**Liberating and loving youth who use(d) drugs: a foundation for building new worlds**

by

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We acknowledge and respect the lək̓ʷəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I intentionally embody and politicize the acts of liberating and loving youth who use drugs. Liberatory love provided a conceptual starting place, from there I emersed myself in the critical addiction, violence and response-based practice, and youth substance use literature to build and create a strong yet flexible foundation from which to begin. This research engaged six youths who have use(d) drugs in intimate inquiry with the intention of gathering storied life experiences and surfacing the political from within the interpersonal. Proximal to questions of how love shows up in youth's drug use journey, and what might change if love guided our responses to youth who use drugs, emerged the collective experiences of the mind, body, and heart as youth made visible their interactions with liberation and love. Through this research youth who use(d) drugs interactions with liberation and love kept me grounded and urged me to continuously return to the values and teachings that brought me to this work, reminding me to move slowly and intentionally, resisting the false pretense of collective safety promised in racial-capitalist societies.



Keywords: liberation, love, critical addiction studies; youth, drug use

## Table of Contents

## List of Figures

## Acknowledgments

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## A Note on Language

In dreaming up this thesis I had intentionally resisted "addict" language for its totalizing nature, its ability to diminish individuals to a singular identity and trap them in a narrative that fails to reflect their truth. In moving through this, I was drawn into stories, academic literature, and various other publications that actively used this language. While it is a highly contentious and ambiguous concept, it will be used within the pages that follow. I cannot lay claim on its meaning as every youth, article, book, and the grey literature utilized the concept within their own context, creating their own meaning. I will however ask you to consider the language of addiction, the meaning you make of it, how it operates, and who it is meant to serve while engaging with the following pages. To share the place from which I view the concept of addiction, I lean into addiction as an assemblage, conceptualized by Fraser et al. (2017):

> [Addiction as assemblage is an] ad hoc cluster of knowledges, technologies, bodies and practices that contingently gather to form a temporary phenomenon, be it abstract or material. The world is made up of such assemblages, not of stable natural objects or self-evident, foundational concepts. One of these assemblages is … addiction. The addiction assemblage is made in practice and – an effect of politics – it is multiple and contingent, its shape, scale and content dependent upon a range of other equally labile phenomena (pp. 235-236).

## Chapter One: Surfacing the Personal, Political & Academic

*"To value collective livingness, to touch and know life fully, to know a life that is not in some way predicated on and subsidized by the suffering of another: I suspect that this is what liberation is" (Maynard & Simpson, 2022, p. 250)*

This project exudes love from its very core: love of self, love of community, and love of people who use drugs. Liberation and love provided a conceptual starting place, a steady heartbeat guiding the research process and consistently placing me in proximity with the values, history, and experiences that brought me to this place of exploration. The concepts intend to support people who use drugs to be both free and held in a space of communal love (Doyle, 2020), emerging from the shadows of society to be honoured in all that they are without the demands of change, abstinence, or claiming identities that fail to capture their lived realities. Grounded in the voices and experiences of young people, bolstered by academic literature, this project examined dominant substance use rhetoric, exposing the deep fragmentations created by a sociopolitical narrative that has failed to create a social space for people who use drugs. In a desperate search for hope, I placed my focus on rupturing the problematic notions created by this narrative and the way they intersect with theory, policy, and practice. I combed delicately through each intersecting layer, leaning into liberatory love, where freedom is a place and love is untethered from its racial-capitalist co-options, to expose what could be through remaining curious about what is not (Maynard & Simpson, 2022).

When I began this thesis, I was curious about the potential of love, I wanted to know what might be possible if love were to guide our collective efforts, to dream of the changes that could emerge through this generative and compassionate lens. I wanted to allow myself to dream, to lean into the thought that there are an infinite number of other possible ways of living

(Maynard & Simpson, 2022), ways that center love and liberation for the collective; a collective inclusive of people who use drugs. I wanted to resist political violence through the courageous act of imagining a better world. As I moved through this research process, it became clear that I was far from alone in this space. Youth who use drugs have been living on the social margins, creating their own spaces of liberation, love, and resistance. As I began engaging with young people, it became clear that liberatory love was very much present in their everyday lives. Youth provided stories and experiences about the ways they have shared and received love, resisted racial-capitalist co-options of love, and shared hopes for what the future might look like if policy and practice were to be guided by liberatory love.

**Context & Focus**

Public health discourse in British Columbia (BC) highly endorses the notion that "problematic" substance use is a medically moral issue, seen simultaneously as a disease of the mind and a moral failure (Alexander, 2014; Hari, 2016; Marsh et al., 2016; Room, 1985; Truan, 1993). The politicization, medicalization, and individualization of drug use have shaped how we respond to "problematic" youth substance use (Fraser, 2017; Nelson & Wilson, 2017; Urbanoski, 2017). This discourse has perpetuated policy and programming that focuses on abstinence-based approaches which view recovery as abstaining from substance use for the rest of your life. It requires the individual to admit powerlessness to substances while also taking responsibility for their actions and well-being (Fomiatti et al., 2017; Fraser, 2017), stemming directly from a neoliberal, racial-capitalist mindset that requires individuals to work tirelessly at creating a social space for themselves through a commitment to upholding economy and individual wellbeing above all else. This approach fails to consider the benefits of drug use and harm reduction strategies, while perpetuating colonial harms at a systemic level, by taking a neoliberal stance to

contextualizing substance use (Jenkins et al., 2017; Nelson & Wilson, 2017). This neoliberal stance actively asks youth to rid themselves of key pieces of their identity that fail to fit within a racial-capitalist, colonial agenda, reinforcing the idea that these aspects of their identity are a moral failing – a nuisance to society (Fomiatti et al., 2017; Skott-Myhre et al., 2016). Moreover, abstinence-based approaches have been critiqued for their failure to consider the lived realities of young people (McCune, 2014; Slemon et al., 2019; Urbanoski, 2017).

Youth substance use discourse paints a troubling narrative of youth across BC. It places labels, forms identities, actively problematizes, others, and dehumanizes their experiences (Alexander, 2014; Hari, 2016; Fomiatti et al., 2017; Fraser, 2017; Room, 1985; Truan, 1993). It separates youth from their family, friends, community, and support system, with overt and covert messages telling them they will never belong in society unless they give up core pieces of who they are to fit neatly into the racial-capitalist landscape (Fomiatti et al., 2017; Skott-Myhre, et al., 2016). This research was purposeful in focusing on and exploring the concept of liberatory love in relation to youth substance use. Where liberation is tied to spatial, bodily, and spiritual freedom and love is an extension of nurturance, resources, and an upholding of dignity and respect (hooks, 2018; Maynard & Simpson, 2022). Liberatory love steps away from the commodification of racial-capitalist co-options of love in that it does not require members of the community to be any more or less than who they are to be worthy of experiencing and expressing acts of love, freedom, dignity, and respect (hooks, 2018; Maynard & Simpson, 2022; Skott-Myhre et al., 2016). The work engaged in troubled the many ways that our current substance use services landscape stigmatizes, labels, others, and dehumanizes youth's experiences, asking them to fit within a box that demands they abandon aspects of their identity. This research explored possibilities of hope and direction for policy and practice through the lens

of liberatory love, breathing life into what could be by illuminating what is missing (York, 2018). I intended to politicize liberatory love within the context of youth substance use to inform policy and practice, based on current literature highlighting the intersecting influences of politics, social values, and individual experiences on youth substance use services (Jenkins et al., 2017; Jongbloed et al., 2017; Nelson & Wilson, 2017).

**Purpose & Guiding Questions**

The purpose of this research was to explore and politicize the concept of liberatory love in relation to youth drug use, and to create space for youth's individual and collective voices to come together with the hope of informing substance use policy and practice in British Columbia. The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the possibilities if love guided youth substance use practice, shaped policy, and informed social responses?
2. How does love show up in youth's drug use journey?

**Rationale**

BC's Representative for Children and Youth's (RCY) office reported that youth substance use services across the province lack accessibility and appropriateness (Representative for Children and Youth, 2020). This is congruent with the young folk I have walked alongside who have identified a need to critically review the way we approach youth substance use. This is bolstered by academic literature which claims current one-size-fits-all and abstinence-based approaches fail to accurately meet youth's needs and do not reflect their lived realities (McCune, 2014; Slemon et al., 2019; Urbanoski, 2017). Additionally, the literature is rich with scholars attempting to expose current substance use discourse for its shallow, value-laden understanding of the "issue" at hand (Alexander, 2014; Hari, 2016; Room, 1985; Truan, 1993). Discourses

influenced by social values have created a contentious issue, which Rush and Urbanoski (2019) expressed concern over as it has caused major gaps between research and practice, further noting that conflicting views of substance use etiology create distance between evidence and practice.

The illumination of incongruency between youth substance use services and youth's lived reality stems from policies that fail to consider the unique needs of youth who use drugs. Flemming et al. (2021) wrote that youth's needs in relation to harm reduction, decriminalization, and safe supply have been outright ignored and left out of political decision-making processes. They spoke to the alarming way abstinence remained the only goal when responding to youth who use drugs, through punitive and treatment-based measures that continue to place power in the hands of the criminal (in)justice and health systems. This can be found in the previously proposed Bill C-22, Youth Stabilization Care, which would have allowed the health system to involuntarily hold youth in hospital care after experiencing a nonfatal overdose. Further to Bill C-22, the Vancouver Model, an application sent to the Federal Government to seek an exemption from the criminalization of drug possession under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, excludes "young offenders", stating that diversion programs will be offered to youth possessing illicit narcotics (Flemming et al., 2021; Government of Canada, 2023). Research, policy, and practice have made it abundantly clear that the current systemic approach to youth substance use fails to meet youth's needs, consider their unique experiences, and value their expertise. Acknowledging this, I ask you to walk alongside me as we explore the concept of liberatory love within the context of youth substance use policy and programming.

## Positionality

In this research, I have asked young people to go deep, to be vulnerable, and to share the pieces of their lives that have lived under cloaks of shame, guilt, and stigma. I have also asked young people to share moments of joy, generosity, love, and kindness. It felt imperative that I do the same and open myself to the very vulnerabilities that brought me to this work and emerged along the way. I share these with you as an act of resistance against systemic violence, perceived academic excellence, and normative qualitative research practices. I used to live within these academic norms, with a perceived sense of comfort and belonging, seen as driven, dedicated, intelligent, and overachieving, an identity that came undone as I witnessed intersecting drug poisoning, health, and climate crises interact with one another and further displace populations that weren't imagined within public safety discourses (Maynard & Simpson, 2022). I was intimately alive to the structural and political violence that created inequity across race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and housing status. I had to find new ways of being, to be in a conscious space of justice-doing (Reynolds, 2020), to recognize how I responded to, existed in, and upheld these political systems (Reynolds, 2021), and to begin searching for a generative and compassionate new world (Maynard & Simpson, 2022).

Before I delve into a thesis that lays bare my passionate dedication to shifting youth substance use practice and policy, I would like to give thanks to the lands that held me throughout this endeavour, to the waters that surrounded me, held space, and allowed me to let go of what no longer served me, and to the rich diversity that surrounds me in the place I now call home. I am an uninvited settler living on the unceded, ancestral territory of the Snuneymuxw First Nation. As a Canadian with ancestors from Mòrar, England, Northern Ireland, and Bear River First Nation, white-passing, middle-class, English-speaking, cisgender female, I have been

afforded a great deal of unearned privilege. This privilege is something that I carry with me in all that I do and has implications for research and practice. The very labels that shape my identity have positioned me in a place of power, unspoken, in that I do not need to put it into words for it to be recognized, but it certainly does not go unseen. I must acknowledge these privileges, attuning myself to the way they have and continue to shape my life experiences and to balance power dynamics and connect with youth as members of community (McCracken, 2020). Furthermore, I position myself as a mother, a daughter, a sister, a partner, an advocate, and a woman passionately dedicated to creating change. These rich roles have shaped every piece of my being. They have nurtured me, challenged me, and supported me in understanding who I am and how I show up in this research.

I moved through this thesis as a mother, partner, and member of a big, chaotic, and loving family. These roles were intricately connected to the journey and created areas of tension, support, and conflict. I cautiously considered how I could possibly represent myself in this work without compromising my family, with risks that felt overwhelming at times. The threat of owning pieces of my identity that had the potential to expose and rupture a very well-presented image of who I once was, who my family is, where I have been, and where I am going loomed in the shadows, ready to expose themselves at any moment. This was further complicated by the act of disclosure (Cherry & Vachon, 2020), a politically charged decision that had the potential to impact many of the people I love most in this world, as my disclosure regarding my position on drug use is woven into the stories of many others. My story, intricately linked and influenced by theirs, is one that I moved back and forth on, considering the many implications of sharing such vulnerabilities. Supported by the work of Harris and Luongo (2021) I wanted to populate the academic space with stories of resistance and reclamation as both an academic and a person with

a historical and ongoing relationship with “addiction”. I returned to the values that shaped this work, which also encouraged me to remain vulnerable, and so I will share that I have a messy and ongoing relationship with drugs. It has brought me moments of hope, joy, and connection alongside sorrow, pain, and anguish, supporting me through many times and significantly impairing my ability to move through the world at others. Where I am now and where I will be in the future in this ongoing journey remain unknown. I do not care to take on the labels of sober, in recovery, or addict as they fail to capture where I have been and where I am now.

My relationship with drugs is one of many meeting points between myself and the participants. I have been surrounded by drug use my entire life, witnessing and experiencing relationships that from the outside would have received labels such as “problematic”, “risky”, and “addicted”. These concepts never fit with my worldview, they didn’t hold the capacity to capture what was happening for myself or those around me. They failed to see the way drugs showed up for me, supported those around me, provided points of love and connection, and at times a way to carry on when life became too much. The subtle nuances of the relationships I held and witnessed were often missed by the outside eye. The subtleties that were missed, and the overgeneralizations and labels received caused feelings of shame that left me feeling trapped by an identity I did not choose. These feelings and experiences, along with the stories I hold in my heart of others in my family brought me here. These experiences urged me to explore what might be possible if we were to view substance use through the lens of liberatory love.

Having shifted my focus to parenting over the last two years, I returned to a seemingly distant piece of my identity, the positions I held in community, supporting youth and their families in mental health and substance use services navigation. Witnessing their strength and resistance to systemic violence, coercive control, and conformity, I hold each relationship close

to my heart. These relationships inspired and informed the creation of this project. The participants reconnected me to the lasting impact that this role and the organization I worked with had on their lives. I was entering back into a community that had experienced deep wounds at the hands of the organization I worked with and was further displaced by political agendas that failed to consider the impact of assimilation on the lives of the community. The rupture and lack of repair were yet another meeting point in our identities as we aimed to make sense of it all and repair our relationship. Acknowledging the many meeting points that emerged when reflecting on my own positionality and that of the participants I was intending to engage with a methodological approach that allowed me to uphold these relationships, and to be transparent about my vested interest in all aspects of the work. This encouraged me to uphold an ethical standard that held love and liberation at its core and to create enough space to move cautiously through our various connection points. Intimate inquiry alongside episodic narrative inquiry allowed me to engage with participants, to be transparent, to capture storied experiences, and to step into the youth's worlds as fully and presently as I could.

## Chapter Two: Creating Intimate Pathways of Connection, Research, and Relationality

Capturing the storied experiences of participants with whom I shared pieces of identity required a weaving together of qualitative approaches to inquiry for stories and identities of this nature to emerge in their entirety. Intimate inquiry alongside aspects of narrative inquiry was cautiously braided into one another to create an approach to qualitative research that was expansive enough to muddle our way through the unknown, taken-for-granted, storied lives of youth who use drugs (Laura, 2010). Love and liberation created a sturdy foundation upon which the methodological approach was to unfold. Intimate inquiry allowed both concepts to continue flourishing and centered a love ethic in participant engagement, while narrative inquiry created a contained space for stories to be held within.

### Intimate Inquiry

Reflecting on the pieces of identity that I shared with participants and the intimate connection I felt to this topic, I sought a methodological approach that could adequately hold space for the personal investment of the participants and my academic investment as the researcher. I aimed to resist normative approaches to qualitative research that felt exploitive in nature, extracting knowledge and resources without adequate or equitable return for the participants. I was immediately drawn to the way intimate inquiry embodies a love ethic that "presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well" (hooks, 2018, p.145). I appreciated that it celebrated and held relationships sacred to the research process, and the way it allowed me to courageously step into the mess that arose as multiple identities and experiences converged, clashed, and came together to co-create knowledge. With love guiding the overall project, it was both fitting and necessary that the approach to inquiry take on a critical stance of love as ethical guidance.

Education scholar, Laura (2010; 2016) conceptualized intimate inquiry as a love-based methodological approach to qualitative research; a framework for engaging in research that lands close to the heart of the researcher and recognizes the influence of one's positionality on both the research and participants. It requires the researcher to remain transparent, openly acknowledging their positionality as "someone who is in connection with the people… announc[ing] the way that intimate inquirers see the world and how they believe that we come to know [ourselves] and others within it" (Laura, 2016, p. 217). This transparency provides an ethical foundation that emerges through shared identity and shifts as we engage with the historical, political, and social storied experiences of participants. Intimate inquiry manifests a love ethic in its process and approach to research by placing value on the relationship between researcher and participants; emphasizing the researcher's duty to act alongside participants; and for focusing on solidarity throughout the research endeavour (Laura, 2010; Moreno, 2019). This approach allowed me to weave in and out of individual stories and the broader context the stories exist within, which is a particularly important piece for this project, as I aimed to explore youth's experiences individually and examine how they fit within our larger social fabric.

Intimate inquiry embodies three main tenets of witnessing, engaging, and acting within the research context, guiding the researcher from inception through dissemination. The intentional act of witnessing is to acknowledge another's lived reality and to consider the historical, cultural, and social influences that have shaped their experiences (Laura, 2013; 2016). Witnessing moves beyond common methods of observation found in normative approaches to qualitative research, as Laura (2013) shares that "to witness is to validate the existence of stories, and to protect their places in the world" (p. 2). Witnessing is a practice that moves past knowledge extraction and into an empathic place of active listening and validation. This is an

ethic I intentionally uphold throughout dissemination, as I actively resist sharing intimate pieces of youth's stories to enact change. The stories shared throughout the analysis will reflect youth's active resistance, and acts of self- and community-love, and aim to spark change through an active witnessing of what is, using this as a guide to see what could be. Witnessing involves a cautious co-creation of safety, security, and respect that allows individuals to show up as authentically as possible within a research context working to maintain a sense of social justice through the illumination of violence and oppression. I witnessed youth share stories and experiences that spoke to contextual nuances of youth substance use, illuminating what Laura (2013) speaks to as the "mundane, the taken-for-granted, the whispered, and the hushed" (p. 2). These are salient elements, as much of youth's drug use (his)stories exist within social shadows, hidden under political stigma and violence (Fadus et al., 2019).

Laura's (2010) conceptualization and approach to qualitative research have been critiqued for centering the researchers' positionality and closeness to the work, with questions surfacing around boundaries and the blurring of academic and personal lives. However, these critiques fail to consider that the academic, political, and personal are forever blurred, and meticulously intertwined in scholarly practice. Intimate inquiry recognizes that research and knowledge are inherently biased by our life histories, the way we make sense of the world, and our political positions. While intimate inquiry intentionally works with that or those closest to the self, it aims to uphold and respect these relationships through ongoing transparency, requiring the researcher to extend ethical care to participants and themselves alike by providing generous amounts of love, kindness, and compassion to all involved in the work.

The foundation of intimate inquiry is witnessing, engaging, and weaving together personal (his)stories and collective ideas with intention. It places responsibility on the researcher

to act and lean into their positional power, honouring the stories shared by creating space for them to live in community, academia, policy, and practice. This action can look like writing, speaking, and artistic expressions that aim to share the co-created knowledge with others, which is to be carried out respectfully, ethically, and empathically. This translates to taking time, being intentional in the process, and checking with participants to ensure what and how you are capturing and sharing their stories is an authentic representation of the shared experiences (Laura, 2013; 2016; Moreno, 2019). The analytic expression of this project – namely the writing – that culminated from this research will be an intentional labour of love as I acknowledge the "mental work of writing, but also the physical labor – the work of the hands and the bodies – of sharing available resources" (Laura, 2013, p. 2).

**Episodic Narrative Inquiry**

Episodic narrative inquiry, conceptualized by Mueller (2019), provided a frame for engaging youth in storied experiences while recognizing the limitations that come with research such as time, funding, and scope. Stemming directly from narrative inquiry, Mueller's (2019) approach uses an hourglass metaphor to explore individual life (his)stories through a process of defining the phenomenon of interest, exploring two stories about the phenomenon, and revisiting the original definition as a means of checking in with the initial meaning made and wrapping up the session. Episodic narrative interviewing is a practice that emerged from narrative inquiry, which holds a well-established place within qualitative analysis, with seminal works formed by Connelly and Clandinin (1990), who conceptualized a multi-method approach to gain insight into complex storied human experiences. Narrative inquiry has since been taken up across several fields and refined into many unique and specific approaches focussed on garnering storied experiences. In and of itself, narrative inquiry is a complex and at times daunting

methodological approach, which many shy away from due to its inaccessibility, particularly for small-scale research. Mueller (2019) aimed to address these critiques by creating an approach to narrative research that held a contained and yet explorative format for engaging participants in storied narratives. Not without its critiques for stepping away from the in-depth life history style that is the heart of narrative research (Mueller, 2019), this approach has however been taken up widely across social, political, and geographical fields of study specifically for its ability to engage with participants about a specific phenomenon, gather storied experiences, and co-create knowledge within limited time constraints.

Weaving in components of episodic narrative inquiry allowed me to create a container for stories to emerge and exist within. The researcher and participant begin by creating shared meaning around the topics of exploration, move into how this phenomenon has shown up in their lived experiences, and then revisit the definition, engaging in dialogue around the way the initial definition does/not show up in the participant's story. This was a meaningful starting place as it created space to see how young people engage with the concepts imposed upon them and allowed me to check that with my understanding. Further, it allowed stories to emerge within a space of shared understanding, guided by the youth's voice and language. Episodic narrative inquiry complimented intimate inquiry in its aim to gather stories and create relational understandings of life histories.

**Embodying Fluid Praxis Through Methods of Engagement**

Intertwining intimate inquiry alongside episodic narrative inquiry created space for reflexive methods that were fluid and youth-led. I was able to support youth in generating knowledge through storytelling, semi-structured interviewing, photography, and music. These methods allowed youth to share the subtle nuances that significantly impacted their everyday

lives and were often invisible to others. Storytelling followed the episodic narrative interviewing structure (Mueller, 2019) and semi-structured interviews included open-ended questions surrounding the phenomenon of interest. Photography was used during research sessions to spark dialogue. The participants took pictures of places that had significant meaning in their lives and shared stories and experiences about the meaning within the pictures. Pictures were taken using an instant camera to allow the physical image to provide a tangible starting place for dialogue. Participants also shared songs during research sessions and drew connections between their unique experiences and the meaning they made from the lyrics in the song(s) they shared. Participants had a choice of selecting (a) method(s) that fit best with how they wanted to share. Six youth participated in the study in two to three one-on-one research sessions. Four of the youth chose to share through a combination of storytelling, music, and photography. Two youths shared through semi-structured interviewing and storytelling.

**Participants**

The six participants were all youths between the ages of 16 and 25, living across the lands colonially referred to as Vancouver Island. All youth identified as a person who has used or is currently using drugs, including the use of stimulants, depressants, opioids, cannabinoids, hallucinogens, and/or polysubstance use. The term drugs is used to encompass a wide array of psychoactive substances and include the use of alcohol. Adding alcohol to the umbrella term of "drugs" is an intentional resistance against legal reform, which has normalized the use of specific drugs (alcohol, nicotine) while vilifying and criminalizing the use of other drugs (heroin, cocaine, methamphetamines to name a few). Youth were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling and I relied upon my established relationships in community to recruit participants. Recruitment occurred through sharing the project recruitment poster on social media

and sharing it with others working with youth who use(d) drugs. The youth reached out to me directly to express interest through Instant Messenger, after which information on the project was shared, and informed consent was sought.

The participants were majority female-identifying (5) and one male-identifying and came from diverse racial backgrounds including First Nations, and white. They had all experienced housing insecurity from couch surfing to living on the streets. They spoke of themselves as homeless when sharing collective experiences but did not identify as homeless when sharing their identity. All of the participants resisted the idea that homelessness reflects the lack of a physical structure to call home. Rather, they leaned into the idea that this *is* their home, these lands, streets, and community, and what is missing is the physical structure housing provides. They held shared systemic experiences of being connected to the child welfare system, criminal (in)justice system, and the legal system. Although they held these shared experiences, systemic interactions looked vastly different between each participant. Differences within the child welfare system included their care status, housing, age, and parenting of a child while being in the child welfare system. The legal and criminal (in)justice systems held similar differences. Some youths had experienced time in juvenile detention, while others had been placed in jail, held for several reasons such as public intoxication, refusal to comply with police orders, and shoplifting (often for survival). Being a youth who use(d) drugs increased each participant's frequency of contact with police, due to their increased visibility from experiencing homelessness and having no safe space to use drugs in community. Participants shared in active resistance as well, resisting racial-capitalist co-options of love, and resisting violence and oppression dressed up under the guise of support. They held a shared strength, a shared hope,

and a shared desire to create meaningful change – both for themselves and for generations to come.

**Muddling Our Way Through Knowledge Generation**

Youth voices were central to the research and therefore the approach to analysis needed to create space for participant voices to continue informing and transforming the narratives captured in the writing. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) provided a mechanism for participants to provide feedback throughout data analysis (Braun & Clark, 2019; 2021; Braun et al., 2019). RTA is an approach to qualitative research that identifies the impact of researcher subjectivity on analysis. Having my own personal history connected to this topic, RTA offered me space to own my positionality and bias, recognizing the way it influenced the questions I asked, what I heard, and how I interpreted the data collected.

Braun et al. (2019) describe RTA as an approach informed by social injustice, researching alongside groups targeted by systemic and political violence. RTA is about becoming one with the dataset, deeply entrenching oneself in the data by coding and recoding until themes emerge. RTA acknowledges that researcher subjectivity is impossible to remove, and therefore views analysis completion as a "coherent and compelling interpretation of the data" (Braun & Clarke 2019, p. 848). This interpretation represents a story, told by the researcher, influenced and shaped by the participants. They caution that it is similar and yet holds a few differences from thematic analysis. Differences are found in the way that RTA researchers land on specific codes and themes, in that there is no prescribed theme or codebook used before entrenching oneself in the data. The analysis is emergent and co-developed, removing the researcher as "expert", while also acknowledging the historical presence the researcher and participants bring to the dataset and how this then influences the development of

codes and themes. Data analysis is a collaborative and generative process, undergoing several revisions based on feedback from participants and others supporting the work.

With liberation and love as the foundation, connection and shared identity as our meeting place, and reflexive practice as a means of engagement, there emerged a thesis encompassing the radical act of dreaming up the world anew (Maynard & Simpson, 2022). In an attempt to do justice to the strength, vulnerability, and hope that participants courageously shared with me, I invite you to set aside preconceived notions of what is and what should be, and to lean into the following work with an open heart, actively reflecting on your positionality, education, and biases as you move through the chapters to come. The following literature review sparked my curiosity about where we are and where we might land should we dare to actualize the dream-like state envisioned by many people who use drugs, harm reductionists, and substance use advocates. The analysis and discussion, embedded within the literature, ask us to consider the stories participants shared and how we may be able to take these worlds and incorporate them into practice, education, and everyday interactions with family, friends, and community. As well, I am urgently asking us to consider how to move the knowledge contained in this research forward, to form fluid and long-term connections between academia and community.

**Mapping Our Conceptual Starting Places**

Liberatory love, violence and response-based practice, youth substance use, and critical addiction studies provided a foundation of language and understanding directly informing this project from inception through dissemination. Each body of literature is distinct and yet connected. The concepts, ethics, and knowledge found within each of the following sections are represented subjectively through my own lens and lived experience which allowed me to begin building and generating new knowledge alongside young people. The connection between each

body of literature is the way the knowledge is operationalized in political spaces and how it is used to justify oppressive and violent political practices. The politicization and weaponization of knowledge will act as a connection point to return to within each distinct body of literature and support us in remaining connected to the overarching ethics of liberation and love that grounded this research.

**Conceptualizing & Situating Trauma Within Multiple Intersecting Contexts**

Trauma encompasses an array of experiences and interpretations, which Clark (2016) refers to as an "umbrella term that includes experiences ranging from single incident experiences such as car accidents, to genocide" (p. 4). This is echoed by the American Psychological Association (2023), which defines trauma as "an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster" (para. 1). The APA then explains symptoms of trauma as emotional, mental, and physical, stating that the symptoms may be long lasting, strain relationships, and interfere with everyday 'functioning'. The "trauma" label reduces individuals to a set of symptoms, disappearing the way these experiences are embedded within structural, political, and historical violence, and oppression (Clark, 2016; Reynolds, 2020; Richardson & Wade, 2010). This section is deliberate in departing from the trauma industry, namely the medicalization and individualization of trauma that reduces people to a set of symptoms without situating the violent experiences within their political, structural, and historical contexts. In moving away from the language of trauma and the way it operates to entrap, victimize, and create an image of brokenness, I step fervently into the practice-based literature to act as an ethical guide in engaging with youth who use drugs. The practice-based approaches that follow embody acts of witnessing, structuring "safe enough" spaces, and attending to the personal, political, structural, and historical, while maintaining proximal to one's responsibility to change

the conditions that perpetuate violent conditions (Clark, 2016; Reynolds, 2020; Richardson & Reynolds, 2014; Richardson & Wade, 2010).

**Removing Ourselves From the Trauma Industry**

The trauma industry relies on the individualization of traumatic experiences, profiting off the way that violence shows up in our bodies, focusing specifically on the symptoms that arise after experiencing such events. This industry, while structured around Western psychology, has proliferated harmful practices through the use of incomplete statistics that highlight the type of traumatic experience, age, gender, and race of the individual who experienced the event, inadvertently silencing structural factors (Reynolds et al., 2021). Clark (2016) refers to this as the "shock and awe" effect, eliciting sympathy from the masses while doing little to upend the conditions that uphold the violence and statistics. This response and the statistics fail to protect the dignity of the trauma survivor and disappear the social, historical, and political conditions that have contributed to the normalization of such violence (Clark, 2016; Reynolds, 2020). This disappearance acts to continuously ostracize and dehumanize racialized bodies, families living in poverty, people who use drugs, and several other fluid identities that fall outside normative ideas around the "upstanding citizen". Disappearing the violence created by these contextualizing factors justifies state interventions by actively placing people at the periphery of society (Richardson et al., 2021), leading to an overrepresentation of those that populate the social periphery in the child welfare and criminal (in)justice systems. Being placed on the periphery allows the state to justify such interventions under the impression that they are working towards "collective safety". However, the works of violence-informed, and response-based practices insist we question whose safety is being considered here and whose is not.

**Violence Informed Practice & Red Intersectionality**

Violence-informed practice and red intersectionality conceptualized by Natalie Clark (2016) embodies acts of witnessing and resistance as a form of healing for Indigenous Peoples, outwardly rejecting the idea that the colonial trauma industry could hold space for integrated and embodied essences of healing for Indigenous peoples. Further, resisting the tokenism of Western systems attempts to integrate Indigenous ways of healing into existing systems, as an "add-on" (Clark, 2016, p. 8) to what is already in place. Clark (2016) recognizes this act of tokenism and the harms that surface when systems take part in including Indigenous approaches to healing as an afterthought, speaking to the way this leads to pan-Indigenous service delivery. Throughout the lands colonially known as Canada, there is an abundance of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, communities, traditions, and healing practices, each as unique and diverse as the lands they live upon. This diversity and abundance could not be captured in what Clark (2016) refers to as the "add-on" (p. 8), the afterthought of Western systems attempting to position themselves as Indigenous allies. These feeble acts of reconciling past harms do little to rectify the past and much to perpetuate harms connected to ongoing colonization and violence towards Indigenous Peoples.

These recognitions led Clark (2016) to conceptualize a practice that has the capacity to be dynamic, expansive, and adaptable, upholding diversity, and integrating multiple ways of knowing and being into healing spaces. Violence-informed practice based on red intersectionality encompasses a practice of naming, educating, supporting healthy strategies of resistance, situating violence within its historical, systemic, and political landscape, and reconnecting to self and community. This involves a sacred act of witnessing and holding space while placing accountability on external structures that have created the conditions upon which

the violence has been created. In this approach, “resilience and survivance are thus not viewed as individualistic but are instead linked to past, present, and future generations” (Clark, 2016, p. 9). This theory recognizes that individual health cannot be untethered from the health of the family and community. Violence-informed practice calls on us to be aware of the constructs of trauma and how they operate in the political field, questioning who it serves, what is considered to be violent, and what violence is erased from Western trauma narratives.

**Islands of Safety, Response-based Practice & An Ethics of Justice-doing**

**“**Islands of safety”, as conceptualized by Richardson & Wade (2010) creates a soft and yet politicized space for experiences of violence to be witnessed within, to be felt, heard, seen, and held up with dignity and respect. Honouring an individual’s rights to agency and autonomy within liberated spaces, and placing dignity at the center of their practice, Richardson and Wade (2010) offer a dynamic approach to practice. In centering dignity, they connect dominant discourses around violence to undignified practices that center and uphold victimhood. Through this recognition, they offer alternative language that decentres victim blaming and actively places responsibility on perpetrators, systems, and policy. Islands of safety are responsive to the multiple domains of interpersonal, cultural, political, and historical experiences that must be centered in the helping profession to uphold dignity and respect for the person you are working with. This approach is an ethical practice based on resisting trauma psychology, pathology, and medicalization separating out ideas of learned helplessness and victim blaming through an ongoing attunement to the political conditions that create and sustain the concept of victimhood.

Similarly, Reynolds (2020) situates and responds to violent experiences from a space of dignity and respect, recognizing that people are always working to maintain their safety and resist indignity. Response-based practice aims to situate helpers in an active therapeutic role,

responding to both the interpersonal and the political, outwardly stating our own identity, politics, culture, and other fluid identities as a practice of safety making and justice doing (Reynolds 2020; Richardson & Reynolds, 2014). When we remain aware of the structural inequities and conditions that perpetuate violence, we must also remain committed to changing these conditions, fighting against the systemic inequities, and doing so in a way that centers the voices of the people, the community, and the change-makers that exist outside of Western ideas of perceived "experts". Reynolds (2020) reminds us that this *is* the work. Creating safe enough spaces in a therapeutic setting is our ongoing role, alongside bringing hope which comes from our commitment to change. In this setting the "helper" is not viewed as an expert, rather they are decentered and humbled, acknowledging their historical and ongoing power within the therapeutic relationship. Response-based practice intends to hold spaces that center dignity and prioritize integrity and agency in the healing relationship. The relationship is reciprocal between the person, the helper, the community, past, present, and future generations.

The common thread woven throughout these approaches lies in how they all step away from the medicalizing, pathologizing, and individualization of trauma, leaning instead into a space of collective awareness, embedding the interpersonal within the political. These practice-based theories recognize that healing and wellness narratives fail to situate violence within their historical and political contexts, thereby perpetuating suffering through reductive symptomology and an erasure of systemic oppression. In resisting the diminishing nature of medicalization and the trauma industry, they lean into the hope that through witnessing, naming, and upholding dignity they can make space to see the other side of violent experiences. Wade (1997) invites us to recognize that, "alongside each history of violence and oppression, there runs a parallel history of prudent, creative, and determined resistance" (p. 11). Here Wade demonstrates a shift in

language allowing the parallel to be seen and honoured, and for trauma survivors to reclaim their agency, dignity, and ability to maintain personal safety.

**Liberatory Love**

Liberatory love is a purposeful and guided approach to actioning and politicizing the act of loving another (Johnson et al., 2019; Skott-Myhre et al., 2016; York, 2018). Deconstructing the concept, liberation is founded in the fading of greed and hatred, and love is the act of extending oneself to spirit, family, and community with the purpose of nurturance and transformation (hooks, 2001). With a guiding force built on the deconstruction of greed and focus on nurturance, liberatory love aims to step away from racial-capitalist, neoliberal definitions and cautions of the use of love outside the nuclear family (hooks, 2018; Skott-Myhre et al., 2016). This embodiment of liberation and love is an act of rebellion against racial capitalism, resisting the individualization of love through connecting with those furthest from one's self. The embodiment is both personal and political, as it aims to unify people across divides while recognizing and upholding an individual's unique journey. A concept is seemingly nonexistent within youth substance use policy, practice, and theories, liberatory love holds the potential to build up futures for people who use drugs, a future that is not violently constrained by the political rhetoric that vilifies the act of using drugs (Çıdam, 2013; Johnson, et al., 2019; Laura, 2016; Marasco, 2010; Nash, 2013; Skott-Myhre et al., 2016; Toye, 2010; Wilkinson, 2017; York, 2018).

When tracing the act of politicizing liberatory love, scholars have noted that love has been relied upon as a force within marginalized and targeted groups in racial-capitalist societies across time (Çıdam, 2013; Johnson, et al., 2019; Laura, 2013; 2016; Marasco, 2010; Nash, 2013; Skott-Myhre et al., 2016; Toye, 2010; Wilkinson, 2017; York, 2018). Çıdam (2013) suggested

that liberatory love is a force that brings people together over shared struggle and hardship, acting as a catalyst that challenges the status quo. They argue that love holds the capacity to shift shared struggle for survival as a movement's driving force, leaning instead into the power of unity and potential for creating something better. Across scholarly writing on liberatory love, there is a believed in hope (Reynolds, 2020), that love can rupture and expose what is not, inviting imagery of what could be (Çıdam, 2013; hooks, 2001; Johnson, et al., 2019; Laura, 2016; Marasco, 2010; Nash, 2013). Marasco (2010) conceptualized the politicization of love as the promise of something better, with the ability to witness what is missing as opposed to creating images of what should be. Furthered by Wilkinson (2017) stated that liberatory love is about creating social change and taking risks where we abandon pieces of our sociopolitical climate that no longer serve collective well-being. Often seen as a beacon of hope, liberatory love instills wishful feelings, as noted by hooks (2018) who recognized that regardless of racial capitalism's aim to neutralize the power of love we hold on to it's power, with a believed-in hope that it holds capacity to create and sustain just worlds. It is this believed in hope that sparks action and unifies people across divides.

Politicizing liberatory love is about creating connection, embracing the power of love, and asking communities to stand together against injustice, a power that people who use drugs have leaned into over time. Love has been a driving force behind movements such as clean needle exchange programs, safe injection sites, and most recently the Drug User Liberation Front, a unifying front to generate a safe supply of illicit drugs in Vancouver (Drug User Liberation Front & Vancouver Area Network Of Drug Users, 2023). These movements draw attention to what York (2018) describes as the desperate need for unification at a political level, seeing love as an action that propels us forward and allows us to create justice within unjust

societies. The political act of liberating and loving is a powerful force that enacts change by exposing violence and oppression in a fight for justice.

Within the liberatory love body of literature, many scholars point to the dangerous way that racial-capitalist co-options of "love" have been conceptualized and weaponized as a weapon of gendered and racialized control (hooks, 2018; Johnson, et al., 2019; Nash, 2013; Skott-Myhre et al., 2016). The racial-capitalist, neoliberal society is a sociopolitical landscape built on oppression and violence, instilling classism through fear and dominance (hooks, 2018; Skott-Myhre et al., 2016). A landscape built on individualistic values; upholds the needs of the (white) individual over the needs of the collective. There is little room for liberatory love in this society, which is when those who rebel against racial capitalism begin to fill the social grey with radical ways of living and being, the ones who have been left out of the sociopolitical collective for daring to demand a world that embodies liberatory love, a way of being that values every individual for who they are and how they move through the world (Maynard & Simpson, 2022). This embodiment, the radicality of living and breathing this way of loving and living is a direct threat to racial capitalism, with the ability to break down the foundation upon which our current world has been built (hooks, 2018). Skott-Myhre et al., (2016) exposed the weaponization of love within racial-capitalist societies as conditionally linked to one's acceptance of their role within racial capitalism, which requires all members of society to exploit their body, mind, and spirit in the name of capitalism, with the reward of creating a social space for oneself. This caution is furthered within intersectional feminist writing, which explores the way love as an emotion and action have been gendered within the neoliberal state to exploit female labour, placing unrealistic expectations on the female body to care for their children, spouse, family,

household, and maintain their status as an unpaid labourer (hooks, 2018; Johnson, et al., 2019; Nash, 2013; Skott-Myhre et al., 2016).

Under the racial-capitalist regime, "love" tells us that we must fit the mold, otherwise we are not worthy of love, kindness, and care from our family, peers, community, and society (hooks, 2018; Skott-Myhre et al., 2016). Not only are we not worthy of love, but we are also specifically targeted by systemic violence and oppression for failing to adhere to social norms (hooks, 2018; Johnson et al., 2019; Skott-Myhre et al., 2016). It is as though "love" has been constructed as capital, in that individuals ascertain love capital based on various aspects of their identity such as education, socioeconomic status, housing status, gender, race, religion, and sexual orientation. For people who use drugs, this leaves a bleak and disconnected reality, as they are often found in the shadows, outwardly rejecting the pieces of identity that would claim them worthy of love, acceptance, and connection (Fornili, 2018). We must illuminate the weaponization of "love" within the neoliberal state to step away from the harm inflicted through this conceptualization. The harmful and violent depiction of "love" in our social landscape has led several academics, community groups, and individuals to re-imagine what liberatory love could look like, re-visiting it as a driving, unifying force (Çidam, 2013; Johnson, et al., 2019; Laura, 2013; 2016; Marasco, 2010; Moreno, 2019; Nash, 2013; Skott-Myhre et al., 2016; Toye, 2010; Wilkinson, 2017; York, 2018). In moving through this literature review, I invite you to hold onto the two conflicting definitions of love, recognizing how they do/not show up in youth substance use theory and practice**.**

**Historical Roots of Addiction**

Youth substance use rhetoric is a highly contentious topic permeating social and political scenes, creating divides and discomfort amongst youth, families, and communities (Alexander,

2006; 2014). A significant entry point to conversations about youth drug use is through unpacking the historical, political, and moral belief systems that have shaped how drug use and "addiction" are viewed and operate within current sociopolitical landscapes. To build upon this foundation is to then examine how the concept has been taken up politically and the way it operates in various realms including policy, practice, and the lives of youth who use drugs (Keane, 2021; Fomiatti et al. 2017; Fraser, 2017). In creating this foundation and exploring how it operates on multiple levels, we can begin to see where and how liberation and love do/not take up space and begin imagining how they might start doing so.

The concept of "addiction" has and continues to perplex the minds of scholars, with competing theories impacting the translation of research into practice (Rush & Urbanoski 2019). Alexander (2014) traces early definitions as far back as the English Renaissance, during this time Addiction was used to describe one's sincere devotion to their life's work (Alexander, 2014). This definition shifted as social values and beliefs evolved, as the concepts of morality, liberality, and the "upstanding citizen" arose, marking shifts in the way we organized around work and family (Alexander, 2014; Peele, 2000; Reinarman, 2005; Room, 1985; Schneider, 1978; Truan, 1993). Addiction went from being understood as devoting oneself fully to their life's work, to a term used to describe one's uncontrollable desire to engage in drug use, and more specifically the use of alcohol. This concept continued to change with the times, with social norms continuing to reconstruct themselves around the working class and racial capitalism as it entered into the 20$^{th}$ and 21$^{st}$ centuries.

To dissect the historical roots of "addiction" in the 21$^{st}$ century we must examine the social, moral, and political values that contributed to the concept's uprising. This will create a shared understanding of how "addiction" was and continues to be classed, raced, gendered, and

sexualized, creating broad assumptions about what is acceptable drug use, what is not, and who has the right to experience the pleasurable effects of drugs. Alexander (2014), Room (1985), Truan (1993), and Schneider (1978) argued that the current definition of "addiction" was, and still is, heavily influenced by Christian moral values and beliefs that demonize drug use. Alexander (2014) suggested that Western conceptualizations of addiction were linked to the beginning of the free-market workforce, which placed individual gain over collective well-being. This inevitably created several converging divides between those who used drugs and those who did not, a divide that was further complicated by several individual characteristics as the social, political, and religious values that underpin "addiction" have created a class system amongst those who use drugs. The class system within people who use drugs, designed and perpetuated by state control, influences how far one is from claiming space as a neoliberal citizen (Fraser, 2017; Fraser et al., 2017). Moral uproar alongside racial capitalism created the very policies, practices, and attitudes we hold to this day regarding drug use. When tracing these historical roots, we can see how people started creating the bounds of normal in the sense of drug use, and in turn, creating an image of who was not able to take up space within the social collective (Fraser, 2017; Keane, 2021).

Unpacking the social climate and political agenda that allowed "addiction" to flourish into what it is today has been furthered by medical politics which have claimed "addiction" is a disease while steadily supporting the dehumanization of people who receive this disease label (Fraser, 2017; Fraser et al., 2017; Keane, 2021). The medicalization of "addiction" led to a theoretical brain disease model of addiction, which holds steadily to the belief that addiction is a chronic disease marked by periods of recovery and relapse. This model was taken up politically, which led to a social acceptance of addiction as a disease, with messaging promulgating the idea

that addiction is influenced by one's genetic predisposition, with disease roots landing in the biological and physiological spaces of the body (Alexander, 2014). The disease renders the person helpless to the influences of drugs and alcohol, attacking their ability to care for themselves, others, and the community. While the medical model attributes the disease to internal bodily processes, it simultaneously interrogates one's moral character, suggesting that the inability to remain abstinent following medicalized approaches to treatment is a moral failure of the individual (Alexander, 2014; Graham et al., 2008; Room, 1985; Sharpley, 2008).

Scholars have drawn our attention to the way "addiction" emerged through sociopolitical values, which inevitably led to an uptake of drug research heavily funded by the systems that allowed the concept to flourish in the first place (Keane, 2021; Fomiatti et al. 2017; Fraser, 2017). This has created an inherently biased approach to research which in turn has influenced and promulgated public messaging that supports the religious and political value systems that sparked addiction research in the first place. While the medical model of "addiction" is widely accepted across Western societies, several alternative theories have been constructed and have populated the youth substance use literature and service landscape. While aiming to understand the complexities of the phenomenon, there are limited theoretical standpoints that step away from problematizing drug use. The literature suggests that the main theories in Western society fall within medical, moral, and social perspectives, which have created the foundation for service delivery, and sociopolitical responses to people who use drugs.

Alongside this theoretical foundation emerged the political grounding of "addiction". Political narratives on the concepts of "addiction" were created through historical and ongoing violence towards racialized people (Boyd, 2017/2021; Maynard & Simpson, 2022). This violence was then furthered as the drug war agenda shifted to include all people who use drugs,

problematizing individuals for drug use that falls outside of social norms, leaving minimal space for them within the collective public (Boyd, 2017/2021). The language found within these narratives is inherently linked to colonialism, racial capitalism, and the drug war. Within these narratives lives language that creates and sustains violence at multiple levels towards people who use drugs, and intertwines with oppression linked to race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality, and several other fluid and intersecting identities (Fomiatti et al., 2017; Fraser, 2017; Keane, 2021; Maynard & Simpson, 2022).

To begin unpacking the concepts that influence these intergenerational narratives, we must look at the ongoing violence perpetuated by colonialism, racial capitalism, and the drug war (Maynard & Simpson, 2022). Maynard and Simpson (2022) unpack the long-standing history of colonization across the lands colonially referred to as Canada with European settlers stealing land, forcing assimilation, and exploiting the lands, bodies, knowledges, and spirits of Indigenous, Black, and racialized migrants for centuries. This process was closely followed by racial capitalism, which emerged through colonial practices of exploitation, upholding the (white) individual over collective wellbeing. Racial capitalism prioritizes economic gain over all else and is specifically tailored to provide an abundance of wealth and resources to white people, withholding privilege, wealth, and resources from other races through structural violence(Gebhard et al., 2022). In late racial-capitalist, colonial societies, we are expected to live within and accept a political landscape built on violence and oppression, instilling classism through fear, dominance, intergenerational inheritance, ongoing land theft, and an ignorance of the privilege and violence that has sustained white supremacy (Gebhard et al., 2022; hooks, 2018; Skott-Myhre et al., 2016). One’s political value is intricately tied to their intersecting identities. The radicals, the misfits, the ones who fall outside social norms and rebel against this

structure are found in what Maynard and Simpson (2022) refer to as “forgotten spaces”. In forgotten spaces we find the “no-ones”, the ones who are not imagined or considered within the collective “we” that exists in public health rhetoric, resulting in a heavily problematized narrative of people who use drugs (hooks, 2018; Maynard & Simpson, 2022; Skott-Myhre et al., 2016).

Furthered by colonial and racial-capitalist agendas, the drug war has created a political narrative surrounding substance use that individualizes, others, and dehumanizes people who use drugs (Boyd, 2017/2021; Maynard & Simpson, 2022). Its historical beginnings can be traced back to acts of state control over racialized bodies and evolved over all bodies that took up the use of drugs outside of racial-capitalist norms. The state aimed to control and criminalize drug production, sales, and consumption on a global scale, causing mass devastation, violence, and death at every level. The roots of this control and violence live here in so-called Canada, with strict drug laws rising in the early 1900s to enforce racialized state control and violence, placing further power, resources, and privilege in the hands of the white settler (Boyd, 2017/2021). The drug war is a violent and hate-fuelled tactic of control, it has actively aimed to socially erase racialized, impoverished, female, and gender-nonconforming drug users for over a century. It promises health and safety for all – all those who do not use drugs that is. Further complicated by intersecting political identities, people who use drugs receive differential treatment linked to their race, gender, sexuality, and other intersecting identities. As one’s identity moves further from the Western norm (white, affluent, educated, housed, heterosexual) they experience increased severity and frequency of violence stemming from the drug war (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Fornili, 2018). Fornili (2018) calls us back to the intersection of critical race theory and the drug war by situating experiences of people who use drugs within overlapping identities, noting how these shape experiences for them, leaving some with more advantageous outcomes

when interacting with the health, child welfare, and criminal (in)justice systems. How people who use drugs have been left out of "collective safety" narratives appears prominently in the ongoing drug poisoning crisis, as it has claimed countless lives and has sparked minimal action at a government level to reverse the harms caused by the war on drugs. From the guise of "collective safety" and demonization of drug use, rose the medicalized model of substance use, which furthered the agenda of the drug war, placing the blame of substance use on physiological and biological processes, while also responsibilizing (Beare, 2012) people who use drugs for failing to abstain from drug use and conform to social norms. Responsibilization is a conscious shift of responsibility of collective "wellness", releasing the state from owning violence they have created and perpetuated, shifting the focus onto individual actions (Beare, 2012). This shift demoralizes and vilifies the individual as the cause of criminality, violence, and lack of safety in community, a convenient starting place for theory to emerge, thereby perpetuating the political narrative that people who use drugs are responsible for both their actions and simultaneously lack the ability to control their own lives (Fomiatti et al., 2017).

## Substance Use Theory & Implications for Practice

**Medical model & implications for practice.** Scholars across disciplines have recognized that substance use rhetoric is predominantly influenced by the medical model of "addiction", some going as far as to say that it has become the official, accepted view of drug use across Western society (Alexander, 2000; 2006; 2014; Graham et al., 2008; Granfield, 2004; Peele, 1986; 2000; Room, 1985; Schneider, 1978; Sealock et al., 1997; Sharpley, 2008; Truan, 1993). The medical model theorizes the cause of substance use as a chronic relapsing brain disease with disease roots landing in the cognitive and biological functions of the brain. The individual is born with the disease and therefore, has no control over it. Reinarman (2005) and

Room (1985) attributed the medical model to the following three components: the moral demonization of alcohol and other substances; the belief of drug use being out of one's control; and a shift in social values from upholding the collective to prioritizing the individual. The three components that have heavily contributed to the emergence of the medical model derived their evidence and made claims on social and political attitudes toward drug use. Despite various critiques within the academic realm, the medical model reiterates that individuals are predisposed to specific patterns of drug use through their genetic makeup (Alexander, 2000; 2006; 2014; Graham et al., 2008; Granfield, 2004; Peele, 1986; 2000; Reinarman, 2005; Room, 1985; Schneider, 1978; Sealock et al., 1997; Truan, 1993).

As the medical model views problematic substance use as a chronic, relapsing disease, abstinence from drugs is viewed as recovery (McCune, 2014). In practice, the medical model offers youth pharmacological support along with strict programming intended to deter the individual from continuous drug use. Treatment is viewed as unsuccessful when the individual does not remain abstinent or "relapses", at which point accountability is placed upon the individual for their inability to adhere to medical treatment (Alexander, 2000; 2006; McCune, 2014; Peele, 1986; 2000; Reinarman, 2005; Room, 1985). Motivating factors for individuals to seek treatment include hitting rock bottom, tough love, and isolation from familial or other supports that are seen as enabling drug use. With the medical model being so widely accepted, it significantly impacts youth substance use service landscapes, community, family, and peer responses to youth using drugs. Most notably, it impacts young people who use drugs and their self-perception. It also heavily influences youth's perception of their identity as it pertains to their drug use, shaping the way they view themselves in relation to drugs, family, friends, community, and society. The hyperfocus on the problem residing within the individual limits the

youth's support systems from identifying other potential factors contributing to drug use such as developmental curiosity, pleasure-seeking, trauma responses, and other environmental factors (McCune, 2014). Individualization can result in a breakdown in relationships, disconnection from the community, and ripples of chaos across youth's lives as they often lose valuable points of connection due to the reductive medical model approach (Alexander, 2000; 2006; McCune, 2014; Slemon et al., 2019; Urbanoski, 2017). Youth are left, often with full reliance on family, in a place of isolation, perpetuated by stigma and fuelled by shame.

**Moral perspectives & implications for practice.** Second to the medical model, the moral model of substance use is known widely for its influence within Western culture (Alexander, 2000; McCune, 2014; Peele, 1986; 2000; Reinarman, 2005; Room, 1985; Schneider, 1978; Sealock et al., 1997; Sharpley, 2008; Truan, 1993). McCune (2014) shed light on how the moral model's basis is derived from political attitudes which then inform social policy. These political attitudes include upholding individual wellness and viewing "addiction" as a moral failure of the individual. This has consequently led to the labeling of those who use drugs in a "socially unacceptable" pattern as deviant, troubled, and weak. This model believes that youth must face significant hardship such as loss of income, housing, and familial support before being "ready" for support (Alexander, 2000; 2006; Hari, 2016; McCune, 2014; Peele, 1986; 2000; Reinarman, 2005; Room, 1985; Sealock et al., 1997; Sharpley et al., 2008; Truan, 1993). The ideology of the individual being "ready" for support reinforces ideas found within the medical model which infer that one must hit rock bottom before being "ready" to accept responsibility for their actions and create meaningful change within their life. Further, it infers a universally accepted idea of "ready". Tactics employed to support youth to disengage from drugs include disconnection from family, friends, and community, and a withdrawal of resources that are seen

as supporting the behaviour. This model is known for its deficit-based understandings and approaches to youth drug use, which ultimately perpetuate shame, blame, guilt, and dichotomous perceptions of right versus wrong and good versus bad (Fomiatti et al., 2017). These dichotomous perceptions leave deep fractures between youth who use drugs and their support systems. The labels, attitudes, social values, and beliefs that inform the moral model have a significant impact on youth substance use services and are operationalized in practice when a youth does not complete programming as prescribed by their support team. Oftentimes those supporting youth perpetuate blame and stigma by claiming the youth was not "ready" to accept support; a narrative deeply intertwined with moral understandings of drug use. Similar to the medical model, it leaves youth in extreme isolation as this model ultimately separates youth from their support system to entice treatment-seeking behaviour. The isolation has long-lasting impacts on the youth, their family, friends, and other supports as pressure mounts on all to promote "readiness" for support (Alexander, 2000; 2006; Fomiatti et al., 2017; McCune, 2014; Peele, 1986; Reinarman, 2005; Room, 1985; Truan, 1993).

**Social perspectives & implications for practice.** Social perspectives on youth drug use aim to shift the blame away from the individual and place it on external environmental factors (Adams, 2016; Flemming et al., 2021; Fomiatti et al., 2017; Fraser, 2017; Henderson et al., 2019; Jenkins et al., 2017; Kirst et al., 2017; Marsh, 2016; McCune, 2014; Moore et al., 2017; Okamoto et al., 2014; Rowan et al., 2015). It claims that multiple intersecting factors contribute to an individual's drug use, including social location, socioeconomic status, and political, cultural, and environmental factors. McCune (2014) expressed that drug use is understood as an adaptation to adverse life events, essentially a means of surviving and coping with stressful

circumstances. The theory does not deviate from problematizing drug use; however, it shifts the focus away from the individual, placing it in the hands of family, community, and society.

Social perspectives on drug use step away from medicalized treatment options and focus on relational belonging and social integration (Flemming et al., 2021; Fraser, 2017; Fomiatti et al., 2017; Jenkins et al., 2017; Marsh, 2016; McCune, 2014; Moore et al., 2017; Okamoto et al., 2014; Rowan et al., 2015). This perspective and accompanying theories contrast with the medical and moral model in the approach to support, in that it does not see a need for hitting rock bottom, rather it believes that connection and integration are among one's greatest tools for intervention. Often service options include multiple dimensions of integrated support that include factors such as family, housing, access to food, social support, and therapy as the foundation for healing. The theory emphasizes rebuilding a sense of community and belonging for the young person and sees these pieces as necessary for them to thrive long-term. This more holistic approach is particularly difficult to mobilize in urban settings, as disconnection and dislocation of people and community resources are abundant (Okamoto et al., 2014; Rowan et al., 2015). Many community resources compete for funding and have limited time and capacity to bridge relationships across services. Government-funded services are burdened by similar limitations and strict policies regarding their ability to maintain relationships in community. Social perspectives require youth drug use services to be comprehensive and collaborative across the domains of family, friends, and professionals, an approach that has existed in First Nations, Inuit, and Metis communities historically and currently as they have created a political foundation to uphold its core values (Okamoto et al., 2014; Rush & Urbanoski, 2019). Comprehensive and collaborative services are a preferred approach to support within the literature for its ability to weave in aspects of the medical and moral models while simultaneously integrating external aspects (Adams, 2016;

Flemming et al., 2021; Fraser, 2017; Fomiatti et al., 2017 Jenkins et al., 2017; Kirst et al., 2017; Marsh, 2016; Okamoto et al., 2014; Rowan et al., 2015).

This assemblage of theories and perspectives on drug use often leaves youth, parents, and broader systems of support in a place of social fragmentation, as competing ideas on drug use etiology cause breakdown in relationships and services (Rush & Urbanoski, 2019). The competition for best fit causes major delays in applying relevant research to practice, which has left youth with substance use services that fail to consider their lived and current realities (McCune, 2014; Slemon et al., 2019), leaving youth, families, and communities in isolation, stigmatized, and at greater risk of systematic and societal violence and oppression. The way youth and their families are targeted by systemic violence and oppression is not surprising as youth substance use theory highly problematizes drug use and fails to consider "that it's not deviant or pathological for humans to desire to alter their consciousness with psychoactive substances" (Kendall, n.d. as cited in Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, n.d.). Theory, policy, and practice need to critically question what is missing, which this research proposes could be done through the converging lenses of liberation and love.

**Critical Addiction Studies**

Critical addiction studies is a body of literature worth turning our attention to as it speaks directly to the political landscape that has allowed the concept of "addiction" to emerge and flourish over time. Scholars unpack the power of the concept and the way it operates to serve a select few while placing many others in direct harm and violence through dehumanization, othering, and stigmatizing people who use drugs, thereby impacting their capacity to exist within social spaces. This field critically responds to these concepts and asks us to collectively question how we arrived where we are today and if the disease-ing and disorder-ing of "addiction" is the

best and only approach to this phenomenon. In carving out a way forward, scholars have pointed to an ontology of politics that recognizes the ebb and flow that shapes phenomena, suggesting we take a progressive lens to drug use, acknowledging that multiple truths and futures can coexist to create continual change.

Critical addiction studies openly challenge who benefits from the disease-ing and disorder-ing of "addiction". By exposing harmful ways these concepts have occupied social space, Fraser (2017) makes note of how society, on the backs of neuroscience, has adopted the medicalization of "addiction" in public health messaging, policy, and practice. She brings to life the harmful ways disease models have permeated the social and political scene, leaving little room for alternative truths to emerge and coexist. Pointing our attention to drug user advocates, Fraser (2017) amplifies their contestation of the medical model and its erasure of the complex factors that influence the political concept of addiction. Congruently, Keane (2021) critiques the claims of political messaging that reifies the medicalization of addiction for its ability to create healthier drug-free futures. Making clear connections between research, policy, and practice to dispel this political messaging, unpacking the language within and the way it operates to uphold medicalization while simultaneously dehumanizing people who use drugs, Fraser (2017) exposes how this political messaging is taken up in policy, advocacy, and direct service as they explored the attitudes and beliefs of those working as service professionals. They noted that although service providers disagreed with the medical model, they were unable to separate their work from it. She revealed that many found political messaging and the medical model supportive in allowing family members, friends, and community to make sense of a complex idea, moving them a little bit closer to individuals bearing the weight of the "addict" label, while also recognizing the harmful impacts this reductive model had on people who used drugs.

Noting the way that political messaging and the medical model of addiction operate with one another, scholars speculated about the harms that are felt on an individual level, illuminating the power that the medical model holds, and the power it yields. Fraser et al. (2017) examine what is at risk of erasure when the language of addiction is adopted, exposing the harms that surface when taking on the label of "addicted" and how it eclipses any sense of autonomy, free will, and reasoning, making the "addict" the antithesis of the neoliberal citizen. As furthered by Fraser (2017), who speaks directly to the racial-capitalist, colonial construction of addiction identifying that "addiction is a fundamental concept against which Western liberal societies define themselves" (p. 130).

Stigma in addiction has been perpetuated by the idea that "the intoxicated or dependent body is an abomination – the product of a weak will, belonging to a tribal underclass of deviant and damaged souls" (Fraser et al., 2017, p. 7), which in Western societies justifies the stigma and discrimination people who use drugs face. The current sociopolitical landscape creates and perpetuates harm towards people who use drugs while promulgating public health messaging that emerged from within and then suggests that the state is intentionally trying to tackle the very stigma within which it has emerged. Stigma on an individual level has created immense emotional labour for people who use drugs, as they go to great lengths to conceal the stigmatized pieces of their identity, which limits career opportunities, social activities, clothing, basic health and hygiene options, and a number of other common privileges (Fomiatti et al., 2017). Fraser et al. (2017) expressed concern about the use of education in dispelling stigma by stating that education does not begin to address the complexities of stigmatization and therefore is not enough to eradicate it. Education alone continues the process of othering and dehumanization as

specific traits are highlighted and focussed on creating overgeneralizations and more distance between the “collective” and people who use drugs.

The messages received on a political level have a direct influence on creating and perpetuating stigma. Addison et al. (2022) and Fraser (2017) illuminate the connection between political messaging, the medical model, and stigmatization, clearly identifying their disbelief and shock behind the idea that medicalizing addiction could alleviate the stigma, as disease-ing and disorder-ing of conditions hold a history of stigmatization. Fraser (2017) identifies the way disease categories uplift marked differences between specific members and groups within society. These marked differences are often hierarchal, in that some are more socially accepted than others, the less accepted the difference, the further one is from being able to take up social space within the public “collective”. Addison et al. (2022) view people who use drugs as one of the most stigmatized social groups, attributing this to the fact that their diseased identity is also marked by the absence of free will and moral character. They speak to the conditions that create and perpetuate stigma, highlighting that it is much more than the marked physical, spiritual, mental, or emotional differences between the “collective” and those of us who fall on the other side of this divide. Addison et al. (2022) and Fraser (2017) make clear connections between stigma and attempt to maintain governmental power and control, as the state creates policy that is punitive and coercive in nature, taking away social support, housing, and food when people who use drugs fail to seek medical support. They further complicate this argument by acknowledging the way punitive and coercive policies extend to their natural support circles, as political messaging influences the relationships people who use drugs can hold with their family and friends. In this essence, Addison et al. (2022) and Fraser (2017) view stigma as an emerging political entity operating within this landscape, deployed against specific groups to ensure

political power remains unquestioned. They see it as a mechanism that intends to generate sympathy for those that exist within the social grey while also ensuring this "us and them" divide remains, and even deepens over time through specific policies and practices that suggest the differences between us are too great to co-exist, let alone receive social space to exist within.

Stigma at an individual level is pervasive and incredibly hard for those using drugs to escape. Addison et al. (2022) recognized that people who use drugs have limited options for support and are often forced to self-stigmatize to receive social support, actively identifying as either an "addict" or "in recovery" to be granted social support. Fraser (2017) refers to this as an embodied experience that awakens our sense of self to the many ways we fail to measure up to social norms, as "we are intimately alive to what others see as [our] failings" (Goffman, 1973, pp. 17-18). In this sense, stigma operates to solidify the divide between us and them, as individuals are acutely aware of their stigmatized identity and the ways they differ from the neoliberal citizen. In turn, the neoliberal citizen is bombarded with fear-inducing messages that hypervisiblize and deepen the us and them divide. Addison et al. (2022) refer to this process as an internalization of political knowledge, accepting that which shapes individual understandings, attitudes, and beliefs both for people who use drugs and those who do not.

Keane (2021) invites us to consider what it might be like to normalize addiction, to move away from the criminalization and disordering of those who receive this label. Keane (2021) asks us to turn our collective attention to the bounds of normal, how norms are created, and what might happen if we were to expand the construct as a way to normalize the concept of addiction. She explores the concept of normalization, noting that creating a normalized entity is sure to bring about another division of what is sensible. In this recognition, she asks us to join her in a generative and imaginative space when considering the futurities of addiction, reframing the

problematization of addiction as a possible future. Similarly, Fraser (2017) encourages researchers to consider, "how could we conduct 'drugs' research differently so that we recognize drugs as real material phenomena but build our explanatory frames in ways that cast light on neglected areas to compose new, more useful problems." (p.133).

Moving into a space of multiplicity, Fraser (2017) and Keane (2021), move through the idea of a politics of ontology. Here, Fraser (2017) and Keane (2021) create space for researchers, policymakers, governments, and others who play an active role in framing the concept of "addiction" to view the phenomena as a static essence that shifts when we apply the lenses of time, political landscape, environment, and individual identities. Fraser (2017) counters ideas around the disease-ing and disorder-ing of addiction, suggesting we adopt a multiverse of habits, understanding it instead as a matter of essence. In this sense, habits create and hold phenomena stable, and as habits shift, so does that phenomenon. Addiction in this view is a dynamic essence, forever evolving and progressing to new understandings. Fraser (2017) further suggests we recognize the social construction of problems based on collective values, unchecked bias, and unchallenged assumptions about who belongs to this so-called "collective". In this light, we are asked to critically reconsider the "problem" of addiction, who it serves, and how it operates.

Critical addiction studies invite us to rethink the problems we have socio-politically created about the concept of "addiction", creating space for us to explore the problematization of addiction, whom it serves, and how it operates to maintain power over people who use drugs. With direct questions about the validity of the medical model and political messaging, critical addiction studies critique the power it holds and how this power – not research – holds this phenomenon stable. In shifting our stance, scholars suggest we adopt a new way of viewing addiction and associated problems, focussing our collective attention on ongoing progress as a

way forward and recognizing that progress allows us to remain flexible to the complexity of the concept. The suggested dynamic and fluid stance in approaching the 'problem' of addiction is intentional in expanding the narrow frame that "addiction" exists within, asking us to create space for multiple truths to take up space at a political, social, communal, familial, and individual level, acknowledging that addiction does not fit neatly into one theory, model, or experience.

## Chapter Three: The Collective Works of the Minds, the Hands, and the Hearts

Intimacy and analysis, two seemingly distant concepts, came together to bring the following chapter to life. This analysis reflects the intimate connections between six youth participants, a number that reflects my limitations in this work, as I strived to be generous with my time, energy, and resources. In resisting perceived academic norms, I chose to engage with a smaller number of participants. This allowed me the time and space to adapt research methods to the needs of the individual, to nurture our relationship, and provide ongoing support as needed before and after research sessions. This act of resistance allowed me to remain fully dedicated to this work and to being a mother. The number of participants was not a compromise based on my intersecting roles and did not devalue the work, it strengthened my ability to hold space for multiple roles, engage in quality work, and let go of the idea that the number of participants is a reflection of academic rigor or success. It allowed me to build intimacy into the process, to slow down, to acknowledge the time and energy each piece of this project deserved, and to move with intention. This was a concrete starting place, connecting energies, bodies, and minds in a soft and gentle research space.

Each participant engaged in two to three one-on-one research sessions. Each session looked and felt drastically different than the previous, with differences surfacing in the physical space, the prompts used, and the methods we engaged in. Despite the differences in the individual sessions, the youth held a collective strength within their shared identity as "youth who use(d) drugs". The youth engaged in multiple data collection methods, with the first session consisting of a semi-structured interview, followed by photography, and prompting through music. The participants were provided an option of taking photographs of people, community spaces, or themselves to depict significance and meaning. Youth also had the opportunity to

share songs that represented their experiences. They made connections between the song lyrics, their experiences, and how they saw themselves reflected in the song. The photography was captured using an instant camera, to provide a tangible starting place for dialogue. We listened to the music together as a shared experience. These methods allowed me to step further into the youth's world, exploring multiple dimensions through art.

As I moved through the research process and began engaging with young people, it became clear that love is very much present in their everyday lives. Love was woven through the stories shared by participants and showed up in the cautious pauses between shared memories, in the photographs youth took of themselves, in their connection to nature, and in their unwavering devotion to showing up for themselves, their family, friends, and community. Youth provided stories about the ways they have experienced love, resisted racial-capitalist co-options of love, and shared hopes for what the future might look like if policy and practice were to be guided by liberatory love. I was drawn into stories surrounding youth's yearning to be heard, seen, and validated by their family, friends, and systems of support. They shared deep personal histories that shed light on the ways they have been impacted by policy, practice, and sociopolitical narratives that have often failed to create safe spaces for people who use drugs to be seen. Radical acts of resistance illuminated the way youth who use drugs carve out space for themselves in a society that dehumanizes their existence, which spoke directly to the need for drastic and immediate systemic changes.

System change begins with acts of resistance against injustice. In my attempt to resist the damage that research has inflicted on people who use drugs, I move with caution, upholding the sacred nature of the stories shared (Laura, 2010). As such, I am intentionally holding them close to my heart. Stories have been altered to protect the youth's identity, and traumatic experiences

have not been shared to resist using the youth's most vulnerable times as a catalyst for change. Instead, the focus here is to spark change through situating the political within the personal, by recognizing their inherent ties. Further, I share in this way as I hold the assumption that those reading this are likely students, advocates, researchers, and family members who are all too familiar with the violent experiences youth who use drugs face. I intend to share fragments of pain alongside pieces of hope to inspire possibilities for future policy and practice.

Throughout this chapter, you will find lyrics from the songs that participants shared with me and groupings of photographs taken by participants. The lyrics shared reflect the stories and knowledge generated, the youth's resistance, and their strength. These pictures reflect embodied experiences of hiding in plain sight, seeing the world from multiple viewpoints, and leaning into culture and nature to heal and be held in safety. Each group of photos is accompanied by a brief description that reflects the moments shared between myself and the youth. Many of the images taken throughout the research sessions will not be included for confidentiality and to honour the safe and sacred spaces the youth invited me into. The youth requested that as you look at these pictures, you notice the shadows, and the lighting, and reflect on how it feels to be held up by the land, the water, and the light.

**Participants**

The six youths who gave generously their time, knowledge, and life histories could not possibly be reflected as numbers or using generic pseudonyms. This small but significant section is dedicated to upholding the youth's strengths and to sharing their light and love with you. This is a resistance to normative qualitative research processes and an attempt to bring us closer to the fiery, kind, and passionate spirits that fearlessly took up space and shared their stories with the intention of creating better worlds for generations to come. The names chosen for each

participant reflect plants native to the unceded and ancestral territories of the Snuneymuxw First Nation, many of which are on endangered plant and watch lists, as they have been devastatingly impacted by land theft, ongoing colonization, racial capitalism, and climate change. These wildflowers were chosen intentionally to reflect the rare and sacred nature of every youth who shared their knowledge generously and abundantly. The endangerment and rarity of these native plants also uphold the youth's resistance to being disappeared through political and structural violence and the way they hold steadily to hope and strength.

*Elegant rein-orchid*: Abundant in its blooms, a sight to be seen. She is adaptable and can thrive across seascapes, scrublands, forested areas, and dry cliffsides. She has learned to bloom where she is planted, but always returns to the strength family brings to her growth, recognizing that home is where she is surrounded by her kin. She is kind, hardworking, and dependable. She is secure in herself, accepting nothing less than the respect she deserves, offering endless amounts of kindness, joy, and light-heartedness to those who see her for who she is (Nanaimo & Area Land Trust, 2023).

*Shooting star*: A wildflower that seeks solar nurturance and support, with blooms shooting upwards in a whimsical star-like manner with the gentle warmth and energy of the sun. She invites you in with her magnetic and captivating spirit. She works tirelessly to support others in seeing the beauty that exists within, fighting for space within their ancestral homelands despite overwhelming odds. These odds do not leave the shooting star depleted, they remind her to continue returning to the sun for that is where her strength, her compassion, and kindness for herself and others are located. It is in the warmth of the sunshine that her love is strongest, her spirit is fiercest, and her connection to kin is radiated through every fiber of her being (Nanaimo & Area Land Trust, 2023).

*Howell's violet*: Enigmatic, thought-provoking, a rarity that once grew in opulence, now spotted in few areas as an endangered wildflower species. She sparks curiosity in others, is mysterious and engaging, a natural leader with the ability to conceal that which she does not believe others have earned the right to know. Advocating for a world that is just, where she is free to be her mysterious, bubbly, kind, fierce, and loving self. Where her gifts are nurtured, supported, and encouraged and her aspirations of being and creating the change are within reach. It is a privilege to witness such courage, to hear such strength, and to uphold the teachings she has shared (Nanaimo & Area Land Trust, 2023).

*Sea blush*: A wildflower, self-seeding with an annual bloom in the spring. She is tough and holds the ability to thrive within harsh climates, she is incredibly adaptable, growing in sunny ocean cliffsides through to shady forest floors. She is equipped with the ability to survive an array of elements, known to be tolerable of rapidly changing winds, rains, and temperatures. Her strength doubles when surrounded in abundance by their kin, wrapped cautiously in a blanket of love consisting of other native plant life. As a self-seeding wildflower, she continues to attend to her own needs for survival, recognizing the inner strength that exists within her maternal roots. She is sassy, open-hearted, and determined to heal and fight against injustice for herself, her family, and generations to come (Nanaimo & Area Land Trust, 2023).

*Dense spike primrose*: Once seen in abundance throughout the lands colonially referred to as British Columbia, this endangered wildflower takes up space and supports ecological wellness. She blooms to populate her world with kin, community, love, and respect. She is rare and fearless, soft, and kind, extending herself to others with the hope of creating a sustainable world for all to co-exist. Her kindness is not to be mistaken for weakness. Rather, kindness is her strength. She upholds community ethics of dignity and respect for all and will be the first to let

you know when your actions are incongruent with collective wellness (Nanaimo & Area Land Trust, 2023).

*Bog birds-foot lotus*: Rare and endangered, yet spiritually abundant. This wildflower shares that much of their family, like the bog bird's-foot lotus, was displaced by colonization which inflicted violence across the lands of so-called British Columbia. He is dedicated, loyal, and passionately committed to nurturing his kinship relations, going to great lengths to protect his family's culture, and their spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical safety. Gathering strength in moments of vulnerability, he turns inward to reflect on his own relational needs that historically went unmet, so that he does not replicate these harms. He would give anything for a future where he and his family could grow in abundance, nurtured, loved, and safeguarded against political and environmental violence (Nanaimo & Area Land Trust, 2023).

This is a glimpse into the incredible young people I had the absolute honour of co-creating the following knowledge alongside. I intend to do justice to their strength, vulnerability, and fearlessness through sharing their knowledge widely.

**My Story Is Not Yours to Tell: Resistance Through Reclamation**

*"I'm a lost cause, baby don't waste your time on me.*

*I'm so damaged beyond repair, life has shattered my hopes and my dreams"*

*(Save Me, Jelly Roll, 2020)*

Sociopolitical narratives surrounding drug use and "addiction" in Western societies create and perpetuate insurmountable harm toward people who use drugs. These narratives consist of the stories we hear, see, and share about drug use at a social and political level and are disconnected from those who use drugs. In the last century, these stories have included language through which the "addict" as the antithesis of the upstanding citizen emerged (Fraser et al.,

2017). The political stories shared lay the groundwork for stigma and dehumanization of people who use drugs, which Addison et al. (2022), and Fraser (2017) speak to as the way political messaging operates to create the social conditions under which people who use drugs live. This creates a totalizing and reductive identity that focuses solely on an individual's drug use pattern, silencing all other aspects of who they are or who they could be. This showed up throughout the storied experiences youth shared, as they brought to life the very real consequences of such violent and oppressive narratives surrounding people who use drugs. Dense spike primrose shared their experience of this political narrative, expressing that they had been hearing this message throughout their childhood.

> *Dense spike primrose: When I think of what addiction means, I think of what I've heard growing up in my childhood, they [society] look at people who use drugs and all they see is somebody that let their addictions take over and somebody whose family doesn't even care about them, who they are or where they're at or anything… or they [person who uses drugs] gave up on their family for their addictions.*

This participant explored the politicization of the "addict" and noted the way it creates stories around who populates the community of people who use drugs.

The political narrative, which creates the very stage for stigma and dehumanization to operate within makes lackluster attempts at eradicating stigmatizing experiences for people who use drugs. Anti-stigma campaigns emerge through a variety of lenses, attempting to shift language to person-first, drawing us slightly closer to the "addicted" individual through attempting to create personal connections and failing to take accountability for the policies and narratives that have allowed stigmatization and dehumanization of people who use drugs to

flourish in the first place. The political narrative has worked cautiously to dehumanize people who use drugs. Brown (2021) describes this process as:

> Start[ing] with creating an enemy image. As we take sides, lose trust, and get angrier and angrier, we not only solidify an idea of our enemy, but we also start to lose our ability to listen, communicate, and practice even a modicum of empathy. Once we see people on the "other side" of a conflict as morally inferior and even dangerous, the conflict starts being framed as good versus evil. (paras. 10-11).

Brown (2021) makes a clear connection between dehumanization and moral uproar, both of which have been adopted to create the narrative surrounding people who use drugs and to criminalize the use, purchase, and sale of an array of substances that now fall within the Canadian Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (Government of Canada, 2023). The stigma and dehumanization of people who use drugs were relevant across youth's experiences. Participants drew upon experiences of such stigma and dehumanization to share how they had lost connection with family, friends, school, support services, and community. Shooting star shared an experience of reaching out for support and being dismissed based on their age, race, gender, and presentation. Speaking to the way stigmatizing people who use drugs led to them not being heard and not receiving the support they needed:

> *Shooting star: "I was at a few breaking points, and I ended up going to the mental health and addictions place and I was like hey, I need your help… and then they were like I think you're having a nervous breakdown… and I was like really, you're supposed to help me… and she was typing it and I was like oh my god, please give me a support, like help me and she was just like we can check in, in like a week. I was like great, thanks. And I knew by the way she looked and spoke to me, it was because I'm First Nations, and*

*it's like, no, help me. Like I'm not some drunk on the street, I have a home, I have a family, I need help."*

This experience shows the way political narratives show up in practice and the way violence towards people who use drugs is taken up systemically. Shooting star highlights the way intersecting political identities shape systemic interactions and the way service providers are trained to accommodate racism, oppression, and poverty (Reynolds et al., 2021). This service provider exists within and must respond to the systemic landscape, an unethical landscape that directly profits off the oppression of others. In this space, service providers typically lean in one of two directions, which Reynolds (2021) conceptualizes as disconnection or enmeshment. Disconnected service providers typically distance themselves from the person, the pain, the political, and the unjust work that they are expected to engage in. Meanwhile, enmeshed service providers place themselves at the center of their practice, blurring boundaries, and positioning themselves in close proximity to the pain and suffering of others. Viewing the service providers' response through this lens we can see how service providers are trained to accommodate racist and oppressive practices and in doing so have disconnected from the person standing in front of them under the guise of self-protection. To resist oppressive training, disconnection, and enmeshment, Reynolds (2021) offers up a "believed-in hope" (p. 2), and "solidarity teams" (p. 7), as a practice for service providers to exist within with collective ethics of upholding dignity and justice-doing in youth work.

Systemic violence towards people who use drugs is directly connected to the limiting and reductive political narrative, which has inevitably shaped policy and practice. It has led to systems that dismiss people who use drugs as unworthy of care, safety, and support (Fomiatti, 2017), creating a binary of the addicted person as unhealthy and their counterpart as healthy.

Explored by Fomiatti, et al. (2017) and furthered by Keane (2021), the harms that arise when we criminalize and medicalize people who use drugs create deep fragmentations across the social landscape, a divide that is perpetuated at a political level through public health messaging which reifies disease models of addiction to achieve "collective wellness". However, Keane (2021), and Maynard and Simpson (2022) argue that this collective is not inclusive of those who live in the social margins, including people who use drugs and a myriad of other political identities. This surfaced for youth as they attempted to navigate these complex systems of "care" including the health, criminal (in)justice, legal, child welfare, and education systems. With microaggressions accumulating across time and experiences, youth were pushed further into the social grey, distancing themselves from the systems that upheld violent practices. Howell's violet shared a stigmatizing experience with the child welfare system:

> *Howell's violet: From my experience and my past history it is really hard to get out of addiction and I think a lot of youth struggle in that scenario because of the way they are treated or seen as from their past. They feel like they are labeled by that person for the rest of their life and I think a lot of youths have more potential than that… and it's definitely difficult with the effort you feel like you're putting in is not being seen, like when I was dealing with social workers after experiencing trauma [it] was the hardest. The workers just seen me as aggressive and an alcoholic and not willing to prove myself for my family… they felt like I was creating an unsafe environment for other people and that's not who I was … and I feel like they really underestimated my sobriety, especially when they looked at my past and they knew…like I ended up in the hospital a few times and that's how the social worker found out I was on drugs, from my records from the hospital, and that's all they wanted to bring up like I was still that person.*

This experience demonstrates the impact of the overarching political narrative on youth's interactions with the health and child welfare systems. These two systems interacted with one another to justify a breach in confidentiality and reduced the youth to what they read about in their file, justifying such violence under the perception of safety for the "collective" – which this participant is not a part of, despite their distance from drug and alcohol use.

Systemic violence created a divide between youth and the social support systems that surrounded them. This is similar to the divide between people who use drugs and people who do not, in that the divide has been created and maintained by political messaging that has a significant impact on the relationship between youth who use drugs and social systems. Youth who begin distancing themselves are often referred to as service-resistant and not ready for change. This is a convenient label serving to place responsibility on the young person, disappearing the need for systems and practitioners to look inward as to why the young person has stepped away from their services or support. This divide spread to the youth's family and friends, as they were often brought into service planning and exposed to the same violent language heard within the political narrative. The situation is further complicated by families often experiencing stigma and shame around their loved one's relationship with drugs. The youth expressed that family and friends often sided with systems, due to the power imbalance existing between themselves and the perceived expert existing within the system. Sea blush shared how complicated this was and the way it impacted their relationships with service providers, family, and friends:

> Sea blush: *when it comes to family and relationships it's the hardest thing to take cause it's like not only the people you thought had your back, but they always see this certain angle of you that you wish they seen past and it's even harder when they're thinking that*

*way about you when workers are involved because it just makes them [family] disbelieve you more and have less confidence that you're actually working up to what you're wanting like they wanna take their [the workers] words over your actions… they [workers and family] are making you take a step back by not believing your words or your actions and just believing what was shown in the past.*

This was echoed by Elegant rein-orchid who described their experience being labeled by systemic supports, which were then adopted by family members:

*Elegant rein-orchid* shares: *People [service providers, family] just like to see all your mistakes and not your success… when I am drinking they just see that part but they don't see me actually succeeding at work and they just judge me for my mistakes. They just make my whole life about drinking and don't take the time to actually see and get to know what else is going on.*

Participants experienced systemic violence which permeated through to family and friends. This experience was particularly isolating as the youth responded by isolating themselves from those who were unable to recognize the entirety of their situation.

Political narratives create the foundation upon which violence, oppression, and stigma operate. They actively other, dehumanize, and remove entire populations from taking up space within the political collective. Further, political narratives cause deep fragmentations between youth who use drugs and systems, community services, families, and communities. These fragmentations grow as youth aim to preserve their identity, dignity, and self-respect. Relationships begin to collapse as youth distance themselves from harmful language and practices. It is in this space that radical acts of self-love flourish as youth actively resist a narrative that is far from their lived reality.

Us and them divide thrives on the imagined space between the two distinct yet connected groups on either side, with the space between being the marker of differences, the disease-ing of addiction, and the othering, dehumanization, and oppression of people who use drugs (Keane, 2021). The distance between the two groups grows as established relationships with family members, friends, community, and systems begin to crumble. When we begin to label those we perceive to be existing on the other side we deepen the divide. The political narrative surrounding drug use that falls outside social norms is the very heart of the space between, providing the landscape upon which conceptual ideas about "addiction" are constructed and instilling fear, anger, distrust, and stigma as their tools of oppression. Participants shared the harmful impact of receiving labels from the support and loved ones in their lives. Speaking to the way labels damaged their ability to be seen as anything other than an "addict" among other negative labels. The labels they received were far from who they truly were, and the misperceptions of others were yet another way the space between us and them grew. Youth shared how they distanced themselves from others for the sake of their safety, for dignity, and self-respect, illuminating their acts of resistance as acts of radical self-love.

*Figure 1 Hiding in Plain Sight.*

**Existing in Forgotten Spaces**

*"They say my lifestyle is bad for my health*

*it's the only thing that seems to help*

*all of this drinking and smoking is hopeless but feel like it's all that I need*

*something inside of me's broken I hold onto anything that sets me free"*

*(Save Me, Jelly Roll, 2020)*

When the youth became caught inside a political narrative that infiltrated every area of their life, from the systems they were supposed to interact with to their family, friends, and community support, they began to seek safety on their own, away from violent and hate-filled politics and systems. This was a safety that they imagined, chose, and actively worked towards creating in their day-to-day lives. This safety existed in what Maynard and Simpson (2022) refer to as the social grey, a dynamic home space that lacked many of the features considered safe in the neoliberal citizen's eyes, reinforcing the idea that the "addicted" body is the antithesis to such a citizen (Fraser, 2017). This home space allowed them to be seen for who they are (by whom), to re-claim a sense of identity and agency and is a space they had to pour emotional labour into creating their own systems of safety and support. This is where love surfaced in youth's stories, as they resisted racial-capitalist ideas of "love" and the political narrative that aimed to entrap them in a lifelong battle against "addiction". They continued to stand, unwavering in their strength, against the systems that continuously attempted to inflict harm, and against the ones that villainized them for choosing themselves, for attending to their own needs for safety,

connection, and support. This is the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional home space that allows youth to re-claim a sense of identity and agency and begin building their world anew.

The stigma surrounding drug use that falls outside of social norms is notorious for creating strict binaries of healthy/unhealthy, addicted/recovered, and good/bad, leaving little space for youth who use drugs to exist as they are. Fomiatti et al. (2017) explored these binaries with people who use drugs and found the binaries to be false, to create misunderstandings, and to isolate people who use drugs by limiting their opportunities to simply exist in this world. As opportunities began to dwindle, participants found themselves seeking connection, support, and agency elsewhere, searching for a world in which they could belong seamlessly. Howell's violet shared their experience of safety-seeking through leaving behind traditional "support" systems, explaining that they did not feel welcome in these spaces:

> *Howell's violet: Well especially when they [community services] don't make you feel safe or welcomed in a certain environment…it feels like you don't have an option but to be homeless and to be on the streets. It actually feels safer there."*

Howell's Violet exposed the reality that many youth who use drugs experience when moving through the systems they are surrounded by, the lack of safety and belonging forced youth to seek it elsewhere. From a system's viewpoint, youth shared the pressure they felt to make decisions and their fear of saying "no" or disclosing continued drug use. Sea blush shared the fear of reaching out for support and disclosing drug or alcohol use:

> *Sea blush: My supports didn't really have faith in me... I think it's cause I constantly tried and tried with sobriety before I didn't think they were gonna have faith in me anymore because I just kept trying and trying and slipping up. They gave up on helping me and that's just how I feel.*

In this quote, the process of isolation unfolding is evident as the youth begins to seek a genuine connection elsewhere.

As youth identified fractures within their systemic relationships, they were forced to seek belonging elsewhere and to find space for themselves to exist in their entirety, far from the limitations systemically thrust upon them. Participants began identifying what safety looked and felt like as they stepped away and built their own systems of support. In a way, it led youth to find a more welcoming community that could provide physical safety, connection, compassion, empathy, and basic needs without judgement. Those who comprised this population included other youth who use drugs, adults who use drugs, peer support workers, and community-based workers. Dense spike primrose shared that this self-made support system was an essential lifeline through which they expanded their support network:

> *Dense spike primrose: I met more friends along the way who I could trust, who looked after me, brought me home, called ambulances for me whenever I needed… and if you make enough friends that have your back, eventually it works out, or if you already know people that are on the streets too… then it's like a safety net.*

The youth also identified themselves as empathic and supportive, expressing how easy it is to be a kind person and how far doing so goes:

> *Shooting star: I'm the person that will make sure everyone else is good and supporting them and being like, 'Hey, let me get you these resources. Do you want me to come with you?'. That kind of stuff. And then it's like I'm in denial…and it's so good just being a kind person…that's what I've always done, even when I was drinking. I was always a kind person. I was always just there, and I still am.*

Self-made support systems came at a cost. The youth found themselves pouring emotional and physical labour into maintaining safety and attempting to meet their own basic needs for food, clean water, and housing. All participants involved in this project experienced some level of housing instability ranging from couch surfing to spending a few months to a few years living on the streets. The cost of safety came with the loss of access to systemic financial support to maintain their basic needs. Participants identified this as a necessary cost as they were unable to continue surviving within oppressive systems operating under the guise of support. While services operate under the impression that basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing must be met before scaffolding in other needs, the youth have made clear that safety takes precedence over meeting these basic needs. Response-based and violence-informed practices prioritize safety by centering dignity, recognizing that people are always moving towards safety, and continuously structuring safe enough spaces for support, connection, and healing (Clark, 2016; Reynolds, 2020; Richardson & Reynolds, 2014; Richardson & Wade, 2010). Navigating these waters early on in their departure from formal systems was particularly tricky, as youth aimed to find people they could trust to support their safety. Youth shared that they often had to trust their instincts and did not have the privilege of making informed decisions when accepting resources, services, and offers from others in similar circumstances. Bog birds-foot lotus spoke to the emotional labour of being a youth who uses drugs and living on the streets:

> *Bog birds-foot lotus: Basically I had to just keep to myself and trust the right people… and just follow my gut instincts. Basically, for me spending that much time on the streets, I've made it so that I can read a person just based off the vibe that they give me the very first time we meet, which tells me whether I should trust them or not… and there's only a select few that I would count on in my life to actually hang out and talk to.*

While circles were limited and youth were overwhelmingly disconnected from opportunities to take up space within the "social collective", they continued to seek out others who they deemed safe enough, had their back, and saw them for who they were. They actively maintained and allowed these relationships to flourish as a natural and invaluable protector of their well-being.

While maintaining safety and connection in the social grey, participants continued working to remain connected to their family members. This looked like nurturing the relationship from a distance through prayer, asking their support network to pass along messages, and sending energy into the universe for their wellbeing. Participants also maintained contact through social media and visiting with family in community. Regardless of their family connection, all participants held a shared desire to support their family member's safety and well-being. Participants resisted political messaging that suggests "addicts" are unable or unwilling to care for their family members, through their ongoing dedication to extending love and care. Elegant rein-orchid shared that her mother is her source of strength explaining:

> *Elegant rein-orchid: Sobriety…yea, it's what I'm aiming for. I'm trying to have that sober life for my mom. My mom did it. She's been four years clean and sober, so I know I can do it. It'll take me a bit to get there though, but I know I will.*

Their relationship with their mother was a source of inspiration, a held hope that things could change.

With participants' devotion to their families came systemic limitations that negatively impacted their ability to seek sobriety and collapsed them deeper within the "addict" identity. Participants shared imposed barriers to remaining in contact with family such as a lack of access to telephone and internet, social workers refusing to provide family's contact information, and the legal system "red flagging" them from areas in community, all of which limited their ability

to maintain a connection. Bog birds-foot lotus shared the harm they experienced after being red-flagged from a community and split up from their sibling:

> *Bog birds-foot lotus: The day that I got kicked out of my foster house with my sister living there, I did everything to protect her and whoever did anything to her physically or mentally I would have done anything to put an end to it. Eventually when we got separated and the ministry and the cops tried to do everything to stop me from seeing her. They kicked me out of the town where we were living in the foster house and they red-flagged me from that town. But I kept on running back and I would always try my best to be there and be by her side to be there as a brother, even though it meant I was risking a lot of jail time to do so. But like, she was everything that I had…and yeah I just didn't know what I would do if the day came that I had to tell myself that I lost her.*

This participant illuminates the way systemic violence operates and targets youth who use drugs by creating multiple barriers to keeping in touch with their family and at times criminalizing them for attempting to maintain that connection. As Wade (1997) shares, this act of resistance is the parallel line that runs alongside acts of violence, this is the youth resisting violence that emerged through the criminal (in)justice system and child welfare system, wrestling with the need to maintain their safety and recognizing that their safety was intricately connected to the safety of their sister.

Participants were clear in establishing the link between systemic violence and oppression and their need to create new worlds in the social grey. As youth stepped away from political systems, they found a sense of belonging, community, and a felt safety. They also experienced harm including food, housing, and other basic need scarcities, and they were isolated from friends and family who did not have an understanding of why the youth had to step away from

these systems. Emotional labour was a constant as youth were bargaining safety for autonomy, choice, and control. They were creating their own spaces of safe enough, which forced them to take extreme measures to support their well-being. Still, they continued to create a better world for themselves, they continued to dream up alternative ways of being and held hope that these worlds would one day come to fruition, both for themselves and generations to come.

*Figure 2 Stepping back, stepping in*

**Moving Into the Space of Multiplicity**

*"It takes courage to live your dreams,*

*It takes courage to manifest your greatness,*

*It takes courage to decide to live."*

*(Bruno Mali Kidd, 2018)*

In conversations where we examine the political and social systems that have violently excluded people who use drugs from concepts of safety and wellness, we must remain in an open and generative space of building up, as we tear down existing structures. Building up new worlds, and daring to dream even when the odds seem stacked against you is a radical act, defying racial-capitalism through claiming social space and living in it anyway (Maynard &

Simpson, 2022). It is also a cautious and intentional act that in this work has been held up foundationally by loving and liberating one another. To love another is to extend one's spirit generously, to be with, stand by, and nurture one another for their authentic selves. Liberating one another, for participants, emerged through holding space, honouring each other, and creating moments where participants were free to dream, to hope, and to simply be. Weaving in an ontological approach to politics, we recognized the dynamic state of the world and the everchanging spaces we occupied, and we were guided by the process rather than the end goal. This is the world the youth began to imagine. A world where our conceptual framework began to shift language, policy, and practice.

Political narratives hold immense power, as we have seen for youth who use drugs, these narratives hold the power to entrap, dehumanize, stigmatize, and create a myriad of violent and oppressive experiences for youth who use drugs. Political narratives are the thread that holds the medicalized concept of "addiction" stable, a thread which we must begin to untangle, and otherwise remove from the concept of "addiction" as a way forward. When we begin to unravel the political narrative, so meticulously wound together by religious and moral beliefs, social norms, and racial-capitalism we create space for such dream-like worlds. Addressing the political narrative creates space for us to move through changes at all levels: systems, community, family, and individual. Participants held onto hope that a shift in language could open the door for systems and community-level supports to be rebuilt and for family members to be invited in and intentionally included in nurturing them. They were committed to a believed in hope (Reynolds, 2020) that the language we heard and saw at this political level could provide others with compassionate language that sought to connect with youth who use drugs as they are. Further, the participants expressed that a shift in language had the potential to restore and repair

intergenerational trauma and harm, with the hope that they could help foster a softer space for future generations of youth to thrive. Sea blush shared the judgement they experienced and their commitment to breaking the cycle of stigma in and for their family:

> *Sea blush: I felt judgement everywhere, especially with family and support. It's not easy to break a cycle [of addiction and violence] once you start… once you're in it, it's really hard to get out… and in my experience, that's what I am trying to do, break the cycle… a little late but that's ok. I'm trying to break generational cycles, I want my younger brothers to feel supported. I want the young one's out there - you know like 13, 14-year-olds - to get the support I didn't, and to not have to live with the labels and judgement.*

This youth explains how they have felt generationally trapped within a political narrative that disallows adequate support for their family without prescribing to the violence of the "addict" identity.

With a new political narrative as a collective starting point, we may begin to see shifts in policy and move from a place of liberating and loving the public collective, inclusive of those not currently imagined within it. Youth dreamed of a world where policy was written from a place of love and liberation, a sturdy foundation upon which our collective society could be built. These policies would lay the essential groundwork for practice to look and feel different and for systems to truly hold compassion and empathy for people who use drugs. Participants had a shared desire to be a part of decision-making processes at every level as a valued partner, rather than as an afterthought or an act of tokenism. Howell's violet shared that they believe they could make a difference if they had the platform and if political, social, and community workers held youth's safety at the heart of their decision-making processes:

*Howell's violet: I know the city can do it 'cause they have listened to us once before… we've done it with the bus routes. We advocated for the city to put a bus stop by the youth center and the city actually did… cause they knew it was for our safety and I think if they (the city) did look at it that way, making changes for the safety of youth, then I think they would follow through on creating youth resources that we actually need… and if they actually included us and asked us what we needed… I think if they heard and seen youth out more then it would work if they just gave them an opportunity.*

Here we can see that youth are seeking the opportunity to be heard on the political stage and for policymakers to prioritize their safety.

This need for felt safety within the social collective rippled into systemic practice. Youth identified a need for systems and community services to be open and vulnerable, and to create space for youth-led re-development. Redeveloping systems looks like a restructuring of policies and redistribution of power, and for those traditionally in places of power to extend themselves generously to those often silenced in service formation, such as youth who use drugs. A crucial and highly contentious piece in rebuilding is creating space for youth-led re-development, to acknowledge and hold ourselves accountable to the harms we have all been a part of holding stable within the overarching systems we populate. Participants invited us to consider how we may have perpetuated harmful practices, failed to carry our personal values into the workspace and to consider how we may approach the work if the youth was a member of our family. Elegant rein-orchid expressed that many social and community workers walk into their life and expect youth to invite them in as if their professional title or education automatically make them a "safe person". They challenged this idea stating:

*Elegant rein-orchid: Workers just expect you to trust them… and they don't even ask you if you're okay with what they are doing. Especially when they are taking notes just scribbling down notes. That's just a bit weird. Like why do they have to write down what we are saying?… Yeah, it's for them to remember, but they didn't ask me first if I was comfortable with them writing down what I am saying. They just whip out their pen and paper and start writing.*

This participant illuminates the need for consent-based services that allow workers the time and space to slow down, to actively engage youth in conversations around consent, and what the youth would need to say "no" to those in positions of power.

In describing the ideal service landscape, youth consistently spoke to the need for youth-specific harm reduction services to exist in community, that focused on education, safe use, naloxone training and distribution, resource connection, a place to check in, and options for involving family. Participants recognized the lack of education they held when it came to things such as how to use safely, how drugs interact with each other, information regarding routes of consumption, and other drug-specific information. They acknowledged how this increased their risk of harm in many ways, from overdose, and infection to exploitation from adults who use drugs. Youth continuously urged us to consider their safety in service delivery, revealing how they had been their own harm reduction system and how emotionally exhausting this was for them. In caring for the youth's safety from a service delivery standpoint, the youth asked for workers to collaborate with and mobilize existing supports, including the youth's families, and providing options for what that inclusion might look like. Howell's violet shared how it would have been supportive for them to have a space where they could show up, check-in, and that their parents could contact to ensure their safety:

> *Howell's violet: Like I brought that up to my parents like I think that's where it came in like if I had a place where I was willing to show up whether I was intoxicated or under the influence because they [service providers] would rather see me alive than missing. Like my mom always had that gut feeling that she's gonna find me dead or unconscious and that's where she wanted somewhere I could check in, for at least someone who has seen me alive and like showed up to school or a support worker. I think having that opportunity or safe structure for people would help a lot cause it's not always family that gets you out of it [unsafe situations].*

Youth-specific harm reduction spaces in community could have provided a space for this young person to check in, to remain in contact with their family, and to gather resources that supported their safety.

In building up this dream world, the youth asked at minimum for more comprehensive support options. Resources within reach that could meet their needs for food, hygiene, clothing, connection, and safety, and where youth could show up without feeling the pressure to exchange physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual commodities for these basic needs. In such a space coercive control would not be relied upon to change a youth's drug use. This space was warm and accessible, the paint colours were bright, the walls were filled with art that reflected past, present, and future generations of youth's stories and there was a felt sense of dignity and respect for the land, the people, and the stories that moved through it. It had specific areas for males, females, non-binary, transgender, and two-spirit youth. The cupboards were filled with nutritious food, and closets held clothing and shoes for those who needed it. This space had places to sleep, to relax, to shower and wash clothing. It provided information for further resource connection, but it was not a requirement. It was open 24 hours, 7 days a week, and did not turn young people

away if they were under the influence of drugs. Dense spike primrose shares their dream service landscape:

> *Dense spike primrose: I think what was needed to feel more supported is for workers and families to be more understanding than judgemental cause when I found myself using or drinking it was to numb the pain of things that were done behind doors that I never really spoke of and I think the most difficult time was being held against my will and they [service providers] thought I was just not willing to go home or get the help and I think also having a helper or safe place to be while under the influence would help people that struggle using or drinking or a place to show up to be able to freshen up or shower, for the community to have a place…to maybe have donated clothes and shoes. Cause when I was using or drinking I was mostly at a friend's house or homeless due to my decisions and I think it would make a difference to have a place open a few times a week for drop-ins for people to shower and grab clothes and warm drinks. I think it would be a lot more supportive if they expanded current services like if they took one of the [empty, abandoned] buildings and like added showers, one for male and female so they feel more comfortable, cause I knew when I was under the influence I had a hard time with sort of trusting with it being mixed with youth and adults and males, and I think just from my experience that even having a youth and adult but also having even on separate sides of the building male and female to be able to shower… I think it would just have more privacy separating them.*

This fearless space was thought up as a connection point, a shared home space that had the ability and capacity to meet youth where they were at, to provide resources generously, and to hold young people in a space of communal love. This service landscape is a direct reflection of

response-based and violence-informed (Clark, 2016; Reynolds, 2020; Richardson & Wade, 2010) practices as they work to continuously define safety based on the person, setting, and conversations taking place. Further, through working to change the sociopolitical conditions through which violence emerges, they attend to the need for hope, the fight for something better, a fight that could be reflected in this dream-like space, as the space itself centers safety, dignity, and agency.

This is a world worth holding onto, worth fighting for, worth moving into with humility cautiously guiding us towards a shared goal of progression. The participants, youth who use drugs, and generations to come deserve to be shouldered up and held strong as they dare to dream the world anew. Participants' voices came together, across differences and emerged through similarities, guiding us to a generative space – one that could come to fruition through our collective resistance and risk-taking. As Maynard and Simpson (2022, p. 253) highlight:

> And of course, jumping through the portal, the portals asks of us that we assume an element of risk. It demands a certain sacrifice, that we cannot know in advance. It demands the end of safety that some of us have come to know. But safety is already over. And for some of us, it never arrived.

We must turn to the ones not envisioned within narratives on collective wellness to tear down the systems as they are and begin building up from a space of liberation and love.

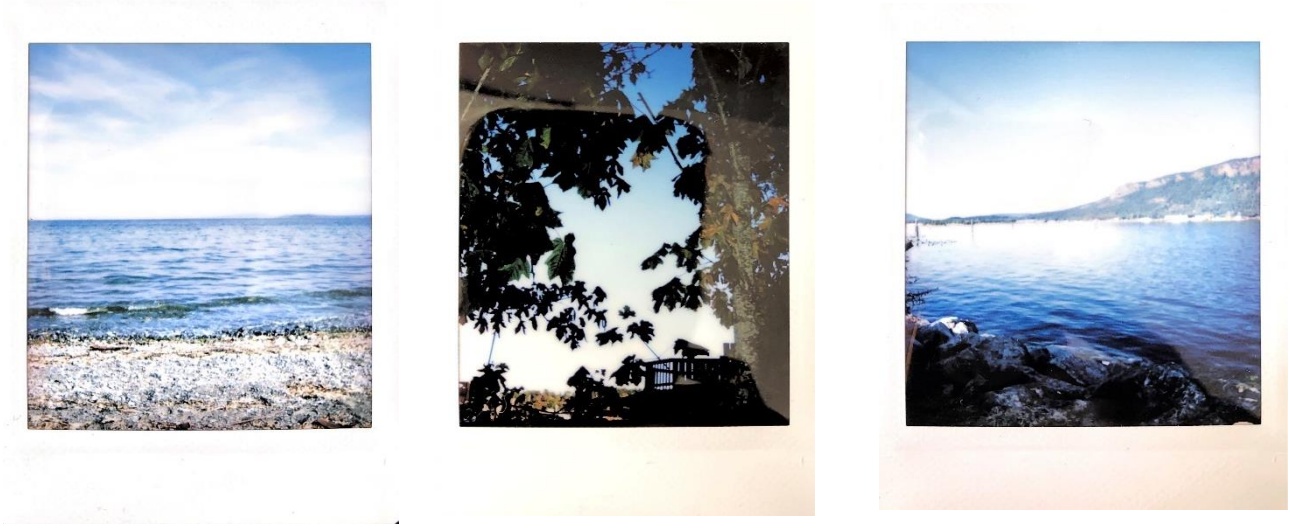

*Figure 3 Land based healing*

## Chapter Four: Dreaming, Collaborating, Doing

*"Hope, yeah, I'm on my way, I'm coming, don't, don't lose faith in me…*

*What's my definition of success?*

*Listening to what your heart says"*


*Figure 4 Liberating and loving*

Speculating on a happy future of addiction is a conversation Keane (2021) invites us into, "If what is most resolutely unthinkable in addiction discourse is a happy future of addiction, then this is an impossibility that is worth speculating about" (p. 2). This imaginative space has the

capacity to create space for liberatory love, and critically questions if where we are reflects where we want to be. If we were to embody liberation as the erasure of greed and hatred and love as an extension of oneself to that or those furthest from ourselves, what might be possible at a political level? Specifically, what might change for people who use drugs? Acknowledging the lack of this embodiment within our political system, we can then look to the cracks in policy that could be filled with such presence. I ask you to join me in exploring what might be, remaining open to these futurities. I remain committed to this expansive state, cautiously weaving together moments of hope and aspiration and intentionally stepping into an imaginative political realm because I recognize that our current political systems are not the only possible way to structure society (Maynard & Simpson, 2022). Inspired by Keane (2021) I aim to focus on affirmative outcomes, on hope, on infinite futurities, and imagining the world anew. I do not aim to dismiss the limitations of the work or to state an unproblematic argument, rather to remain in a dream-like state as an act of resistance against the problematization of "addiction".

I am cautioned by the works of Maynard and Simpson (2022) in acknowledging that tinkering with the system as is could not possibly provide the futures I am dreaming of. It is not enough to ask for small shifts in policy and practice when the foundation holding systems in place is built on the oppression and violence of racialized bodies, of people who use drugs, of women, gender nonconforming, and a myriad of other identities. We cannot possibly create space for ourselves within this world, as we have "lived and died for generations now within the limited and limiting promises of reform" (Maynard & Simpson, 2022, p.114). We must hold steady to the belief that other worlds are possible, and continue dreaming in the social grey, "building worlds and living in them anyway" (p. 44). Dreaming of such worlds is an active resistance against dominant Western ways of knowing and being, as they produce knowledge

with the purpose of numbing one's desire to dream the world anew, to question their power, to break up with the ideas that have thrived in racial-capitalist, colonial societies.

People who use drugs live on the outskirts of what Maynard and Simpson (2022) refer to as the constitutive outside of the nation-state. The outside of belonging, of protection, of safety. There is no political space for people who use drugs to exist within, and political leveraging of violent narratives ensures this distancing divide grows over time. We see people who use drugs hypervisibilized in legal discourse while all but forgotten in conversations regarding public health and wellness. This hypervisibility dehumanizes people who use drugs and acts as a justification for the political, community, and relational violence they endure. The Canadian government then pours money into anti-stigma campaigns that illuminate the harmful webs they have spun, but do little to unpack, unlearn, and eliminate the overarching political narrative that creates violent policy and law (Kania et al., 2018). The very language and violence that push people who use drugs outside of the political realm, steal the opportunity for belonging, safety, protection, and love. Under our current political regime, the space for liberation and love for people who use drugs across society is bleak.

This narrative has created deep fragmentations for youth who use drugs as they are dehumanized, criminalized, and pushed to the outskirts of society in a time of identity formation and exploration. Through violent political messaging, youth who use drugs are faced with innumerable biases, stigma, and stereotyping as they are reduced to a seemingly singular identity that focuses on their relationship to drugs and is then further complicated by their race, gender, sexuality, age, and other individual factors. As we recognize how these factors influence one another and in turn, the biases we hold towards youth who use drugs, questions begin to surface around what might shift if we were to create policy and political narratives with liberatory love at

the core. It is this very dehumanization that sparks a desire to envision, dream, and build up new worlds.

In the expansive frame of liberatory love, I dream up a world that is generous and kind, a political landscape that actively works to create and hold space for people who use drugs. In this world, we step away from the criminalization, medicalization, and coercive control of addiction politics. We begin to tear down the foundation that has perpetuated violence, oppression, and stigma towards people who use drugs. Not only do we tear down this foundation down, but we begin building up simultaneously, systems that hold the capacity to be expansive, fluid, and dynamic structures of support. This new world is built with the collective in mind, a collective reflective of people who use drugs and the intersecting identities they hold that influence their political position, built not only for but with people who use drugs. This dream-like space relies upon violence and response-based practices to bring many walks of life together in this new formation.

This expansive new world is impeded by the political narrative that holds the concept of addiction stable, a salient point Fraser (2017) made, in urging us to consider what is at risk of erasure when we adopt this politicized language without critique. To move ourselves into a new world we must tackle the operations of politicized language, and how addiction language has created mass exclusion of people who use drugs from the perceived collective. It begins on a political level, disappearing people who use drugs from political messaging, public safety, and policy decisions. On a systemic level, we see language that others and deepens this divide, making the drug user into a less-than-human entity. We see this in youth's systemic interactions as they were misjudged, labelled, and denied services based on their relationship to drugs. How could we begin moving ourselves from this systemic place, repairing the fractures in this

relationship? Language has the potential to set us free, it also holds the power to divide, to dehumanize, to trap. We cannot disconnect spoken language from the written policies, academic articles, and social messaging that allow it to flourish. A salient piece of creating social change that Kania et al. (2018) surface as they identify the interconnected web of policy, practice, funding, narratives and the language we hold in our hearts. They carry on to recognize that language is the most important piece of systems change, stating that without it we could not possibly expect the changes to reach the community level. We must actively take back language at all levels to create a truly kind and compassionate space for people who use drugs.

As I step into the multitude of progressive possibilities, of hope-filled politics, I place myself in proximity to the question of how we begin dismantling oppressive political narratives and systems and simultaneously begin building up the spaces participants dreamt up. I dream of a world where we could shift political narratives, and interrogate the language, policies, practices, and biases we hold that feed into the violence youth who use drugs face. I begin to believe in the infinite futurities that surface. I envision and aspire to build a world where youth who use drugs are met with kindness, compassion, love, and generosity; where they are welcomed, heard, valued, and honoured in all that they are. I see services that are flexible, youth-developed, and centered, remaining curious about the ever-changing realities that young people exist within. When I hold this world up, I see youth who use drugs being able to maintain connections at a community level, being provided opportunities to engage in education, recreation, and social events, and feeling safe enough to take up social space.

This world holds liberation and love at its center and is driven by safety for young people. If this were true, we could actualize youth-specific harm reduction services. We would not be placing that burden and emotional labour on the backs of young people. We would take an

active role in providing life-saving services, drug use education, and providing a consistent, safe connection point. Recognizing that reducing harm is a complex act of care involving education, youth-friendly knowledge on how to use safely, how drugs interact with one another, learning our tolerance levels, exploring routes of consumption, drug checking, naloxone, and sterile equipment. Harm reduction is safety, it is connection, it is belonging. I hope to see this world accompanied by spaces that allow youth who use drugs to heal, learn, grow, and remain connected to themselves, family, community, and society. Where they are actively invited in and supported to show up in a meaningful way. Access to basic needs is not conditional upon sobriety or accessed through community services, they are consistent, stable, reliable, and safe in the eyes of the young person. This is a dream world worth holding onto, worth unpacking, tearing down, and building up a social system that could support such a vision.

Envisioning such a world requires us to consider the practicalities of building it up, from who must be involved to how we begin to actualize such large-scale ideas and practices. It is well known that major gaps exist in translating research to practice in the field of substance use, with such a wide gap being linked to conflicting ideas on the etiology of "addiction" and best practice (Rush & Urbanoski, 2019). However, in this new world, I suggest focussing on liberation and love as our guide, regardless of one's theoretical standpoint. As the youth have mentioned we cannot approach young people through a one-size-fits-all approach, to step into the multitude we must depart from dichotomous thinking, and bring ourselves closer to the ideologies that feel most foreign. We must create space for an infinite number of possible truths to co-exist. To understand that the root of substance use may be different for every young person – and that this root is not inherently problematic. Creating a theoretical starting point that is

flexible, compassionate, respectful, and open to the expert guidance of young people who use drugs.

If we were to start with a soft and flexible theoretical foundation, we may hold space for systems to create services that reflect those same attributes and that support service providers to show up in meaningful ways, sharing themselves generously with young people and their families. A systemic space where practitioners across fields were encouraged to include love in their practice, where they were supported to engage in ongoing education and training, seeking information from a variety of "experts" that would start with youth who use drugs. They would be encouraged to bring in new knowledge, to dream, to believe in a better world, and to fight back against the bounds of the system and begin breaking down barriers to service. A world where youth are not afraid to reach out for support. A world that pushes back against the diminishing language often thrown at those of us brave enough to dream of something better.

**Practice Makes Different**

*"I am being transformed by witnessing, in these times, the multiple and often decentralized forms of community and collective care that stand to interrupt age-old patterns determining who is able to live and who is left to die" (Maynard & Simpson, 2022, p. 73).*

Practice makes different, a concept cautiously thought up by Maynard and Simpson (2022) invites us to consider our acts of resistance as a practice of making different worlds. It asks us to reflect on how our actions, regardless of their scale, work to either resist or maintain systems as they are. From this space, we can begin imagining the practicalities of mobilizing such a world and who must be involved in building it up. From the ground up, I look to people who use drugs for they hold knowledge that cannot be acquired from theory or policy. I look to them to be meaningfully, ethically, and equitably involved in dreaming up such changes. I wish

to invite in family members, friends, and community members. The social workers, nurses, doctors, child and youth care practitioners, counsellors, outreach workers, lawyers, judges, and all others in the "helping" profession who interact with youth who use drugs. I invite these groups in intentionally as we cannot build these worlds without those who populate youth's interpersonal, familial, communal, and systemic worlds. We cannot challenge language, policy, law, and practice without those who are currently practicing within the systems as they are. Further, it is near impossible to support a shift in language without inviting in those who are seen as supportive, professional, "experts" in their field and community. The advocates, the family members, the parents, the friends, the young person's community, their people. Finding strength in our shared desire of creating a better world for youth who use drugs.

Leaning into the idea that practice makes different, we create space for imperfection, for ongoing learning, for humility in the acknowledgement that we are far from the position of "expert" in youth drug use. We should be compelled to dream, to resist, to act, with an abundance of opportunities to acknowledge the seemingly small acts of resistance that push back against systemic violence and look to each other in solidarity when the system pushes back. Standing steadily in the strength of knowing that we are far from alone in our fight to dismantle systems as they are. We practice pushing the reductive and diminishing impacts of the disease-ing of addiction, continuously expanding these narrow frames of reference.

I acknowledge what is at risk when we put ourselves in this place of resistance, however, I also invite us to consider what is at risk when we abandon pieces of ourselves to fit within the system. I see the harms that one might experience as they rebel against racial-capitalism in the labels they will receive, the pushback, the diminishing comments about this dream-like state. That said, I invite you to see past the backlash, to examine what might be at the core of these

diminishing responses, and to consider what fear might look like from within the system. hooks (2018) draws our attention to the power that liberatory love contains in its ability to shake systemic foundations, sharing that this type of love is a direct threat to the foundation of colonialism and racial capitalism. And so, to you I acknowledge the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical energy it takes to fight the system, to practice different, to embody liberatory love, a political ontology, to build a new world, to stay true to your values. It is a complex and heavy action to take. However, the reductive and diminishing concept of "addiction" permeating our sociopolitical worlds urges us to take action against political narratives that reduce people to their trauma, to their substance use. As political narratives continue narrowing the frame of "normal" we must keep resisting and pushing the frame open.

**Caring for ourselves.** When we dare to dream, take up space, and push against systemic violence, we often find ourselves in a space commonly considered burn-out. So how exactly does one push against the system without compromising their ability to support themselves and others? This is a complex question that will look different for everyone. In child and youth care specifically, I can recall being taught about self-care, boundaries, and burnout. Not so much in a tangible way, but as an abstract piece of our existence. Another one of those complex concepts that we were to learn and establish in our practice. The reality of taking these concepts and engaging with them in practice is drastically different, in the same way that applying theory to practice creates tensions. We were not meant to have the kind of self-care and boundaries we learn about within these systems, taking time to honour our needs, to support our family, and to extend a generous amount of care to our inner beings. As another act of resistance, it falls upon our shoulders to take that time, to be present, and to tend to oneself. Further, finding our support circle, the ones who hold us up, who bring light, life, and joy to our worlds, and when we are

experiencing something along the lines of “burn-out” taking the courageous step back, as yet another act of resisting racial-capitalist ideas of productivity.

In practicality, it can be supportive to build a grounding practice to remain connected to our own biases and assumptions, as an act of care for self and others. To actively engage in creating a new world, we must move with caution and humility. Recognizing that how we move through this world is tainted by our life experiences, education, and personal identities. Questions I have considered when attempting to uphold this new world include:

1. What values ground my practice?
2. Am I proximal to my value system and if not, what do I need to return to it?
3. How are my biases and assumptions showing up in practice?
4. What might shift in my practice if I were to hold love and liberation central to my actions?
5. How can I repair relationships when I’ve failed to hold safe enough spaces?
6. Who can I rely upon to hold me accountable, and to stand in solidarity with?

These questions ask us to continuously come back to ourselves and our values, and to remain in a generative learning space, questioning and reflecting on our positions as a form of self and community care.

**Speaking makes different.** The language distributed at a political level has a significant impact on youth who use drugs. This language is then taken up by systems, supports, and provided to the community, family, and youth. This builds their conceptual foundation and shapes their relationships. Without alternative language, it is near impossible to release ourselves from the confines of the “addict” language, identify as a person who uses drugs, and take up social space. Therefore, it is crucial that we actively aim to shift language at a political level. We

take the theories and language we hear in academia and weave them into practice. A gentle process that intentionally approaches the political, systemic, communal, and familial landscapes with love and liberation as its guide to ensure that we do not perpetuate the harms imposed on people who use drugs, we move with caution and humility. We stand strong in our position and support a shift in language that works to repair the divide between people who use drugs and the social-political scene.

Examining the weaponization of language against people who use drugs, we have to explore the contextual and individual factors and the violence that shifts along with these factors. Things such as race, gender, age, housing status, educational status, and socioeconomic status all create further violence around political narratives. Intersectional feminism reminds us that political identities are nonbinary (Carastathis, 2014), and we are targeted differently depending on who we are and where we come from. Language is a powerful tool, and one that is used to push political agendas, shape social norms, and can maintain the status quo; for people who use drugs in a way that defies social norms, this often means getting caught up or trapped within narratives that fail to accurately represent their lived experiences, causing isolation, fear, stigma, shame, blame, and guilt. It can also prevent those who use drugs from being able to share and connect with others. When we fail to use language that is compassionate, understanding, and supportive we fail to create spaces for youth, families, communities, and systems to engage with and compassionately connect with one another. Further, when we fail to include people with lived and living experience in system formation and service delivery, we create a greater us and them divide, with language and services that are incongruent with the everyday experiences and needs of the population.

## Conclusion

Liberating and loving one another means extending ourselves generously to those seemingly furthest from us, recognizing that we do not need to understand their unique circumstances to show up, to care, to love, and to share space. It is a courageous act of rebellion against a society that built itself upon the instillment of classism through ongoing oppression and violence; that others, dehumanizes, and forces entire groups of people to live with less than based on their sociopolitical identities. A world that outwardly forces youth who use drugs to live in the margins, just outside of political and systemic violence. If we were to truly step into liberatory love, we may learn how we can create a collective space for youth who use drugs to exist within. So, I ask you to consider, what might change if you were to respond to youth who use drugs from the lens of liberation and love. What might be possible if our political system was built and structured from such a conceptual starting place?

The relationships strengthened, the stories shared and held sacred, and the taken-for-granted truths that emerged throughout this project provided invaluable teachings – ones I hope to carry with me personally, professionally, and academically as I continue moving through these intersecting realms. The youth I spent time with taught me the importance of being vulnerable, of loving fiercely, and sharing my resources generously. They encouraged me to look inward, to continuously check my own biases, and to reflect on how I have held up harmful practices. They invited me to question how it is that I take up space within our social collective, and what I am doing to support those who are not envisioned within it. The youth showed me the importance of slowing down, taking time to understand what informed my decision-making process, and what life experiences, theories, relations, and knowledge formed the foundation of that decision. Am I staying true to my values and beliefs? Do my values and beliefs reflect the world we are

dreaming up, and if not, what holds them stable? They encouraged me to dive deep into myself, my family, and my political position, to remain in a state of curiosity.

How might I show up in this world differently if I were to hold love and liberation at the center of my world, my practice, and my family? I lean into the youth's urgency for change, and the words of Robyn Maynard (2023) when she asks us to "address the cops in our hearts" as I aim to do differently, recognizing that it is in the doing that we are making. When we look inward, we begin to see how we are contributing to oppression and violence. From this space we can move with humility into new worlds, owning and learning from our past mistakes. As I begin unpacking the political narratives that have shaped my world, I step into this generative space to dream alongside the youth who made this possible.

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# Appendix A: Interview Guide

**Framework**

I am approaching the research through a critical paradigm, acknowledging that knowledge is subjective and influenced by one's cultural identity, familial history, and in a broader sense by current and historical sociopolitical climates. I will lean into intimate inquiry which validates personal [his]stories and places them within broader sociopolitical contexts through a continuous act of witnessing, engaging, and acting alongside participants.

**Research Questions**

3. What are the possibilities if love guided youth substance use practice, shaped policy, and informed social responses?

   Why this question: I am interested in this question for its ability to think of what might be possible if a social shift were to occur – and interested in this shift at multiple levels. What would be the impact for the individual, for families, for theory, for practice, and for policy. What might shift or change. It is not to criticize but to expose and rupture, to breathe life, to think past normative approaches. To challenge the status quo. To ask people to be vulnerable, to get to know the youth and the families that are impacted by the ongoing hate and violence toward people who use drugs. What might change if we were to approach people through a lens of love.

2. How do youth conceptualize their interaction with youth substance use services?

Why this question: This question intends to explore youth's own definitions, perceptions, descriptions of their substance use journey. What stands out for them, how has it changed them, shaped them, hurt them, supported them, etc.

3. How does love show up in youth's drug use journey?

Why this question: I am interested in seeing how youth have experienced love in their drug use journey. To explore avenues for self, community, and social forms of love that might be integrated into the broader youth substance use landscape.

| Research Questions | Interview Questions | Prompts, Comments, Considerations |
|---|---|---|
| What are the possibilities if love guided youth substance use practice, shaped policy, and informed social responses? | What do you wish you could tell your friends/family/supports about your drug/alcohol use?<br><br>What would need to change in our community for you to feel more fully supported as a youth who use(d) alcohol or drugs? | What pieces are we missing here, on an individual/communal/familial/social level?<br>If we had a fuller picture of the realities of youth substance use, would we be better equipped at responding to and supporting youth in their drug use journey? |

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| | If you could tell your family or community about our conversations and time together, what would you say? | What is it that youth would like to see from us?<br><br>How might we respond or what services might we need?<br><br>What practices are working and what need to be redefined? |
| How does love show up in youth's drug use journey? | Can you tell me about a time when you felt loved and supported as a youth who used drugs?<br><br>If you could capture your drug or alcohol use in a picture, what would it look like?<br><br>What songs reflect how you felt/feel as a youth who use(d) drugs or alcohol? | How do youth experience love while using drugs or alcohol?<br><br>How do youth embody love for self?<br><br>How do youth share their love with others?<br><br>Do youth experience love from community, family, social services, etc.?<br><br>Lean into the feelings, explore storied experiences of love, happiness, friendship, kinship, community, etc.<br><br>Create space for opposing experiences where love may have failed to show up. |
| How do youth conceptualize their interaction with youth substance use services? | Can you tell me how you would describe youth who use drugs or alcohol?<br><br>Can you tell me about a time that you went to a youth drug or alcohol service?<br><br>If you could capture the way that community responded to your drug or alcohol use in a picture, what would it look like? | Explore youth's own understandings, descriptions, definitions of drug use. Pay close attention to what influences these descriptions.<br><br>Ask for stories around their experiences and relate that back to their definitions of young people who engage in drug use. Do they connect, contrast, contradict, etc.<br><br>Pay attention to the smaller seemingly insignificant details here. |

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| | | What is being brushed off – if anything. What is the youth creating space for and how/why. |