer, 2014). This approach may allow clients to begin their journey in a way that respects their cultural connection and readiness.
6. Counsellors can use this thesis to more effectively pinpoint potential sources of separation-associated experiences, which can then be addressed in therapy sessions. As mentioned in the subtheme of Wisdom Learned within the displacement theme, recognizing experiences of displacement can be challenging, and therapists can play a crucial role in identifying and understanding these experiences.

Incorporating these considerations into therapeutic practice can foster more effective and culturally sensitive support for Indigenous individuals seeking reconnection with their cultures and communities. As a result, this research provides culturally relevant and journey-informed understandings that can be used in counselling practice to facilitate conversations around Indigenous journeys of reconnection.

As an additional consideration, Stephanie expressed that feminist therapies were the first of differing mental supports to provide relief around her experiences of anxiety and colonialism. However, these results were only short term for her. Instead, both Stephanie and Nevada have made strong recommendations for Indigenous Focusing-Oriented Therapy (Turcotte & Schiffer, 2014) to be used for counselling those on their journey of reconnection, citing their own experiences of being validated by this therapy approach. Further research to support and investigate what therapeutic approaches are the most appropriate for Indigenous journeys of reconnection, now informed by common experiences, would be an important area of further study.

Strengths and Limitations

A central strength of this research is its relational approach, integrating direct accounts from the Storytellers paired with two documentaries and an affidavit, triangulating various sources of Story, and providing a deeper understanding of Indigenous journeys of reconnection in line with Indigenous approaches to research and relationality (Archibald, 2014; Wilson, 2008). In doing so, a larger Story of Indigenous reconnection is formed through these relationships, painting a picture of the connections and shared experiences that may often be present. As an additional strength, the findings promote a depth of understanding for complex relationalities, supporting counsellors in working with Indigenous clients who have experienced separation, accounting for a length of differing experiences and contexts so that conversations can be approached in an informed way.

While I identify breadth of different sources as a strength, limitations exist in the number of sources that were used. Due to time considerations, direct conversations were limited to three Storytellers and specific choices of other Story sources were made to facilitate a range of experiences. Therefore, the findings may be limited in their representation of experiences of

reconnection. Due to the complexity of the topic, it was not feasible to explore intersectional relationalities and their effects, variation in timing of journeys of reconnection, or differences across specific Indigenous Nations and groups. Additionally, a limitation exists that is also a strength. Following Indigenous approaches to research as a relational process (Archibald, 2008; Archibald & Parent, 2019; Kovach, 2005), the findings of this thesis are a mutual creation that stems from the relationship between the Storytellers and myself as the researcher and listener. This means that we were able to work towards these findings in a way that only our research and Story relationship could. However, this does open questions around whether an alternative method would have yielded different or more applicable findings and creates a specific series of results that are unique, and so cannot be replicated in the exact same way. As such, this is a limitation to consider, but it is also a product of Indigenous research and ways of being in relation (Archibald, 2008; Archibald & Parent, 2019; Kovach, 2005).

Directions for Future Research

As previously mentioned, intersectional experiences within journeys of reconnection are a strong area of further study. This research has focused on shared relationships and commonalities across Stories to understand central themes and experiences of journeys of reconnection. This has been enlightening and opens space to then identify complicating factors that may be additional hurdles or unseen supports along their reconnection journey. Additionally, given its intrinsic cultural connection (Battiste & Henderson, 2000) research on the use and learning of Indigenous languages as a part of the reconnection process would be a valuable area of further research. I do not know what information or findings would arise from such research, but I am hopeful that further understanding will help alleviate the difficulties we have identified and provide more opportunity for the fulfillment and joy that we have also seen. On a personal

note, I intend to continue pursuing research in this area, both out of responsibility to those on their journey and to myself. What strikes me as the most important factor is that research builds, providing direct and applicable support that has a practical application in the lives of those seeking reconnection.

For other researchers interested in this topic, I recommend exploring intersectional relationalities and their effects, variation in timing of journeys of reconnection, differences across specific Indigenous Nations and groups, reconnection journeys and their connection to language, and the applicability of specific therapeutic approaches.

Final Message

In conclusion, this research and the shared Story connections it identified is an important addition towards understanding Indigenous journeys of reconnection in counselling psychology. When there is little mode of access for understanding a group's complex experiences, it naturally creates a system that overlooks and ignores, leaving Indigenous individuals who were raised outside of their culture without their unique perspective and needs being addressed or supported. By increasing our knowledge of the way in which Indigenous individuals on journeys of reconnection experience displacement, confusion, longing, and reconnection, we can begin to enter into discussions around those topics in an informed and good way. Hopefully, this increase of understanding will lead to a more welcoming atmosphere for personal exploration of reconnection that recognizes each individual's personal life context, needs, and what supports would be best suited for them.

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Appendix

The following are a collection of sample prompts for an unstructured research conversation.

1. How would you describe your experience being raised separate from your Indigenous community and culture(s)?
2. When would you say you first came to know that you were Indigenous?
 1. What was that experience like for you?
3. What did being Indigenous mean to you during the period of your life where you were separated from your community and culture(s)?
 1. What does being Indigenous mean to you today?
 2. [If answers were different] What was it like for you to shift that perspective?
4. What, if any, effects did being Indigenous have on your day-to-day life during the period of your life where you were separated from your community and culture(s)?
 1. What were those experiences like?
 2. What effects does being Indigenous have on your day-to-day life today?
5. What led you to seek out reconnection with your community and culture(s)?
6. What was your journey towards reconnection like for you?
 1. Were there any moments in that journey that were particularly difficult? Any that were particularly meaningful or impactful for you?
7. Was there anyone who was a support for you in your journey?
 1. [If yes] Who were they to you?
 2. [If no] What was it like to go through that experience without support?
8. Did you ever access any mental health support (of any kind, including but not limited to discussions with Elders) to help you with this journey?

1. [If yes] How was that experience? Was there anything that went well? Was there anything that you would have liked to be different?
2. [If no] What would you say contributed to you not accessing mental health support?
9. Is there any advice or wisdom that you might pass on to Indigenous individuals who are just beginning their own journey of reconnection?
10. Is there anything related to your journey reconnecting with your Indigenous community and culture(s) that we haven't talked about yet but is important to your experience?