

(De)colonizing Space: Critical Reflections on Aboriginal Youth Space and Self

by

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Thesis

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Acknowledgements

I am writing this on unceded unsundered Mi'kmaq territory and must begin by first acknowledge this above all else, knowing that so much of what I have is the result of immeasurable loss for others.

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Finally, to all the brave women, children, and youth I am blessed to know. It is through all of you that I learn, change, and am challenged. Thank you for your strength and laughter.

Abstract

There are two central purposes for this research. The first is to explore reclaimed colonial space within the context of colonization through a reflective exploration of three public spaces deemed to be created for and/or by Aboriginal youth in the city of Halifax, Nova Scotia. The second is to situate myself, as a white body, in the research process and explore how I participate in, and am impacted by, the ongoing process of colonization.. For each space previously determined questions were used to guide my reflections. The intention of these questions is to provide insight into the complicated relationship between ongoing colonization and reclaimed colonized space. These questions also function to reveal some of the imbedded assumptions I carry. By engaging critically with myself and these spaces, and including this as part of my research, I acknowledge that much of what I have been taught, both formally and in more subversive ways, about Aboriginal identity is not neutral. These ideas come from somewhere and influence how I approach and move through this research process. I will attempt to deneutralize these spaces and my role in them by exploring these tensions. My hope is that this research comes to reflect a reclaimed space itself, as I navigate the tensions in challenging interlocking systems of oppression, and being part of them, on the page.

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1**Introductions**

I must begin by expressing gratitude. Thank you for entering into this, whether this is as far as you go or you continue on with me to the end, your willingness to enter is what gives this document life.

I finished my proposal defense and he asked me to locate myself; I was confused, I thought I had?

My expectation of comfort was disrupted.

I knew that I was perceived a certain way, but I did not feel that this was who I am, or more accurately who I was for a long time. What do you do when who you have become, who you are perceived to have become, feels entirely disconnected from who you were, the life that you lived for so long, and even though it is everything you hoped for during that time; you feel like the person you now are does not allow you to share your truth.

I wanted to share this truth of who I am. I located myself through my personal relationships, because they are where I find myself. I was hiding behind their stories, wanting to locate myself through my relationship to them, not yet understanding that location is about more than how you feel about yourself—it is about how you are seen and act in the world; it is political. I only wanted to share what I felt, how I wanted to be seen.

I am a white woman of privilege, a settler, in the colonial space of Canada.

It is not all that I am, but it is a part of my truth that impacts all others.

The ability to hide the parts of my past that they would be made uncomfortable by, the ability to transform into what society views as a person worthy of voice, come largely from unearned advantages.¹ How I am perceived is directly connected to the privileged position I occupy which is directly connected to both my desire and ability to share my voice. I did not locate myself in this way initially because I did not yet occupy a space where I fully understood the importance of making this explicit, itself an indicator of my privilege, and I took my position of power for granted. Writing this here does not illustrate how this part of my truth impacts my experiences in the world. However my hope is that you keep it in mind when reading and that it helps you to recognize, in ways I cannot, how my unearned privilege interacts with and impacts my ability to express self and understand the world.

After the same proposal defense another woman in attendance approached me and told me she admired me for doing such brave research, for exposing myself. I thought that there was nothing brave about this research, the risks for me are so minimal. But I wasn't really sharing anything difficult. I couldn't be, I was only showing the parts of myself that I wanted to. But what would it mean to share what I didn't want to share? To share not only the stories that connect us, which we think connect us, but the ugly stories as well. The contradictions.

Will I be able to share these stories? To recognize and acknowledge them?

¹ I use the plural pronouns 'they' and 'them' at different points throughout this text to give name to the abstract and real forces I felt weighing down on me as I moved through this process. To give name to the multiple systems and peoples that, in direct and indirect ways, communicate who and what has value in our society. The forces that have communicated to me that I do not have value and that this does not have value.

Is this more about you or Aboriginal youth?²

Here I will try to accomplish the difficult task of beginning to introduce you to who I am, or more accurately the pieces of who I am that I am able to share and express through this text and that I think might matter to you (this is not all of me). I will also introduce the story of my intended research topic, its complexities, and the changes it has passed through on its, and my, ongoing decolonizing journey. The separation between these two may at times be unclear, and I have been asked:

Is this research more about you or Aboriginal youth?

For me it is about both and has to be about both. It is about exploring the relationship between how our lived realities shape how we see ourselves and others in a colonial context, and how we express ourselves to others and understand one another within space that functions as both reclaimed colonial space and part of an ongoing process of colonization.

Space that functions as both reclaimed colonial space and part of an ongoing process of colonization refers to space that is being claimed and used by Aboriginal peoples to express who they are, while at the same time being located on settler occupied Aboriginal land within a

² I use the word Aboriginal here to refer to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in the Canadian context. The political and limited nature of this language is explored more fully in a later section of this text (see section titled “The Limitations of Language” starting on page 18).

process of ongoing colonization. I refer to this space as (De)colonized Space to emphasis this tension and give name to these sites of resistance.

The knowledge I have to share comes from my lived reality and my interpretations, based on this, of the world around me. It is a limited, living, changing, and political knowledge. It is in no way neutral. In writing it down on the page I give it to whomever wishes to have it, and I welcome all responses.

Even now I am tempted to apologize. I want to write that I am sorry for making this complicated and for not knowing. Instead I write this and realize that apologizing to you or sharing my desire to apologize, expresses fear and shame—the fear and shame at what you will think; the fear and shame in needing to externalize these feelings—and functions as an act of self-preservation.³ But this inclusion of self is also an act of political resistance.

I refuse to distance myself abstractly because

I am a part of the research,

and a part of the story

(Hodges, 2010, p.7)

³Many women scholars have written on their experiences in academia and feelings of inadequacy and insecurity within this space. See Overall, C., & McLeod, C. (2002). A feminist I: Reflections from academia. *Resources for Feminist Research*, 29(1), 141-144.

The traditional method of academic writing that is often presented serves as an oppressive tool.⁴ It functions to neutralize and standardize our diverse experiences within the political landscapes of our lives. It serves to segregate and define ‘knowledge’, by dictating both who possesses valid knowledge and how this knowledge is expressed. It silences certain voices and makes other voices screeaaaaamm. I resist these notions and the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy they perpetuate, that they want me to perpetuate.⁵ How we express our ideas is as political as the ideas themselves, if not more, because it is through this expression that our ideas find voice and that voice, the traditional academic voice, is not mine.

Knowing what I know now, this is the only way I could write this. And yes, it will probably be complicated and yes, I will likely not always know (and they don’t tell you that no one does), but I had no choice but to do it this way. I now know no other way.

⁴ ‘Traditional academic writing’ refers to a style of writing that is characterized by linear structure, formal tone, academic jargon, specialized vocabulary, third-person perspective, and an emphasis on results. This is what I was primarily exposed to, and taught to reproduce, in both my undergraduate and graduate degrees.

⁵ Imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy was originally used by the prominent black intellectual bell hooks as a way to describe the interlocking systems of oppression that are at the core of the imbedded political systems governing much of our lives. In this work I will focus primarily on colonization, as both an expression and tool of this larger system. See hooks, 1981.

Coming to Here

I cannot continue without first sharing what brought me here, as it is not where I started. I entered the Master's program a little older than the majority of my classmates and with what I thought were a broad range of life experiences. While many of my classmates struggled to identify why they entered the program or what their research interests were, I felt a naive clarity about both. I struggled to understand why anyone would commit to writing a thesis without feeling the way I did.

I completed my undergraduate degree in International Development and Globalization. During this time I was also working at the Boys & Girls Club as a youth worker having previously worked at their summer camp and participated in their youth leadership program. In these roles I built relationships with Aboriginal children and youth that forced me to examine the world in which I lived in a much more critical way. I soon began taking elective courses taught by Aboriginal scholars that were related to issues impacting Aboriginal peoples in Canada. These scholars challenged my thinking, while always showing me unearned patience, love, and respect. During this period in my life I was also very fortunate to spend time with Elder William Commanda at his home prior to his passing and experience a different way of being with people. I am so thankful for the time they shared with me.

I began to make connections between what was happening to marginalized peoples in an international context as a result of dominant systems of power and what Aboriginal peoples were experiencing in Canada, a 'developed' country. I did not yet have the language to fully describe what I was seeing or feeling, but I had a clear sense that much of what I thought I knew about the place I lived and in particular the settler relationship to Aboriginal peoples, reflected a specific political agenda.

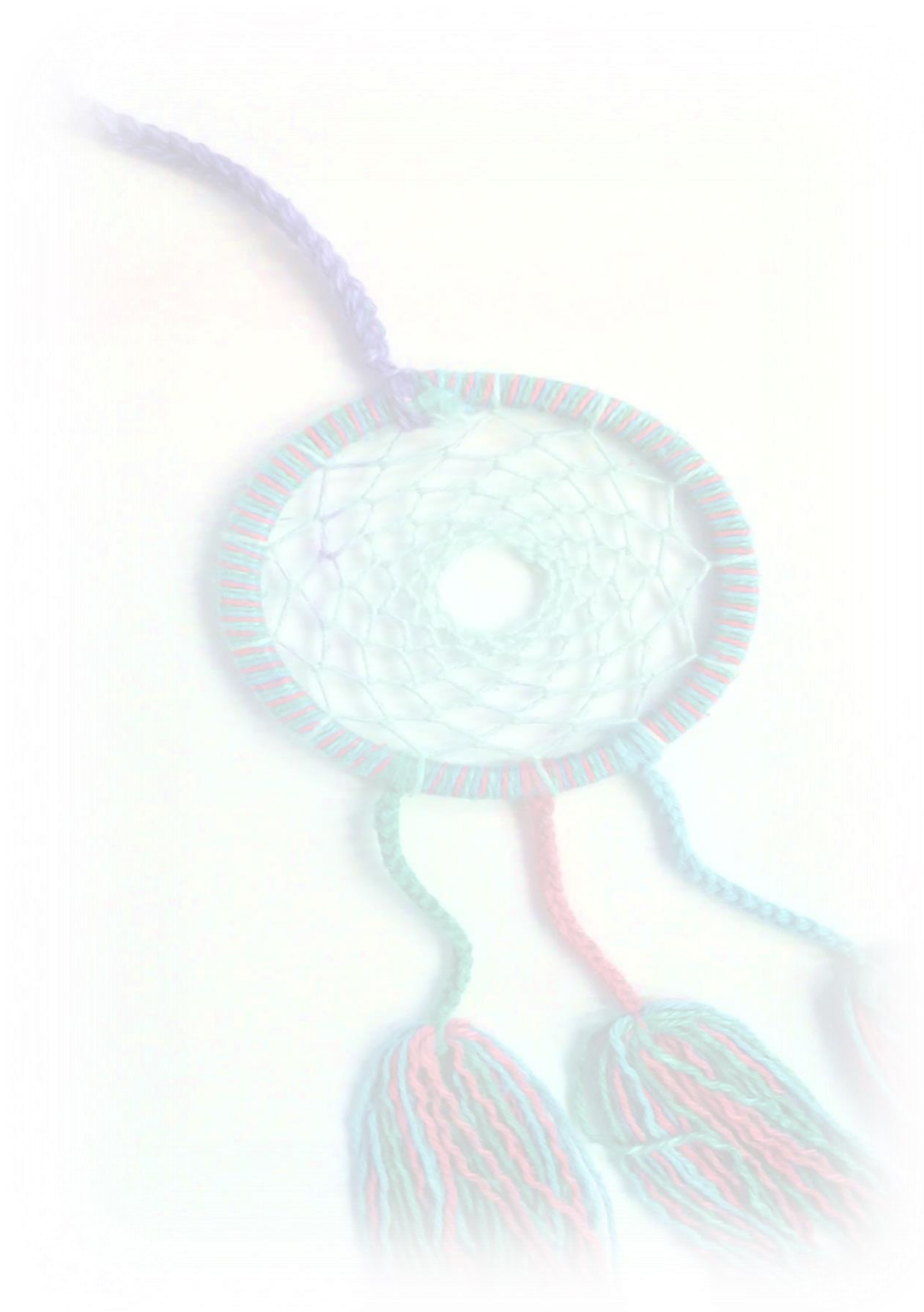
We're frequently missing each other, we've got one frame of reference over here and another over here and there's this disconnect...That disconnect is a legacy of colonialism, as I see colonialism as an extended process of denying relationship

(Donald, 2010, n.p)

The combination of all of these experiences lead me to research. Research seemed like the best way within this political landscape to have the space to explore these issues more fully and freely. When asked at the beginning of my Master's thesis program what I planned to research I said that I wanted to conduct interviews with Aboriginal youth on how they feel they are perceived and represented in the broader Halifax community using community-based participatory research (CBPR). However, as I engaged with more and more writings by Indigenous and black thinkers questioning imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, I began to question myself more and more. ⁶

And then I realized: this whole time I had removed myself. I had seen this system as acting on Aboriginal peoples and not implicated myself in it. In my mind I somehow existed outside of it all, separate and neutral.

⁶ An article was recently published discussing the limitations of CBPR within a context of colonization. The authors state that power and privilege must first be identified and addressed. The researchers use self-reflections on racial, ethnic, and gendered life experiences to do this and analyze them using an integrated feminist & post-colonial framework. See Muhammad, Wallerstein, Sussman, Avila, Belone, & Duran, 2014.



In September I moved to Halifax to start work on my thesis and build a life for myself. That winter, shortly after his 19th birthday, my little brother was arrested, charged, and began serving a prison sentence. He was arrested for a violent crime that took place in our home. Our home culture was a culture of violence, and this did not stop when I left.

On the night I got the call from my mother, I was not surprised, I had in a way been waiting for it, and the tears we cried together were not entirely from this confirmation of the loss of his innocence, of the reality of our lives together, but from relief, relief that this phone call had not been to tell me something much worse had happened, something we had never shared with one another, but we both were preparing ourselves for.

While in prison creative expression became a way for my brother to reconnect with us and share what he was experiencing. One of the pieces he created was a dreamcatcher for my youngest sister. He wrote that as materials were difficult to access, he had created it using threads from his blanket and the lid of a fruit cup. He thought it was pretty funny and was proud of his resourcefulness. I saw it as a metaphor for what we were going through, how when you seemingly have nothing left, you are able to look at what was always there in a new way and use it to create something you never before thought possible.

The first time I saw the dream catcher hanging over my sister's bed, I felt an intense emotion in the center of my being. I think one of the reasons this particular piece resonated with me so deeply is its relation to my thesis, and what I had been focusing on at the time I first saw it. I had been reading a lot about Indigenous identity and youth, learning about them through a computer screen. At the same time that I had been doing this, my brother was learning to create this piece with the help of an Aboriginal inmate. The dreamcatcher's power is in its embodiment of the inseparability of my brother, from me, from my research. I continue to see my brother as a young boy and struggle with how I have neglected him, his pain, while directing so much of my energy towards understanding the experiences of other children and youth. At a distance.

The inseparability.

My Intent

With the realization that I was part of this system, I began to think about how I could even begin to engage with Aboriginal youth as a researcher. I considered walking away from this process, unsure of how I could work through these ideas while being part of it. As I thought more and more about it, I decided that I could work through these ideas, that these ideas and struggles had meaning. I actually needed to share my experiences as I moved through this political landscape, how they impact my understanding of Aboriginal peoples, and critically engage with my participation in the research process.

This thesis is the documentation of that process. Through critical engagement with Aboriginal youth space that is located within a context of ongoing colonization in my community, I will attempt to deneutralize these spaces and my role in them by exploring these tensions and implicating myself, as a white body, in the research process and broader process of colonization. My hope is also that this document will come to reflect a reclaimed space itself, as I navigate the tensions in challenging imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, and being a tool of it, on the page.

I began this by introducing you to part of who I am and what brought me to this. I will now introduce the knowledge that has informed my thinking and shaped my approach to this process, before presenting my observations and reflections on my engagement with the three spaces more specially and finally, closing this work with a discussion on the *findings* of this process.

2

The Knowledge that Informs Mine

I came to here, or maybe more appropriately was brought here, through the shared knowledge of diverse critical thinkers. Here I will honor some of this knowledge and the role it has had on me, and by extension this research, by creating a space to discuss, connect, and compare these ideas. Grouping these thinkers together based on key themes, while at the same time dividing them, has proved challenging as they are all intimately connected. In order to more clearly articulate the stated intention of each, I have grouped them into two broad sections: The Construction of an Identity and Colonization & Space. In all the works discussed below the authors make clear the ways in which colonization has and continues to perpetuate and create an idea of what it is to be an Aboriginal person—A Native, AN Indian—that supports the objectives and values of the state (Denetdale, 2006).

Construction of an Identity will outline and politicize three dominant ways Aboriginal identity has been and is constructed within a context of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy in order to show how complicated and multifaceted research in this area is, as well as the limitations of non-Indigenous researchers to explore these issues from their position. Following this, in Colonization & Space I will explain why space matters so much in this conversation, exploring how it functions as a key site in the perpetuation of dominant systems of oppression, as well as how it is used to challenge these same systems.

The Limitations of Language

To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture

(Fanon, 1967, p.38)

The ideas presented come from the works of self-identified Indigenous scholars and non-Indigenous scholars writing from various geographical and political locations; however much of what I will share is located in the North American experience. The language used by these thinkers, the language I use throughout this document, to give name to these peoples, is highly political and rooted in Western history (Smith, 2012). When referring to the works of these writers I use the terms they have chosen and may at times repeat some of these terms in my own writing when emphasizing their relationship to identity politics. When speaking on a global scale I use the term Indigenous.⁷ However, the focus of my own work is within Canada, and most often I use the words Aboriginal peoples to refer to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. I acknowledge that the term Aboriginal is limited, problematic, political, and “cannot possibly convey the diversity found within Aboriginal cultures and languages” (Max, 2005, p.93).

And still, considering all this, I use these words. I use them because this is the language used by the Canadian state, and has thus become what is most commonly used and understood in the Canadian context. I do not know of another way to talk about these ideas that would make

⁷ The term ‘Indigenous’ is highly complex and political, encompassing much more than just the global connections amongst Aboriginal peoples. Here I primarily use the term Aboriginal to focus on the constructed idea of ‘the native’ in the North American, specifically Canadian, context of colonization because I believe this image is particular. However, there are important conversations happening, and that need to be had, around Indigenous space, the relationship between Aboriginal and Indigenous space, as well as Indigenous identity and (De)colonization.

clear to whom I am referring more than this term. Language, like space, is a tool that is used to control and perpetuate ideas. It is a neat little box that helps in making sense, a certain type of sense, of something that does not make sense, or that could make sense differently, but this word and many of the words I will use, because I do not know others, are lies. They are lies because of what they hide, the neutrality they too often present.

The Construction of an Identity

Are There Even Any Aboriginal People in Halifax?

She asked

And I was thankful for the question

....I mean I don't really see any

She said

And I thought:

But what are you looking for?

A friend of mine asked the above question while my partner sat across from her. With his blonde hair and light eyes he does not fit the idea of what the Canadian state has taught us an Aboriginal person is. And he is told he is a lucky one. And he feels that he is the lucky one. To not have to carry the visible markers of being a Native. To live a life that feels so far away from that. He is now part of the privileged and holds power; he is seen as a white man and therefore is a white man. But this truth, who he is, is the direct result of an ongoing process of colonization and genocide.

She was taken away, that identity was taken away, by a system. It was not a choice.

Residential schools had a specific goal which was...institutionalized assimilation by stripping Aboriginal people of their language, culture and connection with family. The results for many, have included a lifestyle of uncertain identity...

(McKenzie & Morrisette, 2003, p.254)

The knowledge I will now share supports this idea and together these works begin to create a picture of how the construction of the category of Aboriginal peoples by the Canadian state, and the socio-cultural idea of the Native that is presented in Western society, are part of the historical and ongoing process of colonization in Canada.

*Let us refrain from inquiring at the moment whether or not he actually exists;
for we believe that he exists*

(Baldwin, 1984, p.83)

Blood. In order to understand the present and speak to the future one must first look to the past. However, understanding how the historical legacy of colonialism in Canada shapes contemporary expressions of Aboriginal identity requires more than a brief reread of history in Canada, it requires situating self in this process and exploring how colonialism has shaped and continues to shape relationships with and understandings of Aboriginal peoples (Donald, 2009; Donald, 2012; Max, 2005; Smith, 2012). Colonialism has led to the creation of a variety of measurements of authenticity and these measurements continue to shape understandings and expressions of contemporary Aboriginal identities. The ways North American society has defined, and continues to define, who is a 'real Indian' are complex, inconsistent, and highly

political (Garrouette, 2003; King, 2003; Lawrence, 2003; Morgan & Warren, 2011; Strong & Winkle, 1996).

Blood quantum is a biological approach to defining who is and who is not a 'real Indian.' This method was historically used in North America as a way of determining who had legal claim to the rights and privileges that a recognized Indian identity carried (Frideres, 2008; Garrouette, 2003; Lawrence, 2003). The idea is that the more Indian blood an individual has the more Indian they are and that after a certain amount of mixing, as determined by the state, the person ceases to be Indian. This method of measuring 'Indianness' continues to be used today in Canada, and around the world, in overt and subtle ways (Amnesty International, 2013; Frideres, 2008; Lawrence, 2003; Lawrence, 2004). It is done by having one's blood quantified, by proving one's bloodline through birth records or other documentation, or on the basis of one's physical appearance. There is a belief that the more Aboriginal blood you are perceived or proven to have, the more authentic your cultural identity is (Garrouette, 2003; Strong & Winkle, 1996).

This method of understanding who is and who is not an Aboriginal person is used by the state to control Aboriginal peoples and is built into much of the policy and services governing Aboriginal peoples' day to day lives. In Canada, historical legislation and practices, explicitly aimed at eradicating Aboriginal culture, caused many Aboriginal peoples to lose all legal records of, or rights to, their bloodline (Dickason & Calder, 2006; Lawrence, 2003; Strong & Winkle, 1996). Many Aboriginal children were also forcibly mixed with the dominant cultural group through widespread practices of adoption by non-Aboriginal peoples (Dickason & Calder, 2006).

Madison (2013) argues that these ideas about authentic Aboriginal identity perpetuate a form of symbolic political violence against Aboriginal people. The author discusses how

classification based on blood and appearance has created division within the Aboriginal community. This fragmentation is a form of violence as it further marginalizes individuals, limiting their mobility, and preventing them from effectively combating their own exploitation. Aboriginal peoples living in urban areas are more often of mixed-ancestry and face a particular type of violence as they experience racism and exclusion from both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal peoples as a result of colonization.

Cheryl Kickett-Tucker (2009) explored feelings and perceptions on racial identity with Australian Aboriginal children and youth. These interviews and focus groups revealed many participants felt they had to prove their racial identity in order to be accepted by the Indigenous community, wider community, and their peers (2009). Many expressed not being accepted because of their appearance, either being too white or too black. The author argued that the physical appearance of Indigenous peoples is too often over emphasised as a measurement of identity and can contribute to racial prejudice (2009). The author acknowledges that these measures of identification are not working; however there is no politicization of them or discussion of their intended function by a colonial state. Instead, the author chooses to focus on the experiences of the children and youth, their stories. However, in doing this, we are made to think that Indigenous communities are the ones to blame for not accepting children of mixed race, when in actuality these stories demonstrate how colonial tools impact Aboriginal communities from the inside and can force them to distrust one another or feel alienated from one another (Denetdale, 2006).

Culture. Using cultural practices as a method to determine Aboriginal identity emerged in response to purely biological approaches (Garrouette, 2003). This approach is framed as a better and more inclusive method, because it considers how people live day to day, not only their

bloodline. Using this approach to understanding Aboriginal cultural identity, you are an Aboriginal person if you practice Aboriginal culture. But who is the authority on Aboriginal identity and culture?

Lee Maracle speaks to this and asks: *Is “tradition” an Indian tradition?*

(Smith, 2011, p.64)

The use of specific cultural practices as a method to determine authenticity implies an essentialist view of Aboriginal cultural identity; that all Aboriginal peoples must live a certain way, the same way, in order to be considered authentically Aboriginal (Denetdale, 2006; King, 2003). This approach conjures up images of the caricatural 'Indian' that saturates popular culture. In doing this, this approach threatens the existence of Aboriginal cultural identities and peoples by not acknowledging the cultural identities and voices of individuals who identify as Aboriginal, but who live very different lives than those of their ancestors. This approach also fails to acknowledge the role of the colonizer in contemporary expressions of Aboriginal cultures, the appropriation of Aboriginal culture, or their relationship to one another (Donald, 2009).

The history of policy and practices aimed at assimilating 'Indian' peoples in Canada had a radical impact on Aboriginal cultures. In some cases, cultural practices and languages were entirely lost as a result (Garrouette, 2003; Dickason & Calder, 2006). In other cases, Aboriginal peoples have tried to rediscover and reclaim their lost cultures; however this can be difficult if you are no longer recognized as an 'authentic Indian' (Forte, 2013; Donald, 2012; Maddison, 2013). Aspects of contemporary expressions of Aboriginal cultures can be seen as both a result

of and response to this history. There is no pure, unchanging, authentic way of being Aboriginal (King, 2003; Hollands, 2004; Morgan & Warren, 2011; Wang, 2010; Warren & Evitt, 2010).

Self-identification. Those who are unable to claim an Aboriginal identity based on biology or cultural practices, can self-identify as Aboriginal: the idea being that if someone believes that they are an Aboriginal person, and want to be seen as such, then they are one. This approach allows individuals, whose cultural identities as Aboriginal people were lost as a result of policies and practices of assimilation, to access their culture and begin to reclaim an identity that was taken from them (Garrouette, 2003).

What ideas of identity are youth 'reclaiming'?

And what about the land?

The people who are lost?

What about the languages?

This method has been described as being viewed with great suspicion by many Aboriginal peoples (Garrouette, 2003; King, 2003). The concern being that if anyone can claim an Aboriginal identity, the identities, histories, and cultures of Aboriginal peoples become appropriated, devalued, and commodified, largely to the benefit of non-Aboriginal peoples. As Aboriginal peoples disappear into whiteness through the process of colonization, white people feel they are free and able to access and claim all that is indigenous (Fowler, 2013).

The skepticism described around self-identification is occurring within an imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal context. For this reason self-identification, while seemingly providing a way for individuals to reclaim an identity that was taken from them, can

have very real costs for Aboriginal peoples who have to live day to day within this system as Aboriginal peoples, in terms of, for example, access to resources, funding for programs, loss of culture, and representation.

The three ways Aboriginal identity has been and is constructed that I described above have real impacts on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples' lives and identities. They do not operate in isolation from each other and all three reflect the highly complex, changing, and political nature of a single Aboriginal cultural identity and Aboriginal cultural identities generally. At best these methods are said to help society make sense of complex and diverse peoples and to organize these peoples based on this understanding.

However, as the discussion of these methods reveals, it is important to consider who is making sense of which peoples, the motivations for their organization, and how this understanding impacts how we now understand ourselves and relate to one another. These constructions of identity are also grounded in an idea that Aboriginal identity only exists in relation to whiteness; whiteness is the normal measure that all others are compared to and understood through. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2008) speaks to this, reminding us that "The native did exist before 'the gaze' of the settler and before the image of 'native' came to be constituted by imperialism, and that the native does have an existence outside and predating the settler/native identity" (p.86).

what do you know about dad's mom?

grandmother

dad's mom was native
went to residential school
was adopted

came from Gunn Alberta
that's as much as I know about her
what do you know about dad's mom?
not much.

But what are you looking for?

She was adopted
believe she was native
died of cervical cancer
dad was eleven

1964

But what are you looking for?

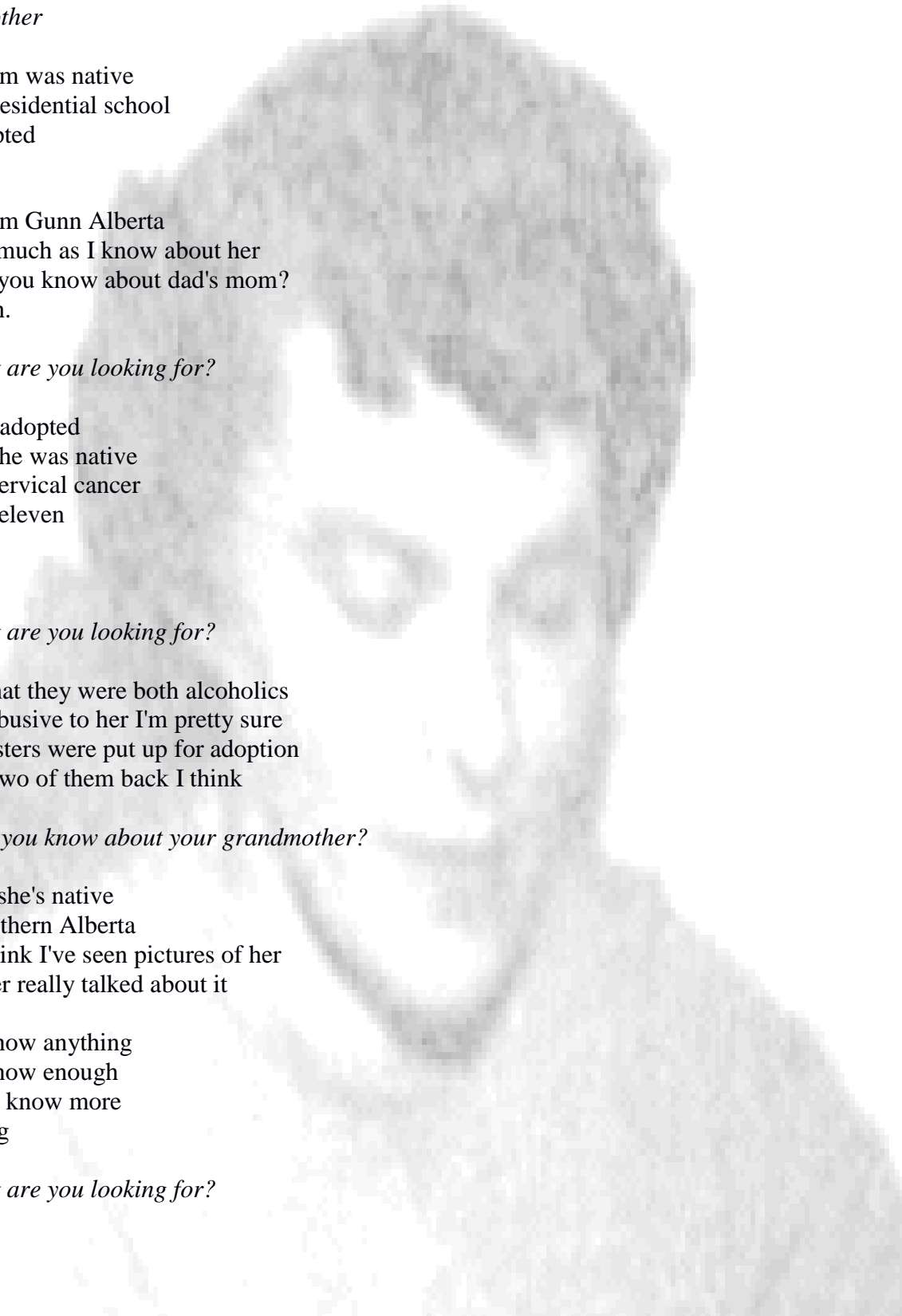
I think that they were both alcoholics
he was abusive to her I'm pretty sure
all his sisters were put up for adoption
dad got two of them back I think

What do you know about your grandmother?

just that she's native
from southern Alberta
I don't think I've seen pictures of her
he's never really talked about it

I don't know anything
I don't know enough
I want to know more
I'm trying

But what are you looking for?



The above poem was created from conversations between myself, my partner, and his family. His struggle to learn about his grandmother and understand his identity impact how I view expressions of Aboriginal identity. The process of creating, sharing, and spending time with this poem has lead to the creation of new questions around not only what is being shared and how, but why this woman matters to me and to him. The legacy of colonialism has a role in how grandmother's story is told, understood, and who hears it. But what am I looking for?

I am a child of adoption, and both my partner and I were raised by overextended resilient single mothers. The realities of their circumstances meant that that as children we were both left to figure out much of the world, and who we are in it, for ourselves. My partner and I connect through our individual and shared desire to learn the stories of who we are, to make the stories we were not told as children a part of our family together. But the interest in Grandmother is particular, as if being Aboriginal, the story of being an Aboriginal woman, somehow matters differently than the others. But why does it seem to matter differently? And how might it matter differently to my partner?

I think the story of grandmother matters differently to me because many of the realities of grandmother's life caused by colonization offer an explanation, point to reasons, for why certain things have occurred in my partner's life and the life of his family. Understanding this enables me to feel as though I know him. But her life is more than an explanation for all the bad things that have happened. I must acknowledge to myself and you that this story, this interest in Grandmother, while in part rooted in a desire to connect with my partner, also comes from a comfortable place of distance, a distance that protects me from the pain and loss that come from having lived this story

From a comfortable place of distance.

Colonization & Space

What unsettles culture is ‘matter out of place’—the breaking of our unwritten rules and codes. Dirt in the garden is fine, but dirt in one’s bedroom is ‘matter out of place’—a sign of pollution, of symbolic boundaries transgressed, of taboos broken. What we do with ‘matter out of place’ is to sweep it up, throw it out, restore it to order, bring back the normal state of affairs. The retreat of many cultures towards ‘closure’ against foreigners, intruders, aliens, and ‘others’ is part of the same process of purification.

(Hall, 1997, p.236)

It is through space that people experience the world, learn about their position, and the positions of others in it. Space should never be seen as neutral as it very much serves the interests of a particular system and those who benefit from it. In the context of the Canadian state, colonial space was and continues to be created through the “psychic erasure and material displacement” of Aboriginal peoples from their land in order to make room for settlement and development that served imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy (Buffam, 2011, p.339). Aboriginal peoples were removed and communities forced onto pieces of land known as reserves, they were seen as existing on the margins, an inconvenient reality. Even though many Aboriginal peoples did not settle on reserves, Aboriginal space, as constructed through the colonial lens, is still very much thought to exist on the margins, outside of the colonizers’ colonial space—the city, and limited to existing within the colonial space the colonizer created

for them to occupy—the reserve. Space is where colonization happened and happens, and while space continues to perpetuate colonization, it can also be used as a tool to challenge it.

How is this space being used to challenge power relations? To maintain them?

Challenging colonization. Maintaining colonization.

I am writing this trying to give them what they want while trying to write against what they want while trying to be who I want to be while being who they want me to be while trying to change who we are while reinforcing who we are.

How groups of people are represented and understood through space can cast them in particular lights that may or may not represent their views of who they are or serve them. It can also silence them by making their identities, experiences, and histories invisible. Many have written on the experiences of those on the margins of society and how they navigate their lives and identities through the spaces that they encounter (Peake & Ray, 2001; Skelton, 2013; Venzant & McCready, 2011). Much writing has also been done exploring the particular impacts colonized space has on Aboriginal youth, as well as the ways they are reclaiming and using space to challenge this (Buffam, 2011; Lashua, 2006; Richmond & Smith, 2012; Skinner & Masuda, 2013; Swanson, 2010; Van & Halas, 2006; Wang, 2010).

Skelton (2013) writes that how youth move through and experience space is crucial to an understanding of identity formation. She writes that space is the product of existing social relations and youth actively interpret, alter, and produce spaces (2013). Space is structured around and rooted in historic and continuing power relations that impact the ability of certain

peoples to move through the world (Skelton, 2013). These power relations impact what spaces people can enter, how they enter them, as well as perceptions and expressions of identities (Peake & Ray, 2001). However, people also use space as a means to challenge the dominant stories being told through space that seek to perpetuate these power relations (Buffam, 2011; Peake & Ray, 2001; Venzant & McCready, 2011). This act of trying to reclaim space and use it to tell different stories about who we are is still situated within the broader context of colonization, and as such those groups and individuals using space in this way will often meet resistance. In addition, those taking up this work must navigate the difficult task of reclaiming and challenging space, while at the same time being part of these deeply imbedded power relations.

Existing work into the relationship between Aboriginal youth identity and space explores the impacts of colonial space on Aboriginal youth, as well as how Aboriginal youth are creating and challenging space. Researchers Skinner and Masuda (2013) explored health inequities in Winnipeg with Aboriginal youth artist-activists and found that the dominant spaces in this city produced physical and social threats that limited the physical and social mobility of Aboriginal youth. These limitations impacted the health of the youth as it prevented them from accessing necessary services.

From a comfortable place of distance.

Both Richmond and Smith (2012) as well as Van and Halas (2006) focused specifically on the experiences of Aboriginal students in the public school system. Through discussions with Aboriginal youth, the writers found that the presence of racial difference and racism in schools is often conveyed in ways that go unnoticed to non-Aboriginal peoples. The authors also

discovered that the colonial spaces that exist within schools are created and perpetuated; they are not neutral, and reflect imbedded normalized ideas about the superiority of whiteness and Eurocentric perspectives (Richmond & Smith, 2012; Van & Halas, 2006). The Aboriginal students that Richmond and Smith (2012) spoke with shared that identifying as or feeling perceived as an Aboriginal person within this space directly impacted their willingness to seek out social support. The public school system, functioning as a colonial space, did not encourage supportive relations between Aboriginal students and their non-Aboriginal classmates and educators, and instead served to reinforce existing power relations.

From a comfortable place of distance.

Aboriginal youth challenge colonial space like this through the process of reclaiming space within existing colonial space. Buffam (2011), Lashua (2006), and Wang (2010) all spent time engaging with Aboriginal youth participating in a hip-hop based recreational program in a Canadian city. These writers found that the youth were creating distinct forms of hip-hop to express their identities from their perspectives and challenge existing ideas around who people thought they were. The youths creation of this space disrupted the racist perception that authentic Aboriginal identity can only be understood as existing in specific historical locations (Buffam, 2011). While the program represents a space that was created for them within a colonial context, the youth participants used the tools of the space to create a new space that told their stories of who they were and allowed them to “refashion themselves as politically efficacious social actors” (Buffam, 2011, p. 338). They were able to redefine the space they occupied and in doing

this give a different meaning to the position they occupied within the broader existing colonial space of their city.

In their article, Morgan & Warren (2011) also write about the use and creation of space by Aboriginal youth as a means of challenging dominant power relations. The authors argues that participation in hip-hop by Aboriginal youth reaffirms the participants' Aboriginality as a primary component of their identity and provides them with a means of expressing and challenging their social marginalization. Through their research they concluded that the production of Aboriginal hip-hop is a politically and culturally complicated process that can be used to connect alienated Aboriginal youth with the broader Indigenous social discourse, in which the Indigenous movement and its political achievements are emphasized.

From a comfortable place of distance.

Ignace and Ignace (2005) discuss the use and creation of space by Aboriginal youth living between a reserve and a smaller urban community. The authors found that the youth were creating their own space within colonial space as a means of challenging a dominant narrative on Aboriginal identity and navigating their own experiences with identity as they moved between these spaces. The authors focus particularly on the youth's use of graffiti, or 'tagging', and offer that this form of artistic expression reflects an ongoing re-thinking of personal and collective Aboriginal identity. This idea is informed by the explicit cultural and social messages, deeply connected to Aboriginal understandings and experiences, found in the graffiti art done by the youth.

The knowledge presented thus far shows the relationship between colonization and space, and the specific ways this relationship impacts Aboriginal identity and youth. It has also explored how Aboriginal youth are using space to challenge existing colonizing space. However, it has not yet explored, at least not explicitly, the role of non-Aboriginal peoples in this system, and more specifically the role of researchers.

As we move through the spaces in our lives, experience them, building an awareness, how might we begin not only to recognize colonial space and efforts to reclaim colonial space, but start to challenge and support these spaces ourselves, from our various positionalities?

3

Decolonizing Research—Decolonizing Self

Why do they think that by looking at us they will find the answers to our problems, why don't they look at themselves?

(Smith, 1999, p.198)

This section is titled Decolonizing Research—Decolonizing Self because I do not believe one is possible without the other. The idea that the work we do is not connected to who we are or our day-to-day realities is a lie. I feel that in acknowledging and exploring this, how we come to our research, and interact with it throughout the process we begin to deneutralize and complicate a key space in the ongoing process of colonization: academia, and through it, disseminated knowledge. In this section I will share how different Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars are

attempting to create space for discussion and action around decolonization work, and provide ideas and tools for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, students, practitioners, and activists to undertake decolonizing practices in their own work.

I stated at the beginning of all this that I came to a realization that I had no choice but to do this, to explicitly include myself in this process: that I now knew no other way. I had a specific idea of what this inclusion of self would look like because I felt so open, so raw. However, throughout this process my expression of inclusion of self has taken different forms, as I have taken different forms in how I relate to this process. I have realized that sometimes emotional distance from our work is needed, sometimes it cannot be avoided, in order for us to keep moving. But this distance is part of me, it is part of my research process, I do not want to hide it or pretend it is neutral. And so as you have read through this document, as you continue to read through it, you will likely see and feel this through the different forms this text takes. Some parts are very intimate, while others may seem to contain none of me. However, I am here and have been here through all of this. Just trying to keep moving.

More examples of decolonization processes in practice by scholars, from various positionalities, need to be expressed in order to create increased understanding of how researchers engaging in these processes are actually coming to and experiencing them in their lives. The possibilities I was presented with for how one conducts research did not show me a way to do this, and so I was left lost. I knew what I felt I needed to do, but I did not yet know how. It is one thing to know that the presented options silence who you are and your beliefs—it is quite another to know how to challenge dominant ways of knowing and thinking.

I started by beginning to read for pleasure again and not just for the required acquisition of information. I sought out, and have chosen to present here, works primarily by Indigenous, black, and feminist thinkers that draw from their lived experiences to explore power, identity, and relationship. It is through this reading and the thoughtful guidance and support of my thesis committee that I was able to find different ways of thinking about, presenting, and participating in research as a researcher and person.

In this section I will provide a brief overview of four research methods that together inform how I have engaged in this research process. I will begin by presenting the ideas of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, as they form the theoretical foundation of my thinking about research. After this I will move into a discussion of the more specific ways of doing and presenting research that I have used as a non-Aboriginal researcher in my own decolonizing work: critical self-reflection, personal narrative, and autoethnography. Together these approaches influence not only how I entered each of the three spaces presented in this text, but how I have interacted with every part of this process.

These possibilities were never presented to me during my undergraduate degree, and either in a flippant manner or not at all in any of the research methods courses my department recommended I take for my graduate degree. To find them I had to seek out an arts-based research methods course in another department taught by one of my committee members and receive special permission to take it. So while the very existence of these approaches in academic discourse is promising and illustrates that space for disparate marginalized voices within academia exists and is increasing, particularly within certain disciplines, the approaches that I will now discuss are still very much on the margins. Scholars writing from these positions are constantly having to justify why their voices and experiences matter to those individuals in

power, who continue to maintain a rigid idea of academic merit and knowledge that perpetuates the legacy of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Decolonizing Methodologies

In an earlier work of hers, Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2008) acknowledges the difficulty in undertaking decolonizing research and presents an argument for how researchers might proceed. To begin she writes that the research being done must ultimately “serve and inform the political liberation struggle of indigenous peoples” (2008, p. 89). This statement alone is of course not enough, as ideas on how this is best achieved will be very different depending on the position of the researcher. However, the language she uses politicizes this type of research from the beginning.

Smith (2008) believes that qualitative research provides a greater range of tools to explore the complex and fluid nature of human experiences, to challenge representation and create space for decolonization, and for these reasons is viewed by Smith (2008) as the best existing framework in which to begin this process, but only when researchers can move beyond the outsider looking in, the disconnected consumer. It is not enough then for researchers to just make changes within existing qualitative research. They must use these tools in the transformation of the institution of research, use the tools of qualitative research to question the underlying assumptions and power structures inherent in dominant ways of “organizing, conducting, and disseminating research and knowledge” (p.88).

Smith’s (2012) major work *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* expands on these ideas further, serving as a reference, intended primarily for Indigenous scholars, on how decolonization within research can occur. Smith (2012) writes that decolonizing methodologies are not really about the actual steps involved in selecting what

research methods are used, but focuses on the broader context that research, as it is typically conceived, exists in and perpetuates. Decolonizing methodologies must look critically at research as an institution and its relationship to power in our society. This means that researchers must look at their role within society and as part of this institution and form an awareness of research as an institution that implicates them in the process of colonization.

There is a tendency for those involved in the research process to see their work as part of creating a better world and to view this as the primary goal of research (Smith, 2012). This perspective of research is what allows researchers to view themselves as good Samaritans, as helpers, and it is what allows them to neutralize themselves, to depoliticize themselves and their role. Smith explains that research functions to both regulate and reinforce interlocking systems of oppression through “the formal rules of individual scholarly disciplines and scientific paradigms, and the institutions that support them (including the state)” and through “the myriad of representations and ideological constructions of the Other in scholarly and ‘popular’ works” (2012, p. 40).

I do not believe that most researchers doing work related to Aboriginal peoples seek to contribute to the perpetuation of colonization. That desire to ‘make things better’ comes from an authentic place, but that researchers often unknowingly support these functions because they are doing research within a context that has taught them a certain way ‘good research’ must be done, while at the same time teaching them what an Aboriginal person is and is not. Challenging and unpacking these ideas, ideas that have come to be truths to many, is very challenging, especially when alternatives are never presented, or are presented in a way that discounts their value.

Critical Self-Reflection

Karen Max (2005) is not an Indigenous scholar. She identifies as a white woman and describes herself as an ally to Aboriginal peoples. Like Linda Tuhiwai Smith she shares a way of thinking about research that challenges not only how we do research, but more broadly what research is, who it serves, and our role in it. However, the position she writes from is very different. While Smith states that her work is primarily for the Indigenous researcher, Karen Max is speaking to the non-Indigenous researcher. She writes that before engaging with Indigenous peoples, non-Indigenous researchers must engage with themselves. *Engage with themselves* this again can be interpreted and enacted in so many ways, but Max makes clear that this engagement must occur on more than a superficial level, that self-engagement needs to be centered in research.

Max (2005) states that while there exists an excessive body of research on Indigenous peoples by white peoples, there remains very little research that explores whiteness, shifting the gaze off of the other and on to the self. While I agree with Max, this article was written in 2005, and I do feel that this is increasingly changing and that white privilege in particular has become much more widely acknowledged and discussed. However, I still find a theme of distance within this area of inquiry, both in academia and in the activist community, that white bodies engaging with these ideas, and I include myself here, struggle with implicating themselves beyond a superficial level and fear presenting themselves in a negative light. There is a tendency to point the finger at other white people, the ones saying and doing the wrong things, and not recognize these things in ourselves. Naming our location and understanding how it influences our lived experiences is an ongoing reflective process that needs to be present throughout the research process, and, I would argue, throughout our lives outside of our research.

Personal Narrative

The inclusion of personal narrative as a tool of decolonization has served as a gateway into deeper ideas and connections that I would not have otherwise accessed. During my proposal defense it was these pieces that seemed to most resonate with my thesis committee and make most clear what I was wanting to do with this work. Personal narratives can serve to reveal things to others about ourselves that we are not yet able or ready to see ourselves. Using personal narrative in this research process has enabled me to more fully share my role in this process and make myself vulnerable (Ellis, 2004).

Jill Hodges is an Indigenous scholar who believes in and uses personal narratives to create nontraditional scholarship. She writes that, “many scholars who are not white or who do not fall into the traditional socioeconomic classes/cultures of academia have been ‘expected’ to write for publication as if they had no history other than traditional, Western academic values, knowledge(s), and experiences” (2010, p.12). She feels that traditional academic writing asks us to separate ourselves into parts, to see ourselves as only researcher in this context and forget all the other roles we occupy (2010).

Academia continues to change and include more diverse voices, yet there are still many scholars who continue to write for “the traditionally constructed academic audience which has been Western, male, white, and middle/upper-class” and only see valid meaningful research as that which has meaning to this audience (Hodges, 2010, p.12). She advocates for the continued and increased use of research that challenges this and embraces elements that are “indirect and non-linear, emotional, non-argumentative, located in memory, history, and personal experience, non-adversarial, and tolerant of complexity and ambiguity” (2010, p.13). Academia and the knowledge it produces should not be written for one audience, and this audience should not be

the same as those who benefit from the continuation of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography brings the personal into the spaces where ideas about one another are formed and power structures maintained. It is a process that requires the critical movement of thoughts inward and outward, between ourselves and the world around us. Historically, valid ethnographic research, consisting primarily of anthropological studies, was seen as presenting an accurate account, based on the observations of a neutral researcher, of peoples and their cultures. However, this approach has led to the creation and perpetuation of harmful ideas about Indigenous peoples and cultures because, far from being accurate accounts, these ideas were largely constructed through the lens of very biased, predominantly male, white researchers. This approach has tended to either exotify and mystify Indigenous peoples, or portray them as less than human (Forte, 2013; Smith, 2013).

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that “seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010, p. 1). This approach requires the explicit presence of critical analysis and self-reflection/personal narrative in the study of space, asking researchers to question their own understandings of identities and cultures (Ellis et al, 2010; Holman Jones, 2005). The approach is also an attempt to challenge and problematize the history and use of problematic anthropological approaches to ethnography.

Boylorn and Orbe explore this more fully in their writing on the use of critical autoethnography (2013). They write that critical autoethnography is rooted in the idea that research is not separate from our lives: research is life and life is research (2013). Rather than

attempting to hide this, researchers should look to methods that enable them to explore the politics of their position and address “processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain” (Madison, 2012, p.5).

Autoethnographic research can take different forms depending on what the researcher is trying to emphasize with their work (Ellis, 2007). In my own research, you will see a constantly shifting focus from myself to the spaces and ideas I engage with. The form this research has taken is a reflection of my shifting focus throughout the process. Sharing this shifting focus as part of the form the research has taken is important as it allows me to draw attention to, and problematize, my role in perpetuating colonial ideas through my actions and thinking, while actively trying to challenge them. It has also allowed me to explore and share the complicated, personal, political, and emotional aspects of research and being *a researcher*.

Within autoethnography this shifting between the personal experience and the research experience, often blurring the lines between the two, is sometimes described as narrative ethnography. Narrative ethnographies refer to texts presented in the form of personal narrative, including creative writing or poetry, which incorporate the researcher's experiences into their descriptions and analysis of others, or in this case space (Tedlock, 1991). As previously discussed, these two aspects are in reality very much connected and presenting them together can share layers of the experience with the reader that may have otherwise remained hidden. However, when the researcher's lived reality is incorporated in to the process and form the research takes, some difficult relational ethical situations can arise (Ellis, 2007).

We do not live in isolation, and our stories are often also the stories of others in our lives. Claiming these stories as our own and not recognizing the impacts sharing them can have is reckless. When possible, the personal narratives I have shared in this text have also been shared

with the people in my life they implicate, allowing them to respond and share with me how the pieces impact them. In some cases the pieces have been altered based on their feedback, and have ultimately become richer because of this exchange. I believe that incorporating personal relationships and self into one's research narrative in this way holds the researcher to a greater degree of accountability. In sharing these experiences the researcher has a responsibility to represent their loved ones as they would want to be presented and to do research that is ultimately rooted in an ethic of love.

I don't know how to do it. How to keep moving with this and not walk, run, away from this entire process. I don't know how to do this as me, acting against this, acting within it. Within this I can't. Within this, I realize as I come to here, I am still always this. But I told myself I needed to keep moving, they told me to keep me moving, so I give them what I think they want. What I feel they need to see value in this. What is required. What fits. This is the only way I could write this part.

And yes, this makes things more complicated and yes, I do not know (no one does), but I had no choice but to do it this way. I know there are other ways, but I can't do them here and now and keep moving. I don't know how. I am too within this.

4

Interactions with (De)colonized Space

The tendency to overvalue work by white scholars, coupled with the suggestion that such work constitutes the only relevant discourse, evades the issue of potential inaccessible locations-spaces white theorists cannot occupy

(hooks, 1990, p. 55)

The two central purposes of this process are first, to explore reclaimed colonial space within the context of colonization through a reflective exploration of three public spaces that I have identified as being created for and/or by Aboriginal youth in the city of Halifax, Nova Scotia. The second is to situate myself, as a white body, in the research process and explore how I participate in, and am impacted by, the ongoing process of colonization. The focus of this process is on space as a tool of colonization and decolonization and the two central questions all of this is about are: How does space function as both a tool of colonization and decolonization? And what role do I play in these processes?

I use the term (De)colonized Space to describe space that functions as both reclaimed colonial space and part of an ongoing process of colonization. More specifically, it refers to space that is being claimed and used by Aboriginal peoples to express who they are, while at the same time being located on settler occupied Aboriginal land within a process of ongoing colonization.

As discussed in the previous section, I have attempted to root my research in an understanding of decolonizing approaches, as conceptualized by Linda Tuhiwai Smith. With this

informing my approach, I have had to explore how I, as a non-Aboriginal person, might engage with the three spaces in a way that exposes my location and implicates it. Using critical autoethnography I have entered the three spaces I will discuss and explored these questions using critical self-reflections and personal narrative. These methods inform how I entered the spaces, how I have presented the interactions in this section, and how I have approached writing and presenting this entire text.

Questions that Guided my Interactions

While in each space I engaged with the following questions to guide my reflections:

- How am I accessing this space? Where did I find out about it and how?
- Why am I identifying it as a space created for or by Aboriginal youth?
- What impact does the space have on who is present and who is not?
- What stories are being told about Aboriginal youth identities through these spaces?

The intention of these questions is to provide insight into the complicated relationship between the process of ongoing colonization and reclaiming colonized space. These questions also function to reveal some of the imbedded assumptions I carry. By engaging critically with myself and these spaces, and including this as part of my research, I acknowledge that much of what I have been taught, both formally and in more subversive ways, about Aboriginal identity is not neutral and I implicate myself in both the perpetuation of colonized space and the reclaiming of space. In addition, when appropriate and possible, I will research the publicly available broader context of each space and its location in order to engage some of the explicit politics and power relations impacting these spaces asking: When did this space come to be and how? Who is responsible for its existence and continuation? And why is it located where it is?

Ethics

Although this research process does not directly involve people, I still choose to submit it for approval, with the support of my thesis advisor, to the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University and Mi'kmaw Ethics Watch, the regional authority on research being done with/among Mi'kmaw peoples. My research was ultimately exempt by both boards from going through a full ethical review because of the focus on space and how I position myself within the research process. The feedback was that sharing my personal experiences and reflections on Aboriginal spaces in this region posed no harm to Mi'kmaq peoples.

However I feel that there are ethical risks involved with this type of exploration, even if the focus is on space and my experiences, which I need to discuss. These spaces are an extension of people and need to be protected. In the context of a smaller city like Halifax politicizing these spaces does have the potential to put them at risk, and by extension the Aboriginal youth using them. It is for these reasons that the spaces are not named and referred to instead as Space 1, Space 2, and Space 3. In a colonial context and within a colonial institution, it is never possible to eliminate all risk, and I constantly struggle with how this text may function to reinforce the very things I am struggling to challenge through it. I absolutely do not believe the exemption this research was given means that I am ethically off the hook or that this research actually poses no harm to Aboriginal peoples.

In using critical reflections and personal narrative as my primary research tools, I acknowledge that the ideas presented are very much *my* experience of a truth, but that this truth has meaning outside of me. My experience, with this research process and how I have chosen to represent it, will not be the exact same as anyone else's, as even people who live through the same experiences often tell very different stories of those experiences. However, the themes that

have emerged out of this process are themes that others may connect with, disconnect with, have experienced differently, or similarity, and this can provide a space for discussion and even change. It is through this space that I feel the ethics of this work will more fully be understood and explored.

Space 1

Why am I here?

Next to him in this space

Why is he here?

Watching them in this space

The performance

Watching

Watching

I sit back in a dark corner

sipping a cocktail

In a context of ongoing colonization what can our minds really allow us to learn about one another through watching? In these moments of watching I want to step outside of my safety, watching from the corner, put the eyes on myself. What do I see, watching myself watching them?

How am I accessing this space? Where did I find out about it and how?

I found out about this space through a social media invitation that I received because I was a follower of the music group who would be performing in the space. I began following the group after reading about some of the activism they had been participating in around racist representations of Aboriginal peoples in the city I grew up in. I also had previously seen one of the artists perform as an individual DJ during my undergraduate degree and was curious about the direction this new project would take, as well as the overt politics attached to it. Soon after receiving the online invitation, posters were put up around the city sharing the event with the wider public. I initially accepted the invitation into this space because I really enjoyed the music this group was creating and supported what they were trying to achieve politically, but soon after it became apparent that this space would also serve another purpose. And so while I entered this space rather organically, I also came to it with an awareness that my interactions in it would serve to form part of my research process.

Why am I identifying it as a space created for or by Aboriginal youth? What stories are being told about Aboriginal youth identities through these spaces?

If the space does not explicitly state that it is an Aboriginal youth space I am left to navigate why I have identified it as such. In doing this I am able to begin to unpack and think through the internal, instant and often unchallenged ways Aboriginal youth identity markers are interpreted and categorized. In our day to day realities we are all constantly entering spaces and quickly interpreting what they are about and who they serve as a way to make sense of where we are. These quick processes are rarely questioned, particularly by individuals who feel they have power and are represented in most, if not all, of the spaces that they occupy (Richmond & Smith, 2012). I want to take these quick assumptions and explore them more deeply.

I am going to start first by sharing my unpacked assumptions about this space before outlining the thinking that informs these assumptions in more detail. Simply put, I have identified this space as an Aboriginal youth space created through the presence of Aboriginal performing artists, who are primarily speaking to Aboriginal youth and issues impacting them. I also identify the space in this way because I perceived Aboriginal youth to be present and engaged in the space at the time.

I interpret it as a space created through the presence of Aboriginal performing artists, who are primarily speaking to Aboriginal youth and the issues impacting them

This idea is formed in part by how the artists have publicly described themselves and what they do, along with the types of music, images, and themes I observed while in the space (Young, 2014). The members of the group have all self-identified as Aboriginal peoples and the music they create and perform mixes hip-hop, electronic, and dubstep music with Aboriginal drumming and singing (Young, 2014). The group's performance roots are in the late night hip-hop scene, youth making up their core audience. This is of course not surprising as hip-hop began as a political movement by African-American youth against dominant forces of oppression. Looking to this, there is a new history of hip-hop being written by Aboriginal youth who have taken it up as a method of resistance to articulate their politics of marginality (Buffam, 2011; Hollands, 2005; Ignace & Ignace, 2005).

On this particular night, the music was presented in the space along with pop culture representations of Aboriginal peoples on a large screen; clips from Disney's *Pocahontas*, *Back to the Future III*, and *He-Man* were featured. These images immediately resonated with me as a person who grew up in the late 80s and the 90s, the time frame when these images first appeared

and were popular. One can assume that they were selected with the age of the audience in mind.

When I see these images I am immediately struck by the unmasking of their false neutrality in this space. Representations like these are present in so much of North American culture and for the most part are never questioned because they reproduce colonial understandings that have been for so long normalized. The particular pop culture relics shown in this space are loved by so many twenty somethings and looked at primarily with nostalgia, as just fun entertainment. And while yes, they are this, what other stories about who we are and how we see one another do they tell? This space allows those stories to be told. This decolonizing reclamation of space takes away the false neutrality of these images and politicizes them, attempting to force the audience to stop and think about them through a different lens.

I perceived Aboriginal youth to be present and engaged in the space at the time

I perceived

I

I perceived. This part of this sentence is key because articulating the complicated ways Aboriginal identity has been constructed within an imperialist capitalist white-supremacists patriarchal society does not prevent us from reproducing these ideas in our day-to-day realities. So when I write that *I perceived Aboriginal youth to be present and engaged in the space at the time* what I mean is that I as a white women use visible biological and cultural markers that our society tells me are associated with this identity to identify Aboriginal youth in this way. It is very possible that Aboriginal youth were present that represented themselves in ways that would not automatically signal to me their identity. It is also very possible that non-Aboriginal youth who bore these markers were wrongly perceived by me.

What impact does the space have on who is present and who is not?

This space had a number of impacts on who was present and who was not. Though it was publicly advertised, it did take place in a night club and therefore in order to attend you had to be of legal drinking age. This meant that a large number of younger Aboriginal youth could not attend. The sale and consumption of alcohol at the venue also does not make this a safe space for anyone who does not want to be around people consuming alcohol or feel they may put themselves at risk by engaging in alcohol consumption. This space is not a family friendly space, and anyone with children would either have to find alternative care, likely at a cost, or not attend. The event cost 20 dollars making it inaccessible to anyone not able or willing to spend that much money on an entertainment event. The space itself was situated in the city, making it difficult for non-urban Aboriginal youth to attend. Finally, the venue is not one that is associated with being a space created for or by Aboriginal youth, so Aboriginal youth may not feel as comfortable or familiar with it as they might in a space that had been created for them.

Broader context: When did this space come to be and how? Why is it located where it is?

This music group was booked to perform for one night at a music venue in the North End of Halifax. This venue is privately owned, and operated by the manager of another Halifax night club. I was unable to find information on who exactly owns the space, however its primary function is to showcase musical acts that will bring in a crowd and generate revenue. The neighborhood where it is located is currently undergoing a process of gentrification, and this can be seen very clearly in its immediate surroundings. The Mi'kMaw Friendship Centre has been located just down the street since the 1970s, a YMCA shelter is located directly across the street, along with a brand new condo development and a trendy coffee shop. This location allows the business owners to draw a broad range of diverse audiences.

Space 2

This makes me sad.

Nothing against her...

just sad that she is so full of hatred

This makes me sad.

Nothing against her...

just sad that she is so full of hatred

The above poem was created using comments posted online in response to the perspectives shared through the Aboriginal youth space I will discuss here.

How am I accessing this space? Where did I find out about it and how?

I accessed this space while engaging in my usual mid-week routine of pulling up a variety of news sources in an attempt to try and stay somewhat informed on what is happening locally and internationally around issues that I care about. This particular space was found within a weekly feature of a local news source that highlights different perspectives on different issues within our city. The space provides more personal perspectives on issues and allows different community members to have voice.

This weekly feature consistently provides members of the community with an opportunity to discuss topics from their perspectives, as opposed to being the subject of articles written about them. It also takes up a full page within the news source, giving it a significant amount of physical space within the news source. I always find these pieces particularly interesting because Halifax is such a small city, and I like to know how other community members are experiencing it, as well as how we respond to one another's experiences. To gain some insight into this, in addition to reading the articles themselves, I always also engage with the comments made in response.

The space I am going to discuss here is a specific piece that was shared through this weekly feature. It was written by a young woman and local Indigenous activist, who I had seen at both political and leisure events around the community. My usual routine of reading this feature, the political nature of the title, combined with the description of the author, and recognizing her from the photo that was published, are all what caused me to enter the space.

Why am I identifying it as a space created for or by Aboriginal youth?

I identified this as a space created by an Aboriginal youth. I identified this space in this way because the author, and as such the creator of the space, identified herself as an Indigenous

activist. In addition to this, my interactions with her outside of this context—where I have seen her, how she presents herself, who she associates with—lead me to the conclusion that she is a person that would fall into the broad category of youth or young adult. Beyond how she identifies and how I perceive her as an individual, I perceived this particular space as an Aboriginal youth space because of the contents of the article. The author referenced experiences specifically associated with youth culture/young adult culture and being an Aboriginal person.

What impact does the space have on who is present and who is not?

This space is interesting because it was created by a single individual and takes the form of a written work. The creator of the space used the space to problematize the widespread celebratory framing of Canada Day and present her own perspective on the celebration as an Indigenous activist. She was able to reclaim a space within a colonized space and use it to speak out against colonization. However, in order for her to create this space and reclaim space from colonization, her work had to be approved by the larger space it was contained within. The quality of her writing, her education, the particular political stance she took, and likely who she was outside of this space, all played a role in this. Not just any Aboriginal person can get published in a widespread news source, and this particular news source does not belong to Aboriginal peoples. This space was allowed to exist because this woman's story made sense to the people who decide what stories are worth sharing to the public through their news source.

As such, this space may appear to represent a fairly closed space that does not support the participation of many Aboriginal youth. However, an increased number of Aboriginal youth may have been able to interact with this space in a different way because the news source is widely distributed and is also free. So while only one person created the space, other Aboriginal youth are able to access the ideas presented and engage with them, outside of this space. In addition to

being published in print form, the work was also available online, allowing it to reach an even larger number of people. Online, people are also able to participate in the space by responding to the piece in the comments section. This unfortunately made the space, and by extension the creator, vulnerable to hate speech and harassment by non-Aboriginal peoples who did not share or respect the perspectives the author expressed.

What stories are being told about Aboriginal youth identities through these spaces?

The stories being told through this space position Aboriginal youth perspectives on the margins. The space itself takes up a very small amount of physical space, broadly speaking, and is located within a larger colonial space that has the ultimate say over whether or not this space can exist. The space shares a different way of thinking about a celebration that is seen by many as neutral. In presenting this perspective, and taking an overt political stance, the author was met with resistance and hostility. Even though this space is already operating on the margins it was viewed as threatening and as something that quickly needed to be discredited and silenced.

The following week the same news source published a response to the article by a non-Aboriginal man who did not agree with the perspective shared. The response was published in the same space and format, presented as a different perspective on the issue. However, the act of publishing this response, in combination with the comments that were shared online, tell the story of the silencing and devaluing of Aboriginal voices, and in this case the voice of a young Aboriginal woman, in order to appease those who benefit from colonization and whose voices are vastly overrepresented in public space. The space was quickly (re)colonized as a colonial space.

This space also tells another story I have seen and heard many times. The story of Aboriginal women trying to create change for themselves, their families, and their communities.

A story of great bravery and love. The creator of this space identifies herself as an Indigenous activist and shares her photo publically. She put herself in a position of great vulnerability in doing this, as many Aboriginal women continue to do around the world every day fighting against the various manifestations of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Space 3

I have walked in this space

Spoken in this space

Eaten in this space

With ease

With arrogant fearlessness.

It becomes clearer now

why you might feel uncomfortable here.

How am I accessing this space? Where did I find out about it and how?

The space created by Aboriginal youth that I will discuss in this section does not exist in a single centralized physical or geographic space. Currently, the space exists primarily on social media, though not by choice. This space was created by a small group of Aboriginal youth who are currently in the process of trying to access and reclaim a physical space of their own within a broader institution they belong to. This institution has a space in existence that was created for, and is intended to serve, Aboriginal members of the institution. However, in order for this group of Aboriginal youth to access the physical space, a space that was created to serve them, they must go through an application process.

The relationship between the space created by the institution and the space the youth have created collectively represents a unique example to explore because it illustrates the impact access to physical space can have on Aboriginal youth and their ability to reclaim colonial spaces. The control over access to space speaks to the broader issues of power: who has it and who decides who can have it. This power is a function of the ongoing process of colonization that seeks to marginalize certain voices, while centralizing others. Further, this example also illustrates how institutions, which claim to want to serve and support Aboriginal youth, but are rooted in imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, may actually alienate these youth from the very spaces they want them to use.

Why am I identifying this space as a space created for or by Aboriginal youth?

Because the space created by Aboriginal youth does not exist in a physical sense, the focus of this example is instead on the relationship and disconnect between a space created for Aboriginal youth by a colonial institution and a resulting nonphysical space created by the Aboriginal youth themselves.

I identify the space created *by* the youth as an Aboriginal youth space because the members who created it are known to me and self-identify as Aboriginal youth. I identify the space created *for* Aboriginal youth as such because this is the stated purpose of the space on the web page of the institution. In addition, the space is named in a way that suggests this.

What impact does the space have on who is present and who is not?

I will begin by discussing the space created by the Aboriginal youth and discuss why the role of physical space matters. Not having a physical space in which to situate the collective can impact the ability of other Aboriginal youth to participate. Because their location is constantly shifting other Aboriginal youth may find it difficult to know where the space is located as well as how and when they can access or participate in the space. Other individuals who share in the commonalities of this collective may not participate in the space because they are not known to the existing collective and/or they do not know of the space.

The lack of a physical space at present is also meaningful in the message it sends to the Aboriginal youth who are trying to create a space for themselves within the space that is supposed to be for them within the broader institution. It sends a message that yes, this space is intended for Aboriginal youth, but in order to use it, you must explain to us, by filling out this paperwork, how you intended to use it, who you are, and what messages you intended to share through it. The thinking behind this type of a process is to ensure that any groups using the space within the institution and forming a space defined in part by their Aboriginal identity are not doing harm to Aboriginal peoples, the space intended for Aboriginal peoples within this institution, or the institution itself.

However, the colonizing connotations of such a process require Aboriginal youth to abide by the rules of the colonizer in a space which is supposed to be their own. Having this type of a

process as policy can serve to alienate Aboriginal youth spaces, existing on the margins, trying to access this centralized space. Individuals and groups may decide never to use the space because of this; it functions as a barrier to the space and not as a bridge. In addition, those Aboriginal youth who do decide to go through the application process may in the end be denied access to use the space because the space *they have created* does not fit with the space *the institution has created*.

Though it is a space created for them, Aboriginal youth have limited control over it, they had limited say in how it was created, what messages it shares, and how it continues to function. Considering all this, it is not surprising that on the many occasions I have entered the space it was almost entirely empty. Clearly, creating a physical space alone is not enough. What then does it mean for a space to be an Aboriginal youth space? Do Aboriginal youth need to have a powerful voice within the space? Do they need to be able to access it? Does it need to express their identities as defined by them?

What stories are being told about Aboriginal youth identities through these spaces?

The fact that a space for Aboriginal youth exists within this institution can be interpreted as a positive first step in an ongoing process of decolonization. However, it raises the pertinent question: Is it possible for colonial institutions to engage in decolonization using imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal structures and ways of knowing one another? This approach is the type that looks great on paper and to outsiders assessing inclusive practices and representation, but is actually doing little in the way of change for Aboriginal youth.

Can a space that has been created for Aboriginal youth become a space created by Aboriginal youth using these structures and what might that look like? Could the institution let go of these structures and give control of them to the youth. I feel this when I enter the space and

see no Aboriginal youth? I feel this when I see Aboriginal youth wanting to use the space and being challenged, even deterred.

The stories being told about Aboriginal youth through the interactions between these spaces are not new. Increasingly institutions like this one are feeling the pressure to create spaces for Aboriginal peoples as more and more public attention is being given to issues impacting them. However, as social movements begin to gain popular attention they also begin to be increasingly controlled. Voices within are silenced if they do not fit with the vision of the movement that has been latched on to and created by the public, the colonial power.

Why is it located where it is?

The space itself is situated in a hidden away corner of the institution, in a space that does not clearly appear to even be part of the institution, in a building in great need of renovations. It is located here because it was not part of the original design of the institution, nor has space been created for it that places it at the center of the institution. A brand new centrally located building was recently built as part of the institution and the space was not relocated to it.

5 Discussion

But what are you looking for?

Is this research more about you or them?

I now offer a closing discussion on what the three spaces and this process might tell us about (De)colonizing space. I struggled with writing this section and the previous one because as I moved further and further into this process, I felt increasingly uncomfortable framing this conversation and these spaces from my position. However, my unease in this role is important and needs to be acknowledged, considered, and discussed. Too often do those with power shift the conversation or end it when things get messy or uncomfortable. In addition, I feel that the themes that have emerged through my engagement with these spaces offers particular insight into how space functions to colonize and decolonize our community and how non-Aboriginal peoples might recognize, engage with, challenge, and support these processes. I will begin by discussing themes that emerged through the spaces before moving into a discussion of my role in this process.

(De)colonizing Space

In the previous section of this text, I shared my interactions with three very different spaces that I believe all function as (De)colonized spaces. I have previously defined (De)colonized space as space that simultaneously functions as reclaimed colonial space and as part of an ongoing process of colonization. I believe that in all three of these spaces the tension between these two processes was present; however in all three the relationship between these two processes was not equal. The Decolonizing processes I observed through space were all situated

in a broader context of colonization, and it was ultimately the colonizing space that was in control.

Though I had an awareness that I would be looking at Aboriginal youth space as part of this process, I did not always know this nor did I know how exactly I would go about it. I did not know what spaces I would encounter or what exactly they would tell me when I started this process. I did not seek out any of the three spaces I have discussed, rather I encountered each space organically as I moved through my daily life and its routines: the first space I learned about through social media, the second through a news source, and the third through a personal connection.

Though they share some key features, each of these three spaces also differed from one another in terms of the physical form they took. The first space was a music show that I attended, the second a piece in a news article, and the third was a space that was struggling to claim a permanent physical space for itself within an institution. Another difference between the three spaces is in the number of Aboriginal youth perceived to be engaged with each, how I identified them as Aboriginal youth spaces, as well as what each spaces perceived primary function was. I have chosen to start this section off this way in order to show that despite the differences that exist between these spaces, (de)colonizing struggles were present in all of them.

Aboriginal identity. In all three cases Aboriginal identity was centered in the space. The Aboriginal youth, whom the space was created for or by, were perceived to use the space in different ways to share who they were. In the first space the performance explicitly addressed identity and identity politics using visual media and music to challenge dominant notions of what it means to be an authentic Aboriginal person, addressing such methods as blood quantum, ideas of cultural practices, and self-identification. In the second space, the space opened up a

discussion on identity as an Indigenous person, power, and how the relationship between the two can impact experiences of particular events, in this case Canada Day. In the third and final space we saw an Aboriginal youth space struggling to claim a space that wanted them to fit an idea of being Aboriginal that had been created for them and not by them. In addition, the space and its creators had to articulate a vision of Aboriginal identity to the institution through colonial processes and language.

The emergence of Aboriginal identity as a significant theme in all of these space is based on my interactions with each space and looking over my reflections on these interactions after the fact. I observed a need in all these spaces for the space to not only convey, but explicitly address who Aboriginal peoples are, what that identity means and how it might mean different things. All of the spaces communicated to me an identity that was both trying to exist separate from colonialism, while at the same time being impacted by it. The spaces articulated in different ways the message *we are not who you say we are*.

In in the first two spaces Aboriginal youth were the ones sharing their identities as they had constructed them because they were given a space to do so. However, being given a space in itself does not guard these identities and spaces against resistance. In addition, all three spaces explored Aboriginal identity in relation to dominant power systems: the first and second space explicitly referencing colonization. The use of space by Aboriginal peoples and youth in this way has been similarly discussed in writings related to space and the maintenance of dominant social structures based on unequal power relations (Buffam, 2011; Peake & Ray, 2001; Venzant & McCready, 2011).

In the absence of relationship I am only able to access and understand Aboriginal youth space through the identification of what I have come to know as signifiers of Aboriginal identity. These signifiers are rooted in the same flawed methods that I have described previously in this text. So while I identify Aboriginal identity as a common theme among all three of these spaces I must also acknowledge that the spaces I interacted with were the Aboriginal youth spaces I was able to access (Peake & Ray, 2001).

When Aboriginal peoples are with one another, with their relations, how do they think about the space they are in, how might they think and talk about Aboriginal space differently?

This is Political. Not all of these spaces may appear to be overtly political in nature. However, I found that the politics of what it means to be Aboriginal in a colonized space were overtly expressed by each space in different ways and in each case met with a different response from those who encountered the space. All three spaces were used to communicate a political message about the experiences of Aboriginal peoples and in doing so functioned to decolonize the colonial space they were situated in and struggling against. But, not all the spaces were met with the same resistance from colonial ideals and institutions.

The first space discussed did not receive the same type of resistance as the second and third spaces. Though the space was overtly political in nature, the location of the space, as a music performance in a night club that required a ticket to enter, more greatly ensured that the majority of those in attendance likely supported the space and wanted to take part. The performance was specifically targeted at youth and Aboriginal youth and served to make money for a local wealthy business owner; it was a fun money making recreational event. The nature of

the space, as a music performance in a night club, also served to delegitimize the political aspects of the space making it less threatening to imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Situated in the same city and around the same time, the second space shared similar messages about power, Aboriginal identity, and colorization as the first. However, this space was met with much resistance. The space shared an idea about Aboriginal peoples and their experiences publically; it was not hidden away and unthreatening like the first space. The space also presented ideas about non-Aboriginal peoples and Canada Day that challenged the positive celebratory nature of this event and Canadian identity. This public act of decolonization functioned differently than the decolonization that occurred in the first space because of the wide reaching and public nature of the space it occupied. It disrupted non-Aboriginal expectations of comfort. Aboriginal peoples are allowed to have space for themselves to celebrate and express who they are, as long as this is done in a way that makes sense to non-Aboriginal people and does not feel threatening to them and their way of life.

The news source that the second space was situated within did not function to protect the Aboriginal youth who created it, and in ways actually supported the recolonization, the reclaiming of the space as colonial, of the Aboriginal space. This action was done by the news source choosing to publish a white man's response to the Aboriginal youth space the following week. In this response the man sought to argue that the experience expressed through the Aboriginal space was not valid and explain why he wished the space expressed different messages. The news source also allowed for overt and subtle racist, ignorant, and hateful online comments to be directed at the Aboriginal youth and the space. I want to note, that in contrast, other news sources have made the decision to temporarily close online comments on stories

related to Indigenous peoples after noticing the disproportionate amount of hate, racism, and ignorance that these stories receive.

The third space did not have a physical space through which to share its messages about identity or politics like the other two; however, the actions and struggles faced in attempts to establish the third space relate very strongly to the political role of space and identity. The youth wanted a space for themselves within the institution they belonged to, and the institution claimed to want to provide them with this space; however this could only occur on the terms of the institution. The actions of not going along with this or walking away from the process are political actions. In sharing this struggle, in recognizing the situation as problematic, and in attempting to challenge it, the attempt to establish the third space is decolonizing action.

I attended a panel discussion last Friday titled Colonization Capitalism and Race. The panelists shared some of their experiences with decolonization in the academy and discussed how more and more academic institutions are creating positions for individuals engaged in radical scholarship. They shared that when radical scholars apply for these positions, scholars that implicate the academy, they do not get them because they are too outside the box, too radical, too likely to create trouble.

You still have to fit with the idea these institutions have of what radical scholarship is, what decolonizing is, what Aboriginal is, in order to take part. These institutions can appear to be making progressive changes, when in actuality these actions may operate as Band-Aid solutions to hide the inherit imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy of these spaces.

Space Matters. Earlier in this text I discussed the role space plays in constructing and reproducing knowledge about the world and our positions in it. I stated that space is never neutral and described how the Canadian state functions as a colonial space through the removal, control, silencing, and erasure of Aboriginal peoples. In the context of this broad colonial space and its associated institutions, decolonizing spaces are being created by Aboriginal youth like the ones I explored above. These spaces act to reclaim parts of colonial space and give back control and visibility to Aboriginal peoples.

However, in all of the spaces I encountered, colonization remained the dominant force which ultimately had control over where Aboriginal space could occur, what it would look like, how much space it was allowed to reclaim, and how much say it really had over the space it was creating. The three spaces I explored all communicated messages that challenged colonization, while at the same time being dependent on spaces rooted in colonization and imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy to exist. The first two spaces existed because they were allowed to exist, because larger institutions with power deemed them valid or beneficial in some way. The third space might be allowed to exist, in a visible physical sense, depending on what the larger institution with the power over it ultimately decides. In all three cases this permission to exist is deeply tied to who can access space, and in all three cases, this access was granted by non-Aboriginal peoples living on and profiting from unceded unsurrendered Mi'kmaq territory.

Space matters. Land and power matter. Decolonizing processes are occurring through the act of reclaiming colonial space, space that is situated on Aboriginal land that is now controlled by non-Aboriginal peoples. These decolonizing processes are dynamic, brave, political, and have the power to create new ways of thinking, being, and acting. However, these spaces are situated

in broader colonial spaces making them vulnerable, forcing them to exist in a certain way, communicate certain ideas, and remain on the margins.

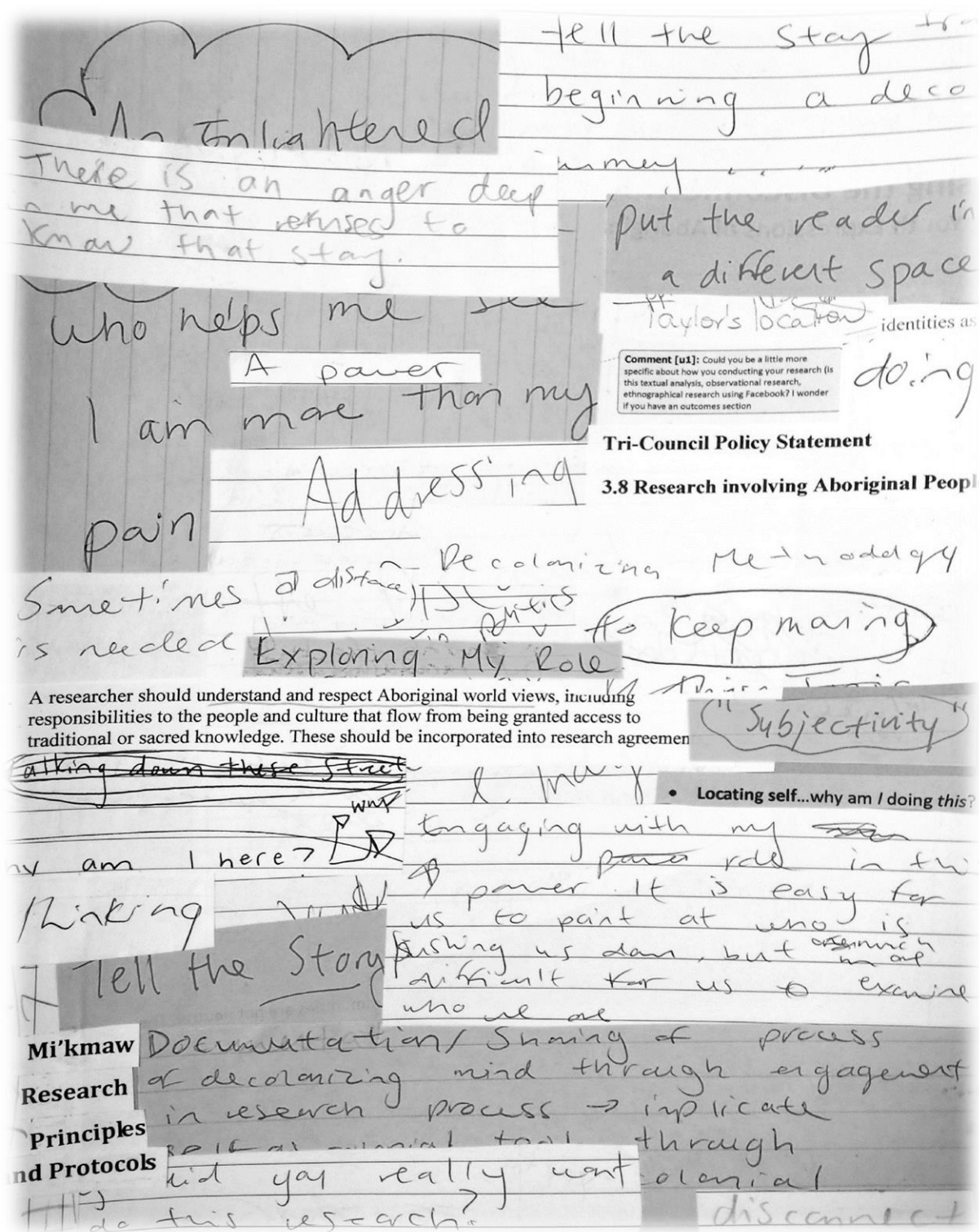
More than this, I think that viewing these small acts of reclamation and visibility as indicators of an end of colonization enables colonization to continue unchecked by removing the critical eye from the colonial institutions that *allow* (De)colonized spaces to exist. While these small acts of reclamation have power, it is important to always look to these broader spaces, the spaces controlling (De)colonized spaces, controlling this space, and ask ourselves if decolonization is ever possible within this context.

(De)colonizing Self

As I feel the end of this text, the written expression of this portion of a never ending process of learning, drawing closer and closer, I have experienced a surprising range of emotional responses from extreme anger and fear to complete indifference and even the occasional moment of contentment. It is a difficult thing to end this type of undertaking in what seems such a definitive way, on the page, when it has not ended and continues every day outside of this document. I was many times unsure that I ever would be able to let myself finish and feel at peace. I now embrace not feeling at peace and understand that this unease I feel, this disruption, is important. It is what keeps me aware of my surroundings, prevents me from becoming complacent, from forgetting, it is what makes me want to walk away from this processes, but ultimately what forces me to stay with it.

As I came to the end of writing this I went back to the beginning of this process. To when I first started thinking about these ideas. I looked at my old note books, drafts of this text in its various stages (and how different some of them were), the knowledge of others that I had read through and painstakingly highlighted (but ultimately never used). I went through all of this and

created the below collage out of some of these texts that spoke to me and my changing relationship to myself, colonization, and this process.



Going back to the beginning allowed me to see how this process has impacted my thinking and to see the changes that have occurred in my thinking, recognize how much more I have to learn, as well as how difficult this type of self-interrogation can be. It showed me the importance of embracing the process of learning and not focusing on the product, of not rushing it and of doing something that has meaning in your life. It also showed the importance of being vulnerable in academic space and owning that vulnerability, seeing it as powerful, political, and transformative. I do not believe that the shifts that have occurred in my thinking and the way I experience and see the world around me would have happened had this process not allowed for, and supported, the type of engagement it did. I am thankful that I had a teacher and guide who embraced this approach and challenged me. However, committing to this type of process, within the colonial space of academia, was not without its challenges, and in many ways being within academia inhibited my ability to explore decolonization.

There were times during this process when I found myself motivated primarily by ego and hidden insecurity, by a need to prove something, to show Them that I could do it, that I was smart, and I mattered. I needed to finish this so that I could get that piece of paper that proved this and move on, be successful, have voice. It was in these moments that my engagement with the process suffered, and my ability to critically self-reflect suffered. I found myself writing what I thought they would want and not anything that I connected with, nothing that would create real change in my thinking and actions. I had to leave the academic space, to go out into spaces in my community, to share and hear stories of struggle against colonization, against existing power structures, to find myself again and reconnect with the process.

Looking back now on where I have ended this text and not where I started it, I find myself left with many unanswered questions that I continue to explore in this ongoing process,

questions that keep me moving and motivate me to share the impacts of this engagement. I believe that this research has the ability to create change for and in people by presenting not only critical reflections on existing Aboriginal youth spaces in this city, but how non-Aboriginal peoples think about and engage with these spaces.

6**Keep Moving**

I must end by expressing gratitude. Thank you for staying with this, for taking the time and energy to enter and be in this space until the end.

My hope is that this research may serve educators, child and youth practitioners, and interested members of the community by providing a different way of doing research and a way of critically engaging with self and colonization. I believe that this research is really the documentation of my own learning process, one that is ultimately incomplete and does not end when this text ends. I have made a continued commitment to critical self-reflection and engagement in my day to day life, and this can be taken up by anyone interested in embracing a decolonizing process. In my own journey I have found that an attempt at decolonizing self requires a support system made up of individuals who challenge and push your thinking, embracing being really uncomfortable, being okay with being told you are wrong, and most of all it requires listening to the voices of Indigenous peoples and believing them.

The spaces I interacted with in this process shared ideas that inform thinking about space and decolonization. Though very different, the three Aboriginal youth spaces that I presented in this text share three common elements. They all expressed ideas about Aboriginal identity, they were all political in nature, and in all three cases, the spaces existed within and were impacted by larger colonial space. These shared elements may not be true of all Aboriginal spaces in this city or outside of it; however these findings are still important in that they create a picture of the particular way at least some of the Aboriginal youth spaces in this city are functioning, and the challenges they face in resisting colonial ideas, practices, and structures.

These themes also illustrate some of the ways that these spaces are actually quite vulnerable, showing that even when Aboriginal space is visible within an institution, it does not mean that the institution is a decolonized space or that colonization is not actively occurring. What I found through this engagement is that, more accurately, Aboriginal space is being used and created by Aboriginal youth to challenge colonization while at the same time existing within

and being controlled by colonized space; it is space that is both colonized and decolonized, but that the power relations within this relationship are not equal.

The information found through these spaces can be used to support Aboriginal youth spaces by challenging institutions that claim to want to support decolonization, or that claim to be decolonized, but are unwilling to give the power to Aboriginal peoples in these relationships. At a minimum it can be used by colonial institutions that want to do better to inform how they might better protect Aboriginal youth spaces and support their existence, even if it continues to occur on the margins.

This information also shows us that it may not be possible for decolonization to really occur within these colonized spaces so deeply rooted in imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Perhaps energy in the aim of decolonization may be better put into supporting, expanding, and creating Aboriginal youth spaces and ally spaces that exist outside of these institutions, and challenge the broader colonial space of the Canadian state. However, the reality remains that many Aboriginal youth and non-Aboriginal allies are forced to live out their day to day realities in the spaces where colonization happens. It makes sense to want to have space for yourself, your identity, your politics, within the spaces you live. And so this question remains: How do we decolonize space, and decolonize ourselves, when our lives are so intertwined with colonization?

Although I wrote this text, I do not feel as though any of it is mine, so much of it is directly informed by the writing, stories, and actions of the many people I have encountered throughout these past three years. This text really belongs to the Aboriginal youth in the place I now live, Halifax, and all the Aboriginal youth I have had relationships with in my role as a child and youth worker in Canada. My relationships with them are what started this process long

before I was even aware it had begun. I do not know if they will find any meaning in this text; I hope that for some it may provide insight into how a non-Aboriginal ally might understand Aboriginal youth space and some of the ways it functions within this political landscape, but I think the real impact is in how this writing has affected my understanding of self in my role as a child and youth worker and my commitment to centering decolonization into this role.



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