

**“It’s Something That Runs Through Your Blood”: Urban Indigenous Identity-Making and the Victoria Native Friendship Centre**

by

Katharine Neale  
Bachelor of Arts, Queen’s University, 2013

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of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Anthropology

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## **Supervisory Committee**

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## Abstract

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This thesis examines the processes of urban Indigenous identity-making at the Victoria Native Friendship Centre (VNFC), and within Greater Victoria, B.C. more broadly. The diverse experiences of VNFC staff and community members are explored in relation to colonial narratives that fix Indigenous identities to ‘traditional’ ancestral spaces (Wilson and Peters 2005). This project contributes to the newly-emerging bodies of anthropological literature that focus on urban Indigenous identity construction and place-making. I carried out 8 semi-structured interviews with 11 Indigenous women (both VNFC staff and community members over the age of 18) and conducted informal participant observation at various locations around the Centre. Representing a range of different backgrounds and life histories, the women brought to light shared experiences of resistance, relationship-building, and finding balance that permeate identity-making at the Friendship Centre and in Greater Victoria. In addition to challenging discourses that assume “Indigenous people simply cannot be Indigenous in the city” (Watson 2010, 269), discussions with these women also highlight the resilience and adaptability of Indigenous identity-making that transcend spatial boundaries.

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Finally, I would like to thank my supervisory committee. I am grateful to my supervisor Dr. Margo Matwychuk for mentoring me while also challenging me to explore different avenues I had not considered during the research process. I am also thankful for the input provided by my departmental committee member Dr. Rob Hancock, whose keen insight introduced a new, critical perspective to my project. I would also like to acknowledge the help of my external examiner Dr. Jeannine Carrière, who asked thought-provoking and instructive questions during my defense. Lastly, I am very appreciative of the numerous contributions that were provided by faculty, staff—particularly Jindra and Cathy in the graduate office—and my fellow graduate students in the department of Anthropology.

## **Dedication**

I would like to first and foremost dedicate this thesis to the eleven women who participated in this research project. I am grateful for the generosity and courage you demonstrated in sharing your stories with me.

I would also like to dedicate this to my family and friends for their unending support, encouragement, and sense of humour. I could not have done this without you all!

# **Chapter 1: Indigenous Identity-Making and the Victoria Native Friendship Centre**

This chapter delineates the research questions and objectives for this project, a literature review of anthropological and other applicable scholarship, the historical context of my project, the emergence of the Friendship Centre movement, the conceptual framework, and the location of my research at the Victoria Native Friendship Centre (VNFC) in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Before delving into the research questions and objectives, there will be a brief discussion about who I am and how this topic was chosen.

## **1.1 My Self-Location**

I am a settler-Canadian of European descent who is originally from Ottawa, Ontario (located on the territory of the Algonquin peoples). My mother immigrated to Canada from Australia, and my father is a second-generation Canadian settler. I moved across the country to Victoria, B.C. in 2014 to pursue my Master's degree in Anthropology.

When reading Mark Watson's (2010) "Diasporic Indigeneity: Place and the Articulation of Ainu Identity in Tokyo, Japan" in Dr. Brian Thom's graduate seminar, I became curious about the possibility of carrying out similar work on urban Indigenous identity construction within the city of Victoria. After several meetings with my supervisor Dr. Margo Matwychuk and a consultation with Executive Director Mr. Bruce Parisian, we decided that the Victoria Native Friendship Centre would be the best location to carry out this research project—as it is a local organization widely used by both permanent and temporary urban Indigenous dwellers.

Maintaining an ongoing partnership with Mr. Parisian and the Board of Directors at the VNFC after getting permission to conduct the project was important to me throughout the research process, and I sought input and guidance from my contacts at the Centre wherever possible. I shared my research proposal, preliminary objectives and interview questions with the VNFC team and remained open to any recommendations that were provided. Though offering advice when needed, Mr. Parisian largely gave me the freedom to explore different avenues in order to raise awareness of my project, and garner interest from potential participants.

As I was new to Victoria and had never before visited the Friendship Centre, I became a weekly volunteer at the library on-site to get to know the community and gradually ease into the research. I also attended the weekly Friday lunches and various gatherings to familiarize myself with the new environment. In retrospect, this was the most critical part of my project; direct involvement with the Centre's activities not only afforded me the opportunity to give back to the organization, but it also helped to remedy the feeling of being an outsider within a tight-knit community—a sentiment to which many researchers can relate.

I had several concerns going into this project; most notably, I was a non-Indigenous person with a vastly different background from my participants. Moreover, approaching a topic as politically and historically-contentious as identity was an intimidating task. When I reflected on my own processes of identity-making (i.e.: as a woman, a graduate student, a sister, a settler-Canadian, etc.) and place-making (i.e.: where I feel 'at home,' the communities to which I belong, etc.), it reinforced for me how difficult it is to articulate such a multi-faceted topic—particularly to a complete stranger.

In a small way, grappling with my own identity helped me relate to my participants and the stories they shared on a more personal level. While my position as a researcher and settler-Canadian undoubtedly affected how participants answered questions—and how I subsequently understood and interpreted their responses—it was nevertheless constructive to explore the experiences that connected us as well. The following section will delineate the questions and objectives that premise this research project.

## 1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

There are two main objectives guiding the proposed research project. *The first* is to explore the role of the Victoria Native Friendship Centre in the construction, reinforcement, and assertion of Indigenous peoples' identities in an urban landscape. *The second* is to evaluate academic and mainstream representations of Indigenous identities as incompatible with urban environments (Lobo and Peters 2001; Newhouse and Peters 2003; Watson 2010). As Watson powerfully articulates in his critique of assimilationist social theories, such research assumes that “Indigenous people simply cannot be Indigenous in the city” (2010, 269).

The research questions that address the above objectives are twofold: (1) What are the processes involved in identity-making and reinforcement for urban Indigenous peoples?; and (2) What role does the Victoria Native Friendship Centre play in the construction, reinforcement, and assertion of Indigenous identities in an urban environment?

## 1.3 Literature Review

### 1.3.1 Narratives of Incompatibility in Indigenous Identity-Construction and Retention

Narratives of incompatibility between Indigenous identity and urban spaces pervade government policy, academia, and Indigenous communities. This section will deconstruct the conceptualizations of urban Indigeneity that have become commonplace in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples' imaginaries (Howard and Proulx 2011).

#### 1.3.1.1 In Policy

By physically excluding Indigenous communities from urban areas in most parts of Canada, the federal reserve system institutionalized notions of 'difference' and 'otherness' that became historically embedded in the discriminatory treatment of Indigenous peoples (Peters and Andersen 2013, 5). As Wilson and Peters articulate, "these mappings of space and identity increasingly represented cities as areas in which Indigenous peoples and cultures were 'out of place'" (2003, 399). The establishment of reserves and the concomitant land dispossession naturalized the stereotype that Indigenous peoples belonged in rural areas, as their cultural practices and lifestyle were seemingly incongruous with the urban experience (Newhouse and Peters 2003, 6). Migration to urban centres—and departure from reserves more generally—continues to be misconstrued as a sign that Indigenous culture has been abandoned in favour of assimilation into mainstream society.

Lawrence (2004, 18) describes how assimilatory state policy is embraced by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. She argues that "the Canadian government's regulation of Native identity has become deeply internalized, by Aboriginal people as well as by members of the dominant culture, [and] severely restricts the kind of future we are capable of imagining" (2004, 18). The 1951 Indian Act classified Indigenous peoples on a collective basis contingent on band and national membership, and individually into

status and non-status Indians—thereby controlling who can claim Indigenous identity, and who cannot (Bell 2014, 64). Several of the participants in this research project, some with status and some without, are of mixed ancestry—however, the implications of government-imposed categories are vast in terms of how they claim their own Indigenous identities, and how they are recognized as Indigenous peoples by their families, friends, and communities.

#### 1.3.1.2 In Academia

Both anthropological and sociological systems of knowledge production have played influential roles in dictating where Indigenous peoples do and do not ‘belong,’ both within and outside of academia (Howard and Proulx 2011). Lobo and Peters (2001) assert that due to firmly imposed disciplinary boundaries, pre-1980s anthropological research focused almost exclusively on rural Indigenous peoples’ culture, history and politics. Such a narrow focus projects an image of communities being frozen in time and space: romanticizing Indigenous identities as ‘out there’ (Lobo and Peters 2001, 14). Conversely, Lobo and Peters maintain that sociology had long claimed authority over urban social issues. This turf war led to “an unspoken code by academics that anthropologists could ‘have’ Indians while sociologists could ‘have’ urban studies” (Lobo and Peters 2001, 14). As a result, sociologists problematized urban Indigenous experiences, emphasizing issues of substance abuse, crime and homelessness as chronic to the urban “culture of poverty” (Lobo and Peters 2001, 13). Successfully adjusting to cities was—and arguably continues to be—measured by an individual’s ability to integrate his or herself into the ‘modern’ culture of the urban space (Howard and Proulx 2011, 80). Notions of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ echo the Enlightenment rhetoric of

sociocultural development as a linear progression from ‘primitive’ to ‘civilized’ (Howard and Proulx 2011, 8; Stocking 1987).

David Newhouse (2011, 23-26), a self-proclaimed urbanite who migrated from a rural reserve in Ontario, attests that mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century academic literature about Indigenous peoples does not accurately represent the lived experiences of those communities. Dwelling on crime and substance abuse as characteristic of the urban Indigenous experience, Newhouse argues, neglects the degree of resilience and strength urban communities have demonstrated over the past several decades (2011, 26). Moreover, Howard and Proulx (2011, 8) demonstrate how assumptions about Indigenous cultures as incongruous with the ‘modern’ city conceal deeper structural problems, such as systemic racism and assimilatory policies, which create conditions for the inequality that is being critiqued.

#### 1.3.1.3 In Indigenous Communities

Assumptions of incompatibility between Indigenous identity and urban spaces pervade relationships among many Indigenous communities. Indigenous identity is often perceived as enhanced for those who remain in their ancestral homeland, as opposed to those who migrate to cities (Lawrence 2004). Urbanization, Bonita Lawrence argues, is frequently equated with ‘whiteness,’ in turn creating a social divide between Indigenous peoples who live in urban and rural areas. In an interview Lawrence conducted on Indigenous urbanity in Toronto, a Northern Métis respondent described feeling out of place in leaving the city: “I go home, and I’m not quite fitting in now. It’s like white values have come into my head a lot. So my friends treat me a little bit differently”

(2004, 202). The respondent expressed a disconnect between her lifestyle, her sense of humour, and her social values and those of her friends and family living back home.

Some individuals believe that Indigenous identity and culture deteriorate in the urban context due to the physical distance from ancestral homelands and decreased social interactions with other Indigenous peoples (Lawrence 2004, 203). The respondents who spoke to Lawrence attest that there are indeed instances where culture is at risk, and that they have a difficult time reconciling their Indigeneity in spaces that are not their ancestral lands. Evidently, ideas of incompatibility between Indigenous culture and the city create a complex terrain for Indigenous identity making and preservation among those navigating urban landscapes. This project explores this disconnect, specifically trying to determine how participants perceive the role of the VNFC in their experiences negotiating Indigenous identity construction and preservation in an urban environment.

#### 1.4 Historical Context

The next subsections will introduce some of the most prominent examples of institutionalized colonialism in Canada's recent past, the repercussions of which continue to be visible today across Indigenous communities as trauma is passed on inter-generationally. The colonial framework in Canada is reproduced in contemporary state relations with Indigenous communities. Systemic abuse and discrimination against First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities in the settler state creates a context in which Indigenous identity making and assertion has great salience for Indigenous peoples. The following overview of Indigenous land dispossession, the Indian Residential School system, and the child welfare system is by no means exhaustive; rather, it is meant to

highlight the policies that both create and perpetuate notions of Indigenous identities being ‘out of place’ in urban centres.

#### *1.4.1 Land Dispossession and Urbanization*

Factors that have and continue to influence urban migration appear similar for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. In a survey conducted by the Environics Institute (2010), Indigenous men reported increased employment opportunities as a primary reason for migrating, while women reported reasons such as access to higher education and proximity to family (Newhouse and Peters 2003, 6). However, as Peters maintains, what distinguishes Indigenous experiences from those of other migrants is that the former are travelling within their ancestral territories:

Anthropologist Nancy Lurie argued that First Nations people saw the process of urbanization less as one of moving from reserve to city than as traveling within their traditional territories or equivalent spaces—performing, in contemporary times, historically familiar patterns of movement and migration. (2002, 87)

In order to better understand the processes of contemporary urban migration, it is necessary to contextualize these processes within the history of Indigenous land dispossession in Canada. Canadian cities were developed on lands typically used by Indigenous peoples as subsistence and settlement areas. As cities expanded, the Crown implemented the 1876 Indian Act which sanctioned the compulsory relocation of First Nations communities to remote plots of land, often located great distances from urban centres (Newhouse and Peters 2003, 6). Métis peoples were dispossessed of their land and forced to settle on the outskirts of towns, in different provinces and territories, and in other regions that were unfamiliar to them.

Not all reserves, however, were relocated away from urban centres. The city of Victoria, the location of this research project, is located on the largely unceded territory

of the Lekwungen<sup>1</sup> peoples (Songhees 2013, 53). Although the Lekwungen had a history of trade relations with surrounding Indigenous groups and visiting Europeans, the Hudson's Bay Company was the first to settle permanently on their land (Songhees 2013, 50). The expansion of the city of Victoria in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century encroached upon Lekwungen villages, forcing them to small plots of land on the fringes of Victoria harbour (Blomley 2004, 106; Songhees 2013, 53). The rapid population growth and disputes over land generated tensions between the settlers and the Lekwungen community:

Going forward, though some traders fought to preserve the Songhees village, an increasing settler population would eventually win out and see the Songhees relocated from their traditional harbour territory. Once the Douglas Treaties were signed, reserve land and enclosed fields were allocated to the Lekwungen. (Songhees 2013, 53)

The Douglas Treaties forcibly relocated the Lekwungen families to other areas of Greater Victoria to make space for the development of colonial infrastructure, as First Nations communities were perceived as “impediments” to urban growth (Blomley 2004, 106-107; Songhees 2013, 53).

Today, the Esquimalt and Songhees reserves are located in the urban core of Greater Victoria, with other Coast Salish and Nuu-chah-nulth First Nation communities situated throughout the Capital Regional District (Songhees 2013, 53). The fact that the reserves fall within urban borders creates a unique distinction from other provinces, such as Manitoba and Québec, where the distance between cities and reserves translates to a clear divide between ‘urban’ and ‘non-urban’ colonial constructs. However, the

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<sup>1</sup> Comprising the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations

development of urban reserves in Greater Victoria disrupted ties between families and political relationships that are fundamental to Lekwungen social structures, contributing to the ongoing disenfranchisement that is on par with more remote Indigenous communities (Songhees First Nation 2013, 53).

#### *1.4.2 The Indian Residential School System*

The Indian Residential School System (IRS) began operations in the late nineteenth century in Canada as a colonial policy which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) described as “cultural genocide” since it entailed

[t]he destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group. States that engage in cultural genocide set out to destroy the political and social institutions of that group...and, most significantly to the issue at hand, families are disrupted to prevent the transmission of cultural values and identity from one generation to the next. (TRC 2015, 1)

Indigenous children were removed from their families’ care as an assimilatory measure and sent to schools administered by churches in partnership with the Canadian state. The vast majority of the children never had the opportunity to return home to their families due to a physical and emotional disconnection from their home communities, or due to the urge to move to the city to find jobs for which they had been trained in school. Many of them suffered immeasurable forms of psychological, emotional and physical abuse that were documented in the final report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1996, as well as in the testimonies of IRS survivors that were presented in the full 2015 report of the TRC. The TRC estimates that at least 150,000 First Nations, Métis and Inuit children attended these schools across Canada, with the last federally-backed school ceasing operations in the 1990’s (TRC 2015, 3).

The extent to which the colonial legacy of the IRS continues to affect the family structures, health, and cultural identities of Indigenous peoples across Canada is vast, and particularly visible in the stories shared by participants in this research project. Families were unable to transmit cultural practices, traditions, or knowledge of the land onto their children, resulting in generations of children growing up with little to no connection to their Indigenous identities (Lawrence 2004, 110). Some of the women in this study are urban dwellers because of their own involvement, or their family's involvement, with the IRS.

#### *1.4.3 Child Apprehension System*

The TRC (2015, 138) maintains that the period denoted the 'sixties scoop' in Canada was an extension of the assimilatory policies that characterized the IRS: state-sanctioned practices that continue to disproportionately affect Indigenous children and youth. The federally-backed 'sixties scoop'—which lasted well into the 1980's—permitted provincial child welfare agencies to extend their jurisdiction to Indian reserves and the removal of Indigenous children from their parents' care if it was deemed 'unfit.' Once apprehended by the system, the children were placed into foster care or adopted into non-Indigenous families across Canada and the United States, thereby severing ties to their culture and identities (TRC 2015, 138). Approximately 17,000 children were adopted out or taken in by the foster care system during the period of the 1960's-1990's, representing about 5% of the Status Indians at that time (Sinclair 2007, 66-67). The parallels between the lasting impacts of the IRS and the child apprehension policies are poignant, as both systems left children vulnerable to abuses and neglect, and severed ties to their families and Indigenous identities (Lawrence 2004, 114).

It must be recognized that the current child welfare system in Canada continues to emulate the assimilatory measures of the sixties scoop and the IRS. As the TRC reports, “A 2011 Statistics Canada study found that 14,225 or 3.6% of all First Nations children aged fourteen and under were in foster care, compared with 15,345 or 0.3% of Non-Aboriginal children” (2015, 138). Such colonial policies reflect the past and continued de-valuation of Indigenous cultures and systems of childcare. Lawrence (2004, 114) points to the cyclical nature of cultural and psychological damage which is exacerbated by the child apprehension system, as many families turn to substance abuse to cope with the loss of their child, putting them at risk of losing more children in the future. They are some of the conditions created by the state which ensure that a large proportion of Indigenous peoples live in extreme poverty, making them unable to provide adequate care for their children.

### 1.5 Situating the Friendship Centre Movement in Canada

Native Friendship Centres (NFCs) emerged at the start of the 1950’s, as post-war Indigenous urbanization increased (Langford 2016, Peters and Andersen 2013, 25). The Friendship Centre movement mobilized as a response to the growing demand for support services *by* Indigenous peoples *for* Indigenous peoples moving to urban areas from distant communities (BCAAFC 2014).

NFCs were perceived by the federal and provincial governments as being temporary: responsible for familiarizing Indigenous peoples with the dominant, settler culture until ‘successful’ integration was achieved (Ouart 2013, 135). Friendship Centres in the 1960s were seen by the state to act as intermediaries between Indigenous peoples who were new to the city and pre-existing social service agencies. Although they

provided a space for conversation and community gatherings for Indigenous peoples in urban settings, the primary role of NFCs in the early years of the migration boom was to provide referrals to government services for healthcare, employment, and social assistance (BCAAFC 2014, Ouart 2013,135).

The 1970s witnessed a moderate growth of partnerships between social service agencies and NFCs across Canada, as the former began issuing referrals to Friendship Centres for more specialized, culturally-sensitive service provision for Indigenous peoples in the city. However, Langford claims that the term ‘partnership’ is used too loosely, as government agencies often downloaded the responsibility of urban Indigenous service provision onto Friendship Centres:

Rather than solely divert First Peoples and Métis to existing social service agencies, the Aboriginal women and men centrally involved in elaborating center programming developed services that responded to the actual needs of Aboriginal peoples. In no small part, they did so because many traditional service providers were unresponsive to Aboriginal peoples, even if relationships between centers and social service agencies were better in some places than others. (2016, 13)

Working with limited budgets and high demand from the urban Indigenous population, Friendship Centres continue to face significant financial hurdles in carrying out their operations in urban centres. Today, there are Friendship Centres located across Canada in most major cities. Jedwab (2009, 80) and the 2007 Urban Aboriginal Task Force (UATF) survey maintain that NFCs constitute the largest off-reserve Indigenous institutional network in Canada, playing a significant role in asserting the legitimacy of Indigenous organizations in an urban context (Jedwab 2009, 80; UATF 2007, 20). However, Langford (2016) asserts that Friendship Centres have been—and continue to be—sites of moral, political, and social contestation: understood by some as political

hubs for Indigenous activism and identity resurgence, and others as gateways for integration into the dominant colonial society.

## 1.6 Conceptual Framework

This research project has drawn on three themes in order to address its objectives: (1) identity construction; (2) urban Indigenous identity-making; and (3) place-making.

### 1.6.1 Identity Construction

Exploring the notion of identity as a unit of social analysis became a major theoretical undertaking for social scientists in the 1960s, highlighted by Erik Erikson's work on 'communal culture' in the midst of widespread social justice movements (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 3). Marked by the onset of post-modernism in the 1980s and 1990s, and heavily influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, anthropology has increasingly concentrated on the complex networks of power and discourse in which identities are *constructed* (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Howard and Proulx 2011; Peters and Andersen 2013; Proulx 2006, 409; Sokefeld 1999, 417). Speaking to both the agency and passivity of individuals in processes of identity construction, Proulx suggests that identification "proceeds *both* through consciously acting subjects and through subject positions constructed by the discourses" (Proulx 2006, 409). In order to fully grasp the implications of identity and identity construction, one must unpack the underlying political, economic and social processes in which identities are enmeshed.

However, it should be noted that such understandings frame identity-making and reinforcement as an individual, rather than collective, process. Focusing primarily on self-identification diminishes the fundamental role of relationships in identity

construction. Alfred and Corntassel (2005), Lawrence (2004), Newhouse (2011, 26), and Proulx (2006), among others, assert that relationships are integral to strengthening individual and collective Indigenous identities. If an aspect of identity (such as connection to ancestral landbase<sup>2</sup>) is jeopardized, “unified action can be taken to revitalize and restore that part of the community by utilizing relationships, which are the spiritual and cultural foundations of Indigenous peoples” (Alfred and Corntassel 2005, 609). This research engages with notions of central importance to Indigenous identity construction—such as relationships, sense of place, and community—to challenge individualistic perceptions of identity. It calls attention to the processes through which identities are constructed and reinforced at the VNFC (Peters and Andersen 2013; Proulx 2006).

### *1.6.2 Introduction to Urban Indigenous Identity-Making*

Identity construction as it pertains to urban Indigenous peoples is a newly-emerging body of scholarship in anthropology due to the discipline’s longstanding relationship with the ‘rural’ and or ‘foreign.’ As such, anthropologists have tended to spatialize ‘authentic’ Indigenous identity construction as located first and foremost in rural spaces. Yet, current demographics indicate that over half of Indigenous peoples in Canada currently reside in urban centres (Peters and Andersen 2013). It is therefore vital to extend the focus of anthropological research to include the dynamism of urban Indigenous identities. The theoretical foundation of this research project draws on three scholars who specialize in

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that participants may apply different meanings to their ‘ancestral homeland’, as it is a personal notion. For some, it is a connection to a bounded reserve. For others, a homeland could refer to the land occupied by their band/nation during the pre-colonial period— territory on which their reserve may or may not be situated today.

processes of cultural identity construction and reinforcement, and diasporic identities in urban environments: Stuart Hall, Gerald R. Alfred, and Bonita Lawrence.

#### 1.6.2.1 Stuart Hall

Stuart Hall, a cultural theorist and sociologist, provides an analysis of migrant identities in the context of ‘diasporic’ experiences. His theory helps frame this project, as it can be useful in conceptualizing urban Indigenous identification in settler states such as Canada. Hall (1993, 223-25) distinguishes between two competing and overlapping notions of identity as ‘essence’ and ‘potential.’ He argues that identities can be positioned as an essence, referring to an “underlying, authentic presence that binds a people together” (cited in Andersen 2013, 49). In this sense, identities reflect a united front, based on shared cultures and histories, including a fundamental spiritual relationship with the land. The ‘essence’ positioning that is based on shared attributes and common histories can also be used to track the emergence of essentialist beliefs embedded in mainstream colonial discourse and state policy, such as Indigenous identities being inextricably tied to ‘natural’ spaces (Andersen 2013, 49; Scott 2001, 87).

Hall (1993, 225) also positions identity as ‘potential.’ This emphasizes what identities can ‘become,’ calling attention to the processes of history, culture and power with which Indigenous identities continue to engage. Urban Indigenous identities are drawn to both impulses throughout their lives (in Andersen 2013, 49). Identity as ‘essence’ provides a sense of community and commonality in an urban environment, while identity as ‘potential’ “acknowledges the discontinuities and fragmentations marking our colonial experiences” (cited in Andersen 2013, 49) and challenges conceptions of identity as fixed in the past.

This framework has significant implications for understanding the degree to which the participants in this project connect with their Indigenous identities. Certain individuals claim strong ties to their sense of identity, and see the Friendship Centre as a space for re-affirming their cultural pride in an urban environment. Others use the Friendship Centre as a place for connecting to a core and communal sense of Indigenous identity that they had never had the opportunity to explore while growing up, as many were displaced from their home communities by the IRS, the child apprehension system, or other assimilatory measures carried out by the Canadian state. Hall's conceptualization allows for a more flexible understanding of the diversity of participants' experiences with identity-making, without undermining common links that bind Indigenous identities together. It is through this framework that my study explores both the processes of identity *construction* and *assertion/reinforcement* for urban Indigenous peoples involved with the VNFC.

#### 1.6.2.2 Gerald R. Alfred

Gerald R. Alfred's work on 'nested Mohawk identity' is foundational to my understanding of the complexities of Indigenous identity-making and preservation at the VNFC and in urban spaces more broadly (1995, 19). He challenges individualistic understandings of identity construction that attempt to compartmentalize pieces of identity into distinctive categories, evidenced by the rigid classifications in Statistics Canada censuses (Alfred 1995; Andersen 2013, 47). Alfred instead engages with the social realm by examining the role of relationships and allegiances in creating or asserting identity. He draws on the example of nested Mohawk identities that are simultaneously localized (Kahnawake), nation-based (Mohawk Nation) and Pan-Native:

People of Mohawk descent who live in Kahnawake have a multi-layered identity which incorporates each one of the ‘communities’ he or she has inherited, and which also includes a broader Native—or the more common ‘Indian’—identity flowing from their racial affiliation and identification as the indigenous peoples of North America. (1995, 19)

The processes through which many Indigenous peoples negotiate their identities in the city mirror those indicated in the example of Mohawk identities, with the added layer of urban Indigeneity, and uncertainty of national, racial or community-affiliation. The various assimilatory policies that have targeted Indigenous cultures in Canada means that many urbanites lack a knowledge of their history and culture. Physical distance from home community and landbase, transient lifestyles, a sense of disconnect from families living on reserve, and a multitude of other factors are collectively incorporated into the nested identities of the participants in this research project. Alfred’s ‘nested identity’ therefore offers a framework for understanding the multi-faceted nature of Indigenous identity-making and reinforcement in the VNFC community and Greater Victoria more broadly.

#### 1.6.2.3 Bonita Lawrence

Bonita Lawrence’s (2004) work on “mixed-blood,” urban Indigenous peoples in metro Toronto is deeply influential in theorizing this research project. Lawrence conducted interviews with twenty-nine individuals living in the city over the span of five years to better understand their experiences with Indigenous identity-making and explore the processes that shaped their family histories (2004, 20). She highlights how urban peoples of mixed ancestry struggle to negotiate their identity while living in a community that is largely non-Indigenous:

A crucial difference, then, between the experiences of urban Native families and those who grew up in Native communities is the need on the part of urban people to find some way of managing the intolerable pressures on their identities that come from being always surrounded by white people, in a society that has offered little protection for Native people in the face of white violence. (2004, 120)

Lawrence maintains that urban Indigenous families adjust how they self-identify as a defense mechanism in a racist environment. Many of the research participants in my project voiced their own personal struggles negotiating multiple worlds in their experiences living in the city, whether they lived in Victoria their whole life, grew up on-reserve and later moved to the city, or travel back and forth to their home community frequently. They contend with pressure from a number of sources, including settler-Canadian urban dwellers and Indigenous peoples living on reserve who feel that culture has been abandoned in favour of urban assimilation (Lawrence 2004, 133).

While facing many obstacles in urban centres, the degree of resilience and determination shown by these women in spite of these challenges cannot be ignored. This paper will engage with Lawrence's conception of *reclaiming* Indigeneity in urban environments (2004, 143). Many of her respondents are making an effort to uncover parts of their histories and identities that have long been concealed by their families as a protective measure. My participants represent a range of age groups and have naturally had diverse experiences living in the city; however, many of them voiced a common interest in reclaiming and restoring pride in their Indigenous identities. It is for this reason many of the individuals are involved with the Friendship Centre, a notion that will be more deeply explored in Chapters 3 and 4.

### 1.6.3 Place-Making

Identity and place are inextricably linked. This relationship is fundamental to theoretically situating the experiences of Indigenous peoples in urban settings (Basso 1996; Environics Institute 2010, 28; Watson 2010, 271). Public policy has frequently “incarcerated” Indigenous peoples to specific geographic regions, such as the Ainu in Japan as described by Watson (2010, 269). The Ainu’s Indigenous identities have been publicly restricted to their ancestral homelands in northern Japan, a reality that overlooks how Ainu cultural practices adapt to and transform the urban landscape. Defining ‘place’ exclusively in terms of a connection to a landbase limits one’s ability to understand Ainu place-making in cities, a process Watson maintains is largely social. He conceptualizes ‘place’ as “a social construction and relational site, a ‘meeting-up’ point of social relations” (2010, 414) with which identity is constantly engaged.

Basso (1996) speaks to the relationship between identity-making and sense of community. According to him, “knowledge of place is therefore closely linked to knowledge of the self, to grasping one’s position in the larger scheme of things, including one’s own community” (1996, 34). Lobo (2001) argues that urban communities do not develop within bounded spaces as they do on reserve or in other rural areas. Rather, they emerge as fluid spaces that extend their boundaries to different corners of the city in a needs-based manner (Environics 2010, 42; Lobo 2001, 76). Communities adapt to the fragmentation and diversity of urban landscapes, characterized by networks of social relations that are often grounded in Indigenous organizations and other communal areas. Within this fluidity, communities are multiple, dynamic, and loosely bound as a spatial unit (Lobo 2001, 75). Conceptualizing communities as contingent on relationships, rather than ethnically-homogenous places, allows for a better understanding of the ways in

which community manifests in a city (Lobo 2001; Watson 2010). Building on existing theories of place-making, this project aims to more deeply explore the role of the VNFC in creating spaces for community and relationships to flourish within the context of an individualistic, urban environment.

### 1.7 Location of Study

The Victoria Native Friendship Centre (VNFC), located on traditional Coast Salish territory in the Burnside-Gorge neighbourhood of Victoria, opened in April 1970. Initially starting out as a one-room facility in the downtown core, the VNFC underwent four moves until signing a lease on the former elementary school where it continues to operate today (VNFC 2016). According to the Centre's 2014 Annual Report, the VNFC offers services and programs to over 15,000 Indigenous peoples who live off-reserve across Vancouver Island and 5,000 individuals from First Nations communities in Sooke and Sidney, and provides services to a vast number of Indigenous peoples from cities across Canada. Governed by a twelve-member volunteer Board of Directors, the centre is funded by the provincial and federal government, as well as by Indigenous organizations. It has also partnered with a number of local organizations and agencies, including the Songhees First Nation, Camosun College, the University of Victoria, and the BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres.

The VNFC mandate is “[t]o encourage and promote the well-being of Urban Aboriginal People, by strengthening individuals, family, and community” (2014, 4). The multitude of services offered at the organization reflect the high level of community engagement carried out by VNFC staff and volunteers. Available to urban residents both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, the Centre hosts departments in Early Childhood

Development, Family Services, Health, and Career Education and Employment Resources, to name a few.

### 1.8 Chapter Summary

Very little research has been conducted in the context of Friendship Centres, particularly in British Columbia. The studies that have been undertaken predominantly focus on the history of Indigenous-run institutions during the early stages of Indigenous urbanization in the 1950s, or are policy analyses detailing Indigenous views toward urban service provision (see Langford 2016; Lindsay 1996; Newhouse 2003; Ouart 2013; Sookraj et al. 2012). A historical focus on the emergence of Friendship Centres offers great insight into the mobilization of urban Indigenous organizations, the perceived role of Friendship centres in urban Indigenous activism, and the ways that services and programs have changed overtime.

However, my research intends to shift the focus to the relationship between the VNFC and urban Indigenous identity construction and assertion. David Newhouse maintains that “urban Aboriginal identities are consciously and systemically reconstructed in cities and that Aboriginal organizations play an important role in this process” (cited in Ouart 2013, 132). The goal of this research project is to contribute to the growing body of anthropological and other literature (see, for example, Alfred and Corntassel 2001; Andersen 2013; Lawrence 2004; Lobo and Peters 2001; Patrick and Tomiak 2010; Proulx and Howard 2011) on the diverse experiences of Indigenous peoples living in urban areas and their involvement with Indigenous-run organizations. In doing so, there is the potential to illuminate the role of the VNFC in making and claiming identities within an urban landscape.

## 1.9 The Structure of this Thesis

The subsequent chapters will address this project's methodological approach in Chapter 2, the analytical framework in Chapter 3, a discussion of my findings in Chapter 4, and finally a conclusion in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 2: Research Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodological approach used in my project, detailing the ethical procedures that have been foundational to the research, the population at the VNFC, recruitment procedures, qualitative methods of data collection (i.e.: semi-structured interviews and participant observation), transcription and analysis.

### 2.1 Ethical Framework

Measures were taken to ensure that the methodological design of this thesis project stems from a decolonizing perspective. The Indigenous Governance (IGOV) program at the University of Victoria released the “Protocols & Principles for Conducting Research in an Indigenous Context” (2003) which continued to serve as guiding principles for the duration of the project. As stated in the document, researchers working in collaboration with Indigenous communities “should ensure that research protocols uphold the principles of protection, partnership and participation” (UVic IGOV 2003, 3). Taking a “participatory approach” is a fundamental component of the project, as the research questions and methodological design have relied upon ongoing consultation and collaboration with contacts at the VNFC (UVic IGOV 2003, 7). Prior to beginning the data collection process, a formal research agreement was signed by the Executive Director and the volunteer Board of Directors at the Centre, and approval to begin research was granted by the University of Victoria’s Human Research Ethics Board (HREB). It is anticipated that I will have the opportunity to share the findings of the project with participants prior to publication to ensure that their voices are conveyed respectfully and truthfully.

## 2.2 Population

There are two participant groups in this project: (1) Indigenous VNFC Staff Members; and (2) Indigenous VNFC Community Members. A description of the contributions made by each group is provided below:

**Group 1:** The staff members' experience and familiarity with the services provided at the Friendship Centre were key to helping determine the relationship between the VNFC's programs and identity construction. Staff members had the experience necessary to connect me with other staff and community members engaged in VNFC programming who may be interested in being participants. Additionally, their knowledge gained from fostering relationships with community members over the years proved to be invaluable to the research process; staff were able to provide keen insight on observations they have made during their time at the VNFC. Moreover, staff members offered a unique perspective to the research as they also reflected on their own experiences negotiating identity-making and -assertion in the city, and the ways that their experiences shape their approach to program and service development at the Centre.

**Group 2:** Community members have firsthand experience, either short-term or long-term, of being involved with the VNFC, making them key knowledge-holders in determining the role of the Friendship Centre in shaping Indigenous identities in urban spaces. Participants in this group were vital to the research project, as they openly shared their own perspectives and lived experiences in engaging with the services and programs at the VNFC and in navigating the urban environment more broadly.

The research project's scope initially intended to include both men and women over the age of 18 who self-identify as Indigenous. However, those who ultimately expressed interest in participating were all women. This could have been for any number of reasons, whether due to the uneven ratio of female to male staff at the centre, a higher percentage of female community members who use the programs and services at the centre, or perhaps the fact that I am a female researcher. Regardless, the findings of this project represent the views of eleven Indigenous women residing in and around Victoria who are involved with the VNFC. Though men were not included in my project, their presence was strongly felt as drummers, singers, elders and guest speakers at the events that I attended at the VNFC. There is much potential for further research on the gendered experiences of Indigenous men and women who use the Centre, as I did not explicitly explore how gender may have been a factor in shaping the experiences of identity-making and assertion in an urban context. It is likely that identity-making and assertion may be differently problematic for women who may have been more often dislocated from their ancestral homelands because of loss of legal status, family violence or other factors.

As with all urban centres, the population at the VNFC and in Victoria more broadly is extremely diverse and transient. The majority of participants involved in this research project come from reserves outside of the local Coast and Straits Salish nations, and have migrated to Victoria from across Canada. Most individuals from local bands (including Esquimalt and Songhees Nations) use the service-provision facilities located on reserve, but may travel back and forth to the VNFC for various reasons. It is for this reason that the findings in this study could vary from similar research conducted in the

prairies or Eastern Canada, where reserves are predominantly located significant distances from cities.

### 2.3 Limitations

The major area of focus for this research project was the experiences of urban Indigenous identity making for VNFC community members and staff. I recognize that this focus excludes the voices of Indigenous urbanites who are not involved with the VNFC in any way, and that the findings will only represent the views of a small segment of the population in Victoria. There remains much potential for future research on the experiences of identity construction and assertion in urban centres.

### 2.4 Recruitment

In order to recruit staff members, I consulted with VNFC Executive Director Bruce Parisian, who was my primary contact throughout the research process. Mr. Parisian presented my proposal at a staff meeting in September 2015 and provided Letters of Information<sup>3</sup> to staff members who expressed interest in participating. As there was third party intervention from a position of power, steps had to be taken to ensure confidentiality and minimize undue pressure to participate. Interested respondents were provided with my contact information to contact me directly if interested in participating, at which point I assured them that their decision to participate in the study must be their own and that they should not feel pressured in any way to participate. Participants had the option of carrying out interviews off site in order to protect their anonymity, and the Informed Consent Forms delineated how participation in the research project would be

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A.

entirely voluntary and should have no effect on one's involvement or access to services with the VNFC.

Posters detailing the objectives of my study and my contact information were displayed around the Friendship Centre to garner interest from general community members. I would inform visitors to the library and other community members of my research project during the Friday lunches, movie screenings, and various other events hosted by the VNFC during the period of September 2015 to January 2016. I distributed letters of information to individuals who expressed interest, and employed the Snowball Sampling technique by providing additional letters to participants who could then refer eligible friends or family members to my project (O'Reilly 2012, 44). Through this process, I recruited 11 participants, 5 of whom were staff and 6 of whom were community members.

## 2.5 Data Collection

The following sections will describe the two methods of data collection: interviews and participant observation.

### 2.5.1 Interviews

The primary methods of data collection were semi-structured interviews with two participant groups: (1) VNFC Staff Members and (2) VNFC Community members. The fundamental importance of oral histories and story-telling in Indigenous cultures was a major reason interviews were relied upon as the method of choice. As Smith asserts, "story telling is a useful and culturally appropriate way of representing the 'diversities of truth' within which the story teller rather than the researcher retains control" (2008, 145).

Participants were given the option of partaking in a one-on-one interview, or opting for a group interview. Each style offered a unique approach to understanding participants' views on identity retention and construction at the VNFC. Individual interviews allowed for greater privacy in discussing sensitive subject matter, whereas the group interview provided a comfortable space to exchange ideas and share stories on personal experiences at the VNFC and in the city more broadly. O'Reilly speaks to the level of creativity that is fostered in group interviews, as "ideas emerge and are introduced that the interviewer might not have considered. They can be more naturalistic than individual interviews, reflecting the idea that people make sense of their world in interaction, not as individuals" (2012, 135). Given the social component of Indigenous identity formation, the project would have benefited from more group interviews had there been more time and resources available. However, one-on-one interviews did allow for a thorough exploration of life histories that may not have occurred in a group setting.

Eight individual interviews and one group interview, ranging in length from fifteen minutes to one and a half hours, were conducted from the period of October 2015 to January 2016. I carried out five individual interviews with staff members in their offices at the Friendship Centre at a pre-determined time during work hours. Three individual interviews were conducted with VNFC community members, and one group interview involving three community members was carried out. Group 1 and 2 were asked a different set of questions<sup>4</sup> to differentiate between staff and community member experiences.

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix C.

In light of the complex and multi-faceted topic of identity being explored, the interview structure was more conversational and free-flowing, characterized by open-ended questions that allowed for a range of responses from participants (O'Reilly 2012, 120). As O'Reilly maintains, more flexibility in the structure of the interview gives “people more time to delve into their thoughts, to express their contradictory opinions, their doubts, their fears, their hopes, and so on” (2012, 120). My aim was to encourage the reflexivity of participants in recalling their own personal experiences in navigating identity construction. Taking this into consideration, I found that the initial prompts that I had prepared should the participants struggle to articulate what Indigenous identity means to them (i.e.: language fluency, community, kinship ties, etc.) placed constraints on the way individuals regarded their identity. I omitted prompts after conducting the first interview, which ultimately allowed for more ideas and questions to be introduced throughout the data collection process.

### *2.5.2 Participant Observation*

I conducted periods of informal observation as a recruitment tool first and foremost, while also using the opportunity to collect general, contextual data on the activities taking place around the centre. In order to get to know the community members at the VNFC, familiarize myself with the programs and services available, and give back to the organization, I became a weekly volunteer at the library. The library is a volunteer-run facility in the Centre that contains pre-dominantly Indigenous content for both adults and children. My role at the library facilitated my gradual immersion into the VNFC community, a process O'Reilly (2012, 96-113) calls ‘participation.’ As O'Reilly denotes, it is through participation that the researcher can become informed about the *context* of

events and activities that are taking place, and gain an embodied—albeit limited—understanding of what community members experience through their engagement with the Friendship Centre.

As previously mentioned, the VNFC hosts a wide range of cultural events that are open to the community, in addition to regularly held lunches that are provided weekly at no cost. Everyone is welcome to these events as they cater to individuals and families from different demographics. Many of the participants referred to these informal gatherings when sharing their experiences with the Centre, particularly in relation to their effect on Indigenous identity-making and retention. I attended some of the major events to take notes on the general atmosphere and the activities that took place, but did not directly interview individuals attending these gatherings on their experiences with identity-making.

One of the biggest annual events that was held in December 2015 was the “Honouring the Sacredness of New Life Baby Ceremony,” in which over fifty newborns were blanketed by elders, provided gifts and introduced to the community. Drumming circles and singers from local Coast Salish Nations and across Canada performed to an audience of over one hundred people. Attending this ceremony, volunteering at the library, and dropping in on the community lunches each week gave me a broader understanding of the strong presence of both men and women who attend the events, the wide range of age groups served by the Friendship Centre’s various programs, and the diversity of cultures—both Indigenous and non—that are visible in the community. I did not, however, use participant observation as a tool to explore individual experiences of identity-making and assertion.

## 2.6 Transcription and Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded if participant consent was given, and were then transcribed on a laptop. If a participant opted out of recording, supplementary notes were handwritten in my notebook and then transcribed electronically. The transcripts were then coded following the format outlined by O'Reilly (2012): pinpointing words, phrases, and expressions that were repeatedly used within and across interviews. Examples of codes included *relationships*, *community*, *children*, *isolation*, *balance*, *healing*, and *racism*. Once commonalities and patterns were detected, the codes were then sorted into larger themes that culminated in a theoretical framework for analysis (O'Reilly 2012, 187-89).

In the next chapter, I discuss three overarching themes that I inferred during the coding process in relation to urban Indigenous identity-construction and retention at the VNFC and Victoria more broadly: "Relationships," "(De)colonizing Identity-Making," and "Finding Balance."

## Chapter 3: Analysis

This chapter will analyze the three core themes that were identified in interviews with 11 Indigenous women who are involved with the VNFC, regarding processes of urban Indigenous identity-construction and retention in the VNFC and in the city more broadly. As women spoke about their experiences negotiating identity in and around Victoria, common themes relating to isolation, community-building, urban-rural tensions, cultural assertion, and the importance of family and friends (among other topics) were frequently highlighted in our conversations. To address these themes, my analysis is organized into sections entitled: “(De)colonizing Identities in the City,” “Relationships” and “Finding Balance” and further divided into sub-sections.

It is important to note that some of the women chose to be identified in this project, while others opted to remain anonymous. Pseudonyms are distinguished by an asterisk and identifiers have been removed to maintain confidentiality.

### 3.1 (De)colonizing Identities in the City

To begin to address the questions that frame this research project, this section will focus on the impact of the on-going colonial project on Indigenous identity-making at the VNFC and in the urban centre of Greater Victoria. The colonialism that permeates the lives of the women in this project—and the courage they demonstrate in actively resisting it—is what inspired the title of the theme “*(De)colonizing Identities in the City*.” Based on the stories shared by participants, three major sub-themes speak to the link between colonialism and identity-construction: the individualistic culture that is reproduced in the city, internalized stereotypes among settler Canadians and Indigenous peoples, and individual and collective acts of resistance.

### 3.1.1 A Culture of Individualism

Lawrence (2004, 169) suggests that the culture of capitalism, which favours economic growth and individualism over community-building, is magnified in cities. She goes on to suggest that such an economic framework works to further isolate and marginalize urban-based Indigenous dwellers. Within the Greater Victoria context, this environment poses a challenge to certain individuals and families who are seeking a sense of belonging in a place that may be completely unfamiliar to them. As VNFC staff member Gina maintains, a major obstacle facing Indigenous peoples who use the Centre in terms of identity assertion is the need to forge connections with other individuals in similar situations. In particular, the process of community-building is hugely difficult for many people moving to the city without relatives to help them transition to the new environment. Danielle\*, another staff member, speaks to the contrast between her First Nations community and the urban culture in Greater Victoria:

So, when you come from rural, or reserve, or from a self-governing First Nation, and more to an urban setting, one of the biggest things that you lose is that sense of *community*. So where I come from, kids are playing on the streets at midnight, 4-5 year olds—because this is 24 hour daylight in the summer—and people aren't concerned; the whole community is watching those kids. If there's a single mom in the community and everybody's been out hunting, people are going to take her meat, and are going to take her caribou and moose, and her and her kids' needs are going to be met. Someone is going to haul wood for them in the summer so they're not freezing in the winter. She may do some baking for the hunters for when they're out hunting but there's a real sense of community and people help each other and that's just the way it is.

And so it goes back to our traditions, right? Everybody has a purpose and everybody helps each other, there's no, "I'm in it for myself" and you know, this taxation of technology that we live in nowadays. And I think when we're in an urban setting, we leave each other behind, it becomes a competition and we lost sight of our culture and our traditions. I think we have to be very grounded, I think we have to be very mindful of what keeps us grounded and what connects us. Is it going to be drumming on Tuesday night with my family? Is it making regalia? Is it, making sure at least once a week I'm making a moose stew, or we're still eating

traditional foods? That we're still going out and practising this stuff in some way? I think, when you lose sight of that stuff and you get sucked into the television and the cars and the malls and the buying stuff, we're losing pieces of ourselves slowly.

I also think that if we make an effort to connect to places like the Friendship Centre, and to drum groups or to go hunting or whatever it may be—this interview is making me hugely homesick—I think that you can hang onto a piece of that.

For Danielle\*, the Friendship Centre provides a space to regain that sense of community that is critical to strengthening or affirming Indigenous identity for those who are living in the city. Christine\*, another VNFC staff member, also spoke about the role of the VNFC in building a community for those who feel disconnected in Victoria:

So, for example, if I... for some people who may have come to an urban setting, from different communities, they come here and don't *know* anybody—and so they get to know people *here* by providing—we provide consistent programming so when they come here every week, you know that they are excited to come see the friends that they've made here. And when they leave here they're not isolated anymore; they're not on their own raising children. They have other people who are doing the same thing as them.

However, running a non-profit organization in a capitalist framework comes with its fair share of challenges. In order to receive the necessary funding from the Canadian state, the VNFC must reproduce the values of the dominant culture to a certain degree. Though committed to building a tight-knit community for urban dwellers, the Centre does reflect a hierarchical, bureaucratic model. Community member Janet\* struggled with the atmosphere at the VNFC as it reminded her of her experiences with the IRS:

I think I'm always looking for places where I feel welcome and I feel a homey feeling, right? Because I have been in day schools and residential schools I don't like that environment. I can't operate in certain environments. The Friendship Centre reminds me of that residential, institutional feeling and for a lot of people, they don't say it, but I know it's there.

If the staff at the centre were standing outside their doors and saying, "Welcome, how can I help you?" that would make a difference. You know what I mean? Because a lot of the time they're sitting in their offices with the door closed and it's like...oh my god...you know, it's very institutionalized.

### 3.1.2 *Internalized Stereotypes (Among Settlers and Indigenous Peoples)*

Contemporary colonialism in Canada is reinforced in part by the internalization of racist and discriminatory stereotypes that incarcerate Indigenous peoples in time and place.

Many settler Canadians continue to imagine Indigenous peoples' identities as being rooted in the past, and fixed on reserves. Evidence of such harmful mindsets can be found in conversations participants have had with friends at work, strangers on the street, and even family members. When asked to share the biggest challenge she faced in the city in relation to Indigenous identity construction, Dannette talked about her previous experience working for the government:

D: It's really hard because discrimination is alive and thriving but—there is polite discrimination, you know? Even in the workplace, the comments that people used to make were actually frightening. Seminars and workshops were held at work to educate the employees about what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, in terms of how we spoke and how we behaved towards each other. And in this day and age with all these immigrants, I mean, the comments that come out of people's mouths sometimes are just not right. And if you don't nip it in the bud, the offending behavior continues in the form of racism directed towards you, and you have these feelings of helplessness, embarrassment and sometimes...shame. I think that contributed to my feeling depressed. I used to have a really, really hard time at work with a couple of people, and I was the only Aboriginal in our department.

KN: And this was in Victoria in the government?

D: Yeah. There were a couple of other Aboriginal people in the workforce, but, some of my coworkers I felt were so racist, and they'd turn to me and say "well I didn't mean you" and I would be like, "but you mean every other Indian but me right?" So it's really hard, and it starts to wear on you. But I was also fortunate to work with some really good, kind people who made every attempt to support and encourage me.

Dannette speaks to the embodiment of racism that starts to take a toll on one's physical and mental health, creating repercussions on how she sees herself as an Indigenous

person. Community members Amber\* and Sarah\* share similar experiences with ignorance, both in their government youth internships and in the city more generally:

KN: What challenges do you encounter in the city?

A: ...I guess just being so far away from my hometown and my own traditions. On my dad's side I used to go to powwows...it's not really an island thing. Another thing, I had a good one and I forgot. Yeah, I guess just trying to find a connection back to your culture. Just through, either if it's buying art, or buying anything in relation to Indigenous peoples or I guess just assumptions, if I wear a pair of moccasins, "did you make those?" "No... I bought them at Soft Moc! Where did you buy yours?" It's just also facing assumptions that a lot of city people have, that's a challenge. Yeah. (Amber\*)

S: I think it's also challenging when people in the workforce assume that you know everything about Indigenous people too. I encountered that with one person in my workplace—that's why I keep my office door closed now. She would come into my office and be like, "so do you know so-and-so from this Aboriginal organization?" "No!" (Sarah\*)

KN: So you become almost a spokesperson.

E: It's nice that people are asking questions though, that's good to see at least. (Emily\*)

S: She comes to me with every Indigenous problem though...and I'm like, "I don't know..." (Sarah\*)

At times, participants found themselves wanting to conceal their Indigenous identity to avoid having to answer questions from friends and co-workers. When I asked whether she identified more as a member of her First Nation or an Indigenous person more generally in the city, Dannette replied:

Definitely more general. I mean, I tell everybody—everybody knows I'm First Nation. But in the scheme of it, I have to live in this community, or within a larger community, so as long as I can balance and I'm safe, I'm okay with being where I am. And nowadays—I hate to say this—but every once and a while people get on this Aboriginal bandwagon. I dunno why that is but every so often people jump on this Aboriginal bandwagon. And I wonder if it's for the right reason. I'm trying to think of a really good example...

KN: You mean like, the Halloween costumes being a caricature of an Aboriginal person?

D: Yeah...I mean like those...Being Aboriginal, being a part of Canada in general, there's still so much racism, such bad racism against Aboriginal peoples. And a lot the time it's because people are ignorant and don't choose to learn about Aboriginal

history. Of Canada, and Aboriginal people. So—there’s actually times I don’t want to identify because it then creates this racism and this attitude towards me that, “oh she’s Indian, she’s been on welfare her whole life, oh she’s a drunk, oh we pay for all her meds” and that’s not even *true*. And it’s amazing because a lot of people still have this notion that everything is paid for. I don’t understand that because I’m Aboriginal and I pay \$110 a month for medical coverage regardless of whether I use it or not. And then I have to pay a certain amount for dental, so how can everyone tell me that I must get everything for free because I’m Aboriginal. And I can show my \$50 thousand student loan for going to university.

These things are not true. It may have been a long time ago but our treaties are quickly changing and they’re changing because whoever is in power and the government there is like a fight and pull, and whatever and you end up re-negotiating things and giving a little bit away for something else, right, so there’s all of that going on, and we don’t—I don’t really think that people realize what it’s like when they say stuff like that, and they absolutely don’t know anything about what they’re saying. But it’s just that attitude again, right, like, “this is the way it’s always been” and I think there should actually be a course taught, people should be forced to—and nowadays, in school, kids *are* taking Indian studies classes to learn about what’s the treaties, and how they worked and what happened—but there’s the whole residential school, right? There’s that whole issue and there’s always something, right? Like payouts, like okay we’re paying out all these millions of dollars ‘cuz the priest did whatever, all this stuff, when is this gonna end? There’s this whole attitude about that. Canadians do not realize what Aboriginal people have gone through and why we are always fighting to have things “put right” and why we deserve to have something acknowledged and an apology.

KN: Can’t we put it in the past, yeah.

D: Yeah, but that’s not really—it’s not as simple as that. It’s really not as simple as that and I read documents about residential school survivors and it’s just—it’s so sad. These people that were beaten and not allowed to speak their language or whatever, didn’t know how to raise children. Because that’s how they were raised. So all along we’ve lost our language, because our parents sure as hell didn’t want to speak the language. Our *grandparents* did, our parents didn’t. And we were kind of removed from the reserve life, because people started moving to the cities, so there’s that loss of language, loss of culture and traditions, and that whole sense of pride and I think that somewhere in my 40s I finally found that whole nice package again, that worked for me, you know? To be able to hold my head up and be proud that I’m First Nation, or Aboriginal.

When reflecting on the importance of community-building in urban environments,

Dannette drew parallels between the stereotypical mindsets of settler Canadians in the city, and remarks made by her family living back on the reserve:

And I, myself, I don't have a lot to do with my own family...by my own family I mean my sisters and brothers because I feel...that they are racist towards me. So I know, what that feels like, and I wouldn't want anybody else to feel like that. I wouldn't want to participate in anything like that. I was a child of the welfare system from aged 6 to 11, then I went to a girls school run by the government, and had not been to my reserve until I was 11 and only for a few days, and went back when I was 16 and managed to stay for a year. For years, well they probably do when they still talk to me, but for years, my family has called me Ms. White. And that's *always* bothered me but—I'm only half Aboriginal. And my father is white—he's Ukrainian so, it's even harder than being full-blooded because both sides discriminate against you—both sides are racist towards you...so, finding this, that's why this community is so important.

Evidently, Dannette's experiences with Indigenous identity construction are largely impacted by the views of her family members and their perceptions of what Indigenous identity means, *where* it can be claimed and *who* can claim it. Bluesky\*, a staff member at the VNFC, spoke of her own preconceptions about where Indigenous community-building, and identity assertion, could take place:

KN: And so, what do you feel is an urban community?

B: Well we try to be an urban centre here. I consider us to be a First Nations community, but it's urban. It took me awhile to realize that because I was going to the First Nations land because I was working as a contractor and when I started here I realized that this is a community as well, it's just an urban community as opposed to living on a reserve. (Bluesky\*)

### 3.1.3 *Individual and Collective Acts of Indigenous Resistance*

The ongoing colonial project in Canada that becomes visible through the actions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike plays a significant role in the processes of Indigenous identity-making and reinforcement, as seen in the discussions with participants. However, the level to which colonial mindsets are persistently being challenged by Indigenous individuals and communities should not be understated. Many of the participants shared moments in which they spoke out against discrimination and

outright racism they have encountered in Greater Victoria, and subsequently how that shifted how they understood their own Indigenous identities. Community member Nora\* spoke about how she actively takes responsibility for defending herself and those she cares about when targeted on the street. She connects the current situation of racism in an urban environment to her past involvement with residential school:

N: ...I didn't go through hell like the rest of them.

KN: You didn't go through hell.

N: No... I was fortunate because it was already out in Canada, all over Canada that they were getting abused. One of my elders is still alive. That's why I still get aggressive, you know how I was saying earlier, aggressive on certain occasions but I'm trying to be nice—and I always... and that's what encourages me to speak out. 'Cuz a lot of [Survivors] are still alive and a lot of them get treated like that still. And I'm out there like "you don't treat my elders or me"... you know when they say something about natives: "oh they're dirty" but up the street, who's up there? The *Caucasian*.

KN: Yeah.

N: I want to point that out to people like "hey buddy" because it's still ongoing. I think my cousins get annoyed...but it helps *me* to put it out there. I put a comment [on Facebook]: "racism. It's here to stay. It's not going anywhere." Even my white friends don't mind, because they know what we went through...  
...But at the same time they aren't looking at the big picture of what the Caucasian and the priest have done to us. And they're like, "that lady said a bad thing to us" not realizing that we lived it our whole life...

Nora\* also spoke of using humour as a way of overcoming the trauma she struggles with on a daily basis while living in an urban centre as an Indigenous woman. Nora\*, like many other of the participants interviewed in this project, has dedicated much of her time to urban social justice movements that embody collective forms of anti-colonial, anti-patriarchal resistance:

N: That's why I said I should be a comedian. Because I know natives—you know how people assume all natives are stupid, it's all "blah blah blah". It's just a cycle, from century to century, and then we laugh just like the grand chief. I even said "Thanks lord." I even do Idle No More, and Missing and Murdered Women.

Nora\* also emphasizes the crucial significance of land in strengthening Indigenous resurgence movements. She believes that identifying as an urban Indigenous person, rather than an Indigenous person from a particular Nation or ancestral territory, represents a form of resistance against the colonialism of the Canadian state:

KN: So, in the city, would you say you identify more as an Aboriginal person in general? Or more affiliated with a First Nations group?

N: I'm more of a city person. I would rather be part of the *big world* rather than tied to some reserve.

KN: You identify more with the city? More urban?

N: Yes, more than being on a reserve. Because it's our native land and why the hell should I be on a reserve? The Caucasians came on and told us to go live on a shoebox. Why would I want to go live on a reserve when I got everything here? We lived well even before they came, so sad but so true. The reality of the immigrants coming into the native land and telling us to go to reserves. Jeez that's a really sad thing but the Caucasian taught me everything that's negative. From the residential school, that's why I'm the way I am. I got my mom's mean blood. I even caught on from her to be mean. And to say stick up for yourself, no one else is gonna do it.

Margot, a VNFC staff member, shared many of the same views as the other participants in terms of internalized stereotypes that both Indigenous people and settler Canadians embody, and in turn how those expectations affect processes of identity construction. She also reflected on the temporal side of identity construction in a collective sense, and how she has seen changes in relation to how identity is being claimed by Indigenous peoples now versus in the past few decades:

KN: What does Aboriginal identity mean to you?

M: I think for me it means, I would *like* for it to mean inclusivity. But even still there is a lot of assumptions about who you are, people often ask who you are, where you come from. From personal experience I remember shortly after starting work here, I remember a community member making reference to excluding the white woman sitting across the table, to me. And I made the comment "you need to ask who I am and where I come from before you make that assumption." So I think that, I think that Aboriginal identity is getting stronger... I think that people are standing up and saying this is who I am and this is where I come from but I still there is a lot of, um, stigma might not be the right word but there's still a lot

of, I don't even know if it's shame—people don't want to stand up and say who they are and where they come from because maybe they're not 100% Aboriginal, maybe they don't entirely know where their family comes from, but I would like to think that at some point anybody who is Aboriginal can stand up and feel like they can identify as being an Aboriginal person without any shame or judgment from other people—including Aboriginal people. Because there are some people who assume, because you're not dark enough, because you aren't 100% Aboriginal that you don't have the right to identify as an Aboriginal person.

## 3.2 Relationships

This section will examine the inextricable connection between relationships and processes of Indigenous identity construction and retention, both in an urban environment and more specifically in the context of the VNFC. Drawing on the experiences participants shared, I describe two ways in which social relationships form the basis of Indigenous identity construction: manifesting in 1) support networks and 2) cultural exploration.

### 3.2.1 *Support Networks*

The isolation and individualism that is reinforced in the city is a product of colonialism (Lawrence 2004, 169). As previously discussed, the culture of individualism in an urban environment makes it challenging for Indigenous peoples to connect with other individuals of shared backgrounds. Many participants pointed to the lifelong friendships they have formed with individuals they met through the VNFC, culminating in a deepened sense of community and belonging for those who had felt placeless in the city. Dannette describes how she first learned of the VNFC after having lived and worked in Victoria for some time:

After being diagnosed with Primary Progressive Multiple Sclerosis, I was too sick to get out and go anywhere or do anything. A friend took me out for a walk in my wheelchair along the Songhees walkway, and I ran into Carol\* and Lisa\*, and I

hadn't seen Carol\* since I was a child in Saskatchewan...but I recognized her laugh. And I knew it was her. I called her and we did the hugging thing and she was telling me she worked at the VNFC. She said I should come in and check it out because they had good programs there that I might find helpful to me. I've only learned about the various programs by walking around the Centre and asking questions. Now thanks to Lisa\*, I've gotten access to a lot of services from the Friendship Centre. They've taken over taking me to appointments, something previously handled by my co-workers from Service Canada. Since many of my specialist appointments are not somewhere that I can easily take a bus to (my neurologist is in Sidney). I can call the VNFC and make transportation arrangements to and from my appointments.

A brief encounter with a friend from her past led to a lasting involvement with the VNFC, and relationships that transcended the formality of staff and community member relations. Dannette gained a support network through her involvement with the Centre. Many of the participants heard of the VNFC through word of mouth. When asked about how she got connected to the VNFC and her thoughts on the role of the Centre in Indigenous identity construction and retention, Amber\* shared her experience moving to Victoria:

Growing up in [a small coastal community], the closest Friendship Centre was in Port Alberni, which is about an hour and a half away, so I didn't really go there. So this is the first time I've actually got involved with a Friendship Centre. And the first couple of years, being here and being at school, because my sister used to live here about 5 years before I moved—and she always told me “go check out the Friendship Centre. They have so many activities and this and this” and she was a single mother at the time, so I don't know, I just felt—not strange, I just wondered like really, if I would belong there—being from somewhere else. So I never actually came. So coming here and seeing all the actual things that they provide for people was really amazing. And like a few of the events I've gone to hang out with the youth, they're *incredible*—hearing how involved in their culture they are, and they're like 14-18. I'm almost 24 and I'm *not* like that and so many of them—a lot of them are artists, one of them is carving a totem pole in the back! I just feel like I wish I came here earlier, or sooner. I think it does have a huge impact on peoples' lives—I think Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people too.

The importance of investing in long-term, supportive relationships between staff members and general community members at the VNFC was a process also highlighted by

Christine\*, a VNFC staff member. When asked which programs may shape Indigenous identities more than others, Christine\* emphasized the importance of building a foundation of trust above all else, before assisting individuals and families with any services they might need:

I think all services help with that. When you look at the relationship piece, building relationships is really important, and it takes a very long time. So we spend a lot of time with that piece first before moving on to anything else. So again, that's that piece around culture—that's a cultural practice is building relationships and giving it the time, really walking beside the families and just supporting them wherever they are. And even though our program is [involves working with children], we know it's hard for families to think about child development when they are concerned about many aspects of their lives. So for us, it's how can we walk beside them and support them and um, and then we can look at child development later on when they are in a better place to do that, and sometimes that can take a long, long time.

A sense of community, for many, could also mean a stronger sense of self-worth. Sarah\* reflected on the changes she witnessed in families who first connected with the VNFC and returned regularly over time:

When I used to work here, I would meet a lot of people who didn't have that connection to community, didn't have that connection to...what felt like family to them. And when they came here, and they started coming, gradually, week after week, you could see that change in them—they had that connection, they found a place where they feel accepted. In a way, they found things that help them grow.

### *3.2.2 Cultural Exploration*

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the legacy of colonialism in Canada plays an immense role in the way in which Indigenous identities are constructed and claimed. Many of the women I spoke to had been taken in by the foster care system at a young age and raised outside of their culture and, in many cases, far from their ancestral territories. When asked what Indigenous identity meant to them, some participants referred to their efforts to uncover

the parts of their histories that they never had the opportunity to explore while growing up in an urban environment. Dannette, originally from Key First Nation outside of Regina, describes her experiences in re-claiming her Indigenous identity later in life at the First Nations University of Canada in Saskatchewan:

Learning about Aboriginal peoples and their culture was important to me because I hadn't been raised with my family or in my home community. A lot of the girls in the Roy Wilson Centre in Sedley were Aboriginal and hadn't been raised knowing their culture. It was really hard because I was 16 almost 17 and I didn't know anything, so one of the reasons to go to SIFC was that there were a lot of Aboriginal people; they taught courses on Aboriginal cultures and issues faced by Aboriginal peoples. Initially I enrolled in a Job Skills program being offered and ended up getting a full time job. As employees we were encouraged to take classes offered through the University of Regina and the SIFC. I took classes on my lunch hours and in the evenings. I took as many Indian studies classes as I could to learn about Aboriginal people. Working for the college gave me the opportunity to be with other Aboriginal peoples, access to Elders and the opportunity to participate in numerous ceremonies and that became my link to my Aboriginal culture, which I would not have had access to, because I would not have known where to look for it.

When speaking to the role of the VNFC in shaping or reinforcing a sense of Indigenous identity, many participants highlighted the reciprocal nature of cultural exploration, expressing the importance of mutual respect and open dialogue when broaching the topic of one's identity. Christine\*, a staff member at the Friendship Centre, shared her views on what Indigenous identity means to her while reflecting on her work at the organization:

That's a big question. So for me, it's really just knowing who I am and where I come from. When I work with families, I really try to get to know that piece and explore that with them—getting to know who they are...what families they come from...So I try to explore that with families and that seems to be...sometimes we don't get very far if they haven't grown up within their families. Sometimes they were in foster care themselves or disconnected from their families or there are a number of reasons why they don't want to open up to that part of their life. And oftentimes we just try to talk about "so in your community what are the kind of cultural practices or traditions you follow, or in your family what are some of the practices that you follow?"

KN: And so for those people who don't necessarily know where they come from or aren't affiliated with any community, do you think the Friendship Centre helps them gain more of a sense of Aboriginal identity?

C: I think it does. I think it helps them connect with *an* Aboriginal culture. One of the training that I had taken in the past and brought to a community that I worked with before this one was [an interactive family program], and it's a program that really helps families connect with their culture in just the way the questions are asked—so it's never us teaching them about culture. It's helping *them* explore within *themselves* about their own culture and just bringing to the surface. So yeah, we provide some opportunity for them to try to connect with something that feels like it—and culture is so big right, are we talking about practice, are we talking about how it looks, are we talking—you know? It's so big...

KN: It's very multifaceted for sure.

C: Yeah, there's so many layers to it. So we're trying to help them explore and, in working with some families, I recall some of them who had said I had no idea anything about myself because I grew up in foster care. So being part of discussions we really focussed our discussions on just some cultural teachings of our own. We would talk about that and just some parents would talk about that and get excited about it and go, "Hey I didn't know about that" and they would get excited and want to learn more about their family and connect with their history that they didn't grow up with.

Margot, who works in the Early Childhood Development department, also described the mutual learning process involved in bringing together diverse cultures in the VNFC community:

We ask people to *bring* their culture, bring what is important to *them*, share what is important to them—because that's how we learn. And everybody's different; everybody has a different way...even people who are, you know, belong to this territory. People will do things differently from family to family. So it's not just about picking one way...and this is one of the things we talk about a lot, so yes, we are on Coast Salish territory, but it isn't just about Coast Salish people; it's about everybody who comes. And we need to respect and embrace everybody's cultures... not just our own cultures.

In Margot's view, it is up to the individual or family to share their culture and values, and it is the responsibility of the staff and other community members to be open to a dialogue about that, ultimately creating the foundation for respectful relationships to form.

Many community members made similar statements regarding the opportunity to learn more about their family histories and cultural backgrounds that the VNFC provides. In

Nora's\* case, her interest in her family's ancestry had already been sparked prior to her involvement in the organization's programs; however, a visit to the VNFC library solidified her objective of writing a memoir about her experiences at residential school:

Oh I use the library! Because I want to do something else...look up more of the cultural side of my history. I even told the lady yesterday because I want to use some of the books. I want to learn more about [residential school on B.C. mainland]—I went to residential school for one year.

The importance of instilling cultural pride in Indigenous children and youth was emphasized on several occasions by both staff and community members as being key to Indigenous identity construction and retention. The teachings that youth workers offer children and families are particularly significant for parents who have little knowledge of their Indigenous identities and struggle to transmit cultural teachings to their children.

Sarah\*, a community member at the VNFC, reflects on the space the VNFC provides for cultural exploration at a very young age:

And I think—I think the Friendship Centre does play a big role in helping people find their Indigenous roots. Especially with the Best Babies program that they have here, or just between the [Aboriginal Infant Development Program] and [Aboriginal Supported Child Development Program], I know they both do a lot of cultural teaching with the babies in a sense because I remember when my mother was there, there were a lot of teachings given to the mothers, that even I hadn't heard before. But that's because a lot of the workers that they have here have different Indigenous backgrounds, which is really cool because they incorporate different Indigenous backgrounds into the teachings that they bring here. So it's not just like—just coastal teachings, this is all you're going to have....So I think that how the Friendship Centre plays in the role of identity I think is a pretty big one-- especially among people who are trying to find their Indigenous identity and how they fit within it.

Danielle\*, a staff member, offers a similar perspective on how their activities encourage young people to connect with the land and the traditions of the local territories. She also

recognizes the challenges that arise when attempting to incorporate such a diverse array of cultural teachings into programming:

We try. We try to offer life-skills programming, physical fitness programming, and a cultural activity at least once a week. And our physical fitness component may be, you know, hiking and learning about the traditional territory there and what it means and go kayaking or canoeing in our traditional canoe, and we'll do cedar weaving—this week we're doing cedar weaving—and we try to do a sweat at least once a month. Tonight our “Cooking our Life Skills” classes are taught by an Aboriginal chef who tries to do traditional foods a lot. Tonight we're cheating... we're having chicken wings and Caesar salad just because it's one of the kids' favourites. But, you know, we try to incorporate culture and traditions into everything we do, and it might not always be apparent but we try and, you know, kids no matter whether you're from Africa, or Saudi Arabia, or Japan, or downtown Victoria... kids are kids, and at the end of the day, kids want to be a part of something, they want to feel welcomed, and they want to have fun. So those are the things that we try to establish here—no matter where you're from, what your world view is, if you're willing to be open, and learn, and come and enjoy-- you're going to get something out of it.”

### 3.3 Finding Balance

This section examines different ways in which the women seek balance while living in an urban environment, and the implications for Indigenous identity construction and assertion. The two primary sub-themes that became apparent during discussions with the women are the commitment to maintaining balance both (1) between urban and reserve life; and (2) across Indigenous cultural differences.

#### *3.3.1 Finding Balance Between Urban and Reserve Life*

Many of the participants who originate from territories outside of Greater Victoria described a physical and emotional disconnection between the urban way of life and the culture of their home communities. When asked what Indigenous identity meant to her,

Dannette spoke about balancing the various roles in her life and the way in which the VNFC is involved in that process:

D: Oh Gosh. Well, since I've never been raised on a reserve or that whole environment, my Aboriginal identity to me is—I guess I need to find a balance, because there's a part of me that needs to be in society—a functioning person that's working and doing things. But there's also a side that needs to know about my culture, to try to blend the two so that it gives me a sense of balance, and so I'm much more content and healthier. And I guess, in a way, one of the reasons I first started looking into the Saskatoon College because I realized that sense of belonging, and I couldn't find it, right? And I find it in both, and I can embrace both.

KN: Can you clarify what you mean by both?

D: Both being...living in the city and still being able to be a part of Aboriginal culture, you know, integrating it. There are people who have never left the reserve, culture—it's their whole way of life. They do the powwow trail, they're very traditional. I've never been like that because I was taken from my mother at a young age and placed in foster care. So I didn't learn about culture, or hear or learn to speak my native language. I've always felt like something was missing,—not quite right. But I found it at the college and it's the same here. I have found a sense of belonging at the Friendship Centre and I have “created my own family.” I didn't have anything or anyone here, having come from Saskatchewan and I found it very frustrating trying to meet other Aboriginal people. I know only a couple of Aboriginal people here aside from those I have met at the Friendship Centre. The Friendship Centre in Victoria does for me what the college did for me in Sask. It provided the link to other Aboriginal peoples and culture...giving me a sense of community and belonging.

Janet\*, who has lived in Victoria for several years after having moved from her reserve in northern B.C., continues to feel torn between her former life on reserve and her current home in the city. The sense that she does not belong in either world permeates Janet's\* Indigenous identity, as she claims she is a “visitor in the city” and is not sure if she “might be fully integrated, or a permanent tourist.” Yet, over time, the way of life on her reserve has grown more distant from her current lifestyle:

Well I think the more I spend more time away from home, the more I feel disconnected. Because times have changed back home too—everybody's new and everyone's different. I've totally lost connection to a lot of the people back home

too, although I still can speak the language. It really doesn't help me. Which is weird.

Staff member Danielle\* also points to the challenges in maintaining ties to one's home community and culture when living in an urban centre, particularly if someone has left their reserve because of a traumatic experience:

But a lot of people leave home because they've been a victim of abuse or sexual abuse, or they've got an addictions issue, or you know all sorts of reasons that people leave home, right? And usually there's some sort of shame associated with that. So sometimes they need that anonymity that the city can provide to heal or move forward, and they want to be, they want to be an Aboriginal person and they want to practise their culture and they want to be strong in what they do, but they can't go home.

A few of the community members felt that tensions between Indigenous identity making and urban environments were at their highest at the workplace, particularly this idea of having to adopt or perform a different identity depending on where you are at the time. When asked what challenges she faced in asserting her Indigenous identity in the city, Amber\* described the two conflicting roles she feels she embodies at her government internship:

After being part of [an internship program], and working for the government, it's been challenging—no, it's not challenging to be an Indigenous person in the government. Incorporating my perspective, my cultural background, but also having that tension between Indigenous people and government in general, is kind of a hard bridge to build, or to merge, because either you're seen as a government worker or an Indigenous person—you can't be seen as both. And I've definitely experienced that in government so it's been somewhat challenging to be an Indigenous person who works for the government.

Emily\* agrees that government bureaucracy poses a challenge to reinforcing one's Indigenous identity, claiming that:

There's not always space to practice your cultural identity. And I think that goes for anyone as well even if someone is from a different, you know, country or

something and that is their cultural identity, there is not always space for that in a government structure.

Faced with these limitations, there are a range of tactics through which individuals practice their Indigenous identities. According to Sarah\*:

I think how I keep my identity in an urbanized setting is by, I think just, remembering the teachings that are given to me, whether they're from my grandparents, or they're from someone here at the centre. Or they're from my partner, who has a completely different First Nations background from me. I think it's just being aware and just holding on to those teachings and those stories that have been given to you—because that always connects you back to home, back to where you're from. In some way, if you don't have anything else, at least you have those words or teachings that were given to you.

Danielle\* says:

If we make an effort to connect to places like the Friendship Centre, and to drum groups or to go hunting or whatever it may be (this interview is making me hugely homesick) I think that you can hang onto a piece of that. And I think that if you can, and you're from a rural setting, I think you need to go home at least once a year, if you can and connect with your own people and connect with your elders.

Christine\*, another VNFC staff member, spoke to this notion of balance in building programs for children at the Centre that incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems:

Yeah, I think it's really just—my focus since coming here has really just been trying to strengthen the Indigenous base of the program. And, my work has always been trying to equalize the Indigenous knowledge, because all of the tools that we use and all of the theories that we kind of rely on are very—they come from Western perspectives, right? So for me it's about trying to raise the value of Indigenous knowledge and equalize it with that because, especially in this program [where we work with children], we are taking developmental screening tools that are definitely not Indigenous ways of being at all. We're working with family but we also need to come from, for example, I'll give you an example specifically to speech and language. When you look at a child and you go through the questionnaires and, you know, you check the checklists and you see that they are delayed, because they are not speaking—it is based on this checklist. But then if you look at the family and you talk to the family about their values and beliefs about communication and how they are talking, you often learn—you *can* learn

from them that language is, for them, oral language may not be that important. And what they value is that a child observes first and speaks second. So it's different from expecting the child should be speaking by the age of 3—whereas in some cultures that I've worked with—they prefer a child to really pay attention to cues—communication cues. They teach their children to, um, make eye contact and they are not speaking, they are just using gestures, they are reading body language at a different level, which to me can be higher up in some of those children than children that are using a lot of words. So it's kind of interesting to look at language that way, and to me, raising their value of their communication style is important and not to disregard that because they don't fit the standard way that the tests were written, based on the standards.

KN: Oh for sure, yeah!

C: It can be tricky to do that, when you work in this type of program, where the foundation is around child development and screening tools, so how can we bring in that other piece because, after all, we are an Aboriginal program. We need to make sure that we are also looking at families' values and views.

KN: And balancing those two worlds.

C: Yes, yes. So it's really a lot of work and when you get time to get into it, it's great—it's nice to be able to have the time and the flexibility to do that. That's not always the case because things get really busy, so you don't really get to do that all the time. We talk a lot about the spirit being missing too—you know a lot of the screening tools don't look at that piece, they look at development. So we really try to see “so what is the spirit of the child” and what is that telling us and how are we supporting the spiritual development—it's kind of adding that other layer to it.

For Christine\*, the VNFC has the potential to play a major role in strengthening Indigenous identities by foregrounding Indigenous ways of knowing and instilling these values in children at a young age. However, it is a challenge to implement these changes to programming when faced with financial and time constraints.

### *3.3.2 Navigating Differences in Culture*

Beyond the urban-rural divides, participants identified another key layer of identity-making in the city, namely, the diversity of Indigenous cultures in the city, and the challenges with asserting one's identity in a region that is not one's reserve or ancestral territory.

Janet\*, a VNFC community member originally from a reserve on mainland B.C., reinforced the social nature of Indigenous identity construction and retention, while emphasizing the challenges of reconciling her identity in an individualistic urban environment far from her home community. Although she attends various events at the VNFC and other Indigenous organizations, she is critical of immersing herself in organizations that do not reflect the culture of her nation:

KN: What does Aboriginal identity mean to you?

J: It's weird, now that I've been here so long I've kind of lost perspective. I think of myself because where I grew up, on reserve, it meant something completely different: it meant independence, meant being able to speak your own language and be comfortable hanging out with relatives and hunting and fishing trips, camping. You know, hanging meat and fish to dry, just having fun, going to powwows, and stuff. Hang out for socializing. Nowadays, my whole world is just not like that anymore. Everything is kind of organized and it feels weird, unless you are with your own people, your own culture.

KN: You feel kind of isolated.

J: I do, I tried going to some powwows and events here. But you can always tell. It's a different language, a different culture, a different environment. It's not the same—it's not home.

VNFC staff members Bluesky\* and Christine\* reflect on this concept when describing what Indigenous identity means to them:

Well there is a lot to the question, but I will say first thing off the top of my head if you get someone who is not from the Coast Salish community for instance, they may not have a lot of connection with their own community, right, they may not have ever lived on a reserve—so they may not have that identity at all. (Bluesky\*)

...and sometimes if they're so far away from home and if they were raised in their culture, in their families and cultures and communities, and being so far away from home they feel disconnected from it and it's just a long way, you know. And I can, even my own experience, coming from my community back home to here—I don't have the connections to my family, don't have connections to when we were doing celebrations or ceremonies or anything like that because I don't have my people to do that with. So, being away from it, it does make it challenging to come be a part of this territory where things *are* different, and wanting to be respectful and not wanting to impose my practices and my stuff on the people here and wanting to be respectful of the traditions *here*. So for me it's about trying

to learn that from the people in the communities so I don't do anything that would be...wrong or disrespectful...so it's that, that reaching out to the communities.  
(Christine\*)

Both Bluesky\* and Christine\* articulate how the separation from one's home community, or unfamiliarity with one's ancestral background entirely, create a barrier for identity reinforcement. Christine\* highlights the need to connect with her own cultural practices while respecting those being practiced locally. Community member Sarah\* also describes how she negotiates multiple Indigenous identities in the city, as she has ancestral ties to different communities:

KN: In the city, do you find you identify more as a member of a particular Nation, or band, or anywhere you consider home? Or do you identify as an Indigenous person more generally?

S: I guess I would say that I do generally identify with where I come from because I grew up here in Victoria. I know I'm not really close to my mom's side the [Nation on Vancouver Island] people in [a small Northern community] but I still recognize myself as from there. Because when they do have ceremonies down here, they always recognize me as being from that community, I guess, that I still feel the need to recognize that I do come from there even though I don't know all the treaties, I don't know the dances, I don't know the language, but I do come from there in some way.

Many of the women discussed the role of the VNFC in forging connections between diverse cultures. When asked whether the VNFC promotes a general Indigenous identity or identities more specific to one's own Nation, Dannette shares her experiences adjusting to Victoria after having lived in Saskatchewan:

Well I guess its...oh for sure the Friendship Centre has this incredible, um, I don't know how to say it, I don't know if it's the people there or whatever but they have a really unique group of people that offer incredible services. And although it's Coast Salish or um, everywhere you go, it's going to be different. So, that in mind, everything is also the same. Because, we have a lot of the same in Saskatchewan and in other provinces and other people there is still that music, and dancing, and generally its traditions, right? It might be a different dance but you know the tradition. So you know why they do it. There's a variance in culture,

there is always going to be a variance in culture, but it's still there. The *root* is still there. So you, the friendship centre is, does bring a number of different people together and, it brings them together and offers these programs just I think to bring an individual, prepare them for a better life. A life that they can understand and that they can meld, because you are trying to put two cultures together. And what you want to be able to flow freely between the two cultures, and still retaining your Aboriginal customs and identities. But be able to go also, into the workplace, or travel anywhere in the world, and still be a part of that too. ...But at the same time, they do provide something that is unique to Aboriginal people, because they *do* provide a piece of their culture. And at the end of the day they can still go home, that's not in that direct setting, and still feel good about who they are. That's what I like, that's what they do.

Dannette highlights the fundamental values and practices that are shared across Indigenous communities, and the way in which she believes the Friendship Centre plays a role in uniting Indigenous peoples by celebrating these common links. When asked how the VNFC helps to connect Indigenous peoples from diverse backgrounds to their identities, VNFC staff member Gina also referred to the organization's efforts to incorporate traditions that are shared across all Nations, such as drumming, into their ceremonies.

Community member Emily\* spoke to the importance of Friendship Centres in her life, claiming that, “a lot of my Indigenous identity has been through things like Friendship Centres, or some of the different groups I joined through school” when she lived in the Okanagan. Emily\* sheds light on the idea that her Indigenous identity to some degree adapts to and changes as she navigates different environments and learns about different cultures:

Well I haven't been coming to this Friendship Centre for very long because I'm new to Victoria so I don't know so much about that—but I started to become more involved in my heritage when I was living in Kelowna, and my mother's family is originally from Saskatchewan, so growing up in the Okanagan—the culture is very different than what my mother's family would've been tied to in Saskatchewan. So it was interesting for me because I was growing in an identity

with Okanagan cultural practices when maybe that's not necessarily my grandparents' or my mothers' specific cultural practices. So I could see a similar pattern happening, where you can learn different cultural practices from different cultures that aren't necessarily the same.

The process of Indigenous identity-making for Emily\* encompasses her collective experiences living and interacting with different Indigenous communities while growing up.

### 3.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a detailed account of participants' responses in relation to their experiences with Indigenous identity construction and assertion in the urban context, and within the VNFC. With contemporary colonialism permeating urban experiences, participants shared stories on how they continue to navigate the individualism of the city, and carve out spaces for identity retention on an individual and collective level.

Participants' responses illuminated the diverse backgrounds that are represented at the VNFC, and the varying degrees to which each woman feels connected to her Indigenous identities. While the VNFC proves to play a key role in re-claiming Indigenous identities for some, others struggle to assert their identities without a direct connection to their ancestral landbase. The following chapter will delve into a deeper discussion on the theoretical implications of these findings.

## Chapter 4: Discussion

This chapter critically examines the significance of each theme—Relationships, (De)colonizing Identity-Making and Finding Balance—explored in Chapter 3, in relation to the project’s research objectives and questions. Each section engages with the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2, to position the study within the broader anthropological and interdisciplinary scholarship on Indigenous identity construction and assertion in urban areas. I will be returning to certain quotations used in Chapter 3 to deeper unpack the significance of women’s responses within the context of my research topic.

### 4.1 Relationships

The social component of Indigenous identity construction and assertion in the city and at the VNFC was a fundamental theme addressed throughout all interviews as relationships build the foundation for cultivating long-term supportive communities and cultural exploration at the Centre. Alfred and Corntassel (2005, 609) discuss the pivotal role of relationships in reinforcing a collective dimension of Indigenous identity:

We consider relationships (or kinship networks) to be at the core of an authentic Indigenous identity. Clearly, it is the need to maintain respectful relationships that guides all interactions and experiences with community, clans, families, individuals, homelands, plants, animals etc. in the Indigenous cultural ideal. If any one of these elements of identity, such as sacred history, is in danger of being lost, unified action can be taken to revitalize and restore that part of the community by utilizing relationships, which are the spiritual and cultural foundations of Indigenous peoples.

Mirroring the views of Alfred and Corntassel, VNFC staff members Christine\*, Gina, and Danielle\* pointed to the importance of foregrounding trust and respect in building relationships with Indigenous community members. It is only after a respectful dynamic

is formed that staff members can assist with childcare, education, or any other services that families may require in a manner that best incorporates their unique cultural practices. Gaining trust from strangers involves a long-term, mutual commitment on the part of both community members and staff—often spanning several years. Staff member Danielle\* described how she has witnessed many children and youth grow up and have children of their own while continuing to use the services and programming the centre offers.

#### *4.1.1 Reclaiming Identity*

For individuals who feel isolated from their kinship roots, some of the participants claimed that the VNFC provided them with the opportunity to *reclaim* their Indigenous identities by partaking in cultural activities and engaging with the urban Indigenous community (Laliberte 2013, 114; Lawrence 2004, 143; Yamanouchi 2010, 288). This process of reclaiming identities is particularly salient for the participants who are Survivors of residential schools, who grew up in foster care outside of their culture, or who are of mixed-ancestry. VNFC community member Dannette articulates her own experiences asserting pride in her Indigenous identity later on in life:

I read documents about residential school survivors and it's just—it's so sad. These people that were beaten and not allowed to speak their language or whatever, didn't know how to raise children. Because that's how they were raised. So all along we've lost our language (because our parents sure as hell didn't want to speak the language. Our *grandparents* did, our parents didn't). And we were kind of removed from the reserve life, because people started moving to the cities so there that loss of language, and that whole sense of pride and I think that somewhere in my 40s I finally found that whole nice package again, that worked for me, you know? To be able to, to be proud that I'm First Nation, or Aboriginal.

Dannette speaks to the role of generational differences in asserting one's Indigenous identity, and the degree to which assimilatory measures taken by the Canadian state continue to impact how identities are claimed.

For those participants who claimed a connection to their Indigenous identities before moving to Victoria, there are definite tensions that surfaced in their involvement with an organization that does not practice traditions and customs unique to their home nation. While some of the women praise the VNFC for its degree of community engagement and range of cultural activities, others struggle to feel a sense of 'place' in a culturally diverse environment, and on a territory that is not their home nation. The importance of 'place' in constructing and reinforcing identity in the city is highlighted by those who feel 'placeless.' In many cases, Indigenous peoples without close ties to a particular community outside the urban context endure a constant struggle to establish a form of collective identity in the city. Lawrence refers to these individuals as being "truly diasporic" (2004, 191) as they are unable to pinpoint places in which they 'still belong.' This sense of 'placelessness' often applies to those who were adopted, and whose families are dispersed across the country. The VNFC, though helpful in offering a space to meet other urban dwellers going through similar situations, did not remedy the lingering sense of placelessness Janet\* and Danielle\* articulated about living off reserve:

It's weird, now that I've been here so long I've kind of lost perspective, I think, of myself. Because where I grew up, on reserve, it meant something completely different: it meant independence, meant being able to speak your own language and be comfortable hanging out with relatives and hunting and fishing trips, camping. You know, hanging meat and fish to dry, just having fun, going to pow wows, and stuff. Hang out for socializing. Nowadays, my whole world is just not like that anymore. Everything is kind of organized and it feels weird, unless you are with your own people, your own culture. (Janet\*)

But a lot of people leave home because they've been a victim of abuse or sexual abuse, or they've got an addictions issue, or you know all sorts of reasons that people leave home, right? And usually there's some sort of shame associated with that. So sometimes they need that anonymity that the city can provide to heal or move forward, and they want to be, they want to be an Aboriginal person and they want to practise their culture and they want to be strong in what they do, but they can't go home. (Danielle\*)

#### *4.1.2 Community-making*

Both community members and staff at the VNFC stressed the importance of having a community to which they feel they belong and feel safe—particularly if a person lives far from her home territory, or has no connection to her Indigenous identity for a number of reasons. To define community is as contentious as defining identity, as it is subject to a range of powerful discourses that dictate where communities boundaries lie, and who may claim their membership to them. Smith (2008, 215) offers insight as to how we might conceptualize Indigenous community-making:

The idea of community is defined or imagined in multiple ways: as physical, political, social, psychological, historical, linguistic, economic, cultural, and spiritual spaces. For colonized peoples many local communities have been made through deliberate policies aimed at putting people on reserves that are often out of sight, on the margins. Legislation and other coercive state practices have ensured that people stay within their own community boundaries. Communities have also made themselves, however, despite policies aimed at fragmenting family bonds and separating people from their traditional territories. Indigenous communities have made even their most isolated and marginal spaces a home place imbued with spiritual significance and indigenous identity.

Similarly, Alfred and Cornassel (2005, 600) and Andersen (2013, 51) maintain that state-sanctioned definitions of Indigenous identities have limited the capacities of individuals, both Indigenous and settlers, to imagine Indigenous community-building occurring outside of homogenous, constitutionally-recognized communities. While this

section does not position participants' voices in direct conversation with discourses that fix Indigenous identity construction to the reserve, the responses do demonstrate discrepancies between urban Indigenous views and the assimilatory narratives.

Participants described their understanding of community in terms of social ties, safety, a sense of belonging, and often as an extension of a family. Many of the women also emphasized inclusivity as being critical in defining both Indigenous identity and community, implying that no one can be turned away, regardless of cultural-background. While a spiritual connection to land proved fundamental in affirming Indigenous identities across the majority of the interviews; the *social* component of community-building and by extension, Indigenous identity construction and assertion prevailed as the most important factor among the participants' responses. From that standpoint, the VNFC embodies a space where Indigenous peoples can find that link to a community in an otherwise isolating, urban environment.

Community member Sarah\* pointed to how a stronger connection to the VNFC community could have a powerful impact on individuals and families who lack a connection to their Indigenous identities:

When I used to work here, I would meet a lot of people who didn't have that connection to community, didn't have that connection to...what felt like family to them. And when they came here, and they started coming, gradually, week after week, you could see that change in them—they had that connection, they found a place where they feel accepted. In a way, they found things that help them grow...it provides a new link for individuals and families to build a new community for themselves where they kind of find themselves.

Basso describes how “knowledge of place is therefore closely linked to knowledge of the self, to grasping one's position in the larger scheme of things, including one's own community” (1996, 34). For Sarah\*, the Friendship Centre has come to represent a place

where individuals can engage with and situate themselves in the broader urban community without having direct access to a ‘traditional’ landbase.

The process of Indigenous community-making at the VNFC and in urban centers more broadly is highly significant to destabilizing colonial narratives that fix Indigenous identity construction and retention to the reserve. The stories shared by the eleven women who are involved with the Centre demonstrate that communities are fluid entities that extend beyond state classifications of community borders (Lobo 2001; Watson 2010). Evidently, the VNFC has the potential to strengthen Indigenous communities and relationships, with further implications for Indigenous identity assertion in the city.

#### 4.2 Finding Balance

Chapter 3 examined how urban Indigenous identity construction and assertion is coupled with a need to acquire balance, not only when navigating the tensions between urban and reserve life, but also across Indigenous cultural differences. Many of the participants articulated the tensions and perceived incompatibilities between Indigenous identity assertion and living in the city, affirming the need for a connection to an ancestral landbase to fully embrace their culture. Although discourses on cultural authenticity being tied to the reserve stem from a history of Indigenous land dispossession and colonial expansion, such tensions have real, lived implications for how Indigenous peoples reconcile their identities in Victoria and at the VNFC:

One of the greatest difficulties individuals face in attempting to work their way through these hegemonic ways of thinking is the fact that these constructs have power precisely because of their ability to reflect reality in common sense ways. Appearance *does* make a difference to Indianness. Having status *has* shaped the realities of status Indians in ways that are highly distinctive. Being reserve-based *has* provided for a stronger collective identity for band members than is typically the case for urban Indians. (Lawrence 2004, 228)

The spiritual connection to land should not be understated, as it is a fundamental component of Indigenous identity construction and retention on a collective level. The physical disconnect from an ancestral landbase is a reality that many participants struggle to reconcile while living in the city, leading some to seek out alternative ways to reconnect to the land and maintain that balance. VNFC staff members indicated how they work to integrate outdoor activities into their program development. Danielle\* discussed the importance of teaching children who use the Centre about the local territory to reinforce a core connection to the land from a young age.

Participants identified several ways in which they connect to the land and gain a measure of balance, a process denoted in Watson's (2010) framework of 'diasporic' identities. According to Watson, conceiving identities as 'diasporic' allows for a reassessment of place and place-making and its interconnections with urban identity (2010, 273). The increasing numbers of Indigenous urban migrants across Canada does not necessarily suggest a loss of a sense of place; rather, it signifies extensions and transitions of social identities that connect new places to the old. Many of the participants who live in the city maintain close ties to their ancestral homelands and remain in frequent contact with their families living outside city borders, an integral part of sustaining their cultural practices and identities (Environics Institute 2010, 29; Watson 2010, 271). As Sarah\* and Amber\* maintained in their interviews,

I guess I would say that I do generally identify with where I come from because I grew up here in Victoria. I know I'm not really close to my mom's side the [First Nation] people in [Northern Vancouver Island] but I still recognize myself as from there. Because when they do have ceremonies down here, they always recognize me as being from that community, I guess, that I still feel the need to recognize that I do come from there even though I don't know all the treaties, I

don't know the dances, I don't know the language, but I do come from there in some way. (Sarah\*)

I use two different identities, like my mom is [Vancouver Island Nation] and my dad's side is from the Mainland, like [territory in the United States]. And I feel like even those two kind of have different ideas of what this would mean—different cultural practices, and um, even like political ideas. But I guess it gives you a sense of, like what Sarah\* was saying, inclusion. Like any culture I think it kind of builds who you are... and then you kind of grow into that person. But for me it's been interesting because of spending the past 5 years in Lekwungen territory and being so, not too far, but kind of far from my home territory and learning that and accepting that too. (Amber\*)

Sarah\* and Amber\* maintain social linkages with friends and family that bind them to several places instantaneously. Engaging with identity as diasporic challenges the cultural abandonment perspective when Indigenous peoples migrate to urban centres (Watson 2010, 271). Diasporic identities allow for greater flexibility in conceptualizing identity as a multi-faceted process rather than something fixed in time and place.

#### *4.2.1 Nested Identities*

Beyond the urban-rural tensions, participants also describe the implications of being involved at the VNFC—a highly diverse environment—for their Indigenous identity construction and retention. As seen throughout the interviews, there were salient differences between the individuals who grew up on reserve who firmly assert their Indigenous identities, and those who were removed from their ancestral territories at a young age who claim a disconnect from their identities. Overall, participants in the former group predominantly struggled with balancing their cultural practices with the multitude of traditions practiced at the Centre and in the city more broadly. The staff members in particular regularly grapple with incorporating their own cultural practices in

their teachings, programming and service provision—while respecting the culture of the local territory and the customs of the community members with whom they work.

For the participants who claimed a lack of connection to their ancestral nations for any number of reasons, many of them elaborated on the positive role of the VNFC—and other Friendship Centres—in shaping or reinforcing their Indigenous identities later in life. As staff member Christine\* maintains, it gives you a sense of connection to *an* Indigenous identity for those who feel disconnected in the city, indicating a broader, pan-Indigenous layer of identity. Dannette also describes how the diversity of the VNFC can be a positive link to understanding her Indigenous identity:

Because, we have a lot of the same in Saskatchewan and in other provinces and other people there is still that music, and dancing, and generally its traditions, right? It might be a different dance but you know the tradition. So you know why they do it. There's a variance in culture, there is always going to be a variance in culture, but it's still there. The *root* is still there.

Participant responses reflect the VNFC's efforts not only to explore the diverse cultures that are practiced at the Centre, but also to celebrate the commonalities that are fundamentally shared across Indigenous cultures when hosting ceremonies and gatherings.

Employing Alfred's (1995, 18) theory of 'nested identities' is instructive for better understanding the complexities that underline participants' experiences with navigating multiple Indigenous identities at the VNFC and the city more broadly. Alfred denotes Mohawk identities as being multiple and complex, characterized at the grassroots Kahnawake, National-Mohawk, broader Iroquois and the Pan-Native levels. Each layer of identity is inherited, signifying the historical, social, and political processes in which Indigenous identities are enmeshed.

Though this framework focused on reserve-based Indigenous communities, it can— to a certain degree—be applied to the experiences of urban Indigenous peoples in constructing and asserting their identities. For example, each of the participants in this project contend with a multilayered identity: stemming from band membership and clan affiliation, a sense of Pan-Nativeness that connects them with all Indigenous peoples of North America, as well as the added layer of *urban* Indigeneity. While each identity is inherited, certain layers may be foregrounded based on where they live, who they surround themselves with, etc. For example, VNFC community member Nora\* illustrated how she asserts her identity as an *urban* Indigenous person—as opposed to her national-affiliation—to challenge the colonial legacy of Indigenous land dispossession and reserve allocation.

Conversations with these women illuminated the potential for *new* identities to be claimed in urban environments. The social ties that link participants to various geographic regions at once, as described in the previous section, reflect the importance of cross-allegiances in identity-making. VNFC community member Emily\* highlighted the learning process involved with growing up in a community that was not her ancestral territory, and how that sense of belonging added a new dimension to her multi-layered identity.

Growing up in [Northern B.C. community]... the culture is very different than what my mother's family would be tied to in Saskatchewan. So it was interesting for me because I was growing in an identity with [Northern B.C. community] cultural practices when maybe that's not necessarily my grandparents' or my mothers' specific cultural practices. So I could see a similar pattern happening, where you can learn different cultural practices from different cultures that aren't necessarily the same.

Furthermore, physical distance from home community and landbase, transient lifestyles, a sense of disconnect from families living on reserve, and a multitude of other factors are collectively incorporated into the nested identities of the participants in this research project.

While Alfred's theory on nested identity offers a helpful premise to begin to understand the processes of Indigenous identity-making, his scope is limited to status Indians living on reserve—and is not designed to address the experiences of Indigenous peoples who are urban-based or otherwise disenfranchised as a result of colonial policies. Indigenous women in particular have been disproportionately affected by assimilatory legislation that regulates band membership and status designation (Lawrence 2004, 18-20). It is therefore necessary to transform the idea of 'nested identity' so as not to silence the voices of Indigenous women within the context of urban environments. I have attempted to do so in this section by taking into consideration the impact of movement across space—either voluntarily or through forced displacement—and its implications for the acquisition of new layers of identity.

#### 4.3 (De)colonizing Identity-Making

As discussed in Chapter 3, individualism in the city is a product of contemporary colonialism, resulting in further marginalization and isolation of many Indigenous peoples living in the city. Lawrence delineates the widespread nature of individualistic culture, pointing to the experiences of urban Indigenous communities in Toronto:

One powerful strength that the Toronto native community has in its favor is the existence of a developing middle class capable of building institutions to support Native culture. And yet, this middle class is struggling with the individualism and consumerism that is rampant in urban middle-class white environments. (2004, 169)

Cities are capitalist hubs that promote economic growth and responsibility to the individual, rather than the community. Within this environment, many of the participants denoted the challenges of connecting with other Indigenous peoples, a critical component of asserting and constructing Indigenous identities in the city.

Further, the colonial project that incarcerates Indigenous identity construction to the 'rural' is reproduced by harmful stereotypes internalized by both Indigenous peoples and settlers alike. The majority of the participants identified instances in which they were subjected to ignorance based on their Indigenous identities, oftentimes having to assume the role of spokesperson for all Indigenous peoples to satisfy the ignorant questions asked by settler Canadians. Most notably, the women who were employed by the government described the dual roles they felt they adopted within and outside the workplace.

Dannette pointed to the way in which some of her colleagues would make offensive remarks about Indigenous peoples while speaking with her, forgetting that she herself is First Nations. The fact that she worked for the government did not match their preconceptions of urban Indigenous peoples, so instead they treated her as though she was an exception. As Proulx poignantly demonstrates in his discussion of processes of urban identification, "the drunken Indian is ten feet tall, but a sober one is invisible" (2006, 414). Stereotypical discourses that essentialize urban Indigenous peoples as homeless and troubled eclipses those who are not, dismissing them as 'inauthentic' (Proulx 2006, 414).

At the same time, stereotypical mindsets also pervade Indigenous communities located on reserve, despite reserves being a colonial construct that forcibly dispossess

Indigenous peoples of their land. Dannette's anecdote about her family's opposition to her urban life—and her nickname “Ms. White”—poignantly illustrates the normalization of such assimilatory narratives that dictate where identities do and do not belong.

Lawrence (2004) refers to this process as the internalization of hegemonic discourses: an avenue through which the colonial state maintains its power over the regulation of Indigenous identities.

#### *4.3.1 Strategic Self-Identification and Resistance*

As a conscious response to stereotypes and racism that many of the participants contend with in their daily lives, some of the women identified moments in which they felt compelled to conceal their Indigenous identities—if that option were available to them. In some situations, it was to avoid the burden of answering ignorant questions about cultural practices and ancestry that are rooted in colonial discourse. Simpson (2011, 14-16) discusses the role of intergenerational shame as another key factor in self-identification, drawing on the history of land dispossession and degradation of culture faced by her Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg ancestors. Many Indigenous peoples, particularly of the older generations, learned to hide their Indigenous identities as a defense mechanism. Although choosing whether or not to self-identify is an individual act, Simpson (2011, 16) argues that shame permeates the collective identities of Indigenous peoples and is transmitted cross-generationally.

VNFC staff member Margot spoke of this process specifically within an urban context, using the example of individuals of mixed backgrounds who struggle to assert their Indigenous identities:

So I think that, I think that Aboriginal identity is getting stronger, I think that people are standing up and saying this is who I am and this is where I come from but I still there is a lot of, um, stigma might not be the right word but there's still a lot of, I don't even know if it's shame—people don't want to stand up and say who they are and where they come from because maybe they're not 100% Aboriginal, maybe they don't entirely know where their family comes from, but I would like to think that at some point anybody who is Aboriginal can stand up and feel like they can identify as being an Aboriginal person without any shame or judgment from other people—including Aboriginal people. Because there are some people who assume, because you're not dark enough, because you aren't 100% Aboriginal that you don't have the right to identify as an Aboriginal person.

Margot did, however, point to the degree to which she has seen Indigenous identities collectively become stronger during her time in the city. This could also be seen in the responses of other VNFC community members, as individual and collective acts of resistance to colonialism were defining features of participants' Indigenous identity-making at the VNFC and in Victoria more generally. Rejection of colonial discourses becomes part of everyday life for many urban Indigenous peoples, including VNFC community member Nora\*. Nora's\* commitment to speaking out in defense of elders, family members, and friends in the face of discrimination demonstrated a form of embodied, individual resistance for the benefit of her urban community.

#### 4.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter reinforced the importance of relationships and community-building in strengthening urban Indigenous identities, according to the participants' responses. Urban community-making not only enables Indigenous peoples from a range of backgrounds to connect and explore their cultural ties, but it also challenges state and legal definitions of community boundaries. For many, the VNFC promotes a sense of place and belonging despite a physical disconnect from their ancestral landbase. For a few of the women, the VNFC could not remedy their sense of loss in living far from their home communities.

This chapter also explored the need to find balance in negotiating their multiple Indigenous identities; both across urban-reserve binaries and within a culturally diverse environment. While some of the women travel back and forth to their home reserves to maintain social ties to their families and friends, others carve out spaces for identity assertion through other avenues, including using the VNFC as a space to express their identities in a supportive environment.

It is clear that the culture of individualism in the city creates barriers for reconciling Indigenous identities with urban environments, as the stereotypes and assumptions about where identity can be claimed and who can claim it pervade a multitude of powerful discourses—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Harmful narratives exacerbate the shame that is embodied and carried across generations of Indigenous families. However, this section highlighted the dynamism and resilience of the participants' Indigenous identity-making in the face of a racist, urban environment, a reality to which many participants point to the VNFC as the antidote.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter will begin by re-visiting the research questions and objectives that premised this research project. I summarize my conclusions and make recommendations for future research in the area of urban Indigenous identity construction and assertion.

### 5.1 Research Questions and Objectives

**Objective 1** was to explore the role of the Victoria Native Friendship Centre in the construction, reinforcement, and preservation of Indigenous peoples' identities in an urban landscape. **Objective 2** was to evaluate academic and mainstream representations of Indigenous identities being incompatible with urban environments.

The research questions were twofold: (1) What are the processes involved in identity-making and assertion for urban Indigenous peoples?; and (2) What role does the Victoria Native Friendship Centre play in the construction, reinforcement, and preservation of Indigenous identities in an urban environment?

### 5.2 Significance of Findings

This section will address the objectives and research questions above in relation to the findings of this project.

#### *5.2.1 Processes of Urban Indigenous Identity-Making and Assertion*

Although the participants were not directly responding to assimilatory discourses that fix Indigenous identity construction to the reserve, there were significant discrepancies that arose during interviews. As explored in Chapter 3 and 4, there *are* powerful tensions between urban and non-urban environments that have salience for Indigenous peoples'

realities in the city. Participants contend with assumptions about where identity can be claimed and who can claim it on a daily basis; assumptions that greatly impact how they position themselves within the spectrum of Indigenous identity. However, the ways in which the women in the research project balance multiple Indigenous identities in the city are a testament to the resilience and adaptability of their identities as they navigate urban environments. The processes of identity construction and assertion—regardless of geographic location—are deeply social, and must be evaluated on a collective level.

This research highlighted how these women negotiate multiple identities, and can add new layers to their nested identities and sense of place as they move from community to community. These cultures, although different from their home nation, shape how they understand their Indigenous identity. If an individual has a strong sense of who they are, it is something that they can carry with them in all aspects of their life. It may be weakened if they leave their ancestral landbase, or live in a racist environment, or lose that connection to their culture some other way—but there is always potential for it to be strengthened. A connection to community is the underlying factor necessary in reinforcing Indigenous identity, both on an individual and a collective level. Once that component is strong, other aspects can then be addressed.

### *5.2.2 The Role of the VNFC in Indigenous Identity Construction and Affirmation*

As explored in Chapter 1, Hall's (1993, 223-25) framing of identities as both “essential” (i.e.: a stable, core sense of Indigeneity) and “potential” (i.e.: discontinuities that continue to shape contemporary experiences) is critical in understanding the extent to which these women connect to their Indigenous identities. For many of the participants, the VNFC represents a space for a diverse urban community to grow and for individuals and

families to reclaim their Indigenous identities from which they had been disconnected as a direct consequence of the ongoing colonial project. Stories of re-claiming identity later on in life demonstrate the *potential* for identities to be actively influenced by relationships, policy, and involvement with the Friendship Centre over the course of a lifetime (Hall 1993, 223-225). A few of the participants noted the role of the VNFC in asserting a more general, pan-Indigenous identity that manifests through the shared practices that bind Indigenous peoples (such as a shared colonial experience and spiritual connection to a land base). For other women with a strong sense of identity, the Friendship Centre helps reconcile Indigeneity in an urban setting by providing a safe space to assert their identities and practice their customs in the city. These individuals foreground the *essential*, stable layer of identity to which they feel firmly connected (Hall 1993, 223-225).

In some ways, the VNFC is a microcosm of the culturally-diverse, urban environment in Victoria. Not everyone who claims a strong connection to their Indigenous identities feels comfortable being involved with an organization that engages a multitude of cultural practices, as they are not practices with which they grew up. For these women, a connection to their ancestral landbase and culture is fundamental to asserting their identities.

### *5.2.3 Incompatibility Between Indigenous Identity and the 'Urban'*

As the preceding chapters argued, commonplace assumptions in the media, policy, and across certain Indigenous communities that root Indigenous identity construction to the 'rural' derive from colonial constructs. Cities continue to be symbols of 'modernity,' with Indigenous urbanization widely interpreted as the desire to assimilate into the dominant

culture and economy. Recognizing the diversity of places in which Indigenous communities have existed—and continue to manifest—means challenging the assumed rural location of all Indigenous identities. These communities, whether represented in organizations like Friendship Centres, urban-based reserves, or other collective forms are continuously and actively shaping the urban landscape in Greater Victoria.

This being said, very few of my participants were from the Victoria-based reserves, which may have affected my results. While my study highlighted the experiences of women who are predominantly from remote communities on the mainland, it is important to also recognize those whose ancestral homes are considered ‘here,’ not ‘there’—either because they have continued to live on traditional territories that are within urban boundaries, or their traditional territories were urban before they were displaced to reserves in more remote regions.

### 5.3 Recommendations for Future Anthropological Research

My study focused on verbal expressions of identity-construction and assertion: a method that allowed participants to openly share stories and recall memories through conversation. However, employing a visual methodology to the study of identity-making—such as artwork or crafting—would offer a creative outlet to express such a multi-faceted and complex topic. The value of visual ethnography has yet to be fully embraced according to O’Reilly, as “the use of the visual is more emancipatory and powerful than the use of text” (2012, 167-69) in many cases. Several ethnographers have taken an auto-photographical approach that allows participants the freedom and authority to share their own stories visually. I originally planned to include an artistic component to my research methodology to engage the material side of identity-making; however, I

decided to not move forward with that approach because of my limited time frame.

Future studies might also explore in more detail which or how particular services offered by the VNFC contributed most to identity-making and assertion.

In addition, the scope of my project was limited to the population at the VNFC, which enabled me to examine the processes of identity-making for individuals who both interact with the Centre and live in urban environments. There is potential for further research on the processes of identity-construction for Indigenous peoples who choose not to use the centre: exploring the ways in which they assert their identities and engage in place-making in an urban environment. Returning to Langford's (2016, 13) argument that Friendship Centres are sites of moral contestation could be pertinent to this question, as it is possible that such individuals view the role of Friendship Centres as tools for integration into the dominant culture. It would be valuable to determine how Indigenous peoples who do not get involved with urban organizations seek out community in other ways, and how their conceptualization of community may differ from those who participated in this research project. Moreover, a discussion with such individuals may provide insight as to how Friendship Centres fall short in meeting the needs of certain groups within the urban Indigenous population.

In sum, there is a clear need within anthropology to deeper theorize urban Indigenous identity and the role of Friendship Centres in those processes of identity-making and affirmation. In addition to challenging discourses that assume "Indigenous people simply cannot be Indigenous in the city" (Watson 2010, 269), interviews with these eleven women highlight the complexities that underlie their involvement with the Friendship Centre. For many of the respondents, the role of the organization extends far

beyond the realm of service and program delivery—with rich implications for community-building, cultural exploration, support networks, and other processes implicit to Indigenous identity-making and assertion.

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## **Appendix A: Letter of Recruitment (Staff Members)**

Hello, my name is Katharine Neale and I am a Graduate student in Anthropology at the University of Victoria. I am currently conducting a research project on the role of the Victoria Native Friendship Centre in processes of identity-making and preservation among Indigenous peoples who are involved with the Centre. I would like to provide you with more information on my project.

The research is being conducted with Indigenous VNFC Users and Staff Members over the age of 18. I would like to interview you about your involvement with a program or service specifically intended to promote Indigenous identity retention and construction (music, art or dance classes, language courses, drumming circles, etc.) at the Victoria Native Friendship Centre. I am interested in discussing your views and experiences with identity making, reinforcement, and preservation at the VNFC. You are invited to participate in a one-on-one or group interview based on your preference. The interview will be audio-recorded with your permission, and notes will be written by hand.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Whether or not you choose to participate will have no effect on your position at the VNFC, access to services or programs, and will not influence how you are treated by the researcher at any future VNFC activities.

## **Appendix B: Letter of Recruitment (Community Members)**

Hello, my name is Katharine Neale and I am a Graduate student in Anthropology at the University of Victoria. I am currently conducting a research project on the role of the Victoria Native Friendship Centre in processes of identity-making and preservation among Indigenous peoples who are involved with the Centre. I would like to provide you with more information on my project.

The research is being conducted with Indigenous VNFC Users and Staff Members over the age of 18. I would like to interview you about your involvement with the services and programs at the VNFC. More specifically, I am interested in discussing your views and experiences with Indigenous identity making, reinforcement, and preservation at the VNFC. You are invited to participate in a one-on-one or group interview based on your preference. The interview will be audio-recorded with your permission, and notes will be written by hand.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Whether or not you choose to participate will have no effect on your job, access to services or programs at the VNFC, and will not influence how you are treated by the researcher at any future VNFC activities.

## Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

### Sample Questions for VNFC Staff (Group 1)

1. How long and in what capacity have you worked at the VNFC?
2. How did you get involved in the Friendship Centre movement?
3. Do many VNFC users come from outside of Victoria? Outside of the province?  
From where?
  - a. Do many of the users reside in urban communities?
  - b. Are many users new to urban spaces? Or do the majority have lengthy experiences living in urban communities?
4. What does (Aboriginal/Indigenous) identity mean to you?
  - a. Ex: National identity or citizenship, language ability, kinship networks, ancestry, participation in cultural traditions, etc.
5. Do you think the programs available at the VNFC shape (Aboriginal/Indigenous) identity? If so, in what way?
  - a. Are there any programs that might most directly create or reinforce Indigenous identities? If so, which ones and why?
6. What programming is prioritized at the VNFC?
7. How would you describe a community?
8. Does the VNFC play a role in creating a space for Indigenous/Aboriginal community building in the city? Why or why not?
9. What are the challenges faced by Indigenous peoples living in urban environments in relation to identity making/preservation?
  - a. Do you feel the VNFC plays a role in addressing these constraints? Why or why not?
10. Does the VNFC construct a sense of Pan-Indigenous identity? Or does it promote an identity that is more specific to one's membership in a particular Band/Nation?

### Sample Questions for VNFC Community Members (Group 2):

1. Do you live in or around the city of Victoria?
  - a. What different places have you lived in?
  - b. How long have you lived in an urban community (if applicable)?
2. How long have you been involved with the VNFC?
3. Can you describe your use of the Victoria Native Friendship Centre? Which programs/services are you involved in?
4. What does Indigenous/Aboriginal identity mean to you?
  - a. Ex: National identity or citizenship, language ability, kinship networks, ancestry, participation in cultural traditions, etc.
5. Do you feel the VNFC plays a role in shaping Indigenous/Aboriginal identities in an urban environment?

- a. If so, which programs/services do you feel most contribute to Indigenous identity-making and reinforcement?
6. What challenges do you experience in maintaining your Indigenous identity in an urban environment?
  - a. Do you feel that the VNFC addresses these constraints? Why or why not?
7. How would you describe a community?
8. What role does the VNFC play in creating a space for (Indigenous/Aboriginal) community building in the city?
9. In an urban environment, do you identify more as a member of a specific First Nations (Status or Non) / Metis/ Inuit community, or as an Indigenous/Aboriginal person more generally?
10. Does the VNFC construct a sense of Pan-Indigenous identity? Or does it promote an identity that is more specific to your band, nation or community-affiliation?

## Appendix D: List of Participants

### Group 1 (VNFC Staff Members)

1. Gina, November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015
2. Margot, November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015
3. Bluesky\*, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015
4. Christine\*, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015
5. Danielle\*, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016

### Group 2 (VNFC Community Members)

1. Nora\*, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015
2. Janet\*, November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015
3. Dannette, November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015
4. Emily\*, February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016
5. Sarah\*, February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016
6. Amber\*, February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016

*\*Names have been changed*