RE-IMAGINING THE RED ROAD: INTEGRATING INDIGENOUS WAYS OF KNOWING INTO HARM REDUCTION WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES WHO USE ILLICIT DRUGS IN VANCOUVER'S DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE NEIGHBOURHOOD

by

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Abstract

Grounded in my experience as a Two-Spirit/queer Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis researcher in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood, situated on the unceded territories of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and sel̓íl̓witulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations, this dissertation presents three interconnected papers that centre the experiences of Indigenous Peoples who use illicit drugs (IPWUID) amid a drug poisoning crisis disproportionately impacting them. Using the three-article model, this interdisciplinary study uniquely engages with Indigenous studies, public health, and community-based participatory research. It began with sixteen (16) Indigenous-led interviews with IPWUID and expanded to include six (6) community workshops, co-constructed and co-facilitated by IPWUID in the DTES. These workshops were guided by the central question: *How do IPWUID reimagine what it means to walk the Red Road?* – a term used to describe a personal commitment to embodying and living an *Indigenous way of life*. Chapter Two examines the experiences of IPWUID in the DTES, focusing on the drug poisoning crisis and the responsiveness of harm reduction programs through the lens of settler colonialism. Recognizing the limitations of conventional qualitative research in representing Indigenous knowledge, Chapter Three draws on Cree law, *Sihtoskâtowin* (mutual support), to present a methodology that re-centres my Nêhiyaw, Saulteaux, and Métis worldview through relational practices that honour the experiential knowledge driving resistance and resurgence among IPWUID. While acknowledging the challenges IPWUID face, Chapter Four shifts beyond risk-based narratives and rejects depictions of Indigenous Peoples solely as 'victims' in 'need of saving.' Instead, it aligns with frameworks that move beyond "damage-centred"

narratives (Tuck, 2009), emphasizing their resistance to colonial power and the revival of ancestral practices through everyday acts of healing, kinship, and resurgence.

Within kinship networks rooted in reciprocal responsibilities, IPWUID challenge traditional understandings of the Red Road by centring their own approaches to care, wellness, and healing. Their stories reflect Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination, illustrating how they resist colonial power while reviving Indigenous models for decolonial life. By rejecting romanticized, colonial notions of abstinence, IPWUID are reimagining the Red Road as one that embraces *all our relations*.

Lay Summary

This dissertation draws on my experience as a Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis Two-Spirit/queer researcher in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES), located on the unceded lands of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and sel̓íl̓witulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. It centres the experiences of Indigenous Peoples who use illicit drugs (IPWUID) during a drug poisoning crisis that disproportionately affects them. Through sixteen (16) Indigenous-led interviews and six (6) community workshops, the study explores the experiences of IPWUID living and working in Vancouver's DTES, along with how IPWUID reimagine the Red Road – a culturally specific term used to describe a personal commitment to living an *Indigenous way of life*. Moving beyond narratives of victimhood, this work highlights how IPWUID resist colonial structures and revive ancestral practices through everyday acts of kinship and resurgence. These stories demonstrate Indigenous sovereignty and reframe the Red Road to include *all relations*, rejecting colonial ideals of abstinence.

Preface

This statement certifies that the work contained in this dissertation was conceived, conducted, written, and disseminated by Jennifer Lavalley (JL). All empirical research undertaken for the completion of this dissertation was approved by the University of British Columbia (H22-01377), the UBC Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies/Solutions Initiatives, Canadian Institute for Health Research, and the US National Institutes of Health (R01DA044181). Co-authors of the published manuscript (Chapter 2) include Drs. Ryan McNeil (RM), Thomas Kerr (TK), Ms. Linda Steinhauer (LS), and Mr. Dino (Boomer) Bundy (DB). These individuals made contributions only as were appropriate with supervisory committee, collegial, or co-investigator duties. The specific contributions of the author and co-authors are outlined below.

Chapters 1, 3, 4, & 5 are original, unpublished work produced by JL with substantive input from Drs. Sarah Hunt (SH), Sarah de Leeuw (SDL), and TK.

Chapter 2 has been published in the *International Journal of Drug Policy*. JL conducted the literature review and prepared the first draft of the manuscript. The co-authors of the manuscript (RM, LS, TK, DB) contributed only within the scope of their collegial or committee duties. Prior to submission for publication, the co-authors reviewed the draft, provided critical feedback, and contributed to its revision (with the exception of DB, who passed away in April 2023). JL revised the manuscript following receipt of comments for co-authors and peer reviewers and was responsible for submitting the manuscript for publication and preparing final revisions based on the comments of the journal editors and external peer reviewers. This manuscript is published as:

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it like it's an overdose crisis when in fact it's basically genocide”: The experiences of Indigenous peoples who use illicit drugs in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, *134*, 104631.

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List of Abbreviations

BC – British Columbia

BCCSU – British Columbia Centre on Substance Use

CSR – Cultural Sharing in Research

DTES – Downtown Eastside

IPWUID – Indigenous Peoples Who Use Illicit Drugs

NA – Narcotics Anonymous

OPS – Overdose Prevention Site

PWUD – People Who Use Drugs

SCS – Supervised Consumption Site

VANDU – Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users

WAHRS – Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society

Glossary

Feast A feast is a ceremonial meal where elders smudge and offer prayers over the food, often marking the start of a Round Dance and honouring relatives who have journeyed to the spirit world.

Powwow A powwow is a celebration where Indigenous Peoples dance, eat, sing and can buy or sell crafts. Powwows were made illegal under the Canadian *Indian Act* from 1884-1951.

Round Dance A Round Dance is a traditional Indigenous ceremony where participants form a circle and move clockwise. Like many other cultural and spiritual practices, round dances were made illegal under the Canadian *Indian Act* from 1884-1951.

Two-Spirit Two-Spirit is used by some Indigenous Peoples to describe the diverse roles and identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, trans and/or gender-fluid Indigenous Peoples in North America. During the 1990 Winnipeg gathering of the International Gathering of American Indian and First Nations Gays and Lesbians, "Two-Spirit" was chosen to represent Indigenous queer identities and communities. In keeping with this usage and recent Two-Spirit scholarship, I choose to capitalize the term.

Acknowledgements

As I reflect on this five-year journey, I recognize and honour that I have been living, learning, and growing on the unceded, occupied, and ancestral lands of the səl̓ilwətaʔɬ təməxʷ (Tsleil-Waututh), xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), and Skwxwú7mesh-ulh Temíx̱w (Squamish) Nations. These lands have offered me endless support, grounding, and love as I journeyed through imagining, analyzing, and writing this dissertation. As a Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis Two-Spirit/queer woman and a guest here, I view this work as part of my responsibility to honour our shared obligations by validating the experiences of my substance-using kin through research.

This dissertation is guided by the Cree law of *Sihtoskâtowin*, which calls us to come together in mutual support and uphold our responsibilities to one another. In this spirit, I recognize that this work is not mine alone; it belongs to a network of kin, friends, and mentors who walked beside me. Without the support, encouragement, and contributions of friends, colleagues, and family, this journey would not have been possible. I begin by giving thanks to the co-collaborators who have shaped this work.

First, this dissertation is rooted in the stories and experiences generously shared by Indigenous Peoples who use illicit drugs (IPWUID) living and working in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES), who agreed to be interviewed and participate in community workshops. Many of these individuals I have come to know as kin over the years. Thank you for sharing your vulnerability, joy, sadness, and love with me. Thank you to the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction (WAHRS) for trusting me with your stories from the very beginning of my work as a research coordinator at the British Columbia Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU). I am truly in awe of all that you do for our kin. To all the members of my Indigenous Advisory Circle over the years—Tracey, Sammy, Norma, Sandy, James, and Wally—this work would not have been possible without your dedication and guidance. You are a powerful circle of drug user activists, harm reduction workers, and knowledge keepers, and I am deeply grateful and humbled by the opportunity to learn from each of you. Thank you for keeping our communities safe.

To my supervisors, Drs. Thomas Kerr and Sarah Hunt, as well as my committee member, Dr. Sarah de Leeuw, I am eternally grateful for how you held space not only for my work but also for my heart. Your unwavering care and compassion as I navigated family loss and illness throughout this journey carried me through moments when the weight felt too much. Thank you, Dr. Kerr, for encouraging me to pursue a PhD and for believing in my potential even before I did. Your pragmatic guidance in navigating the often-mysterious world of academia made a world of difference throughout this process. Thank you, Dr. Hunt, for being one of the first Indigenous scholars to inspire me to even imagine the path of a PhD. You have taught me to stand in my power and trust in myself. Your brilliance has been a guiding light, and I am honoured to have had your voice and vision alongside me on this journey—I truly cannot imagine doing this without you. Dr. de Leeuw, you went above and beyond your role as a committee member. Words cannot fully express the impact your voice and writing have had on me. Thank you for pushing me to dive deeper into my creativity and imagination.

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A heartfelt thank you to the friends and colleagues who traveled this path before me and those who moved alongside me, generously sharing their insights and patiently answering my unending questions. I would like to offer special acknowledgement to Samara, Taylor, and Loulou. Your guidance, camaraderie, conversations, and writing sessions made all the difference on this journey. Thank you.

I was extremely fortunate to receive financial support throughout my studies. Frederick Banting and Charles Best Doctoral Scholarship and Pierre Elliot Trudeau Foundation Scholarship made this community-centred work possible.

And of course, to my fur babies Goose and Frankie for the endless cuddles and comic relief. You two kept me sane (mostly) and loved (always).

Dedication

For Tasha

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

It was late September and Elder Sandy was preparing for a pipe ceremony in my office, the office where I work as research coordinator and where much of my PhD research bubbled and boiled into being. Sandy proposed offering a pipe ceremony to community members after one participant, a well-known and respected harm reductionist in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood, died of drug poisoning just two weeks after attending our previous workshop. While Sandy set up the space, she shared stories behind each sacred object she pulled from her bag, including the story of receiving her pipe. Listening to Sandy, I witnessed just a fraction of her immense wisdom and felt a mixture of strong emotions. A deep sense of reverence came over me. I remember thinking how extraordinary it was for a Two-Spirit Elder to claim ceremonial space in a DTES research centre. I was also overcome with grief. Just outside the office door there was (as there is during the writing of this introduction) a drug poisoning crisis ruthlessly claiming the lives of our Indigenous kin. The countless lives lost, the funerals, the memorials, the heartbreak. I thought a lot about what it means to grieve. Mostly, I thought about collective grief: the grief caused by the million ways in which the drug poisoning crisis, and governments' responses to it, cause so much harm to our people.

Norma[1] participated in the pipe ceremony that Sandy had prepared, and coincidentally, it was also her birthday. She wore a purple shirt that read "Happy Birthday, Norma!" - a thoughtful

[1] Norma (aka "Auntie Norma") is a member of the Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC) for this project. Her dedication, time, and expertise has been invaluable to not only this work, but to me as a human being. This project would not have been possible without her.

gift from her coworkers at OPS[2]. Throughout the year, Norma had shared numerous stories with me about her experiences of exclusion from ceremonies and cultural gatherings in her home community of Thunder Bay, Ontario (*traditional territory of the Anishnaabeg and Fort William First Nation*), often linked to her drug and alcohol use. During the ceremony, she revealed her spirit name, recounting the context in which she received it and the significance it held for her, especially coming at a later stage in her life. In that moment of sharing, I witnessed a powerful rejection of the dominant narratives around abstinence that frequently shape discussions about substance use in our communities. As Norma spoke, she asserted her ancestral right to connect with her culture as a proud Ojibwe woman.

***

This dissertation focuses upon (and is intended to lift up) Indigenous Peoples[3] who use illicit drugs (IPWUID) and their experiences of substance use, harm reduction, and culture in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood. As detailed on pages 41 and 42 where I highlight the guiding questions of this dissertation, the main objective of this work is to develop culturally appropriate research, including methods that foster a collective sense of belonging, and honour the unique and diverse ontologies, epistemologies, and wellness practices within Indigenous communities in the DTES, while also recognizing the complexity of their resistance to colonialism. Above all, this dissertation is part of a long history of Indigenous resistance to colonial violence in the lives of IPWUID. It is about Indigenous resurgence and movement building. Like

[2] An OPS facility is designed to promptly address community needs and can be established within weeks, bypassing the necessity for community surveys or consultations and the obligation to provide support services like a supervised consumption site (SCS).

[3] Indigenous Peoples includes First Nations, Inuit and Metis. Capitalizing "Indigenous" and "Peoples" emphasizes respect and recognition for our collective rights, identities, distinct cultures, and significance as unique groups with individual histories, languages, and rights.

the strength embodied by Elder Sandy and Norma, I am constantly in awe of how IPWUID in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood, and elsewhere, resist colonial forces that aggressively try to harm and eradicate them. My awe is part of this work: I make no pretense of positivist, objectivist, (aka white-settler-colonial) or unemotional orientations to the work of this dissertation, which I introduce in these pages. Despite colonial violence, IPWUID continue to show up for one another. IPWUID generate their own approaches to harm reduction, approaches centred on responsibilities, relationships, and resurgence. In this dissertation, I honour their labour by attending to IPWUID intimate practices of care (Hunt & Holmes, 2015) as IPWUID navigate reducing the harms of colonialism and create spaces that both reject restrictive colonial notions of substance use taken up by our communities, and that also reminds us about the endurances of resistance, kinship, Indigenous resurgence, and joy.

The ideas that shaped this dissertation emerged from my own lived experience as an Indigenous person navigating intergenerational trauma and addiction: the ideas are also anchored in my work with communities across Turtle Island over the past 15 years. Thus, throughout this work, I move between 'our' and 'their' voices when discussing Indigenous Peoples, reflecting my dual role as both an insider and a researcher.

I was raised in Narcotics Anonymous (N.A). I spent most of my early childhood attending Saturday morning N.A. meetings in smoked-filled church basements with my dad while my mom worked as an addictions counsellor and an executive director for an Indigenous operated addictions treatment facility in Regina, SK. Being an Indigenous kid who grew up in a 12-step program makes one realize how much your family functions through internalized substance use shame. How much there continues to be a normalization of substance use stigma. These realizations are the basis of my research.

The research I present in the pages that follow is deeply informed both by my personal relationship to family and intergenerational addiction and by my extensive involvement as a Qualitative Researcher Coordinator in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood. Since 2017, I have worked with the British Columbia Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU), primarily in partnership with the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS). WAHRS is an Indigenous-led harm reduction organization operating under the umbrella of Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU) and is made up of Indigenous Peoples who use illicit drugs and/or alcohol (current and former). Our work aims to raise awareness and to address the disproportionate impact of the drug poisoning crisis on IPWUID. This work was also concerned by the limitations of qualitative research approaches in providing genuine and respectful representations of Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and realities. Such concerns arise from the tendency of conventional qualitative methodologies to overlook underlying philosophies, research approaches, and ethical considerations that reflect our diverse cultural and epistemological perspectives. This dissertation thus delves into questions that explore how IPWUID define, experience, and practice harm reduction in their daily lives; what spaces—physical, emotional, intellectual—are created through engagement with land, resistance, and resurgence; and how these spaces foster forms of harm reduction and care that revitalize our knowledge of our Indigenous bodies, health, identities, and futures. Additionally, I felt compelled to confront both substance use stigma and the alarming disparity of drug poisoning deaths in our communities after relatives and friends started to die from this crisis.

1.1.1 The Red Road

In my childhood memories of attending cultural events, like powwows, feasts and round dances, one thing always stands out; adhering to cultural protocol almost always involves abstaining from all substances. For some Indigenous Peoples and communities, we are taught to walk the *Red Road,* a culturally specific term used to describe a substantial personal commitment and responsibility to living and experiencing an Indigenous way of life. The Red Road is also closely associated with the principles of sobriety and healing, serving as a guide for individuals seeking recovery from substance use. My understanding of addiction (and what it meant to be a person who used drugs and/or alcohol) was complicated by growing up as an Indigenous person in the southern prairie lands of Treaty 4 Territory, the ancestral lands of the Nêhiyawak (Cree), Saulteaux (Anishinaabe), Dakota, Nakota, Lakota, and the homeland of the Métis. I have always felt this strange dualism of being an Indigenous person, especially one that participates in culture, while at the same time, being someone who uses substances. I spent my childhood and the better part of early adulthood trying to understand and unpack the idea of absolutism, delving into the notion that you are either "clean"[4] or "using". There was no middle ground in how most people in my family and community talked about drugs or alcohol. And there was certainly no room for less risky consumption. The struggle of the "addict"[5] and the achievement of "clean time" was, and to some extent still is, the *celebrated* story in my family and community. This means that anything

[4] Language matters. I intentionally do not use the term "clean" to describe a person who abstains from substances throughout this dissertation. I believe describing someone as "clean" implies they were previously "dirty," perpetuating stigma around addiction. For more see: https://www.cpha.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/resources/stbbi/language-tool-e.pdf

[5] Much like the word "clean", I refrain from using the word "addict" in this work as I believe it carries stigma, diminishing an individual's identity to their substance use struggle and disregarding their dignity and humanity. Instead, I use the term people who use drugs (PWUD) to centre their humanity, autonomy, and agency.

other than “clean time” was resolutely not celebrated. Was frowned upon. Was something to overcome and avoid. Might this, I wondered, have something to do with coloniality and settler colonialism?

The enduring impacts of settler colonialism and the ongoing challenges related to substance use has led to controversy and stigma within Indigenous communities surrounding the concept of harm reduction (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019; Goldstein et al., 2022), posing significant barriers to individuals seeking access to life-saving supports. The experiences of stigmatization are reflected in Canada’s colonial history of enforcing abstinence-only and prohibitionist policies and as a result, people who use drugs (PWUD) are often ostracized and displaced from our own communities (Levine et al., 2021). A recent study that explored harm reduction acceptability and feasibility in a North American Indigenous First Nation reported mixed attitudes regarding whether harm reduction strategies align with Indigenous cultural traditions, with feasibility challenges noted in merging harm reduction with traditional healing methods (Goldstein et al., 2022). For instance, while some health care workers were open to flexibility regarding sobriety requirements for cultural ceremonies, community members emphasized the importance of sobriety as the ultimate goal, specifically within the context of cultural practices (2022).

In my own family, I have seen both a place for, and the significant limits of, abstinence-based models. These models are often disconnected from the everyday realities of intergenerational trauma and other impacts of colonization. I have witnessed how PWUD, including members of my own family and broader community, are often treated as outsiders, resulting in limited or no access to their own communities, effectively separating them from the lands to which they are ancestrally connected and where they might otherwise find belonging,

care, and guidance. This exclusion can sometimes push people out of cultural spaces, including ceremonies, powwows, and access/use of traditional medicines, thereby vacating IPWUID from visions the future of our communities and further distancing IPWUID from the teachings the land provides. These outsider positionings result in perceptions and experiences framed within a much larger ongoing debate centred on the perceived dichotomy of abstinence versus harm reduction (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019). The concept of harm reduction, which at its core is about reducing substance-related harms, is commonly perceived as being in conflict with Indigenous cultural traditions and values. Indeed, substance use within Indigenous communities is a complex and multifaceted issue shaped by deep social-structural injustices rooted in the ongoing impacts of colonialism, and underlying factors tied to colonialism have hindered the public health response to address the health disparities among IPWUID.

Navigating abstinence-based perspectives in our communities is complicated. In this research work, I do not intend to analyze or argue the reasons for the prioritization of abstinence-based approaches in our communities. I've heard these debates for most of my life; some arguing that perspectives originate from or are consistent with our cultural teachings, while others believe they are rooted in imposed colonial values. Perhaps both explanations hold some truth. I do, however, argue my research from a perspective that harm reduction and abstinence-based perspectives are not opposing ideas. Instead, harm reduction and abstinence-based perspectives exist on a spectrum and can complement each other (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019).

The Government of Canada’s commitment to address the health disparities and overall systemic oppression of Indigenous Peoples, through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,

has occurred alongside a drug poisoning[6] crisis that disproportionately affects IPWUID (Lavalley et al., 2018). The overrepresentation of IPWUID in the drug poisoning crisis today highlights the need for immediate action and transformation. This overrepresentation is most acutely visible in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood. The DTES is a low-income neighbourhood and site of Canada's largest street-based illicit drug scene, characterized by high rates of poverty, violence, and houselessness (Wood & Kerr, 2006). It has also long been home to many Indigenous Peoples, who currently make up approximately 8.5% of the neighbourhood's population (St. Denis, 2021). This urban Indigenous population comprises individuals from diverse Indigenous communities across Turtle Island.

As I engage with, and listen to stories in this work, I also enact an ethic of refusal[7] that pushes back on colonial narratives that depict Indigenous Peoples in need of "saving." Research that exclusively focuses on colonial dynamics of power runs the risk of reproducing the colonial categories it seeks to understand as "the danger in damage-centred research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community" (Tuck, 2009, p. 413). It also means asking whom research benefits, how it reveals issues, and what it contributes to a decolonial ethic (Tuck & Yang, 2012). By turning away from trauma as the foundation of this research, I reject research about our communities that has historically been "damage centred, intent on portraying our neighbourhoods and tribes as defeated and broken" (Tuck, 2009, p.412). Racist

[6] In my work, and throughout this dissertation, I purposely use the term "drug poisoning" instead of "overdose". When someone drinks too much, we call "alcohol poisoning", but when someone takes too much of a drug, it's an "overdose". This reflects societal inherent biases and stigma towards people who use drugs. Using the term "poisoning" accurately describes the body's reaction to the drug, while "overdose" suggests the person knowingly takes too much.

[7] According to Audra Simpson (2014), acts of refusal involve the deliberate decision by Indigenous individuals and communities to reject the impositions and expectations of settler colonial states. This refusal is not merely about saying "no" but is a profound assertion of sovereignty, identity, and autonomy.

notions that represent 'Indians' in need of fixing or saving perpetuate the concept of the 'Indian problem', rather than recognizing colonialism's structural, historical, and social conditions as the root issue. Indigenous critical scholars, theorists, and activists like Leanne Simpson (*Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg*), Eve Tuck (*Unangax̂*), Dian Million (*Tanana Athabascan*) and Glen Coulthard (*Yellowknives Dene*) have helped me redefine discourses of healing in ways that reject state interventions and western frameworks that position Indigenous Peoples as reliant on the "state." There is a need for research that counters this erasure by making visible the potential to operationalize Indigenous critical theories and models, ones that are grounded in culturally specific relationships to lands, wellness, safety, and everyday acts of resurgence. Such frameworks can redefine harm reduction beyond the confines of our healthcare systems, which often push individuals into a state-driven public health realm that pathologizes Indigenous experiences rather than honouring land-based perspectives.

This dissertation aims to advance understandings about Indigenous wellness and harm reduction approaches for IPWUID. My work resides at an intersection of being an Indigenous PWUD, which is not always captured in the research, and an understanding that settler colonialism is not a historical event but, rather, is an active and ongoing process enacted through present day genocidal policies and practices (Wolfe, 2006). Aligned with Indigenous organizations, like the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS) and Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN), I see the drug poisoning crisis, and the war on drugs that sits behind the poisoning crisis, as an extension of settler colonialism: both, I argue, are acts of genocide against Indigenous Peoples. Centring the voices, needs, lived experiences, and cultural contexts of IPWUID thus entails an interrogation of how settler colonialism continues to shape the experiences of IPWUID in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood. Ultimately, this research endeavors to contribute to the

ongoing resistance and resurgence I have witnessed during my time as not only a researcher, but as a human being who has built relationships with community members and who is also as an Indigenous person that has deeply personal and intimate relationships with substance use/rs in my own life.

This work is anchored in **16** Indigenous-led interviews and engagements that were initially done with IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood. As my journey as an Indigenous researcher unfolded, and as I will later discuss, so did the project's objectives. This research then also includes **6** Indigenous and peer-led community workshops with current and former IPWUID, with the central question guiding this work, (1) *How do we as Indigenous Peoples reimagine what it means to walk the Red Road?*

This dissertation is comprised of three interconnected papers that each explore Indigenous conceptions of harm reduction as it relates to the perspectives of IPWUID living and working in the DTES neighbourhood. The papers include both the perspectives of the collaborators (Indigenous Peoples who use illicit drugs – current/former) and my own meaning-making as an Indigenous person alongside them. This style of thesis supported my knowledge sharing throughout this journey through conference presentations across the world, including Portugal, France, Australia, and Norway.

Before I delve into a more in-depth introduction to myself and my relationship to the approaches and methodologies informing this dissertation, I offer a brief outline of this introductory chapter. I was taught that our spirit names are how we show up for ourselves, our families, and our communities. It is how we know who we are in Creation. My name is Acâhkos Akwân Iskwew (Starblanket Woman). According to my teachings, the Starblanket is the framework for all stages of life, encompassing ceremonies and rites of passage that guide our

journey as spirits in the human realm[8]. Like my spirit name, I see this research, and my journey as a researcher, as formed and unfolding across many stages. First, I introduce myself in a culturally appropriate way to position myself in this research. Identity, the way we answer the question, "Who am I?" is linked to Indigenous self-determination and journeys of healing, decolonization and resurgence. My positioning is central to how I approach my doctoral work and my academic journey more broadly, and my existing knowledge comes from my lived experiences and relationships with family, community, and the land. Positioning also provides an opportunity to disrupt the Western academic narrative that views researchers as "experts" rather than recognizing the communal nature of knowledge production and application and offers the necessary epistemological framework to implement decolonizing research methodologies. I then explain my process of "coming to know", and what significance it holds in relation to this work. I then summarize BC's drug poisoning crisis, and harm reduction responses as it relates to IPWUID and key knowledge gaps, and provide the study context of this dissertation, including research objectives and questions, as it relates to these gaps. I describe the conceptual framework that guides my research to address these questions, along with my methodological approach and methods. Finally, I conclude with an overview of the chapters in this dissertation.

[8] I only recently began sharing my spirit name publicly. I was taught that the more we understand our spirit, the better we understand ourselves. Through my relationships with IPWUID, and relationship to the DTES neighbourhood more broadly, I continuously evolve, connecting with and understanding previously undiscovered aspects of myself. For this, I am forever grateful.

1.1.2 Self-in Relation: My Relationship to Research with IPWUID

> *The introduction is a mechanism for the beginning of not only acknowledging your place in the world but also of creating Indigenous and allied networks. The introduction is a first step in organizing Indigenous belonging and placemaking (Goeman, p. 25).*

Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux scholar, Margaret Kovach, reminds us that we need to share "enough" about ourselves to "prepare" the reader for our work (Kovach, 2021). Indigenous scholars are always reminding me, and holding me accountable, to situate myself in my writing and to answer the questions: *Who are you? Where are you from? Who are your ancestors? Why do you care?* (Lavallée, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Introducing ourselves and telling our stories is a form of resistance to colonization and so, to respect and honour an Indigenous research framework, I begin by introducing myself in a culturally appropriate way by first taking the role of a storyteller, rather than a researcher (Wilson, 2008). This is something I try to do throughout this dissertation. In doing this, my aim is to tell a collective story of wellness and create a shared space of belonging based on the experiences of those involved in this research. Engaging in this reflexive stance creates a mindfulness about the privilege I hold as a researcher and prepares me to approach my work respectfully and reciprocally with the community that respects the ethical space we collectively share.

I am of the Nêhiyawak (Plains Cree), Saulteaux (Anishinaabeg) and Métis Nations from the southern prairie lands of what is now known as Saskatchewan (SK). I am a registered member of the Piapot First Nation, located approximately 52 kilometers north of Regina in the Qu'Appelle Valley. I was gifted my spirit name by a Dakoka Elder in Fort Qu'Appelle, SK when I was 20 years old - Acâhkos Akwân Iskwew (Starblanket Woman). This research reflects and builds on both the learning inspired by my time as youth worker, social worker, researcher, and graduate

student, along with my lived experience as an Indigenous person who continues to live through complex family experiences of drug and alcohol use. Since 2017, I have resided on the unceded lands of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and sel̓íl̓witulh (Tsleil-waututh) Nations. "As a researcher," Shawn Wilson (*Opaskwayak Cree*) (2001) asserts, "you are answering to all your relations". As such, I see my work as a form of accountability to all my relations, especially to those I have lost to the drug poisoning crisis. These relationships define my responsibility and role within the communities I serve.

1.2 My "Coming to Know"

Coming to know reflects the idea that understanding is a "journey, a process, a quest for knowledge and understanding" with all our relations (Cajete, 2000, p. 66). It is more than an intellectual pursuit, it is "the pursuit of whole-body intelligence practiced in the context of freedom, when realized collectively it generates generations of loving, creative, innovative, self- determining, inter-dependent, and self-regulated community minded individuals" (Simpson, 2014, p. 7). Simpson (2014) writes,

> The process of coming to know is learner-led and profoundly spiritual in nature. Coming to know is the pursuit of whole-body intelligence practiced in the context of freedom, and when realized collectively it generates generations of loving, creative, innovative, self-determining, inter-dependent and self-regulating community minded individuals. It creates communities of individuals with the capacity to uphold and move forward our political traditions and systems of governance (p.7).

It also requires a personal and reflexive engagement with one's Indigenous way of knowing and being. My journey as a Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis woman growing up in Saskatchewan informs this work. Like many prairie Indigenous Peoples, my family tree and kinship systems are

beautifully complex. Our kinship systems are expansive, yet undeniably complicated under genocidal colonial law. My biological father (*Cree, Saulteaux, and Métis*) is a 'Bill C-31 Indian', having been assigned a 6.2 Status designation in 1985, one year before I was born[9]. My mother is Nêhiyaw (Cree) Métis with direct kinship ties to the Red River settlements in Manitoba. By using what some refer to as 'Indian math' (6.2 + non-status = non status)[10], I was not legally considered an 'Indian' for most of my life. Likewise, my Métis identity, an identity historically rooted in a shared sense of history and culture, has made it nearly impossible for me, and many other Métis people, to make political claims to our ancestral lands due to an extensive history of forced assimilation. In 2021, I received my Indian status through Bill C-3, an amendment to the Indian Act that ensures registration entitlements to eligible grandchildren of women who lost status due to marrying non-Indian men.

I intentionally share these parts of my identity because I think it speaks to the imposition of assimilative settler colonial law and in what ways it serves to reinforce colonial control over our Indigenous bodies and rights to our ancestral lands. As I moved through my PhD journey, I came to understand that this was an important way of *coming to know* that I needed to present within my research. My own experience as an Indigenous person influences my theoretical framework and epistemological approach in this dissertation because it enables me to challenge hegemonic rules and norms, understand the intersections of power, privilege, and oppression, and resist the colonial roots of research. It also provides a theoretical anchor in how I situate myself in the broader

[9] Bill C-31 refers to a 1985 amendment to the Indian Act that intended to reinstate status for those who had lost it (my kokum lost her status when she married my mushum, a non-status Métis man).

[10] âpihtawikosisân (2011, December 14). Got status? Indian Status in Canada, sort of explained: https://apihtawikosisan.com/2011/12/got-status-indian-status-in-canada-sort-of-explained/

movement of Indigenous Peoples reclaiming physical and temporal space in their territories, and in territories of other nations, amidst the ongoing occupation of settler colonialism.

Over the years working across non-profit, academic, and activist spaces, I have been part of many conversations in varied contexts with people who are also concerned about the harmful, and often deadly impacts of stigma, racist discrimination, and mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples. Early on in my career as a youth probation officer, and later a social worker working in harm reduction, I found that discourses on substance use among Indigenous Peoples were often led by both non-Indigenous Peoples and non-substance users, with many of these conversations rooted in Christian doctrine and racist ideologies that ignored the intricacies of colonial power, and instead, centred on a paternalistic discourse that aimed at "improving" or "helping" Indigenous Peoples.

In recent years, increasing recognition has been given to harm reduction approaches to addressing substance-use related harms, expressly within the context of a worsening drug poisoning crisis, however, I still find myself struggling to normalize substance use and harm reduction approaches in Indigenous communities and spaces as dominant colonial discourses of "recovery" and abstinence still permeate our thinking. In June 2023, I presented preliminary findings of this research at the Indigenous Health and Wellbeing conference in Cairns, Australia - lands of the Gimuy-walubarra Yidi Peoples. To my knowledge, I was one of only two researchers at the conference whose research focused on substance use in relation to Indigenous health. Yet, it appears I was the only person that presented on harm reduction that positioned IPWUID as experts with autonomy and agency over their own bodies. This worried me deeply. The perspectives of IPWUID are not usually visible within discourses of Indigenous health and wellbeing, and narrow representations of IPWUID in our communities serve to limit the grounds in which their autonomy and agency can be recognized.

As mentioned, I became increasingly concerned about the limitations of qualitative research approaches in genuinely and respectfully representing Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and realities during my time as a research coordinator at the BCCSU. Initially, I struggled to articulate why, as it was more of a feeling I couldn't put into words. Through maintaining and nurturing relationships with DTES community members—relationships that extend beyond a research context—I came to realize that knowledge reveals itself over time and through our intimate connections with each other. My relationships with IPWUID revealed an intimate knowledge and "felt theory" (Million, 2009). Dian Million (*Tanana Athabascan*) argues that "academia repetitively produces gatekeepers to our entry into important social discourses because we feel our histories as well as think them" (2009, p.54). In the intimate space of friendship with IPWUID, the felt theory of "bearing witness" (Million, 2009) to their personal narratives fundamentally altered my understanding of how we connect with each other through our cultural ways of knowing and being as Indigenous Peoples. I began to realize that some stories cannot be confined to conventional academic discourse and instead require various creative expressions. I believe these creative expressions do something distinct from conventional discourse: they create theory and meaning through active engagement in community, on the land, and through emotional connections with each other.

1.3 Background

The longstanding experiential knowledge that informs and structures resistance and resurgence movements among IPWUID is significant and demands recognition, therefore, the theoretical and methodological framework for this research is built on the tireless work of Indigenous theorizing of resurgence, resistance, and Indigenous refusal (Coulthard, 2014; Hunt, 2018a; Hunt, 2014;

Simpson, 2014, 2016, 2017a; Tuck & Yang, 2021). Settler colonialism has failed to erase our collective Indigenous consciousness. I know this because I continually bear witness to how traditional Indigenous intellectual systems in the DTES neighbourhood have continued to thrive despite settlement, violence, assimilation, and land dispossession. The commitment to honour and explore our experiential knowledge, even when we are displaced from our ancestral homelands, resonates with a number of Indigenous scholars (Simpson, 2014; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014), including Dorothy Christian (*Secwepemc and Sylix*) who states, "Our Indigenous knowledge does not evaporate from our daily lives when we live in urban centres; in fact, Indigenous diasporic peoples who live in the city do participate in land-based practices and inter-tribal ceremonies by honouring cultural protocols between communities and Nations" (p.105). Still, we need to move beyond merely theorizing and challenging settler colonialism and instead, utilize Indigenous Peoples embodied theorizations of space and place which contains "knowledge of resurgence, resistance, and Indigenous refusal" (A. Simpson, 2014, as cited in de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018).

Resurgence is often used to refer to "Indigenous peoples exercising powers of self-determination outside the state structures and paradigms" (Asch et al., 2018, p.4). This work reflects Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Sarah Hunt's (*Kwakwaka'wakw – Kwagu'ł*) (2023) theorizing of resurgence which calls for us to be attentive to the ways in which our relationships have been reordered by colonization and encourages us to think through resurgence collectively by engaging in dialogue with one another (Stark et al., 2023). In reminding us to be attentive to the violences that too often play out disproportionately on the bodies of women and Two-Spirit people, Hunt makes a critical point about resurgence being a luxury and privilege that is not afforded to all (Stark et al., 2023). She calls attention to what it means if we are missing a vast number of our people from the spaces in which we are carrying out resurgence and theorizing

practices. This research aims to contribute to the understanding of resurgence by asserting that our communities have adopted restrictive and colonial perceptions of substance use, perpetuating damage-centred narratives that systematically exclude IPWUID from our spaces, thereby hindering our efforts towards resurgence.

Amidst a drug poisoning crisis that disproportionately impacts IPWUID, including my own family members—most recently, two cousins who passed away during the course of this work, one during fieldwork in April 2023 and another in July 2024—I feel an even greater urgency to centre, reveal, and amplify the stories and voices of IPWUID. I argue that nowhere are the public health consequences of colonial abstinence-only policies more apparent than within Indigenous communities. I wonder then how we as Indigenous Peoples can reimagine what means to *walk the Red Road*? One that includes *all our relations*.

1.3.1 Indigenous Peoples and Canada's Drug Poisoning Crisis

Drug poisoning remains one of the most pressing public health issues in Canada, with Indigenous Peoples who use drugs and/or alcohol (IPWUID) disproportionately affected by this crisis (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022; Lavalley et al., 2018). Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and since the start of this dissertation journey, the drug poisoning death rates of Indigenous Peoples in British Columbia (BC) have increased 93% between January and May 2020 (First Nations Health Authority, 2020). In BC, Indigenous People account for 17.7% of all drug poisoning-related deaths despite representing only 3.4% of the province's population and are 5.6 times more likely to die from drug poisoning than that of other BC residents (First Nations Health Authority, 2023). In 2024, First Nation women made up 37.2% of toxic drug poisonings among First Nations, compared to 25.1% among other BC residents (First Nations Health Authority, 2024).

Significantly, the severity of this crisis is likely understated due to poor disaggregation of data on Indigenous Peoples. Canadian statistics on drug-related harms and deaths are not disaggregated by Indigenous identity in most Canadian provinces (Joshi et al., 2018) even though available data indicates that Indigenous Peoples are far more likely to die of drug poisoning.

The sheer magnitude of drug poisoning related deaths in our families and community is difficult to comprehend and accept. These numbers are crushing. They are not just statistics - they are our loved ones, our matriarchs, our kin. They are my cousins, aunties, uncles, and friends. The roots of this crisis are woven into Canada's violent colonial history, and despite the implementation of North America's most comprehensive set of harm reduction interventions, including syringe distribution, supervised consumption services, low-threshold and pharmacy-based opioid agonist treatment, take-home naloxone program, and drug checking programs (Ivsins et al., 2021; Kanate et al., 2015; Kerr et al., 2017; Moustaqim-Barrette et al., 2019), Indigenous Peoples bear the brunt of this crisis. Genocidal drug policies and practices persistently sever their sacred connections to family, community, and land[11]. The socio-political realities that even make it possible for Indigenous Peoples to experience 17.7% of all toxic drug poisoning deaths in 2023 (First Nations Health Authority, 2023) originates in the colonial violence that enabled the creation of the settler state and the expansion of capitalism. Canada could not have been built without it. Colonial acquisition of lands was, and continues to be, enacted through targeted violence that aims to destroy Indigenous Peoples' connection to their territory, which served to debase their power and autonomy over their land and bodies.

[11] *Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers,* in her documentary: "The Meaning of Empathy chronicles the frontlines of *harm reduction*", connects the ongoing substance-abuse crisis to the legacy of colonial violence on Blackfoot land.

The criminalization of Indigenous bodies has always been about land: stealing land, undoing land-based knowledges, defusing languages of land, and dispossessing people from their land. Racialized drug policies are intrinsically linked to Indigenous struggles over land and self-determination and reinforces the oppression and racialized violence that shape the everyday experiences of IPWUID. As critical geographers Sarah Hunt and Sarah de Leeuw (2017) point out, "to not acknowledge these contexts risks perpetuating the idea that writing and knowledge is not produced in places, many of which are forged in ongoing colonial violence toward Indigenous peoples" (p.4). A large body of work has argued persuasively that the war on drugs has disproportionately targeted Indigenous Peoples and people of colour and has resulted in substantial health and social harms, including an increase in drug poisoning (Lavalley et al., 2018; Marshall, 2015; Wood et al., 2009). These drugs related harms are which is acutely visible on the lands where this research took place, Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood. The area comprising present-day Vancouver's DTES is located on the ancestral, unceded, and occupied territories of the Coast Salish peoples–xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and sel̓íl̓witulh (Tsleil-waututh) Nations. Any discussion of the DTES must therefore situate this geography within the context of colonial land dispossession. Yet, it is equally necessary to recognize that the DTES is also where the Coast Salish peoples actively assert their laws, relationships, and responsibilities. Thus, understanding the DTES requires acknowledging both the impacts of colonial dispossession and the ongoing assertion of Indigenous sovereignty that shapes this place.

Land dispossession, according to Simpson (2014), is "by far the largest attack on Indigenous Knowledge systems", yet in my work as a researcher, I found that while an abundance of substance use research has been written about the DTES neighbourhood (Damon et al., 2017; Goodman et al., 2018), very little has been written about the complexities of how this land is still

under the jurisdiction of the settler state and what this means in relation to research, engagement, and knowledge production with IPWUID. Even fewer works have been written by, for, and with Indigenous Peoples[12].

Scholarship and community advocacy focused on substance use among IPWUID have generally used settler colonialism as a theoretical framework to make visible the Indigenous struggle, a way to understand the "political, rhetorical, and discursive fields of past and present Indigenous movements" (Aikau, 2019, p.84). Yet it has been argued settler colonialism does not have a vision for an Indigenous futurity (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). This research, then, is an effort to expand theoretical and methodological approaches with IPWUID to incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing in order to untangle the structure and systemic influences operating within the broader context of historic and ongoing experiences of colonization in the DTES neighbourhood. I believe there are important learnings in the modalities created by IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood in how they have come to practice culture and ceremony within a harm reduction framework. I aim to centre the knowledge of IPWUID as we work to shift and expand our understandings of harm reduction, creating a vision for Indigenous futurity and resurgence among IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood, and elsewhere.

[12] While Indigenous drug user-led research is limited, important work has been conducted with Indigenous Peoples, including IPWUID in the DTES. Notably, Cree Métis scholar Ashley Goodman (2017; 2018) has contributed valuable insights, and the *Red Women Rising: Indigenous Women Survivors in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside* report, published by the DTES Women's Centre (DEWC), amplifies the voices of 113 Indigenous women and 15 non-Indigenous women, providing crucial perspectives related to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

1.3.2 Indigenous Harm Reduction

The movement of Indigenous harm reduction emerged as a response to the inadequacies of mainstream harm reduction approaches which frequently fail to address the unique needs and contexts of Indigenous communities[13]. While mainstream harm reduction practices, such as naloxone distribution and opioid substitution therapies, are necessary and undoubtedly save lives, some argue (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019; First Nations Health Authority, n.d.) that these programs do not adequately address the broader social and systemic issues that intersect with substance use for Indigenous Peoples. By centring Indigenous knowledge and leadership, Indigenous harm reduction initiatives prioritize culturally safe and relevant care, recognizing that true harm reduction involves addressing broader social and systemic issues rooted in the historic and ongoing impacts of colonization. It involves creating culturally safe, trauma-informed environments that honour the agency and self-determination of Indigenous individuals and communities. Programs are community-based and peer-led to ensure local leadership and involvement at every step, integrating traditional knowledge and practices with evidence-based mainstream approaches to nurture holistic wellness and restore cultural connections (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019; First Nations Health Authority, n.d.). It involves meeting individuals where they are, practicing non-judgment and non-interference, promoting sovereignty and self-determination, focusing on building relationships with people rather than addressing behaviours, a reconnection to one's cultures, traditions, ceremonies, languages, and land, and

[13] Considering that much of Indigenous harm reduction work remains undocumented in academic literature, I want to acknowledge the invaluable contributions and knowledge of Indigenous-led groups and organizations, both past and present. This includes the Indigenous Harm Reduction Team (IHRT), or I-Heart (https://www.ihrt.ca/), Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSNH) (https://www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/), the Ka'wàhse Street Patrol (https://www.nfcm.org/en/our-work/kawahse-street-patrol/), and many more. These groups and organizations play a crucial role in advancing harm reduction efforts within Indigenous communities.

facilitating access to necessary health and social services (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019; Native Youth Sexual Health Network, n.d.). For example, The Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN) 'Indigenizing Harm Reduction Model' aims to help Indigenous communities reclaim self-determination over their health and bodies[14]. Finally, given Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of life have been disrupted by colonialism, Indigenous harm reduction efforts is also about undoing, unlearning, and reducing the harms associated with colonialism and the neocolonial structures that continue to oppress and marginalize Indigenous Peoples and communities (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019).

Today, Indigenous harm reduction is gaining recognition as a vital and effective approach for our communities in reclaiming health and sovereignty. However, from my experience and the stories shared with me by IPWUID involved in this work, the normalization of substance use and harm reduction stigma, along with the exclusion of IPWUID from our cultural and resurgent spaces, and often communities, persists.

1.3.3 Research Purpose and Questions

Within the context of a worsening drug poisoning crisis, the purpose of this PhD research is to both examine the experiences and perspectives of IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood in relation to the drug poisoning crisis, and to demonstrate that a focus on Indigenous perspectives and worldviews, from the perspectives of IPWUID themselves, is valuable in elucidating culturally specific philosophies and practices about harm reduction and wellness. Additionally, this research also aims to contribute to the understanding of resurgence by asserting that our communities have

[14] Indigenizing Harm Reduction Model: https://www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/indigenizing-harm-reduction

adopted restrictive and colonial perceptions of substance use, perpetuating damage-centred narratives that systematically exclude IPWUID from our spaces, thereby hindering our efforts towards resurgence. IPWUID are vital members of our families and communities with an inherent right to their cultural practices and everyday resurgent actions which enact responsibilities with land. Including IPWUID in the spaces in which we are carrying out our resurgent practices is then about honouring their ancestral rights to engage in these practices, and "restoring all Indigenous bodies as political orders within our political systems and nationhood" (Simpson, 2017, p.134).

In my efforts to acknowledge and centre IPWUID experiences and conceptions of harm reduction and wellbeing through IPWUID systems of knowing, I ask: **(1)** How do we as Indigenous Peoples reimagine what it means to *walk the Red Road?*; **(2)** How do IPWUID define, experience, and incorporate harm reduction into their daily lives?; **(3)** What spaces (physical, emotional, intellectual) do IPWUID create through engagements with land, resistance, and resurgence, and each other, both at an individual and community level?; and **(4)** What forms of harm reduction and care arise in spaces that restore knowledge about our Indigenous bodies, health, identities, and futurity?

The purpose of this analysis is manifold: First, my analysis attempts to understand harm reduction frameworks that draw on experiential Indigenous knowledges to restore understanding of Indigenous bodies, health, and identities, with the land recognized as alive, as a teacher, and as a way to reconnect with belonging. Building on this foundation, the second focus is to recognize the potential of Indigenous harm reduction and wellness practices based on the perspectives of IPWUID to address the intersecting harms of racism, settler colonialism, and everyday violences which constitute our dispossession. In developing an analysis of harm reduction and wellness practices from the perspectives of a network of IPWUID and Indigenous harm reductionists, this

research exposes a range of actions being taken in the DTES neighbourhood, and elsewhere, to address substance use related harms amidst an unprecedent drug poisoning crisis, understanding them as expressions of Indigenous resurgence through which IPWUID come to belong.

1.3.4 Research Objectives

I am guided by IPWUID ability to generate and sustain intimate spaces to support and care for each other in the face of ongoing settler colonialism, a structure that is fundamentally intent on claiming and controlling Indigenous land, labour, and bodies through the elimination of the "Native" (Hōkūlani K. Aikau, 2019). The main objective of this work is to develop culturally appropriate research, including methods that honour this care, and the unique and diverse ontologies, epistemologies, and wellness practices within Indigenous communities in the DTES, while also recognizing the complexity of their resistance to colonialism. I seek to reinforce Indigenous scholars and decolonial theorists' stance on rebuilding Indigenous nationhood using Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being through local engagement with land and community (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2014, 2016)

The core objectives of the PhD project are to: **(1)** build knowledge of the priorities and life experiences of IPWUID in Vancouver's DTES in relation to harm reduction; **(2)** create a culturally-safe site where IPWUID can share their stories of harm reduction, substance use, and culture and have their voices heard and witnessed by other Indigenous Peoples; **(3)** strengthen relationships among IPWUID, scholars, and community members concerned with IPWUID rights, safety, and experiences and; **(4)** create a safe and inclusive space for IPWUID to engage in cultural and art-based practices of their choosing in ways that can reimagine what means to walk the *Red Road* – one that includes all our relations.

Given that for many Indigenous Peoples and communities, harm reduction equals reducing the harms of colonialism (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019), this research intends to redefine Indigenous harm reduction in terms that account for IPWUID's living experience and consider ways to strengthen collective knowledge rooted in the relationships among IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood, ancestral knowledges, lands, and teachings, and each other. Afterall, I argue that Indigenous harm reduction is embedded in traditional knowledge systems that are deeply rooted in land and place, and given the cultural disruption of settler colonialism, the restoration of IPWUID sacred relationships is vital to rebuilding the health and wellness of Indigenous communities. We know that equitable access to mainstream harm reduction programs is part of the work necessary to keep our people safe and alive during this crisis. Yet, as I will explore in this dissertation, it also requires experiential Indigenous knowledges to position harm reduction as necessary practices towards decolonization and Indigenous sovereignty.

1.4 Research Design: Conceptual Framework and Indigenous Methodology and Methods

> *"Theory" is generated and regenerated continually through embodied practice and within each family, community and generation of people. "Theory" isn't just an intellectual pursuit – it is woven within kinetics, spiritual presence and emotion, it is contextual and relational. It is intimate and personal, with individuals themselves holding the responsibilities for finding and generating meaning within their own lives. (Simpson, 2014, p.7)*

Indigenous research paradigms and theories, or what Kovach (2009) refers to as a "conceptual framework", which in turn informs the methodologies, is based on Indigenous ontological worldviews and epistemological approaches, building in cultural protocols, morals, and values into methodology in the pursuit of self-determination and decolonization (Archibald, 2008; Simpson, 2014; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008; Wilson-Hokowhitu, 2019). In thinking about theory from an

Indigenous perspective, I have come to understand it as purely a way for us to make sense and meaning from our lives, time, and experiences as Indigenous Peoples. Thus, my conceptual framework for this dissertation embodies the relational approach of Indigenous methodologies and methods, highlighting the interconnectedness between the researcher, the community, the land, and the subject of study. Importantly, because decolonization demands acknowledging multiple ways of knowing and being, especially those of Indigenous Peoples and systems (De Leeuw & Hunt, 2018), I understand this exploration of Indigenous harm reduction to be decolonial in nature as it rejects colonial abstinence-based perspectives, and not only includes IPWUID in the research process, but centres their ways of knowing and being.

My articulation of, and struggles with, the concerns in this PhD dissertation also emerge from my lived experience as an Indigenous person navigating both the academy and the intergenerational trauma and addiction within my family and community. Thus, I position myself in an uneasy "insider/outsider" (Kwame, 2017; Smith, 2021) relationship with the knowledge keepers involved in this work. By this I mean I recognize that while I am an Indigenous person conducting Indigenous research with other Indigenous Peoples (some of whom I have a preexisting relationship with), I am doing so within a community I am not part of. While I had been working in the DTES neighbourhood for numerous years leading up to my doctoral work, I had to remain aware that I was still an *outsider* to this community as I am not a person whose drug use is criminalized nor am I from these lands or live in the DTES neighbourhood. Following Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2021) call for insider research by Indigenous scholars, which is informed by research priorities arising from their own community realities, epistemologies, and protocols, this research is deeply influenced by my personal and intimate relationship with the drug poisoning crisis.

Over the course of this project, I realized that applying a community-based, participatory action research approach without grounding it in my own culture, which includes my understanding of and connection to my ancestral homelands, risked weakening the focus on Indigenous concerns, peoples, and systems at the centre of my research. The words of my relatives echoed the work of various Indigenous scholars who engage their culturally based knowledge as the basis of their theoretical frameworks (Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2021; Simpson, 2014, 2017a; Smith, 2021). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou, Māori) (2021) states,

> Our knowledge is embedded in the land. It is not something that can be written down or stored in a book. It is lived knowledge, passed down through oral traditions, ceremonies, and everyday practices. Our connection to the land shapes who we are and how we understand the world (p.146)

In developing my research design and in gaining clarity on my theoretical and methodological choices, I concur with Smith (2021) who proposes that decolonization does not entail "a total rejection of all theory or research or Western knowledge," rather, it is about "centring our concerns and worldviews and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes" (Smith, p.39). As a trained qualitative researcher who has worked on several research projects in the DTES neighbourhood involving IPWUID, I challenged myself to examine my own position in terms of my relationships with land, history, family, and identity. I spent time reflecting on who I am, where I come from, and what compels me to engage in this type of work. Admittedly, this process of learning and unlearning–of engaging in critical self-reflexivity–was extremely challenging at times. It necessitated embracing an intentional vulnerability throughout my PhD journey, a method that pushes the boundaries and confronts discomfort, including my own. As Kovach (2009) reminds us, when choosing an Indigenous research methodology, "start where you are, it will take you where you need to go" (p. 10). To

determine where I needed to go, I had to look within myself as a Two-Spirit Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis woman, understanding and honouring my own embodied knowledge, relational meaning-making, and relationship to my culture and homelands.

Much like participating in ceremonies, powwows, and feasts, the topics I explore in my dissertation are deeply personal, embodied, and relational. This knowledge is also woven into my lifelong journey of taking up my duties and responsibilities as a Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis person with deeply intimate connections and relationships with IPWUID in my own family and community.

To establish the framework for my research model that connects witnessing, story, and IPWUID living and working on the DTES neighbourhood, the theme of *land* became central to my theoretical exploration. In my conversations with my supervisor Dr. Sarah Hunt pertaining to an Indigenous theoretical framework for this project, she suggested I seek a body of knowledge that came from my own ancestral lands and methods of living that shaped and informed the way I perceive the world as a Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis woman. This process would ensure that my research remains firmly rooted in who I am, and that I am attentive to the interests and priorities of IPWUID living in Vancouver's DTES, located on the unceded territories of the xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and sel̓íl̓witulh (Tsleil-waututh) Nations. *But what does it truly mean to engage with concepts of land in this work?* Below, I explore various theorizations of land that align with my approach.

1.4.1 Land as Pedagogy

Perhaps one of the most distinct markers of a decolonial epistemology and methodology has to do with the meaning of land. In Western thought, flattened ontological or materialist frameworks of

place de-emphasize the agency of people and politics (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014), and is commonly theorized through its physicality without any epistemological or pedagogical underpinning or significance (Dei et al., 2022). This perspective often views space as an empty, abstract concept, imagining it as free, available, or unoccupied (Dei et al., 2022). However, within Indigenous epistemologies, land is a living entity and the source of Indigenous knowledges. It informs our cultures, pedagogies, languages and identities and includes human and more than human entities, including the spirit world.

Indigenous scholars have long indicated a preference for the term "land" over place. Indigenous philosophies of place represent significant epistemological and ontological departures from those within Western frameworks and emphasizes that conceptions of place have been profoundly transformed through colonization and land dispossession (Grande, 2015; Smith, 2021; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014, 2015; Wilson-Hokowhitu, 2019), since for the Indigenous world, these conceptions have been "radically transformed in the spatial image of the West" (Smith, 2021, p.53). Thus, I align myself with Indigenous theorists who emphasize the centrality of land, recognizing the foundational role of the land in Indigenous cultures and knowledge systems (Armstrong, 2016; Corntassel, 2012; Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2014, 2017a; Wilson, 2008).

Critical work on place studies has also had an impact on this work. In particular, Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie's (2015) work, which brings together critical place inquiry with Indigenous research methods and worldviews, has argued for the need to contextualize participants' understandings of place alongside an examination of place itself "in its social and material manifestations" (p. 101). Critical place inquiry takes seriously the practical and conceptual contributions of Indigenous epistemologies of land and locates Indigenous critical theories, methodologies, and methods at the centre of inquiry (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014, 2015). Tuck and

McKenzie (2015) define Critical Place Inquiry as, "…research that takes up critical questions and develops corresponding methodological approaches that are informed by the embeddedness of social life in and with places, and that seeks to be a form of action in responding to critical place issues such as those of globalization and neoliberalism, settler colonialism, and environmental degradation" (p. 95). As implied by its focus 'place', it is rooted within a wider movement of research that seeks to interrogate how place shapes our reality and suggests research both take up critical questions and develop related methodological approaches that work to address these settler colonial relations and recognizes the disparate realities that are (re)shaped through the ongoing occupation of settler colonialism. Importantly, a critical place inquiry framework takes seriously the contributions of Indigenous epistemologies of place and land.

Moving towards reciprocity and relationships that are inherent to Indigenous research, and to this work more specifically, Sandra Styres (*Kanien'kehá:ka*) (2019) reconceptualizes land as more than just a physical or geographic entity. From an Indigenous perspective and worldview, land is both space (abstract) and place/land (concrete); it is also conceptual, experiential, relational, and embodied" (p. 27). Styres emphasizes that land is spiritual, emotional, and relational and argues that "storying land" is crucial for decolonization and reconciliation. From a Syilx perspective, Jeannette Armstrong (*Syilx Okanagan)* elucidates the notion of tmixw as perceiving the land as a vital life force. She states, "Each life form is a single strand of the life force of that place and requires others of that place to have existed and to continue to exist. In that way tmixw captures the dynamics of the myriad relationships that make that place what it is" (2019, p. 97). This concept, which emphasizes the interdependence of beings and their environment, is crucial for the Syilx's sustainable self-determination and echoes a common theme in many Indigenous perspectives. Further, in juxtaposing a spatial analysis of state recognition with the relational

geographies that are lived through everyday practices of self-determination rooted in Indigenous ontologies, Michelle Daigle (*Mushkegowuk*) (2016) asserts the spatial politics of recognition confines Indigenous self-determination within colonial territorial boundaries that neglects Indigenous relationships and responsibilities to their kinship networks, including the land. Instead, Indigenous ontologies and their everyday practices foster an alternative politics for Indigenous self-determination.

Most importantly, the research model in this dissertation is firmly rooted in the idea that land *is* Indigenous resistance and resurgence: Indigenous land *is* a being, a force, that challenges dominant narratives and, by its very existence, advocates for recognition of Indigenous sovereignty. In his work "Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition," Glen Coulthard (*Yellowknives Dene*) introduces the concept of grounded normativity as "the modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 13). Critiquing colonial structures that marginalize and displace Indigenous Peoples from their lands, Coulthard opposes state-recognition and its resulting colonized subjectivity, and instead, advocates for decolonial politics grounded in Indigenous resurgence and land-based practices. Simpson (2014; 2016) and Armstrong (2016) frame land as not merely a physical place but as a living entity with inherent agency and wisdom. Simpson's scholarship further expands the understanding of land as a source of cultural resurgence where Indigenous communities reclaim and revitalize traditional lifeways in the face of ongoing colonial violence. Moreover, Wilson (2008) promotes research methodologies that recognize the spiritual and cultural importance of the land, contending that Indigenous methodologies should be

firmly rooted in the land as a fundamental aspect of Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of understanding.

Significantly, Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars discussing the meanings of place and land argue that land is not restricted to rural or "green" spaces but also includes urban settings (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). This view recognizes urban areas as part of land-based relationships and connections. For instance, Hatala et al. (2019) explores how urban Indigenous youth craft their identities through traditional and new cultural practices, connecting with land and nature in urban settings. This process influences their sense of health and wellness and promotes a reinterpretation of miyo-wicehtowi (a Cree word meaning ‘having or possessing good relations’) in the context of urban "land-making”. As Simpson (2014) remind us:

> All Canadian cities are on Indigenous lands. Indigenous presence is attacked in all geographies. In reality, the majority of Indigenous peoples move regularly through reserves, cities, towns and rural areas. We have found ways to connect to the land and our stories and to live our intelligences no matter how urban or how destroyed our homelands have become (Simpson, 2014, p.23).

Collaborating with IPWUID whose ancestral land bases span across Turtle Island, the aim of this work is to co-construct an approach rooted in our collective teachings and practices, while paying attention to the active teachings of the lands we are on. Through this process, IPWUID voices and narratives are amplified, underscoring Indigenous agency and rejecting the colonial gaze that often imposes notions of helplessness onto Indigenous Peoples. This methodology further stems from a deeply personal and intimate journey with identity, belonging, addiction, connection, and meaning. I have seen how IPWUID have continued to generate and sustain intimate spaces to support and care for each other. With staggering rates of drug poisoning among IPWUID, it has become clear there is a need for culturally appropriate research that honours this care, and the unique and diverse

ontologies, epistemologies, and wellness practices within Indigenous communities in the DTES neighbourhood, while also recognizing the complexity of their resistance to colonialism. I am interested in how IPWUID have and continue to mobilize themselves in response to ongoing colonial violence and land dispossession. I contend engaging with Indigenous intellectual traditions is essential for substance use research, as it addresses questions of sovereignty, decolonization, and social change that are integral to supporting IPWUID.

These concepts are relevant to this work because of the implications of Indigenous connections to the land and how they intersect with stories and land-based practices. It is within this context that my conceptual framework is placed within and embodies the relational approach of Indigenous methodologies and methods. Further to contextualize the research design of my community-based and participatory action research study that is immersed in Indigenous methodologies and methods, I turn to theories of Indigenous resurgence.

1.4.2 The Resurgence of Indigenous Drug User Knowledge

Alongside Indigenous and decolonial conceptualizations of land, a focus on Indigenous resurgence as it relates to IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood is central to this work. Eve Tuck (*Unangax̂*) and Marcia McKenzie (2014) assert that we must attend to theorizations of settler colonialism as an ongoing and incomplete project "with internal contradictions, cracks, and fissures through which Indigenous life and knowledge have persisted and thrived despite settlement" (p.61). I believe within these cracks lie current and future possibilities for resurgence among IPWUID: the cracks offer us pathways to liberation. Everyday acts of resurgence, including the simple reconnect of IPWUID to our cultural practices, can restore a sense of individual and community responsibility. Settler colonialism is not a theoretical framework that can explain how to transform

the system or to envision an Indigenous futurity (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014), thus, a different framework is needed if we are going to re-imagine an Indigenous future.

The concept of Indigenous resurgence is frequently associated with John Borrows (*Anishinaabe*), Jeff Corntassel (*Cherokee*), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (*Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg*), Glen Coulthard (*Yellowknives Dene*), Heidi Stark (*Turtle Mountain Ojibwe*), Eve Tuck (*Unangax̂*), and K. Wayne Yang among others. These scholars commonly reject the pathways of recognition or reconciliation offered by liberal settler states. Instead, they advocate for the revival of Indigenous cultural practices and land-based sovereignty. While their approaches to resurgence vary, a central dedication to these principles is consistent across their work. In analyzing Indigenous resurgence literature, I will briefly outline its critique of the "politics of recognition," the centrality of land to understandings of resurgence and decolonization, as well we other visions of resurgence found in the works on Leanne Simpson, Sarah Hunt, and others.

In his book Red Skin, White Masks, Glen Coulthard presents a framework for resurgence and decolonization that emphasizes fostering relationships among Indigenous communities and individuals, rather than relying on state mechanisms of redress. He argues for a "turn away" from the state which links discussions of grounded normativity with a call to reject, or "turn away" from settler state relations (Stark et al., 2023). Coulthard describes this approach as an attempt to reconcile Indigenous assertions of nationhood with the sovereignty of the settler state by accommodating Indigenous identity-related claims through agreements on land, economic development, and self-governance. According to resurgence theorists, these political strategies reinforce settler colonialism. However, some argue that this framing "effectively either dismissing both as improbable or problematic or embracing the 'turn away' with a critique that failure to do so makes grounded normativity impossible or inauthentic" (Stark et al, 2023, p. 5). This debate is

particularly significant for those of us striving to balance the immediate needs of our communities with the broader goals of decolonization and self-determination.

Coulthard and Simpson underscore the centrality of land in Indigenous resurgence efforts, illustrating how social relationships and ethical engagements are deeply intertwined with place and land. For Coulthard (2014), land is not merely a material object vital to Indigenous cultures, but is a dynamic field of relationships, where the Dene and the natural elements (land, animals, plants, and lakes) are interconnected through a network of reciprocal obligations and mutual interdependence. Simpson describes resurgence as a multiplicity of "place-based, nation-based" grounded normativities that come into mutual solidarity "within a network of other Indigenous nations doing the same" (Simpson, 2017, p.178). These systems are not isolated but are part of a broader network of Indigenous nations engaging in similar resurgence efforts, which asserts that resurgence is inherently a form of decolonization. Further, the term *resurgence* involves everyday practices that assert Indigenous nationhood through grounded cultural practices and relations that engage the "spiritual, cultural, economic, social and political scope of the struggle" against settler colonialism (Corntassel, 2012).

While resurgence is a concept is most associated with these key thinkers, the body of resurgence literature is vast and draws from a broader Indigenous studies literature and grassroots efforts within Indigenous communities. There has been a growing number of critical Indigenous scholars contributing and advancing notions of Indigenous political resurgence (Daigle, 2018, 2024; De Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Starblanket, 2017; Stark et al., 2023), calling for Indigenous resurgence efforts to move beyond merely large-scale political mobilization to include a reassertion of everyday practices that emphasize the intimate, lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples (Corntassel & Scow, 2017). This emphasis recognizes that daily life holds

significant potential as a site for emancipation and resurgence against colonial power (Corntassel & Scow, 2017).

Hunt (2015, as cited in Hallenbeck et al., 2016), insists our resurgent efforts “demand(s) that we work in both directions, scaling resurgent actions down to the intimate level of our everyday relations” (p.112), signifying that acts of resurgence derive from our everyday kinship systems. Further, Hunt and Cindy Holmes’ work on the colonized queer politics elucidates the way that intimate spaces in one's daily life and in their moments with friends and family are also sites of resistance in decolonization (Hunt & Holmes, 2015). As a conceptual framework, I further understand resurgence, as described by Simpson (2011, p. 31–32), as one that “not only maps a way out of colonial thinking by confirming Indigenous lifeways of alternative ways of being in the world”, but that ultimately “seeks to dismantle colonialism while simultaneously building a renaissance of mino bimaadiziwin"—a term meaning living of a good life based on ancestral teachings. Within these framings of resurgence, the focus here is on the complex interrelationships among kin, within which humans are intertwined, and the responsibilities these relationships entail. Focusing on everyday actions allows us to witness how we relate to each other within intimate spaces, such as families, communities, and close friendships.

I aim to engage with Indigenous resurgence thought and practice in this way to challenge certain assumptions within our communities that can sometimes lead to IPWUID being shunned from their community and culture. As such, I feel compelled to provide a counter narrative to IPWUID experiences of being criminalized, shamed, victimized, and at times, ostracized from their own families and communities, and the spaces in which we are carrying out our resurgent practices, due to the intergenerational effects of colonial abstinence-based policies that target Indigenous Peoples. My intention is to move away from representing IPWUID as solely victims

and instead represent their lives in ways that recognize their humanity. IPWUID are vital members of our families and communities with an inherent right to their cultural practices and everyday resurgent actions. Recognizing the practices of IPWUID as resurgence, while honouring their ancestral rights to engage in these practices, can propel us toward a future of hope.

In the context of this work, I also seek to frame resurgence as a form of *Land Back*, with IPWUID at the centre of this framing. Below I contend that by viewing Indigenous lands and bodies as inherently linked, one can begin to see how the reinstatement of Indigenous consent-based jurisdiction over our lands is vital to the health and well-being of our communities and provides us opportunities for community resurgence. This framing of resurgence further reminds us that "our position on these lands requires that we daily consider our responsibilities to these nations and their territories" (Stark et al., p.10).

1.4.3 Land Sovereignty Means Body Sovereignty

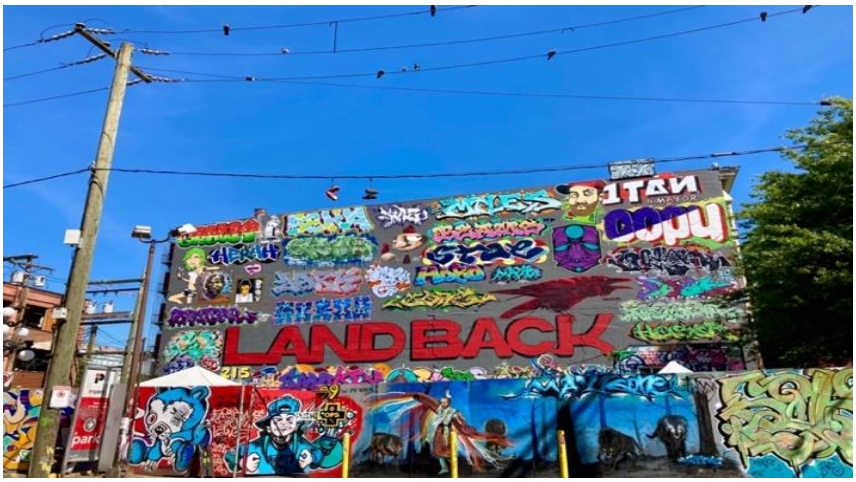

Figure 1-1 Personal Photograph of the Land Back Mural Located at 83 West Pender St. in Vancouver's DTES Neighbourhood

I am deeply rooted in the Land Back movement. Specifically, I aim to embolden the connection between land and body in my work, thereby creating a work that is influential to community

members as they reconnect with their bodies, the land, and see themselves in relation to one another. This stream of analysis of in my work came to me while I was walking through the DTES neighbourhood around the time I was writing my comprehensive exam. During my walk, I found myself looking up at a larger-than-life "Land Back" mural located on the corner of Pender and Abbot Street in the neighbourhood. As I stood there, going over all the things in my head that I still needed to do for my comprehensive exam, I could not help but wonder what Land Back meant in relation to my work with IPWUID? Whose voices have been left out of spaces in which we are carrying out our movements and resurgent practices? What does it mean to engage in these movements if our communities are not attentive to the violences that too often play out disproportionately on the bodies of IPWUID? What does Land Back mean for IPWUID who live in urban spaces like the DTES neighbourhood? Is the DTES neighbourhood also land? What, indeed, is "land" in the conversations of the Land Back movement, and do highly urbanized lands like the DTES constitute that "land"? Is "land" a romanticized "out there" concept that might thus map onto romanticized notions of sobriety and abstinence? And, thus, what about my substance using kin in the "lands" of the DTES? Are they allowed to be part of these movements? I began to reflect on the disconnect that I often felt as I worked within the DTES neighbourhood, which, despite its rich history, community, and cultural *diversity*, felt far removed from what I traditionally considered to be "land".

Most simply, the Land Back movement might be defined as being a literal return of land in so-called Canada (and elsewhere) to Indigenous Peoples. It likewise encourages us as Indigenous Peoples to reconnect with our lands in meaningful ways. The movement shares commonalities with Indigenous resurgence, as both involve challenging dominant institutions and prioritizing Indigenous nationhood, place-based relationships, and community-centred practices.

Like the diverse nature of the Land Back movement, which includes various approaches, resurgence is an ongoing process continually revitalized and reimagined by contemporary Indigenous thinkers and leaders.

Indigenous communities have long recognized the connection between people and land, as expressed through ceremonies, creation stories, and traditional kinship and governance systems. As Cree scholar Alex Wilson states, "Indigenous sovereignty over our lands is inseparable from sovereignty over our bodies, sexualities, and gender self-expression" (Wilson, 2018). Thus, we must address body sovereignty and what it means to have agency and autonomy over our bodies to imagine pathways forward. And while colonization, forced removal, and continued land dispossession have attempted to sever this land/body connection, many Indigenous Peoples, particularly Indigenous women and young people, continue to resist the separation. For instance, for nearly a decade, the Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN) has been actively engaged at the nexus of the Land and bodies, focusing primarily on Indigenous youth. Therefore, this dissertation heavily draws upon and is shaped by this work, and of many other Indigenous theorists, scholars, artists, activists, and poets, that align with the belief that sovereignty over one's body involves sovereignty over Land (Hunt, 2013; Simpson, 2014, 2017a; Tuck & Yang, 2021). This recognition of inseparability from body and land sovereignty is at the core of the Land Back movement, and the renewal of Indigenous traditions, protocols, and law on Indigenous lands (and waters) necessarily extends to Indigenous bodies. Thus, Land Back can also be understood as self-determination over our Indigenous bodies, considering both the dispossession and liberation over Indigenous lands is inseparable from bodily sovereignty (Simpson, 2017a). But how do I understand Land Back in relation to my work?

When I refer to the connection between Indigenous bodies and land throughout this dissertation, this connection is not a mere metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2021). It is embedded in the understanding that land, and bodies' relationship to land, is a necessary aspect of sovereignty, and so, the engagement in land-based practices (medicines, cultural activities, language, etc.) is part of the place or land making process. I argue this framing is a powerful intervention into how Land Back is generally imagined in mainstream discourse which represents the 'classic' land defenders not to be IPWUID, nor is the site of land reclamation imagined to be the DTES neighbourhood. Conversely, harm reduction efforts are typically focused on drug policy or health rather than the reclamation of land. Through everyday acts of resurgence, we are imagining and creating a future for our all of our kin, including IPWUID, one that exist beyond "state-centred, colonial manifestations of power to the relational, experiential and dynamic nature of Indigenous cultural heritage…" (Corntassel & Hardbarger, 2019, p. 55). As a Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis person, colonialism has disrupted our understanding of ourselves within the universe and the relational structures that inform that knowledge. Therefore, when I say, "Land Back," I am not merely referring to the physical ground, or ownership of land. Instead, I align with scholarship and activism that view Land Back as a way to prioritize our most structurally marginalized groups (queer, trans, drug users, sex workers, etc.), centring ways of being that exist outside the confines of settler colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. When I say, "Land Back," I am asserting that IPWUID both belong and have the right to reclaim and redefine their relationships with the land.

I have come to understand Land Back as a fusion of many things. It is the decriminalization of IPWUID to alleviate the many forms of violence enacted on their bodies (e.g., colonialism, inadequate drug policies, surveillance, police brutality, etc.), defunding the police that routinely enact these forms of violence on Indigenous bodies, IPWUID reclaiming physical and temporal

space in the DTES neighbourhood, and the embodied knowledge and resurgence of IPWUID. I also believe Land Back is about incorporating harm reduction strategies and principles into ceremony, rejecting the idea that IPWUID experiences depart from traditional Indigenous knowledge systems. Since settler colonialism attempts to dispossess Indigenous Peoples of their lands, cultures, and bodies, normalizing substance use and harm reduction in our communities in ways that believe all people, including people who use drugs, have sovereignty over their bodies and what they choose to do with their bodies, is an act of resistance and defiance to colonial trauma. This framing is intended to inspire others to fight for IPWUID and care about their safety and well-being.

Ultimately, what I have learned over the years from Indigenous activists, poets, scholars, and thinkers, and through engaging critically in my research as an Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis person, is that land is more than just a physical entity or geographical place but rather a living being with inherent agency and wisdom (Armstrong, 2016; Simpson, 2014, 2017a; Styres, 2018). It is where life happens. It is the caretaker of our ancestral stories. It provides us with food, medicines, and what we need to sustain life in the everyday. Land is our greatest teacher. The deepest and most healing truths and knowledges have been revealed to me through my own intimate relationship with the land and all its creation. My collaboration with IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood has grown over time and has been informed by our collective understandings of land in its various forms. This includes our collective learnings rooted in the DTES neighbourhood, along with our relationship with and responsibilities to the land and all our relations. Thus, this research remains firmly rooted in the local, social, and cultural contexts of the IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood, located on the unceded and occupied territories of the xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and sel̓íl̓witulh (Tsleil-waututh) Nations. To engage

critically with land in this work, I consider the DTES neighbourhood as an active participant in the research process, shaping and being shaped by the interactions between people and their environments (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). The DTES is not just a place where life happens. The DTES is Indigenous land, too. The DTES is a site of Indigenous resistance and a source of cultural resurgence where Indigenous communities reclaim and revitalize traditional lifeways in the face of ongoing colonial violence.

Further, resurgence literature reminds us that we must contend with how we are engaging with and producing knowledge, therefore, in the next section I outline my Indigenous methodology and methods for gathering knowledge, including how my approach is placed within and embodies the relational approach of Indigenous methodologies.

1.5 Methodologies

> *It [harm reduction] is bringing back the holistic philosophy of Aboriginal people. Learning about your culture. As an Aboriginal person, knowing that I am Ojibwe and how we used to live, and bringing back the spirituality and testimonials of our people and how they see what harm reduction is. It is getting everybody involved (Tracey Morrison aka "The Bannock Lady", Better Harm Reduction with Heart, 2018)*[15]

This work is located within terrains of community-based participatory action research that centres Indigenous knowledge(s) and is grounded in Indigenous research paradigms that uplift Indigenous

[15] I never met Tracey Morrison. I started working at the British Columbia Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU) in the fall of 2017, two months after she passed of drug poisoning. At the time of her passing, Tracey was the president of the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS). The grief surrounding Tracey's passing, also known as "The Bannock Lady," for the bannock she baked and sold to Downtown Eastside (DTES) residents, left an unfillable void in the heart of the DTES community. It is through stories about her life that I have come to know and learn from her. It is also how I have come to learn some of the local knowledge of Indigenous Peoples in the DTES as it relates to harm reduction, overdose prevention, and organizing. Tracey has taught me the meaning of "doing more from the heart instead of your head" and her dedication to prioritizing Indigenous voices in harm reduction has shaped many aspects of this research, including my methodological approach.

methodologies in the generation of knowledge (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008). In this section, I outline my Indigenous methodology based on my own understanding of approaches that align with Indigenous perspectives that are mutually respectful, culturally relevant, and responsive in honouring Indigenous traditions. My methodological approach builds on the efforts of Indigenous scholars and thinkers who position Indigenous ways of knowing as central to their research methodologies (Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2021; Simpson, 2014, 2017a; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Methodology positioned as Indigenous is intricately related to Indigenous ways of knowing, thinking, relating, and being (Kovach, 2009; 2015). I draw on the work of these scholars because of their significant contribution to Indigenous research methodologies and to decolonizing research approaches within the academy. Here, I also turn towards how my own nations, the Nêhiyaw (Cree), Saulteaux (Anishinabe), and Métis, understand and live self-determination through actively upholding my responsibilities to my ancestral prairie lands by engaging in place-based customs, such as taking part in ceremonies and traditions, picking berries, visiting relatives, sharing food, and storytelling traditions. My methodology then, is informed by my own understanding of Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis ontologies, and the emergent methods uncovered through this research journey, which act as guiding principles throughout this process.

Inspired by the works of Sarah Hunt (2014, 2018), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014, 2017) Natalie Clark (2016); and Dian Million (2009), and by my own lived experience, research involvement with WAHRS, and later a doctoral student, I began reflecting on well-being and healing through everyday acts of decolonial love, relationships, and kinship. I wondered what it meant, in relation to my work and personal relationships with IPWUID, to create a sacred space where we strive to keep each other safe and bear witness to our lives (Hunt & Holmes, 2015;

Simpson, 2015). Importantly, I asked myself: *what does it mean to create a cultural and ceremonial space with people who are actively using substances? Are we allowed to do this? Does it go against traditional protocols?*

As I expand on further in Chapter's 3 and 4, my methodology emerged from my own cultural teachings, those of the collaborators who shaped this work, and the specific teaching and *application* of the traditional Cree law of *Sihtoskâtowin*—a principle centred supporting one another and coming together in mutual care and solidarity. It implies an understanding that we cannot "do it alone". I argue that in order to truly provide mutual support and to uphold *Sihtoskâtowin* in our communities, it is essential to *fully* witness people's lives, including their drug use. Following a methodological decree offered by Million's (2013) felt theory, I drew on various forms of embodied knowledge, rooted in my own understanding of *Sihtoskâtowin* - focusing on narratives that honour and uplift rather than perpetuate damage-centred stories that paint our people as inherently vulnerable and in need of saving. Instead, I shift away from colonial narratives of struggle and toward joyful, life-affirming spaces that celebrate *all our relations*. This involves recognizing and uplifting community-driven interventions rooted in land, culture, kinship, self-determination, and well-being, where IPWUID, like all Indigenous Peoples, are sovereign beings deserving of culture.

I believe this work with IPWUID is a crucial and important first step in healing from the impact of ongoing colonization because it challenges our own biases towards substance use which can sometimes lead to the prohibition of life-saving harm reduction services in some of our communities (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019). In a research context, the field that is Indigenous research methods offer crucial insights into how we can discuss our experiences, thoughts, and expectations for accountability in our communities when we talk about something

as sensitive and stigmatized as substance use, and the role our communities and leaders play in marginalizing IPWUID from our spaces. However, in my experience as a researcher, these insights often operate at a macro level, and the ways in which we engage with one another—particularly informal relationship building within intimate settings—are often minimized or not necessarily the central focus of the work.

In confronting the erasures and deliberate disruptions of Indigenous communities and individual well-being by colonial efforts, truth-telling and witnessing work together to expose settler violence against Indigenous bodies and their connections to their homelands and waterways. I position myself as a witness and participant to my research, allowing me to deepen my methodological approach as I have begun to learn about own self in relation to this work.

1.5.1 Witnessing

Witnessing is a sacred and ceremonial role (Clark, 2018) in many Indigenous cultures. It requires engaging in the process of witnessing another person's testimony in order to "link a series of acts in community where knowledge is shared through revisiting the past" (Iseke, 2011. P.568). However, in discussing the temporal frame of her Kwagiulth witnessing methodology, in that the responsibility of witnessing stories is both about remembering the past and bringing those responsibilities to the present, Hunt (2014) writes, "Witnessing has been used in the recreation of collective spaces where contemporary experiences of Indigenous Peoples are validated through ceremony" (p.39). This framing of witnessing resonates with my methodological approach given that I continue to see how my family and community create and sustain barriers that keep IPWUID out of our collective, land-based and ceremonial spaces. This is unacceptable to me within ethical frameworks of grounded normativity because I believe IPWUID have the right to live in a world

that is consistent with their lived realities. I deeply empathize with Simpson (2017) in her articulation of an Indigenous queer normativity based on the exclusion of queer and trans bodies in some ceremonial communities: "The toll of crushing on bodies, minds, spirits is accumulative, diminishing, and restrictive. It also eliminates. It eliminates queer bodies from Indigenous spaces. It eliminates Indigenous bodies from political orders. Their *Indigenous* worlds get destroyed" (p.120). Similarly, colonial violence is normalized through the ongoing erasure of IPWUID from our collective and ceremonial spaces, making it impossible for their stories, and *Indigenous* worlds, to be heard on their own terms. As I have come to understand my witnessing methodology, the creation of a collective space where IPWUID experiences could be validated through ceremony inspired the creation of the workshops.

I frequently think about my cousin who died of drug poisoning on our reserve shortly after the second workshop of this PhD project. Her experiences, from her perspective as an Indigenous woman who used drugs, deserved to be honoured and validated. She deserved to be listened to in ways that called upon our responsibility to take action, recognizing that violence against her body as an Indigenous woman and person who used drugs is so tragically normalized. I worry her experiences continue to be silenced, ignored, and stigmatized as I watch my family and community frantically try to make sense of her senseless death. The act of witnessing, then, is especially crucial in the context of punitive and prohibitionist drug policies that produce state-sanctioned violence against IPWUID. Hunt (2014) states, "As witness we have a role that is not to take up the voice or story of that which we have witnessed, nor to change the story, but to ensure the truths of the acts can be comprehended, honoured and validated" (p.38). But how exactly can I step up to my obligation as a witness in this work? I also empathize with Hunt (2018) when she asks, "And how can I remain ethically committed to the ongoing relations in which I live and work, while being

called to respond to the guidelines of university ethic boards, the pressure to publish in peer-reviewed journals, and other institutional demands?" (p.286). I find myself asking the same questions as I navigate writing a dissertation while also seeking ways to honour and care for my grief and loss, as well as that of my community.

Additionally, in the context of current substance use research, opportunities for IPWUID to tell their own stories, and have their stories witnessed by other Indigenous Peoples, are limited. As such, witnessing can create new avenues to validate their voices through nurturing truth-telling in an intimate and relational space (Clark, 2016; Hunt, 2018b; Iseke, 2013). This is especially important in the context of increasing drug poisoning and drug poisoning-related deaths among IPWUID.

I now turn to some of the ways relational accountability was developed through this project, with the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS), and the Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC) formed for this project.

1.5.2 Honouring IPWUID Ethics, Protocols, and Relational Accountability

It takes time to get to know a community, its land, and people. I take cue from a large body of work that stresses the importance of building, nurturing, and centring relationships in Indigenous systems of knowledge and practice (Archibald, 2008; Battiste et al., 2002; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Wilson (2008) suggests that Indigenous research methodologies emphasize the significance of relationality and relational accountability, highlighting the need for researchers to establish genuine and respectful connections with the communities they conduct research with. This approach entails researchers assuming accountability and responsibility for upholding ethical relationships throughout the entirety of the research process. Relational accountability, for me, has

also been about nurturing relationships with DTES community members that extend beyond the research context. The DTES neighbourhood, despite its notorious reputation for being known as Canada's "poorest postal code", is known for its remarkable political organizing and community building. Thus, relationality was central to this research, reflecting my belief that research is fundamentally about building relationships with the communities involved. This study was conducted through numerous connections, including the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society, the Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC) that co-constructed and facilitated the workshop series, and the participants themselves. My hope is that it will continue to build connections through knowledge mobilization and with future readers. Without these connections, this research would not be possible, and thus, my responsibility in this research lies with these relationships. I feel immeasurably privileged and grateful to have built and sustained relationships with many DTES community members, drug user activists, and others doing work.

Finally, access was embedded in the research process by honouring the diverse forms of knowledge, practice, and experience in all participants' cultural expressions. I aimed to achieve this by meeting participants where they are on their respective cultural journeys and by providing a platform for their stories and experiences to be shared and valued, both individually and collectively.

1.5.3 Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS)

The first part of this research (Chapter 2) was done in partnership with the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS), an Indigenous-led harm reduction organization operating under the umbrella of Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU) and is made up of Indigenous Peoples who use illicit drugs and/or alcohol (current and former). WAHRS Board

Members have had active roles as community researchers and contributed their knowledge and expertise throughout. Board members selected the research methodology and were responsible for data collection, while the BC Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU) provided research and logistical support. The research team met with WAHRS board members at bi-weekly meetings – referred to as "Cultural Sharing in Research" (CSR)–dedicated to knowledge creation, sharing, and dissemination over the course of a year to develop this project, which included discussions of qualitative research approaches, community-based research ethics, and research tool development. Lastly, in each of the interviews, we offered medicine bundles at the onset of each interview and research relationship.

1.5.4 The Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC)

This second part of this research (Chapters 3 and 4) was done in collaboration with an Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC), consisting of current and former IPWUID living and working in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood, and whom I considered knowledge keepers in the community. My selection of knowledge keepers was guided by the principle of engaging individuals with lived or living experience of substance use and a commitment to harm reduction. Through the relationships I had built and sustained with IPWUID, harm reduction workers, and activists in the DTES neighbourhood, I initiated a pre-engagement process in the year before conducting the workshop series. I first reached out to two former WAHRS members with whom I had collaborated on previous research projects prior to my doctoral work. They both agreed to participate in this work, and together we formed the IAC. Initially, I invited four members, however, as the project progressed, some members faced life circumstances that prevented their continued commitment,

leading to recommendations for other individuals, including a Two-Spirit Elder who played a crucial role in the project.

The names of the knowledge keepers have been largely identified throughout the research. From a relational perspective, the information shared, or the story offered, would lose its power without acknowledging the knowledge of the teller. This is why the individuals involved in the research chose not to remain anonymous (Chilisa, 2014, p. 133). Kovach (2009) affirms that allowing people's names to be recognized is a form of relational accountability and is deeply rooted in oral cultures. Additionally, the knowledge keepers were given the option to remove their names from the articles before submission or publication.

1.6 Indigenous Methods in Gathering Knowledge

> *I don't want a seat at their table, and I really don't even have the energy to flip their table either. They can have it. I'd rather go to the land, put down tobacco, gather wood and my comrades, and build our own table with the folx actually invested in creating something new (Dr. Autumn BlackDeer (Southern Cheyenne))*

As stated, this PhD project is a direct extension of my work as a Qualitative Research Coordinator working alongside IPWUID in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood. During this time, I had a few eye-opening experiences that would eventually lead to me to question why Indigenous methods were missing from the vast landscape of community-based methods used within substance use research. When using qualitative methods such qualitative interviews, ethnographic observations, and even focus groups, I felt a disconnect between why these methods were chosen and how they were employed. I wanted to create something new. As I discuss in more detail below, my research approach began to shift as I started to grapple with these questions, and subsequently, new methods emerged.

While Indigenous methodologies are aligned with several western qualitative approaches (Kovach, 2010) they remain distinct due to the complex, diverse, and expansive tribal knowledge systems that shape Indigenous worldviews (ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies, and axiologies). Kovach (2010) suggests that Indigenous methodologies are a paradigmatic approach to research, in that the methods we choose as Indigenous Peoples are "congruent with philosophical orientations identified in the research framework to show internal methodological consistency…and should make sense from an Indigenous knowledges perspective" (p.41). Wilson (2008) supports the idea that Indigenous methodologies are a paradigmatic approach as they are grounded in an Indigenous philosophical positioning or epistemology.

Lavallee (2009) and Smith (2021) suggest Indigenous research is not qualitative inquiry, however, most method/ologies used within Indigenous frameworks are a mix of existing methodological approaches and Indigenous practices and may be qualitative in nature. What is important is that our methods of inquiry are political, create space for Indigenous Knowledges, and aim to provide new insights into self-determination and decolonization (Kovach, 2010; Lavallee, 2009). And while qualitative research offers space for Indigenous ways of researching, Indigenous methodologies are distinct because of the theoretical work beneath them (Kovach, 2021; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). Kovach (2009) points to the difficulties of bringing Indigenous methodologies under the "wing" of qualitative research. She states:

> The first centres on form or, more specifically, the language that holds meaning in epistemological discourse. Indigenous knowledges have a fluidity and motion that is manifested in the distinctive structure of tribal languages. They resist the culturally imbued constructs of the English language, and from this perspective alone Western research and Indigenous inquiry can walk together only so far (p. 30).

Thus, my methods are meant to be transformative and anticolonial, contributing to Indigenous resurgence by centring Indigenous knowledge, practices, and leadership, and by redefining resurgence to be inclusive of the spaces being formed by and with IPWUID. This engagement not only challenges colonial and harmful narratives about IPWUID but actively contributes to the resurgence of IPWUID knowledge by centring their perspectives. Importantly, recognizing that not all Indigenous Peoples engage with traditional and cultural practices was critical to creating safe spaces for IPWUID to connect with culture in ways that were dictated by, and meaningful to them. Therefore, culturally specific philosophies about harm reduction were determined by the participants, and was embedded in the research methods themselves, allowing for the development of a new approach to exploring questions of harm reduction in IPWUID.

As Indigenous Peoples, we know (and live) that culture is medicine. Many IPWUID have been excluded, however, from cultural spaces because of a history of intergenerational trauma perpetuated through contemporary colonial policies and practices. Increasing access to, and inclusion in, cultural activities mean respectfully challenging the perspectives that deny or limit access to ceremony or traditional medicines for IPWUID. Challenging notions of the *Red Road* means challenging the moralistic grounds that are the result of colonization and Christianization to expand conceptualizations of harm reduction. Instead, I wanted to give IPWUID opportunities to participate in cultural activities in ways that felt comfortable for them as an expression of body sovereignty and place-based inquiry.

I believe IPWUID leadership within harm reduction is essential in order for IPWUID to reclaim self-determination over their health and bodies. I argue that spaces of collective knowledge sharing on issues of substance use, harm reduction, displacement, violence, justice, and safety can help to strengthen harm reduction measures by rebuilding sacred relationships among IPWUID.

My previous work reveals the significance and benefits of community-based and peer-led support in relation to substance use, including shared lived experience, nominal power dynamics and hierarchies, and a sense of emotional and practical support (Lavalley et al., 2020), as well its ability to strength self-representation by amplifying and upholding the voices of IPWUID while fostering community building. Moreover, Kovach (2005) highlights how the communal nature of Indigenous research challenges individualistic research approaches, where researchers seek to pre-determine and pre-define questions, participants, and processes. At its core, this project was a community-based effort, meaning that all aspects of the research design and process was held in consultation with IAC, so it was imperative to avoid a predetermined process. Instead, data collection efforts involved a collective and iterative process to respond community needs.

First, to inform this doctoral work, Indigenous-led qualitative semi-structured interviews were done with 16 IPWUID living and working in the DTES. The interviews utilized Indigenous storytelling, or storywork (Archibald, 2008; Iseke, 2013), as the guiding methodological framework to conduct qualitative interviews with IPWUID and were co-facilitated in partnership with board members from the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS). Drawing from my experience conducting these interviews and my role as a Research Coordinator supporting individuals who use drugs (PWUD) in the DTES neighbourhood, alongside my journey as a doctoral student and the invaluable guidance provided by the community, the direction of my research began to shift. I started to grapple with the theoretical foundations and methodological approaches specific to research involving Indigenous Peoples, thus, the methods emerge from my theoretical journey as an Indigenous researcher and my time supporting and learning from IPWUID.

At the initial stages of my research, I had limited awareness and understanding of other method options within academia. The semi-structured qualitative interview was my starting point, gathering perspectives from the community about their experiences of the drug poisoning crisis in Vancouver's DTES. As I began to exercise agency as an Indigenous researcher and scholar, I shifted my focus "inward". This involved a deeper connection to myself as a Nêhiyaw and Saulteaux Métis person, which included my own cultural perspectives on health and wellbeing. Kovach contends that the "crucial difference is that Indigenous researchers count inward knowing ways as part of the knowledge construction and referencing methods, subsequently legitimizing them in academic research" (Kovach, 2008, p.127). She further emphasizes that in research methods centred on community concerns and tribal epistemology, the researcher's needs should not supersede the research itself (Kovach, 2008). My exploration of Indigenous inquiry as a distinct methodology with its unique epistemology and core values (Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2021) led me to critically reflect on participatory and decolonizing research processes, revealing a gap in current methodologies within community-based and participatory research with IPWUID.

My research attempts to address this gap by engaging in an emergent decolonizing and place-based practice through amplifying and revealing the stories and resurgent practices of IPWUID. I wanted to consider opportunities to engage the agency of IPWUID as experts and knowledge keepers and not merely as victims. I started to ask myself: What does it mean to conduct community-based and participatory research that examines substance use, harm reduction, and culture from an Indigenous perspective? It was through this question I then co-constructed and co-facilitated six (6) community-based, and Indigenous-led workshops with current and former IPWUID living and working in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood.

1.6.1 Participant Recruitment

For the interviews, participants were recruited by the research coordinator and CSR committee members through outreach to WAHRS members and community meetings of IPWUID facilitated by WAHRS meetings, all of whom met eligibility criteria as Indigenous Persons with current illicit drug use. Individuals interested in participating were identified by the community researcher and the Indigenous research coordinator and then accompanied to the BCCSU's storefront research office in the Downtown Eastside for interviews. We obtained informed consent prior to the interviews. All interviews were co-facilitated by the Indigenous researcher coordinator and a community researcher (member of the CSR committee involved in project). Interviews averaged 30-60 min, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Identifying information was removed from transcripts to ensure confidentiality and participants were assigned pseudonyms. Participants received $30 CAD honoraria for their participation. Interviews were conducted from March 2019 to February 2020, when data collection was suspended due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. We had originally intended to recruit 20-25 IPWUID into this study but permanently suspended data collection due to the severe impacts of the overlapping COVID-19 and drug poisoning crises on the CSR committee (including the deaths of several members) and wider community of IPWUID, as well as the scope of community-level changes during the extended institution-wide suspension of research activities (until Spring-Summer 2021).

A purposive sampling method was used to identify participants for the Indigenous and peer-led workshops, through the IAC of knowledge keepers, Elders, and activists, and through my own position as an Indigenous community researcher, and own community relationships. Together, the advisory members and I drew on our relationships to identify Indigenous individuals living or working in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood beginning January 2023. Participants had

to be 18 years of age or older, identified as Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, Inuit), and a current or former person who uses drugs. Participants were paid a $50 honorarium for each workshop attended.

1.7 Data Sources

This research incorporates multiple data sources to maximize self-determination in the research process. First, witnessing methodologies challenge traditional notions of objectivity in research and emphasize the importance of bearing witness to people's stories within an Indigenous framework that fosters knowledge, relationships, and reciprocity. Additionally, visual arts-based methods were employed to allow participants to express themselves creatively, further embodying self-determination by reframing discussions around our health, wellness, and bodies. Each of these data sources, from witnessing and storytelling in interviews to creative expressions and cultural activities in workshops, was carefully chosen to ensure participants could lead and shape the research according to their values and perspectives.

1.7.1 Witnessing as method

Within a research context, witnessing methodologies grounded in felt theory (Million, 2009), challenge the notion that research must be objective and neutral; instead, they emphasize the importance of emotions and embodied experiences in generating knowledge. This approach calls us to bear witness to people's stories within an Indigenous framework that honours Indigenous knowledge, relationships, and reciprocity. Too often western discourses have failed to centre the agency and voices of Indigenous Peoples, and therefore, I instead want to reframe issues in terms that reflect the strengths of the Indigenous communities in the DTES neighbourhood through the

act of witnessing their stories. Further, because Indigenous knowledge and land co-constitute each other, this project amplified Indigenous agency and reconstituted the diverse relations among IPWUID through the engagement in cultural practices as determined by IPWUID themselves. In this way, this project revealed deeper practices of witnessing each other to build our understandings of harm reduction, and cultural contexts more broadly.

The inclusion of witnessing as a data source in this thesis is evident by my deliberate focus on creating a culturally safe space for IPWUID voices to be heard and honoured, as well as the emphasis on capturing and validating the lived experiences and narratives of IPWUID in the DTES neighborhood. Moreover, my commitment to a reflexive practice that emphasizes my own positionality indicates the implementation of witnessing methodologies within the research process.

1.7.2 Indigenous-led Interviews

Indigenous-led qualitative interviews were conducted with 16 IPWUID recruited by Indigenous peer researchers. By consensus during the CSR meetings, we decided to adopt Indigenous storytelling, or storywork, as the guiding methodological framework to conduct qualitative interviews with IPWUID from the neighbourhood. The act of storytelling is deeply important to many Indigenous peoples and communities and is a central focus of Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies, and research approaches (Archibald, 2008; Iseke, 2013), with its decolonizing ability deriving from both listening and making meaning of participant's stories (Smith, 2021). Through the CSR meetings, we developed an interview guide (referred to as 'storytelling guide') intended to facilitate discussions regarding the experiences of IPWUID of overdose and overdose prevention and locate these experiences in relation to people's life histories and experiences of

colonization. This structurally-informed approach to the storytelling guide aimed to contextualize how the historical structure of colonialism has been enacted through policies, (i.e., Indian Act) that influence contemporary Indigenous health inequities (Allan & Smylie, 2015). The storytelling guide included life history perspectives, experiences of and responses to the drug poisoning crisis, and experiences of stigma and discrimination. To centre some of the teachings that both myself and some of the peer researchers were aligned with, which were rooted in Nêhiyawak ways of knowing, we created medicine bundles at our bi-weekly CSR meetings. The bundles were then offered to participants before their interviews to honour their contributions and express reciprocity for sharing their stories and expertise.

Participants were also given the option to engage in the ceremonial practice of smudging and asked to locate their ancestral territory on Native Land Digital–an Indigenous-led online educational resource that includes a map dedicated to Indigenous place names (https://native-land.ca/). It is within this context that the conceptual framework is placed within and embodies the relational approach of Indigenous methodologies and methods.

1.7.3 Indigenous and Peer-Led Community Workshops

Six workshops were held between January and December 2023 that centred on harm reduction practices and substance use experiences among IPWUID, with workshop lasting between 1.5-2 hours. Each workshop was open to 6-8 participants, yet on two occasions, we were surprised when 10-15 participants attended. Participants had the choice to attend one, all or whatever number of the workshops they chose to take part in. Each workshop was co-led by an Indigenous guest speaker, invited by myself and the IAC, and included Indigenous Peoples with lived experiences of substance use and/or harm reduction work, with priority areas and topics determined by

participants, to explore the meaning of harm reduction. Workshop activities combined cultural practices and art, including a pipe ceremony, medicine bundle making, painting, and collage making. In collaboration with the IAC, trusted community members were identified and invited to lead workshop activities. Importantly, the workshop practices were, in part, determined by the culture that each facilitator aligned. Examples of this include the medicine bundle making workshop which was facilitated in alignment with the teachings embraced by both myself and all members of the IAC, as well as a pipe ceremony that was ran by an Algonquin/Cree-Métis Elder.

In each workshop, participants discussed their ideas about harm reduction and substance use with myself, each other, and Indigenous community members, with the option to produce visual representations of their individual and collective perspectives. Workshops were held at a community location determined by me and the IAC. The workshops themselves were aimed at providing meaningful participation in which participants were able to create a space that is aligned with their own values.

Workshops encouraged IPWUID to dictate conversations and discussions around harm reduction and substance use, with Indigenous scholars, activists, and community members with lived experiences themselves, and worked to reframe issues related to harm reduction and substance use through a strength-based lens, encouraging and allowing IPWUID to lead and determine conversations. As previously noted, too often conversations about harm reduction are tethered to substance use and tend to narrowly focus on individual substance-using behaviours. Workshops and facilitated dialogues with IPWUID encouraged conversations that move beyond substance use and individual behaviours to capture the daily practices that a lot of IPWUID use to reduce the everyday risks and harms of structural and systemic realities like racism, colonialism, displacement, and police violence. In this way, their stories illuminated the ongoing resistance to

colonial structures and power, while demonstrating the ways in which IPWUID are reinstating traditional and ancestral forms of well-being and healing through everyday acts of resistance, relationships, and kinship.

1.7.4 Visual Arts-Based Methods

Making art is a valuable way for people to connect with self-determination by creating new ways to frame how we talk about issues pertaining to our health, bodies, and cultures. Artmaking can provide another entry point to resurgence that may be more accessible to some participants by expanding potential avenues of expression. Indigenous art-making and creativity have transformative and decolonizing potential, serving to resist ongoing forms of settler colonialism while advancing Indigenous nationhood and resurgence (Martineau, 2015) and has the potential to build on or reclaim cultural identities or practices (Flicker et al., 2014). In order to understand how knowledge can be mobilized in the world to move our communities forward in a *good way*, we need to determine what kinds of questions need to be asked. Therefore, during each workshop, participants were asked a set of guiding questions, determined in collaboration with the IAC, and were given opportunities to create their own visual pieces as a way to talk about harm reduction, substance use, and culture. Participants were also given the option to discuss and/or write down their reflections if they choose not to participate in the art activity.

1.7.5 The Journal

As my journey unfolded, I kept a journal record of the knowledges that were revealed to me to support in the embodiment of teachings throughout this experience. As a Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis person, I am actively participating in the process of Indigenous knowledge production, and so, I

write myself into the research process through implementing a reflexive researching model that utilizes the philosophical underpinning of an Indigenous research paradigm (Kovach, 2021). This act of self-reflection "moves beyond field notes to have a more integral positioning within the research process and the construction of knowledge itself" (2021, p. 33). Archibald (2008) states, "Many First Nations storytellers use their personal life experiences as teaching stories in a manner similar to how they use traditional stories…" (p. 112). As such, I maintained a journal during the entire duration of my dissertation work, particularly during the knowledge gathering process that includes my emotional reactions, dreams, feelings, and responses that emerged from the experience. Thus, my own lived experiences, stories, and reflections as a Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis person are revealed throughout this work. This approach marks a departure from my previous projects within the same community, offering a more intimate and reflective exploration of the research process and its impact on both the participants and myself.

1.8 Data Analysis

In this section, I provide a summary of the analytical methods I use. My analysis for this work combines two types of analytic practices: first, I used thematic coding for the interviews, which involved the participatory interpretation of identified themes, and second, for the workshops, I took up an analytic practice that refuses the desire to stabilize data into fixed themes and concepts. Instead, I interpreted these findings relationally via witnessing and participatory interpretation with the IAC.

1.8.1 Indigenous-Led Interviews

Interview transcripts were imported into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software programme, and was analysed thematically. Preliminary themes and descriptive quotes emerged and were presented to two of the community researchers (WAHRS board members) for review. We then developed a coding framework based on categories extracted from the interview guide (e.g., life history perspectives, everyday life experiences, experiences of the drug poisoning crisis, etc.), and used this to code the interview transcripts. We drew upon concepts of everyday structural violence, including experiences of colonialism to situate the everyday experiences of our participants within the context of the drug poisoning crisis. Structural violence refers to how social structures and institutions (e.g., drug criminalization, correctional services) perpetuate, maintain, and normalize inequalities and related harms (Farmer, 2005) while everyday violence refers to how the normalization of structurally-situated violence is normalized in specific contexts, such as a drug scene (Scheper-Hughes, 1992).

Throughout the study, evolving interpretations of the data were discussed with WAHRS board members. These processes informed the focus and direction of subsequent interviews, including gaps where we needed to ask new questions. Importantly, the CSR originally consisted of six core members, but due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing drug poisoning crisis, we were unable to locate most of them for the full analysis process. Sadly, two members passed away since the onset of COVID, two others moved on from work with WAHRS, and one could not be located, leaving only one person available for analysis. Despite these challenges, we were able to present our final themes to the one remaining community researcher, who provided valuable feedback and insights. This input helped enhance the trustworthiness of our themes, and revisions were made based on their recommendations.

1.8.2 Indigenous and Peer-Led Community Workshops

After the completion of the workshop series, I had generated layers of data in a variety of forms: field notes, journal entries, observations, and participant's art creations. Data analysis and interpretation was guided by and grounded in an Indigenous relational approach and protocols of knowledge production (Kovach, 2021), therefore, unlike the interview, I did not code data based on the guidelines of conventional qualitative methodologies. Rather than engaging in conventional qualitative coding and following my intentions to centre the knowledge and wisdom of IPWUID, I instead took up an analytic practice that refuses the desire to stabilize data into fixed themes and concepts. As Tuck and Yang (2014) remind us, coding is a practice that intends to stabilize research into consumable knowledge and "is a result of the imperative to produce settler colonial knowledge to produce it for the academy" (p. 813). The act of refusal then is "not just a no, but a generative stance, situated in a critical understanding of settler colonialism and its regimes of representation" (p. 811).

Moving away from conventional qualitative coding does not involve a lack of analytical rigour. I instead engaged in a relational analysis consistent with Indigenous witnessing methods that make room for an ongoing reflection throughout the project. My hope was to develop methods of analysis congruent with Indigenous oral traditions and storytelling, a process that involves an ongoing engagement and intimacy with the data generated during the project (fieldnotes, arts-based materials, reflections) and demands a focus on reading with theory as an analysis (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Rather than audio-recording and transcribing, or grouping data into textual format, my analysis of this data followed an Indigenous oral method of repeatedly reading and

reviewing fieldnotes, reflections, and examining the art pieces that were created during the workshop series in order to draw out key ideas and themes within the data.

Ongoing participant feedback and participation is inherent to this research, therefore regular reflection about workshop themes and experiences was incorporated into the workshop's activities. Participants were asked to discuss and/or write down captions for their own art pieces to inform analysis of the images. Most significantly, fieldnotes and participant reflections were reviewed individually and the collectively with the IAC.

1.9 Overview of Dissertation

This dissertation follows a three-paper format that allows for three stand-alone published papers[16]. The interdisciplinary structure of this thesis, designed to engage a variety of audiences, is especially well-suited to the focus of my research.

Chapter 2: Chapter two is the first paper, *"They talk about it like it's an overdose crisis when in fact it's basically genocide"*.: The experiences of Indigenous Peoples who use illicit drugs in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood, examines the experiences and perspectives of IPWUID in the DTES regarding the drug poisoning crisis and the responsiveness of harm reduction programs within the context of settler colonialism. I argue that the harms faced by IPWUID are exacerbated by racism, intergenerational trauma, and the ongoing project of settler colonialism. To effectively address these issues, I recommend it is crucial to decolonize policies, combat structural racism,

[16] Chapter 2 is published in the *International Journal of Drug Policy*. Chapters 3 and 4 are intended for community and public audiences, including activists and Indigenous communities engaged in decolonial efforts, with potential publication in journals such as *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* and the *Journal of Ethnicity in Substance Abuse.*

and prioritize Indigenous, community and peer-led, trauma-informed models that support Indigenous self-determination.

Chapter 3: In this paper I explore the development of a co-created Indigenous research methodology deeply rooted in my personal decolonization journey and guided by the collective wisdom of Indigenous Peoples who use illicit drugs (IPWUID) in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood who collaborated with me throughout this work. I enact an ethic of refusal, rejecting colonial and deficit-based narratives that frame Indigenous Peoples, particularly those who use drugs, as "victims" in need of saving. Through my work with IPWUID, I developed a co-created methodology grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and responsive to community needs. Drawing on my experiences as a research coordinator and my personal connections to substance use/rs, this paper addresses the limited use of Indigenous methodologies in substance use research. Guided by Cree law, *Sihtoskâtowin*—coming together in mutual support—this methodology re-centres my Nêhiyaw, Saulteaux, and Métis worldview, fostering decolonial love, re-imagined kinship, and cultural resurgence through relational research practices. Ultimately, this work contributes to ongoing resistance and resurgence I have witnessed among IPWUID living and working in the DTES neighbourhood.

Chapter 4: Here, I present the outcomes of the Indigenous-led, community-based workshops as guiding principles for strengthening our communities, applying the co-created Indigenous methodology developed in collaboration with IPWUID. I showed how the politics of traditionalism is evoked to activate anti-substance use Indigenous thought and practices within our Indigenous communities. This paper shares stories from the six (6) Indigenous led and community-based

workshops with IPWUID, including those working in harm reduction in the DTES neighbourhood. Embedded in the theoretical and methodological frameworks that sought to meaningfully engage IPWUID, and within methods that are meant to transformative and inherently anticolonial, these community-based, peer-led activities, and workshops facilitated conversations that moved beyond substance use and individual behaviours to capture the daily practices that a lot of IPWUID use to reduce the everyday risks and harms of structural and systemic realities of colonialism. Their stories illuminate the ongoing resistance to colonial structures and power, while demonstrating the ways in which IPWUID are reinstating traditional and ancestral forms of well-being and healing through everyday acts of resistance, resurgence, and kinship.

Chapter 5: In the final chapter, I reflect on key insights from my doctoral journey, clarifying the intentions behind this work and my evolving methodological approach. I discuss the unique contributions of this research and explore its potential future directions. I also reflect on the personal and professional growth I experienced throughout this project, addressing the limitations of qualitative research and exploring future directions for decolonizing research methodologies. Ultimately, this dissertation resists damage-centred narratives of risk, instead highlighting IPWUID's intimate practices of care and considering how these relationships inform understandings of colonialism, resurgence, and resistance.

Chapter 2: "*They Talk About It Like it's an Overdose Crisis When in Fact It's Basically Genocide*": The Experiences of Indigenous Peoples who use Illicit Drugs in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood

2.1 Introduction

In Canada, an increasingly toxic illicit drug supply characterized by illicitly manufactured fentanyl and adulteration with other novel psychoactive substances (e.g., benzodiazepines) is driving an unprecedented drug poisoning crisis that is disproportionately impacting Indigenous Peoples (First Nations Health Authority, 2023; Lavalley et al., 2018). Since 2017, the majority of drug poisonings in Canada have involved fentanyl, which has displaced prescription opioids and heroin in illicit drug markets (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2023). While Indigenous Peoples are most impacted by drug poisoning (Government of Alberta, 2021; Indigenous Services Canada, 2022; Lavalley et al., 2018), the severity of this crisis is likely understated due to poor disaggregation of data on Indigenous Peoples. Canadian statistics on drug-related harms and deaths are not disaggregated by Indigenous identity in most Canadian provinces (Joshi et al., 2018) even though available data indicates that Indigenous Peoples are far more likely to die of drug poisoning. In the province of British Columbia (BC), for example, First Nations (a term used to identify Indigenous Peoples of Canada who are neither Métis nor Inuit) people accounted for 16% of all overdose-related deaths in 2021 despite representing only 3.3% of the province's population (First Nations Health Authority, 2021), and were 5.6 times more likely to die from an overdose than other BC residents (First Nations Health Authority, 2020). Furthermore, drug poisoning patterns are distinct among Indigenous persons who use illicit drugs (IPWUID). For example, while non-Indigenous men are dying of drug poisoning at rates greater than non-Indigenous women, Indigenous women

are experiencing rates similar to Indigenous men, and have died from drug poisoning 8.7 times the rate of non-Indigenous women (First Nations Health Authority, 2020).

Higher drug poisoning rates are consistent with – and fuelled by – the severe health and social inequities experienced by Indigenous Peoples due to structural conditions created and sustained by colonization (Allan & Smylie, 2015; Kolahdooz et al., 2015; Lavalley et al., 2018; Reading & Wien, 2009). Colonization in Canada began with settlers arriving, seizing control of Indigenous lands, and imposing cultural values, religions, and laws disregarding and devaluing Indigenous ways of life. The violent legacy of colonization involved forced displacement, cultural genocide, and aggressive assimilation (Wolfe, 2006). Implemented by the federal government, the Indian Act of 1876 exacerbated these injustices by positioning Canada as the ultimate authority over Indigenous Peoples' lives, dictating how "Indians" were to live and further entrenching systemic control and marginalization (Allan & Smylie, 2015; Matheson et al., 2022; RCAP, 1996).

Previous research has documented that Indigenous Peoples' experiences with the toxic drug supply crisis are deeply bound up with histories of colonization, racism, and intergenerational trauma (Interior Health, 2021; Lavalley et al., 2018), including the residential school experience, multi-generational poverty, child welfare system involvement, and inadequate access to education, health services, and social supports (Allan & Smylie, 2015; Browne, 2017; Goodman et al., 2017; Hahmann et al., 2023; Lavalley et al., 2018). The historical and current impacts of colonial policies and practices in relation to the health and well-being of Indigenous Peoples are fundamentally linked to the structural racism and systemic inequalities produced by colonization (Blue Bird Jernigan et al., 2015; Lavalley et al., 2020; Reading & Wien, 2009; Smye et al., 2023) and reflect a much larger pattern of marginalization and discrimination that has persisted throughout history. These structural injustices are deeply entrenched and established through historical land possession

and discriminatory policies (i.e., the Indian Act, Sixties Scoop,) and encompass a wide range of factors, including chronic health conditions, economic disparities, lower life expectancies, lack of educational opportunities, and suitable housing (Davy et al., 2016; Kolahdooz et al., 2015). For instance, a prior study has documented the impacts of systemic racism within the healthcare system and how these social structural forces shape social norms and behaviors of healthcare providers when treating IPWUID, consequently influencing the healthcare experiences of IPWUID (Goodman et al., 2017).

In Canada, and elsewhere, the war on drugs has been used to uphold these oppressive colonial power structures (Marshall, 2015) and has contributed to over-policing, mass incarceration of Indigenous Peoples, resulting in substantial health and social harms, including an increase in overdoses (Friedman & Hansen, 2021; Lavalley et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2009). Further, evidence highlights how structural violence operates within street-based drug environments, a form of violence that is produced by social arrangements within society determined by societal structures (i.e., racism, sexism) that cause harms to structurally vulnerable populations (McNeil et al., 2014)**.** The intersection of structural violence and anti-Indigenous racism points to the need for specific attention to how they together produce drug poisoning vulnerability among IPWUID.

Since 2017, British Columbia (BC), Canada has implemented and scaled-up harm reduction and substance use treatment interventions in response to the drug poisoning crisis, including naloxone training and distribution (Bardwell et al., 2019; Moustaqim-Barrette et al., 2019), drug-checking services (Crepeault et al., 2023; Klaire et al., 2022), overdose prevention sites (OPS) (Kerr et al., 2017), a continuum of high and low-threshold oral and injectable medications for opioid use disorder (Mayer et al., 2020) and, more recently, prescribed safer

supply programs (Glegg et al., 2022; Ivsins et al., 2021; McNeil et al., 2022). However, gaps in harm reduction services in meeting the needs of IPWUID have been acknowledged. For instance, a report by Select Standing Committee on Health, *one of nine permanent all-party committees of the Legislative Assembly of British* Columbia, highlights the gaps in harm reduction services for IPWUID and urges the Legislative Assembly to direct the provincial government to support Indigenous-led, trauma-informed care across all substance use stages (Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, 2022). While drug poisoning deaths decreased 35% from 2017 to 2019 even as fentanyl overtook the local drug supply (BC Coroners Service, 2022) and they have reached unprecedented levels since the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, fuelled by fluctuations in fentanyl potency and new adulterants (e.g., illicit benzodiazepines) and deepening socio-economic marginalization (Kennedy et al., 2023). Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, drug poisoning death rates of Indigenous Peoples in British Columbia (BC) increased 93% between January and May 2020 (First Nations Health Authority, 2020), According to the most recent data released by the First Nations Health Authority in BC, First Nations People died at six times the rate of non-First Nations people from January to June 2023, while the number of First Nations people who died from toxic drugs increased by 24.7 per cent compared to the same period in 2022 (First Nations Health Authority, 2023). This draws attention to the urgent need for contextualized understandings of drug poisoning risk among IPWUID.

The need to understand the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous Peoples on drug poisoning and harm reduction interventions is particularly important in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood, a low-income neighbourhood located on unceded territories of the xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam) nation. The DTES is Canada's largest street-based drug scene characterized by high rates of poverty, substance use, violence, and homelessness (Werb et al.,

2010), and includes a disproportionately high number of Indigenous Peoples who face a significantly increased risk of drug poisoning related death (First Nations Health Authority, 2023). Despite the well documented health disparities faced by Indigenous Peoples, there is limited research on their unique experiences within the context of a drug poisoning crisis. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring how intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression, such as settler colonialism, influence these experiences.

This Indigenous-led, community-based and participatory research project was undertaken in Vancouver, BC through a collaboration between researchers from the British Columbia Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU) and the Cultural Sharing in Research (CSR) working group of the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS). WAHRS is an Indigenous-led harm reduction organization based in the DTES neighbourhood and operating under the umbrella of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU). It is comprised of Indigenous Peoples who use illicit drugs and/or alcohol, currently or in the past. The organization is dedicated to peer support, the promotion of harm reduction, and improving the quality of life of IPWUID. This work was led by the lead author, who is Indigenous, to respond to the need for community demands for community-driven research in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood (Damon et al., 2017; Neufeld et al., 2019), and employed Indigenous and qualitative methods to explore the perspectives and experiences of IPWUID in relation to the drug poisoning crisis.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

We situate the experiences and perspectives of IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood regarding the drug poisoning crisis by highlighting how settler colonialism shapes their realities. According to Wispeleway et al. (2023), structural approaches and frameworks used to understand Indigenous

health inequities have generally overlooked a crucial element for understanding health inequities: settler colonialism. The ongoing and significant Indigenous health inequities in Canada and elsewhere, coupled with the lack of conceptual clarity of regarding their underlying causes, indicate that this exclusion has had serious consequences (Wispelwey, Tanous, et al., 2023).

Settler colonialism is a form of colonialism where settlers arrive with the intention of establishing a permanent home by asserting their sovereignty over the land and its resources. Unlike other colonial forms, settler colonialism is distinct from franchise colonialism and involves the pervasive embedding of settler societies within Indigenous territories and marked by efforts to eliminate Indigenous bodies and sovereignty (Tuck & Yang, 2021; Wispelwey, Tanous, et al., 2023). Understanding settler colonialism as an ongoing, persistent, and evolving structure rather than a historical one-time event (Tuck & Yang, 2021; Wispelwey, Osuagwu, et al., 2023; Wolfe, 2006) forms the basis of our analysis. This framework emphasizes the continuous processes and structures of colonialism that impact Indigenous communities, revealing the historical and systemic factors contributing to the drug poisoning crisis among IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood. Examples of processes, structures, and factors linked to setter colonialism include but are not limited to: policies aimed at controlling Indigenous Peoples, such as the forced removal of children from families (Allan & Smylie, 2015), that have led to the intergenerational loss of family connections; displacement of Indigenous communities from their traditional lands (Varma, 2023); and the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous women in Canada and elsewhere (Bowers, 2019; Luoma, 2021). Settler colonialism fundamentally seeks to claim and control Indigenous land, labour, and bodies through the elimination of the “Native” and thus perpetuate the displacement and marginalization of Indigenous peoples (Hōkūlani K Aikau, 2019). These mechanisms exacerbate vulnerabilities and contribute to the ongoing drug poisoning crisis.

Settler colonial theory is an important complement to existing theories and frameworks by offering an overarching eliminatory logic that explains why—and how—white supremacy and structural racism are embedded within settler societies, institutions, laws, academia, and societal practices (Wispelwey, Tanous, et al., 2023). Examining IPWUID experiences and perspectives of the drug poisoning crisis within the conceptual framework of settler colonialism is crucial for understanding the factors that contribute to their vulnerability. This framework helps comprehend the systemic, historical, and present-day forces that perpetuate health inequities, emphasizing the importance of decolonizing approaches to health and policy interventions.

2.3 Methodology and Methods

We locate this study as an Indigenous-led, community-based and participatory research project that centres Indigenous knowledge(s), and is grounded in an Indigenous research paradigm, utilizing Indigenous methodologies in the generation of knowledge (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Drawing upon Indigenous methodologies situated within Indigenous worldviews and perspectives, this project was informed by the experiences, knowledge, and tireless work of the IPWUID serving on the CSR committee. In brief, Indigenous methodologies can be explained as a body of Indigenous and theoretical approaches and methods that centre the experiences and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples (Kovach, 2010; Simpson, 2014; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008) and thus provide a valuable approach to examining the complex ways in which IPWUID experience the drug poisoning crisis. While Indigenous methodologies are aligned with several western qualitative approaches (Kovach, 2010), they remain distinct due to the complex, diverse, and expansive tribal knowledge systems that shape Indigenous worldviews (ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies, and axiologies). Kovach (2010) suggests that

Indigenous methodologies are a paradigmatic approach to research, in that the methods are "congruent with philosophical orientations identified in the research framework to show internal methodological consistency…and should make sense from an Indigenous knowledges perspective" (p.41). Further, Lavallee (2009) and Smith (2021) suggest Indigenous research is not qualitative inquiry, however, most method/ologies used within Indigenous frameworks are a mix of existing methodological approaches and Indigenous practices and can be qualitative in nature. What is important is that these methods of inquiry are political, create space for Indigenous knowledges, and aim to provide new insights into self-determination and decolonization (Kovach, 2010; Lavallee, 2009). While qualitative research offers space for Indigenous ways of researching, Indigenous methodologies are distinct because of the theoretical work beneath them (Kovach, 2021; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014).

Throughout bi-weekly CSR meetings from 2018 to 2019 as part of the co-learning and project planning stage, we worked to embed Indigenous ways of knowing in the research design to ensure that this project was conducted in a culturally congruent way. By consensus during the CSR meetings, we decided to adopt Indigenous storytelling as the guiding methodological framework to conduct qualitative interviews with IPWUID from the neighbourhood. The act of storytelling is deeply important to many Indigenous peoples and communities and is a central focus of Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies, and research approaches (Archibald, 2008; Iseke, 2013), with its decolonizing ability deriving from both listening and making meaning of participant's stories (Smith, 2021). Through the CSR meetings, we developed an interview guide (referred to as 'storytelling guide') intended to facilitate discussions regarding the experiences of IPWUID of overdose and overdose prevention and locate these experiences in relation to people's life histories and experiences of colonization. This structurally-informed approach to the

storytelling guide aimed to contextualize how the historical and present day structure of colonialism has been enacted through policies, (i.e., Indian Act) that influence contemporary Indigenous health inequities (Allan & Smylie, 2015). The storytelling guide included life history perspectives, experiences of and responses to the drug poisoning crisis, and experiences of stigma and discrimination.

Further, foundational to Indigenous methodologies is the concept of relational accountability because it provides necessary epistemological framework to actualize decolonizing research methodologies. The concept of "relational accountability", or what is most "important and meaningful is fulfilling a role and obligations in the research relationship, that is, being accountable to your relations" (Wilson, 2008, p.77). A part of creating and maintaining relational accountability between the researcher and Indigenous communities is to engage in research that is centred on forming relationships, thus the project prioritized relationship building. To honour our Indigenous research framework and centre relationality, we created medicine bundles during bi-weekly CSR meetings during data collection and offered them to participants before interviews as a sign of reciprocity for sharing their stories and expertise. Participants were also given the opportunity to participate in the ceremonial practice of smudging. Both the medicine bundles and smudging are cultural practices aligned with nēhiyawak ways of knowing that are shared by the researcher and some WAHRS board members. Participants were also asked to locate their ancestral territory on Native Land Digital – an Indigenous-led online educational resource that includes a map dedicated to Indigenous place names (https://native-land.ca). It is within this context that the conceptual framework is placed within and embodies the relational approach of Indigenous methodologies and methods.

Participants were recruited by the lead author and CSR committee members through outreach to WAHRS members and community meetings of IPWUID facilitated by WAHRS meetings, all of whom met eligibility criteria as Indigenous Persons with current illicit drug use. Individuals interested in participating were identified by the community researcher and the Indigenous research coordinator and then accompanied to the BCCSU's storefront research office in the DTES neighbourhood for interviews. We obtained informed consent prior to the interviews. All interviews were co-facilitated by the Indigenous researcher coordinator and a community researcher (member of the CSR committee involved in project). Interviews averaged 30-60 minutes, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Identifying information was removed from transcripts to ensure confidentiality and participants were assigned pseudonyms. Participants received $30 CAD honoraria for their participation. Interviews were conducted from March 2019 to February 2020, when data collection was suspended due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and an extended institution-wide suspension of research activities (>1 year). While we had originally intended to recruit 20-25 IPWUID, we decided to permanently suspended new data collection due to concerns related to: (1) the severe burden of the overlapping COVID-19 and drug poisoning crises on the CSR committee, WAHRS, and wider community of IPWUID; and (2) the scope of changes to health and social supports and the drug supply during this period. We also experienced profound losses within our team that impacted our ability to undertake additional data collection, as multiple CSR members have passed away since the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, through coding and analysis, we nonetheless reached thematic saturation as is consistent with qualitative approaches (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Ultimately, we recruited 16 IPWUID ranging from 29 to 59 years old, all of whom identified as cisgender (11 women, 5 men).

Interview transcripts from this study were imported into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software programme, and was analysed thematically. Preliminary themes and descriptive quotes emerged and were presented to two of the community researchers (WAHRS board members) for initial review. We then developed a coding framework based on categories extracted from the interview guide (e.g., life history perspectives, everyday life experiences, experiences of the drug poisoning crisis, etc.), and used this to code the interview transcripts. The CSR originally consisted of six core members, but due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing drug poisoning crisis, we were unable to locate most of them for the full analysis process. Sadly, two members passed away since the onset of COVID, two others moved on from work with WAHRS, and one could not be located, leaving only one person available for analysis. Despite these challenges, we were able to present our final themes to the one remaining community researcher, who provided valuable feedback and insights. This input helped enhance the reliability of our themes, and revisions were made based on their recommendations.

Further, conceptualizing the settler colonial determinants of health as an analytic framework guided our analysis to focus on how systemic, historical, and evolving structures of settler colonialism impact the experiences and perspectives of IPWUID in the context of a drug poisoning crisis. This involved identifying themes and patterns that reflect ongoing processes of dispossession, cultural erasure, and structural violence inherent in settler colonial structures. By employing this framework, the analysis remained grounded in recognizing historical and ongoing injustices and provided a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of IPWUID within these broader structures. We interpreted the data through this lens to understand how these themes interconnect and reflect broader colonial dynamics, critically analyzing how contemporary issues

(e.g. drug poisoning crisis) are rooted in historical and ongoing colonial practices and how participants navigate these structures in their daily lives.

2.4 Results

2.4.1 Drug Poisoning as Genocide

In the context of a worsening drug poisoning crisis occurring amidst ongoing changes to the illicit drug supply, the structural and everyday violence experienced by Indigenous Peoples fuelled perceptions that this crisis was related to ongoing gentrification efforts in the DTES neighbourhood. While community organizing had impeded previous efforts to gentrify the DTES neighbourhood (Ley & Dobson, 2008), one of the only remaining neighbourhoods in the region with low-income and social housing and that is home to a large community of IPWUID, an influx of development in the wake of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics has gradually remade the neighbourhood and resulted in the loss of low-income housing units (Swanson, 2018). Participants located efforts to displace IPWUID from the neighbourhood now occurring as part of gentrification.

Some participants expressed that the fentanyl-driven drug poisoning crisis was "*manufactured*" as part of the broader "*genocide*" of Indigenous Peoples – that is, that the changes to the drug supply were nefarious and linked to efforts to eradicate IPWUID in the neighbourhood. Such framings of the drug poisoning crisis were grounded in the social suffering produced by the structural oppressions rooted in the ongoing processes of settler colonialism involving the dispossession and displacement of Indigenous Peoples. For example, 'Mary', a woman in her late fifties who had lived in the DTES neighbourhood since moving to Vancouver at sixteen years old, explained how her "*rough*" childhood had led her to drink to "*numb the pain*". She lived with her

cousin when first arriving in Vancouver, but quickly found herself houseless in the DTES neighbourhood after being sexually harassed by her cousin's boyfriend. Left without options at only sixteen years old, Mary "*sold pot* (cannabis)" to survive. She later connected with a social worker and eventually was "*signed over*" by her father to the Ministry of Social Services, becoming a ward of government. For Mary, prevailing narratives that framed what was happening as a 'drug poisoning crisis' did not adequately account for the social violence that produced this crisis and was evident in neighbourhood gentrification and the wider structural oppression of IPWUID. She explained:

> *I think we're [i.e., Indigenous people who use drugs] not represented at all. I don't think anybody is. They don't seem to represent anybody. They talk about it like it's an OD [overdose] crisis when in fact it's basically genocide. It's hiding the gentrification. It's not fucking an OD crisis. I don't give a fuck what anybody says about it. I tell people what it is. It's genocide hiding the gentrification. They want to fucking [demolish] SROs [single room occupancy hotels], so they can put all these little yuppie places in here. Always we got to be little puppies. They can come down here and walk by us like we're all fucking bedbug-ridden and, you know, walk past us like scalded cats. It's very odd. The whole thing is wrong.*

Mary's framing of the crisis as "*genocide hiding the gentrification*" underscored how her experience living in the epicentre of drug poisoning deaths led to the perception that this crisis was inextricably linked to displacement and driven by efforts to eradicate people who use drugs (PWUD), generally, and IPWUID, specifically. In addition to the abovementioned insights about the crisis, Mary framed the crisis as a conspiracy targeting poor people, fuelling her belief that Canada is "*basically telling people, poor people, go ahead and die*" – equating the drug poisoning crisis to a "*death sentence*" in which IPWUID were abandoned to a toxic drug supply by governments refusing address the underlying social and structural conditions driving drug poisonings.

Mary's sentiments were echoed by David, a 44-year-old man who had arrived in the DTES neighbourhood shortly after the drug poisoning crisis was declared a public health emergency (April 2016). He characterized the DTES neighbourhood as a "*war zone*" where people "*drop like flies*" – framing drug poisoning deaths as a mass casualty event fueled by the everyday violence that disproportionately impacted IPWUID. David recalled the fear he felt whenever he heard a siren – something that meant that "*somebody's dead or somebody's dying*". Like Mary, David's experience of living amidst this ongoing crisis in the DTES neighbourhood had led him to believe that the drug poisoning crisis was "*manufactured*":

> *Everything in every fibre of my being tells me that that's what's up. That fentanyl is manufactured here on Canadian soil and given to the Downtown Eastside to rid Vancouver of drug [users]"*

While fentanyl can enter a local drug supply through multiple routes – and popular perceptions often situate it in relation to China and Mexico (Fleiz et al., 2020; Pergolizzi et al., 2021) – David's framing assigning blame to actors within Canada more directly locates the overdose crisis as a project of colonization. As such narratives illustrated, some participants perceived the drug poisoning crisis as intentional neglect, viewing it as a form of systemic oppression aimed at facilitating gentrification in the neighbourhood through the eradication of IPWUID. Further, equating the drug poisoning crisis to genocide suggests a belief that the crisis is a deliberate action to displace and eradicate IPWUID, thus, exacerbating historical and ongoing injustices.

2.4.2 Distrust and Adversarial Relationships with Law Enforcement

Participants described having negative interactions with the police in the DTES neighbourhood. For many participants, negative interactions with police reinforced mistrust, including the view

that police officers deliberately engage in harassment, intimidation, and neglect when people who drugs are in distress. Such interactions were also linked to the intersection of policing and gentrification that fueled ongoing displacement of IPWUID, including long-documented and disproportionate harassment and surveillance by the police while using drugs outside, being forcibly displaced within the neighbourhood, and having tents and other belonging disposed of by police officers and municipal workers.

Mistrust and neglect

Participants' accounts revealed a collective narrative about negative interactions with police within the neighbourhood that resulted in general mistrust towards and were indicative of the systemic injustices perpetuated by colonial practices underlying the ongoing structural oppression of Indigenous Peoples. For example, some participants recounted instances of police ignoring their calls for help. Kathleen, a 49-year-old involved in various harm reduction initiatives in the Downtown Eastside, described being ignored by the police when she called them for help:

> *I called them [police] twice about those guys downstairs fighting. I said nobody should have to watch them fighting over something as petty as they're arguing about and beating up each other, and knowing there might be kids walking down the street one day, and they ignored my call. [When they did show up] They stood there five minutes, for five minutes and then left. See and that's the response we get.*

Kathleen's experience demonstrates the extent to which some participants felt ignored by police, who failed to protect both them and their community from violence. Further, she felt that, while police ignored their calls for help and safety, they actively prevented residents from engaging in what few opportunities existed for them to make money necessary for addressing survival needs:

> *And they're wondering why people down here are so poor. They're not letting them make any money. And there's nothing we can do about it. They just take it and they have no regard for our feelings.*

Additionally, suspicion of police corruption was commonplace, as expressed by David:

> *I don't know about a police force, but I do know about a gang. A gang of thugs and fucking thieves. And drug dealers. These cops out here are fucking dirty as fuck man. I don't know even know why they call them cops. I've seen some pretty shady shit.*

Notably, Denise, a 42-year-old woman engaged in sex work, described how sex workers are habitually targeted by the police in the DTES neighbourhood: **"***Yeah, they'll come and harass you, and… or they'll put their lights on you if somebody picks you up. Or they'll sneak up behind you with the lights off and scare you and stuff."* She further emphasized how racism toward IPWUID, including sex workers, led to the failure adequately investigate the cases of missing women in the DTES. Such experiences led to conspiratorial views toward police that reflected the broader disempowerment of IPWUID.

She further described her fear of being taken by the police, referencing the case of Canadian serial killer Robert Pickton, who victimized women from the DTES neighbourhood throughout the 1990s and 2000s, many of whom were Indigenous. In this case, police officers were criticized for neglecting the roles that racism and negative stereotypes played in their failure to adequately investigate this case.

Against this wider backdrop, participants expressed that they were made to feel responsible for developing more positive relationships with police to mitigate the impacts of being mistreated. For example, a 46-year-old woman engaged in sex work explained the need to try to build "*rapport*" with police to mitigate the racism and discrimination towards her as an Indigenous woman: "*Like, I try to be humour…humour, you know, um, and I, like, entertain them [police*

officers], or, like, reverse their thoughts about what I should be like because I'm Native and I'm this and that". Nevertheless, participants conveyed that there was an inherent injustice in placing the onus on those systemically victimized by police for how they are treated.

Enforcement of "zones of exclusion" and displacement

The intersection of racist and gentrification practices led to "zones of exclusion" in the DTES neighbourhood that were enforced by police. That is, a zone that police blocked public access to and restricted people from entering, and where PWUD were arrested to regulate their spatial practices. For example, "Misty", a 44-year-old woman, explained: *"There's a two-block radius they* [police officers] *have this on, from Main to Abbott …. We go on the outskirts and the police tell us to get back*". Such spatial regulation specifically targeted and impacted IPWUID, as their vulnerability to these practices was heightened by racist policing practices, such as street checks or 'carding' (interactions where police will request identification), that subjected participants toward more frequent police encounters. In turn, these practices functioned to further marginalize and stigmatize IPWUID. Misty elaborated on how these place-based policing practices targeted IPWUID:

> *You go out of the area you're looking at, okay, the police are going to… you get fined by the police. You're going to be more upset because you're out of the area that we're not supposed to be in. You know, we call the…inside, you know. Like past Cordova or past Pender, you know. But yeah.*

Whereas these place-based policing practices restricted the spaces occupied by IPWUID, participant accounts illustrated how they attempted to limit their risk of criminalization by further

restricting the geographical scope of their drug-related activities to avoid police surveillance and criminalization. For example:

> *If they [police officers] come around, you got to move, right. You have to move out of the area or move… when they're coming, you got to move because if you stick around and it's just like… they know what you were doing…So, we just walk around the block or, you know, if they want you, they'll come and get you, right. There's been many times that they've been coming after me and when they want you, they'll come and get you…They know… they know our daily routine better than we know our routine, you know.*

Participants experiences with these place-based policing practices also extended beyond the DTES neighbourhood. For example, David indicated how police highly surveil the area surrounding a supervised consumption site (SCS) in Surrey (a Metro Vancouver suburb), making it challenging for people to access the site without interacting with police officers, and at times, preventing participants' access to needed services, including overdose prevention. David further characterized these policing practices as a deliberate strategy to "*divide and conquer*". At times, police surveillance would necessitate changes to drug use practices and limit ability to safely inject, ultimately increasing their risk of drug poisoning. Misty explained having to smoke instead of injecting in public settings and having to relocate when police are present.

> *Well, first of all, if the police presence aren't around, usually I inject, right, but if I'm sick and I have to get something inside me, either it's going to be smoking it, because it's going to be done fast and I don't have to, you know, take out a needle and, you know. They hate seeing that. But yeah, they impact the way I use because if they're around, it's a different way I use or I can't use or I have to go somewhere else. I have to find… now that the OPS is in the back alley, so it's pretty easy just to go in there now because they can't come in there, right. Just run in there and use quickly.*

These place-based policing practices also included "street sweeps", a practice in which a team of Vancouver City police and municipal workers patrol the DTES neighbourhood to "sweep" unhoused people off sidewalks, parks, and alleys by removing and disposing of their belongings

and shelter (e.g., tents and tarps). Kathleen referred to this practice as "*poor bashing*" due to police officers and municipals workers destroying resident's belongings and forcing them to relocate, a practice that perpetuated a cycle of distrust and reinforced the systemic oppression inherent in colonial practices. She explained: *They [police officers] don't say anything. They say give us your stuff or we will arrest you. They don't have any kind of response. And if we don't they'll arrest us like all the time".* Kathleen elaborated on street sweeps, highlighting the extent to which this police-accompanied practice reinforced her distrust in the police:

> *Not arrested, just telling to pack up their stuff and if they don't pack it up they take it and shove it in the garbage and that's pretty sad. And the stuff that they like, they keep for themselves. They have no regard for anybody else's feelings. That's just sad to watch every day.*

2.4.3 Culturally Safe Harm Reduction

Participants emphasized the need for culturally safe harm reduction services that prioritized Indigenous representation that include the integration of cultural and traditional practices into harm reduction spaces. Participant emphasis on Indigenous representation as a condition for cultural safety demonstrated the importance of relationships and connection to culture as paths to healing and wellness. Julie, a 38-year-old woman, described her vision for a culturally safe overdose prevention site that connects Indigenous Peoples with housing supports:

> *I'd have sweat lodges for them, and more counseling. Like one-on-one counseling, for their lifestyle and like, say, housing. Like that's a big problem right now. They have to have more advocates that are good to help people that are homeless, because they're… they have a hard time trying to get a place to live.*

Harm reduction services having Indigenous staff was identified as important for cultural safety in harm reduction care, especially because IPWUID were often presented with abstinence as the only solution within their home communities due to a long and complex history of colonialism

(Goldstein et al., 2022). For some, engaging IPWUID within harm reduction services was seen as necessary to promote and facilitate meaningful engagement of those accessing such services. For example, Mary spoke to the importance of Indigenous-run harm reduction spaces: "*I think we should be in more places run by Indigenous people that have used in the past and then know what it's like".* David indicated that Indigenous staff would help him feel more comfortable at overdose prevention spaces:

> *I think it could probably maybe be a little bit more comfortable for an Indigenous person to have more Indigenous people around in place, in those places. I think it would be actually a lot better, just for the, you know, for the, for being comfortable and to have, you know, some bros and some sisses around, right.*

Significantly, David evoked "*family*" when discussing Indigenous representation – signifying the importance of Indigenous relationality and kinship:

> *And yeah, we're all family. We're a big family. We're all related. All brothers and sisters. And why not, you know. There should be… we should have every opportunity that everybody else does anyways. So regardless of what colour we are, we're all red on the inside and everybody should have equal opportunity.*

Indigenous representation and engagement in cultural practices were also understood to be a step towards recovery or other positive changes in their substance use. Some participants expressed that overdose prevention sites that included Indigenous staff or were Indigenous run would help them to "*get clean*" and "*choose sobriety*". For example, when asked what it would mean to have Indigenous peoples involved in the design and operation of overdose prevention sites, Jaime noted: "*I think a lot of us would wake up and pick up our socks and actually start choosing to become more sober and be more associated with our ways of, with our lives the way it used to be I suppose*". Crystal, a 29-year-old woman, recounted how she began to engage in beading (a cultural art practice for Indigenous Peoples) at a local overdose prevention site, and emphasized how this was crucial to her overall wellness and ability to "not use down [heroin]" for a month:

> *You know but to go like a month without using anything, like I was like so proud of myself. But the one thing that makes it easier is to like have somewhere that you can go to have peace from, from that pressure of using. And like even though I was at the [local overdose prevention site] and there's other people like doing their dope or going outside and smoking or whatever, like it didn't bother me because I had my, my hobby.*

These accounts revealed that some participants viewed culturally safe harm reduction services, led by Indigenous staff and integrating traditional practices, as vital for nurturing healing, wellness, and a strong connection to culture.

2.5 Discussion

In summary, some participants described the drug poisoning crisis as a consequence of structural oppression evidenced through gentrification-driven displacement and policing. This perspective highlights the structurally racist and colonial aspects of this crisis and illustrates how these aspects function as modern mechanisms of settler colonialism and the erasure of Indigenous Peoples. Placed-based policing practices, including exclusion zones, surveillance, and street sweeps, were central to these gentrification processes and seen in commonplace harassment and forced displacement of IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood. However, amidst these ongoing and significant challenges, participant narratives emphasized how harm reduction services could be improved through Indigenous representation and leadership, including the integration of cultural and traditional practices, to better respond to the social suffering experienced by IPWUID.

Our findings expand upon previous research documenting how the intergenerational impacts colonization continue to harm Indigenous individuals, families and communities (Adelson, 2005; Allan & Smylie, 2015; Bethune et al., 2019; Smallwood et al., 2021), emphasizing the need for these to be central to discussions surrounding IPWUID experiences of harm reduction

and the drug poisoning crisis. Centring settler colonialism within the drug poisoning crisis exposes how the present-day structure of settler colonialism affects IPWUID daily lived realities. The intergenerational impacts of colonization, including the residential school experience, ongoing colonial policies (i.e., the Indian Act), forced displacement, and the removal of Indigenous children from their homes and communities by the child welfare system as part of the Sixties Scoop, have contributed to the disproportionate number of social and health inequities experienced by Indigenous Peoples (Allan & Smylie, 2015; Reading & Wien, 2009; Smallwood et al., 2021; Wilk et al., 2017). Today, the global war on drugs, rooted in colonialism and racism, has been used to sustain colonial structures that target Indigenous Peoples and people of colour (Lavalley et al., 2018), resulting in substantial health and social harms, including an increase in drug poisoning and drug poisoning related deaths (Richer & Roddy, 2023; Wood et al., 2009). As such, our findings demonstrate how efforts to address the harms of the drug poisoning crisis among IPWUID needs to include an understanding of broader systems of structural racism and colonial oppression.

Our study builds on previous research on the intersection of gentrification and street-level policing of the DTES neighbourhood (Collins et al., 2019; Lyons et al., 2017) and elsewhere (Collins et al., 2022), extending this work by documenting continuities with the displacement produced by structural racism and colonialism. Gentrification strategies and related street-level policing practices, such as street sweeps and zone surveillance, adversely impact PWUD by increasing their exposure to violence, constraining access to harm reduction services, and producing drug-related risks (Collins et al., 2019; Cooper, 2015; Kerr et al., 2005; McNeil et al., 2015). This study expands on these findings by highlighting the linkage between gentrification as a contemporary mechanism of settler colonialism, operationalized through increased police presence specifically targeting IPWUID. In turn, we found that participants framed the drug

poisoning crisis as reflecting the social suffering produced by the structural oppressions rooted in the ongoing impacts of colonialism. IPWUID described how the drug poisoning crisis felt like "*genocide*" and "*war*", underscoring how the crisis is understood to affect Indigenous Peoples in particular ways owing to the legacy of colonialism, racism, and intergenerational trauma (Lavalley et al., 2018).

Importantly, our findings underscore the urgent need for Indigenous representation in harm reduction services, noting the importance of relationality and kinship in providing a more holistic framework that includes community support, cultural connectedness, and more culturally responsive interventions. Past research has highlighted the importance of peer-led harm reduction interventions (Bardwell et al., 2019; Bardwell et al., 2018; Dechman, 2015; Greer et al., 2016; Lavalley et al., 2020), including in relation to promoting safety, enhancing relationships, and optimizing drug poisoning response efforts (Bardwell et al., 2018). Our research builds upon existing studies that demonstrate the benefits of integrating cultural practices, traditional medicines, and community engagement in healthcare services, including harm reduction interventions, to enhance the overall wellness for IPWUID (First Nations Health Authority, n.d. ; Lavalley et al., 2020; Rowan et al., 2014). Despite evidence supporting culturally safe and informed practices, these approaches are often underutilized in harm reduction services. To improve harm reduction services for IPWUID, it is crucial to combine harm reduction strategies with culturally safe and peer-led supports.

Navigating harm reduction perspectives and approaches in Indigenous communities is complicated by several factors, including the common misconception that harm reduction conflicts with Indigenous cultural traditions and values (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019). There is little consensus around harm reduction and not everyone in Indigenous communities, and

elsewhere, agrees that harm reduction is a valid or viable approach to addressing substance use-related harms (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019). While some participants expressed a desire to achieve abstinence, it is crucial to assert that harm reduction and abstinence-based perspectives are not opposing ideas. Despite ongoing debates within many Indigenous communities about the perceived dichotomy between abstinence and harm reduction, these approaches can be positioned as complementary so long as an individual can choose what approach is right for them. Since harm reduction facilitated choice in the management of substance use and related harms, some individuals may opt not to stop using drugs while others might pursue treatment and strive for drug abstinence. Importantly, a harm reduction approach to substance use in the short term does not preclude the possibility of abstinence in the long term.

As participant narratives demonstrated the importance of Indigenous representation to facilitate safety within harm reduction spaces, there remains a need to expand culturally based, peer-led services for IPWUID that are rooted in the diverse experiences of IPWUID, including the prioritization and hiring of Indigenous peers. To date, very little research has focused specifically on Indigenous-led interventions within harm reduction. Our findings point to the need for Indigenous-led research on Indigenous-led harm reduction interventions that respects and centres the unique experiences, knowledge systems, and ethical considerations of Indigenous communities. Indigenous-led research led by Indigenous researchers, communities, and IPWUID themselves, fosters self-determination and allows for a reclamation of knowledge that helps challenge and dismantle the colonial legacies of research (Goodman et al., 2018).

Consistent with previous research (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019; First Nations Health Authority, n.d.), our findings demonstrate that harm reduction initiatives within Indigenous communities means Indigenous Peoples with lived or living experience of substance

use must be at the centre of decision-making power to enable IPWUID to access to culturally safe environments. Therefore, any discussion of harm reduction initiatives and measures among Indigenous Peoples must be founded and directed by communities and their members (Dell, 2007; First Nations Health Authority, n.d.). Further, research has documented how mainstream harm reduction frameworks tend to narrowly address issues related to substance use and changing individual behaviours and typically fail to address structural drivers of drug-related harms, including the ongoing impacts of colonialism (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019). Participants' accounts offer insights to the potential of how harm reduction approaches can address the intersecting harms of racism, settler colonialism, and structural violence experienced by IPWUID, and the urgent need to address gentrification-related policing as a crucial part of achieving racial justice.

Our study has important limitations. First, our research is limited to those experiences of IPWUID living in the DTES neighbourhood, and therefore, the extent to which our findings are transferrable to other Indigenous Peoples and other settings warrants further investigation. Importantly, this study did not account for the unique living experiences of Indigenous women, transgender, and Two-Spirit participants and thus, further investigation of the unique experience of these groups is warranted. Lastly, data collection for this study was suspended in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and might not account for the impacts of changes since that time on IPWUID.

In conclusion, the harms experienced by IPWUID amidst the drug poisoning crisis are shaped and compounded by intersections of racism, intergenerational trauma, and the ongoing impacts of colonization. Increased police violence, criminalization, and displacement efforts act as extensions of settler colonialism that produce vulnerability to drug poisoning and other harms.

Thus, addressing the needs of IPWUID in the context of a drug poisoning crisis must acknowledge the harms perpetrated by structural racism and through ongoing colonial policies and systems. There is an imperative to decolonize these policies and systems and address structural racism in ways that shift the balance of power to Indigenous communities to facilitate a more impactful response to the drug poisoning crisis. Incorporating community and peer-led models that are trauma-informed and centre IPWUID must also occur at the local level as a step towards self-determination.

Chapter 3: Coming to Know *Sihtoskâtowin*: An Indigenous Methodology with Indigenous Peoples Who Use Illicit Drugs in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) Neighbourhood

Do not touch or use medicine if you're under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Avoid attending ceremony if you've used drugs or alcohol within the last four to seven days. You lose your spirit when you drink and do drugs. The voices of my relatives echoed in my mind as I looked at the table before me, where traditional medicines (sage, sweetgrass, cedar, and tobacco) were laid out beside harm reduction supplies (sterile needles, alcohol swabs, syringes, glass pipes, etc.). Past scenarios of Elders and relatives sternly enforcing these 'protocols' before being permitted to enter ceremony or attend other cultural events like powwows, round dances, and feasts kept playing in my head—a function of both the substance use stigma that plagues many of our communities and my own internalized shame and fears.

The Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC) members (comprised of Indigenous Peoples who use illicit drugs—current/former) and I organized an Indigenous harm reduction kit making workshop as a way to merge harm reduction practices with our Indigenous cultures, and to connect our traditions to the realities faced by many Indigenous Peoples who use illicit drugs (IPWUID) in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood. There was no discussion ahead of time about who could or could not touch the medicines; in our space, everyone was welcome. Everyone was sacred. More times than I can count, I was overcome with joy, sadness, grief and hope, all at the same time—a complex web of emotional truths that shaped every part of this dissertation, as participants shared their teachings, stories, and connections with our plant relatives, their relationships between themselves, and the spirit world. I felt proud of the space we had created together, but I also felt deep sadness in the realization of how rare this experience was for

many IPWUID. As we began making our harm reduction kits, I thought about all my relatives, friends, and colleagues who have died from drug poisoning since the beginning of this dissertation.

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In this paper, I reflect on and present theoretical and epistemological foundations of what I have come to understand as an Indigenous methodology grounded in my own Indigenous ways of knowing and the guidance of the collaborators (Indigenous Peoples with lived/living experience of illicit drug use) who helped shape this work. It is my intention to contribute to a growing and important field of Indigenous research methodologies, while at the same time, transforming and adding to existing resurgence theory in ways that creates space where all our relations can have "valuable, ethical, consensual, meaningful, and reciprocal relationships with all aspects of creation" (Simpson, 2017b). As I explain later, in my shaping of a methodology for working alongside IPWUID in Vancouver's DTES, I turned to the always-in-existence Cree law of *Sihtoskâtowin*—a principle centred on supporting and helping one another or coming together in mutual support. Although I had been familiar with Cree laws and principles throughout my life, it was only when I began developing the methodology for working with IPWUID that these teachings returned to me. In the context of my doctoral research, this paper explores how my methodological approach promotes decoloniality by centring Cree cultural and land-based practices alongside harm reduction to challenge colonial power dynamics that often perpetuate harmful stereotypes and pathologize IPWUID, including within my own community.

In addition to this intimate relationship with culture, substance use, and addiction, this research also emerges out of my experience as a research coordinator with the BC Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU). My intent is to contribute to expanding bodies of literature on the critical

role of Indigenous research methodologies, while directly addressing a crucial gap I have witnessed in my work as a community and substance use researcher with IPWUID amidst the ongoing drug poisoning crisis. In 2017, when I began working at the BCCSU, my role primarily focused on supporting research projects in collaboration with IPWUID, including coordinating multiple projects alongside the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS) (see Chapter 2). This was my first really significant experience in research, and it led to several "a-ha" moments wherein I began questioning the lack of Indigenous methods in the community-based approaches used in substance use research. I felt a growing disconnect between the qualitative methods we relied on—interviews, ethnographic observations, and focus groups—and their relevance to the communities we worked with.

As I grappled with these questions and concerns, and as my relationships with DTES community members, drug user activists, and harm reduction workers grew, my research approach evolved, leading to the development of new methods. In this paper, I explore the process of developing an Indigenous research methodology in collaboration with IPWUID in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood by thinking through my methodological approach and the knowledge shared and co-created between myself and IPWUID, who I have come to see as kin. This examination is informed by a brief review of relevant literature, my experiences as an Indigenous researcher, and my identity as a Two-Spirit/queer Nêhiyaw (Cree)-Saulteaux Métis woman. Through this process, I have come to understand the decolonizing nature of research grounded in my epistemologies, as well as the individual and collective insights of IPWUID involved in this work—voices that are too often excluded from these conversations. By centring these voices, this work contributes to the broader movement toward decolonizing research and honouring Indigenous ways of knowing. In my pursuit of an Indigenous research methodology, I continually seek guidance from Elders,

mentors, and my own embodied knowledge, creating a methodology that exists beyond colonial definitions of tradition, kinship, culture, and identity.

This work is situated within the context of my doctoral research with IPWUID living and working in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood, and is supported by Indigenous harm reductionists, drug user activists, a Two-Spirit Elder, and other IPWUID community members who continue to protect and sustain one another in the face of a seemingly unending drug poisoning crisis. This paper highlights the relationships built during the research process, which became foundational to co-creating a methodology with IPWUID. Reflecting on the participatory, action, and community-based research models I applied in past work (Lavalley, Collins, et al., 2021; Lavalley et al., 2020; Lavalley, Society, et al., 2021), I recognized the alignment of these approaches with Indigenous methodologies, as both prioritize community involvement, challenge power dynamics, focus on actionable change, and accept the notion that no research is free from bias (Drawson et al., 2017; Lavallée, 2009). I felt my intuition telling me something was missing, but, like many, I hesitated—mistaking that inner voice for fear of stepping into something new. It was not until I let go of that hesitation and fully immersed myself in the process that the fundamental distinctions became clear between: 1) what remain fundamentally colonial pillars of much qualitative research and; 2) a uniquely Indigenous approach to research grounded in my own ways of knowing and being. Though my previous work embodied an Indigenous perspective, it was framed within a non-Indigenous paradigm. I conducted the research through my lens as an Indigenous person, yet within the confines of a dominant, non-Indigenous framework (Wilson, 2001). A key distinction, according to Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2001), is that Indigenous research views knowledge as a shared, relational experience with all of Creation, while dominant paradigms see knowledge as an individual pursuit that can be owned. This distinction led me to

question whether participatory action and community-based research truly aligns with a decolonizing agenda, echoing critiques by de Leeuw et al. (2012). In response to these concerns, de Leeuw et al. asks:

> …whether, indeed, participatory, community-based research truly does move away from other styles of research and if so, in what ways, and under what conditions? If it does, how do we know it does? What would be the indications that the relations and relationships established by researchers engaged in participatory, community-based research are indeed, different? In what ways does this philosophical and methodological approach demand additional challenge and in what spaces might such challenges manifest?

Thus, a main intention of my work is to remain committed to grappling with and addressing these tensions, moving beyond the traditional 'researcher-subject' dynamic. I realized I needed to begin asking new questions about my responsibilities and obligations within this relationship. These questions feel especially urgent in the DTES neighbourhood, where terms like "participatory," "action", and "community-based" are frequently used in research, yet I often question whether they have genuinely led to meaningful change for the community. Therefore, before delving into my process and the potential of co-created methodology with IPWUID, I begin by critiquing the colonial nature of research in Vancouver's DTES, focusing on its exploitation of Indigenous Peoples and other structurally vulnerable groups, the erasure of their resistance, and the need for a research approach that activates their agency and autonomy, upholding their place of belonging in Indigenous resurgence.

3.1 Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) Neighbourhood

Vancouver's DTES has long been known as one of Canada's poorest urban neighbourhoods. This low-income area, known for its large and open street-based illicit drug scene, is often associated with high rates of poverty, substance use, communicable diseases, houselessness, and police

violence (Collins et al., 2019; Fleming et al., 2019; Hayashi et al., 2019; Wood & Kerr, 2006). Consequently, the DTES has been the subject of extensive research, resulting in numerous peer-reviewed studies, reports, and dissertations (Boilevin et al., 2019; Linden et al., 2013; Neufeld et al., 2019). Much of the literature highlights the connection between the drug poisoning crisis and the lack of adequate housing, two closely intertwined issues (Collins et al., 2018). However, in the service of the "advancement of knowledge," (Smith, 2021), research has been shown to perpetuate stigma, exploit the pain and suffering of structurally vulnerable populations, and benefit researchers more than the community itself (Boilevin et al., 2019). Importantly, under the guise of innocuous terms like urban "revitalization," the DTES has been reshaped by an influx of development following the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, leading to the loss of many low-income housing units (Swanson, 2018), and making way for "settlers" whose claims are seen as more legitimate by dominant society (Dean, 2010). This perspective shifts the focus from social issues like drug use and crime as root causes, instead revealing these injustices as ongoing processes that perpetuate colonization (Boilevin et al., 2019).

This context of displacement and colonization is particularly significant given that the DTES has long been home to many Indigenous Peoples, who now make up approximately 8.5% of its population (St. Denis, 2021). This urban Indigenous population comprises individuals from diverse Indigenous communities across Turtle Island. For many Indigenous Peoples and communities, research is dirty word (Smith, 2021), and has long functioned as a tool of colonialism, as colonial research practices continue in the ways that researchers exploit, exhaust, and extract from Indigenous and other marginalized communities (Neufeld et al., 2019). Fundamentally, research can replicate the dynamics of colonization as it can be a strategy to "help" community, rationalized by paternalistic notions of benevolence, and normalized through

hegemonic and unjust research practices. Harms include, but are not limited to, the collection of research data from Indigenous community members that was used or disclosed without their knowledge or consent, the misrepresentation of Indigenous knowledges and experiences, and the extraction of knowledge and resources from Indigenous communities without offering meaningful reciprocity or benefit in return (Boilevin et al., 2019; Hayward et al., 2021; Smith, 2021). Theories about people who use drugs (PWUD) and Indigenous Peoples are rooted in pathologization, surveillance, and colonizing, racist assumptions (Boyd & Kerr, 2016; Johnson, 2018), which underpin dominant research practices that frame them as inherently vulnerable, while rarely acknowledging their perspectives, agency, or self-determination. In Métis scholar Natalie Clark's "shock and awe" paradigm (2016), researchers expose the harsh realities of trauma and death (shock), which often result in detached reflection or moralizing by privileged observers (awe). This approach perpetuates a sense of distance between scholars and the communities they study, particularly Indigenous Peoples, reinforcing colonial control and intervention through trauma discourse.

Despite the socio-economic factors that have shaped their lives, residents of the DTES neighbourhood, alongside their allies, have long shaped this urban landscape as a place of resistance (Dean, 2010; Jozaghi et al., 2018; Neufeld et al., 2019). The community carries a rich history of activism and has been the site of significant community-led struggles that have resulted in life-saving harm reduction interventions, such as North America’s first supervised injection facility, Insite (Kerr et al., 2017). However, these efforts are often overshadowed by narratives created by deficit-based research that erase the residents' rights-based histories and perpetuate ongoing politics of dispossession and displacement. I have heard too many stories from DTES Indigenous community members who have felt disrespected and harmed by research that assumes

(and indeed perhaps depends on and thus perpetuates) vulnerability, risk, and sometimes, even death (Goodman et al., 2018). Instead, I take up a research methodology that centres the agency, autonomy, and sovereignty—arguably key components of Indigenous resurgence—of IPWUID while rejecting the colonial gaze that often imposes notions of helplessness onto Indigenous Peoples. In doing so, I acknowledge the incredibly precarious circumstances in which IPWUID live their daily lives, yet rather than pathologizing these realities, I seek to honour their living, their voices, and their resistance to conditions where their death is too often normalized.

Within this resurgence framing, it is important that my collaborative and relational work with IPWUID in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood challenges exclusionary, violent, and erasure-based interpretations of 'traditionalism' by centring IPWUID understandings, philosophies, beliefs, localized teachings, and stories. As one participant said, "*What is tradition, anyways*? *So many of our traditions are not for drug users. Who gets to decided what is traditional? DTES Indigenous people have created new traditions. We had to."* I believe this work is crucial for creating meaningful pathways toward Indigenous resurgence, and my intent is to contribute to the growing body of literature and conversations on the vital role of Indigenous research methodologies in furthering resurgence inclusive of our relations who use drugs. More specifically, I seek to address a tension I have seen, and experienced, within my Indigenous community and family; the tendency to adopt and accept narrow interpretations of Indigenous thought, which can sometimes be used to shame and exclude IPWUID from our nations. Thus, in this work, I assert that we collectively have a responsibility to find ways to make our spirituality and culture meaningful and accessible relevant to all members of our community.

3.2 Towards an Indigenous Methodology with IPWUID in Vancouver's DTES Neighbourhood

In the early days of COVID-19, I found myself isolated at home in Squamish (*Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw*), British Columbia (BC), about an hour north of Vancouver, while trying to develop a research methodology for my doctoral work. As a Néhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis woman from Saskatchewan, living in Squamish, a former logging and mill town where the Coast Mountains meet the Pacific Ocean, made me feel distant from the vast prairie lands that raised me. I agonized over finding a research methodology that could adequately capture my lived experience both as a researcher and Indigenous person, as well as the needs and experiences of the people involved in the research. I also felt disconnected from DTES community members I had been collaborating with in the DTES prior to COVID-19. This distance left me feeling untethered to my family, community, teachings, and stories. Untethered to myself and spirit. Despite immersing myself in articles and books and having in-depth conversations with my supervisors and other mentors about the trajectory of my research approach, I felt as though my methodology still lacked a solid theoretical foundation. The isolation and disconnection led me to reflect on what it means to be in relation with each other as Indigenous Peoples in ways that promote our collective well-being and healing. I desperately wanted to shift from relying solely on the participatory and community approaches I was already familiar and comfortable with, toward an Indigenous approach grounded in my own cultural teachings and the wisdom of the collaborators involved in this work.

During a conversation with one of my co-supervisors, Dr. Sarah Hunt (*Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw*), she offered advice that would stay with me throughout my research. "What is it you want to do?" she asked. As I envisioned the day where I would finally reconnect with community members, I

responded, “I want to create a ceremonial space where Indigenous people who use drugs can engage in culture on their own terms, build relationships with each other, tell their stories, and have their stories heard and witnessed by other Indigenous People.”

“Well, do exactly that,” she said. Her words may seem simple, but for me, they affirmed my commitment to promoting collective action in our communities by ensuring that my substance-using kin were seen, heard, and validated in ways that support their well-being. I started to understand what it truly meant to be a witness in this work.

Hunt (2018) discusses the temporal frame of her Kwakwa̱ka̱’wakw witnessing methodology that emphasizes the responsibility of witnessing stories involves not only remembering the past but also carrying those responsibilities into the present. She writes, "Witnessing has been used in the recreation of collective spaces where contemporary experiences of Indigenous Peoples are validated through ceremony" (2014, p.39). Similarly, Tanana Athabascan scholar Dian Million’s concept of “felt theory” (2008) positions the act of bearing witness to participants’ personal narratives as a powerful tool for fostering connection to one another and our cultural ways of knowing and being. Aligned with these scholars, I position myself as both witness and participant in my research, deepening my methodological approach as I learn more about myself in relation to this work. In developing an Indigenous methodology, Kovach (2009) reminds Indigenous researchers to “start where you are, it will take you where you need to go” (p.10), a principle that guided me as I began to trust the process and the value of what I was determined to create.

Though far from my family and homelands, I remembered that I carry within me teachings and knowledge—a knowingness rooted in dreams, language, intuition, and “interrelationships with the human world, the spirit world and intimate entities of the ecosystem” (Kovach, 2005, p.28).

This realization helped me reconnect with the practice of learning, creating, and embodying my Nêhiyaw, Saulteaux, and Métis knowledge systems. I realized that to truly begin this work, I needed to be clear on who I was—not just as a researcher, academic, or doctoral student, but as a Two-Spirit/queer Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis person. To determine where I needed to go, I had to look within myself, honouring my embodied knowledge, relational meaning-making, and connection to my culture and homelands, even when my homelands felt so out of reach.

In developing my research design and in gaining clarity on my theoretical and methodological choices, I concur with Linda Tuhiwai Smith (*Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou, Māori*) (2021) who proposes that decolonization does not entail "a total rejection of all theory or research or Western knowledge; rather it is about "centring our concerns and worldviews and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes" (Smith, p.39). As a trained qualitative researcher involved with several research projects in the DTES neighbourhood involving IPWUID, I challenged myself to examine my own position in terms of my relationships with land, history, family, and (queer) identity. I spent time reflecting on who I am, where I come from, and what compels me to engage in this type of work. Admittedly, this process of learning and unlearning, of engaging in critical self-reflexivity, was extremely challenging at times. It necessitated embracing an intentional vulnerability throughout my PhD journey, a method that pushes the boundaries and confronts discomfort, including my own. This process aligns with Kovach's (2009) experience of "seeking insights into Indigenous forms of inquiry," which led her to revisit her identity and "retrieve [her] story from the archive of [her] being" (p. 5). But for me, vulnerability is scary. *What if people don't like what I have to say? What if people misunderstand my words, or worse, my intentions?* Despite these fears, I do know one thing to be certain; vulnerability is essential for connection. It is fundamental to our ability to

survive and thrive. It is how we form meaningful relationships with all of Creation. And it was necessary in the development of my methodology. Leaning into my vulnerability made it possible for power dynamics to shift away from the assumed vulnerability of participants, toward genuine connection where we truly see and are seen. In this process, I have come to realize an important distinction between *seeing* and *witnessing*. Seeing often involves projecting our own interpretations and worldviews onto others, shaping their reality to fit our understanding of what or how someone should be. Witnessing, however, is about fully encountering another's whole self, accepting them as they are without the need to align them with our beliefs, and being open to the transformation that unfolds through this process.

Sharing my story has demanded vulnerability and openness about my personal experience of loss due to the drug poisoning crisis—a crisis that continues to disproportionately claim the lives of Indigenous Peoples (First Nations Health Authority, 2022, 2023). Since beginning my doctoral work in 2019, I have lost relatives, friends, and colleagues to drug poisoning. Losing kin to a drug poisoning crisis while simultaneously conducting research with other Indigenous Peoples affected by and dying from the same crisis is both surreal and deeply painful. In navigating my pain and grief, I was reminded that I no longer need to separate myself from my work, and that this research is more than an academic pursuit. It is personal. It carries the responsibility of honouring my kin, both in life and in death, ensuring that their stories and the ongoing drug poisoning crisis are neither forgotten nor overlooked.

As I began losing relatives to this crisis, I felt compelled to centre my doctoral work on IPWUID, not just to validate and honour their often-overlooked resurgent efforts, but to act as a witness to their lives. This witnessing informed my decision to create resurgence spaces in collaboration with IPWUID—spaces where their voices, experiences, and cultural practices could

flourish. Grounded in the longstanding experiential knowledge of resistance and resurgence among IPWUID, my research draws from Indigenous theories of resurgence, resistance, and refusal (Coulthard, 2014; Hunt, 2018a; Hunt, 2014; Simpson, 2014, 2016, 2017a; Tuck & Yang, 2021). Despite the enduring impacts of settler colonialism, our collective Indigenous consciousness persists. Scholars such as Dorothy Christian (*Secwepemc and Sylix*) emphasize the ongoing relevance of Indigenous knowledge, even in urban contexts (e.g. DTES neighbourhood), where diasporic Indigenous Peoples engage in land-based practices and inter-tribal ceremonies (Christian, 2017).

My personal experiences of loss from the drug poisoning crisis drive my commitment to creating spaces of resurgence where IPWUID reclaim their cultural practices and relational ways of being as a form of resistance and healing. Hunt (2015) argues that resurgent efforts must be scaled down to the intimate level of daily relations, where resistance and resurgence are enacted within families, friendships, and communities. Similarly, Simpson (2011) describes resurgence as a process that not only challenges colonial thinking but also regenerates *mino bimaadiziwin*, or living a good life, rooted in ancestral teachings. My work, therefore, intentionally creates spaces of resurgence within intimate, interpersonal sites of care, cultural practice, ceremony, and harm reduction, centring the self-determination of IPWUID to support the collective pursuit of living a good life together. Gina Starblanket (*Cree/Saulteaux)* and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark (*Turtle Mountain Anishinaabe*) (2018) remind us that decolonization and resurgence must not rely on Western resources but should instead be driven by the revitalization of Indigenous cultural practices. In Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood, I have witnessed and participated in spaces created by and for IPWUID, grounded in relationships and an ethic of care. These efforts are especially important at the intersection of the harmful and ongoing impacts of colonization and the

drug poisoning crisis, both of which continue to disrupt our communities and the intimate relationships we share with one another.

One of the first teachings in my methodological journey was that witnessing is neither a passive nor simple act. Rather, witnessing is a deeply sacred and ceremonial role (Clark, 2018) that involves engaging in the process of witnessing another person's testimony while linking a series of communal acts where knowledge is shared through revisiting the past (Iseke, 2011, p. 568). As Hunt (2014) shares from her Kwakwaka'wakw lens, "As witness we have a role that is not to take up the voice or story of that which we have witnessed, nor to change the story, but to ensure the truths of the acts can be comprehended, honoured and validated (p.38). Métis scholar Natalie Clark's (2016) work with Indigenous girls underscores the necessity of ensuring that our listening and witnessing do not perpetuate narratives of risk and harm that are divorced from the stories of strength, resilience, and survivance. Similarly, Unangaŝ scholar Eve Tuck (2009) speaks to the significance of "re-visioning research in our communities not only to recognize the need to document the effects of oppression on our communities but also to consider the long-term repercussions of thinking of ourselves as broken" (p. 409). Instead, Tuck (2009) wants to re-orient research around a theory of change that documents *desire* instead of damage:

> This is important because it more closely matches the experiences of people who, at different points in a single day, reproduce, resist, are complicit in, rage against, celebrate, throw up hands/ fists/towels, and withdraw and participate in uneven social structures—that is, everybody. Desire fleshes out that which has been hidden or what happens behind our backs. Desire, because it is an assemblage of experiences, ideas, and ideologies, both subversive and dominant, necessarily complicates our understanding of human agency, complicity, and resistance (p.420).

Tuck clarifies that she is not proposing desire-based research as a replacement for damage-centred research, but instead as a component of an epistemological shift: how knowledge is generated and understood, or how we know what we know.

My previous work (Lavalley, Collins, et al., 2021; Lavalley et al., 2020; Lavalley et al., 2018; Lavalley, Society, et al., 2021) focus on PWUD's experiences (mainly IPWUID) with police violence, gentrification, and disparity in drug-related deaths within the context of a drug poisoning crisis, is, by necessity, about damage. Indeed, damage has occurred, continues to persist, and must be recognized and addressed to uncover the structural foundations of harm rooted in colonialism. However, damage is not the entire story for IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood. In this methodological journey, I was reminded of the importance of centring healing by both the collaborators involved in the creation of this methodology and subsequently the workshop series and the scholars whose work shaped my approach. As my research progresses, and as I learn from activists and individuals with living/lived experience of substance use, it has become clear to me the weight of documenting the full, complex experiences of those involved. Instead of focusing solely on the damaging narratives about IPWUID that dominate public discourse, I am committed to exploring alternative forms of care that emerge within marginal yet central spaces of the settler-state, like the DTES neighbourhood. These spaces offer a lens through which harm reduction can be seen as a generative, life-expanding practice in and of itself. As Gaudry (2015) notes, research that fixates solely on the effects of colonization "perpetuates outsider perceptions of Indigenous communities as fundamentally dysfunctional and in need of outside intervention" (p. 245). My work, thus, seeks to challenge such perceptions by documenting not just harm, but also the resilience, care, and healing that emerge in these contexts.

3.3 Research as a Shared Journey of *All* Participants: Navigating the Insider/Outsider Dynamics

My intimate journey of loss within the drug poisoning crisis positions me as an insider researcher with IPWUID, which, according to Smith (2021) allows Indigenous scholars to determine research priorities arising from their own community realities, epistemologies, and protocols. In recognition of my personal connection to the issues I was researching, the development of my methodological approach required me to consider debates about objectivity/subjectivity between Indigenous and Euro-Western scholarship (Absolon, 2022). Indigenous research requires engagement within an intimate network of relationships—an approach that stands in stark contrast to the Western tendency for objectivity and detachment (Hunt, 2016). Thus, I position myself in an uneasy "insider/outsider" (Kwame, 2017; Smith, 2021) relationship with the collaborators involved. By this, I mean that although I am an Indigenous researcher working with other Indigenous Peoples, some of whom I had established relationships with before this project and have personal and familial connections to the toxic drug crisis, I acknowledge that I am engaging with a community to which I do not belong. Despite having worked in the DTES for many years before beginning my doctoral research, I remain aware of my position as an outsider, as my drug use is not criminalized, and I am neither from these lands nor a resident of the DTES. Rather than a tension, however, this insider-outsider position provides a meaningful place of connection and relationality. As Cree-Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach (2009) explains, Indigenous methodologies are closely tied to the researcher's identity and life experiences, requiring self-reflection on how personal history and culture shape their research. Rather than being viewed as a bias, this connection is considered a strength that adds authenticity

and value to the research process. In the next section, I reflect on the relational responsibilities that come with navigating insider/outsider dynamics in research with IPWUID.

3.3.1 Further Positioning Myself In-Relation to this Work: My Relational Accountabilities and Responsibilities

At the start of my doctoral studies, I could not have anticipated how significant the interpersonal, spiritual, and self-reflective processes would be to my research journey. Yet, I soon found that this vulnerability was necessary for meaningfully conducting *research-in-relation*. The development of my *Sihtoskâtowin* methodology is intertwined with my own processes of transformation, decolonization, healing, and the mobilization of our people, all while remaining intimately connected to my spirit and accountability to myself, my family, and my community (Kovach, 2010; Smith, 2021). By sharing our personal stories—stories of who we are, the relational nature of our identities, and our ways of being—we engage in a process of reconnecting and remembering that can lead us toward *mino-pimatisiwin*, which Hart (2002) defines as the "overall goal of healing, learning, and life in general" (p. 44), or “the good life.” Our stories can also be linked to personal journeys of decolonization (Kovach, 2010). Processes of healing, decolonization and resurgence have allowed for my development as a Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis woman, and subsequently, my methodology. This deeply intimate research project was born from my own personal journey with identity, belonging, connection and meaning. It is through our understanding and experience of relationship that we can work to express knowledge shared between participant and researcher (Wilson, 2001, 2008). Thus, I felt it was necessary to develop a methodology that incorporates relational accountability, in other words, the ways in which we are responsible for

fulfilling our relationships and answering to *all my relations* with the world around us (Weber-Pillwax, 2001).

According to teachings shared by my family, community, Elders, and the collaborators involved in this work, it is an important protocol for me to share an introduction of who I am, where I come from, and who my family is. Coming from an Indigenous perspective, one of the responsibilities that I undertake as I prepare to engage in research includes locating myself. This also includes the responsibility that comes with creating a relational space within which to engage in this work (Wilson, 2008). It is part of acknowledging the responsibility that comes with carrying and witnessing another's story, and that in these experiences I will work to honour and maintain this responsibility in a *good way* (Weber-Pillwax, 2001). Since I have previously in this thesis introduced myself in an Introductory paper that positions my Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux-Métis identity in relation to my research, here I share another part of myself. This part centres more on my family, interpersonal relationships, and connections with collaborators. Here, I primarily focus on my relationship to the drug poisoning crisis. In doing so, I remain accountable to those who have lost their lives to this crisis, ensuring their stories and experiences are respected, remembered, and centred in this work.

Nothing can truly prepare you for the devastation of a toxic drug crisis, where Indigenous Peoples experience 17.7% of all toxic drug poisoning deaths (First Nations Health Authority, 2023). I have lost count of how many people in my life have died since the crisis was declared a public health emergency in April of 2016 (BC Coroners Service, 2022). During fieldwork for this research, I received a frantic call from my mom, telling me that my cousin had just died from drug poisoning outside my other cousin's funeral on our reserve. In the days following my cousin's death, I watched as my family and community struggled to make sense of this unimaginable

tragedy. As with other drug poisoning or substance-related deaths in my family, the initial reaction, though rooted in fear, was one of blame. *Who gave her the drugs? Why was she using while her kids were in the house?* At times, this blame was projected onto other family members who also used drugs, sometimes with her. Even if unintentional, the blame often seemed to be directed toward her for simply for being a drug user.

After she died, I felt angry. For nearly a decade, I had been working in harm reduction, having conversations with my family about its importance in keeping our people alive. I thought about the countless people in my community, and elsewhere, that have and will continue to die from this crisis. I asked myself: *How come no one on our reserve had access to Narcan? What might have happened if she had felt safe enough to let others know she was using? Why was she using alone? If our community had provided a safe space for her to use, would she still be alive today?* Despite my racing thoughts as I tried to make sense of her passing, I want to make it abundantly clear that I do not blame my family or community for her death. Colonial ideologies, positions, and attitudes on substance use have been imposed through racist policies and are deeply rooted in our communities. In 1884, an amendment to the Indian Act enforced a complete prohibition on alcohol for Indigenous Peoples, prohibiting "Indians" to purchase and consume alcohol unless they renounced their Indigenous identity and assimilated into Canadian society (Government of Canada, 1884). Alcohol and drug consumption continues to be weaponized to keep Indigenous Peoples down by shame and blame. The effects of the Indian Act prohibition also set the stage for the pervasive stereotype that Indigenous Peoples are savages in need of saving—a stereotype that continues to drive paternalistic discourses (and research practices) aimed at "improving" or "helping" Indigenous Peoples. While alcohol is no longer prohibited on or off

reserves, the legacy of these colonial ideologies lives on, and I have seen how these dogmas have been ingrained in our communities and ceremonial spaces.

In grappling with the aftermath of my cousin's death, and with the deep-seated colonial ideologies that shaped my community's response to drug poisoning, harm reduction, and substance use more generally, I began to reflect on the many IPWUID in the DTES who have welcomed me into their lives. Over the course of my research, many participants came to feel like kin. I began to see my role as a witness through a relational lens, as being *in-relation* with participants. I felt a responsibility to reduce harm, nurture a sense of belonging, and support them as I would any family member. I remain committed to walking alongside IPWUID in both this work and in my life, however, I find myself struggling with the reality that research alone will not change the material conditions of their lives. The challenge lies in ensuring that my work goes beyond academic inquiry and contributes meaningfully to improving the lives of IPWUID rather than simply documenting their struggles.

As I bear witness to their experiences, I am continually struck by how traditional Indigenous intellectual systems have not just *survived*. Indigenous intellectual systems have, in spite of so much, also *thrived* in this community. This thriving is in the face of and despite the enduring impacts of settlement, violence, assimilation, marginalization, and land dispossession. In my work, I demand of myself a responsibility to witness this survival and thriving and a commitment to reduce harm within our communities by creating spaces that acknowledge IPWUID drug use while still honouring their cultural belonging and agency. I also feel an overwhelming sense of responsibility to bear witness to my relatives, both in life and in death, to ensure their lives, voices, and experiences are never forgotten—or worse, overshadowed by harmful narratives about their substance use. This growing sense of responsibility compelled me

to honour stories in a way that affirms humanity and challenges the stigmatizing discourses that too often define their experiences. As Hunt (2018) explains in her work on violence within our Indigenous communities, “This is what it means to be witness—stepping up to validate what you have observed when an important act is denied or forgotten” (p.284). In my own work, that meant making sure all those who have died from this crisis were seen not just as statistics or victims of a crisis, but as full human beings with stories, relationships, and contributions that matter.

3.4 Core Foundations: A *Sihtoskâtowin* Methodology for Research with IPWUID

Four foundational elements, rooted in my Nêhiyaw (Cree), Saulteaux, and Métis worldview, scaffold and inform both my own Indigenous methodology and, thus, the ways I considered perspectives of collaborators with whom I worked. These four foundations are: *decolonial love; land as relation; re-imagining kinship where all our kin are valued; and cultural resurgence through research.* Each element is an expression of *Sihtoskâtowin,* woven together to express the interconnectedness of *all relations*. Together, they highlight the power of the collective, not just in our healing and growth, but in providing possibilities for engagement of individual and collective agency, power, and self-determination.

Worldview is intertwined within every decision (implicit or explicit) made by the researcher(s), and, therefore, greatly impacts the research process, purpose, motives, and roles of those involved. It also provides grounding of the self in the research process which requires articulation (Absolon, 2022), as I have shared above. As I reclaim(ed) cultural knowledge, I deepen my connection to a worldview rooted in my ancestral lands and kinship ties. The development and articulation of this methodology is thus rooted in my personal journey of transformation, mobilization, healing, and decolonization. At the heart of this is *Wâhkôhtowin*, a Cree principle of

kinship and law, which teaches us that the circle remains open, and no one is ever left out. My identity is formed not only through my Indigenous roots but also through my queerness and Two-Spirit identity. I take up *queer* because of how I align my own lived experiences and identities, and as a way of honouring the queer people and spaces that have supported, nourished, and loved me throughout my life. My queer ethics are a relational way of being and have been formed alongside my queer and Two-Spirit kin, as we support each other in a world that often seeks to erase us. Making connections across coastal nations has also expanded my ability to reimagine how we relate to one another. For me, queering these relations means reimagining how we connect—not only with each other, but also with the lands and waters that sustain us. While I am still learning and growing in my understanding of this worldview, I do not claim fluency in these knowledges, nor do I fully grasp everything this worldview means for my journey, not just as a researcher, but as a human being. Instead, I approach this work from a place of learning and growth, where, with deep respect, I embrace the possibilities of reclamation, decolonization, and resurgence. This relational worldview continues to guide me in all that I do.

My methodology is further grounded in my own cultural teachings, those of the collaborators who shaped this work, and the specific teaching and *application* of the traditional Cree law of *Sihtoskâtowin*—a principle centred supporting one another and coming together in mutual care and solidarity. It implies an understanding that we cannot "do it alone." I argue that in order to truly provide mutual support and to uphold *Sihtoskâtowin* in our communities, it is essential to *fully* witness people's lives, including their drug use. Following a methodological decree offered by Million's (2013) felt theory, I draw on various forms of embodied knowledge, rooted in my own understanding of *Sihtoskâtowin*—focusing on narratives that honour and uplift rather than perpetuate damage-centred stories that paint our people as inherently vulnerable and in

need of saving. Instead, I aim to shift away from colonial narratives of struggle and toward joyful, life-affirming spaces that celebrate *all our relations*. This involves recognizing and uplifting community-driven interventions rooted in land, culture, kinship, self-determination, and well-being, where IPWUID, like all Indigenous Peoples, are sovereign beings deserving of culture.

In the sections that follow, I share stories that highlight how the four principles of *Sihtoskâtowin* came to life in our research practices with IPWUID.

3.4.1 Decolonial Love: The Indigenous Advisory Circle

> *Love is medicine. It's what our ancestors used to live on this land, and it's what we need to live here now.*
>
> *—Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Islands of Decolonial Love*

Figure 3-1 "You Are Loved," Workshop #6

While discussions on relational accountability point to the significance of research being driven by and for Indigenous communities, they frequently fall short of addressing the specific lived realities of colonial violence and oppression, such as those faced by IPWUID. The discourse of relational accountability, then, runs the risk of failing to consider or address the responsibility to individuals whose identities or experiences challenge or fall outside the traditional or limited

definitions of what constitutes the Indigenous community (Starblanket, 2018). In other words, it fails to account for the need to be accountable to those who do not neatly fit within conventional understandings of "the Indigenous community." I follow Starblanket (2018) and Smith's (2021) call for researchers to develop practices of accountability that go beyond the conventional notions of community. With this in mind, my *Sihtoskâtowin* methodology not only challenges relational accountability: it also redefines relational accountability by prioritizing the voices and experiences of those often marginalized or silenced within our communities. To truly *witness* IPWUID means placing them at the centre of the work.

The methodology I have developed for this research resists discourses of risk and damage-centred research (Tuck, 2009), and instead attends to the everyday decolonial love practices within our intimate relationships. Decolonial love, a concept first introduced by Junot Diaz in an interview for the Boston Review (Moya, 2012, June 26th), refers to "the only kind of love that could liberate…from that horrible legacy of colonial love." This concept has been further theorized by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (*Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg*) in her book *Islands of Decolonial Love* (2013), in which she imagines decolonial love as a powerful, intimate act of embracing bodies and beliefs historically deemed unworthy of love, as a means to undo colonial harm. To root this methodology in community, care, and decolonial love, I established a community advisory group to guide the process, grounded in community protocols and shaped by the wisdom of IPWUID, including a Two-Spirit Elder with deep ties to the DTES community. Revisiting the question, "*Why am I doing this research?"* I realized that building relationships was the first step—both with the Elder and the advisory committee as a whole. Despite having pre-existing relationships with some members, I needed to demonstrate respect and reciprocate within each of those relationships. As an Indigenous person, particularly as a researcher, I am accountable to the communities I work

with and have a responsibility to contribute to them in meaningful ways. This includes acting with respect, reciprocating within relationships, and working authentically from my own position, including from my heart.

My relational accountabilities and responsibilities also derive from my own cultural epistemologies and those of the Indigenous Advisory Circle. Thus, the practice of gift gifting was implemented in each workshop to honour the teachings shared. This act not only acknowledged the exchange of knowledge but also symbolized a mutual responsibility between the researcher and participant. Aligned with our shared teachings, relational accountability, and respect for local protocols, this process involved offering either a small medicine bundle or tobacco to the Elder, workshop facilitators, and participants as a gesture of respect and recognition for the relationship and the wisdom provided.

The emotional impact of this work was powerful, as the deeply felt realities of colonialism became visible through the intimate process of bearing witness (Million, 2009). The vulnerability required in this research moved me to tears on multiple occasions as I listened to stories of injustice together with those of strength, courage, and resistance, all while navigating my own losses. This emotional depth became a key part of my meaning-making and learning process. Witnessing and engaging with these stories in real-time also allowed for a more embodied and healing experience, making the truth of these lived realities visible through the intimate act of bearing witness (Hunt & Holmes, 2015).

3.4.2 Land as Relation

We are sovereign people, on our sovereign land that was stolen from us.
—Elder Sandy

Figure 3-2 Participant Collage, Workshop #3

Indigenous People are taught to go back to the land when in need of guidance or help. As Cree scholar Neal McLeod (2007) explains, "Cree collective memory is anchored in places and landscape" (p. 19), highlighting the connection between memory, identity, and land. Emerging scholarship repeatedly calls attention to the ways in which strong kinship with the land is

understood as a source of cultural healing. For example, the Maori Peoples use the term *whakapapa* to describe a genealogical system that links all life, human and more-than-human, through a healing kinship with the land, recognizing land as kin (Graham, 2005). *Whakapapa* offers an ethical approach to research that centres interconnectedness and relational responsibility (Kawharu et al., 2024). Similarly, *Wâhkôhtowin* is a fundamental concept for understanding the interconnected nature of relationships, communities, natural systems, and traditional beliefs as it reflects the deep interconnectedness of community (Ermine, 2001, as cited in O'Reilly-Scanlon, Crowe, & Weenie, 2004).

When I sought to develop an Indigenous methodology, I began with my own Nation and lands. This meant understanding land as a source of my own personal cultural knowledge—an ethical guide that informs every step of the research process to ensure that the knowledge generated is in alignment with cultural responsibilities, respect for Indigenous law, and the wellbeing of all my relations. What I have learned over the years from Indigenous activists, poets, scholars, and thinkers, and through engaging critically in my research as an Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis person, is that land is more than just a physical entity or geographical place but rather a living being with inherent agency and wisdom (Armstrong, 2016; Kovach, 2021; Simpson, 2014, 2017a; Styres, 2018). It is where life happens. It is the caretaker of our ancestral stories. It provides us with food, medicines, and what we need to sustain life in the every day. It is our greatest teacher. The deepest and most healing truths and knowledges have been revealed to me through my own intimate relationship with the land and all its creation.

Despite the distance from my homelands, my work remained deeply grounded in the teachings, responsibilities, and guidance of my ancestors, shaping my approach to this research. At the same time, I recognize the Coast Salish nations whose lands I was on during this work,

honouring the responsibilities that come with being a guest and acknowledging how these lands and peoples have influenced and supported the research.

More than a witness to relations who use drugs, I am also witness to the wisdom of resurgence shared culturally, ceremonially and spiritually through relations with land and the natural world. I learned that the IPWUID's efforts to reconnect with their cultural practices are, in fact, a powerful political act of cultural resurgence, reaffirming their sovereignty, autonomy, and deep connection to the land. Over time, my collaboration with IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood has grown to be informed by our collective understandings of land in its various forms. This includes our collective learnings rooted in the DTES neighbourhood, along with our relationship with and responsibilities to the land and all our relations. Thus, this research remains firmly rooted in the local, social, and cultural contexts of the IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood, located on the unceded and occupied territories of the xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and sel̓íl̓witulh (Tsleil-waututh) Nations. To engage critically with land in this work, I consider the DTES neighbourhood as an active participant in the research process, shaping and being shaped by the interactions between people and their environments (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). The DTES is not just a place where life happens. The DTES neighbourhood is Indigenous land, too. The DTES neighbourhood is a site of Indigenous resistance and a source of cultural resurgence where Indigenous communities reclaim and revitalize traditional lifeways in the face of ongoing colonial violence. Importantly, this research extends beyond the physical land of the DTES neighbourhood, drawing on teachings from plants, animals, and other beings that informed the resurgent spaces we created together.

Indigenous communities have long recognized the connection between people and land, as expressed through ceremonies, creation stories, and traditional kinship and governance systems.

As Cree scholar Alex Wilson states in relation to the connection between land, sexuality, and gender, "Indigenous sovereignty over our lands is inseparable from sovereignty over our bodies, sexualities, and gender self-expression" (Wilson, 2018). In this work, the connection between Indigenous bodies and land is not a mere metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2021). This methodology, then, is embedded in the understanding that land, and bodies' relationship to land, is a necessary aspect of sovereignty. Drawing on the work of Indigenous theorists, scholars, artists, activists, and poets, that align with the belief that sovereignty over one's body involves sovereignty over land (Hunt, 2013; Simpson, 2014, 2017a; Tuck & Yang, 2021), I knew that centring IPWUID agency and bodily autonomy in this work was vital. Thus, honouring the body sovereignty of IPWUID and upholding their agency and autonomy over their bodies—regardless of their substance use—is a crucial aspect of my methodological approach. This involved shaping what a cultural space would look like when created through a relational approach that respects and upholds the agency and autonomy of IPWUID. At every workshop, participants could *choose* how they wanted to engage in culture and ceremony. There were no rigid protocols regarding individuals' drug use; the primary focus was creating a space that cared for and supported *everyone*.

In Elder Sandy's involvement with the workshop series, she too recalled the importance of centring the connection between body and land in this work:

> *We get to decided what's right for us. We are ceremonial people. Firewater and whatever drug we choose to use and put in our bodies does not take away from who we are as Indigenous People. We are sovereign people, on our sovereign land that was stolen from us.*

Sandy's comment reflects the sense of healing and love that is embedded in the work being done within the DTES community. Similarly, learning how to live in relationship with both the land and my body has carried me through much grief and pain, reminding me that healing is not just an

individual process, but one that thrives in connection with the land, with ourselves, and with our community.

3.4.3 Re-thinking Kinship Relations Where *All Our Kin* Have Value

> *We are spiritual beings. We need each other in the world. We need these types of friendships.*
> *– Norma*

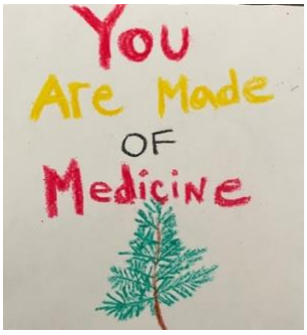

Figure 3-3 "You Are Medicine," Workshop #6

Indigenous identity and relationship with the land, nature, ancestors, community, and future generations are entangled within and woven into layers of kinship and accountability. These connections are foundational to Indigenous realities. Relationship is not just a social construct but a complex, holistic network that reflects and shapes the Indigenous worldview (Cajete, 2021; Kimmerer, 2013; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2001, 2008; Wilson-Hokowhitu, 2019). Kinship includes family, community, and all extended human and more-than-human relations. It unifies these connections because "there is no distinction between relationships that are made with other people

and those that are made with our environment. Both are equally sacred" (Wilson, 2008, p. 87). This understanding affirms that all relationships, whether with people or the environment, hold equal sacredness. Kinship—being a good relative and in good relations with *all* things—is a traditional teaching that guides this work and community pathways for re-imagining the Red Road. By centring cultural teachings in this work, I am reminded of my own kinship systems, which inspire me to explore how our communities are actively reimagining and reclaiming narratives of resurgence, well-being, and love. These teachings not only guide my research but also elucidate the powerful ways in which IPWUID are reclaiming their stories. I remain committed to fulfilling both a relational obligation and spiritual responsibility, based on my understanding of kinship, *where all our kin have value*.

The work of my PhD is also focused on promoting the necessary engagement and centring of IPWUID as part of our kinship responsibilities to unsettle the strict colonial interpretations of tradition, particularly in addressing the tensions that now exist between traditionalism and its fusion with settler conceptualizations of “purity” as it relates to substance use. Unsettling these tensions in my work—and in life—is a constant challenge. Over the years, in-depth conversations I’ve had with my family and communities across so-called Canada, and elsewhere, are sometimes met with defensiveness, anger, and concern, largely centred on assumptions of what is considered 'traditional.' In response, I challenge these assumptions of traditionalism, situating my family’s preference for 'zero tolerance' approaches to mitigating substance use-related harms within the broader context of colonialism. To truly centre our individual and collective teachings on kinship relations, to enact *Sihtoskâtowin*, we must disrupt the harmful binaries that too often end in the exclusion of IPWUID from our communities and ceremonial spaces.

Sachs (2011) describes kinship as a reciprocal relationship, where *everyone* has an inclusive obligation to each other. In my experience, however, the exclusion of IPWUID has been more common than their inclusion. It is within my own expansive family kinship systems that I have come to understand how upholding our kinship relations with and responsibilities to each other unsettles the politics of traditionalism and how it activates shallow and problematic interpretations of Indigenous thought and practices that lead to exclusion. Many Indigenous family systems, including my own, are built around an extended family structure, unlike the nuclear family model prevalent in many Western societies. As stated, Cree kinship, or *Wahkohtowin*, reflect a complex and dynamic system and defines where a person fits into their community. The kinship system is valuable because it organizes people's relationships, obligations, and behaviours toward one another. This means our family responsibilities extend beyond the nuclear family to include *all our kin*. Our kinship roles are also reflected in our language. For example, the Cree word for "my mother" is *nikâwiy*, while the word for "aunt" (specifically, a mother's sister) is *nikâwîs*—both of which translate to "my mother." We are taught to regard our mother's sisters as our mothers, not in the sense of being our biological mothers, but as relations who fulfill a maternal role in our lives.

I share this as an example of how we, as Cree people, live theory and how this research supports a kinship-based pedagogy. While my kinship framework shares similarities with the above scholars' work, it is uniquely rooted in Cree teachings and adapted to include PWUD within our kinship systems. By positioning myself within these kinship relations and teachings, I can enact on my connection to place, family, and identity. This reflection drives my pursuit of a methodology that challenges the imposed assumption that substance use negates one's ability to live an Indigenous way of life or from walking the Red Road.

Relatedly, "nothing about us, without us" is a core principle in the DTES community that speaks to the necessity of including DTES residents in decision-making processes related to research, development, housing, services, income, and land use (Pedersen & Swanson, 2008). Originating in disability activism (Kočnik et al.), this principle has become crucial in substance use research, advocating for the centrality of PWUD's voices and experiences (Boilevin et al., 2019). Researchers are increasingly moving beyond tokenistic participation by engaging community members as 'peer researchers,' ensuring meaningful involvement in the creation and dissemination of knowledge (Boilevin et al., 2019). During a conversation with Sammy, a long-time collaborator on multiple DTES research projects and a member of the IAC, they made it clear that involving peer researchers was not enough. "*The community already has the answers you're looking for. They must be involved from the very beginning*." This lived principle, shared by collaborators who became friends and kin, has shaped my ethics and protocols, deepening my understanding of *Sihtoskâtowin* as a principle enacted through everyday relationships. *Sihtoskâtowin* gently reminds us to hold onto every part of ourselves and ensure no one is left behind, creating spaces filled with care, where each person is seen and valued. This relational approach nurtures a sense of belonging, honouring the agency and autonomy of IPWUID. As Elder Sandy beautifully shared, "If we are given the chance to connect with one another and our culture in ways that come from us, our spirit finds its way home."

During the workshops, I was overwhelmed with gratitude as I realized that happiness comes from the care and intention that we bring to nurturing our relationships with *all* our kin. It was in these moments of connection that I understood how much our well-being relies on the love and respect we cultivate within our communities.

3.4.4 Cultural Resurgence Through Research

> *The DTES is what led many of us to the Red Road. It's a place where we've been able to reconnect with our culture and with each other.*
>
> *–Participant*

Figure 3-4 Indigenous Harm Reduction Kits, Workshop #4

When we think about healing in our communities, we often focus on specific actions or methods, like Indigenous practices such as smudging, sweat lodge ceremonies, or cultural practices. But how do these practices connect with the principle of *Sihtoskâtowin*? As witness to IPWUID, I understand it as my responsibility to affirm the right of drug users to engage in cultural resurgence, which has become a core component of my methodology. When some of our kin are excluded from ceremonies, they are also denied the opportunity to be in relation to our lands and waters. I have been part of cultural spaces and ceremonies, like our workshops, where every person is

welcomed and valued, whether they choose to abstain from substances or not, where all bodies are sacred and respected, and where our ways of being are collectively lived out. To me, this is the true purpose of ceremony: creating spaces where everyone belongs. This is how we live out *Sihtoskâtowin,* by ensuring that all our relations have a place and that none of us are left behind.

The cultural alignment of each workshop was guided by the stories, teachings, and protocols of the co-facilitators' specific cultures. For instance, an Algonquin Cree Two-Spirit Métis Elder facilitated a pipe ceremony grounded in her cultural teachings and protocols. Likewise, the medicine bundle workshop was led in accordance with the research team's shared Cree and Anishinaabe teachings. Each of these workshops reflected the community's fierce commitment to supporting one another. The practice of *Sihtoskâtowin* within these cultural spaces underscores that healing is a collective process, rarely achieved alone. As it applies to my research framework, this means committing to the work necessary to ensure none of our relations, including those who use drugs, are left to carry the burden of colonial harm alone.

3.5 Conclusion

If, according to Simpson (2017), being Indigenous and living diverse lives in different places while staying true to oneself as Nishanaabeg is a form of resurgence, then IPWUID are also engaging in resurgence by reclaiming their place in their communities, accessing teachings, and living in the best way they can. IPWUID theorizing, practices, and contributions to harm reduction are all key components of resurgence. Colonial binaries not only sustain the marginality of all Indigenous Peoples, but also perpetuate the exclusion of those whose bodies, spirits, and lives exist outside these rigid structures. We must shift away from policing, judgment, and exclusion, and instead cultivate spaces that celebrate and honour *all our relations.* IPWUID are not just part of our

communities—they are our teachers. They carry the knowledge our Nations need to survive the toxic drug crisis.

At the end of our last workshop, a first-time participant came up to me and shared that she believes things come into your life when you need them most. She gave me hug and told me her spirit had been longing for this kind of connection with other Indigenous Peoples since moving to Vancouver, and she saw the workshop as a blessing given to her by the Creator. In that moment, the principle of *Sihtoskâtowin* was alive between us, as the workshops created spaces that valued, honoured, and celebrated her life, body, and spirit as an essential part of our communities and nations.

Chapter 4: "*We Get to Decide What is the Right For Us*": (Re)imagining the Red Road with Indigenous Peoples Who Use Illicit Drugs

4.1 Preamble

I see this work of gathering together with Indigenous Peoples who use illicit drugs (IPWUID) and sharing understandings about their needs in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood as a form of accountability to all those who have lost their lives to the drug poisoning crisis, including my own relatives. I want to illuminate the human stories behind the statistics to make visible those members of our communities who are silenced, forgotten, and spoken over. I also want to honour and recognize the teachings, activism, and resistance of IPWUID in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood. Working alongside IPWUID, including members of the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS), the Indigenous Advisory Circle involved with this project, and numerous other drug user activists and Indigenous harm reduction workers, has shown me how our knowledge and practices can shape decolonial possibilities. Together, we are redefining our relationships with each other as we move towards opening space for *all our relations.*

4.2 Introduction: The Red Road

This article provides and overview of research centred on a reflexive data analysis process rooted in community perspectives gathered during a series of workshops. Throughout the research that is discussed in depth in this article, I ensured that collaborators (Indigenous Peoples who use illicit drugs – current/former) were actively involved in analyzing workshop outcomes. Using participant narratives, art, and cultural activities, I aimed to unsettle how IPWUID stories are heard and shared, prompting others to recognize and act on the potential of Indigenous practices to transform

norms around substance use. With this in mind, the article begins with a discussion about Indigenous resurgence, drawing on critical theoretical frameworks anchored in insights of Indigenous feminist and queer scholars, and emphasizing the importance of incorporating a harm reduction lens in definitions of resurgence. I then introduce my project, situating the experiences of IPWUID within the context of the drug poisoning crisis. Finally, I ground my work in my relational accountabilities and responsibilities, positioning myself through the lens of my connections and commitments, before moving into the findings of the workshop series. But before any of this unfolds, I begin in memory: memory frames everything I think, do, and write.

In my childhood memories of attending cultural events, like powwows, round dances, and feasts, one thing always stands out; adhering to cultural protocol almost always involves abstaining from all substances. I, like many other Indigenous People, was taught from an early age that abstinence was part of *walking the Red Road*, a concept used to describe a substantial personal commitment and responsibility to living and experiencing an *Indigenous way of life*. Though it may hold different meanings for each person and each culture, at its core, the Red Road symbolizes the collective journey of supporting one another in living a *good life* (Arrows, 2020; Penak & Allen, 2022). Rooted in teachings of the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the Red Power movement, the Red Road both encompasses local knowledge and serves as a unifying force among Indigenous Peoples (Penak & Allen, 2022). Emerging in the late 1960s, the AIM and Red Power movement arose in response to centuries of colonization, broken treaties, and systemic oppression, aiming to reclaim Indigenous rights, resist forced assimilation, and assert self-determination. Sometimes referred to as the 'Good Red Road,' the phrase has gained popularity in urban Indigenous services and programs (Penak & Allen, 2022). For instance, *The Red Road*, a nonprofit devoted to celebrating Indigenous culture through awareness and education, highlights how

communities use this term to signify a commitment to integrity, respect for others, oneself, the natural world, and honouring the Creator [17].

Significantly, this concept reflects both a "metaphor for collections of lessons about how to live a good life" (Penak & Allen, 2022) and frequently implies the decision to turn away from addictions to substances like drugs and alcohol. Notably, this concept is commonly entangled with Christian traditions, as noted on *The Red Road* website, where it is explained that "In Christian culture, The Red Road similarly represents the blood-stained road that led Jesus to the cross after having lived His best life and given His own life for those of His followers." Within this framing, the symbolic journey of the Red Road when viewed through the lens of colonial ideologies, reveals the deep-rooted oppression embedded in Christian-based, colonial, and racist policies, particularly regarding substance use among Indigenous Peoples. In 1884, an amendment to the Indian Act enforced a complete prohibition on alcohol for Indigenous Peoples. Under this law, 'Indians' were only allowed to drink if they relinquished their legal 'Indian' status by becoming enfranchised and assimilating into Canadian society (Indigenous Corporate Training Inc., 2016). This policy not only restricted access to alcohol but also pressured Indigenous Peoples to abandon their identity and culture in exchange for the rights available to non-Indigenous Canadians. This historical weaponization of alcohol and drug consumption further perpetuated damaging stereotypes that Indigenous Peoples were "savages" in need of saving—a stereotype that still influences paternalistic attitudes toward "improving" or "helping" Indigenous communities. The Canadian government enforced alcohol prohibition as part of a broader effort to replace Indigenous culture

[17] The Red Road: https://theredroad.org/

with Christianity and Western norms, often under the guise of ‘protection’ or improvement. This alcohol prohibition operated alongside other assimilation policies, such as the banning of cultural practices like the Potlatch and Sundance, both of which were outlawed under the Indian Act. These bans aimed to control all facets of Indigenous life, including spiritual and social practices, with the shared goal of cultural erasure and forced assimilation. The regulation of alcohol, together with the suppression of cultural traditions, was a calculated element of Canada’s colonial strategy to undermine Indigenous identity and impose Christian and Euro-Canadian values. This reinforced harmful stereotypes and advanced the broader goal of assimilating Indigenous Peoples while exerting control over their bodies and lands.

This historical framework of control over alcohol set the precedent for the broader regulation of substances, reinforcing colonial narratives that Indigenous Peoples required management and intervention regarding their consumption choices. As these patterns extended into the criminalization of drug use, Indigenous Peoples Who Use Illicit Drugs (IPWUID) became particularly vulnerable to the ongoing impacts of these racist, assimilationist policies. Even with the end of alcohol prohibition, both on and off reserves, the influence of these colonial ideologies persists, shaping the ways substance use is perceived, internalized, and addressed within Indigenous communities. This enduring legacy is evident in the continued enforcement of ‘dry’ policies across many Indigenous communities in Canada. Many ‘dry reserve’ bylaws were implemented under the Indian Act during the 1980s. These regulations remain in use today and Section 85.1 of the Indian Act continues to be the primary legal authority that allows band councils to create and enforce bylaws restricting the possession and consumption of alcohol in their communities (Owen, 2017).

Growing up as an Indigenous person in the prairies, I experienced the complexities of substance use and addiction, particularly within the context of cultural participation. I often felt a dualism between being Indigenous and using substances, as my family and community viewed addiction through an absolutist lens—you were either clean or using, with no room for less risky consumption. In my family, I have seen both a place for, and the significant limits of, abstinence-based models. These models are often blind to or in refusal of the everyday realities of intergenerational trauma and other impacts of colonization. I have witnessed how people who use drugs (PWUD), including members of my own family, were treated as outsiders, excluded from communities and cultural spaces like ceremonies and powwows, thereby vacating IPWUID from visions of the future of our communities. According to my teachings, abstinence from drugs and alcohol for four to seven days is typically required before entering a ceremonial space, further compounding this exclusion, as this is unrealistic for most people who regularly consume substances.

Witnessing these challenges in my family and community motivates me to support Indigenous people who use drugs—particularly illicit drugs, by which I mean drugs whose possession and use is criminalized—by validating their experiences through research. However, my growing awareness of power dynamics in academia has led me to reconsider my role as a researcher. Through working in harm reduction and substance use research for nearly a decade, I have come to recognize how research can reinforce the very power structures that have oppressed Indigenous Peoples for centuries. As Goodman et al. (2018) note, the lack of literature on marginalized populations like IPWUID underscores the need for research that respects and uplifts their voices while challenging historical and ongoing power imbalances. Thus, as I seek to reimagine the Red Road by engaging with and listening to stories of participants—whom I view

as friends, relatives, and collaborators. I enact an ethic of refusal [18] that pushes back against colonial narratives that portray Indigenous Peoples as 'victims' in need of "'saving'—including those of us who use drugs. Focusing solely on colonial power dynamics risks reinforcing harmful stereotypes and pathologizing communities. Instead, in the context of an ongoing toxic drug poisoning crisis, I ask whom research benefits, how it reveals issues, and what it contributes to a decolonial ethic (Tuck & Yang, 2021).

The sheer magnitude of drug poisoning related deaths in our families and communities is difficult to comprehend, let alone accept or turn away from. The numbers are crushing. They are not just statistics—they are our loved ones, our matriarchs, our Elders, our youth, our kin. In recent years, my focus has shifted from exposing injustices experienced by IPWUID—harms we already know all too well—to exploring alternative forms of care and joy within the margins of the settler colonial state, even amidst the drug poisoning crisis. In this work, I honour IPWUID labour by attending to their intimate practices of care (Hunt & Holmes, 2015), co-creating knowledge with friends, colleagues and kin in the DTES as they navigate harm reduction and create spaces that reject restrictive, colonial notions of substance use.

4.3 Background: Resurgence For Whom?

In this article, I engage resurgence thought and practice alongside knowledge co-created with IPWUID. I do this in order to challenge assumptions within Indigenous communities that lead to IPWUID being shunned from our cultural spaces or spaces of resurgence. For me, resurgence is

[18] According to Audra Simpson (2014), acts of refusal involve the deliberate decision by Indigenous individuals and communities to reject the impositions and expectations of settler colonial states. This refusal is not merely about saying "no" but is a profound assertion of sovereignty, identity, and autonomy.

about reclaiming all that colonialism has stolen from us—our land, language, cultural practices, and ways of knowing and being—all of which is rooted in an intense love for our land, our families, and our nations. It is an approach to decolonization that centres Indigenous political thought and practices, yet these ways of knowing and being often align with the politics of traditionalism, where imposed ideas about substance use become embedded in Indigenous lifeways and are then labeled as 'traditional.'

Indigenous scholars and activists have taken up political and social dimensions of belonging within spaces of resurgence, including questioning ideas of 'traditionalism' (Crosschild, 2019; Simpson, 2017b), respectability politics (Maynard et al., 2021), and gender roles (Crosschild, 2019; Hunt, 2018a; Simpson, 2017b; Starblanket, 2018). Scholars like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (*Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg*) (2017), Sarah Hunt (*Kwakwaka'wakw – Kwagu'ł*) (2018), and Gina Starblanket (*Cree/Saulteaux*) (2018) have highlighted how heteropatriarchy contributes to homophobia and transphobia in Indigenous communities, stressing the importance of centring gender and sexuality in our resurgence work. In examining the exclusion and violence that too often unfold in our intimate spaces, particularly against queer and trans bodies, Simpson (2017), states:

> Heteropatriarchy isn't just about exclusion of certain Indigenous bodies, it is about the destruction of the intimate relationships that make up our nations, and the fundamental systems of ethics based on values of individual sovereignty and self-determination. The more destruction our intimate relationships carry, the more destruction our political systems carry, and the less we are able to defend and protect our land, and the easier it is to dispossess (p. 123).

While early debates on gender, sexuality, and representation in Indigenous communities have broadened, these scholars underscore the necessity of revitalizing Indigenous knowledge systems in ways that fully embrace the diverse experiences and identities of *all* Indigenous Peoples.

Centring gender and sexuality is not only vital for addressing the harms of heteropatriarchy but also for ensuring that decolonization efforts are truly inclusive and representative of all Indigenous realities (Starblanket, 2018). Further, Lindsay Nixon (*Cree, Saulteaux, Metis)* argues there are limitations of resurgence theory in that it frames resistance to the colonial state as an individualized responsibility that does not attend to disparate realities among Indigenous Peoples:

> Resurgence has been damaging to the project of developing rigorous Indigenous theory that attends to the intricacy of difference (i.e., race, class, colourism, location) because of the way it appeals to a singular, unified Indigenous struggle (Alfred 199-201), wherein the only oppressor of Indigenous peoples is the Canadian state. (2018, p.47)]

This literature reveals critical efforts to disentangle resurgence from heteropatriarchy. Yet, I argue it is equally necessary to further delink resurgence from Christianity, respectability politics, and other colonial value systems that perpetuate the exclusion of people who use drugs and alcohol. These systems not only impose moral judgments but also reinforce colonial hierarchies, marginalizing individuals whose lives and choices fall outside these imposed colonial frameworks. Much of my decolonial work has involved recognizing that Indigenous resurgence often overlooks those who do not fit romanticized ideals of sobriety and abstinence. My research thus argues that the exclusion of IPWUID from resurgent spaces (in service of 'living a good life') actually furthers, as opposed to challenges, colonial ideals. Such exclusion hinders our collective efforts toward resurgence. IPWUID are vital members of our communities, with the inherent right to cultural practices and everyday resurgence and including IPWUID in these practices and honouring their ancestral rights can lead us toward a hopeful future. Thus, this project is motivated by the politics of exclusion that IPWUID encounter within ceremonial and community settings and works to contribute to resurgence scholarship by positioning the voices of IPWUID at the centre of

conversations on land back, self-determination, and bodily autonomy and agency, thereby furthering visions of Indigenous communities in which *all our relations* belong.

A growing number of critical Indigenous scholars (Corntassel & Scow, 2017; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Simpson, 2017b) have advanced notions of Indigenous political resurgence which shift beyond large-scale mobilizations related to land to include the reassertion of everyday practices that take up the intimate, lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples. This focus on daily life as a site of emancipation challenges colonial power and recontours resurgence so as to include social realms that are usually views as apolitical. Hunt (2015) insists that resurgent efforts must scale down to the intimate level of everyday relations, which are also sites of political contestation, as seen in Canadian laws and policies which intervene in everything from Indigenous identity to the management of children and families. Hunt and Cindy Holmes (2015) further explore how intimate spaces, like those shared with friends and family, become sites of resistance in decolonization. This emphasis on everyday actions reveals how colonization has reordered our relationships and calls for collective resurgence through dialogue and relationship. In reminding us to be attentive to the violences that too often play out disproportionately on the bodies of women and Two-Spirit people, Hunt makes a critical point about resurgence being a luxury and privilege that is not afforded to all (Stark et al., 2023).

As an Indigenous person actively involved in cultural and political resurgence, I grapple with the tensions surrounding the acceptance of harm reduction within our intimate and everyday cultural, ceremonial, and resurgent spaces. As mentioned, in my own experience I have seen how PWUD in our communities are frequently excluded from ceremonial spaces due to the belief that substance use disrupts or is antithetical to traditional protocols. I have witnessed firsthand the harm experienced by people who are stigmatized, pathologized or criminalized due to their substance

use, as cultural disconnection is justified through discourses of traditionalism. From being told I couldn't smudge because I had consumed substances that day, to hearing powwow MCs call for the removal of 'drunks' from the powwow grounds, I've seen how deeply these judgments affect our people. I have also seen how difficult it is for substance-using relatives to access Indigenous-operated cultural services due to their drug use. This exclusion is linked to broader debates within Indigenous health centred on the perceived dichotomy between abstinence and harm reduction (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019).

Harm reduction is generally seen as a comprehensive public health approach focused on minimizing the health and social harms associated with substance use through practical strategies. These strategies include syringe distribution, supervised consumption sites, opioid agonist treatment, take-home naloxone, and drug checking programs (Ivsins et al., 2021; Kanate et al., 2015; Kerr et al., 2017; Moustaqim-Barrette et al., 2019). Grounded in the principle of meeting people "where they are at," harm reduction philosophies and practices rest on an inherent respect of peoples' circumstances and choices. Over the past two decades, harm reduction has evolved as a public health policy, with principles extending beyond substance use to areas like safer sex work conditions (Hawk et al., 2017; National Harm Reduction Coalition, 2020; Rekart, 2005). This evolution has also led to Indigenous conceptualizations of harm reduction in fields like social work, expanding our understanding of harm within our communities and highlighting its potential as a promising practice for Indigenous social work (Dell et al., 2010). Some Indigenous voices position harm reduction as a movement to reclaim self-determination over health and bodies. For example, the Native Youth Sexual Health Network's Indigenizing Harm Reduction Model frames harm reduction as a means of "centring community wellbeing and the restoration of different Indigenous knowledge systems, life ways, ceremonies, culture and governance structures

Indigenous peoples of many Nations and cultures can reduce the harm we experience in our lives" (Native Youth Sexual Health Network, n.d.).

Although harm reduction principles have been applied to issues like sex work and adopted in social work and health fields, there has been limited discussion among Indigenous scholars on how these principles relate to resurgence, land-based and cultural work, and decolonization. This gap results in a broad failing around questioning how exclusionary tactics are reproduced within our resurgence spaces and practices. Harm reduction principles, which are grounded in shifting power dynamics and centring relationality, highlight the importance of meaningfully engaging with and redistributing power to impacted peoples and communities. Harm reduction reminds us that while addressing immediate harms is vital for keeping our people alive, particularly in a drug poisoning crisis, it remains insufficient unless we also confront the underlying structures that perpetuate these harms, including those within our own communities. Thus, in this work, I argue for the need to integrate harm reduction concepts with Indigenous ideas of resurgence and decolonization, as this integration provides valuable tools for advancing our decolonizing and resurgence efforts which are increasingly necessary across our communities which continue to be disproportionately impacted by the drug poisoning crisis. No community remains untouched by this crisis. The abstinence approach has not only failed but has also intensified the harm by pushing people out of spaces of belonging and into further isolation. For many scholars, activists, and families working toward resurgence, addressing the drug poisoning crisis is a critical part of our healing journey that we can no longer ignore.

4.4 The Project

In this section, I begin by setting out the context and statistics related to the alarming overrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples affected by drug poisoning. My intention is not to quantify trauma, but to emphasize how and where statistics matter. Statistics reflect the lived realities of IPWUID who continue to fight for our collective freedom on the frontlines of this crisis.

4.4.1 Indigenous Peoples and the Drug Poisoning Crisis

Following decades of Indigenous resistance through movements like Red Power and AIM, which challenged assimilationist policies, Canada has shifted its narrative from forced assimilation to reconciliation. In the current era of reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples and Nations, Canada claims to be committed to a nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous Peoples based on recognition of their inherent rights, self-determination, and sovereignty (Government of Canada, 2022). However, within this settler fantasy, the ongoing prevalence of the drug poisoning crisis remains one of the most pressing public health issues in Canada, with IPWUID disproportionately affected by this crisis (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022; Lavalley et al., 2018). Despite the implementation of North America's most comprehensive set of harm reduction interventions, including syringe distribution, supervised consumption services, low-threshold and pharmacy-based opioid agonist treatment, take-home naloxone program, and drug checking programs (Ivsins et al., 2021; Kanate et al., 2015; Kerr et al., 2017; Moustaqim-Barrette et al., 2019), Indigenous Peoples bear the brunt of this crisis. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the drug poisoning death rates of Indigenous Peoples in British Columbia (BC) increased 93% between January and May 2020 (First Nations Health Authority, 2020). In BC, Indigenous Peoples account

for 17.7% of all drug poisoning-related deaths despite representing only 3.4% of the province's population and are 5.6 times more likely to die from drug poisoning than that of other BC residents (First Nations Health Authority, 2023). Significantly, I would argue that the severity of this crisis is likely understated due to poor disaggregation of data on Indigenous Peoples, as Canadian statistics on drug-related harms and deaths are not disaggregated by Indigenous identity in most Canadian provinces (Joshi et al., 2018) even though available data indicates that Indigenous Peoples are far more likely to die of drug poisoning.

The overrepresentation of IPWUID harmed by the drug poisoning crisis is most acutely visible in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood, located on the unceded and occupied lands of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and sel̓íl̓witulh (Tsleil-waututh) Nations. The DTES neighbourhood is a low-income neighbourhood and site of Canada's largest street-based illicit drug scene, characterized by high rates of poverty, violence, and homelessness (Wood & Kerr, 2006). Yet, the DTES is not solely defined through these markers of marginalization, as it has long been a site of Indigenous resistance and community-building. (Martin & Walia, 2019; Schatz, 2010). The neighbourhood has a rich history of political activism, leading struggles for human rights, including those advocating for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), sex workers, and tenants of Single Room Occupancy (SRO) buildings (Boyd & Boyd, 2014; Martin & Walia, 2019; Masuda et al., 2020). Additionally, the DTES has been home to vibrant cultural communities established by Chinese, Japanese, and other migrant populations, who have also played key roles in its history of resistance and resilience (Franks & Masuda, 2015).

For decades, the DTES has been home to many Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous Peoples account for approximately 8.5% of the population living in the neighbourhood (St. Denis, 2021).

This urban population is made up of people originating from Indigenous communities all across Turtle Island. Indigenous rights movements and harm reduction movements have strong roots in the DTES. The movement of Indigenous harm reduction emerged in response to the limitations of mainstream approaches, which often fail to meet the unique and diverse needs of Indigenous communities. Indigenous harm reduction deviates fundamentally from mainstream harm reduction in that it is not bound to any health behaviour, including the use of substances (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019). While practices like naloxone distribution and opioid substitution therapies save lives, some argue that these programs do not adequately address the broader social and systemic issues that shape substance use for Indigenous Peoples (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019; First Nations Health Authority, n.d.). Indigenous harm reduction initiatives, by centring Indigenous knowledge and leadership, prioritize culturally safe and relevant care, recognizing that true harm reduction requires addressing the social determinants of health and the impacts of colonialism (Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development, 2019). These approaches, which include community-based and peer-led supports and trauma-informed care grounded in Indigenous knowledge, are gaining recognition as vital for reclaiming health and sovereignty in our communities (First Nations Health Authority; Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development, 2019). However, my experience, along with the stories shared below by IPWUID involved in this work, reveals that substance use stigma and the exclusion of IPWUID from community and cultural spaces persist.

4.4.2 Relational Accountability and Community Ethics: The Indigenous Advisory Circle

In the remainder of this article, I share research conducted in collaboration with an Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC), comprising current and former IPWUID in Vancouver's DTES

neighbourhood. The IAC members were chosen for their lived experience with substance use and their commitment to harm reduction. I undertook a year-long pre-engagement process, reconnecting with two former Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction (WAHRS) members with whom I had previously collaborated. They agreed to participate, and together we formed the IAC. Initially composed of four members, the group evolved as some faced life circumstances that that prevented their continued commitment, which led to the inclusion of others, including a Two-Spirit Elder who played a crucial role in the project. This laid the groundwork for a series of co-designed workshops, which I describe in more detail below. Our research approach is rooted in developing and honouring relationships, creating a space where cultural knowledge can be shared in a purposeful way. While meaningful researcher-community engagement meets Western standards (Kovach, 2021), relationality, central to Indigenous research, is much more complex and nuanced. Shawn Wilson (2008) explains that "if Indigenous ways of knowing have to be narrowed through one particular lens, then surely that lens would be relationality. All things are related and therefore relevant" (p.58). This perspective suggests that our knowledge systems are co-created through relationships, with reciprocity upholding the wellbeing of our kinship networks.

The names of the knowledge keepers have been largely identified throughout the research, with their consent. From a relational perspective, the information shared, or the story offered, would lose its power without acknowledging the knowledge of the teller. This is why some the individuals involved in the research chose not to remain anonymous (Chilisa, 2014, p. 133). Kovach (2009) affirms that allowing people's names to be recognized is a form of relational accountability and is deeply rooted in oral cultures. Additionally, the knowledge keepers were given the option to remove their names from the articles before submission or publication.

4.4.3 Positioning Myself Relationally in this Work

My doctoral work with collaborators in the DTES is intertwined with being a research coordinator at the BC Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU). Also interwoven in this work is my journey examining my own lived experience as an Indigenous person navigating intergenerational trauma and addiction in my own family and community.

Central to this journey is the understanding that Indigenous knowledge is tied to our life experiences, acknowledging the existence of multiple truths in our shared world (Absolon, 2007; Kovach, 2009). I carry this knowingness within me to explain who I am before I share my knowledge with others. In thinking through the *knowingness* of this teaching within myself, I am reminded of my own embodied knowledge as an Indigenous person, and what this means in relation to our research. I bring to this research my family's experiences of the drug poisoning crisis that has infiltrated our community in recent years after countless relatives and friends started to die from this crisis. I have felt compelled by my role to bear witness to the injustices experienced by family members and those who have shared their stories with me throughout this project, and within the larger network of community responsibilities that ensures the safety of my most vulnerable kin. Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) discusses the concept of Self as relationship in Indigenous research. He writes:

> Identity for Indigenous peoples is grounded in their relationships with the land, with their ancestors who have returned to the land and with future generations who will come into being on the land. Rather than viewing ourselves as being in relationship with other people or things, we are the relationships that we hold and are part of. (p. 80)

Thus, in honouring both my kin who have been affected by this crisis, and the situated knowledges that I am in relationship with and embody, I will share some aspects of who I am, where I come from, and what brings me to this work. I share these parts of myself in the hopes that you, the

reader/witness, can establish a context of my interest in this work with IPWUID and appreciate how both this work and the relationships foundational to it are deeply interconnected. I also share this to break down the perceived social distance between the DTES and other lands, communities and neighbourhoods, as these social differences often position researchers at a distance from, rather than in relation to, their research collaborators.

I am of the Nêhiyaw (Plains Cree), Saulteaux (Anishinaabe) and Métis Nations from the southern prairie lands of what is now known as Saskatchewan (SK). I am a registered member of the Piapot First Nation, located approximately 52 kilometers north of Regina in the Qu'Appelle Valley. Since 2017, I have worked as a research coordinator with the British Columbia Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU). This work was done primarily in partnership with the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS), an Indigenous-led harm reduction organization operating under the umbrella of Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU), made up of Indigenous Peoples who use illicit drugs and/or alcohol (current and former). Together, our work aims to raise awareness and to address the disproportionate impact of the drug poisoning crisis on IPWUID. In my role, I have observed that contemporary qualitative research approaches often fall short in creating the necessary space for authentic and respectful representations of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives. These limitations have increasingly concerned me, as they fail to adequately address our diverse cultural and epistemological distinctions. As a community-based researcher, I have also seen and felt the deep suspicion IPWUID have towards research, considering the belief among many Indigenous Peoples of being over-researched (Goodman et al., 2018). On the other hand, I have also seen when Indigenous Peoples develop research methods aligned with their own priorities, cultures, and traditions, centred on relationships and reciprocity

(Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008) they create opportunities for Indigenous knowledge and resurgence.

Despite ongoing trauma from colonization, I have seen and experienced IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood continue to create spaces rooted in care, reciprocity, and resurgence. Against critiques of the DTES as being 'over-researched', I seek to hold up, value and centre this leadership and persistence collaboratively and in relation. The IAC members in this work sought to establish a space where other IPWUID could come together for healing, ceremony, community, and harm reduction—a place where they could truly belong. The workshop series emerged directly from their calls for such spaces, addressing the gaps and meeting the need for culturally safe environments that honour their lived experiences.

From cultural and arts-based initiatives to activism for drug policy reforms and building connections between Indigenous Peoples and settlers, the fight for a different future is palpable in the DTES neighbourhood. The impacts of settler colonialism here and elsewhere are not just historical—they unfold daily in the lives of IPWUID. Despite its prevalence, settler colonialism remains an incomplete project, with cracks through which Indigenous life and knowledge persist and thrive (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). These cracks are where resistance and resurgence grow, and where I am called into practice and action as a witness, relative, and collaborator. It is from this vantage point that I engage and build relationships with IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood. As one participant noted, "DTES Indigenous people have created new traditions. We had to."

In my work as a social worker and community researcher, I have recognized the privilege of being in spaces where Indigenous Peoples share stories of resistance, resurgence, and strength. These spaces often centre our processes and laws, embodying the concept of "bearing witness" (Million, 2009), which allows for meaningful sharing of culture and knowledge. These relational

experiences, alongside my personal journey in understanding my responsibilities as an Indigenous person, have deepened my identity and exposed some of the limitations of traditional research methodologies in capturing the complexities of our experiences. My engagement with these concerns positions me in an uneasy "insider/outsider" (Kwame, 2017; Smith, 2021) in relation to the collaborators in this work. While I am Indigenous and conducting research with other Indigenous Peoples, including some with whom I have prior relationships, I remain an outsider to the DTES IPWUID community. Quite practically, my experience of substance use is not criminalized, I do not live in the neighbourhood, and I am not from these lands. Following Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2021) call for insider research by Indigenous scholars—grounded in their community's realities, epistemologies, and protocols—this research is deeply influenced by my personal connection to the drug poisoning crisis and my long-standing ties to substance use within my family, which are closely linked to questioning the cultural concept of the Red Road.

4.5 Indigenous Methodology and Methods with IPWUID

As a community-based participatory action research study that centres Indigenous knowledge(s) and is rooted in an Indigenous research paradigm, our project utilizes Indigenous methodologies in the generation of knowledge (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008) with IPWUID. My methodological approach builds on the efforts of Indigenous scholars and thinkers who position Indigenous ways of knowing as central to their research (Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2021; Simpson, 2014, 2017a; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008). In this section, I outline the relational foundations of my methodology and describe two key aspects of the methods which seek to further resurgence within this research: land as relation in research and cultural practices in research with IPWUID.

My methodology, or theory of knowledge, is deeply rooted in my own ceremonial teachings, practices, and connection to my ancestral homelands in Treaty 4 territory–home to the Cree (Nêhiyawak), Dene, Lakota, Dakota, Nakota, and Saulteaux (Anishinabe) Peoples and the homeland of the Métis Nation. Thus, this approach is informed by Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux and Métis ontologies, and the emergent methods uncovered relationally throughout this research journey. I draw upon the self-determination practices of my own nation by actively upholding my responsibilities to my ancestral prairie lands through my engagement in land-based customs such as partaking in ceremonies, picking berries, sharing food, and sharing story with relatives. It is further grounded in the specific teaching and application of the traditional Cree law of *Sihtoskâtowin*—a principle centred on supporting one another and coming together in mutual care and solidarity. It implies an understanding that we cannot "do it alone." I argue that in order to truly provide mutual support and to uphold *Sihtoskâtowin* in our communities, it is essential to *fully* witness people's lives, including their drug use.

From this experiential knowledge of resurgence alongside my research experience with WAHRS, I began reflecting on well-being and healing through everyday acts of decolonial love, relationships, and kinship, bridging my cultural practices with research spaces. I wondered what it meant in relation to my work and personal relationships with IPWUID to create a sacred space where we strive to keep each other safe and bear witness to our lives (Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Simpson, 2015). Importantly, I asked myself: *what does it mean to create a cultural and ceremonial space with people who are actively using substances? Are we allowed to do this? Does it go against traditional protocols?*

Indigenous research methods offer valuable insights into how we can address sensitive topics like substance use and the role our communities play in marginalizing IPWUID. However,

in my experience, these insights often focus on the macro level, while the importance of informal relationship-building in intimate settings is often overlooked. I believe collaborative work with IPWUID is a crucial first step in healing from ongoing colonization because it challenges biases around substance use that can limit access to cultural healing practices and life-saving harm reduction services (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019) as well as challenging ideas about whose voices can define politically and culturally significant terms like resurgence.

I have found the methodology of witnessing to resonate with my relational methodology given that I continue to see how my family and community create and sustain barriers that keep IPWUID out of our collective and ceremonial spaces. This is unacceptable to me within ethical frameworks of grounded normativity (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016; Coulthard, 2014) because I believe IPWUID have the right to live in a world that is consistent with their lived realities. As witness I am called to validate the truths and experiences (Hunt 2018) of IPWUID, taking up the sacred role (Clark 2018) of recounting what has been shared with me in the past (Iseke 2011), bringing those truths to bear on present-day responsibilities. I deeply empathize with Simpson (2017) in her articulation of an Indigenous queer normativity based on the exclusion of queer and trans bodies in some ceremonial communities: "The toll of crushing on bodies, minds, spirits is accumulative, diminishing, and restrictive. It also eliminates. It eliminates queer bodies from Indigenous spaces. It eliminates Indigenous bodies from political orders. Their *Indigenous* worlds get destroyed" (p.120). Similarly, colonial violence is normalized through the ongoing erasure of IPWUID from our collective and ceremonial spaces, making it impossible for their stories, and *Indigenous* worlds, to be heard on their own terms. Therefore, the need for us to step up as witnesses to these exclusions from our communities remains vital as the drug poisoning crisis continues to disproportionately target and kill our kin.

I frequently think about my cousin who died of drug poisoning on our reserve shortly after our second workshop. Her experiences, from her perspective as an Indigenous woman who used drugs, deserved to be honoured and validated. She deserved to be listened to in ways that called upon our responsibility to take action, recognizing that violence against her body as an Indigenous woman and person who used drugs is so tragically normalized. I worry her experiences continue to be silenced, ignored, and stigmatized as I watch my family and community frantically try to make sense of her senseless death. The act of witnessing, then, is especially crucial in the context of punitive and prohibitionist drug policies that produce state-sanctioned violence against IPWUID. Hunt (2014) states, "As witness we have a role that is not to take up the voice or story of that which we have witnessed, nor to change the story, but to ensure the truths of the acts can be comprehended, honoured and validated" (p.38). But how exactly can I step up to my obligation as a witness in this work? I also empathize with Hunt (2018) when she asks, "And how can I remain ethically committed to the ongoing relations in which I live and work, while being called to respond to the guidelines of university ethic boards, the pressure to publish in peer-reviewed journals, and other institutional demands?" (p.286). I find myself asking the same question as I navigate writing this article while also seeking ways to honour and care for my grief and loss, as well as that of my community.

4.5.1 Land as Relation in Research

More than a witness to relations who use drugs, I am also witness to the wisdom of resurgence shared culturally, ceremonially and spiritually through relations with land and the natural world. What I have learned over the years from Indigenous activists, poets, scholars, and thinkers, and through engaging critically in my research as a Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis person, is that land is

more than just a physical entity or geographical place but rather a living being with inherent agency and wisdom (Armstrong, 2016; Simpson, 2014, 2017a; Styres, 2018). It is where life happens. It is the caretaker of our ancestral stories. It provides us with food, medicines, and what we need to sustain life in the everyday. The land in its everydayness is our greatest teacher. The deepest and most healing truths and knowledges have been revealed to me through my own intimate relationship with the land and all its creation. Over time, my collaboration with IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood has grown to be informed by our collective understandings of land in its various forms. This includes our collective learnings rooted in the DTES neighbourhood, along with our relationship with and responsibilities to the land and all our relations. Thus, this research remains firmly rooted in the local, social, and cultural contexts of the IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood, located on the unceded and occupied territories of the xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and sel̓íl̓witulh (Tsleil-waututh) Nations. To engage critically with land in this work, I consider the DTES neighbourhood as an active participant in the research process, shaping and being shaped by the interactions between people and their environments (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). The DTES is not just a place where life happens. The DTES neighbourhood is Indigenous land, too. The DTES neighbourhood is a site of Indigenous resistance and a source of cultural resurgence where Indigenous communities reclaim and revitalize traditional lifeways in the face of ongoing colonial violence. Importantly, this research extends beyond the physical land of the DTES neighborhood, drawing on teachings from plants, animals, and other beings that informed the resurgent spaces we created.

In this research, and in collaboration with the IAC, six (6) Indigenous-led community-based workshops were held in the DTES neighbourhood with current and former IPWUID, with the central question guiding this work—*How do we as Indigenous Peoples reimagine what it*

means to walk the Red Road? Through this overarching question, I act as a witness to examine shared narratives of IPWUID (current/former) asking what forms of harm reduction, care, and teachings arise out of intimate spaces in which IPWUID can share and co-create knowledge with each other [19].

4.5.2 Cultural Resurgence Through Research

As witness to IPWUID, I understand it as my responsibility to affirm the right of drug users to engage in cultural resurgence, which became another core component of this research. The cultural alignment of each workshop was guided and shaped by the stories, teachings, and protocols related to the co-facilitators specific culture. For instance, an Algonquin Cree Two-Spirit Métis Elder facilitated a pipe ceremony based on her own cultural teachings and protocols, and the medicine bundle workshop was guided in accordance with the research team's shared Cree and Anishinaabe teachings.

Workshops were co-led by Indigenous guest speakers, including some members of the IAC. The workshops were deliberately not designed to focus on the trauma and violence participants had experienced or to recount painful memories of living through a drug poisoning crisis. Instead, the content and priorities of each workshop were participant-driven, and focused

[19] A purposive sampling method was employed to identify participants through an Indigenous Advisory Circle of IPWUID (activists, knowledge keepers, Elders) and my position as a community researcher. Together, we drew on our community relationships in the neighbourhood to identify Indigenous individuals living or working in the DTES neighbourhood between January and December 2023. Participants had to be 18 years of age or older, identified as Indigenous (First Nations (status/non-status), Métis, Inuit), and a person who currently uses (or has formerly used) drugs. Participants were paid a $50 honorarium for each workshop attended. Each workshop was open to 6-8 participants and lasted between 1.5 to 2 hours, yet in two occasions, 10-15 participants attended.

on exploring the meaning of harm reduction, participants' visions for the future, what they need from their communities and leaders, and the personal connections they have to their culture. Participants were asked questions such as:

> *How do we as Indigenous Peoples redefine what it means to walk to the Red Road?*
> *Do you incorporate cultural activities into your daily life? Why or why not?*
> *How do you define, experience, and incorporate harm reduction into your daily lives?*
> *How can we promote culture and healing in our communities?*
> *How can we challenge the cultural narratives we were taught?*

Our methods were deliberately co-created and emergent, allowing participants to choose both the priority topic areas as well as their level of engagement with each workshop activity. The IAC, along with participant feedback at each workshop, determined future workshop topics and activities in order to meet the needs and desires of the DTES neighbourhood IPWUID community. For instance, participants were given opportunities to both facilitate future workshops and brainstorm ideas for workshop topics. They could also choose to attend any number of workshops, from one to all, which resulted in several repeat participants. Within each workshop, participants had the freedom to create art, engage in topic conversations, and/or participate in cultural activities. This flexible and responsive approach ensured that the methods evolved organically based on participants' interests and involvement and encouraged a thoughtful and culturally congruent participant-centred research process.

The analysis shared below was conducted through stories, ceremonial practices, personal journal entries, and collective learning with IPWUID. Drawing on Indigenous witnessing theory (Brant, 1994; Hunt, 2018b) and Indigenous storywork (Archibald, 2008), I sought to challenge the idea that research must be objective and neutral by weaving cultural and relational practices throughout. Rather than stabilizing data into fixed themes, I adopted a relational analysis,

interpreting findings through participatory interpretation with IAC members. This approach allowed for continuous reflection and focused on the interconnectedness of stories, experiences, and teachings rooted in Indigenous epistemologies that view knowledge as inherently relational. This approach also aimed to align with Indigenous oral traditions and storytelling, involving deep engagement with fieldnotes, arts-based materials, and reflections, and interpreting them through theory (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012). Instead of relying on audio recording and transcription, I repeatedly reviewed fieldnotes and workshop art pieces to identify emerging themes. Both fieldnotes and participant reflections were analyzed individually and collectively with the IAC.

Ongoing feedback was integral to this research, with workshop activities designed to incorporate collaborator reflections on themes and experiences. Participants were invited to discuss and write captions for their own art pieces to inform the analysis of the images. This feedback was not given separately from, but alongside, cultural practices like smudging, drumming, etc. The shared knowledges presented in this section include the reflections that emerged from the knowledge keepers (Indigenous Advisory Circle) as well as myself during the workshop series, knitting together the concepts of bearing witness and storytelling. Prior and during the workshop series, the co-researchers were encouraged to brainstorm research questions and workshop ideas and/or prompts that they deemed significant and relevant to their own lives. In all the workshops, I asked, how do we as Indigenous Peoples reimagine what it means to *walk the Red Road* to include IPWUID? The resulting discussion included the following reflections on what a self-determined harm reduction space looks and feels like for IPWUID living and working in the DTES neighbourhood, along with other insights to the everyday experiences of IPWUID in the neighbourhood.

4.6 Redefining Resurgence with IPWUID (Findings)

Here, I present the outcomes of the Indigenous-led, community-based workshops as guiding principles aimed at strengthening our communities. I encourage you, the reader/witness, to make space in your hearts for the knowledge and stories that will be shared, and to seriously consider how IPWUID can be embraced in our communities rather than shamed or silenced. As a reader and witness, you are being called to action. As Hunt emphasizes (2018), "Witnessing here is taking up a specific role in maintaining the integrity of Indigenous knowledge and community. It entails not just an obligation to recall but to action, given that violence continues to be normalized" (Hunt, 2018b). As witness, I invite you to consider how you can uphold the autonomy and agency of IPWUID in remaking and redefining spaces of resurgence.

"Come as you are. You are all welcome in my lodge, no matter where you are at": Meeting kin where they are at

During our first workshop, Elder Sandy offered to smudge each participant as part of her opening ceremony. As she approached a participant sitting at the end of the table, he lowered his head and quietly declined to participate. "*I respect your choice not to participate*," Sandy whispered to him, "*but I want you to know that I accept people who use drugs in my ceremonies. If you change your mind at any point, let me know*."

I focus on this exchange because these words and sentiments have hugely impacted how I approach my role as a witness in this work. Over the course of the year, I observed this participant becoming increasingly engaged with the workshops and interacting more with others in the space. His journey began with participating in the opening smudge ceremony, and gradually, he started asking Elder Sandy questions about medicines and protocols at each subsequent workshop. Within

a few months, he requested to take medicines with him to offer smudging as part of his work at a DTES overdose prevention site (OPS). This exchange brought to light stories of unspoken stigma and discrimination in our communities, and highlighted how uncommon it is for many of us to engage with Elders that include people who may be using substances in cultural activities. It also reminded me that my role as a witness in this work with IPWUID goes beyond a general understanding of addiction and harm reduction. It also requires me to be attentive to the moments of silence, to the words that are not often spoken.

During the workshops, IPWUID shared stories of exclusion from their families and communities. Sometimes these stories were not communicated through words, but through individual and collective art pieces and other creative expressions. However, and despite these painful experiences of exclusion, participants continue to create sacred spaces—physical, emotional, and intellectual—that centre on decolonial love, relationship, and kinship through their engagements with culture, resistance, resurgence, and with each other.

At our last workshop, a participant went out of her way to comfort a young woman who had retreated to the washroom due to concerns about being "too high" upon arrival, assuring her that she was still welcome in the ceremonial space without judgement. "*This is a judgement free space,"* she gently said through the washroom door*, "everyone is welcome here. If you need to use [substances], then use. It's okay. Just let us know so we can make sure you are safe, and then come hang out."* Though cautious, the young woman joined the group and participated in the activity. These gatherings, and the conversations that take place in them—much like those around our family kitchen tables—are vital to restoring all Indigenous bodies as sacred and integral to our political systems and nationhood.

Sammy, community activist and long-time resident of the DTES neighbourhood (and member of the IAC) spoke about the ways in which their work as a drug user activist rejects cultural narratives of abstinence that exclude and stigmatize IPWUID by creating safe spaces for IPWUID to be with each other in ceremony: "*I practice harm reduction in my daily life by holding and creating spaces for my people, such as this space today. This space is harm reduction. It is having access to medicines. The Red Road was very strict. Spaces like this are important for us*." This powerful statement causes us to reconsider how we think about the reinstatement and resurgence of Indigenous healing approaches and efforts among IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood, recognizing that IPWUID are bringing in their own ceremony and traditions while working within harm reduction spaces.

Elders and other cultural practitioners are central to the implementation of inclusive and culturally safe spaces and other initiatives like harm reduction services, that support IPWUID, in part because their acceptance of IPWUID challenge the belief that IPWUID lived realities are not part of a 'traditional' way of life for Indigenous Peoples. Elders are therefore vital in restoring and integrating traditional teachings into harm reduction and contemporary realities faced by many IPWUID. Elder Sandy's work in creating a ceremonial space for IPWUID for this project not only renews cultural understandings of harm reduction but also inherently confronts and challenges Indigenous perspectives and programs that cite 'traditional values' as a reason for not allowing people who use using substances to access ceremony or traditional medicines (First Nations Health Authority, n.d.). Her work has involved providing Indigenous Peoples and communities, including IPWUID, with a safe and inclusive ceremonies, including a sweat lodge, in the Vancouver area for over 20 years. Sandy said it is encouraging that Indigenous Peoples and communities are now more willing to talk about harm reduction as a life-saving intervention, yet the work of humanizing

IPWUID as part of our broader communities and movements is still needed. In Elder Sandy's words, she makes central the importance of meeting people where they are at: "*Come as you are. You are all welcome in my lodge, no matter where you are at*." Sandy went on to say: "*We are taught that we are not pure enough to go into ceremony when we are using [substances] and I work to counter that narrative. My lodge is how I push back that we aren't pure enough*."

"Who gets to decided what is traditional?": Centring IPWUID approaches

> We made medicine bundles and tobacco ties with medicines harvested from both this land and my ancestral territories. The familiar and comforting smell of sweetgrass and sage fills the air. My spirit feels calm. As we made bundles, we shared traditional usages, how to care for the medicines, and our cultural and wellness practices rooted in our individual and collective teachings. There are knowledges and relations that reveal themselves as we touch, smell, and share medicine with each other. Stories of ceremonies and rituals that protect you while consuming drugs are shared (personal journal entry, January 28, 2023).

This journal entry conveys my feelings after our first workshop. As I reflect on the words of workshop participants, the enduring impacts of settler colonialism, and the ongoing challenges related to substance use that has led to controversy and stigma within Indigenous communities surrounding the concept of harm reduction (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019; Goldstein et al., 2022), I am reminded of the urgency of our Indigenous practices and traditions to include considerations of substance use on both individual and collective levels. In the words of a participant, "*What is tradition, anyways*? *So many of our traditions are not for drug users. Who gets to decided what is traditional? DTES Indigenous people have created 'new traditions'. We had to."*

In workshop after workshop, one important vision was shared by participants: the need to honour IPWUID generated approaches that support their wellbeing. Looking to our Indigenous teachings, we must work within our own communities to determine the best ways to support IPWUID. This means accepting a variety of approaches, or *new traditions,* instead of relying solely on abstinence-based approaches that have been adopted by our communities. This also means grounding our approaches in relationships among each other rather than assuming there is a one size fits all approach that works for everyone. Indigenous Peoples have long relied on their traditions and localized strategies, which from my experience, often prove more effective and meaningful in addressing local issues than state-sanctioned approaches. However, and as participants discussed throughout the workshops, gatekeepers and other community leaders that oppose efforts to support drug users can constrain local efforts, including implementing harm reduction strategies in our communities. In response, participants shared examples of "new traditions" that support the sovereignty of their communities and bodies. Many of us working within substance use and harm reduction care with Indigenous communities have observed how our 'traditions'—such as smudging, feasts, and drumming—originate from our home communities yet have been adapted to meet the needs of those who use drugs, often as a response to being excluded from ceremonial spaces. For instance, a participant shared his personal practice of "smudging drugs as a way to protect yourself and your spirit" before consumption.

Further examples of how IPWUID have created new traditions that centre lived realities and needs of IPWUID are found in the work of Elder's Sandy cultural work bringing her own ceremony and traditions while working within and supporting IPWUID communities. We need to look to our own cultural practices for processes that can be adapted to today's realities for IPWUID. Researching and being in relation with IPWUID requires acknowledging the stories that

make us uncomfortable. Challenging cultural narratives that are framed as 'traditional' can feel scary. I often reflect on witnessing the judgement experienced by those who use substances in my own family and narratives that portray them as being 'non-traditional' or not following cultural protocol. People sometimes function under this binary that they are either 'for' or 'against' drug use without discussing the complexities of lived experiences and realities. This makes me think of the common argument that drug use is a colonial concept and that participating in it means you are inherently anti-Indigenous, or not cultural, because using substances is not considered a traditional part of our cultures. I refuse to accept this argument. I am tired of this colonial trope that pushes our most marginalized kin out of our communities while also reproducing the discourses of colonialism that constitute IPWUID as without agency to make decisions for themselves. *How can we nurture a more nuanced and non-judgmental understanding and acceptance within our communities that honours how IPWUID interpret and practice their traditions?*

"Support, not stigma": **Normalizing substance use in our communities**

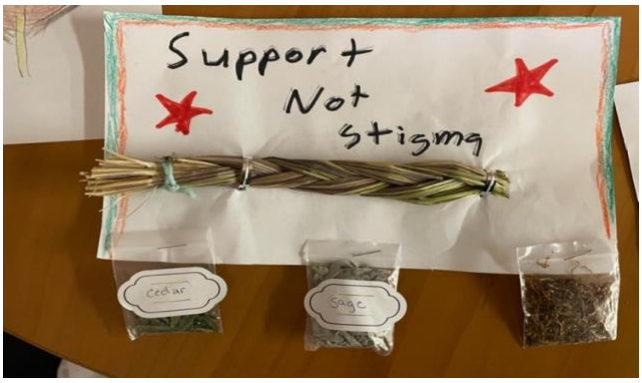

Figure 4-1 "Support Not Stigma," Workshop #6

Many participants spoke about the urgency of their communities, Elders, and families in reducing stigma toward drug users. This support was especially significant for those who did not view abstinence as a desired goal. James, who started his engagement with the workshops as a participant and later became part of the IAC and a co-facilitator, often spoke about the weight of "*support, not stigma*" in relation to what he needed from his home community. For James, a part of reducing substance use stigma among Indigenous Peoples, which also included the internalized stigma he and many other IPWUID experience, was normalizing the use of traditional medicines among IPWUID. In response to the stigma James often experienced, he created the above 'card of affirmation' to give back to DTES community by offering traditional medicines.

While some participants have observed a shift towards reducing stigma and a growing acceptance of harm reduction practices, the ostracization of IPWUID, particularly in smaller communities or on reserves, including my own, persists. This reality is reflected in both the lack of harm reduction services and integration of IPWUID within our ceremonial spaces in our respective communities, as well as in what many of us hear, see, and feel on a regular basis. For both the research participants and I, this is a deeply disheartening reality, as our extensive efforts to address substance use stigma and a drug poisoning crisis that disproportionally kills IPWUID have not yet shifted perceptions or actions toward substance users in our families and home communities: *My [drugs and alcohol] are my medicine. Some of my relatives back home don't think I should be allowed to attend powwows when I'm drinking. Others tell me I am, but to keep it quiet about it. What they don't realize is that sometimes beer is my medicine. I'll get sick if I don't drink it*" (Norma).

For some participants, achieving abstinence is a significant and desired milestone in their wellness journey. As such, normalizing substance use in our communities is to also recognize that

the road to abstinence (if that is what a person chooses) can be long and complex. This means that individuals, regardless of whether they use substances or not, deserve care, protection, support, and access to culture. As one participant expressed: "*Culture can help us with addiction. It can help us stop using. If I had a place like this one to engage in my culture it would help me sober up."*

There is a dangerous misconception in our communities that harm reduction encourages drug use or stands in opposition to abstinence. In truth, both harm reduction and abstinence are focused on minimizing the harms associated with drug use. We need to broaden our definitions of sobriety and abstinence to include harm reduction as a valid and effective form of healing rooted in our distinct cultural teachings and principles.

"Firewater and whatever drug we choose to use and put in our bodies does not take away from who we are as Indigenous People": **Centring bodily autonomy and sovereignty in our approaches**

Indigenous bodies have long been violated through colonization. The Canadian government has employed various means to control our bodies, including confining us to reserves, restricting our ability to manage our own lands, banning cultural practices that sever our deep connection to our bodies and the land, forced sterilization and starvation, and even regulating and prohibiting alcohol consumption on reserves (Campbell, 2008; Clarke, 2021; Simpson, 2017a). Decolonization involves dismantling these oppressive practices while supporting Indigenous Peoples in reclaiming land, culture, language, community, family, and history. Often missing from these discourses is the recognition that those who seek to prohibit drug use and harm reduction services in our communities are also participating in the ongoing control of Indigenous bodies. Restricting IPWUID from accessing cultural and ceremonial practices undermines their autonomy and

sovereignty over their bodies. When participants in the pipe ceremony asked Elder Sandy if there was a specific protocol or order in which they should follow during the ceremony, she firmly stated:

> *We get to decided what's right for us. We are ceremonial people. Firewater and whatever drug we choose to use and put in our bodies does not take away from who we are as Indigenous People. We are sovereign people, on our sovereign land that was stolen from us.*

Thus, Sandy succinctly links the connection between Indigenous bodies and the land. When we are forcibly displaced from our lands, we lose the ability to make decisions about our own lives and communities. This loss of self-determination is magnified for IPWUID. IPWUID have the right to sovereignty over their bodies and the choices they make regarding their bodies. The ability to use substances safely and without judgment can free us from the confines of colonial ideologies, allowing us to truly love all our kin. By foregrounding decolonial perspectives on substance use in our approaches, we can advance towards culturally safe harm reduction practices that broaden our understanding of healing, agency, and collective liberation.

"The DTES is what led many of us to the Red Road": Expanding our understandings of the Red Road

Participants shared their unique experiences of living in the DTES neighbourhood. For some, the DTES neighbourhood carried notions and feelings of 'home', notably for those that felt ostracised from their home communities. Throughout our conversations, it became clear relationships with community and the ability to connect with other IPWUID provided a sense of place and belonging for participants, which in turn, created a deep sense of connection to the DTES neighbourhood. As emphasized by Sandy; "*I am not from this territory, but I have built relationships and learned from this land and its people. "The DTES informs my practice. The DTES is who I am."* Other

participants echoed similar sentiments about the neighbourhood: "*I am on a journey to figure out who I am, and the DTES has helped me on this journey*."

Despite ongoing colonization and numerous systemic barriers and violent colonial tactics (e.g., long documented and disproportionate harassment and surveillance by the police, forced displacement within the neighborhood, and the disposal of tents and belongings by police officers and municipal workers), the land where we conducted this research was rich with stories of resistance and resurgence. In my work and throughout this project, I witnessed the significant creativity and determination of the Indigenous communities in the DTES neighbourhood. We were called to witness how they have *always* practiced resistance in the face of violence. Together, participants chose to paint a "Red Road" through the middle of the collective painting (as seen below) to represent their journey to and experience living in the DTES. A community leader who has worked in the DTES neighbourhood for several years described the painting as a way to "*map out their Red Road journey,*" saying, "*The DTES is what led many of us to the Red Road. It's a place where we've been able to reconnect with our culture and with each other*."

As with the other participants, the DTES neighbourhood is seen not only in the broad historical violence of colonialism, but as a place where intricate networks of mutual support flourish and where cultural belonging, community-building, and resurgence thrive. Participants sense of community and the acceptance they experience in the neighbourhood makes it a uniquely healing place for them. Our Indigenous communities have much to learn from IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood in how we can expand our understandings of the Red Road to include harm reduction as a way of Indigenous life.

Figure 4-2 "The Red Road," Workshop #2

"Harm reduction is spiritual"

> *We silently witness two eagles circle above our heads while frying bannock outside—their wings catching the sunlight as they danced in circles between the high-rises. We looked at each other and smiled. An unspoken understanding unfolded between us. (personal journal entry, March 10, 2023).*

Figure 4-3 Participant Collage, Workshop #3

There is something deeply special about an interaction I had with a participant during our second workshop. I witnessed, and thus came to understand, that spirituality is often missing from how

we report our research "findings." As Ellerby (2006, p. 5 as cited in Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2014) states, "to study Indigenous healing is to study Indigenous spirituality." Ellerby's assertion affirmed for me both the spiritual and Indigenous epistemological bases of traditional healing, while also offering an assurance that there are methodological implications for spirituality in our work. In the process of doing this research, I never expected to focus my analysis on my own active engagement with the spiritual domain on this work. However, the transmission of spiritual knowledge between myself and the participant, even without exchanging words, moved me. It taught me that when we feel triggered in our work, especially since so many of us are personally connected to our research, we can always turn to ceremony and connection with the spiritual world for grounding and guidance. Within the context of this work, and my broader ancestral responsibilities, I am constantly reminded of our connections to the spirit world. As many of the participants involved in the workshops expressed, the strength that comes from our connection to spirit has always existed. As we sorted through magazines, stickers, and other art supplies for our collages, a participant asked if he could present his collage to the group (as pictured above). He talked about how he wanted to convey the spiritual essence of harm reduction in his collage. "*Harm reduction is spiritual*. *It can provide you with guidance and safety in your life*."

Like my unexpected findings around spirituality, I never expected humour to play a role in my approach to spiritual praxis in this work, but it quickly captured my attention and heart. Humour, both culturally distinct and complex, is one of our most vital survival tools as Indigenous Peoples. In my life and work with Indigenous communities, I have come to see humour as a spiritual tool for healing, both individually and communally. It is a reclamation of our histories and identities, embodying our survivability and joy. Despite the adversities and injustices that many Indigenous Peoples face, when I think of my community and family, I picture aunties

laughing, teasing each other mercilessly. The laughter at every workshop felt like home, whether we were making medicine bundles, painting, building harm reduction kits, or crafting collages. We are reminded that humour is one of our most sacred spiritual traditions because it creates moments of joy and connection that uplift our spirit and reminds us to be in good relation with each other. *How might our understanding of harm reduction shift if we embrace it not only as a practical tool but as a spiritual practice as well?*

4.7 So What?

While writing this paper, I lost another cousin to drug poisoning. In the wake of her passing, some family members reached out to me, expressing interest in organizing an "Overdose Awareness Day" on our reserve. This sparked a necessary discussion about whose voices need to be held up and included in work about overdose awareness, and more importantly, whose voices have been historically left out of overdose awareness conversations and community spaces. The conversation with my family brought me back to the central question that has guided my work: How can we redefine what it means to *walk the Red Road* in a way that includes *all our relations*? Centring IPWUID in conversations and practices related to self-determination, Land Back, and decolonization is key to shaping a new vision of the Red Road. I am reminded of the practices and principles shared by IPWUID in this work that, I argue, frame harm reduction as an emergent practice of care that can offer "new constellations and trajectories of living and healing" (Maynard & Simpson, 2022). What I mean is that, rather than focusing on the damaging narratives about IPWUID that dominate public discourse, we must commit to exploring alternative forms of care that emerge within the marginal yet central spaces of the settler-state, such as the DTES neighbourhood, and consider how harm reduction is a generative life expanding practice in and of

itself. The DTES neighbourhood, located on the unceded lands of the Coast Salish Peoples, is steeped in stories of resistance and resurgence, continually bearing witness to the enduring presence and knowledge of IPWUID.

What does it mean to have harm reduction theory and practice as part of our resurgence and decolonial work? If Indigenous harm reduction aims to address the harms of colonialism (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019) we must recognize our responsibility not just to theorize these concepts, but to live them out daily. This involves challenging the rigid interpretations of tradition that some traditionalists have used to justify the oppression of IPWUID in our communities (Simpson, 2017). This also means that IPWUID voices, perspectives, and knowledge are no longer made invisible in our cultural, social, and political movements. The ongoing substance use stigma in our movements has caused harm in our communities, weakening our relational ways of being and hindering our collective freedom. It is therefore crucial to move away from simply accepting notions of 'traditionalism' towards critically engaging in power relations within communities. As Simpson asserts (2017):

> Breaking Indigenous peoples' spiritual connection to each other and to land is a critical part of dispossession. Breaking Indigenous peoples' social and spiritual mechanisms for processing trauma, for comfort, and for connecting to a higher power is critical in demobilizing our responses to colonial violence (…) We have to confront the idea that we may be made to feel we don't belong, and we have to stop practicing interpretations of Nishnaabewin that cast people out. We don't exist unless we all belong. We all belong" (p.143).

In this article, I documented my own processes of bearing witness to how wellness and healing practices among IPWUID are being reinstated through a collective resurgence of individual and collective self-determination, consent, the ethics of non-interference, deep relationality, and a commitment to radical care and decolonial love. The stories and experiences of IPWUID living in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood are powerful examples of Indigenous communities asserting

their sovereignty and self-determination in the pursuit of care, wellness, and healing from colonization. These narratives document Indigenous resistance to colonial powers and highlight the reinstatement and regeneration of Indigenous models for decolonial life, as shared by participants in each workshop through their stories and creative expressions. Cree feminist scholar Gina Starblanket describes this regeneration as the "adoption of political strategies and cultural practices rooted in Indigenous visions of freedom and autonomy." She explains that resurgence refers to "individual and collective practices that embody this reorientation" (Starblanket, 2017, p. 22). But what about the freedom and autonomy of our substance using kin? Harm reduction, as both a public health practice and as a radical form of community care rooted in Black, Brown, queer, trans and sex worker communities, has not been adequately integrated into resurgence efforts. I have witnessed how this work is frequently dismissed or devalued, and at times, perceived as a threat within certain notions of traditionalism that reinforce harmful power dynamics, leading to the marginalization and exclusion of IPWUID within our resurgent spaces, such as our sweat lodges, bighouses, cultural workshops, language revitalization classes, and more. If colonization is rooted in the exertion of power and control over our bodies, then we must respond by practicing non-judgment, non-interference, and meeting people where they are at, while honouring and upholding their agency and self-determination.

As Sarah Hunt (2023) observes in her analysis of the harm heteropatriarchy causes within cultural and community spaces, "the more we integrate this intimate decolonial work of transforming our everyday relationships into our resurgent practices and theories, the more welcoming cultural and political spaces will be for all our relations" (p.131). I want to extend this notion by asserting that the more we integrate harm reduction and its principles of agency and autonomy into our decolonial efforts, the more we can create inclusive and compassionate spaces

that honour the dignity and humanity of all our relations. By embracing harm reduction within decolonial practices, we lay the groundwork for a future where all members of our communities can thrive and fully participate in the reclamation of our cultural and political identities.

I saw firsthand the ways in which co-creation of these workshops activated decolonial possibilities for IPWUID, opening up new avenues for resistance and healing. They not only challenged colonial research structures but also created spaces for IPWUID to reconnect with Indigenous lifeways in liberating ways. While this is a central goal of the work, I anticipate resistance from those who benefit from upholding exclusionary practices and ideologies within our communities. Nevertheless, the work provides a platform for broader resistance and freedom that emerge from within our Indigenous lifeways. The sharing of knowledge from the workshops offers new opportunities to critically engage with different interpretations of Indigenous thought and practices. As Starblanket and Heidi Stark (2018) emphasize, decolonization and resurgence efforts "are centrally driven by the need not just to revitalize Indigenous cultural practices, but to do so in ways that are not reliant upon Western resources, whether ideological or material" (p. 196). A key area that will need to change in our communities is the policing of identities and practices that reproduce Western paradigms of power and exclusion, especially in sacred spaces like our ceremonies and other resurgent practices.

What I propose is that we turn away from *solely* relying on state-sanctioned interventions and instead recommit to the most intimate parts of our lives, where our culturally specific relationships to lands and waters and everyday acts of resurgence flourish. The over-representation of IPWUID dying from drug poisoning highlights the urgent need for this transformation. While I respect the important and necessary work of other Indigenous and allied scholars writing about substance use and harm reduction, including my own previous scholarship (Lavalley et al., 2020;

Lavalley et al., 2018), this research follows a different path. It shifts the focus from transforming public health policies to exploring the knowledge and resources within our Indigenous communities, particularly the knowledge of IPWUID who are often missing "from the spaces in which we are carrying out resurgence and theorizing these practices" (Hunt, as cited in Stark, Craft, & Aikau, 2023, p. 18). Significantly, focusing on our everyday relationships and actions allows us to witness how we relate to each other within intimate spaces, such as families, communities, and close friendships. Leanne Simpson and Robyn Maynard (2022) remind us that investing in and deepening our relationships with one another, across communities and movements, opens up new possibilities for dismantling white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism. This work then also involves rebuilding the relational networks damaged by substance use stigma that has targeted and sought to erase and exclude IPWUID from our communities.

The drug poisoning crisis is a direct continuation of colonial policies that once criminalized alcohol use among Indigenous Peoples, both rooted in paternalistic frameworks designed to control Indigenous bodies and lands. Just as AIM and the Red Power movement resisted these oppressive systems, today's resurgence movements must also challenge the colonial structures behind substance use to reclaim Indigenous sovereignty and advance community healing in ways that re-imagine what it means to include *all our relations* on the Red Road.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Conclusion

I am starting to write this final chapter from my family's cabin in Buena Vista, Saskatchewan, about 35 minutes north of Regina. As I stare out the window at the prairie lands that raised me, I feel calm. There is a stillness inside of me that I haven't felt in a long time. When I am surrounded by expansive space, my mind feels clearer. Any limitations I placed on myself about what I think is possible fade away. The prairies expand how I feel. I remember feeling disconnected from my homelands during the early stages of this work, and how my visits home guided and grounded me in a way that carried me through. There is an intimate resurgence that grows within me every time I visit these lands.

Earlier today, I walked down to the lake and spotted sage growing by a dirt road. With late summer in full swing, I knew it was time for harvesting. Rather than pulling the plant up completely, I carefully twisted the sage, keeping the root base intact so it could regrow next season. This is an act grounded in our teachings about honouring our connections and responsibilities to the land. For me, reconnecting with my identity as a Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis person goes beyond chasing a romanticized idea of 'traditional' living or surviving off the land. Rather, reconnecting with my identity as a Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis person is about rediscovering the land in ways that deepen my own understandings of my Indigenous knowledge. Harvesting sage is more than a practice. It is a conversation with the land. It is a reminder to me of my kinship ties and the reciprocal responsibilities they bring. This careful twist of a sage plant is, for me, what coming into wisdom looks like. What it feels like. This is *Sihtoskâtowin*.

As I picked sage and reflected on my doctoral journey, I thought about my responsibilities to all those who have died from the toxic drug crisis. I thought about the stories shared with me

throughout my life broadly and within the confines of this specific research process. I thought about voices silenced, about the urgent need for change that continues to weigh heavily on our communities. I thought about all the kin we have lost. The resilience of those still fighting. The role I must play in honouring their humanity through my work.

The three papers that, along with my introductory and final chapters, compose my dissertation are anchored in the insights I gained from interviews and community-based workshops with Indigenous Peoples who use illicit drugs (IPWUID) in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood—lands of the the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and sel̓íl̓witulh (Tsleil-waututh) Nations. These voices have been integrated along with my own personal reflections about relationship to family, culture, and intergenerational addiction. The stories from IPWUID are crucial as they bear witness not only to the violence of the drug poisoning crisis and other forms of colonization, but more importantly, to the strengths, resistance, and healing of this community. These narratives illuminate their ongoing resistance to colonial structures and power, demonstrating how IPWUID are reinstating traditional and ancestral forms of well-being and healing through everyday acts of resistance, resurgence, and kinship.

The primary aim of this study was to centre the voices and experiences of IPWUID in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood. As my journey as an Indigenous researcher evolved, so did the objectives of the project, making this dissertation a reflection of my own decolonizing journey. Interwoven in this work is my exploration of my lived experience as an Indigenous person dealing with intergenerational trauma and addiction, and now a drug poisoning crisis within my own family and community. My time as a research coordinator at the British Columbia Centre on Substance use (BCCSU) heightened my concern about the limitations of qualitative research methods in genuinely and respectfully representing Indigenous knowledge and perspectives.

Guided by collaborators – IPWUID living in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood, I was exposed to IPWUID resurgence efforts amid a toxic drug crisis that relentlessly targets and kills them. My decolonial work has uncovered a critical gap: Indigenous resurgence often overlooks those who do not adhere to idealized or romanticized notions of sobriety and abstinence. Thus, this research further aimed to examine the exclusion of IPWUID from resurgent spaces in service of 'living a good life' or 'walking the Red Road', and how this exclusion upholds rather than challenges colonial ideals, ultimately hindering our collective efforts toward resurgence and healing. My hope is that this work contributes to resurgence scholarship by positioning the voices of IPWUID at the centre of conversations on land back, self-determination, and bodily autonomy and agency, thereby furthering visions of Indigenous communities in which *all our relations* belong.

5.2 Summary of Chapters

In Chapter One (Introduction), I outlined the aim of this study and explained how my personal and professional experiences with IPWUID have shaped my understanding of the research. I share my process of "coming to know" and reflect on its significance to the work at hand. The chapter also provides an overview of BC's drug poisoning crisis and harm reduction responses, highlighting key knowledge gaps related to IPWUID. I introduce the study's context, objectives, and research questions, demonstrating how this dissertation addresses critical gaps in substance use research and resurgence theory with Indigenous Peoples. Additionally, I position resurgence as a form of "Land Back," centring IPWUID in this framework. I argue that understanding Indigenous lands and bodies as inherently interconnected reveals how the restoration of Indigenous, consent-based jurisdiction over our territories is essential for the health and well-being of our communities, creating space for collective resurgence that includes IPWUID. By centring the experiences of

IPWUID, I also explain how this dissertation examines their navigation and mitigation of colonial harms through everyday acts of resurgence and their intimate relationships.

In Chapter Two, I provide the context for the disproportionate representation of IPWUID among toxic drug poisoning deaths in Canada. This issue is framed by the historical and ongoing traumas of settler colonialism, with its effects particularly visible in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood. I argue that the harms experienced by IPWUID are intensified by layers of racism, intergenerational trauma, and the persistent realities of settler colonialism. Findings from Indigenous-led interviews revealed that the drug poisoning crisis is seen as a form of genocide against Indigenous Peoples, worsened by distrust and adversarial relationships with police due to racist policing practices. Participants expressed a need for culturally safe harm reduction care that includes Indigenous representation, cultural integration, and addresses colonial and systemic inequities. To effectively address these crises, I propose the need to decolonize policies, confront structural racism, and prioritize Indigenous, community-led, peer-led, and trauma-informed models that uphold Indigenous self-determination. Through this study, I felt compelled to rethink my research approaches with IPWUID, challenging myself to step beyond my comfort zone, reflect deeply, and engage in my own decolonial work as the crisis claimed the lives of many of my loved ones.

Chapter Three reflects on the development of an Indigenous research methodology rooted in my personal journey of decolonization and guided by the collective knowledge of collaborators. This chapter enacts an ethic of refusal, challenging colonial and deficit narratives that depict Indigenous Peoples, particularly those who use drugs, as "victims" in need of saving. Through my work with IPWUID in the DTES neighbourhood, I developed a co-created research methodology grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and responsive to community needs. Drawing on my

experiences as a research coordinator and my own personal connections to substance us/ers, I sought to address the absence of Indigenous methodologies in substance use research. Guided by Cree law, *Sihtoskâtowin*—mutual support—this methodology re-centres my Nêhiyaw, Saulteaux, and Métis worldview, fostering decolonial love, land as relation, re-imagined kinship, and cultural resurgence through relational research practices. This work represents a decolonizing process of research, contributing to ongoing resistance and resurgence among IPWUID.

In Chapter Four, I apply the co-created Indigenous methodology in collaboration with IPWUID living and working in the DTES neighbourhood, through Indigenous-led and community-based workshops. I showed how the politics of traditionalism is evoked to activate anti-substance use Indigenous thought and practices within our Indigenous communities. I argue that we must integrate harm reduction concepts with Indigenous ideas of resurgence and decolonization, as this integration provides valuable tools for advancing our decolonizing and resurgence efforts which are increasingly necessary across our communities which continue to be disproportionately impacted by the drug poisoning crisis. Participant stories illuminate the ongoing resistance to colonial structures and power, while demonstrating the ways in which IPWUID are reinstating traditional and ancestral forms of well-being and healing through everyday acts of resistance, resurgence, and kinship.

In this final chapter (Conclusion), I highlight key takeaways from my doctoral journey. In doing so, I clarify my intentions behind this work, reflect on my methodological journey and limitations, discuss its unique contributions, and explore the potential future directions of this research. Returning to the central argument of this thesis, I argue that IPWUID develop their own harm reduction strategies, rooted in responsibilities, relationships, and resurgence. These approaches challenge colonial narratives around substance use, while highlighting acts of

resistance, kinship, Indigenous resurgence, and joy as key elements in navigating and mitigating the harms of colonialism.

5.3 My Intentions

I began this dissertation with a story about a pipe ceremony that took place in my DTES research office. This ceremony stands out in my memory as it was my first experience participating in ceremony where active drug users could fully participate without any prerequisites dictating how they should show up. In that sacred space, everyone was welcomed.

The pipe ceremony also reinforced my intentions behind this work. Simpson (2017) reminds us of the importance of intent alongside vision, asserting that it is not enough to simply envision change; there must also be "intent for transformation, intent for re-creation, and intent for resurgence" (p. 147). The ceremony was powerful to witness and experience, though I will not share details here as this is sacred knowledge. However, I will share that the pipe ceremony was important for thinking about how our methodologies inform the core principles of our kinship systems. Sometimes, I think I learned more in that pipe ceremony, than in my whole PhD. The lessons from that pipe ceremony, where inclusion and intent guided our actions, continue to inform my understanding of the deeper harms that abstinence-based policies and practices inflict on IPWUID, even when such approaches come from within our own communities.

Time and again, I witness the harm done to IPWUID through abstinence-based policies, programs, and practices, sometimes enacted by our own communities. This research is accountable to the stories and experiences that have been shared with me throughout my life and during this study—some of which I will share below. It honours the voices of those who have entrusted me with their truths, ensuring that their narratives shape and guide my work.

Norma arrived for the pipe ceremony with an older Cree man from Saskatchewan who had recently moved to Vancouver. She said she felt an instinctive "pull toward his spirit" while recruiting participants in the neighbourhood and sensed that he needed to be part of the ceremony that day. The participant shared that both his wife and daughter had recently passed away, with his daughter having died from drug poisoning just two days earlier. Norma and others reassured the participant that he had found a new family in the DTES, offering him companionship and connecting him with local groups and organizations to ease his transition. This act of care reflected the Cree law of *Sihtoskâtowin,* where the community's commitment to mutual support, collective care, and responsibility meant that no one faced their struggles alone.

Months prior to our pipe ceremony, I wrote the following in my journal. I share it to highlight the enduring violence and dehumanization that IPWUID in the DTES face daily, and to emphasize how these harsh realities shaped my understanding of the urgency behind this work. From April 26, 2023:

> *Dehumanization. Dehumanization that thrives in the shadows of colonial and carceral state logics, targeting people who use drugs in the DTES. These people, my kin, deemed as disposable and dispensable. Street sweeps have surged as a direct consequence of the new municipal government's policies. The community is tired. Tired from the constant struggle for the right to exist… to remain. As I walked down East Hastings, I witnessed several police officers and city workers tearing down tents and throwing out people's belongings into the back of disposal trucks with what can only be described as pitchforks. PITCHFORKS?! It causes my stomach to ache and my breath to quicken. I tried to intervene, but it was too late. The truck drove off. People's entire worlds spilling out the back like garbage.*

Throughout my dissertation journey, I grappled with the loss of my own relatives. You lose someone and you are trying to grieve and then somebody else dies. Repeat. I cannot help but wonder what kind of relatives they were meant to become—the aunties, uncles, cousins, parents, and partners they deserved to be. How their ability to heal, love, and be loved was stolen from

them. I am accountable to these stories. This dissertation is fundamentally shaped by my love for IPWUID and my commitment to addressing the harms perpetuated by restrictive, colonial perceptions of substance use within our communities. Ultimately, this dissertation is about offering support to IPWUID with the same care, love, and respect I would extend to any family member.

5.4 Methodological Reflections: "*Doing More from the Heart than Your Head*"

An Indigenous research methodology rooted in decolonization and critical self-reflexivity holds the power to transform us. While I had read the literature and embraced the principles of both participatory research and Indigenous research methodologies, it was the DTES community that taught me the deeper truth; real transformation happens on the ground, among relations. Indigenous Peoples know their communities best and are uniquely positioned to address ongoing issues, including Indigenous health disparities. As Sammy reminded me, "*The community already has the answers you're looking for. They must be involved from the very beginning*." Since time immemorial, Indigenous communities have engaged in research, even when those approaches to research have been dismissed or devalued, seen as unscientific, unmethodological, or not objective. Indigenous Peoples have always been researchers, with their/our worldviews and knowledge systems rooted in inquiry and curiosity, drawing on our innovation and creating new knowledge to solve problems and adapt our laws and ways of living over time. The knowledge we uncover is shared through storytelling and ceremony. The knowledge is passed down through generations of understanding in ways that honour both the land and our relations.

This research journey has changed me in ways I never anticipated. As I struggled through writing my methodology chapter, I reached a point where I felt completely stuck, nearly ready to give up. Doubts overwhelmed me. I questioned my right to even speak about Cree law. But I

started to realize that in order to truly centre Indigenous knowledge, voice, and worldview, research must begin with listening and learning. For me, this meant first listening to myself—deepening my own knowledge as a Two-Spirit Nêhiyaw-Saulteaux Métis person. Embodying the principle of reciprocity in my work required me to engage in deep self-reflection. And so, I turned inward, exploring my identity, my home, my community, and my family, uncovering the aspects of myself that were essential to fully engage in this process. The first step was starting a journal, a place where I could document the emotions and reflections that emerged along the way. This journal became a useful tool to help me acknowledge and process the teachings that unfolded throughout this journey. Through this practice, I began to recognize just how disconnected I had felt—from my home, from the land, and from my relatives. Fortunately, as pandemic restrictions began to ease, I was able to return to Saskatchewan intermittently throughout my doctoral work. Being present in my homelands during this journey led me to re-examine and re-welcome my own cultural notions of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility based on a connection to my relatives and to the land. This is how I came to re-examine the meaning of kinship in relation to my work with IPWUID.

As I explored in Chapter 3, the teaching of kinship informed another way of approaching research and led me to a crucial tenant of my methodology; re-thinking kinship relations where *all our kin* have value. The workshops provided a crucial space—even for a moment—for IPWUID to cultivate kinship bonds with one another. As Starblanket and Stark write (2018), decolonization and resurgence activities "are centrally driven by the need not just to revitalize Indigenous cultural practices, but to do so in ways that are not reliant upon Western resources, whether ideological or material" (p. 196). This revitalization includes the crucial task of restoring the relational networks

that have been fractured by the stigma surrounding substance use, which persistently seeks to exclude and eliminate IPWUID from our communities and cultural spaces.

According to Smith (2021), the objective of a decolonizing approach is not to "discard all theory of Western knowledge" (p.39), rather, decolonizing methodologies draw from existing knowledge and bridge western and Indigenous knowledge systems. While qualitative methods have often been seen as fitting within Indigenous research approaches and dominate much of the literature, they are not the only methods available when it comes to Indigenous health research. Over the years, I have struggled to have meaningful conversations about what it truly means to engage in Indigenous research. Part of that struggle came from my own journey of self-discovery, which demanded that I bring more of myself into my work. However, it was also influenced by the many misconceptions surrounding Indigenous methodologies, particularly from non-Indigenous researchers. In predominantly non-Indigenous institutions, pursuing Indigenous research quickly reveals the need to confront widespread misunderstandings about what these methodologies really involve. They are more than utilizing talking circles or adding a cultural component to the research process. Though it may seem obvious, I came to understand that researchers, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, cannot rely on a one-size-fits-all approach when working with Indigenous Peoples. Such an approach fails to recognize the complexity and richness of our diverse methods, theories, and stories.

While I could further elaborate on the true nature of our methodologies throughout the remainder of this dissertation, I believe I have already demonstrated this in the preceding sections. Instead, I want to share a teaching I received from the late Tracey Morrison (*Ojibwe*), also known as "The Bannock Lady". Tracey was a drug user and harm reduction activist in the DTES neighbourhood until she passed away from suspected drug poisoning in the summer of 2017, two

months before I began my role as a research coordinator at the BCCSU. Tracey participated in a video series that was part of the same BCCSU research project I was originally hired to coordinate. It was through the stories shared about her life that I have come to know and learn from her over the years. These stories have helped me understand some of the local Indigenous knowledge related to harm reduction, overdose prevention, and community organizing in the DTES. In a video titled, "Better Harm Reduction with Heart", Tracey said something that would stick with me to this day; "*Doing more from the heart than the hea*d. *Listen to this [your heart] first*". With this teaching, I found a way to navigate the uncertainty within my research. In moments when I questioned the value of this work, the teaching resurfaced, reminding me of its significance. I carried it with me through every stage of the process, especially when the path ahead felt overwhelming or unclear. *Take a breath. Slow down. Get out of your head. What is your heart saying?* Consistent check-ins and meetings with the collaborators provided further guidance, clarity, and reassurance that there was utility to this research, and that if I was approaching this work with my heart, everything would be okay.

Listening to my heart played a necessary role in understanding my responsibilities as a witness. In the interviews and workshops, I noticed that the way we show up and listen was how we build trust and demonstrate respect for participants. I gave myself permission to share parts of myself with participants, leaning deeply into a relational approach to create a space where participants felt safe enough to laugh, cry, joke, dream, and share their stories. Listening, I realized, goes beyond the ears – it is about listening with our hearts as well. As Natalie Clark (2018) articulates in her work with Indigenous girls, "It is a kind of knowledge making that emerges in the spaces where our body-hearts-minds-spirits come together. It is where conversations create

meaning as they are happening, a form of relational conversation, where you push my ideas further and I yours – where I am not even sure whose idea came first" (p.21).

5.5 Limitations

This work exists because of the kindness, generosity, and knowledge of the collaborators who welcomed me into their lives, sharing their insights, wisdom, and time. Rooted in a deep sense of responsibility and accountability to those lost to the toxic drug crisis, including my own relatives, this dissertation sets itself apart by centring the human stories behind the statistics. It strives to amplify the voices of community members who are so often silenced, forgotten, or overlooked. Though I sought to avoid the comfort of certainty throughout this work, the journey was still uncomfortable and extremely challenging at times. I caught myself, more than once, slipping back into familiar patterns—defaulting to checklists or relying on conventional qualitative methods to analyze data. I also feared that by writing the stories and intimate knowledge of IPWUID into this dissertation, I might unintentionally translate and categorize Indigenous epistemological thought within a Western framework, attempting to legitimize it through those terms. Rather than reinforcing this binary, a return to the principle of *Sihtoskâtowin* calls us to hold ourselves accountable to our relations in ways that colonial categorization cannot dismiss.

Although this study provides the means to establish a theoretical foundation for IPWUID experiences, my approach does elicit several limitations. Of note, this research is limited in scope, focusing solely on IPWUID living in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood, and it does not represent all IPWUID lived experiences or provide a complete account of their collective experiences. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the interviews did not account for the unique living experiences of Indigenous women, transgender, and Two-Spirit participants and thus, further investigation of the

unique experience with these groups is warranted. Further, data collection for the interviews was suspended in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and might not account for the impacts of changes since that time on IPWUID. The gender representation in the workshops also poses a limitation to my analysis, as many participants chose not to disclose or identify their gender, either on the demographic form or during the workshops themselves. Further, as a project grounded in my close engagement with harm reduction and substance use within Indigenous communities, this research is significantly shaped by my emotional connection to the subject. Given my proximity to these issues, I cannot claim neutrality or objectivity, qualities often upheld in Western knowledge production.

5.6 Indigenous Peoples Who Use Illicit Drugs as Kin

Throughout this dissertation, I have examined the persistent silencing and marginalization of IPWUID, a reality exacerbated by the public discourse around the toxic drug crisis. Over the years, I have observed how IPWUID are consistently excluded from conversations about their own safety, well-being, and bodily autonomy. Despite good intentions, some community leaders and advocates, including those from my own family and community, promote abstinence-based policies (e.g., dry reserves), coerced treatment, and exclusionary practices within ceremonial and cultural spaces. These approaches, while aiming for healing, further alienate IPWUID by reinforcing their disconnection from traditional values, from land and from Indigenous knowledge systems. As I discussed in Chapter 4, those advocating for the prohibition of drug use and harm reduction services in our communities are complicit in the ongoing regulation and control of Indigenous bodies. This marginalization is part of a broader framework of violence that also affects other structurally vulnerable kin, including missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, trans,

and Two-Spirit people. Rooted in white supremacy, these harmful ideologies—misogynistic, transphobic, anti–Two-Spirit, and anti–substance use—dehumanize Indigenous bodies, treating us as disposable. These beliefs have even infiltrated Indigenous spaces, creating further divisions within our communities. As I have demonstrated, harmful practices aimed at controlling IPWUID bodies are perpetuated through the politics of tradition, which normalizes anti-substance use discourses and continues to portray IPWUID as 'non-traditional' or 'anti-Indigenous.'

The ongoing marginalization of IPWUID within our communities and the exclusionary practices they face highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of harm reduction. In Chapter 2, I discussed the complexities of navigating harm reduction within Indigenous communities, particularly the misconception that harm reduction conflicts with Indigenous cultural values (Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, 2019). There is a lack of consensus on harm reduction, with varying opinions on its validity as an approach to addressing substance use-related harms. While some community members seek abstinence, it is important to recognize that harm reduction and abstinence-based perspectives are not inherently at odds. These approaches can complement one another, allowing individuals to choose the path that best suits their needs. Harm reduction offers the flexibility for individuals to manage substance use according to their own choices - some may continue using substances, while others might pursue treatment and strive for abstinence. It is also important for our communities to understand that embracing harm reduction in the short term does not preclude the possibility of achieving abstinence in the long term.

Our communities have much to learn from the insights and practices of IPWUID, whose contributions to harm reduction are essential to Indigenous resurgence. Embracing harm reduction means recognizing IPWUID not just as part of our communities, but as vital knowledge keepers and kin. This perspective shifts the conversation from judgment and exclusion to one rooted in

care, where we honour their humanity and acknowledge their place within our communities, regardless of substance use. By treating IPWUID as kin, we uphold the relational principles central to Indigenous knowledge systems, reinforcing that every community member is deserving of love, respect, and support. Creating spaces of inclusion, rather than exclusion, is necessary for the survival of our Nations, particularly as we face the ongoing toxic drug crisis.

5.7 Unique Contributions

While reflecting on the research process for this dissertation, Elder Sandy shared, "*If we are given the opportunity to connect with each other and our culture in ways that are decided by us, our spirit finds us*." There is something deeply powerful in Sandy's interpretations of tradition, in her belief that cultural engagement must be a personal choice, and in the way she welcomes *all relations* into her lodge. For many of us, these alternative interpretations of our individual and collective teachings were new and unfamiliar. This perspective offers a crucial shift in resurgence discourse, challenging rigid notions of tradition and opening space for a broader, more inclusive vision. In this way, Sandy's work stands as an act of both resistance and resurgence because it challenges the anti-substance narratives that have sought to erase or exclude IPWUID, making them no longer acceptable within the framework of our cultures.

This dissertation offers several unique contributions to substance use research, Indigenous methodologies, and resurgence theory and practices. First, this dissertation tackles the dearth of research focusing on the unique experiences of IPWUID amid the ongoing drug poisoning crisis. Chapter 2 seeks to bridge this gap by examining how intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression, including settler colonialism, shape IPWUID experiences – elements that are often overlooked in substance use research. It emphasizes that settler colonialism is not a past event but

an ongoing process (Wolfe, 2006) continually reinforced through present-day genocidal policies and practices. Conceptualizing the toxic drug crisis through the lens of settler colonialism pushes us to re-examine how colonization has entrenched power structures that restrict Indigenous Peoples' ability to make fundamental decisions about their lives and bodies, effectively undermining their agency and autonomy. We then have to ask ourselves different questions about the role these structures play in perpetuating the crisis and how they shape the lived experiences of IPWUID. However, it is not enough to simply theorize and critique settler colonialism. We must also draw on Indigenous Peoples' understandings of place, which carry within them "knowledge of resurgence, resistance, and Indigenous refusal" (A. Simpson, 2014, as cited in de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018).

This dissertation, as outlined in Chapter 3, thus contributes to Indigenous resurgence thought and practice by prioritizing the agency and bodily autonomy of IPWUID, regardless of their substance use. Honouring their body sovereignty was central to developing a new methodological approach that addresses the complexities of their marginalization. In the context of the drug poisoning crisis, the experiences of IPWUID have been largely overlooked. However, centring their perspectives is essential for advancing a relational approach that confronts settler colonial power. Developing a methodology that acknowledges these tensions was crucial for informing decolonizing research approaches attuned to the diverse needs of IPWUID. Quinless (2022) describes decolonizing research as "an everyday practice" that critiques conventional epistemologies and dominant knowledge systems, aiming to create culturally respectful frameworks that resist privileging Western ways of knowing over Indigenous knowledge (p. 109). Similarly, Hunt and Holmes (2015) emphasize the importance of everyday resistance, stating that "While large-scale actions such as rallies, protests, and blockages are frequently acknowledged as

sites of resistance, the daily actions undertaken by individual Indigenous people, families, and communities often go unacknowledged but are no less vital to decolonial processes" (pp. 157-8). These perspectives underscore the necessity of embedding decolonial practices not only in large-scale activism but also in the everyday research and relational approaches we adopt.

Third, while some Indigenous resurgence theorists have highlighted how heteropatriarchy drives homophobia and transphobia within Indigenous communities (Hunt, 2016; Starblanket, 2017), underscoring the need to centre gender and sexuality in our resurgence efforts, there remains a significant gap in addressing the need to disentangle resurgence from Christianity, respectability politics, and other colonial frameworks that lead to exclusion. These systems continue to ostracize those who use drugs and alcohol, perpetuating harmful exclusions that hinder our resurgence efforts. Drawing from the teachings shared by collaborators and participants, along with my own experiences, I propose a witnessing practice rooted in the Cree law *Sihtoskâtowin.* As outlined in Chapter Three, this approach implies an understanding that we cannot "do it alone", and in order to truly provide mutual support and to uphold *Sihtoskâtowin* in our communities, it is essential to *fully* witness people's lives, including their drug use. Chapter Four provides the implementation of this approach to unsettle how IPWUID stories are heard and shared, prompting others to recognize and act on the potential of Indigenous practices to transform norms around substance use.

Lastly, this dissertation contributes meaningfully to Land Back by establishing a safe, affirming space for IPWUID to reclaim and reshape their relationships with land and community in ways that honour their inherent right to engage in this reclamation. Land Back extends beyond the physical return of territory; it involves understanding land, especially in the DTES neighbourhood (located on unceded Indigenous lands), as a living relative—a relational force

essential to identity, belonging, and healing. Land-based cultural practices brought into this space, such as smudging and arts-based activities, facilitated an embodied engagement with knowledge in, from, and with the land. These practices furthered connections to cultural traditions, highlighting how Indigenous ways of knowing and being remain firmly intertwined with the land, even in urban contexts. Framing Land Back as a movement rooted in kinship, this work centers the voices, rights, and relationships of all Indigenous Peoples, including IPWUID. By addressing settler colonialism's dispossession of land, culture, and body, this dissertation also advocates for normalizing substance use and harm reduction within our communities. Upholding body sovereignty for all people, including those who use drugs, is a vital part of reimagining Land Back as the interconnected reclamation of land, body, and self-determination.

As I continue this journey, I know that there is more knowledge to be revealed in my research. I am forever in awe and inspired by the generative worlds created by collaborators, where the cultural practices of those involved are centred, while space is intentionally created to welcome other Indigenous Peoples, regardless of their substance use, to practice and share their own ways of knowing. They created their own spaces to exist.

5.8 Future Research Directions

This work offers hope and guidance for Indigenous resurgence and futurity, presenting a vision of possibilities for IPWUID as imagined by IPWUID themselves. In my research on harm reduction and substance use, I have begun to recognize that we are in the midst of transforming our approaches to care and community. The time has come to take seriously our personal and collective potential for transformation, creating spaces of love and care, in which we can reimagine a path (or road) towards healing. Acknowledging the settler-colonial nature of our nations and the ways

colonial thinking is perpetuated in everyday life is essential to how we envision our relationships with one another. For me, and others engaged in Indigenous harm reduction, drug poisoning is not merely a matter of drug policy; it is intricately tied to larger colonial power structures that continue to shape the daily lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples.

When we consider how colonization and ongoing states of coloniality has entrenched power structures that restrict Indigenous Peoples' ability to make fundamental decisions about our lives - such as where we live, how and where we practice our culture, how we manage our resources and lands, and how we legally define our identities - it becomes clear how these injustices shape drug policy. Although this dissertation does not exclusively focus on the implications and impacts of colonial drug policy on Indigenous Peoples, it is imperative to highlight that drug policy does not exist in a vacuum. It must be understood and critiqued in relation to the various forms of violence that strips Indigenous Peoples of their agency and ability to make choices for themselves. The connections between drug policy and broader patterns of oppression highlight an intricate web of injustices against Indigenous Peoples that must be addressed. Thus, it is crucial that policy and research actively embraces the concerns of Indigenous Peoples more inclusively. In my field of study, I have yet to encounter substantial research that genuinely stands in solidarity with Indigenous communities or engages critically with the pressing issues of consent, agency, land, and self-determination. Our work as researchers must disrupt these oppressive structures within our research and policy-making efforts. We must also resist the politics of inclusion in research that reduces the involvement of Indigenous Peoples to mere tokenism, as if their participation alone is sufficient. This begs the question: *What is the true utility of research if it does not serve a meaningful purpose for those it seeks to include?* To be genuinely useful, research must engage with the complexities of Indigenous experiences and actively

contribute to social change, rather than simply providing a platform for representation without impact.

5.9 Re-imagining the Red Road: Recommendations

> *The DTES is what led many of us to the Red Road. It's a place where we've been able to reconnect with our culture and with each other (workshop participant)*

Returning to the Cree law, *Sihtoskâtowin* (mutual support) is important in addressing the removal of IPWUID from Indigenous practices, places, and lifeways. This dissertation reveals how the politics of tradition can cultivate a selective Indigenous intellectualism that shapes contemporary political practices and thought. Consequently, Indigenous perspectives on substance use and harm reduction have been fragmented and marginalized, deemed irrelevant to broader movements of Indigenous resurgence. In this dissertation, I centred the living/lived realities of surviving the drug poisoning crisis through the voices of IPWUID in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood. These perspectives only begin to tap into the deep knowledge thriving within the diverse Indigenous communities that call the DTES home, as we collectively navigate and mitigate the harms caused by colonialism and the drug poisoning crisis.

As the participants in this research have demonstrated, communities are engaging in acts which have the potential to change norms around substance use and harm reduction within small and intimate networks, which I think have much to offer for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. What do these new understandings of harm reduction mean in how we envision our homes, our families and communities? How do we reimagine the Red Road, knowing that it is fundamentally shaped through a politic of exclusion rather than upholding our Indigenous laws, like *Sihtoskâtowin?*

Chapter 2 first highlights the urgent need for Indigenous representation in harm reduction services, underscoring the role of relationality and kinship in creating a framework that embraces community support and cultural connectedness. Integrating cultural practices, traditional medicines, and peer-led interventions is crucial for enhancing harm reduction efforts and supporting the overall well-being of IPWUID. Within the IPWUID DTES community, promising models are already taking shape through Indigenous-led partnerships and initiatives. This dissertation highlights, for instance, the life-saving work of the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS) and other Indigenous drug user activists who are on the frontlines of the drug liberation movement.

In Chapter 4, I suggest that we turn away from *solely* relying on state-sanctioned interventions and instead recommit to the most intimate parts of our lives, where our culturally specific relationships to lands and waters and everyday acts of resurgence flourish. In suggesting a "turn away" from the state, which includes settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and other settler-colonial institutions, it might be assumed that this implies a complete disengagement from state actors and settlers. Corntassel (2021) points out that turning away from the state does not mean disengaging entirely from settler governments; instead, it involves centring Indigenous nationhood and authority while engaging with settlers on Indigenous terms. This approach creates opportunities for settlers to act in solidarity by inviting them to recognize and respect our communities' relational responsibilities through their participation in these actions. This call to reimagine resurgence beyond state-sanctioned interventions extends to the urgent need for more inclusive conversations around harm reduction in many of our communities. While awareness of harm reduction efforts has increased, the lived realities of IPWUID continue to be shaped by stigma and exclusion, raising important questions about how effectively we are addressing these

challenges. Reflecting on my work in harm reduction, both on the front lines and in academic spaces, I continue to wrestle with how to engage in meaningful conversations about harm reduction within my community. Although organizations like the Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN), Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network (CAAN), First Nations Health Authority (FNHA), and local initiatives led by IPWUID have brought greater visibility to harm reduction, the gap between these efforts and the lived realities of IPWUID remains significant. This disconnect raises critical concerns about whether our strategies are truly addressing the painful truths faced by IPWUID. If we continue to exclude those directly impacted from decision-making processes and fail to centre their voices, our solutions will inevitably fall short, and more lives will be lost. Without their input, how can we ensure that our efforts are genuinely effective and responsive to their needs?

This has led me to ask different kinds of questions in my work: *What does harm reduction look and feel like for our communities? How can we reimagine the Red Road to include all our relations?* My commitment is to work at the community level to engage with those who are usually excluded from traditional, cultural, and decision-making spaces. This includes prioritizing building relationships, providing opportunities for cultural engagement, and creating resources (i.e., Indigenous harm reduction kits) to make sure my research and interventions genuinely address the needs of IPWUID. This relational work is crucial in keeping formal research relevant and responsive to those most affected. It also keeps me accountable by making sure that my work is not just responding to scholarship but addressing the real needs on the ground. Since IPWUID are still absent from decision-making tables in our communities and not recognized as the experts they truly are, the gap between formal research and lived realities remains, reminding me that the work is far from over.

The methodological findings in Chapters 3 and 4 reinforce the argument that resurgence theory provides a critical framework for addressing the toxic drug crisis in ways that respect IPWUID autonomy. The workshops highlight solutions drawn from the daily lived realities of IPWUID, centred on practicing non-judgment, respecting autonomy, and meeting individuals where they are, while upholding their agency and self-determination. These findings affirm that IPWUID are best positioned to determine their own needs, as they are already actively engaged in resisting the colonial policies that have fueled the crisis and navigating these challenges in their daily lives. Resurgence theory challenges harmful colonial narratives while centring the leadership of IPWUID in shaping responses rooted in Indigenous values and well-being. I hope this research encourages others to recognize the value of these intimate relationships in theorizing colonialism, resurgence, and resistance. Specifically, I urge Indigenous Peoples concerned with resurgence to view harm reduction as an essential component, one that manifests in the everyday relations of many Indigenous communities. Addressing this will require accountability from community leaders and Elders who continue to uphold exclusionary practices that undermine harm reduction efforts.

Just as sage renews itself each season, reminding us of the reciprocal responsibilities of our kinship systems, our collective resurgence depends on supporting networks of reciprocal resurgent movements rooted in the strength and love of *all our relations*. This perspective invites us to rethink 'tradition' in ways that include rather than exclude. Colonialism has distorted traditional Indigenous perspectives on the sacredness of our bodies. True resurgence requires us to confront these legacies and create a future where *all* our bodies and spirits are respected, celebrated, and welcomed on the Red Road.

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